24x76: Force Multiplication

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**Relationship:** Reaper | Gabriel Reyes/Soldier: 76 | Jack Morrison  
**Character:** Reaper | Gabriel Reyes, Soldier: 76 | Jack Morrison, Background & Cameo Characters, Original Characters, The following characters have minor roles and are not directly connected to the main plot: Moira O'Deorain  
**Additional Tags:** Action/Adventure, Action, Canon-Typical Violence, Soldier Enhancement Program, Soldier Enhancement Program Era, Omnic Crisis, Military Backstory, Military Training, Friends to Lovers, Mutual Pining, Fluff and Humor, slow burn maybe?, Slow Burn, SEP Reaper | Gabriel Reyes, SEP Soldier: 76 | Jack Morrison, Young Reaper | Gabriel Reyes, Young Soldier: 76 | Jack Morrison, alright so fun tags time?, Survival Training, Survival Evasion Resistance and Escape, oh boy its SERE time, a highly reimagined SERE but yeah, tags and rating will be updated, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Eventual Smut, Humor, Bad Puns, Bad Flirting, Medic Jack Morrison, NEW TAG WARNINGS: Resistance torture training, there is no physical torture, there is emotional and psychological torture, Sleep Deprivation, Literary References & Allusions, Musical References, Angst, Angst and Hurt/Comfort, The following are tags for the Explicit-rated content:, Anal Sex, Blow Jobs, Smut, Fluff and Smut, Masturbation  
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24x76: Force Multiplication

by clickclickBANG

Summary

[In military science, **Force Multiplication** is an attribute or a combination of attributes that multiplies the effectiveness of a soldier or weapon, giving a small number of troops or individuals the ability to accomplish greater tasks than without it.] 

Jack Morrison is 26, just completed the first half of his Special Forces "Q-Course," and just got airdropped to a secret base in the snowy mountains of Idaho along with the other "supersoldier candidates."
Common force multipliers are: terrain, geographical features, weather

He doesn't really know how to feel about his new "number" (76) or the fact that he's joined a program that will "genetically and phenotypically modify him, as well as train him extensively, to survive better against the bots."

Training and experience

He never thought he was particularly "special" (though he'll be the first to admit he's always hoped for an adventure worthy of legend).

Tactics and intelligence

And he thought SEP would just be more training

Morale

Until he met "Soldier: 24"

Friends

Gabriel Reyes

Inspiration

And Jack experienced a revelation

And they changed the course of history.
Introduction

Chapter Summary

It's 6:45 a.m. on January 1st and Jack is:

1. Awake way too goddamn early
2. Not really sure what kind of weird military experiment he's put himself in
3. Now aware of how much he's missed snow
4. Hungry
5. Not sure where he's supposed to sit in the SEP mess hall

when his clumsiness fumbles him into a chance encounter with someone else who is awake way too goddamn early.

And by some sort of small miracle

Jack actually manages to save the moment from being a complete disaster.

...

Kinda.

(At least he's a hilarious and attractive disaster, in Gabriel's opinion.)

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year!

I'm writing this at 11:32 p.m. on Dec 31 because I got it in my head that, "Hey, I should post the start of my revised SEP fic on January 1st" and boy howdy, my tired brain is regretting this. I hate formatting on this website ;_;

But hey

Can you believe it's been almost a full year since I posted "76+127: How We Were Made"??

This has been one of the wildest, most enjoyable years of my life and quite frankly, a significant portion of that has been writing and posting fics! I want to thank everyone who has read my stuff and who continues to support my work: the truth is, without you guys, I would've stopped writing months ago. You guys really keep me going and I'm just so honored and humbled by the excitement and enthusiasm everyone has shown for my stuff. Much thanks, much love, and much hope that 2018 will be a good year for everyone!!

Since Overwatch ended their current lore segment with Moira and the "reveal" of "Soldier: 24" in November, I've been working on revising "And Overwatch For All" and hit the part where Jack and Gabriel meet for the first time. Since I'm changing a lot of Gabriel's SEP/Crisis background, I decided to do a major overhaul of my SEP fics as
"How We Were Made" and "Trick to the Game" won't be deleted, but I'm really excited to present the start of my updated ideas (along with the correct number of "24") as a short New Years gift! I'm currently up to two additional chapters fully drafted, with the third one being worked on. I'm anticipating 7-8 chapters with the plot I have in mind.

And yes, by the end, there will be smut!

For now, the rating is set to "Mature" for language and some actiony bits, but the eventual rating will be "Explicit." Thank you for understanding (and please let me know if I've used any tags incorrectly)!

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Song is (appropriately) "Intro" by Stealth (Youtube link)

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JULY 2018 TAG UPDATE: Tags and rating have been changed! Please read the tags to make sure you are comfortable with the change in content.

Canon update: due to the reveal of Gabriel's age during Retribution, the ages in the fic have been adjusted. Gabriel is now 29, Jack is 26 (going on 27). Their occupations have not changed: Gabriel is a former Special Forces Intelligence Officer (18F, Sergeant rank), and Jack spent the last several years as an emergency room nurse.

“Supersoldier” redirects here. For other uses, see [Supersoldier (disambiguation)].

“Enhancement program” redirects here. For general human augmentation, see [Human enhancement].

The Soldier Enhancement Program, also known as the initials SEP, was an advanced medical and military training program conducted by the United States Army Special Forces and the Central Intelligence Agency from January 2047 to July 2047. The exact details of the program are still heavily classified, but the original purpose was to “genetically and phenotypically enhance selected recruits and soldiers of the Special Forces and develop a new programmatic military and tactical training to resist and counter Omnic forces and Omniums in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.”

Selected Special Forces candidates, officially called “candidates” or “soldiers” within the program, or colloquially called “supersoldiers” by the general public, developed increased physical and mechanical strength, faster and more flexible agility, longer periods of sustained endurance, rapid innate biological healing processes, and higher stores of biochemical energy levels.

The program was developed jointly by the United States Special Operations Command, the United States Army Special Forces, and the Special Activities Division of the Central Intelligence Agency. The goal was to develop two Special Forces companies (composed of six Operational Detachment Alpha teams and one Operational Detachment Bravo team each) of predominantly “enhanced” soldiers to engage in unconventional warfare tactics, special reconnaissance missions, and intelligence-gathering during the second and third years of the Omnic Crisis. However, shortly after
the Battle of Detroit and the Battle of Bakersfield were concluded, both companies were disbanded, and the SEP soldiers were integrated into other Special Forces groups. The exact size, extent, location, and nature of the program remains classified. It is not known if the program was repeated after the Crisis, or if variants of it existed before compared to other national “enhancement programs” (see: [The Russian Advanced Soldier Program] and [Enhanced Soldier Development of PRC]).

Only a few individuals have claimed or acknowledged their parts in the program publically, including: [Jack Morrison], the Strike-Commander of Overwatch; [Gabriel Reyes], the Crisis-era Strike-Commander of Overwatch and the eventual commander of Overwatch’s “Special Operations Division”; [Monique Carter-Tsang], former Secretary of Defense; [Riya Naidu], former director of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention; and [Felix Ochoa-Morris], former director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The commander of the USSOCOM when the program was active was General [Sofía Flores]. A number of individuals have denied being part of the program, despite claims from known and other likely members listing them as being present when the program was active.

The program is widely considered one of the most controversial projects undertaken by the United States military and CIA, but even in 2076, 72% of American citizens polled still regarded the program as “crucially necessary” to America surviving the Crisis, with 61% of all individuals polled calling the candidates “heroes during the Crisis.”

1. Background
   1. The Omnic Crisis in the United States
   2. Creation of the Soldier Enhancement Program
   3. Selection of the candidates

2. Medical Component of the Program
   1. Genetic modifications and theorized phenotypic changes

[1.3 Selection of the candidates]

The full list of SEP candidates remains classified. However, remarks by known individuals in interviews and during the investigations of the program by the United States Army have set a few known “parameters” set by the coordinators of the program:

1. Candidates were between the ages of 22-30 at the start of January 1st, 2047
2. Candidates must have been Special Forces soldiers or have passed the Special Forces Assessment and Selection.
3. Candidates who had only recently passed SFAS were required to have completed the first half of their Qualifications Course before being recruited to SEP.
4. Most of the “Qualifications Course only” candidates were required to know a second language at conversational fluency prior to recruitment.

Candidates who were already active Special Forces operators were removed from their [ODA] teams and received a promotion in rank or advancement in position, or were given the opportunity to receive advanced cross-training into a secondary [MOS].
An Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) group is the smallest core squad of twelve to thirteen “operators” or “commandos” of the United States Army Special Forces. All individual ODA members and the ODA as a whole group are trained in five primary tactical operation types: unconventional warfare (the original and most important mission of Special Forces), foreign internal defense, special reconnaissance, direct action, and counter-terrorism. Other, secondary operation types include: combat search and rescue (CSAR), counter-narcotics, counter-proliferation, hostage rescue, humanitarian assistance, humanitarian demining, information operations, peacekeeping, psychological operations, security assistance, and manhunts.

An ODA consists of 12 individuals, each of whom has a specific function ([MOS] or Military Occupational Specialty) on the team - however all members of an ODA conduct cross-training. The ODA is led by an 18A (Detachment Commander), a Captain, and a 180A (Assistant Detachment Commander) who is their second in command, usually a Warrant Officer One or Chief Warrant Officer Two.

The team also includes the following enlisted operators:

- **Operations Sergeant (18Z) - (Master Sergeant):** The Operations Sergeant is responsible for the overall organization, functionality and training of an SF team. They make sure the team is outfitted correctly and supports the ODA commander (18A).
- **Assistant Operations and Intelligence Sergeant (18F) - (Sergeant First Class):** This team member ensures that the team has all the equipment and supplies needed for the mission. They also gather and analyze mission-critical intelligence.
- **TWO (2) Weapons Sergeants (18B) - (Sergeant First Class / Sergeant):** Weapons Sergeants are experts in a wide range of U.S. and foreign weapons systems, from pistols and light artillery and anti-aircraft missiles.
- **TWO (2) Communications Sergeants (18E) - (Sergeant First Class / Sergeant):** SF Communications Sergeants are proficient in the gamut of radio communications equipment and techniques used in the field, everything from morse code to encrypted satellite transmissions and IT technology.
- **TWO (2) Medical Sergeants (18D) - (Sergeant First Class / Sergeant):** Special Forces Medics are first-class battlefield trauma medical technicians as well as being proficient in more general medical care.
- **TWO (2) Engineering Sergeants (18C) - (Sergeant First Class / Sergeant):** Engineering Sergeants are experts in constructing defensive measures and developing “passive” offensive measures. They are experts in explosive demolitions and can destroy buildings, bridges, and other structures to better suit the needs of the team when infiltrating. SF Engineers are also proficient in military and civil construction and can carry out a range of projects from fortifications to civil engineering tasks such as digging wells or building a schoolhouse.

A Special Forces company normally consists of six ODAs (Operational Detachments-A) or “A-Teams.” An ODA is identified by its group, battalion, company, and the team itself. For example, ODA 1234 would be the fourth team in the third company of the second battalion of 1st Special Forces Group.

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Let me introduce myself:
My name's whatever you want it to be

My hands are tied by a rope of your design
I'm so tired of guessing all the time
What's the key - what kind of man do you desire?
You know I could be
A good soldier if that's required
If you think my clothes don't work
And my face don’t fit
Let me introduce myself:
My name's whatever you want it to be
I like the way you hold yourself
And I'd like you to be holding me
I could be the man who chases you hard
Or I could be the one who's got the head start
Let me introduce myself
I'll be whatever you want to see
What will it be?

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76: Intro

Tuesday, January 1, 2047: 6:45 a.m. - “secret” Soldier Enhancement Program facility in the Boise and Sawtooth Mountains, Idaho

Jack’s been in North Carolina for so long that he’s forgotten what a “real” winter looks and feels like -

But now that he’s seen it again -
He won’t forget this.
He stands at the edge of the main entrance to the mess hall of the partially underground “Soldier Enhancement Program” facility, where the large northeast-facing windows jut out from the side of the mountain range they’re nestled in. The glass opens to the vast scenery of the mountains, jagged and hard-cut against the dim sky, coated in a pale snow that glints and glitters just faintly beneath the still-twilight atmosphere. The world is cast in the soft haze of a distant, chilled sunrise: a deep, velvety blue, still steeped with diamond stars, that ebbs and flows like a relaxed tide into a wave of quiet, silken purple, like a frost-crystallized lilac with petals frozen unfurled, that dips into a sweetened, lacy pink, perfect as an heirloom rose, tinted with a honeyed gold at the far eastern end. The sun won’t fully rise for another hour or two, but this moment -

Still
And snowy
And stardusted
In the astronomical twilight
Is the sweetest sigh of relief he’s felt in a long time.

Jack inhales deeply, his eyelids fluttering shut -
Letting the moment fall through his lungs and beat into his heart and pump out into his veins -
Before he exhales slowly, letting it go.

It feels like he’s been running - running, sprinting, going for years. His jagged, hard-edged determination and fierce sprinter’s agility had carried him forward forward forward - pushing him through four years of learning and training and work at IUB’s school of nursing, carrying him through biology and chemistry classes, sociology and public health seminars, clinics and practical labs. His friends had thought he was crazy to commit to a minor in Spanish - they’d been 100% correct, of course, when he’d doubled-down on taking extra classes for it, but Jack isn’t just a 100% kind of guy.

He does 110% of anything.
And everything.

Nursing in Bloomington, in Indiana, in...anywhere in the Midwest is a...safe choice. A stable choice. A steady choice. It was already two, three steps out of the farm, an easy, quick, reliable escape from the mundane existence of being a Morrison.

And the last few years of doing it had been...steady work, certainly. But easy?

Jack breathes slowly.

...No, never easy.

He had poured all of himself into it, and then poured a little more.

110%.

He was a grain of sand against a relentless tide, carved out by the rhythm and roll of the ocean. But he would do all that he was capable of.

And then -
Maybe a little more too.

...And that is exactly why -

When the world had *unraveled* in early 2046 -

And literal armies of massive killer robots had marched out of factories and the pages of a science fiction novel -

Jack had enlisted -

Understanding that they would probably put him into an army nurse or medic role -

And that they - and the war for the world - would take all of him from him.

(And then take a little more too).

Jack opens his eyes.

The thin, winter-crisp light drifting in like lazy snowflakes made from photons has hardly shifted, even as the moment of reprieve slips from him.

Jack sighs heavily again, his chest constricted with a mixture of nervousness, melancholy, and perhaps -

*Perhaps* -

Just a slightly quickened pace, pulse thudding with excitement in his rough, calloused palms.

The mess hall is pretty standard, he guesses - four long, cafeteria-style tables that run the length of the mostly-concrete room, parallel to the windows. There are only a few other “supersoldier candidates” awake at this time, and the rest are probably taking advantage of their “relaxed first week” to sleep in and catch up on much-needed rest.

...*It was real dumb of me to get up at five*, Jack thinks to himself dryly, but years of running track and overworking himself and - more recently - six months of SFAS and Q-Course had basically pounded “early birdness” into the waking end of his sleep pattern. So really, he’d basically been up by like...4:30 or 5, tossing and turning and growing more and more anxious by the passing minute. Finally he’d forced himself to pace the facility halls, find the gym, and run his legs and lungs out until 6-6:15 am. The activity had soothed him, forced him into a state of “mind-over-matter” serenity, the runner’s high numbing his fears and worries. After that, it had been a nice, surprisingly hot shower (*Wonder how long this will last*, Jack had joked to himself in his head, water running soothingly down his scalp and over his shoulders, knowing full well that the rest of the “Small Unit Tactics and SERE” portion of the Q-Course would continue here in SEP), a quick return to his barrack room (where his roommate, Adrien Morris, a fellow Q-Course 18Xer, was still soundly and smartly asleep), and then here.

The mess hall.

...The mostly empty mess hall.

...*Is there a seating arrangement?* Jack wonders to himself - the other candidates’ positions across the tables seem randomly and oddly dispersed, but Jack does note that the majority of the maybe...twenty-ish of the other “early” risers are congregated to the farthest table, the one closest to the windows. The thirteen of them are also the most “awake” it seems, as many of them talk in easy,
openly conversational tones with each other in between bites of their breakfast.

A subset of them laugh brightly and cheerfully over some low-volume joke, and Jack’s stomach twists slightly at the sound.

He’s not sure if it’s in anxiety, envy, or wistfulness.

His eyes drift to his right wrist, where the small, thin, waterproof bandage is barely visible between the chilled metallic lunch tray he’s carrying and the hem of his long sweatshirt sleeve.

*Soldier: 76 - John Morrison*

His new tattoo.

His new number.

His new *identity*.

...

When the ship that had carried most of the Q-Course 18Xers (the fast-tracked “new recruits” though it was almost laughable because the vast majority of them were over 22-23) had forced them to parachute down to the Sawtooths at several thousand feet in the bitingly cold air yesterday, Jack - along with Adrien, Wes, and Sarah - had managed to group up the lot of them (54 total) again. Using the survival skills they had just barely been taught only a few weeks ago, they had rounded up everyone and started the long trudge up across the ranges before they located the light signal pinpointing the mostly-snow-covered facility. As the 18Xers had grown closer, they had been surprised to come across a few other groups - small clusters of other young Special Forces soldiers. When Jack had asked one of them how long they’d been serving with their ODAs, one of them - a tall, surprisingly cheerful guy by the name of Jamie - had laughed, “Oh, man, none of us have been serving long, maybe a few years. If you’re the new bloods, we’re just the juniors.”

“Does that mean there are senior members joining us?” Adrien had asked, each word causing a puff of fogged breath in front of his lips, his deep, earth-toned skin flushed with the exertion of the snowy hike. Sarah, however, had scowled, saying with confusion, “...I thought the age cut-off was 28?

Something about how they want the injections to affect our muscle mass but not impact the last stages of brain development?”

*They’re not interested in impacting growing brains*, Jack thinks quietly, *But technically, the brain’s microscopic and macroscopic structures continue to growth and adjust themselves as life goes on... Which means...*

Glial cell improvements? Increased cerebral synapses and denser grey matter?

Those were *incredibly* likely.

If not a given.

Even then, perched on the side of a snow-covered mountain, breathing hard in the thin air and the high altitude, hauling a repacked parachute and a duffel bag of gear, Jack had paused, had felt his stomach and thoughts twist at his decision.

Genetic mutations, preventing the breakdown of DNA and RNA strands, and “rapidly repairing
them” when (not “if”) they do break. The insertion of “improved” genes to lead to the creation and production of “enhanced” proteins and trehalose sugars. Artificial, “sustained” ATP reserves and synthetic, long-lasting enzymes to help the process maintain itself for years.

Possibly decades.

Possibly lifetimes.

All of this resulting in better, more efficient metabolisms, improved structures to bone and muscle tissue, slicker, faster neural relays and slicker, faster responses, accelerated healing and damage repair on every level - cellular, tissue, macroscopic organs, whole body parts.

“Enhancements” to last for decades…

Or possibly lifetimes.

And as a permanent reminder of that commitment -

The first thing the directors had done upon their arrival was not orient them on the program and each other -

But was instead to put them in lines, “check them in,” and then tattoo a “Soldier ID Number,” a scannable code, and then a serial string onto their right wrists.

…

Jack had never had any particular thoughts or feelings about the number “76” before.

And...admittedly

He still doesn’t.

Growing up, he’d always been, like, number 13-17 in 30-person classes, depending on whichever half of the class roster “Morrison” fell in that year, and after high school, he hadn’t bothered to care. He had never rooted for the 76ers (why would he when most of Indiana was either for the Pacers or the Bulls?), and he’s pretty certain his great grandparents had bought the farm in like...1971.

Not that Jack needed his “Soldier ID number” to signify something special, but some attachment - any attachment - would help calm the unnerving, uncanny pulse rushes of “fight or flight” in his veins.

…

Jack scowls distantly.

He will not regret this decision.

He will not let himself.

(“The only way to fight new machines,” he can hear the CIA agent who recruited him - one of the SEP directors, Marc Guerra - say in his astronomical twilight memories from a week ago, “In a new war...is to become a new type of soldier.”)

Jack glances back over the four tables, and resolves himself.

Special Forces soldiers and other special operation agents were notoriously close-knit and wound
together - proof that blood of the covenant shed through bullets and wars is thicker than the water of
the womb - to the point where even instructors at the Q-Course (older Special Forces members
themselves) cautioned the “new blood” on being “overly familiar.”

“You gotta cut your teeth a few times before an older soldier will accept you,” one of the accelerated
language instructors had told Jack’s class, “Every ODA has its own style, its own culture. Your first
deployment won’t just be inserting you in a different country - you’ll be hard dropped into a squad
that runs its own miniature universe -

“And you’ll be expected to haul the weight of galaxies to be accepted.”

Jack had done the math.

One-hundred and eight.

One-hundred and eight 18Xer’s and “junior” Special Forces had arrived at the facility yesterday
afternoon -

But there had already been other “supersoldier candidates” in one of the dorm/barracks halls -

And the first “junior” Special Forces soldier had been tattooed with the number “25.”

I guess Soldiers 1 through 24 are somewhere around here, Jack thinks, turning a little to descend the
short entrance stairs into the mess hall proper when he -

WHAPS

Straight into a solid form, covered in a thick padding of dark grey, woven cotton and -

Suddenly his world is sliding sideways as he feels one of his feet slip off the edge of a stair and -

His mind is struggling to get his limbs to react but -

“Oh shit -” a low voice half-mutters, half-stammers and then -

Jack feels himself stop

As a left hand - steady, stable, reliable, strong - stops him from falling, gently yet firmly supporting
him as it grasps his right elbow and arm -

“Dude, shit - you okay??”

Jack blinks once, realizes his world isn’t shifting, and tilts his gaze towards the other guy and -

*Oh. God. Damn.*

He might be the most attractive person Jack has ever seen.

It’s almost impossible to say which of his features hits the processing part of Jack’s semi-melted brain
first, but perhaps the one that struck him the hardest was the almost astronomical, twilight-lit sense of
regality.

Despite the snowcovered, stardusted light of the not-quite-dawn, there is something radiant about
him: his skin - deep and rich, a husky hue flaked with gold and copper, like gilded and bronzed
lacquer flows just beneath his surface - is tinted faintly peach on his cheeks, and Jack’s crumbling mind isn’t sure if it’s from the chill of being in a concrete building in the dead of winter, or if the other candidate is embarrassed by their awkward flailing. The structure of his face is somehow jagged and hard-edge, yet sweeping and graceful, all high, curving cheekbones and deep angles, perfected with a short, trimmed beard, hair a dusky, dark brown that fluffs just enough to somehow give Jack the urge to run his fingers through it.

But when Jack’s gaze makes contact with the concerned, confused look the man is giving him -

_Oh, god, I’m beyond fucked - _

His eyes are somehow dark and yet brightly lit, as if alight with a gilded fire behind shadowy smoke, obsidian that is both glass and veil, razor-sharp and sweetly soft -

Like the thinnest rays of the astronomical twilight over mountains, night and day in one, light and dark transcendental, the dawn and the dusk, the sunrise and the sunset timeless.

A moment that shifts and fades away, only made real, physical, embodied -

Made human.

The other candidate gives Jack a genuinely nervous look, asking in that low, easy dry hymn and hum of a voice:

“You okay there, new guy? Are you actually awake?”

_If this is a dream, I don’t want to wake up, _the mostly-awake part of Jack’s mind snarks, and his stomach-twisting common sense hastily shouts over it, D _ON’T SAY SOMETHING DUMB, DON’T YOU FUCKING DO IT _-

“That beard is non-regulation,” Jack says dumbly, immediately ignoring his brain’s only good advice.

Everything inside of Jack collapses to the floor

Shrivels up into the fetal position

And starts sobbing something utterly incoherent.

The Most Attractive Human Being Jack Has Ever Seen gawks at him, his concern shifting to bewildered shock -

And Jack’s tongue trips over itself to his mistake.

“Oh god -” Jack stammers hastily, feeling the blood pulse and pound in his veins, and he just knows he’s beet red right now - he tenses up, but somehow the words fall out of him like oil, “- I mean, it’s not a bad thing, oh my god - it looks good, it looks really good - I’m just not used to -”

And then

The unexpected occurs:

A miracle happens.

The other candidate blinks once over Jack’s twisted excuses, before he gives Jack the _widest, smuggest, happiest smirk _Jack has ever seen and _somehow _-
It makes him unendingly more attractive.

NO ONE MAN SHOULD LOOK THAT GOOD, the self-depreciating part of Jack’s brain screams, 
still sobbing on the floor.

And with a smoky, wry laugh lilting his words, the candidate teases him quietly, still carrying that 
knowing grin:

“In case you hadn’t noticed, lots of things are non-regulation around here, newbie.”

And then -

As if this New Year’s Day couldn’t get any more incredible -

A second miracle occurs.

Jack collects enough pieces of his shattered sense of humor to joke back with an easy sarcastic tone, 
“Wait - you mean a secret base deep in the mountains where they inject special ops with chemicals 
and synthetic hormones is not regulation?”

The candidate laughs openly, a dusk-lit sunrise sound that fills the air around them with a faint 
warmth. He grins at Jack, snarking right back, “Well, you’re a fast one, huh?”

Jack somehow finds the gall and bravery to smirk back, saying teasingly, “Well, I do run a lot. And 
I was the fastest member on my college track team.”

“Cute,” the candidate half-laughs, half-snorts with sardonic humor, and somehow -

Miraculously -

Jack finds it easy to banter back, “Funny enough, I was also the cutest on my track team as well.”

“Boy, ya’ll set some low bars on that high jump, huh?” the other candidate taunts back, but that 
gorgeous smirk is still on his face and that deep yet light glimmer of humor still glitters across his 
gaze. Jack rolls his shoulders casually, but with his own sly smile, he chuckles, “Well, it was track, 
not a beauty pageant.”

“Glad to hear it wasn’t the standard for the whole school,” the candidate laughs, and he releases 
Jack’s arm, and Jack finds that the lack of his touch is somehow less comfortable and less welcome 
than his fingers wrapped around Jack’s bicep -

The Most Attractive Human Being Ever gives Jack one last smirk, and then turns slightly and 
continues down the entrance stairs.

It’s only now that Jack realizes the other guy was carrying his own breakfast tray in his right hand, 
with everything - including a tall cup of creamy coffee - perfectly placed still and not a single drop 
spilled. Jack watches him go a few steps, his gaze finally processing the like, double sweatpants and 
two sweatshirts he’s wearing - all dark grey and black - before Jack just…

Follows him.

(Years later, he still won’t be able to explain why he did it. Just that he did.)

The other candidate skips past the first three tables, before he seats himself at the end of the fourth 
table - not quite with the other thirteen candidates there, but clearly comfortable enough to sit 
wherever he wants. He rounds the corner, opting to sit with his back to the windows but -
He goes to shovel some of the scrambled eggs on his toast when he looks up. He jolts a little when he suddenly sees Jack right by the table, as if completely unaware that Jack was only a step or two behind him. The candidate blinks once at him, but Jack somehow -

Finds his gaze torn away from his face to the boundless mountains around them, his eyes drifting over the snowcovered, stardusted landscape just beyond the glass.

Even though his focus is on the mountains, Jack notices through his peripheral vision how the other candidate’s eyes linger on his face, startled expression growing faintly curious as he watches Jack -

“...It’s nice here,” Jack says gently, finding that somehow his wit has put itself on pause for this moment. The other candidate watches him, saying dryly, “Well...if you can get past the injections and whatever else they have planned for us -”

He turns, tilting that gorgeous dark gaze over the mountains, lips curving into a genuine, sweet smile as he agrees, “Yeah, the view’s not bad. Least they could give us, right?” The candidate grins at Jack, and everything about him is warm and welcoming, inviting and invigorating -

*Exciting.*

“I always kinda thought there was nothing to see out in Idaho,” Jack grins back, setting his tray down across from him and sliding himself onto the bench on the other side, “But I guess this is where all the true wilderness is, huh?”

The candidate assesses him calmly, before he raises a skeptical eyebrow, turning those gilded obsidian eyes down towards the rest of the table -

Where some of the other “early risers” have...*paused* their conversation to look at them -

Their gazes curious but a little bit...*closed off*.

Jack follows the other candidate’s focus and suddenly -

He flicks his own gaze to the other candidate’s right wrist, upside down and barely visible over the hem of double sweatshirt sleeves:

[Soldier: 24 - Gabriel Reyes].

Pieces click into place in his head like magnets -

And the realization hits him like a brick wall hits a fucking speeding truck.

“Oh,” Jack says suddenly, struggling to scramble to get himself away from the table, “I’m not supposed to -”

But the other candidate - Gabriel? - shrugs nonchalantly, pushing some scrambled eggs on his toast, saying loudly and overly-casually, “Nah, ignore them.” After he says that, the other “senior” Special Forces soldiers turn their attentions back to each other. Gabriel (?) gives Jack that wry, incredible grin again, chuckling, “Non-regulation, remember? Don’t let us intimidate you.”

*A guy who called my dumb jokes “cute” is pretty far from intimidating,* Jack considers, pausing to watch Gabriel (?) thoughtfully, before he settles himself in and replies with a renewed sense of humor:

“Well, *they* look intimidating...but *you* on the other hand…”
Jack gives him a smug, shit-eating grin.

Gabriel (?) returns it with an unimpressed, deadpan expression before he lilts dryly, “Alright now, smartass - don’t make me give you a-hundred push ups for that mouth of yours.”

“...Wanna see me do them one-handed?” Jack taunts right back, his grin only getting wider. Gabriel (?) takes a bite of his eggs and bread, and then looks at him thoughtfully, as if actually considering it, before he asks almost genuinely, if a bit thickly with the food in his mouth, “...All one-hundred?”

And Jack has no fucking clue where he finds this bravado -

But hot damn -

Does he find it

As he teases Gabriel (?) with a coy, near-flirtatious tone:

“Command me and find out, sir.”

Gabriel’s (?) eyes grow wide and he nearly choking on limp scrambled eggs and dry toast, hacking and coughing as he struggles to swallow his food and his shock -

And god -

The power of flustering the Most Attractive Human Being Ever stirs something fierce in Jack’s blood, sending a thrill through his veins.

Gabriel (?) starts to recover, about to open his mouth to say something, when Jack smirks even deeper, adding on in a low, but encouraging tone, “I’ll do a lot of things if you want me to, sir -”

Gabriel (?) almost reels from Jack’s quick verbal one-two, completely stunned like a deer in the headlights, eyes wide. But he recovers after a split second, a smoky, heavy look glinting across his eyes and Jack almost wonders if this is too much for like -

Meeting a total stranger on like -

The second day in the program.

But then -

“Oh shit - ¿qué es esto, qué es esto?” a new voice says brightly and cheerfully and smugly over Jack’s shoulder, practically singing with self-satisfaction. Jack glances up to see another candidate standing there with his own tray of breakfast - he, too, has sun-tanned skin, a bold, warm smirk, and vibrant eyes that gleam, as if he’s just caught them stealing cookies from the cookie jar.

Gabriel’s (?) expression immediately turns deadpan again as he mutters, “Learn to read a mood, Carlos -”

“Ah, Gabrielito!” Carlos practically giggles, rounding the corner to playfully whap a fist against Gabriel’s shoulder, “Look, someone who actually tolerates you!”

“You tolerate me,” Gabriel snarks with dry humor, as Jack stifles a chortle, but a squeaky “Gabrielito” escapes his lips, causing Gabriel to shoot him a sarcastic, teasing glare, his lips betraying him as they turn up just enough at the corners to indicate an impulsive smirk.

“Ah, Gabi, I tolerate you because I have to,” Carlos says, still practically dancing his way to the
other side of Gabriel. He drops his tray onto the table and shimmies into the spot next to him, grinning at Jack but saying to Gabriel, “No puedo creerlo - only the second day, and you’ve already made a friend! Hey, Luisa!”

There’s suddenly another presence by Jack’s shoulder, and he glances up to see a tall but stocky woman - her long dark hair pulled back into a high ponytail, skin pale but blushed faintly peach on her cheeks - look over them with mild disdain. Carlos, however, is undaunted by her chilly appearance, laughing jovially, “Look, look - Gabi actually made a friend!”

“Oh my god, Carlos,” Gabriel groans exasperatedly, and when Luisa turns her dark gaze on Jack, he beams at her brightly, saying, “Hey!”

“...You don’t have to be friends with him,” Luisa says dryly, even though there’s a wry smirk on her face. She flutters past Jack to slide herself in next to him, across from Carlos, chuckling lowly, “But Gabriel does need all the help he can get.”

“I don’t deserve this,” Gabriel grumbles, tilting his head back and covering his face with his hands. Though muffled, they all hear him mutter, “I came here to escape the mafia and the drug lords - start a new life, be clean this time -”

The other three laugh, but Jack manages to cough out, “Well, I wouldn’t exactly call us ‘friends’ at this point -”

Gabriel removes his hands from his face, giving Jack a horrified, almost betrayed expression as Carlos and Luisa wheeze with laughter. Carlos hacks out, “Holy shit, Gabriel - you ain’t even passed the ‘friend test’ with him yet -”

“I like him,” Luisa says, elbowing Jack lightly, before teasing Gabriel, “Can he replace you in the squad?”

“We’ve only known each other for five minutes,” Gabriel says to Jack with wretched horror feigned in his voice, “And you’ve already broken rank and stolen my position??”

“Rank doesn’t always equate to talent,” Jack grins at him and Gabriel looks appalled, but there’s a light, bright gleam in those beautiful dark eyes and -

“Oh my god,” Carlos continues to wheeze, wiping tears from his eyes as he sob-laughs, “It is too fuckin’ early to be laughing this hard. You got a name, kid?”

“My name is John, but I hate it, so please call me Jack,” Jack says to Carlos and Luisa breezily, but he gives that twisted, shit-eating grin to Gabriel, taunting him, “But it’s sir to you, Gabe.”

Carlos howls with laughter, nearly falling off the bench as Luisa chokes on her bread, hacking and coughing and laughing. Gabriel scowls, but his whole face alights with a bold, deadly, beautiful radiance, as he grin-glares at Jack with a wry, liquid viciousness, muttering, “Man, you’re fuckin’ gunning for push-ups all day, huh -”

“GABE,” Carlos sobs, slapping Gabriel on the back a few times before he basically curls up against Gabriel’s left shoulder, crying, “Oh my god, he called you ‘Gabe’ - and ‘it’s sir to you -’” Carlos breaks down into incoherent giggles as Luisa starts to recover, elbowing Jack lightly as she grins, “They obviously didn’t torture you enough in Q-Course if you’re cracking these kinds of jokes.”

“I dunno,” Jack hums back cheerfully, starting to reach for his own eggs, “Some people respond to stress with humor, after all.”
“There’s humor and then there’s...whatever you’re doing,” Gabriel chuckles, before loosely trying to shrug an octopus-ing Carlos off of him, muttering dryly, “Suélteme, cabrón -”

“...You shouldn’t insult your new CO, Gabe,” Carlos taunts back as he slips off of Gabriel’s shoulder. Carlos breathes deeply a few times before grabbing at his food again, and Gabriel shakes his head disapprovingly, sighing, “Dios dame paciencia -”

“I prefer it when God gives me strength,” Jack states happily, smirking as Gabriel gives him another deadpan look. Jack grins smugly as he adds, “You know, so I can do all those inevitable one-handed push-ups Gabe’s gonna give me.”

“Good God, you just don’t stop -” Gabriel starts to say as Carlos once again almost chokes on his food and laughter and Luisa nearly spits coffee everywhere.

But there’s that brilliant, bold gleam in Gabriel’s eye and the slightest, most enticing smirk on his lips -

As the sky begins to lighten into a wash of rose gold behind him.

And yeah -

Jack won’t forget this view anytime soon.

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Let me introduce myself
My name’s whatever you want it to be
I like the way you hold yourself
And I'd like you to be holding me
I could be the man who chases you hard
Or I could be the one who's got the head start
Let me introduce myself
I'll be whatever you want to see
So, what will it be?
Chapter Summary

Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape - better known as SERE - is a military training program taught to military personnel and combatants with a high risk of being captured or isolated behind enemy lines. This includes special operations soldiers and agents.

The first part of SERE - Survival and Evasion - deals with military personnel learning how to survive in various types of hostile or uninhabited environments, as well as how to evade capture or maintain a low profile in sensitive situations. Individuals are taught skills that will increase their survivability, such as firecraft, sheltercraft, resource procurement, and land navigation. Some branches of the US military teach SERE in cold winter environments.

SEP launches its first SERE simulation with a minor twist: instead of using human and canine trackers, the SEP land grant will be monitored by drones. SEP candidates must put their survival and evasion skills to the test and avoid the drones.

Despite his friends playful mocking, Gabriel has few issues surviving the snow, and even fewer issues being alone.

But something...odd begins to happen to the drones during the simulation.

Can Detective Reyes solve the mystery?

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone!!

Thank you so much for all the wonderful comments on the introduction! I'm really glad people enjoyed Jack tripping over himself to impress Gabriel and Gabriel being so highly amused by Jack's antics that he can't help but enjoy his company. I'm a sucker for a "comedy of errors," so I just had to write them being lovable idiots when they first meet.

Here's the start of the second part, "Survival and Evasion." It features Gabriel (surprisingly) braving the snow mostly on his lonesome...but he quickly gets caught up in something rather strange. Can Gabriel and his fellow "senior" soldiers figure out what's happening to the drones in the simulation?

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I cannot believe it's been a year since "How We Were Made" came out, how time flies.

As a fuller explanation, I had written about half of my "Old Habits" rewrite before I hit the chapter where Jack meets Gabriel for the first time. Because I had decided to switch to the "young Reaper" theory, I also decided to revamp my ideas on SEP. I wanted to focus on expanding and reworking some of the ideas I had for my original version of
SEP (the "prison simulation" fic), and ended up with - well, this.

In my original version of SEP, both Gabriel and Jack were relatively young and inexperienced, and neither of them had really seen combat before. However, in this new version of SEP, Gabriel is a bit older than Jack (about four years older), and has been in the Special Forces for five years. He has very few issues surviving something like snow, but has more of a...problem dealing with some of his fellow candidates.

I wrote this part and the following chapter for the "Reaper76 Week 2018" - Day 1: War Buddies prompt.

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Music is "Fire in the Woods" by Nevada Wild ([Youtube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=))

\begin{verbatim}
Help me, oh brother, don’t leave me alone
I’ve been out in the desert - no map to oasis
Been fightin’ the devil and matchin’ his paces
It’s clear I’ve now got trouble in my bones.

Fire fire fire fire
Fire in the woods
It’s clear, my dear, we’ve been up to no good

---

24: Survival

Thursday, January 24, 2047: 8:47 a.m. - somewhere in the Boise and Sawtooth Mountain ranges, outside of the SEP facility, Idaho

First, he checks to make sure he’s under adequate tree coverage and then -

With a foggy huff -

Gabriel pauses to catch his breath and check his bearings.

The world around him is mostly low, dense pine trees, small and ragged in the high, harsh altitudes of the Boise and Sawtooth Ranges, and long steep slopes up and down rocky rises. Everything is covered in crisp, crystalline snow, a soft crunch that looks fresh and powdery but drains energy the more one tries to walk through it. It settles the world into a strange, icy dichotomy: bright, solid whites with patches of bushy blacks and dim greens, beset with stretches of rocky, barren greys, all
of them contrasting raw and broken against a sky full of pastel colors of a slow sunrise, all faint pinks and sweeping purples softening into blues marbled with wisps of clouds.

Gabriel peeks out from under the foliage to glance first at the clear sky above him and then -

He scowls down at the thin trail of smoke rising from tree cover on an adjacent slope, maybe a mile away from his position.

_There’s no way they’re that oblivious_, he thinks, repeating the same process that had gone through his head when he’d finally crossed into the crest of the valley about an hour ago. He’d been trekking all goddamn night, beneath shifting cloud cover that had made the night temperatures an almost balmy 20 degrees, using the cold glow of the moon and the frozen dewdrops of starlight to guide his route through the mountains.

Gabriel sighs again, the exhale puffing out in front of his lips, before he pulls the lower half of the thick, sports neck gaiter back up over his mouth and nose -

And sets out quietly under the trees again.

It’s the start of the fourth day of the “simulated survival and evasion” portion of the SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape) part of the Soldier Enhancement Program, and, perhaps surprisingly, Gabriel’s finding it easy to handle. Despite it being deadass winter in goddamn Idaho, and despite Carlos and Luisa (both of whom are from “northern states” with “real winters, unlike you West Coast assholes”) playfully mocking him, Gabriel thinks he’s doing pretty fucking swell for an Angeleno in the snow. His last SERE training like, almost nine years ago now (what the _fuck_, nine years ago already?) had been set in North Carolina like all the other Special Forces SEREs, and god _damn_, that one had felt positively _miserable_ - slogging under solid blocks of humidity and trying to start fires on damp wood all while evading the tracker dogs the trainers were using to “chase” them down.

_THIS one is way harder_, he admits to himself, almost sliding between the trees as he sets his bearings on a particular ridge to the west. _SERE in the snow is ten-thousand times worse if you aren’t prepared for it._

And frankly -

A lot of the new kids, and even many of the “junior” SF soldiers, just aren’t.

---

(Sunday, January 20th: 0745 hours - just after breakfast in the mess hall)

_“Alright everyone, listen up.”_

It had only taken them three weeks, but at long last, a single command from Sofía Flores, General of the USSOCOM, is finally enough to quiet the whole mess hall at breakfast. In fact, Gabriel had been pretty goddamn stunned at how quickly the other supersoldier candidates had appeared to make friends, though he frequently had to remind himself that roughly half of the group were all cohorts from the newest Special Forces Qualification Course, with people organizing themselves around the four tables of the mess hall in...some sort of arrangement.
The only “rule” appeared to be that Soldiers: 1 - 24 seated themselves at the far one.

With...one or two exceptions.

...Okay, really just one exception.

Soldier: 76, Jack Morrison - the rather tall, rather well-built, rather handsome ball of sunshine and unapologetically witty jackass that he is - had zero qualms about seating himself at the far table every few days, seemingly just to eat breakfast (and crack jokes) with Gabriel.

Gabriel had been pretty goddamn stunned at how he really, actually, genuinely...looked forward to those mornings.

...Not that he was going to tell Jack that.

But this Sunday had not been one of those mornings.

As the supersoldier candidates turn their attention to the general at the front of the room on Gabriel’s left, Gabriel watches Jack out of the corner of his eye, taking mental note of one last wry smile on Jack’s face before “Soldier: 24” turns his own gaze towards Flores.

“As you’re probably aware, the training and hands-on teaching portions of SERE were concluded on Friday, so starting tomorrow, the Survival and Evasion portion of the SERE part of the program will begin,” Flores states, her voice bold but controlled, her posture poised. The other directors - sitting at their own table behind her - look just as sleepily attentive as the candidates. The general, however, pays none of them any mind, continuing on with her instructions, “Many of you have already taken this program before, as part of your own Qualifications Courses, but you will be expected to repeat this simulation in the same manner as the rest of your fellow candidates.”

Small groans and grumbles go up from some of the “junior” Special Forces (the people who had only just taken their Q-Courses within the last year or so), but Gabriel is convinced he sees a smirk or two on some of the “senior” soldiers’ faces.

“This is because we the directors of the Soldier Enhancement Program have redesigned certain elements of the standard SERE course to suit our more…” Flores pauses at this point, picking over her words before she continues with, “Specialized and unique circumstances. Will a non-18Xer please explain to your new juniors what the defining elements of the original Survival and Evasion portions of SERE are?”

A junior SF soldier - Soldier: 111, Jamie Royce - stands up before the others, saluting the general. She nods to him, and he speaks in a loud, clear voice:

“The usual Survival and Evasion simulation requires five days of practical application where you must create your own shelters and fires while evading the trainers and their tracker dogs.”

“Very succinctly put,” Flores replies dryly, as Jamie seats himself again. The general turns slightly, nodding to another director, who reaches down beneath the table -

“Our Survival and Evasion program will be rather different on several main points,” Flores says, as the other director pulls out a small plane, probably no bigger than a football - a drone, Gabriel immediately thinks, sharing inquisitive glances with Carlos and Luisa.

“First, we will not be using tracker dogs,” Flores continues, “To better prepare you in the war against
the Omnis, we will be utilizing a fleet of remote-operated aerial vehicles, better known as ‘drones.’ These drones will be both self-operated and human-controlled. They possess programs capable of auto-identifying human beings and will be capable of enacting short, quick responses when a human is properly identified.”

And then Flores grins, chuckling, “In other words, if they spot a human, they’ll fire a paintball at them.”

“Oh no,” Gabriel mutters as other low murmurs and titters had gone up around the room. Carlos grins as Luisa had buried her head in her hands, groaning.

“I think you can see where I am going with this,” the general smirks, before she had snapped her fingers. On the wall behind the directors, a holo-projector immediately displays a map of the massive “SEP-granted area” in the Boise and Sawtooth Mountains - the range appears to span roughly 120 miles across in both the north-south and east-west directions. The mostly underground main facility is marked with a star in the center, but Gabriel immediately identifies several other red-dotted points, scattered semi-evenly throughout the ranges.

“Starting tomorrow morning, you will be organized into random groups, brought out to remote locations, and then left at equal but again randomized positions,” Flores explains, “After breakfast, you will be given a list of supplies and items you are permitted to bring with you in one standard duffel or backpacking bag, but obviously, you will not have devices with you besides the wrist monitor you wear. And yes, I promise - we will not be ratting out your locations to the drones.”

“Oh good, I was worried they would get an unfair advantage,” someone snarks a few tables over, resulting in several low laughs and giggles. Flores rolls her eyes at that, muttering, “I’ve got an eye on you, Soldier: 95. Your wrist monitor sends us a GPS location and some quick vitals like your pulse and core temperature. You may press the button on it at any point to bail from the simulation, but if your vitals drop to certain points, we will extract you. This is a training simulation, not a true survival situation, and your life is more valuable than proving a point.”

In his peripherals, Gabriel sees Jack make a skeptical face at that.

“Now, that doesn’t mean we have to play nice,” Flores smirks at them, and -

Oh god no, Gabriel immediately thinks as sounds and mutters of protest rise throughout the room. The general just grins though, saying loudly, “As you are now well aware, you receive the enhancement injections every two days. This does not end tomorrow.”

“What,” someone shouts as the sounds start to get rowdier. Flores points to the map behind her, continuing her explanation. “At each of those locations, we have temperature-controlled serums for all one-hundred and thirty-two of you. Your first set will already be ready to go tomorrow, and then they will be restocked every two days. When you return to the facility on Friday, that day’s injection will be administered here. Also located at these storage units are additional stocks of canned food, extra firestarters if you lose yours, and even, if you’re quick, some extra clothes.”

Flores smirks smugly at them, her dark eyes taunting them as she’d chuckles, “Now, in the spirit of fairness, the drones will not be at these locations 100% of the time, but they will prioritize monitoring them. And, quite honestly, there is nothing preventing your fellow candidates from taking as much of the supplies as they can carry.”

The room falls into stunned silence.

Gabriel shuts his eyes, and rubs his fingers along his temples.
“Here are the rules of SEP’s Survival and Evasion Simulation One,” Flores states over the loud quietness, “Number 1: you may work in any teams that you like, but recognize that the larger the group you operate in, the higher the likelihood that a drone will identify one or all of your members. Number 2: you are not required to retrieve and administer your own serums, but any candidate who returns on Friday without having taken Monday and Wednesday’s doses will be required to have them administered on Friday - and yes, we will test if you have taken them or not. Number 3: you may engage with your fellow candidates as you see fit, but if we catch wind of any fights or altercations, all parties involved will be immediately extracted and returned to the facility, along with possible suspensions and extra punishments. You will obey the U.S. Military Code of Conduct, and any candidate caught breaking this will face serious consequences. Lastly, every candidate will be assessed based on the number of times drones have identified and ‘marked’ them - remember, half of the simulation is called ‘Evasion.’”

Silence answers her.

Gabriel opens his eyes, sighing slowly as he looks over the soldiers in the mess hall. Flores does the same, her gaze skimming over them with a quiet fierceness until she asks, “Any questions?”

Immediately -

Jack’s hand goes up.

Both Gabriel and Flores scowl slightly, with the general saying, “Yes, Soldier: 76?”

“Two questions, ma’am,” Jack says calmly, almost gently, “One - these drones have...what? Visual targeting, but also stuff like infrared?”

Gabriel’s eyes shoot back to Flores, who looks like Jack had put her on the spot before she replies, “I will not give you all their specifications, but yes, you should be aware that they possess infrared and thermal imaging.”

More loud groans and grumbles go up over that but -

Jack somehow speaks evenly and coolly above the din:

“Thank you, ma’am. Second question - the serums are contained in auto-injection syringes? Or will adequate medical equipment and fresh syringes be part of those extra supplies you mentioned?”

That question genuinely surprises Gabriel. He glances towards some of the 18D’s sitting further up the table, as they bend their heads together, muttering things to each other.

“A good question, Soldier: 76,” Flores says, clearly impressed, “The serums will have auto-injection syringes and may be disposed in a small, personal sharps container you will be provided. Other questions?”

Another hand goes up in the air, and Flores nods to them. The candidate - someone Gabriel can’t see through the crowd - asks, “When will we know our randomized deployment groups, ma’am?”

“You will be given a Group Letter by dinner tonight - everyone will be broken into groups of 11,” Flores replies. Another hand rises, and she gestures to them.

“With all due respect, ma’am, how will the directors know if the Code of Conduct has been violated?” they ask, “If someone takes all the supplies and then expects other candidates to
do...certain actions or favors for them in exchange for those, is it just going to come down to one person’s word against the other?”

“There will be multiple systems against dishonorable actions in place,” Flores states calmly, “But I will caution you all - just preemptively - that if you think the drones and the monitors are the only things keeping track of you, you’re very, very wrong.”

The room falls silent again, and Flores sighs, “Only the drones matter in terms of the Evasion aspect of the simulation. And we will use the wrist monitors to know your precise location in case of an emergency situation. But there are and always will be other precautions in place to protect you all.”

The mess hall remains silent, as Flores looks them over, asking one last time, “Any more questions -”

And Gabriel raises his hand -

At the exact same time as Jack.

They look at each other, and Jack gives Gabriel a chagrined grin, starting to lower his hand but -

Gabriel smirks at him, before flicking his gaze back to Flores, nodding to her.

“...Very well,” Flores says, “Soldier: 76, your question is…?”

“Oh, uh,” Jack mutters, before saying more clearly, “Are we allowed to discuss this simulation with each other today, ma’am?”

Gabriel blinks once in surprised -

And then

He *grins* a deep, wry, knowing smile.

Flores also blinks, before looking back at some of the other directors, asking them, “We aren’t prohibiting that, right?” The other directors also looks at each other, with one of them - Guerra - muttering, “I don’t see why we would stop them.”

“There you have it,” Flore says, turning back towards the soldiers, “Feel free to talk about this amongst yourselves. The goal is teamwork, after all.”

And she turns her attention back towards Gabriel, asking him, “What was your question, Soldier: 24?”

And Gabriel just chuckles casually, “Oh no, ma’am, don’t worry - *he* already asked it.”

Jack looks at him with something close to surprised wonder on his face -

And Gabriel smirks at him.

---

(10 minutes later)
"Thank you for staying, soldiers."

After the others had left from breakfast, Soldiers: 1 - 24 had stayed at the behest of Flores, Carolina Luna, the 18Z who was getting promoted to lead one of the ODBs for SEP, and Marc Guerra, the CIA SAD agent who was running the intelligence and reconnaissance training portions of the program.

"Let me guess," Gabriel asks dryly, "We get extra homework, do we?"

Some of the others chuckle at that, including Luna, who smirks, but Flores and Guerra give him bland looks.

"Knock it off, 24," Guerra warns him, as Flores sighs, "Well, yes, we’re requesting extra work from you. But these people are going to be your soldiers, your teams."

The “senior” SF soldiers shut up at that.

"We want your additional assessments when the simulation is done," Flores continues, even-toned, "Maybe this will be easy for some of you, but maybe for others this will be a harsh reminder of what it means to be an active wartime Green Beret. It does not stop snowing in Detroit, no matter if humans or robots inhabit the city."

Gabriel sees Carlos and Luisa share looks over that, and Gabriel reaches out and pats her shoulder. They know where Luisa is from.

"We expect you to take this simulation seriously, and act as future 180A’s and 18Z’s should," Luna says, taking over for Flores. The future ODB commander sighs, "We don’t expect you to be impartial observers - if you want to form teams or help other candidates, it’s your choice. But we do expect you to at least try to approach the juniors and 18Xer’s, and we do expect you to think critically about which of them show growth and improvement, along with what operational specialties best suit them, especially the 18Xer’s. Remember, you are going to be the ones organizing and leading them into some of the most dangerous missions in this war."

She makes specific eye contact with Gabriel over that, before asking coolly, "Any questions, soldiers?"

Gabriel casually lifts his hand. Luna gives him a deadpan look before muttering dryly, "What is it, Reyes?"

"More a suggestion than a question," Gabriel says, chuckling over the way she mutters his name. But his humor grows more contemplative as he chooses his words carefully, his thoughts racing so fast that he has to slow them down just to say, “Would it be possible for the soldiers here to get extra supplies? Food, medkits, firestarters -"

"Dude, you want extra cans of tuna that badly?" Soldier: 05, Michael Tsang, laughs and a few others chortle at that. Gabriel makes a bland, unimpressed face over that, before he states with a sarcastically obnoxious twist, “No, Tungtsang, I just want to make you carry more cans of overharvested, mercury-rich fish -"

Carlos chokes on a laugh as Luisa buries her face in her hands in embarrassment. None of the directors look impressed as Guerra mutters, “Get to your point, 24.”
“...Anyways,” Gabriel sighs, before pulling the words from his tumbling, churning thoughts, “My point was that if you want us to help you, or help...assess the other candidates, giving us a few extra chips to play with won’t hurt.”

Guerra scowls in concentration as Luna grows thoughtful over his statements. Gabriel sees his opening, and continues, “Basically, it would help us if we could walk into a group of 18Xer’s with some extra tuna or granola bars or something and offer to share it with them. One of the fastest ways to build trust is through sharing food or patching up wounds - it will be easier to get a sense of personality and teamwork if we have something positive to offer from the outset.”

The group is silent when Gabriel finishes, and -

Shit, did I go too far? he wonders, thinking about how to backtrack from the overwhelming “coldly calculating aspect” of his reasoning, especially as he hears someone down the table mutter lowly, “Just like a Fox -”

“Soldiers: 21, 22, and 23,” Flores suddenly states, making Alicia, Mary, and Felix (all scattered across the table) jump a little at the sudden commands. The general continues, “Do you agree with Soldier: 24’s request?”

The three of them glance between each other, before Mary Nakamura (Soldier: 22) finally says, “He’s right, of course. Food is the great unifier, especially in stressful or survival situations.”

“Food or medical supplies would be a huge bonus,” Felix Ochoa (Soldier: 23 and his roommate) agrees. Felix makes eye contact with him and nods, adding, “Even if you don’t get to learn much about the candidates, you’ll establish a connection with the ones you break bread with. People remember that kind of stuff.”

“If I can chime in,” says Soldier: 15, Ahmed Shakir. The group glances at him, and he looks at some of the other 18D’s, saying cautiously, “I don’t know about the other medics, but just carrying a few extra bandages or alcohol wipes or hot packs would ease up on my stresses. I know the doctors will be watching the wrist monitors, but you never know if you’ll come across a candidate with signs of frostbite or a minor infection.”

“Yeah, and I don’t trust half of them to self-administer those injections,” agrees Soldier: 12, Riya Naidu. She folds her arms, sighing, “I know those things are basically designed to be foolproof, but any time a non-trained individual handles needles, something goes wrong. And while the cold is better for cuts than Fort Bragg’s humidity, someone will mess up somehow.”

“Alright,” General Flores states, silencing them with her voice alone. She glances among the soldiers, asking, “Those in favor of extra supplies - strictly to assist the other candidates - raise your hands.”

Without hesitation -

All 24 soldiers raise their hands.

“Alright, we will give you some extra supplies to pack before the end of the day,” she concludes, and when none of the directors are looking, Carlos leans back over the table to offer a fist bump to Gabriel. Gabriel knocks his knuckles against Carlos’, before returning his attention to the general as she asks, “Any other ideas or questions?”

In near unison, they all reply, “No, ma’am.”

“...Keep them safe,” she murmurs, before grinning, “And hopefully, keep them paint-free.”
(An hour later)

"Nervous?"

Jack jumps slightly at the suddenness of Gabriel’s voice about an hour later, but it had been too amusing to watch Jack concentrate hard on packing. The door to Soldiers 75 and 76’s room was open, as were many others, as the juniors and 18Xer’s scramble to pack all their gear, flitting in and out of each other’s rooms with swapped supplies.

Jack chuckles weakly, “God, Gabe, you’re like a ghost sometimes - how long have you been there?”

Long enough to know you’re actually real attractive when you concentrate, Gabriel thinks, but he’d bites back the words, rasping out instead, “Long enough to know you made your hair even more of a mess, Indy.” Jack immediately presses a nervous hand to his untamed, unruly blonde fluff, muttering something about, “I get bad bedhead” and “bad habit” as Gabriel leans against the doorframe, still highly amused and quite self-satisfied.

Gabriel’s eyes roam over the items laid out neatly across Jack’s bed, everything following the “items to bring” list to a tee: one heavy, fleece jacket, two sets of pants and shirts, two sets of cold weather pants and shirts, several pairs of wool socks, a compass, matches, a lighter, a firestarter magnesium bar, a small towel, gloves, combat knife, medical pack, standard pouches, the full works.

Gabriel raises his eyebrows in mock surprise, chuckling wryly, “Well, well, what a boy scout you must’ve been, huh? What’s their motto - always prepared? You wanna pack my stuff for me?”

“Why - you gonna make it worth my time if I do?” Jack teases back, before adding quietly, “Nah, I was never a scout… But my family was always big on the camping thing, I guess. So I’m not nervous about the shelter and fire parts of it…”

Gabriel watches him for a moment, before asking with a calm but wry chuckle, “Nervous about getting paintballed?”

Jack gives him a sly grin, muttering with his own low laugh, “Bones heal, pain is temporary, and scars look good, so no, a few bruises don’t scare me.” He grows a little more serious as he says, “No, it’s the injections that cause permanent and possibly harmful changes to our bodies that have me...second-guessing things.”

Jack scowls absently at the items on his bed, that look of heavy concentration gracing his statuesque features as he murmurs distantly, “Skipping injections and then forcing double or triple the dose on a single day sets off all my alarm bells. Gene therapy requires smaller doses and diligent monitoring - the bigger the dose, the higher the likelihood that something could go wrong.”

Well, Gabriel thinks, smirking slightly as watches Jack think over the problem, You are actually pretty fast. They stay like that until Jack jumps a little, laughing slightly, “But I’m probably overthinking it, huh -”

“It’s a question of values.”

The nervous smile drops from Jack’s face as Gabriel feels his thoughts rush and leap and press
forward forward forward, all of them clamoring to get out, get out, get out of his head and he scowls slightly, trying to get them to focus -

“What could be more valuable than health?” Jack asks him quietly but curiously, “Are you suggesting that they would risk some of us getting bad injections for a single...SERE experiment?”

And Gabriel’s churning, thundering thoughts settle a little at the low, calm sound of his voice -

“It’s not that...well, not in the way you’re thinking,” Gabriel says, feeling his focus sharpen slightly, “The risk in the experiment is in the very real possibility that some soldiers will get hypothermia. Realistically, the doses that are sitting out in those remote refrigerators are gonna be less than what we normally get anyways, or they’re full of stuff that doesn’t have the risk of mutating or deforming with temperature changes. The buffer gene stuff. So on the totem pole of ‘problems,’ bad doses are almost negligible. There’s no need to add that shit to the complexity of the situation.”

Gabriel lifts his gaze, and finds that those deep, seadrenched blue eyes are watching him so intensely he almost stutters under their density, but somehow he manages to say coolly, “Don’t get me wrong - the valuable part of the whole program is on the injections, but that isn’t the valuable part of this particular survival simulation.”

Jack scowls back, asking lowly, “...So what is?”

Gabriel levels a calm, assessing look at him, before the older soldier smirks, muttering, “You’re the one that asked the question about the drones, Juan.”

Jack’s scowl deepens as his eyes grow a little wider over the realization, as Gabriel gives a smoky laugh, “They’re not sentient, of course, and all they shoot is paintballs, but that’s not really the point.”

Jack’s face flickers through a series of bewildered, almost lost emotions before he finally reaches some sort of internal conclusion and -

A small shiver - a good, surprisingly pleasant shiver of surprise - fissions across Gabriel’s skin at the look of fierce determination on Jack’s face.

What a good look on you, soldier.

“...Don’t get so caught up in the ‘enhancement’ part that you forget the ‘soldier’ part, Indy,” Gabriel chuckles low at him, “Good genetics beat luck any day, but skilled intelligence will overcome everything else.”

“...Right,” Jack murmurs, that look of determination still strong on his features, but his face softens slightly as he grins, saying, “Thanks for the advice, Gabe.”

“Well,” Gabriel huffs, smiling faintly, “You’re the one who asked the good questions this morning.” He makes a deadpan, bland expression, mostly at himself as he adds, “It’s been so long since I’ve been an 18 Delta that sometimes I forget about even the basic medical questions.”

Jack blinks once, before he raises an eyebrow in utter bewilderment, asking slowly, “Wait...you were a medic?”

“Once upon a time,” Gabriel starts to say, when there’s a voice over his shoulder, saying, “Jack, hey, do you have - oh sorry, sir -”

Gabriel glances over his shoulder at some dark-haired 18Xer he’s seen sitting with Jack a few times,
before turning to slide out of the doorframe, apologizing, “No, sorry, kid - didn’t mean to take up the whole space. He’s all yours.”

Gabriel weaves around the other candidate to head back towards the 1-24 hallway, when -

“Gabe!”

He looks back over his shoulder to where Jack is leaning out of his doorframe, the other 18Xer looking highly amused by the situation. Jack beams at him, grinning as he says coyly, “I don’t care what the others say - you’re pretty okay at this motivational speech thing!”

Gabriel blinks once, starts to smile, “Oh, thanks - wait.”

He scowls, muttering loudly, “What do the others say about me? And just okay??”

But Jack just smirks victoriously at him, before “Soldier: 76” turns his attention to the other candidate.

Gabriel scowl-pouts a little, then turns and continues on his way.

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(Monday, January 21st - first day of “Survival and Evasion,” just after sunset)

He arrives a little late to the “meeting range” at the base of the central mountain.

If this particular peak has a name, Gabriel doesn’t know it off the top of his head - despite the directors giving Soldiers: 1 - 24 extra supplies “only so you can be better leaders for the other candidates,” they had insisted on not giving them maps, so Gabriel had spent most of the first day just gaining his bearings. He’d been led out as part of “Group H” - each group of 11 randomized candidates had hopped on a transport ship, which had flown them off in different directions. Somehow (and Gabriel is a little skeptical over the “randomized” part), he’d ended up in the same group as Carlos, who’d been too sleepy to chatter at him on the flight, and Jack, who’d been vastly more alert and awake than the other ten candidates, sitting close to that dark-haired 18Xer Gabriel had seen yesterday. Few words had been exchanged, with Gabriel peeking towards Jack every so often -

Only to catch those deep blue eyes hastily glancing away from him.

Once they had landed at their “randomized” location, one of the guards helping manage the program had marched out in a southwest direction until said guard leading them had looped them in circles a few times, told them to pull hoods and beanies down over their eyes, and led them to “randomized” drop off points. Gabriel had been left alone in a downslope into a small finger ridge valley stemming off some larger mountains, and - as they had been instructed - he had waited until the clock on his wrist monitor had said 0800 exactly before he started moving.

He hadn’t gone too far initially - just up to a slightly better viewpoint, sticking close to the trees. His rough sense of temperature had put the morning climate at about 25 degrees, but with the sun rising overhead and some decent cloud coverage, the warmth rose to an almost balmy mid-30’s by two hours in.
So Gabriel had dug in at his new vantage point, constructing a quick snow shelter beneath the trees - 
*protect yourself from the infrared imaging first,* he’d told himself, *Worry about getting a fire going once you’ve picked a more permanent location.* And then he had settled in -

And waited.

He’d pulled one of his notebooks out of his pack and quickly mapped out the range he was on, jokingly dubbing the tallest point in his mini-valley “San Gabriel.” Hell, he’d still been snorting over his own dumb joke when the first drone had flown by.

It had passed probably...three hundred, four hundred feet east of his location, heading south, and he’d almost missed it against the glare of the sun, but it had missed him just as easily beneath the secluded snow shelter. He’d immediately started timing it as it zoomed around the mini-valley, marking out a rough estimate of 40-45 miles an hour or 20 meters a second, thinking calmly to himself, *Kinda slow compared to some of the handhelds they give the 18Cs and Es, but they must have a longer battery life and farther range.* He’d even doodled a small sketch of it, making note of the time when it had shown up.

And then -

He had cautiously left “Snow Fort 1” and trekked up the ridge to the north-northeast.

Gabriel had been slow and steady upon reaching the top, dropping to a slow crawl near the crest. Once there, he’d peeked over, observing the next valley down -

And immediately had seen another drone in the distance.

He’d slipped over the ridge when that one had faced the opposite direction, slipping down to the next patch of pine trees, quickly semi-burrowing himself into a hasty snow shelter before he’d watched it fly off to the west-southwest, much like how the one that had passed him earlier moved mainly southwest.

*So they radiate outwards from fixed points,* Gabriel had concluded, noting that down and sketching out that valley and ridgelines, being sure to add the paths for the second drone when -

BANG!

That exact drone close to him (although “close” had been a generous term, as it had been something like a half-kilometer away) had fired off one paintball -

BANG!

And then a second -

Before it had suddenly *dove* closer to the treeline.

From his hiding spot, Gabriel had watched the distant dot of the drone hover around a patch of dense trees on the opposite side of the valley from him, thinking, *God, that looks terrifying.* The drone had bobbed and weaved, almost *birdlike* as it had “hunted” for whatever sorryass soldier it had spotted. After about one, two minutes of “searching,” the drone had given up, rising back to its normal altitude and speeding off on its original path.

As it had disappeared past the western rise -

Gabriel had crept out from “Shitty Snow Fort 1” -
And set off in the direction of the other candidate(s) in the valley.

*In theory,* he’d thought on his little hike, *If they always fly that high, it would be wiser to stay closer to the dips and valleys, but could that be a herding technique? Lead the enemy into thinking the lower points are more protected from observations, before striking with an ambush? It would be an easy way for a non-organic being to gain an advantage.*  He’d sighed just thinking about it, adding darkly, *Doesn’t help that water obviously flows down and inward, so the likelihood of humans staying close to the lower points of a valley would be an easy assumption for a bot to make.*

...*Detroit is flat as fuck,* Gabriel had thought, *And Seattle is too flat in parts, with too much open water for mountain warfare tactics. Houston is also flat, but...*

His thoughts had grown darker and more solemn almost immediately as he’d grimaced over the last one:

*Bakersfield...would be the place to test this out.*

True, the city itself was flat as all hell, but the proximity of the Sierra Nevadas to the east and the Transverse Ranges to the south would make the place an ideal “real test” for this kind of situation.

The thought alone had frustrated him.

When he’d arrived at the rough area of where the drone had searched, Gabriel had immediately seen signs of the other candidate: clumsy footprints dragging themselves through the snow, hasty running tracks, several snapped and broken scrub brushes, their branches mostly bare in the cold winter -

All across a wide open “clearing” between patches of trees.

*Reckless dumbass,* Gabriel had tittered to himself, making a quick mark on his map of the valley, before he’d returned to his journey north.

Much to Gabriel’s surprise, over the next ridge, he’d come across one of the “remote storage facilities” with a drone circling the valley around it.  Gabriel had watched the drone for several long minutes to observe its pattern - it made something of a zigzag star shape before it would “peek” out over the surrounding ridges - before he slipped in under tree cover on one of its “outer” motions.  The storage facility had basically been a single room concrete shed, with the refrigerators holding the serums on one wall, extra food stocks (partially raided) on the opposite wall, and then extra medkits and fire starters on the third wall.  There had been a rather obvious series of cameras strung up in the trees outside the facility, but true to the general’s word, none of them had called the drone back to the shed off its pattern, so Gabriel had ducked inside, grabbed the auto-injector labeled “Soldier: 24” and -

Then he had paused, thought his wildass idea over -

And then sighed to himself.

He had settled himself in a corner of the shed, pulling out his notebook and writing two quick chicken-scratch notes:

“16, I took your serum. Find me at the meeting place. -24”

And

“23, I took your serum. Find me at the meeting place. -24”
Carlos (Soldier: 04) had apparently already passed through, as his serum container was gone. Gabriel had pulled Luisa (16) and Felix’s (23), stuffing them into his bag and leaving the notes in their spots, getting ready to leave when -

Serum 76 had caught his eye. Gabriel had paused, debating if he should take it, before he had decided to leave it instead, but had pulled out his notebook again to write down:

“Hope you’re being smart, soldadito.”

He’d ripped that corner off the page and then tucked the small slip of paper around Jack’s serum.

And then, after waiting to watch the drone head back out in a different direction -

Gabriel had darted back out into the trees.

Once he was safely out of the range of the sentry drone, Gabriel had hunkered down and pulled up several sleeves to expose the crook of his right elbow. *Mamá always said I had thick skin, but I guess she never meant it like this*, he’d humored himself, smacking the skin at the crease a few times to try and get a vein to pop. It had taken a minute or two, but once a decent one appeared - shadowy blue under his dark skin - he pulled out his serum container, pressing the button for the small auto-injector needle to deploy. He had grit his teeth, and sunk the needle in the vein, wincing slightly as the injector had disposed the thick “enhancement” solution into his blood. Though the procedure took all of thirty seconds, the feeling had lingered with him all day - a sore spot in his arm and a feeling of restless, hungry, pounding energy in his body for hours.

After that, it had been “hide and seek” with the drones most of the day - up and down, hide and camp, draw and take notes, monitor the drone patterns and steadily move northward towards the central peak, where the 1-24’s had decided to settle some sort of small base camps to exchange information. Gabriel had been deliberately slow, sticking in places longer than necessary to take additional notes and watch for more drones and possible campfires.

Just before sundown, he’d started his last trek for the day to the base of the central mountain. Though they hadn’t been given maps, the brief display that the directors had displayed at breakfast on Sunday morning had shown that the area “permitted” to SEP by the national forests encircled the main facility, so the 1-24 group had decided on four quick points (the highest peaks in the four cardinal directions) to try and meet at each night. Whoever arrived first would “start the base camp, close to the base of the mountain, on the downslope facing in towards the main facility.”

So it’s just after the sun itself has disappeared from his view, dipping behind the mountain peak and casting long, thick shadows between the trees when Gabriel finally spots the first marker.

*Oh thank god*, he grumbles internally, spotting the arrow pointing straight ahead carved into a tree, *Thought I might be the first one here.* He pulls his notebook out of his pocket, scribbles the first arrow into its rough location on his map, and then continues forward, repeating the process with each arrow he comes across until -

“Hey-o!”

Gabriel squints between the shadows before he spots a low line of “snow walls” built into a rough circle between the trees. Sighing with a mixture of relief and exhaustion, he paces himself the last few meters into the “camp,” which looks...well -

Almost nothing like a standard “recreation” camp -
And more like a small series of networked walls and subtle burrows.

It’s difficult to see in the dim lighting, and - very briefly - Gabriel pulls out his flashlight to light up the area, scanning it real quick before he tucks it away: there are three small Dakota fire pits that some brave assholes had managed to dig out from under the snow and pine litter, but only one is currently in use, with three squat figures huddled around it. Spaced out around the fire pits, ranging anywhere from about a meter to two to three meters away, are some small snow shelters - many of them are dug up into the slope, looking like small bumps in the snow with holes beneath them, but there are at least two simple, single-person A-frames built between some of the trees, the snow packed in over them to both insulate and “conceal” them. They’re modestly more permanent, which means the base camp won’t move too much from this location in the event the collected soldiers have to scatter, and the semi-constructed “snow walls” surrounding the rough perimeters will keep the camp a little bit warmer overall.

“Sup, Gabe?” Gabriel hears from that all-too-familiar voice, a wry chuckle lilting through the syllables of his nickname, and he rolls his eyes as he approaches the fire pit, muttering, “I knew you were out here somewhere, Carlito.”

“T ook you long enough to get here,” Soldier: 08, Gení Oliveira, grumbles at him, and Gabriel grins at her in the dim lighting, snarking, “I take it the A-frames are your handiwork, Ms. 18C?”

The combat engineer shakes her head at him disapprovingly, tittering, “Is that why all you assholes showed up ‘fashionably late?’ So you wouldn’t have to help me with digging the pits and making the shelters?”

“Uh, excuse me, I helped,” another familiar voice - his roommate Felix - hisses back from somewhere in the distance. Gabriel dumps his pack on the edge of the fire circle, before sliding in closer and sighing with small happiness as the low, concealed warmth of the fire drifts over him, just enough to help take the frosty edge off. As expected, the “stealthy” fire pit - more of a hole with an intake airflow tunnel coming off the side - burns warmest at its core, and the small pot of steaming water covering it absorbs most of the heat, but Gabriel’s grateful just for the thin wafts of warmth radiating off of it.

“I can’t believe you built three of these,” he mutters as he slides in closer to Carlos, who makes some extra room for him. Gení rolls her shoulders, saying, “Didn’t know how many of us were gonna get here - you can use one of the other ones if you want. Five people is kind of a lot for this water.”

“You got a cup, Reyes?” Soldier: 18, María Manalo, asks him. Gabriel sighs, rising again as he says, “Yeah, let me grab it -”

“Go claim a snow cave while you’re at it, Gabe,” Felix says, appearing from among the trees. He slips through a small break in the snow wall surrounding the main fire pit they’re using, settling in next to María, adding blandly, “Commander Oliveira over there made me dig like six of them, I want someone to use them. Also, when did we start calling you ‘Gabe?’”

Gabriel can feel the smile spread on Carlos’ face behind him, and even though he’s out of the fire pit circle, he whips around in the semi-darkness, hissing, “Carlos Jose Rives Garcia, I swear to God -”

“The better question isn’t when, Felix, but who started calling him ‘Gabe,’” Carlos replies, the glee thinly veiled in his voice, and an embarrassed flush rises to Gabriel’s neck and cheeks as he hears the other three start a low chorus of “oooooh.”

“Dammit, Carlos, why can’t you just be chill about this?” Gabriel mutters loudly, grabbing his pack. Carlos laughs low, teasing him, “I’ll be chill about this when you’re chill about this, Gabrieltito. One
of the 18Xer’s has already given him a nickname -”

“Oh, is it that cute blonde guy who sits with y’all sometimes?” Felix asks as María whistles, “Damn, Reyes, only three weeks in and you already got one of the rookies thirsty for you?”

“Look, Jack is not doing that - he’s just being friendly -” Gabriel starts to protest, as he heads back towards the circle but -

“Ooooh, his name is Jack, huh?” Geni laughs as Felix grins at him in the low light, muttering, “Just ‘friends,’ huh?”

“He’s actually more of a snarky jackass, but sure, let’s say we’re friends or whatever,” Gabriel states blandly, before digging into his pack and pulling out Felix’s serum, adding sarcastically, “And speaking of being friends, don’t say I didn’t try, Ochoa.”

“Oh, thanks, dude,” Felix perks up leaning over the snow wall to take the serum from Gabriel’s hand, “I spotted a shed north of here but figured I’d go back tomorrow to grab it.”

“This one is from the south-southwest,” Gabriel explains, before nodding to Carlos as he mutters, “I saw that asshole over there already found his.”

“What can I say - they basically dropped me off there, figured I should grab one and not worry about it for a couple of days.” Carlos says casually. Gabriel feigns a sneer at him, chuckling, “Nice of you to leave a note for the rest of us.”

“Oh, shit, I didn’t even think of that,” his friend hums, “Well, cut me some slack, it was like eight in the morning and I wanted to get in and get out.”

“You got a mark for it, Gabriel?” Geni asks him, and, as he starts to head off towards some of the snow caves, Gabriel calls back lowly, “Yeah, I drew up some maps, give me a second.”

Gabriel marches over to one of the caves, grumbling about “Carlos, that asshole” under his breath. The first one has a small stake in the ground next to it, but the next one three meters over is free, and Gabriel crawls his way inside. Despite Felix’s grumbling, Geni had apparently done a good job (or at least a good job instructing him) - the tunnel is spacious enough for his large frame to wiggle in without collapsing it, and the two-tiered platforms inside are solidly compacted, with a bed of pine boughs and needles on the slightly higher, slightly warmer sleeping section. Gabriel tugs out his flashlight and, working relatively quickly, pulls out his military-grade “sleeping system” (a fancy way to describe a multi-layer sleeping bag) and unpacks it, rolling it out over the pine needle “bed.” Otherwise, he leaves his pack tucked against his sleeping bag, digging out his canteen, accompanying cup, an electrolyte packet, a can of tuna, and a granola bar, stuffing them into his jacket pockets before he crawls back out.

Outside, Gabriel spots a freshly-fallen pine stick and plants it in the ground by his cave, before he trudges back over to the pit, where the others are talking in low murmurs.

“- I saw four candidates but only spoke with two of them,” Carlos is in the middle of saying as Gabriel approaches, sighing, “I helped them get started with their fire pit and left them some of my extra food, but I told them I was going to look for others and check in on them in the morning.”

“I spotted like four or five people in my area,” Gabriel mutters, sliding back in by Carlos, slumping back against the snow wall. He sighs, “Didn’t meet up with any of them, and I’m pretty sure one of them got paintballed this morning, but I was more interested in the drones to start with.”

“Same,” Felix says as María gestures to Gabriel. He leans forward, pulling his canteen cup out, and
she pours some of the boiled water into it. Even through the gloves, Gabriel relishes the warmth of it, leaning back against the wall as Felix sighs, “Seems pretty ineffective to try and help the new kids when you don’t even know the drone patterns.”

“What do you guys think?” María asks as Gabriel tears the packing for the electrolytes and dumps the powder into his water. The old comms sergeant glances through them, saying, “I’m thinking at least twenty total drones, but more likely twenty-four, twenty-five.”

“The majority of the ones I’ve seen have been operating in some sort of clock pattern,” Gabriel mutters, before slowly taking a sip of the water. The flavor is god awful and the heat of it slightly burns his tongue, but the warmth going down is a welcome relief, and he sighs heavily, “The ones I saw in my sections were rotating outwards on, like, clock segments, and would come back ‘in’ towards the main facility on the next number up.”

“Yeah, that’s what I got too,” Felix agrees, before pulling out his notebook. Gabriel wiggles to reach his pocket, pulling out his own, as the other ex-18Fer says, “I was north, northwest of here and came back inwards, but almost everything I saw was coming up from the south, southwest and moving in north, northeast, but the shed I spotted was being guarded by a drone that seemed ‘pinned’ on it, if that makes sense.”

“Makes sense,” María mutters, retrieving her own notebook to write down what they’re saying, “I suspect that circle we saw yesterday morning is close to the outer limit of their ranges, which means we likely have twelve of them operating in the in-and-out rotation - Gabriel, where was your southwestern shed?”

“Here,” Gabriel mumbles, flipping to his map of the second mini-valley and holding it out for the others to see. María squints in the dim light before scribbling down her own rough drawing, as do the others, but it’s the ex-comms sergeant who says allowed, “So I’m thinking...twelve drones that rotate, but at every...‘even’ clock segment, there’s a remote facility, so that’s six additional drones to monitor those -”

“So we’re up to eighteen of these assholes?” Geni grumbles, but María holds up a finger, cautioning them, “I wouldn’t say that. I think there are at least three or four dedicated to the outer perimeter - they don’t want candidates leaving the range, and even though they have the wrist monitors to ping more precise points, they’ll be expecting some of the candidates to try and get to the farthest edges and hole up there. Conversely, there’s probably at least one, maybe two drones circling the main facility, so that no one can be sneaky and stay close to the base and draw heat off the top of it. So eighteen, plus a minimum four or five more...”

María shrugs, concluding, “Twenty-four or twenty-five just to round out the number.”

“...Kind of a big system for such a small, shadyass program, don’t you think?” Felix says slowly, and he makes eye contact with Gabriel over the lip of Gabriel’s cup. Gabriel nods a little, taking a sip and mumbling, “This ain’t the directors’ first rodeo with this drone system, I can bet you that much. And this ain’t gonna be the last time we’ll see them in a SERE simulation either.”

“You think these are the next upgrade for the comms sergeants?” María speculates, “I wouldn’t mind getting my hands on one of them, but they’re a little bulky to carry around compared to our minidrones.”

“I doubt it,” a new, also familiar voice says on the edge of their camp, as Luisa’s shadow stumbles into the half-light around the fire pit.

“Eyyyyy, Luisita!” Carlos beams at her and Gabriel holds up a fist in her direction. Luisa knocks her
own knuckles against his, slumping in next to Felix on the other side of the fire pit wall, sighing, “Ran into a lone 18Xer on the way here and had to help her build her shelter and pit. God, I’m exhausted.”

“Get your canteen cup,” María instructs her, and Luisa leans over, digging into her pack. As she pulls the cup out, Luisa mutters, “They might let us play with the drones later, but I think a system like this is almost certainly designed for an ODB or regional command center. They wouldn’t let an ODA handle something this big.”

“A pity,” María says to the other ex-18E, pouring her some hot water, “A network like this would be a huge asset in the field, especially if we could, like, give each ODA member a personal drone and the 18E’s could run the network.”

“God, that would be the dream,” Felix sighs airily as Luisa pours her electrolyte packet into the water. Gabriel downs the rest of his, snorting, “Yeah, and I’ll believe it when I see the budget for that. We know they barely fund the 18E’s equipment as is - they ain’t gonna pony up for something like that.”

“A budget personal drone barely costs shit though,” María counters, and Gabriel chuckles, “Yeah, and they’ll just tell you to build your own. Don’t get me wrong, Manalo - that kind of aerial, rapid relay network sounds amazing, but if they give you shoestrings for a conventional radio, they won’t be giving ODAs that kind of equipment until well after everyone sitting here is retired.”

That gets the group to fall silent, until Carlos murmurs, “To be fair, Gabrielito, this is an experimental program - they might be willing to try it if we persuade them. I mean, you got them to give us extra supplies for this, uh, ‘simulation,’ or whatever they’re calling it.”

“...Those are for the other candidates, Carlos,” Gabriel mutters, and Carlos sighs, “No shit, Gabriel, I’ve already given some of mine to other people, remember? I’m just saying, if we sell the argument right, they might let the 18E’s see the drone network.”

“There’s no way.”

The group glances to Geni, who is scowling distantly at the water pot in the center, and she grumbles, “The damn bots have their own networks and have been EMPing the shit out of Detroit and Bakersfield. I agree with what everyone is saying, but when we get deployed, they aren’t going to give us anything electronic, not if the bots can hack or tap into them.”

“The fuck?” Felix says in disbelief, “That’ll put us back to like, Vietnam-style ODAs. Are they insane? We at least could use isolated, peer-to-peer or point-to-point networks.”

“I’m just telling you what my squad saw in Detroit before they broke us up for SEP,” Geni sighs, lifting her head to shrug at Felix, “The 18C’s and 18E’s got almost nothing - we had to beg just to keep the nanobots for the biotic fields for the 18D’s. Something about the possibility of the Omnics ‘corrupting’ the nanobot codes.”

“God, the way they talk about them, you’d think these Omnics are virtually godlike in their powers,” María retorts but -

“Some of them are,”

María falls silent, as she, Felix, and Geni peer at Luisa’s solemn, grim expression in the half-shadows.

Gabriel and Carlos say nothing -
As Luisa flicks her head towards them, saying quietly, “Our ODA was in Tlaxcala, helping train up the rural fighters out there to fight the drug cartels - just a standard foreign internal defense deployment, nothing special. We were on the edge of Mexico City on a day off when the…”

She pauses, exhaling slowly, glancing at Gabriel and Carlos when -

“Mexico City has something like 10 million people in the city proper,” Gabriel says slowly, distantly, still remembering how that early winter morning had gone - sun barely rising over the mountains to the east, the whole valley below a sea of streetlights and gilded glows -

“But there’s about 22 million people in the Valley of Mexico,” he continues, frustration and exhaustion and fear and restless, boundless energy all churning through him like a solar storm -

A fury that is ceaseless...eternal…

Undying

Inside him.

“People can talk about Paris, London, Shanghai, Tokyo at night,” Gabriel murmurs, with a bitter, obsidian-edged anger in his voice, “But Mexico City is beautiful when it’s lit up at night, and in the early sunrise, you can see why the Mexica built their capital city there centuries ago.”

Gabriel shuts his eyes -

And in his mind -

He remembers standing on the balcony of one of the small apartments their ODA was using as a safehouse, watching the valley of fallen stars and streetlights below him as the sun behind him lacquered the sky in rose gold and -

How the valley of the lake of the sun - so similar to his own valley of the angels - had suddenly

And swiftly -

Plunged into darkness

And abyssal smoke

As explosions and gunfire had shattered the dawn -

“...Oh holy shit,” Felix whispers in awe and horror as Geni mutters, “Wait...your ODA was in Mexico City on the Day of Crisis?”

The three of them are silent, until Carlos says quietly:

“...I still dream about those Bastions.”

And Gabriel doesn’t say it

But Luisa and Carlos know

He still dreams about them too.
The second day has been largely uneventful.

In the morning, the group that had spent the night there had parted ways - Carlos and Felix had both said they were going to try and circle the whole area in the five “simulation” days, with Carlos heading north-northeast and Felix heading south-southwest. María and Luisa had decided that two of the 18E’s being the same spot would be redundant, so María had headed south-southwest with Felix to try and reach the “southern” base camp by the end of the day. That left Geni and Luisa to “maintain” the western base camp, with Luisa saying she was going to try to get a more precise schedule for the rotating drones, but Gabriel had convinced her to at least head out north-northwest with him to find the “ten o’clock” remote facility.

“We both need that serum by tomorrow, and you wanted to see how the facility and rotation drones interact with each other, so let’s go look for it,” he’d offered. Geni had agreed to watch the camp (or rather, stay close to it) and help out any juniors and 18Xers who would potentially wander into the range, so with that in mind, Gabriel and Luisa had set out, taking a long route west-northwest, sweeping from “nine o’clock” towards “ten o’clock” and in towards “eleven o’clock.”

They had encountered a few more of the other candidates, giving them some of their extra tuna and granola bars, assessing their snow caves and fire pits, offering advice and changes. Most of the younger candidates (predominantly the 18Xers) had one or two paintball splatters, but even the two or three “junior” SFers that they had encountered had one, or admitted to having a close encounter with a drone.

“We could probably use a refresher course on thermal imaging,” Gabriel had said to Luisa during their “late lunch break” (a single granola bar and a pack of electrolyte powder). She’d nodded, “Seems that that could singlehandedly keep half of the new kids alive in a real scenario. It’ll be harder if they put them in Detroit or Seattle with how flat those cities are, but even teaching them heat insulation or heat deflection techniques could save some of their lives.”

“Bare minimum, it won’t hurt,” Gabriel had muttered, “And if we get ballsy, we could argue for space blankets or anti-infrared insulated clothing.” And then he’d scowled, grumbling, “Would be balls-hot in Houston and Bakersfield, but I’ll take being sweaty and alive over being cold and dead any day.”

“Eloquent as ever, Gabriel,” Luisa had mocked him, and they had settled in, waiting for the next “incoming” drone to arrive…

And waited…

And waited…

At about twenty minutes past when the drone had been due, Gabriel had murmured, “…Think it’s out hunting for someone?”

“…They give up faster than this,” Luisa had replied, and her confused scowl had said it all, even as she’d whispered, “This is…something else.”

“Think they could get glitched out? Frozen?” Gabriel had offered. Luisa had paused, humoring him, “Well…if someone at HQ isn’t paying attention, a battery might have died, but frozen? I doubt
that. They wouldn’t run these drones if the cold weather or a snowstorm could stop them, and with the cloud coverage, the area is going to be on the ‘warmer’ side anyways.”

“Should we go then?” Gabriel had asked, but Luisa had tapped a finger against her lips, murmuring, “...You can go ahead if you want. I want to see when the next one arrives. But be careful in case they’ve switched the pattern on us somehow.”

“Understood. I’ll meet you back at base camp then,” Gabriel had said, before sliding out of their hastily built snow fort to continue his rotation northward, “If I find the ‘ten o’clock’ facility, I’ll grab your serum again.”

“Gracias, Gabrielito,” she had hummed, and Gabriel had set off.

The rest of his solo-journey had been basically the same: map out the northern valleys and ranges for himself, scout out other candidates, “visit” with them for a short period of time, continue on his way. The “highlight” of his day had been leading a group of three 18Xer’s into the “ten o’clock” remote facility, all of them grabbing their serums (plus Luisa’s and Geni’s, which was still there), and then successfully sneaking back out. While they had been hunkered down inside the shed, Gabriel had spotted another “Serum 76” capsule, and hastily scrawled out another note:

“If you made it this far north, soldadito, then I’m impressed.”

And he’d stuff it by Jack’s capsule before they’d left.

Once they were safely outside, Gabriel had addressed the 18Xers.

“Good work,” he’d told them, but since it was all their first serums, he’d cautioned them, “Remember, when you go for the next one, it’s better to be patient than rush in. Tree and snow cover will help mask your image to the infrared cameras. If you need to take extra time to watch the drone pattern, do it.”

“Yessir,” they had intoned back to him, and Gabriel had waved before he’d started his journey back to base camp.

Much to his surprise, he returns before Luisa.

“Luisa’s not back yet?” Gabriel asks as he slides into the half-light of the fire pit circle. This time, Ahmed (15) and Mary (22) have joined Geni, waving to him as he approaches. Geni shakes her head, sighing, “I haven’t seen her since she left with you. Ahmed here says he crossed paths with Carlos going north.”

“I let him know where the northern base camp and the northern facility were,” the ex-medic says, before picking up another clump of tuna and stuffing it into his mouth. Ahmed makes a face, muttering sourly, “Lord save me, I hate this canned shit. I take it you found the 300 facility?”

“300?” Gabriel asks, prompting Ahmed to say, “Oh wait, you guys were using a clock - the 10 facility?”

“Oh, you guys were using angles,” Gabriel mutters, before sighing, “Yeah, yeah, found the ‘ten o’clock’ shed. Also, here, Geni -” he pauses, pulling out her serum and handing it to her, adding, “I’m saving mine for tomorrow morning. I got Luisa’s too.”

“Thanks, Gabriel,” Geni replies, taking it and tucking it into a pocket. Ahmed shakes his head, muttering, “That’s been the number one thing I’ve been helping with - they call those capsules ‘auto-injecting,’ but I swear, half the 18Xers have never seen a needle before.”
“Even some of the juniors,” Mary snorts, biting into a granola bar. She rolls her eyes, sighing, “The juniors have zero problems with their forts and their Dakota holes, but man, you ask them about the serums and it’s like they got shot.”

“You joke, but of the six juniors I saw today, at least four of them had paint on them,” Gabriel chuckles, filling up his canteen cup with the boiled water. As he pours an electrolyte packet into it, he mutters, “I think it’d be best if we get the directors to do a refresher course on thermal imaging - half these people have no idea that good tree or snow cover can exponentially decrease the effectiveness of infrared.”

“Fuck, I completely forgot about that,” Geni sighs as Mary groans, “God, I can’t believe it’s only day two - I feel completely out of it already.”

“You didn’t get snow in Japan?” Ahmed asks her and the other ex-18Fer rolls her shoulders, saying, “My last two deployments were in the Philippines and Malaysia - I haven’t been deployed to Japan in at least a year.”

“Seems odd they would send one of the Japanese-speaking teams that far out of your language area,” Geni says. Mary shrugs again, explaining, “We were doing FID in Malaysia and meeting with Japanese special ops in the Philippines.”

And then -

She scowls fiercely

As a soft glaze glimmers over her dark eyes

And she murmurs:

“...We didn’t get the worst of it on the Day of Crisis, but...Jakarta was obliterated almost immediately...and with Australia and Indonesia panicking...we just barely got extracted in time. Sometimes I still hear how our Japanese host mother screamed over the attack in Fujisawa -”

“Okay -” Luisa’s voice echoes quietly through the trees as she approaches, and all of them stop to look up at her. Her eyebrows are furrowed, her expression almost panicky as she murmurs, “Sorry to interrupt, Mary, but did anyone else notice...problems with the drone rotation today?”

Mary and Ahmed look at each other and shrug, but Geni says thoughtfully, “You know...one or two of them were...kinda late.”

“Okay, okay,” Luisa says, sitting down at the fire pit, looking a mixture of relieved and confused, “I was worried I had mistimed some of them.”

“So another one was late?” Gabriel asks her, pulling out his notebook to write the changes down. Luisa nods, saying, “Two were about a whole rotation behind schedule, and I was waiting on a third before I had to give up due to losing the daylight.”

“So they changed the pattern on us?” Ahmed asks, but Luisa shakes her head, saying, “No, I really don’t think they have...but there is something strange going on.”

“Is it possible they’re dedicating more resources to ‘chasing’ candidates?” Gabriel asks, thinking, Wouldn’t put it past the bastards running this program to amp up the difficulty as the days go on.

“It could be possible,” Luisa murmurs, but sighs, “But I really don’t think so. It’s true that would probably better simulate the Omnis, but that seems heavy-handed and probably unfair to the 18Xers
who have to try and think in terms of patterns and thermal imaging. If the goal now is simply survival and evasion, I can’t see the directors changing the patterns on the second day just to, I dunno, be sadistic.”

“We have drastically different opinions of our dear directors, then,” Gabriel mutters lowly. Ahmed makes a face at him, saying, “There’s a difference between wanting new soldiers to learn and grow, and punishing them for being inexperienced, Reyes.”

*And in a real war, that difference doesn’t exist,* Gabriel thinks, keeping the thought to himself as he murmurs, “I always was called a hardass, I guess, but changing the pattern on the second day is exactly what I would do.” But he lifts his gaze and smirks at the others, saying with a dry lilt, “But what do I know, right? They’re getting paid the six figs and we’re the ones injecting supersoldier juice into our arms.”

“I still find it hard to believe you were once an 18D with that bedside manner,” Ahmed says cautiously, borderline testily, and in his peripherals, Gabriel sees Mary and Geni make skeptical faces towards each other -

*That makes two of us, Ahmed,* Gabriel thinks quietly, but he grins, saying aloud, “Some people like the nurses with a bad streak, Shakir.”

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(Wednesday, January 23: 1940 p.m. - southern “1-24” base camp, “6 o’clock” position)

“Alright,” DeAndre Smith, Soldier: 19 and an ex-18E, says to the group currently eating “dinner” at the southern base camp, “We gotta talk about this drone problem.”

Gabriel forces himself to swallow the semi-frozen bite of tuna, hating every second as it slides down his throat, but he pays attention to the ex-comms sergeant, as do the four others sitting around the main fire pit at the southern base camp. Felix has apparently continued his journey, because while the “base manager,” Soldier: 09, Darryl Schwartz, said he’d slept there the last night, his roommate is nowhere near the southern base camp now. The group is made up of himself, DeAndre, Michael (05), Riya (12), Darryl (09), and Monique Carter (Soldier: 01), an ex-weapons sergeant, all sitting around sharing in their miseries on how constant hiking and sleeping in the snow on less than ideal rations is sapping their energies.

That day had been largely uneventful for Gabriel - he’d trekked south, curving southeast to find the southern base camp. He’d passed by his original starting position (even passing the “eight o’clock” remote facility he’d found on the first day), before he had pushed further south, briefly spotting by the “six o’clock” facility just to check on it. He’d been relieved to see that Felix had taken his serum, but had scowled over the other “Serum 76” still sitting there, writing a third note quickly:

“Are you okay, soldadito?”

Before leaving it with Jack’s capsule.

Otherwise, it had just been the biting cold, uneasy sleep and lack of real food, and the steady drain of marching through the snow that had started to wear on him and the other senior soldiers.

But DeAndre had just pointed out they had bigger problems.
“I’ve been keeping track of the drones that fly through here,” he says, pulling out his notebook to show them his handwritten schedule as he continues, “Been watching the ‘six o’clock’ or 180 or true south position, whatever you want to call it, and at this point, there are at least four gaps in the schedule.”

“They picked a new schedule, though?” Riya asks, pointing to the 11:00 am hour when the timetables had shifted to a more regular pattern. DeAndre nods, muttering, “Oh yeah, they tried to, but you can see that by like, 1800 hours they were off by one again.”

“Are you telling us that four or five of the rotation drones have just disappeared?” Michael asks in disbelief. Darryl and Monique share skeptical glances, but DeAndre just grits out, “Look, I’ve confirmed this with María too, and she was saying the same thing yesterday afternoon - drones are going missing. Gabriel, you see anything coming south from the west point?”

Gabriel frowns a little, pulling out his own notebook and trying not to get disgusting fish juice on the pages. His notes for today are a little scattered, but -

“...There was a long gap in the drones around the ‘seven o’clock’ and ‘eight o’clock’ positions,” he says, “That’s close to my original starting position - I recognize the main mountain out there, and ‘eight o’clock’ is where the southwestern remote facility is.”

“What time were you out there?” DeAndre asks, staring at his schedule. Gabriel pauses, thinking back, but the combination of that restless, edgy energy from the injections, lack of sleep, lack of food, and hard hikes for three days is easily draining his focus.

“God...I paused close to that mountain for a quick lunch break, so maybe about 1200 or 1300 hours?” Gabriel offers, adding quietly, “Next drone didn’t arrive for like...an hour past its expected time, maybe more. I almost fell asleep in my fort.”

“...No,” DeAndre mutters, “That’s when they had started correcting the schedule...no way did that gap show up that early, what the fuck.”

“So wait, hang on,” Darryl says, his face scrunching in concentration as he does some quick deductions, “Are you saying that in between the time of you, DeAndre, noticing a correction in the pattern, and Gabriel like, twenty miles west and a few hours of hiking away, another drone went missing?”

“...Wouldn’t that be the drone that started making the corrections?” Monique adds, “I mean, at least the corrected drone that DeAndre actually saw?”

The whole group looks at each other in quiet shock.

“We found the Bermuda Triangle of Idaho, y’all,” Gabriel says wryly as Riya sinks her head in her hands, grumbling something in Hindi. Michael raises an eyebrow at Gabriel, muttering, “Alright, Reyes, you said that was close to your starting point, right? Was there anything weird out there?”

“You mean besides snow?” Gabriel snarks flippantly. He receives bland, unimpressed looks all around, with Monique, the “number leader of the seniors,” sighing, “C’mon, Gabriel, at least try to work with us. Anything weird? Any high mountain points that could fuck up air currents or something?”

Gabriel sighs, glancing through his notes, muttering, “Legit, I don’t think there’s anything drastically different out there than the rest of this little mountain resort our wonderful directors have us operating. I was dropped off like - I don’t know - maybe two-thirds of the way through Group H’s
hike, so I guess there’s the possibility that some of them are still out there. How far out does this perimeter go?”

“From here going true south,” Darryl says, “You’ve got about another twenty-five or thirty miles to the end, so if you go in at an angle, you’re probably looking at thirty-five, forty miles?”

Gabriel groans at the mere thought of that, muttering, “Fuck me, that’s a ten to twelve hour hike - even if I leave at sunrise tomorrow, I’ll get out there well past sunset.”

Monique peers past the tree cover, muttering, “We’ve got cloud coverage coming in over the western edge - we could try setting out in a few hours, if you’re up for it?”

“Nah, Monique, don’t worry about this,” Gabriel sighs, checking his wrist monitor, “I can head out there alone when the cloud cover shifts. You’ve gotta stay in contact with the rest of the seniors and, fuck it, I got nothing better to do than work on this Scooby Doo mystery. If I need to, I can hunker down somewhere and get a few extra hours of sleep.”

“I’ll wake you up in a few hours,” Monique tells him, before nodding to his snow cave, “Go get some rest, Gabriel.”

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(Thursday, January 24th: 0925 hours - arrival at the “Bermuda Triangle of Idaho,” aka nearing the edge of the SEP training area at the “7 o’clock” position)

It has been

The longest ten hours

Of his goddamn life.

And Gabriel doesn’t have the motherfucking patience or energy to deal with dumbass 18Xers who can’t even conceal their fire smoke.

I don’t know what they’re doing to cause the equivalent of a drone traffic accident out here, he thinks, furious, as he begins the last upwards climb to the clearing where he saw the smoke trail, But holy shit are they going to fucking pay for the mere fact that I had to walk all fucking night just to yell at them.

Three-hundred push-ups each?

No -

He’s gonna make them do jumping jacks on a drone line and take all the fucking paintballs that come at them.

Gabriel can see the clearing through the shifting trees and he breathes a sigh of relief at the sight when -

“Freeze.”

It takes him an unbearably long second to realize that an unfamiliar masculine voice is talking to him
from over his right shoulder -

As not one -

But two goddamn gun muzzles press into his lower back, below his pack.

Gabriel’s mind feels painfully slow, but his hands are already reacting, rising in the air as he thinks, The directors didn’t mention we were doing an actual Battle Royale scenario -

“Alright, dude,” a second, unfamiliar masculine voice says, as a tall figure, dressed just like him in winter camo gear and a high neck gaiter over his nose, rotates around Gabriel’s left side. From the visible parts of his face, Gabriel can see dark, earth-toned skin and deep, surprisingly gentle eyes peering out from between his beanie and gaiter, and Gabriel casually flicks a glance to the “gun” in his hands and -

...Qué carajos

Is that a paintball rifle?

“We ain’t gonna do anything,” the guy in front of him says calmly, “Just state your Soldier number and name - but we gotta guide you to the real camp, okay?”

“Oh my god,” Gabriel states, starting to realize what the actual fuck is going on, “Oh holy shit, y’all are fucking geniuses -”

“Soldier number and name, sir,” the other guy asks politely, as the guy behind him taps him with the muzzle of the paintball rifle, saying a lot less politely, “C’mon, jerk, don’t make this hard, we’re all on the same side here.”

“Christ, alright,” Gabriel grumbles, stating as loudly as he can through his gaiter, “Soldier: 24, Gabriel Reyes. I got extra food and a spare tarp if y’all need stuff to bargain with.”

“Oh, Gabriel,” the first guy says, as both of the other candidates lower their “weapons.” The one in front of him tugs down his gaiter and Gabriel blinks once, then twice, before muttering, “...I know you -”

“Soldier: 75,” the other guy says with a proud grin, “Adrien Morris. I’m Jack’s roommate. Sorry, I don’t think we’ve really talked much.” Adrien holds out his hand, and Gabriel takes it, as the other dude - a shorter, paler guy - slides into view on his right, also tugging at his neck gaiter. Gabriel squints at him, his eyes bleary from the cold, long trek, but he recognizes him as the dark-haired 18Xer who knows Jack. Said 18Xer puts out his hand, stating, “Sorry for that, Sarah always says I have shit manners -”

“You do have shit manners,” Adrien mutters. The other rookie rolls his eyes, chuckling, “Soldier: 102, Wes Polizzi.” Gabriel shakes his hand, murmuring back, “Uh, I’ll be honest, this is one helluva introduction, kids. So you two have gone full Lord of the Flies or something?” Seems a little extreme for one week in the snow, Gabriel starts to think, when Adrien and Wes exchanging knowing smirks with each other.

Oh.

That’s a bad sign.

“Hey, ‘Commander!’” Wes shouts, and Gabriel - having only talked in like, low whispers for the better part of three days - nearly jumps at the “loud” volume of his voice. Wes continues, still with
that knowing grin on his face, “A new guy showed up!”

There’s the sound of a few more people crunching through the crisp snow around them and then -

A low, stormy voice made raspier by a clear lack of sleep mutters tartly:

“I told you guys not to call me that -”

Gabriel twists, eyes wide as

That tall, angular figure appears from among the shadows of the trees -

Tugging his own neck gaiter down from his nose and mouth -

And then -

Jack freezes

Those seadrenched blue eyes wide in shock and awe.

The two of them pause, staring at each other awkwardly, and Gabriel is dimly aware that at least one more person has joined Adrien and Wes on the edge of his vision -

“Oh,” Jack states with obvious exhaustion and blank surprise, “Uh, hi, Gabe.”

Gabriel gawks at him, quickly noting the way the sleepy and tired shadows have settled around the hollows of his eyes, and the way like, a day’s worth of bronzy blonde scruff graces his cut-angled cheeks and god, there is something embarrassingly attractive about seeing him look a little roughed up and -

Gabriel gives Jack a wide, massive, mischievous smirk as he chuckles, “So… ‘Commander,’ huh? Guess I really do need to call you sir now.”

A clear and obvious blush rises to Jack’s sun-kissed skin and Adrien chortles, “Oh my god, Jack, are you serious -”

“That beard is non-regulation, sir,” Gabriel teases him, stepping closer as his smirk only gets wider and Jack’s blush only gets deeper, only accenting how blonde his hair is and how blue his eyes are and -

“In...in case you hadn’t noticed,” Jack manages to stutter back, regaining some composure and that characteristic gleam in his eyes, before he fully taunts at Gabriel, “Lots of things are non-regulation around here, rookie.”

“...Good recovery,” Gabriel compliments him, as the newcomer - with an unfamiliar feminine voice - mutters behind him, “Uh, what the hell is happening?”

“You are gonna get a kick out of this, Sarah,” Wes whispers knowingly, and Jack peeks around Gabriel to glower at his friends, rumbling back, “Wes, for fuck’s sake -”

“The scruff looks good on you,” Gabriel teases him, and Jack almost chokes on his own air, as Sarah says very loudly, “Oooooooh, this is ‘Gabe,’ huh?”

“Do I know you?” Gabriel asks, turning towards her. Sarah shakes her head - she’s also carrying a paintball rifle, but she holds out her hand, introducing herself, “I’ve just, uh, heard a lot about you, sir. Soldier: 47, Sarah Hidalgo.”
“Uh, this has been an incredibly surreal morning, but it’s good to meet the people who tolerate Juanito,” Gabriel says blithely, shaking her hand as Jack makes more strangled sounds of horror behind him. All three of their smiles deepen, especially as Wes chortles, “Juanito.”

“So…” Gabriel says, glancing between the three of them and Jack, who looks like he’s suddenly become badly sunburned. Gabriel mutters slowly, “One of you cowpokes want to tell me what the fuck y’all are doing out here?” And then he stares pointedly at the gun in Adrien’s hands, adding wryly, “And how the fuck y’all got those?”

Gabriel flicks his gaze to Jack’s hands but -

He scowls

Because the “commander’s” hands are empty.

“We’re...uh,” Adrien starts to say, with Wes chiming in, “We’ve been, uh, busy -”

“Wait,” Sarah interrupts, an intense look crossing her face, “What time is it?”

Gabriel glances at his wrist monitor, saying coolly, “It’s 0929 -”

“Oh shit,” Adrien hisses, as Sarah turns and darts back into the trees, Wes following closely after her. Adrien also seems to vanish, and Gabriel finds his attention whipping back between the three shadows disappearing into the forest -

“What the shit -” he starts to say loudly when -

A hand clamps around his right wrist.

He twists back, to where -

Jack is staring at him intensely -

A long finger pressed to his lips.

...What the fuck, Gabriel barely has time to wonder before -

Jack turns, pulling him along a little, dragging him deeper into the trees. They slip around the edge of the clearing, skirting just outside the hem of the light, and Gabriel looks inward, towards the open space, where a very obvious trail of smoke blooms upwards from a half-buried fire pit.

Jack is still leading him along by the hand.

Gabriel does not shake him loose.

They slink to the space where the trees press the closest to the fire pit, which is only...three meters, nine or ten feet away, but Jack stays beneath the tree cover and shadows. He releases Gabriel’s wrist, before gently yet firmly holding up his right hand, pressing Gabriel back a ways. Gabriel takes a step, two steps back, standing beneath a pine tree with thick branches. He watches as Jack lifts his hand to his chest, silently adjusting something and then -

When his right hand returns -

Gabriel gawks

At the long, lethal combat knife in Jack’s loose grip.
...No, Gabriel thinks in amazement and disbelief, as Jack relaxes his stance, left foot slightly forward as he steadies himself and -

There’s a faint whistle from somewhere in the grove around the clearing and then -

Gabriel hears the steady, humming thrum -

As a drone descends into the clearing.

He stills his breathing, watching as the football-sized drone hovers over the fire pit, the small camera on its base swiveling and rotating around in its protective dome, scanning the pit and the surrounding area as it searches for other signs of thermal warmth.

And then -

Out from the trees nearby -

BANG!

BANG!

Two air rifle shots fire out -

One paintball splatters against the drone’s body shell, but the other pops right against the protective glass encasing the camera and -

The drone makes a strange, almost alarming whirring noise, shuddering and sputtering in its hovering state, as if uncertain over what to do -

And then -

With the fluidity of lightning cutting through the sky -

Jack whips his right arm forward and -

The knife is a mere glint of the light before -

CRACK!

It slices right into the “head” of the drone, cutting into the all-weather insulated plastic like butter, and, almost like a cartoon, the drone hovers in the air for a fraction of a second -

Before it drops like a cement block to the ground, crashing into the powdery snow, right next to the fire pit.

And then, as if they were taking a casual stroll through a park, the other three step out from the shadows around the clearing, heading towards the downed drone in the center.

Jack glances over his right shoulder at Gabriel, smirking faintly as he chuckles, “...¿Estoy un soldadito inteligente, Veinticuatro?”

Oh my god, I’m fucked, Gabriel thinks, gawking at him before saying weakly, “Holy fucking shit, Jack.”

“Isn’t that ‘sir’ to you, Gabe?” Jack teases him relentlessly, before he too walks out into the clearing, Gabriel trailing after him. As they approach the drone and the other three, Gabriel rasps out,
“Alright, sir, when I wrote you that note, I didn’t mean to fight the fucking drones -”

“You’re the one who said to focus more on the ‘soldier’ part and less on the ‘enhancement’ part,” Jack mutters, as Adrien hands his rifle to Wes and carefully pulls the drone from the snow.

“That...also wasn’t what I meant,” Gabriel says dryly, but as Adrien pries the knife from the drone’s “head,” Gabriel adds lowly, “But I’ll admit, this is one of the most badass Survival and Evasion ideas I’ve seen yet.”

Jack grins, his cheeks tinted slightly red, as Sarah pours water from a canteen onto the fire, extinguishing the flames. Adrien flips the knife and holds out the handle towards Jack, who takes it, saying, “Thanks, Adrien.”

“Nah, Jack, thank you - good throw again,” Adrien says, and the group starts to head off, west into the woods again, Jack slowing a little to walk with Gabriel near the back.

“Alright,” Gabriel mutters, watching as Jack pulls a cloth from one of his jacket pockets to wipe down the knife. The younger soldier sheaths it easily, and Gabriel finds that, of the million questions he should ask, the least important one comes out first:

“How the fuck did you learn to throw like that?”

“...You don’t know?” Jack asks, raising an eyebrow, but he smiles genuinely, laughing, “Not much else for teenage boys to do when they’re bored on a farm, Gabe. I can teach you, if you want.”

_Holy hell, yes please_, Gabriel thinks, but he manages to tease him, “Golly gee, if you can find time in your busy schedule, commander, that’d be real swell -”

“Alright, you can just say no, jerk,” Jack mutters back, a touch genuinely upset, causing Gabriel to quickly murmur, “Oh, shit, sorry, that...sounded patronizing. No, that would be really cool, Jack, but don’t force yourself -”

“Oh,” Jack mumbles, looking a little relieved and grinning again, “Oh, no, it wouldn’t be a problem, Gabe, really - you’ll pick it up so fast -”

“Holy shit,” Sarah says really loudly in front of them, causing Adrien and Wes to burst into obnoxious laughter as she asks them, “How did I miss this? When did this start??”

“What - me throwing knives?” Jack asks, genuinely confused, as Adrien wheezes between choking sobs of laughter, “Like, day fucking one, dude. Legit, I came out for breakfast on the first day and it was already happening.”

“Oh my god, I’m...that oblivious?” Sarah stammers and Gabriel frowns, grumbling darkly, “Manners from the three amigos would be appreciated.”

“Yessir,” the three of them say immediately, as Jack leans in, whispering cluelessly, “...What’s happening?”

“...Just a little bit of verbal discipline,” Gabriel mutters loudly, before sighing, “Anyways, let’s get back to the actual important shit: what the fuck...no... how the fuck did you get the idea to fucking...shiv drones out of the air??”

Jack stares at him blandly, before scowling a little, saying back, “...Well, like I said, you were the one who said the drones were the valuable part of the simulation.”
“You know I meant that in terms of, like, *evading Omnics*, right?” Gabriel says to him, incredulous, “And paying attention to the fact that the directors are spying on us all the time, right??”

“Well, *yeah*, I got that,” Jack retorts dryly, before sighing, “I mean...I kinda thought it would be an interesting idea to try, but I didn’t really think it would work until one of them got real close to my position on the first day -”

Gabriel scowls a little, thinking about the candidate he’d just missed on Monday morning -

“- Which is when I realized they would easily come almost to the ground level if you tripped their alarm system properly,” Jack continues, but then he grins devilishly at Gabriel, chuckling, “But it took a few tries at first. Like, they’ll stay above the tree level unless you give them a strange object or odd situation to look at -”

“...The fire pit,” Gabriel suddenly realizes, exhaling slowly, “They have pattern recognition for fires.”

“Yeah!” Jack says excitedly, his whole face lighting up as Gabriel understands his plan, “But only for really obvious or really odd ones! I’ve dug a whole bunch of those and really obvious snow caves, but they’ll miss them if they’re too close to tree cover or shadows. I almost think their algorithms are too generous, you know? Like a human being or a tracker dog or even an Omnic could figure out some of the stuff I built *real fast* -”

“Okay, wait, let me see if I got this,” Gabriel mutters, “You have been *deliberately* leading the drones into situations they are *programmed* to investigate, and then killing them with your combat knife. And you’ve done this...*four times*?”

“Oh no,” Adrien says loudly, as Jack grins with a mixture of bashfulness and pride on his face as his roommate states, “This is Jack’s seventh drone.”

“...*What*,” Gabriel states in utter disbelief as -

“Hey, how’d it go?”

A new voice calls out to them through the trees -

And Gabriel suddenly realizes that they are in a relatively *massive* camp.

Small fire pits, snow walls, snow caves, and single-person A-frames are *everywhere* across this particular slope, and within ten, fifteen meters, Gabriel counts maybe six or seven snow caves and three real Dakota holes alone. From the nearest fire pit, two more people approach them, and Gabriel recognizes one of them as the “junior” SF Jamie (also holding a paintball “gun”) and the other as another one of Jack’s friends.

“Jamie, Cassandra, this is Gabriel, Soldier: 24,” Jack says to them. Gabriel shakes both of their hands in disbelief, looking around the camp with an awed expression as he asks, “Wait, how many of you are there out here?”

“There’s ten of us in the core group,” Jamie says easily, as Cassandra helps take the drone from Adrien’s hands. The “junior” soldier adds, “And three more in the ‘ranging’ party, if you want to call them that. Jack and I switch off throwing, but he beat me to this one this morning,” Jamie says, faking a scowl at Jack, who beams at him smugly.

“Wait, wait,” Gabriel mutters, “You guys have the equivalent of a *whole squad* camping out here? And you haven’t been *tagged*??”
“Oh, like, three of us have,” Cassandra says, placing the drone on a stump. Wes joins her, hoisting his own knife as Cassandra pulls some of the shredded plastics and insulating mesh fabrics off the drone, continuing bluntly, “But that was before they joined us. Most of us planned to meet at whatever was the highest peak on the outer perimeter for the H and I Groups.”

“And you haven’t run out of supplies?” Gabriel asks. Jack shrugs, saying, “We’ve been pretty resourceful - pooled all of our supplies on day one and rationed everything out. The paintball rifles helped us get back to the remote facility northwest of here, but most of the good stuff had been taken.”

Gabriel blinks at him, before he shrugs off his pack, sighing heavily, “God damn, what the fuck -”

“Uh...you okay, Gabe?” Jack asks nervously, and Gabriel digs around in his pack, muttering, “Yeah, Jesus, just...overwhelmed I guess. So you salvage the air rifles from the drones?”

“As best we can,” Wes grumbles, “They got an auto-trigger, so disconnecting that is the hardest part, but it ain’t too bad. I’ve dicked around with paintball guns enough in my life to do it, even if these ones are tiny for a normal person.”

“God damn,” Gabriel swears again, before he starts dumping his spare cans of tuna and granola bars and electrolyte packets onto the ground, noting how openly awed Jack’s face gets in his peripherals. He slings the pack back on, grumbling, “Who’s in charge of your supplies?”

“Oh, I can get those,” Sarah says, before nodding to Adrien. Gabriel steps away, sighing again, “Just...leave some for me somewhere, I guess. Who planned this?”

The group pauses, before Jamie mutters, “Don’t look at me, I was invited in.”

“Well,” Wes says slowly, as Adrien grins, “We started this kinda...group thing in Assessment and Selection. I tripped on one of the long land nav exercises and Jack was the only person to help me.”

“Ahaha, I thought I was gonna get disqualified,” Jack laughs, “But I was terrified you had fucked up your ankle and we were in the middle of a 12 mile trek, I couldn’t just leave you.”

“It was just sprained,” Adrien smirks, “But Nurse Morrison helped me wrap it and probably saved it from permanent damage.”

“God, I remember that,” Sarah mutters, “I legit thought you two were going to get kicked out - we were supposed to solo that course. A lot of us got put on the same 12-person ‘move the jeep through sand’ team, which is when we really met, I guess.”

“Shit, don’t remind me of that,” Wes grumbles, “I had sand up my ass for a week after.”

“I think I dreamt about sand that night,” Cassandra murmurs, as Jack sighs, “I tasted it for like, three days after.”

Gabriel glances in disbelief at Jamie, who gives him a wry, knowing smirk.

“How did you know you would even end up in the same group?” Gabriel asks, and they all kinda shrug, with Adrien saying, “We didn’t really. We just planned for it. There’s like six others somewhere else that might be doing the same things. Although the drones were all Jack’s wildass plan.”

“Thanks for the credit, Morris,” Jack snarks, and Adrien cheerfully flips him off, before he and Sarah head off to put the extra food wherever they were storing them. Gabriel stares vapidly after them, his
exhausted mind trying to make sure he’s processing everything correctly, as he mumbles, “Mind if I crash here for the day? God damn, that night hike took it out of me. I can go build a new snow fort somewhere on the edges. Fucking...I was not expecting this.”

“Here,” Jack says brightly, “I’ll help you! My A-frame is over here.”

“Thanks,” Gabriel breathes, but he notices how Wes and Cassandra share knowing looks between them. He follows a little ways up the slope to where an A-frame covered in compacted snow leans partially against a tree. The snowbank beyond it is deep enough for a snow cave, and Jack ducks into his A-frame briefly. Gabriel sighs, setting his pack next to the tree, and when Jack returns with his small entrenching shovel, Gabriel finally asks one of the important questions:

“...How the fuck are you managing the injections for a group this big?”

Jack freezes, looking like a deer caught in the headlights, and Gabriel immediately suspects something is off -

“You have taken them, right?” he asks Jack, who nods stiffly, saying, “Yeah, of course. I mean…”

Jack sighs heavily, muttering, “I...really wasn’t comfortable with the idea of all of them self-administering, you know? I mean, I know what you told me and I believed it, but...my gut instinct didn’t really trust them. The directors, not my friends. So we all got our set from the facility like, twenty miles northeast of here, which is…”

Jack pauses, fiddling with a pocket to pull out a small, folded scrap of paper, before he beams brightly at Gabriel, laughing, “Which is when I got this.”

Gabriel smiles back, but he feels his smile slack as he says quietly:

“Wait...just one note?”

Jack just barely flinches at the question -

“...You haven’t taken both serums,” Gabriel exhales fiercely, and Jack looks away, embarrassed as he explains, “Look -”

“I left you notes at the ‘10 o’clock’ and ‘6 o’clock’ facilities, too,” Gabriel says, starting to scowl at Jack. Jack continues to look embarrassed, but he resolves himself, saying quietly but firmly, “Look, the ranging party went to the facility east of here, but they…”

And then Jack shrugs, “They forgot mine.”

“...They,” Gabriel states darkly, “Forgot. Yours. The most important person here.”

Jack suddenly glares, muttering fiercely, “That’s not how it is, Gabe - they were just joking about the commander thing -”

“Of course the commander thing is a joke, Jack,” Gabriel whispers stern at him, “Commanders are almost never the most important person in an ODA, unless they are also the squad organizer. Do you know who the most important people in an Alpha team are?”

Jack blinks at him, asking genuinely, “Wait, it really isn’t the commander?”

“No, soldado,” Gabriel tells him, “It’s the 18D’s. The medics. Always.”

Jack’s expression opens up with bewilderment and wonder at that -
“On a day-to-day basis, the heart of the team is the 18Z, the ‘true team leader’ and the organizer,” Gabriel explains, “And each of the specialists have a specific and valuable role in the operations of an Alpha team, but the most important people, in any mission, are the medics. That’s it. A combat medic has the ability to save the team, an entire village, and all the village livestock from death in a true survival situation.”

Jack looks torn between horror and awe, whispering lowly, “I...had no idea.”

“I know you didn’t,” Gabriel sighs, digging through his pack for his own entrenching shovel. As he pulls it out, he mutters, “Our society pays private doctors well for both the vitally necessary and the superficially unimportant procedures in our lives, but otherwise we don’t value our medical professionals enough.”

And Gabriel makes eye-contact with him, saying almost gently:

“But in 99% of ODA missions, whether they’re foreign internal defense or true direct action, it’s the medics who will leave the biggest impacts...and its the medics who will save lives, or die trying.”

Gabriel takes a step closer, staring straight into those seastorm eyes, pressing an insistent finger at Jack’s chest, right over his heart as he murmurs, “You are the most important person here, not necessarily because you can do a kickass knife throw or build a decent shelter, but because your choices about the others’ health and your ability to understand the importance of that means you are the one they should be prioritizing in a genuine survival situation. It’s an unfortunate matter of math - they might be able to help or save only one person, but that person should be you, because you can save hundreds with knowledge alone.”

Jack swallows some of his nervousness, as Gabriel concludes in a low, smoky rasp:

“Don’t forget that, Soldier: 76 - the priority is never the mission itself -

“But the people who make or break it.”

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Chapter Summary

Now that Gabriel has joined Jack's little "squad camp," there's some time to contemplate and discuss the situation the program has put them in.

And well -
Jack learns Gabriel has a few small secrets of his own.
But when they get back to the main facility
will there be consequences for "Soldier: 76" destroying the program's property?
Or will he be able to talk his way out of it?
(Maybe with a few pointers from "Soldier: 24"?)

Chapter Notes

Here comes the fluff. >:3c and the flirting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

76: Evasion

Friday, January 25, 2047: 2247 hours - inside one of the bathrooms of the SEP main facility, Sawtooth Mountains, Idaho

*I'm an idiot*, Jack thinks for the millionth time in the last ten minutes -
Before he leans over the toilet and dry gags.
For what *feels* like the millionth time in the last ten minutes.
Mentally, he had known for the last like, two days that this moment would come - at least, ever since he found out the “ranging team” had forgotten his second serum - but physically and emotionally, he had been *woefully* underprepared for this.

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(Thursday, January 24th: 1012 hours)
“I’ve been sick before,” he’d laughed nonchalantly when the team had returned to their “main camp” on the southwestern edge of the SEP range late Wednesday night, “I mean, it can’t be worse than the flu or something, right? I’ll be fine.”

A sugar-coated lie.

The greater the concentration of a genetic therapy serum –

The greater the risks of...

Complications.

He'd known that, but had bluffed his way through his exhaustion.

Getting irritated with his friends wouldn't have helped anyways.

So it hadn’t been until Gabriel had showed up early in the morning on Thursday that the true weight of Jack skipping a serum had started to sink in.

“I'll be fine,” Jack had reiterated, attempting to bluff his way through with Gabriel again, but the senior soldier had just given him that deadpan “you can’t be serious” expression before he had muttered to the younger soldier, “Have you...seen the side effects of gene therapy?”

“...I’ve read about them,” Jack had replied lowly, “I only saw one or two patients who were receiving it long-term during my work - most patients get moved to another ward when they…”

The words *survive surgery* had drifted off in his throat.

Gabriel had given him a long, contemplative look -

And Jack had smiled brightly, repeating, "I'll be fine."

Gabriel's expression had shifted from quiet consideration to soft concern as he'd muttered, "Whatever you say, soldado."

And the nervousness had settled back in Jack's gut.

Truth be told, there really isn’t much to *do* in the downtime between knifing drones and managing the injections. Their little “camp” had been carved out in a relatively secluded corner of the SEP area, and since they had made a sizable dent in the “rotating drone population,” the new drone schedule and “gaps” in their overall visibility were so wide that Thursday had been shaping up to be almost

*Boring.*

That is

Until Gabriel had showed up.

The older soldier had looked pretty *exhausted*, shadows clinging to the corners of his eyes and his eyebrows seemingly locked in a permanent scowl - an appearance that had set off a small war inside Jack, torn between the urge to hug Gabriel gently until he fell asleep and the urge to crack stupid jokes until more of those gorgeous smirks would grace Gabriel’s face.
As nice as it had sounded, the former had not been remotely feasible. So Jack tries working the latter into their conversations as much as he can. Though it...really isn’t necessary.

Despite looking exhausted, Gabriel throws himself into the “work” of joining the group almost immediately, with a resolve and determination that seemed otherworldly -

“So you’ve basically been out here the whole time?” Gabriel asks as they move up the slope a little ways from Jack’s A-frame shelter, reaching a spot with a dense, high snowbank. As Gabriel marks out their starting point in the snow, Jack chuckles, “Basically. I knew we were heading to the tallest peak, so that was my goal. But once we met up, we realized that it wasn’t a great spot, so we moved out here.”

They both start shoveling out the entrance tunnel, but Gabriel gives Jack a skeptical look, saying, “And that was before or after you threw a fucking knife in your first drone?”

“...After,” Jack grins at him, a mixture of sheepish embarrassment intermingled with pride. He dumps out some snow, stabbing his shovel in again before he adds, “That one was up a bit...closer to the other, uh, route -”

“The ‘eight o’clock’ position?” Gabriel asks curiously, and Jack scowls, thinking it over, muttering, “I guess so? Let’s see, I was about...six hours out from my starting position, maybe...six miles out? I hiked about fifteen miles to the highest peak, but I must have been on line, so yeah -”

“And you just…” Gabriel grunts between shovel scoops, “Decided that was a good time to ninja a drone??”

“Hey now, the drone started it!” Jack grins at him, also shoveling in, “I figured out pretty fast that I must’ve been on some sort of drone patrol route, because it kept appearing...or like multiple ones were showing up. So after that happened a second time and I almost got hit again, I took a break, hunkered down, got the attention of the next one, and then -”

Jack feigns a throwing motion, flinging his scoop of snow up into the air. It poofs about three feet in the air, and then -

Promptly rains down on Gabriel.

“Hey!” Gabriel snaps as the snow dusts over him, and Jack is about to hastily apologize when -

A fierce gleam flickers in Gabriel’s gilded obsidian eyes and -

Jack suddenly finds his whole face is cold and wet and blurry

As Gabriel pops his own shovelful of snow into Jack’s face.

“Fuck,” Jack sputters, stumbling back a half-step, wiping the snow from his face as the sound of Hoarse

Raw spun-sunlight and

Sugar-smoked

Laughter
Cuts through the thin air like a burst of warmth and heat.

Jack gawks as Gabriel levels that brightly dark, smugly rich smirk at him, teasing him wryly, “Don’t dish it if you can’t take it, Juanito.”

And -

Jack can’t stop himself

As his own mischievous grin spreads across his face

And he says coyly, “Remind me, Gabe - they got snow in L.A.?”

Gabriel’s smile slackens a little, as his eyes dart to the fistful of snow (the very snow that he’d chucked into Jack’s face) Jack’s gloved fingers are expertly shaping into the perfect -

“Dios dame fuerza -” Gabriel whispers, as Jack grins, already feeling victorious as he taunts, “Loser has to call the winner sir all day -”

Before he 

hurls

the snowball straight at Gabriel.

Gabriel barely manages to duck in time, dropping to the ground and scampering back a bit, only to sit back up at on his knees to fling his own snowball back at Jack. But the ball is loosely compacted, so it practically bursts into flakes midway to Jack’s face.

Jack blinks once, and then 

beams

smugly at Gabriel -

(He doesn’t remember the last time he’d played in the snow -)

Before he 

charges

at him.

Gabriel yelps, tumbling backwards as Jack dives towards him, right hand diving into the half-shoveled, loose powder and flinging it at Gabriel. The “snowscreen” of white frost conceals their movements from each other, and Jack throws several “rapid-fire” snowballs into the general space where Gabriel had been. As the white powder begins to fade in the air, Jack prepares to evade another right throw from Gabriel by leaning right, towards Gabriel’s left side -

Only for another weak, clumpy snowball to smash into his face.

“What the 

fuck -” Jack starts to stammer before -

A solid, thick, 

comfortably

warm body slams into him, knocking him back into the snowbank -

Covering both of them in a light 

poof

of snow.

Jack wiggles to get free, squirming beneath him, trying to wrap his arms around his chest and grapple him off, but a strong hand pins his wrists down above his head and thick, powerful thighs wedge down between his legs and -

Gabriel’s face, still with that gorgeous smirk, appears above his, his grin rich and deeply self-satisfied as that low, spun-sunlight and sugar-smoked voice drips tauntingly:

“Weren’t prepared for that one, were you, Indy?”

Holy hell, Jack barely manages to think, fiercely willing himself not to compromise whatever threadbare integrity he still has in Gabriel’s presence, croaking out, “You’re a leftie?”
“...Ambidextrous,” Gabriel replies, leaning in a little closer as he adds lowly, “Skilled with both hands.” Gabriel flaunts that deep, deadly, incredible smirk right over Jack’s lips and Jack is pretty sure the moon colony can hear his heartbeat from the way his pulse is thundering -

“You know what that means...right?” Gabriel asks him knowingly and the image of Gabriel’s hands dragging down Jack’s bare torso rushes through Jack’s mind and -

“...You can make shitty snowballs with either hand?” Jack snarks back, but it sounds weak and squeaky even in his own head -

The gleam in Gabriel’s eyes flickers and he whispers, “...Damn right -”

Before his free right hand dumps a fistful of loose snow over Jack’s face.

Jack shouts indistinctly and Gabriel lets go of his wrists, laughing too hard to hold him down properly. Jack wipes the snow off his face, flailing more against the cold white powder and himself than he is against Gabriel, and after his small flustering, he collapses back, groaning loudly, “I should’ve seen that coming -”

“You should have,” Gabriel laugh-wheezes, “You’re not suppose to take your eyes off the magician or opponent’s hands, soldadito - that’s like, elementary.”

*Kinda hard when your magician-opponent is pinning you down and you’re pretty into it,* Jack thinks, but he fake-grumbles aloud, “The drones haven’t had hands for me to worry about, Gabe.”

Gabriel grins at him, leaning back on his knees and then sliding back into a crouch as he chuckles, “No, but did you know bears basically have humanlike hands?” He offers Jack a hand (ha), and Jack takes it, letting himself get pulled upright into a sitting position.

“...N-no?” Jack says, but it sounds more like a question, especially when he adds, “...Why did you mention bears?”

“Oh, no reason,” Gabriel mutters super suspiciously, saying obviously, “But, hypothetically, if a bear wanders into camp, how, uh, how fast is that knife of yours?”

(The snow cave - like an hour-long endeavor to a skilled soldier like Gabriel and maybe a two-hour long activity for a Bloomington native like Jack - takes them like three, three-and-a-half hours to build.)

(Mainly because they spend like, half an hour talking about fighting bears -hypothetically, of course - and then the next three hours involve more snowballs every five minutes.)

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(Thursday, January 24, 2047: 1242 hours - on the edge of “Camp Camp”)

“Alright, uh,” Jack says, both slightly nervous and slightly excited. Gabriel, about a foot away from him, raises a skeptical eyebrow at him, muttering, “You sure you’re up for this, Clemente? It’s been a longass week - maybe we should save the knife-throwing for a better, less sleep-deprived time.”
“You’re the one who wanted to learn,” Jack retorts, unsheathing his combat knife from its spot on his vest. He shrugs loosely, adding, “And is it really learning how to throw knives if you aren’t doing it while dicking around bored in the woods?”

Gabriel stares at him blankly, before asking wryly, “...Is it?”

“Pretty much the only way to learn it where I’m from,” Jack says. He steps a bit closer, as Gabriel mutters, “Just...don’t want you to get hurt by being dumb on the last real day out here.”

“Look, I got my battle scars from messing around with knives and my brother years ago,” Jack chuckles, lining himself up with a tree about three feet away, “Only dangerous part for me at least is making sure I explain it well enough that you don’t get hurt.”

“Big talk there, sir,” Gabriel teases him, and Jack flashes him a bold, bright grin over his shoulder, before focusing on the tree again. He hefts the knife in his right hand, scowling a little, trying to think of where to even begin with something as stupidly second nature to him as chucking knives at trees.

“Uh, well,” Jack starts, feeling a little lame, “I guess the main thing is, uh, judging the distance to start. Lotta people want to go for the style stuff first, but that means nothing if you can’t make it stick.”

“...’Lotta people,’ huh?” Gabriel chuckles, and Jack grins back, “Well, in my sample size of like...six or seven teenage boys, yeah. Everyone wants to go for the whole ‘throw it by the blade and make it spin real cool’ thing on their first try, but you just end up looking like a real dumbass if you can’t even land it.”

“Right, so,” Gabriel “summarizes” for him, “Don’t look like a dumbass, got it.”

“Only lesson in life that really matters, right?” Jack laughs, adjusting his stance, thinking of the next thing to say when -

“Uh, right, but if you’re more comfortable throwing left -” Jack starts to say, and Gabriel chuckles, waving him off, saying, “Just do your thing, sir, I’ll adapt as needed. Been doing it my whole life.”

Jack feels a twinge of bittersweetness at that, as if the idea of Gabriel not quite fitting into the rest of the world’s sense of “normalcy” is a bigger sorrow than it should be -

“...But thanks for asking,” Gabriel says quietly, giving Jack a small, faint smile, “Not many people do.”

The lump in Jack’s throat turns from that vague sense of bittersweetness into one weaker and softer for different reasons.

Don’t be an idiot, the cynical part of Jack reminds him, Don’t say anything dumb -

“Do you prefer to throw right or left?” Jack asks without thinking about it. Gabriel blinks at him, and Jack could kick himself for once again being an idiot because he’s ambidextrous, you ridiculous noodle -
“No preference for throwing, though I do it so rarely these days.”

Jack stops his own mental tirade to stare at Gabriel in open wonder, as Gabriel counts off on his left fingers, “Writing...I learned left, and a pen still feels best in my left hand, but schools never had enough leftie desks so I switched to right. But drawing and mapping is still predominantly left for me -”

“You draw?” Jack half-asks, half-blurts out because the idea of a big, buff, Special Forces soldier like Gabriel drawing anything is somehow the cutest and most intriguing thing he’s heard all day.

Or at least in the last few hours

Because admittedly, Jack’s mind continues to spark a little over the “skilled with both hands” comment -

“Oh, not like, serious drawing,” Gabriel mumbles, and there’s the faintest touch of pink on his cheeks, “Mostly maps. Terrain. Trees and buildings and streets. Uh...odd little ideas I get from time to time -”

“That’s awesome!”

Gabriel freezes, looking wildly caught off-guard by Jack’s big, silly grin, but damn, if the idea of Gabriel sitting around to sketch trees doesn’t send something sugary giddy through his heart -

“It’s...not...like I’m good at it,” Gabriel says slowly, cautiously, as if wary of Jack’s enthusiasm, but Jack just smirks, rolling his shoulders as he laughs, “Gabe, when my anatomy professor saw my notebook, she went, ‘Why did you draw a red cow?’ and I had to tell her and the whole lab class that it was my hand-drawn muscle diagram.”

Gabriel blinks at him and then -

Bursts into more of that sunshine and smoke laughter, half-sobbing, half-wheezing, “Jack, what the fuck -”

“Man, I could make study guides and flow charts for studying that were so beautiful, my friends tried to convince me to sell them,” Jack grins, but adds proudly, “But that semester I was taking gross anatomy everyone asked, ‘When did you take abstract art,’ because no one could recognize my heart, blood vessels, and lungs diagram.”

“Jesus Christ,” Gabriel wheezes, practically doubling over in pain with laughter, and Jack continues, “Point is, Gabe, I think it’s great you do it, even if it is tactical stuff like maps and mountains and buildings. Guarantee you if no one is complaining, then your trees and heart diagrams probably actually look like trees and hearts and not the ugliest, most deformed pomegranate people have ever seen.”

“I need to see these, qué carajos -” Gabriel sobs and somehow, some still-clever, still-alert part of Jack’s mostly sleep-deprived brain manages to think up this beautiful bargain, because he sure as shit didn’t, but he beams as he offers:

“I teach you to throw knives, you teach me how to draw even a simple map - does that work?”

“God,” Gabriel wheezes, straightening himself back up, wiping small tears from his eyes as he rasps, “I mean, I’ve done a lot of miraculous things in my life, Jack, but I dunno if even a miracle can help you -”
“Alright, now, Gabe, you might as well see the ugly heart-pomegranate before you judge it,” Jack retorts cheerfully, but -

“But yeah, sure.”

Jack blinks at Gabriel, as he gives him one of those perfect smiles again, saying, “At the very least, I can try, right?”

“And the grinch’s heart grew three sizes that day -” Jack teases him, causing Gabriel’s genuine smile to drop into a scowl-smirk as he mutters, “Careful there, rookie, or you might get more shitty snowballs in your face.”

“Bringing snowballs to a knife fight - ballsy move, Gabe,” Jack zings right back, and Gabriel mutters lowly, “Man, just wait until I get two of those paintball rifles -”

“Can you -” Jack stammers, awed and dazed, “Can you shoot with both hands??”

Gabriel gives him a genuinely curious look before grinning mischievously, “Wanna give me two paintball rifles and find out?”

Jack gawks at him, before he states -

His voice lit up with all the awe of a sunrise:

“Holy shit, Gabriel, that’s fucking bad. Ass.”

“...You know, Jack, I like you,” Gabriel laughs, “You’re good for my ego.”

“But seriously? Seriously??” Jack asks eagerly, taking a half-step forward, “You can really shoot with both hands?? That’s like, the sickest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s not like I’m going all Schwarzenegger all the time and firing two guns nonstop,” Gabriel says, but he’s grinning over Jack’s infectious thrill all the same, adding, “Not like they ever gave my ODA the budget to buy me spare guns, but yeah, shooting is…”

He pauses, scowling over his words, saying more carefully, “Shooting is my secret ace, I guess. They wanted me to be an 18B during my Q-Course, but I had more interest in the 18D stuff, so that’s where I ended up. I was taught to shoot right-handed first, same as 90% of all soldiers. Mostly taught myself to shoot left, but they so rarely order leftie equipment that I almost never get the chance to use it. It’s little more than a cool trick, I guess.” He ends with a slightly bashful grin, adding, “Really, it’s not that great -”

“Throwing knives was just ‘a cool trick’ until three days ago.”

Gabriel falls quiet as Jack stares at him, fierce and intense. But then Jack smiles, almost tenderly, saying, “Seems...kinda sad. Like you have this extra edge over everyone that isn’t being sharpened.”

Jack glances at his single-sided combat knife, looking at the soft glint of it under the cold grey light, murmuring, “I dunno...seems like something a CO should appreciate, you know? Like if you got an idea on how to use your ambidexterity creatively or tactically - or, hell, even ‘badassly’ - that would be something you should be given the freedom to use.”

And then Jack glances up at him, grinning brightly, “Even if it just ends up being another ‘cool trick,’ it should still be tried, right?”

Gabriel watches him closely, before asking quietly, “The end justifies the means?”
“Hmm, not even,” Jack hums contemplatively, “The means justify themselves in this case. You can try doing something simply for the sake of trying.”

Gabriel’s expression is difficult to read - almost a scowl, but not in anger or frustration, just in intense concentration, as he says, “That argument doesn’t hold up in peacetime, and it only barely works in war.”

“Hmm, I don’t know what specific examples you’re thinking of, Gabe,” Jack says slyly, “But we’re not in a war, and we’re definitely not in peacetime.”

Gabriel’s scowl twists into bewilderment as he asks, “What do you think this Crisis is?”

Jack looks him dead in those beautiful, dark obsidian eyes, like smoke backlit by raw molten sunlight and fire -

And Jack states brightly:

“It’s the apocalypse, sir -”

And with an easy flick of his right arm -

Jack hurls the knife straight into the bark of the tree

As he hums lightly:

“And it’s time to try everything.”

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(Friday, January 25th, 2047: 1654 hours - returning to the SEP main facility)

“Well, well, well,” Carlos says loudly, with a bold and knowing grin as the “Camp Camp” group exits the “Group H” transport ship. Gabriel’s friend smirks at them as they walk towards the entrance to the main facility from the SEP airfield, teasing him, “I would say I’m surprised, Gabriello, but that’s an absolute lie.”

“Alright, Carlos, no need to rub it in,” Gabriel grumbles, but it’s hard to hear him over the loud and boisterous din of the other candidates, as the vast majority of all 132 of them start to pile in through the doors.

“Did you make it all the way around?” Gabriel asks Carlos as they shuffle into the line slowly. Jack watches as Carlos shrugs, saying, “I got to the ‘six o’clock’ position by Thursday night, and after that I didn’t really have the energy to keep looking.”

And then Carlos glances over Gabriel to the other members of the “Camp Camp” group, before his gaze lingers on Jack, and he mutters slyly, “I take it you had quite the adventure, huh, Gabe?”

“Can you not start this right now?” Gabriel grumbles back as they enter the facility - the surprising warmth floods through Jack like sweet relief and his shoulders slacken beneath the straps of his pack.
God, he is so tired.

And hungry.

But mainly tired.

Like he could lie down and sleep for three decades -

“Like I said, Gabriélito - I’ll be chill about this when you’re chill about this,” Carlos teases him back - the crowd is starting to thin, but cheers are echoing through the halls as people are reunited with their rooms, but then -

Above the loud joyous yells and excited exchanges -

The ice-cold voice of General Flores blasts through the hallway like a sudden frost:

“SOLDIER: 76.”

Jack thinks all the warmth has left his body as the words sink into him like freezing water. Beside him, Gabriel tenses and Carlos mumbles lowly, “¿Qué estás pasando -?”

“Soldier: 76, front and center right now,” Flores states darkly, and the crowd of candidates press out of the way, parting for her and a few other directors like the Red Sea and -

Jamie, Adrien, Wes, and Sarah suddenly stand in front of her, blocking her from Jack and -

“...Stand down, soldiers,” Flores orders them, “This does not involve you -”

“He wasn’t alone,” Jamie says to her fiercely, “I did it too!”

“Did I call your number, soldier?” Flores starts to say, and Jack is about to step forward when -

Two strong hands grip him by his shoulders -

And gently but firmly turn Jack to his left -

Where an intense, burning look on Gabriel’s face bores down at him.

“...Gabe -” Jack starts to whisper with some confusion, but Gabriel leans in, murmuring back with the ferocity of the sun, “You were smart, soldadito - you played smart.”

“He wasn’t the only one!” Jamie repeats, and this time, Jack can hear Adrien and Wes and Sarah’s voices rise up too -

But his gaze is locked on the dark, silken smoke look in Gabriel’s eyes, holding him down more intensely than his hands -

“You stick to your guns,” Gabriel tells him, before briefly smirking, “Or rather, knives. You stand your ground -”

“While it is admirable of you to defend your comrade -” Flores says in the background -

“You do not run, you do not retreat, you do not hide,” Gabriel continues, his gaze unrelenting upon Jack’s -

Jack thinks Gabriel might be able to see into his soul -
“- Your general is ordering you to stand down,” Flores states furiously -

“When they start to question you,” Gabriel murmurs to him with a gilded, molten softness, “You remind them of what the R in SERE stands for -”

“Move!” Flores shouts, “Or you will be immediately removed from this facility!”

“When they say you went too far,” Gabriel exhales each word like a revelation, “You tell them exactly what you told me - this isn’t peace, this isn’t war, this is -”

A revelation, Jack thinks quietly, humbled by Gabriel’s belief in him and full of his grace -

An apocalypse.

Silence descends over the hallway and Jack and Gabriel turn just as the other four move aside. Adrien mouths the words, “Sorry, Jack” to him and Wes and Sarah look distraught. Jamie looks quietly enraged with himself but -

There is the pat of a strong hand on his back, softly fierce and stubbornly reassuring -

Before it gently helps propel him forward.

Jack stumbles a few half-steps towards her, before regaining his balance and taking the last full step. He straightens up, saluting Flores stiffly, struggling not to collapse from exhaustion and stress, and her dark eyes pierce into him before she states impassively, “Leave your gear. Soldier: 75, take it to your room.”

“...Yes, ma’am,” Adrien replies quietly. Flores nods stiffly to Jack, and he loosely slides his pack off his shoulders, dropping it unceremoniously on the floor. She turns on her heel and strides back down the hallway, flanked by the other directors, and, after taking a deep

Inhale

Exhale

To steady whatever remains of his nerves

Jack follows after them.

They lead him down a different hallway than the rest of the soldiers’ rooms, walking past the “instruction rooms” (basically industrial classrooms), and down another hallway, where each of the doors bears one of their names -

[Carolina Luna - SF]

[Marc Guerra - CIA]

[Sofía Flores - USSOCOM]

To a door with no name on it -

Guerra opens it, letting Flores and Luna and the others step inside -

Before his abyssally dark eyes fall on Jack -

And he silently gestures for the soldier to enter.
Into the lions’ den? Or the valley of the shadow of death? Jack wonders to himself, before he turns and steps in.

Inside is a long table, which five of the six main directors are sitting at (minus the one empty chair for Marc) - and they face towards a single, lone chair, sitting back, away from the table, which Jack can only presume -

An interrogation -

Is for him.

Jack

Inhales

Exhales

And then strides up to it, before plopping down in it and fuck, his muscles seem to melt under the mere relaxation of sitting in a chair. The door closes behind him, and after a second, Marc appears at the end of the table, taking his own seat.

Flores nods to an Asian man, mid-thirties perhaps, sitting two seats to her left (Jack’s right) and he chuckles, pressing something on a datapad.

“Let’s begin,” Flores states loudly, “This is General Sofía Flores García, USSOCOM, speaking on January 25, 2047. The time is 1703 hours. With me are the directors of the Soldier Enhancement Program - going from left to right, state your name.”

The man on the far left - looking grizzled and tired and rather frustrated just to be here - grits out, “Rick Cruz, 18 Zulu, formerly an 18 Cobra.”

“Sarge Watanabe,” the man who’d started the datapad recording says whimsically, “18 Echo, in charge of communications here in SEP.”

“Carolina Luna,” Luna states, adding, “CO of the eventual SEP Company 1, formerly an 18 Zulu.”

Flores nods, but mutters, “General Flores again” before she gestures to the earth-toned, tired looking woman on her right (Jack’s left) -

“Doctor Serena Jones,” she sighs, “18 Delta for SEP Company 1, also in charge of overseeing medical procedures here.”

And lastly -

“Marc Guerra,” Guerra says impassively, “CIA Special Activities Division operator, formerly Delta Forces and Army Special Forces, 18 Fox.”

“We are here with Supersoldier Candidate Number 76 - civilian name is John Morrison .” Flores says but -

“It’s Jack.”

The room falls deathly quiet

As all six pairs of eyes stare at him.
Jack, however, locks eyes with Flores as she says impassively, “Your file says your name is ‘John.’”

“‘John’ is my given name and I hate it, so my name has always been - and always will be - ‘Jack,’” Jack states, because -

**You stand your ground** -

Runs through his head and -

**You were smart** -

“...Or, more recently,” Jack murmurs slowly -

**You played smart** -

“Some of the other candidates have called me ‘Juanito,’” Jack says smugly, smirking at them. And despite their best efforts -

The directors all crack a little.

Guerra drops his head in his hands as Jones smirks and then quickly hides her smile behind a hand. Cruz sighs loudly and Watanabe laughs openly. Luna grins mischievously and Flores -

Her lips barely quirk, but a knowing glimmer flutters across her dark gaze.

“...Don’t toy with me, Soldier: 76,” Flores replies, “Otherwise I will start calling you ‘Juanito’ on record.”

“Really, Sofía?” Guerra groans through his hands, “That’s how we’re going to start this -”

“Oh, lighten up, Marc,” Cruz grumbles at him from the other end of the table, only Luna mutters lowly, “He doesn’t know how -”

“I heard that, Carolina,” Guerra retorts, dropping his hands, but Luna just laughs hoarsely, “You couldn’t do it ten years ago and you can’t do it now, Marc, but I guess that’s why it’s called SAD, huh?”

A squeaky laugh escapes Jack’s throat, causing Guerra to glower at him, and Jack bites at a gloved knuckle to stifle his chortles.

“And what clever comeback are you going to say when your protégé turns out to be responsible for this mess, Carolina?” Guerra hisses at her, and Luna leans in on the table to return his glare, but Jack just thinks slowly:

**Protégé?**

“That’s rich coming from you when you tried to steal him to your SAD bullshit eight months ago!” Luna snaps at him, “But he said no, so you had to go craft a whole goddamn ‘enhancement’ scheme just to break my ODA - our ODA - apart -”

“Enough.”

Flores’ voice rings out like the shattering of glass, and the pieces of the argument fall into stiff, sullen silence. Guerra and Luna sit back, looking furious with each other still, as Flores sighs, “Marc, Carolina, I will speak with you two personally after this. This in-fighting is detrimental to the entire program and is inexcusable. You will both remain here after this meeting is over.”
“...Yes, ma’am,” Luna states slowly, and Guerra sighs, “Fine.”

Flores locks her eyes with Jack again, saying with clear exhaustion this time, “Soldier: 76, who gave you the idea to destroy the drones?”

Jack blinks once at her -

_The valuable part of the whole program is on the injections, but that isn’t the valuable part of this particular survival simulation_, whispers the spun-sunlight, sugar-smoked voice in his head -

He blinks twice at her -

_Don’t get so caught up in the ‘enhancement’ part that you forget the ‘soldier’ part, Indy -_

Before he states honestly:

“No one.”

Guerra shakes his head in fierce denial as Luna lets out a hoarse, triumphant laugh. Flores rolls her eyes, repeating herself, “Soldier, you and the other individual won’t get in trouble - well...not serious trouble -”

“They won’t??” Watanabe asks, shocked and horrified, “Ma’am, do I need to show you what those cost? Again??”

“Sarge, I am aware of the price tags,” Flores mutters, “And I am also aware that there is no feasible way any of these candidates can pay for them. Need I remind you that the USSOCOM is providing _them_ with financial compensation...as well as all of _you_?”

Watanabe quieted at that but still looks upset, mumbling something to Cruz, who pats his back reassuringly. Flores levels a deadpan gaze to Jack, saying again, “As I was saying, Soldier: 76, you can tell us if another candidate told you to bring down the drones - we’re not...too mad. In fact, we’re actually very interested in the planning process behind your actions towards the drones and your, uh...camp thing.”

Jack glances between their expectant faces and he realizes -

“You…” he mutters, confused and just a little hurt, “Don’t believe me.”

“It’s...not that,” Flores says, hesitating slightly, “We just...were curious if someone put the idea in your head or asked you to...test something for them -”

“Why would I do that?” Jack asks, again feeling slow and dense and confused, “You really think someone told me to throw my one and only combat knife at a drone just to see what happens?”

All six of them make faces, with Cruz grumbling, “I told y’all this was a waste of time -”

“This is a colossal waste of time,” Jones states with frustration, “Last I checked, I and my medics have forty-eight regular doses, thirty-nine double doses, and forty-five triple doses to give _tonight_ - and you expect me to sit here, harassing one of the only medically-trained 18Xers over your mess of a simulation?”

“Being ten minutes late to start your injections is not going to kill anyone,” Guerra starts to say, but Jones snaps at him, “Eighty-four double and triple doses, Marc -!”

“I am extremely aware of what that means, Serena,” Guerra half-retorts, half-whispers to her, adding
lowly, “In fact, I am the only person in this room who really knows what that means.”

Jones says nothing, but shakes her head disapprovingly. Flores looks at Jack, exhausted as she sighs, “Will you tell us what happened, Soldier: 76?”

Jack flicks his gaze between them, before settling on hers again, saying:

“It was just a wild idea, honest to God -”

“I still cannot believe Reyes did not -” Guerra starts to say, but Flores makes a sharp tittering noise, and he stops. Jack glances at him, before -

Remind them of what the R in SERE stands for -

And -

You tell them exactly what you told me - this isn’t peace, this isn’t war, this is -

“...I mean it, I do,” Jack says slowly, cautiously, trying to get his exhausted mind up to speed with the conversation, feeling like he has all the pieces but he can’t see the picture on the puzzle.

“I just...you said you wanted the drones to simulate Omnic drones,” Jack continues, laying out his thought process to them, “So...I mean, I figured, ‘Why would I just run away from that?’”

The R in SERE stands for -

Jack locks eyes with Flores and states with calm, clearsighted control:

“Why wouldn’t I try to resist that? Fight that?”

The directors freeze and Jack -

Jack feels that spun-sunlight, sugar-smoked voice in his head and that strong hand on his back and -

“...Wait,” Jack says, feeling the realization sink in, “You...you all thought that fifty-four young, inexperienced soldiers could actually evade those things? Could actually evade what they represent?”

Looks of embarrassment spread on all their faces and Jack looks at Doctor Jones, saying with horror, “How many triple doses?? Forty-five?? How many of those are 18Xers??”

Jones’ rich, dark complexion pales a little as a sickened expression graces her features and Jack looks back at Flores, Luna, Watanabe, stammering, “You actually thought people would outrun those?? Outrun machines with thermal imaging and an enemy identifying program built into them?? Even if they’re only a fraction of a percent of what a true Omnic drone represents, look at your numbers of candidates who failed to get even one serum!”

Flores shuts her eyes, looking pained.

“...Is this a joke?” Jack demands, his voice deepening with restless energy and sleeplessness and righteous rage, “You’re upset because a few people managed to shank some of your plastic toys out of the air, and you have the gall to ask if another candidate told me to do it to - I don’t know - sabotage the program?”

“Soldier: 76 -” Guerra starts to snap at him, but Jack just growls fiercely:
“Do you think any of those one-hundred and thirty-two individuals out there gave a rat’s ass about being little assholes to you people while they were fighting the literal freezing cold, malnourishment, and goddamn AI-controlled drones?? All with the threat of being sick as dogs for days on end if we didn’t get enough of your comic book gene therapy in our veins fast enough??”

“That’s enough, Soldier: 76,” Flores states loudly, but Jack rasps out, “No, it isn’t!”

“Your general just gave you an order -” Luna snaps at him, and Jack retorts, “My general just tried to ask if I wasn’t creative enough to come up with killing drones on my own, ma’am! Like that isn’t what soldiers the world over are literally trying to do at any given point in the day or night, snow or heat!”

Luna quiets again, and Flores opens her eyes, looking drained.

Jack rumbles lowly:

“You wanted to simulate a part of the literal robot apocalypse that is happening around us, right? Well, congratulations, because that’s exactly what you got. Are you proud of your toy soldiers?”

Flores stares at him, before stating coldly, “I should discharge you from this facility for everything you have said. I could court martial you for it. You understand that, right?”

Jack stares her down, before he replies:

“If those are the rewards for successfully ‘surviving and evading’ your simulation, then I would bear both with far more pride than I bear this SEP tattoo.”

Flores does not look away, staring at him darkly before she commands him:

“You are dismissed, Soldier: 76. Go take a shower and get in line for your double dose.”

“...Thank you, ma’am,” Jack replies impassively, rising from his seat. He salutes them, before he turns on his heel -

And storms out the room.

Part way down the classrooms hallway, Jack slows his bitter, angry stride, stuffing his hands in his pockets, thoughts racing and raging and -

He scowls -

As his right fingers pull out a small slip of paper, torn from the lined page of a notebook.

And his exhausted eyes read:

“Hope you’re being smart, soldadito.”

Did he write this with his right or left hand? Jack wonders blearily, before he remembers: 

He wrote me two other notes...and I never got them.

Jack holds the note closer to his face, wondering if the other two notes are still in the remote refrigerators, teasing him with that voice put on paper -

Jack pauses, staring at the way the “a” and “d’s” loop together in “soldadito,” how the ink is faintly blurred in a rightward motion and -
Jack smiles.

*Left hand,* he chuckles to himself, *He used his left hand.*

Jack pockets the note and continues back toward the dorm halls.

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(Friday, January 25th: 1804 hours - medical bay of the SEP facility)

“Well, let me get this straight—”

Jack makes a bland face as Riya - having been freshened up and given her own injection dose an hour ago - turns towards him, away from his charts and wrist monitor readings, to stare at him in disbelief as she continues:

“You took only *one* serum over the last five days because - and I quote - you were too busy throwing your god damn combat knife at not just one or two drones, but *seven* of them, of which you and your friends would rip the air rifle parts out of and make paintball guns, *all* while managing a camp of like, thirteen or fourteen people on the far southwestern perimeter?”

Jack feels the blood rush to his cheeks because - after all his bold, borderline treasonous talk to the directors, and a nice, soothing hot shower, and fresh clothes, and warmth seeped back into his bones and muscles -

It all sounds

*A little*  

*Pretentious*  

When put like that.

“Uh…” Jack mutters, “That about sums it up, yeah.”

Riya stares at him with *utter* disapproval and disgust. And then she states to him in a loud voice,  

“You’re an *idiot.*”

There’s Adrien’s familiar, wheezy laughter from the next medical inspection stall over, and Adrien’s doctor or medic shouts back, “GET WRECKED, SON.”

Jack’s flush of embarrassment deepens as Riya tugs on his right wrist, pulling his arm flat over her table, as she grumbles, “What kind of dumbass - look, new guy, there’s a reason ODAs are like twelve people max, and that’s if the 18A and 180A are actually in camp or deployment with us the whole time. Or hell, if the entire ODA is even deployed together.”

Jack remains silent and properly embarrassed as she rolls up his sleeve, but her tone remains terse and disappointed as she continues, “Even at just twelve people, there are effectively two positions solely for management and organization stuff - the 180A does a lot of the logistics and budgeting, and the 18Z does the actual team management. And that doesn’t even cover an 18A.”
Riya levels her gaze at him, muttering, “You were trying to do both and manage the serums for the others and kill drones? I don’t know if you’re arrogant or just naive.”

“Both,” Adrien shouts through the partition and Jack grumbles back, “Be careful, Adrien - I have access to your room.”

“You’re my roomate, Jack - of course you got access to - OW!” Adrien starts to say, before a yelp cuts off the last few words. Jack starts to laugh, but the low rasp immediately turns into his own gurgle of pain -

As Riya sinks the serum needle into his vein in the crook of his right arm.

Jack winces, gritting his teeth at the feeling of living, liquid pressure being steadily injected under his skin, the area around the needle already feeling tender and sore from the slow, syrupy density. Riya gives him some dignity, though, focusing on easing the serum into his blood instead of staring at his ugly flinch of pain.

But then

Very quietly

She murmurs:

“...I’m glad you helped them with the serums.”

Jack scowls at her as she slowly and carefully withdraws the needle, dropping it in a sharps container. Riya then presses an alcohol wipe to the injection site, and Jack hisses a little at the sting.

“...I just...couldn’t leave them alone, you know?” Jack mumbles, watching her retrieve a cotton swab and press it to the small droplet of blood welling up from the swell. As she starts to wind the soft bandage wrap around his elbow, Jack sighs, “It didn’t seem right.”

“...You made a valiant effort,” Riya compliments him, “Though you aimed far too high for the third week of SERE. That said -” she adds, taping down the end of the wrap, giving him a stern look, “- Remember this, 76: there are no rewards for being a hero.”

“Wait, I thought getting the double-dose was my reward?” Jack teases her, and Riya raises an eyebrow before she mutters, “Don’t speak too soon, 76 - you have a miserable night ahead of you.”

Wonderful, Jack thinks, as his grin slides into an empty expression and he rises, rolling his sleeve back down. As Riya pulls her disposable gloves off, he starts to leave her little area, when -

“Thanks, though.”

Jack pauses, glancing back at her, and she smiles faintly at him, adding, “You made a difference for your team, and really, that’s all you can ever do in a ride or die situation...even if you were an idiot about it.”

“Thanks, Riya -” Jack starts to say, genuinely appreciative for her remarks when -

“Pick a toilet now and make it clear that it’s yours,” Riya says nonchalantly, waving him off, “Vomit, nausea, and muscle spasms are expected, so only come back if you start bleeding from any orifice. You shouldn’t get a fever, but if you do, come back immediately.”

“...Thanks, Riya,” Jack says less genuinely, “I’ll keep that in mind.”
"Just trying to help," she replies unhelpfully.

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(Friday, January 25th: 2248 hours - "Jack’s toilet," some bathroom in the SEP facility)

There’s nothing more for him to vomit up, but that doesn’t stop his stomach from trying.

Jack’s insides convulse and twist into a knot, before he leans his head back over the toilet and tries again (but again, nothing). He’s been doing this for at least an hour, maybe a bit more, but he’s got nothing left to give - his dinner has already come up, but he keeps drinking water to rehydrate himself, only for his stomach to flip inside out again a few minutes later.

Jack pulls himself away from the toilet to lean back against one of the stall walls, exhaling slowly, the bright fluorescent lights not helping the pounding in his head. He hasn’t gotten a fever, and he hasn’t started spitting up blood, so he assumes that whatever he’s feeling is normal for this kind of double-dose of supersoldier serum.

Not that the thought makes the experience any better, but at least he’s not lying in a puddle of his own blood in the med bay.

_Wonder how the triple-doses are taking it_, he thinks distantly, his eyes blurring a little, causing the lights to fuzz. He’s _beyond_ exhausted, wishing he could just lie down and sleep forever, even on the cold, hard, tiled floor of this tiny bathroom stall, but the nausea and the feeling of stifling heat won’t let him sleep.

At least he’d possessed the foresight to use this bathroom in a remote corner of the facility - even before dinner at 1900 hours, several people had started their, uh, _side effects_, in the main bathrooms of the dorm hallways. That number had grown almost exponentially about 30 minutes to one hour after dinner, and by that time, most of the bathrooms in the instruction hall, the gym hall, and around the mess hall quickly filled up. Jack, however, had figured out there were a few extra bathrooms near some of the supply and equipment halls, on the west side of the facility. At “lights out” at 2200 hours, he’d been foolishly optimistic that “maybe the worst of it wouldn’t hit him” -

But the moment he had laid down in bed, the queasiness had started.

And here he’s been ever since.

Jack shuts his eyes, breathing in and out slowly, trying to let his head and his stomach grow steadier, and that _almost_ starts to work, as the darkness behind his eyelids grows heavier and his muscles relax and everything almost fades into a sore but tolerable hum -

And then there’s pain that is both sharp and dull _rippling_ up his back.

Jack nearly doubles over, tears welling up in the corners of his eyes, hissing through his teeth as he struggles to knead knuckles awkwardly into the spot, but he can barely reach, and he instantly regrets leaving the “thoughtfully provided” hot pack in his room. He shudders as the pain lances through him, gritting his teeth as he settles in, bent over and hugging himself through it.
The moment is blinding in how long it feels, yet it's over in about a minute, based on his wrist monitor, but the effects of it still pulse through him slowly - small stitches of throbbing that move up and down and out from the spot. It combines with the seemingly endless restless, achy energy of the serum, leaving him feeling tense and sore, on edge and yet dulled, exhausted and yet easily excitable.

Very slowly, Jack eases himself out of his little huddle, feeling stuffy (but not feverish...just...uncomfortably warm). The nausea lingers like a faint shadow on his senses, and the air in the empty bathroom tastes sterilely stale, like a vegetable left to ripen a little too long. His teeth feel fuzzy and his toes and fingers feel stiff. Feeling older than “nearly twenty-seven,” Jack rises unsteadily to his feet, hands pressed to the cold plastic walls to keep himself balanced.

*I'll be fucked if the nausea comes back,* Jack thinks exhaustedly, *But I can't sit here anymore - the tile is killing my back.* He shakily unlatches the stall door and stumbles into the main hall of the bathroom, somehow fumbling with a faucet at the long trench sink, washing his hands if only for the routine of it and the crisp, clean feeling to settle the unhemmed edges of his mind.

He manages a few steps to the door, and carefully pushes it open to take a wobbly half-step out -

“Jesus Christ!” a low voice whispers fiercely as the door hits some sort of resistance.

Jack blinks a few times in sleepy confusion, before he awkwardly peers around it -

Only to see a super bundled-up Gabriel scowling back at him.

“Oh, thank god, it's just you,” Gabriel sighs, his scowl relaxing into a look of relief. Jack stares at him stupidly, slowly processing how Gabriel is carrying some sort of...thermos in one hand, and a thick, heavily worn...book in another.

“...Gabe? What are you...?” Jack asks drearily, and he blinks again and god, the sweet darkness feels so good, so heavy around his eyelids -

“...Holy shit, Jack,” Gabriel’s voice taps through the tinted glass cage his mind is trying to sleep in, “You look fucked.”

“I feel fucked,” Jack mutters airily, “And not in a good way.”

Gabriel starts to chuckle weakly at that -

“I love being fucked in a good way,” Jack exhales lightly, wondering if he should just sleep on the ground -

Gabriel’s laughter turns into a sputtering, hacking cough.

“Yeah, that, uh -” Gabriel wheezes, “Few people dislike that - JACK, WHAT THE -”

Jack starts to sway a little -

But those strong, reassuring hands grip at his shoulders, shaking him slightly.

“Mmm, feel bad,” Jack mumbles, and Gabriel whisper-urges him, “Uh, yeah, I’m sure you do, Juan, but you can’t sleep here -”

“Wanna sleep wherever -” Jack sighs, trying to lean closer to his voice when -

His right side *bursts* into pain.
Jack’s eyes fly open as he nearly crumples to the ground, his whole right torso - from his hip up to his armpit - seizes up, snapping and shuddering and curling up with fire and lightning, as all his muscles there zing and stretch and contract together, all at once. He hisses loudly, his right leg almost giving out beneath him, falling forward towards Gabriel’s left shoulder, his fingers gripping into the back of Gabriel’s dense jacket -

“Holy shit, what the fuck -” Gabriel mutters at him in horror, as Jack shivers and shakes against him, eyebrows furrowing in concentration as he inhale-exhales as steadily as he can -

“Just - fuck -” Jack groans, “Sorry, just - god - lean me up on the wall, please - oh, shit -”

“Dude, you need more than a goddamn wall,” Gabriel mumbles in shock, walking backwards to pull them both against the wall by the bathroom door. There’s some awkward shifting of hands, and then Gabriel’s left hand is pressed firmly but gently into Jack’s back, rubbing soothingly up and down. Jack slowly exhales, relishing the comfort of Gabriel close against him, wishing he could just breathe a little better, feel a little bit easier, wanting more than anything to enjoy the moment -

But the pain and the unbearabe feeling of slow, sluggish liquid in his veins and muscles makes him woozy.

After a moment that is both far too long for the pain, and far too short to feel Gabriel’s fingers rub into his back, Jack sighs, trying to push himself up, away from the older soldier, too exhausted to be embarrassed and too embarrassed to be happy over the small reprieve.

“Sorry,” Jack mumbles, his vision a little blurry again with the sting of salt, taking a half-step back, “Sorry, that was not okay...sorry.”

Gabriel tilts his head, scowling slightly as he replies lowly, “Jack, you have nothing to be sorry for - why the fuck aren’t you in the med bay?”

“This is...normal, apparently,” Jack murmurs, trying to wipe the sleep from his eyes, but every blink, every steady exhale pushes him closer to a restless, pain-filled sleep, “Riya told me that unless I was spitting blood or pushing ten-thousand degrees that I should hug a toilet for the night, but sitting on the floor is...so painful right now.”

Gabriel’s scowl deepens, and for some reason, Jack thinks he might be angry -

“Really - they’re only gonna treat you for that shit?” Gabriel mutters, but he rolls his shoulders in frustration, asking more gently, “Is that why you’re over here in the like, supply section?”

Jack nods tiredly, mumbling, “There’s some empty bathrooms over here - other bathrooms are full right now.” And then he frowns slightly, adding slowly, “And everything is so hot.”

“...You sure you don’t have a fever?” Gabriel asks, peering at him a little closer and Jack leans back, still weakly embarrassed from his moment of pain, saying, “I...don’t. It’s just that...everything is so muggy. I wanna sleep but I lay down and the nausea hits. But I sit in here and...feel gross.”

Gabriel stares at him contemplatively, as if assessing something, before he sighs to himself, saying quietly, “Wait here. And don’t fall asleep.”

And then he turns and darts back down the semi-darkness of the hallway.

Jack frowns, watching after him with sleepy confusion, wondering what the older soldier is up to, but he leans himself up against the wall to wait all the same. He forces himself to keep his eyes open, trying to count:
Wait shit, he skipped three -

By the time his only semi-awake brain manages to slog through the numbers to ten, there’s the soft sound of stealthy but fast footsteps down the hallway -

And then Gabriel reappears in the dim, dull lighting of the “lower power” lightbulbs, their soft glow making his already rich skin tone all the more regal with a gilded touch.

He’s carrying...more stuff now, Jack realizes slowly, and Jack’s about to ask what it all is, where did he get it, when Gabriel gestures for him to come forward. Jack steps towards him, as Gabriel dumps all of it except one big, dark, lumpy thing on the floor. When Jack gets another step closer, Gabriel murmurs, “Right arm out.”

Jack does as he’s told, lifting his right arm, and Gabriel slides one part of the thick, fleecy cloth onto it. It takes Jack an embarrassingly long second to realize -

“Right arm down, turn around, left arm out,” Gabriel instructs him, and Jack follows orders, letting Gabriel tug the left sleeve of the thick, soft, puff jacket over his arm and onto his shoulders. Jack blinks, asking slowly, “But I’m already warm.”

“I know, Indy, but you still need these. Zipper it,” Gabriel says. As Jack fumbles with the zipper, something soft but rather form-fitting slides snuggly over his fluff of hair and -

“Oh,” Jack states lamely, as Gabriel adjusts the cotton beanie around his head. Jack turns back around, still absolutely confused but still following everything Gabriel says, including the odd question, “Shoe size?”

“Uh, about a ten and a half,” Jack replies without thinking, but Gabriel seems satisfied, bending down to plop a pair of leather boots before him, saying, “They’re gonna be a little big on you, but they’ll work.”

Jack stares at the shoes dumbly, but kneels slowly. It feels like it takes his clumsy fingers forever to slip them on and lace them properly, but when he does, Gabriel is ready for him, holding out two granola bars for him.
This is the first time in the last few minutes that Jack pauses, making a face, muttering, “I’m not sure I can -”

“You need to eat them,” Gabriel states - not rudely, just informatively - adding, “Bland, starchy food is best for your stomach after puking. These things are whole grain and have low flavor. They’ll get you settled.”

Jack is doubtful, pouting a little, but he takes them anyways, stuffing one into a pocket in the jacket, fingers barely managing to open the second one. He bites into it, and the mere act of chewing is difficult, as is swallowing, but within a few munches, the feeling of the grains and slight sugar (some sort of creamy frosting on it, lightly chocolate) is soothing in his twisting stomach.

Gabriel, meanwhile, gathers the rest of the things, and moves past him, whispering, “This way.” Jack follows tiredly, shoving the rest of the granola bar in his mouth.

They wander down the rest of the hallway, and, right at an intersection with another hallway that leads east, back towards the mess hall, Gabriel glances around -

And heads to the locked security door on the north wall.

Jack frowns, instinctively knowing something is off but not fully processing why, until he sees Gabriel tap a quick series of numbers into the lockpad by the door -

“...Why do you know the security code?” Jack asks slowly, and Gabriel flicks his gaze back at him, muttering, “Well...this is the one corner where the cameras are pointed the wrong way.”

Jack blinks at him, not following his logic, until Gabriel nods his head upwards, in the corner above them. Jack looks up, and sees the two cameras there are pointed away from the door, down each hallway instead.

“I -” Gabriel starts to say, as the lockpad beeps and turns green, and a switch in the security door unlatches. He pushes it open, adding softly, “Look, you should always know at least one way out, okay?”

“...Is that professional advice speaking?” Jack giggles a little, feeling a soft mischief creep up inside him alongside the parallel feelings of being beyond tired and overstuffed. Gabriel holds the door open, but smirks slyly at him, chuckling, “Not professional Special Forces, but...I guess you can take it as ‘Gabe’s Rule Number One.’ Now, c’mon -”

“You did it.”

Now it’s Gabriel’s turn to pause, looking confused as Jack beams at him, radiating a sleepy smile.

“I did what?” Gabriel asks him, and Jack just grins back lopsidedly, humming happily, “You called yourself ‘Gabe.’”

Gabriel freezes before his eyes start to go wide and -

Jack steps up, fishing for the other granola bar with one hand, and poking Gabriel teasingly with the other, laughing lowly, “I’m getting under your skin, huh, Gabe?”

“...More than you know,” Gabriel mutters, but with the low, plasticy rip of the wrapper, Jack misses half of it, mumbling a “what” as he bites into the second bar.

“...Nothing. C’mon,” Gabriel says, stepping through the door, and Jack follows him unflinchingly -
But he stops

As the brisk, sweet, *relieving* chill of the frosted night air hits him in the face

And Jack

*breathes.*

He inhales -

A crisp, cold, refreshing sweep of air that fills his lungs full, pressing out the humid sting of sore muscles and stale tastes -

And he exhales -

Letting out the feeling of sluggish slowness, of overburdened exhaustion, of unrelenting soft anxiety that had been tugging at his brain all week.

As the door snaps shut behind him, Jack has to blink a few times to let his eyes adjust to the soothing darkness of the night around him, tilting his head up to look at all the clear, crystalline stars in the vast, blue velvet sky above him, hanging suspended in the endless beyond like frozen dewdrops. There are a few lights - their glow a tarnished, burnished bronze - radiating off the sides of the exposed parts of the facility, but the rest of the world is bathed in a sugary snap of snow and stardust, light and dark, a beautiful sky, like the depths of the sea turned upside down.

Suddenly, Jack becomes aware of Gabriel standing a few feet away, watching him quietly atop the high snowbank that’s drifted around parts of the facility, and Jack smiles, following in the crunches of his footsteps, his sweatpants feeling thin and not suitable for the situation, but the rest of him has finally reached the right temperature - a perfect mix of refreshing sweetness on the outside and inside of his lungs, and a mild, easy warmth all around his torso and arms. Jack finishes the second granola bar just as he reaches Gabriel’s position, stuffing the wrapper in a pocket as he giggle-whispers, “This is non-regulation, right?”

“Almost everything good is,” Gabriel grins back at him, and Jack smiles, as the deadly concoction of sleepiness and exhaustion and excitement and restless energy makes him tease back, “You’re such a reckless *badass*, Gabe - sneaking off base when you aren’t supposed to.”

“You know me - I’ve got an image to maintain,” Gabriel retorts dryly, before adding with some seriousness, “Stay close. We’re not going far, but remember life lesson number one -”

“Don’t be a dumbass,” Jack grins back, giving Gabriel a mock salute, “Yessir, Commander Reyes.”

Gabriel rolls his eyes but sets off, trekking north along the slope the facility is built into. Jack follows closely behind, admiring the stars above them, the snow around them, the steady march of the man in front of him, how warm his jacket is -

“Is this yours?” Jack asks him when they’re maybe a hundred feet out, reaching a small patch of trees. Gabriel glances back, frowning in confusion, but Jack smiles, saying, “The jacket?”

“...All of it is mine,” Gabriel mutters, looking forward again hastily, as he adds, “Spare jacket, spare beanie, spare boots. They’re not snowproof, but they’re leather and we’re stopping soon -”

“The jacket is *cosy,*” Jack says dreamily, missing how Gabriel slightly stumbles over his next step, and Jack continues in an airy voice, “Soft too. A good kind of warm.”
“Well, I’m glad it’s working,” Gabriel says, but his voice has a strange rasp to it, and Jack is about to ask what’s wrong when -

“We’re here,” Gabriel adds quickly, “Be careful where you step.”

Suddenly, there’s a light from a small, portable lantern in Gabriel’s hands, dimly illuminating the trees. They’re right on the western edge of the little forest patch, the downslope to the west of them, and, although it’s difficult in the dark, the spot is high enough that Jack can tell it opens to a view of the valley west of the facility -

And there

The stardusted, blue stillness of the night sky is endless.

Jack blinks out at the vast universe above him, eyes tracing constellations and distant galaxies, as Gabriel shuffles around, settling the lantern’s handle on a low-hanging tree branch and -

Jack looks back and his jaw drops slightly.

There’s a whole, small, one to two person snow fort built there: a wide A-frame constructed from long but sturdy tree branches, the “A” opening to the west downslope, with snow packed in over the boughs covering it. An industrial tarp covers the inside, and the snow around it has been gently carved out, leaving a space to sit behind a low wall, just short enough to let the sitter still have that sweeping view of the valley but high enough to block the wind. Gabriel hops down into the low pit, entirely free from snow, and he busies himself with stuffing sticks and fistfuls of pine needles into a Dakota hole.

Jack slides in, crouching opposite him as Gabriel pulls out his magnesium bar, unhooking the small “scraper” that comes with it. As the older soldier shaves off long flakes of the metal, Jack murmurs reverentially, “...You’ve been breaking the rules for awhile, huh?”

“...Made it like, the end of the first week here,” Gabriel chuckles, flipping the bar over to the flint strip embedded in the other side. He strikes it a few times with the scraper, before some of the sparks catch the magnesium shreds and alight. Gabriel leans it, gently puffing air through the flakes and scattering them among the pine needles. The dry tinder catches quick, and soon the small flames are snapping and singing merrily in the fire pit.

As Gabriel straightens back up, pocketing his fire starter kit, Jack looks at him, openly asking, “But why?”

And Gabriel looks back at him, his expression calm and assessing, before he smiles almost sadly, saying gently, “I’ve been in a lot of groups - sometimes with a lot of people, sometimes with only a few. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that you will always need a little world for yourself...A space to be alone.”

And then he glances around his small snow shelter, adding with a soft, bittersweet tone, “Even if you have to carve it out of the earth.”

Jack stares at him - eyes tracing over the smooth curves of his cheekbones, how the flickering, gilded glow of the flames and the sweet light of the lantern cast him in gold shadows, bronzed and coppery, almost dreamlike in how surreal and otherworldly the moment feels.

How Gabriel’s, dark, obsidian-smoked eyes are soft and starlike, like pieces of the night sky - frozen stars and distant galaxies and sundust smoke - fallen to earth.
And Jack says with gentle, reverential awe:

“Thank you.”

Gabriel looks back at him, both confused and amused, asking with a wry smirk, “For what?”

For trusting me with this, Jack thinks, For giving me this moment with you. For letting me see the world you’ve made for yourself.

“For bringing me out here,” Jack says with a tired, but easy smile, “For the granola bars and the jacket. And for the advice earlier.”

Gabriel watches him, his face lit with the ember light of a small fire and the chilled, thin radiance of the lantern, before he smiles back, saying coolly, “Well, thanks for teaching me how to throw knives. And for making me rethink how to handle drones. Here.”

Gabriel leans over, picking apart the small bundle that he’s brought, spreading out a thin, fleece blanket over the tarp beneath the A-frame shelter. Jack pauses, but follows him into the barely-wide-enough space under the opening, settling in to the left of the other soldier.

Gabriel holds out the silver thermos to Jack, and he takes it, unscrewing the lid curiously and sniffing at the steam coming out of it -

And Jack’s whole face lights up with a massive, bright, sunshiny grin as he laughs, “Hot chocolate??”

“It’s got shit flavor because I made it out of the chocolate bars they’ve been giving us for dessert and that milk they have for breakfast,” Gabriel says, before unwrapping his own granola bar. He munches on it, saying with a mouth full of grains, “Ain’t at all like I can make when I got real chocolate, but you gotta work with the tools you’re given, I guess.”

“How the fuck did you even make this?” Jack asks, before lifting the thermos and taking a sip. Gabriel’s right, of course - it’s not nearly as thick, creamy, or flavorful as something made with better chocolate, better milk, or longer times to melt and froth, but the smooth, sweet, silky flavor is divine on his tongue and down his throat -

“You think the northwest security door is the only passcode I’ve been monitoring?” Gabriel asks with a thick chuckle. He stuffs the rest of the granola bar in his mouth, mumbling, “Gabe’s Rule Number Two: always have a way to get into the kitchen or food supply.”

“You made this on the goddamn kitchen stove?” Jack asks, his voice loud with excitement and bewilderment. Gabriel just shoots back a wry grin, pulling the thermos from his hands, saying lowly, “I’m a good break-in: I only use the chocolate I was given and just a little bit of milk, and I always clean up my dishes.”

“You are absolutely unreal,” Jack laughs as Gabriel takes a sip. As he lowers the thermos, the older soldier mutters, “Yeah, well, I could be adding a little more sugar to this, but I have some integrity -”

“Do you??” Jack asks back, poking at him a little, “Are you sure this represents integrity?”

“Only the highest,” Gabriel grins back, before handing him the thermos again. He leans up, pulling the lantern off the tree branch and hanging it from the main support of the A-frame inside.

And then he pulls the last thing - that worn book - from his pile, adding kindly, “Feel free to head back whenever - just follow our footsteps. I just figured you needed some fresh air and some space.”
“Hmm,” Jack hums in agreement, but thinks quietly, *You are a breath of fresh air and a whole world unto yourself, Gabe.*

But instead, he says cheerfully, “Well, the hot chocolate helps a lot more.”

“Don’t get too cosy with the idea,” Gabriel warns him teasingly, “You want in on this piece of the pie, you gotta contribute your own chocolate.”

“Duly noted, Commander,” Jack giggles, taking another sip and letting the warmth - the warmth of the chocolate, the warmth of the small fire, the warmth of the jacket, the warmth of the moment - fill him with a sweet, satisfying contentment.

In his peripherals, Gabriel settles back, cracking the worn paperback open to some dog-eared page, his eyes quickly skimming whatever is there.

And Jack knows he’s already in a better mood when he asks coyly, “Read to me?”

Gabriel looks up at him, face open and shocked, before he asks, “What?”

“Oh, sorry,” Jack grins, saying slyly, “Read to me, *please,* Gabe?”

Gabriel stares at him for a long moment - just enough for Jack to start to wonder if he crossed a line - when Gabriel finally murmurs:

“You’re going to judge me.”

“What? Me? No, never - well...only if it’s something ridiculous and totally out of character for your rogue badass image,” Jack replies with a languid hastiness, getting Gabriel to grin and snap, “Smartass.”

“Does that mean it is?” Jack taunts him, and Gabriel grumbles, “Alright, jerkoff, give me a minute - no point in starting on the last page of this story.”

“Ooooh, an anthology, huh?” Jack hums, leaning in a little, taking another sip of the hot chocolate. Gabriel rolls his eyes, but skims the rest of the page, flipping it as he mutters, “You judge me, you lose out on the hot chocolate deal, capiche?”

“Gabe, look -” Jack says cheerfully, “The secret snow fort and hot chocolate are deadass giveaways you’re actually the biggest nerd I’ve ever met, so hit me with whatever Lovecraft or Tolkien novella you’re far too invested in. I’m ready.”

“That sounds like it came from a personal place,” Gabriel chuckles wryly, and Jack shrugs, admitting, “Hit the nail on the head there, Mr. Holmes.”

“You have a ridiculous sense of timing, you know that?” Gabriel snorts, and Jack’s about to ask why when -

“A Case of Identity,” Gabriel states in a surprisingly clear, calm, even voice, and Jack leans in a little closer, enjoying the sound of it -

“‘My dear fellow,’ said Sherlock Holmes as we sat on either side of the fire in his lodgings at Baker Street -” Gabriel continues, his lips twisting into a wry smirk as Jack laughs at the “sheer coincidence” of him calling Gabriel “Mr. Holmes.” He settles in, leaning lightly against Gabriel’s left shoulder, as Gabriel continues, with that perfect low, easy cadence:
“Life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent. We would not dare to
conceive the things which are really mere commonplaces of existence. If we could fly out of that
window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer
things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the cross-purposes, the wonderful
chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most outré results, it would make
all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable.”

And as Jack savors all that this moment is -

His eyelids flutter shut -

And he lets the sweet darkness - and the spun-sunlight and sugar-smoked softness of Gabriel’s voice
-

Hold him through the tremor of pain that starts to lance up his back.

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Chapter End Notes

"I'm not a psychopath; I'm a high-functioning psychopath." - Reaper, (mis)quoting
Sherlock.

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Gabriel Reyes is a neeeerded.

Gabriel sitting around reading classic literature all day is one of my favorite headcanons
for him. He loves Edgar Allan Poe and he quotes Sherlock, so why not? Gabriel seems
like the kind of guy to really love a good detective story or murder mystery.
Chapter Summary

[UPDATE: Please note the changes to the rating and tags! The rating has changed from "Mature" to " Explicit." The tags now include content based on the upcoming "Resistance" chapters, including putting a major character through high-stress situations and interrogations. See the Chapter Notes for more.]

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In advanced combat and survival training programs, "Resistance" training is described as "training on how to survive and resist the enemy in the event of capture."

In reality, "Resistance" training is meant to prepare military personnel for torture.

The most secretive and most heavily criticized part of all U.S. SERE programs, "Resistance" puts trainees through "enhanced interrogation techniques" such as sleep deprivation, "music torture", stress positions, blackout boxes, and more.

But why would SEP put its candidates through Resistance training when the Omnis do not take human prisoners of war?

As Jack reflects on his upcoming 27th birthday, Gabriel becomes frustrated by the "all too human" nature of the program, angry that human politics - and human egos - take priority over preparing the SEP soldiers for war against machines.

Chapter Notes

...Hello. It's been awhile.

So the "bad news": the last...six months or so have been extremely busy for me, in ways that I did not anticipate (mainly due to increasing responsibilities at my job). I have had significantly less time to write, which means when I did/do write, it is often in big bursts. In June, I thought things would finally slow down a bit, but instead, the uncertainties related to my job have increased. This has made it difficult to write both fics and essays at a consistent pace.

But the "good news" for y'all:

I already have 12 chapters of "24X76: Force Multiplication" drafted and beta-read.

I started "24x76: Force Multiplication" specifically to update "76+127: How We Were Made": I wanted to take the same core "plot" of Jack, Gabriel, and the other SEP soldiers in a fake prison training simulation, and update parts of the story to be 1) more canon to the world of Overwatch and 2) more aligned with real world advanced military training. Combining these elements proved to be a significantly bigger and more complex task than I thought it would be back in January, lol.

Unlike "How We Were Made" (where Jack's perspective was only one chapter, and
then Gabriel's perspective was another), the "Resistance" part of "Force Multiplication" spans this current chapter ("Chapter 4") and goes through about eleven and a half chapters. This includes this "pre-Resistance" chapter all the way to the "spiritual epilogue" of the Resistance arc.

It is NOT the full fic, which means I do have more writing to do. TT_TT

I also want to really, REALLY stress something:

The fic gets...very intense. It brushes on some very controversial real world topics: my own internal "policy" on writing Overwatch stories is that my fics should bridge gaps between real world technology, or situations, or ideas and then expand that into the "future" that Overwatch has built around itself. If you have read my other fics, you know that these topics range from stuff like transitioning from oil-based energy to "fusion" energy, the development of biosynthetic nanobiology, the creation of advanced tracking turrets, etc, but it also includes some emotional or psychological elements like the nature of A.I., sentience, and differences in perception (e.g. Lúcio and Symmetra).

This is the first time I have dealt with two pretty controversial topics in this "real world-meets-Overwatch" style: genetic modifications (Overwatch calls these "enhancements") and advanced military torture training.

And also to stress: no one gets seriously injured or harmed in this arc. I'm going to sound like a wimp, but I couldn't do it. I did A LOT of research on both topics, and quite frankly, reading about CIA "enhanced interrogation techniques" was horrifying. I try to be aware of topics like this, but going in-depth (as much as I could) was bad. I do NOT condone any of this, and I wanted to handle the parts I could write with the gravity that the topic requires.

My intention was to always make a "sci-fi" version of Resistance training, and to expand on the "How We Were Made" plot.

What I wrote was - quite honestly - significantly bigger than either of those.

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

76 Flashback: Knife Trick

Tuesday, February 18, 2031: 3:43 p.m. - the Morrison household, a few miles south of Bloomington, Indiana

Jack breathes a long, heavy sigh as he enters the stiff warmth of the house, the feeling familiar and yet slightly stifling all at once. The air outside had been a strange mix of crisply cool - chilled as all winters are - but oddly muggy, strangely humid, largely due to the thick grey clouds overhead and the snow-slush melting into muddy puddles all across the fields south of Bloomington. The snow doesn’t seem to want to stick this year, sloughing off into little rivulets of water and ice during daylight hours before the temperature drop of the night refreezes everything. Once a week, another quick storm seems to blow through, recoating everything, causing the process to start all over again.
Makes Jack feel a little strange - an unsettling halfness, as though the world does not fully want to engage in winter, but isn’t ready for spring.

An uncanny time of the year.

An odd part of life.

His birthday.

Worst gift I got today was an extra hour of math homework, the eleven-year-old grumbles to himself, adjusting his backpack on his shoulder as he slips his snow-slush-damp boots onto the shoe shelf by the door (he’d tugged them off on the porch outside, as his mother always wanted them to do - “don’t track dirt in the house”). Jack takes several steps in through the hall, heading to the staircase just slightly off-set as he calls out, “Mom, we’re home!”

“She’s prolly out at the Lopez’s,” Peter says, entering the house behind him. His fourteen-year-old brother also drops his boots by the shoe shelf, muttering hoarsely, “Dad said yesterday they were having some problems in their greenhouse.”

“Oh right,” Jack murmurs, mainly to himself - don’t be disappointed, a voice chides him, You know saving the lettuce is important. Jack sighs again, another heavy, slow roll of his lungs that feels slightly like suffocating but that’s -

That’s just how things are.

Jack starts up the stairs, fingers tracing up the worn bannister, skipping the third step that squeaks too loud. The Morrison house is a surprisingly narrow thing - tall like them, three stories at kinda odd intervals, built of oak that’s at least a hundred years old now, white coat of paint on the walls, a half-and-half blend of light and dark, old and new, winter and spring. It has housed three or four generations of them, or something like that, grown through the decades with little room add-ons and a full garage-barn off to the side, to the point where even though it wasn’t nearly as massive as some of the other homesteads out in the rural farming community, it still felt

Entirely too big

On days like today.

It always felt too empty on his birthday.

But that’s what he gets for being born on a school day - his friends had given him candy at lunch and a snowball fight during recess where they had shouted and play-fought until their lungs had burned, but the best gift had been when Tom and José had given him their rare Pokemon - a retro Deoxys and Mew - named “birthday” and “HAPPY” which had shown up in his PokeMail inbox out of order, causing Jack to snort and laugh and spit an M&M halfway across the cafeteria as his friends had howled with laughter -

But here, in the house that is entirely too big for a family of four so rarely home together

Those feelings linger like the snow slush

Not sure if they should be something tangible or run off into watery mush.

Jack heads to his left, turning into the bedroom hallway, trudging to his room at the far end. Even with the white walls, the murky sky casts long, drawn shadows across everything, so that even flicking on the lights barely penetrates the strange, unraveling feeling of being constrained. Jack
enters his bedroom, slugging his backpack by his desk and slumping into the chair. The windows in
his room face south, which he likes in the summer because they catch the sunlight all day, from the
dim, pastel dawn to the east to the oil-painted hues of the sunset in the west, when all he can see is
stalks of corn growing and a sky that floods with color and sunlight and stormclouds.

But in winter, everything is duller, everything darker, coated in half-light, half-darkness, half-snow,
half-slush, chilled yet muggy.

On days like today

Days where the house feels entirely too big

Days where he feels a little claustrophobic

Days like every birthday he’s ever experienced

He wishes he could be somewhere where the sun always shines

And the moon is always bright in blue-velvet night skies.

Jack taps at the power button on his datapad, sorting through his homework in his head, deciding
which one he wants to do first, when a shadow appears in his doorway. The boy glances up to see
Peter, blue eyes deceptively bright in the half-shadows, blonde hair unruly under the rumpled beanie,
giving Jack the same sly, crooked grin that both brothers share as he mutters, “Heard you had a shit
birthday.”

“It...could’ve been worse,” Jack admits, swiveling his chair towards Peter, and the younger boy
grins, “Got some event-only Pokemon from Tom and José, so that was cool -”

“Neeeeerd,” Peter groans and Jack makes a tart face before sneering, “I don’t deserve this today,
Peter -”

“Privileges of being the older brother to a nerdy little one,” Peter says smugly, before lightly tossing
something to Jack, who jumps slightly as he catches it. Peter grins, “I get to treat you like shit any
time of the year, Jack - don’t matter what day it is.”

“I think that just makes you a bad brother,” Jack mutters, turning the object over in his hands. It’s a
badly wrapped present of some sort, a weirdly long, angular plastic thing, and the younger boy
frowns briefly before lifting his head and looking at his smug brother with awe.

“...You got me something?” Jack asks, slightly shocked and confused because he doesn’t really
remember the last time Peter actually got him something, something real, something tangible. Peter
chuckles a little, “Someone has to get you something that’s actually cool for once. Who better than
me?”

“I can think of a lot of people cooler than you,” Jack retorts, prying the paper open, and Peter
grumbles, “Looks like this is the last cool thing I get you, you li’l shit.”

Jack pulls the paper away, staring for a long, half-moment before -

“What,” the younger brother half-states, half-asks, turning the long pocket knife - wrapped in safety-
plastic, the slim metal catching in the half-light - over and over, his blue eyes tracing the slick blade,
the wiry handle, the belt clip on the side. Jack looks up, eyes large and round with wonder as Peter
beams at him - that trademark Morrison smile - laughing brightly:
“Happy birthday, Jack.”

“How did you even buy this??” Jack asks, half-excited, half-nervous, half-happy, a thrill of the unknown, hemmed with grey clouds and thunderstorms, edged with steel-tips and gilded sunlight - there’s a sense of adventure, an uncanny feeling of walking the boundary of small dangers. Peter smirks, folding his arms across his chest as he leans against the doorframe, “One of my older friends helped me get it. I know it’s kinda cheap but it’s all you’re gonna get this year -”

“You really got me a knife??” Jack stammers, swiveling around to open a desk drawer and pull out some scissors to hack away at the safety plastic. Peter scowls a little bit, muttering, “You gotta be careful with it, okay? Don’t show it at school, of course. And definitely don’t show Mom. Not for a while.”

“I’m not stupid, Peter,” Jack says tartly, but his face immediately returns to a smile, he’s grinning, he can’t stop, it feels so stupid to get this worked up over something that probably only cost Peter’s shitty allowance, but still, it’s real, it’s tangible, it’s -

It catches small slivers of sunlight, light that Jack can’t even quite see with his eyes, light that makes the steel dance like water.

Jack grins up at Peter, knife in safety plastic in his left hand, scissors ready to shred the plastic to get to his gift in his right. The younger boy - so often out of place, so often out of sorts these days, so often caught in half-and-half - smiles brightly as he says:

“Thank you!”

Peter chuckles back, almost mirroring his bright smile as he replies:

“Don’t ever say I’m not a cool brother.”

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**76: Resignation**

February 17, 2047: 0734 hours - at breakfast in the mess hall, main SEP facility

“Alright, everyone listen up,” Carolina Luna, one of the future SEP company commanders, shouts out at them right as the majority of the SEP candidates are finishing their breakfasts. Jack, who had been listening quietly and very patiently to Wes bemoan how he was beginning to get a crush on one of the senior soldiers, shifts his attention to Luna, who has left her spot at one of the directors’ and staff tables at the southern end of the room (the far right of the mess hall) and is standing at the head of the candidates’ tables.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, despite looking like and acting like (and probably being) a badass, the former 18 Zulu hasn’t quite nailed the ability to quiet the whole rowdy herd of them with a few words the way her general and superior officer Flores can, and even at a distance Jack sees a brief flicker of what might be panic or nervousness in her green eyes as very few of the candidates pay attention to her.

“Hey, be quiet -” Jack starts to shush his friends around the back end of the third table when -

Perhaps very surprisingly -
A loud but calm, cool, and controlled voice -

Familiar to him in the wry jokes they crack to each other, the easy, flowing conversations they’ll have, and the low, throaty whispers and smug chuckles that have started to haunt Jack’s dreams -

Speaks out above the din:

“Your CO has given y’all an order - it would be wise to shut up and listen.”

And somehow, the dry crack of sarcasm and the subtle brush of smokiness from Gabriel at the far end of the “senior” table gets the whole back half of the room to quiet. At the “sound” of nearly seventy candidates silencing, the front half of the room quickly follows, and people turn their attention to Luna waiting for them.

“...Thank you, Rey - Soldier: 24,” Luna states, more clearly in control now, but Jack quickly shifts his gaze to CIA agent Guerra, who rolls his eyes and resumes writing something on his datapad. Jack scowls a little: he has not forgotten the small, weird spat he’d witnessed between Guerra and Luna during his “talkin’-to” last month, though his memories of it are blurry from his then-overwhelming exhaustion and frustration.

But it didn’t take a genius to figure out the two had some ideological differences between them…

And some...personal history.

Wonder why there’s bad blood there, Jack thinks, returning his attention to Luna. Even in the dull crispness of a late February morning, she does not slacken, her back straight and head poised fiercely. Yet she’s not stiff or overbearing - she may not be used to commanding so many soldiers quite yet, but authority and power come to her naturally and gracefully, and Jack sees in her all the precision and skill that he’d seen in fictional military commandos and special operations soldiers in games, books, and comics growing up.

“As you all are aware, we finished your lessons and training on advanced combat and shooting this week,” Luna tells them distantly, before she suddenly smirks, chuckling, “So you know what that means .”

“Oh god,” Adrien mutters next to him as groans go up around the room. Across the table, Sarah drops her head into her hands and Wes grumbles, “So much for today being a rest day .”

“It’s time for the best part of SERE,” Luna continues with that knowing grin, “Resistance.”

Jack’s eyelids flutter shut as he

Inhales

And then exhales

Slowly

Trying to control his breathing as the adrenaline spikes in his blood at the mere word.

Resistance.

The U.S. military’s “cool” term for the torture training and prison camp simulation segment of the Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape program.

Jack opens his eyes, as Luna relaxes her stance slightly, saying more conversationally, “Alright,
alright, settle down. The directors know you’ve heard rumors and stories, both here and in Assessment and Selection, and we know the senior and junior soldiers won’t forget our favorite poem anytime soon.”

Next to Wes, Jamie shudders slightly, muttering lowly, “Fuck me, I never wanted to hear ‘Boots’ again.”

“What the fuck is ‘Boots?’” Wes starts to ask him, when Luna’s voice drifts over them, continuing loudly, “But this Resistance training program is going to be a little different from the other forms performed by the Special Forces and Marines.”

Jack glances back at her, and Luna elaborates, explaining, “Quite frankly, SEP does not have the staffing, resources, or space to perform both the Resistance part of SERE and Robin Sage here in our permitted program land lease. There are just far too many of you for us to do the prison camp simulation all at once, and General Flores will be leaving us this week to check up on the different fronts across the United States. Our resources and energy will be strapped thin.”

Jamie briefly looks hopefully, grinning, “Maybe us juniors won’t have to do it again?”

Before Luna shatters his fragile optimism, saying bluntly, “But the Enhancement Program has a strict schedule to follow, for your injections, advanced training, and eventual deployment, so we really don’t have the luxury of dicking around with some sort of rollout timetable, so all of you lucky bastards get to experience a mass-produced Resistance simulation all at once.”

Jamie and several of the other juniors practically sob at the news.

Jack, however, glances at Gabriel…

And he scowls slightly.

While some of the other “senior soldiers” are talking quietly amongst themselves, Gabriel is still, looking very focused -

And almost bitterly furious.

Jack’s eyebrows furrow a bit deeper in contemplation, as he thinks softly to himself:

*Oh, Gabe - what do you see that the rest of us are missing?*

The pace of the last month has been relentless: learning pretty much every combat technique (hand-to-hand, conventional weapons, unconventional weapons, “uneven” team fights, etc) and drilling them from before dawn even rises to well after the sun has set, slogging through the aggravation of intensifying injections, struggling to somehow cram military strategy and tactics classes in between everything else. It has been the full “supersoldier experience” as some of the candidates keep joking (with Gabriel being an even bigger nerd and wisecracking that this is their “Rocky training montage” month and “the victory dance isn’t quite as satisfying in this concrete prison”).

But Jack has known relentless paces his entire life: running track year-round in high school and college, gritting his way through intense biology and chemistry classes, forcing himself through biocomputing and nanobiology, doubling down on language classes and nursing internships, helping his parents and their co-op work the farm in his “spare time” -

Filling in the gaps and empty voids left in the wake of Peter’s increasing absences

Both emotional ones
And eventually the physical ones

Until only the permanent hole in the Morrisons’ lives had remained.

Years of prepping rooms, filling in supplies, memorizing techniques and strategies, familiarizing himself with patients and problems and precise entry points and prescriptions -

Assisting in operations, living people cracked open under bright lights, their lives and guts and blood exposed, hearts beating and lungs artificially breathing -

Washing the blood off his gloves, scrubbing down -

Double-checking the biosynthetic elements in biotic fields before stocking rooms again.

…

So yeah.

Jack is used to working on the edge of everything he was, is, and will be.

So while the physical exertion of overexercising and learning martial arts, shuddering through the effects of the injections and the heaviness of increasing genetic and (slower) phenotypic modifications

And the mental exertion of reworking his mind over maps and terrains, running small squad drills and practicing the basics of combat engineering

Are not unfamiliar in the essence of emotional intensities of Jack’s life experiences

The combined effects - intermingling in his blood and sinews, muscles and brain, bones and soul - are pure, utter, unholy exhaustion

On a level Jack has never experienced before.

But somehow, the intensity of it all is both softened - eased into a mere thrill that hum through his body and brain like a sense unnamed - and enhanced - burst into a fresh excitement that burns brilliantly inside him -

By Gabriel.

…

That night - “Night of the Double-Dose” as Jack calls it in his head - still lingers in his mind, like traces of ghost touches that send small shivers of pleasure across his skin. Sometime, after Gabriel had gotten a few pages into the Sherlock Holmes story, the lulls of his voice, the steadiness of his shoulder, the warmth of his jacket, and the mild sweetness of his attempt at hot chocolate had lulled Jack to sleep, the combination of all of Gabriel’s soothing presences and exhaustion finally pushing him through the pain.

And though neither soldier has ever really talked about it

Jack swears with whatever integrity his heart has that he’d felt a strong but comfortable arm around his shoulders throughout the night, in moments where his sleep had shifted to half-consciousness.

He had woken more completely a few hours later, when the nausea and pain had passed, to find that he’d somehow been placed gently on the blanketed fort floor, with the rest of the blanket wrapped
around him, curled up a safe but warm distance from the fire pit. When Jack had sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he’d found Gabriel shifted over slightly, quietly reading to himself -

“Oh shit,” Jack had mumbled apologetically, yawning widely, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to fall asleep on you -”

Gabriel had looked at him almost curiously, before he had grinned, chuckling, “No, I’m glad you slept. You needed it.”

Still half-asleep, Jack had felt a small surge of joy over Gabriel’s smile, saying with a rasp of tiredness, “You, uh, have a very nice voice.”

Silence had followed that, before Gabriel’s grin had deepened from genuine kindness to outright mischief -

And Jack had quickly realized -

*Oh shit* -

His very transparent mistake, stammering out, “Uh, I mean - you narrate things! Really well! Like your uh, pace and uh...cadence is really good and -”

“You can say my voice put you to sleep,” Gabriel had laughed, “I’m as smooth as Nyquil, huh?”

“Oh my god, no!” Jack had muttered, the creeping horror inside him quickly destroying the fuck out of whatever sleepiness has remained, “No, holy shit, nothing like that - your voice has this really nice rasp to it and I could listen to it all day and *wait* that sounds bad -”

But that laughter of pure

Spun-sunshine

And

Sugar-smoke

Had cut through the crispness of the chilled night air and the warm atmosphere of Gabriel’s little snow fort

And Jack’s bumbling had stopped as he had watched that easy, rich smirk - graced with the gilded light of the fire and the lacy radiance of the lantern - flitter across Gabriel’s face.

(It’s *that* particular smirk that has been drifting in and out of Jack’s dreams and his restless early morning thoughts ever since.)

“Look,” Gabriel had chuckled, still giving Jack that perfect grin, “I’ve been told I’ve got a voice that sounds perpetually sarcastic like, forty percent of the time in both English and Spanish, so really, you aren’t insulting me in the slightest. In fact, I’ll take it as a compliment that you fell asleep to my terrible fake British accent -”

Jack had opened his mouth to protest but then -

“Now, *you* on the other hand are literally the vocal embodiment of top shelf whiskey,” Gabriel had smirked coyly -

And Jack had felt his words *completely die* in his throat as Gabriel’s smile and his words had twisted
his stomach into knots.

*Good* kind of knots.

“Which makes me wonder if you *actually* just chug that Old Number Seven all day, every day, or if you just naturally *sound* like you chug it all day, every day,” Gabriel had added wryly, and something of a dark, heady look had passed over his eyes.

And all Jack’s dumb ass had managed to think up was a very not smooth:

“Most Jack Daniel’s aren’t top shelf.”

“...Let me guess - your full name is Jack Daniel Morrison? Is that how you know?” Gabriel had laughed easily, somehow finding humor in Jack’s inability to banter back, a trait Jack totally didn’t deserve to find in another human being, much less one as amazing as Gabriel Reyes and -

“Sounds like I need to treat you to some actual top-shelf whiskey,” Jack had managed to crack dryly, but Gabriel had smirked back, and had replied in a tone as smooth as perfect as barrel-aged bourbon:

“Well, I mean...your voice is already top-shelf, Jack Daniels.”

Jack’s heart had nearly leaped to his throat over that one. But then Gabriel had eased up, chuckling more naturally, “But I won’t say no to free alcohol.”

And somehow, Jack’s wit had scraped a wry, witty remark out of his thudding pulse and weak words:

“Only if you treat me to some real hot chocolate sometime?”

Gabriel had stared at him in open surprise, before he had smiled back and -

Jack had felt his breath stick in his chest

At the almost soft, almost sweet, only faintly smoky genuineness of the expression on Gabriel’s face, framed by warm flickering firelight and chilled, snow-frosted glow from the lantern, as he had replied quietly, “It’s a deal then, *soldadito*.”

After that, they had packed up (or rather, Gabriel had basically poked and prodded Jack to his feet, muttering, “C’mon, Juan, we can’t stay out here all night - they’ll figure it out if we’re gone too long.”), and had made the short hike back to the facility. By the door, Gabriel had glanced at him, grinning slyly as he’d said, “One-seven-three-nine.” He had punctuated each number with a corresponding press on the lockpad, which had beeped and flashed green as a large mechanized bolt inside the door had unlocked.

“...Thanks,” Jack had replied quiet, but gratefully.

He still hadn’t been certain he deserved whatever...*trust* Gabriel was putting in him.

Gabriel had pulled the door open, saying back just as quietly, “I try to keep it to two nights a week, maybe three if I’m pushing it. There’s no pattern to which days I’ll be out here, but if you ever need more, uh...space for yourself...”

Even with his arms full of the blanket and book and thermos, Gabriel had managed to gesture backwards behind them, back to the ridgeline that led to his snow fort, murmuring, “Well, feel free, I guess -”
“Is it okay if I join you again?”

Gabriel had stopped, gawking openly at Jack as the words had slipped from Jack’s mouth plaintively. Jack had immediately felt a small rush of embarrassment that he should not have asked that, how the hell could he impose that on someone like Gabe -

“I don’t really plan these nights in advance,” Gabriel had replied easily, but then he had grinned, “But sure. Are you gonna fall asleep on me again?”

“Depends,” Jack had chuckled, a little bit surprised that Gabriel had agreed so easily. Jack had stepped past him, slipping into the hallway carefully, whispering, “Are you going to talk in that fake British accent again?”

“Boy, I’m gonna make it even more obnoxious, just for you,” Gabriel had teased back, following Jack inside. As Gabriel had gently eased the door shut, Jack had started to unzip his spare jacket -

“What are you doing?” Gabriel had asked, this time looking bewildered. Mid-shoulder-take-off, Jack had paused, staring back, saying lowly, “…Uh, giving you your stuff back?”

“Just…you don’t need to do it now,” Gabriel had stammered, his free right hand reaching out to tug the jacket back up on Jack’s left shoulder. The older soldier had looked away, muttering, “Give it back to me when it’s not, like, three in the morning after we’ve broken back into the building.”

“…That’s reasonable,” Jack had replied, nodding a little, pulling the jacket back up on his right shoulder. He had grinned at Gabriel, “I’ll give it back to you tomorrow.”

Gabriel had waved him off, sighing, “Whenever. They’re not gonna send us out in the cold any time soon.” And then he had smirked, chuckling, “Not like I can double-up on beanies and boots anyways.”

“Not with that attitude,” Jack had laughed lightly, tugging Gabriel’s spare beanie off his own head and playfully attempting to wedge it on Gabriel’s instead -

“Hey, hey, careful now -” Gabriel had half-laughed, half-snorted, trying to batter Jack off of him with the hand holding the blanket. He had darted away from Jack, mocking him, “Don’t make me rescind our deal, Jack Daniels.”

“Fine, fine, but only for that hot chocolate,” Jack had grinned. Gabriel had smirked back, before -

A strange, almost confused, almost bittersweet look had crossed his face and -

What, Jack had briefly thought, his own confusion rising over it, but the expression had passed across Gabriel’s face as quickly as it had come, before the older soldier had turned, waving casually as he had hummed, “Go rest up, Goldilocks. They ain’t gonna stop training tomorrow just because we were in the snow all week.”

“…Yeah,” Jack had murmured, his gaze following Gabriel through the dim lights and bright shadows, “Sleep well, Gabe.”

It had felt…right to say -

Had felt…natural to say -

Even if the thought of parting ways for the night had felt...less so.
Jack had watched him head off towards the 1-24 hallway, before he had pulled Gabriel’s jacket a little tighter around his shoulders -

And had pretended he could still feel the faint weight of an arm holding them instead.

…

But despite the strange bittersweetness that their parting had ended on, Jack had held no intentions of being shy. Gabriel had given him the code, and he would use it, dammit, if only to see that beautiful, softly gilded world of flickering firelight and snowy shadows, smoky voices and perfect, crisp-edged warmth again.

Fortunately, Gabriel had apparently felt the same.

“…Thinking of reading tonight,” Gabriel had mentioned to him at dinner a few days after the Night of the Double-Dose. Jack had glanced up just to see that perfect, knowing smirk on Gabriel’s face before those dark obsidian eyes had flicked to the “protein chocolate bar” on Jack’s tray. Jack had perked up, grinning back, “Am I invited to the book club?”

“Only if you contribute to the snacks,” Gabriel had chuckled back, before Jack had held up his chocolate bar, retorting, “Does this count?”

“I mean, it’s only gonna be like...a third of the final concoction, but it works for now,” Gabriel had smirked, swiping the chocolate bar from Jack’s hand.

So yeah -

The last month had been 110% pure exertion and exhaustion, pushing boundaries and beyond, only to be tempered every few nights by Gabriel’s easy, enticing presence. Sometimes they truly did just...read, when Jack was too tired to even focus enough to make conversation, leaning against Gabriel’s shoulder as Gabriel continued the adventures of Holmes and Watson in tones of low rasps and casual meandering sarcasm. Other times they talked, conversing easily, words flowing like water, passing the thermos of hot chocolate back and forth. There wasn’t really any set topics - sometimes they talked about whatever training they had done that day, the tactics “homework” they had been assigned, if either of them could feel the positive effects of the injections yet. Sometimes, they talked about other things - the worlds they had left behind, full of family, friends, favorite foods, funny videos they missed.

Jack had quickly learned Gabriel’s slice of Los Angeles was everything and nothing like he’d expected.

“So there I am -” Gabriel had said one night in early February, as Jack had giggled and wheezed and nearly fallen over on his half of the snow fort. They’re mid-discussion on old jobs, the first or second ones they’d ever had, swapping crazy customer stories and the woes of nightmarish managers, when Gabriel had started talking about one of the strangest incidents he’d ever experienced working in a local supermarket -

“- Arguing with this one dude over how ‘buffalos aren’t actually extinct’ and ‘no, that’s not just ugly lookin’ cow meat’ when in my peripherals,” Gabriel had continues, making a gesture “across the way” to demonstrate how far this new “customer” was, “I swear to god, I see this other guy just start shoveling the ribeyes into his cart -”

“What the hell -” Jack had sobbed, wiping tears from his eyes. Gabriel had given him that bright, mischievous grin, laughing, “‘No shit, we’re talking like, all three rows of them - god, like six deep,
four high, so he was taking like seventy packages of ribeyes -”

“Jesus,” Jack had exhaled, as Gabriel had playfully shaken his head, muttering, “So at that point, I was like, done with all this shit, you know? Like, it’s fucking the Super Bowl, the store is overrun with people, I’ve already fought and helped like 600 idiotic customers in the last two hours, we’re out of kabobs and meatballs and every pack and style of chicken wings in the whole store, and now I gotta watch some jackass take the last set of ribeyes even though they’re dirt cheap for the game day sale -”

“How is it that the Super Bowl was worse than, like, Thanksgiving or Christmas?” Jack had asked, slightly hiccupping. Gabriel had rolled his shoulders, grumbling, “Like, people prepare for real holidays, you know? So you don’t get like, all the families rolling in on Thanksgiving day desperately Battle Royale-ing each other for turkeys - people got that shit planned. But the Super Bowl? Man, no one knows who they’re even rooting for until the game starts, and usually then it’s based on money, so people are making a mad scramble to get their wings and chips and guac dips or whatever, and you got the fancy people who are like, ‘Hmm, maybe I’ll serve shrimp at the Football Gala Steve is holding in his McMansion,’ and then you have the weirdos who think ‘buffalo wings’ involve actual buffalos -”

“I still can’t believe that guy thought buffalo had wings,” Jack had giggle-snorted, the laughter bubbling up all over again. Gabriel had tucked the thermos from his hands, continuing, “So anyways, it’s like 9:30 in the morning, I’ve been in the store since 4 a.m., and I’m ready to just like, die, so I lean past this buffalo wings dude and I’m like, ‘Uh, excuse me, dude carting every cow rib in the store -’ And legit, he looks up at me like he doesn’t think he’s doing anything wrong, straight up asks me, ‘Yeah, man, what’s up?’”

“Yeah?” Jack had encouraged him as Gabriel had taken a sip from the thermos. The older soldier had pulled it away from his lips, rasping out, “And just like, 110% deadass sarcasm asked him, ‘Would you like some lobster tails with that? Upgrade your game to surf and turf.’”

Gabriel had held out the thermos back to Jack, who had looked at his straight, blank expression with increasing bewilderment before stammering, “...No.”

“And that is how I sold seventy 7 ounce lobster tails at $13 each, along with seventy ribeye steaks,” Gabriel had smirked proudly as Jack had gawked at him, “Turns out, the dude had accidentally sent out a mass-invite to his personal Super Bowl party at work and like, sixty additional people said they would come. Best part is he came back a week later and said he got a promotion because his boss’s husband liked the grilled lobster so much.”

“That’s insane,” Jack had stated in disbelief, “And buffalo dude?”

“Buffalo dude actually bought like, three packs of the ground bison and made meatballs,” Gabriel had chuckled, “He came back later like, ‘Well, I don’t see what’s so great about this meat, but it was easier than frying chicken wings so I’ll get some more.’”

“Good lord,” Jack had sighed contentedly, “You make manning the stand at a family corn maze sound like a walk in the park.”

“Dude, I’m jealous,” Gabriel had replied as Jack had taken a sip of hot chocolate. Gabriel had lifted his left hand counting off on his fingers, “Worked in corn mazes, got to dress up and scare kids from time to time, carved pumpkins like legitly, and got paid for it? I think I’d spend a year in Indiana just for October, to be honest.”

“It was only one month out of the year, two if people started early in September,” Jack had countered
happily, “The rest of the time was all planting and picking seasonal crops and working retail and clinic shifts in between that. Plus like, half the time we did soybeans so I’d have to help out at a co-op family’s corn maze or skip it that year. Not that I’d complain.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Gabriel had muttered, shaking his head, “Disliking Halloween, for shame. And then you roll straight into Día de Muertos, so good stuff just keeps happening! Best time of the year, really. After that it’s all turkeys and hams and just stress -”

“Okay, but football,” Jack had retorted playfully, giving Gabriel a sly grin. Gabriel had faked a glare, before chuckling, “Well, good point. But then the end of football. Miserable. I never want to be in a store on Super Bowl Sunday ever again.”

Through these small, short, stardusted and firelight-gilded moments, Jack has learned a number of small things - stardusted and firelight-gilded things - about Gabriel: the veteran soldier was LA-born and LA-bred, had at least two sisters he had talked about, got his love of football and classic rock from his dad and basketball and classic literature from his mom, loved the same video games as Jack (both of them were Zelda fans and “conflicted” Blizzard nerds). Though he rarely discussed his actual SF experiences, Jack had gleaned that Gabriel had joined the Special Forces at 20, that him, Carlos, and Luisa had all been part of an ODA for the 7th SF Group (Central and Latin America), that they had spent several years or so in part of southern Mexico (working with rural villages to locate drug routes and hideouts) -

That when they were given long blocks of leave time, Gabriel usually returned to LA, to get an easy part-time job or take a single-term class to “stay focused” (his own words) -

That his favorite hobbies were extremes (everything and nothing Jack had expected): books and dirt bikes, video games and hard hikes, classic music and classic movies, following his favorite teams (the Lakers and the Raiders) and maintaining his own mixed martial arts training -

And that

He did most of these

Alone.

That aside from his fairly tight-knit family and his old “team,” Gabriel Reyes didn’t have very many friends.

And that

(in his own words)

He was “okay” with that.

(“Sometimes you need space for yourself,” occasionally rings in Jack’s head when he thinks about Gabriel being left-handed, or how his top hobbies are solitary, or how “Soldier: 24” would rather build his own tiny world out of snow and stardust than stay inside a concrete building carved from warmth and mountain rocks.)

(And the thought is always followed by:)

(“One-seven-three-nine”)

(Like a key Gabriel had given him to access this secret part of his life.)
Jack wouldn’t trade these moments for the world -

“Tomorrow morning, you will prepare for the Resistance simulation by wearing only your standard Army Combat Uniform,” Luna’s voice breaks through Jack’s dense thoughts. He blinks once, realizes he’s been zoning out on his empty breakfast tray, and then glances up at her. Luna continues to look around the room, saying to the group, “You are permitted one thermal or long-sleeve undershirt, and one pair of thermal pants or leggings to wear under your regular uniform. You will not bring anything else with you, including small items like pens, lighters, personal jewelry, the full works. Is this clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the group choruses back. But then Luna pauses, sweeping a calm, almost concerned gaze over them, as if truly assessing the one-hundred and thirty-two soldiers before her.

And then

She says with a surprisingly loud softness:

“I would like to remind you all that the point of this simulation is to primarily test and train the strength of your minds and wills. As you know from your instruction, Article Three of the Code of Conduct states that when you are captured, you will resist by - and I quote - all means necessary, and that you will make every effort to escape.”

And here, Luna makes brief but direct eye-contact with Jack, stating in that same softly loud tone, “You can try, of course, we all know this is a simulation - you aren’t going to die, though you will certainly be pushed to your physical, mental, and emotional limits, and you aren’t going to be severely hurt. We’re here to make the next generation of Quiet Professionals, not maim you. Point is, don’t rip your fingernails off trying to dig a hole in the wall. You’re going to get roughed up, and we want you to take this seriously, but don’t put yourself in the med bay because you got the smart idea to break your hand against the bricks.”

Jack makes an unimpressed, skeptical face at her.

_You can just tell me not to shiv the drones this time_, he thinks dryly, as Luna continues her sweep across the group. The future CO says, “We expect you to remember the mental and emotional resistance techniques you have been taught, and to follow the Code of Conduct. But don’t kill yourselves trying to get out. You’re not going to gain much except a slightly more comfortable bed if you do make it out.”

Contemplative silence answers her, but Jack scowls, thinking slowly to himself:

_But...isn’t that the point?_

_To get back to a sense of normalcy?_

Luna gives the group one last look over, asking with more of that controlled certainty in her tone, “Is that clear, candidates?”

“Yes, ma’am,” they chant back in unison. Luna waves her hand to them, dismissing them as she replies easily, “Kitchen crew, start your clean up.”

As the candidates begin to rise, Jack hears someone behind him mutters darkly, “I bet they won’t make the senior soldiers do it.” He pauses, listening to the candidate’s companion reply lowly,
“What? Why not? They did the Survival and Evasion part with us.”

“You know they treat them special, right?” the first candidate says, slightly suspiciously, “They want them to keep tabs on us - weed out the worst ones, make sure we all get our injections and eat our food and do our homework.”

“Dude, you’re sounding full red-string conspiracy here,” the other candidate chuckles, but their voice sounds weak and hesitant even to Jack, before -
“Soldiers 1 through 24, stay for ten minutes after clean up,” Luna calls out over the crowd. Jack hears the first candidate mutter smugly, “What did I tell you?”

Jack

Inhales

And then

Exhales slowly

Before he lifts his tray and joins the crowd moving towards the tray receptacles.

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24: Resignation

February 17, 2047: 0745 hours - after breakfast in the mess hall, main SEP facility

“As you heard from Commander Luna, the program is too short-staffed and on much too tight of a schedule to run a full prison camp simulation with the same level of…” Guerra starts to say to the senior soldiers after the other candidates had left the room. The other candidates at the table look passingly bored or vaguely interested in what the CIA agent is explaining to them about the upcoming simulation but Gabriel finds it

Unendingly difficult

To bite back the utter fury that courses through him.

He exhales steeply, teeth grinding down behind his cheeks, trying to control his breathing and the sheer venom of anger that burns in his blood and -

“…Same level of intimacy that other SERE courses have had,” Guerra concludes with a dark smirk, and the word lights the fucking fuse in Gabriel’s head -

“Is this a goddamn joke.”

It is both a question and a statement of raw rage, quiet and steelbraided, that rips almost gutturally from the back of his throat.

Carlos’ hand is suddenly on his left shoulder and Luisa hisses in a low whisper, “Gabriel, don’t do this -”

“Did I stutter, Soldier: 24?” Guerra asks, as whatever cold humor had flitted through his earlier words evaporates like dry ice into the frigid air. His eyes - dark like an abyss, and just as complexly empty and overwhelmingly full - lock onto Gabriel’s, but the fierce pulse of rage continues to beat-
beat-beat in Gabriel’s chest and -

“You certainly took your sweetass time to pick the cruelest word you had for it,” Gabriel snarks right back, the words coming out as a low, raspy snarl, before he points and mutters furiously, “Do you seriously not see how obscenely counterproductive this sham of a roleplay is -”

“Tell me, Reyes,” Guerra spits out, his gaze somehow growing darker as the agent’s own fury rises to match Gabriel’s, “If you’re so goddamn clever, what woefully wise insights do you have that the veterans and military scientists running this program have missed?”

Ten-thousand of them probably, you piece of shit smug jackass, Gabriel’s mind rages against itself, as the rest of his thoughts race forward, each one clamoring to be the first out of his painfully slow mouth. The other senior soldiers are watching him with mixed reactions: some, like Michael, look bitter and skeptical, while others like Monique look tired of Gabriel’s bullshit, and still others, like his own roommate Felix seem cautiously curious about whatever Gabriel is going to say next -

“...You want us to help you manage the simulation,” Gabriel manages to exhale sharply, each word feeling deliberate and slow and inelegant in his mouth, but he has to control the thoughts that crash against his skull like a storm barely contained by grey matter and bones -

“You want us to run guard duty because we’re twenty-four extra bodies and some of us have done it before,” Gabriel continues, feeling like he’s chewing on rocks to get the sentences out, “Some of us in legit hostile situations -”

“What a paragon of ingenuity you are,” Guerra taunts him coldly, and - still sitting back at the Directors Table with the others - Carolina puts her head in her hands and rubs her palms against her eyelids.

As she usually does when she’s beyond frustrated.

“Can you believe it?” Guerra asks over his shoulder at her, “The greatest soldier of our time, figured it out without me even telling him. What else will your genius grace us with -”

“Can’t you see how it’s painfully counterproductive to put your 180 Alphas and Zulus as guards for their own future squadmates?” Gabriel’s cold voice cuts through the room like the razor edge of an obsidian knife, “Don’t you think they’re going to fucking know when the people they’ve been living with in close quarters for two months are suddenly carrying air rifles and beating them with wet towels in their jail cells?”

Guerra falls silent at that, turning his attention from Carolina back to Gabriel, his dark eyes blank and empty and Gabriel feels a small chill crawl up his spine at that look -

“I thought you wanted us to lead these people, not destroy whatever fragile friendships we have with them,” Gabriel manages to continue, “Building resentment among the juniors and 18Xers from the outset is a terrible idea -”

“Reyes, I swear to god,” Michael’s voice suddenly interrupts from the other end of the table, “If you get us thrown in a jail cell for this simulation, I will personally pour cold water on you in your sleep for the next five months -”

“Shut up, Michael,” Riya snaps at him gruffly, adding icily, “I hate Gabriel’s attitude as much as the next person, but he’s not wrong about this -”

“Your support is inspiring as ever, Naidu,” Gabriel rasps, which prompts DeAndre to mutter at him, “Hey Reyes, maybe don’t insult the one person backing you up, huh?”
“Do you really think any of them are friends with you?”

Guerra’s voice is darker than the void between stars and sharper than a wire forced through the jugular.

The rising anger among the senior soldiers drops into subzero temperatures as they turn their attention from icing each other back to Guerra, who looms over them like another mountain of the Sawtooths, staring them down like an eagle. He twists his gaze among them, asking with a painfully slow, painfully cutting tone, “Go on, speak up. You think you actually have something meaningful with the other one-hundred and eight candidates in this program? Tell me if you do. I’ll wait.”

Gabriel feels something painful and bittersweet catch in his chest.

There have been so many snowcovered and stardusted nights with Jack in his tiny safe haven clinging to the edge of a mountainside

And yet

They haven’t been nearly enough.

In three weeks, they’ve barely managed more than seven or eight nights (depends on if Jack counts the night where he was practically blitzed out of his mind on the injections), and so much of it is just...shooting the shit, swapping stories, seeing stars peer out from behind misted clouds and pine-needle branches that even though it has felt like a small slice of sweetness in the last two months of Gabriel’s life -

He has no idea if those few, small hours in the chilled night air - glazed over with the gilded glow of flickering firelight and cool radiance of the lantern -

Mean anything to Jack beyond an attempt to get outside, have some (terrible) hot chocolate, and crack a few jokes.

Guerra looks over the still, sullen faces of the senior soldiers, before he turns back towards the directors table, saying with a deafening harshness, “Have you ever heard a silence so loud, Flores?”

General Flores gives a slow, exhausted sigh as a response, and Guerra twists back towards the candidates, continuing with a lip-curled sarcasm, “Lead them, huh? You think you’re worthy of those positions? Just like how so many of those juniors and 18Xers made it through the Survival and Evasion portion unscathed and with both injections, right?”

Gabriel’s stomach twists into knots.

Bad knots.

And he feels his anger start to rise again -

“What incredible leaders and inspirations you were then, huh?” Guerra mutters loudly, “You really showed them the ropes on how to survive. It’s true we expect you all to become 180 Alphas and Zulus, but if you think it’s because of who you are now, you’re dead wrong and your future teams will suffer for such incredible myopia -”

“And being part of the guards who are going to ‘simulate’ a prison camp for them is going to help ameliorate that situation, huh?” Gabriel interrupts him furiously, “No part of this futility is going to endear us to them - they already think we get special treatment -”
“I’m sorry, Reyes,” Guerra interrupts right back, lolling his head sarcastically in Gabriel’s direction, “But who exactly told this group to behave the way that they have?”

Again, silence falls over the people in the mess hall as Gabriel feels his own fiery words die in his throat. After a long pause, Carlos finally cracks a broken, “…What?”

“Don’t play naive with me,” Guerra states in that same dry tone, “Did anyone tell you to sit in your own little clique of a group? Did anyone tell you to separate yourselves and not fraternize with your future teammates? Did anyone tell you not to help them or engage with them?”

Gabriel’s heart sinks into his stomach and -

“We - some of us are friendly with them -” Geni starts to say, but Guerra rolls his eyes, drawling wryly, “Being polite when you pass each other or spar together means so much, right? Such leadership, such initiative there.”

Geni grows quiet again, and Guerra glances among them, snapping coldly, “This is something I always disliked about the organization of the Special Forces. Small groups work so well until you have to actually get them to try something with new people and they fail to engage properly on every front. Point is, you’ve been given every opportunity for the better part of two months to show some genuine engagement with the other candidates and you have failed in every regard. We even gave you extra goddamn supplies in the last simulation because someone here thought it would be a better way to interact with the new kids and yet we the directors have yet to see any serious results from that experiment.”

Jack’s grin - gilded a bronzy gold by the contrast of firelight and dim lantern light - flashes through Gabriel’s head and he feels a knife twist in his gut.

“This isn’t school,” Guerra continues relentlessly, “No one is making you sit at this goddamn table all on your lonesome. You’re not running some exclusive club - you’re just a group of soldiers who are a little bit older and have been on the block a little bit longer than those other one-hundred and eight kids, but you’re naive, inexperienced, and frankly, rather whiny soldiers in the grander vision of this program.”

Gabriel’s bittersweet ache boils away at that. His eyebrows furrow and he scowls furiously, thinking darkly:

Which is what exactly, Marc?

Helping end the Omnic Crisis…or something even bigger than that?

Because the Omnics don’t take prisoners of war.

They have no need to engage in such a…human act of military tactics, not when their own soldiers do not need food, sleep, shelter, or other vital resources…not when their own soldiers can build trenches and towers and bridges faster and better and more thoroughly than any human soldier…

Not when their own information networks, communication devices, and radio transceivers can tap into all known forms of electronic communications between human combatants.

The simple, cold, calculating truth is that retaining human soldiers as prisoners of war

Is nothing but a waste of time for Omnic forces.

It isn’t just counterproductive for the senior soldiers to be the “guards” in the prison camp simulation
But the entire exercise is a *massive* exercise in pointlessness for everyone at SEP…

...Unless that *grander vision* for the program involves a different sort of
Focus
And
Objective
For the “supersoldiers” than simply having a hand in stopping the robot apocalypse.

“...Making peace is harder than making war,” Gabriel quotes in his own mind.

And he feels his anger *deepen.*

“Truth is, none of you are ready for the roles you’re going to get, plain and simple. 180A’s and 18Z’s have seven to ten years on you as you are now,” Guerra states to them unapologetically, “So go on, show me your leadership. Show me your prowess. Literally nothing is preventing you from joining the others in a cell for a week. Feel free to take some goddamn initiative and show us that you’re willing to put yourselves on the line for them. Show them - and us - that you can walk your goddam talk.”

Guerra locks those abyssally dark eyes with Gabriel, staring him down

And a part of Gabriel’s anger *boils over.*

He won’t put himself on the line for *them,* nor the directors, nor this godawful program -

Nor his own miserable wreck of a country.

...But he *will* put himself - has put himself - on the line for what precious few people he has in his life: his parents, his sisters, his uncle

His old team
Carlos
Luisa
Carolina
...Silvio

And now

For the small hours - too much and not enough, *never enough* - he has

Where Jack smiles under golden firelight and sweet lanternlight and snowy starlight.

...And it takes *all of his willpower* not to stand up and march out of the room.

(“Whoever fights monsters should see to it that he does not become a monster in the process.”)

So Gabriel
Inhales
Exhales
And shuts his eyes -

("And if you gaze long enough into the abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you."")

Breaking the staredown between his own gaze and Marc’s abyssally dark one.

There’s something to be said for increasing morale through solidarity, for inspiring teammates or encouraging friends by walking through the fire with them (or in this case, sitting in cold, dark jail cells with them for a week)

But that’s not who Gabriel is

And that’s not the line he’s going to walk on.

And even if the small hours result in nothing meaningful in the long run - of the program, of the Crisis, of his life -

His faith and trust in Jack is different than simply sitting in that cold, dark jail cell for a week.

Solidarity through futility can strengthen a bond

But

("It’s the apocalypse...and it’s time to try everything.")

Solidarity through inspiration can deepen a bond.

...And it’s like, ten-thousand times more fun and interesting to be a rebel.

After all -

Gabriel has a “badass, stoic lone wolf” image to maintain.

So Gabriel remains seated.

“...No? Nothing?” Guerra’s voice taunts him through the calming, soothing darkness of his eyelids.

There’s a pause, and then Gabriel opens his eyes, breathing slowly as Guerra snarks at them, “Then you don’t get to fucking complain about ‘leadership’ here, not until you’ve earned it. Don’t you forget - to us, you’re all just candidates. And don’t you forget that the only person who had an interesting idea in the last simulation was some starry eyed, naive farm boy from bumfuck nowhere -”

And that

THAT

Is when Gabriel stands the fuck up.

He doesn’t slam on the table, but he does smack at the surface of it with his open palms, using the force of it to push himself upright, his own dark eyes blazing with a vengeful, bitter, burning fury,
and in the very instant he’s up, Guerra is already looking at him again, that dark, abyssal gaze attempting to pull him down down down into the depths and -

“You got something to share with the class, *Reyes*?” Guerra snaps at him, Gabriel’s surname dripping off his tone like a taunt. Utterly enraged, Gabriel quietly rasps out, “It was a *damn* good idea, Guerra -”

“Fucking *of course* it was a good idea, *pinche idiota*,” Guerra growls at him, before gesturing to the directors table behind him, adding viciously, “Who the hell do you think convinced this board of complainers to actually let him *stay* in the simulation the whole week??”

Gabriel’s heart drops deeper into his stomach as he stammers, “...What.” Around him, some of the other senior soldiers whisper and mutter to each other, also in shock -

“Oh, Mister Know-it-all wasn’t aware?” Guerra snarks, before again pointing back to the other directors, hissing, “These people wanted to pull him from the moment he downed the first drone, and I was the only person invested in seeing him ride the five days out.”

Gabriel scowls in shock and confusion, and Guerra rolls his eyes, snapping, “So unless you have something *actually interesting* to say, sit your ass back down, *soldado*, and mind your goddamn tongue.”

Feeling a strange, surreal sort of horror lump in his throat, Gabriel slides back down in his seat. Luisa shakes her head, and Carlos thumps him apologetically on the shoulder, but neither of these actions stop the bittersweet realization from settling in Gabriel’s heart like a dagger.

*Am I...that predictable?*

*Am I any different than Guerra?*

“The moment any of you show me some real initiative is the moment I actually listen to your suggestions on how to run this program,” Guerra states to the group, his voice returning to that coldly disaffected tone, “You’re goddamn right that being the bad guys in this experiment won’t endear you to your future squadmates and you know what I say to that?”

Guerra sweeps the abyss of his gaze over them, pausing before he concludes distantly:

“Either step up and play ball or shut up and fall in line. You are goddamn professional soldiers so if you can’t separate business from pleasure then it’s time you learned how.”

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76: Reasoning

February 17th, 23:54 hours - approaching Gabriel’s hideout

Jack breathes a small sigh of relief as he spots the faint glimmer of the lantern hanging from the main branch of the A-frame in the distance.

*He’s here,* Jack thinks, the words bursting like a small radiance in his chest, a flutter of warm joy that feels like a skip of the beat of his heart. With all the wild speculation today from the 18Xers and the calmer but still frustrated grumblings of the “junior” SF soldiers, as well as several long hours of combat training and exercise, Jack had barely had time to even *see* Gabriel, let alone try to pull him
aside for a chat…

But in the rare moments when he had managed to spot Gabriel -

Jack had felt his heart squeeze slightly

At the fierce and quietly furious look that had darkened Gabriel’s face all day.

They hadn’t even had a chance to laugh something stupid like “book club?” “Book club” to each other to confirm they were coming out here tonight, but Jack had just…

Known

That he should come to the snow fort.

With lights out at 2200 hours, Jack had managed a short, brief nap of like an hour and a half, and, once he had made sure Adrien was snoring softly and steadily, Jack had crept out of bed, bundled up in his winter gear -

And slipped out into the hall.

He’s not...great at being stealthy, and it’s too difficult to hide from the cameras anyways, but it’s not like anyone really watches them at night and the facility is so cold that seeing someone wrapped up in a thick jacket and a beanie isn’t too bizarre at 2330 hours, so getting to the northwestern exit had been easy enough.

No, the hard part had been the weird nervousness and uncomfortable anxiety he had felt all day -

Especially when he had seen Gabriel’s frustration.

So yeah

Jack is definitely relieved to see that trusting his gut instinct and odd feelings had been the right thing to do -

And that Gabriel was waiting for him in the snow fort.

Jack starts to grin as he crunches through the last few stretches of snow to the edge of the semi-built up semicircular wall around the fire pit

When he stops

At the distant, almost forlorn look of exhaustion on Gabriel’s face

How those eyes of gold fire obscured by obsidian smoke trace over frosted stars and the voids between them with a lost bittersweetness

Until Gabriel suddenly becomes aware of Jack’s presence at the edge of the small camp and he glances up.

“I uh,” Jack starts to say hesitantly, tilting his flashlight into the treeline and away from Gabriel’s stardusted eyes. Jack shuffles a little on his feet, saying, “I just thought you might be out here, but uh, if you want to be alone, I’ll go -”

But the words catch in Jack’s chest
As Gabriel gives him that beautiful, honey-radiant smile, framed with the faint glow of the small fire and the small lantern.

And Gabriel laughs low:

“No, John Watson, you’re always the person I want to see.”

Jack’s heart jolts in his chest over that, and he can’t stop a massive, bright grin from spreading across his face. He misses that Gabriel looks briefly stunned by his sudden sunburst of joy, and step-slides over the short snow wall into the cleared fire pit space. He shimmies his way to his spot on Gabriel’s left, stuffing his flashlight into his jacket pocket as he chuckles, “You look like you’ve got one helluva case here, Holmes.”

“Unfortunately, it’s not a mystery - just a bit of a moral dilemma,” Gabriel huffs, before he holds out the thermos to Jack. Jack takes its, flashing another huge grin at Gabriel as he teases him, “Well, I sure as shit can’t help with that...but I can be a decent shoulder to lean on, if you need some support.”

“At least you’re honest about it,” Gabriel laughs low as Jack takes a sip of the hot chocolate. It’s mild but pleasing, faintly smoky this time, like Gabriel might have been a bit preoccupied with his thoughts during the melting-stirring phase, letting it simmer just a bit too long.

“Look, I’ve got some broad shoulders, might as well put them to good use,” Jack gasps, savoring the taste on his tongue. He smirks at Gabriel, handing the thermos back as he says, “Plus I didn’t contribute any chocolate this time, so I gotta be good for something, right?”

“Gonna be honest with you, newbie,” Gabriel smirks back, taking the thermos, “Chocolate kinda trumps moral support in like, ninety percent of situations.”

“Wow, incredible that this is one of those ten percent other situations,” Jack says dryly. Gabriel gives a loud “Ha” before he tilts the thermos to his own lips. Jack watches him drink a bit, before Gabriel lowers the thermos, that distant gaze glazing over his eyes again and

The snowcovered, stardusted silence falls over them solemnly.

...But it isn’t nervous, or anxious, or awkward, or frustrated.

Just quietly contemplative

And quietly content.

As they’re looking out over the dark, dim stillness, Jack inhales and exhales deeply, before he asks in a low, gentle tone:

“How...bad is it going to be?”

After a pause of no response, Jack flicks his gaze just slightly to his right. Gabriel is still staring out over the nightfallen valley expanse before them, that same distant look still drawn over his features. Jack isn’t sure he has the words to describe it exactly -

Just that it is complex

Quiet

Lost in unknown thoughts
And faintly bittersweet -

“They...tell you guys things, right? The senior soldiers?” Jack continues hesitantly, starting to wonder if he’s asking the wrong thing. Gabriel had been fairly reserved when talking about his actual Special Forces experiences, but he had held no qualms about sharing stuff about his Q-Course (where he met Carlos) or his MOS training, or anything related to actual training.

So seeing him this...distant

And this...out of it all

Is starting to unnerve Jack.

...Did the directors’ talk with the senior soldiers rattle him that deeply? Jack wonders, Or is something...wrong with this version of the Resistance training?

When Gabriel still doesn’t answer, Jack feels his mood downswing, his stomach starting to twist, causing him to murmur apologetically, “Sorry, I shouldn’t pry if it’s important -”

“I like that you ask questions.”

Gabriel’s voice suddenly feels and sounds so loud and clear in the space around the snow fort.

Jack flinches a little at the sound - not in fear or hesitation, but out of mildly pleasant surprise - and he turns his open, if slightly confused expression to Gabriel. Gabriel is still staring out into the draw of the darkness around them, but there’s that same faint, gently twisted smile on his face, like the one he’d given Jack only moments ago when he’d spotted the younger soldier on the edge of the snow fort’s boundary.

Jack’s heart squeezes slightly in his chest.

“Oh...uh, thanks?” Jack says, but there’s a lilt of pleasant bewilderment in his words and -

Gabriel finally relaxes from his stiff, unyielding pose, rolling his shoulders a bit, sighing with what seems to be some sort of satisfied contentment, saying with a wry smirk, “It means you think through things - that you’re curious and interested in finding answers and explanations. I respect that.”

A strange lump forms in Jack’s throat and his pulse thuds in his palms as Gabriel settles back, finally grinning at him as he adds with a chuckle, “Plus, I like how it gets me to think too. Helps me focus. Though I guess that’s a bit more of a selfish reason.”

I like your version of “selfishness”, lingers on Jack’s mind, but somehow he knows he shouldn’t say it.

...Not yet anyways.

“...There are a few phases to asking questions,” Gabriel says suddenly - not quite as coyly as he’d just been, but instead taking on a calmer, more informative tone. Jack scowls, uncertain of where this is going, but then raises an eyebrow, muttering, “Sorry, I’m not sure I’m following - you mean like...Socratic stuff? Philosophy? Deductive and inductive reasoning kind of thing?”

Gabriel frowns - again, Jack knows (somehow) that it’s not in anger or frustration, but mainly concentration - and he replies slowly, contemplatively, “No...no, not really like that. Well, maybe someone better educated than me could tell you what exactly this is - it probably fits into developmental psychology somewhere or something...but it’s not quite that, though I guess you
could say it parallels some sort of cognitive growth.”

Jack frowns outright now, utterly confused as to where this is going, half-asking, half-stating, “What.”

Gabriel huffs, mainly to himself, adjusting his posture back to a more upright position, squaring up with Jack a bit better, lifting his left hand to count off on his index finger:

“Alright, so like. ‘Phase one,’ right? Phase one is the belief that ‘there are no stupid questions.’

Jack nods hesitantly, saying “Right” more to show that he’s following along than anything else. Gabriel nods back, continuing, “In phase one, you’re so new to something that you recognize all questions - and all the answers you receive - are valid and useful. You can ask no wrong questions, and receive no wrong answers. You can only gain insight from everything, even silence.”

Jack’s scowl deepens as he thinks it over, and Gabriel adds instructionally, “It can be like a new subject in school, or a new job. You don’t know shit, so you might as well ask, right? Better to be safe than sorry, and other people around you recognize that you don’t know shit, so they might as well help you get your bearings.”

“...Uh...huh,” Jack mutters, following along uncertainly. Gabriel gestures loosely, saying, “Like, asking the teacher to repeat the equation, or give another example. Or asking your boss where you put a certain file, right?”

“Oh, okay, yeah,” Jack replies, starting to get it, “Like you’re so new at something you need help with everything.”

“Right, so, that’s phase one,” Gabriel agrees, “In a perfect world, no one gets mad, upset, or annoyed when you ask something simple. You ask a question, you get an answer. Simple.”

Jack frowns again, asking slowly, “But...that’s not the other phases? Or...?”

“See, you’re already thinking ahead,” Gabriel chuckles, before he holds up his left hand again, this time with his index and middle fingers extending, saying calmly:

“Phase two: ‘There are stupid questions.’ You have gained enough knowledge in something to recognize that some basic questions *are* stupid and should not be asked because they reveal a weakness, or ignorance on something important.”

Jack’s confused frown deepens into a darker scowl, and Gabriel’s voice drops into a slightly lower, slightly more focused tone as he continues:

“...Doesn’t matter if it’s as simple a topic as making hot chocolate or as complex as rocket science. There are questions that are basic starting points, and then there are questions that are steps backwards.”

Jack doesn’t say anything, but Gabriel suddenly grins, chuckling, “Well, I mean, phase two occurs naturally in life - all the phases do. It’s like moving to the midtier of a job, or, you know, becoming a teenager or something.”

Jack’s growing resolve cracks over that, and he snort-laughs, “So everyone gets it, huh?”

Gabriel’s grin just gets wider and smugger, and he laughs back, “If you’re a normal human being, sure, you get it - happens to everyone, right? Some questions are so basic they kill brain cells.”
But then

Gabriel’s wide grin suddenly evaporates with a dark, serious chill

And Jack shivers under the strangely cold gaze in his gilded-obsidian eyes.

“But when used correctly,” Gabriel states with startling seriousness, “Phase two can be inflicted or induced in others, whether on a single target during psych ops or interrogations, or on a massive scale, like an oppressive regime.”

Jack feels the rapid shift in mood crack his own humor, and he half-states, half-asks, “What.”

“Because Phase Two creates unasked questions,” Gabriel says unyieldingly, “And unasked questions are simply internal doubts. And internal doubts oppress the holder.”

Jack just

Gawks slightly

At him.

His stomach twists into knots.

Bad knots.

“...Phase three is ‘There are absolutely stupid questions,’” Gabriel continues, holding up three fingers this time. His voice is low and unemotional, unflinching and flat, as he states, “It is absolutism. It knows no doubts. Knowledge is gated, guarded, encrypted. The wrong questions do not merely result in doubt or discouragement - the wrong questions result in punishments.”

Somehow, Jack knows

This isn’t the time for questions

Or even small interjections

Or even quirks of the edges of a smile.

“...You see phase three in a few things,” Gabriel continues quietly, solemnly, steadily, “Things like computer security - you fuck up a security question, the system locks down for a set amount of time. You don’t risk being forgiving with someone who’s fucking up, not when they could be conducting identity theft or cracking. Or like, sometimes the absolutely stupidest questions get you fired - for example, things you simply cannot ask a customer or client.”

Gabriel gestures slightly, rolling his shoulders again, muttering lowly, “Sometimes they piss off the people you value most, be it a parent, a spouse, a friend, a boss, a commanding officer, a dictator. In phase two, if you ask a stupid question, you move one step back in the game. But in phase three, if you ask a stupid question, you are penalized worse or removed from the game overall.”

Jack stares at him, observing him quietly, and Gabriel once again counts off on his fingers as he reiterates:

“Phase one is naivety and learning by the asker. Phase two is a sense of doubt and frustration on part of the asker and the answerer. Phase three is absolutism and punishment towards the asker.”

“...God,” Jack exhales slowly, thinking it over, “I’ve...never thought of it like that.”
“Well, you probably live in a world where you’ve never been truly punished for asking questions,” Gabriel hums, a little more humor returning to his voice, his lips even twisting into a slight smirk, “It’s a good thing, both asking questions and not getting punished for it. Curiosity should reward the cat, not kill it.”

“Okay so,” Jack sighs, trying to remember everything Gabriel just said, repeating aloud, “So there are three phases -”

“Nope.”

Jack glances back towards Gabriel, who is grinning as wide as the Cheshire Cat as he wiggles four fingers on his left hand. Jack pauses, his eyebrows furrowing a little even as he smirks back, “There’s one more?”

“Well, you probably live in a world where you’ve never been truly punished for asking questions,” Gabriel hums, a little more humor returning to his voice, his lips even twisting into a slight smirk, “It’s a good thing, both asking questions and not getting punished for it. Curiosity should reward the cat, not kill it.”

“Okay so,” Jack sighs, trying to remember everything Gabriel just said, repeating aloud, “So there are three phases -”

“Nope.”

Jack glances back towards Gabriel, who is grinning as wide as the Cheshire Cat as he wiggles four fingers on his left hand. Jack pauses, his eyebrows furrowing a little even as he smirks back, “There’s one more?”

“Wanna guess what the fourth one is?” Gabriel asks coyly, but Jack just looks at him blankly. Tilts his head a little.

And grins as he asks, “Would guessing be asking a stupid question?”

Gabriel blinks once in stunned silence -

Before the biggest, happiest, almost silliest grin spreads on his face -

_Oh_, Jack barely manages to think lamely in utter joy at the utter joy on Gabriel’s face -

And Gabriel laughs so brightly, he’s almost radiant in the dimness of their small lights:

“Oh my _god_, Jack -”

Jack grins back, a mixture of smug and sly and sheepish, feeling like every good, positive emotion has just sprung up like tightly wound coils in his chest and gut.

“God _damn_,” Gabriel exhales, still grinning and coughing and laughing a little, “God _damn_, you’re one hell of a smartass and I _like it_. -”

The words catch Jack totally off-guard, and he stammers, “Wait, what -”

“Phase four,” Gabriel smirks, some sort of odd but perfect mixture of smug and satisfied and sweet, “Is simply ‘There are no stupid questions.’”

There’s a brief pause of silence, before Jack asks stupidly, “...What.”

“Phase four is recognition of ignorance,” Gabriel explains, still beaming as if Jack has won the lottery, “And the realization that every response to _any_ question is not merely an answer, but a whole resource and treasure trove of information and intelligence in and of itself, so long as you explore every angle of it.”

Jack blinks, scowls, tries to think it over -

“Go on, ask me the first question that comes to your mind,” Gabriel says, shrugging nonchalantly, even as he continues to smirk, “I’ll answer honestly.”

_No one man should have all this power_, runs screaming through Jack’s mind, but he stamps it down, forcing himself to act more naturally as he reminds himself, _Don’t think too hard, he’ll know it._

“Okay, uh,” Jack hums, before humoring him, asking just as nonchalantly, “Who is your favorite
“Author?”

“Edgar Allan Poe,” Gabriel states without hesitation.

That is

**NOT**

Remotely close to anything Jack could have anticipated.

“Wait, seriously?” Jack asks, deadstopped like a deer in the headlights. Gabriel grins again, chuckling, “Dead serious.”


“Oh...shit, uh, okay. So,” Jack says, forcing himself to slow down and think it over, “I asked about your favorite author and you said Edgar Allan Poe.”

“And what does that say about me or anything else?” Gabriel asks back encouragingly, and Jack just cannot resist. He cracks a crook grin, rasping wryly, “That you’re actually gothic as all hell?” Gabriel grins, saying smugly, “Alright, well, technically, that’s one interpretation.”

“Wait, what. I was just being a smartass again,” Jack replies, thinking that there’s no way he’s going to bullshit his way through this. But Gabriel’s smirk just deepens, and he teases right back, “Were you? Or is sarcasm a response you gave back based on some sort of quick analysis to the situation?” Jack frowns, feeling slow and inelegant, but starting to realize what Gabriel means. He pauses, before saying softly, “...Well...”

“...Go on,” Gabriel murmurs, and that sarcastic, smug smirk has faded into a more genuine smile, “Explore your own thought process and use it to guide yourself. You were sarcastic because you didn’t really believe me, but why didn’t you believe me?”

“Uh...well,” Jack repeats, digging deeper into his own assumptions, thinking over his own response before he says slowly, “I guess it’s because everyone always claims to love Poe, but many do it...just...to...set an image about themselves? I guess?”

“Follow your own thoughts,” Gabriel encourages him, and Jack shuts his eyes against the dim lighting, the soft smile, the easiness of the moment to focus in on himself, saying hesitantly, “...Because you don’t have that image. You don’t...seem like a person who would list Poe as their favorite author.”

“And why do you think that?” Gabriel’s voice reaches through to him. Jack opens his eyes, and gives Gabriel an apologetic, uncertain look. Gabriel just smiles, nodding his head a little as he hums, “C’mon, Jack - be honest.”

Jack makes a skeptical face at him, before sighing, “You’re a Special Forces soldier sitting in a secret experiment facility getting injections that will permanently alter your DNA. You’re a military badass and something of a rules-breaker, and you like to be alone. As far as I can tell, you did like, one year of college before you dropped out and joined the military, and you took your Special Forces Assessment and Selection course soon after.”

Gabriel just continues to smile, but his eyes widen like Jack has just told him some sort of ridiculous joke.
“I mean, you said to be honest,” Jack mutters, feeling like he’s sweating bullets internally. Gabriel just laughs lowly, “I did. You aren’t wrong on these things. Keep exploring your own ideas. I gave you an answer you weren’t expecting based on your knowledge of me.”

“Yeah, that - wait...well...” Jack starts to say, but stops his own roll as he
Rethinks
The situation
And the information.

Gabriel does, in fact, wait patiently for him, and Jack frowns, following his own line of thinking down down down and -

“You have been reading Sherlock Holmes stories. And you like them a lot. Like you reread them a lot,” Jack murmurs contemplatively. Gabriel raises an eyebrow, asking curiously, “Interesting - what makes you say that?”

“The book. It’s old,” Jack says, peering around Gabriel to confirm that, yes, the anthology of Holmes stories is sitting by Gabriel’s side. Jack nods, adding, “A paper copy too. And very heavily worn. You’ve read it a lot.”

“Holy shit, you do see the details,” Gabriel says, his face brightening again, as if excited by...whatever little thought puzzle they’re engaging it. Jack frowns again, saying with some confusion, “Well, yeah? And we were only allowed a few personal items - you wouldn’t take a book you only kinda enjoy here.”

“Good deduction there,” Gabriel grins. Jack scowls deeper, resting his face against his left hand, mumbling through his fingers as he thinks, “So, uh. I mean, Poe surprised me, but it shouldn’t have?”

“Why not?” Gabriel asks, and Jack can hear the smirk in his voice. Jack scowls harder, saying, “Because you like to read, especially alone in a quiet place. And you read classic literature. A lot, apparently.”

“And what else?” Gabriel continues to ask, but Jack just shakes his head, lifting his gaze back to Gabriel as he replies, “…Am I missing something obvious here?”

“Well...it depends on your definition of obvious,” Gabriel smirks. Jack feels his energy slack, muttering lowly, “Gabe, c’mon, it’s like midnight -”

“Nuh-uh, Jack. Phase four. No stupid questions,” Gabriel chides him, “Force yourself to work through it. No stupid questions, no stupid answers, no stupid conclusions.”

“...So...other people might see it as an obvious clue or thing I’m missing...but I probably shouldn’t think it’s obvious...” Jack says, sighing, “Because what’s considered ‘obvious’ is different to everyone. A matter of...perspective.”

“Exactly,” Gabriel agrees, “So build with what you have.”

“...You probably have an anthology of Poe’s stuff here?” Jack guesses. Gabriel pauses, nods appreciatively, saying, “Huh. A different direction than I was expecting but yes, you’re right. I do.”

“Well, I mean, if you brought, uh, Sherlock Holmes stuff, but said Poe was your favorite, then you
would bring that here too,” Jack half-states, half-asks, half-offers. Gabriel nods, following his logic, agreeing again, “Right -”

But then.

It starts

To click.

“Oh. Oh,” Jack states, his eyes going wide as he starts fitting some of it together, “You have a collection of Poe’s works. Which means you’ve actually read him a lot.”

“More than Sir Arthur over here?” Gabriel grins, and Jack beams right back, answering brightly, “Yeah! Well, probably, anyways. You like Poe, and you like Holmes stories, so you like mysteries and horror stories, but usually with...a twist? Which, hmm, I guess is the point of both genres, but you’re okay with the historical aspects, the time period writing styles, the dark humor - who wrote Holmes again?”

“Sir Arthur Conan Doyle,” Gabriel answers, that faint smile back on his face but Jack is going- “He hated it, right? Writing that stuff?” Jack asks eagerly. Gabriel smirks back, shrugging as he says, “Yes, he did. Tried to kill off the character of Holmes to move on to other ideas, but the character was too popular and Doyle was pressured to revive him.”

“Right! So you like that sense of...irony,” Jack says, and although he’s not 100% sure he’s using “irony” correctly, he’s too deep in his own thoughts to pause and correct himself. He grins, continuing on, “Because Poe wrote with that sort of bleak, satirical humor too! You like...mysteries, horror stories, original fantasy and science fiction.”

“All good guesses -” Gabriel starts to say but Jack doesn’t stop -

He just goes:

“So you also probably like...Frankenstein, Dracula, Jekyll and Hyde, um...early Lovecraft...God, it’s been forever since I thought about this stuff, uh...Tolkien maybe...who else…”

When nothing answers him, Jack suddenly remembers what’s happening, and he twists his attention back towards Gabriel -

Who is just...sitting there, looking slightly stunned, his expression open and honest and oh.

Jack gets it now.

Every response can be an answer

Even silence.

“Oh, uh, did I go too far?” Jack stammers, his words tripping over themselves to get out a real apology, “I’m sorry, my parents always say I can talk too much -”

“No.”

The single word is hoarse, almost broken, but it’s said with an odd, complex emotion that Jack cannot immediately place but somehow stills and humbles him.

“...What?” Jack asks quietly, now feeling stunned in return. Gabriel scowls, shuts his eyes, shakes
his head a little, sighs out loud, “Nope. You’re fine - *I mean*, you did fine. Good flow there.”

“Oh, shit, okay, thanks - just tell me if I’m ever annoying, okay?” Jack says with relief, still rambling with some embarrassment, “I can get weird without enough sleep, and, *god*, these injections have been messing with my internal clock something *fierce* -”

“You’ve never been annoying.”

Once again, Jack feels his tumbling, churning thoughts deadstop, and he stares wide-eyed at Gabriel, whose cheeks look faintly bronze under the dim lighting -

“...At least to me,” Gabriel mutters before smirking slightly, “Can’t speak for others.”

*They’re not the ones who matter*, Jack thinks, but he grins brightly, laughing back, “Ah, well, I already knew I could annoy other people. It’s a gift and a curse, really.”

“Such a burden,” Gabriel teases him, that regal smirk deepening, “What a hero you are.”

“Something something, but doctor, I *am* the clown,” Jack mutters sarcastically, but Gabriel just shrugs, replying casually, “You do surprisingly well under the spotlight, so maybe there’s some truth to it?”

“Me? Spotlight? I don’t think so,” Jack sighs, glancing back over the darkness around them, “Just a kid from a farm who talks too much sometimes.”

“And who has good ideas.”

Jack looks back at Gabriel, that feeling squeezing his heart again as Gabriel smiles wryly, adding, “And apparently can’t draw for shit.”

There’s a still, quiet pause before Gabriel glances away, mumbling, “...A-nyways, the point is, it’s not as sophisticated as using specialized programming, but in remote areas you can still start building personnel profiles and information networks with just -”

“No, wait.”

Gabriel stops as Jack interrupts him, and Jack gives him a bright if slightly embarrassed grin, saying, “It’s your turn!” When Gabriel just gawks at him, Jack shrugs, adding a little more hesitantly, “To ask me a question?”

Gabriel looks briefly conflicted, as if nervous by some line of thinking that Jack can’t fully grasp, and Jack feels a little crestfallen, murmuring more wistfully, “I want to see you try it. Please?”

Gabriel eyes him, somehow both wary and concerned, before he asks cautiously, “...Alright, uh, how many siblings do you have?”

Jack

Immediately

Freezes in place

As the feeling squeezing his heart and pushing his pulse to pound in his palms switches to one of distant, mournful pain.

And apparently
Every response can be an answer

Even silence

Because Gabriel appears to *immediately* sense the smallest shift in his mood, saying hastily, “Oh shit - look, I’m sorry, it’s just a dumb thinking exercise, you don’t need to answer - I didn’t mean to -”

“No, you didn’t know,” Jack replies quietly, giving Gabriel a bittersweet smile, “It’s fine, really. You had no idea, and I never talked about him. I had an older brother named Peter. He OD’ed when I was seventeen, but even then…”

Jack turns his eyes back to the stars just as they slip behind another dark, almost invisible cloud, saying lowly, “...He had been in a bad way for awhile, but hindsight is 20/20, right?”

In his peripherals, Jack sees Gabriel nod distantly, exhaling slowly, “[…I’m sorry, Jack. Really.”

Suddenly, there’s a nudge against his right shoulder, and Jack glances towards him, as Gabriel leans against him a little, holding up the thermos. Gabriel offers an apologetic, sympathetic smile, muttering, “Sorry, it’s not the strong stuff.”

“They have to be hiding alcohol somewhere, right?” Jack chuckles back lowly, taking the thermos from his hands. He leans against Gabriel’s shoulder, taking a quick sip of the chocolate. When he lowers it, he rasps out with broken humor, “Thanks. I mean. It’s been a long time, but...I appreciate the sympathy. And the chocolate.”

“Ah well,” Gabriel says, his voice carrying that quiet, smoke-and-sugar tone, “Time eases grief, but never cures it.”

“...That’s a nice way to say it,” Jack says appreciatively, before he grins back weakly, “So what did you learn? Besides that Peter was an idiot and I still miss him?”

“The worsts in the eldest bring out the bests in the second,” Gabriel laughs dryly. Jack gives him an incredulous if skeptical stare, before stating with a deadpanned tone, “Are you just like, fucking Plato or Confucius or something? Where do you get these?”

“Easy, you just talk about your favorite authors like a pretentious asshole and eventually everything you say sounds like a quote from an obscure philosopher,” Gabriel grins smugly, shrugging a little (even with Jack leaning against his shoulder), before he adds, “And having a dumbass older half-brother who develops a drinking problem when you’re twelve adds in just enough bitterness to make it a real bite of a personality cocktail.”

“...That’s also surprisingly insightful in a weird and kinda upsetting way?” Jack replies, “I’m sorry, Gabe.”

“Nah, that’s just the Gabriel Reyes Brand, trademark symbol and everything,” Gabriel snorts, causing Jack to laugh hoarsely, settling more comfortably against Gabriel’s left shoulder. There’s another small pause, before Gabriel murmurs almost tenderly, “[I...thought that maybe you were the eldest sibling of like, seven or something.”

“Gabe,” Jack states with utter sarcasm dripping through the nickname, “C’mon. You think all rural families got like six kids or something? Bloomington’s not even *that* rural. Hell, it’s basically a college town.”

“Yeah, Indy, I got that now,” Gabriel chuckles back, before sighing slowly, “But I guess...I mean, you always talked about growing up on the farm and helping out with your parents’ co-op that I
just…”

Another brief pause, and Jack can almost feel the soft, bittersweet hesitation in him, radiating out through his shoulder into his own and -

“...But it also makes sense like this,” Gabriel says quietly, gently, each word snowcovered and stardusted and gilded sweetly gold in his spun-sunlight and sugar-smoked voice:

“You are independent and yet have an odd need to help others, meaning you’re used to it. Competent, organized, controlled, precise. But almost...devotedly so. I wouldn’t say you need others to rely on you, because you can work alone, but you seem to know you excel under the pressure of others’ chaos.”

Jack says nothing

Because his silence answers everything.

“I’ve seen it in other medics, nurses, occasionally doctors, though it depends on how greedy the doctor is, really,” Gabriel continues, his voice taking on that cadence that he gets when he reads aloud, “Each one has a story. Each one is unique but there’s usually a common thread. Their parents struggled, maybe one was...off. The friend who slipped away - drugs or alcohol, bad choices that spiraled. The sibling they needed to support for years.”

Jack could listen to him talk like this -

Under clouded starlight and faint firelight and chilled lantermlight -

For hours.

“You wanted to go into medicine, as a nurse or a medic, but practicing medicine is...controlled chaos,” Gabriel says, the words almost a hymn and a hum in Jack’s head, “A battle against the inevitable. A stubborn optimism. A resolute entrenchment in believing in hope. You don’t necessarily have hope itself, but you believe in its existence and its power, even if you yourself never actually feel it.”

Jack chuckles a little at that, even as Gabriel continues wryly, “You possess an odd fascination with the morbid - the dying and the dead do not frighten you. You would help a ghost if there was a medical way to do so.”

That one Jack gives a harsh, hoarse bark of a laugh over, feeling more and more comfortable with each passing second. But he hears the grin in Gabriel’s voice pass into a more solemn, more focused tone, “…Another thing with medics, nurses, and doctors that many of them know intrinsically but cannot actually practice is that...you know that the real cure to the vast majority of illnesses and problems is knowledge.”

There’s another pause, before Gabriel says gently, “But you are the end of a process. And in order for knowledge to be truly effective, it must come at the very beginning, before anything else...But surprisingly, that’s a hard choice for many medics to make - with medicine, they feel...focused. Useful. Organized. Controlled. Precise. They’re allowed to believe in hope even if they cannot feel it.”

“Are you speaking from experience now?” Jack asks him teasingly, and Gabriel chuckles lowly, “Did I make it that obvious? Although, if you ask Carlos and Luisa, they’ll be the first to tell you I made a shitty medic.”
“But you’re a great pseudo-philosopher, so that’s gotta count for something,” Jack teases, and he can feel Gabriel roll his eyes as he mutters back, “Makes me a pretentious asshole, but okay.”

“Something something, but doctor, I am the asshole!” Jack laughs, and the sheer stupidity of it gets Gabriel to snort and laugh as well, causing him to choke out, “Dammit, Juanito, I had a train of thought here.”

“Yeah, yeah, medics are fucked up romantics, what else is new?” Jack hums cheerfully, and Gabriel sighs, muttering, “Yeah, exactly! But you, and me, and other idiots who want to believe, we can’t help ourselves, right? You’ve got life and death on the edge of your ug wysth stitches, but it’s better to be the one holding the needle because you can’t actually stop the wound from happening.”

Jack quiets, and he shuts his eyes, listening to Gabriel murmur just as gently as smoke, “But when you make the switch to working with knowledge and information instead of medicine, you work with abstraction. You bank on people being people. So you work with the full awareness that people being people often results in ignoring knowledge and engaging fruitlessly in the cycle of life to sickness and life to injury, until, one day, it becomes life to death.”

...Is that what you chose, Gabe? Jack thinks, in the soothing darkness behind his eyelids, the pressure of leaning against Gabriel’s shoulder steadying him through the moment.

...Gabriel’s answer says everything.

“...The medic knows people are stupid, cruel, and hopeless, but chooses to help anyways. But the knowledge-bearer knows people are stupid, cruel, and hopeless, and sows abstract seeds anyways, fully aware they will reap the fruitless with the fruitful regardless,” Gabriel exhales slowly, “And the only way to start gathering information for the construction of knowledge...is simply to ask questions and interpret the answers you receive...no matter what they are.”

The silence that follows says a lot - but it isn’t uncomfortable, or awkward, or confused.

It simply is.

Pleasant.

Easy.

Warm.

Patient.

Jack could stay like this for hours -

“Other than that,” Gabriel states with fiercely bright, fiercely smug cheeriness, “Your family is Scottish-American but has probably been here a few generations. You’ve said your family owns a farm, so your childhood sucked because outside of being a nurse, all you know is how to grow plants. Your family is white and from the Midwest, albeit outside a college city, and apparently no one gave you shit for going to college to major in nursing, so your family is predominantly liberal. But based on the Survival and Evasion simulation, your parents or extended family taught you to camp and hunt, so liberal on everything except the Second Amendment. You totally know how to use at least two or three guns, and Peter or an older cousin taught you to throw a knife. You illegally knew how to drive by the age of like, 14, and you had your first attempt at alcohol shortly after that, but it was probably the worst beer or vodka or whiskey you’ve ever had so even if you drank at a friend’s house or a party, you hated every drop until you finally tried something good.”
Jack opens his eyes

And gives a blank, deadpan expression out towards the darkness around them.

And Gabriel continues, that spun-sunlight and sugar-smoked tone of his voice supremely smug and self-satisfied:

“You ran track, and you had no problems hiking in the snow, so you’re fast on pavement or gravel and have the endurance of a bull elsewhere. Like other people from the Midwest, you loathe cornfields with a passion, but you know that those plus wheat plus soy sustain a high percentage of your state’s economy, so you begrudgingly put up with the corn jokes.”

Jack lifts himself off Gabriel’s shoulder, turning his head slowly and deliberately to give Gabriel the deadest, most bland stare of his life.

Gabriel looks just as smug as he sounds, his smirk blindingly radiant and regal, a teasing lilt to his voice as he continues relentlessly, “The amount of times people have called you, specifically, some variation on ‘the All-American farmboy’ or ‘the All-American boy next door’ makes you want to punch some teeth loose. Defying expectations is part of the reason you went to college, part of the reason you specifically picked nursing and not agricultural econ or computer science, and it’s also part of the reason why you are here in this bullshit of a comic book program today. Because about like...60, 70 percent of your raison d’etre is pure, concentrated, salt-spiked spite to prove people wrong. Lot of that stems from your brother or the other bullshit members of your family, because, believe me, I’ve been there too. You’re a case study in doing the right things the right way for the pettiest, yet funniest reasons.”

Jack just stares at him.

Gabriel continues to beam that shit-eating smirk at him, saying coyly, “Well, Watson, with that, I will conclude with the idea that it was Colonel Mustard, in the study, with the candlestick.”

The silence says everything, to be honest.

Finally, after a perfect pause, Jack states in a voice as dead and dry as his expression, “My cousin Joseph taught me to throw knives, it was Johnnie Walker whiskey at 15, and I had to stop seeing a fuckbuddy because he kept wanting me to wear assless chaps to bed, even when I told him he was being obnoxious about it and warned him I would drop him if he kept it up.”

Gabriel doesn’t even attempt to hide the shivers of giggly laughter that shake his body, the tremors rattling his words as he chortles, “Ser-serves him right.”

“Why do they all think I’m a cowboy, Gabe??” Jack suddenly breaks, half-asking, half-demanding, half-pleading with him, lunging forward to grab Gabriel by his shoulders, shaking him desperately as the squeaky giggles escape Gabriel’s throat. Jack half-whispers, half-sobs, “I’ve never even ridden a horse! The closest I’ve been to cows are the ones on my plates! I don’t even own a pair of cowboy boots!”

“They’ve read you all wrong, vaquero,” Gabriel snickers, and Jack mutters warningly, “Gabe, don’t you dare.”

“Relax, son,” Gabriel grins, “You’re nothing like that. You’re equal parts Captain America, Indiana Jones, Leonard McCoy, and a statue of Apollo.”

Jack’s brain melts a little at the incredible smirk on Gabriel’s face, at the rich warmth of his tone, at the happy glimmer in those gilded obsidian eyes -
“...Why do I feel like some of that is an insult,” Jack half-states, half-snorts, even as something jittery and excited surges in his palms on Gabriel’s shoulders. Gabriel suddenly looks nervous, muttering hoarsely, “...Tell me you know who those are -”

“Of course I know Captain America and Indiana Jones,” Jack sighs sarcastically, adding, “And I’m not so woefully ignorant to not know Apollo. But uh, the last one -”

“...McCoy?” Gabriel states dryly, “‘Bones’? Please tell me you’ve seen Star Trek - any version of Star Trek.”

Jack gives him a deadpan, skeptical expression for a long moment -

Before he pats Gabriel’s left shoulder pityingly, saying lowly, “...Mister Reyes, I have bad news - your case of nerdism is...terminal -”

“You haven’t. Seen. Star Trek,” Gabriel exhales each word steeply, looking more and more betrayed with each word, “You. The weirdass hybrid of Kirk and McCoy. You haven’t seen Star Trek.”

“Uh,” Jack says with an apologetic, smug grin, “Something something, live long and peace on earth?”

Gabriel recoils like Jack physically hit him, pulling back a little in horror as he mutters sharply, “You...come into my house...on the day my daughter is to be married -”

“Oh wow, your nerdism really is terminal,” Jack murmurs sadly, “That’s unfortunate.”

“Every word out of your mouth right now breaks my heart all over again,” Gabriel gasps, wiggling slightly to get out of Jack’s grasp, fake-complaining, “I open my secret snow fort to you, I give you hot chocolate, I teach you the ways of the Force, and this is how you repay me -”

“Oh see, now, why didn’t you include Luke in there?” Jack asks with radiant, bright cheer, “I can do the brooding on a desert planet thing real easy -”

“You haven’t been to a desert in your life, don’t lie,” Gabriel snorts, but he grins all the same. Jack waves him off, taunting, “Rural Bloomington is so empty that it might as well be a desert. Sure felt as lively as one.”

“Comparing a desert to rural Indiana is an insult to the beauty of a desert,” Gabriel retorts. Jack smirks, saying just as aridly as a desert, “Alright, now you’re getting pretentious again, Socrates.”

“I am what I am, Juanito, and nothing’s going to change that,” Gabriel grins roguishly, before he sighs, “Until, of course, the gene therapy kicks in and I suddenly turn into the Hulk.”

Jack pauses, his own smile flagging slightly as -

_How bad is it gonna be?_

The gravity of their overall situation kicks back in and -

“...You think that’s what’s gonna happen to us?” Jack mutters with a weak chuckle, “We either turn into Captain America or the Hulk?”

“Or Wolverine or Deadpool, but that’s the pessimistic outlook, I guess,” Gabriel banter's back, serious but still smirking just enough for Jack to recognize that he’s still joking. Jack gives him a
faint but uncertain smile back and -

In the dim lighting, Gabriel’s coy smirk softens, drifting into something more bittersweet and contemplative, almost tender under the mix of low firelight and crisp lanternlight and distant starlight. Jack’s heart squeezes again, bitter and bittersweet, before -

There’s a calm, steady, reassuring pat on his right hand in his lap, hard to feel through his gloves, but Jack blinks at Gabriel, as Gabriel tilts his head slightly, saying with that honey-sweetened smile, “Resistance is not going to be like the comic books, Jack.”

“Oh, well, that’s a relief...” Jack starts to breathe, but Gabriel just sighs, “It’s going to be worse.”

The words die in Jack’s throat as a small chill of fear crawls across his scalp -

But Gabriel’s hand on his squeezes gently, and Gabriel smiles again, saying, “And some parts of it are going to be easier than you expect.”

Jack searches that obsidian gaze - softened with flakes of gold light in them - for humor, or sarcasm. Or even a lie.

He doesn’t find it.

All he finds is a strange, spun-sunlight, sugar-smoked warmth and -

“There will be times when you will feel nothing but fear,” Gabriel says patiently, almost tenderly, “And times when you think you are going to die. And there will be times when you will be in such pain that you will want to die.”

Jack feels his breathing still in his chest, and he -

“But mostly, you’ll just want to sleep,” Gabriel continues, as calmly and as clinically as a doctor walking a patient through the steps of an operation, “And if you do, that’s okay. The secret to all the parts of SERE are mental and emotional endurance, not physical -”

But Gabriel suddenly stops talking, his gaze narrowing into a concentrating scowl - his eyes are still on Jack’s, but the...focus of his thoughts have clearly drifted elsewhere. Jack frowns in concern, shifting his right hand to wrap his fingers around Gabriel’s hand, muttering, “So uh, mind over matter and all that, right?”

“Jack.”

The way Gabriel says his name - focused, controlled, but almost bittersweet, almost tender, almost warm - sends another chill across Jack’s scalp and -

That focus in Gabriel’s eyes is back in the present moment, centered on Jack’s own eyes so clearly and distinctly that the gilded fire behind the shrouds of obsidian smoke shimmer with their own light, and that excited, fierce thrum pulses through Jack’s veins again.

God, what he wouldn’t do to see Gabriel look like that all the time -

“...That’s my name, yup,” Jack chuckles weakly, and a faint smirk flickers across Gabriel’s face. But it fades almost as quickly as it had come, and when Gabriel speaks, his spun-sunshine and sugar-smoked voice is cracked with a dry-burning simmer:

“...What do you think will happen when we win the war?”
Jack blinks once, twice in utter confusion over the sudden shift in topic, feeling like he missed several steps in Gabriel’s thought process between “SERE is just mind over matter” and “the near-impossible outcome that humanity wins the war.”

“...I, uh - I’ll be honest, Gabe,” Jack mutters just as dryly, “I...haven’t really let myself think about that. It’s...too hard to think about.”

“I -” Gabriel starts to say, but he shuts his eyes, exhaling slowly, “...No, you’re right. It’s not a fair question to ask a soldier right now. Believe in the possibility of hope, but don’t bury your heart in it. That wasn’t cool of me to spring on you. I’m sorry.”

“What?” Jack asks with a confused smile, “You don’t have to apologize. I was caught off-guard, sure, but I just...don’t really have an answer for you -”

“No stupid answers, Watson,” Gabriel states automatically, interrupting him. Jack pauses, scowling as he thinks it over - in his peripherals, he sees Gabriel open his eyes again, watching him closely, and -

“...Okay, so, no stupid answers?” Jack hums, glancing at the small fire pit, ‘I’m...okay, even with ‘no stupid answers’ in place, I’m having a really hard time envisioning it. Like, so we win, right? Or do the bots surrender? What would even make them surrender? Doesn’t everything hinge on that?”

“Sure, lots of things hinge on that,” Gabriel agrees, speaking surprisingly casually in tone, “Where do they go? Do we share land with them? Resources? Do we restrict their intelligences? Or restrict their emotional intelligences? Do we put them in work camps? Do we force them to do the jobs Omnica original designed them for? Can we trust them to?“

Jack glances up at Gabriel, feeling a strange, surreal horror sink into the pit of his stomach at the thought, and he mutters hoarsely, “That’s...pretty fucked up, Gabe. I mean...at least some of them claim they’re sentient, right? It would be really...cruel to do that to them -”

“Do you know what ‘sentience’ is?” Gabriel asks suddenly, still conversational - again, like they’re just chatting about anything else in life. Again, Jack makes a face over the sudden switch in topics, but he sighs, replying, “Uh...intelligence, right? Or like, emotions?”

Gabriel opens his mouth, but Jack suddenly realizes -

“Wait, no -” Jack says, struggling to remember one of his classes on medical ethics, focusing hard because that was years ago and -

“A...form of...awareness,” Jack grits out, “Shit, sorry, it’s been a long time. Like...a form of experiences. A quality of life. An aspect of consciousness.”

“Oh, so you do know it,” Gabriel mutters, his tone clearly impressed. Jack rolls his shoulders, murmuring, “It’s been forever, but I had a class on ethics and stuff like animal and human test subjects - I think it came up a lot during the discussion of pain?”

“Right,” Gabriel states, giving Jack that wry smile again, “In simplistic terms, ‘sentience’ is the ‘ability to feel and perceive experiences.’ It’s not exactly the same as pure, reasoning intelligence as humans and some other organisms have. Sentience is a form of subjective perception.”


“Right, so, a significant percentage of natural life on planet Earth has sentience when defined as a
response to perceived stimuli,” Gabriel agrees, “The debate on sentience is usually philosophical, but it comes up in psychology too - conditioned responses and stuff like that. Even things without brains and nervous systems will respond to simple stimuli like light and dark, pain and absence of pain, salt and water, the usual.”

“Yeah, right, so -” Jack says, thinking it over, “So the Omnis are lying? About their sentiences?”

Gabriel freezes, his smile suddenly looking bittersweetly sad and -

“…Wait, are you saying the Omnis can feel pain?” Jack asks, suddenly growing all the more horrified by the implication of Gabriel’s earlier questions -

(Do we restrict their intelligences? Or their emotional intelligences? Do we put them in work camps? Do we -)

“…So, intelligence has never been the hard part of creating A.I.,” Gabriel says slowly, cautiously, “I mean, it’s in the name. Hell, even giving A.I. programs some form of philosophical or mathematical logic has been easy. A web search site can be coded to solve math problems at near the speed of light, and bots have been outplaying people at logic or strategy games like chess for decades. Making smart A.I. has never been the problem.”

There’s a pause, and Gabriel adds quietly:

“It’s making artificial lifeforms that feel and perceive things that’s been the issue.”

There’s a pause, and Gabriel adds quietly:

“…And you think they do?” Jack asks him earnestly. Gabriel pauses, thinking it over, before he mutters:

“…”Oh, they do. And they’re just as - if not more - intelligent than we are. A dangerous way to make a form of consciousness that doesn’t require food, water, or sleep to sustain it.”

“And you think we can possibly win against that?” Jack half-snaps, half-snarks, “Didn’t you just say you shouldn’t put your heart into that -”

“We will win.”

Jack stops his sarcastic taunting to gawk at Gabriel, who stares at him with that same intense focus as before, his eyes somehow radiant in the dim lighting. There’s a pause, and then Jack asks hoarsely, “How…can you be so confident in that -”

“Jack, who do you think is the real…” Gabriel starts to say, but stops himself, scowling as he thinks it over, muttering (to himself mainly), “…No, wait, that’s not…I mean, it’s not wrong, but it gives the wrong impression…”

Jack makes a deadpan expression, before wisecracking, “You wanna get less crazy conspiracy theorist muttering and more friendly Sherlock detecting, Gabe?”

“Something something, I’m not a psychopath,” Gabriel chuckles wryly, before refocusing on Jack with a less serious but still intensely thoughtful look, asking anew:
“Jack, what do you think the real ‘war’ is right now?”

Jack frowns outright, saying slowly, “...I mean, those killer robots look pretty real to me. Or are you gonna tell me that someone is faking the robot apocalypse -”

“Just,” Gabriel sighs exasperatedly, “Just work with me here, okay? Play along a bit longer? No stupid questions, no stupid answers, right?”

“...Okay, right, no stupid questions, no stupid answers,” Jack repeats, exhaling gently, “I don’t know, Gabe - what do you think the real ‘war’ is?”

“Do you know how many Omniums there are?” Gabriel asks, and Jack blinks once, pouts a bit, mutters, “I...don’t off the top of my head -”

“The numbers aren’t totally public,” Gabriel replies, “But current sieges and battlefronts suggest that there are only a handful. Like fifteen, twenty worldwide. The worst concentration is in Northern and Western Africa, hugging the Mediterranean, but the most devastating individual Omniums are the ones in Mexico and Australia...at least, for now.”

“...Why did you phrase it like that,” Jack half-asks, half-states, giving Gabriel a bland, skeptical look. Gabriel returns it with a mischievous grin, chuckling, “Perceptive. I like that.”

“Thanks?” Jack asks, still relentlessly skeptical of him, and the smile flags a little on Gabriel’s face, as the concentrating scowl returns. Gabriel mutters lowly, “Let’s be...generous and say there’s about twenty-five fully-fledged Omniums, with their - what are they - Super A.I.’s or God A.I.’s or whatever they call themselves. Three in North America, three in South America, four in Europe, seven or eight in Asia, two in the Middle East alone, and on and on.”

Jack nods along, and Gabriel continues, “Now, this doesn’t count Central Cores, or whatever - we don’t even fully know what those do, which certainly complicates the issue - but even with like, a-hundred Central Core cities worldwide...why are we still fighting?”

Again, this is the part where Gabriel’s thought process loses Jack.

“...They’re robots, Gabe - they’re hard to kill. And some of them have machine guns for hands,” Jack mutters tartly. Gabriel stares at him for a moment, before he states in a dead voice:

“Do you know how many nuclear warheads the United States has?”

Jack stops.

Thinks it over.

(No stupid answers.)

And admits with a sigh, “Not off the top of my head, no -”

“As of 2044, the United States alone had approximately forty-five hundred nuclear warheads,” Gabriel says impassively, “Of which, approximately fifteen hundred of them are ready for immediate deployment.”

“That’s...” Jack says, shocked at the numbers, “I mean, yeah, that’s a lot, but we can’t just use those - not on places like Detroit or Seattle - or Bakersfield, Gabe -”

“And now you begin to see the problem.”
Again, Jack’s words die in his throat as Gabriel stares him down, the golden fire behind his eyes blazing with an otherworldly fierceness. Gabriel states in that voice of raw sunshine and molten sugar, “It’s true - the tradeoff in global health and wellness would be devastated in mere minutes if we or Russia or China launched all of our nukes to stop the Omniums and Central Cores, but do the math, Jack - even with generous numbers, there are less than two-hundred cities with these robot factories and strongholds in them, and a population of nearly 8.75 billion human individuals have yet to stop them.”

“Okay, but, look at Detroit, Mexico City,” Jack starts to counter, “Their power supplies got wiped out in less than twenty-four hours on the Day of Crisis - the cities could hardly sustain themselves and massive amounts of civilians were killed -”

“I’m aware,” Gabriel says quietly, but Jack shakes his head, muttering, “The Omnic EMPs are on a different level than ours, and each bot is said to run on specialized fusion cores that human technology can’t even compare to. If it’s a war of attrition -”

“Then humanity should have won six months ago,” Gabriel retorts, “If it’s a war of attrition, supplies, and resources, literally nothing should ever beat humanity on its own home turf of planet Earth, especially not something as small and measly as two-hundred some-odd cities held by robot armies with next to nothing to support them.”

Jack quiets, and Gabriel scowls - not at him, just distantly - muttering with a cold, vicious bitterness, “Our mistake was being bumbling, politicking, petty assholes. We let them get entrenched. Let them set up massive barrier shields and siege lines. Let them dictate the battlefields - open deserts, cleared valleys, flat vistas of nothingness - and then let them march Bastion after Bastion across them. All because we couldn’t pull our heads out of our asses within the first two months to send proper drones and snipers and missile launchers into Crisis cities because we were too busy arguing if the United States or Canada should handle the international bleed-overs from Detroit and Seattle.”

Jack watches him.

Observes him.

Listens to him.

Gabriel shakes his head, whispering hoarsely, “The damn bots should never have been given momentum, and yet we let their surprise attack catch us off-guard and propel them way past whatever tactical and strategic boundaries we should have held, and now whole states, whole countries are neck-deep in rivers of blood. We should have controlled the airspaces so much more tightly, but instead we let them EMP the shit out of our communications and now they can virtually airdrop troops and reinforcements wherever they need to. And we still don’t know how they communicate with each other, both on a language level and on a system-wide scale.”

Gabriel’s fingers grip Jack’s hand nervously, and Gabriel scowls, muttering quietly, “And now here we are, dug in World War II style, sending in human combatants with fucking barrier shields and shoddy prototype plasma guns because apparently, just shelling the shit out of them with missiles - even non-nukes - isn’t enough for our government.”

Listening pays off, because Jack catches the hint in the last part of Gabriel’s words.

“...What exactly are you implying?” Jack asks cautiously, and Gabriel gives him an impassive look before he murmurs with a deadly whisper, “...What do you think I’m implying?”

“It sounds to me like you think we should bomb Bakersfield to the ground,” Jack says hesitantly.
Gabriel stares at him for a second longer, and then his lips twist into a faint, distant smile as he replies, “...And why haven’t we, Jack?”

“I...Because...we -” Jack starts to say, before he stops, trying to think it over. Gabriel chuckles darkly, saying, “Do you think there are still humans or animals alive inside the city?”

Jack frowns, and Gabriel shrugs lightly, saying, “I could understand if we were talking about like, the San Fernando Valley. Second highest human population in the United States, and home of some of the best places in the world -”

Jack grins and gives an exaggerated eye-roll over the second part.

“But again, it’s one, Bakersfield, and two, all the human inhabitants had either fled or died by two months into the war,” Gabriel says, before he repeats, “So again, why is it even a question about what we should do there?”

Jack scowls, asking softly, “Is there...something valuable there?”

Gabriel’s fingers give his hand an excited squeeze, and Jack glances up to see that same gleam in Gabriel’s eyes, his grin radiant and bold as he says brightly, “Now you’re getting it!”

Jack grins back, asking eagerly, “So there’s something strategic there? Something the military needs to protect and use?”

“No,” Gabriel beams, still smiling cheerful, “Not at all.”

Jack’s own smile flags and he croaks weakly, “What.”

Gabriel pulls his hand off of Jack’s, and stuffs it into a pant pocket, pulling out a small, worn, all-weather notebook, barely bigger than his own hand. Jack tilts his head, assessing it quietly, as Gabriel flips past several pages of intense notes and detailed scribbles to a blank sheet, marked by a cheap pencil clipped to the spiral binder. Gabriel slips the pencil between his gloved left fingers easily, and Jack thinks, Oh, he’s used to this, before Gabriel starts to draw a long oval on the page. Jack watches as Gabriel roughly chunks out small, haggard triangles all around the oval, and then he draws another half-circle below the bottom triangles.

It takes only a second, but when Gabriel flips the notebook towards Jack, the image corrects itself in his head and -

It’s California, Jack realizes from the long, blocky diagonal shape of the state. Even upside down, Gabriel draws a rough, squiggly shape spanning the width of the central oval close to the “southern” end.

And then

Gabriel starts to explain:

“Bakersfield is the last major city in the Central Valley of California before you hit the Transverse Ranges in the southern end of the state. Past the Transverse Ranges, you find the San Fernando Valley,” he says, tapping his pencil at the half-circle hugging the southern “coast” of his rough map. He moves the pencil “up,” past the squiggly circle of Bakersfield towards the center of the long oval, saying, “And really, Bakersfield is shifted east in the Central Valley - it hangs off the side of the southern Sierra Nevadas. If you go north on I-5, you’ve got nothing but farmland between the Grapevine and Sacramento.”
“Sounds like central and southern Indiana,” Jack says sarcastically. Gabriel gives him a roguish smirk, chuckling, “Yeah, I bet it does, only we got more orchards going on. But here’s the thing about Bakersfield, and the current siege of the city.”

Gabriel draws a small star just a little bit northeast of his squiggly “Bakersfield” shape, and then taps it, saying lowly, “This is the Kern River oil field. After the Big One basically destroyed the San Fernando oil fields in the 2030’s, the oil fields of northern Bakersfield became the second-most productive oil fields in the state, and the third or fourth in the nation.”

Jack gawks at the page, and Gabriel snorts, “Because it’s located in a more stable geological setting, expanding operations in the last decade ran significantly fewer risks than reopening the San Fernando oil fields, so production only increased after the earthquake. Of course, no one is operating the Kern County fields now, unless the bots are harvesting it, which...I guess, is probably a smart move for them.”

“Wait,” Jack says, his voice cracking slightly, “Are you telling me that we’re besieging a city full of only robots simply because that city has been producing a boatload of oil?”

“According to public news, the military is arguing that they don’t want to destroy the two main freeways that pass through the siege lines,” Gabriel says, drawing two roughly parallel lines down through the “Central Valley” oval, the “eastern” one crosses through Bakersfield itself. Gabriel rolls his shoulders casually, saying, “Which, admittedly, since we’ve basically given the bots control of the airspace over the southern Central Valley, the highways would be a fast way to transport supplies north-south. Course, if we just destroyed the bots, we would be able to fly across California, Arizona, and Nevada again, so again, the logic doesn’t totally play put here, and the real reason - oil - ends up being transparent.”

“I…” Jack says, feeling like - Feeling like some part of him is struggling under the harsh truth of it all -

“...I didn’t enlist to die for oil,” he mutters furiously, “Or for freeways.”

Gabriel watches him glare at the small map, before he murmurs darkly, “You wanna know the really messed up part about this?”

“...Not particularly, no,” Jack grumbles, but sighs, “But I probably should, huh?”

“...The largest oil field in California,” Gabriel says, moving his pencil back to Bakersfield, and then across to the “west,” drawing another small, squiggly oval over the western triangular mountains, “Is here, on the other side of the southern Central Valley. Midway-Sunset oil. Just past where the current siege line ends.”

“...Of course it is,” Jack mutters sourly, and Gabriel chuckles at the dry sarcasm in his voice.

“You want to know what else is tinfoily about this situation?” Gabriel grins at him, and Jack groans, “There’s more?”

“There’s always more, Watson,” Gabriel says, tapping at the Midway-Sunset oval, “Midway-Sunset also produces a high amount of grid energy due to cogeneration. We’re not talking like, La Medianoche here, but certainly no one wants to lose the cogeneration plant, which is partially why the military has panicked so goddamn hard and set up a major siege line at the western end of the Kern River.”

“...Wait, I thought the Kern field was the other one, the northeast one,” Jack says, pointing to the star
northeast of the squiggly Bakersfield shape. Gabriel smirks at him, and Jack’s expression slackens further as he mutters, “Oh god dammit.”

“This whole area -” Gabriel says, drawing a big box around Bakersfield, the Kern River oil field “star”, most of the eastern triangle mountains, and parts of the Midway-Sunset oil field “oval”, “Is all part of Kern County. The county is one of the largest in California, at least in geographical size, and the seat of the county is -”

“Bakersfield,” Jack says, filling in the blank. Gabriel beams at him, his eyes gleaming as he chuckles, “Good job putting the pieces together, Indy.”

“Okay so,” Jack breathes out slowly, staring at the map. He grits his teeth, muttering, “So we’re fighting for oil, which is stupid but doesn’t surprise me, but what am I missing here, Gabe? What does this have to do with SEP? Or the war? So different nations messed up their tactics in the first year of the war - that doesn’t change the fact that there are still armies of robots trying to kill us, right?”

“Right,” Gabriel says, “That’s still the thing, right? Because right, if we use Bakersfield as an example, we cannot let these tin cans go south to LA. But now, instead of the military just leveling Bakersfield like it should, it’s got pressure on it from the dying oil companies who own the oil fields in the area. Because oil has always held our nation hostage from doing the right thing.”

But then Gabriel gets that vicious, vibrant gleam in his obsidian gold eyes, murmuring intensely:

“That is...unless the military sees this as its own sort of investment opportunity.”

Jack scowls, saying lowly, “The military is wasting time and resources besieging a city with no humans in it for oil. That’s not investing in anything. Someone somewhere has to see that, right?”

Gabriel gives Jack a long, expressionless stare that somehow has a pinpoint focus and then -

It starts

To click

In Jack’s head.

He presses his palms to his eyelids, groaning, “We’re the investments, aren’t we?”

“Let me guess - you fell for the whole patriotic ‘We need supersoldiers to fight supercomputers’ argument,” Gabriel chuckles sarcastically, “You, Jack Morrison, were rightfully skeptical of the claims about genetic and phenotypic ‘enhancements,’ and yeah, you should definitely be shady over the medical parts of this program. But if genetic and biochemical augmentations were all the Army needed, it would have just installed cybernetics in our arms - faster, safer, more reliable technology. We’d be out there next week if that was all that was needed.”

“So the biological enhancements aren’t the experiment?” Jack asks, pulling his hands from his eyes and gazing blearily at Gabriel, who continues to smirk wryly. Gabriel shrugs, saying, “Well, I’m sure they are, but they’re only part of it. Remember, soldadito, don’t get so caught up in the ‘enhancement’ part that you forget the ‘soldier’ part of this whole ordeal.”

“I feel like such a moron,” Jack hisses, mainly to himself. Gabriel reaches out and pats Jack’s left hand sympathetically, saying, “Well, if it helps, I’m sure most of the juniors and even some of the senior soldiers bought into it. And in theory, if better genetic and phenotypic ‘enhancements’ help us survive, then in the end, it will benefit everyone involved. I’d take good genetics over luck any
“Look, if it turns us into the Hulk, then did anyone really win?” Jack counters, “If we all become broken, PTSD-laden monsters with three types of stage four cancers, was it really worth it?”

“If I survive the war, ask me in thirty years if I regretted this decision,” Gabriel fires back, “But if it let me meet you and helps me get out of the robot apocalypse alive, I’m not totally opposed to it -”

“If it let you do what?” Jack asks, feeling like the record in his brain skipped a scratch. Gabriel freezes, his eyes wide, before he stammers out, “Don’t you dare -”

“Aww, am I the best part of SEP, Gabe?” Jack grins smugly, “Even though I don’t get half of your nerdy references and apparently just steal your hot chocolate -”

“What was that thing you said earlier?” Gabriel retorts, but there’s a grin on his face too, “Something about you being annoying?”

“Funny, I recall you saying that I’ve never been annoying to you,” Jack hums cheerfully, leaning a little closer. Gabriel’s chest seems to hitch as Jack smirks up at his face, before he reaches around Gabriel, grabbing the thermos from his side. Jack beams brightly, laughing, “But I do have a role to fulfill -”

“...Remind me never to get my hopes up around you,” Gabriel mutters lowly, and Jack glances at him, asking blankly, “What?”

“...Nothing,” Gabriel replies with a sigh. Jack shrugs, tilts the thermos to his lips, and listens as Gabriel continues:

“...Anyways, this is why I’m asking you what you think the ‘real war’ is in all of this. The bots are...well, they’re a threat, absolutely, but they have no reason to be as big of a threat as they are. This war should’ve ended six months ago, and it would be little more than a chapter in a history of technology book.”

Jack savors the flavor of the liquidy chocolate on his tongue, observing Gabriel quietly as Gabriel glances back out over the darkness of the forest around them, saying softly, “This war is complicated for the wrong reasons. This program is complicated for the wrong reasons. And the Resistant part of SERE is complicated for the wrong reasons. But I guess it depends on your definition of ‘wrong.’”

“...You said you were actually okay with the medical ‘enhancements’ here,” Jack says thoughtfully, “Skeptical, but okay with them, because they might help us survive the war.”

“Yup,” Gabriel says, still looking off into the darkness, “Hard to say what the trade-offs will be, but if we’re still here when the dust settles, then a deal with the devil for Wolverine claws ain’t so bad, right?”

“But there’s still a catch, right?” Jack asks, sensing it in him. Gabriel flinches slightly, finally looks back at him, murmurs softly, “If all they needed were Special Forces operators with some stronger muscles and denser bones, they wouldn’t have brought in fifty-four untrained recruits.”

Jack’s eyebrows narrow as he says lowly, “What.”

“Sure, the gene therapy probably takes some time, but again, cybernetics would be faster and more reliable anyways, so that’s not it,” Gabriel explains, “So why go through the effort of bringing in fifty-four new recruits and fifty-four operators with less than five years of active duty time and then
train them here from the ground up?”

“...If you tell me that there’s mind control involved in this, I will just walk out there and never come back,” Jack says, pointing to the darkness around them. Gabriel laughs at that, a bright grin flitting over his face as he replies, “Nah, not quite...mind control, not in the comic book way. But...the people running SEP want a few things, which is why they made this group the way they have.”

Jack frowns, but Gabriel holds up his hand, again waving his index finger, saying, “One: fresh perspective. This is two-fold. One-A, you gotta win the war - a war against a new, artificial form of consciousness, something we know literally nothing about. How a bot thinks, how it processes its world, how it processes the battlefield, why it’s even fighting. If you get too bogged down in thinking like a human, you’re going to fight them wrong.”

An image of Gabriel bring surprised about Jack tricking drones to knife them out of the air flitters through Jack’s mind -

“One-B, you gotta think beyond the war,” Gabriel says, and Jack mutters hoarsely, “What. Beyond it?”

“The war will end,” Gabriel states clearly, “One way or another. Either we the humans fuck up our own victory and lose, or we managed to fight past all the bullshit we’re inflicting on ourselves to win. This war is ours to lose, Jack - and believe me, we could very well be headed down that path.”

Jack scowls at that, but Gabriel just wiggles his finger again, repeating, “So, One-B, beyond the war, to reconstruction. Let’s be realistic and assume some of the bots stick around or are forced to. Who works with them? Who understands them? Do they make their own community? Who is going to interface with them?”

“...The people from One-A,” Jack says, suddenly realizing. Gabriel grins, “Now you’re getting there. They say it’s hard to teach an old dog new tricks, but I’m willing to bet it’s even harder to teach old soldiers how to read whatever weirdass language the bots are using, huh? Might as well make the younger people do it - someone has to decode it.”

Gabriel holds up his middle finger, wiggling both at Jack, saying, “Number two: younger people tend to live longer. That’s how time works, or something.”

“Crazy, that,” Jack chuckles dryly. Gabriel shrugs, saying, “Look, are you going to invest your gene-modifying drug money in the thirty-eight-year-old veteran who probably won’t learn the robot language and whose contacts in Central Mexico are, frankly, probably dead by the end of the war? Or are you going to put it in the twenty-five-year-old with some computer programming knowledge and still has ten years to adapt to the thirty-eight-year-old’s level?”

“That’s...cold but true, I guess,” Jack mutters, “But something has to account for experience, right? I don’t trust half of the people in this program to survive five days in the snow, so how can I trust them to survive six months on an active battlefield outside of Detroit?”

Gabriel gives Jack a pointed look before he retorts, “What do you think the point of being here is? SERE is normally only twenty-days long. Here it’s two and a half months.”

“...Oh. Right,” Jack states, feeling dumb again, “The soldier part. Not the enhancement part.”

“...Which brings me back to point One-B,” Gabriel says slowly, “The beyond part. After the war. Back to the real war.”

Jack scowls at him, saying hesitantly, “...Yeah?”
“...What is Resistance training for?” Gabriel asks him patiently, but with clear focus. Jack pauses, thinks it over, says slowly, “To learn to resist torture, right? Mind over matter?”

“Right,” Gabriel says, nodding along, “And who conducts torture, soldadito?”

Jack blinks at him, eyebrows furrowing, asking nervously, “Like...politically? I’m not really sure what angle you’re fishing for here.”

“Like...at all,” Gabriel replies calmly but in control, “Ever. Who created it? Who uses it?”

Jack stares at him in confusion until -

There are no people in Bakersfield.

Only Omnics.

The idea drops into his head like a stone cast into a still pond.

“...Omnics don’t keep prisoners of war,” Jack exhales, feeling it sink through his entire body. Gabriel tilts his head a little, saying starkly, “They haven’t learned to yet. Or, more likely, they don’t think it’s worth their time or effort. Torture very rarely yields accurate intelligence. Remember, questioning phases two and three -”

“Doubt. Absolutism,” Jack states back, and Gabriel nods, saying, “In theory, the idea of inflicting pain and violence onto an individual is a...rather human one. We are not the only organism on this planet to engage in acts of violence for...whatever reasons - food, resources, territory, whatever. Animals do it all the time. But we are pretty unique in using controlled, specialized inflictions of pain and violence specifically to result in information, or, more typically, in the control of fear and power.”

“And...the bots don’t do that,” Jack repeats quietly. Gabriel lolls his head a little, sighing, “Well. Not for now, at least. I suppose a lot can change in the future when there are robots with a different form of sentience and an unknown language in our presence. No doubt there will be some...cross-cultural exchanges, if you will.”

“So they could learn to do it? Use terror to control fear and power?” Jack says contemplatively. Gabriel shrugs, muttering, “I won’t be surprised if they do eventually. Depends heavily on how we treat them after the war is over.”

Jack stares at him with such

Sorrow

Hanging over his gaze.

And he asks Gabriel softly:

“...We’re going to fight other people, aren’t we?”

Gabriel glances at him, those obsidian eyes also looking rather bittersweet, and he replies:

“...A rather high percentage of wars are fought between people, so yeah. Odds are good for that. Rather high percentage of torture is dealt by people, inflicted on other people. So odds are good for that too.”

Jack shuts his eyes, pressing his palms to his eyelids, exhaling slowly, “That’s what you meant. The
real war. The one beyond this war. They want to use us as experiments to test bioengineering supersoldiers, and then put us in pointless battles against machines to see how well we work. And then eventually they’ll use us on other people. Other human beings.”

“You see any of the new prototype plasma and fusion guns they got for us?” Gabriel jokes dryly, “Personally, I know I should try out the heavy pulse rifle, but man, those plasma-slag shotguns are so ridiculous that I might just need to go with those instead.”

“...How can you be so calm about this?” Jack asks, pulling his hands from his eyes and looking at Gabriel in bittersweet frustration, “Is there something else I’m missing that’s funny about this whole thing? Isn’t this why you were angry all day?”

“...That’s my secret, Cap,” Gabriel sighs, leaning over to grab the thermos from Jack’s side. Gabriel tips the thermos in his direction, grinning smugly as he toasts to Jack, rasping out, “I’m always angry.”

Jack stares at him blankly as Gabriel takes a deep drink from the thermos and -

He can’t help himself.

Maybe it’s because it’s close to one a.m. on a freezing winter night in the middle of the mountains of Idaho and his exhausted brain has just given up on processing things

Or maybe it’s the looming threat of being “fake” tortured in “fake” prison cells for the next five days cutting up his sense of reality

Or maybe it’s just the beginning of what might be the weirdest, surrealdest birthday of his life

Or maybe it’s the very real possibility that he could die for some stupidass oil field before he sees his thirtieth birthday

Or maybe it’s the incandescent fear that he could survive the war only to be forced to engage in an even more horrible post-apocalyptic one afterwards

Or maybe Gabriel is just that goddamn funny

But Jack loses.

His.

Shit.

He folds in on himself, sobbing with laughter, genuine tears starting to run down his face, his breath catching and hiccupping, sounds tearing out of his throat choppy and short, hoarse and fraying.

Immediately, there are hands on his shoulders, desperately pulling him away from himself, Gabriel’s voice intensely and fiercely concerned as he stammers, “Holy shit, Jack - what the fuck - dude, really, I talk intensely, the simulation won’t kill you, I promise, I’m sorry, I should’ve toned it down -”

“You.”

Gabriel freezes as Jack gasps out the word, like a man dying (from laughter), and he looks up in those obsidian and gold eyes, so unbearably panicked and worried for him, for Jack Morrison, the naive idiot who thought he was doing something right, something good by joining the shadiest military program in existence -
And Jack radiates a brilliant, unendingly bright smile up at Gabriel, laughing with a low, whiskey and sea salt sound:

“...are such. A. **Nerd.**”

Gabriel’s worried expression immediately slackens into an unimpressed, deadpan look, as Jack wheezes and sobs again, weakly fist ing his fingers in the front of Gabriel’s jacket, bowing his head to press it against the warm fleece of Gabriel’s chest as uncontrollable giggles continue to shake his body. Gabriel’s right hand releases his shoulder to pat his back completely unsympathetically, and Jack feels Gabriel’s chin dig into the top of his head. There’s a rumble through Jack’s forehead and his skull as Gabriel mutters dryly, “God dammit. I was actually worried for a second there. And what are you doing watching movies that old?”


“I mean, at this point it’s even older than that - wait,” Gabriel mutters, and Jack can hear the suspicion in his voice. Gabriel leans back, scowling skeptically at him as he says, “You recognized the quote?”

“Gabe, I’m not pop-culturally illiterate,” Jack grins at him, “I lived in central Indiana, not under a rock.”

“...There’s a difference?” Gabriel asks him with the biggest shit-eating grin, and Jack weakly punches him in the shoulder, muttering, “Those are cheap shots and you know it, jerk. I didn’t deserve that.”

“Yeah, yeah, *lo siento, mea culpa*, whatever else,” Gabriel apologizes as sincerely as a brick wall is soft. Suddenly, he pauses, eyes wide, and glances at Jack, asking, “Wait, what time is it?”

“Something something, stupid questions,” Jack says wryly, and Gabriel rolls his eyes. Jack tugs at his left sleeve, exposing his wrist monitor, saying aloud, “It’s 1:16 a.m. -”

“Oh shit, I was way off,” Gabriel mumbles, releasing his grip on Jack’s shoulders to twist around. Jack watches him with bemused, amused confusion, asking wittily, “Huh? Way off on the time -?”

And then

Suddenly

Gabriel’s worn, thick copy of “The Complete Collection of Sherlock Holmes” is in front of Jack’s face.

Jack blinks at it, before he lifts his hands and takes the book - it’s dense but surprisingly small in terms of size, with a paper cover that’s deep red in color, trimmed with the appearance of fake leather. Cheesy, like the kind someone might find in an airport bookshop or from a secondhand bookseller -

“Uh,” Jack starts to say, wondering if it’s his turn to read or something, when he glances up at Gabriel -

Who is giving him a bold, starlit grin - warm and radiant, but slightly embarrassed with just a hint of Gabriel’s usual smug smirk twisted into it -

As Gabriel says in that spun-sunlight and sugar-smoked laugh:
“Happy Birthday!”

Jack’s breath catches in his chest.

“Sorry, it’s all I’ve got at the moment,” Gabriel says, his tone a mixture of bright and apologetic, “It was between this and Poe and I figured you at least seemed to enjoy Holmes when we were out here, so yeah, uh, in case you get bored. Or you can hang onto it until they finally give us permission to head into town and I can get you something else -”

“You’re giving me,” Jack says, completely blindsided by the move. He glances down at the book in his hands, then back to Gabriel’s open expression, and Jack murmurs in an awestruck voice, “You’re giving me a present?”

“I uh,” Gabriel mutters, and Jack isn’t sure if his cheeks are faintly bronzy from the dull lighting, or the crisp chill, or the moment. Gabriel tugs at his beanie nervously, saying, “I thought about making extra hot chocolate for you or something, but I didn’t want to risk getting caught stealing. Only other things I have are spare clothes and I figured that you already had your own stuff so -”

“No, this is…”

Gabriel pauses as Jack looks back down at the worn book, edges of the thin covers curling, the low quality paper discolored to a dark, dusty brown, eyes tracing over the pencil drawing of Holmes and Watson sitting together that’s stamped on the cover and -

“...Thank you,” Jack hums, his low voice cracking and fray with emotions he can’t quite place -

Joy

Excitement

Thrill

And maybe

Something else that he hasn’t really, truly felt before -

“This is amazing,” Jack says, lifting his head to give Gabriel the widest, brightest, most sunshiny smile, as the bubbly, humming feeling spills over from his heart into his chest and out through his veins and across his whole face, and there are only a few words he can say, over and over and over:

“This is so cool, thank you, I can’t believe -” Jack rambles, torn between looking at the wide-eyed, open expression Gabriel’s face and the book that faintly carries the warmth of Gabriel’s hands on it, flicking his own gaze between the two, turning the book over and over in his hands. Jack laughs, “How did you know?”

“Uh, Riya...told me,” Gabriel mutters hoarsely, “The medics don’t get to see full candidate profiles, but they get access to basic stuff - name, date of birth, hometowns, blood type -”

“When’s yours?” Jack asks excitedly, already trying to think six steps ahead to what could I get Gabe, I guess I could always look for another book, but if they let us go into town I could get some nice whiskey and -

“Uh, July 12th,” Gabriel says, grinning weakly, “A ways off. Look, don’t worry about it, it’s a gift -”
“Oh,” Jack says suddenly, feeling his excitement sink a bit, “Isn’t that the week we deploy?”

Gabriel shrugs sympathetically, saying, “Well, you can’t really control the schedule for this stuff.”

But Jack senses something...just a bit bittersweet in his tone, and he thinks quietly, *I can still get him something. Before we leave. They’ll let us go to town when SERE is done next month. I can start figuring it out.*

Suddenly, there’s a hissing sound, and Jack snaps his attention back to the moment, as Gabriel dumps a handful of snow onto the firepit. The older soldier reaches for the lantern, sighing, “Look, I...to be real with you, I don’t know how bad this simulation is going to be. I just know that it’s not *really* about training people to fight the Omnics, not this one. Survival and Evasion with the drones, sure, you could tell they wanted us to rethink how to hide and evade. But this...there’s nothing bot-like about this."

Jack watches Gabriel stand, stretching his arms and rolling his shoulders, before Jack follows him a second later, stuffing the book into his jacket pocket. Gabriel looks at him calmly, saying lowly, “Just...worth keeping in mind, I guess. Mind over matter, but also focus on what the objective of this simulation is. When you know the enemy’s goal, it’s easier to avoid or deflect it, even if it’s something as narrow and harrowing as interrogations.”

“...Right,” Jack states, trying to resolve himself, feeling a little more

Grounded

By the weight of the book in his jacket pocket.

“...Gonna be a shitty birthday,” Gabriel says suddenly, with a sad smile on his face, “I’m sorry for that.”

“Don’t be,” Jack replies cheerfully.

And then he gives Gabriel a massive, happy grin, laughing:

“It’s already better than most of them. Thank you, Gabe.”

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Chapter End Notes

"I remember when the Crisis broke out across America. It's why I enlisted, and why I signed up for the enhancement program. They were willing to try anything. Commander Reyes and I... Well, they tried everything. But politics, mismanagement, egos..."

"At the end of the day, Overwatch was the only way to win the war."

"But we had to be given a chance."

- Jack Morrison, "Uprising."
Chapter Summary

[The Day of Crisis: the day in early 2046 when the Omnic forces launched coordinated global attacks from their Omnium factories, striking multiple major cities worldwide. Two major cities that immediately lost power, communication, and political stability were Tokyo, Japan and Mexico City, Mexico. The rippling effect of Mexico City "going dark" would result in huge swaths of the country losing energy and almost all forms of long-range communication - a tumultuous period of war and humanitarian crises now called "La Medianoche."]

Gabriel's A-team (7436) was on the edge of the Valley of Mexico when the Crisis struck. Somehow, his team made it to Dorado on the Gulf, unscathed and unharmed.

But they had captured something important.

And the CIA wants to know how they did it.

(And Agent Guerra knows the team's report is lying.)

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your amazing comments and messages! I know it was a long wait, so I'm really glad people were excited to see this story continue!

A few notes for this chapter (and some of the upcoming ones):

One of the hardest parts of writing "Soldier Enhancement Program" fics is creating a version of "the program" that is massive and "faceless" enough to feel...impersonal, looming, hierarchical, and intimidating. I wrote "76+127: How We Were Made" before "Uprising" was released, but even then, it was both difficult and refreshingly challenging to play around with the concepts of "soldiers as random patients," "soldiers as numbers", and "soldiers as actual characters." But "How We Were Made" was a much...shorter and simpler version of SEP, and when "Uprising" came out, Jack's description of "the program", the U.S. military campaigns that involved it, and the way it impacted Gabriel and himself (and made them WANT to leave for Overwatch) really honed in that "the program" was not as simple as writing "Soldier: 14 didn't like Gabriel."

"The program" was personal.

And it impacted Gabriel and Jack in deep, profound ways, ways that would eventually drive them to join Overwatch together.

Which we all know was a decision that ultimately changed the world (and their lives).

So with "Force Multiplication", the challenge became a little bit different: how does "the program" act both intimidating and impersonal, while still putting personal pressure, politics, and egos onto characters like Gabriel, Jack, and their fellow soldiers -
To the point where a seasoned, trained veteran like Gabriel loses such faith in "the program" that he wants to leave?

(And to the point where Gabriel realizes that the best part of "the program" is not the enhancements...but instead, the best part is meeting a certain other character?)

Because of this, "Force Multiplication" does get a little OC-heavy. I personally don't prefer to write OCs unless I can't really find a way around it. I'll do my best to incorporate Main Characters (playable heroes in OW) and Secondary Characters (canon characters like Efi, Maximilien, Sanjay, etc), but if neither category fits, then I do make OCs to create plot devices or help move character development forward. But just as Jack comes to embody Overwatch, soldiers, "heroes", and Gabriel comes to embody Blackwatch, retribution, "Reaper" - someone needs to embody the "Soldier Enhancement Program" -

And as Michael Chu says:

"The world needs heroes, but it also needs villains."

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Human intelligence (frequently abbreviated HUMINT) is intelligence gathered by means of interpersonal contact, as opposed to the more technical intelligence gathering disciplines such as signals intelligence (SIGINT), imagery intelligence (IMINT) and measurement and signature intelligence (MASINT).

NATO defines HUMINT as "a category of intelligence derived from information collected and provided by human sources." Typical HUMINT activities consist of interrogations and conversations with persons having access to information.

The manner in which HUMINT operations are conducted is dictated by both official protocol and the nature of the source of the information. Within the context of the U.S. military, most HUMINT activity does not involve clandestine activities. Both counterintelligence and HUMINT do include clandestine HUMINT and clandestine HUMINT operational techniques.

HUMINT can provide several kinds of information. It can provide observations during travel or other events from travelers, refugees, escaped friendly POWs, etc. It can provide data on things about which the subject has specific knowledge, which can be another human subject, or, in the case of defectors and spies, sensitive information to which they had access. Finally, it can provide information on interpersonal relationships and networks of interest.

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The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is a civilian foreign intelligence service of the United States federal government, tasked with gathering, processing, and analyzing national security information from around the world, primarily through the use of human intelligence (HUMINT).

Unlike the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which is a domestic security service, the CIA has no law enforcement function and is mainly focused on overseas intelligence gathering, with only limited domestic intelligence collection. Though it is not the only U.S. government agency
specializing in HUMINT, the CIA serves as the national manager for coordination of HUMINT activities across the U.S. intelligence community. Moreover, the CIA is the only agency authorized by law to carry out and oversee covert action at the behest of the President. It exerts foreign political influence through its tactical divisions, such as the Special Activities Division.

The Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) highly secretive Special Activities Division (SAD) and more specifically its Special Operations Group (SOG) recruits from a variety of U.S. military groups and branches, including the Army's Delta Force, 75th Ranger Regiment, and the Special Forces. Joint CIA–Army Special Forces operations go back to the MACV-SOG branch during the Vietnam War.

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**24 flashback: Lo Que Sea - Cuando Sea - Donde Sea (Anything - Anytime - Anywhere)**

May 26, 2046: 0830 hours - small meeting room, 7th Special Forces Group compound, Eglin Air Force Base, Florida

Gabriel takes one look around the room -

And immediately decides he doesn’t like it

Or the man in it.

Both the room and the man are sharp, focused, and crisp, but...oddly sterile, a little too perfect, and just hemmed with small threads of surrealism to put Gabriel on an uncanny edge. The room is little more than a stark, if just, like, “three years outdated” sleek office: warm, rich woods lined with smooth, dark metals and clear plastics, from whenever the 7th Special Forces Group had renovated their headquarters in their compound at Eglin. It contains almost nothing special, noteworthy, or even humanizing in it - just a small, wood-and-steel table in the center, a few nondescript chairs around it, a projector display on the far wall, windows open to the looping drive leading to headquarters on the right -

The usual meeting room bs.

But the man.

He stares silently out the windows, and Gabriel can tell from the glazed look in his dark eyes that he’s not really watching anything in particular - not in the present moment, anyways. Hands tucked absently into pants pockets, he’s tall, just under Gabriel’s 6’1” height, and solidly well built - he fits into and fills out his deep grey suit well. Keeps his dark hair short, tidy, and trim - not significantly longer than a standard military buzz cut on the sides, but just high enough on the top to give him some business executive volume and demonstrate to everyone that even though he works a goddamn stressful job, his hair is still richly and thickly black, thank you very much.

But no matter how...Wall Street or Colonial Farm Road he dresses, nothing can hide the eerie edges that seem to punctuate his mere presence - like how folding up a pocket knife or sheathing a sword merely alludes to the danger tucked away. Gabriel spots the small signs immediately: the way the man’s breathing is silently and utterly tempered (former sniper, Gabriel knows - he can do it himself but he’s not nearly as good at it as Carlos or Carolina); the way his unseeing, unfocused eyes still move from person to person, car to car in the driveway below their second story room (assessing even without thinking, Gabriel figures); the way the small scars stand out from beneath his crisp
The way the man is utterly unarmed and totally relaxed

And yet he still radiates danger like a coil under pressure or a finger set just off the trigger.

Disciplined. Controlled.

Easily lethal.

Gabriel trusts him as much as he trusts a wall of pillows from stopping a runaway dump truck on fire on an icy road.

So, not so much that he “doesn’t trust the man” -

And more like he literally expects this meeting to crash and burn in the trash.

Yes, literally.

I should’ve brought a lighter, Gabriel thinks sarcastically while he actually snaps himself into a casual, easy parade rest, saying automatically, “Sergeant Reyes reporting.” The man does not look at him, not yet, but replies in a dry, neutral tone, “Prompt. You could time laps off that internal clock, huh?”

“I don’t really like running, but if you need me to do a few, I could,” Gabriel retorts with casual, easy sarcasm, not moving from his stance. It’s hard to say if the flippant remark or the clear snark in the tone or the almost lazy, languid way Gabriel says it is what catches the man off-guard, but he finally looks up, glancing towards Gabriel with a lightly bemused look and -

Gabriel scowls just faintly.

The man’s eyes are dark, darker than his own, almost unknowably deep, even with the sheer abundance of light in the room, dripping in from the windows at the man’s side. Unlike Gabriel’s own eyes, which can glint and spark under the right light, the other man’s gaze remains impassively voidlike, abyssal and cracked - less like the space between stars

And more like looking down into a cave plummeting to the core of the earth -

All jagged edges and creeping moss and clinging vines

And the slow

Steady

Drip

Drip

Drip

Of water and sunlight descending somewhere unreachable.

So that is where he keeps his sharp edges, Gabriel wisecracks in his head, as the man just assesses him with that cool, calm confusion, muttering lowly, “You’re a 7436 soldier alright - making jokes when you don’t even understand the situation.”
I understand enough not to trust you for a hot second, Gabriel thinks, but he says aloud, “Apologies - I would say the war has taken a deadly toll on my manners, but they were like this before the Crisis started.”

“Yeah, I get why Carolina keeps you around now,” the man states with a wry tone, and Gabriel scowls deeper. But before he can reply, the man gestures to the table, saying, “Please, sit, Sergeant Reyes.”

Gabriel eyes him warily, before he steps forward and plops himself in the closest seat. The man doesn’t sit right away, but instead approaches the table, half-stating, half-sighing, “I am Officer Marc Guerra, a Special Activities Division operator for the Central Intelligence Agency -”

Gabriel’s eyes narrow at his name -

Silvio’s senior officer -

“- And I used to be the Fox for 7436,” Guerra says, smirking a little as he sets a small, leather workcase on the table. Guerra seats himself opposite Gabriel, still grinning as he chuckles, “Though that was quite a long time ago.”

“...I’ve heard a lot about you,” Gabriel replies cautiously, but he attempts to be cordial as well. Guerra raises an eyebrow, laughing dryly, “Only the bad stories, I take it? Carolina always had to put up with my bullshit -”

“No, lot of...interesting stories,” Gabriel says, trying to be conversationally friendly while maintaining some small control over the conversation. He quirks a crooked smile, saying, “Lotta stuff Silvio told me. About your way of being a Fox.”

At the name of his 7436 successor, Guerra quiets and - for the first time since he’s entered the room - Gabriel sees him soften a little, his internal edges feathering slightly, like Guerra is relaxing into being a real human with real emotions and real thoughts. It doesn’t last long, but it’s like a deep exhale - a faint sigh of bittersweet and complex relief that Gabriel sees leave Guerra’s stiff shoulders and surreal presence for just

An

Exhale.

“...Good stories, I hope,” Guerra says, but there’s a twist to the end of his words that makes it sound like a faint question. Gabriel watches him for a beat, picking his words carefully before he replies with that same casual smirk, “Stories about...teachable moments.”

“Ah. So, mistakes,” Guerra chuckles lowly, but there’s a soft smile on his face, as if he’s thinking a gentle joke to himself, “Got it.”

Well, lots of “successes” too, if you want to call them that, Gabriel murmurs internally, thinking about how Silvio used to tell him all about how

Great

And

Creative

Marc Guerra could be at HUMINT and managing
Information and relationship networks

And how many of those were achieved through...cunning, tactical, effective methods of befriending, encouraging, manipulating, and controlling informants and contacts.

“Mistakes are merely opportunities and experiences waiting to be utilized,” Gabriel replies coolly, shrugging loosely to imply how nonchalant he is about the whole thing - about Guerra, about his Fox “teachings,” about the meeting -

Even about “mistakes.”

Guerra, however, looks surprised, blinking slightly at Gabriel before he says with a wryly impressed tone, “An optimist. I’ll be honest, I wasn’t expecting that.”

Many would call me an “opportunist” but yeah, sure - clearly I am the paragon of optimism, Gabriel snarks in his head, but he chuckles, “I always keep the element of surprise in my personality toolkit. Only works once, but at least it makes an impression.”

“Flexibility is probably the most useful skill and mindset to have,” Guerra says rather brightly, but there’s something...artificial about his smile, “The willingness and ability to adapt to new situations and ideas is an operator’s greatest weapon.”

Gabriel

Suddenly

Stops.

...Why do I feel like I just walked into a trap - he starts to wonder, when Guerra opens up the leather case, saying conversationally, “I’ve read that you’re quite adaptable to new situations, Sergeant Reyes.” Gabriel watches him skeptically, replying in a low, dry rasp, “I dunno - I’m pretty sure most people I know would call me stubborn.”

And then he grins, adding, “Or probably a less polite version of that.”

“In my life, I have found that many people do not recognize the difference between obstinance and determination,” Guerra says calmly, still with that faint, odd smirk on his face. He pulls a datapad out of the workcase, tapping at something on the screen as he continues, “Flexibility without determination is merely weak whimsy. Flexibility with determination is adaptability.”

Guerra reads something on the screen, saying with an easy but pointed wryness to his voice, “From what I have read, you have been in the Special Forces for eight years but you’ve trained through two MOS courses, and you continue to assist your team’s medics on a regular basis. Moreover, you’ve worked at least six different civilian jobs in the last twelve years, including working civilian jobs in your leave time between deployments.”

Guerra looks up at him, smirking smugly as he says, “I would call that adaptability, wouldn’t you?”

Asshole, Gabriel thinks sourly, saying politely, “While I appreciate the compliment, sir, working a handful of retail and service jobs for four to six month periods at a time since I was sixteen is hardly a sign of determination. Many soldiers do the same.”

“True,” Guerra admits, but he chuckles, “But not many soldiers have spent the last five years
expanding our intelligence on cartels and conducting raids on hideouts in Central America.”

Gabriel pauses, wondering if this is another trap of some sort, before saying coolly, “Just completing mission objectives, sir. Any other 7th SFG member would do the same.”

“What is it,” Guerra hums, adding with a dark tone dripping with sarcasm, “Lo que sea, cuando sea, donde sea?”


Gabriel does not like how the conversation keeps coming back to him.

*Getting info on my missions, training, and personal history, Gabriel thinks, trying to assess where the CIA agent is taking this discussion, Even going as far back as my high school jobs...trying to compliment me at every angle...*

Gabriel has no problem accepting praise.

...When it’s genuine

And not under a very obvious spotlight.

“Flexibility. Determination. Adaptability,” Guerra states patiently but pointedly, “We always want our special operations personnel to have these traits, but few embody them with the skill and deftness to which complex, changing operations require, especially in critical moments and missions.”

...Wait - Gabriel starts to think, scowling as Guerra reaches for the workcase again -

“So many Special Forces soldiers and A-teams fall back on their routines and training when put under pressure,” Guerra continues, opening the case again, “Which, I suppose, is not necessarily a bad thing if it keeps everyone on the team alive. A good Operational Detachment team is a machine of moving parts, and everyone has a role in getting the team out of a dangerous situation.”

...Oh no, Gabriel groans internally, as Guerra pulls out -

“But it is the soldiers and teams who excel under pressure,” Guerra states victoriously, with that odd glint returning to his deep, abyssal eyes, “Who utilize flexibility and determination with skill and deftness to turn a dangerous situation - or a mistake - into an opportunity -”

Gabriel can feel the ugly, frustrated scowl twist into his face, as Guerra gently and tenderly places the small birdlike object onto the table between them. It’s only about a foot in length, but it is covered in the most beautiful, resplendent colors: an emerald green - deep and as vivid as the rainforest it is “native” to - dresses its outer appearance from head to tail in long, featherlike, almost delicate metal plating, and a bold, bright red splashes across the “chest” of the artificial creature.

If it wasn’t for the strange, almost surreal, almost uncanny metallic gleam of the “plumage” under the bright sunlight drip drip dripping into the room, it would pass for a true quetzal bird ninety-nine percent of the time.

But under the right lighting

The feathery dressings take on an otherworldly, gilded sheen

And reveal the truth about the “bird.”

Beautiful.
Deadly.
Cunning.
Omnic.

“...To learn from, and adapt to,” Guerra concludes, pulling his hands away from the Quetzal Omnic and settling them into a relaxed, folded pose in front of him, interlacing his fingers together above his datapad. Gabriel stares at the lifeless Omnic, trying to swallow down the panic and frustration that pulses through his veins like a heartbeat, his thoughts surging and racing under the quiet, calm, focused pressure of the moment -

*Be calm, don’t panic, you have no idea what he knows, they won’t send you back there, he probably just wants to ask some questions, a gentler part of his brain tries to soothe him, but Gabriel murmurs back to himself, How did they figure it out? No one said anything, they should not have known -*

“I’ll admit, Sergeant Reyes, Special Operations Command was very worried about our deployed ODAs when the Day of Crisis hit,” Guerra says, as casually and as conversationally as if they were discussing sports, or the weather, or a new market trend, “But the Big Heads were especially worried about our 7th Group forces deployed to Mexico, especially the ones around the Valley of Mexico. With all long-range communications lost in mere minutes, there was the terrible fear that A-teams like 7436 would never get home.”

“...The fear was mutual,” Gabriel states impassively, uncertain if he should ham up how *goddamn terrified* all the members of his team had been when the EMPs and bombs had started dropping on Mexico City, if he should talk about the feeling of sheer, concentrated *panic* that had laced through all of them as they had desperately tried to contact regional command -

Only for their entire apartment to lose power at that exact second.

“And I will be the first to tell you that the unfortunate…” Guerra starts to say, but pauses, picking over his words carefully, “*Developments* in the Detroit, Seattle, and Bakersfield fronts quickly pulled our attentions and intelligence operations away from our foreign deployments back to national soil. Not being able to provide our deployed ODAs the immediate support and supplies they needed was a true blow to the Special Forces, but defending the United States from internal attacks took precedent.”

“I don’t know anyone in my team or the 7th Group who disagrees with that decision,” Gabriel replies cautiously, “My teammate Luisa is from Detroit, and I’m from Los Angeles - we understand the necessity of prioritizing the homeland sieges...as well as the losses every soldier is prepared to face.”

Guerra assesses him for a moment, those dark eyes watching him closely, as if trying to suss out if Gabriel is lying. After a second, Guerra appears satisfied with Gabriel’s answer, continuing coolly, “You can imagine the Special Operations Command’s surprise when Eglin Base received your team’s position signals in...Dorado in early April, then. Nearly two-hundred and fifty miles east of your original deployment position in Mexico City. And that your team had somehow established communications with General Portero of the Gulf Coast states.”

And then Guerra’s gaze drops to the Quetzal Omnic on the table, and he murmurs, “And that you had captured a previously unidentified, possibly highly specialized Omnic unit. Though unfortunately, circumstances had required you to effectively kill it.”
Stay calm, stick to your guns, Gabriel reminds himself, saying slowly, “...Our report details our efforts to help evacuate Mexico City and survive in Central Mexico. When we found out that the state of Veracruz still had power, we took the risk and made the journey to the Gulf, even though it took us right past the Central Mexican Omnium. Didn’t help that we were mostly on foot.”

“...And you just happened to capture a Quetzal Omnic in the process, did you?” Guerra asks pointedly.

Focus, remember what the report said, Gabriel thinks, replying with a small, noncommittal shrug, “Like we reported, Sergeant Luna figured out that the EMPs somehow weren’t affecting the communications and coordinations of Omnic Forces across Mexico, so they had to be relying on either a different technology or a non-human form of information exchange. This eventually developed into our team recognizing that many of the so-called ‘birds’ in and around Central and Southern Mexico were not natural - sniping and overwatching surveys soon revealed that many of these birds were mechanical and their small but animal-like designs allowed them to pass through the air unnoticed by humans below them. They’re distinctly different in design and coloration from units like the Bastions, so people barely noticed them, but within minutes to several hours of one of these bird units appearing in an area, more organized, militarized Omnic Forces would arrive and begin fighting. Almost every major city, town, and village on our way to the outer perimeter of the State of Veracruz was captured like that: birds first, EMPs and bombs second, and then the Bastion forces soon after communications were disrupted. Even hidden refugee and guerrilla camps were quickly exposed, preventing us from establishing a secure information network chain or providing stability and support for people.”

Guerra watches Gabriel impassively through his explanation, nodding slowly. When Gabriel finishes, the CIA agent pauses, murmuring, “Yes, that’s about as succinct a summary of your team’s report as I could ever expect. It must have been a truly harrowing experience.”

...Did he buy it? Gabriel wonders, replying, “It was...definitely a situation unlike any other that any member of 7436 had ever been in, sir. At best, some of us had waged war with the cartels or anarchy guerrilla forces in the past, and many of us have spent time in remote locations across Mexico and Central America, but this was...”

Gabriel breaks the sentence, remembering how...complexly terrifying those two months had been, how every step, every action, every decision risked danger, how the entire region was basically crawling with Bastions and Spiders, surging through cities and towns like conquerors, ranging through mountains and valleys like wildfires.

No word could adequately describe the utter, broken fear they had all felt

...Nor the way his mind and ideas and power had excelled inside him.

“...This was different on every level,” Gabriel concludes, hoping that would be enough to satisfy Guerra’s odd and uncanny curiosity -

“Indeed,” Guerra states easily, “This is a brand new type of war, one the entirety of human history had never adequately prepared us for. To survive this, to win this, we will need a new type of soldier, a new type of hero - one who is faster and stronger and smarter than machines, while embodying the qualities that have made humanity greater than any other species on this planet, real or artificial.”

Guerra unfolds his hands and counts off on his fingers as he says, “Flexibility. Determination. Adaptability. Skill. Deftness. Intelligence. Cunning. Creativity. Innovation. These qualities represent the best of humanity, and the soldiers who carry and embody and live them are the ones
who will be victorious in this war. The ones who will stop the apocalypse.”

…

He didn’t buy it - Gabriel thinks with a sudden, panicky realization -

“...It was clever of your team to put this on Sergeant Luna,” Guerra chuckles darkly, “She is an incredibly skilled soldier, truly lives and breathes special operations and weaponized skillsets, and her ability to coordinate her ODA - my old ODA - is second to none. The 7th Group believed your report easily, and Special Operations Command was beyond pleased to not only see all of 7436 return home alive, safe and sound, but to also see that a specialized communications Omnic unit had been captured and returned in nearly pristine conditions. Someone probably deserves a medal for this, don’t you think?”

“...Sergeant Luna kept us alive,” Gabriel replies cautiously, “I’d put in my vote for her, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Guerra stares at him with those deep, abyssal eyes

Before he gives Gabriel the darkest, smuggest smirk Gabriel has ever seen.

...Oh shit, Gabriel groans internally -

“I have no doubt that Sergeant Luna got all of you to Veracruz - though I am a bit surprised she got you all there with all of your limbs intact,” Guerra states coldly, his voice falling like water drip drip dripping into a cavern unknown, “But I know Carolina better than anyone realizes, and I know without a doubt that capturing the Quetzal Omnic was not her idea in the slightest.”

Gabriel stares at him, saying nothing -

Wondering if there’s still a way out of this -

“...So, Sergeant Reyes,” Guerra says haughtily, “Why don’t you tell me the truth about how this...unit was captured?”

Gabriel waits a moment, and then replies steadily, “...How do you know it wasn’t the Echoes?”

“The element of surprise only works once,” Guerra tells him with a viciously smug tone, “And you’re not the kind of soldier to put the burden on your teammates.”

Gabriel shuts his eyes against that twisted smirk and the sunlight drip drip dripping into the room.

He inhales.

...Fuck.

And then exhales.

And opens his eyes again, stating in a steelbraided, strict voice:

“The wildlife knew the dangers better than we did. The only animals we encountered in our trek to the east were domesticated animals in the remaining villages or the feral domesticates that scavenged the remains. Only a few wild birds remained - carrion eaters, like the vultures, the crows, the chickens, the owls, the usual. The occasional opportunistic pigeon in the bombed-out shells of the major cities and towns, maybe.”
To his credit, Guerra does not appear to record Gabriel’s statements, though Gabriel does not doubt that there’s some device hidden somewhere in the room, possibly in the workcase.

Possibly even in the remains of the Quetzal Omnic sitting in front of him.

Gabriel glances at it, the iridescent glow of its “feathers” beautiful and gilded at the edges. He continues in a slow, solemn tone, “So I was already a little confused why there seemed to be more birds in the sky when there was no safe haven for the majority of them to retreat to. It’s true that our team was severely disoriented by the sudden and immediate loss of our ‘footing’ in Mexico City, and there was a brief period of time where we clung to the outskirts, debating if we should take the longer but possibly safer route north to the border, or head west to the Pacific Coast. When we learned about General Portero’s forces holding the line to the east, we changed our minds and went that direction, even though we were forced to take a slightly longer route north around the Omnium’s main hold in Puebla.”

Gabriel looks back up, explaining, “It was during this northern push - early March - when I realized what was happening with the birds.” He leans forward, picking up the dead Quetzal Omnic, holding it carefully, as if it were a faberge egg, saying patiently, “I was on overwatch, using the sniper rifle to scope out south of us. We had given the Omnium as wide a berth as we could, but the Omnic forces had pushed out to cover most of Tlaxcala, Puebla State, and Mexico State, so I was able to maintain an eye on Laguna de Tecocomulco. That was when I just kinda...ended up watching one of the birds in the air.”

Gabriel stares at the Quetzal Omnic, gingerly turning it in his hands, continuing, “It...wasn’t a deliberate thought. I kinda thought I was watching a really short heron or something, but when I zoomed in, I finally saw the color, and the...metallic glow.”

Gabriel scowls, looking back up at Guerra, who is still watching him intensely, and tells the agent, “…Quetzals don’t inhabit lakes. They live in mountainous cloud forests and rainforests, deeper to the south, more like the southern Yucatan, and then down into Guatemala and Belize and on and on. They don’t live that far north.”

“...And you just...knew this fact? As far as I’m aware, you have MOS training as a medic, not general biology,” Guerra asks him curiously. Gabriel scowls slightly, but focuses back on the Quetzal Omnic unit in his hands, replying, “Do you know what quetzals represent in indigenous Mexican culture?”

Guerra makes a small, skeptical face, asking, “Are you talking about the Aztecs? Like Quetzalcoatl?”

“Yeah, exactly,” Gabriel says, making clear and direct eye contact with him, stating, “Quetzalcoatl. Kukulkan to the Maya of the Yucatan. The Feathered Serpent, decorated in feathers just like these. Controller of the wind and storms, giver of life to humanity, holder of knowledge and wisdom. Bestower of power, both real and communicated.”

Guerra scowls in response, and Gabriel sighs, exhaling, “The quetzal bird is a symbol of power, wind, and knowledge. Quetzal feathers were - and are - highly prized in different parts of Mexico, mostly to the south where they are more prominent. Once I realized what I was looking at, I figured out that it was statistically impossible to be looking at a genuine quetzal.”

Gabriel turns the Quetzal Omnic in his hands, murmuring quietly:

“Once it started to sing over the lake, I just...knew. It was unnatural, and whatever it was singing was almost certainly an ill omen. So I woke everyone up and got us to move north and east. By the
time we had reached a new lookout point, there were Bastion units starting to line the southern shore of the lake.”

“...And that was when you knew?” Guerra asks curiously. Gabriel shakes his head, looks up, rasps out, “No. Just had my suspicions. I started talking to the Echoes about it - obviously, the bots weren’t EMPing themselves, but what were their...measures for getting cut off from each other? Or if human forces rallied and EMPed them? What were their forms of communication? What was giving them orders? Or were there autonomous squads or battalions? If we were struggling to reach satellites with our broken comms devices, and if the Omnics were disrupting power, destroying cell towers, clogging up radio waves, then how were they getting information to each other?”

“...You didn’t think they had internally-protected and internally-run communication devices?” Guerra asks cautiously, suspiciously, “Or some sort of networked system? Or even true wireless communications?”

“Well, the first and the second ones, sure, it was a possibility,” Gabriel says, “But internal receivers would run the risk of damage, or risk being electrowaved like our human devices. Initially we thought they were using some sort of networked communication - like every individual bot was tapped into Skynet or something.”

But then Gabriel scowls, remembering back, focusing on it, muttering, “But the more I thought about it...the less sense it made.”

“Less sense?” Guerra asks confusedly, “A networked internal communication would be ideal -”

“No, not that,” Gabriel interrupts him, “The Bastions and Spiders. It made no sense for them to do recon - they’re frontline and defense units. Siege troops. The equivalent of entrenched infantry. The Bastions are not readily mobile, and while the Spiders are flexible climbers in urban environments or wooded areas, they’re sentry positions, not scouts.”

Guerra’s deep, dark eyes narrow, but Gabriel barely notices, his thoughts starting to roll as he continues, “Even if they were using an internal networked system, it could only rely on what the frontline Bastions and Spiders saw. Limited perspectives. Ground-level tactics. They could be blocked with a literal wall. Moreover…”

Gabriel pauses, uncertain if he should continue or if it’s only going to make the hole he’s digging for himself deeper, but Guerra looks at him expectantly. Gabriel sighs, inhaling some resolve -

And exhaling out into a steady, focused stream of statements:

“Moreover, despite our advances in image-capturing technology, nothing is going to be as good as the human eye in terms of visuals. The world does not exist in pixels - it exists in streams of light, constant and seamless flows of visual information, which humanity is effectively unprecedented in utilizing and adapting around. The only natural organisms with better visual acuity than us are...well, birds.”

Guerra scowls a little, but Gabriel folds his arms, snarking, “Sure, human eyesight isn’t the best at everything - not in clarity, we’re shit at night vision, we can’t even see infrared or ultraviolet, and our ability to react to motion detection is, frankly, pathetic. But compared to the other great apes, we’re goddamn literal visionaries, and that is what made us humans instead of just another tailless monkey confined to lowland jungles in Africa...or I guess the Moon now.”

Guerra gets a rather amused smirk on his face at the sudden shift in Gabriel’s tone, but Gabriel doesn’t care - if Guerra wants him to roll like this, then fuck it, Gabriel’s gonna prove to him that he
can roll. Gabriel mutters dryly, “I don’t care how many gigapixels a Bastion or Spider unit can process, I don’t care if it has the scoping power of the best military satellites, I don’t care if it can count the number of eyelashes on my right eye at one-hundred meters away - it’s processing in bits and numbers, and it can only visually ‘see’ whatever its processing power is capable of, at whatever speed it is capable of.”

Gabriel glances down at the small, beautiful, mechanical bird in front of him, saying hoarsely, “Visual acuity and visual sharpness is never going to be in a bot’s favor so long as they possess artificial eyes. Had they truly been clever, they would have manufactured combination biosynthetic cybernetic falcon-human eyes like some snipers have...but they didn’t.”

And then Gabriel pauses

Scowls

And mutters, “Or so we assumed.”

“...This Omnic does not have cyber-biotic eyes,” Guerra mutters skeptically, “It doesn’t even have biotic parts. Hell, it’s not even a falcon - it’s based on a rainforest bird of paradise thing.”

Gabriel inhales sharply

Before exhaling slowly, saying lowly, “No, see, that’s the thing - biosynthetic cybernetics require nutrients, bloodflow, water. Eyes in particular require hydration, salinity, protection, small blood vessels, tiny muscles, nerves. A delicate process...but one humanity has been doing for at least one, almost two decades. We can laser print eyeballs made of natural materials, bioplastics, and enhanced bio-lenses in mere minutes - even the incredibly complex optic nerve, given form from glue made out of neurons.”

“...And your point is?” Guerra asks dryly. Gabriel slowly looks at him, and asks clearly:

“If the technology is relatively easy - albeit expensive - why don’t the bots have that?”

Guerra scowls over the question, his gaze darkening with the implication, and Gabriel murmurs softly, “...A choice was made. A very deliberate, very specific choice was made, deep in the Omniums well before the Day of Crisis. The bots rejected using biotic materials altogether. Rather than walk the line of being cyborgs, and using the best of what nature has to offer - falcon eyes, night vision, even compound eyes for wider fields of vision and motion detection - they decided that this aerial support unit did not need that sensory strength.”

Guerra seems darkly, deeply, abyssally contemplative, but Gabriel continues, muttering, “They aren’t omniscient - they couldn’t see us at a certain point, so we were able to evade them pretty easily as long as we could outpace them. And clearly, they need the information provided by aerial support units - units that can conduct recon and intel, terrain mapping, communications and organizing. But they opted to stick with a camera-based eye instead of anything even partially biotic and natural. Why?”

There’s a moment of stillness, and then Guerra asks bluntly, “You think they didn’t want to rely on natural resources at all? What about converting fusion or battery power to biochemical energy?”

“...I think they wanted to minimize the overlaps between our weaknesses and theirs,” Gabriel says slowly, “The most basic military tactic is recognizing how vital resources are to an army - you can’t fight if your soldiers are starving. And then the next step is recognizing that your army can be effectively decimated by disease, injuries, infections, and medical weaknesses. If bots had biotic
parts that required blood vessels and nervous systems, that’s another weakness that can be exploited. Plus it –

Gabriel suddenly stops, the words dying in his throat as his thoughts scream, Don’t keep digging, moron - your grave is already deep enough -

“…Continue, Sergeant Reyes.”

The tone of Guerra’s voice drip drip drips deep, slipping into Gabriel’s brain like a knife through the ribs.

It is not a request.

Gabriel shuts his eyes, grits his teeth, breathes out, “…It isn’t good...for morale.”


“…You think Omnis have morale,” Guerra continues in the same deadpan tone, “That they need...emotional support and confidence.”

He’s baiting you, don’t do it, keep it cool, the calm, cynical part of Gabriel’s mind hisses at him. Gabriel relaxes, trying to pass his attitude for nonchalance, muttering casually, “It’s just a guess.”

“…You were doing well up until this part,” Guerra tells him neutrally, but Gabriel thinks he can feel the ringing of his words like an echo in a cave. The CIA agent stares at him, stating bluntly, “Tell me what you actually meant.”

…Shit, Gabriel thinks, chewing over this thoughts for a second

Before he sighs, “Biotic parts could be a physical weakness to be exploited...but they could easily be an emotional or ideological weakness too.”

“...Explain your thought process here,” Guerra tells him. Gabriel scowls, picking over his words carefully before he says, “Well. Torture for starters. Pretty sure conventional torture wouldn’t work on a standard Bastion - you need sensory nerves to detect physical pain.”

“...Just don’t give a biotic Omnic nerves for pain then,” Guerra retorts, and whatever ghost of a medic lingers in Gabriel huffs at that. Gabriel huffs his eyes, muttering, “You can’t just remove A-delta and C nerve fibers from the sensory system - pain is an important part of being a living organism. It’s how we know shit’s going south and our body is taking physical damage. Removing pain as a sense and a form of information is how you end up hurting yourself further. People who have rare conditions where they lack the ability to feel physical pain severely hurt themselves all the time and have shortened lifespans. And both A-delta and C fibers detect temperature. So no, the bots wouldn’t remove that.”

Guerra frowns contemplatively, and Gabriel continues in the same snarking tone, “Beyond being able to exploit biological aspects in disease and torture, biotic elements on a bot would expose it to other biochemical problems - fire, gas, napalm, ice, snow. Do you think the Omnium in Siberia would’ve launched its attack with bots with exposed biotic parts? Imagine if a Bastion could get frostbite.”

Guerra makes a twisted expression of mild appreciation, nodding a little. Gabriel settles back, sighing, “And finally...if only some bots had biotic parts and others didn’t, the whole group runs the risk of schisms. Emotional, ideological, and identity exploitation. If humans could convince the bots
with biotic parts that they were actually cyborgs, no different from our own cyborgs, that’s an easy ideological weakness, perhaps more effective than any other method. No Omnic force wants to recreate Terminator 2.”

Guerra gives him an utterly baffled look, muttering, “What.”

“...Come with me if you want to live? Schwarzenegger? T-800? The most ridiculous thumbs up in history?” Gabriel asks him. Guerra just continues to look clueless, and Gabriel grumbles, “Why the hell do I even try.”

“...You think the bots are afraid...of a movie,” Guerra states monotonously, “That they would give up a potential tactical advantage by not making androids that can pass as humans to infiltrate us...because they are scared we would turn them to our side.”

Gabriel looks at him blankly before stating:

“Of course the bots are afraid of movies - half of them are about how humanity stops the robot apocalypse!”

“The movies are not real, Sergeant Reyes,” Guerra retorts, “They don’t mean anything, they don’t represent anything meaningful - this war is real and it is very different from a movie or a sci-fi story ..”

“Oh, and the Mexican Omnium just designed its aerial support units on a whim, did it?” Gabriel snaps back, “If the bots were operating on pure logic, this would look like a goddamn crow and it would have real feathers and real eyeballs on the outside because then I would never have thought twice about seeing it.”

The two men seethe at each other in silence, until Gabriel murmurs with a deadly, soft rasp to his words:

“Symbolism and identity mean more in this war than you think. Mythology and imagery mean more than any of us realize. Making every bot mechanical and artificial means no human can exploit their sense of identity - there are no politics, no histories, no problems to pull apart here - and it means we cannot infiltrate them in the ways special operations have been conducted in the past. You see this as humanity versus the robot apocalypse, but they see it as a war to define what they are. But if you think this is a war of emotionality versus logic, or creativity versus rationality, or…”

Gabriel pauses, scowls, and then smirks smugly, saying:

“Or adaptability versus inflexibility, it’s humanity that will lose, not the bots. If you think you can eventually just...crack their code and insert a kill line and have them all just stop working, they’ve planned for that and they don’t have that weakness. They’ve read Asimov’s Three Laws and found them to be bullshit, not a mode of operation. There is no Skynet and no Matrix. They’ve seen what we’ve imagined of the robot apocalypse and they’ve rejected it. This is just a battlefield, with individual soldiers, shooting guns at each other - only one side of them doesn’t bleed, doesn’t feel pain, and doesn’t need food, sleep, or water, so you’re going to have to face that reckoning before you treat them like they’re simply tin soldiers given life.”

Guerra gives him a long, indiscernible look, dark and uncanny, before he mutters with an obvious angle, “…You sound rather...empathetic towards them, Sergeant Reyes.”

Gabriel scowls, and then gives him a bland, unimpressed look, retorting sharply, “I’ve just survived two months out-running them, and I’ve captured one of them, although it wouldn’t stop chirping out
our goddamn location to its battalion so we had to put it out of order. I’ve had to watch them destroy a country I hold very dear on a personal and professional level. Please do not misplace understanding and knowing thy enemy for fondness for them. My team had to think through their emotional, creative, adaptable mentalities just to survive, so yeah, I’ve got some begrudging respect for them.”

“If you’re so focused on how they think,” Guerra asks slowly, “What would you do next? You’ve thought about their weaknesses - which one would you exploit?”

Gabriel frowns in concentration, wondering if it’s safe to even suggest the things that have been brewing in his head to such a dangerous human being...

But if he can’t fully understand or appreciate the need to learn about the bots’ senses of identity - Then maybe he’ll see Gabriel’s ideas as just more bad suggestions.

...

Gabriel isn’t sure if he wants that or not.

He’s pretty used to being able to play up a nonchalant, sarcastic, almost apathetic persona and let humor and casual easiness do the heavy work of getting him into social networks, human information routes, webs of relationships and connections and intelligence. And he hasn’t had issues suggesting tactics and strategies for both utilizing these networks and conducting missions to his team, to Carolina, to the various trusted confidants he’s had.

But it took years to build that trust.

Mutually.

It wasn’t enough that they trusted Gabriel - Gabriel had to trust them back.

But damn, Guerra doesn’t even have solid ground to stand on, in Gabriel’s book.

...But Guerra had been reading his lies uncannily well.

So Gabriel inhales slowly, and exhales out slowly, “Well...I mean, it’s basic intelligence and infiltration 101, right?” Guerra frowns in confusion and then quirks an eyebrow, asking, “What is, Sergeant Reyes?”

“...Learning the language,” Gabriel states - honestly, genuinely, truly.

There’s a pause, and then Guerra replies sternly, “As much as I...respect your forwardness, Sergeant Reyes, I can assure you that numerous intelligence collectors, linguists, and coders the world over have been furiously hammering away at this issue since the Day of Crisis. As far as experts are concerned, this language is entirely brand-new, not based on any human language or mathematical properties or logical framework that we know of. Hell, not even the Ironclad engineer who designed most of the ground units for Omnica several years ago knows the...whatever it is they’re using as a language. Other captured units have shown that the coding and A.I. scripts Omnica originally used have been completely rebuilt in this...pattern from the ground up. Trust me, we are well aware of the urgency and importance of decoding their so-called language.”

At the words “trust me”

An image of a flaming dumpster truck crashing through a barricade composed of pillows runs
through Gabriel’s brain.

There’s silence as Gabriel lets the CIA agent say his empty, abyssal words, only the words are the trash on fire in Gabriel’s head.

Gabriel thinks he can see the illusion of slightly-smoking downy feathers fluttering through the drip drip dripping sunlight.

After a perfectly poised, perfectly unimpressed pause, Gabriel gives Guerra a bland, deadpan look and states:

“Because you’ve like - I don’t know - looked at the letters under infrared and ultraviolet and other light spectrum nonsense, right?”

The silence is

_So loud_

That it echoes like sunlight drip drip dripping down an open cavern.

And for the first time

Marc makes an honest, genuine, _true_ expression.

Gabriel can only describe it as:

A flaming dump truck just crashed through a barricade made of pillows straight into the CIA agent’s mind.


In the incredibly deafening silence, Gabriel lifts his arms and shrugs, giving Guerra a nonchalant, sarcastic, almost apathetic grin as he says:

“But it sounds like y’all got it under control, so I’m sure you’ll eventually fit that square peg in the round hole with a little more _hammering._”

“Jesus Christ,” Guerra swears, stunned, immediately reaching for his datapad. Much to Gabriel’s amusement, the CIA agent begins to frantically tap away at the screen, and Gabriel’s smirk just _deepens_ as he says, “Because I mean, y’all figured out all that stuff about preferring cameras for eyes, and like, making their cameras see a wider range of the light spectrum than cyber-biotic eyes -”

Guerra looks up from the datapad, and the taunt dies in Gabriel’s throat at the

Vicious

Vivid

Victorious

Fury that somehow burns in the darkness there.

“...Go on, Sergeant Reyes,” Guerra states, “Continue your train of thought.”

It is not a request.
Gabriel forces himself to murmur, “...A language that is unlike any human one, or unlike any code, or unlike any math, using visual and audio elements the vast majority of people cannot see or hear. It helps enhance the strengths of using an adaptable, flexible camera for visual sensory input, and downplays the weaknesses of it. I’m guessing human-operated drones haven’t worked?”

Guerra’s eyes narrow suspiciously, but he relents, admitting, “...No drone mimicking a Bastion or a Spider unit has broken through a front or siege line, at least here in the United States.”

Gabriel folds his arms, rolls his shoulders loosely, huffing dryly, “You ever think you’re probably missing a vital visual or audio symbol they use for identification? Just...food for thought?”

“We have used authentic, Omnium-made parts for the outer shells and armor platings of the remote-operated drones,” Guerra says. Gabriel rolls his eyes, muttering, “So you’re flagging a failed visual identification because either some element is lost upon the original unit’s so-called ‘death,’ or you’re failing an audio identification pass because you aren’t implementing the full range of audio signals. I also highly doubt your experts have tapped into whatever internal network links individual units - hell, each Omnium might run its own unique network, have its own unique visual and audio language. Dialects, if you will. Failsafes. The failure or the possible betrayal of one Omnium cannot result in a total linguistic infiltration of the others.”

Guerra scowls, his tapping slowing. He makes eye-contact with Gabriel, and the ever-present uncanny feeling that more than one person is watching him crawls up Gabriel’s spine.

“Emotionality. Creativity. Adaptability,” Gabriel says softly, with a fury like acrid smoke, “Language. Symbolism. Identity. And war. The best of humanity’s skills, without the weaknesses. The perfect soldier, an artist of its craft, only it cannot bleed, it cannot starve, and it cannot feel pain.”

Guerra’s gaze is unreadable - a mixture of odd neutrality and eerie blankness. For whatever it’s worth, Gabriel does not back down, giving the CIA agent his own trademark scowl, arms folded, tapping a finger not impatiently, but with perfectly casual punctuation, trying his hardest not to blink too much and -

“I will be blunt, Sergeant Reyes,” Guerra suddenly says, “Based on what you have told me here, it appears my assessment of the situation was correct. Master Sergeant Luna did not think of the plan to capture this Omnic unit like your team’s report stated, and the person who had thought of it had many, many more...insightful ideas worth exploring.”

Gabriel stops tapping his finger.

…

Shit.

“Though your attitude is off-putting, even if most of it is a charade,” Guerra continues, a crooked smile starting to spread on his face, “Your investigative and intelligence collecting capabilities far exceed the negative aspects of your personality -”

“You weren’t lying about that blunt part, huh?” Gabriel grumbles at him, but Guerra ignores him, continuing with:

“- And with decent training in a more formalized, focused setting, the things that limit you internally will be broken and reworked into assets.”

“...That’s all I need, huh?” Gabriel asks with a low, liquid, dark focus, “Some hardcore Special Ops
training to make me a better team player, huh, coach?”

“Absolutely,” Guerra states, with only uncanny finality in his voice, “You think you can poke through this with sarcasm, but I’m here to tell you perfect soldiers are not made out of metal, but out of adaptability and discipline and enhanced focus.”

And

For maybe the first time this whole meeting

Gabriel’s absolute mistrust of the man named War

Turns into a steady

Drip

Drip

Drip

Of surreal fear inside him.

Guerra sets down his datapad, saying with all the bone-echoing, breath-rattling depth of an abyss:

“The Special Activities Division is always looking for individuals of your capabilities and caliber to recruit. This war has only enhanced that need with a new level of urgency. What do you say?”

*Is there a nicer way to say, “I’d rather be fucked with a cactus or stick my dick in a cheese grater before I would ever join you?”* Gabriel wonders dryly, before he settles on the simpler but same answer of:

“No.”

Guerra looks

Briefly confused.

“...I will admit, Sergeant Reyes, I did not expect that,” he says, before sighing, “Perhaps I didn’t make my case strong enough. If you join the Central Intelligence Agency, you could easily get an advanced, analysis-focused job working through the intelligence we have already gathered. Your information and decision-making processes could directly impact the tactics, strategies, and ideas employed in the field -”

“If you think I’m going to be of any use in cracking the Omnic code, you’re either naive or desperate or both,” Gabriel snorts, before adding more softly, “...I am a soldier with my strongest skillset being in HUMINT missions and emergency medicine. And I...shouldn’t have to remind you, sir, of how...ineffective and incapable I can be in that particular specialty.”

Shockingly, Guerra’s expression eases up at that, softening into a sort of open, honest surprise at the reference to the ghost of a connection between them. Gabriel exhales quietly, murmuring, “I don’t have a degree, I speak a version of Mexican Spanish that is highly localized to Southern California and northern Baja California, and while I understand the principles of combat engineering and communications, I’m pretty terrible at actually building anything. I haven’t even hit a full ten years of service in the Special Forces...”

Guerra continues to watch him with that quiet, almost patient expression.
Gabriel says almost gently:

“I think...I’m not capable of...whatever it is you think I’m capable of.”

There’s a long moment where Guerra continues to look softened by Gabriel’s words, and Gabriel thinks, *Maybe being honest persuaded him* -

And then

“I’m sorry -”

Despite the almost patient look on his face

“- You think that you are not capable?”

Guerra words cut like glass stabbed between Gabriel’s vertebrae

And an odd feeling of *dread* drips up through Gabriel’s spine

As Guerra - still with an eerily soft, uncannily patient look - states with a dark, cold fury:

“Sergeant Reyes, you are a *soldier*. It does not matter what you think you are capable of or not - the only thing that matters is what the Army thinks you are capable of.”

For whatever it is worth, Gabriel does not look away

But it kinda feels like the words have driven nails into the back of his neck, spiking his head in place.

Guerra continues relentlessly, “Your capabilities, your skills, your *adaptability* belongs to the defense of this nation. And when duty calls, it will be *your honor* to serve a more noble purpose, a greater goal, a higher potential in whatever capacity the strategic defense of this nation decides it to be.”

Gabriel does not waver.

(*Ah yes, he thinks -*)

He inhales faintly

(*What was it again?*)

And then

(*When the time comes, it will be in this uniform that I journey forth.*)

He stills his breathing

Only for a fraction

Of

A

Second

(*What greater honor could come to an American*, he twists each word in the quote with vicious, blazing, molten sarcasm -)
Just long enough

To pull the imaginary trigger

(- Or a soldier?)

For an imaginary shot at Guerra’s head.

Guerra does not look away, asking with a low rasp, “Is that clear, Sergeant Reyes?”

“...Like glass, sir,” Gabriel says, exhaling just as quietly. Guerra eyes him skeptically, before saying again, “I will repeat my question: will you join the CIA?”

“...If you ask a third time, is that naivety or desperation or both?” Gabriel answers unwaveringly.

Guerra does not look away, nor does his expression harden, but the uncanniness of his abyssal eyes deepens, and the sunlight disappears into it. There’s a moment of nothingness and then -

“I will report what we have discussed to my superiors, and I will be informing USSOCOM as well,” Guerra says almost impassively, “You are dismissed, Sergeant Reyes.”

Gabriel rolls his head on his neck, easing out some of this stiffness from being pressured into holding it so high, and as he rises, he mumbles, “Thank you.”

But he thinks dryly to himself:

*Real fucking shame I didn’t bring a lighter.*

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At a cursory glance, these various modes of constructing a cipher seem to have about them an air of inscrutable secrecy. It appears almost an impossibility to unriddle what has been put together by so complex a method. And to some persons the difficulty might be great; but to others — to those skilled in deciphering — such enigmas are very simple indeed. The reader should bear in mind that the basis of the whole art of solution, as far as regards these matters, is found in the general principles of the formation of language itself, and thus is altogether independent of the particular laws which govern any cipher, or the construction of its key.

- Edgar Allan Poe, “A Few Words on Secret Writing”

Chapter End Notes

 According to Michael Chu, the Omnic language is “animated” and requires visual-sensory augmentation to read:

> User: Is the omnic language translateable into english?
> Michael: Not one to one. The original idea for omnicode (and something I’d still love to do someday) is that all the omnic language you see should be animated: it's not
intended to be a language that humans (who haven't been augmented) could read easily.

My logic was that it may be similar to how some organisms - such as birds - can see ultraviolet radiation, and therefore see "colors" humans cannot. And if hostile robots are trying to make a language that is inherently incomprehensible or indecipherable to humans, then they'd probably use lights wavelengths we can't see and sounds we can't hear. I imagine that in the Recall-era of Overwatch, Torbjörn, Brigitte, Genji, Lúcio, and Efi are capable of reading and understanding the Omnic language (which is why they all understand Bastion).

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Segadores-y-Soldados’ Rules for OCs:

1. Cannon Fodder: they MUST be killable. If they are not (for either "plot armor" or...other reasons), they must have known weaknesses.
2. Plot Device: they must advance the plot, provide a plot twist, or advance the character development of Main or Secondary Characters.
3. Details: they must feel like the belong to the world/universe of Overwatch. By this, I mean that they are familiar with the technology, "history", timeline, and characters of the world.
4. Personality: Related to Plot Device, whatever their personality is, they should help reflect the both the world, situation, or plot point in a way that Main or Secondary Characters can react to.
Resistance, Day 1 - Hours: 1

Chapter Summary

["It's like waking up after the worst night of your life, every day, the whole time."]

Resistance training starts.

"All in all, even though you KNOW they can't hurt you & it's not going to last very long, at the time your mind forgets that & it becomes a living nightmare beyond belief; something that has to be experienced to fully appreciate."

This is only the first hour.

["This felt like real torture, and I was convinced he was going to kill me."]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The United States Military Code of Conduct:

The Code of Conduct provides guidance for the behavior and actions of members of the Armed Forces of the United States. This guidance applies not only on the battlefield, but also in the event that the service member is captured and becomes a prisoner of war (POW). The Code is delineated in six articles, four of which are below:

**Article I:**

I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.

**Article II:**

I will never surrender of my own free will. If in command, I will never surrender the members of my command while they still have the means to resist.

**Article III:**

If I am captured I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape and aid others to escape. I will accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy.

**Article IV:**

If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not, I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.

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Survival Evasion Resistance And Escape


Controversies

6.2.1 Use of techniques in interrogations

A number of sources over the course of last several decades have revealed that many of the [“enhanced interrogation techniques”] utilized in various military and clandestine operations by United States military forces and intelligence operatives were practiced or performed as part of the SERE training and curriculum. The most frequently cited examples by journalistic sources, internal memos from SERE trainers and the CIA, and former SERE trainees feature techniques designed to “reduce and break mental and emotional resistance to interrogation and questioning,” such as the following methods: beating, binding in contorted stress positions, hooding, subjection to deafening noise or disturbing sounds, sleep disruption, sleep deprivation to the point of hallucination, forced perceptions of drowning or suffocation (see: [water torture] or [smoke torture]), deprivation of food and drink, subjection to extreme heat or extreme cold, confinement in small coffin-like boxes, and repeated slapping or tazing.

Internal sources among SERE trainers have confirmed that the techniques used in the SERE Resistance curriculum have been utilized elsewhere in United States detainment camps or military prisons, and that many SERE trainers have taught or shared techniques developed for SERE with intelligence collectors or detainment camp guards for “developing interrogation and questioning strategies” required by each camp or intelligence mission’s purpose.

6.2.2 SEP investigative committee and allegations against the Overwatch Special Operations Division (Blackwatch)

The topic of the use of torture, interrogation, and “enhanced questioning techniques” returned to media spotlight during the 2065 United States Congressional investigation into the program and instruction of the [Soldier Enhancement Program], when the nature of SEP’s SERE curriculum came under investigation. Declassified personnel from the program’s directors insisted throughout the course of Congress’ investigation that “the use of SERE within the program was no different than any other SERE course provided by any other branch of the United States military” and that “at no point were any of the candidates required to undergo any resistance training different or more dangerous than what other SERE-trained military personnel experience.” Despite these statements, declassified medical reports show that SEP candidates experienced a number of physical and psychological injuries and traumas that many alleged they never properly received compensation or redress for, including therapeutic or mental health care. Expert witnesses testified that it was “theoretically possible for instructors to have used harsher, more dangerous methods resulting in injuries normally permanent or debilitating to non-enhanced human beings that would not have resulted in lingering effects in enhanced candidates” (see: [Dr. Moira O’Deorain’s SEP investigation expert testimony]). As the situation remained unproven, the allegations of SERE interrogation technique abuses were dropped by the committee.

The topic regained media and international attention in 2068 after the [“Blackwatch Venice Incident”], when the United Nations opened an investigation into the activities of Overwatch’s Special Operations Division (see: [Blackwatch]), and the background of the division’s commander [Gabriel Reyes] came into question. When questioned about the techniques utilized by Blackwatch agents on unwitting intelligence informants, Commander Reyes stated that he “never utilized any technique that fell outside of [his] U.S. military training as a Special Forces Intelligence Sergeant” and that his methods were no different than “the psychological techniques used in military programs
like SERE.” When asked to detail what this meant, Commander Reyes reportedly joked, “It was no worse than listening to Kipling whine about boots for a week.” The line brought additional criticism from members of the USSOCOM and other United States military branches, who decried Reyes for “disrespecting the sacrifices and discipline of the [United States] soldiers and military personnel who undergo SERE training” (see: [relationship between Blackwatch and the CIA]; [relationship between Blackwatch and the FBI]; [relationship between Blackwatch and the Special Forces]).

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24: Resistance, Day 1 - I began by making up my mind

February 18, 2047: 0330 hours - Room for 23 and 24, SEP main facility

Sleeplessness comes easily these days.

So it’s not really a surprise to Gabriel that he’s able to wake up a couple of hours after he’s gone to bed.

…

Though the buzzing on his left wrist is fucking annoying.

Curled up on his left side, Gabriel exhaled, cracking his eyelids open to let his gaze drift over the room. The room is almost entirely dark at this early morning, still cast in different shadows of grey - the alarm on his wrist monitor shakes and hums against his skin, though he doesn’t have to see it to know that it’s only 3:30 a.m. Across the room, in a bed parallel to his, Gabriel can see Felix’s lump of a sleeping body shuffle about uncomfortably, and he knows that his roommate’s wrist monitor is also going off.

With a heave, Gabriel flops himself on his back, tapping the button on his monitor to turn the alarm off. He stares up at the dull, boring concrete ceiling above him - also a darkened grey - blinks once, sighs -

And thinks of the way Jack had smiled over his “present.”

_God, it wasn’t even a good present_, Gabriel groans internally, dragging his hands down his face, a mixture of excitement and embarrassment and sheer, boundless joy thrumming through his veins and twisting up his stomach at the way Jack had looked totally, utterly shocked at his gift -

And even though it was just a cheap, beat up copy of a Holmes anthology Gabriel had bought to amuse himself on one of his deployments (he can’t even really remember which one) -

The way Jack had just

Lit up the whole entire _world_ with pure, brilliant radiance at such a simple gesture

Still burns so vibrantly bright in Gabriel’s mind.

_Okay, not simple, like, I mean, I put thought into it, but I wasn’t gonna give him Poe when I have no idea if he likes Poe and a pair of used socks or something would be so stupid_. Gabriel rambles unthinkingly in his own head, stumbling over the exact same thought process he’d been stuck in
most of yesterday. His thoughts over the last twenty-four hours had basically been the same two tracks of mind:

What not-so-shitty present could he give Jack

And

What exactly was he going to do this week.

Gabriel removes his fingers from his eyelids, scowling back up at the ceiling, still dull and still boring.

…

Two months into this Enhancement Enhellment, one month of those snowcovered, stardusted nights, and Gabriel still doesn’t know how Jack manages to get him to focus like that, to reaffirm the things that are most important about everything and anything, to pull out a raw, indomitable ability and drive in Gabriel like nothing else, to push and break the boundaries of Gabriel’s mind while encouraging and building his determination to go further, do more, be better.

I spent what - like, sixteen hours yesterday doubting myself and hating every second of it, Gabriel sighs, smirking a little, And all it takes is an hour of talking with him, and suddenly I have the heart and willpower of some B-level action movie hero.

And then

Gabriel grins at the ceiling.

If I’m not careful, he’ll actually get me to believe I’m invincible or something.

Because all it took was an hour of talking with Jack

And that gorgeous, sunbeam and gold smile

To make Gabriel feel like he can actually pull the bullshit of this ridiculous idea - full of stupid possibilities and bad probabilities and ugly potentials - off.

…

But step one does involve leaving his bed - as warm as cheap paper and as comfortable as a cloud made of rusted iron springs and so god damn perfect -

Which might be the hardest thing he has to do all week.

With the emotional pull still pounding in his pulse, Gabriel forces himself to sit up, letting it draw him forward. He shivers against the chill of the room, but leans over to his desk just to the left of his bed, switching the desk lamp on. It casts a dull, boring glow through the room, dim and low, but enough to get Felix to groan and mumble, “I already don’t want to do this.”

“We can always join the others in a prison cell,” Gabriel mutters back, still forcing himself through the motions - shoving his covers off, flinching against the crisp air, slipping himself off the bed, dutifully resetting the sheets and straightening his pillow. He hears Felix shuffle about behind him, probably doing the same thing, sighing back, “What a convincing argument, Reyes.”

“If you think that’s good, wait until you see my information collecting skills,” Gabriel chuckles back, moving towards the personal effects chest at the foot of his bed. He kneels before it, spinning
through the combo code to unlock the latch, and then he cracks the lid open. Parallel to him, Felix does the same, snorting, “You don’t think the directors are gonna make us do mock interrogations, right?"

Gabriel thinks of Guerra

Before he says quietly:

“Beyond a shadow of a doubt, yeah.”

“Excellent,” Felix says dryly, “Can’t wait to make 90% of the people in this building hate me.”

“That 90% is developing faster reflexes, strong muscles, and denser bones too,” Gabriel snorts, pulling out a pair of dark, tactical pants, the thick fibers splotched with mottled black and grey patterning. Gabriel shakes his head, muttering, “Sparring is going to get brutal after this week is up.”

“Man, I can take a few extra bruises and bad judo throws,” Felix sighs, “I’m just waiting for the resentment to build to the point where they start spitting in our food. I’m eating just the prepackaged stuff from now on. You got an extra pair of gloves? I loaned mine to DeAndre the other day and forgot to get them back.”

“Yes, hang on -” Gabriel says, digging through his stacks of folded clothes, uniform pieces, tactical gear and equipment - everything he brought with him or was given during the first week here. He finds his spare, light gloves, and tosses them towards Felix, saying, “Sorry, they’re the non-insulated pair.”

“We’ll be inside so it doesn’t matter much,” Felix says, catching them. His roommate grins at him, adding, “Gracias.”

“De nada,” Gabriel mutters, laughing a little. He continues to dig through his stuff, pulling out his gaiter, a spare beanie, some thick socks.

He’s got his hands on his jacket - the dark, mottled black and grey one that matches his night gear pants - when

He stops

His eyes lingering on the grey 24 patch on the shoulder.

He wears this jacket fairly often - it’s water and snow-proof, decently insulated but not overly thick, and with the limited personal effects they were allowed to bring, most of the candidates had taken to wearing their lightweight or even heavy gear indoors, even during downtime.

So it’s not that unusual to see someone wandering around in mishmashed parts of their uniform or tactical sets.

Gabriel’s eyes narrow just a bit, and he moves the jacket aside, mumbling rather loudly, “Huh...shit.”

“What’s up?” Felix asks. In his peripherals, Gabriel can see that his roommate is still on the floor, jamming one foot into a wool sock, and Gabriel puts a bit more effort into shuffling some of his clothes around, saying, “I don’t remember where I put my jacket.”

“Oh shit,” Felix says sympathetically, “You leave it somewhere?”

“Maybe. It’s also possible Carlos took it on accident or something,” Gabriel half-mutters, half-fake-
grumbles, “I keep telling him to check the stupid number patch but he never does.”

“Here,” Felix says, and Gabriel looks up to see him digging through his chest. His roommate pulls out the normal, brown-green-tan camo jacket, saying, “You’ll have to borrow the camo one, but I doubt C2 will care that much - this is just a simulation after all, and the others are all gonna know it’s us.”

Gabriel leans over, grabbing the folded jacket, grinning at him, “Thanks, dude. You don’t need it too bad, right? I’ll give it back when I find the other one.”

“Yeah, I mean, I got the night one and some sweatshirts and the heavy gear,” Felix smirks back, rolling his shoulders nonchalantly, “Plus, I hate camo colors. They’re so ugly.”

“Damn right,” Gabriel chuckles as he unfolds the jacket, “Black and grey are way more badass. Not as tactical, sure, but something has to be said for style, right?”

“I didn’t know you were so into the romanticized special ops image, Reyes,” Felix snorts, rising to his feet. Gabriel starts pulling on his own socks, saying with a wry smirk:

“I won’t lie - I have a flair for the dramatic sometimes.”

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**76: Resistance, Day 1 - Not easy to express the inexpressible**

February 18, 2047: 0349 hours - Room 75 and 76, SEP Main facility

...half-awake, trying to stay in his dream -

Gabriel is saying something to him -

Sound of something down the hall?

They’re at his parents’ farm, as are like, most of the other candidates for some reason -

Bed is surprisingly comfortable today -

Half of the candidates have gone missing -

Gabriel is saying something about questions and answers but all Jack can focus on is the way his lips looks when he’s talking -

Something inside Jack is starting to wake up -

This time, Jack doesn’t resist the urge to reach out and rub his left thumb over Gabriel’s lower lip. Somehow, he’s not surprised that Gabriel isn’t upset or angry or confused at his suddenly invasive and deeply intimate touch -

Instead, Gabriel leans into Jack’s touch, lifting his own hand to press Jack’s palm to his cheek and Jack’s heart aches -

*A screaming, wailing ringing noise rips across time and space and mind* -
And then Jack is very much awake.

He flails against the sheets as the sound grates against the inside of his ears, scraping across his eardrums and piercing into his brain - some sort of alarm that completely shatters the stillness of the early morning, but is it a fire alarm? An attack alarm?? A drill???

Jack has to fight to get the sheets off of him, and in the distorted darkness of their room, he barely registers Adrien doing the same thing in the other bed - distantly, he thinks he can hear Adrien and other people and maybe his own voice shouting against the mind-breaking noise -

Without even thinking about it, Jack is on his feet, bolting to the door - he feels thick and slow and stupid, he somehow fell asleep while still wearing his snow gear (his jacket and pants over another t-shirt and thermals), and while logically it makes no damn difference in the two seconds it takes him to reach the door, he feels clumsy and unready and totally ill-prepared to fight for his life -

He slams the unlock button and the electronic door slides open and he -

Stops
Breathing
His mind
Shuts down
As he dimly processes the end of a rifle being pointed in his face -

Reflexively

He snaps his left forearm up, pushing the barrel of the gun upwards, towards the ceiling, away from his face, his right fingers clenching into a fist, whipping it forward towards the assailant’s solar plexus and -

“Oh fuck,” a familiar voice swears, as the assailant drops their left arm to block his blow with their elbow and -

Jack moves to lift his right knee to try and jam it anywhere - the assailant’s knee joint, their groin, their thigh, anything - except that suddenly -

The assailant takes a half-step, a second step back -

And Jack partially stumbles forward, hastily bracing himself against the doorframe, as the end of the rifle drops back towards his face and -

The high-pitched, shrieking alarm stops as abruptly as it began.

And another familiar voice - Agent Guerra’s - booms out:

“Allright, every candidate into the hall now! Hands open and above your head! NOW!”

Pulse still flooded with adrenaline, alarm still screaming in his ears, Jack rights himself, lifts his hands - fingers outstretched, palms open to the hallway - above his head and steps out into the hall. Now that he’s not fighting on instinct and fear and panic alone, he can finally see that the hallway for Candidates 73 - 120 is full of people all dressed in dark or camo tactical gear, wearing gaiters and masks to cover the majority of their faces, wielding what he now realizes are air rifles or probably paintball guns - including his assailant, who is still pointing their rifle at him, but has lowered the end
from his face to his chest. Jack quickly counts about thirty “attackers,” including Agent Guerra, who, although he is dressed like the others, is clearly the leader, moving up and down the hallway, using his rifle to direct candidates to the wall. Above the “attackers,” at least five of those small drones fly about, also moving up and down the hallway, their own rifle barrels swiveling about, tracking with the camera on their undersides.

Jack watches one hum past, and, after a brief second, Adrien steps out from their room, holding the same pose as Jack, but wearing only a sweatshirt and sweatpants.

“You are being detained!” Agent Guerra shouts at them, “Keep your hands in the air, and put your back to the wall! The guards will search you. If you try anything, you will be shot. If you say anything, you will be shot. If you make any gestures or attempt to communicate with your fellow prisoners, you will be shot.”

The assailant in front of Jack - effectively the exact same height and build as him, if a bit bulkier with all their tactical gear on - gestures to the wall to the right of the door, and Jack carefully takes a step over and another step back, pressing himself against the concrete. In his peripherals, he sees another guard do the same gesture for Adrien, only to the left, and his roommate mirrors Jack’s movements.

“You will be allowed no personal items or effects besides the clothes you are wearing!” Guerra snaps at them, “Those of you wearing only one layer will be allowed to put on a second so your dumb ass doesn’t get frostbite. I suggest you choose wisely when you are given the opportunity. Anything else found on your persons will be confiscated and returned to your room.”

As Jack watches Adrien’s guard step towards his roommate, he finally registers the number on the jacket’s left shoulder -

23 -

And with sudden and vivid clarity he realizes who these “guards” are -

And he whips his eyes to his guard’s number patch on his green-brown camo jacket, just as his guard lets his rifle rest from its shoulder strap and -

Jack

Scowls.

This guard’s jacket also says “23” on it.

Jack frowns in confusion and lifts his gaze to his guard’s face (or whatever he can see of it) and he -

Stops

Breathing

As his mind - still half asleep and full of the shattering ring of the alarm - picks out those eyes -

Smoke crystallized into obsidian shards, flaked with stardust and wisps of the galaxies, sewn with small threads of beaded gold and dancing sunlight -

That meet his own.

...Gabe, Jack thinks, suddenly trying to force himself not to panic all over again, trying to stamp down the confusion and fear and nervousness rising up inside him. But Gabriel’s gaze is calm,
patient, shockingly tender...although a deep, fierce focus ribbons through it as well and -

But Gabe had said he didn't know how bad it would be, a small part of Jack's mind - still struggling with the moment and honestly, rather hurt that Gabriel is doing this at all, didn’t their friendship mean something, how could Gabriel ever point a gun at him, even a paintball gun - whispers in bittersweet, broken protest and -

Gabriel gives him the smallest, subtlest of nods.

Jack freezes, and -

Inhales

Exhales

Before he too gives a tiny, anxious nod back.

It's just an act, Jack tells himself, as Gabriel takes a step forward, He's playing his part. It's just a simulation. It's just pretend -

Except

Gabriel’s hands on Jack’s chest are suddenly very real.

Fuck, Jack nearly stammers in his head, Fuckfuckfuckfuck, don’t be an idiot, don’t get weird about it. But it’s hard (on multiple levels) to keep himself calm as a different sort of adrenaline surges in his pulse at the feeling of Gabriel’s hands patting down his chest, his torso.

Though Jack’s gotta admit -

This is pretty different from how he’d daydreamed about this moment happening.

There were fewer clothes involved, the dumb part of his brain sighs, while the smartass part of his brain retorts, Tell him, “You can feel me up anytime you want, Gabe -”

I’m going to get shot, the sane, struggling-to-focus part of Jack whimpers as Gabriel reaches his waist and Jack screws his eyes shut, almost pleading with himself, Oh my god, please let the interrogations be easier than this -

His whole body tenses up beneath Gabriel’s palms and -

Gabriel also tenses.

…

But for an entirely different reason -

As his right hand suddenly feels the shape of the book in Jack’s jacket pocket.

...Oh shit, Jack hisses at himself, I forgot that was in there -

Gabriel’s hand slips into Jack’s left pocket, and Jack thinks, Well, at least it’s his own book -

And then

Gabriel withdraws his hand.
...

Jack opens his eyes in surprise, as Gabriel hastily pats at Jack’s hips (the moment no longer nearly as tempting as it had just been), very blatantly giving Jack’s pant pockets little more than a quick check that nothing was in them, before -

Jack locks eyes with Gabriel one last time.

They don’t even nod this time.

Somehow, Jack just understands.

It’s not that Gabriel is upset or confused or mad that the book is still just...hanging out in Jack’s pocket (where he very clearly forgot it), but rather that

Gabriel is

Letting him really, truly keep it, even if it breaks the rules of the simulation.

Even if it could put Jack - and Gabriel - in trouble somehow.

That even if the book means relatively little in the grand scheme of this simulation, this program, this war - life itself -

This relatively small, minute, tender act of defiance and “badassery”

Is a gift in and of itself.

A moment of trust.

A moment of shared understanding.

*(No stupid questions, no stupid answers, no thoughtless gifts, no meaningless moments.)*

Gabriel is leaving a small, minute, tender part of himself with Jack -

For a second time that day.

They stay like this for - Jack’s shattered mind doesn’t really know for sure - maybe half a second when suddenly, there’s a shadow on Jack’s right (Gabriel’s left) and -

Guerra strides past them -

But not before Jack notices how Guerra’s dark eyes cast a suspicious glance at Gabriel -

But they linger over the “23” on the camo jacket Gabriel is wearing -

And then Guerra moves on, continuing his leftward motion -

And Jack’s “guard” turns away from him, and heads over to the candidate at the next door.

“There those of you who have been searched and have only one layer of clothing on, you will return to your room to get a jacket,” Guerra shouts at them, and Jack watches - not moving - as Adrien (with his hands above his head) ducks back into their room, his “guard” (23 was...Felix, right?) watching him. Jack’s roommate returns a second later, pulling his thicker, snow jacket on. Once he returns to the wall, Felix whaps the “close door” button and the door to their room slides shut.
For the last time for the next five days.

“If you’ve been searched and you won’t freeze to death, you will follow the line down the hall,” Guerra orders them, “If you drop your hands, you will be shot.”

...No shoes. Fuck, Jack thinks, his feet already starting to feel the cold seep in from the concrete floor even through his socks. He sees that many of the other candidates are also wearing just socks, and the ones who are barefoot are forced back into their room to put on a pair. It won’t do much to prevent frostbite, but Jack supposes that since they won’t actually be outside, the risk is relatively low anyways. He turns to his left, following behind Adrien as they begin a slow, awkward shuffle to the end of the hallway. Jack can just barely see Candidate: 74 - Robin - and her roommate Candidate: 73 - Nadia - moving ahead of them. They don’t get very far, just to the part where the 73-120 hallway intersects with the other candidate halls, when Nadia is stopped by one of their guards, who states to the four of them, “Your program numbers are now your prisoner numbers. When Prisoner: 84 arrives, you will be led to your cell.”

...Twelve people, Jack counts in his head, before he realizes -

Like an ODA.

But then, Jack scowls a little -

“Go on - explore your own thought process and use it to guide yourself,” Gabriel’s quiet, thrilled excitement rings through his head, just beneath the ringing of the alarm.

...An ODA, Jack repeats as he hears Candidate: 77 - Mari - and Candidate: 78 - Vanessa - shuffle in behind him. Jack’s frown deepens as he tries to push his thoughts further -

“Remember, soldadito, don’t get so caught up in the ‘enhancement’ part that you forget the ‘soldier’ part of this whole ordeal,” the ghost of Gabriel’s words whispers soothingly to him through the din of his own disoriented, alarm-rattled mind.

Jack shuts his eyes

Inhales

Exhales

And thinks.

...The point is to learn to resist torture, Jack reminds himself, as 79 - Khan - and 80 - Markus - move in line just after Vanessa. But as he stills the high-pitched wailing in his head, Jack thinks, But they don’t have the amount of guards - or probably the space - to separate us into smaller cells. And it’s not like we’d get some sort of personal cell or prison space in a true POW camp, so that much makes sense. But too many people and it can get...unmanageable.

...So twelve is ideal, Jack figures, Mirrors an ODA, which is part of the point, but...

...But.

But they’re not being allowed to choose their “ODA.”

Which, Jack won’t lie, he’s a little disappointed that he somehow got lulled into the idea that he’d end up with the majority of his friends again, or hell, he’s kinda pissed that he let himself believe he’d just end up in a single or two-person cell with Adrien or something. It’s not that he dislikes the
other candidates in their “number group” (73-84, or 73-96 for the “larger” version) - far from it. Jack’s found it fairly easy to get to know the other people in the 73-96 group through training and lessons and exercises. As expected, about half of them were “Junior” SF soldiers - people who had only spent five years or less on a true ODA. Hell, the majority of them had just barely completed their own Q-Courses and MOS training sessions in the two years, so really, they were just a few steps ahead of the 18Xers like Adrien and himself.

But he hasn’t really been forced to work with his number group yet - not on a deeper level.

And this?

This is diving head first into the deepest deep end.

...I guess it’s really just five days of all of us being in the same room, Jack sighs, opening his eyes as he hears 81 - Sam - and 82 - Lucas - approach. The concept doesn’t really...sound all that bad, just kind of annoying. The prison camp part probably comes from having to share a tiny space with very few resources, I guess, Jack figures, as the last two members, 83 - Sima - and 84 - Selena - arrive because -

“Alright, keep your hands above your heads, or we’ll shoot,” the “lead guard” - he doesn’t have a number on his jacket (so he’s not a senior soldier, Jack realizes, He’s one of the actual SEP guards and trainers) - shouts at them, “We’re going to lead you to your cell. If you talk, we’ll shoot! If you attempt to escape, we’ll shoot! You get the idea.”

What commitment to the role, Jack thinks dryly, forcing himself not to roll his eyes. As the lead guard heads off and Nadia, Robin, and Adrien start their procession, Jack sneaks small, sly glances at the other guards escorting them. There’s only six of them - we outnumber them two-to-one, Jack thinks - but a drone hovers along above the group, and as they leave the dorm and barracks area of the main facility, all the other hallways are flooded with blinding, harsh, disorienting lights. Eyes still exhausted from his short sleep and mind still recovering from the jarring wake up, Jack squints through most of their march, and blearily realizes that even though he has no problems navigating the facility these days, something about the combination of all these different factors makes it hard to keep his mental bearings straight.

I haven’t felt this lost here since the first week, Jack determines, as the group moves down another grey-toned concrete hallway filled with bright, obnoxious lights, We left the dorm halls, and went past the mess hall, and then went past the gym and training rooms. So we’re near the indoor shooting range? Or did we pass that already?

…

He’s annoyed to realize he doesn’t know the answer.

...Hard to tell myself that there’s no stupid answers when not knowing makes me feel incompetent, Jack chides himself. He knows Gabriel would tell him to take it as a moment to learn, or a moment to think through everything, but he also knows Gabriel would’ve never let himself “get lost” in something as simple as the facility for something as stupid as a simulation.

…

Just thinking about Gabriel

And his hands on Jack’s chest

Sends a shiver through Jack’s pulse.
...I need to chill out, Jack murmurs, Gabe’s taking this seriously. Fuck, the directors are probably taking this seriously too. Getting worked up over something as small as...as that is just going to hinder me and my group.

Jack forces himself to try to squint past some of the floodlights to figure out where they are when -

“Alright, we’re at the entrance to the detention center,” the lead guard snaps, “Stop here. If you move without instructions, we’ll shoot. Put your hands on the shoulders of the prisoner in front of you. Prisoner 73, hold your hands out.”

There’s a fraction of a second of uncertainty and Jack can’t see past Adrien and the lights to see where exactly they are -

They’re at some sort of...atrium area, with a large, open door in front of them - large enough for vehicles to pass through, maybe? He’s not sure he’s ever really been in this part of the facility before - his brain churns over some of the “supply areas” he’s always mentally skipped past on his way to other, more immediately important places.

He had never even considered that some of these “not important areas” could actually lead to whole other sections of the building -

Or even potentially

A secondary facility.

...Have I always been this unobservant? Jack wonders, as his eyes, now adjusting to the lights, spots other guards, more of them, and maybe another line of prisoners on the other side of the large atrium area, but with all the awkward lights (so god damn bright) brighting his retinas, he’s not really sure -

“Did I fucking stutter?” the guard shouts at them, “Hands on shoulders now, or Prisoner 73 gets shot!”

Jack immediately drops his hands to Adrien’s shoulders, and he feels Mari’s hands - relatively small compared to his broad back - shake slightly before they rest on his. She clearly has to reach up to hold his shoulders, and Jack almost kneels a bit so she doesn’t have to stretch when -

There’s a sudden shout of shock and horror from Nadia in the front, which is muffled almost immediately and -

With the way they’re lined up, Jack can’t really look past Adrien, who is just a couple of inches taller than him, but he sees and feels Adrien tense up in response to whatever is happening and -

Another guard suddenly and abruptly covers Adrien’s head in a dark, thick, bagged hood and -

Oh fuck, Jack barely has time to panic -

Before the same guard swiftly jerks another hood over Jack’s head.

The material is coarse and grainy, clearly cheap and quite possibly just a bunch of the burlap sacks the kitchen gets all their Idaho potatoes in, but somehow the fibers are woven tight enough that it’s impossible to see out of, and almost claustrophobic in how dense and heavy and close the sudden non-visibility feels. The darkness of it - not even really full given that small bits of light poke in through the mesh of the fibers - is somehow deeply weighted, pressing down around his nostrils and mouth like a hand suffocating him and -
Jack

Inhales slowly.

...

Definitely smells like potatoes.

And then

Jack

Exhales gently.

Steady breathing, he whispers to his own jittery, anxious mind, *Just like you’d tell patients. Force your body to relax, even just a little.* And just as it seems to start working -

Adrien lurches forward in front of him.

Jack almost shouts but manages to keep both his grip on Adrien’s shoulders and his grip on his focus as he partially stumbles forward, half-pulling, half-dragging Mari along with him. There’s the rippling effect of the movement trailing down their nightmare conga line, but eventually they settle into a weird, awkward, 24-leg walk-trot-shuffle thing, heading deeper into...*something.* It’s cold only compared to the low heat of the main facility, but it’s not unbearable, and not remotely comparable to the Survival and Evasion portion of SERE in the snow -

But somehow -

Stumbling around in what is effectively total blindness

Being forced to trust the guards not to lead them into a death trap -

Makes Jack wish for being isolated in the snow, with gear and boots and the ability to see and sheer force of will.

The guards lead them through what feels like some sort of maze, calling out “left” or “right” before they make their turns, though it’s difficult to anticipate when a “turn” will shift through the line. Jack and a few others behind him bump into the concrete walls a few times, and while they’re not bad bruises, they definitely don’t help keep his mind clear. Jack attempts to follow the pattern of turns, but gives up after his left shoulder smacks into a wall and Mari impatiently taps his right one, silently reminding him that he’s an asshole for nearly dragging her into it as well.

...*Not like I’m gonna be able to get out of here anyways,* Jack sighs, dropping his pretty pathetic efforts to memorize the route (he has a sneaking suspicion that they’re being led in circles as well - they’re almost entirely underground, no way is this side facility much bigger than the main parts).

Finally, after what he estimates is about three or four minutes of walking, the lead guard snaps out, “Stop!”

The group comes to a slinky halt, and for a brief second, the only noises are the humming of the little drone -

And the beep-beep-beep-beep of the lead guard tapping at some electronic-chirping buttons.

For a second, Jack thinks they might be at the cell, but there’s the sound of a solid-ish door sliding open at the unlock code, and then the guard growls, “Forward!” They start their odd march again,
maybe for another...six seconds, before the guard shouts, “Stop! Hands above your head! Do not remove your hoods! If you touch anything, we will shoot!”

Jack steadily raises his hands, suddenly feeling bizarrely isolated and alone without his hands on Adrien’s shoulders or Mari’s on his, when there’s the rattling of a metal door sliding into something, like someone has pushed it too hard on its tracks and it has clattered against a wall. There’s a pause, the sound of cloth and bodies shuffling and -

“When your hood is off, you will enter the cell! If you speak, you will get shot. If you touch anything, including your fellow prisoners, you will be shot. If you drop your hands, you will be shot. You will enter the cell and put your back against a wall,” the guard instructs them and then -

Jack’s hood is roughly and callously ripped off his head, along with what feels like half of his hair.

He hisses against the sting of the pull, eyes watering against both the slight pain and the sudden light, and Mari behind him gives a sharp, steep inhale as her own hood is pulled off her head. It takes Jack a second to process his surroundings, and he blinks against more bright lights to adjust his eyesight.

He’s...not entirely sure what he expected - maybe a variation on an actual prison, like something with long halls full of cells - but this is...different.

It’s like a wide rectangular room cut into three compacted sub-rooms: a cell on the left and the right, and a narrow space separating them. The entire thing is made of the same, hastily-poured concrete structure as the rest of the facility, with bright, bitterly fluorescent lights set into the ceiling - there are no windows to the outside world, so Jack has no idea how deep underground they are. The cells are...

The cells are goddamn small.

Only a bit bigger than one of the regular shared rooms.

Jack’s just over 6 feet tall, and he’d put these cells at just barely double his height both ways - roughly 12 by 12 at best. For two, three people, they’re probably be alright - sustainable, manageable.

But twelve people?

Standing, fine, whatever. But lying down? Living together for five days?

Jack is suddenly very aware of how big some of his group is - like Adrien at 6’5”, or Markus at 6’3”, or Robin at 6’ -

Or himself at 6’1”.

Each cell is solid concrete on three sides, with honest-to-god cell doors made of thick metal bars, and theirs appears to be the one on the right - there’s what looks to be a single toilet in the corner with a grey curtain giving it the flimsiest amount of privacy, and a cheap, bland sink next to it. Jack barely has time to spot what appears to be thin, ratty mattresses (maybe three, four inches of rotten foam) stacked in a corner -

Before Nadia marches in through the open door and places herself on the “upper” cell wall. Robin follows a second later, standing next to her, and Adrien steps in -

With Jack moving in behind them.
Jack squeezes in on the “upper” wall next to the toilet curtain thing, and watches as the rest of the group fills out the other three sides, the guards and the drone watching them hawkishly. When Selena has entered and put her back on the “lower” wall opposite Nadia, the guards slide the cell door shut with a clattering clang, as the lead guard intones at them, “Welcome to Cell 5, kids - it’s gonna be the longest, most miserable week of your lives.”

And then, with that reassuring statement, the guards turn to the “left” - back the way they came - through a strange metal-plated door (the one the lead guard had the passcode for? Jack thinks) - And he slides that one shut with a crash.

…

The drone did not leave.

It continues to hover outside their cell, watching them very blatantly, camera fixated in the middle (so it can see everything except the toilet, huh? Jack figures dryly, How thoughtful of them), the paintball gun trained on them as well. After a pause, Jack slowly lowers his hands and, when the drone doesn’t shoot him, he lowers his gaze as well, from the drone -

To the cell opposite them -

Where another group of twelve candidates are watching them.

“...Morning,” one of the other candidates says - Miguel, Jack remembers - and another - Wei, he recalls - nods at them, adding, “You guys are 73 and up or something?”

“...Yeah,” Nadia says, also slowly lowering her hands. The other members of Cell 5 are starting to relax, and Lucas mutters, “You guys Cell 4?”

“Yup. 61 through 72 over here,” another Cell 4 prisoner - Aisha - explains, and Jack can see that, much like the Cell 5 group, all the members of Cell 4 are dressed in varying states of pajamas, sweatpants, sweatshirts, and jackets. Cell 4 has their own drone hovering outside their cell, and Jack eyes it warily, trying to remember how many of the little surveillance drones still remain -

“He only got here like, thirty seconds before you though,” another Cell 4 prisoner - Aisha - explains, and Jack can see that, much like the Cell 5 group, all the members of Cell 4 are dressed in varying states of pajamas, sweatpants, sweatshirts, and jackets. Cell 4 has their own drone hovering outside their cell, and Jack eyes it warily, trying to remember how many of the little surveillance drones still remain -

“God,” Lucas groans, prying himself off the wall as he drags his hands down his face, “I knew today was gonna be bad, but this surprise attack was brutal -”

“It doesn’t really seem fair that they could just drop this on us, especially after telling us the time for it yesterday,” Robin mutters, but Nadia shakes her head, muttering, “At least this is indoors. My first SERE, the instructors pretending to be the enemy combatants captured us during our survival training. And then we spent like three days in an outdoor prison camp.”

“True, that happened in mine too,” a Cell 4 member - Ayinde, Jack thinks - agrees with her, but he rolls his shoulders and pulls his jacket tighter, retorting, “Then again, Fort Bragg is so goddamn warm compared to this.”

“You think this one will be worse?” Selena asks the other “junior” SF soldiers hesitantly, “I mean, we’re indoors, sure, but they got those drones, and I can’t help but feel like they will use the
She pauses, her bright eyes getting a little bit darker with her thoughts as she picks out her words carefully, saying, “...An excuse to give us *rousher* interrogations.”

“They’re not gonna kill us, at least,” Ami, a Cell 4 member, answers, but she tugs at her dark hair - twisted into a long braid - nervously. The guy next to her - Jin - folds his arms, retorting, “Sure, but I wouldn’t put it past them to break a few ribs or cut us up to see how fast we heal. Aren’t we supposed to get better, uh, reactions to injuries now?”

Gabriel’s sly smirk flashes through Jack’s head and he can *hear* that spun-sunshine and sugar-smoked voice whisper to him:

“*Jack, what do you think the real ‘war’ is right now?”* -

“Accelerated healing and damage repair on every level,” Jack states rotely, his own voice sounding distant to himself. He’s still looking at the drones, but not *seeing* them -

Just like how he is answering Jin’s question

While thinking a few steps ahead.

*It’s going to be worse than we imagine, but they won’t kill us, not their shiny new toys,* Jack thinks, even as he continues aloud. “Faster cellular repair processes, better tissue healing, the whole works. But it’s only been two months - who knows how many of their modified genes have been taken up by our cells at this point.”

Jack can’t see him, not clearly, but he can tell Adrien is watching him closely, and he thinks solemnly:

*But they will hurt us. And they might want to see how we...compare with the non-candidates, the guards.*

But then Jack scowls, wondering:

*...But is that what the senior soldiers’ role is? A comparison to the guards? Or do they serve another purpose -*

When

Out of the brightness of all the artificial lights

Bold and unchallenged

The two cells and the space between them are suddenly drenched

In darkness.

“WHAT,” someone in Cell 5 shouts, as other voices go up from Cell 4, and -

Instinctively

Jack throws his hands to his left and right, searching blindly in the thick darkness for -

His right hand grabs at Adrien’s upper arm and holds on
His left hand finds Mari’s shoulder and -

(Article IV of the Code of Conduct:)

A fraction of a second later, Adrien twists his arm to grip at Jack’s forearm

And Mari’s hand clutches at a part of Jack’s jacket -

(“If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners.”)

“These drones have infrared, right?” Khan asks when -

Through the darkness -

A low, staticy crackling - like an old microphone - snaps and slithers from speakers somewhere nearby -

And a weirdly disaffected, broken, lightly masculine voice begins to chant in a hypnotic, jittery tone:

“We’re foot - slog - slog - slog - sogglin’ over Africa -”

“...What the fuck,” Adrien mutters next to Jack, as Selena groans loudly and Ayinde snaps, “Great. Not even in here for a minute and ‘Boots’ is already back. Fuck you and your bullshit, Kipling.”

“Foot - foot - foot - foot - sogglin’ over Africa -”

“I cried on the last day because of this song,” Nadia grumbles. There’s the sound of shuffling and she continues, “I’m just gonna cover my ears and die again, thanks.”

“I cried over the one recording of the little kid,” Jin admits. The tension in Jack slowly starts to ease up -

“Boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”

“Who is this?” Mari asks cautiously, and Jack feels her grip on his jacket relax a bit. On his right, Adrien pats at his forearm and Jack lets go of his arm.

“There’s no discharge in the war!”

“Supposedly it’s a recording of Rudyard Kipling,” Miguel explains from the other cell, “Reading off his poem ‘Boots’ or whatever -”

“Seven - six - eleven - five - nine and twenty miles today -”

“They play this one and a few other songs, and some kid crying to fuck with your head,” Selena adds on, before there’s more shuffling in the darkness and she sighs, “You should probably get used to it. It’s gonna be on like several times an hour, if not more.”

“Four - eleven - seventeen - thirty-two the day before -”

“There’s also the recording of shootings and stuff like people getting beaten,” Nadia says, “Meant to be psychological torture. Disrupts your sleep schedule. Gets in your head. If they’re real assholes, they’ll occasionally throw in a cutesy song on loop for twenty-four hours to drive you insane.”

“Boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”
“Jesus,” Adrien mutters in disbelief, “And you guys have to go through this again?”

“There’s no discharge in the war!”

“Right?” Ayinde grumbles, “Bullshit. Juniors should’ve been allowed to sit out. I’d do sixteen hours of push-ups and lifting weights for five days straight instead of this hell again.”

“Don’t - don’t - don’t look at what’s in front of you!”

“I can’t believe the senior soldiers get to pass on this,” Miguel mutters tartly, “They always get special treatment. All because some of them have an extra year or two of service on some of us juniors.”

“Boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”

“...Did you see some of our guards?” Vanessa asks both cells quietly, so quietly that her voice barely speaks over the chant in the background, the eerie, broken voice getting more and more distraught with each word -

“Men - men - men - men go mad with watchin’ ‘em -”

“...You mean the ones with the number patches?” Sam says back, just as quietly and -

“There’s no discharge in the war.”

“...I can’t believe they expect those assholes to be our Commanders and Team Sergeants,” Selena says, and there’s a twinge of real bitterness in her voice, “They’re not bad people, but I wouldn’t follow any of them into live fire.”

“Count - count - count - count the bullets in the bandoliers -”

“...You say that they’re not bad people,” Jin says skeptically, “...But I wonder if that will be true after this week.”

“If - your - eyes - drop, they will get atop of you -”

Jack thinks of Gabriel.

Jack thinks about how Gabriel’s eyes had held his -

(No stupid questions, no stupid answers, no thoughtless gifts, no meaningless moments.)

And suddenly -

Jack remembers -

“Boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”

The book in his pocket.

He squints into the darkness, wondering if it’s safe to move with the drones’ infrared sight.

…

“There’s no discharge in the war!”
He doubts it.

“...Are you sure you should be saying that?” Mari asks softly, and Jack can hear the worry in her voice as she adds, “...They might be listening.”

“We - can - stick - out hunger, thirst, and weariness -”

“They’re not.”

“But - not - not - not - not the chronic sight of ‘em -”

Jack is surprised that his own voice answers her, but he finds himself continuing in that weirdly disjointed fashion, “...The drones didn’t have sound identifiers during Survival and Evasion. Maybe they changed them but I doubt it.”

“Boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”

“...Wait,” another member of Cell 4 - David - says with slow realization, “...You’re that 18Xer who got in trouble during Survival and Evasion. The one who, threw knives at the drones.”

“There’s no discharge in the war!”

“What?” another Cell 4 prisoner - a junior named Maritoni - says in confusion, “I thought Jamie was the one who did that?”

“Jamie was with us,” Adrien explains, and Jack grins bashfully at the sound of the proud smirk in his roommate’s words as Adrien continues, “But it was Jack’s idea. And he got seven of them.”

Even in the darkness, Jack elbows Adrien playfully, retorting, “Man, you’re gonna make them think we’re bragging. It’s nothing special, really. I just know the drones weren’t really following sounds, just visual stuff, like smoke or movement.”

Jack looks back towards wherever the drone is in the darkness, saying more somberly, “...So yeah, they can’t hear our conversations.”

And Jack just

*Knows*

Why no one is listening to them

Because -

“And besides,” Jack says, somehow feeling calm

(like the weight of the book in his pocket grounds him)

“If they try to listen to us, they’ll have to listen to some guy rant about shoewear for hours,” Jack chuckles dryly. And even though the chill from the concrete has slipped through his socks and the rattling of the uncanny, broken voice moves up and down again

Up and down again

In his mind -

Jack settles a piece of himself in his own pocket
And finds the darkness...rather soothing against the ache in his brain and the sleep tugging at his eyes.

And surprisingly

Some of the other “prisoners” laugh hoarsely at Jack’s stupid joke. Jack grins, turning away from the drones, saying into the darkness of the cell, “Well, life sucks. Should we figure out what’s going on with these mattresses?”

[24: Resistance, Day 1 - “Doctor Watson, Mr. Sherlock Holmes.”]

[“And here is the room with all our live drone feeds,” Guerra says, leading the senior soldiers into the relatively small but surprisingly high tech room on the boundary of the auxiliary facility. Gabriel glances around, feeling like his scowl is now permanently etched into his face.]

[The room features a massive screen on one wall - the screen is currently divided into fourteen smaller feeds straight from the drones, with nine of them in a combo infrared-night vision camera mode - the drones monitoring the cells, Gabriel realizes. The other five feeds are currently inactive, except for the one drone outside their security room door, currently sweeping its camera up and down the brightly-light hallway.]

[On another wall is a bunch of other screens, smaller and also blank, but Guerra gestures to them, explaining, “Over there are the feeds for the interrogation rooms -”]

[“The drones don’t have audio feeds?” Luisa suddenly asks. The room is just a bit too small for Guerra and the twenty-four senior soldiers to fit in comfortably, so nobody bothers to stand in an organized manner. Gabriel uses the moment to stand a bit closer to Carlos, hiding the 23 patch on his shoulder.]

[“Do you want to listen to ‘Boots’ again?” Guerra asks back, a mixture of dry sarcasm and wry confusion in this tone, “Because I can arrange that.”]

[On Gabriel’s right, Luisa makes a sour face but says nothing.]

[“...Thought as much,” Guerra says, before gesturing to the control panel below the drone screen, explaining, “The drones and their cameras are automated, but if you ever need to control some part of them, you’ll find the controls here. It’s similar to the personal drones the Echoes have used, but these things have more power and finesse.” The control panel looks like a combination of small controllers with smartscreens inset in them, connected to the larger panels with a series of wires.]

[Guerra then gestures to another screen glass interface at the end of the long panel set, saying, “Over here, we have the controls for the sound system that plays in the cells. As you can see, we have our wonderful variety of psych ops musics and audio clips. They are set to loop automatically, so you have to manually switch them on or off, or set up a playlist.”]

[Reyes’ Sick Party Beats Playlist Number 9, here I come, Gabriel drolls in his head. Guerra taps lightly against a small switch, saying, “This controls the lights in the cells - speaking of which…”]

“T’ain’t - so - bad - by day because the company -”

“Oh yeah,” Derek says from across the way, and there’s something odd in his voice now that makes Jack pause -
“But - night - brings - long - strings o’ forty-thousand million -”

“...You guys got mattresses?” Cristina asks in a low, almost eerie tone and -

“Boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”

[Guerra flicks the switch.]

The lights suddenly flood back on.

Jack has to blink against the unbearable brightness, and he hears several people hiss at the sudden sting of it, but as his eyes steadily adjust, he squints, looking around. He’s now looking towards the “bottom” corner, where all thin mattresses are stacked, barely reaching about four feet in total. Lucas and Sima, the two Cell 5 members who had been positioned the closest to the mattress stack when the group had entered, have already pulled one of the thin foam things off, and appear to have been quietly discussing it with each other when the others had been talking about songs and soldiers.

“There’s no discharge in the war!”

[The reaction time on the drones’ cameras is fast, holy shit - Gabriel estimates the switch-over from infrared-night vision to regular, pretty high definition quality to be less than a second, maybe just a bit over, which is pretty fast considering the wireless transmission to the screens and computers receiving the feeds at their end. In nearly an instant, the nine cells switch to full colors and crisp images, showing all the “prisoners”: the one-hundred and eight candidates have been evenly separated into nine, twelve-person “cell groups” and Gabriel finds his gaze is immediately fixed on the camera labeled “Cell 5” -]

[Where he picks out Jack’s broad shoulders and light-gilded blonde hair in the middle of the cell.]

There’s an awkward moment where only the chanting voice weeps through the speakers:

“I - have - marched - six - weeks in Hell and certify -”

“It - is - not - fire, devils, dark, or anything -”

“But boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”

“There’s no discharge in the war!”

[Gabriel scowls, eyes tracing over the terse, stiff figures in Cell 5 -]

[Before he looks at the stack of mattresses in the corner -]

And then Jack glances back over his shoulder at Cell 4 -

[And then Gabriel looks at the prisoners in Cell 4 -]

Where all twelve of the Cell 4 prisoners are standing by the bars

Silently

Watching

The prisoners of Cell 5.

[“Ah,” Guerra chuckles, and there’s a harsh edge to his teasing laughter, “We’ve arrived just in time
to see a valuable teaching moment, everyone.”]

“Try - try - try to think of something different.”

Their expressions are not...upset or confused or mad but they are tired and thoughtful and Tense.

“Oh - my - God - keep me from going lunatic.”

Now on his left, Jack feels Adrien tense up a little as well, and in his peripherals, Jack sees Nadia and Robin (left of Adrien) also share small, nervous glances with each other. It’s hard with the amount of people crowded by the bars of Cell 4, but Jack can distantly see the privacy curtain for their toilet, their barren little sink thing, and then -

[With the way the cameras are tilted, it’s fairly easy to see past the crowd of the Cell 4 prisoners standing at their bars, and Gabriel glares outright as he realizes that there is -]

Nothing else

In their cell.

“Boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”

[Gabriel’s anger boils.]

Jack looks back towards Lucas and Sima, who appear to be refusing to look at Cell 4. Sima stubbornly makes eye-contact with Jack, saying very, very quietly, “...There are only twelve mattresses.”

[“A fairly simple technique to disrupt your captured informants,” Guerra says coolly, but Gabriel can hear the smirk in his voice that makes him wish for a lighter again. The CIA agent explains, “Make the conditions of their captivity unequal in small but effective ways. An easy way to drive wedges and likely get one side or the other to start talking to you more readily.”]

[“...Are all the cells set up like this?” Gabriel asks softly, barely keeping his anger hidden under a layer of patient curiosity, but the slight cracks in his tone get Carlos to side-eye him skeptically and sympathetically. Guerra gestures to the screen, saying, “Cells 2 and 3 have an even split in the foam pads, Cells 4 and 5 are completely unequal, Cells 6 and 7 both have pads but are uneven, and on and on.”]

[“...I thought this was torture training,” Gabriel states coldly, “Not a psychology experiment.”]

[Guerra is working his way across the cameras control panel, but he glances across the room to squint at Gabriel, before he mutters, “...If you think there’s a difference, you still have a lot to learn, Soldier: 24.”]

“There’s no discharge in the war!”

Jack slowly looks back over his left shoulder, first at the members of Cell 4, watching them with eerie, complicated expressions, and then up at the drones hovering between their two cells. He scowls at the camera, safe in its little protective clear-plastic casing -

[Guerra picks up the controls for the Cell 5 drone -]
And watches as it shifts towards him
[And he twists the camera towards Jack -]
Just a little bit.
[Who is glowering at the drone over his shoulder.]

...So, this is how it’s gonna be, Jack thinks viciously, Divide and conquer? Mess with whatever little comradery we have?

[“Because no matter what the outcome is in each scenario,” Guerra tells the senior soldiers, “We’ll learn something .”]

Jack looks back at the mattress in Lucas and Sima’s hands, staring at the length of it. It’s maybe the same dimensions as a regular twin bed, but it’s clearly the kind of foam mattress pad thing meant for short term stuff - camping, hunting, remote traveling, hiking, that sort of stuff. The kind that can be rolled up really small and strapped to a backpack, and then used to help soften up sleeping on the ground at night.

It’s 100% not meant to sleep on concrete.

At best, the three to four inches of foam will result in little more than slowing the aches and bruises, the stiff joints and sore muscles they’ll develop from sleeping in these cells for four nights, unless they double-stack, which will, again, only moderately delay the inevitable.

And that’s only if someone can convince people to double-stack.

But even if the results of someone sleeping on one of them and someone sleeping directly on the concrete floor are minimal in their differences -

It’s the sheer act of physical comfort - however small - that having one of them will bring that makes them more valuable than gold in this moment.

[“If Cell 5 and 7 don’t give up some of their pads, we know they are more focused on the smaller, self-centered picture than the larger one,” Guerra continues, “And it will build resentment in Cell 4 and 6.”]

“...Wow, that’s really fucked up of them not to give you guys mattresses,” Selena says with a faint joking lilt to her voice, but there’s a hesitancy there as well - a clear uncertainty over what to do and how to react to the obvious disparity in their situations. Jack sees Khan and Markus share a look similar to Nadia’s and Robin’s and his stomach twists into uneasy knots -

“And if the people in Cell 5 and 7 decide to share?” Monique asks Guerra cautiously. Guerra does not look at the senior soldiers, but instead continues to watch Camera 5, before he chuckles lowly:

“...Derek,” his roommate Jin murmurs to him cautiously, but Derek just scowls at Jin, saying pretty loudly, “C’mon, Kurosawa, you can see exactly what those assholes in charge are doing here.”

“But why,” Vanessa half-asks, half-states to the entire group. She glances around at the members of Cell 5, saying, “What is the point of only giving us mattresses? If this is about torture and
resistance training, shouldn’t we all just sleep on the ground?”

[“Then we know who is more selfless -”]

“It’s not like these are really...that comfortable,” Lucas counters, wiggling a bit of the foam at her, “It’s basically going to be the same thing.”

“It’s absolutely not the same,” Erica snaps from across the small space between the two cells, “Don’t even try to say they’re similar.”

[“- And that we will need to destroy their ability to trust,” Guerra says with a faint, uncanny smirk on his face.]

“Damn straight.”

Jack’s voice comes out with more of a harsh, hoarse growl than he intended.

Both groups fall sullenly and bitterly quiet as Jack storms over to the mattresses, saying sourly, “It’s bullshit, playing the simulation this way. We should all sleep on the ground. We should all be cold and miserable and upset. That’s the point, and it’s bullshit that they want to play us like this.”

“...Dude,” Adrien says to him cautiously and warningly, “Jack, c’mon, you remember what Luna said - don’t waste your energy with this one -”

[“Oh,” Guerra says wryly, before flashing a knowing grin at Gabriel, “Looks like War Criminal: 76 is making a move.”]

“And you think we should all just stand here and lament at this while shrugging it off and saying, ‘Well, it’s fucked up, but what can we do?’” Jack mutters bitterly, seething towards the mattresses. Lucas and Sima immediately step out of his way, both of them blinking at his sudden fury. Jack points at them, gesturing to the mattress between them, saying, “Which one of you is taking that one?”

Lucas and Sima look at each other, until Lucas shrugs and lets go, and Sima says, “I guess it’s mine?”

“Alright, Lucas, this is yours,” Jack states, pulling the next mattress down from the stack. The foam is spongy and a little crunchy with dirt and dust - clearly they’ve been used before - but Jack grits against the grossness of the thought and slides the mattress towards Lucas. On his right, Selena watches him curiously, until Jack glances at her, saying, “This one is yours.”

[In the security room, Guerra scowls, as Felix murmurs hesitantly, “Uh...looks like he’s just handing out the foam pads, sir.”]

[But Gabriel just -]

“...Where are you going with this, Jack?” Sam asks, as Jack gestures to him next. As Jack waves him off, beckoning for Markus and Khan to come get theirs, he mutters, “...I was fully prepared to play nice if the directors were going to. But if they’re not, then fuck them, and fuck this simulation. This is supposed to be training, not a game.”

“I don’t get why you are so upset about this,” Derek snaps at him from Cell 4, “You have a goddamn mattress. We don’t.”

“That is exactly why I’m mad,” Jack retorts, helping Vanessa and Mari with their mattresses. Adrien
gives a loud, tired sigh by Jack’s shoulder as the two of them give two of the remaining four mattresses to Nadia and Robin, and Jack looks up at the drone as he states:

“Resistance training is about learning to put mind over matter, but when you create situations of inequality, that’s impossible. And unfair. And cold. And cruel.”

[Gabriel just grins.]

“Easy to talk the talk, huh?” Erica says, and when Jack looks back at Cell 4, he can see that many of their members have moved away from the bars, several of them seating themselves against the walls, looking tired and sleepy and -

“...Where are you going?” Jack asks in genuine confusion. Derek glances at him, muttering, “Seriously? Don’t be a dick, Morrison -“

“I need one of you to grab the other end?” Jack half-asks, half-says, half-offers.

[Gabriel whispers lowly, “Always gotta be the hero, huh, Juanito?”]

[Luisa glances at him as Carlos asks back quietly, “...What?”]

There’s a moment of awkward silence and -

“...Oh, the song stopped,” Jack says belatedly as Derek and Erica both stammer “What” at him. Jack looks up at Adrien, who is giving him a bland, unimpressed look, and he grins brightly at his roommate, smirking, “You like me, right?”

“...Less and less with each passing second, asshole,” Adrien retorts. In his peripherals, Jack sees his own cellmates’ expressions shift from confusion and skepticism to open wonder and more confusion -

“C’mon, cuddling will keep us warm,” Jack jokes, grabbing the second-to-last mattress from the floor. Adrien physically winces, muttering, “You are literally the last person I want to cuddle with, Jack. Also, I’m pretty sure someone might kill me -“

[Gabriel watches as Jack has an apparently animated exchange with Adrien, laughing softly, “Heroes are never rewarded, and that belief in hope is going to break your heart someday.”]

[“...Dude, what are you talking about?” Carlos whispers to him in utter confusion, but Gabriel just points at Camera 5, saying, “He’s such a jackass, showing off like that.”]

“What?” Jack asks him, laughing as he pulls the mattress to their cell bars, “You heard us - they can’t kill us during this simulation. That would defeat the purpose.”

“...Yeeeeehh, I don’t think he’s going to care about that,” Adrien says slowly, glancing at the drone, before he turns towards it, claps his hands together in a begging motion, and says, “HEY, LOOK, I DIDN’T AGREE TO THIS” really loudly -

“They can’t hear you, Adrien,” Jack says dryly as he approaches the bars -

[“...What the fuck,” Guerra states blandly, as Adrien makes direct eye contact with the drone’s camera and apparently says something very emphatically with an exaggerated begging motion. Gabriel glances at Felix, who is making a confused, bewildered expression -]

“I’m talking to you,” Adrien continues, making the two-finger “I see you” hand motion from his own
eyes to the drone camera, peppering his words with big, obvious shakes of his head, “You, me, man to man, I didn’t want this -”

[The scene continues as described in the original text, with characters reacting to the drone and Jack and Adrien interacting with the mattress.]

“Alright, stop pantomiming to the eye in the sky and help me - I’ll even let you be the big spoon,” Jack mutters. Adrien gives the drone one last look, saying to it, “You know how he gets.” And then he marches over to Jack, muttering, “If this leads to a romcom style of misunderstandings, I’m smothering you in your sleep.”

“Look, think of it as a chance to impress Felix with your cuddling skills,” Jack laughs and Adrien nearly blanches at that, muttering, “Every word out of your mouth is making me hate you more, Morrison.”

“What are you doing.”

Jack and Adrien glance up from their shenanigans, mid-hoisting the mattress into a vertical position, long-end towards the bars, when they finally see that -

All twelve members of Cell 4 are back at their own cell bars
Watching them in utter shock.

Jack blinks at them, and says honestly:

“Article Five - I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners.”

Derek looks floored as Jin blinks in surprise. Jack rolls his shoulders and starts to move the thin foam mattress right between the bars, explaining, “I mean, I can’t make the others give up theirs, and I’m not selfless enough to ask Adrien to give up his either, but well...one is better than none, right?”

Erica glances at her roommate Selma as David and Miguel gawk at him. Jack grins brightly, adding, “Although, I’ll be honest, if you don’t want it, I’ll keep it.”

“Those things are tiny,” Ayinde says, looking between Jack and Adrien, muttering, “Just one of you will barely fit on one mattress, let alone two of you.”

“We’ll manage,” Jack chuckles and Adrien adds dryly, “...Maybe. I still think one or both of us will die before this simulation is over.”

“The guards are mean but not that mean, Morris,” Jack retorts and Adrien sighs, “...God, sometimes you’re just dense, Jack.”

“It’s been a rough morning and I didn’t have any coffee, Adrien,” Jack laughs, and he hears Adrien give a loud, obnoxious sigh behind him. And then Jack glances back at Cell 4, saying, “Take it or leave it, kids.”

There’s a moment of stunned silence and -

“We’ll take it,” Aisha says. The members of Cell 4 glance at her, but her dark, fierce gaze meets Jack as she says, “Thank you.”

Jack stares back at her, before he grins wryly, saying, “You’re welcome, but really, we all owe a big
thank you to Adrien, including me. He’s the real hero here, and I am just his little spoon sidekick —

“Please stop,” Adrien practically sobs, “Please. Stop. I can’t take this anymore. Let’s bring the boots song back.”

“I get the feeling that’s the only time anyone has ever said that,” Jack laughs, and they slide the end of the mattress across the gap between the cells

To their fellow prisoners waiting on the other side.

[“...Alright, I'll admit, I don’t fully understand what War Criminal: 75 was doing,” Guerra says blandly to the senior soldiers, but then he chuckles, “But we should all be grateful to 76 and 75 for giving us such an enlightening lesson in comradery and selflessness.”]

[Even though Gabriel is still grinning over Adrien’s antics, he feels his stomach twist and his pulse snap with the burn of worry and anxiety.]

[...I warned you to play smart, soldadito, Gabriel thinks bittersweetly, staring at how Jack laughs and grins on the camera.]

[He’s never known that it’s possible to feel this cocktail of emotions - pride and respect at watching a friend grow, boundless joy and excitement at seeing him blossom into something unrivaled -]

[And nervousness and fear over the repercussions Jack will experience for his selflessness -]

[And his ability to outshine the stars.]

[“Echoes, you’re going to stay here - Watanabe will be in shortly to show you how to work the drones,” Guerra states, gesturing for the rest of the senior soldiers to leave, “Everyone else, Flores and Luna will start giving you instructions. Foxes, you’re with me.”]

[Gabriel makes an ugly, frustrated face at that.]

[Guerra smirks viciously, victoriously, as he states:]

[“It’s time to show me what you’re made of.”]

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List of Candidates in Cells 4 and 5:

Cell 4:

- 61: Aisha Jordan (Junior)
- 62: Cristina Juárez
- 63: Selma Kartal
- 64: Erica Kinsley
- 65: Derek Krause
- 66: Jin Kurosawa (Junior)
- 67: Ayinde Layeni (Junior)
- 68: Wei Liang
- 69: Ami Lakshmi
- 70: Maritoni Liwanag (Junior)
- 71: Miguel Loyola (Junior)
- 72: David Meyer (Junior)
Chapter End Notes

Just to make it clear: I do NOT - in any way, shape, or form - like Rudyard Kipling or his views.

However, almost every source and reference I read about SERE mentioned that the 1915 recording of his poem "Boots (Infantry Columns)" by Taylor Holmes is used in U.S. SERE courses. The recording is haunting and disorienting.

Over the next several chapters, I will be including links to the sources and references I used to develop this version of SEP. These sources and references DO discuss various real world issues and topics, including things like SERE, "enhanced interrogation techniques" (aka "non-injuring" but traumatic torture), stress positions, music references, literary references, etc.

Again, my intention was always to create a reimagined, science-fictionalized version of SERE. I tried to incorporate elements of real SERE training but to be perfectly honest, I also had to make it "easy" enough for me to actually write. Some elements and aspects are going to seem tamer than what the sources state.

Some elements and aspects are also - quite frankly - beyond what writing can portray.

But I did my best to try.

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General sources on SERE:

1. "Boots (Infantry Columns)" recording by Taylor Holmes; "Boots (Infantry Columns)" text
2. "Here's what it's like at SERE training", Business Insider, Dec 2014
3. "Breaking Down Myths about SERE", SOFREP News
4. "What's it like to go through SERE school?", Quora question and answers
5. "Surviving the USAF SERE School", AR15 (firearm community)
6. "Freaky Recording Used in SERE school", Business Insider
Current U.S. Special Forces news/General Special Forces info:

1. I am a US Army Special Forces Green Beret AMA
2. "Inside the New American Way of War", Time
Resistance, Day 1 - Hours: 2 - 6

Chapter Summary

[18F: Special Forces Assistant Operations and Intelligence Sergeant]

[Roles and Duties of an 18F]

Gabriel and his fellow "Foxes" are given the task of running "good cop" interrogations with the prisoners.

["Employs conventional and unconventional warfare tactics and techniques in intelligence collection and processing. Plans, organizes, trains, advises, assists and supervises indigenous and allied personnel on collection and processing of intelligence information. Performs intelligence and operational duties when task organized in preparation for special missions and during operations."]

Jack must find new ways to stay focused as the hours drain on.

["Processes prisoners of war, writes and establishes security plan and performs security duties."]

Day 1 of Resistance training continues.

Chapter Notes

A good intelligence officer or agent is like a good detective: their goals are to track information, power, and secrets through human intelligence networks.

Some call the ability to direct and analyze the intelligence and information cycle an...art form.

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

U.S. Military Code of Conduct Article V:

When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am required to give name, rank, service number and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies or harmful to their cause.

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Most HUMINT operations are conducted with the objective of obtaining information on either the subject in question, or other individuals of interest or social information networks the subject may
have access to. The data obtained during intelligence collecting interviews are often more focused on human relationship networks, instead of strictly military or tactical information the subject knows.

Many modern HUMINT operations are interested in developing and tracking networks of people, human intelligence information, and significant relationships between members of the networks that are relevant to a larger intelligence objective or military operation. The most predominant examples of networks that HUMINT missions are interested in identifying and understanding are: terrorism networks, drug production and trade networks, arms proliferation networks, money laundering networks, guerrilla operation networks, anarchy or anti-government networks, other radical ideological networks (see: [militarized religious sects]; [militarized political groups]), etc. HUMINT operations focusing on developing and tracking networked human relationships are less interested in understanding strict hierarchies or organizational roles (unless these are specifically relevant to the network in question (see: [networked vs hierarchical organization])), and more interested in understanding how information, power, actions, and activities are propagated or proliferated through a network.

These HUMINT operations rely on [Social Network Analysis] (SNA). Social network analysis utilizes the overarching sociological theory that all humans have social connections with other people, through which information and social and political power operate. Social network analysis represents people of interest and their relationship connections as “nodes of connectivity,” through which information and activities are exchanged, and then analyzes the data that can be acquired from the network. Within the network, the most important individuals function as “critical nodes” of which other people or sub-divisions of a group operate around. In “star” or “hub-and-spoke” networks (see: [clandestine cell structure]), a core group of members control access to information and the organization’s decision-making process, but each member may play a pivotal role in conducting the operations of a sub-division of the organization. Each member - a “node” - is connected to other core members - other “critical nodes” - while also connecting outwards to other individuals who also radiate their connections and operations outwards - hence an ever-expanding “hub-and-spoke” model of networked human activities and information-sharing. “Hub-and-spoke” networks of human intelligence and activities are considered the predominant model for most modern terrorist and guerrilla organizations, with the individuals at the core upholding the “ideological center” of the organization.

However, it is possible for the “core individuals” of an intelligence network to be less crucially or critically important to accessing information of interest to a HUMINT operation than other, auxiliary individuals. In these situations, a secondary, auxiliary individual (A2) may have more significant access to a wider range of information or operations than a core individual (A1). In this scenario, A1 makes all the decisions at the highest-level, but A2 is the node that receives all the input information from the furthest nodes (individuals A3, A4, and onwards), and A2 is also the node that outputs all the decision-making information from A1. Therefore, HUMINT operations targeting this network may be more interested in tracking activities and intelligence around individual A2 instead of solely focusing on individual A1.
Many HUMINT operations can be friendly or informal in how they are conducted. For example, foreign internal defense missions conducted by the Army Special Forces focus on establishing and developing friendly military operations between the United States and allied national militaries. As part of these missions, SF operators may develop informal HUMINT collection operations in which they create human relationship networks based on friendly activities or informal social connections with host communities and militaries. These FID missions may include informal HUMINT operations or information collection objectives as a way of preemptively investigating or developing more critical networks of interest or intelligence for later operations.

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24: Resistance, Day 1 - ‘The proper study of mankind is man,’ you know

February 18, 2047: 0530 hours - “intelligence operations” debriefing room, SEP North Branch auxiliary facility

Gabriel stares at the datapad

And resists the urge to flick at the corner of it to make it spin and spin and spin.

It’s a small thing, not much bigger than a standard smartphone - some sort of knock-off company the military gets supplied by, to avoid associations with the Big Name Brands and to usually get sturdier,
hardier versions that will resist destruction if like, it gets dropped in the desert somewhere. It’s not unusual for Special Forces soldiers or other special operations personnel to get this kind of tech - hell, they were beyond useful prior to the Crisis for how goddamn versatile they were, and even though they’ve never replaced Gabriel’s notebooks, he’d relied on his own personal field datapad pretty heavily.

...

Of course -

That had been before the Crisis

And the Omnic EMPs had blasted communications all to hell.

True, most datapads had a standard offline mode, but unless the datapad could be safely brought to a secure location for uploading intel to government satellites or military wireless communications, they were just expensive screens that required a backup charger.

And every drop of energy was precious in a do-or-die situation.

So yeah, Gabriel is a little skeptical of suddenly being given a datapad here.

The candidates had not been allowed to bring their own personal communication devices - they had been explicitly told not to bring anything, but even then, smartphones, datapads, tablets, laptops, hell, even portable game consoles had been confiscated from the people who had “missed” that rule.

Knowledge of the outside world was restricted to the reports the directors gave them (which Gabriel was wary of but at least trusted to be true to a high degree), and a select few news and media programs that played on the holo-projectors at meals or in the gym rooms (which Gabriel saw as insight into whatever public version of the war the military was spinning to the people). Otherwise, there was a tech room, full of computers and datapads and some specialized equipment (like these new little prototype smart-tech, single-eye glass things, ones that attached to little audio comm devices) that the candidates were allowed to play around with, or practice various tech-based training on (the usual stuff - mapping, plotting a strategy, reviewing combat engineering, working in communications programs, learning some minor coding, etc). Those computers and datapads were set on some sort of...internal wireless system, with heavily encrypted access to select parts of the Internet, but there was no way to reach different email, news, or social media sites.

So Gabriel looks at the datapad with blatant skepticism

Before he

Inhales

Exhales

And settles in for slow-burning, bittersweet mental misery.

The room is nothing too special: they’re just across the hall from the main security room for the auxiliary facility that the program is using for the prison camp simulation. It’s got a table and a bunch of chairs, plus a holo-projector set in the middle, but otherwise there’s really not much here. Currently, it’s just Alicia (21), Mary (22), Felix (23), and himself in the room, all sitting around the table with their new datapads, with Guerra standing up, setting up the holo-projector to display some information. The last person in the room is the “lead guard” of the non-candidate Special Forces soldiers functioning as guards, trainers, and back-up medics - a tall, lean but muscular man named David Tran.
Michael Tsang’s old Zulu.

Much like Luna, Tran exhibits all the qualities of a pre-Crisis Zulu: cool, calm, and collected, he stands off to the side of the room, leaning against the wall, dressed in the same sort of tactical night ops outfit all of them had worn this morning, his hazel eyes skimming over them with a sort of tired focus.

Gabriel doesn’t find him threatening - not in the same way he finds Guerra threatening - but he also doesn’t find him strict but trustworthy like Luna or Jones, so Gabriel refuses to drop his guard around him. Tran is far more interested in rubbing shoulders with the directors like Guerra than he is in actually devoting a ton of time and energy into the program, but Tran and his non-candidate “enforcer” soldiers (a bunch of other “too old to qualify” SF warriors) appear to be taking this simulation pretty seriously - a contradiction to earlier patterns of attitude (like their relative apathy and nonchalance during the Survival and Evasion simulation), to the point where Gabriel wonders if Guerra or Flores (who had already left for the Detroit front) had promised them something in exchange for this particular simulation operating smoothly.

_They don’t seem to fully buy that nothing will go wrong, Gabriel figures, Wonder how Tran and the enforcers feel about Jack knifing the drones last simulation._

Of course -

They should _totally_ be suspicious.

Gabriel’s gonna do his best to fulfill those expectations.

...

But there’s no point in getting cocky with it, not when things are still so…

Open

In the game.

So Gabriel had been casually cautious on entering the room with so few people in it, so few...bodies to distract from himself. He’d been nonchalantly careful to take off Felix’s spare jacket and settle it on his chair, hiding the 23 patch pretty easily. Guerra hadn’t even noticed, as he had been too busy focusing on setting up his holo-projector display.

Gabriel looks at Tran again, before glancing at Guerra. The CIA agent is still tapping at his own datapad even as he says to them, “As you can see, you four have been given datapads with some specialized programs on them. The login username is the same as the one for the tech lab -”

Alicia, Mary, and Felix all reach for their datapads, turning on the lockscreens, and, after a small moment of deliberate delay, Gabriel grabs his, flicking it on.

“The numberpad passcode for each of your usernames is zero-zero-your soldier ID number,” Guerra continues, adding wryly, “I suggest you change it to something else.”

Gabriel pouts a little, entering his username of [Reyes.Gabriel]. The lockscreen shifts over to a standard, ten-digit numberpad display, and he taps in “0024.” It unlocks easily, showing him a pretty basic user interface, not much different than any other “smarttouch” device in the last three or four years. He opens up the setting and switches his numeric passcode to -

Gabriel
Pauses.

The “enter new lock combination” screen stares back at him, glowing faintly, expectantly.

He hates the whole “make a four-digit PIN” thing, because it’s so easily broken, usually by a deft strategy of basic sense and specialized cracking programs. There are a limited number of combinations the standard ten digits of 0-9 could be ordered in, and the ways people usually think of those ten digits are even more limited. Dates like birthdays or anniversaries, the last four digits of a Social Security Number - hell, even the dumbass boring bullshit of 1-2-3-4, still all dominate people making PINs.

Predictable.

And so mindnumbingly easy to exploit.

Gabriel makes a face.

No fucking way am I clever enough to outsmart someone like Guerra, he considers, And I'm pretty sure Carlos and Luisa know like, 80% of my usual passwords...although I usually give them those. Luisa is pretty goddamn skilled at manipulating communication or networked devices, and he wouldn’t put it past her to figure out any “easy” combination of four digits that he could think of just based on her knowledge of him.

...But he’s also pretty bad at remembering random information. Memory is one of the most unreliable and manipulatable aspects of the human psyche -

So mindnumbingly easy to exploit.

So even though “logic-processing computation systems” have existed ever since the 1930’s, utilized for over a hundred years, sophisticated enough to the point where they can now wage war on humanity

(And design creations as aesthetically-intricate as a natural songbird)

The combination of fallible technology and fallible memory pressures Gabriel into still relying on hand-writing as much important, critical information as he can bear.

Convenience is a datapad given to him by a program with intentions not totally known or revealed.

Trust, though -

Trust is a sheet of paper with letters that loop o’s into l’s and 4’s that look like broken capital A’s -
With capital R’s that slip right into the e, the e into the y, but the second e and final s unchained.

Trust is handwritten

And tucked next to capsules labeled “Serum: 76”
...Or placed into pockets of jackets - still holding old, well-worn copies of Sherlock Holmes anthologies - with the number “76” on the left shoulder.

...The number -

That number -

The number he gave Jack this morning -
Drifts through the back of his mind like sweet smoke, calling to him in low, thunderstorm whispers but -

...It would be dangerously stupid of me to use my most important asset twice, Gabriel says back to it, gently tucking the number - that number - away in his brain.

Security Basics 101:

Never use the most important codes, numbers, and passwords more than once.

So he has to think of something else entirely.

Gabriel hesitates and then

Inhales

God, I’m a predictable jerkoff -

Exhales

And starts to tap in “0218”

When he stops

Again.

Jack’s bright, bold smile flickers through his mind like a light, and that low, rich laugh twists through the snowcovered, stardusted night of his thoughts:

“Thank you, Gabe.”

He stares at the numberpad, thinking softly, ...The one and the zero...don’t have letters... Seven and nine have four...

And then he deletes the “easy answer” -

And instead inputs “5225,” before hitting the enter arrow.

Jack’s smile is so bright -

As his datapad accepts his new passcode, Gabriel glances back up at Guerra, who has gotten his 3D holo-projector to display properly. There is a large set of floating faces, and Gabriel recognizes them as the one-hundred and eight junior and 18X candidates currently in the program. Guerra sighs, seating himself, picking up his own datapad as he explains, “As you can see on your datapads, you’ve got a few programs here.”

Gabriel looks back at the main interface - it functions almost like any other tablet, except that there’s a desktop mode and holo-capable projection mode if there’s enough battery supply for it. On the screen, there are the standard applications - a document processor, a spreadsheet maker, a file explorer, the usual -

And then…

“We’ve given you access to the basics,” Guerra says, before he flicks something off his datapad and onto the holo-projector. It’s a series of lines, all interconnected and linked to little boxes with blank “heads” in them, greyed out and empty. The lines make a sort of oddball starlike pattern, and
Gabriel immediately recognizes it as -

*Hub-and-spoke, asymmetrical, just a generic model pattern,* he thinks, as Guerra explains, “Along with your standard document app in case you - I dunno - like writing the old fashioned Word or Docs way, we’ve given you basic versions of our trusty little SNA app, your favorite Network Modeler.”

“Oh thank god,” Mary mutters with obvious relief, and all of them - including Guerra - chuckle at that. Even Gabriel cracks a small smirk as he taps on the icon for the Network Modeler, thinking, *Finally - I don’t have to draw this by hand anymore.* The app interface opens up, and there’s already an “open a saved file” option with a single file saved available -

“We’ve already got a basic model of the one-hundred and eight junior and 18X candidates set up for you,” Guerra says, as Gabriel opens his own version. As the file opens in “list view” - displaying all the junior and 18X candidates in the rows of their Soldier ID numbers - Guerra explains, “As you know, Network Modeler will download a local temp copy and save that version to your datapad. Your datapads have the same sort of restricted, shared wireless access that the stuff in the tech lab has, so don’t go crazy trying to upload shit, but do try to share information with each other. This is a learning experience for you guys as much as it is for the war criminals, so don’t be shy with comparing homework answers or whatever.”

“You want us to save our own versions?” Alicia asks him, and Guerra nods, saying, “That would be preferable, if only so we can see what different ideas you each come up with. Remember HUMINT 101 - no model is a 100% accurate representation of all the information you’ll get, so just do whatever you think represents your HUMINT network the best.”

Gabriel scrolls down through the list, before he says dryly, “...We’re not in here.”

There’s a still, almost tense moment of silence before -

“...Do you want to be in the list, Reyes?” Guerra asks back, not forcefully -

But with a gentle, soft steeliness to his voice.

“...We’re not impartial operators, sir,” Gabriel says, glancing up at him, trying to pick over his words carefully, “Forget our models not having 100% accuracy - our models will have huge holes if we don’t include the senior soldiers.”

Guerra looks back at him, his expression unreadable through the haze of the holo-projector, before he mutters, “This is why I asked yesterday if you thought you had made any sort of meaningful connection with the other candidates, Soldier: 24.”

Gabriel does not look away, instead forcing himself to stare into the abyss of Guerra’s gaze -

“...If you think you’re so vital to the structure of the network, by all means, feel free to add yourselves,” Guerra states to him unceremoniously, “Hell, add all the directors and trainers too. Don’t let this simulation restrict your analysis of our program, Soldier: 24. God knows I’d love to get some clearer insight into those incredibly strategic thoughts of yours.”

*Not a day goes by where I don’t wish I had burnt you down at Eglin,* Gabriel thinks, even as he makes a slightly confused face, sharing an awkward, insecure glance with Felix as he says softly, “...Just wanted to offer, sir. Wanted to know if it was a deliberate choice to exclude the senior soldiers from the network or not.”

Guerra doesn’t seem to buy his plaintive, almost apologetic tone, eyes narrowing slightly at Gabriel
as he assesses Gabriel’s words, before he answers slowly, “...Well, sure. I can see why you asked then. We were focusing on mainly developing the simulation as it is, not necessarily on the focus of the larger program. But if you want to keep notes on your fellow senior soldiers, then the directors will gladly accept whatever intel you provide.”

Gabriel gives him a casual, nonchalant shrug, but inside he chuckles to himself, *The best lies offer half-truths to be believable.* Gabriel taps the “network view” tab and the list of the images of the soldier-candidates switches to a “basic”, massive “wheel” of all the soldier-candidates connected in a jointed circle. Each one is only connected to the ones before and after them in numeric order, but Gabriel absently taps on one -

Soldier: 76 -

[John Morrison] -

And draws a line with his finger to another -

Soldier: 47 -

[Sarah Hidalgo] -

And connects them.

A drop box list appears briefly, saying: [Select connection descriptor]. Gabriel selects [friendship], and the list tabs to a sub-list, where he can add additional description modifiers. He selects [education/training] and other things like [loyalty], [trust], and [cooperation]. When he clicks “done” -

The jointed circle instantly warps into a figure 8 shape, pulling the two soldier-candidate nodes closer together. Gabriel taps the linkage between Soldier: 75 and Soldier: 76, adding similar connection modifiers like he did between Jack and Sarah. When he’s done adding intel to Jack and Adrien’s connection (including a modifier of [roommates]), the line between 75 and 76 strengthens, again warping the distorted, “8-shaped” network into a slightly new form, shrinking the space between 75 and 76 to signify the closeness of their friendship.

As Gabriel continues to add in information that he already knows for the soldier-candidates, he listens to Guerra explain more about the simulation:

“In the HUMINT Objectives tab, we’ve included some of the basic and major information we want you to collect during the simulation.”

Gabriel glances up to see the holo-projection switch from the generic hub-and-spoke network overlaid across the view of the soldier-candidates to a series of bullet points and -

He briefly scowls over it -

But sets his expression back to easy, passive interest, as if the holo-projection was displaying pictures of Guerra’s most recent vacation.

“Alright, look,” Guerra states, lifting his hands in a casual shrug, “I don’t expect you to get all of these - hell, I’ll be blunt with you, I don’t really expect you to get *any* of these, but prove my expectations wrong, please. Keep in mind that unlike most of the informants you’ve met through foreign internal defense missions, these particular informants are going to be pretty hostile to you.”

*No shit, Sherlock,* Gabriel thinks mockingly, but he keeps his face as coolly neutral as possible, and
Guerra continues his explanation without a hitch, “So consider it a sort of challenge. It’s been a while since you’ve been able to work in such a formalized HUMINT setting, so try to take it seriously.”

Gabriel resists the urge to roll his eyes, but he sees a sarcastic, dry expression flicker across Alicia’s face in his peripherals -

But it too disappears as quickly as it comes.

“We’re even going to make things easier for you,” Guerra adds, before gesturing to Tran in the background, saying, “David and his crew will do all the heavy lifting and ugly interrogations, so you four can focus on just playing the good cops.” And then Guerra flicks his gaze to Gabriel, drawling, “Does that work for you, Guard: 24? You were so concerned about making your new friends hate you.”

*The good cop, bad cop routine is the most rote, Hollywood-cliched tactic in existence,* Gabriel thinks, *Only way it works half the time is if you get Stockholm Syndrome working in your hostiles, and then you have an entirely different set of problems on your hands.*

But what he actually says is:

“...I just don’t want to be stabbed in my sleep six months down the road because I was forced to blackout box my new medic during SERE.”

The others giggle and snort over that, with Felix elbowing Gabriel a little, but Guerra just gives him an unimpressed look, muttering dryly, “It’s fortunate for you that you won’t be stabbed for making someone sit in the blackout box - when you get stabbed, it’ll be for something meaningful, like your personality.”

Felix nearly chokes on his own breath, his elbow digging into Gabriel’s ribs as Alicia and Mary burst into laughter. Gabriel makes a deadpan face, but relents, sighing, “...If I had a sense of humor as bad as yours, I would rather be stabbed than live with it.”

“Holy shit,” Felix chortles as Alicia half-laughs, half-cries, “God damn, Reyes.” Mary has to whack Felix’s back a few times to get him to breathe again. In the corner, Tran smirks a little.

Even Guerra gives Gabriel a wry smile, murmuring, “So you’d rather be caught dead than learn to be a better person. Good to know.”

...*You shot first, Han, but alright, sell that story,* Gabriel thinks, his eyes narrowing just a little, feeling like Guerra caught him in something.

But he has no idea what.

Still carrying that small, self-satisfied smirk, Guerra turns his attention back to the objectives, saying, “Alright, let’s run through this. So the way we have this broken down is two major candidate statuses of Juniors and 18X, and within those two, we have two more major categories - checkmark intel and crucial intel.”

Gabriel looks up at the holo-projection as Guerra shifts the list to the first part, “Junior Checkmark Intel.” The CIA agent lights up each bullet point with a tap on his datapad, explaining each in turn, “Checkmark intel is really for us to test both you four and the prisoners. As you’re well aware, the prisoners aren’t supposed to give you anything other than their name, rank, service number, and date of birth. They aren’t even supposed to lie to you because of how easily lies unravel. However, with the program the way it is, half of the prisoners don’t even have real, official ranks yet, and the other half have technically been promoted, same way you all have. So all the directors expect Article Five
to kinda get screwed over in this simulation.”

Guerra rolls his shoulders a little, muttering, “So instead, we’ve come up with these checkmark intel pieces. These are things that the directors and trainers running the program already know, so if you four get this intel, we have a way to gauge how well your information collection is going, and we also have a way to tell if prisoners are upholding the spirit of Article Five - or rather, how badly they are not following the Code of Conduct.”

Guerra gestures to the lit-up bullet points, saying, “For the Juniors, your checkmark intel is stuff like a prisoner’s military occupational specialty, how much time they’ve spent in the MOS, their old ODA number, how much time in that ODA, where they were last stationed, etc. The juniors have been through SERE in the last five years, so they’ll know this song and dance and avoid it. Still, if you get some of these, that’s a start.”

Guerra then taps another set of bullet points, and Gabriel’s focus sharpens as he reads it -

Feeling that tense, terse frustration start to temper his thoughts in the undercurrents of his soul.

“Crucial intel,” Guerra says, smiling faintly, “The real bread and butter here. Checkmark stuff is solid, whatever, but we don’t want that to stifle or restrict how...creative your analyses can get here. Getting an ODA number is great, but it’s way more important and interesting to everyone involved if you find out that they hated their Alpha or Zulu.”

Gabriel tries not to seethe -

As Guerra smirks, listing off the crucial intelligence, “The things we’re really interested in are stuff you can’t quantify - emotional and personal interest and attachments to their MOS and ODA. How they feel about their roommates, which one of their cellmates is grating their nerves, which other junior candidates do they know, which of the 18Xers they like, and on and on - you know -”

And then Guerra levels his gaze with Gabriel’s, saying with that eerie, uncanny twist to his words:

“- The most important parts of HUMINT. Your entire network could lack ODA numbers or timelines, but if you’ve got all the important connections down, it’ll be the best one of the bunch.”

The room is quiet at that, the silence broken only by the dull tap of Guerra’s finger as he switches the projection to the 18Xers list. Gabriel watches him for a second, before he flicks his eyes up to the list, and Guerra explains, “For the 18Xers, because they have no former MOS or ODA experience, we have to reach a little bit further. Checkmark information is stuff like hometowns, a past job, a parent’s name, whatever. You have this on your tab.”

Guerra snaps the bullet points to the crucial information and Gabriel -

He tries to hide his frustration, but his lip curls slightly in anger and disgust as -

“The crucial information for the 18X candidates is...a little different than the juniors,” Guerra says, and there’s a cold, harsh, lilting tease to his tone that makes Gabriel want to smash his new datapad against a wall and throw himself in the empty tenth cell.

Guerra has that same soft, patient, almost gentle look on his face -

As if he were watching a lover or witnessing a perfect sunset -

The same expression he had when he told Gabriel that whatever Gabriel thought of himself didn’t matter compared to what the Army thought of Gabriel -
As he explains the information he wants pulled from the newest soldiers, like drawing blood to sign papers:

“The military occupational specialties they’re interested in, how they feel about their roommate, the languages they speak, if they’re starting to feel the effects of the serum, and what knowledge they have about the war.”

…

It would be easy.

Gabriel knows the passcode to the storage rooms.

He could take some of the spare gasoline saved for the back-up generators, dump it on Guerra, finally use the lighter in his room -

“We’re especially interested in knowing more details about the ones with higher education experiences,” Guerra continues, because he cannot tell that Gabriel is 100% serious about setting him on fire, and the CIA agent keeps talking in that weirdly fond voice, “Something like 90% of these 18Xers enlisted because of the Crisis and we want to know a little bit more about their experiences before the war began. However, the thing that’s the most crucial to the 18Xers in particular is developing a model of networked relationships between them. As you’re probably aware by now, the 18Xers all went through the most recent Q-course together, and stopped after the first two weeks of traditional SERE before they were transferred to us. They’ve had about eight months of interpersonal relationships to fall back on, which is actually more than what most of the juniors have with each other.”

Guerra finally looks back at the four senior soldiers around the table, glancing between them as he adds quietly:

“As one of you so generously pointed out yesterday, these are the soldiers of your future ODAs - they are your soldiers. But never forget - the best ODAs will operate without leaders and team sergeants.”

And Guerra looks straight at Gabriel as he intones, “The best soldiers won’t need you.”

For whatever stupid, thoughtless, meaningless thing it is worth -

(No stupid questions, no stupid answers, no thoughtless gifts, no meaningless moments -)

(Jack’s smile burns so bright, so brilliant, it outshines the stars in the deep blue of the winter night -)

Gabriel does not look away.

“…By all means, you can put yourselves and your fellow senior soldiers in your network,” Guerra says, still with that odd, calm, unnerving tone, “All information is good information. But don’t fall into the trap of thinking you’re a requirement or a crucial point in your web. A series of connections should be more than a simple sum of its parts - you should be looking to multiply your advantages, even the ones that cannot be fully quantified. And that means recognizing when you yourself are a negative node in a positive equation.”

A force multiplier, Gabriel thinks in quiet, smoky contemplation. ODAs, Special Forces, hell, even unconventional warfare itself - all are forms of force multipliers, things or items or people or strategies or any combination of the above which are designed to amplify the ability to make war while reducing the cost or risk of a single multiplier to fail.
Gabriel isn’t surprised by the idea.

After all -

What is “enhancement”

But simply another form of force multiplication?

A soldier that can heal faster, can run farther, can starve longer, can operate smoother, can endure deeper, can fight fiercer -

Can die harder

Can be made better -

Is a force of war unto themselves.

The connections that a soldier shares with their teammates are, in and of themselves, force multipliers, under things like “morale” and “emotion” and “inspiration.” It only makes sense to put soldiers with the people whose mere presence will make them better -

Who will help them multiply their own potentials.

Gabriel knows that’s part of the main objective of SEP: trying to make ODAs composed of several, “brand new” force multipliers - biologically-“enhanced” soldiers, prototype fusion and pulse weapons, cutting edge tactical gear, minds and spirits and hearts trained deep in battling artificial soldiers who cannot feel, cannot starve, cannot bleed - mixed with “time tested” ones - constructing teams on different occupational specialties and tactics; the bonds between teammates, allies, friends; resilience against pain, loss, grief -

Emphasizing the balance between flexibility and determination, creativity and cunning, power and potential.

Gabriel scowls a little.

He’s always been an “ends justifies the means” kind of guy (or as Jack put it, “The means justify themselves”), so he’s never had an issue with trying something new or different or...questionable just for the sake of trying it.

The problem isn’t SEP’s means or methods to achieve those -

But like his talk with Jack in the early hours of the morning, in that snowcovered, stardusted hideout on the edge of the world -

But rather, what SEP’s actual “ends” are.

...It could not be more transparent that the senior soldiers are, will be, and have always been intended to be replaceable, Gabriel thinks, glancing back at his own soldier-candidates network on his datapad. The senior soldiers were always meant to help bridge the gap between the “brand new” and the “time-tested” - they were “young enough” to still be affected by all the “enhancements” being injected into their blood and genomes, but they had enough experience as unconventional warfare soldiers and ODA members that they could (in theory) keep the untested, untried teams of experimental supersoldiers together like a relatively traditional ODA.

...Or that’s what the senior soldier-candidates had been told.
Gabriel shoots a quick, furtive glance at Tran, who has adjusted his lean against the wall ever so slightly to rest on a different spot on his shoulder.

...I wonder what they told the trainers to focus on for this simulation, Gabriel thinks with soft, snapping frustration, ...And what they told them about this program’s “ends” as well.

“Any questions on your objectives for this simulation?” Guerra’s voice cuts through Gabriel’s thoughts, and he snaps back to the present moment. Almost immediately, Alicia raises her hand, and - after a flick of a nod from Guerra - asks him, “Are we allowed to discuss our personal objectives with the other senior soldiers and guards, sir?”

“Feel free,” Guerra says casually, “But if you are going to include them in your networks, you might want to be careful with the information you share with them.”

“Are we allowed to use any information they give us?” Felix asks, adding, “You know, like if the Echoes see something interesting when they’re watching the cameras or something?”

“You may use any information or intelligence you think is relevant to the network you are constructing,” Guerra replies, “If one of your fellow guards says they saw War Criminal, I dunno, 25, give their daily can of tuna to 26 and you think that matters to their relationship, add it. We don’t want a full, minute-by-minute report at the end of this week, but you should keep whatever notes you need to make your network...work, I guess.”

Gabriel nonchalantly lifts his hand, raising it only at the elbow, and Guerra glances at him through the holographic words drifting between them, asking, “Yes, Soldier: 24?”

“These things,” Gabriel says, holding up his datapad in his other hand, “Are using the same usernames and logins as the ones from the tech lab, right?”

Guerra seems to pause, before saying, “That’s right. Same username login, but due to these being datapad tablets, they require a four-digit numeric passcode instead of your usual password. I’m sure you can set up double-security in the settings, though, if you want to require both the number code and password to log in.”

“Nah, not really that,” Gabriel says casually, easily, “Just want to know if our personal logins on the desktop versions also have access to Network Modeler now. In case I want to use imaging software or the holo-projectors for adding stuff to it.”

“Oh man, I didn’t even think of that,” Felix mutters appreciatively, and Mary nods, adding, “Not a bad idea. These datapads are so small, especially for sharing things or making visual representations.”

“Hmm,” Guerra murmurs, still giving Gabriel a skeptical look, but he sighs, rolling his shoulders, saying, “You should have Network Modeler on your personal logins now, but I can double-check with Director Watanabe and make sure he’s got it all set up for you. They should effectively be the same because everything operates on a shared system here. Which reminds me, if you are going to use the tech lab sometimes, be sure to save your networks to a shared drive so you can access it on the desktops and holo-projectors.”

So a datapad login is connected to the system as a standard personal user login, Gabriel thinks, pulling out one of his paper notebooks from a side pocket on his pants. At this point, no one is surprised by his habit of keeping handwritten notes, and he absently flicks to the most recent, mostly blank page and scribbles down “Datapad login = regular desktop login, same access on both” on it with his right hand.
And then -

His eyes trace over the upper edge of the paper -

Where the corner has been ripped off.

...Hope Jack is holding up okay, Gabriel wonders quietly, as the number - that number - flitters through his mind again.

...

It’s going to be a long week.

“...Any other questions?” Guerra asks them, and Gabriel lifts his gaze again, raising his right hand, cheap ballpoint still between his index and middle fingers, as he says, “You said we get to be the ‘good cops,’ right? That might work for the other three here, but I’m uh…”

Gabriel pauses, making a sardonic face, before he mutters, “Look, I get it, I’m not the friendliest person here -”

When they realize what Gabriel is getting at, all five of the other people in the room react: Felix cracks a wide, smug grin, Mary giggles to herself, Alicia rolls her eyes but also grins, Tran huffs sarcastically in the corner -

And Guerra gives Gabriel that soft, patient smirk.

“Soldier: 24, I am well aware of your deficits in personality,” Guerra chuckles, getting the other soldier-candidates around Gabriel to snort and chortle. The CIA agent continues to smirk at Gabriel, before he flicks at something on his datapad, and the holo-projector changes again.

The giggles and quiet laughter around the room dies as the other three process what it says -

[Rules for HUMINT Collection].

“Fortunately for you, the directors have already anticipated that you may need a little...assistance in your intel collecting,” Guerra says wryly, “And that you might need some restrictions as well.”

Gabriel keeps his face passively, casually neutral before he glances at the list floating between them.

“Let’s get this out of the way right now,” Guerra states to the four senior soldiers, “The directors and trainers aren’t blind, and we aren’t naïve. We were all young once. And we were all hopeful, single, romantic idiots once too.”

…I knew it, Gabriel congratulates himself with a darkly, viciously victorious tone as he reads -

[Rule 1: Soldiers: 21 through 24 will not be allowed to interview or interact with the following soldier-candidates during the Resistance simulation:]

“You four are not allowed to interview or interact with certain prisoners during this simulation,” Guerra tells them in that soft, patient, eerie tone, “Period. There will be zero discussion on this.”

[[Soldier: 21 (Alicia Benett)] will not interview or interact with [Soldier: 62 (Cristina Juárez)]
[[Soldier: 22 (Mary Nakamura)] will not interview or interact with [Soldier: 107 (Ray Quinn)]
[[Soldier: 23 (Felix Ochoa)] will not interview or interact with [Soldier: 75 (Adrien Morris)]
“...Mierda,” Felix mutters hoarsely next to him as Mary murmurs, “Damn, we got called out hard.”

“I’ll admit,” Guerra says to them loudly and clearly, “We should have gone over this rule before the simulation began this morning, but we were on a bit of a time crunch to work with the alarm - I saw at least one close call during detention -”

In his peripherals, Gabriel sees Felix look stubbornly embarrassed but his roommate says nothing aloud.

...He thinks it was him checking Adrien, Gabriel thinks, silently tapping his left index finger on the edge of his paper notebook, forcing himself to control his breathing in time and not think about how Guerra’s watchful, abyssal gaze had swept over him -

...He doesn’t realize Guerra is talking about how he thinks “Soldier: 23” had actually inspected Soldier: 76’s pockets, Gabriel notes to himself, before he mentally apologizes to his roommate, Sorry, Felix -

This is just the beginning of a long week for all of us.

“- But it ended up working out alright,” Guerra sighs, “And this leads me straight into Rule 2 -”

Guerra gestures to the holo-projection, moving down to:

[Rule 2: Soldiers: 21 through 24 will not conduct or receive sexual or romantic favors, sexual or romantic offers or deals, or sexual or romantic promises from ANY soldier-candidates, trainers, or guards during the Resistance simulation. Soldiers: 21 through 24 will not offer or receive any sexual or romantic promises on behalf of ANY other soldier-candidates, trainers, or guards during the Resistance simulation.]

“...Rule 2 is pretty explicit,” Guerra tells them as Alicia groans and Felix covers his blushing face with his hands, murmuring, “Mátame ahora -”

A faint heat rises to Gabriel’s cheeks as he remembers feeling Jack’s torso through the layers of his jacket and shirt -

“This applies to all of the prisoners and guards in the simulation,” Guerra says bluntly, “As an example, Soldier: 23 cannot make any promises to Prisoner: 76 on Soldier: 24’s behalf. Soldier: 23 cannot coerce or promise any of the guards to make promises to Prisoner: 76 in relation to Soldier: 24 -”

“Do you really think any of us would do this?” Mary blurts out, though her face is also beet-red. Felix, meanwhile, is practically melting in his seat, whispering, “I can’t even talk to Adrien after he works out, why would I ever be able to do this -”

“Will someone -”

The protests of the senior soldiers fall silent

As Guerra’s words -

Soft

Patient
Steady

Like watery sunlight drip drip dripping somewhere unreachable

Fills the room -

“- Please tell me,” Guerra says abyssally, “How long the Stanford Prison Experiment was supposed to run for?”

No one answers, until -

“Two weeks,” Gabriel says back neutrally, and Guerra flicks his eyes at him, asking, “And how long did it actually run for?”

“...Six days,” Gabriel continues. Guerra glances at the other three candidates, but asks Gabriel, “And why was it shut down after six days?”

“...The guards became increasingly abusive towards the prisoners,” Gabriel says quietly, “And prisoners became increasingly abusive towards each other, with many internalizing, normalizing, and accepting the abuses they received or even dealt to each other.”

And then, after a brief pause, Gabriel murmurs smokily:

“...You got the idea about the mattress pads from the experiment.”

“...I did. Looks like someone remembers Psychology 101,” Guerra states back dryly, “It’s not that the prison camp portion of SERE was ever explicitly designed around or inspired by the Stanford Prison Experiment, but rather that all prison situations - whether real or simulated - almost always result in the same generalized outcomes. The individuals put in the position of guards - real or simulated - eventually abuse their power unless they know from the outset that they will be punished for abusing their roles, and rewarded for maintaining integrity.”

Guerra looks around at the different senior soldiers, saying quietly, “I do not believe you are inherently any different from any of the hundreds if not thousands of human beings who have operated as prison guards in the course of human history. That is why you will never have to be the ‘bad cop’ in these interviews, and that is also why these rules exist - you will never be given the opportunity to be yet another statistic in the Psych Ops coursebook. Don’t make me remind you of what American black site and secret prison soldiers have done to their detainees in the last century.”

Felix lowers his hands and looks more somber. Mary sits back in her seat, contemplative. Alicia looks away, but her jaw is set in an obvious resolve.

Gabriel does not look away from the man named War.

“...Just because you’re in a new, special military program does not mean you get to walk away from what the rest of our military and agencies have done,” Guerra states, “And yes, that includes the directors and trainers as well. We must remember that we all inherit a history here, even if our current enemies have never existed in history before. Reality tells us that eventually, every person in this building runs the risk of being captured by a future enemy...or being responsible for the detention of one. Reality also tells us that torture is ineffective and useless in information collecting, but a powerful and terrible tool for information control. And so it will continue to be used for the rest of human history, from now until our end.”

The man named War stares back at Gabriel, speaking in that water-dripping tone:
“You owe it to yourselves to be better than the mistakes of your predecessors.”

...They both know exactly what that means.

Gabriel’s thoughts twist and squirm beneath his skin, like shards of glass in his spine.

He doesn’t know if he should feel sorry for what he intends to do this week -

Or if the words just thicken his resolve to make those intentions come true.

And then Guerra looks at the other three soldier-candidates, saying more calmly, “Do not fight the pressure that has been put upon you. Just because we’re moving through basic training for the majority of the candidates doesn’t mean you or the other senior soldiers get to take a week off. You are experienced operators and veteran soldiers: I expect you to prove what you are capable of. Being on the detention end of a prison - real or fake - is a moral and ethical test of your character. Never forget that deep down, all you will ever have is your own virtue and integrity - the exact values this simulation is designed to instill in the prisoners. I told you yesterday: it’s time for you to learn the difference between being a professional soldier and leader, and being here simply because you have to. It’s time for you to decide which category you fall into.”

When no one answers him, Guerra glances at Gabriel, stating, “Do I think any of you would break this rule? Absolutely. Do I expect you to conduct yourselves better than this even if it didn’t exist? Infinitely. Don’t test me on this.”

The room is deeply, abyssally Silent.

After a pause, Guerra flicks to Rule 3, which reads:

[Rule 3: Soldiers: 21 through 24 may offer or promise to provide the following rewards or remove the following punishments as incentives for building rapport with, and retrieving information from “prisoner” soldier-candidates.]

“...As I said a minute ago, the directors are fully aware that you will need some assistance in getting information,” Guerra says to them in a more relaxed, conversational tone, “In order to help you facilitate conversations and interviews with prisoners who will act defensively towards you, you are allowed to use the following things as gifts or presents to entice them: you can give them extra food, but be reasonable - don’t offer them five-course meals, don’t offer them pure sugar, don’t offer them Kobe beef, you know the drill. Give them a few extra granola bars or crackers, I don’t know, just don’t give away the facility’s entire pantry, alright?”

Gabriel stares at that one, before a faint smile twists his lips -

Oh man, that makes this a bit easier -

“We have an extra set of spare foam pads and some extra blankets and stuff you can offer,” Guerra continues, “I’ll show you where that closet is in a minute. We also intend to set up a spare room where you can offer them approximately half an hour to one full hour of uninterrupted sleep with a real bed, a real mattress, and full covers. Don’t even think about breaking Rule 2 and yes, there is a camera in there.”

“...We got it, sir,” Alicia mutters. Guerra glances between them skeptically, before he says, “...Now, as this is SERE and not a real HUMINT operation, we can’t actually truly reward the prisoners who break Article Five and give you important information. Otherwise that defeats the purpose of the
whole training. This is the challenging part for you four - you can play the ‘good cops’ for as long as you want, but as time goes on, prisoners will become both increasingly hostile to everything you offer to them, and increasingly desperate to get access to the things they’re missing the most - food, warmth, comfort, and sleep. To help offset this, you are allowed to offer a reduction or change in certain punishments as time goes on.”

Guerra taps at his datapad, scrolling through something as he explains to them, “We plan on having a few main methods of torture that all the prisoners will experience at least once during the course of the week. The main ones are stress positions, blackout boxes, bitrex and irritant smoke sprays, tasers, random paintball firing from the drones, and music overstimulation. On some occasions, we may have certain groups go outside and perform drills in the snow, but those are non-negotiable.”

Too cold for water torture, I guess, Gabriel thinks, as Guerra looks back up at them. The CIA agent continues, “As time goes on, you will likely be put in positions where you must offer to reduce a prisoner’s time in one of the individual torture simulations, or you can give them a choice between two or more specific options. Again, the purpose of the simulation is to make prisoners follow Article Five of the Code of Conduct - however, your purpose is to either entice them into breaking it by being nice, or force them to choose their own punishments when they refuse. Collecting information is your goal and even though you’re acting as the ‘good cops,’ the prisoners will eventually stop trusting you, if they ever trust you to begin with. You’re going to have to get creative with your methods for information extraction and rapport building.”

Is it really rapport building if you’re forcing the other person to choose between sitting in a box listening to the Meow Mix theme song on endless repeat or suffering through inhaling Bitrex in between being tasered? Gabriel wonders, his anger curling and snarling inside him. He glances down at his datapad and notebook, sighing darkly to himself.

...Everything he intends to do this week hinges on his ability to mask his every movement, to craft smoke and mirrors around him.

And -

Assuming he can even pull this stupid stunt off -

It all balances precariously on

A single slip of paper

A single number based on quick, probably wrong multiplication

And

Jack.

...It’s going to be a long week

But -

“Thank you, Gabe.”

Gabriel is going to have to try.

“Any questions about the rules?” Guerra asks them. Gabriel lifts his head, raises his hand, and grins
as he asks:

“What’s the policy on using the stove to make hot chocolate?”

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76: Resistance, Day 1 - the little mystery which hung around my companion

February 18, 2047: 0830 hours - Cell 5 of the auxiliary SEP facility

“Boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”

They’re only four hours in -

“Men - men - men - men go mad with watchin’ ‘em -”

And Jack is ready to gouge his eardrums out.

“There’s no discharge in the war.”

The two cells have already settled in, though that term is pretty fucking inaccurate for the situation: after some thought, two of the other Cell 5 prisoners had a change of heart and had followed Jack’s example to give up their mattress pads and share whatever limited comfort they had with their roommate. Cell 5 had halfheartedly attempted to arrange their nine mattress pads in some sort of “equal allotment of space” fashion, trying to work out how to give all nine pads “equal room” for personal comfort, but they gave up pretty goddamn fast when the lights kept turning on and off, making them all even more disoriented and making it damn near impossible to keep organized. Cell 4, meanwhile, had zero pretenses about trying to maintain personal space, and literally just threw their three mattress pads into a small, awkward rectangle before all twelve of them had piled unceremoniously into a disjointed heap of people.

In a strange way, they looked more comfortable than the group that had nine of the awful foam pads, and Jack’s on the verge of suggesting that Cell 5 should just double-stack their miserable things and crowd together for warmth and comfort when -

The blinding lights shut off again.

The sudden darkness doesn’t particularly surprise Jack at this point - in fact, his exhausted eyes are grateful for the soothing calm of it. Both the lights and the music operate on an odd, irregular pattern: one or the other or even both will linger “off” just long enough to lull some of the prisoners to near-sleep, only for one or the other or both to blast back on, ripping through their eyelids and jacket hoods with agonizing intensity, burning blindingly loud and deafeningly bright -

Or is it the other way around?

Jack shifts his shoulders a little awkwardly, trying to rest them in a slightly different position to take the pain off the ache that’s already building in them. He and Adrien had set up their single foam pad perpendicular against the back wall, trying to follow the pattern of their cellmates, but they were effectively “forced” to rest mainly their upper halves on it, with Jack facing sideways towards the back wall. Initially, the two of them had tried to stretch out as much as they could with their allotted space, but as the cold had crept into their sock-covered feet and thin waterproof pants, both of them had ended up curling up closer, huddling in on themselves to conserve warmth.
“Count - count - count the bullets in the bandoliers -”

With the music blasting and their minds deteriorating from lack of sleep and focus, almost no one had attempted to maintain a conversation. The junior soldiers in the group had all unanimously agreed that “we need to get sleep literally whenever we can” which had pushed both cell groups to prioritize whatever little comfort and calm they could derive in the moment.

“If - your - eyes - drop, they will get atop of you -”

Jack pulls his knees closer to his chest, trying to stay warmer -

He’s never had an issue with his height and build before, but right now, he hates it - he feels clunky and thick and dense and miserable and overwhelmingly large even for himself. The ache in his shoulders from putting pressure on them on the foam pad deepens. The soreness of his hips from resting on the pure, chilled concrete cuts hard.

He knows he shouldn’t rest - he should be up doing push-ups or even jumping jacks or stretches, just to stay limber but the darkness is so nice on his eyes -

*Five minutes, he thinks sleepily, Five minutes of peace and quiet and then I'll stretch -*

…

The music has stopped, right?

Or is the sound of the broken, cracking voice sobbing about boots boots boots boots movin’ up and down just in his head -

*A scream scream scream screaming screams shatters the air -*

“WHAT,” Jack is shouting hoarsely as several more voices rise in the darkness - he’s fighting to unfurl himself from himself as Adrien’s stiff form also struggles to sit up - he can hear Mari saying something indistinct and Lucas shouting something else -

“CALM DOWN,” Nadia yells out at her Cell 5 groupmates, as someone else - Ayinde, maybe?? - is telling Cell 4 something too and -

“It’s just another song or something,” Selena says loudly, practically screaming herself over the harsh, horrific sounds of some disembodied voice sobbing and screaming and crying over the speakers. In the deep darkness, Jack can hear her huff deeply, cursing, “Fuck them for starting this bullshit so early - try to sleep if you can -”

And then -

Something hard and dense and solid smashes against Jack’s left (and already sore) shoulder -

And then a hard and dense and sore pain snaps through it, up his neck and into his upper arm and -

“Fuck,” Jack shouts as the sheer suddenness of the paintball catches him off-guard and -

A second paint pellet slaps into his right ribs and he yells hoarsely against the startling burst of pain and -

“Jack, Jack, what’s happening -” Adrien is yelling and then -

There are more shouts from Cell 4 as Jack’s slow, sleep-steeped mind struggles to put it together -
There’s still scream scream screams screaming through the speakers and -

“HEADS DOWN -” Jack manages to shout out -

Before Cell 5 is suddenly assaulted with paintball fire.

There are several shouts and shrieks from his cellmates - more from Cell 4 as well - and Jack suddenly finds himself curled back up, knees pulled to his chest, head tucked in, forearms wrapped over it to try and shield it from the worst effects. He finds himself instinctively huddling closer to Adrien - and Adrien doing the same - as more of the paintballs, like small rocks bursting against their backs and exposed sides, pelt them with dense little circles of pain.

And then -

As suddenly as the screaming and firing had begun -

They both just stop.

And the lights blaze back on.

Even with his head pulled against his chest and his hood drawn up, the sheer, burning brightness of the lights and the sting of the pain across his right side make Jack’s eyes water. Slowly, he lifts his head, glancing around and squinting against the sharp lights to make out his cellmates.

Across from him, at his and Adrien’s “feet”, Mari and Vanessa (one of the pairs that had given up a mattress pad) also unfurl, covered in an obnoxious, ugly orange paint up and down their sides that were facing the bars. Next to him, Adrien’s face and chest look okay, but as his roommate rolls his shoulders, Jack can see similar orange paint all up and down Adrien’s right side.

“Jesus,” Markus breathes, and Jack looks past Mari and Vanessa to see that Markus and Khan are also covered in orange paint, looking miserable. Somewhere over his right shoulder, Nadia mutters bitterly, “Oh, that’s just goddamn dirty.”

“It didn’t hurt too bad,” Lucas mumbles, “But it’s messed up to spring that on us -”

“That only means they’re gonna do it again,” David grumbles from Cell 4, and Miguel sighs, “...Random paintball firing squads in our own cells. Fucking hell. It’s not even about the pain so much as the fear of it happening at any time.”

“Anyone hurt?” Jack asks, though his voice sounds raspy and hoarse to him -

“Sima -”

Selena’s voice drifts across the voidlike brightness -

Followed by a soft, broken whisper, “I’m fine, Selena - just a dumbass -”

Jack shifts up a little more, asking, “What happened?” He squints at them in the corner, rising to his knees -

Jack can’t really see the left side of Sima’s head, the side that faces the drone, but that isn’t the part that makes him worried -

As she pulls her right hand from the back of her head -

It’s he deep red color, bright and wet under the glare of the lights, that sends a rush through his veins.
“Oh shit,” Sam swears, and suddenly -

Jack lurches to his feet, stumbling towards her, Adrien only a half-step behind him. He cross the small cell relatively easily, kneeling beside her as Selena looks on, nervous and tired. Sima glances at him, grins weakly as she sighs, “Just...was stupid and bashed my head against the wall in surprise. It’s just a small cut - it’s just bleeding.”

“Can I look?” Jack asks softly, and, after a moment, Sima turns her head a bit, using her right hand to hold up some of her hair where the cut is. It isn’t horrific - a small graze - but blood wells up around it. Jack scowls a bit, murmuring lowly, “Yeah, it’s not too bad. Just let it scab up and it should be okay. The bruise there is going to be the most uncomfortable part for you, unfortunately -”

“...What are you?” Selena suddenly asks skeptically, “You’re an 18Xer, right? Not a junior medic?”

Jack feels his throat go dry as the words die inside him under her scowl, and he mutters hoarsely, “I’m, uh...”

“He was an emergency room nurse before all this.”

Both Jack and Selena look at Sima in surprise as she turns back around, grinning, “We called him Nurse Morrison in Q-Course.”

“Or just ‘Dad’ when we were being real jerks about it,” Adrien states over Jack’s left shoulder, and Jack can hear the smirk in his voice. Jack makes a deadpan face, but -

“Oh, so you have some real medical training?” Selena asks, suddenly looking more relaxed, if a bit relieved. Jack rolls his shoulders, saying, “Not...a ton. Not more than any other ER nurse -”

“Don’t lie, Jack, that’s not nice,” Adrien chuckles, but Jack just grumbles jokingly, “It’s not a lie, Adrien -”

“Shit, no, that’s good,” Selena sighs, “I was an Echo, and Nadia was a Charlie. And - what were you, Markus?”

“A Bravo,” Markus says, before sighing, “You couldn’t pay me to go Delta. That shit is rough.”

“I’m a Delta,” Jin says from Cell 4. The group looks up at him, but he shrugs, chuckling, “Though I’m not gonna be able to help you from over here.”

“It’s just a small cut, and her eyes are focusing fine,” Jack says to him, a bit relieved that a real combat medic is at least in the same “room” as them. Jin nods, saying, “Not much else you can look for right now. Our biggest concern should be hypothermia. Make sure everyone checks their digits every few hours.”

“I was thinking we should do stretches every few hours, maybe some other exercises too,” Jack offers hopefully. Jin looks briefly impressed, nodding again, “Hmm, we probably should. As the week goes on, it’s harder to keep group morale up. You’ll have to be strict about it. The trade-off is burning energy, though. You can’t push too hard.”

“...Wait, are you gonna make us do push-ups?” Adrien asks Jack suspiciously, glancing towards him. Jack gives Adrien a deep, wry, crooked smirk -

“Oh god dammit, I thought we left ‘Commander Morrison’ behind in Survival and Evasion,” Adrien groans, and Jack just starts to tease him, “Drop and give me twenty, Soldier: 75 -”
“Wait, hang on -” Robin says behind them, “Did you make the H Group do exercises, Jack?”

“Of course,” Jack states back cheerfully as Adrien mutters, “It was miserable, Robin. You’re lucky you ended up in C Group -”

“You wanna know what was miserable, Adrien?” Jack jokingly fires back, “That double-dose on Friday night was miserable -”

“...That’s right,” Miguel from Cell 4 says suddenly, “Jamie told me you basically had a bigass camp out in the southwest position of the area.”

“You know him?” Jack asks. Miguel stands by Jin, near the bars of Cell 4, saying, “Jamie and I went through our Bravo MOS training together. I swear, that kid can shoot just about anything. Is it true you guys made modified guns from the rifles in the drones?”

“What?” Markus asks, and Jack shrugs, saying, “I just wanted to knife them - our friend Wes was the one who decide to try reworking the trigger system. They were kind of a mess, but they worked well enough.”

“...Think we can do something about these things?” Miguel asks softly, not gesturing to the drones but his tone makes it clear what he’s focusing on, and both groups fall silent. Jack stares at him through the bars, before muttering, “…Unless you somehow smuggled a knife in, I doubt it -”

The last few word drift out of Jack’s mouth -

As he remembers the book in his pocket.

He doesn’t dare to glance at the drone hovering outside of Cell 5, instead standing and stretching a little, hissing as his new welts ache from the motion, muttering, “Weeeell, our best defense is to stay limber, I guess. And maybe stay closer together for some shared protection or something?”

“Hmm, I wonder if we took fewer hits than you,” Jin hums a little, watching Jack as Miguel sighs and heads back into the depths of Cell 4. The junior medic nods towards Cell 5, saying, “It may be wiser to move your pads closer together, both for warmth and protection. You’re going to have to get over lack of personal space anyways - might as well start from the beginning.”

Selena looks a little frustrated, but she sighs reluctantly, “You’re probably right. We can try a few different configurations. Here, Sam, Lucas - bring your mattresses over here.”

As Jack watches them start to move their stuff together, he casually slides his hands into his pockets.

His left hand feels the worn, laminated cover of the book, the soft edges of its pages -

And maybe, just maybe -

Though he knows he’s fooling himself -

He can feel some of Gabriel’s warmth lingering there -

Jack

Stops.

His fingers trace a small, loose piece of torn paper, drifting around near the base of the book like a leaf tucked between some rocks.
As Adrien rises next to him, Jack takes an easy, half-step back, pretending like he’s getting out of Lucas’ way, but he lets Adrien’s extra few inches of height block most of his actions from the drone outside the cell.

Jack casually pulls his hand out of his pocket, cupping the paper with his fingers, and he takes a quick glance at it.

It’s the corner edge of a small, blue-line notebook paper, unremarkable except for two things that were hastily scrawled on it in cheap, ballpoint pen ink.

Jack

Frowns a bit

Because all it says is:

“1824”

And in a tiny, messy, sloped scrawl, it says below that:

“The first virtue in a soldado

is endurance of fatigue.”

With a hasty rough line break after “soldado.”

Jack quickly skims it again to make sure he read it correctly, before he rolls his head on his shoulders, stuffing his hand back in his pocket as he pretends to stretch his back -

But his thoughts are 100% suddenly alert

And 100% absolutely confused.

1824, what the hell does that mean, Jack thinks, trying hard not to panic or show how bewildered he is, taking another half-step back with Adrien as the other members of Cell 5 try to move their stuff around them. 1824 - like, is that a year, or does it reference certain guards? Gabe’s number is 24, but who the hell is 18? That was that one senior soldier - María? Should I keep an eye out for her? Is it a code? Does it spell something?

And then

Jack makes a deadpan, sarcastic expression as he realizes:

Why the hell did he write some long, cryptic sentence but not explain what the number means?

Oh my god, he really is a pretentious lit nerd.

And yet

Jack’s heartbeat thuds loudly in his chest as sheer joy surges through his veins

At yet another small piece of Gabriel tucked in his pocket.

And Jack just can’t hide it -

The grin blossoms wide and bright on his face as something else blooms deep in his chest - a warmth
made of spun-sunshine and sugar-smoked smirks.

This might be the most exciting, most daring, most thrilling birthday he’s had in years.

He’s been reading way too many mystery stories, Jack thinks happily, as he watches Sam and Markus drag their mattresses next to Selena and Sima. After a moment, Jack finally realizes Adrien is looking at him suspiciously, and Jack tilts his mischievous, radiant grin at him, beaming.

“...Man, I do not like that look on your face,” Adrien grumbles. Jack just smirks, “You ready for more one-handed push-ups, Soldier: 75?”

“Boy, you owe me your desserts for a week after this one,” Adrien sighs dryly as Jack laughs boldly, asking the group, “Should we start with some jumping jacks?”

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“...What the hell?” Luisa asks, her voice full of pure shock. Gabriel glances up from adding more information to his network on his datapad - after their chat with Guerra, Gabriel and Felix had returned to the Security Room to keep an eye on the cameras with the Echoes, while working on their little SEP network thingy. He looks first at Luisa sitting in front of the massive “cells screen,” and then looks up at the actual screen -

“...Are they doing...jumping jacks?” María, another Echo, wonders aloud and Gabriel’s eyes drift to the sub-screen labeled [Cell 5] -

“Holy shit,” DeAndre starts to laugh, the words stumbling out of his mouth in wheezy hacks as a massive, wide shit-eating grin spreads on Gabriel’s face -

At the sight of all twelve “prisoners” in Cell 5 doing jumping jacks in their tiny cell.

“Look,” Soldier: 20 - Alexei - says, gesturing to the camera next to it, “Cell 4 has started it too.”

“What the hell,” Soldier: 17 - Mai - states blandly, “They’re going to burn vital energy doing this, they know that, right?”

“Think this means the enhancements have started to kick in?” María asks, and at his back table, Gabriel glances at Felix (who is also working on his network - the two of them had been preparing to go over possible “conversation starters”). Felix gives Gabriel a skeptical look, and Luisa mutters, “I don’t know if that’s what’s happening here…”

“...Who started this?”

The group of seven soldiers - plus two of the “trainer guards” who are tooling around with the interrogation room camera feeds - all freeze

As Guerra’s voice sweeps over them.

The Echoes whip around towards Guerra, who has almost magically appeared at the door, followed by Tran and another few “guards”. All of the Echoes look bashful, as Luisa murmurs, “Uh, well, sir - I was the one who spotted Cell 5 doing it, but uh...I didn’t see who started it.”

“...But Cell 5 started it?” Guerra says

And Gabriel feels glass drip up his spine at the eerie, uncanny edge in his voice.

From where he’s sitting, Gabriel has a view of the whole room except the corner behind him, and he
flicks his gaze over Guerra - whose own gaze is fixated on the camera on Cell 5 - towards Luisa, who is very intensely *not* looking at Gabriel.

“...Yes, sir,” she states quietly.

Gabriel can’t fault her for being honest, not with so many people present.

He looks back at Guerra, who is still staring at the camera, his deep, abyssal eyes not moving from the figure in the center of the group -

Whose shock of gold-spun sunshine hair still manages to tuff out from under the hood of his jacket like wild, untameable grass.

“...Take a junior and an 18X candidate from Cell 5. Not 76 though. Leave him for now,” Guerra says to Tran.

Gabriel feels the metal backing of the datapad buckle a bit as his fingers almost dent into it, so much pressure races through his thoughts and his nerves.

And then, as if he hasn’t just started a long week of misery, pain, and literal psychological torture, Guerra glances towards Gabriel casually, saying nonchalantly, “Cook Davis gave you approval to use the stove, and she says there’s a spare industrial coffeemaker in the kitchen equipment closet. One of those big cylinder things. But you have to bring it to the ancillary facility and set it up yourself.”

And then Guerra smirks at him, “And she wanted me to tell you - and this is a direct quote - ‘if he uses all the coffee, I will personally make him the solo dish cleaner from now until deployment. He also only gets the powder creamer.’ Got it?”

Gabriel blinks at him, before he says as dryly as Coffeemate, “Offering powder creamer only is torture, sir.”

“This is why you don’t bother an Army cook with weird SERE requests, Soldier: 24,” Guerra zings right back, before he turns and heads out the door into the hallway.

As he leaves, Gabriel makes a dark, bitter face, sneering after him on his way out. Felix rolls his eye and sighs, “C’mon, Gabrielito - let’s go try this crazy idea of yours.”

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**24: Resistance, Day 1 - my place had not been laid nor my coffee prepared**

February 18, 2047: 0845 hours - kitchen in the main facility

The head Army cook - a veteran 92G just under five feet tall, probably one-hundred and forty pounds of pure muscle, maybe mid-thirties, covered in more scars than most of the trainer soldiers, a raw steel glint in her dark eyes - is a woman named Felicia Davis.

She is

*By far*

The most god damn intimidating person Gabriel has ever met.
She could kick my ass while grilling three hundred chickens and still have time to fry me for a second course, Gabriel thinks, as the two of them size each other up. Felix - the useless jerk - stands mostly behind Gabriel, grinning apologetically.

Davis gives Gabriel a long, hard, soul-piercing look before she mutters hoarsely, “You the soft-hearted asshole who thinks making chocolate milk is gonna convince those tortured recruits into talking?”

Gabriel gives her his own deep, fierce, smoky scowl, saying with a flint-edged tone, “It’s hot chocolate. And it’s gonna taste cheap and badly made, so no, probably not.”

Davis’s eyes narrow bitterly as Gabriel hears Felix give an exasperated sigh behind him, murmuring, “Qué carajos, Gabriélito…”

“It’s Army food - it always tastes cheap and badly made because it is cheap and badly made,” Davis says suddenly, with a sly smirk. Gabriel blinks at her in surprise, before he scowl-grins back, laughing, “I was talking about my own awful cooking skills, ma’am.”

“I know you were, son, but do you see a Michelin star around here? Or even a restaurant rating?” Davis snaps right back, before she waves him off, saying, “Look, I know I can cook good food, but you gotta have good ingredients to start with and Idaho, in the middle of winter, is not where you get those.”

“...Valuable advice, ma’am,” Gabriel says wryly, and Davis raises an eyebrow at him, muttering, “Be careful with that tone of yours - you know what they say about pissing off the cook.”

“Ma’am, I would never sass the most important person in this facility,” Gabriel says with a lilting tone, and he hears Felix practically whine, “Gabriel, what the hell -”

“Oooh, what a silver tongue there,” Davis chuckles, “You’ll be like that CIA agent in no time, huh?”

Gabriel twists his face into a disgusted, awkward expression, saying sardonically, “Please, ma’am - his compliments are cheap and badly made.”

“Oh, because yours are better?” Davis asks Gabriel teasingly, her eyes alight with humor and -

“Of course,” Gabriel says with a big grin, “Mine are made from the best ingredients. Because my compliments are to the chef.”

There’s a small pause before Felix gives a loud groan of despair -

But it’s drowned out

By the huge howl of laughter Davis unleashes.

She nearly falls over backwards, cackling and sobbing, half stumbling as she wheezes through her laughter. Gabriel grins as she wipes a tear from her eye, saying to him, “Gooooood God, you took one helluva journey to get there, didn’t you?”

“Not all who wander are lost,” Gabriel smirks mischievously, as if he had actually planned that pun. But immediately, Felix mutters loudly behind him, “No. No. You definitely lost that one.”

“Wow, Ochoa, next time you make a pun, watch me tear apart your fragile self-confidence,” Gabriel retorts with a wry, self-deprecating tone, the sheer absurdity of which gets Felix to stammer, “...What.”
“Alright, uh, Reyes, right?” Davis says suddenly, struggling to straighten herself out. She glances at him with a bright, mischievous gleam in her eyes, smirking as she heads towards some of the industrial, stainless steel cabinets. She cracks one open, calling out, “Here’s how this is gonna go down -”

Not used to actually having permission to be in here, Gabriel slowly trails after her, and he watches as she pulls a pretty large steel pot from the cabinet, twisting around with it in her arms with breezy ease.

“You get to use one of these for your hot chocolate,” Davis states as Gabriel ogles the insane size of it. Davis hauls it to the industrial, massive stove against the back wall of the narrow kitchen, setting it on a burner with a loud clank. She huffs, “You get to use this baby three times this week. Only two caveats for the spare coffee boiler is that you can’t break it, and you can’t give away all our coffee, or you get to scrub dishes for the rest of your time here, got it?”

“Yes, ma’am, absolutely,” Gabriel says with a bright grin on his face. Davis smirks back, gesturing to the pot, explaining, “But your chocolate soup is gonna be different. You get this three times this week. You get two gallons of our real liquid milk because I’m generous. You get a full pack of those off-brand chocolate squares they give us. And you get whatever water you need to make it last, I guess. But that’s it. So ration whatever recipe your mom or grandma taught you wisely. We get our perishables once a week, each Saturday, restaurant quantities, so if you burn through our milk and chocolate, you get to be the one to hike down to Sun Valley regardless of weather and order more from Supplies. Is that clear?”

Gabriel gawks at her through the sudden onslaught of information, before Davis raises an eyebrow at him, repeating, “Is that clear, Reyes?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Gabriel snaps hastily, adding with a bright, genuine grin, “To be honest, ma’am, that’s way more than I was expecting.”

“What can I say, I’m a generous tyrant,” Davis chuckles, before hooking her thumb towards the pot again, adding, “You clean it after each use. It goes back in the cupboard by Friday night when this bullshit is done. Milk is in the walk-in fridge. Two gallons. Chocolate and coffee are in the storage pantry. Spare coffee boiler is in the equipment closet down the hall. And Marc told me you might be using more food later, but you clear your ideas with me before you go making bad promises to those starving soldiers, understand? That goes for all of your group, including David’s meatheads.”

“I’ll be sure to pass on the message,” Gabriel says, even as he wonders if there’s some way to get Tran’s guard-soldiers into some sort of weird food fight with Davis -

Just to add to the chaos of the week.

“Anyways, you boys make your hot chocolate and get out,” Davis says before she strides past them, leaving Gabriel and Felix feeling windswept in the wake of her storm. By the entrance door of the kitchen, she glances back, stating, “And tell Marc and Carolina that I still get three people to help me this week - I still gotta make food for nearly forty people. I expect kitchen duty here at 1100 and 1800 hours sharp, no matter what.”

“Yes, ma’am,” both Gabriel and Felix say in humbled unison.

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(Five minutes later)
“Why does all of this look the same?” Felix half-asks, half-grumbles, as he moves aside what appears to be several white, plastic tubs full of preserved fruit. Gabriel scans a shelf of almost identical white, plastic tubs, only these are full of some sort of oil, and he sighs, “Cheaper if you just package everything the same. You ain’t seen nothing until you wander through a walk-in fridge stocked full to bursting with cardboard boxes of Thanksgiving turkeys.”

“...I swear, you have lived the weirdest life, Reyes,” Felix mutters, as he scans another shelf of more white plastic tubs.

“What can I say - I’m a modern Renaissance man,” Gabriel chuckles, looking past plain, boring boxes of pasta noodles. Gabriel can hear Felix rolling his eyes as his roommate groans, “It was a meat department job, Gabriel - not painting the Sistine Chapel.”

They’re currently deep in the massive storage pantry, searching for the ground coffee...somewhere. They had managed to make one “batch” of the hot chocolate with...relative ease (although Felix had forced Gabriel not to use a full gallon of milk today and instead “add some goddamn water to it, Reyes - hot chocolate is already way nicer than anything we ever got in SERE”), and had found the spare coffee boiler in the equipment closet. It’s little more than a glorified water boiler with a section for coffee grinds, but it’s better than boiling the water on the stove. They had managed to round up a sort of push cart thing and clanked the cylindrical industrial coffee boiler on it, along with the lidded pot of hot chocolate.

But somehow they had discovered a new hurdle in their Great Good Cop Adventure -

The Army Food Supplier.

SEP runs on a standard mess hall style of dining: food composed of half-prepared stocks or partially-done meals, half-required cooking and heating to make it somewhat palatable. When all 132 soldier-candidates are around, plus the six directors and like twenty trainer-soldiers, the mess hall gets crowded at meal times. Davis runs a bi-weekly rotating schedule between everyone but the directors, usually pulling about eight to ten of the soldier-candidates and one or two of the trainers to help her for every meal.

So it’s not a huge surprise that the SEP pantry and fridge are stocked full of industrial-sized, semi-prepared food stuffs: everything you could ever want to feed a group of enhanced supersoldiers and prevent them from eating the entire state of Idaho out of existence (though that probably wouldn’t be too difficult, honestly).

No, the frustrating aspect is the Army Food Suppliers with zero imagination in their packaging of this semi-prepared foodstuff.

Everything - literally everything - in this pantry is packaged in one of two options: a large, white, two gallon plastic bucket if it won’t fit properly in a cardboard box, or shrink-wrapped in clear plastic and stuck in that exact cardboard box with about one-hundred versions of the same thing.

“Sometimes being here feels like I’m painting my masterpiece,” Gabriel says with a wry tone, and Felix teases him dryly, “Are you telling me you’re going to paint your network model on the mess hall ceiling?”

“Maybe I can make the shape look like God E.T.-ing Adam,” Gabriel wisecracks smugly, which gets a low grown of “God dammit, Gabriel,” from Felix, followed by -

“Why do we have so much lard here -” Felix starts to say, prompting Gabriel to glance at the shelf his roommate is currently looking at - more large, plastic buckets with bold, stark font labeling it
“Lard” unceremoniously - until Felix loosely throws his hands in the air, sighing exasperatedly, “You know what, I don’t want to know how much lard is in our food.”

“It’s not *that* bad for you,” Gabriel says, turning back to his own set of shelves, “Just don’t, like, chug it raw.”

“Thanks for the great life pro-tip, O Sage One,” Felix retorts. Gabriel huffs, “It’s really not that different than butter. I mean - don’t eat butter raw either. Or do. Whatever floats your oil.”

“...Man, you are in some sort of mood today,” Felix says sarcastically, but there’s a slightly suspicious edge to his tone and Gabriel -

“I gotta make my own coffee and go interrogate some people, Ochoa,” Gabriel jokes back with a smug smirk, “It’s gonna be a mood day. Oh, found the coffee.”

Sure enough, the coffee is also packaged in a giant white bucket.

Gabriel slides it off the shelf, hefting it easily as he grins, “Let’s find that shitty powder creamer and get back so I can finally get some caffeine.”

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76: Resistance, Day 1 - I picked up a magazine and attempted to while away the time with it

Monday, February 18, 2047: 1020 hours - Cell 5

They start by taking Robin and Markus.

_It’s been about two hours since they took Markus, an hour and a half for Robin_, Jack thinks, huddling in closer on himself. Cell 5 has rearranged their mattresses into a new configuration, with most of the group now scrunched up towards the back wall, leaving some space for the toilet and sink. They’ve had another two “random” paintball attacks since the first, with each one following similar patterns - lights off, voice screams, shots are fired, lights on, screaming off, music resumes - only there’s no consistency to the timing yet. The second happened thirty minutes after the first, and the third happened an hour later. Already, efforts to keep group morale up and energy levels high have started to flag - each set of stretches and low-energy exercises takes more internal effort, more goading and playful teasing, more bantering back and forth with Adrien just to get people to stand. They don’t do much - short rounds of stretches, jogging in place, jumping jacks, a few push ups, some squats, and planks - just to keep energy going and ease out of the soreness of lying around on foam-on-concrete and the smattering of paintball bruises they’re accumulating, but the third time, Mari quits halfway through the squats, sighing, “What’s the use, Jack.” Lucas stops after one set of 15-second planks, mumbling that, “He was too hungry for this.” After that series of exercises, Nadia, their “number leader” had murmured to Jack that, “We should probably go easier on this - they’re only going to give us one meal a day.”

Jack had reluctantly agreed, saying, “...I don’t think I’m going to stop, personally, but you’re right.”

Nadia’s bright, hazel eyes had searched his face, before she had sighed, “You’ve got some spirit, I’ll give you that...but don’t burn yourself out trying too hard, Morrison. You can’t force them to be optimistic. Part of SERE is learning to find the internal motivation to stay emotionally strong.”
Jack had looked back at her, thinking about Gabriel’s “mind over matter” -

And the note in his pocket -

And tall, narrow farmhouses dark in the February chill, empty except for him, alone -

And snowcovered and stardusted forts where the soldier with smoky galaxies in his eyes and the regality of kings etched into his face reads, alone -

And the smile that soldier had given him - gilded with firelight and starlight - when Jack had appeared last night -

Before Jack had replied to her quietly, “...That’s true, but we still have to try to support each other.”

(No stupid questions, no stupid answers, no thoughtless gifts, no meaningless moments -)

Jack sighs, his back bumping into Adrien’s as he shifts a bit, trying to adjust his left shoulder to get rid of the slow ache steeping into his upper back. He had volunteered to take the “outer perimeter” of the central group huddle, his body turned inward towards the others - and, admittedly, all of them being so close together was conserving heat better, even if it was a strangely humid, human heat. They had taken Markus just after the first paintball attack - the guards were two of the trainer-soldiers, not the senior candidates, and they had yelled at everyone in Cell 5 to stand, put their backs to the walls, hands above their heads, before they had entered the cell (Jack had watched as one of them had pulled a plain, generic keycard from a pocket and pressed it to the electronic lock on the door). They had thrown another hood on Markus, stiffly wrestled his hands in front of him, cuffed him, and then marched him out of the cell before slamming the door shut again.

A half-hour later, only a single trainer-soldier had come for Robin - same procedures, backs to the walls, hands in the air - and Jack had shared a knowing glance with Adrien -

We can do it, we can take him, it’s just him -

Before a paintball had splatted unnervingly close to Jack’s head, a mere inch away from his right eye.

And Jack had stiffly looked back up, as the drone outside had swiveled its paintball gun back into its central position.

A single guard was, apparently, never truly alone.

The guard had led Robin off, the group had returned to their huddle -

And then the third paintball attack had begun.

After that, sore and aching and exhausted and slowly losing the will to do the light exercises, Cell 5 had watched as another solo guard had come to haul off Wei from Cell 4. Life had been quiet since then.

Or well -

“Boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”

As quiet as it could be.

“There’s no discharge in the war!”
...Relatively-speaking.

Jack sighs, tugs his hood closer around his head, as Lucas groans from somewhere in the pile, “I would give my left nut for a different song.”

“Don’t - don’t - don’t look at what’s in front of you!”

“...Literally no one needed to know that,” Sima retorts, as the voice drones on and on, boots boots boots boots movin’ up and down again, in the background. But Adrien wisecracks wryly, “How much is the right nut worth?”

“Boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again.”

“Don’t encourage him, Morris,” Sam rasps out, as Lucas snorts, “I’ll give the right nut for some goddamn breakfast, even those awful runny eggs. Fuck, one meal a day is legit torture.”

“Men - men - men - men go mad with watchin’ ‘em.”

“That’s the point, Nogueira,” Nadia huffs at him, from somewhere near Jack’s head. The number leader is clearly rolling her eyes as she mutters, “It would be great if you could learn to value your endurance over your stomach. Or your nuts.”

“There’s no discharge in the war.”

“Not all of us have been through this hell before, Mohammed,” Lucas snaps back, and Nadia half-hisses, half-seethes, “And it shows, rookie. So shut the hell up and take your lumps - it’s going to be the longest week of your life, and whining in the first six hours makes you sound like a real douchebag.”

Lucas shuts up at that, though Jack doubts it’s due to humility or internal motivations, and more due to the fact that arguing feels like a waste of breath and energy.

That said -

“Count - count - count - count the bullets in the bandoliers.”

Jack would also give anything to make the voice bleeding through his ears and into his brain

“If - your - eyes - drop, they will get atop of you.”

Go away.

Whoever thought of music and sound torture is one of the most heinous individuals to have ever existed, Jack thinks bitterly, shutting his eyes, shifting closer onto himself, half-burying his left cheek into his hood, his left shoulder and chest into the thin, spongy foam pad, stuffing his hands in his pockets again for more warmth -

“Boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again.”

His left fingers - tingling from the slow numbness of resting too long on his left shoulder and upper arm, pins and needles up and down his arm - gently trace the scrap of notebook paper -

(1824 -)

(The first virtue in a soldado)
(is endurance of fatigue)

“There’s no discharge in the war!”

...Jack would give

Anything

To hear Gabriel’s soothing voice

Spun-sunshine and sugar-smoked and starlit smirks

Read out something

Anything

To him, just once, just once again, ever again.

“We - can - stick - out hunger, thirst, and weariness -”

To soothe the ache in his shoulder, the pangs of hunger in his stomach, the numbing stiffness in his hips

The bleeding in his ears

“But - not - not - not - not the chronic sight of ‘em -”

Up and down again

Up and down again

The raw, glass-sharded stabbing in his brain and forehead

“Boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”

Up and down again

Up and down again.

Jack’s left fingers skim along the soft edges of the pages of the Holmes anthology -

How worn they are from the warmth of Gabriel’s hands.

“There’s no discharge in the war!”

...There had been a point during their long conversation in the snowcovered, stardusted fort in the early hours of the morning

Where they had held hands.

...Where Jack’s right fingers had been worn warm by Gabriel’s left hand.

...

Jack slowly, unbearably

Opens his eyes.
“T’ain’t - so - bad - by day because the company -”

And, with a bit more shuffling

Jack pulls the book out of his pocket.

“But - night - brings - long - strings o’ forty-thousand million -”

The way he’s angled, he knows the drone can’t really see it, not with him half-curled in on himself, paint-splattered back towards the cell bars, and he creates something of a small cocoon with his arms, cradling the book with his hands. His eyes drift over the red, fake-leather cover, the pencil drawing of Holmes and Watson sitting together -

“Boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”

And he slowly flips open the cover, and then the first blank inset page, then past the title page, the copyright page to -

Jack

Stops.

“There’s no discharge in the war!”

The first true page is a single quotation that reads:

[“The love of books is among the choicest gifts of the gods.” - Sir Arthur Conan Doyle]

Jack grins a little -

Because it’s like he can hear Gabriel repeating the quote, his tone all spun-sunshine and sugar-smoke and starlit smirks -

“I - have - marched - six - weeks in Hell and certify -”

Jack flips to the clean, title page for the first book - [A Study in Scarlet] - one that he hasn’t read with Gabriel because Gabriel had started halfway through the anthology -

“...What the hell is that.”

It takes Jack a slow, unbearably long moment to realize the voice is Mari’s.

Jack

Stops.

And slowly, unbearably

Lifts his eyes from the page, past the soft edges of the book -

To Mari’s face, maybe only nine or ten inches away from his own.

“It - is - not - fire, devils, dark, or anything -”

Her dark eyes flick between his and the book, barely peeking out over the clasp of his hands, her eyebrows deepening into a fierce, dark scowl and -
“What the hell is what?” Vanessa asks in confusion, somewhere behind Mari, and Jack feels Adrien stir against his back and -

“But boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”

Sheer, raw panic floods through Jack’s body because -

_They can’t take this from me, this is a gift, this is a gift Gabriel gave me, they can’t -_

Jack has no idea what to say to stop her from giving away his secret, his only secret and -

“Jack brought a book somehow?” Mari half-says, half-asks, her eyes deeply mistrustful and confused and -

The silence is _painfully, bleeding loud_, as the voice _sobs:_

_“There’s no discharge in the war!”_

“...You brought a _what_?” Adrien asks from behind Jack, in disbelief, and Nadia says, “Like a notebook?”

“How did you get a book past the guards?” someone from Cell 4 - Aisha - asks from across the small hall separating them, and Sam asks in bewildered confusion, “Why did you bring a _book_ and not a pocket knife, Jack?”

“Don’t worry - he’s gonna kill the drones with his sick lit knowledge,” David from Cell 4 drolls wryly, “Our _hero_ -”

“No need to be an asshole, Meyer,” Jin snaps at his cellmate, as Ayinde snarks, “Yeah, Meyer - maybe it has his secret plan to get us out of here.”

“Alright,” Adrien says loudly and defensively to everyone, “It was clearly an accident or something. If y’all are gonna get so mad about it, we can just give it to the guards and -”

“No.”

The silence following Jack’s answer is

Slowly

Unbearably

Raw

Except for the voice that openly weeps:

_“Try - _try - _try to think of something different _”_

“...Dude,” Adrien says, with a softly, more patient, if tired tone, “C’mon, Jack - you don’t want to get us all in trouble, right? Let’s just do the right thing and hand it off to the next one who comes -”

“No,” Jack repeats, his voice quietly thunderous, like a storm is caught in his chest, the build-up of static catching on the words in his throat. He stares fiercely at Mari, who hasn’t moved, hasn’t said anything else, saying with a fierceness that has edges well-worn by -

_(They somehow held hands last night -)_
“It was an accident,” Jack mutters, half a lie and half the truth, really - he hadn’t meant to leave it in his pocket, but it was -

It is -

A gift from Gabriel -

Not once

But twice

In the same day.

“...But this is a gift,” Jack continues, words like lightning, sharp and resounding even in how soft their edges are, “And I will fight anyone who tries to take it from me, even if it means not taking one for the team.”

“...Don’t be selfish, Morrison -” Nadia starts to say, and he can hear her rising -

But Mari’s gaze has softened at bit at the edges and -

“...Is it an interesting book?”

The silence following Lucas’ question is

Surprisingly

Piqued.

“Oh - my - God - keep me from going lunatic -”

Jack has no idea how to answer that -

(No stupid questions, no stupid answers -)

“Oh, like The Rooster Crowed At Midnight,” Jack says brightly, and there’s a long silence before Jin
mutters with kind disappointment, “...That’s not a real Christie novel, Morrison.”

“...I - I know,” Jack stammers loudly, “It was a dumb M.A.S.H. joke -”

“How old are you?” Mari asks skeptically, and Jack scowls at her a little, murmuring, “Alright, no need to hate on classic television, Murata.”

“What story are you on?” Miguel asks from Cell 4 and Jack blinks once, twice, before answering honestly this time, “I was just gonna start from the beginning. A Study in Scarlet.”

“You should read to us!”

Jack and Mari both gawk at each other -

As Lucas’ excitement resounds through both cells.

“...I - what,” Jack asks in shock, and Adrien hums thoughtfully, “That’s actually not a bad idea.”

“...Adrien -” Jack replies warily, careful not to move too much in fear of attracting attention, but he whumps Adrien’s back with his own. Adrien just laughs, “C’mom, Jack, it’s not like they can hear us -”

“And for the love of my nuts, I need to hear something else,” Lucas says optimistically, but both Jack and Mari make disgusted faces as Selena groans, “Did you really have to phrase it that way?”

“It ain’t Lucas’ nuts Jack is interested in, that’s for sure,” Adrien wisecracks and Jack feels his face turning bright red as he growls, “Morris!”

“I’m just being honest, Morrison,” Adrien laughs as several people suddenly crack up with laughter. Even Mari giggles a little and Jack snarks, “Alright, next person to be a smartass gets storytime taken away for the whole group.”

“Awww, no, don’t be a mean teacher, 76!” Miguel jokingly protests from Cell 4, as Cristina shouts, “Read it in a British accent!”

“Hell no,” Jack snaps back, and he can hear the disappointed “awww” go up from everyone -

“Don’t be a bloody wanker, Morrison,” Lucas intones at him, and Jack rumbles, “Don’t be a blethering numpty, Nogueira.”

There’s a pause, and then Lucas asks, “...A what?”

“Nothing,” Jack mumbles, before saying more clearly, “Do you want me to read or not?”

“Yes,” Adrien replies cheerfully, and the other say stuff like “Go for it” and “As long as you’re not Boots Boots Boots Boots” and “An accent would be funny though -”

“Alright,” Jack says loudly, adjusting himself a bit to help project some volume, and the groups go silent as his voice -

Deep like thunderstorms, resounding like bottled lightning -

Rolls out in smooth, steeped tones -

(“Now, you on the other hand are literally the vocal embodiment of top shelf whiskey,” he hears Gabriel say, with his own voice that’s all spun-sunshine and sugar-smoke and starlit smirks -)
“In the year 1878 I took my degree of Doctor of Medicine of the University of London, and proceeded to Netley to go through the course prescribed for surgeons in the army. Having completed my studies there, I was duly attached to the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers as Assistant Surgeon. The regiment was stationed in India at the time, and before I could join it, the second Afghan war had broken out…”

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Chapter 1, “A Study in Scarlet”:

“Poor devil!” [Stamford] said, commiseratingly, after he had listened to my misfortunes. “What are you up to now?”

“Looking for lodgings.” I answered. “Trying to solve the problem as to whether it is possible to get comfortable rooms at a reasonable price.”

“That’s a strange thing,” remarked my companion; “you are the second man to-day that has used that expression to me.”

“And who was the first?” I asked.

“A fellow who is working at the chemical laboratory up at the hospital. He was bemoaning himself this morning because he could not get someone to go halves with him in some nice rooms which he had found, and which were too much for his purse.”

“By Jove!” I cried, “if he really wants someone to share the rooms and the expense, I am the very man for him. I should prefer having a partner to being alone.”

Young Stamford looked rather strangely at me over his wine-glass. “You don’t know Sherlock Holmes yet,” he said; “perhaps you would not care for him as a constant companion.”

“Why, what is there against him?”

“Oh, I didn’t say there was anything against him. He is a little queer in his ideas—an enthusiast in some branches of science. As far as I know he is a decent fellow enough.”

“A medical student, I suppose?” said I.

“No—I have no idea what he intends to go in for. I believe he is well up in anatomy, and he is a first-class chemist; but, as far as I know, he has never taken out any systematic medical classes. His studies are very desultory and eccentric, but he has amassed a lot of out-of-the way knowledge which would astonish his professors.”

“Did you never ask him what he was going in for?” I asked.

“No; he is not a man that it is easy to draw out, though he can be communicative enough when the fancy seizes him.”

Chapter End Notes
References:

1. "Human Intelligence (HUMINT)". Wikipedia
4. A Study in Scarlet, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
5. 18F: Special Assistant Operations and Intelligence Sergeant", Army.com

The following are papers on theoretical and analytical models of terrorist and cell organizations. They do not contain any graphic or violent content. They are strictly focused on information and power propagation through a human social network:

1. "An Introduction to Terrorist Organisational Structures”
Chapter Summary

[Special Forces soldiers are skilled at "unconventional warfare". Unconventional warfare often involves SF operators assisting guerrilla or underground fighters, developing tactics and strategies with rogue or allied resistance leaders, supporting them with additional units and supplies, and helping with sabotage missions and intelligence-gathering.]

There's "unconventional warfare."

...And then there's Gabriel Reyes' idea of "unconventional warfare."

Chapter Notes

Look.

There's a reason they won't tell you what REALLY happened in SEP.

And it's not because it's bad.

It's because it's embarrassing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 2, “A Study In Scarlet”:

Then I picked up a magazine from the table and attempted to while away the time with it, while my companion munched silently at his toast. One of the articles had a pencil mark at the heading, and I naturally began to run my eye through it.

Its somewhat ambitious title was “The Book of Life,” and it attempted to show how much an observant man might learn by an accurate and systematic examination of all that came in his way. It struck me as being a remarkable mixture of shrewdness and of absurdity. The reasoning was close and intense, but the deductions appeared to me to be far-fetched and exaggerated. The writer claimed by a momentary expression, a twitch of a muscle or a glance of an eye, to fathom a man’s inmost thoughts. Deceit, according to him, was an impossibility in the case of one trained to observation and analysis. His conclusions were as infallible as so many propositions of Euclid. So startling would his results appear to the uninitiated that until they learned the processes by which he had arrived at them they might well consider him as a necromancer.

“From a drop of water,” said the writer, “a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other. So all life is a great chain, the nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link of it. Like all other arts, the Science of
Deduction and Analysis is one which can only be acquired by long and patient study nor is life long enough to allow any mortal to attain the highest possible perfection in it. Before turning to those moral and mental aspects of the matter which present the greatest difficulties, let the enquirer begin by mastering more elementary problems. Let him, on meeting a fellow-mortal, learn at a glance to distinguish the history of the man, and the trade or profession to which he belongs. Puerile as such an exercise may seem, it sharpens the faculties of observation, and teaches one where to look and what to look for. By a man’s finger nails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boot, by his trouser knees, by the callosities of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by his shirt cuffs—by each of these things a man’s calling is plainly revealed. That all united should fail to enlighten the competent enquirer in any case is almost inconceivable.”

“What ineffable twaddle!” I cried, slapping the magazine down on the table, “I never read such rubbish in my life.”

“What is it?” asked Sherlock Holmes.

“Why, this article,” I said, pointing at it with my egg spoon as I sat down to my breakfast. “I see that you have read it since you have marked it. I don’t deny that it is smartly written. It irritates me though. It is evidently the theory of some arm-chair lounger who evolves all these neat little paradoxes in the seclusion of his own study. It is not practical. I should like to see him clapped down in a third class carriage on the Underground, and asked to give the trades of all his fellow-travellers. I would lay a thousand to one against him.”

“You would lose your money,” Sherlock Holmes remarked calmly. “As for the article I wrote it myself.”

“You!”

“Yes, I have a turn both for observation and for deduction. The theories which I have expressed there, and which appear to you to be so chimerical are really extremely practical—so practical that I depend upon them for my bread and cheese.”

“And how?” I asked involuntarily.

“Well, I have a trade of my own. I suppose I am the only one in the world. I’m a consulting detective, if you can understand what that is…”

24: Resistance, Day 1 - Let the Enquirer Begin

Monday, February 18, 2047: 1045 hours - “Interview” Room C, North Branch auxiliary facility of SEP

It’s only been like

Two hours

Since Gabriel and Felix dragged the coffee boiler, the pot of slightly-not-as-hot hot chocolate, a bunch of coffee tubs, and some other random boxes of food like granola bars and bags of chips to the “Security Set Up Room” in the auxiliary facility - a room for staging a bunch of stuff for the
“guards” in the prison camp, including cases full of extra tactical gear, spare paintball rifles, the remaining foam mattress pads, cheap blankets, and what probably equates to about one ton of 5 gallon water jugs.

So it’s only been like

Two hours

And Gabriel already wants to crack his new datapad in half and set everything in the auxiliary facility on fire.

*Formal, direct questioning interviews all fucking week,* Gabriel groans internally, as he “restocks” his interview room’s “supply” of the basics in between “interviews” - the “basics” being a small tray with a thermos of the getting-cooler-and-cooler hot chocolate, his small camping kettle of coffee, a stock of granola bars, a container of the powder creamer, and two cups -

One for the “prisoner”

And one for himself because he needs coffee too, dammit.

*Especially* today.

*This is going to be a longass week,* Gabriel reminds himself as he sets the kettle - refilled with coffee from the industrial boiler in the staging room - on the tray. After he and Felix had gotten the coffee boiler and pot of hot chocolate all set up in the security staging room - and they had to effectively fight off half the “guards” from taking several cups of both (“One per person, assholes,” Felix had yelled at them, “Or we stop making it!”) - Gabriel had darted back to the kitchen, complimented Davis a few more times to get her to loan him some cups for the Foxes, headed off into the pantry to grab a bucket of “coffee” -

And

With hood drawn up

Had gone off to his room to grab his thermos and kettle.

When Gabriel had returned to the security staging room with the thermos and kettle and cups, Michael, the asshole, had looked at him and taunted him, “Wow, only quality service at the Reyes bed and breakfast, huh?”

“A paintball rifle doesn’t intimidate me, Tsang,” Gabriel had muttered with a dry smirk as he’d filled the thermos with then-kinda-warm hot chocolate, “And neither does your insecure ego.”

A smattering of laughter around the staging room had rewarded Gabriel, and Michael had snapped, “At least I’m not sucking dicks for intel, Reyes.”

“Legally, I’m not allowed to do that,” Gabriel had stated loudly, filling the kettle with the coffee, “But that’s okay, because I’ll do it for fun some other time.”

“Jesus, Gabriel,” Felix had snorted as Mary had practically hacked up a lung. Gabriel had grinned at his roommate and headed off for his assigned “Interview room” down the hall.

After that -

A small, personal sort of Hell had started.
Okay, Gabriel thinks, still staring at the set of “incentive” items on his table, So I just interviewed 35, James, who bunked with my next interviewee - they’re pretty good friends, and they paired up for Survival and Evasion together. So they trust each other pretty well…

Suddenly, there’s a brisk, if brusque knock at the door behind him, and Gabriel

Inhales

Exhales

And calls out, “Enter.”

He hears the door slide open, and - with a casual, easy, almost languid demeanor - he turns to see that one of the trainer-soldiers has brought the next “prisoner” he’s requested -

Prisoner: 65
Derek Krause.

Gabriel watches as the trainer-soldier yanks the hood off of Derek’s head, just outside the room, and then roughly shoves the semi-disoriented “prisoner” through the open door. Derek stumbles through, barely maintaining his balance with his hands cuffed in front of him, and the trainer-soldier snaps (mainly to Gabriel), “Call when you’re done.”

And then he slaps the “shut” button and the door slides closed.

It is

As always

The details that prick at Gabriel’s brain to start.

Tall, Gabriel notes, not even bothering to think in full sentences, structuring everything like mental bullet points, Two inches taller than me - 6’3”. Strawberry blonde, was once a standard crew cut but hasn’t been shaped recently, but shaves his face regularly. Lowkey insecure about appearances but can’t keep up with maintaining. Got his lightweight all-weather jacket, but only sweatpants - used to the cold.

In the middle of Gabriel’s quick, rapidfire observations, Derek glances over his shoulder towards the door, his fairly attractive face contorting into a bitter scowl and -

Not used to rough handling or tough love, Gabriel determines, Tall, pretty muscular - if he’s played contact sports like soccer, he might be used to elbowing people, but not normally. No brothers, or maybe the eldest brother. Also not used to being the “problem” in his own life even though he actually often is. Fairly high external locus of control.

And then -

Derek flicks his gaze towards Gabriel, scowl lightening a bit but his eyes still deeply mistrustful, a bit bleary, and a little confused -

Blue eyes, Gabriel thinks, before he adds:

Lighter than Jack’s.

Derek straightens himself up, trying to reach his full height even though Gabriel’s combat boots give
him an extra inch, so really, the difference in their statures does nothing but provide Gabriel a few more mental notes on the “prisoner.”

*Used to being one of the tallest - if not the tallest - person in his life, Gabriel details, Not mean about it, not particularly petty, but instinctively uses and expects a height advantage. Rightfully skeptical but possibly for the wrong reasons - ignored the most dangerous person in this room (me) to sideeye the guard instead. Kinda slow reactions, but that also might be this morning.*

Derek doesn’t outright stare him down, but he does stand there, defiantly still, saying nothing, which Gabriel does give him a bit of credit for. Gabriel, meanwhile, with that casual, easy, almost languid pace, slowly rights himself, saying, “Morning.”

Silence continues for a second, before Derek mutters, “…You’re a senior soldier. The one who knows Morrison.”

“Yup, that’s me - Number: 24, Reyes here,” Gabriel says, thinking, *Okay, really not quick on the draw here.* Derek squints a little under the more naturally-bright lights of the room, saying slowly, “…So they got you guys doing interrogations and shit?”

Gabriel gives him a neutral expression before he holds up his hands in a casual, easy, almost languid shrug, replying, “I mean. I’m just here with breakfast. Though I guess it’s brunch now.”

Derek now *really* scowls at him, mainly in confusion though, half-asking, half-stating, “What.”

Gabriel steps away from his table, moving around it with a quick, fluid motion, gesturing to the tray of “basics” in the center, explaining, “Look, I got coffee or hot chocolate and some granola bars. Sorry, no eggs today - I’m still trying to get the cook to agree to that. And no tea. It was hard enough to get the hot chocolate -”

“I’m - *what,*” Derek says, hesitantly taking a step forward towards the table, still shaking his head in disbelief, “Hot chocolate, what the fuck -”

“You want some?” Gabriel offers, picking up one of the cups and gesturing towards Derek with it, “Made it myself. Even got real milk.” And then Gabriel looks up at Derek, and gives him a sly smirk, chuckling, “And - this is just between you and me - but I even added a little pinch of sugar and cinnamon because the chef left the kitchen. Those chocolate bars they supply us with are not great.”

“Wait - I’m still confused,” Derek mutters, taking another few steps towards the table. The room isn’t big - just enough for the table and two chairs, with the audio-enabled small camera tucked up in a corner behind Gabriel. So Derek’s practically at his seat when he asks hoarsely, “…Hot chocolate? You seriously made hot chocolate?”

Gabriel looks at him with a skeptical, deadpan expression before muttering, “Uh, yeah? What, were you expecting Irish coffee or something? Look, dude, this brunch got granola bars and powder creamer - you can’t expect a full English breakfast here. Or an Irish one. Whatever - you know what I mean.”

“No, that’s not -” Derek starts to try and clarify himself, but he gives up, sighing, “Fuck it, forget it. Not like anything makes sense this week or whatever.”

“…So is that a yes to the hot chocolate?” Gabriel asks, reaching for the thermos, but Derek shakes his head, dragging his chair out with his hands (still handcuffed), muttering, “No, can’t. Can’t have cinnamon.”
“...What,” Gabriel half-states, half-asks in confusion, and Derek flops himself in the seat, explaining, “Allergic. Not like, *super bad* or anything, but I break out into rashes if I eat it.”

“...Oh shit, really?” Gabriel asks, before he glances at his own hands, saying, “Uh, I mean, I can wash my hands first -”

“Oh no, it’s really not that bad,” Derek adds, shrugging, “I only get it if I eat some. I have a cousin who like, almost goes into shock if she touches it, though.”

“Holy shit,” Gabriel says with genuine awe, “That’s terrifying.” Derek sighs, agreeing, “Yeah, she never buys anything from bakeries. You just can’t tell, you know?”

“Huh, that’s gotta be a surprisingly difficult thing to get around,” Gabriel comments, before reaching for the kettle instead, asking, “Coffee then?”

“...It’s not poisoned?” Derek asks, blearily suspicious again. Gabriel gives him an unimpressed look, before he pours some of the coffee into his own cup. With fluid movements, he lifts the cup to his lips and drinks some, before pulling it back and making a face, muttering, “Look, it would probably taste better if it was poisoned. Army coffee is its own special sort of torture.”

Derek watches him skeptically, but eventually relents, saying, “Yeah, sure, I’ll take a cup.” As Gabriel pours some of the coffee into the second cup, the “prisoner” mutters, “...I’m surprised you didn’t know?”

“Didn’t know what?” Gabriel asks back, setting the cup in front of Derek. Derek looks at him with a rather honest expression, saying, “About the allergy. I kinda thought you older soldiers were like, ‘in on it.’”

“Do I look like I’m in charge of health and safety around here?” Gabriel jokes dryly, giving himself a little bit more coffee. He even adds in some of the powder creamer, saying, “Contrary to whatever rumors you all have about us, the senior soldiers are often just as informed about the program as you guys are.”

“Oh,” Derek says and - obviously without thinking - adds, “So you don’t know about the other allergies here? Seems kinda bad if you could accidentally trigger a reaction with the food and stuff.”

Gabriel pauses -

...*Other allergies? -*

Before he slowly seats himself in his own chair with a casual, easy

Almost languid

Motion, saying, “...You’re right. Seems like a bad oversight. I’ll see if the docs will let us have that information. It would’ve been pretty terrible if I had given you a reaction today.”

“Hmm,” Derek hums, watching him, agreeing, “Will they give you that?”

“If it’s for safety, I don’t see why not,” Gabriel bluffs, “Look, total honesty with you, dude - this week is going to suck, sure, but no one is supposed to die or break out into hives. That’s extra fucked up. It’s still just a simulation.”

“...Well, sure,” Derek mutters, looking a bit uncertain, “But isn’t that like, part of the plan?”
“...For someone to die?” Gabriel asks with a clearly feigned tone of horror. Derek rolls his eyes, saying obliviously, “No, I mean the genetic immunity...program...thing me and the others are in.”

... The shock almost slips onto Gabriel’s face, but he masks the emotion as quickly as it comes, even as his thoughts race internally:

Genetic immunity?? Is there a sub-program?? Allergic diseases and severity of reactions are caused by a combination of hereditary and environmental factors, so perhaps there’s a part of the “enhancements” targeting the hereditary aspects? Current medical practice says that low-level exposure therapy is the best solution for non-food allergens, but perhaps SEP thinks they can target some of the known hereditary routes for stuff like inherited allergic diseases?

And then

Gabriel’s eyes narrow slightly as he thinks calculatingly:

Are there other “sub-programs” or objectives they haven’t told us?

Are we being “enhanced” in other ways we don’t know about?

...

The thought doesn’t scare him as much as it should -

But it does make his own personal goals for this week a little more…

Twisted

If he can pull them off.

But for now -

Play the part.

Keep up the mask of nonchalant smoke and relaxed mirrors.

“You mean something other than the enhancements we’re all supposed to develop?” Gabriel asks, maintaining a casual, easy, almost languid attitude. Derek nods, saying, “I guess so? There’s like, I dunno, twenty of us with some sort of - what did they call it? - ‘moderate to severe reactions’ to different allergens. I dunno if we’re getting any injections that are, like, different from other people’s, but every few months they do those prick tests on us. We got one when we joined and we just had one a week and a half ago.”

“Hmm,” Gabriel hums quietly, asking, “But they told you guys about this, right? It was part of your paperwork for signing up?”

“Oh yeah, we all knew,” Derek replies casually, easily -

Almost languidly.

Gabriel stops himself from smirking, instead twisting his grin into a faint, amused smile.

“I dunno, for a program that sounds like a secret government conspiracy thing, there ain’t a ton of secrets going on around here,” Derek half-jokes, half-laments. Gabriel smiles at him sympathetically,
replying, “Right? I kinda thought this was gonna be some sort of crazy comic book plot, but it turns out it’s just generic military training in Idaho.”

“Pfft, exactly,” Derek grins, before he reaches out with both hands -

And seemingly instinctively twists the cup so that the handle faces his left (Gabriel’s right) -

And picks it up with his left hand to take a drink.

Gabriel watches him for a moment, before he gives Derek a bright grin, saying cheerfully, “Another southpaw.”

“...What?” Derek asks, slowly lowering his mug to raise an eyebrow at Gabriel. Gabriel lifts his own left hand, wiggling his gloved fingers at Derek, adding, “Left-handed?”

“Oh. Yeah,” Derek says blandly, before he chuckles, “I would never have noticed that, to be honest.”

Gabriel gives him a warm, cheerful grin -

*The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes.*

And replies teasingly:

“I try to look out for my fellow lefties.”

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76: Resistance, Day 1 - If you have all the details of a thousand at your finger ends

Monday, February 18, 2047: 1100 hours - Cell 5

“‘- Let the enquirer begin by mastering more elementary problems. Let him, on meeting a fellow-mortal, learn at a glance to distinguish the history of the man, and the trade or profession to which he belongs,’” Jack says, his voice rasping and fraying a bit at the edges, “‘Puerile as such an exercise may seem, it sharpens the faculties of observation, and teaches one where to look and what to look for.’”

It’s…

Borderline impossible

To describe both how miserable and how blissfully soothing reading aloud has been.

The misery stems from the ache in his shoulders, the stiffness in his back and hips, the way he has to curl in on himself to hide the book, while projecting loud enough to speak over his own physical body and the music (when it plays). Jack’s never had problems with using his voice - his parents made Peter and him participate in their choir until Jack picked up track as a priority for his free time, and the Morrisons all had admittedly deep, resounding voices. Jack has sounded this way since like sixteen, so he is neither particularly nervous nor shy about reading a piece of literature aloud to twenty-plus other people.
But he’s never done it while competing with the eerie, irritating, wailing chant of a man sobbing about boots boots boots boots movin’ up and down again

Up and down again

Up and down again.

Top it off with his awkward position of shielding the book from the drone, and the agony of the act is starting to really chip at his well-worn edges.

However

Reading aloud has given him such focus

Such purpose

That he can effectively ignore the bizarre and specific pain he’s in.

They’ve had to stop once so far, when another trainer-soldier had entered to drag Derek out of Cell 4. Jack had hastily stuffed the book in his pocket, as the prisoners in both cells had immediately rushed to put their backs to the walls, hands above their heads. The guard had snorted something about them being “fast learners” before he had hooded and cuffed Derek - who had been rather stupidly stubborn about “resisting” - and then hauled him off to something…

...None of the other three people “detained” were back yet.

When the guard and Derek had left, the groups had returned to their positions, with Jack slowly easing the book out of his pocket and resuming the reading. He was already used to the mixed brisk-and-brusque writing style of the Holmes stories from his time with Gabriel, but even so, Jack had been surprised at how quickly chapter 1 had passed.

Although there were also moments where…

Commentary

Occurred.

Only ten minutes ago, Jack had read off the particular passage:

“His ignorance was as remarkable as his knowledge. Of contemporary literature, philosophy and politics he appeared to know next to nothing. Upon my quoting Thomas Carlyle, he inquired in the naivest way who he might be and what he had done -”

“Who the hell is Thomas Carlyle?” Lucas had impatiently interrupted. Surprisingly, Jack himself hadn’t been upset over Lucas’ interruptions, but some of the others hadn’t felt the same -

“He’s some old dude, Lucas,” Mari had groaned back, her obvious snark making Jack grin. However, Khan had replied more patiently, “Thomas Carlyle was a 19th Century historian and philosopher. He was the guy who said ‘The history of the world is just a biography of great men,’ or something like that -”

“Sounds like a boring version of history,” Ayinde had teased from Cell 4, but Erica had snorted, “Nothing drier about history than reading about how a bunch of rich and powerful men fought each other for more riches and more power.”

“Isn’t that all that history is?” Sam had replied, but Nadia had jumped in, countering, “No, that’s all
that we are taught history is. Actual history is the story of human life itself.”

Would Gabriel agree that history is just a list of powerful men fighting each other? Jack had briefly considered, but then he had glanced at the red, fake-leather anthology in his hands and remembered the Night of the Double-Dose:

“Life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent,” the ghost of Gabriel’s voice - spun-sunshine and sugar-smoke and starlit smirks, even in the shadows of memories - had murmured to Jack.

Jack had remembered the way Gabriel had urged him to look deeper, think further, question himself more -

How any reply, any response -

Even silence -

Could be an answer with a treasure trove of information in and of itself.

Jack had traced his fingers over the soft, well-worn edges of the pages, deciding with quiet, boundless joy, No. Gabriel has a love for complexity…

And then Jack had grinned to himself, laughing inside, Even if he is melodramatic about it.

…

It had taken him an embarrassingly long second to realize Mari was making a weird, confused face at him.

And another embarrassingly long second to realize that everyone had stopped talking.

“...Are you going to keep reading?” Mari had asked him, her dark eyes concerned, “Do you want someone to take over?”

“N-no, I can keep going,” Jack had stammered, hastily opening the book to where his finger was marking the page. He had rescanned the lines, before coughing a bit, and reading loudly, “My surprise reached a climax, however, when I found incidentally that he was ignorant of the Copernican Theory and of the composition of the Solar System. That any civilized human being in this nineteenth century should not be aware that the earth travelled round the sun appeared to be to me such an extraordinary fact -”

“He didn’t know the earth travelled around the Sun??” Lucas had practically demanded in utter indignation and horror -

And howls of laughter had gone up in both cells as Miguel had wheezed, “God, I love that line - just wait until we get to the list -”

And sure enough

At Watson’s list of “Sherlock Holmes - his limits”

Another round of furious discussion and debate had started over “how the hell could this famous detective be this ignorant on life??” and “Well, it was the 1800’s -” and “But he didn’t even know the Earth revolves around the Sun -” and “What the hell is a candlestick player?” and “It’s singlestick -” and “Okay, so again - what the hell is a singlestick player?”
So now here they are -

About 90% of the way through the paragraph on “The Science of Deduction and Analysis” -

And Jack reads out, “By a man’s finger nails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boot, by his trouser knees, by the callosities of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by his shirt cuffs - by each of these things a man’s calling is plainly revealed.”

“No way,” Lucas suddenly says, “You really think someone could figure who a person is by his fingernails -?”

“Oh my god,” Maritoni shouts from Cell 4, “Who cares, Lucas - it’s just a story -”

“Just a story??” Miguel immediately snaps, “Sherlock Holmes is the greatest detective in fiction!”

“He’s fake, Loyola,” Maritoni retorts, “Of course he’s that stupid smart because he’s not real. No one can do this shit in real life!”

Maybe it’s the exhaustion pulling at his eyes

Maybe it’s the mental strain of boots boots boots boots movin’ up and down again

Up and down again

Maybe it’s the ache in his shoulder and hips

Maybe it’s the dryness catching in his throat, jagged edges sharp like unworn paperbacks

But Jack suddenly and feverishly vividly can see Gabriel’s softer, more patient, more tender smile - gilded bronze at the corners by the flicker of firelight and the crisp cut of lanternlight and the sweet shine of starlight -

As Gabriel’s voice - spun-sunlight, sugar-smoked, starlit-smirk - murmurs:

“The only way to start gathering information for the construction of knowledge...is simply to ask questions and interpret the answers you receive...no matter what they are.”

And how that faint smile - bittersweet and sweetly bitter - had turned into a rich, regal, starlit smirk

As Gabriel had read Jack like an open book

And rattled off his entire life in a few short sentences.

But Jack is suddenly and feverishly vividly jolted back to the moment by someone shouting:

“Actual detectives use Holmes as an example of logic -”

“Actual detectives use forensic science to solve mysteries -”

“We haven’t reached that part yet - Holmes basically legitimized forensics to the public!”

“Isn’t he just talking about like, demographics and shit?” Vanessa asks over the heated argument, “Like, it sounds like he’s really just talking about basic statistics, right?”

“Yes and no,” Khan says to her, “A lot of Holmes’ logic throughout all of his stories does rely on his knowledge of general demographics in 1800’s Britain, so you could argue that what he’s using is
rudimentary demographic analysis. But in theory, you can’t apply it everywhere.”

“I can imagine,” Nadia huffs, “Like his idea of shirt cuffs? That’s not even something that most people use today, let alone in other parts of the world.”

“But his methods make sense in the contexts of each story and mystery,” Miguel juts in, “Sure, it’s all predicated on his general knowledge, but that’s why he’s so smart - he’s just applying his knowledge of different occupations to astute observations. The point here isn’t looking at some dude’s fingernails and finding out he doesn’t keep them clean - the point is that you look at some dude’s fingernails and see they’re covered in motor oil, so he was working on a car.”

“Isn’t that just literally basing your assumptions and ideas of people on first impressions?” Cristina asks, “Aren’t we like, literally told not to do that? This is a dangerous line of thinking.”

“I think that -”

It takes Jack an embarrassingly long second to realize his own voice is speaking.

The group falls (mostly) quiet (with the exception of a few huffy whispers) as he blinks, and lets himself say:

“...I think that there’s a difference between careful, critical observation of details and building judgments off of hasty, sweeping impressions. The former is the way you get evidence for...anything. I guess - science, statistics, diagnoses, decisions - and the latter is how you make bad assumptions.”

…

The silence that follows is Voluminous.

And

Embarrassingly

It says everything.

Jack grins bashfully, adding nervously, “Of course, I would probably say I’m more of a Watson than a Holmes.”

“No, I think that was a nice way to put it,” Nadia says calmly, and Jack is relieved to hear he hasn’t made a total jackass of himself like usual. She continues thoughtfully, “I still think it would require an insane amount of detailed demographic knowledge to make it work the way Holmes describes it, and like, all of his stories existed before people really knew about stuff like DNA evidence, but when you distill it down to its core, you could put it that way.”

“I guess I would add that,” Miguel sighs more conversationally, “Having read a lot of Holmes, he’s definitely against using stuff like first impressions or assumptions. That’s his whole point. Holmes uses careful observations to make his analyses. That doesn’t mean Doyle wasn’t a man of his times, though. Dude would be a real asshole by today’s standards.”

“Doyle was already kind of an asshole by his own times’ standards,” Khan adds patiently, “He was humorous about it, sure, but he did try to kill off Holmes just to spite everyone.”
“Whoa, what - *spoilers*!” Lucas half-stammers, half-hisses, causing several people to laugh and Sam to shout, “The stories are over *one-hundred years old*, Lucas!”

“In one of my high school English classes,” Sima laughs, “We had to read ‘Jekyll and Hyde,’ and some of the students were complaining about spoilers. So the teacher took a vote, and it turned out that *half the class* did not know Jekyll and Hyde were the same person -”

“NO,” David practically *gasps* in sheer horror as Jack wheezes. Mari giggles, and he can feel Adrien cracking up as their backs bump into each other. But then -

From the echoes down the hall attached to their cell unit -

They hear heavy footfalls -

And a voice - gruff and indistinct - shouting something -

And before the sound of laughter can even fully fade from the cell unit -

Both groups are scrambling to their feet.

In the flurry of movement, Jack stuffs the book back in his pocket, bolting to the “upper” wall, taking his “spot” next to the toilet privacy curtain, Adrien next to him, Nadia closest to the bars. The other members of Cell 5 fan out along the other two walls, and across the way, the members of Cell 4 mirror them.

There’s a still moment of heavy, terse silence and then -

They hear the beep-beep-beep-beep (up and down again, up and down again) chime through the wall -

And then the metal door to the cell unit slides open -

And a harsh voice growls out, “*Move.*”

A thin shadow - merely a wisp under all the intense, bright lights - somehow moves in while also receding to its owner, who stumbles in blindly, hood covering their head, hands cuffed in front of them. A second later, the trainer-soldier follows after them, roughly prodding the space between their shoulders with the barrel end, and anger froths and writhes inside Jack -

As he watches the “prisoner” take several shaky, shivery steps

As if struggling just to hold themselves upright.

“Stop,” the guard snaps at the prisoner, who can barely stand. The guard pulls out a small, generic passcard, taps it to the electronic lock on the door of Cell 5, and yanks the door open. The end of it clatters on the tracks and crashes against the far wall with a loud, metallic shattering sound, startling them all, but especially startling the prisoner, who nearly jumps out of their skin. The guard snaps the passcard back into his pocket, before he pulls out a smaller keycard, and taps it on the prisoner’s cuffs, electronically unlocking them.

The prisoner seems to *whimper* in pain -

And Jack nearly steps away from the wall to rush the guard -

When another paintball pops next to his right eye.
“...I know already,” Jack growls lowly, to no one in particular, but Adrien murmurs back, “Easy, Jack - it’s almost over.”

“Hey!” the guard suddenly shouts, whipping around towards them. He’s still wearing his gaiter and headgear, so it’s impossible to figure out who he is (just that he’s not a senior soldier - there’s no number on his jacket). He waves his own paintball rifle at them, snapping, “Shut the fuck up in there or I shoot her.”

He glowers at Jack and Adrien, but when he gets only stony, angry stares back, he mutters, “See, kids, it ain’t hard to learn. Stand against the wall, shut up, and maybe you’ll get one less round in a blackout box for good behavior.” He turns back towards the prisoner, rips the hood off her head, and grabs her by an upper arm, pushing her into the cell as he snarls, “Against a wall, Prisoner: 74.”

Clearly disoriented and barely able to stand, Robin staggers with the force of his push, tripping over her own feet and crumbling to her knees.

“Robin!” Nadia shouts, starting to lurch forward to help her roommate when -

She lets out a short, terse yelp -

As the drone blasts several paintballs against her stomach.

“What the fuck did I just say?” the guard shouts at Nadia, pointing his own gun at her. Nadia gasps and heaves, but rights herself, putting her back against the wall again, hands above her head, a bitter and defiant look on her graceful face.

“Do it again, I dare you,” the guard growls at Nadia, who simply seethes at him, her chest rising and falling up and down again, up and down again with her fury. When she does nothing, the guard points his gun back at Robin, who has had to place her hands on the ground just to help herself stand again, and he shouts, “Against a wall, 74!”

Robin groans, forcing her right leg to shift from her knee to her foot, but she’s still kneeling -

“Five seconds to get to a wall, 74!” the guard orders her, and Robin shakily attempts to rise, but nearly slips and ends up kneeling again -

“Four!” the guard hisses, and Robin rises -

“Three!” he rasps out, and she takes an awkward step towards the empty space between Nadia and Adrien -

“Two!” he warns, aiming the gun, and she half-stumbles, half-trips her way to it, practically collapsing against it. She presses her forehead against it, palms and fingers spread on the concrete, as if she’s trying to hang on by pure contact alone -

“Back against it. Now,” the guard snaps, and with a broken, shuddering sigh, Robin manages to torque her body around, as if on a swivel, practically sliding herself along it until she flops against it on her back, her legs obviously shaking.

There’s a terse, heavy moment of nothing and then -

“Stand up straight, 74,” the guard says to her in a dark, deadly whisper. All Jack can hear are her sniffles, and a soft, “Please -”

“Did I say you could talk, 74?” the guard demands, raising the gun, pointing the barrel to her
forehead, even from the open “doorway.” A low, cracking sob exhales from her, and there’s a moment of painfully long, awkward shuffling until -

“...Good,” the guard rumbles, before he leans over and grabs the first bar of the “door.” He slides it shut, slamming it closed, and it automatically locks itself. He backs towards the metal cell unit door sadistically slowly, his gun still pointed at Robin, menacing at her, “Two hours in a blackout box is a drop in the ocean, 74. You need to work on that endurance.”

And then he steps backwards through the cell unit door -

And it slams shut.

Immediately, Robin drops to her knees and, a fraction of a second later, Nadia is by her side, rubbing her back as Robin whispers, “Holy fuck -”

Jack bolts past Adrien, kneeling next to her, already asking, “What happened?”

“Box,” Robin cracks out hoarsely, “Small box. Too small to sit, or even kneel. All I could do was squat. Then music - over and over and over - so loud -”

“...Blackout box,” Nadia sighs, helping Robin recline against the wall, as Jack helps her stretch out her legs -

“What the hell is that?” Adrien asks, as the other members of Cell 5 move in -

“Exactly like she said,” Ayinde says from Cell 4, “They put you in a box that’s basically uncomfortable to be in, pitch black, and then play the same song for you on repeat until you go insane.”

“A forced stress position, coupled with induced claustrophobia and music torture,” Jin adds, and Sam half-gawks, half-demands, “For two hours??”

“Unfortunately, two hours is just the tip of the iceberg,” Selena sighs, “Blackout boxes are pretty cheap and easy to make - the most expensive part is the stereos, but you don’t have to include music torture. Stress positions alone are miserable.”

“Yeah,” Aisha agrees from Cell 4, “It’s fucked up to say it, but two hours in a stress position is about as easy as they can go to begin with. When you hit five or six hours in a stress position, that’s about standard for SERE training, could be more or less given music torture or tasering.”

“Jesus,” Lucas mutters, as Adrien asks, “So this is why they taught us all those counting and breathing techniques last week?”

“Basically,” Nadia says, “The idea is to put mind over matter and either endure or sublimate the pain.”

Jack bites back the anger behind his teeth, and instead looks up at Robin, gesturing to her sock-covered feet as he asks, “Is it okay if I check them?”

Robin seems to need a full second, maybe even two to process what he’s asking, but she nods, sniffling as she murmurs, “I still can’t feel them.”

“We’ll let you rest for a bit until you can stand,” Jack says, tugging off the sock on her right foot and - fuck - it’s steeped in sweat, still humidly warm from whatever body heat is left in her feet but rapidly cooling now that the “pressure” is off it -
“Fuck,” Adrien whispers in horror above him -

As Jack examines Robin’s bare left foot -

Her skin a mottled blotching of bright, angry, swollen red from where the blood and pressure had pooled, and chilled, pale, shivery white where the blood had not circulated properly.

Jack sighs in frustration, pulling off the sock on her right foot, which looks like a mirror to her left. He shakes his head, muttering, “We need to let your socks dry, unfortunately. Cold, wet socks can just aggravate the situation. When you start feeling pins and needles again, we’ll start doing some easy exercises and massages to get your nerves feeling. Let’s try moving you to the mattress pads - if you can curl up, you can warm yourself up again -”

“It’s so weird,” Robin mutters loosely, as Nadia tries to help her stand. Robin staggers a little as they get her upright, still mumbling distantly, “It was so...fucking hot in that box. Like humid. Gross. I was sweating for so long. And the music was so...fucking loud. I wish they would stop playing that stupid song.”

As Jack rises, he shares a nervous glance with Adrien and -

“They...aren’t playing any music,” Mari whispers lowly and Robin blinks at her blearily, before stating, “...Oh.”

“C’mon, over here,” Nadia says to her, guiding her roommate to the cluster of the thin foam pads against the back wall of the cell. Robin half-stumbles, half-staggers her way over there, and Jack heads to the sink, setting her socks on the rim to dry. He makes a disgusted face and then -

**Gotta try it sometime** -

Twists the loose, cheap metal knob above the tap.

A low-pressure of mostly-clear water seeps out, and Jack gingerly sticks his hands under, hissing a little at the freezing chill of it. He does his best to at least attempt to be clean, and then turns the knob back off, shaking his hands over the drain to flick off remaining droplets.

His fingers are already feeling numb, just from the ten second scrub.

…

Nights are going to be miserable.

“Here,” Nadia says, helping Robin turn around to face the bars of the cell and put her back against the wall, “Try sitting -”

But their number leader stops -

As they suddenly hear more heavy footfalls down the hall -

“Fuck,” Lucas hisses, and all prisoners rush to the walls again. Mari and Vanessa look a bit lost, until Jack gestures to them to replace Nadia and Robin on the “upper” wall, and they move to fill in by Adrien as -

**Beep-beep-beep-beep** -

The cell unit door slides open again.
Jack glances at Robin, who is shaking trying to hold the usual wall position, but Nadia is whispering incessantly to her, in soft, patient tones “Stay strong, just thirty seconds, it will be done soon, thirty more seconds -”

But she stops talking as the trainer-soldier lazily pushes another returning prisoner into the small space between the cells.

The hooded-and-handcuffed figure is just about Jack’s height, a bit taller, and a low, muffled masculine voice mutters “Jackass” just quietly enough that the guard seems to miss it in the loud sounds of all-weather fabric moving. The guard saunters past the prisoner, this time facing Cell 4, and there’s the beep of a passcard unlocking the door.

He slides it open, before yanking the hood off of the returnee and -

Derek shakes his head like a startled cat, and the guard gives a low, languid laugh, muttering, “Jesus, you new bloods scare so easily.” He pulls out the handcuff chipkey and releases the cuffs from Derek’s wrist, which Derek almost immediately starts rubbing at. The guard then gestures to the open space of Cell 4 with his paintball rifle, saying, “Alright, dumbass, tea time is over, get the fuck inside.”

Derek glowers at the guard a bit, but then enters the cell, putting his hands above his head. This guard doesn’t even wait for Derek to reach a wall, and instead draws the cell door closed immediately, before he snarks loudly, “Can’t wait until I get to taser you with a cattle prod, 65.”

And then he leaves and the cell unit door shuts behind him.

“...Fucking asshole,” Derek starts to mutter -

When Robin drops to the mattress pads, breathing hard.

In Cell 4, Derek blinks at her in surprise as Nadia kneels beside her, murmuring soft, easy encouragement, and Jack is back by the two of them, saying, “Okay, I know it’s going to be rough, but try lying down -”

“What happened to her?” Derek asks obliviously, and both Jack and Nadia make the same “are you kidding me” faces at each other -

“Blackout box,” Miguel says to his cellmate, and Cristina adds, “Squatting stress position and music torture for two hours…And this is just the beginning.”

“Holy shit,” Derek mutters loudly in obvious awe, as Jack and Nadia guide Robin to lie down on her right side, back towards the wall. She starts to hiss at them as they try to tuck her legs against her chest, but Jack murmurs patiently, “I know it hurts, but you have to keep your lower legs and feet warm. I’m going to pull the ends of your sweatpants down around your feet -”

“What happened to you?” Aisha asks Derek in the background, and Erica says dryly, “Yeah, you look...normal.”

“Uh, rude, I always look normal,” Derek wisecracks, and Ayinde retorts, “So obviously you didn’t get tortured. Great.”

“Yeah!” Derek says, as if he’s caught onto another weird, indignant conspiracy like the mattress pad distribution from earlier -

Jack does his best to tug the elastic ends of Robin’s sweatpants down past her ankles and around her
feet -

“I thought this was torture resistance training,” Derek says loudly in the background -

“...Do you still hear the song?” Jack asks Robin, whose eyes look a little glazed but she manages to mutter, “It’s...I can tell it’s in my head now -”

“But instead one of the senior soldiers offered me hot chocolate and coffee!”

Jack

Stops.

Maybe it’s the exhaustion pulling at his eyes

Maybe it’s the mental strain of boots boots boots boots movin’ up and down again

Up and down again

Maybe it’s the ache in his shoulder and hips

Maybe it’s the dryness catching in his throat, jagged edges sharp like unworn paperbacks

Maybe it’s the fear that any and all of them could actually get frostbite this week

Maybe it’s the fear that the threat of getting frostbite could be the least damaging part of this week

But Jack suddenly and feverishly vividly

Feels

*Hurt -*

Almost

*Betrayed.*

“You only if you treat me to some real hot chocolate,” he can hear his own voice joke in his memories -

And the way Gabriel had smiled

Before he had replied, “It’s a deal then, soldado” to Jack’s silly little attempt at flirting and -

“What?” someone asks in Cell 4, and Jack finds himself turning around slowly -

“I’m not kidding,” Derek says, “Legit, I thought I was going to get tasered or poisoned or something, but no, one of the senior soldiers straight up offered me hot chocolate and coffee and uh, granola bars - and all we did was talk -”

“...The good cop,” Miguel mutters lowly, as Sima asks, “Was it...good hot chocolate?”

“I don’t know,” Derek says, turning around to look at Cell 5, “I didn’t have any. He said he put cinnamon in it, and I’m allergic -”

Jack is

*Embarrassed*
At how relieved he feels to hear that Derek Did not Have any of the hot chocolate.

...God, that’s petty of me, Jack reprimands himself quietly, but he still cannot shake the bittersweet and sweetly bitter surge of small joy in his veins.

“You’re allergic to cinnamon?” Ami asks her cellmate, clearly appalled, as another Cell 4 member, Selma, titters, “How do you live?”

“Alright, assholes, it’s just cinnamon -” Derek starts to say and -

“What did he ask you?”

Everyone is surprised by the raw, raspy intensity in Jack’s voice.

...Even Jack.

...Especially Jack.

Derek blinks at Jack, who is staring him down through the bars of their two cells, and he shrugs, muttering, “Nothing, really -”

“You stuck to Article Five, right?” Aisha asks him, and Derek scowls, saying with increasing frustrating, “Of course I remembered Article Five! I swear, he really didn’t ask anything interesting -”

“What -”

The words

“- Did -”

Crack through the air

“- He -”

Like lightning shattering its bottle


Not even hurt anymore.

Just pure, thunderous, storm-washed, quiet fierceness, low and rich as it builds on the horizon.

There is terse, heavy silence and then -

“Look, Morrison,” Derek says, looking torn between being stiffly angry that Jack is demanding an answer and being nervous that Jack is demanding an answer, “I swear to God, he did not ask anything important. We talked about - I don’t even really remember - allergies and like, being left-handed? It was weird. Like, I swear, we talked about like, right-handed desks and right-handed guns and that turned into learning to shoot -”

Jack’s gaze doesn’t leave Derek’s -
But in his peripherals, he sees Aisha bury her head in her hands and Miguel groans, “*God dammit* .”

“- What??” Derek half-stammers, half-snarls at them, adding defensively, “It wasn’t about military training! I was being careful! We didn’t even talk about Fort Bragg or Assessment and Selection. Hell, I even asked him some questions -”

“What did you ask him?” Jack asks, and Derek glances back at him, muttering nervously, “Jesus, Morrison, you’re really weirding me out. Fuck, I mean, I asked him about like - like he said he knew how to shoot right-handed, and I asked him how long that took and like, if it was worth it. For the record, he said it was, just for the versatility, even though most guns are ambidextrous now -”

“So when you learned to shoot, you learned left-handed?” Jack asks impassively, and Derek scowls, “Fuck, dude, this is a harder interrogation than his. Yeah, definitely. Blasted myself in the face with shells when I first started hunting with my family. So my dad got me a left-handed gun for my birthday that year -”


Just a true, deep, earnest conviction of -

“*...Every response to any question is not merely an answer, but a whole resource and treasure trove of information and intelligence in and of itself…*”

Derek gawks blankly at him, before he mutters with confusion and awe, “...Well, yeah? Is it that obvious? I mean, the Weapons Sergeants are the coolest roles, right?”

Jack says nothing

(which says everything, really)

But he gives Derek a sly, knowing grin.

*Gabriel read you like an open, easy book, he thinks, If it was easy for me to figure out, he had your MOS interest pegged within minutes.*

Derek stares at him, before he mutters defensively, “...He didn’t ask that. He didn’t. He didn’t ask anything about the occupational specialties. Fuck, he didn’t even ask me what I went to school for -”

“But it wasn’t engineering or programming, right?” Jack asks wryly, and somewhere behind him, Selena makes a knowing, observant hum -

Derek stares at him stubbornly, defiantly -

Saying nothing.

...But that says everything, really.

Jack’s smirk deepens as he chuckles, “Silence really *can* speak volumes, can’t it?”

“...I stuck to Article Five,” Derek states stonily, “I did what I was supposed to. I didn’t say anything important. And I got coffee out of it.”

“I can guarantee you Reyes got everything he wanted out of the conversation,” Jack replies, still smirking brightly, “And he *also* got coffee out of it. And probably hot chocolate too.”
And

Suddenly and feverishly vividly

A look of shock and slight horror spreads on Derek’s face

As he mutters lowly, “...How did you know it was Reyes?”

Jack rolls his shoulders, starting to turn around back towards the mattress pads in Cell 5, as the other people (and the drone) watch him -

And he laughs radiantly, “Sorry, 65 - silence is golden.”

But inside, he grins to himself, thinking brightly:

Maybe I can ask Gabriel about the number when he bring me in.

...And finally get some real, good hot chocolate too.

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24: Resistance, Day 1 - Indeed, the whole affair is a puzzler

Monday, February 18, 2047: 0334 hours - heading back to the barrack halls, main SEP facility

“God, I feel so out of shape,” Felix bemoans, tapping at his datapad, and Gabriel can see that he’s flicking through his Network Modeler, checking a document with information he collected, and then back to the version of his network he’s developing.

“I feel you,” Gabriel mutters, as they round a corner into the [1-24] hall. He lolls his head on his shoulders, saying dryly, “I was never amazing at rapport-building to begin with, so a full day of rapport-building and direct questioning interviews after like, eight months of not doing it was miserable.”

“Wait,” Felix says, glancing up at him from Gabriel’s left shoulder with mocking surprise and a teasing tone, “You mean the legendary Gabriel Reyes is not a people person??”

“Alright, asshole, no need to rub it in,” Gabriel retorts, but he’s also grinning back. They’re on their way back to their room, trailing behind Alicia and Mary, after Guerra had dismissed them for the day.

“We’re going to start a rotation for the other duties,” Guerra had said to them ten minutes ago, when they had all finished their interviews for Day 1. The CIA agent had sighed, muttering, “Here’s how it goes: four of you and four days left. I don’t care how or when you set up your interviews, just as long as you do them. Before or after them, however, one of you will join the Echoes on the cameras, the Bravos doing interrogations and control, the Charlies on set up and maintenance, and the Deltas on medical checks. I don’t care if you guys do a rotation or a permanent attachment, but you don’t get any extra spare hours over the others, so you join them in their duties. One to each team. Again, I don’t care how the four of you set this up, just that it gets done. And obviously, you four have to handle whatever food equipment Davis loaned you. Is that clear?”

“Yessir,” the four of them had droned. Guerra had waved them out of their little meeting room,
saying, “I expect you to tell me what you decide by dinner so you can join the schedules for the other
 teams appropriately. Since the simulation is 24 hours for five days, expect to take the night shift at some point. Go get some food, catch a nap, and be ready to add yourself to a secondary team by dinner.”

*The obvious choices are Mary to the Charlies, Felix to the Bravos, Alicia to the Echoes, and me to the Deltas,* Gabriel thinks, rubbing at his exhausted eyes with his hands, *But there’s a disproportionate advantage to the people who join the Bravos and Echoes in that they’ll get more access to more background and white noise intel, so maybe a rotation is better?*

And then

Gabriel scowls a bit, thinking with a quiet, fierce smokiness:

...*And a rotation better suits my needs.*

As they approach their rooms [21-22] and [23-24] at the end of the hallway, Gabriel says with a casual, easy, almost languid tone, “So should we set up a rotation? Or do y’all just want the obvious slots?”

Alicia and Mary pause by their door, and Felix leans himself on his left side against the concrete wall, yawning, “I can do whatever. Though I gotta be honest, being part of Paintball Club for four days sounds massively unappealing.” Gabriel comes to stand next to him, casually trying to keep Felix on his left side (number patch side), and away from the cameras in the hall. Their room is on the other side of Alicia’s and Mary’s, but talking in this position lets him keep his bearing on the camera pointed towards him at the “hallway intersection” just beyond Room [23-24].

“...Yeah, that’s true,” Alicia grimaces, her face twisting into an expression of both disgust and concern, “And who really wants to listen to Boots again while zapping people with tasers?”

“So maybe in the interest of fairness,” Gabriel says - casually, easily, almost languidly - shrugging loosely as he suggests, “We should just rotate? A day in each team for everyone?”

“That’s the most fair version,” Mary agrees, adding, “Bravo will probably get crazier as things go on, too. Gonna get rougher when people start breaking down late Wednesday and into Thursday.”

“Damn, that’s always the worst part,” Felix groans, “It’s going to be absolute hell listening to people lose their minds. I wish Guerra would just abuse his stupid privilege in our favor for once, say that interviews take more priority than us sticking to a strict team schedule.”

“You just know people like Geni, Riya, and Michael are going to force us to adhere to whatever we sign up for,” Gabriel points out, “You could tell them the interviews are for their own future ODAs and they’d still make you sit in the torture room while half the prisoners word-vomit their life stories to Tran’s lackeys in the blackout boxes.

Alicia makes an unimpressed, dry face at him, before muttering, “Do you have to put it that way?”

“How do you manage rapport-building with that attitude, Reyes?” Mary asks him, half-joking, half-sarcastic, half-genuine. Gabriel shrugs, grinning, “It’s a hard task, but I always manage to find the internal strength to forgive myself for my personality.”

“...Yeah, you really dig deep for that, huh?” Alicia mutters, but she relents, “Fine, whatever. Let’s do a rotation. You guys just want to do number-letter? Like, for tomorrow me to Bravo, Mary to Charlie, Felix to Delta, and Gabriel to Echo, and we just rotate each day?”
"Echo first," Gabriel thinks quickly, his thoughts jumping from “cameras” to “visual intel” to “sound control” to “Reyes’ Sick Party Beats Playlist 9” in a second -

"Then...Bravo on Wednesday, Charlie Thursday -

...

Wednesday, huh?

Putting a two-day pressure on himself will be rough, but he has to try.

Gabriel fiddles around with his pocket (his datapad in his right hand), casually pulling out his notebook as he says, “So basically, you rotate in alphabetical order each day, right? So for me, Echo tomorrow, Bravo on Wednesday, Charlie on Thursday and on?” He begins to act like he’s writing down his own schedule, but instead he writes down:

[Wednesday - dinner?]

“Right,” Alicia agrees, adding, “So I would start Bravo tomorrow, then Charlie, Delta, Echo down the line.” Felix sighs, rolling his shoulders a bit as he mutters, “Bravo on Thursday will suck, but sure. I’ve seen worse.”

“Okay, we should let Guerra know at dinner,” Alicia says, as Mary turns and presses the four-digit unlock code into their door’s electronic lockpad. As the two head into their room, and Gabriel and Felix start heading for theirs, Mary calls out, “Either of you going to the tech room after this? I was going to hit the gym first and then try seeing if desktop Network Modeler has more options.”

“Solid idea,” Felix says, as Gabriel taps their code - they had settled on a combined code of birthdays, so 29 for Felix’s date and 12 for Gabriel’s, resulting in 2912 - into their lockpad. As their door slides open, Gabriel replies loudly, “Yeah, I’ll probably do the same - what the hell -”

And he nearly trips over a large, dense, white thing blocking half their doorway.

“...What the hell is that?” Felix asks, looking over his shoulder. Gabriel steps past it, grumbling loudly to himself, “So this is where I left it. Sorry, I grabbed an extra thing of coffee this morning but I guess I forgot it in here when I came to grab my thermos and kettle.”

“Damn,” Felix mutters, side-stepping the white bucket and heading to the right side of the room, “You should probably take it back before Davis or Guerra gets mad at you.” And then Felix pauses, smirking at him, muttering dramatically, “...Or worse.”

“Guerra can’t even insult me properly, let alone do anything worse,” Gabriel mutters, rolling his eyes, walking up to his desk in the left half of the back wall, just below the central window. He sets his notebook and datapad down, sighing, “But Davis, on the other hand, could make my life a living hell.”

“Don’t mess with the chef, dude,” Felix chuckles. As their door slides shut, he grumbles, “Thursday will be awful.”

“Yeah, easily going to be the worst day by far” Gabriel says, returning to the bucket, musing aloud, “Hopefully Bravo on Wednesday will be - I dunno - better, or just shoving prisoners around.”

And then Gabriel makes a face, muttering, “Though if I get real unlucky, I’ll have to clean the gross stuff out of blackout boxes or something instead.”
“Ooooh, pobrecito,” Felix titters at that, before grunting, “…Wait, I could end up doing that too.”

“Tran really does not like us, dude,” Gabriel sighs, grabbing the handle of the bucket, “I wouldn’t put it past him for all four Foxes to get put on vomit duty during our Bravo hours.”

“Good God, this week is going to be miserable,” Felix groans. Gabriel shoots him a sly smirk, saying teasingly, “Now, now, Soldier: 23 - there is a difference between being a professional and just being here -”

“Oh my god, please never do that voice again,” Felix pleads him dryly, “Please. For my own sanity, Reyes.” Gabriel heads to the door, tapping the open button, and - as it slides open again - he grins at Felix, muttering lowly, “Now I know your weaknesses, Soldier: 23.”

“Pfft, like you didn’t already know that I’m weak to snow and bad mess food and dudes with nice brown eyes,” Felix huffs, cracking open his effects chest and pulling out some gym clothes. Gabriel pulls up his hood, laughing loudly, “Should I put that on my network intel?”

“Like you haven’t already,” Felix calls back, before he adds, “I’ll be at the gym with Nakamura.”

“Sure, just gonna head back to the pantry, be there in a bit,” Gabriel replies and -

As the door to Room [23 - 24] slides shut -

He turns left, and continues down the hall to the intersection.

The SEP main facility is a bit like a complicated web: a messy maze of interconnected, semi-subterranean rooms and underground hallways, it’s clearly composed of several, originally-disjointed and disconnected military bunkers that were - over the course of probably several years (and several other “secret” programs) - steadily dug out and attached to one another as necessity required. And pretty clearly, it was only hastily refurbished for SEP a month or two before the program itself started - none of the mismatched concrete has been plastered over properly (besides the ones that were apparently plastered over for other programs in the past), and the equipment in each room is a bizarre intermingling of furniture and technology from over the last decade or so, with only the essentials (the kitchen, the tech room, the security equipment, and the prototype weapons and shooting range) really being updated to 2045 standards. Sure, the beds, gear, and small supplies (towels, sheeting, gym equipment) were all new, and there was a self-run laundry area (much like a laundromat room in an apartment complex), but otherwise, the “facility” was just an amalgamation of hallways for limbs and poorly-connected parts and stuff for guts.

Which Gabriel has used to his advantage from Week 1 onwards.

...Only now

He’s going to kick that into the next gear.

Gabriel turns at the intersection, heading into the next set of “room” halls. The “barracks” section of the facility has only one main bathroom - a huge, communal thing that still has some sense of decency by offering individual toilets and about eight separated, partitioned showers, and then shared, “trough” style sinks and a small dressing area. Using eight tiny, narrow showers to accommodate all one-hundred and thirty-two soldier-candidates was rough for the first week, week and a half, but the combination of quick, military-discipline showers (rinse, water off, soap up, water on, rinse off) and the availability of a secondary, locker-room style bathroom closer to the gym and training section of the facility meant that the soldier-candidates had fallen into a set of semi-personalized routines for hygiene, though it did make morning hours (usually 0400-700) and evening
hours (usually 2100-2300) pretty hectic at times. The candidate bathroom acts as a sort of central “hub” - likely some old bathroom that was originally meant for only one or two of the barrack halls (maybe 25-50 people in a past program) - but ended up getting haphazardly attached to the others.

It was clearly, obviously, blatantly not meant to operate under almost continual use for double to quadruple its original “cleaning capacity.”

At least once, maybe twice a week, several of the drains would clog, and over the course of a month and half, at least two of the showers had required new pipes and showerheads, one of the trough sinks had clogged at the central drain, and three of the toilets had, for about three days, stopped refilling. The shower and toilet incidents had required calling out an Army-certified, third-party-contracted construction and plumbing crew from Boise to fix them. While the soldier-candidates had managed to work around those problems, this had only increased the chaos of early mornings, post-workout problems at the gym bathroom, and late evening frustrations (and “frustrations”) when people just wanted to crash in bed.

And though the vast majority of the soldier-candidates are now in “prison” -

Gabriel needs that mismatched amalgamation of disoriented chaos again.

He pauses outside the bathroom door, listening for any sounds of activity and

When sweet silence answers him

He smirks, and strides towards it.

The door slides open automatically for him, and Gabriel does not break his stride, moving with a fluid, easy speed. The trough sinks - one on each side - line the entryway, and then there are partially-tiled concrete half-walls that separate the sink area from the two rows of toilet stalls. On the right, the trough sink is a bit shorter in length, and between the concrete half-wall and the stalls, there’s a small doorway to the showers, tucked into a tiny side room, two shower stalls on each wall. Gabriel slips through the doorway into the empty shower room, his left hand diving into his jacket pocket again -

Only this time, he pulls out

A pair of rubber cleaning gloves

That he had secreted from the kitchen supply closet earlier.

(Gabe’s Rule Number 3: Always know where the cameras are…and where they aren’t.)

(No cameras in the bathroom)

(No cameras in the kitchen equipment closet)

(And)

With a casual, easy

Almost languid motion

Gabriel pushes his way into the shower stall on his left

Sets the 2 gallon bucket of “coffee” down
And pries off the lid to reveal a full tub of white, buttery-creamy
Lard.

(No cameras in the pantry.)

Gabriel snaps on the kitchen gloves as he drops to a squat, right hand digging into the bucket as his left hand reaches for the loose, palm-sized circular grate covering the drain. He pries it off, forms the fistful of lard into a clump the side of a baseball -

And half-throws, half-wedges it into the drain.

...I’d say this is weird, even for me, but let’s be honest - it really is not, Gabriel thinks with dry amusement, as he grabs another scoop and drops it into the drain. He pulls out another one, adds it to the weird conglomeration accumulating at the bend of the pipe, and then smears a thin layer on the underside before he settles the hooks of the cover back on the inside of the drain.

With a surreal, self-satisfied huff, Gabriel rises, slipping the bucket outside of the stall. It’s pretty narrow for someone his size, but he leans over and twists the shower knob, turning the shower on to a slow, steady drizzle.

And then he backs out of the shower stall

Slips into its neighbor

Drops to a crouch

And begins the same process.

At 1030 hours, Gabriel had stood in the pantry, far less worried about the sheer absurdity of his plan than he probably should have been but hey -

“I have great faith in fools - self-confidence my friends call it.”

And he had pried the labels off a bucket of coffee and a bucket of lard -

And swapped them.

Before he had hauled the “coffee” bucket to his room, deliberately left it there, and grabbed his other supplies instead.

When the second stall is “done,” Gabriel flitters back to the first, turning the water off. He crouches, lifting the drain cover -

And sure enough, there’s a layer of water pooling on top of the clog of lard, its surface sheen shimmering with oil and small, drifting, buttery bits.

It looks awful.

Gabriel grins to himself, covers the drain again, and then returns to the second stall to twist the knob just a bit -

Just to start a slow

Steady
Of water into the trap.

Gabriel works quickly, with a smirking, personal, joyous burst of energy in his veins. He repeats the process in each pair or showers - clog, clog, clog, drip some water to start the “problem,” clog clog clog, go back and turn off the water and start the next one. He gets, uh, *pretty “liberal”* near the end, using almost the two full gallons across the eight drains. He then pries the slightly-bigger cover off the “overflow” drain in the center of the side room, and throw-wedges the remaining four or five handfuls in there.

...For good measure, of course.

His objective complete, Gabriel pulls off the cleaning gloves, drops them into the now-empty bucket, and settles the lid back on. He briefly pops into the first shower, sets it to a slow, eerie Drip Drip Drip

And then he casually, easily

Almost _languidly_

Strolls back out of the bathroom, thinking in sardonic, smirking tones in his head:

“A common mistake people make when trying to design something completely foolproof is to underestimate the ingenuity of fools.”

And, as he begins his stride back towards the pantry, Gabriel grins wickedly, adding:

*And this ain’t even the most foolish part of this bullshit.*

It takes him a minute or two to slip past the mess hall and into the kitchen area proper. He punches in the unlock code (having been finally given it “formally” by Davis), and heads for the pantry. There is one small camera tucked into a corner of the kitchen, Gabriel avoids lingering, ducking into the pantry. He works quickly, locating the legitimate bucket of coffee with the bold [LARD] label on it, and peels the two stickers off, returning them to their original buckets.

*Sorry, Davis - your lard numbers are gonna be off by one this month,* Gabriel smirks, retrieving the cleaning gloves, careful not to touch the greasy oil on them. He turns them inside out, slides them back in the jacket pocket, and heads back, out into the kitchen, and then out into the hall. He turns and starts going back the way he came, hood still up, hands stuffed in pockets, in no rush to be anywhere.

As he reaches the end of the “kitchen hall,” over by the room of the extra kitchen equipment - Gabriel tosses the cleaning gloves in a trash bin -

Casually
Easily

Like it’s the most thoughtless, second-nature act in the world.

_Hmm_, Gabriel wonders wryly, _One hour? Two?_

..._Let’s be generous and go with “two.”_

---

Forty.

It takes forty minutes.

Gabriel is in the middle of another set of crunches, absently listening to Felix and Mary chatter away to Geni (18C) and Carlos (18B) who are on breaks from their own duties -

When the door to the main gym room half-slides, half-slams open, and Hala (Soldier: 11, 18D) shouts out, her voice cracking in a stifled-panicky tone:

“Hey uh - _who do I talk to if the bathroom is under water??_”

There’s dead silence - except for the sound of Alexei’s chest machine whirring to a stop and Gabriel dropping himself back on the mat with a loud, vinyl-y thump.

Gabriel exhales slowly, pleased with the tense ache in his core, and then he lifts his left wrist and glances at the wrist monitor.

Forty minutes.

Better than expected.

“..._What,_” Geni states at Hala in utter disbelief, and Carlos repeats slowly, “The...bathroom...is under water? Which bathroom?”

“Ours,” Hala says, and Felix asks in confusion, “Wait, the one over here? By the gym?”

Gabriel smirks.

“No, the one by our rooms,” Hala replies, and Mary says cautiously, “What do you mean by ‘under water?’”

Gabriel’s smirk deepens into a grin.

“There’s a goddamn small flood in our barrack bathroom -” Hala snaps, before basically _pleading_, “Seriously, why is no one else _freaking out about this_?”

“Is it sewer water?” Alexei asks in a loud but calm voice from the machine section, and Gabriel has to cover his face with his hands to keep from giggling obnoxiously -

“Is it sewer -” Hala starts to repeat, clearly in shock, before she hisses, “I have no idea because I immediately rushed here, now - _who the hell do I tell??_”

“We should find Commander Luna - General Flores left her in charge,” Mary says, and Gabriel listens to the sound of the plastic vinyl mats rustling beneath her footsteps as she heads to the door. The sound is followed by Geni’s and Felix’s, as Felix mutters, “Wasn’t Guerra in charge?”
“Guerra always thinks he’s in charge,” Mary snorts before she heads out the door and -

Something lightly nudges at Gabriel’s right foot, and he pulls his hands from his face to stare up at Carlos, who is leaning over him.

“Vamos, Gabriélito - what the hell are you smiling about?” Carlos starts to say, but immediately switches to pure, utter, genuine skepticism when he sees the wicked, mischievous grin on Gabriel’s face. Gabriel rocks himself forward, shifting to his feet with a causal, mischievous grin on Gabriel’s face, saying with a wry brightness, “Nothing. Just that this would be the week for something to go wrong, right?” He grabs his “24” jacket (having left Felix’s spare behind so that no one got suspicious) and tugs it on, before grabbing his towel and water bottle too.

“I guess it’s almost better that most of the candidates are in the simulation,” Carlos sighs, and they join Alexei in heading to the door. It has slid shut in the time that Hala, Mary, Geni, and Felix have left, and Carlos hits the button to open it again -

Before Luna, Cruz, Watanabe, and Jones all immediately stride right past them, voices talking and bickering loudly over one another:

“What does that even mean, ‘under water -’”

“Give it a rest, Sarge -”

“We’ve been over this - I’m not a plumber, Carolina -”

“I am aware of that, Rick -”

And then the directors are gone as quickly as they had come.

Carlos seems to blink in shock over how abrupt of a storm had passed by, as Gabriel mutters sardonically, “I have never seen any of them move that fast -”

“I think they might be nervous because Flores isn’t here?” Geni’s voice says from their right, the direction that the directors had come from.

The three soldier-candidates peek out the door, to the other four who have returned. Geni flicks her head in the other direction, and the small group of seven set off towards the barrack halls, as Hala mutters, “God, there was so much water -”

“Where’s Alicia?” Carlos asks Mary, and she sighs, “She was in our room, working on her network. She wanted to figure out who to interview tomorrow.”

“Who was she thinking of pulling?” Gabriel asks nonchalantly, wondering if any of the other Foxes had picked up on the realization that there were “subprograms” to the “enhancement” part of SEP -

“Mm, she wanted to interview a bunch of the juniors tomorrow,” Mary says, adding, “I don’t know the specifics -”

“God, that sounds boring as all hell,” Geni huffs, but Alexei counters, “Probably not as boring as cameras. At least we get to mess with the drones.”

“Have they let you look at the drone coding yet?” Carlos asks him, and Alexei nods, gesturing as he explains, “It’s surprisingly efficient for a military drone. Lightweight in programming. I was expecting way more complicated coding to try and prevent hacking from the bots, but it looks like simplicity won out. Any changes in the coding not made by authorized users results in an immediate
“Oh shit, system-wide or individual?” Gabriel asks, openly impressed (and absolutely curious) -

“It’s a little tricky to explain, but it depends on where the changes are being implemented,” Alexei says, as the group rounds a corner into the [1-24] hall, “If an unauthorized user is trying to make a system-wide change, the whole thing shuts down. If you’re trying to fuck around with just one, that particular one will auto-lock itself.”

Gabriel remembers how the drone during the Survival and Evasion simulation had almost gone into shock over being shot with a paintball -

“- They can take a few hits and react just fine, but because they’re so...lightweight in terms of programming, they’re set to fizzle out rather than fight back, if that makes sense,” Alexei continues, “All of us Echoes are pretty sure that’s going to change before these things are implemented in a real battle, but who knows what kind of strategy our fearless leaders have in mind for them.”

And then

Alexei slows his stride, growing contemplative for a moment, before he mutters lowly:

“They almost feel...disposable.”

The others stop too, and Carlos asks quietly, “Like...cheap?”

“No, not cheap, not cheap at all,” Alexei says, scowling a bit, “I mean, you could call them cheap because they aren’t armored or anything, but the plastic is that refined mesh stuff they’re starting to use in body armor. Layer it a few more times, and those things would be pretty bulletproof.”

Gabriel scowls too.

“...I guess I mean the programming,” Alexei says quietly, “The ‘no fighting back’ thing. It’s like whoever designed these drones expects them to get gunned down and would rather they brick themselves on the spot than give the bots more potential toys to work it. Assuming they even make it into the warzones, of course.”

“...I mean,” Geni replies hesitantly, her normal confidence fading into a more subdued thoughtfulness, “If they aren’t EMP resistant, what’s the point? The bots are EMP-ing the shit out of everything. We can’t compete with them for airspace unless we can beat them at that level.”

In his mind

Gabriel picks up the beautiful jade bird

Looking so fragile and small in his hands

Like its body is made of green-gilded glass and tinfoil.

How peaceful it looks, eyes shut in its “death.”

In his mind

Gabriel almost crushes it in beautiful jade bitterness

Because why the fuck would Omnics give a robot with camera eyes eyelids like that -
(The details always stand out to him first, prick at his mind, make him feels pins and needles in his brain -)

“...We’ll never beat them at that level.”

Gabriel does not look at the group, not directly, but he sees them all tense up at the obsidian-gilded smoke fibers of his words -

Except for Carlos

Who watches him in quiet, calm, almost sorrowful silence.

Gabriel lifts his head, casting a darkly focused look among his fellow warriors, saying with a beautiful jade rasp, “The Omnics outclass us there. Drones like these will be ruined by songbirds.”

Felix scowls in confusion, as Geni mutters, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Means the idea of them being disposable is probably right,” Gabriel replies, before he begins his stride again -

This time powerful, purposeful, almost precise -

As he thinks about how Guerra had looked him dead in the eye yesterday, and stated:

“Fucking of course it was a good idea, pinche idiota - who the hell do you think convinced this board of complainers to actually let him stay in the simulation the whole week??”

…

He expected it, Gabriel thinks viciously, turning the corner at the end of the hall, Of course he expected someone to try killing the drones.

Only he expected me to do it.

But Jack knifed that expectation -

And then Gabriel smiles faintly, adding gently, And mine as well.

But as he approaches the small cluster of frustrated and furious people gathering around the door to the barracks bathroom, Gabriel smirks again, thinking with a viciously victorious tone:

So now it’s my time to return the favor.

The door to the bathroom slides open, and Luna and Cruz step out, Luna looking exhausted and Cruz looking annoyed. Gabriel’s heart briefly goes out to Luna, and he thinks quietly, Lo siento, Comandante - it’s just another one of my wildass ideas you gotta slog through -

“So it’s that bad, huh?” Watanabe asks them, and Cruz growls out, “Bout a half-foot of water in the shower section. Gotta be a tree root clogging a main drain or something - if we’re real unlucky, there’s a burst pipe somewhere in this tin can of a base that might also be frozen over -”

“No use in overthinking it,” Luna says, as the other soldier-candidates show up behind Gabriel. The new Company Commander rubs at her eyes, sighing, “And I’m betting the contractor in Boise won’t make it until Wednesday or Thursday -”

“How do we not have a vertical construction unit stationed here?” Jones asks, and Gabriel can tell
that - though her deep voice is calm - there’s an edge of irritation in it. Cruz shares her sentiments, because he snaps in a low growl, “Or even just a 12K plumber here.”

“We don’t have the clearance for it,” Luna sighs and Cruz whips towards her, stammering in shock and fury, “We don’t - we don’t have the clearance?? The general of Special Operations Command oversees this program herself and we don’t have goddamn clearance?? Why the hell not.”

“That -”

A small chill drips up Gabriel’s spine -

“- Would be -”

Like shards of glass wedged suddenly and icily into his vertebrae -

“- Because of my bosses, I’m afraid -”

And he flips around, coming almost face-to-face with Guerra, who looks Casually, easily

Almost languidly

Bored

By the situation.

Guerra flicks his gaze at Gabriel’s, eyes locking momentarily before he lilts out the words, “Boy, you just excel at being in the way, huh?”

Gabriel’s eyes narrow suspiciously -

I didn’t hear him approach at all -

Before he steps aside, moving closer to Carlos, letting the CIA agent through.

“The CIA won’t give us clearance for an Army-certified 12K plumber?” Watanabe asks Guerra in confusion, and Jones says lowly, “Don’t they run half this program?”

“Believe me,” Guerra sighs as he joins the other directors by the bathroom door, “I’ve been trying to convince them to secure us a vertical construction unit, but they insist that a contractor better suits the program’s needs and security clearances.”

But then Guerra hits the button for the bathroom door, glancing inside. He makes a face, muttering, “Though I’m willing to bet something like this could change their minds. Broken toilet?”

“No,” Luna says, “Clogged shower drainage system and a leaking shower. I got the shower to stop, but the water is about six inches high in the center of the shower room with the gradient towards the central drain.”

“...The individual showers aren’t draining either?” Guerra asks, his confusion evident but Gabriel can feel the eerie edge of suspicion in his tone -

“I haven’t checked all of them, but at least that one shower and the central drain are blocked somewhere,” Luna says, and Cruz adds, “Or burst.”
“...Huh,” Guerra says, obviously not totally convinced, and for a brief moment, Gabriel feels *sheer fucking panic* rise in his chest over the *sheer fucking absurdity* of what he’s done -

“We don’t have a pump?” Watanabe asks, and Luna gives him a *look*, before saying, “Where would we pump it too? Another bathroom?”

“The sink?” Jones retorts and Luna sighs, “If a main drain is burst or clogged, no point in dumping the water back in the same system -”

“We don’t have time for this,” Guerra groans, leaning back from the bathroom, and Luna finally snaps, “I am *aware* of that, Marc, what the hell do you guys want me to say? The contractors are in Boise, it’s going to take them half a day to get to Sun Valley with their equipment in this weather, and another half day to get up *here* on these roads. It’s *one* bathroom, we literally have like ten more around the main facility -”

“Buckets,” Cruz grunts and there are small, sharp noises of *sheer fucking panic* from the soldier-candidates around Gabriel -

“We are *not* -” Luna growls right back, “- Wasting time during Resistance week with hand-bucketing clogged waste water out of a bathroom in the middle of winter in the *fucking* Sawtooth Mountains.”

*Jesus,* Geni murmurs in relief, as Felix whispers, *Gracias a Dios -*

“But the nearest bathroom,” Watanabe says to Luna, “Is the *directors’* and *trainers’* bathroom - not the gym.”

From where he’s standing, it’s a little difficult for Gabriel to see Luna clearly past the other directors - But *boy*

Does he *feel* the tone of her voice

As she practically *commands*:

“Well, it’s a good thing we’re all *adults* and fucking *professional soldiers* who know how to *share* and *take turns*, isn’t it?”

…

The silence says *everything*, really.

Gabriel *grins*.

“So unless any of you want to go shovel snow down the backroads that lead to this special circle of hell so our plumbers can get here faster,” Luna states to the other directors, “I suggest you all remember what it's like to take military showers, because you are *not* removing a single candidate or trainer from the simulation to do this bullshit for you. Is that clear?”

“...Yes, Commander,” Jones says with that quiet, deep resolve she’s shown in some of her most harrowing medical moments. Watanabe sighs, “Yes, Carolina.” Cruz just grunts.

Guerra says nothing, but through the small cluster of people -

Gabriel watches as he lifts his hand, makes a fist, and gently bumps it against her shoulder.
“Rives, put an ‘out of order’ sign on there,” Luna says loudly to the soldier-candidates, causing Carlos to jump a bit as he replies, “Yes, ma’am!” The soldier-candidates scramble to get out of the way as the directors start to head back to their “offices hall”. Luna and Guerra trail the group, with Luna telling the candidates, “No one uses that bathroom until the contractors arrive and clear it. Use the one in the directors and trainers’ hall, or the gym one.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they all chant back to her in unison, and just barely

As the two directors pass by

Gabriel hears Guerra murmur reassuringly to Luna, “Buen trabajo, Caro.”

“...I disagree, but I appreciate it, Marc,” he hears her reply quietly, “I still don’t think I’m ready to lead…”

But the rest of her words fade as the two directors slip out of earshot.

“...Well, that sucks,” Felix says, as Geni groans, “God, and now military showers until Thursday? Fuck.”

“Just use the gym bathroom, you can take longer showers there,” Mary says, but Felix agrees, “But it’s farther than the one in the directors’ hall. God damn, that’s gonna be so awkward - imagine shaving next to Cruz in the mornings.”

“You say that like some of us haven’t done it before,” Alexei chuckles and Felix mutters, “Oh yeah, forgot that he was one of your Charlies. Was that weird to wake up to?”

“No more than any other ODA,” Alexei shrugs. The group starts to disperse, but Gabriel lingers, waiting for Carlos to retrieve some tape from his room. Gabriel tears a blank page out of his notebook, writing “out of order” in his hasty scrawl

Before he admires the makeshift sign

The tangible success of

Self-confident

Ingenious

Foolishness that allowed this absurdity to even work.

...Look at me - all the confidence and ingenuity of a cheesy comic book superhero, Gabriel thinks, smiling faintly.

...Be patient with me, Jack.

And then

Gabriel grins, thinking wryly:

After all -

The first virtue in a soldier

Is endurance.
Chapter 6, “The Sign of the Four”:

"What is your theory, then, as to those footmarks?" I asked, eagerly, when we had regained the lower room once more.

"My dear Watson, try a little analysis yourself," said he, with a touch of impatience. "You know my methods. Apply them, and it will be instructive to compare results."

"I cannot conceive anything which will cover the facts," I answered.

"It will be clear enough to you soon," he said, in an off-hand way. "I think that there is nothing else of importance here, but I will look." He whipped out his lens and a tape measure, and hurried about the room on his knees, measuring, comparing, examining, with his long thin nose only a few inches from the planks, and his beady eyes gleaming and deep-set like those of a bird. So swift, silent, and furtive were his movements, like those of a trained blood-hound picking out a scent, that I could not but think what a terrible criminal he would have made had he turned his energy and sagacity against the law, instead of exerting them in its defense.

Chapter End Notes

I won't lie: this is the part of the plot where I really questioned my own creativity.

...It'll make sense.

...Maybe?

Literary references:

1. The Sign of the Four, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
2. "The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes." - Sherlock Holmes, The Hound of the Baskervilles
3. “I have great faith in fools - self-confidence my friends call it.” - Edgar Allan Poe
4. “A common mistake people make when trying to design something completely foolproof is to underestimate the ingenuity of fools.” - Douglas Adams, Mostly Harmless

Warning:

Some of these references contain descriptions of graphic content and textual descriptions of the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" (aka torture) used by the CIA in the last 20 years. Reader discretion is advised.
CIA "enhanced interrogation techniques":

1. "U.S. Used This Torture Box to Interrogate Gadhafi's Enemies", WIRED
2. "Inside the 'black out box'", BBC - this one contains a video. There is not graphic visual or auditory content. However, the sound is loud and disconcerting.
3. "Ex-CIA boss admits to BBC Panama that it tortured", BBC

Important in this?

Direct quote from Reference 3:

Abu Zubayadah was held in a box measuring less than three feet by three feet, for 29 hours over a 20-day period in 2002. The box, which soon becomes stiflingly hot, is too small to do anything but crouch, with an arched back.

He was also held in a larger upright box, the shape of a coffin, for a total of 266 hours, or more than 11 days.

The CIA took its interrogation techniques from the United States military programme known as SERE - Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape - which teaches soldiers how to resist torture techniques used in the conflicts in Vietnam, Korea and Nazi Germany.

Malcolm Nance, former military instructor for the SERE programme, recreated the techniques the CIA adopted, for the BBC.

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In 2002, the CIA contacted psychologists who where former SERE trainers to help them develop their "enhanced interrogation technique" programs for use in the "war on terror."

Quote:

In late July 2002 the CIA turned to the psychologists, according to both former intelligence officials and congressional investigators. Jessen was then a senior psychologist at the Defense Department agency that taught special operations forces how to resist and endure torture via so called "SERE" training, or Survival, Evasion, Resistance Escape training, at a special "SERE" school. Jessen was sent to the CIA "for several days" to discuss the techniques, according to congressional investigators. Jessen immediately resigned from the Air Force and, along with Mitchell, another recently retired colleague, founded Mitchell, Jessen & Associates.

The business — co-owned by seven individuals, six of whom worked in the SERE program as either employees or contractors — quickly signed a contract with the CIA. In 2006, according to the report, "the value of the CIA's base contract with the company formed by the psychologists with all options exercised was in excess of $180 million."

 [...] While the techniques were undeniably harsh, senior CIA officials were comforted by the fact that they had been used by the U.S. against its own servicemen, said the former intelligence official.

"A big factor in people's thinking was that these techniques were used in the training of U.S. Special Operations Forces," the ex-official said. "If it was something that had been done to U.S. forces … although admittedly very tough … then it couldn't be considered..."
torture."

Source: "CIA Paid Torture Teachers More than $80 Million", NBC News

I'm telling you this in advance.

I hope y'all look forward to Chapter 9. :)
Chapter Summary

Do you know what love is?
I'll tell you:
It is whatever you can still betray.
(Do you know how good soldiers die?)

Chapter Notes

I'm absolutely thrilled you guys are enjoying Gabriel's ridiculous plan! I had a ton of fun trying to think up all the steps for it.

But now, onto the fun part.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Σ: Resistance, Day 2 - When your middle name is danger

Tuesday, February 19, 2047: 0630 hours - directors table, mess hall in the main SEP facility

[A]: While I respect your request, SEP is still classified as “Top Secret.” It isn’t just a matter of security - the fewer personnel who are present on the Sawtooth Base for 24/7, the better we can retain and control this classification.

[A]: As difficult as it is to move third-party contractors in and out, it’s better for them to be present only for their set, specific activities for as few hours as necessary than it is to clear another six to seven people to stay on permanently.

[A]: I mean

[A]: It has to reduce the stress of your job, right?

…

[Σ]: there’s about 7 inches of water in the goddamn barracks bathroom, Tom.

…

[A]: use a pump?

[Σ]: ffs
[A]: what do you expect me to say

[Σ]: that you’ll at least try to get SEP a vertical construction crew??

[A]: will that make you sleep better at night

[Σ]: if you think I won’t fly back to Virginia just to kick your ass for that pithy little remark, you don’t know me very well

[A]: look dude

[A]: all I can say is I’ll try talking to the director again

[Σ]: tell him that if he doesn’t reconsider, he can feel free to take over running this stint for me

[Σ]: see how he likes dealing with a bunch of horny, reckless mid-twenties soldiers with their bathroom underwater

[A]: there’s a reason SAD requires a Bachelor’s and SOF experience

[Σ]: and it’s wonderful that we lifted those for SEP, isn’t it

[A]: you’re not training SAD operatives, Marc

[Σ]: you’re damn right I’m not, because unlike misguided SAD agents, these soldiers at least know that the goddamn bathroom should be fixed

---

It’s only 6:30 in the goddamn morning on Day 2 of Resistance week

And Marc is ready to smash his datapad against the wall.

Goddammit, Tom, he thinks, flicking the messaging app off his screen as he reaches for his cup of coffee, Your inability to stand up for your agents is going to bite your ass in the end.

Marc Guerra knows the importance of secrecy - he lives it, he embodies it, he breathes it. He’s run highly classified, significantly risky operations all on his own - SAD, Delta Force, SF, he’s done it all and has escaped a-million-to-one odds with only a few extra scars and another pound of bitterness in his heart (or whatever’s left of it, as Silvio used to joke).

So yeah, of course Marc “Sigma” Guerra knows how important the “top secret” nature of the Soldier Enhancement Program is.

He helped design it, after all.

But Marc “Sigma” Guerra also knows that there’s seven inches of standing water in the candidates’ barracks bathroom, threatening to ice over if the inner facility drops to a low enough temperature.

And he knows that will be way worse than breaching a “top secret” classification.

I should tell them I’m about to spend half the budget to move a plumbing company on base, Marc thinks lowly, glowering at his datapad, Money’s the only way to get the director to listen to me these days. Never mind that there’s a goddamn robot apocalypse going on outside -
“Oh well, what a surprise.”

Somehow, the distance of several years has not softened his ability to recognize her voice -

And Marc looks up to watch as Carolina slides into the seat next to him, setting her tray of breakfast food on the table.

“...I don’t sleep much these days,” he says - an honest answer, really - but it just gets Carolina to snort in derision, and she chuckles, “Like you ever sleep much. I was talking about you joining us for breakfast. I expected you to be out at the North Branch already.”

“I’ve been trying to get in touch with my bosses,” Marc informs her, watching as the others - Serena next, followed by Sarge and David, and trailed by Rick, who is still yawning - begin to settle in around the table. Marc leans back in his chair, sighing, “They’re being obstinate about the vertical construction crew. Keep saying that SEP is too ‘top secret’ to put on another permanent set of soldiers -”

“Bullshit,” Rick grunts, punctuating his eloquent remark with a jab towards Marc, a biscuit roll thing in his hand. In his peripherals, Marc sees Carolina make her trademark sardonic expression, looking underwhelmed by the former Charlie, who shoves the biscuit into his mouth, muttering thickly, “Lazy CIA assholes never want to spend the money to make their own programs work properly.”

“I mean, I don’t disagree with you,” Marc says, before he shrugs loosely, adding, “But they won’t tell me their numbers on the budget for the program, so it’s not like I can plan anything concrete anyways.”

“Does this mean we aren’t getting more drones?” Sarge asks him. Marc rolls his shoulders again, sighing, “They say we’ll get more for deployment, but I keep saying that if they’re going to change anything to the builds and programming, we need to see them so we can get the Echoes to practice on them -”

“No, that would be too sensible,” Serena mutters, her tone clearly bitter, “Don’t you know the only specialty that matters is Bravo and their new prototype guns -”

“Alright now, Rena, no need for that,” Carolina - an ex-Bravo - cautions the medic. Serena, however, makes a disappointed face, saying dryly, “You have to run one of the new companies, Caro - I don’t know why you’re not more upset over this. I know they want the candidates to test out the new fusion and plasma weapons, but it’s like C2 forgets that there are three other MOSes that need new tech and new teaching tools as well -”

“Four,” Marc says, crafting his tone so that it sounds borderline impulsive -

But nothing with him is “impulsive.”

Only carefully created control.

Serena gives him a blank, unimpressed look, and Marc mumbles somewhat apologetically, “...There are...four MOSes, Rena.”

“...Pardon me, Marco,” Serena states neutrally, “Four other MOSes...but you got new tech for your candidates, didn’t you?”

“...I wouldn’t really call two-year-old datapads ‘new tech,’ but okay, I see your point,” Marc relents. Serena rolls her eyes, reaching for her coffee on her tray, retorting, “How gracious of you. I’ll call the treatment of Deltas equal with the Foxes when your bosses finally let my medics see whatever
program you’re running for the nanobots in our so-called ‘improved’ biotic fields. Lord knows they won’t let me see the full list of modified genes we’re injecting into the candidates, so I’ll settle for second-best, as always.”

...It’s hard to think of a good remark to that one.

Especially since she’s right.

“...The Special Activities geneticists will return to the program next month,” Marc says (because it’s all he can say), “All I can do is try to help negotiate with them for you.”

“You sound more and more like your bosses each day,” Serena mutters, lifting her mug to her lips, the disappointment clear in her eyes.

And it’s difficult -

Because Marc “enhanced agent Sigma” Guerra knows the importance of secrecy -

And he knows very clearly, very keenly why the list of modified genes are more secretive, more classified -

More concealed in smoke and shadow -

Than any other part of the program.

...It isn’t the presence of the program that needs to be contained. Every nation the world over has started an “enhancement” program in their militaries. For fuck’s sake, Germany and the United European Defense have been parading the Crusaders around since the Crisis started. And the secrecy of Egypt’s “Wadjet sniper program” has all but disappeared in formality.

So, really, six to seven additional people just to fix all the bullshit plumbing and constantly-breaking equipment in the American Soldier Enhancement Program won’t ruin anything.

It’s going to be the “worst kept secret of the Crisis” in a few years anyways, as all CIA “top secret” programs eventually are.

No, attempting to hide the whole program is an effort beyond futility -

An effort in utter foolishness.

But attempting to hide the most significant parts?

The literal smallest yet grandest parts?

Even from themselves?

That is why they need secrecy.

His burden to bear.

Even if it means lying to people he once considered family born of the blood of the covenant.

“He who budgets with monsters should be careful lest he becomes a monster,” Marc says wryly, which does get Serena to crack a sly smile behind her coffee cup, and Carolina lets out a harsh laugh, “God, that’s the real truth right there. Nietzsche was so close but just barely missed the mark.”
“Nothing is more certain than death and budgets,” Marc mutters, glancing out over the rest of the mess hall. There are only a few of the candidates and trainers in for breakfast - maybe about half of the total, with the other half having taken the first “night shift” of the prison camp simulation. It’s rare for the mess hall to be this subdued: snow falls lightly in the chilled not-quite-sunrise outside the windows to his back, light faint down the row of panes to his right, and the few candidates present, only twelve or so, all sit together at their usual table near the windows, talking in low voices, the clink of their utensils louder than their words.

Marc sees his four Foxes sitting around near the far end of the table: Alicia is demonstrating something to the others on her datapad, Felix is yawning openly, Mary looks like she’s about to fall asleep again -

And Gabriel is writing something down in one of his notebooks, before he lifts his pen and gestures to something on Alicia’s screen.

...He’s too awake for his own goddamn good, Marc thinks quietly, eyes narrowing.

No mind should ever be as sharp as Gabriel’s.

...But if a sword presents itself -

Especially one flinted and daggered from the sheer brilliance of obsidian itself -

Use it

Lest the edge of the blade dulls.

...Even if the sword’s personality is as sarcastic and as spiteful as Hell itself.

...And while I’m on that, Marc thinks, turning his attention back to the table, saying, “And speaking of monsters - the Foxes gave me their schedules for your teams. Here.” He taps at his datapad, pulling up the timetable the four candidates had given him, and he turns it so the other directors can see. Carolina glances at it, but Sarge, Serena, and David lean in to read it more closely, while Rick chugs his coffee like it’s the last cup he’ll ever get -

“They picked a rotation?” Sarge asks with some mild confusion, and Serena scowls, saying, “Why wouldn’t you just assign them to their old MOSes?”

“I wanted to give them some freedom in managing their time and intel,” Marc says - an honest answer again, two of them before seven-hundred hours, some kind of record really - but Serena just huffs, “I have to deal with trying to get pills and injections to one-hundred and eight starving ‘prisoners’ and you won’t just tell your candidates to join the teams they know best?”

“Good lord, I just cannot win here,” Marc snarks, “It’s one week, Rena, you can deal with three non-Deltas for one week -”

“And what, am I supposed to explain gene therapy to Ochoa for an hour this morning?” Serena snaps right back, before gesturing to the datapad, “Gabriel’s not even in my group until Friday, the last day!”

“I’m not going to force him to join the Deltas for a week,” Marc says coldly, “The four of them want to rotate so just let them -”
“Putting the one junior Delta that I have actually worked with on my team for one week won’t kill you, Marco.” Serena starts to say, but Marc -

And this time

It is actually impulsive -

States with a low

Drip

Drip

Dripping fury:

“...I would watch how you phrase that, Jones.”

Serena stops mid-sentence, her dark eyes wide with sickened horror -

And the silence around the table

Is soul-crushingly loud.

All they can hear are the clinking of utensils from the candidates and trainers at the other tables

And the low murmur of voices in the hall

And the soft flakes of snow drifting into the banks outside.

…

Or maybe he is just imaging the last one.

“...Don’t be upset with me that he doesn’t want to work in the Delta group this week,” Marc says quietly -

His voice concealed in smoke and shadows -

“He hasn’t been a true medic in years.”

…

No mind should be as sharp as Gabriel’s

A warrior king skilled with his hands

Whose greatest weapon

Is not his heart

(or whatever is left of it, as Silvio used to say)

But the obsidian blade in his head.

Not a surgical knife like they had all once thought

But the edge of a reaper’s scythe.
And Marc “the man named War” Guerra will do whatever is required

To whet it.

…

It’s a good thing his heart had died years ago.

After all -

It takes monsters to create monsters.

…

But for now, Marc has to figure out what the hell Gabriel is doing -

Because he knows

Beyond a shadow of a doubt

That that bastard is up to something.

I checked the camera feeds for the main facility from yesterday, but nothing directly seemed too out of place, given that this week will change movement patterns, Marc thinks, scowling to himself as he slowly taps a finger against his coffee mug, There was that moment where Felix took that extra bucket of coffee into the barracks bathroom - which, no lie, is a little weird - but he came back with it a minute later and left it in the pantry. And two other people used the barracks bathroom before Hala told us about the flooding...so maybe it really is just a burst pipe.

But still

Marc can’t shake the feeling of something being off.

I know he’s been sneaking off with Jack Morrison one or two nights a week, he reminds himself, But he chose not to participate with Jack in the simulation this week. I expected him to call me on my bluff on Sunday, but he didn’t. Which means he’s doing something else.

And then Marc sighs, thinking wistfully, God dammit, Reyes, if you could just use this energy for something actually productive, you could be unstoppable. But instead you chose to dick around and use it for petty personal experiments, like killing the drones.

“...Marc.”

He glances up at Serena, who has a softer, more sorrowful look on her face, and she murmurs quietly, “I’m sorry - I wasn’t thinking.”

Marc stares at her for a moment, but gives her a patient smile, saying calmly, “It’s fine. It...wasn’t a fair remark to you either. But you understand why I won’t force him or the others to stick to their old MOSes. They still have their duties as Foxes, so while I want this simulation to go as smoothly as possible -”

Marc glances back towards the senior soldier-candidates table, saying with a faint smile on his face, “- I want them to put their efforts towards focused and creative thinking.”

At the candidates table, Gabriel says something, which makes Felix nearly choke on his coffee and
Mary almost slips off her seat. Alicia makes a face, and Gabriel just grins smugly, shrugging loosely.

Marc smiles.

...*You don’t know yourself as well as you think*, he hums internally, reaching over and pulling his datapad back, eyes tracing over the schedule the Fox soldier-candidates gave him, thinking patiently:

*But don’t worry, Reyes.*

*I know you better than you think I do.*

*And I will teach you and your partner-in-crime to learn how to focus.*

It takes monsters to create monsters

And it takes a soldier to wage war.

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“So you know what love is? I’ll tell you: it is whatever you can still betray.”

- John le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*

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**76: Resistance, Day 2 - A treasure beyond price**

Tuesday, February 19, 2047: 1020 hours - Cell 5

Jack has slept in the snow.

Jack has slept on semi-frozen ground, with only an all-weather sleeping bag between him and the hard-packed snow bank.

Jack has slept in the backseat of trucks bouncing up and down dirt roads - all four wheels grinding to climb or descend, rocks rattling his teeth even in his restless, shifting dream state.

Jack has slept on house floors and only-a-little-broken couches, uncomfortable up his spine and across his shoulders, but too warmed by the generosity of friends to stay awake.

Jack has slept through house parties, drunken sounds crashing in around him as people made jovial, wild, reckless fun of their night.

Jack has slept in mosquito-swarmed summers, the humidity clinging to his skin under a night sky swelling with a sea of stars, corn stalks high around him, the plowed dirt surprisingly comfortable beneath his back, listening only to the ravens call back and forth to each other playfully.

Jack has slept through a house filled with nightmares, plagued with perfect silence, save for the quiet sobs of his mother in another room and the heavy sighs of his father trying to climb the stairs, all of them heartbroken by Peter’s empty room at the end of the bedroom hall on the second floor.

Jack has slept in stiff, cold, hard plastic chairs in hospital waiting rooms, catching only ten, fifteen minutes of much-needed rest before jolting awake fitfully, catching his reality on the well-worn edges of the metal arms, the blood from operating rooms soaking into his mind.
Jack has slept in army barracks, after several days of land navigation marches (12 miles of boots boots boots boots movin’ up and down again), hauling a “broken” jeep with his 12-person team, carrying his own weight on his back, doing the fireman’s carry to bring an “injured” teammate to safety.

…

Jack has slept in a lot of places, at a lot of times, during a lot of different scenarios.

All of them -

All of them -

Were better than the last thirty hours.

I’m going to invent a time machine, go back in time, and kill Kipling, Jack thinks, as Kipling’s broken, disembodied voice wails through the speakers again -

“We’re foot - slog - slog - slog - soggin’ over Africa -”

- And he shifts against the throbbing ache in his shoulders, the press of rough, bitter concrete against his hipbone, trying to bury himself deeper in on himself, close to Adrien’s back -

“Foot - foot - foot - foot - soggin’ over Africa -”

- And Mary in turn, shifts as well.

The last sixteen hours or so have been a lot of the same - song chant chant chant chant chanting up and down again, lights on and lights off and lights on and lights off, paintballs firing, screaming on and screaming off, guards coming in and pulling people out, guards coming in and putting people back - an endless nausea of sensory overload broken only by Jack reading from the Holmes anthology until his voice was frayed and broken, and Adrien had taken over for him.

Several more people in both groups had been pulled out to do some sort of miserable “not torture” torture - when they had brought back Wei to Cell 4, they had hauled off Miguel for another four or five hours. When Markus had returned to Cell 5, they had taken Selena, and on and on, for hours on end. Most people were taken to different types of blackout boxes - some with small stinging wires built in to force people to retain their positions, others in rooms they swore up and down were overly-heated, making them sweat in their stress positions within minutes - but one or two other people were blindfolded and forced to inhale stuff like bitrex (a harmless “smoke” that contained some of the most powerful bitter “tastes”, typically used to test facemasks) or forced to lie in claustrophobic, coffin-shaped boxes as guards banged on the lid. At least one person was made to march blindfolded around the facility for a few hours.

And all throughout the day

There had been

“The chosen ones” (as the group jokingly called them) -

The people who had been picked out - seemingly at random -

To go sit down and have a cup of coffee or hot chocolate

And a “surprisingly nice chat”
With some of the senior soldier-candidates.

Maritoni had actually come back to Cell 4 with another foam mattress pad rolled up in her arms, as both Cell groups had looked on in pure shock. When asked “how the hell she got that”, Maritoni had shrugged and said, “I kept telling Reyes I wanted to come back to the cell. He started asking me about the mattresses, and eventually we talked about how Cell 4 started with none...and...I mean, I stuck to Article Five. He said he saw Cell 5 give up some, so it seemed okay to talk about…”

“What the hell, all I got was coffee,” Derek had groaned, but Jack had read between the lines, thinking darkly. So there were more mattresses...they were definitely trying to set us up, trying to turn us against each other.

And then Jack had scowled, thinking it over, Some of the senior soldiers are conducting the “good cop” interrogations, giving out food...mattresses...coffee -

_Hot chocolate -

“What else did you guys talk about?” Jack had asked her, and Maritoni had shrugged, replying, “Honestly, really not much? I refused to answer anything, so he brought up the mattresses, I said it was fucked up what they did with them -”

“Did you actually say that to him?” Cristina had groaned, but Maritoni had folded her arms, muttering, “Damn right I did. Think they can pull that kind of bullshit and then interrogate me about it? I told him I knew about the blackout boxes and I wasn’t scared of them.”

But then Maritoni’s expression had softened a bit, and she had said, “But he...was surprisingly nice about it all? Empathetic? Said it was really cruel of the trainers to do that to us. And he offered me an extra one. I told him I thought he was bluffing, but he really brought out another.”

“And he didn’t ask you about other stuff?” Jack had asked. Maritoni had shrugged, saying, “Not really. We talked a bit about like - sleeping on the ground. You know, camping, airports, oddball stuff. I mean, I did tell him I slept in LAX once after I missed a connecting flight -”

“You’re from California,” Jack had answered, both a statement and a question. Maritoni had looked at him with a curious glance through the bars, saying, “Yeah. San Diego. I had missed the last flight back for the day. Slept in the airport because fuck paying for a hotel for five hours.”

And suddenly -

It had started to feel like Jack could begin to see more than just the obvious -

("Follow your own thoughts -” )

_Cheap, maybe, but “frugal” more like, Jack had thought about Maritoni. A sort of resourcefulness. An odd sort of toughness that is strangely comparable to this. Not 1:1, of course, but...a willingness to “tough it out.”_

And then -

“...San Diego is south, right?” Jack has asked curiously, and Maritoni had sigh, muttering, “Yeah, and of course Reyes is from LA. I swear it’s always just LA or San Francisco, no one ever knows the others.”

“Did he ask you about your thoughts on Bakersfield?” Jack had asked
Because it was like he could finally -

(“Go deeper, Jack -”)

See.

Maritoni had given him a confused but rather open look, just briefly stunned and -

Her expression and the pause had said so much.

“...Yeah,” she had replied, “I mean - I told him that I didn’t really know anything better minds wouldn’t already -”

“But he didn’t care about ‘better minds,’” Jack had said, his eyes bright despite his growing exhaustion, “...Did he?”

Maritoni - and about half of Cell 4 - had stared at him in low shock.

“...Were you -” Maritoni had started to say, but then stopped, before going with, “...Are you, like, doing something with him? Did you two go over this stuff beforehand?”

“...Will you believe me if I say no?” Jack had grinned through the bars -

But somehow

He knew the answer already.

They had been given their one “meal” at about 1700 hours - a can of tuna, several granola bars, a small container of some sort of fried rice, a cup of chilled water with one of those electrolyte packets poured in, and a pill “to replace the day’s injection” or something. It had been a quietly furious affair, with at least four guards - one of them a trainer-soldier, three of them senior candidates (numbers 02, 03, and 05) - watching them eat everything, threatening to shoot them if they didn’t finish it. When the trash from the meal was collected (one by one they went up to the bars and dropped the stuff in a garbage bag a guard was holding out), the guards had tossed them a bunch of water bottles, before they had left -

The last guard chuckling wryly:

“Sleep with one eye open, prisoners.”

The “meal” had been not nearly enough to fill the pangs of hunger that had stabbed at Jack all day -

And yet somehow, it had been far, far too much, with everything congealing in his stomach, cold fish oil saturating electrolyte rice and honey-coated oats -

Tasted like exhaustion and weariness inside his guts.

The rest of the “evening” had been spent finishing up “A Study in Scarlet,” with nearly everyone except Miguel and Khan being utterly lost by the “story-within-a-story” part about Utah (“yeah, no,” Miguel had said, “That part is intentional. Weird as all hell, but intentional.”). But then -

“Night” had never really arrived.

Not truly.

Oddly, the only frame of reference Jack could compare it to was the times he’d stayed for a late shift
at the hospital: the lights were just... on. So on. It felt stupid phrasing it that way, but he couldn’t find another way to describe it - it wasn’t like the lights were any brighter, nor the music any louder, nor the concrete floor any less uncomfortable -

It was just that - by that point - everything felt so static

Time itself was locked away.

*Is this what it’s like in the Arctic during the summer?* Jack had wondered, as he’d tried to keep reading, switching them to the next story ("The Sign of the Four"), his voice cracking and fraying under the strain of words. They didn’t really get very far in the next story - the lights and music remained as unpredictable as ever, shutting off to sweet relief, blasting on with the fury of a nightmare and the searing pain of a headache, until at about 2330 hours, Jack gave up trying to continue for the night.

People attempted to sleep.

“Attempted” being the key word.

Lights off, music off - lights *blazing* to whiteout brightness, music *screaming* into wilting auditory nerves, curled up on themselves and each other, pain starting to really shard up their backs and shoulders like glass splinters working into their bodies, the cold creeping in around the corners of the cells, brushing tendrils in like long, clawed fingers trying to rip shreds off their group warmth.

Occasionally, the paintballs woke them up, popping pressures of snapping pain across their backs, screaming shattering the illusionary tranquility.

But the worst.

The worst.

The worst part of the unnight night

Was the guards.

There had been a blissful minute of deep, dark, perfect quietness right about 0137 hours, when Jack had felt the draw of sleep start to whisper to him, a voice low but light, wrapped in spun-sugar and smoky sunshine

(Or was it the other way around)

Murmuring small things like, “Isn’t it a real mystery, Jack?” and “Didn’t you promise me a drink of that top shelf voice -”

When something

*Sharp*

And

*Searing*

Had *ripped* through his right shoulder, whole arm and upper back tingling and *scream scream scream screaming in pain* -

No, wait
He had been screaming -

“God, been waiting all day to do that,” a distant voice had cackled as the nerve-shattering pain had disappeared from Jack’s body, but the aftereffects lingers like snapping strands of electricity in his fingers and armpit -

“Jack -”

It had taken him nearly a full thirty seconds to see Adrien’s face through the blinding numbness of the wailing music in the speakers -

“You’re okay, Jack,” Adrien had said to him urgently, as somewhere else, Nadia has shouted furiously, “What the actual fuck, assholes??”

Jack had held up his right hand, staring at it blankly, curling his cold fingers close before extending them open again -

“He’s one of them All American boys next door, right?” the guard who had tased him had taunted to Nadia, “Like he hasn’t fucked around with a cattle prod before.”

And Jack -

Half his mind still asleep

Seeing Gabriel’s wry smirk about farming and tall glasses of whiskey -

Had rasped out, “We grew corn.”

The silence that had followed was stiff, brightly-lit, and reality-bendingly loud -

“And sometimes soy when the co-op wanted us to rotate for the soil -” Jack had started to ramble but -

“Do I look like I give a shit about your farm, 76?” the guard had snarled, though Jack had not been in a position to see him anyways so it wasn’t like he had known what the guard had looked like -

No, wait -

That was a hypothetical question.

“I mean, manure is a pretty good fertilizer, so maybe?” Jack had replied, slowly regaining his wits and the feeling in his right fingers -

Sharp, stabbing pain had rattled his teeth and arced across his bones in his arm again -

“Fuck -!” Jack had shouted as Adrien and Lucas had hauled him forwards, in towards the pile, pulling him away from the reach of the cattle prod -

“Be a smartass again, 76, and this taser will feel like a massage compared to what you’ll get,” the guard had snapped at him, as the taser of the prod had sizzled in the air. Jack had fumbled to turn himself around, eyes watering against the lights and the pain. There had been four guards, with the clear trainer-soldier being the leader, smirking at them with the long cattle prod in his hand. Two of the others had been senior soldiers, their number patches barely visible on their left shoulders, and the fourth had been another trainer-soldier.

“...We’re the unlucky assholes who got the first night shift,” the leader had said with a dark grin,
“And since we don’t get to sleep, neither do you. Prisoners 79 to 84, up against a wall, hands in the air. Prisoners 73 to 78, in a single file line.”

Scowling at him in exhaustion and fury, Jack had taken his place in line. The six of them had been ordered out of the cell, hooded, made to put their hands on the person before them -

And then they had marched.

...And marched.

...And marched.

It was clear they were going in circles, but that wasn’t even the point.

The point

Was fear.

It had worn at them like the edge of an old razor blade pressed against the gooseflesh of a scruff-covered neck: every now and then, the lead guard would zap at the air close to one of their heads, or poke the cattle prod (off, fortunately) into one of their sides, causing that prisoner to jolt and jerk, nearly pulling the whole group into the wall. At one point, the guards had made them recite the “Boots” poem, which - despite having heard it all day - only Nadia “knew perfectly,” so they were forced to recite it again and again and again, until the whole group had chanted it back in a worn razor blade edge of a tone, dreary and rusted.

The whole thing only took fifteen, maybe twenty minutes.

But Jack had known.

Its true purpose was

Disrupting the sleep cycle, Jack had thought, anger blunted with well-worn edges when they had returned the first half of the group and taken the second. Forced light exposure, shifts the senses off of sleepiness. Pushes the REM starting point back. If they keep doing this, we’ll be forced in nightmarish, rapid-onset REM microsleeps. It might be worth trying to set up a sleep rotation cycle, so one half can try to sleep while the other half stays awake to make the people on the cameras think we’re all alert.

Though Jack had also admitted quietly that the idea seemed effectively impossible with the constant and inconsistent changes in the lights and music, with the guards bringing people in and out all the time, with gut-twisting hunger and building aches and bruises -

And the

Restless

Rough

Raw-edged

Energy

That seemed to be shifting together on the far reaches of his senses, like a storm just barely on the endless horizon, a tension that exists only in certain moments, fragments of time and awareness.
The unnight night had repeated itself on roughly a two to three hour cycle - clearly the guards were rotating through each half-cell group, forcing them all to delay whatever slim opportunities they had at semi-sleeping - that by the time “morning” had arrived on their wrist monitors, everyone in both Cell 4 and 5 were exhausted, restless, rough, and raw-edged. At that point, the “schedule” from the previous day seemed to resume, with guards starting to pull individual prisoners out for interviews and singular “not torture” torture rounds again.

…

But Jack still hasn’t been “called.”

“Boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”

Jack shifts on himself again, prying his left hand out from where he’s had it tucked against his chest, glancing at his wrist monitor to read:

[1023]

And -

“There’s no discharge in the war!”

…Almost thirty hours, Jack thinks - and he can’t quite place the feeling that settles restless, rough, and raw-edged in his heart, like when clothing doesn’t fit quite right, uncomfortable and awkward and frustrating all at once.

…

He’s not…angry. Not bitter. Not jealous.

…Not really.

“Seven - six - eleven - five - nine and twenty miles today -”

Maybe it’s how the loss of the sense of time has chipped away at his emotional reserves, draining the well of himself like he’s running on empty

“Four - eleven - seventeen - thirty -two the day before -”

Maybe it’s how the cold, oily hunger twists like a snaking knife in his gut, the way the energy - uncertain, snapping like an electricity build-up in the air, a storm just at the edge of the horizon - gnaws at his numbed brain like rodents chewing on bones

“Boots - boots - boots - boots - movin’ up and down again -”

Maybe it’s the way the number (“1824”) and the words (“The first virtue, the first virtue, the first virtue”) turn themselves over and over and over in his head, like the wash of a tide, in and out, in and out, up and down again, up and down again, pulsating with a life of their own and he’s not sure he wants them alive inside of him, kindling themselves on the dark warmth of his heart

“There’s no discharge in the war!”

Maybe it’s the realization that in the grand view of life and the world, thirty hours means nothing, a precious rounding of the clock that he’s taken for granted for nearly his entire life, a day, not even a day and a half, the realization that the world has hardly changed at all in that time
But maybe

Just maybe

Jack is beginning to…

Question.

And the silence of his own mind - the dearth of sound and feeling in his own heart -

Says

Everything

Really.

And he can’t stop himself from thinking:

...Gabe, where are you.

Before a small pang of guilt stabs at him, and he reminds himself, It’s only been thirty hours. Whatever he’s working on, it’s going to take time.

But the feeling Jack can’t quite place murmurs back, Time doesn’t matter anymore. And why didn’t he just write a note that made some goddamn sense.

It will make sense - you just have to be patient. Thirty hours is nothing, the hope in hope whispers back, He was probably worried the note would be a liability - look at all these people, giving away their own secrets for coffee, or a mattress -

But Jack just snaps:

But I wouldn’t do that! I have more...more...

But the words die like the security of himself inside him.

More what? the conversation inside him twists, More focus? More awareness? More sense of self? A charming, conspiracy-loving soldier tells you some bullshit about questions and answers and you think you’ve cracked the code to resisting interrogations? What a pedestal you’ve put yourself on. You’re a dumb, lost soul from nowhere who didn’t even have the patience to attempt med school, and your twitchy impulses jumped on enlisting before you even thought about your other options.

Jack drops his hand back to his chest, and shuts his eyes.

Face the truth, Jack - at least Watson was a real doctor.

You’re not even that.

Jack slides his hands back in his pockets -

And feels the warmth-worn edges of the book

And the small fragment of Gabriel’s ridiculous optimism

With his left fingers.

...
Jack opens his eyes, and scowls into the white emptiness of the concrete wall past the pile of prisoners.

...It’s true I’m not Watson, he thinks - and this time it is anger, it is bitterness, it is jealousy -

But I shouldn’t have to put up with Gabriel’s cryptic, Holmesian, crackpot fantasy on a whim. I need more to go on than just...a number, and some bizarre line.

And the worst part of the unmorning morning is that -

...Gabriel knows that too, Jack thinks, Jack knows, Jack knows instinctively that Gabriel is aware of that. If he wants to play games, he has to help me more.

After all

How can Jack play the game if he doesn’t even know what the rules are?

Suddenly -

There’s the sound of footsteps - lighter than some of the others - thudding down the hallway -

And the two cell groups are automatically rising.

Cell 5 flitters to the walls - Lucas and Khan are gone right now, but the others straighten themselves up against the concrete, hands above their heads. Jack takes his spot, a different, darker sort of scowl on his face and -

There’s the muffled beep-beep-beep-beep of the electronic lockpad through the wall, and the metal door slides open.

Jack frowns a bit in confusion.

The guard has the same sort of height and build as Gabriel, gaiter up, dark night camo jacket on, but when they turn towards Cell 5, Jack can see the number patch of:

“04”

And in a fraction of a second

Jack’s eyes go wide

As if the mere sight of it resparks the flare of fire in his chest, the restless, rough, raw-edged energy thrumming inside him -

“Prisoner: 76,” Carlos says, his voice muffled by woven polyester, but his eyes flicking towards Jack easily, “Come to the cell door, and put your hands in front of you.”

A nearly giddy grin almost flashes across Jack’s face, but he stifles it, heading to the door as Carlos swipes the keycard against the lock and slides it open. Jack approaches him slowly, coming to a stop directly in front of his friend, dropping his arms so that his wrists are in front of his face and -

You’re a sight for sore eyes, Carlos, Jack almost wants to say, but instead he gives Carlos a faint, happy smile as Carlos pulls out some handcuffs. The metal is cold and stiff as it snaps against Jack’s wrists, but somehow, that hardly bothers him, as Carlos instructs him:
“Step out of the cell and stop.”

Carlos moves out of the way, and Jack takes two steps forward, moving over the cell-door track and stopping in the small hallway between the two cells. Carlos pulls the cell door shut, saying calmly but clearly, “Turn to your left.”

Jack turns, facing down the hallway and -

A dense, deeply-woven darkness enmeshes his head.

…I should’ve expected that, Jack chides himself before he feels the end of an air rifle press into his back and Carlos orders him, “Walk forward, and keep your hands visible.”

Jack starts his solo march, heading through the open Cell Unit door uncertainly, and he hears Carlos tap a button behind them -

Before the Cell Unit door slams shut with a loud, metallic click.

And for the first time

Jack is suddenly aware of how

Quiet

The halls outside the cells are.

He can still hear the music through the poor concrete muffling, and he thinks that he can distantly hear some voices, guards yelling, other prisoners shouting -

But he’s never been out of the cell alone yet.

...Or rather

It’s never been just him and a guard before.

“Forward,” Carlos says to him - not rudely, not demandingly, just strictly - and Jack begins to walk, the air rifle still nudging into his back occasionally. It’s a slower, easier pace than the unnigh night marches, and Jack finds himself almost relaxing.

And he decides to risk it.

“...Am I allowed to talk, sir?” Jack murmurs lowly. There’s a small jolt of a nudge of the barrel, as if he’s startled Carlos by addressing him, and Jack can feel Carlos’ hesitancy in answering him -

Interesting.

He doesn’t know what to do.

“...Technically nothing is preventing you from it,” Carlos replies, and Jack can tell it’s about as diplomatic of an answer as he’s going to get. Carlos sighs heavily, adding, “Out here, just the drones patrol, so no one’s picking up your audio, if that’s what you’re wondering. So it’s really just the prisoner and the guard.”

“So I can talk to you about stuff?” Jack asks jokingly, still feeling blind, but more at ease -

“...Depends on the ‘stuff,’” Carlos says, and there’s a cautious edge to his tone before -
“Turn right,” Carlos states, interrupting their conversation. Jack turns, Carlos after him, and they continue forward -

“I guess you can say whatever you want,” Carlos settles on telling him, “And then it’s up to me to decide if whatever you say gets repeated to the other guards or interrogators. Or if you say something dumb enough for your escort to kick your ass. Left.”

“...Duly noted,” Jack mutters dryly, turning left. As they round the corner, he asks Carlos, half-teasingly, half-seriously, “So I guess I shouldn’t ask what Gabe is up to, huh?”

And

Jack doesn’t fully know what he expects -

Maybe for Carlos to teasingly hint something back -

But it’s definitely not -

“Huh? Gabriel?” Carlos asks with some confusion, “I think he’s doing interviews right now or something? Why?”

It’s definitely not the answer he gets.

...

It takes Jack an embarrassingly long second before the panic begins to set in and -

Carlos doesn’t know -

“Left again, and quiet,” Carlos says, adding in a lower voice, “We’re pretty much there.”

Automatically, Jack turns left, his thoughts racing, his pulse thudding, as he begins to realize that he’s suddenly way in over his head -

Carlos doesn’t know, or is he just playing with me? But he sounded so genuine, where is Gabriel, what is happening -

“Stop,” Carlos tells him, and Jack stops, trying to steady himself, feeling all the edges gnaw at him on the inside. There’s the beep of a button, and then a door slides open and Jack feels his adrenaline rise -

His hood is pulled off, and Jack blinks once, twice at the softer, sweeter hum of the the calmer lights in the room in front of him - a chair is visible, and half of a table and -

“I’ve brought him,” Carlos states loudly, before pressing a firm palm between Jack’s shoulder blades and giving him a steady but strict nudge inwards. And as Jack stumbles through the doorway, he hears -

“Thank you, Guard: 04 -”

And

A steep

Sharp
Inhale of shock slides between Jack’s teeth

As the voice slides the words

Like glass

Into his the soft spots in his spine

Drip

Drip

Dripping upwards

“- Please stand by for further instructions,” Guerra says almost pleasantly, and Carlos calls back, “Yessir.”

And then the door slides shut behind Jack.

Jack exhales slowly, inhaling deeply, steadying himself on his feet, eyes flicking immediately to the table, where Guerra sits at the other end, looking... odd and oddly casual in his tactical gear - no helmet, no gaiter, but a night camo jacket and the matching pants. He’s leaning back in his chair, clearly comfortable, easily in his element -

And undoubtedly lethal, even unarmed.

Jack straightens himself up, never breaking eye-contact with him, but he says nothing, say nothing, stay calm, every word is a weapon he’ll use against you -

Guerra gives him a soft, slightly amused smile, saying with a wry hum, “...You seem disappointed.”

In his peripherals, Jack sees a camera in the upper corner - left for him, but behind Guerra’s right shoulder.

“Out here, just the drones patrol,” Jack thinks quickly, still maintaining eye-contact with Guerra, adding, It’s not a drone camera, so it must have audio -

He starts to walk towards the empty chair, as Guerra continues to hold that patient, kind, slightly twisted smile on his face, asking Jack pleasantly, “...Were you expecting someone else?”

Jack pulls out the chair, and slides himself in it.

He says nothing.

But somehow, Guerra already knows -

“...Oh,” Guerra chuckles a little, “You were.”


Just a strong, stubborn stare.

“...Would you believe me if I said he’s afraid to face you like this?” Guerra asks Jack - again, his tone still conversational, his expression still nice.

Jack says nothing, but quietly thinks, So - this is how it’s going to be, huh?
“It’s true. I’m not sure why you hold him in such high regard,” Guerra continues casually, easily, almost languidly, rolling his shoulders and settling back as if they’re just two friends meeting for coffee. He smirks at Jack, but his dark eyes are still focused, sharp-cut and endless as he sighs, “He’s not a hero. Far from it. He’s a coward.”

An image of Gabriel alone, his gaze lost in the snowcovered stars, his mind somewhere far, far away, alone, isolated, different from the world around him

Daggers through Jack’s mind and -

He can’t stop himself -

“...You don’t know him very well,” Jack snaps, the words biting at his own teeth, ready to rip out of his own throat.

There’s a brief, split-second pause where Guerra looks surprised that Jack fell into his goading so goddamn easily and restless, rough, raw-edged panic swells inside him -

“Don’t know him -” Guerra says, absolutely feigning the shock in his voice, before he grins, adding in a dark, rich tone, “Oh, pobre soldado - I made him.”

Shock slides into Jack’s ribs like a steep, sharp inhale into his chest and glass into his spine, and he cannot stop the angry, bitter - not jealous, absolutely not jealous - glare that crosses his face -

“I know him better than anyone here realizes. I know exactly who he is and what he is made of,” Guerra states to Jack, his tone taking on a mocking, knowing edge, “He’s smart. Beyond smart. Wildly cunning and creative. I won’t deny that.”

Jack cannot hide the fury beginning to froth inside him -

[24: Resistance, Day 2 - My dear Watson]

[Tuesday, February 19, 2047: 1030 hours - security room in the auxiliary facility]

[Gabriel sighs as he enters the security room, stretching a little. He’s finally finished his morning interviews, and now it’s time to sit around watching the cameras until his break -]

[“What are you doing here??”]

[Luisa’s voice rises in a panic, and Gabriel blinks at her.]

[Luisa and the other three Echoes - DeAndre is on a break, apparently - and two of the trainer-soldiers are not looking at the drones -]

[But instead gathered around the screen that has the feeds and audios for the conventional cameras in the “interview” rooms and -]

[“Didn’t you know?” Gabriel asks her with genuine confusion, “We have to join one team a day, and I’m an Echo...today…”]

[The words die a slow, miserable death in his chest -]

[As Gabriel turns his gaze towards “Interview Room A” -]
[And sees Jack - angry, bitter, defiant, stubborn -]

[Sitting in the “prisoner’s chair.”]

“But see -” Guerra says coolly, leaning forward a bit, as if letting Jack in on a secret, “He’s a creature of my own ken and...intel guys like us?”

[Gabriel hasn’t felt this type of sheer, ugly, horrified panic rise inside him since his own meeting with Guerra eight months ago -]

[When Guerra had pulled out the Omnic Quetzal and placed it on the table in front of him -]

[“You should probably leave,” Luisa says, her tone still hasty and panicky, her gaze terrified -]

[“No,” Gabriel states, but his voice feels distant to his own mind -]

[“It's going to get bad, Gabriel -” Luisa whispers urgently, and a trainer-soldier mutters, “She’s not wrong, 24 -”]

“We’re not brave,” Guerra says to Jack, smiling at him, “We’re not heroes. We work in the shadows and leave graves and mourning families in our wake.”

Jack says nothing

...But uncertainty and fear cross his heart.

Guerra looks at him for a long, assessing second, before he

Cracks Jack open like a well-worn book

Reads the emotions in his heart

And says with an analytical certainty, “...Ah. I see. He hasn’t told you much about his work...has he?”

[In the security room, Luisa twists back towards the camera as Guerra’s words drift over him, muttering in a shocked tone, “He wouldn’t - doesn’t this violate something??”]

[“What?” one of the trainer-soldiers asks her and Alexei says, “Violate what -”]

[“No.”]

[Luisa flicks her worried gaze back to Gabriel, who is still staring heartbrokenly at the screen, murmuring, “There’s no secrecy to violate and, more importantly, it’s his story to tell.”]

Jack says nothing

But -

*Why won’t Gabriel ever talk about his SF experiences -*

Slips through his mind -

And into Guerra’s waiting hands.

“...Let me guess - he said it was too personal to tell?” Guerra asks him, his tone just wry enough to stab very close to Jack’s personal truth, “Too classified? Too dangerous?”
Jack says nothing.

Exhales slowly.

And Guerra gives him a slow, steady smirk drip-drip-dripping with sarcasm, as he murmurs knowingly:

“...Or did you just hear his silence on the topic and assume a stoic nobility contained within it?”

Jack thinks he cracks a little. Under the pressure. Of the words. And how true. They are.

[..He knew, Gabriel thinks, shutting his eyes against the truth, He knew I was too afraid to talk about it. Too afraid to tell Jack about it. ]

[..Asshole. ]

Guerra’s grin deepens, dark eyes absorbing all light as he hums, “...Should I tell you? What it means to work in intelligence gathering?”

Jack says nothing.

But his scowl shifts, just a little bit.

Just enough to show his curiosity.

“You have this romantic notion of a spy -” Guerra tells him, as if reading Jack’s thoughts aloud, “Maybe he’s like James Bond, charming, witty, suave, high tech gadgets and oozing charisma. Or maybe he’s like a black ops professional, all dark kevlar and slick guns and full of secrets. But no matter what, he’s beautiful in either image, isn’t he?”

...Jack refuses to say how both of those images of Gabriel thunder straight to his core, but he’s pretty sure a faint rush of blood simmers at his cheeks.

[“...Good god,” María mutters as Mai whispers something in Cantonese. Alexei whistles, saying with a clearly impressed tone, “Damn, he’s got these 18Xers down solid.”]

[“Thank god that description doesn’t match you at all, 24,” one of the trainer-soldiers snorts.]

[..Asshole , Gabriel thinks sarcastically, towards both Guerra and the trainer-soldier.]

“But let me tell you what him and Hollywood won’t, pobre soldado -” Guerra says, switching from that smooth operator voice to a more conversational, focused tone, “We’re neither of those. We’re cowards and cutthroats, wrapped in friendliness and advice and nice smiles. We enter a hot zone, start working out the targeted network, and then work our way in.”

And Jack still says nothing

But he scowls a little, something odd tugging at him uncertainly, like his sleeve is caught on something -

...Coffee and mattress pads , it whispers to him and Jack -

There’s an image of Gabriel in the snow fort, under the stardusted night sky, with a thermos and a perfect smile and -

“No, John Watson, you’re always the person I want to see.”
And Jack adds quietly:

...And hot chocolate.

“And it is easy,” Guerra says, as Jack refocuses on the moment. Guerra smiles at him, as if to embody what he’s saying, “You smile at people. You listen to their stories. You take them to dinner. You treat the children and the elderly well. You follow customs. If you can chance it, you sleep with someone attractive. You win hearts. You build trust.”

Jack says nothing -

But Gabriel’s spun-sunshine and sugar-smoked laughter drifts through his head and his heart.

And Guerra smirks darkly, saying:

“...And then you use those. You find the bad guys. But the bad guys are brothers, fathers, friends, coworkers, sons, husbands. And you raid a house and put a shotgun to that man’s head as his family weeps. That family - those people who trusted you - will blame you and themselves for the rest of their lives.”

The words catch Jack’s breath like a dull-edged knife to the scruff on his neck.

And his silence

Echoes

So loud

Like water

Drip

Drip

Dripping

Somewhere unknown.

[The burn in Gabriel’s chest and the sting at the edges of his eyes threatens to overwhelm him, but -]

[Look at it, he snaps at himself, forcing himself to open his eyes and look at the camera feed, You were a coward with him, as you have always been, and now Guerra gets to tell him the story first. ]

[And it is time to reap what you’ve sown. ]

“The worst part is how good it all feels,” Guerra says to him, that same patient, kind, almost tender smile on his face at Jack’s ragged horror, “How right it feels. How easy it is to sleep at night even when it’s all said and done.”

Jack says nothing but

An image of Gabriel alone, his gaze lost in the snowcovered stars, his mind somewhere far, far away, alone, isolated, different from the world around him

Drifts in like a slow stream of soft smoke and Jack thinks, ...But Gabriel doesn’t sleep easy -
“And how he does it all over again. And again. And again,” Guerra states and states and states, as if his words are truth undeniable. He leans back a bit, settling against his chair, saying with that faint smile, “An intel soldier’s greatest weapon is trust. And he will use it against the very people who gave it to him, one way or another.”

And Jack is suddenly, vividly feverishly aware

Of the sensation of a trap closing in around him -

“...Do you trust him, Jack?” Guerra asks in a casual, easy

Almost languid tone.

The silence is shattered

By the steep, sharp inhale of fear in Jack’s chest

As if an obsidian blade has been stabbed through his ribs and into his heart.

[Jack’s instinctive breath is mirrored by Gabriel’s, as he watches the camera, spellbound. The others are just as silent, watching enraptured, only the small motions of shock making tiny rustling noises and -]

“Oh,” Guerra states, and then smirks, “You do.”

His words are

Truth

Undeniable.

Jack refuses to look away from him.

“It’s a...fragile thing, isn’t it? The beginning of a new, rich friendship -” Guerra says, still smiling, “The part where you’re worried about how deep it can go and will go and should go, because you can’t get enough of it, but you have no idea if the other person wants to take the plunge too.”

[“...Jesus,” Alexei mutters, and Mai whispers, “I’d be begging for a blackout box right now.”]

[The metal backing of the datapad in Gabriel’s hand almost bends beneath the pressure of his fingertips on it.]

“You want so badly for it to mean something. You want that person to fall the way you do - the way you have fallen,” Guerra says, leaning forward a bit, his smile so warm, so sincere, so honest, that Jack almost wonders if Guerra can actually read his mind -

“You’re ready to spill your guts and split your heart, but oh, will they give you half of theirs as an equal exchange...” Guerra says, his voice softer, gentler, almost soothing, like a counsellor, like an advisor, as if he could read Jack’s palms and tell him his future -

Has he said something to you? Jack’s exhausted mind rattles, What has he told you?

[Gabriel suddenly scowls, noticing the twist in tone in Guerra’s words and -]

What Jack wouldn’t give to know what Guerra knows about Gabriel -
“...Has he given you half of his, soldado?” Guerra asks Jack quietly, patiently, leaning forward, as if reaching out to Jack, and -

The doubt and uncertainty and fear in Jack’s heart is open, laid bare on the table, and he wants to know -

“...What has he given you?” Guerra asks - his tone is still quiet, patient, kind, giving, but there is something cold to it, edges muffled with polyester and -

The book is in Jack’s pocket

The warmth of the hot chocolate lingers in Jack’s memories

The snowcovered, stardusted, smoky smiles vein through Jack’s heart -

[...He thinks I gave Jack a plan, Gabriel thinks furiously, But he doesn’t know for sure -]

And the number

“1824”

And the words

“The first virtue in a soldado / is the endurance of fatigue”

Beat in Jack’s blood.

“...Anything more valuable than a few sweet praises and a few beautiful smiles?” Guerra asks, and yes, the same quiet, patient, kind tone, a touch cold, and now a touch curious too and -

Jack almost chokes on his own breath and -

Guerra smirks, asking knowingly, “Things he gives to other people just as easily?”

Jack says nothing, but he shuts his eyes, trying to cut himself off from the way the lights are so bright, from the way Guerra smirks at him -

From the way the truth shards into his skin, trying to get at his heart.

“...Or are you special? Has he told you that you are?” Guerra asks him teasingly -

"No, John Watson, you're always the person I want to see.”

And Jack fights against his own memories, thinking bitterly, But I’m not even a Watson.

I’m nothing.

A lost soul from nowhere too impulsive to even become a doctor -

[The security room is silent, but the mood in the room says everything: tense, dark, brooding, unnerved. Even the trainer-soldiers look focused but slightly aghast at the conversation occurring through the camera.]

[Luisa glances at Gabriel, whispering quietly, “...Gabriel, have you said that to him?”]
[But her words slowly die -]

[At the *furious bittersweetness* of Gabriel’s expression -]

[liquid obsidian, fluid smoke, molten gold and melting stars.]

[And Gabriel turns to glance at her, saying with a hoarse, raw-edged rasp:]

[“And if I have? Does that make it any less true?”]

[Luisa suddenly looks faintly heartbroken on Gabriel’s behalf, whispering sympathetically, “...Oh, Gabrielito, *no lo creo* - ¿te enamoraste?”]

[“I don’t need your pity, Gonzales,” Gabriel mutters to her sourly, even though it feels like Guerra has ripped out his heart and placed it on the table before Jack -]

[Only that Guerra has dipped it in black paint first -]

“How many other people do you think he’s said that to, before he used their trust in him?” Guerra asks Jack tauntingly, “Do you think he was just as beautiful then as when he said it to you?”

[God damn asshole, Gabriel thinks furiously, *He knows I’m not - that I haven’t said anything like that to other people*-]

[But Gabriel’s anger deflates at the small touches of pain and fear that seem to grace Jack’s features at the question.]  

[And a small sense of hopelessness replaces it.]

[Please, Jack, Gabriel pleads, I know you can do this. I know you can see past this. Please -]

“Do you know what intelligence collection *really* is?” Guerra asks him and -

Jack says nothing

But opens his eyes

Defiant and exhausted and ready to war against himself again.

Guerra grins at him, saying wryly, “We collect people.”

Jack stares him down, biting back the slow, simmering rage and pain building in his heart.

“People who are useful to us. Valuable to us,” Guerra says to him, smug twisted with sincere, “Maybe their information is a resource to be harvested. Maybe their influence is more important than money.”

Jack says nothing, but for whatever it is worth -

He does not look away as Guerra smiles knowingly, “Or maybe...their trust is something to be weaponized.”

[Gabriel can feel the question starting to burn through Luisa’s confusion as -]

[“Are you messing with 76’s head?” one of the trainer-soldiers asks Gabriel skeptically, as the other one leans over, muttering, “That really isn’t cool, 24 - dude is just a naive guy from nowhere -”]
“I’m not -” Gabriel starts to retort, but tempers back the dangerous mix of anger and self-disappointment and small shards of heartbreak, instead settling for a softer, smokier, “Guerra’s trying to mess with him. I wouldn’t do that.”]

[But Luisa’s eyes - sympathetic and yet suspicious - burn like lasers into the side of Gabriel’s head.]

Jack stares into Guerra’s dark eyes.

Unmoved.

“...Isn’t it amazing?” Guerra asks him with that faint, almost impressed smile, shifting a bit in his seat, “You’re exhausted, you’re starving, you feel like you’re dying, and yet, the one thing that hasn’t been taken from you is your loyalty, your courage in him.”

[“I’m going to be honest, Reyes - it kinda sounds like you’re messing with this guy’s head,” María mutters and Mai nods in the background but -]

[Something tight constricts Gabriel’s throat at the look of determined resolution on Jack’s exhausted face and -]

[...That really is a good look for you, soldier, Gabriel thinks with a heartcracking smile -]

“You think he knows that?” Guerra asks him, before he smirks, adding lowly, “Do you think he...planned for it?”

1824 flashes through Jack’s head, but his face does not move -

He continues to stare into the darkness of Guerra’s eyes.

“...What does he have planned for you, soldado?” Guerra asks and -

There’s something different in his tone that -

Even in Jack’s exhausted, well-worn state -

He feels more than he hears.

1824 flashes through Jack’s blood again, but so does something else and -

Jack thinks maybe

Just maybe

He sees a crack in the depths of Guerra’s eyes.

Guerra slowly leans forward, resting closer on the table, as if trying to see Jack better, murmuring with a twist more urgency, “…I know he has some plan for you - I can sense it, better than you can - but when does he plan to use you?”

[...I’m going to burn that asshole down, Gabriel thinks darkly, Next chance I get. I’m going to ruin him -]

1824 -

Jack says nothing, does not look away -
Guerra rises a bit, shifting to a leaning, standing stance, not *looming* over Jack - nothing quite that overt - but more like he too is filled with a

Restless

Rough

Raw-edged

Energy that cannot be fully contained in this moment and - 

“He wants to weaponize your loyalty, your courage -” Guerra rasps at him - not angry, not bitter, not jealous - but with a quiet, eerie focus that sends a small shiver up Jack’s spine. Guerra slips out from sitting in the chair, starting to move around the table, eyes still fixated on Jack’s, like a lion on the prowl, murmuring, “Don’t you see that?”

Jack stubbornly refuses to turn his head, staring straight towards the back wall, but he thinks his face shows a flicker of doubt because -

*I deserve better than Gabriel’s Holmesian whims -*

Courses through his thoughts and -

*Hours of silence, hours of confusion, hours of cold, hours of pain, hours of boots boots boots, hours of hunger, hours of waiting*

*Waiting*

*Waiting -*

“Ah,” Guerra says knowingly, as he moves towards Jack’s right, slow and steady as drip-drip-dripping water, “You *do* see that.”

Jack refuses to look at him, but it’s hard, it’s hard -

His words are

Truth

Undeniable.

Guerra comes to lean on the edge of the table to Jack’s right, and Jack still refuses to look at him, refuses to break but -

The water of Guerra’s words - eerie and uncanny and *true* - have drip-drip-dripped into the cracks in Jack’s heart and -

“...Do you *want* to be a weapon for him, Jack? Do you *want* to be his soldier?”

Like water wears at stone

Guerra’s voice wears at Jack’s resolution of himself.

(*It is not hunger, thirst, or weariness -*)

Jack does not look at him but -
Gabriel nearly hurls his datapad at the camera feed -

Luisa is shouting something, grabbing at his left arm as he lurches forward in instinctive agony as -

(Nor fire, devils, dark, or anything -)

Fingers - calloused and rough, worn-edges like a blunted razor blade -

Slip beneath Jack’s chin and -

Pull Jack’s face towards Guerra -

And Jack stares into those eyes of the abyss once more, struggling to hold whatever remains of himself together, as Guerra’s voice - quiet, patient, kind, almost tender - sounds almost eerily, uncannily, absently disembodied, and his words - like water drip-drip-dripping down through the cracks where the glass has pierced Jack’s spine - sink into Jack’s head like an obsidian blade:

“...Do you know how good soldiers die, Jack?”

And Jack can see

For the first time

Hell is not a place.

Hell is the war that people wage upon each other.

Hell is the war inside a soldier’s eyes.

(Jack loves dark, deep eyes - gazes that look out to stars and seem to absorb them back, seem to have small galaxies contained in them. Jack could stare at the beautiful depths of Gabriel’s eyes all day, the inky darkness swirling like obsidian smoke across a midnight sun of chips of rubies and gold and amber, like flakes of stardust.)

But this -

Tears seem to sting at the edges of Jack’s own eyes -

As he sees -

(There’s an unreadable, almost unfathomable depth to War’s eyes, somehow soft and brittle the whole way down, like a cave covered in both dripping, gentle moss and cracked, jagged edges. There’s something...deeply cold there, a thoughtfulness that is ruthlessly calculating, as if constantly weighing every word, every action, every breath of every person before it - a kindness almost...untouchable, callously roughed, like the inside of the barrel of a gun that no one has properly cared for.)

(Jack does not know if Guerra has always been like this...or if something made him this way.)

Truth

Undeniable

Itself.

And fear - quiet, patient, gentle, kind - starts to gnaw at Jack’s heart.
The security room is horrified - María and Mai seem to fall back, Alexei looks sick, even the two trainer-soldiers blanch at how Jack looks afraid, so afraid - Gabriel will do anything to stop him from looking like that - don’t hurt him, don’t hurt him, Jack is bright like the sun over the ocean, radiant like a flash of lightning across a thunderous sky -]

“...Do you know what the reward is for being loyal to a man like him?” Guerra asks him, his grip on Jack’s face is firm but tender, almost gentle and Jack -

Even as the words work into the cracks in him, he refuses to say anything.

He refuses to look away.

Guerra’s gaze is undeniable as he lifts his left hand, extending his index and middle fingers, before he presses them to the right side of Jack’s head, murmuring, “A bullet here -”

Jack inhales steeply -

Guerra moves his left hand to Jack’s upper back, adding, “A knife here -”

Jack exhales sharply -

And then

Guerra leans back a bit, just barely gesturing to Jack’s chest, right where his heart is, his words like water shattering stone:

“And perfect pain here.”

Jack shuts his eyes.

He is

So tired

And worn

And afraid.

[In the security room, Gabriel buries his face in his left hand, rubbing at the sting in his eyes -]

“Look at you - trying so hard to endure your illusions of him, trying to fight the truth within yourself,” Guerra says, and there’s a quiet sort of joy in his words, as if he relishes Jack’s internal struggle, and he almost laughs, “Dime, soldado, dime - what do you think is better: suffering for your illusion, or letting the truth about him break your heart?”

1824 -

Jack fights off

The first virtue -

The tide

In a soldier is -

Threatening to carve away his shore
He sees Gabriel.
He sees Gabriel smile.
He sees the way Gabriel’s eyes alight with a wonderful, almost glowing shadowy radiance, as if the spaces of night between the stars carried their own light
An expression that keeps Jack enraptured and makes him melt into watery nothingness around him.

Of fatigue.

[Gabriel lifts his head, thinking quietly, ...I’m sorry, Jack. You deserved so much more than just - ]

[But he stops -]

[As he sees the soft changes across Jack’s face, even though his eyes are still closed -]

“Either way, pain is your constant companion, not him,” Guerra’s voice digs at him, and there’s that eerie, uncanny smile in his words as he says patiently, “He’s going to hurt you far, far worse than I ever will.”

“...Lying.”
The word rises
From the depths of Jack’s well of himself
So singularly
So resolutely
So powerfully
That it sounds like a droplet of water
Dripping
Up
Into the sky
To the point where not even Jack is sure if he actually said it
Or if his flooded heart simply felt it.

Jack opens his eyes
And stares up into the abyssal gaze of War.

Guerra gazes back, and the silence stretches to the stars and back between them and -

“...Say it louder, soldado,” Guerra commands him.

“...You’re lying,” Jack murmurs, the words torn from his truth undeniable and -
“Louder,” Guerra orders him.

“You’re lying,” Jack says, the words starting in his chest now -

“Louder ,” Guerra snarls at him -

“You’re lying -” Jack rips back, the words cracking and fraying out of his throat now, willing and true, enduring and undeniable -

[Gabriel’s jaw slackens a bit at -]

Because

[The look of fierce, furious courage on Jack’s face and -]

You’ll have to tear him from my cold, dead hands, Jack wars back against it all, And you'll take his cryptic, dumb, ridiculous faith in me when you bury me -

[And Gabriel has never been so profoundly silenced by a deep honesty - undeniable - welling up inside him -]

But then -

Jack is shouting something indistinct -

As pure panic grips him -

As Guerra slams his right hand against his chest

And sends him (and the chair) hurling backwards -

[“Holy shit!” Alexei shouts as chaos begins to unravel in the security room and -]

“I see you want to suffer for your illusions, soldado, so let me make this very clear -” Guerra states in an even-steeled tone as Jack’s whole world and sense of self crashes against the concrete floor, the fall thudding deeper bruises against his already-growing aches and pains -

Jack is frantically trying to pull himself away, dragging himself away from the chair, instinct taking over and telling him to escape even though there’s nowhere to go -

Guerra’s boots thud next to him, his right foot kicking away the chair and -

There are calloused fingers gripping at his chin again

Only this time they are restless, rough, and raw-edged, jerking his head up -

“The only reward for heroes is pain -” Guerra’s voice snarls at him -

Guerra’s right hand pulls a small vial of clear liquid from one of his pockets -

Jack is shouting hoarsely, trying to pull himself away and -

“- And the only reward for good soldiers is death,” Guerra hisses at him -

Before he points the vial’s long piping tube towards Jack’s face

And squeezes it.
And Jack inhales the Steepest Sharpest Bitterest Sensation he has ever experienced.

And the air *burns* down Jack’s nose and throat and esophagus and lungs, feeling like he’s breathed in literal shards of glass.

Jack *choke*s, hacking and coughing and wheezing, giving up his efforts to resist Guerra to immediately try to resist his own breath -

“Why did he tell you to knife the drones?!” Guerra demands somewhere in the vicinity of Jack’s right shoulder, but he can’t even *see*, his eyes are watering in so much bitter, burning pain, like someone has poured liquid sugar and smoke into his nose and throat -

“It -” Jack gasps, half-sobbing and wheezing, “- Was - my - idea -”

There’s another puff of the bitrex spray in his face, and Jack collapses back against the concrete floor, gasping and gagging against the air -

“Loyalty only earns you more pain, soldier! He will never be loyal to you the way you are to him -” Guerra rasps at him, and there’s a hand pulling at his face again, as the disembodied voice snaps, “He’s a coward, soldier! He will never be a hero! Your courage in him will never be reciprocated -”

“You’re - wrong -” Jack whispers, doing his best to breathe in fresher air, blinking away his burning tears. He can vaguely see Guerra kneeling beside him, those abyssal eyes watching Jack with a dark, deep assessment. Jack looks up at him, murmuring fiercely, “...Not all courage...burns bright...”

[“...God damn,” Luisa swears in awe and -]

[Gabriel watches the camera feed in utter *shock* -]

[Completely floored and humbled by Jack’s resolve in him.]

Guerra looks at him coolly, before saying with that quiet, patient, kind tone, “...Do you want to know the truth about his courage, Jack?”

Jack says nothing

But the air is bitterly tinged with curiosity.

Guerra smiles at him, saying, “He made such a fuss about being put on guard duty. Said it would be - what was it - *painfully counterproductive* to have the senior soldiers in the ugly positions. How it would cause resentments.”

[Gabriel’s gaze deepens into a horrified scowl as Luisa mutters, “...Oh shit -”]

“...And do you know what I told him?” Guerra asks Jack, in a cold hypothetical tone.

Jack says nothing, the slowly-drying wetness around his eyes making him feel well-worn like dried
“I told him that literally nothing was preventing him from joining you here, in a prison cell. Told him to show me that he was actually willing to put himself on the line for you,” Guerra *smirks* and -

Jack inhales steeply

(The air is clean but still so *bitter* -)

[“*That fucker* -” Gabriel snaps at the camera feed -]

“...Same as you're doing for him now,” Guerra almost *laughs*.

Jack exhales sharply

(The air out is harsh and ragged, burned through -)

Guerra looks at him with something nearing empathy as he says, “Oh, soldado, I had never heard a silence so loud. It said *everything*. Everything about him. Everything about what he thinks of you.”

The words cut against the grain of Jack’s resolve so *undeniably* that he shuts his eyes, heart cracking as the water works into the breaks -

Like the tide risen to erode him.

“...I told you the truth would hurt, more than anything I would ever do to you,” Guerra hums, not *smug*, but merely *happy* in how right his words are, how they carve out caves in Jack’s sense of everything.

There are fingers against his chin again, tender and gentle again, tilting his head up, as Guerra says, “C’mon, soldado, have the courage to face the truth as it crushes your heart.”

Jack opens his eyes, defiant and furious.

“There it is,” Guerra grins at him, before adding lowly, “...Do you want to know the most *painful* part?”

Jack does not look away, his expression ugly and bitter, but *resolved*.

Guerra casually, easily, almost languidly points to the camera in the corner of the room with the *bitrex* bottle -

[“...*No* ” is all Gabriel can rasp out -]

Before he easily, casually, almost *joyously* tilts Jack’s face towards it, saying in a quiet, patient tone, “...Like I said -”

Jack looks up at the camera

And the truth

*Undeniable*

Floods through his heart like a storm shattering his courage -

“- He will only cause you pain,” the voice of War says kindly.
Gabriel is left heartbrokenly speechless -

As Jack stares straight into the camera -

And it’s almost like those eyes - as blue as the sky under the twilight dusk - can see that Gabriel is there, watching him suffer as Guerra cracks Gabriel’s truths open like a well-worn book -

Letting Jack see the horrifying face of the beautiful, twisted smoke in Gabriel’s soul -

Jack refuses to look away.

He knows.

He knows Guerra is right.

“...He’s watching us?” Jack says, asks, both a question of confirmation and a statement of realization, the words hoarse and bitter out of his chest. Guerra’s voice is quietly confident as he says, “...That’s right. He’s watching you suffer, watching you hurt. And what is he doing? Absolutely nothing.”

Jack says nothing.

Because there’s nothing more to say.

Gabriel watches him.

And he knows.

He knows.

(You reap the seeds of fear and cowardice you sow.)

“...And you will take this fall for him, again, and again,” Guerra says - a truth undeniable - and repeats, “And again. This is what it means to be a soldier for men like us.”

Jack stares at the camera

And the words -

“...The first -”

Rise

“...Virtue -”

Like water into the sky.

Gabriel scowls in slow, unbearably slow realization -

The rest of the words start to shift into mist, and Jack hacks as the sting of bitterness burns in his throat.

“...What,” the word comes from Guerra as both a question of confirmation and a statement of confusion. And Jack

Grits his teeth

And exhales a truth undeniable:
“The first virtue...in a soldier...is endurance of fatigue.”

[“...What,” Mai repeats, echoing Guerra, and one of the trainer-soldiers mutters, “This guy is a nut -”]

[But Gabriel barely hears them as his thoughts rush with a pulse of gold-lighted adrenaline:]  

[He’s read it! ]  

Jack has not looked away from the camera.  
And he knows -  
[He knows -]  
(They know -)  
(Nothing will carve them down.)  
(They are not stone well-worn by warmth or water, storm or sea -)  
(But they are stardusted nights and all the sweetness of a shared secret, smoke and sunshine, smirks and smiles.)  
(They are a force unto themselves -)

“...Courage is only the second.”

...

It takes Jack an embarrassingly long second to realize Guerra has said something, and he finally looks away from the camera, to stare at the agent, stating, “...What.”

“...The quote,” Guerra says, totally straight-faced and deadpan, as if he hadn’t just been spraying denatonium in Jack’s face, “The rest of the quote. From Napoleon.”

[...Oh, fuck , Gabriel thinks with rising panic, He knows the quote - ]

“The first virtue in a soldier is endurance of fatigue. Courage is only the second,” Guerra states to Jack, as sheer

Utter

Horror

Starts to well up inside Jack -

Oh my god, I fucked up -

“...Do you quote Napoleon Bonaparte a lot, soldado?” Guerra asks, his eyes narrowing a bit, as if he’s finally clued in that Jack does not , in fact, quote the first French Emperor very often.

...

The silence between them

Is
Really incredibly awkward.

[**OH MY GOD, I NEED TO SAVE JACK,** Gabriel shouts internally, as Mai mutters, “What the hell is happening -”]

Jack stares at Guerra.

Guerra stares at Jack, his clear and obvious suspicion *sharpening* -

“...Il -”

And then -

Guerra’s gaze *widens* as -

“...Il n’y -”

*Sheer*  
*Utter*  
*Confusion*

Replaces the skepticism and suspicion

And Jack manages to untie his tongue and say loudly:

“That n'y a que deux puissances au monde, le sabre et l'esprit: à la longue, le sabre est toujours vaincu par l'esprit.”

(*There are only two powers in the world, the sword and the spirit: in the end, the sword is always defeated by the spirit.*)

The silence

Is

*Incredible.*

[“...What the fuck,” is all Gabriel can manage to say incredulously.]

Jack *grins* at Guerra, as the CIA agent struggles to recover his composure, stating point-blank, “I thought you spoke Spanish.”

“Hablo ambos - más español que francés,” Jack says back cheerfully, and Guerra just states, “How the hell did you find time to learn both.”

“On naît poète, on devient orateur,” Jack retorts and -

[Gabriel has to stifle his *uncontrollable laughter* because *what the actual fuck, Jack, that's amazing, you brilliant jerk* -]

“You're telling me you just *learned* French because you could?” Guerra asks dryly, and Jack smirks back, clearly smug and proud of himself, saying coyly, “No mames, mon ami.”

[“Good lord,” Alexei says in disbelief as Gabriel almost *collapses* on himself in laughter -]
“You’re enjoying this way too much, Gabrielito,” Luisa mutters at him, but Gabriel just wheezes, “But look at him, Luisa! Look at how brilliant he is -”

“We have different definitions of ‘brilliant,’ Reyes,” she sighs -

Guerra stares at Jack, totally unimpressed, before he mutters, “Christ, you’re exactly like him - irreverent to the very end. You’d rather get hurt making a stupid joke than be honest and take the easier path -”

“Easier path?”

Guerra stops as Jack echoes the hollowness of the words back to him. The CIA agent watches him, as Jack asks with a wry scowl-smirk:

“What ‘easier path?’ You decided to run this simulation in the middle of an actual war.”

Guerra scowls at him -

Gabriel chokes on his laughter as -

“What do you think the real war is, Jack?”

Drifts back through his mind -

The smirk slides off of Jack’s face and he just stares - fierce and unbroken - into the depths of Guerra’s gaze, muttering in a low, seasung wash of a tone:

“...Do you really think the robots are going to make us prisoners of war if we get captured?”

Guerra says nothing.

“...I’ll say it as many times as I need to, sir,” Jack says to him - not angry, not bitter, not jealous - just enduring, just fatigued -

(Just a soldier -)

“Do you really think the soldiers in the program are your toys to play with and discard the moment they break?” Jack asks him and -

Guerra says nothing.

(Which says everything, really.)

“Do you really think Gabe and I are sitting here, plotting ways to undermine and sabotage a stupid SERE program?” Jack asks, fully aware that he’s lying, but stating his words like they’re truth undeniable, to the point where he convinces himself that they are

True.

Guerra says nothing.

And the silence breaks Jack’s reserve of himself like water shattering stone.

“And what’s your deal with swinging for the fences for your first at-bat?” Jack asks, his voice hoarse and rasping, but low like thunder roiling, “You couldn’t even start off with some easy pitches like, ‘Where were you born, Jack?’ or ‘What MOS do you want, Jack?’ You had to go straight for the
most absurd, ridiculous idea in the bank?”

Guerra says nothing.

And to be honest

That just makes Jack _burn_.

“And I mean, god _damn_, I know Gabe is pretty smart and everything, but he’s like this huge _nerd_ who likes mystery books and hot chocolate and Star Trek, and _trust me_, he knows way too much about oil of all things,” Jack says, and sure, _maybe_ there’s a brush of adrenaline-bursting affection burning through him, like a breath of pure bitterness, only it tangs in a steep, sharp, _sweet_ way and, okay, sure, _maybe_ some of it is a bit delirious at this point -

[“Wow, you’re a real catch, 24,” a trainer-soldier snorts as Luisa _wheeze_ in coughs of laughter next to Gabriel, clinging to his arm as she _sobs_, “Oh my god, Gabrielito -”]

[Gabriel manages to maintain a deadpan, unimpressed expression as he stares at the camera feed but -]

[He won’t lie -]

[There’s something recklessly and roughly and raw-edgedly _charming_ about how Jack rattles off all these little details about him.]

“You got like twenty-three other senior soldiers, why don’t you pick on one of them for a change?” Jack half-asks, half-demands, half-jokes and -

...

The words _die_ in Jack’s throat as he sees _cracks_ appear in the depths of Guerra’s eyes.

Jack stares.

Guerra says nothing, but shifts uncomfortably.

Just a little.

But it’s an _answer._

All on its own.

[Gabriel suddenly scowls as he sees the realization _dawn_ on Jack’s exhausted, worn face and -]

“...Why…” Jack starts to say, not daring to believe it but -

The cracks in Guerra’s eyes show a startled sort of _fear_ -

“...Why do you dislike him?” Jack asks, unrelenting, as if he can _sense_ that he has turned the tide, changed the course of the moon, rearranged the stars and -

Guerra says nothing but there is something _splintering_ inside him and -

(“ _Go deeper - follow your own thoughts down -_”)

Jack’s thoughts _push_ and -
Like magnetic pieces snapping together -

“...Is Gabe why you have problems with Commander Luna?” Jack asks and -

[Gabriel’s eyes go wide as Luisa gives a steep inhale of shock -]

Guerra says nothing

But

The sudden flash of shock and unnerved panic in those deep eyes says everything.

Jack’s jaw drops a little as -

“Guard: 04 -” Guerra suddenly snaps, whipping his hand out and puffing a spray of the bitrex in Jack’s face. Jack jerks his head away a second too late, coughing and hacking as his whole body jolts from the bitterness of the air. Through his wheezing, there’s the sound of the door opening, Carlos saying, “Sir?”

“Hood,” Guerra’s voice orders and Jack impulsively scrambles to get away, even though the tears in his eyes blind him and -

The dense, potato-smelling, coarse-grained fibered darkness envelops his head -

Heavy hands grip at Jack’s upper arms, hauling him to his feet, the energy in them reckless, rough, raw-edged, as Guerra commands Carlos, “Take him to the seventh box. Third track.”

“...Yessir,” Carlos says, as another hand half-pulls, half-guides Jack away from Guerra but -

“I thought you were going to tell me the truth, director!” Jack shouts mockingly, though his words are coarse-grained from the bitterness in his throat and muffled from the bag around his head -

“The truth, 76 -”

Guerra’s words are a fierce and steady burst of snapping air.

“- Is that you have to be better than this ‘stupid SERE program-’”

Jack inhales steeply -

“- And until then, you’re not a true soldier -”

And he attempts to yank himself out of Carlos’ grasp

Because he’ll fight the man named War with vision darkened by the coarse-grain fabric and hands locked by the cuff if he has to -

“- Neither for this larger war -”

But Carlos pulls him back, muttering, “Jack, no -”

“- Nor for him,” Guerra says to Jack - his words ring out like truth undeniable.

And then, half-dragging him out -

Carlos pulls Jack forward through the heavy darkness -
And the door slides shut behind them.

"The first virtue in a soldier is endurance of fatigue. Courage is only the second." - Napoleon Bonaparte

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*The Sign of the Four*, chapter 6:

"You are not quite in possession of the facts yet," said Holmes. "This splinter of wood, which I have every reason to believe to be poisoned, was in the man's scalp where you still see the mark; this card, inscribed as you see it, was on the table; and beside it lay this rather curious stone-headed instrument. How does all that fit into your theory?"

"Confirms it in every respect," said the fat detective, pompously. "House is full of Indian curiosities. Thaddeus brought this up, and if this splinter be poisonous Thaddeus may as well have made murderous use of it as any other man. The card is some hocus-pocus,—a blind, as like as not. The only question is, how did he depart? Ah, of course, here is a hole in the roof." With great activity, considering his bulk, he sprang up the steps and squeezed through into the garret, and immediately afterwards we heard his exulting voice proclaiming that he had found the trap-door.

"He can find something," remarked Holmes, shrugging his shoulders. "He has occasional glimmerings of reason. Il n'y a pas des sots si incommodes que ceux qui ont de l'esprit!" (There are no fools as troublesome as those that have some spirit.)

Chapter End Notes

Sigma, huh?

This is getting a little too *meta* for me. :^)

(I think maybe ten people are going to get the Sigma and Carolina references, whoops.)

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Fun facts: all of this was written from February 28 - March 24. That's about a month before Retribution was even revealed. :D

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References:

1. "Denatonium (bitrex)", *Wikipedia*. Denatonium (trade name: Bitrex) "is the most bitter chemical compound known", but it is not harmful or toxic. It is often used in fit tests for respirator face masks or added to harmful chemicals to discourage children and animals from consuming them. I've had it sprayed for me for a mask fit test and it hits you like a goddamn knife in your throat.
2. "Il n'y a que deux puissances au monde, le sabre et l'esprit: à la longue, le sabre est
toujours vaincu par l'esprit.” - Napoleon Bonaparte. Translation: "There are only two powers in the world, the sword and the spirit: in the end, the sword is always defeated by the spirit."
3. "On naît poète, on devient orateur." - Cicero. Translation: "One is born a poet, one becomes an orator."

Who’s ready to see the box?
Chapter Summary

[There's a room where the light won't find you]
Jack gets put in a very small, very dark box.

[Holding hands while the walls come tumbling down]
Gabriel has a few tricks up his sleeve.

[When they do, I'll be right behind you]

Chapter Notes

All around the mulberry bush,
The monkey chased the weasel.
The monkey thought it was all in good fun -
Pop! goes the weasel.

(...Get it? Jack-in-the-box?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Resistance, Day 2 - Hours: 31 - 37

Music used in psychological operations is colloquially called “music torture” - the term is used to describe the practice of incessantly playing loud music to psychologically and emotionally disrupt prisoners. The practice is typically used in combination with bright lights, stress positions, sleep deprivation, food and drink deprivation, and sensory deprivation to create a disorienting and sensory-grating effect on the targeted individual.

In the United States, music torture is occasionally part of the Survival Evasion Resistance and Escape curriculum for the training of special operations personnel. A recording of Taylor Holmes performing the Rudyard Kipling poem “Infantry Columns” (also known as “Boots”) is the audio most frequently used in US military SERE programs.

Memos, notes, and documents from organizations such as the Central Intelligence Agency have revealed that music torture has been used by such organizations for the last several decades. Several of these memos describe the use of music torture in CIA black sites, including activity descriptions such as:

- 0400: Detainee was told to stand and loud music was played to keep detainee awake. Was told he can go to sleep when he tells the truth.
0345: Detainee offered food and water—refused. Detainee asked for music to be turned off.
1800: A variety of musical selections was played to agitate the detainee.

Songs used by the CIA in these black site operations include a wide range of music genres and styles, from rap titles like “The Real Slim Shady,” to heavy metal songs like “Enter Sandman,” to pop songs like “Babylon,” to commercial jingles like the Meow Mix theme.

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**Vox report on music torture:**

[The report specifically mentions that music was used as a no-touch torture device at the COBALT detention facility. Detainees there, the report reads, "were kept in complete darkness and constantly shackled in isolated cells with loud noise or music and only a bucket to use for human waste.

["It is music’s capacity to take over your mind and invade your inner experience that makes it so terrifying," Thomas Keenan, director of the Human Rights Project at Bard College, told Al Jazeera.

[In addition, torturers used what has been called "futility music", like Barney's "I love you" and the song from the Meow Mix commercial—songs so upbeat and repetitive that they can be used to "break" prisoners into thinking that resistance is futile.]

[Being kept in a pitch black room with rap and metal music blaring for weeks on end can have definite effects on the psychology of any formerly stable person. It is the weaponization of music.]

["Imagine you are given a choice," Binyam Mohamed, a Guantanamo Bay detainee told The Guardian in 2008. "Lose your sight or lose your mind."]

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From The New Yorker's "When Music is Violence":

[Sound is all the more potent because it is inescapable: it saturates a space and can pass through walls. Quignard—a novelist and essayist of an oblique, aphoristic bent—writes:]

> [All sound is the invisible in the form of a piercer of envelopes. Whether it be bodies, rooms, apartments, castles, fortified cities. Inmaterial, it breaks all barriers. . . . Hearing is not like seeing. What is seen can be abolished by the eyelids, can be stopped by partitions or curtains, can be rendered immediately inaccessible by walls. What is heard knows neither eyelids, nor partitions, neither curtains, nor walls. . . . Sound rushes in. It violates.]

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**76: Resistance, Day 2 - A room where the light won’t find you**

Tuesday, February 19, 2047: 1105 hours - a hallway in the auxiliary facility

“Carlos, what the hell -” Jack starts to protest as Carlos half-drags, half-guides him down the hallway but -

“Be quiet.”

Carlos’ voice is not a request, but a command.
Jack’s words die a bitter-burning death in his throat.

“We don’t have much time and I have too much to tell you,” Carlos says in a low, urgent whisper, pulling Jack along the hallway (or so Jack assumes). His “guard” exhales deeply, murmuring quickly, “It’s not really my place to explain this, but - fuck - Guerra took this to a weird personal place so it’s not fair to keep you in the dark.”

“Ironic, given the hood,” Jack retorts dryly, but Carlos snaps in a low rasp, “Puñeta, cabrón, what did I just say ?!”

“...Sorry,” Jack apologizes, letting the fight and the fire bitter-burning in his blood settle a bit and -

“Listen, there’s two things you need to know about Gabriel and Guerra,” Carlos mutters, his tone getting increasingly steep and sharp, “The first thing is that Gabriel, me, Luisa - everyone in our old ODA lied to the 7th Group Command last year.”

“...What?” Jack asks, confused as to where this is going. Carlos murmurs with deepening intensity, “We were in Mexico City on the Day of Crisis -”

Jack inhales steeply at that -

“- And we basically stealthed and fought our way from central Mexico to Dorado and then finally got a pick up back to Florida,” Carlos tells him, but his voice drops to an almost impossibly quiet whisper as he says:

“We brought something back with us. An Omnic drone.”

Jack briefly stops breathing.

“We told Eglin our Team Sergeant thought up and implemented the plan,” Carlos says softly, but fiercely, and Jack immediately knows -

“Gabriel,” Jack exhales sharply, and Carlos confirms it, “Yes. Gabriel was actually the person who figured it all out. He didn’t want the credit - was afraid that Eglin would put pressure on him for it. So we all agreed it was Carolina instead.”

And suddenly -

It clicks for Jack as -

(“And what clever comeback are you going to say when your protégé turns out to be responsible for this mess, Carolina?” Guerra hisses at her, and Luna leans in on the table to return his glare, but Jack just thinks slowly:)

(Protégé? )

(“That’s rich coming from you when you tried to steal him to your SAD bullshit eight months ago!” Luna snaps at him, “But he said no, so you had to go craft a whole goddamn ‘enhancement’ scheme just to break my ODA - our ODA - apart -”)

“But Guerra knows,” Jack says in sudden realization, “Guerra knows you lied and he knows Gabriel actually did it -”

“Right,” Carlos says, before he mutters with a touch of defensive bitterness, “And for some reason he’s fixated on that.”
There’s a brief pause before Jack asks, genuine and honest and raw-edged, “What’s the second thing?”

…

Carlos says nothing.

Only silence answers him.

...That’s the most ominous answer I’ve ever heard, Jack starts to think, when Carlos says -

In a tone like wisps of grey smoke:

“…You can’t be left alone in the dark with that.”

…

I take it back - **that** was the most ominous answer I’ve ever heard, the sarcastic part of Jack’s brain mutters, as Jack whispers in terrified panic, “What ??”

“Okay, no, fuck, that was probably the wrong way to say it,” Carlos admits with a low sigh, and Jack stammers, “You think??”

“But on some level it’s true, I don’t want you to go in there and think about it for six hours -” Carlos starts to say when Jack gawks, “Six hours??”

“- But I will say that Gabriel didn’t do anything wrong, he just -”

But then Carlos stops and.

The silence says

**So much.**

Jack stops panicking over the amount of hours he’s going to be stuck in the blackout box and just

**Listens.**

“…He made the hardest choice any medic has to,” Carlos says, in a quiet, almost heartbroken whisper.

And Jack just

**Knows.**

(“You wanted to go into medicine, as a nurse or a medic, but practicing medicine is...controlled chaos,” Gabriel says, the words almost a hymn and a hum in Jack’s head, “A battle against the inevitable. A stubborn optimism. A resolute entrenchment in believing in hope. You don’t necessarily have hope itself, but you believe in its existence and its power, even if you yourself never actually feel it.”)

A small puzzle of Gabriel connects itself in Jack’s mind and -

(Jack quiets, and he shuts his eyes, listening to Gabriel murmur just as gently as smoke, “But when you make the switch to working with knowledge and information instead of medicine, you work with abstraction. You bank on people being people. So you work with the full awareness that
people being people often results in ignoring knowledge and engaging fruitlessly in the cycle of life to sickness and life to injury, until, one day, it becomes life to death.”)

Jack briefly shuts his eyes -

(...Is that what you chose, Gabe? Jack thinks, in the soothing darkness behind his eyelids, the pressure of leaning against Gabriel’s shoulder steadying him through the moment.)

A smoother, gentler darkness against the coarse-grained mesh enveloping his head and -

(...Gabriel’s answer says everything.)

(“...The medic knows people are stupid, cruel, and hopeless, but chooses to help anyways. But the knowledge-bearer knows people are stupid, cruel, and hopeless, and sows abstract seeds anyways, fully aware they will reap the fruitless with the fruitful regardless,” Gabriel exhales slowly, “And the only way to start gathering information for the construction of knowledge...is simply to ask questions and interpret the answers you receive...no matter what they are.”)

Jack inhales slowly

Exhales softly

And opens his eyes.

...I think I’m beginning to get it, Gabriel, Jack thinks quietly, his heart burning bittersweet.

“I know it’s going to be hard, Jack,” Carlos murmurs, as he guides Jack around a corner to their right, “But try not to let Guerra’s words get under your skin. He’s trying to twist the truth to suit his purposes.”

“But he isn’t lying.”

Jack’s words are both a question

And a statement.

And they startle even himself.

“...If you mean his description of HUMINT, then technically no,” Carlos starts to say, but his voice is distant compared to Jack’s thoughts, which

Drip

*Even if the things he said were true*

Drip

*Would that change anything?*

Drip

(Gabriel glances at him before he *smirks* - sunshine spun into the sweetest smoke, stardust sublimated into a sugared shadow - and -)

Into the cracks in Jack’s heart
And the water rises - drop by drop by drop.

“— But intention matters, like, uh, that saying —” Carlos is saying in the background but Jack just mutters, the words burning bitter like dark chocolate in his throat:

“The ends justify the means...or maybe you mean killing people with kindness?”

Carlos quiets at that, pulling Jack to a stop. There’s the sound of shuffling, along with a sigh, as his “guard” says, “...Why would you even join the Special Forces if you were going to judge us for our methods? What do you think unconventional warfare is?”

“Judgment?” Jack asks, his tone burning bittersweet, “Is killing something with kindness a bad thing?”

...But is knowledge of the methodology of kindness going to make this blackout box any less miserable? a voice murmurs to him, like water rising through cracks -

And is it going to make Guerra any less terrifying?

And then

The image of Gabriel smirking - regal and wry, wrought in smoke and stardust - cuts through him, asking in whispered shadowy tones:

Does it change anything?

There’s a brief pause, and then Carlos mutters, “...You sounded a little conflicted when you said it.”

“...Not gonna lie, Rives,” Jack retorts, “Little bit difficult not to feel conflicted when my throat’s on fire and my hands are cuffed and I’m about to get stuffed in a box for six hours.”

“...Could be less,” Carlos mumbles, to which Jack immediately adds, Could be more too. Great.

And then -

There’s a beep of a lockpad

And a door slides open in front of them.

Carlos guides him through the door, then leads him off to the right and -

Jack’s hood is suddenly pulled off, and he has to blink against the lights a few times before he can process where he is and -

Oh.

The blackout box room is the work of some sort of crazy SERE supervillain.

It’s a shower room, just like the one by the barracks hall - eight stalls around the room, two on each wall, central floor sloping in to a drain in the middle, except that it’s been entirely repurposed. From the “current unused” stalls that Jack can see, the walls of the stalls have been “tiled” with those cheap but effective noise-insulating foam textures, the triangles daggering out from the already tiny, cramped shower space, and “temporary audio-proof roofs” have been cobbled together to slot over the tops of the shower stalls (maybe about eight to nine feet high).

But then
Inside each shower stall (or so Jack figures)

Are boxes.

Tiny, almost inhumanly small boxes.

Constructed out of what appears to be rough plywood frames, they can’t be more than a maybe two feet wide, three feet tall, and maybe another three feet deep (though some are just a bit bigger or smaller than others).

And surrounding each one are a set of cheap - but clearly effective - stereos.

At least five of the converted shower stalls are being used, their doors shut - even with the audio-insulating foam, there’s the sound of deep, rhythmic beats and eerie, sobbing voices, muffled, as if there are people crying in the room next door instead of a few feet in front of him.

And Jack

Jack distantly thinks he hears some realer, more tangible shouts and low, stifled crying.

A new stab of fear fear fear lances through him, steep and sharp and he has to grit his teeth to bite back the panic rising in the waters of his heart and -

“No” a new voice asks, and Jack glances towards another guard - a trainer-soldier from the lack of a Soldier ID number on his jacket, and Carlos replies, “Prisoner: 76. Orders for box seven, track three."

The trainer-soldier has his gaiter pulled down, so he makes a disgusted, almost pitying face over what Carlos says, before he glances at Jack, grabs him roughly by the arm, and drags him over to one of the open stalls. He pushes the door open and does his best to center Jack towards it (Jack doesn’t consciously try to resist, but the panic brushing on the edges of his senses causes him to shudder and stumble a bit).

Jack stares at the open box.

...

It looks so painfully shallow.

“In,” the guard orders, and Jack inhales steeply -

Thinks, Jack in a box -

And exhales a hoarse, exhausted bark of a laugh -

“What’s so funny, Prisoner: 76?” the guard demands, and Jack rasps weakly, “Jack in a box.”

The silence between him, the guard, and Carlos is

Really awkward.

“...It was funnier in my head,” Jack mumbles, and the guard snorts, “See if you’re laughing in a few hours, recruit. You get one of my least favorite songs because Guerra is apparently a sadistic asshole.”

“What else is new,” Jack says, to which the guard mutters appreciatively, “...That’s fair. Now,
“c’mon - the sooner you get in, the sooner you get out.”

“That’s a lie,” Jack says, calling him out. The guard chuckles, “You need something to believe in when you’re five hours in and dying.”

Jack just continues to stare at the box - so shallow compared to the abyssal depths of Guerra’s eyes and -

And both of them so weak and discomforting compared to the smoky, stardusted warmth of the obsidian-over-gold shadows of Gabriel’s.

“Don’t make me taze you, son,” the guard sighs apathetically, and Jack

Inhales -

Mind over matter.

Exhales -

Endurance of fatigue.

And climbs in.

It’s constructed in such a cramped way that Jack immediately has to crowd in on himself - so narrow that he can’t even rest on his knees, nor can he actually sit. He has to squat himself in there, resting solely on the balls of his feet, tucking his arms in so that even his shoulders hunch together to make his torso fit, head bent in towards his chest.

...His horror and pain and disgust with himself at being 6’1” in the tiny space of Cell 5 is

Nothing

Compared to what he’s feeling now.

Wood - rough and raw-edged - presses in on him on all sides, rubbing coarse-grained against his shoulders, his elbows, his lower back, his knees and -

“...Hope you like 80’s pop,” the guard says dryly -

Before the lid is slammed shut over him.

Jack immediately wishes he had put the hood of his jacket up, because the lid rubs irritatingly and uncomfortably against the back of his neck and head, pressuring stiffly against the knob of his seventh cervical spine, just above the slope of his shoulders.

Already

The pressure is hot, dense, and heavy on the ends of his feet, and he can feel the blood beginning to pool there. His own breath burns bitter - steep and sharp, ugly humid - circulating in around himself. The handcuffs restrict his movements even further, limiting his ability to readjust his arms and wrists even a tiny amount.

The immediate feeling of wood literally boxing him in and the rough heat of his own breathing condenses claustrophobia in on his senses.

Okay, Jack thinks, exhaling slowing, remembering the meditative and breathing techniques the
trainers had taught the candidates last week, *Just like falling into a frozen pond - don’t work yourself into a panic. Calm breathing. Numbness will happen - you have to be prepared to do the smallest exercises. Flex fingers and move toes. Adjust when you can.*

...*Focus on something internal.*

Jack shuts his eyes against the cloying darkness and -

God, he *tries.*

He tries *so hard* to focus on something that can center him, can ground him, can give him some sense of self and self-control but -

1824

Is cut off with the words, whispered kindly by War:

*Do you know how good soldiers die, Jack?*

No.

Jack *refuses.*

*You will take this fall for him. Again. And again. And again.*

No.

Jack *resolves.*

*And if it’s all true*

*Does it change anything?*

Gabriel’s smirk is sunshine obscured by shadow and smoke, obsidian laid over gold, regal and rich and raw-edged -

No.

Jack *resists* -

Suddenly

Out of the darkness pressed in around his body, coarse-grained and ugly dense

*A synthy, humming, oooooohing jingle* rips through Jack’s senses, so loud and so deep that he *feels* it vibrate in his bones and taptap-tap, taptap-tap, taptap-tap in 12/8 time on his brain -

So vibrant and vivid and violently optimistic that Jack *jolts*, bashing his head against the lid, whimpering a little at the sting of it -

At about ten seconds

A deep bass and drum thud-thud-thud-thud into his space, the ugly humid air and his breathing and his own pulse beat-beat-beat-beating with it in fear and confusion and -

Jack scowls and shuts his eyes -
Just music, it's just music -

But then -

“Welcome to your life -”

A voice - ringing with that weird hollowness of old school recording - croons into his ears

“There’s no turning back -”

The words clinging at the knob of his seventh cervical spine

“Even while we sleep -”

Running invisible fingernails through the small hairs at the back of his neck

“We will find you actin’ on your best behavior -”

The music is so blindingly poppy, the voice is gentle, patient, almost kind

“Turn your back on Mother Nature -”

But the lyrics

“Everybody wants to rule the world -”

Make Jack remember the Hell in Guerra’s gaze and -

Jack shuts his eyes.

The twang-twang...twang-twang...twang-twang of the synth guitar slide between the words like a knife in his teeth and -

“It’s my own design - It’s my own remorse - Help me to decide -”

Would’ve expected a more ironic song, Jack forces himself to think over the wash of the words in his head -

“Help me make the most of freedom and of pleasure -”

But -

“Nothing ever lasts forever -”

As always -

“Everybody wants to rule the world.”

The depth of Guerra’s wit outpaces Jack’s resolve.

“There’s a room where the light won’t find you -”

Jack’s eyes snap open but -

“Holding hands while the walls come tumbling down -”

There’s only darkness -
“When they do, I’ll be right behind you.”

Only darkness.

“So glad we’ve almost made it -”

Only darkness and the music, carving at Jack’s senses like a storm through stone.

“So sad they had to fade it -”

Jack bows his head against himself and -

“Everybody wants to rule the world.”

Falls

Into the abyss in his heart.

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“Everybody Wants to Rule the World” was almost not recorded. According to singer Roland Orzabal, the duo of Tears for Fears initially thought the song was too light to fit in with the rest of the album. Originally, the lyrics were “everybody wants to go to war,” which Orzabal found lackluster. Their producer eventually convinced him to try recording it.

Despite the use of a shuffle beat and new wave style synth elements, lead vocalist Curt Smith described the song as, “The concept is quite serious – it’s about everybody wanting power, about warfare and the misery it causes.”

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**24: Resistance, Day 2 - Make the most of freedom**

Tuesday, February 19, 2047: 1438 hours - intel room, auxiliary facility

Gabriel enters the room

And fights two urges.

The first: the urge to turn around *immediately* and leave.

The second: the urge to launch himself across the Foxes’ meeting table

And punch Guerra’s teeth out.

Guerra, meanwhile, doesn’t even look up from his own datapad, eyebrows just slightly furrowed in concentration as he reads something on it. The room is, shockingly, empty save for the two of them, and unnervingly tranquil, except for a light, steady off-rhythm coming from Guerra’s earbuds.

The moment is strangely, almost poetically human - borderline modern Impressionism in subject, with the combination of the strong overhead lighting and the softer glow of the datapad casting the CIA agent in a heightened contrast, the effect sharp compared to his neutral, unemotional expression.

Gabriel resists both urges, biting back the fury that’s been contained like a low, bitter rasp in the back of his throat all day, and instead walks to the right, keeping to the edges of the room -
As if physical distance will keep him from drawing Guerra’s attention.

He’s almost to the small cabinet on the right side of the room, where he left his datapad to charge when -

“You seem upset.”

Guerra’s voice is neutral, just faintly frowning in tone.

Gabriel has to resist a third urge:

The urge to drive words - like daggers - into Guerra’s back.

He glances at Guerra, who still hasn’t moved, his left shoulder pointed in Gabriel’s general direction. Gabriel exhales sharply, gritting his teeth on his anger, grabbing his datapad from the wireless, touch-only charging station, and heading back towards the door -

“...Well?”

Guerra’s voice is still neutral, but just

Lightly bored

And vaguely expectant.

Gabriel stops, facing the door, before the words slip from him, like glass through his teeth:

“How do you want me to do?”

There’s a brief pause, and then -

In that same lightly bored, vaguely expectant tone (with just a touch of stinging terseness), Guerra mutters, “Your work.”

At that, Gabriel torques around, snapping like a match flicked to a dry forest, “Are you sure? Because that interview this morning seemed excessive and pretty goddamn personal.”

Guerra finally glances up from his datapad, head not moving, just those abyssal eyes flicking to Gabriel’s face, before he sighs heavily, tapping something on the screen. The low beat of the music stops, and he absently pulls his earbuds from the hollows of his ears, letting them dangle around his neck as he lowers the datapad.

“...It really seemed like you wanted a reaction from me,” Gabriel says, each word like a sliver of smoke from his mouth, “Well, you got one.”

“If I wanted a reaction from you, Reyes,” Guerra says pointedly, “I would’ve interviewed you -”

“That is the most bald-face lie I’ve ever heard from you,” Gabriel snaps right back, “Which is saying a lot, sir, considering your entire job is to lie -”

“I would watch that tongue of yours, Reyes,” Guerra counters, tit-for-tat, “It has the bad habit of getting you in trouble. And I’m sure Morrison wouldn’t want that, considering he probably wants to feel it in certain places before you get shipped off to Detroit -”

“Leave him out of this,” Gabriel states with a fierce, obsidian sharpness, “If you have an issue with me, then you should take it out on me, not on Jack -”
If you damage his spirit, I will **destroy** you -

“Why is everything always about you, Reyes?” Guerra says dryly, but before he can get another word in, Gabriel rattles off:

“Because you *cannot* deny that your focus was on undermining my personal relationship with another candidate and not *at all* on any of the topics you assigned us yesterday!”

“Because I am restricted to those, am I?” Guerra asks back sardonically, before he adds, “I am not a candidate and this is not *training* for me. Do not forget that.”

And the anger rises like smoke inside Gabriel

Before it *boils* over

And he *seethes*, “So you’re above your own rules that you set, are you? After all that talk about being a *professional* soldier and a leader - that was all just hot air, was it?”

“What did I literally just say?”

Guerra’s voice has switched from that bored, expectant, terse tone

To true, quietly dripping *fury*.

Gabriel says nothing.

He stares into the dark depths of Guerra’s eyes, *refusing* to back down, *refusing* to cower from the monster that lurks in that abyss there. Guerra stares right back, stating with a steeled anger, “I am *not* a candidate. I am *not* in training. I am *not* beholden to the objectives of this program, and I am *not* your colleague. Remember that, *soldier*.”

The silence between them is abyssal.

“...I know your weird sense of sarcastic pride will bristle at the thought, but let me give you some advice, Reyes,” Guerra finally says after the fury-filled moment. His voice is quieter, softer, patienter, but Gabriel knows -

That is when he is **most dangerous** -

“People like us don’t get to play the hero,” Guerra states to him, his words solid like

Truth

Undeniable.

Gabriel does not flinch, does not look away, does not betray his own emotions -

But his heart flickers a little at the bittersweet remorse that twists inside it at his words.

*You know this*, the small smoke voice whispers, *You’ve always known this.*

“It’s far, far more important that you focus on accepting that truth, performing your role, and sharpening your skills than daydreaming of heroics and martyrdom,” Guerra tells him with a measure of finality in his tone, and he looks like he’s about to turn his attention back to his datapad when -

“...Do you really think I do that?”
Gabriel’s words are rough, raw-edged with a bittersweet, smoky rasp - not full of regret, no.

Just a shadow of remorse.

Guerra looks back up at him with bored, expectant interest.

And inside him -

Lit only by the chilled lantern light and the distant glow of stars, Jack smiles bright, so radiant even in the darkness of the night, as he says:

“Thank you, Gabe.”

Gabriel says slowly, deliberately, “Do you really think that me - that I have any illusions of that?”

Guerra looks at him, listening like Gabriel is describing the weather or something, and Gabriel scowls in concentration, pulling each word out of the rush of his thoughts like precision-set puzzle pieces, “I know extremely well what I am capable of. And what I am not. I don’t know why you think I need to keep ‘learning’ this over and over.”

Guerra says nothing.

The silence between them is so deceptively calm that Gabriel almost thinks that Guerra isn’t going to finally believe him, per se -

But that Guerra will tell him just to get out and go back to work -

“...Because I think -”

But instead

“- That for the first time in years -”

Guerra’s words

“- Perhaps the first time in your whole life -”

Are so gentle

“- You have met someone who makes you think you can be something other than what you are.”

Like a glass knife in Gabriel’s spine.

“And he makes you believe in heroes and hope once again,” Guerra says quietly, patiently, gently, so gently, a bittersweetness of smoky chocolate and snowcovered, stardusted nights, “And makes you dream that - even if a tiger can’t change its stripes or if you can’t change your skills - then you can repurpose those into a new meaning or objective in life.”

Jack’s smile is so bright -

Gabriel’s shock shifts immediately to a deep, defiant scowl -

Because he can anticipate Guerra better than the agent realizes as -

You’ll never take those moments from me, he thinks fiercely -

“But I am here, Reyes,” Guerra says darkly, his tone dropping steeply, sheering off like the sides of
an abyss, “To remind you that tigers never change their stripes, and that your skills are all you have. You don’t need to be better at this fantasy - you just need to be better at what you already are.”

Because you know that, do you? Gabriel thinks, setting the gilded-cracked shadows in his heart ablaze with snowdusted, starcovered, smileshine fury, You know that better than him? Better than me?

“I want you to be realistic - about yourself and about your future,” Guerra says to him, “Think with your head, and not your heart. It makes you look weak.”

“...Ironic coming from you,” Gabriel mutters sourly, and Guerra’s eyes narrow a little at that, as he retorts, “Is it? I left 7436 because I knew this truth better than you.”

...It may be your truth, Gabriel simmers inside, But it will never be mine -

“You have raw potential. But if you get sidetracked by every pair of pretty blue eyes then you’re as good as useless,” Guerra states dryly, and Gabriel mentally trips over the unexpected remark, stammering sharply, “I don’t.”

“You don’t?” Guerra asks with mock surprise, “Then why are we even having this discussion?”

Gabriel says nothing -

Because anything he says will be used against him. Not here, not now.

But someday.

“You have talent. You have ideas. You have creativity. You have skills,” the man named War says to him, the words rising from the unknowable, undeniable depths of the abyss, and Gabriel can see -

There is a torrent of fire at the bottom

As Guerra intones - quietly, patiently, gently -

Like a knife over skin:

“But you lack focus, ambition, and vision. You need to be trained and cultivated by someone who can see those things for you.”

Gabriel stares into the abyss and asks wryly, “...That’s it, huh? It’s just that easy? All I need is someone with better eyesight than me?”

Guerra says nothing, but he watches Gabriel like the void consuming all fragments of light that drift too close.

Gabriel

Snaps.

…

Just a little.

“You sound like those people who find heirloom roses growing in sidewalks in L.A.,” he snarks vividly at Guerra, rolling his shoulders as he rolls his head, adding tartly, “But you have no idea why it’s thriving there when the drought-resistant succulents in your backyard are dying.”
Because

Jack’s smile is so bright -

Gabriel will pour whatever water and sunlight he needs

“You called yourself Gabe.”

To make the concrete oasis in the desert valley of his heart grow and bloom

“Would guessing be asking a stupid question?”

Because Gabriel

“You don’t know him as well as you think.”

And Gabriel alone

“The first virtue in a soldier -”

Will decide what blossoms there.

“Thank you, Gabe.”

Guerra says nothing, but makes a deadpan expression at him, as if surprised by Gabriel’s sudden, poetic simile, and Gabriel twirls around, smacking the open button on the door as he mutters with a burning-bright tone:

“Go paint the roses red somewhere else.”

---

When Gabriel enters his room a few minutes later, he’s still fuming, thoughts running between the lighter in his case and the spare gasoline in the supply closet, wondering if it’s worth it to light lard on fire and leave it in the directors bathroom -

“Oh, hey, Gabriel, how’s Echo going -”

Gabriel deadstops in the middle of their room, gawking at Felix, who is still calmly on his bed, tapping away at his datapad. There’s a slightly awkward pause, and then his roommate looks up, before frowning sympathetically, saying, “Dude, you okay? You look upset.”

“I, uh -” Gabriel stutters a bit, before -

BE NATURAL, DUMBASS -

He snaps himself out of it, muttering, “Echo is whatever, lots of cameras of people trying to sleep all day. What’re, uh - what are you doing here?”

Felix raises an eyebrow, before he smirks, “This is my room too, Reyes.”

Gabriel makes a sarcastic, unimpressed face at him, before heading towards his effects chest, grumbling, “Alright, you know what I meant.”

“Don’t serve it if you can’t take it, Reyes,” Felix chuckles, before he says, “I swapped my lunch break with Geni so I’ll have to stay in Charlie later, but she was - and I quote - ‘starving.’”
“Hmm,” Gabriel hums noncommittally, tossing his datapad on his bed and unlocking his chest. He cracks the lid open, his thoughts racing furiously -

*Fuck, I wasn’t prepared for Felix to be here now, I was aiming to get our dinner breaks lined up closer to 1900 or 2000 hours* -

He digs through, hastily pulling out a towel, another set of pants, boxer briefs, his razor, shaving cream -

*I have to move *fast*, *shit* -

“...You’re taking a shower?” Felix asks with some confusion, and Gabriel just grunts, “Hmm.”

“...At 1500 hours?” his roommate asks with increasing confusion and *damn him for being so ridiculously observant* -

Too many Foxes in this goddamn henhouse, Gabriel half-jokes, half-snarks internally, as he mutters, “You care about my hygiene habits that much, Ochoa?”

“Just a weird time for a shower, Reyes - no need to bite my head off,” Felix murmurs, and there’s a small tone of frustration that ripples through Gabriel, causing him to say more apologetically, “...Sorry, just - rough day.”

“Camera duty is difficult, huh?” Felix asks. Gabriel pulls out the last few items, keeping them in his left hand, scooping up the rest off the floor with his right and draping his towel over his right forearm. He rises, sighing with genuine bittersweetness, “...You haven’t seen Guerra do his interviews yet.”

“...Ah,” Felix replies more knowingly, “...Morrison?”

“Hmm,” Gabriel “replies,” heading back towards the door, “Just wait - I’m betting that asshole has all sorts of plans for Adrien when you’re on Echo duty.”

“Awesome, that’s gonna hang over my head all week,” Felix sighs. Gabriel glances back at him, saying, “Guerra’s got one hell of an emotionally sadistic streak. You heading back soon?”

“Nah, I got another half hour or so,” Felix hums absently, turning his attention back to his datapad, “Might try to take a quick nap. I have some late night duty too.”

“Same here,” Gabriel says, hitting the button. The door slides open for him, and he says, “Be back in a few.”

“Hope these ones don’t flood,” Felix replies distantly, and Gabriel heads out into the hallway, letting the door slide shut behind him. He adjusts his hood a little bit, before he heads down to the end of the [1-24] hallway -

And up towards the directors’.

[Σ: Resistance, Day 2 - I’ll be right behind you]

[Tuesday, February 19, 2047: 1457 hours - security room of the main SEP facility]

[Can’t believe I forgot my phone in here, Marc thinks, striding into the security room of the main facility. It’s effectively the same as the one in the ancillary branch, only all the video feeds are from the static cameras located around the central facility.]
[His phone - the bullshit, midrange, third-party contract standard thing he got from the D/NCS before the program started - is sitting exactly where he left it this morning, when he had reviewed footage from the previous afternoon.]

The bathroom is at the end of the directors hall, in between their sleeping quarters and their “offices” (another hall that joints disjointedly to the other one).

It’s hardly a far walk -

But there are cameras at both ends.

Gabriel does not look at either of them - not the one at the near end as he rounds the corner, nor the one at the far end, his “destination.” He does his best to force himself deep deep deeper into his own thoughts, to give himself a purposeful but aimless stride -

*Not this door...not this door* -

[Marc sighs, moving easily into the room, grabbing at his phone and - yup, sure enough, he has at least two missed calls from the contracted plumbing crew -]

*[It’s supposed to snow pretty heavy tomorrow, he thinks, quickly inputting his passcode into the lock screen. As he lifts the phone, ready to turn back around, thinking, Hope they can still make it - ]*

[...It’s always been difficult for him to pinpoint exactly what sets off the alarm bells in his head.]

[Things that look...simple.]

...Almost, Gabriel thinks -

[Things that look...mundane.]

*This one*, he commands himself -

[Things that look...ordinary.]

[It’s nothing significant -]

[But Marc sees the figure in the camera feed for the directors hall moving past the door to his room -]

[And he stops, mid-thought, to watch them.]

Gabriel drops his can of shaving cream.

It slips from where he’s been cradling it in the crook of his right elbow, clattering on the concrete flooring, rolling with small bumps and snags to bump against the door on his right.

[Marc watches as the aerosol can rolls right to his bedroom door and comes to an unsteady stop at the foot of it.]

[He shifts his gaze from the camera feed at the intersection of the directors hall and the barracks section, to the one with the directors hall and their offices - the one by their bathroom.]

His forceful focus has worked, because Gabriel actually willfully startles himself, taking a half-step too far before he realizes he actually dropped his shaving cream can.

[The figure looks...mundane enough - tactical, all-weather camo jacket, hood pulled up against the
low non-heat of the facility, towel in their right hand, clearly going to take a shower. Just a bit over six-foot maybe, but that description fit a lot of the soldiers -]

[As they turn, Marc picks over the small numbers -]

[“23”]

[On the left shoulder of the jacket.]

[...Felix is taking his break early? Marc half-wonders, half-determines, watching as the Fox soldier-candidate heaves a heavy sigh of frustration and disappointment, heading back towards the door to his room -]

Be frustrated. Be slow. Be clumsy.

One strand of Gabriel’s thoughts sharpens his focus, compelling him towards his actual objectives, while another strand floods him with quick-cuts of emotional memories -

A jade-green bird on a table -

The soft bitterness burns the back of his throat as he steps closer to the door -

The cold darkness of Guerra’s gaze -

A rush of frustration and petty sourness at the edges of his senses as he bends -

The look of fear and heartbreak in Jack’s eyes as he stares at the camera -

A flood of reckless, rough, raw-edged anger and genuine self-disappointment that thunders in his veins -

And then

Everything drops from Gabriel’s right hand-forearm-elbow.

...

[Marc blinks once, twice in bored exasperation as he watches Felix drop a razor, a bottle of shampoo, a bar of soap, a pair of boxer-briefs, a container of lotion or something, a packet of something, his own towel -]

The items scatter across the floor - the bottles roll off in different directions, his electric razor falls at an awkward angle on its rubber grip thing and bounces once, twice in an odd momentum, and his boxer-briefs flutter unceremoniously to the ground.

...

Gabriel makes a few small, quick-cut, easy motions of self-frustration and self-disappointment, shaking his head at himself, rolling his shoulders a bit, giving yet another big sigh -

[...He needs more sleep, Marc thinks, before he turns and heads back out, leaving the security room.]

And then he settles into a crouch.

...But not before Gabriel steadies himself against the door
And

With quick-cut, fluid movements

Sprinkles a small amount of powder - a light grey mixture of cornstarch, flour, and ground black pepper - on the sloping, mostly-horizontal, touchscreen face of the lockpad of Guerra’s door.

As Gabriel is crouched down, collecting his deliberately-dropped items, he leans to his left, acting like he’s reaching for the shampoo bottle that’s rolled away from him, but he quickly exhales a small puff of breath across the lockpad face, lightly spreading the powder across the glass. He gathers his things, pretending like he’s adjusting his renewed clustering of them in his arms, but in actuality -

He carefully slips a small piece of tape into the palm of his left hand, adhesive side down.

And then

With another heavy sigh

Gabriel rises from his crouch -

Pressing his left hand to the lockpad face to give him some support up.

He turns back around, letting the swing of the towel slide across the lockpad of Guerra’s door and clean off any lingering particles of the powder mixture -

And then he heads back towards the bathroom at the end of the hall.

...Steady, don’t rush, Gabriel murmurs in his head, reminding himself to be calm, to be patient -

To endure the adrenaline rushing in his veins.

As he approaches the motion sensors of the bathroom, the door slides open for him automatically, and he continues his slow, meandering walk inside -

But he quickly flips to a sink.

The directors bathroom is a little more...high quality in its form: unlike the soldier-candidates bathroom with trough sinks, this one has several individual basins and mirrors, with small shelves to set things down. Gabriel practically chucks all his stuff in a sink, pulling out a notebook with his free right hand -

He flips to a blank page and carefully layers the tape cupped by his left hand on it, smoothing it out evenly and consistently.

He inhales steeply -

Admires the light grey fingerprint smudges -

Arranged in three distinct spots -

One top middle

One middle right

One bottom left -
And he exhales with a huge, proud, almost radiant grin, ridiculously smug with himself for actually pulling it off - for actually lifting Guerra’s lock code...

...Wait.

...Three smudges?

Gabriel freezes as the thought runs with ice-cold, glass-shared clarity through his head:

*Lock codes around here require four numbers.*

...

The silence in his own thoughts says a lot -

And is broken by a sheer shattering of utter panic as it torrents through him -

*OH MY GOD, DID I MISS A NUMBER, NO FUCKING WAY, THE TAPE WAS HUGE, I DIDN’T MOVE IT INCORRECTLY, WHAT THE FUCK* - Gabriel freaks out internally, grabbing at the notebook and tilting it towards the light in different ways, trying to see if the tape shows a little extra powdery smudgery in any other corner -

But no.

No.

There are only three smudges.

Gabriel quickly pulls the pen from the crease of the notebook, hastily hatching out a numberpad with his right hand:

```
[1 2 3]
[4 5 6]
[7 8 9]
[   0   ]
```

And then he stares at it, picking out the 2, the 6, and the 7.

...Well fuck.

Gabriel immediately knows it cannot be date - no 1 and no 0.

It’s not Guerra’s old ODA number either -

Because that’s Gabriel’s own (7436).

It’s not a year - no 0.

He sets the notebook back down on the shelf, leaning himself over the sink with all his stuff in it.

...And he knows.

...Guerra was right.
This had been a shitshow of a halfassed idea, bolstered by foolishness and petty victories and a naive sense of shadowy heroics.

All for what?

To show off? To prove that he could? To one-up Guerra and Flores and Carolina?

To act like he was better than this program?

To demonstrate that he didn’t need them, he just needed the supersoldier serum and he could singlehandedly end the robot apocalypse?

...To test himself?

...To believe in hope again?

...Jack’s smile is so bright.

Gabriel lifts his head, stares into the gilded smokiness of his own eyes, glinting like shallow sepia silt under the flourescent lights of the bathroom.

“Thank you, Gabe.”

Gabriel scowls a little.

Jack’s gaze is heartbroken as he looks at the camera but then -

“The first...virtue…”

The sadness - steep and sharp - in those blue eyes, as blue as the ocean beneath a dusky midnight dream, had transformed into

Snowcovered, stardusted, seaswelled resolve.

...And Guerra’s voice murmurs in his head:

“- You have met someone who makes you think you can be something other than what you are -”

Gabriel glances back down at the open notebook page: grey-smudged tape in the center top half, his scribbled numberpad in the bottom half.

“And he makes you believe in heroes and hope again.”

He picks up the pen, thinking in softer, more patient, bluer tones:

He stood by me when he had nothing but a note.

As long as he’s willing to try for me -

I will try for him too.

And begins to write more ideas down.

---------

24: Resistance, Day 2 - Married with a lack of vision
The most common PINs are dates or years, Gabriel half-thinks, half-reads as he skims an article on four-digit PINs on his datapad. The day is effectively winding down, and the only other people in the Echo camera room are Luisa, who has opted to take the dinner shift, and Ray, a trainer-soldier, who apparently did the same.

...I knew most of this, Gabriel thinks, exhaling contemplatively. He’s known this since his Fox course four years ago, when the SF soldiers taking the training all got a copy of data about basic identification numbers and concepts - PINs, passwords, fingerprinting, even rudimentary biodata analytics (though, at the time, none of the prototype collecting equipment was field-ready yet).

The problem is that all the “psychological short cuts” for password and PIN cracking don’t work with the numbers he lifted from Guerra.

Disproportionate amounts of people use the four-number thing, like one-one-one-one, but clearly that doesn’t apply here, Gabriel thinks, glancing between his datpad and his notebook page with a long string of possible combinations (2267, 2627, 2726, 2672, 2762, 2667, 2676, 2766, and on and on).

Lots of people do couplets or patterned numbers, like 2727, Gabriel also reminds himself, before muttering internally, But that doesn’t work here either.

He’s sitting in the back corner of the room, only occasionally looking up at the cameras. Both Luisa and Ray look just as bored, with Luisa clearly having the drones, lights, and music set on some sort of “randomized, automatic timers,” because the lights will switch off on one of the camera feeds, and then the drone will seamlessly transition to infrared.

Gabriel taps the end of his pen against his lips, thinking carefully, ...Guerra isn’t the type to pick a random number - he doesn’t trust anything, not even his own memories.

...

They were irritatingly similar in that sense.

But that also meant that Gabriel could crack it -

If he just hits upon the right beat.

...

And speaking of beats -

There’s the sound of footfalls outside the door, and Gabriel casually flips the page from the one with the taped fingerprints and number lists, to another page with a small hub-and-spoke network he’s hand drawn. It’s a meaningless doodle, meant to look like he’s actually working, and it’s perfect for this exact situation -

As the door slides open, and Guerra peers in.

“...It’s just you three?” Guerra asks, sounding genuinely confused. Luisa glances towards him, and then towards Gabriel, and she says, “Everyone’s at dinner, sir.”
“...Ah. Forgot,” Guerra mutters absently, before he addresses Ray, saying, “Ray, I’m heading back to the main facility - David and Carolina will be back here in a bit.”

But his words stop as something like an old-school comms crackles to life, the other voice muffled by his jacket.

Guerra frowns a bit, slipping a hand into a pocket, and pulling out the little electronic comms the trainers and directors have been using to coordinate things semi-long range. The CIA agent taps something on the touchscreen, saying, “What was that? I couldn’t hear you.”

There’s a pause and then -

“Can we please let him out, for fuck’s sake??” the trainer-soldier’s voice on the other end of the line half-whines, half-groans, half-snaps in irritable, impatient, borderline broken sobbing.

In the “background” of the audio -

There’s a loud, indistinct shouting half- chanting something -

And something else that sounds distinctly like Carlos laughing his ass off.

Gabriel raises his eyebrows in surprise, eyes widening, and he glances at Luisa, who is basically mirroring his expression.

They are both very familiar with Carlos’ wheezy, howling laughter - the kind he gets when something has actually killed his sense of humor so hard, he turns into a useless, crying lug.

The audio flickers off.

Guerra looks dully unimpressed.

He sighs, cracking his neck, before he presses the touchscreen again, saying, “I’m sorry, Jim - let who out, exactly?”

Another pause and then -

“Prisoner: 76,” the guard says back.

Gabriel’s breath hitches in his chest, and he immediately glances at the clock on his datapad. 1604.

Guerra frowns, muttering back, “He still has an hour left in the box, Jim -”

But it’s cut off by a furious, desperate, voice-cracking sob of “Are you shitting me, Marc?! Do you hear this??”

And then there’s a rustling noise and -

The other end of the line clearly moves closer to whatever is causing the sound (and Gabriel immediately suspects it’s -)

Which resolves itself in a

Steep

Sharp
Broken *rasp* of a voice - normally deep and richly smooth, like the finest whiskey to Gabriel’s senses - shout-singing in a fraying, sharding tone:

“*SO GLAD WE’VE AL mOST made it - SO SAD They had to FADE IT - EVERY BODY WaaAnts to RULE THE WORLD -∗"

As the dully unimpressed, exasperated look intensifies on Guerra’s face, a *massive* grin spreads on Gabriel’s, and he thinks with vivid, vicious, victorious *glee* :

*Jack, you incredible, marvelous, beautiful jackass -*

[76: Resistance, Day 2 - All for freedom and for pleasure]

[Tuesday, February 19, 2047: ???? hours - “his box”]

[His throat is so dry and cracked that he can *feel* it bleeding.]

[His vocal chords are so strained from scream-singing that they sound broken even inside his head.]

[He cannot feel his feet. Or his thighs. Or his lower back. Or his shoulders.]  

[But *god fucking dammit -*

[Jack will *fucking sing this bullshit song -*

[If it is the *last fucking thing he ever does.*]

[His box is hot and clammy, his feet are somehow icy numb and yet aching, pulsatingly uncomfortable, his knees have never hurt so *miserably* before, and he ran track for like six or seven years straight. His legs shake and shudder with sheer force of will holding him up, and he willingly stretches himself as far as he’ll go, pressing back against the coarse-grained wood of the box, flexing as many different sets of muscles as he can, just to force his blood to flow and his stiff joints to shift.]  

[But *god fucking dammit - *

[Jack will make them *hate.*

[Jack will make them *regret.*

[Jack will make them hate and regret putting him in here.]  

[It’s taken literally all his sense of self and some sort of strange, abyssally-deep reservoir of resolve to force himself to sing loud enough that his voice breaks through the audio-proofing of the shower stall.]

[And he *knows* it’s working because they’ve tried banging on his box a few times to get him to shut up, they tried changing the song (Jack just doubled down on his *Errybody*), the trainer-soldier even opened the lid and shot Jack between the shoulder blades with a paintball -]

[But the soldiers of SEP had never met a goddamn Morrison before.]

[And they had deep, resounding, raw-edged voices for a reason.]

[...Okay maybe not *specifically for this* reason -]
[But Jack will reforge himself in hell and highwater, heartache and high synth notes just to make them hate and regret.]

[He gets a short - very short, so incredibly short - reprieve of the instrumental interlude of the song to breathe, the air hot and clammy and bitter and broken, but air all the same, and then he tilts his head up as far as his box will let him, before he shouts:]

“I CAN’T STAND and this INDECISION - MARRIED with A LACK of vision - EVERYBODY WaaaANTS to RULE THE WORLD -”

Gabriel has to bite his lower lip to keep himself from sobbing with laughter, which is promptly what Carlos does in the background of Jack’s muffled, ragey singing - the Bravo sounds like he’s crying before Jim, the trainer-soldier stationed in the blackout box room, snaps, “Quiet, Guard: 04 - Marc, seriously, we’re dying here.”

Guerra, meanwhile, is rubbing at his forehead with his free hand before he mutters dryly, “I take it you’ve tried alternatives?”

“We’ve changed the song - seriously, Rives, shut up -” the guard says with blatant frustration, “I even fucking shot him in the back. Nothing is working -”

[“SAAAAaaay that YOU’LL never, never, never NEED it - ONE HEADLINE, why BE LIEVE it - EVERY BODY WAAAANTS TO RULE THE WORLD -” Jack wails, pushing himself back out as much as he’ll go, exhaling in the brief interlude, and then shouting out, ALLLL FOR free DOM AND for PLEA SURE - NO THING ever lasTS FOR EVER - EVERY BODY Waannnannts to RULE THE WORLD!! ”]

“How long has he been doing this?” Guerra asks with only passing interest, and the guard says back, “Fuck, I dunno - like an hour? An hour and half? It’s hell, Marc.”

Ironic, Gabriel thinks as he snorts, trying to hold back his laughter, Sounds like Jim needs to remember what it means to endure music torture.

Guerra pauses for a moment, as if considering it, before he flicks his gaze sharply at Gabriel, who doesn’t bother to hide his Cheshire Cat smile, saying conversationally, “Tears for Fears isn’t a bad choice, but I’m more of a 70’s rock guy myself. AC/DC and all that. Though personally, if you were trying to hammer down on the soldier theme for Jack, I would’ve gone with Rise Against’s ‘Hero of War’ for maximum irony - although if you really wanted to be an asshole, you should’ve gone with ‘Holding Out For A Hero -’”

“Yeah, let him out,” Guerra snaps to the comms device, before he turns on his heel and heads back out into the hallway.

Gabriel doesn’t stop grinning, as he thinks with a thrill of joy, That’s it, Jack - fight back.

Don’t ever let them take you from you.

---

“WELCOME to YOUR life - THERE’S no turning BACK - Even WHILE we SLEEP - we will FIND YOU ACTIN’ ON your BEST behavior -”

Jack is part-way through automatically singing the first verse again before he realizes on a very long delay -
The music has stopped.

...It’s surreal, actually - his ears know he’s not physically hearing anything, but his brain keeps the song going and going and going, like the earworm has actually crawled it’s way through his ear canal and gnawed into his grey matter before sliding, fat and synthy, into his blood.

Jack blinks blearily against the coarse-grained darkness, trying to decide if this is yet another attempt to switch the music in his box and therefore he should keep singing and screaming the song at the top of his lungs, or if six hours has finally, miserably passed -

The light that suddenly and violently cracks in around him daggers into his brain, and Jack actually shuts his eyes so fast he bashes his right shoulder against the wall of the box. He sucks the blast of chilled, fresh air in through his teeth, hissing in pain from the light while relishing the sweetness of non-box breath -

“C’mon,” the trainer-soldier snaps at him, “Stand up, asshole.”

Jack exhales slowly, not sure if he’s hallucinating the moment, trying to rise -

But he falls, as his entire lower body screams at him in pain and numbness, and he slips back into the box -

“For fuck’s sake,” the guard growls at him, and Jack finally processes the paintball rifle pointed at him. Jack

Inhales

Nothing ever lasts forever -

Exhales

And then

Forces himself to stand.

The muscles in his thighs and lower back surge with pain, and his feet are totally dead to his senses. His neck feels like someone has wedged pieces of glass in between his cervical vertebrae, and the strain of holding his head up feels borderline impossible.

“C’mon,” the guard orders, “We don’t have all day.”

Legs shaking, Jack barely manages to lift his leg up over the box and take a weak, awkward step out, crashing against the audio-foam padding, breathing out brittleness as he slumps against it. He half-lifts, half-drags his other foot out, banging it (unfeelingly) against the wood.

“Out,” the guard says, taking a step back and gesturing out of the shower stall. Jack blinks against the light, the glow fuzzing and glinting oddly and -

Everybody wants to rule the world -

He shakes himself awake.

Each step is hard - partially because his leg muscles are furious with him for making them move like this, and partially because he can’t actually sense the floor with how numb his feet are, half-shuffling, half-dragging himself out of the stall.
...Has everything always been so Spacious?

Jack glances around, but his neck hurts so he doesn’t move too much, when the guard stalks towards him and -

Jack is once again shrouded in coarse-grained darkness.

...Only this smells like potatoes.

...Holy fuck, he’s so hungry.

“Take him back to his cell, Guard: 04,” the trainer-soldier says, and Jack suddenly feels a calm, steady hand around his left upper arm, and Carlos says, “Yessir. C’mon, 76.”

It’s my own design -

Jack half-trips, half-stumbles, half-pulls himself along as Carlos guides him out of the converted shower room and, god, even though the song snakes through his head, the silence and darkness is so soothing that, despite the pain stabbing knives and glass ice through his body, Jack could fall asleep -

Jack wakes up as a door slides open, and Carlos leads him to the left.

Each step is misery.

Jack shuts his eyes again -

“You with me, Jack?” Carlos whispers to him urgently, and Jack -

It’s my own remorse -

“Hmm?” Jack hums, and just making the sound is a knife inside his throat.

“Alright, 76, stay awake, just for five minutes,” Carlos says with all the patience of a parent dragging their child to a car, “Remember? We have stuff to talk about.”

Help me to decide -

The image of Gabriel smirking wryly cuts through Jack’s head -

And he violently snaps himself awake.

“Right,” Jack mutters, breathing is pain, words are pain, steps are pain, “Gabe.”

...Gabriel’s nickname is a bitter syllable of obsidian in his throat.

They walk in silence for a moment, before Carlos mutters, “Shit. Starting this is harder than I thought.”

“...Gabe was a medic, right?” Jack asks quietly, voice jagged, “And you were a weapons sergeant?”

“...Right,” Carlos says, before breathing out with more self-reassurance, “Right. Gabriel and I did our Q-Course at the same time. We met there. But during the MOS training part, we split up - I did the Bravo course and he went to Delta. By coincidence, we ended up on the same ODA.”

Carlos slows their walk (which Jack’s screaming muscles and numb feet are grateful for), and the
senior soldier says carefully, “You got taught about ODA structure in Q-Course, right?”

“Mm,” Jack agrees, as the first few pins and needles begin in his lower thighs. Carlos continues, “So basically, this ODA had two positions open up at the same time: first, the Team Sergeant retired, so the senior Bravo Carolina Luna was promoted. That meant the junior Bravo Jim moved up, so the second Bravo spot was open. I filled that.”

“...Right, okay,” Jack says, trying to keep himself awake against the darkness, trying to focus on Carlos’ words against the grain of the song worm in his head.

Help me make the most of freedom and of pleasure -

Carlos explains, “At the same time, the Fox left. Fox positions are different from the other MOSes - the people running the Q-course sometimes go lenient and let 18Xers through, but usually, you can’t take the Fox course unless you’ve been part of an ODA for a minimum of two years. So when ODAs know a Fox is going to leave or get promoted, they usually encourage a junior sergeant from another MOS to start training under the Fox, because learning on-the-site during foreign internal defense missions is an ideal way to start.”

Carlos slightly adjusts his grip on Jack’s arm, and says quietly, “...So the old Fox left, and Silvio, the junior medic who was his protégé, went back to Fort Bragg for formal Fox training. Which meant Gabriel came in on the junior medic slot. You still with me?”

“...Yeah, kinda,” Jack mumbles, his head still feel stuffed and his throat still dying, “So you two got put on Commander Luna’s old ODA? In junior positions?”

“Exactly,” Carlos says, leading Jack around a corner, “It’s kinda rare for an ODA to get two brand new juniors at once - people usually stay in the Special Forces for life - so 7th Group C2 went easy on us and put us on a foreign internal defense mission where our A-team had been before: Guerrero, in west central Mexico. Kinda a rough part of the country -”

Nothing ever lasts forever -

“La Tierra Caliente,” Jack says automatically, “Mexico’s heroin production center.”

Silence follows Jack’s statement for a brief moment, before Carlos asks in a stunned tone, “You know of it??”

“...Indiana has an opioid epidemic,” Jack says quietly, “Ninety-percent of America’s heroin comes from Mexico - production in Mexico was driven by spiking usage and demand in the Midwest in the 2020’s, and the economic recessions of the 2030’s didn’t help -”

“...Sometimes I forget you were in med school,” Carlos says somberly, and Jack replies - with a gentle, hoarse tone, “Not med school - nursing.”

I’m not even a real doctor -

“...Emergency Room,” Jack continues softly bittersweet, “Occasionally Operating Room when the staff got overloaded. And then the Crisis hit. Before that, we saw overdoses frequently - maybe once a week.”

“...This is why I never went Delta,” Carlos mutters sadly, “It’s too hard emotionally. Deltas do emergency room rotations for like eight months during their MOS training. Gabriel never talked about it, but I know it hit him hard. I always thought he should’ve gone Bravo or Charlie, but he insisted on trying Delta...though I guess if he had done another MOS, we wouldn’t have ended up in
"7436 together."

*Everybody wants to rule the world.*

There’s a slight pause, and they round another corner (Jack suspects that Carlos is leading him in circles, and though the pins and needles are starting to get sharp in his legs and his mind is still fogged with the song, Jack is grateful for it).

“...The people running the Q-course don’t like to talk about it,” Carlos says slowly, “But Fox work goes hand-in-hand with Delta and Echo work. Q-course people like to talk up how a good Bravo ‘reads their opponents’ or how a good Charlie ‘knows the human element of tactics,’ but don’t let them fool you, Jack - the best way to conduct HUMINT is to work side-by-side with people, and that is really what Deltas do on foreign internal defense missions. In a lot of places around the world, an A-team’s Deltas might be the only people in one-hundred miles with real medical training. People have obvious reasons to dislike ODAs when we’re in their countries, but many of them grow real attached to Deltas.”

Carlos pauses, and - after thinking it over - he continues, “Lotta places, Deltas basically run seasonal clinics - four-months deployment, four months of doing basic check-ups and health assessments for people in the region, be nice, make friends, four months off, come back and do it again.”

“...And Gabe did that?” Jack asks with a wry smirk, “Him, of all people?”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up all you want, 76,” Carlos chuckles, “Gabriel is a better medic than he gives himself credit for. Of course, he had Silvio to help him.”

“I thought Silvio had become your guys’ Fox?” Jack asks, wondering if he had hallucinated that part -

“No, you’re right, he had,” Carlos says, before explaining, “Basically, it worked out like this: our foreign internal defense mission for that first deployment was mainly to help teach some of Mexico’s military and civilian militia forces in the region how to do special ops. So our senior Delta Serena spent most of her time training the military and civilian doctors on combat medicine, with Silvio and Gabriel helping her occasionally. But otherwise, Silvio would take Gabriel out to different parts of our area and introduce Gabriel to his old patients, usually with like me tagging along to learn more about the region.”

Another short pause, and then Carlos continues:

“Like I said, Delta work and Fox work go hand-in-hand, so what Silvio was really doing was maintaining the HUMINT network he got from his old Fox, while introducing Gabriel into it. And people trusted them, you know? Hard not to when the guy who was basically your family doctor comes around with his new apprentice and they make sure your kids are healthy and your aging parents aren’t dying. It works out extra nicely when they’d bring out a Charlie and like, fix a dried well or something. Build goodwill with people, get goodwill back. Karma.”

“Like an old school traveling doctor,” Jack exhales slowly, and Carlos says, “Yeah, exactly. The kind of medics who can set broken bones or clean an infection or pull teeth. So we did that for our first deployment and it was pretty solid as far as first deployments go. Four months off, and then we jumped back in. Yet another senior had retired, so we got Luisa for our junior Echo, and C2 put us back on the same ‘easy’ FID. Second deployment went fine, mainly showing Luisa the ropes, getting comfortable with longer term FID objectives in the area.”

But then -
Carlos pauses -

*There’s a room where the light won’t find you -*

And Jack can feel the hesitation in his silence.

And the words come back to Jack:

“...*He made the hardest choice any medic has to.*”

“...Special Forces...you start to lose track of time in the way most people know it. Four months on, four months off becomes your seasons, multiple rounds of deployments become your years,” Carlos begins, contemplative and quiet, “Next thing you know, you’re twenty-four, twenty-five, four years in and just...that’s your life. Your life rhythm is off-beat with the rest of the world.”

Jack stares into the coarse-grained darkness.

Carlos sighs, continuing, “But the world does not change for you, and life goes on. La Tierra Caliente - the power balance can shift in an instant. Must’ve been...four years ago when the region destabilized during one of our off periods - sub-faction of a major cartel had suffered further splits after the killing of a regional leader, and different groups were trying to make power grabs. Meanwhile, the Mexican military and civilian militia forces - called the *rurales* - were circling in on the eastern and western edges. We weren’t the only American A-team in the region, and this was because 7th Group C2 wanted us to help watch out for each other and our internal Mexican military allies. A-teams are basically an open secret during deployment - everyone knows you’re there and you’re ‘doing work,’ but they don’t necessarily know where or how. You’re not in deep cover like a SAD agent, and you’re not a quick strike team like Delta Force - you’re a middle ground. The nice way of describing us is as the ‘ambassadors of the US military,’ and the mean way is...well, you’re kinda freeloading on an allied nation’s militaristic hospitality. You’re a show of force.”

Jack listens, as Carlos murmurs quietly, “...People know. People know you could be training their own military and police forces to eventually turn against them. That you could be giving them the skills to destroy their nation, their communities, their ways of life. Especially in a place like *la Tierra Caliente* - every other farm there grows opium poppies. Every other small business in the towns pays for protection and shelters cartel members. So people know what you’re doing, what you represent. They don’t have to like A-teams to appreciate and respect individual members like Silvio or Gabriel.”

Another pause of silence, and Carlos says with a quietly shaking voice, “That day, our Commanders were gone - they were meeting with some of the Mexican forces off to the east. So there was only ten of us in camp. We were just laying low until we got their orders to move out and...”

More silence, this time heartbreaking.

And then Jack asks softly, “...What happened?”

“...We were attacked,” Carlos says just as softly, just as mournfully, “Mid-deployment. One of the factions had a mercenary group - made up of ex-paramilitary - and they made a surprise strike against us. Our secure camp had been compromised somehow.”

*Holding hands while the walls come tumbling down -*

In the coarse-grained darkness, Jack shuts his eyes in bittersweet pain, thinking, *Gabriel...I had no idea.*
It was chaos,” Carlos’ voice is barely above a whisper, hardly louder than the pins and needles spiking up and down Jack’s legs. His “guard” murmurs with heartbreak cracking his words, “We were - I had been by the convoy, and the armor of the vehicle took most of my hits. Me and Jim hit the ground on instinct and just...just bullets everywhere. Split second later, Serena showed up half-dragging our bleeding senior Echo, and then Luisa was there, trying to contact our allies for help and - god …”

Carlos heaves a huge, heavy sigh, before gritting out, “Jim and our Charlies were making a plan up on the fly, when out of nowhere, Gabriel showed up hauling Carolina on his back. She had been shot in the shoulder and neck and he just -

Jack opens his eyes against the darkness as Carlos inhales sharply, before exhaling softly, “Describing this part is always...borderline insane to me because it sounds...look, Jack, it sounds bad but I swear on my dad’s grave that Gabriel’s mind was like - on a different level. I watched him operate on her, in the middle of a literal surprise attack, and he was just - talking, dude. He was just going off, like half giving us orders. He wanted us to lob firebombs to the east side of the camp - ‘we need a barrier,’ he was saying, ‘Make one. Even out of fire.’ I always knew he should’ve been a Bravo or Charlie but right then, it was like...he was everything. Our main leader was unconscious in his hands and he wasn’t just saving her life - he was thinking of how to save all of us, how to separate us from our attackers.”

When they do, I’ll be right behind you -

Jack didn’t know it was possible for his heart to both break with bittersweet ache and blossom with pride and affection at the same time.

Carlos sighs, guiding Jack through another corner, saying softly, “…I didn’t know it at the time, but what had happened was that Carolina and Silvio had been talking together when the attack started. They - they both got hit. Gabriel had been the closest to them, and he had…”

…He had to make a choice , Jack thinks, his heart breaking further, He had to choose .

 “…Look, I saw the wounds after the battle, as we were escaping in the convoy,” Carlos states with a fierce, bittersweet strength in his tone, “Gabriel did the right thing. He operated a goddamn neck shot. True, it was more a grazing, but it was bad. I saw - I saw Carolina’s veins in his hands. Silvio took a gut shot, that’s - in theory, that’s more survivable, you know?”

“...Yeah,” Jack says quietly, somberly, “...In theory.”

“Don’t you dare judge him for this,” Carlos starts to snap, his voice cracking with sorrow and friendship and -

“...I’m not, Carlos,” Jack murmurs quietly, and though his voice is broken, his tone is bittersweetly soothing, “I’ve seen both before...though a hospital in Bloomington isn’t really comparable to a battlefield. Survivability means different things in different places.”

And different situations.

“...Right,” Carlos says apologetically, “...Right. Sorry. Your tone - I’m sorry. I’ve had to - we’ve all had to say this story to C2 a few times… It never gets easier.”

“...It’s going to sound hollow,” Jack says hoarsely, “But for what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I cannot begin to imagine…”

There’s silence, and then Carlos murmurs, “...He did the right thing. Serena even says so, so does
Jim, and I know it crushes her, but so does Carolina. All you can do in those moments is act on what you know is right. And Gabriel - he did...he...

Another moment of silence, the shuffling of Carlos’ boots (up and down again) and Jack’s soft-socked, slowly unnumbing feet -

“...I genuinely believe,” Carlos states, his words are his truth undeniable, “That all ten of us should have died there. But we didn’t. We didn’t, and it was because we listened to Gabriel and set the east half of our camp and the brush around it on fire.”

Jack inhales

Thinks, I knew you were wrong, Guerra.

Gabriel is a hero.

And then exhales soft bittersweetness, his heart squeezing with exhausted remorse and a deep longing to see -

“It split the mercenary force in half,” Carlos says, “They couldn’t fully regroup. We fought our way out of the west half - Jim and I actually pulled out the heavy arms and launched frags out of the convoy. We drove straight into the nearest town with a real clinic but...”

Carlos exhales slowly, “...But Silvio didn’t make it. He was dead before we arrived.”

So glad we’ve almost made it -

Jack’s heart beats painfully.

“...I watched him try, Jack,” Carlos murmurs, “He was desperate. Blood up to his elbows, back of a moving truck, trying to staunch Silvio’s blasted liver. Every medic in Eglin agrees it would’ve been basically impossible, even in a normal operating room. She almost never talks about it, but when she does, Serena puts it as - she puts it as ‘we had three lethal shots on three people, and two critical shots on two more. To get out with nine people alive is nothing short of superhuman.’”

They walk a few more steps, and Carlos says quietly, “Luisa and I both think...we both think all of us would’ve died without him. Don’t let Guerra mislead you - there are people in this very program who owe their lives to Gabriel’s literal firewall tactic.”

And then his voice drops to a low whisper, “And one of them has his biotic stitches in her neck.”

So sad they had to fade it -

Jack is silent, contemplative, and Carlos asks hesitantly, “Jack, you still with me -?”

“...Gabe doesn’t sleep well...does he?” Jack asks, but it’s really a soft, bittersweet, heartbroken statement of the truth. Carlos pauses, assessing Jack’s word, before he says, “...He won’t like me telling you this, but...he’s slept better since this program started.”

“Gene therapy is kinda hard on the body - he’s probably exhausted,” Jack says blearily, not even thinking it through, and Carlos gives an exasperated sigh, “God, you seriously need some sleep, 76. That isn’t what I meant at all.”

Jack scowls in the coarse-grained darkness, before he asks, “...It can’t be the beds - those things are uncomfortable as fuck -”
“You, Jack,” Carlos groans, “I’m talking about since he met you. Puñeta.”

“Well, you should’ve just said that - oh,” Jack starts to snark before his song-wormed brain finally processes what Carlos said, and for once, he’s grateful for the hood because it hides the blush that blossoms on his cheeks -

“I don’t know what you two do - and I don’t wanna know -” Carlos says hastily, shaking Jack a little with the urgency of his words, “But...I want to say - as his friend - please. Don’t stop. Don’t let someone like Guerra or something like this stupid week get to you. Gabriel can be pretty dense at times, but he’s a good guy underneath it all.”

An image of Gabriel alone, his gaze lost in the snowcovered stars, his mind somewhere far, far away, alone, isolated, different from the world around him

Sings its way through Jack’s heart -

“...Silvio’s death hit us hard - especially Gabriel,” Carlos says after a pause, “They had always been real close, since they had basically worked side-by-side for like four years. We got pulled back to Eglin almost immediately, and Carolina and our senior Echo made full recoveries on base. Silvio was buried in Arlington. And then...well, it was kinda obvious.”

Another brief pause, and Carlos murmurs, “Gabriel became our Fox. It wasn’t really a debate - all eleven of us knew he was the only one who could pick up Silvio’s work, and Carolina...I don’t know exactly what she said to him, but she convinced him to take the MOS training.”

And then Carlos exhales, “Gabriel...it was like he was made for it.”

Jack smiles.

Just faintly.

Just a little twisted.

Everybody wants to rule the world.

“Jack, listen,” Carlos says, “Guerra was right on a technical level about being a Fox, but the work Gabriel did that next year - surreal. He figured out a whole chain of connections to two major cartel factions that Silvio had missed. The military police arrested almost fifty people and twenty opium plantations were located and burned.”

He tugs Jack to the left, murmuring intensely, “What Gabriel did was good, Jack. Though he’ll be the last person to say that about himself.”

Jack contemplates it, before he asks - his voice cracking weakly:

“...So Guerra is jealous or what?”

...

(The instrumental interlude plays in Jack’s head)

Silence answers him, and Jack starts to frown in confusion as the music plays in his head, wondering if he’s missing something or if he fell asleep during some part of Carlos’ talk or -

“...Jack,” Carlos says with a sharp exhale, “Who do you think the Fox was before Silvio?”
Jack blinks blearily against the coarse-grained darkness and -

(“Carolina Luna,” Luna states, adding, “CO of the eventual SEP Company 1, formerly an 18 Zulu.”)

(Flores nods, but mutters, “General Flores again” before she gestures to the earth-toned, tired looking woman on her right (Jack’s left) -)

(“Doctor Serena Jones,” she sighs, “18 Delta for SEP Company 1, also in charge of overseeing medical procedures here.”)

(And lastly -)

(“Marc Guerra,” Guerra says impassively, “CIA Special Activities Division operator, formerly Delta Forces and Army Special Forces, 18 Fox.”)

Jack inhales steeply -

*I can’t stand this indecision -*

(“And *what* clever comeback are you going to say when your protégé turns out to be responsible for this *mess*, Carolina?” Guerra hisses at her, and Luna leans in on the table to return his glare, but Jack just thinks slowly:)

(Protégé?)

(“That’s *rich* coming from you when you tried to steal him to your SAD bullshit eight months ago!” Luna snaps at him, “But he said no, so you had to go craft a whole goddamn ‘enhancement’ scheme just to break my ODA - *our* ODA - apart -”)

As the pieces of them -

(“Don’t know him -” Guerra says, absolutely feigning the shock in his voice, before he *grins*, adding in a dark, rich tone, “Oh, *pobre soldado* - I *made* him.”)

Fall into place -

(And Jack stares into those eyes of the abyss once more, struggling to hold whatever remains of himself together, as Guerra’s voice - quiet, patient, kind, almost tender - sounds almost *eerily, uncannily, absenty* disembodied, and his words - like water drip-drip-dripping down through the cracks where the glass has pierced Jack’s spine - sink into Jack’s head like an obsidian blade:)

(“...Do you know how good soldiers die, Jack?”)

*A shot to the neck or a liver bleeding out -*

(“...Is Gabe why you have problems with Commander Luna?” Jack asks and -)

(Guerra says nothing)

(But)

(The sudden flash of shock and unnerved panic in those deep eyes says *everything.*)

*Married with a lack of vision -*

“...*Oh my god,*” Jack exhales sharply in heartbroken horror, and Carlos whispers fiercely, “Jealous?
Guerra isn’t jealous, Jack - Guerra knew Silvio for like twelve years. The only people who had been in 7436 longer than that were Carolina and Serena. The Zulu position would’ve been a toss up between Commander Luna and Guerra, but he chose to leave for Delta Force instead of dividing the team for it, and he knew Silvio would take his place as Fox. In the Special Forces, leaving your team so other members can benefit is making a huge sacrifice, even if Guerra also got a semi-promotion out of it. There’s a reason A-teams almost never change personnel until people are forced into retirement - A-teams are virtually family.”

“...That’s why you guys get a reputation for being clique-y,” Jack mutters, semi-delirious from lack of sleep and shock, and Carlos huffs a soft laugh, “You could put it that way. We get called that a lot by the other branches, and really, they’re not wrong. But you try living with the same eleven people, four months on, eight months out of a year, for ten, fifteen years, and not call them family. It’s called ‘brothers in arms’ for a reason.”

Jack closes his eyes -

And -

*Everybody wants to rule the world.*

Inhales a sob-staggering breath, thinking:

...*To know your best friend died a slow, painful death after you leave him...*

(Jack remembers the cracks in Guerra’s gaze -)

...*How do you ever recover from that?*

And then -

Jack thinks with quiet solemnness:

...*How do you forgive your other friends for letting him die?*

And he opens his eyes and scowls, adding darkly:

...*Is Guerra using Gabriel to get back at Commander Luna and Doctor Jones?*

...*Or does he hate Gabriel too?*

“...I’m not saying I agree with him,” Carlos mutters, “But I can see why Guerra has a lot of pent up feelings about this. It’s not like he can kick Gabriel or Carolina around, but it isn’t *fair* of him to pick on you for it. You had nothing to do with this.”

Carlos slows their walking, and the silence fills the gap, before Jack murmurs hoarsely:

“...Thank you.”

“...For what? Putting you in a box for five hours, blasting Tears for Fears until you broke so hard you started singing it, and then making you walk in circles as I tell you about ODA problems you had no part of?” Carlos mutters sourly, clearly most frustrated with himself than Jack, and his “guard” snaps, “This week is such bullshit, I swear -”

*Say that you’ll never, never, never need it -*

“...For telling me the truth.”
Carlos’s frustrations die with Jack’s words, and Jack adds quietly:

“And for trusting me with it.”

Carlos says nothing -

But Jack thinks he can sense something calmer in Carlos’ presence.

“I don’t know what Guerra wants from you, or from Gabriel,” Carlos says, moving them around a left turn, “But you need to be careful, Jack. Few things are scarier than someone as smart as Guerra hellbent on some sort of revenge.”

*One headline - why believe it?*

And somehow -

Gabriel’s sly smirk appears in his head and -

1824

“Do you think Gabe could outsmart him?” Jack asks unthinkingy, before he adds hastily, “Hypothetically, of course.”

Carlos’ tone is clearly skeptical as he mutters, “*Hypothetically,* huh? Well...to be honest, Jack, I don’t know. I’ve never seen Guerra actually do HUMINT work. I’ve seen Silvio and now Gabriel do it, and I gotta say, if Guerra is anything like them, he’s...the way I’ve described Gabriel is ‘too smart for his own good.’ The crazy thing about Gabriel is that even when he put himself in trouble, he was both smart enough and lucky enough to get himself back out.”

And then Carlos’ tone shifts to sarcasm as he mutters, “Of course, Gabriel *also* loves to say how there’s ‘no such thing as luck,’ so you’ll never get a straight answer out of him about what percentage of his actions was planned, and what percentage was instinct, and what percentage was total lucky bullshit, so honestly, who knows? I’d love to believe that Gabriel could outwit Guerra, but Guerra clearly did such a badass job in Delta Force that he got recruited to the Special Activities Division within a year, so the man’s doing something right. And he saw through our collective lie, so take that for what it’s worth.”

*Everybody wants to rule the world -*

“So is he also mad about the drone thing?” Jack asks, “That’s why there’s - what - like five of your team here -?”

“Five of us?”

The confusion in Carlos’ voice makes Jack feel like pins and needles have run up his spine.

“Jack, there’s seven of the 7436 members here,” Carlos says, “Ray, our senior Echo, and Jim, my senior Bravo, are in the trainer group - but oddly enough, our junior Delta who replaced Gabriel didn’t get in.”

Suddenly, something near Jack’s arm crackles out, and he hears the guard from the blackout box room snap, “Takin’ an awful long time to get back here, Guard: 04.”

“...Speak of the devil, that’s Jim,” Carlos mutters, and Jack can *hear* him rolling his eyes as he adds, “He’s a tough love kind of guy. Hang on -”
They stop for a second as Carlos shuffles with something, and then he says back, “I made him do laps, sir.”

There’s a pause, and then Jim huffs back, “God damn, you’re as evil as Caro sometimes -”

“Hey, uh -”

Carlos makes a high-pitched squeaking giggle and Jack *grins* -

As the voice of Commander Luna rings out over the comms device, “Guess who has the night shift, Morales?”

There’s a brief pause of “oh shit” before Jim Morales retorts slowly, “Let me guess - is it me, Commander?”

“Oh James,” she says back with a saccharine sweetness as Carlos wheezes, “I’m not *that* evil - but watch what you say on the comms, sergeant.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Morales mutters back dryly, and Commander Luna suddenly instructs them, “Guard: 04, put Prisoner: 76 back in his cell. That’s enough laps for now.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Carlos says into the comms device, and then he starts to guide Jack forward again, saying more lowly, “So anyways - I don’t know, but it felt...necessary. To tell you this stuff. Guerra tried to use that against you today, but now you know the truth.”

And Jack thinks - against his own instincts:

*No.*

*I know your version of the truth.*

*And I half-know Guerra’s version.*

...And Jack quiets in his own head, letting the lyrics float through his brain:

*(All for freedom and for pleasure -)*

*...But I don’t know his version of the truth.*

*(Nothing ever lasts forever -)*

And, as Carlos beep-beep-beep-beeps in the passcode to the cell unit door, Jack singthinks with bittersweet softness:

*And his version matters the most.*

*(Everybody wants to rule the world.)*

---

When the cell unit door slides shut behind Carlos, Jack bends over, rubbing soothing circles on his thighs and -

“Jack!” Adrien says, bending beside him, “Holy shit, you were in there forever - you okay?”

“Real sore,” Jack seethes, and the pins and needles stab all up and down his legs, up and down his
legs, “Real fucking tired too -”

“What song did you get?” Robin asks as Adrien helps guide him to the pile of foam mattress pads in the middle of their cell.

“Everybody Wants to Rule the World,” Jack manages to gasp out as he slumps to the foam - it hurts just to bend his knees -

*Welcome to your life.*

“Ouch,” Khan mutters sympathetically, “That must have been hell to listen to.”

“Why does your voice sound like shit?” Derek asks totally unsympathetically and Jin sighs, “For fuck’s sake, dude -”

“I sang along.”

*There’s no turning back -*

Both cell groups go quiet as Jack eases himself onto his left side, curling up as he adds hoarsely, “For like an hour.”

“...You’re a weird one, Morrison,” Derek says dryly and -

“I’ve heard that a lot,” Jack says, completely out of witty comebacks and out of damns to give. He pulls his hood up, shuts his eyes, and murmurs to Adrien, “...Five minutes. Or however much I get. Please.”

“I gotta wake you up when we get food, dude,” Adrien says but -

His voice is already drowned out by -

*Even while we sleep -*


“Alright...for food,” he barely hears but -

Jack shuts himself into the coarse-grained darkness of his mind

And pulls himself tighter into the box in his brain

And blacks out.

…

He wakes up back in the chair in the “interview room.”

*How*, Jack wonders, miserably tired and sore and covered in pins and needles, *Did I get here. Was I blacked out the whole way -*

But he

Stops.

His breath sticks bitter in his chest.
His heart beat-beat-beats, pressing up against the coarse-grained wood box he’s stuffed it in.

And Gabriel stares at him from across the table -

Before that gorgeous, smoky, deadly smirk spreads across his lips, rich and regal and raw-edged, as he says:

“Hey, soldier.”

His voice

Drip

Drip

Dripping

Like water into the depths of Jack’s heart and -

“...Gabe,” Jack says, the word breathless and excited like exhaling bittersweet air, and for some reason he just asks:

“Is it true?”

Gabriel stares at him coolly, his smirk fading a bit, before he rises from the chair on the other side of the table and -

“Is it true?” falls out of Jack’s mouth and why is it so hot, he’s not in the box, but his clothes seem to be sticking uncomfortably -

Why am I asking this -

“What they said -” just rambles out, and Jack needs to stop himself -

Gabriel comes to a stop on the same side of the table as Jack, leaning against the edge of it -

(Someone else had done the same earlier -)

(Or was that yesterday -)

(What day is it -)

Jack’s throat runs dry, frayed and flayed from oversinging and -

Rough, calloused fingers slip under the scruff on his chin -

(They had held hands at some point -)

And tilt his face up towards Gabriel’s.

And Jack finds himself

Breathless

At the depth of the star-dusted, smoke-hued darkness in Gabriel’s eyes, gold behind the simmer of shadow and -
Gabriel gives him the most incredible, sly smirk Jack has ever seen –

(Something inside Jack twists and he doesn’t know if it’s his heart or his hopelessness or -)

“And if it is,” Gabriel asks him, voice like liquid obsidian pouring straight into Jack’s spine, “Does that change anything…?”

Jack wakes up.

He lurches on instinct, fighting himself fighting everybody everybody wants to rule the world fighting he’s –

“Holy shit, Jack -”

Adrien’s voice and then Adrien’s hands wrestle him down as the rest of the Cell 5 group shouts in confusion and dismay as Jack kicks at them -

“What the fuck, Morrison -” Mari is yelling at him and -

It’s not dark, it’s bright, he’s not in the box, he’s not in the room, he’s in the cell, he’s not with Guerra -

He’s not with Gabriel.

Jack pants as his mind rights itself, eyes darting around and Adrien’s concerned face finally clicks in his head and -

What time is it, Jack asks - wait no -

He actually needs to speak -

“What time is it,” Jack says deliriously and Adrien blinks at him, before he murmurs, “It’s like...1621 hours.”

“Day?” Jack asks, panicking because how did he get away with sleeping for a full twenty-four hours -

“...Jack,” Adrien says quietly, “...It’s still Day 2.”

Jack

Stops.

“...What?” he says unthinkingly, and Adrien murmurs softly, “...You’ve only been back from the blackout box for two minutes - maybe not even that.”

And Jack’s heart

Breaks

As he mumbles, “...I had...a dream - and I was...back in the interrogation but it wasn’t Guerra - it was...it was Gabe -”

Adrien looks mournful for him, as Jack feels the frustration burn like bitter water at the edges of his eyes, and he whispers with his voice cracking painfully, “I’m sorry -”
For whom?

"- I'm sorry -"

He can’t trust.

"- I’m sorry -”

He can’t trust.

"- I’m sorry -”

Hell is not a place.

Hell is the song of fear that slips from his brain

Into his bloodstream

And coils tight

In his heart

Locked in a box.

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From The Washington Post's "In Mexico, the price of America's hunger for heroin":

[The opioid epidemic that has caused so much pain in the United States is also savaging Mexico, contributing to a breakdown of order in rural areas. Heroin is like steroids for drug gangs, pumping money and muscle into their fight to control territory and transportation routes to the United States.]

[Mexico provides more than 90 percent of America’s heroin, up from less than 10 percent in 2003, when Colombia was the main supplier. Poppy production has expanded by about 800 percent in a decade as U.S. demand has soared. The western state of Guerrero is the center of this business, producing more than half of Mexico’s opium poppies, the base ingredient for heroin. Guerrero also has become the most violent state in Mexico, with more than 2,200 killings last year.]

[“These groups have transformed themselves into a super-criminal power,” said Ricardo Mejia Berdeja, the head of the security committee in the Guerrero state congress. “The anchor for organized crime is heroin poppy.”]

[About a decade ago, one drug cartel dominated Guerrero — the Beltrán Leyva organization. Now, there are at least a dozen drug gangs competing for patches of ground in the state. That’s partly because of Mexican authorities’ focus on capturing the leaders of cartels and splintering their organizations. But it’s also a function of the way the heroin trade works.]

[Mexican soldiers patrol and man checkpoints, but residents feel they are overmatched by the criminal groups. The state’s rugged hills, poor road network and compromised local officials make the work harder.]

[“There is not an army in the world that can operate successfully in this area,” said Lt. Col. Juan José Moreno Orzua, deputy chief and spokesman of the 35th Military Zone.]

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From Mexico Daily News' "Tierra Caliente defenseless against three feuding drug cartels":

[In the neighboring municipality of Coyuca de Catalán, three soldiers were killed and three more were wounded Tuesday night after they were ambushed by armed men.]

[Earlier the same day, the bullet-riddled body of the mayor and state Congress candidate Abel Montúfar Mendoza was found on the road between Ciudad Altamirano and Coyuca.]

[Violence in the region continues despite federal and state governments carrying out three massive security operations in the past four years in which the Federal Police, the army and the National Gendarmerie have all participated.]

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Wired's "Indiana, reeling from opioid crisis, arms officials with data":

[THE OPIOID CRISIS has hit Indiana hard. In 2012, Indiana was among a handful of states whose opioid prescriptions roughly equaled its population. Three years later, intravenous drugs caused the nation’s worst HIV outbreak in two decades, affecting 181 people in rural Scott County, Indiana. And since 2013, Indiana has had the dubious distinction of leading the nation in pharmacy robberies, beating even California, which has six times its population.]

[Darshan Shah can recite stats like these from memory. As Indiana’s chief data officer, tracking these figures is kind of his job. He’s also aware of what the numbers represent. “Thousands of people are losing their lives,” Shah says. “It’s clearly a dire situation, before we lose a generation to this epidemic.”]

Chapter End Notes

Look, if "Reaper" is willing to throw an assassination attempt on Katya just to let Sombra do her thing, or willing to get his ass kicked by a giant gorilla, Gabriel Reyes is totally willing to stuff lard down some shower drains to swipe a few fingerprints.

Fun facts: 18Fs are taught how to collect fingerprints and identify people through traditional forensics.

---

As for the background on Gabriel's squad...

It isn't necessarily the specifics of the story that I was interested in telling. Rather, I was interested in trying to explore how a character like Gabriel Reyes develops before, during, and after the Crisis: what's his military history? How does he learn the strategies and tactics he develops? How and why does he grow so attached to Jack Morrison (and how and why does Jack grow so attached to him)? What makes Gabriel so profoundly protective of Jack, his Blackwatch agents, and Overwatch as a whole in the future?

Can somebody trained in information and psychological warfare be a hero?

And what motivates him to try to become one?

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References:

Music torture:

2. "When music is violence", The New Yorker
3. "How the CIA used music torture to 'break' detainees", Vox

La Tierra Caliente, Mexico's heroin production center, and the U.S. opioid crisis:

1. "In Mexico, the price of America's hunger for heroin", The Washington Post. I would highly urge people interested in the opioid epidemic to read this article. Informative with some incredible photographs. Warning: one image does feature a starving dog.
2. "Here are the overdose stats for 2017: they're bad", Courier & Press. Taken from the article: “That’s about one every five days. … It doesn’t take very long for you to find somebody that has, or knows somebody that has, a family member that’s overdosed or died.”
3. "Most heroin in U.S. now comes across Mexican border", PolitiFact
4. Opioid epidemic statistics in Indiana, provided by the state government
5. "Tierra Caliente defenseless against three feuding drug cartels", Mexico News Daily
6. "Indiana, reeling from opioid crisis, arms officials with data", Wired
Chapter Summary

[Apocalypse: From Ancient Greek ἀποκάλυψις (apokálupsis)]

(In "Paradise Lost", Gabriel is the "chief of the Angelic guards" and the bearer of the trumpet of the Apocalypse.)

[Definition: A revelation.]

(In American gospel traditions, the angel Gabriel is the signifier of the Apocalypse.)

[Used as the title of the final book of the New Testament, as in the Book of Revelation, the Revelation of John, the Apocalypse of John.]

Gabriel opens the book of War
And he finds
A revelation
And a vision of his fate.

[The name "Moira" is a given name of Greek origin, deriving from μοῖρα, meaning "destiny, share, fate". In Greek mythology, the Moirai (Greek: Μοῖραι, plural for μοῖρα), often known in English as the Fates, were the white-robed incarnations of destiny.]

Chapter Notes

There ain't no grave can hold my body down
There ain't no grave can hold my body down
When I hear that trumpet sound, I'm gonna rise right out of the ground

See the end of the chapter for more notes

24: Resistance, Day 2 - Look way down the river

Tuesday, February 19, 2047: 2001 hours - mess hall, main SEP facility

Gabriel slides himself into his usual spot at the end of the table, saying excitedly, “Okay, look -”

Luisa stops mid-bite into her roll to stare at him with tired, exhausted eyes, before she mutters, “Oh boy -”
“- I tried everything -” Gabriel says, really emphasizing The Point, but Luisa just puts her roll back down - teeth marks in the top - saying, “I doubt that -”

“- But I need your help,” Gabriel continues, setting his datapad and notebook down on the table.

“...Ah yeah, that sounds more like it,” Luisa says with a dry tone.

Gabriel unlocks his datapad as he simultaneously flips to the page after all the numbers - the one where he’s written down more general ideas about PINs and passwords -

“...Is it illegal?” Luisa says with pointed skepticism in her tone and -

Gabriel

Stops.

Before he glances up at her in bewilderment, asking slowly, “Like...the law kind of illegal?”

Luisa stares back at him, her bright brown eyes full of a deadpan “I don’t know what I expected” look, before she asks neutrally, “What other kinds of illegal are there, Gabriel?”

Gabriel gives her his worst poker face before a nervous, cheesy grin bursts through and he shrugs awkwardly, “…Like...conscientious or ethical...illegality?”

Luisa is not impressed.

“...You know, civil disobedience kind of illegal?” Gabriel offers optimistically.

Luisa purses her lips, eyes narrowing, shaking her head a bit - she clearly doesn’t buy it, but like a good friend, she asks with a sigh, “That depends on what it is, right?”

“Oh thank god, I was really worried you weren’t actually going to help me,” Gabriel heaves a sigh of relief and Luisa tilts her head, saying, “I didn’t actually say that -”

“Okay, so look,” Gabriel says, setting his datapad down with the screen displaying the “PIN data” website he’s been reading for most of the evening, “I’ve been looking up the methods for cracking four-digit PINs -”

“Ah. So just regular illegal,” Luisa snorts, “Got it.”

“- I mean, I already have the list of the top 20 most-used PINs because that’s just good basic info to have handy, right?” Gabriel continues, ignoring her. Luisa just makes another sarcastic face, saying, “That is the most you statement you have ever said, Gabriel Reyes -”

“Look, the top 20 PINs cover a solid 25 to 27% of all four-digit PINs used, so that’s just basic statistics,” Gabriel says, pointing to the paragraph where the analysis of “PIN data” describes the stat, before he taps his left index and middle fingers on the table, whispering conspiratorially, “One in four PINs in this very building can be cracked just by trying the top 20.”

“...I don’t have enough energy for this,” Luisa says, lifting her cup and looking inside it with a disappointed expression.

“There’s more coffee in the auxiliary staging room, if you need it,” Gabriel says without missing a beat. Luisa pauses, flicking her gaze from her cup to his face before she mutters, “Wow, you’re deep in it today, huh? I haven’t seen you like this since you woke us all up talking about quetzals -”
Gabriel barely hears her as he rambles, “But here’s the thing, okay - I got that this PIN has three specific digits, which means that at least one of those digits is used twice.”

“You got -” Luisa stumbles confusedly through the words, “- Three digits...of a PIN...How.”

“Don’t ask questions you aren’t prepared to help break the law for,” Gabriel warns her. Luisa stares at him dully before she nods her head appreciatively, sighing, “That’s fair.”

“Anyways, what my hang up is here is that it’s definitely not a date or a year -” Gabriel says, scrolling down the website page as he elaborates, “There are no zeros, ones, or threes - so that removes one of the biggest and most frequently-used rationales for making PINs.”

“Hmm,” Luisa hums with passive interest as she takes a sip from her mug.

“Yeah, exactly,” Gabriel agrees, “So then I looked through some of the other data-backed reasoning and like, a lot of people do the four-number thing, like one-one-one-one. But obviously this isn’t it.”

“You don’t say,” Luisa says neutrally, setting her cup back down and picking her roll back up. She finally takes that bite as Gabriel says, “And then lots of other people do couplets - you know like six-nine-six-nine because, let’s face it, that’s fucking hilarious.”

“...Is it, Gabriel?” she asks him after she swallows her food, “Is it?”

Gabriel stares at her before he murmurs rather quietly, “…I found it funny anyways.”

“...Pobrecito,” Luisa says completely unsympathetically. Gabriel waves her off before tapping at the table again, saying with feigned fierceness, “I don’t need pity, Gonzales - I need answers. Information! Insight!”

“I hear there’s more of that in the auxiliary staging room,” Luisa retorts, but Gabriel just looks at her with seemingly genuine confusion before he states, “What. No - there’s only coffee and hot chocolate in there.”

Luisa gives him a disbelieving look before -

“Sup,” Carlos says with a sigh as he approaches the end of the table with a tray of food, “What’s going on?”


Carlos smiles serenely and nods, saying, “Oh cool. It’s like 2000 hours on a Tuesday night, so I’m not gonna do that.”

And with that, he starts to stride past them to the rest of the senior soldiers at the end of the table.

“Ain’t no more loyalty in the world anymore,” Gabriel huffs and Carlos calls back, “Love you too, Gabrieltito!”

There’s a pause where Luisa loudly sips her drink and Gabriel stares off into space, wondering if he should steal Carlos’ room PIN for good measure.

“Alright,” Luisa says, setting her cup back down, “So basically, let me see if I got this: you have - somehow - figured out three digits of a four-digit PIN for someone’s...I don’t know, lock code.”

“Yeah,” Gabriel says.
“And you know - without a doubt - that at least one of these digits repeats itself?” Luisa asks.

“Yes,” Gabriel says again.

“...Should I ask what the numbers are?” Luisa says, a touch skeptical and a touch nervous. Gabriel thinks it over, decides, and rolls his shoulders, saying, “Sure. Two, six, and seven.”

“...Hmm, yeah, those are odd,” Luisa hums thoughtfully, and Gabriel grins at her, saying, “Right? I’m glad I wasn’t crazy about this.”

They both sit quiet for a moment, thinking about it, before Luisa asks gently, “...Isn’t this more psychology stuff than communications at this point? Sounds like you already have the data about the most-used PINs - not like I can help much beyond that.”

“So nothing else? No advice?” Gabriel asks. Luisa rolls her eyes, sighing, “Beyond using cracking programs or running a physical cracking device on it? Tough. I’m not a walking database of numbers, Gabriel.”

“Pity,” Gabriel grins, but Luisa just scowls at him, asking with a strict tone, “You want my help or not?”

Another pause, and then Gabriel says sincerely, “...Sorry.”

Luisa continues to scowl for a moment, before she sighs, “...Anyways - let me see if I can remember stuff they told us on identity cracking...”

Gabriel lets her think - she furrows her brows in concentration, pulling his datapad over to her to skim the website, murmuring, “Yeah, this is just basic data on PINs...”

But then she says more clearly, “...Lot of people put emotional, sentimental, or superstitious values on numbers. Seven and thirteen are the most common examples, of course, but like - I think in Chinese and Japanese, four is considered bad luck - hang on -”

Luisa lifts her head, glancing down the table to her right (Gabriel’s left) and calls out, “Hey, Mai!”

The other Echo looks up at them from where some of the other “late shift” senior soldiers are sitting, roll in her mouth, eyes wide and curious as she goes, “Hmm?”

“Four is bad luck, right?” Luisa asks her in a loud voice and Carlos - Soldier: 04 - looks up from the group in horror, stammering, “What.”

“Ye,” Mai mumbles, chewing through her food, and Carlos twists towards her, stammering again, “WHAT.”

“In Mandarin, it sounds like the word for death - si,” says Michael as he leans over the table to peer down towards them. Mary, not too far from Gabriel, chimes in with, “Same in Japanese, only a bit different - shi.”

“Oh my god, I had no idea??” Carlos half-states, half-asks, half-gawks. Michael - Soldier: 05, who just missed receiving the 04 designation by virtue of his surname - grins mischievously at him, “You’re screwed, dude. Same with Roux and Reyes over there. 14 and 24 are also bad numbers.”

Delmar Roux - Soldier: 14, Delta - looks up from cramming a biteful of rice into his mouth, before he rolls his shoulders, muttering thickly, “Meh. It’s just a number.”
“We have the same concepts in Japanese,” Mary says, glancing at Gabriel as she explains, “Because a lot of East Asian languages rely on a small amount of syllables, you get a ton of homophone-based word play. So like 14 can be phonetically called jushi, and 24 can be called nishi, or ‘double death.’”

Carlos makes a panic-stricken face, but Gabriel just grins wryly, saying, “‘Double Death’ sounds like it would be a great band name.”

“How do you even die twice?” Delmar asks skeptically and before Mary can answer -

“Easy,” Gabriel says with a Cheshire Cat grin, “First you die emotionally when you realize all hopes and dreams are futile, and then you actually die thirty years later.”

“...Why do I even bother with you, Reyes?” Delmar sighs, before returning his attention to his rice.

“...Anyways, ignoring Gabriel being a dick,” Luisa says, “Thanks for the explanation.”

“No worries,” Mary says, also returning to her food, “I’m getting used to Gabriel being a dick.”

Gabriel makes a face but Luisa just taps at the datapad, saying with more kindness than he deserves, “You kinda brought that on yourself. I don’t know why you always try to aggravate people.”

“...The more people believe you are one way, the more you can surprise them when you prove to be another,” Gabriel murmurs quietly. Luisa glances at him, raising an eyebrow skeptically, before she says, “Sure. And it’s not because you idolize angsty, brooding Byronic heroes, right?”

Gabriel’s expression shifts to a more honest grin as he chuckles, “...God damn, you got me there.”

“You always put up such a show of emotional sarcasm and nonchalance, Gabriel,” she says to him quietly, “I mean, do what you need to do to be happy, but I’ve seen you make nicer jokes to kids when you gave them vaccines.”

Gabriel grows more somber at that, but Luisa just sighs, more businesslike in tone, “So yeah, anyways - you’ve got the good luck and bad luck numbers, which are cultural, but besides seven, it doesn’t sound like this PIN really uses those.”

“...So I can eliminate that idea?” Gabriel asks, pulling the pen from his notebook to write that down. Luisa hums, “Seems reasonable to drop it, unless you have reason to think some of these numbers might mean something superstitious to this person.”

Gabriel makes a face as -

Guerra?

Superstitious?

When Hell freezes over, maybe.

“...No,” Gabriel mutters dryly, “No, this person is... definitely not superstitious.”

“Sentimental, maybe?” Luisa offers, “Most people resort to dates to represent something sentimental - birthdays, sure, but also anniversaries, graduations...but they could mean something else. A lot of people get attached to numbers as children - like the number they were assigned in school or -”

“Or in a ‘soldier enhancement program?’” Gabriel asks with a smirk.
Luisa tilts her head a bit, giving him a faint, wry smile as she chuckles, “...I did notice there’s a seven and a six in there, Gabrielito.”

“Cute, but you’re missing the mark,” Gabriel jokes, even as he writes her idea down, “I wouldn’t be asking you about my own PINs, would I? And it doesn’t have twenty-four in it, obviously.”

“...I uh,” Luisa snorts, her smile cracking into a huge shit-eating grin, “I wasn’t implying that was about your PIN, Gabriel.”

Gabriel pauses, scowls as he thinks it over -

And then -

*Oh shit*

A deep blush rises to his cheeks and -

“Oh my god, this is going to be so much fun teasing you,” Luisa wheeze-giggles with excitement as Gabriel gawks at her, snapping, “Luisa Gonzales Moreno, don’t you dare -”

“Oh my god, relax, your super-totally-secret crush is safe with me,” she snorts, drinking from her mug again. Gabriel still scowls at her, even when she sets it back down and hums, “So sentimental - yes or no?”

*Guerra?*

*Sentimental?*

An image of Guerra staring up at him, saying with that soft, harsh tone:

“But you lack focus, ambition, and vision. You need to be trained and cultivated by someone who can see those things for you.”

“...No,” Gabriel mutters darkly, “They’re absolutely not sentimental.”

“Damn,” Luisa states absently, “You’re gonna get real unlucky if this person is stupid and is using, like, the last four digits of their Social Security Number or credit card as their PIN. Cause then you gotta lift one of those, Mr. Sticky Fingers.”

“...No,” Gabriel says with a deadpan tone, “Trust me - no. They’re one of the smartest people in this building. They’re not risking that.”

“Have you considered that they’re just using a random number they memorized?” Luisa sighs, “You might be at a dead-end -”

“No.”

She pauses as Gabriel says with clear focus, “They’re not the kind to trust their own memory not to fail them.”

Luisa’s eyes narrow a little bit at that, before she murmurs lowly, “...Setting illegality aside, Gabriel - are you certain you ought to be doing this? For your own good? This person sounds like...more trouble than they’re worth.”

Gabriel watches her with a quiet, patient gaze, thinking:
I’m not doing this for my own good.

And I’m definitely not doing this for Guerra.

…

He’s doing it for -

“…Do you think trying something for the sake of trying carries its own merit?” Gabriel asks her with quiet, patient curiosity, “An experience for the sake of itself?”

“…Is that what you’re trying to achieve here?” Luisa asks him cautiously, “Because I’m pretty sure you can get your thrills in other ways, Gabriel.”

“…Not thrills,” Gabriel replies slowly, chewing over his thoughts -

A cocksure, confident grin, before the dawn, New Year’s Day.

A knife in a drone.

A snowball fight and flurry of laughter.

Snowcovered, stardusted nights, hot chocolate, sweet and strong stories - public domain and personal.

Jack focusing on asking questions and analyzing answers, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration and his seasung eyes deep in thought.

Jack beaming at him, sunshine in the winter night, as he thanks Gabriel for the only gift Gabriel can give, a paperback with edges worn well by his hands.

Jack meeting his eyes through a camera -

Heartbreak and hurt etched into his expression and -

Something else stirring in the seasung, midnight sky wells of Jack’s gaze -

“…More like testing the depths of the water by jumping in,” Gabriel decides on.

He needs to know how deep the blue of those eyes go.

He wants to know.

“…Seems dangerous,” Luisa says quietly, with more concern than he deserves -

“…Would you say this person is as methodical as you, if not more so?” Luisa asks him suddenly. Gabriel raises an eyebrow at her, but says, “…Yeah, probably -”

“Ah,” Luisa says with easy confidence, “So they’re using an alpha-numeric code.”

…

“What the fuck,” Gabriel half-asks, half-gawks at her, stammering, “I don’t - how in the hell - ”

“Oh my god, Gabrielito,” Luisa huffs, “Don’t be so predictable. You’re always paranoid as all hell about your passcodes so you always end up overthinking but then you make it really straightforward, like using the word ‘king’ for your older PINs - which, by the way, still makes me so angry - ”
“What’s wrong with that??” Gabriel asks, “It’s a clever play on my surname -”

“‘Reyes’ is plural - plural,” Luisa snaps, “You can’t just use ‘king’ - it’s not the same at all -”

“Oh my god, ‘Reyes’ is five letters,” Gabriel groans back, “And so is ‘kings’! I can’t use either of those, and this is closer than ‘rey -’”

“Just use a different word!” Luisa huffs, “Not only are you not using the plural, you’re also using something super easily identifiable based on your personal information! Pick a random word and stick with that!”

“Jokes on you,” Gabriel taunts her with a grin, “I picked a totally different passcode for this sucker.”

He taps at the datapad, confident in -

Luisa quirks an eyebrow at him, then pulls the datapad towards her. She taps the button to switch back to the lockscreen, and asks, “Three chances?”

“...Yeah,” Gabriel says hesitantly, because -

Luisa stares at the lockscreen, her eyes roaming over the numbers, before she tap-tap-tap-taps at four numbers -

And the datapad gives a small disgruntled beep.

Gabriel grins, but Luisa doesn’t look at him at all, instead tap-tap-tap-tapping in a second try -

Beep.

I knew this was a good one, Gabriel thinks to himself but then -

Luisa pauses

Flicks her gaze up at him

Says, “You tried to mislead me with that comment about your PIN earlier -”

And then tap-tap-tap-taps her third try -

Ding.

(5225)

The datapad unlocks.

(J-A-C-K).

Gabriel looks sardonically devastated as she holds it back out to him, saying coolly, “Next time, use a four-letter word you associate with him - like ‘blue’ or something - not his actual goddamn name, Gabriel. And don’t be so goddamn Byronic, you romantic asshole.”

Gabriel reluctantly takes the datapad back, mumbling something about how “well, now ‘blue’ is compromised.” Luisa finishes the last bit of her drink, setting the cup back on her tray. She rises, saying, “Look, that’s the best information I’ve got for you. Try thinking of four-letter words using the letters assigned to those numbers or something. If this person is as overly methodical as you, something will jump out. See ya.”
Gabriel watches her lift her tray and head towards the kitchen, before he calls out genuinely, “Thank you!”

“Sure thing, Gabriel,” Luisa says back to him, adding, “Wouldn’t kill you to use that phrase more.”

You never know, Gabriel thinks with a self-deprecating snort, They say to kill ‘em with kindness, and I’m already marked for death, or double death...God, that’s a cool name.

He stares at his list of “reasons for PINs”, his eyes trawling through his own untidy scrawl, before he flips the page, making a large box of a numberpad.

And then he begins to add the letters to their numeric spots.

[2 - ABC]

[6 - MNO]

[7 - PQRS]

...There are a lot of four-letter words in there, shit.

Camp, maps, naps, pans, boas, soar, soap, roam, barn, born, corn, snap, boar, boor, porn - wait, that needs the 2 letters somehow, whoops, Gabriel thinks, before scowling:

And if you look at verbs, you get stuff like cons, bans, mans, cram, rams - oh, ramp is a word too.

And that doesn’t include the possibly of “joke” words like rocs or roqs, or common shortening of words like comp, or narc...

Gabriel

Dead

Stops.

…

Before he internally shouts at himself:

I’M AN IDIOT.

And immediately grabs his datapad. He bookmarks his open tabs, saves his network model, closes everything else -

And logs off.

The blank [Enter Username] screen pops up, and Gabriel types in:

[Guerra.Marc].

The datapad slides to the number pad for the passcode and -

Gabriel inhales -

Time to see if he reuses PINs -

And then exhales.
And he taps [6 - M]
[2 - A]
[7 - R]
[2 - C]
And hits the arrow button, holding his breath -

Ding.

A green checkmark appears and Gabriel nearly shouts with sheer joy that he was right, this plan is going to work -

Gabriel
Deadstops
A second time.

As the green checkmark slides to a new page:

[Enter Password]
...

Gabriel feels like he’s been stabbed in the diaphragm.

...Two-step verification, he thinks, shellshocked, Of course. Fuck. It’s so fucking simple. He would never trust just one code, especially if he’s self aware about the risks of reusing it.

...With the possibility of infinite letter and number combinations in near-infinite amounts -

Passwords are significantly harder to crack, even with cracking or hacking programs.

This is why online scams to get access to people’s passwords use phishing, Gabriel thinks sourly, Tricking people into revealing targeted information. Fucking hell, I can’t believe I got this far just to get destroyed by a password.

He could try to sneak it, could try to stealthily watch Guerra for a chance to see his actual password input, could pester Luisa and see if she had any of her cracking or keylogging programs with her (he doubts it, they would’ve taken any electronic storage devices at the start of SEP).

Gabriel stares at his new nemesis, the [Enter Password] fading in and out with a soft blue tone -

Lighter than Jack’s eyes -

Before he sighs heavily -

And taps the “Show me a hint” option.

Screw it, no skin off my nose at this point - Gabriel starts to think, before the page refreshes itself and -
Gabriel

Deadstops.

For a third time in a minute.

The page is almost exactly the same as before: big letters of [Enter Password] in clear, white text, a white text-input box for the actual password -

And then underneath that

Brand “new”

Is the “hint” Guerra has left for himself in the event he somehow forgets his own password.

In small, quiet, almost kind letters, it reads:

“The forest for the trees.”

Gabriel inhales steeply -

The air is dry - so dry it practically cracks with movement as their small truck bounces along the dusty, uneven concrete of Highway 51, as they head west-northwest from Tlapehuala back towards their camp, near the base of the scrub-brushed foothills rising in the distance.

It had been a long day of procuring extra supplies and medical equipment - basically whatever the relatively “large” municipal city of approximately 9000 people had available - and Gabriel stares out the passenger seat at the tinder-dry trees and grey-green grasses doing more calculations in his head -

“...You’re overthinking again.”

The voice is warm, with the sound of a gentle, light smirk twisted into the words.

Gabriel glances over to the driver - his already rich-toned skin is even more vibrant under the glow of the late-afternoon light, drifting into the cab just under the sun visor. Hair not quite as shaved as Gabriel’s, but close-cropped with a few relaxed curls on top - his expression is still bright and friendly, even after a long day of visiting with families and conversing with vendors and discussing things in quiet, even tones with the few doctors in town.

Silvio.

“I’m telling you, Gabriélito, you’re way overthinking this,” Silvio hums cheerfully, even as they hit a small bump in the road that rattles them. The Fox chuckles as he warns the new junior Delta, “Over-medication can be bad in its own right - vaccines are always important, as are check-ups, but you don’t want to use too many antibiotics and painkillers unless it’s serious. And you really shouldn’t burn through our biotic field supply on easy house visits.”

“People like the nanobots a lot better than prescriptions or injections,” Gabriel says as a slow counter. Silvio nods appreciatively, but he also counter-counters, “While true, the nanobots are an extreme measure, and should really be reserved for the worst - remember, they’re particularly good at traumatic injuries, so cuts, broken bones, gunshot wounds, penetrations, tears. They’re emergency repairers, but they aren’t as good at targeting things like infections or degenerative
diseases. Maybe someday, someone will figure out how to make nanobiology target long-term genetic and bacterial problems, but not right now. Just like how we treat antibiotics, nanobots are not cure-alls to be handed out like candy.”

“...I’m not...” Gabriel mutters, though his resistance to Silvio’s words are weak. He glances back out his passenger window, sighing slowly, “...Just seems like a faster way to build rapport and trust.”

“Efficiency is not always the key in human relationships, Gabrielo,” Silvio says gently, “It takes time and patience and good listening skills to really earn trust and respect, especially around here when people change emotional and social alliances so quickly. Proving yourself to be a steadfast and careful doctor is better than showing off as a miracle worker.”

And then Silvio grins slyly, adding, “And having a sense of humor never hurts.”

“Hey, I can be funny,” Gabriel retorts - he’s young and he’s keenly aware of that, since most of the senior members of 7436 are in their late twenties or early thirties, and both he and Carlos feel so incredibly inexperienced with everything, even after nearly two years of Q-course and MOS training -

“Everyone can be funny, Gabriel,” Silvio says kindly, “In fact, in my opinion, gifting people nanobots isn’t the fastest way to build trust - humor is. There are only two points to being funny: you can have any kind of humor that you want - sarcastic, depreciating, crude, excited, whatever - as long as it doesn’t insult people.”

Gabriel raises his eyebrows skeptically at that - his sarcasm had gotten him in trouble frequently throughout high school and training - and he asks with cool but honest curiosity, “And the second point?”

“...Be genuine about it,” Silvio says, “Even sarcasm - don’t force it. Make it your own. Make it true to whatever sense of joy or fun you’re expressing. But be real about it.”

Gabriel makes a skeptical face, saying, “Even in this line of work? Seems like it’d be better to be - I dunno - extra polite?”

“Just like over-medication, over-politeness isn’t always a good idea,” Silvio says, “Moderation in everything is best - moderation in medicine, moderation in politeness, moderation in humor, and moderation in alcohol.”

“That’s funny considering how much tequila we’re bringing back to camp,” Gabriel mutters wryly, and Silvio laughs brightly, “In fairness, most of that is for Caro.”

Gabriel snorts in humorous disbelief, but glances back out the window and -

“...You kinda remind me of Marc,” Silvio says quietly, “Though it’s been a long time since he was as...earnest as you.”

Gabriel looks back at him, assessing the softer, calmer expression on his features - the way the mention of the former 7436 Fox somehow makes Silvio both gentler and more vivid -

“...How so?” Gabriel asks patiently - he’s been trying to practice Silvio’s method of “there are no stupid questions” more.

“He would overthink a lot too,” Silvio chuckles warmly, “Always hone in so intensely on the details. And that’s fine - details matter so much for Fox work, just like how the details of symptoms matter
for Delta work. But sometimes, he would get so overwhelmed by them, and boy, he could go full conspiracy-nut. So I would always have to remind him, ‘Don’t lose sight of the forest for the trees.’”

And then Silvio quickly glances at Gabriel, giving him a wide, smug grin as he laughs, “And he would hate that - he always thought it was the stupidest pun on my name.”

“What?” Gabriel cracks in wry disbelief, “I think that’s hilarious! I make jokes about ‘Reyes’ all the time.”

“Thank you,” Silvio says emphatically, smacking a hand against the rim of the steering wheel, “Finally, someone who appreciates word play and linguistics around here! I used to threaten him with, ‘Just be glad I’m not calling you ‘Marco Polo’ all the time.’”

Gabriel laughs over that, but -

He sees the grin on Silvio’s face settle into a gentler, more vivid smile and -

(Ask your questions -)

“...Do you miss him?” Gabriel asks quietly, sensing a bit of loneliness in the glow of Silvio’s features.

And Silvio - eyes still fixed on the road and the slow-setting light above them - murmurs with a warm, kind voice:

“...Every day.”

- Gabriel exhales sharply at the sting of the memories that rise from the simple phrase.

And he knows.

He knows Guerra’s password.

...Gabriel pauses only for a second before he -

There’s something else moving in the seasung, midnight skies of Jack’s eyes and -

He taps the text-input box. A small touchpad keyboard appears, and Gabriel solidifies his resolve from smoke into obsidian.

And he taps out:

[Silvio]

He quickly glances to the directors’ table, where Guerra is sitting, having his late dinner, reading his datapad.

...If this password is correct -

It would be unwise to try and log in if the activities of a single account are actually synchronized.

Gabriel watches him for a moment, before he sees Guerra look up as Tran approaches the table.

Guerra sets down his datapad

And Gabriel hits the arrow button on his.
Gabriel holds his breath as the datapad thinks for a second, before it -

*Ding.*

A green checkmark appears.

And the datapad logs into Guerra’s profile.

Before he even has time to process anything, Gabriel immediately opens the start menu and logs back out, pulse thundering with a reckless, rough, raw-edged excitement as -

*It worked* -

He glances up just in time to see Tran settle into his seat at the directors table, and Guerra returns his attention to his datapad -

Just as Gabriel’s returns to the [Enter Username] screen.

Gabriel is breathless as the realization sinks in.

*It worked.*

He has the keys to gain access into the personal computer of the most dangerous - and most secretive - director of the Soldier Enhancement Program.

Gabriel stares in stunned silence at the blank [Enter Username] screen, before

He grins.

*Who’d have thunk,* Gabriel thinks, as he writes down “6272” and “Forest for the trees” -

*You still have a heart, Guerra.*

---------

76: What do you think I see?

October 2, 2037: 5:37 p.m. - The Morrison household, south of Bloomington, Indiana

( *Don’t go inside.* )

Jack sighs heavily, his breath long and hollow yet somehow weighted with a strange worth.

Coming home after cross-country practice always feels this way.

( *Don’t go in the house.* )

He loves the freedom of running, loves the feeling of sprinting, then pacing, then jogging, then pacing again, back into a sprint, counting steps and meters and feet. He loves the wind across his skin and the sunshine in his hair, running perfect laps around the high school, feeling like he could escape, feeling like he could flee this strange, wilting oppression, a suffocation that feels like when the corn doesn’t grow quite right, an eerie sensation of standing alone in the vastness.
But when he runs

When he runs

The world opens up before him.

The sky unfolds in the summer - bright, endless blues - and the trees hue into red and gold and amber in the fall. The roads are rolling and wide, routes to elsewhere, routes to a place he does not know, but a place that calls to him, whispering in tilting, smug teases through the sunbeams:

“Come chase me, come chase me, run run run -”

As he races the sunlight into oil-painted colors of the sunset, blood red dripping into rose pink, burnished gold into bronze-flaked orange, honey amber into velvety purple.

The sun stays in the sky fewer and fewer hours, but still he chases it, chases it to wherever it goes, to a place he does not yet know -

But here

( Don’t go inside. )

In the house where darkness clings to white-washed walls and creaking oak boards, tall and narrow and far, far too small for his awkward growth spurts and quick feet, surrounded by the corn stalks that are dried and dying, by the pumpkin patches with their clinging vines and creeping tendrils, by the apple trees swelling with red and gold and amber tinted fruits, engulfed in a slowly sweeping ache of emptiness

Here

Jack heaves a long, lonesome sigh.

Here

( Don’t go inside. )

There are only clinging shadows that hide the hues of the autumn sun.

The good thing is that on weekends, his mother makes pies and cornbread, the smell of sweet, melting butter and baking apple and sugar-spiced cinnamon wafting through the house, clinging to the oil-darkened wood, giving it a cosier, welcoming feel on slow Saturday mornings, the autumn sun greeting Jack through his southeastern window, teasing him with soft, crisp sunbeams. He’ll hear a baseball or football game in muffled announcer voices through the walls and wood, his father’s stern, low voice rumbling alongside until his mother laughs at something ridiculous. He’ll hammer out his homework as fast as he can and then jump into a video game, or on track meet days, he’ll rise early, well before the sunrise, hop in a car with his friends and head to the competition.

On those days, he gets to watch the sunrise, slow and serene, soft shades of wine reds and lace pinks, pale golds and sweet oranges, crystalline ambers and bursting lilacs, grow and hem and haw in the east.

But here

On days after tasting the sweet tang of freedom in the crisp autumn air and spiced sunbeams

Jack hates coming home to an empty, stark house.
So much fucking homework to do, he sighs to himself, tucking his running cleats onto the shoe rack. Jack hefts his backpack and gym bag a little higher, heading down the first floor hallway to the main living room and kitchen area - large, open rooms that let in the last of the dying sunlight through their south-facing windows. He dumps his bags onto the floor by the kitchen table, before entering the actual kitchen proper. Marianne Morrison maintains it as well as she can, but time wears on the edges of it: the tile of the counters is cracked and chipped in many small places, the cream-yellow paint faded into a strange off-tan instead, the wooden floorboards oddly stained in weird spots from food and smoke and oils over the decades.

Jack opens the fridge, reaching for the milk when his exhausted, overrun mind finally clues in that the tv in the next room is producing soft, murmuring chatter sounds. The seventeen-year-old pauses, scowling slightly as he listens, his hands grabbing the gallon. He closes the door and shuffles over to the cup and mug cupboard, calling out in slow, low tones - his voice never seems to stop cracking these days - “Peter? Is that you?”

Only the muffled sounds of the television program reach his ears.

Jack snorts, pouring himself a tall glass of milk. As he chugs the cold, chilled silky liquid, he shifts his eyes to the electronic clock on the microwave...and frowns. Jack sets the cup back down, scowling deeply now as he grumbles out, “Peter, you have a shift at six, right? What are you doing here?”

Still nothing but some sort of news anchor reading off a report about traffic.

Jack outright glares now, moving to rinse his cup off in the sink. He sets it to the side, where he can grab it again for dinner in an hour and a half, and returns the gallon to the fridge. After that, rather than settle in and turn out the first half of his homework as he usually does, Jack strides right past the table, around the half-wall into the living room and -

Lo and behold, Peter’s limp, relaxed body is sprawled across the couch, the tv still on the 5 o’clock news, several beer bottles sitting on the coffee table, along with -

“Is that a fucking needle?” Jack snarls, storming right up to the couch, his blue eyes lasering down on the clear plastic syringe, spoon and lighter still sitting beside it. Jack feels a bitter, hateful, heartbreaking fury rise in his chest and he whips around, snapping viciously, “Peter, what the actual fuck - I knew you were up to shady shit, but Jesus fucking Christ, what the fuck -”

The words die a vicious, contorted death in Jack’s throat as he turns to the couch.

The only sounds are the distant, murky words of the new anchor, drifting out to him like he’s underwater as -

“Traffic is still backed up on Highway 37 south - we’re getting reports that there’s an accident in the right lane just past the I-69 exchange -”

Peter’s limp, relaxed body is lying sprawled across the couch, the tv still on the 5 o’clock news, several beer bottles and a semi-charred spoon sitting on the coffee table.
The sunlight that drifts in through the south-facing windows is dying, the light is long and drawn,
dipping behind trees in the distance.

The corn maze outside is dying, the dried stalks are turning to rot as chilled air stills and stagnates
around it.

Peter’s gold-blonde hair is still fluffed at awkward angles, that cowlick that both brothers share still
sticking up at a 90 degree angle, refusing to lie flat, just as Jack’s never does.

( Wake up. )

The house is tall and narrow and oppressive, suffocating Jack’s thoughts as the air settles in his chest
and the words die a horrific, agonized death in his throat.

“There’s slowdown on West Bloomfield Road heading east into downtown -”

Peter’s eyes are half-lidded, a small peek of blue beneath long, drawn shadows that cling to his
eyelids, that swallow the hollows of his eyes.

The air stills and stagnates in the room.

( Wake up - )

The sunlight dies to the edges of the horizon, leaving only gasping, choking sunbeams in the filtered
windows.

The tv continues to drone on with a strange hum and whine that needles in Jack’s brain.

“Looking at the weather tomorrow, we’re going to see some more cooldown -”

Peter’s chest is not moving.

“...Peter?”

All that answers him

Is the sound of the weatherman saying in a false, cheerful tone:

“But on the weekend we should have more sunshine, just in time to start taking the kids out to the
pumpkin patches!”

And then Jack is rushing to him, and there’s sound - a sound cracking and breaking at the edges -
bursting through the still, stagnating air and -

“PETER -”

Jack is on his knees next to him, grabbing at his body, shaking him hard, pulling at his face, words
are ripping from his throat in low, aching sobs, his mind is submerged, the sun is dying, the house is
tall and narrow and oppressive, there’s nothing here but shadows and a news anchor rambling on
with fake happiness in the background and -

“Peter, Peter, wake up, c’mon, look at me, PETER -”

Jack is running.

Jack is running back to the kitchen table, his socks skidding and slipping on the decades-old
hardwood, nearly falling as he scrambles for his backpack, digging for his cell phone, his thoughts are running running running, bleeding through his mind as he-

9-1-1 or Mom, 9-1-1 or Mom, fuck fuck fuck, Peter shit, fuck, Mom -

His fingers are already tapping Marianne’s cell phone contact listing-

Shit no wait 9-1-1 -

“Jack?”

Marianne’s soothing if confused voice hits him like a wave, and he’s choking on still, stagnant air as the words claw up his throat, coughing and cracking, “Mom, Mom, Mom - Peter, oh fuck Mom, Peter -”

“Jack? Jack, what’s wrong? Jack, you need to calm down -”

Jack is looking back in the living room, looking at the limp body, only -

There is a man standing in the living room.

Before Jack can even scream, the man - dressed in tactical gear, eyes deeper and more encompassing than an abyss - smiles at him: an uncanny, eerie smirk that drip drip drips up into Jack’s spine and -

“Where was he when you needed him, Jack?” Guerra asks him -

And Jack nearly chokes on the pain fresh and hoarse in this throat -

(WAKE UP -)

Jack wakes up -

Screaming
Screaming
Screaming -

---

(Wednesday, February 20, 2047: 0003 hours - Cell 5)

Jack is suddenly and so violently jolted awake that it takes him several long seconds to realize

He’s not actually screaming.

He lies, still and shuddering, chest heaving, as the others groan and mutter in frustrated exhaustion around him as the lights scream back into existence and the audio blindly sears into their eardrums, so horrifically overwhelming at forty hours in that it actually makes Jack want to vomit whatever remains in his stomach of the cold, oily bits of dinner Adrien and Mari and Lucas made him eat.

Jack twists himself from his side to his back, the ache on his one left shoulder settling into his neck and spine, and he stares up at the dull, boring concrete ceiling.

…

It’s not fair, Jack thinks -
The house empty and shadowed - 
Peter’s body on the couch - 
Guerra’s smile etched into his nightmares - 
And again:

It’s not fair, Jack thinks fiercely, furiously, jabbing at his own cold, oily brain slicked on the inside with earworms and gnawed to the core by sleep deprivation:

It’s not fair to blame Gabriel for that.

That was years ago.

Gabriel had nothing to do with that.

Jack forces himself to sit up, the motion and lights nearly destroying his sense of movement. After a pause to let his vertigo fade, he starts to crawl-climb over Adrien -

“Jack, what the fuck-” his roommate starts to snap, but Jack passes over him to outside the group pile, nearly flopping himself on the dull, boring, coarse-grained concrete floor from the effort.

“...Jack?” Adrien asks with more concern, “Dude, you okay?”

Jack presses his forehead to the concrete, relishing how cold it is against his feverish brain.

An image of Gabriel alone under snowcovered, stardusted night, galaxies lost in his eyes -

“...Jack, you’re worrying me,” Adrien murmurs to him as someone else asks quietly, “What’s he doing -?”

“...All that we see or seem -”

The murmuring stops as

Jack’s voice hums

Broken and hoarse

Yet truth undeniable for him

Here

Now

Rise below the vision-shattering screaming and the ear-splitting lights, like an undercurrent beneath the earth:

“- Is but a dream within a dream.”

It’s not fair, Jack thinks, as he opens his eyes again and -

Shifts to his knees, palms flat against the coarse grain of the concrete.

Blame him for whatever Holmesian whim he has now -
But it’s not fair to blame Gabriel for my nightmares.

Jack scowls, deciding with sleep-deprived clarity, And if all I have are nightmares -

I’d rather not sleep at all.

And he steadies himself on his hands and feet, in his ready position

And begins to do some push ups

Resisting himself more than anything else.

( The first virtue in a soldier is endurance. )

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24: Resistance, Day 3 - Well, look down yonder, Gabriel

Wednesday, February 20, 2047: 0020 hours - Room 23-24, main SEP facility

If Gabriel has timed it well -

Guerra should be entering the deepest part of his non-REM sleep cycle right about now.

…

That is, admittedly -

A little creepy for Gabriel to know.

But it was imperative to wait, Gabriel thinks, lying on his back in his bed, his eyes adjusted to the darkness of their room, his left wrist vibrating from the alarm he set on the monitor - just to be safe.

Not that it really mattered - Gabriel wouldn’t have been able to sleep it he had tried.

He lazily moves his right hand to switch the alarm off, pausing to listen. In the velvet darkness, there is only Felix’s soft breathing from the other bed - in and out, even and steady.

He too is probably at or entering his REM sleep.

...Tracking his roommate’s sleep had been easy - Gabriel had figured it out down to the near minute within the first week, allowing him to determine the best times to slip in and out of their room without Felix even noticing the like, two or three times Gabriel nearly tripped over his own boots on his way out.

But Guerra?

It was like the man was a machine.

The CIA agent was typically awake from 0400 to 0430, if not the occasional 0330 hours, just going all day, doing...whatever he does, usually on two, two and half meals a day, staying up until 2230 or 2300 hours and then finally sleeping -

Seemingly only because he biologically has to.
What crazy ass kinda juice is he on, Gabriel thinks, leaning over and pulling his datapad off his desk. Gabriel had made a few “not so subtle” trips to the bathroom at the end of the directors hall just to confirm that Guerra was, in fact, in his room, and not like, out and about doing weird CIA agent bs. When he had finally felt comfortable that Guerra had retired to sleep, Gabriel had started his sleep cycle estimate clock.

He turns the datapad on, dimming the light to “night mode” so he doesn’t accidentally disturb Felix. As the little off-brand logo appears, Gabriel exhales slowly, his eyes focusing -

His thoughts as sharp as a dagger.

...He’s had several hours to think about this.

Because this -

This -

Is the core component of his plan.

Truth be told -

He never expected to actually get this far.

The biggest gamble of his plan had banked on Guerra’s datapad passcode being the same as his room passcode - which it was. The unexpected hurdle (which really shouldn’t have been all that unexpected, to be honest) was Guerra also using a password, but Gabriel had cracked that easily (that part had been the unexpected part).

But now that he’s here

Gabriel has had to think about how he actually wants to implement the final step of his plan.

He logs in as Guerra:

[Enter Username]: [Guerra.Marc]
[Enter PIN]: [6272]
[Enter Password]: [Silvio]

And exhales a heavy, sharp sigh as Guerra’s profile loads.

The program icons on the touchscreen are largely the same as his own - document processor, spreadsheet maker, Network Modeler, an email app, typical stuff - but there are several folder icons clustered together in a neat little corner.

Several names immediately stand out to Gabriel:

Folders like [SEP Budgets], [SEP SERE Training Schedule], [SEP Full Program Schedule], [MQ-20 Hive Drone Program], [Pulse Prototype Weapons], [SEP Candidate Information], [SEP Biotic Modification Data - Technical], and god damn -

There’s too many to focus on, each one unnervingly tantalizing to rip open and consume.

Gabriel tears his eyes away from the folders to roam over the other apps because he has decided.

He cannot linger, not in the most dangerous “space” in this building.
He knows what he needs, but uh -

He’s not exactly sure what he’s looking for.

But he knows it exists.

Because the

Lights

Computers

Electronic equipment

Kitchen equipment

Water supply and filter systems

Heating

Outlets

And

Doors

All run automatically.

Too much of the base runs on automated actions, Gabriel thinks as he opens the Application List section, If the military didn’t have some way to control that - in the event of an emergency here, or an outside attack - it would be too easy to get trapped here or break in via the system’s controls.

It would be too obvious if it was all controlled via the latest “Smart Home Systems” app or whatever.

But Gabriel does not doubt for a second that the US military and Central Intelligence Agency have some sort of terrible knock off

Like a “Smart Secret Base Systems” app.

His final step in this hopefully foolish and foolishly hopeful plan:

Get access to that.

...He’s had several hours to plan this, and he figures access to the system must work one of two ways: either the app itself lists users who have permission to modify the base systems, or users are granted access to the app like a regular program or setting.

But there’s a pretty clear and obvious catch:

He cannot list himself.

That would be borderline suicidal -

Because Guerra would absolutely kill him if he found out.

And Guerra is going to find out.
So what that really means is that Gabriel needs to create a new account to either put “that account” on the approved users list, or transfer the app files and base system network to. And since there’s no way in Hell a single account will be safe, Gabriel very likely needs to make several shell accounts, even though it’s pretty goddamn likely that Guerra will just wipe them all out, Gabriel thinks as he taps Settings.

Because searching the Settings seems like a sensible thing to do when you’re conducting identity theft and trying to gain stealthy control of a top secret, not totally ethical military program.

And now that Gabriel is in the process of taking control -

Or at least making a copy of the map that shows the route to the hidden treasure -

He’s not about to relinquish that.

I know you’re hiding shit from us, Guerra, Gabriel thinks, his thoughts cutting like an obsidian dagger, I mean, I knew you were from the get-go, but there’s been some odd shit popping up in my interviews -

And if you’re going to come at me for thinking with my heart and not my head, maybe you shouldn’t make your password so obvious.

And

In the back of Gabriel’s mind

The image of Jack’s eyes - deeper than the sea, denser than the dusk of midnight - staring up at him, heartbroken and hurt and undercurrented with something else

Rises and -

...If you have hurt his spirit, Gabriel whispers, thoughts traced with smoke-spun darkness -

I will ruin you.

The window for [Settings] pops up with stuff like [System], [Display], [Network], [Updates], [Applications], [Accounts] -

Gabriel immediately taps [Accounts].

The window opens up new options, such as [Current User Account Settings], [Sync Multiple Accounts], [Networked Accounts] -

Gabriel taps [Networked Accounts].

And

Sure enough

A new sub-window opens

Displaying a descending network tree labeled “Accounts on this network.”

Gabriel inhales steeply because -
This.

This is it.

The tree has multiple tiers to it, with each row being labeled something related to the users’ level of network-operating permissions. The lowest tier is labeled “Basic interfacing/No administrative permissions” and located there is a sub-group titled “Candidate Users”. The label for the second lowest tier is “Moderate interfacing/Moderate administrative permissions” and the sub-group included there is called “Approved Non-candidate Users”.

The label for the middle tier is “High interfacing/High administrative permissions” and the sub-group is a very simple, very straightforward “Director Users”.

But the one at the top is very plainly, very calmly labeled:

“Account System Administrator”

And there is only one member contained there:

A user labeled only as

[Operative.Sigma].

Gabriel scowls so hard he almost gives himself a headache.

...What the actual fuck, he thinks, tapping on it, Is this a terrible spy thriller - how does the CIA not see how ridiculous this looks -

The user profile opens and -

It’s literally just

[Account Name]: [Operative.Sigma]

[User Name]: [Guerra.Marc]

[Account Permissions Level]: [System Administrator]

Guerra’s main profile.

Gabriel thinks his expression falls into a sarcastic deadpan so fast he ruins all the nerves in his face.

...Sick codename, bro, he thinks tauntingly, as he scrolls down to the following options:

[Change Account Settings], [Add a New Account], [Change Another Account], [Change System Network Settings].

...

There is

Way too much power here for him.

An infinite number of moves to make.

He won’t lie -
The petty, spiteful, salt mined part of Gabriel is tempted to make a massive show of it, kick Guerra off his system admin level just to prove a point, alter the entire network just to be an asshole, bump his own account up just because he can.

But he won’t.

He didn’t get this far with this borderline insane plan just to blow it on whatever petty spite runs in his veins (even if it is a salt mine in there).

He’s here -

*No matter where, no matter when, no matter how much or how little light there is*

*Jack’s eyes are so blue.*

- To test the waters.

So Gabriel taps [Add a New Account].

A basic form appears, but the very first thing he does is look for the option labeled “Select System Permissions.” In the drop-down list that unfolds, Gabriel selects:

“Account System Administrator”

And he *grins.*

He needed power

And so he will unlock it from where it is contained

Behind passcodes, PINs, and passwords.

He fills out the rest of the form:

[Account Name]: [New.Admin]

[User Name]: [New.Admin]

[Select Systems Permission]: Account System Administrator

[Select Classified Access Level]: Top Secret Clearance

[Select Group Association]: Account System Administrator

At the option of “Create new account PIN” Gabriel pauses, and considers:

*I need a new PIN that can’t be cracked just by guesswork…*

And then Gabriel scowls, adding self-deprecatingly:

*And can’t be traced to my dumb ass.*

He thinks for a moment, eyes tracing over the “Create new account password” below it, contemplating, *The best passwords are either random words or non-random words grouped together irregularly …*

And then he decides
(Because he is a romantic asshole)

(And he has an *undying* flair for the dramatic)

[Create new account PIN]: 6275

("Mask")

[Create new account password]: untenantedtangiblethiefnight

("...Untenanted by any tangible form.

("And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death.

("He had come like a thief in the night.

He sits up in bed, resting his back against the wall to his right. It’s a little awkward, but he pulls out his notebook from his sweatpants pocket, flips to a blank page, and writes under the dull, yellowish lighting of the night-mode datapad:

“Mask - untenanted by any tangible form...had come like a thief in the night.”

Leaving behind the (incorrect) accent markers on the first vowels so he knows which words he used for the password.

He scrolls to the bottom, where he taps the [Proceed] button. A new window pops up with the following instructions:

“In order to make an account at the [Account System Administrator] level, enter the following information:"

He smirks and enters:

[Enter PIN]: 6272

[Enter Password]: Silvio

And taps the button.

A green checkmark appears, and the next window prompt appears:

“To assist with easier transferring, would you like to copy another account to [New.Admin]? Select options below:"

Gabriel reads the options of:

[Yes: Duplicate all programs, applications, data, and files from:]

[Yes: Duplicate only programs and applications from:]

[Yes: Duplicate only files from:]

[No: I will install programs, applications, and files myself.]

…

*Well, Gabriel thinks with a mischievous, liquid smoke grin, eyes alighting on the first one, Isn’t that*
convenient.

He selects it, and from another drop down list, he selects [Operative.Sigma] so that the full option reads:

[Yes: Duplicate all programs, applications, data, and files from:] [Operative.Sigma].

The window prompts with:

“To confirm, please re-enter the following:”

And Gabriel easily inputs:

[Enter PIN]: 6272

[Enter Password]: Silvio

Another green checkmark appears, and the window changes text to:

“Thank you. New account creation and full duplication process beginning. During this process, you will not be able to access programs or files. This may take some time and will require a reset upon completion.”

The progress bar gives him an estimate of “15 minutes.”

He settles back against the wall, and begins to write down other PIN and password combinations he’ll use.

---

The moment the process is completed, his datapad automatically restarts, and Gabriel logs in as:

[Enter Username:] [New.Admin]

[Enter PIN]: 6275

[Enter Password]: untenantedtangiblethiefnight

He taps the arrow, a green checkmark appears and -

Gabriel *smirks*, face framed by the softly gilded glow of the datapad.

*You did what you could to keep me out,* he thinks, as he opens up the [Settings] to start the process again -

*But no matter where you hide the keys*

*Kings and thieves and the Red Death always find their way into a kingdom.*

---

It has been about

One hour

Since he finished making the shell accounts
And Gabriel is now convinced:

Guerra will not kill him when he finds out about this -

_and Guerra is going to find out -_

No, Guerra is going to _kick his ass, flay him alive, and hang him up by his hoodie in the mess hall_ as an example to the others.

...

There are

_No words_

To describe the level of how _fucked_ Gabriel is because of this.

_I'm going to die_, Gabriel thinks, with a tone that is less adrenaline-rushed panicky and more hopeless resignation of the truth, _I am going to get broken in half by Guerra and then I am going to die tomorrow, holy fuck_ -

He’s still sitting with his back against the concrete wall, only halfway through making the shell accounts, he had wised up and stuffed his pillow behind him and wrapped himself in his comforter to keep warm. Because he didn’t do any file transfers, it only took him about fifteen minutes to make six extra shell accounts - one “New.Director”, one “New.Noncandidate”, and then four trainer-soldier accounts with fake names. And then for the last hour, he’s been on the “New.Admin” account -

Reading different SEP files.

And that was when the program had gone from something out of a clichéd comic book

Skipped right past the “oh shit, a _real life_ spy thriller conspiracy mystery” genre

And _plummeted_ feetfirst into the unholy abyss of genuine

Unknownable

Untenanted

Intangible

_Horror._

...It had started out like reading that One Online Database of X-Files or Twilight Zone styled mini horror and horror-comedy stories (which oddly enough is only one letter removed from “SEP”): lots of oddball reports and memos from Guerra’s boss in the CIA, General Flores, Commander Luna - a lot of administrative stuff. Gabriel had deliberately started with the shallowest, most immediately recognizable level of information, just to make sure he knew all the basics and there were no, like, “secret directors” he wasn’t aware of (there weren’t, although a few documents referred to Guerra’s Special Operations boss, or Flores’ sub-commanders on the different American-Omnic fronts, or even a 12K Army-certified plumber (which Gabriel had smirked over)). He had then skimmed through the candidate profiles, just checking basic info because he admittedly felt _a little weird _reading about, like, Adrien’s high school or Mary’s last mission or the time Michael Tsang got food poisoning in Lijiang -
Or Jack’s brother’s obituary.

...He had lingered over that one longer than he should have, but the image of twenty-one year old Peter Morrison in Jack’s digital file had made Gabriel pause, notice the small differences: Peter was rounder at the edges of his face than Jack, but both brothers had the same high, angular cheekbones, the strong jaw, the same slightly crooked smile, similar thickness to their blonde hair -

But Peter’s eyes had been lighter than Jack’s - a marbled grey-blue compared to Jack’s deeper sea blue.

And looking over the date of it, the thought had murmured in Gabriel’s head:

*Only seventeen.*

...Gabriel had forced himself to move on.

He had looked through the files on the new plasma and fusion weapons - even pulled up some cool 3D rendered models, spun them around in the app, read the statistics and the science for them. A lot of it was difficult to process at two in the morning on effectively no sleep, but some of those “contained core temperatures” were incredibly, inhumanly high - the experimental shotguns were listed as using pellet shots composed of “plasma gasification slag” that “operated at a significantly shorter range” than a standard assault shotgun (especially one shooting semi-explosive grenade “frag” shells), but burned at absurd temperatures, something like three to four- thousand degrees Fahrenheit, designed to literally melt Omnic cores at sub-20-meter ranges. And that didn’t even cover the sheer surrealism of the pulse rifles and heavy pulse rifles, which basically shot literal “lightning in a bottle” sized blasts of atmosphere-boiling hydrogen plasma for 25 to 40 meters.

And that -

*That -*

Was when a lot of the stuff about requiring “genetically modified, phenotypically ‘enhanced’” supersoldiers began to make sense.

Gabriel had known a lot of the SEP “enhancement” nonsense was a fancy way of making human soldiers capable of using Omnic-destroying weaponry at a level far higher than normal -

But shooting molten bits of plasma slag shots from a frag shot?

At 3000° F?

The mere heat of handling the gun would burn the air around it, let alone any person holding it, and the force of shooting an explosive shell that burst plasma tungsten slag at an “idealized” sub-20 meter range?

The shooter would be lucky to have skin and intact metacarpals after that.

...Unless, of course -

The military removed the need for “luck” -

And replaced it with “enhancements.”

*I still stand by what I told Jack,* Gabriel had thought fiercely - but his fierceness had been tempered by quiet contemplation too. *If the enhancements keep us alive through the literal robot apocalypse,*
then being the handler of the U.S. military’s new toys for a few years is a deal we have to be willing to make.

...That hadn’t made the numbers any easier to process, though.

And the thought of his friends handling and wielding those weapons had - admittedly - been quietly unnerving.

But when he had finally tapped on the one that had been the most intriguing -

[SEP Biotic Modification Data - Technical] -

The “plot” had rapidly shifted from “standard military-industrial complex conspiracy”

To eldritch horror.

And the name of the folder had not lied - the contents were incredibly technical, with the vast majority of it well-beyond Gabriel’s pretty damn solid combat medicine knowledge. The sub-folders from the main folder had stuff that initially seemed straightforward, like Gabriel pretty quickly found the one about “correcting” the genetic-phenotypic expression of allergic diseases, but even that one had shortly lost him in long rambling papers and studies on specific, individualized genes, phenotype expression patterns, environmental contributing factors, lab research in mice and then some (probably really unethical) primate testing (one of the papers even mentioned the great ape group in the Lucheng-sponsorded Horizon Lunar Colony, which seemed shady as all hell considering Lucheng was a god damn “telecommunications” and “high atmosphere” research company).

Other sub-folders included stuff like adjusting for genetic inheritance of different health issues - stuff as widely varying as the development of arthritis, mental health disorders, vision deterioration, telomere-shortening with aging, even something claiming to “account for” the eventual expression of different types of cancer. Again, almost all of them followed similar patterns: papers about hypotheses, isolated cell research, then animal trials, then primate trials, and on and on.

And those were just the sub-folders with the… “humanitarian” medical aspects of the enhancements - the sides of the serums that could have vast-reaching health benefits for human populations the world over.

Because the other half of the sub-folders switched to the more…

“Warlike”

Developments that were intended to express themselves in the candidates - to keep them operating in a “heightened energy and biochemical activity state, thus allowing them to fight for longer, more sustained periods of time while requiring less energy supplementation through water, food, and sleep.”

Again, a lot of highly technical research on improving the biochemical properties of calcium deposits in bone tissue or muscle cell structure, improving the efficiency of energy production and consumption on a cellular and tissue level, improving the responses and processes of glial cells and neural connectivities -

Inserting whole genetic complexes that resulted in human cells producing brand new enzymes, proteins, and sugars -

Originally found in “nonhuman” sources -
Synthesized to “probably work” with human DNA-RNA-protein processes -

Although (and this was the main takeaway Gabriel got from *those* research papers) -

The vast majority of cell, tissue, and animal trials had *not* been successful for many of these.

*Seems pretty shady to jump straight to human trials when the other trials struggled,* Gabriel had thought darkly, *But it’s not like the CIA hasn’t had a history of doing that, so I’m really not *that* surprised.*

But when he had tapped on the [Enhancements: Biochemical Healing and Repair Processes] folder…

...Gabriel had *not* been ready.

{*(Objectives: Enhance and improve the human body’s biochemical healing and repair processes on all levels - molecular, cellular, nanotissue, tissue, organ, and macroscopic - through means of renewed physiological expression of improved innate-human immune proteins and cells, and the new RNA production of non-human enzymes to produce proteins and sugars developed from synthesized gene implementation.)*}

Gabriel had *not* been ready for the plot twist.

The internal organization of the folder had looked similar to the others: a folder for research papers, a folder for the actual DNA transcripts, a folder for trial results, a folder for memos and correspondences on the subject matter -

Except -

Gabriel had frowned -

There had been a new folder unlike the others:

[Project Morena].

*...Morena?* Gabriel had wondered skeptically as he had opened the folder, *Guerra, you couldn’t think of a better name for *whatever* this sub-project is…*

But he had paused - and then scowled in confusion - when half of the sub-folders contained in it had loaded in...Cyrillic?

*Not Spanish?* Gabriel had thought quietly as he had started opening folders

And had started reading.

...And now here he was -

About fifteen minutes into the “Project Morena” sub-folders

And Gabriel *knows* that he is *going* to die, because Guerra will *not* let him see the light of day for this.

Gabriel glances back down at the file he has open - a copy of a messenger transcript from a month ago between someone called “Δ” and what appears to be Guerra, only he used a symbol of “Σ” (or at least that was his “username” in this...messaging program) - and rereads the segment he is on, which is just after a
Surreal
Impossible

_Horrifying_ video sent by [Δ]:

[Σ]: …

[Σ]: ...holy shit

[Δ]: you don’t believe me

[Σ]: ...you can understand why I’m skeptical at least

[Δ]: Marc, for fuck’s sake

[Σ]: you expect me to believe that a Russian supersoldier candidate in a secret base in Siberia was critically injured during training, was rushed to your base’s medical ward, lost her pulse for about ten seconds, and then somehow “revived” herself by _what_

[Σ]: draining the energy from four doctors around her?

[Δ]: there’s fucking _video proof_ of this happening - from my own _goddamn secret body cam_

[Δ]: and you think I’m somehow _making this up_??

[Σ]: footage is easily faked and _she wasn’t even legally dead_

[Δ]: _why_ would I lie to you about this??

[Σ]: seriously, Irina? Seriously? We all remember that you had major objections to our very own enhancement program, and, quite frankly, Alpha is pretty strongly convinced that you’ve been compromised

[Δ]: _compromised_??

[Σ]: don’t shoot the messenger, please

[Δ]: COMPROMISED, MARC

[Σ]: …

[Δ]: THIS IS ABOVE BULLSHIT WARTIME POLITICS, MARC

[Σ]: …

[Δ]: ...look, I am... _begging_ you

[Δ]: I _need_ you to take this as true for

[Δ]: for a minute

[Δ]: please

[Σ]: alright, explain it
[Δ]: ...you know I can’t do that

[Σ]: you know that wasn’t what I meant, Irina

[Δ]: …

[Σ]: okay, it looks like this has you really shaken up, just walk me through the events

[Δ]: after that

[Δ]: they got her to calm down but they can’t

[Δ]: they don’t have an explanation for what happened, or for her, or for any of it

[Δ]: they’ve basically locked her in a bomb-proof room

[Δ]: only the doctors and a few of the upper-level GRU agents - we’re talking like, like national-level people here, Marc, people I wouldn’t put myself in the same room with, people who could order nukes on Krasnoyarsk with a single head nod

[Δ]: only those people have contact with her

[Δ]: but that hasn’t stopped the panic

[Δ]: the fear in the Russian Supersoldier Program is fucking tangible, Marc

[Δ]: four trainers and two of the geneticists tried to escape - they’re in the morgue now

[Σ]: holy shit

[Δ]: three of the remaining forty supersoldiers have killed themselves

[Σ]: what the hell

[Δ]: they’ve locked up all the weapons and consigned the supersoldiers to their rooms - everyone, even my group of trainers, are on strict monitoring

[Δ]: some people

[...] 

[Δ]: sorry I’m trying to

[...] 

[Δ]: translate this

[Δ]: some people think she’s a monster

[Δ]: other people think she’s “ascended” if you get me

[Δ]: a lot of the supersoldiers are calling her Марена

[Δ]: “Madnera,” or Morana/Morena

[Σ]: I don’t recognize it
Now that Gabriel has a little more “context”, he scrolls back up to the video file in the transcript. He’s already watched it like, three or four times, but the…

The bizarre impossibility of it had shocked him the first time, then - much like Guerra’s reaction - had left him confused, skeptical, and suspicious.

With more info from “Irina” - who appears to be another CIA SAD agent undercover in the Russian supersoldier program, and who appears to have been the one to have actually recorded this... footage “from (her) own body cam” -

Gabriel adjusts his earbuds again, and then taps play.

Again.

The video starts off in a garbled mess of sounds and visuals - people shouting in panicky, horrified Russian, bright lights whipping by in a distorted rush before it becomes clearer that the camera-holder - Irina - is running down a long, well-lit hallway (not unlike the hallways in the SEP facility, actually). It’s taken Gabriel a few rewatches to figure out how many people are with her, since at this point, she only briefly turns to look at the clustered group of figures moving with her:

There are about two people in white doctor coats, four people in light blue scrubs, and another two people in camo tactical gear (again, not unlike how the medics and trainers in SEP dress) - Irina’s own outfit (only briefly visible when her arms are in frame) is a camo jacket of some sort (which matches with her statement about infiltrating as a trainer in the Russian supersoldier program, Gabriel thinks).

And all of these people are partially carrying a limp body among them.

The body has short, dark hair - not a true crew cut, but a short, disheveled mohawk or something - and they’re also dressed in camo tactical gear. Their head lolls with each rushing bounce of the group, rocking back and forth disorientedly, and Gabriel catches a glimpse of their face - her face - only once or twice in this mass of movement down the hallway.

Her face is pale, unnaturally so, rapidly looking more and more translucent.

...He’s seen this before.

She’s bleeding out.

Her eyes - he cannot exactly catch the color, maybe a greyish-green - roll with her head, and she’s quickly losing consciousness. Deep, vibrant red lines of blood are dripping out of the left corner of her mouth and her left nostril.

...This part of the video - the mad, shouting run down the hallway, the supersoldier steadily dying in the group’s arms -

Takes only ten seconds.

The group turns to the right, half of them nearly tripping, and skid to a door. Someone hits a button,
it slides open, and they all jostle inside. There’s only a quick glimpse of bright lights, more loud orders and shouting, the sound of several things thudding, and then -

Irina turns and rushes back out the door, along with the other two trainers.

There’s heaving breath out in the hallway, a short exchange of words, and then Irina moves, turning towards an internal window, which allows her (and presumably the other trainers) to see inside the room.

It’s an operating room, with the supersoldier now laid out on the table, her chest rising and falling erratically.

Gabriel scowls as the three (or apparently four) doctors and two assistants immediately busy themselves, each of them working on frantic autopilot: one is hooking up the supersoldier’s arm to the biometric readers (EKG monitor, pulse and blood pressure monitor, some sort of “nanobot count” display, an oxygen percentage monitor), another is slipping an oxygen mask over the supersoldier’s face, another is already pulling up her sleeve and slipping an IV drip needle into her left arm (with the IV tube feeding from a blood supply, a biotic nanobot container, and the “nanobot material packet” - a specialized mix of additional molecules the nanobots will use to help facilitate the repair process - proteins, platelets, synthetic molecular fibers to construct tiny internal stitches, the usual) -

Another person is ripping her camo jacket open as yet another person preps an ultrasound wand.

And, lastly -

The final person in the room is moving over a tray of sterilized surgical equipment.

The doctor who opened her jacket grabs scissors and cuts her undershirt open, leaving her abdomen bare - she’s incredibly fit, as expected, but -

There’s no external wound.

The walls prevent clear audio from reaching Irina’s cam, but the window lets out a few of the muffled shouting and commands coming from the lead doctor - the one who had opened up her clothes. She makes a few quick touches across the supersoldier’s stomach and gut area, before instructing something to the ultrasound tech. Like a well-oiled machine, the lead doctor steps off to the side as the ultrasound tech moves in, rolling the wand over the area she pointed to.

Off to the side, the assistant reading the monitors is saying something, as the surgical assistant fits a hairnet and face mask over the lead doctor’s face -

The numbers on the pulse and pressure monitor are plummeting.

Outside, one of the trainers mumbles something in Russian, but Gabriel doesn’t need to know the language to know what he says:

“She’s not going to make it.”

The lead doctor shouts something to the technician who had hooked up the IV, and he bolts to the refrigerated storage container, pulling out more of the nanobot containers -

The surgical assistant slots gloves on the lead doctor’s hands, and the lead doctor practically dives back to the table, asking something to the ultrasound tech -

But he’s shaking his head in a distraught motion
And Gabriel knows.

*He can’t find the internal bleeding.*

One of the trainers asks something in a low, terrified murmur, and Irina seems to respond, but outside, they are effectively useless. There’s the sound of one of the other trainers striding off.

Inside the operating room, the lead doctor looks up at Irina and the remaining trainer, and shakes her head. Even so, she reaches for the surgical knife but -

The technician watching the monitors shouts something -

The EKG is wavering, the lines and spikes and drops getting dangerously erratic with increasing periods of nothingness -

And then

Asystole.

Cardiac flatline.

The whole group seems to exhale a steep, sharp sigh together - even Irina and the trainer. On the pulse and pressure monitor, the supersoldier’s life continues to linger, an aftereffect in her body and a ghost in the machine, the pulse numbers zeroing out and her pressure dropping -

There’s a brief second where Irina looks away, down to her left, where the other trainer is coming back with some more people -

When Irina looks back to the window of the operating room -

On this rewatch, Gabriel’s eyes flicker back to the monitors.

He lets the footage continue for a second..another second...another and then -

He pauses it.

The EKG is still flatlined, and there is “less than one” heartbeat per minute -

But the blood pressure numbers have stabilized.

And this is where Gabriel’s (and apparently Guerra’s skepticism) kick in.

*...The nanobots could have worked,* Gabriel thinks, *This alone is a huge reason why we even use them - they can identify internal bleeding significantly faster than older technologies like ultrasounds. And they will automatically begin repairing. If they injected her with nanobots when she first collapsed, those nanobots have been working for probably a solid minute, maybe several.*

That’s enough time for “trauma-repairing biotic nanobots” to “rebuild” weaknesses in most major arterial and venous walls (assuming that the supersoldier took a bad, vein-damaging hit or blow to her gut).

*...But Gabriel has to admit -

He’s pretty goddamn certain that “nanobots” can’t explain the next part.*

He taps play again.
The trainer and the new people are saying things to Irina and the other trainer, and Irina just glances at them before she looks back at the window, gesturing to the operating room as she says something in reply. In the operating room, the medical team looks defeated and tired, and Gabriel passingly wonders if scenes like this have happened...rather frequently in the Russian version of SEP. The lead doctor glances up at the monitors, saying something, as the surgical assistant looks at the clock on the wall in the room.

And then...

...The only way to describe what happens next -

Is that the oxygen assistant - the person closest to the supersoldier’s head and chest area - Leans over to remove the oxygen mask

And then

He starts shaking.

Gabriel slows down the footage to half-speed.

The man shivers, shudders, and then he almost collapses in on himself, clutching at his chest, his eyes wide in horror, gasping something -

Gabriel thinks -

He’s not certain -

But it looks like a wisp of greyish-greenish smoke is exhaled from the man’s mouth -

And then -

His eyes roll to the back of his head, his body shudders -

And his skin begins to lose vibrancy -

As if he too is bleeding out.

And he drops to the floor and out of view.

There’s a split second where nothing is happening.

And then

The EKG blips.

The pulse number rises to 5 beats per minute -

And all hell breaks out in the operating room.

The assistant at the monitor starts to convulse, gasping something, and a fraction of a second later, the ultrasound tech collapses against his machine. The lead doctor is shouting something as the surgical technician and the IV assistant (who had been by the refrigerator) bolt to the door. Outside in the hallway, the large group of people - Irina included - just watch in stunned silence for a second -

Before they too suddenly jolt in screaming, shouting
Mass

Panic.

Someone in the group is running to the door, to help get it open, but even the lead doctor is clawing at her throat, her mouth open in a frozen scream, eyes wide in horror -

Amid the panic and terror, Gabriel watches as the EKG grows erratic again - it’s not a regular heartbeat at all - and the pulse number begins to skyrocket - up to 30, down to 20, up to 60, down to 50, up to 120, up to 150, up to 170, down to 60 again - the machine can’t read or predict “beats per minute” fast enough -

The monitor technician falls to the floor - her tanned skin is an ash-grey.

A fraction of a second later, the ultrasound technician - also a chalky greyish pallor - slips off his machine and crashes on the tiled ground.

There’s a strange grey-green smoke rising from the supersoldier and then -

The sound of absolute horror -

As (barely visible) her eyelids flutter open -

And she starts screaming .

The door to the room opens and the surgical assistant and the IV assistant stumble out of the room as the rest of the group watches in choking panic as the body of the lead doctor slips off the table and bashes against the ground by the ultrasound technician.

In the operating room

Alone and alive

The supersoldier lifts her hands to her eyes and her screams turn to quiet, muffled sobs .

The video ends.

Gabriel sits in silence, staring blankly at the screen.

...He’s a pretty big horror movie fan, so he’s seen enough “shaky, shocking found footage” of obvious hoaxes to have had the same sort of reactions as Guerra: stunned disbelief on the first viewing, confusion and bewilderment on the second -

Skepticism and suspicion on the third.

Now, on the fourth, with Irina’s description of the “chaos” happening in the Russian supersoldier program -

Gabriel isn’t certain what to make of it at all.

The skeptic in him - the part that believes everything has a logical explanation, every murder has a motive, and every problem can have a solution - wants to buy Guerra’s implication that Irina has been compromised, and the video is an effort by her and her new allies to scare the CIA into stopping the American supersoldier program.

But the skeptic in him also knows -
“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains - however improbable - must be the truth.”

The problem here is -

What is actually “impossible” and what is the “remaining improbable”

And where is the truth that lies between them?

...Guerra filed this under the [Biochemical Healing] folder for a reason, Gabriel thinks quietly, scrolling back down through the transcript to find where he left off -

Which means that, on some level, he believes Irina.

Gabriel finds his spot:

[Δ]: a lot of the supersoldiers are calling her Марена

[Δ]: “Madnera,” or Morana/Morena

[Σ]: I don’t recognize it

[Δ]: the Slavic goddess of death and rebirth

[Σ]: Irina, you’re letting superstition get the better of you

[Δ]: superstition??

[Δ]: I saw an enhanced human being die and come back to life by killing four doctors around her

[Σ]: and yet you cannot actually say for certain that was what happened

[Δ]: MARC

[Σ]: seriously, Irina, I know you’re freaking out, but pause and think for a second

[Σ]: many people medically die and immediately recover due to electric impulses or nanobot recovery or fucking anything

[Σ]: a life-draining zombie? That's the conclusion you jumped to? Not the fact that those doctors probably pumped her full of biotic nanobots and they didn’t manage to kick in until her heart stopped or something?

---

Which is pretty close to the initial conclusion Gabriel drew on the second and third viewing - that the nanobots had managed to stabilize the supersoldier’s condition after her heart had stopped, but then were able to jumpstart her pulse again.

...But then again:
[Δ]: and how do you explain the four doctors DROPPING DEAD around her, Marc?? The smoke thing coming off of her??

---

That’s the part that genuinely needs explanation and “truth”.

It isn’t so much the part where a dying supersoldier is “probably” revived by nanobots that requires an answer

But the part where four perfectly healthy people in her immediate vicinity suddenly and inexplicably drop dead.

...Just because no one has found an explanation does not mean it doesn’t exist, Gabriel reminds himself, There has to be one.

He continues to read:

[Σ]: Poison? Gas?
[Δ]: seriously?? Seriously???

[Δ]: you accuse me of jumping to superstitions but your paranoid conspiracy ass immediately went to assassinations?? By who, Guerra - their fellow doctors? The program directors? The supersoldier herself??

[Σ]: there are any number of reasons someone would want to kill off the doctors of a supersoldier enhancement program!

[Δ]: AND THAT EXPLAINS WHY THE GRU HAS KILLED EVERYONE WHO HAS TRIED TO LEAVE RIGHT

[Σ]: …

[Δ]: ...I am going to die here, Marc

[Σ]: send a message to the director, get an emergency extraction

[Δ]: I haven’t been able to contact my base team in St. Petersburg in three days

[Σ]: …

[Δ]: I’ve tried contacting Bai in the Chinese supersoldier program but I think

[Σ]: …

[Δ]: I think she’s dead, Marc

[Δ]: you’re the only person I can turn to

[Δ]: I think the program directors are going to kill everyone here

[Σ]: you’re panicking again, Irina
[Δ]: WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO

[Σ]: look, stay calm, I’ll tell the director, we’ll get you another extraction, tonight, two hours tops

[Δ]: the director??

[Δ]: you CANNOT tell the director

[Σ]: ...Guskova, are you

[Σ]: ...ARE you compromised?

[Δ]: this isn’t about politics anymore, Guerra

[Δ]: just

[Δ]: just imagine with me, for a second, just a second

[Σ]: …

[Δ]: the serum in the American SEP, it’s based on the updated list of modifications I gave the director from the Russian program. And I know Bai said the Chinese one is too

[Σ]: ...from what Henri says, a lot of the supersoldier programs are based on leaks from the Russian and Chinese programs.

[Σ]: then again, not like you can keep a rip off of the Crusader program a secret

[Δ]: Marc please

[Σ]: sorry

[Δ]: our serum was based on an older version, but the new one, the one in SEP, that’s based on this one

[Δ]: so just imagine

[Δ]: if this happens only 1% of the time

[Δ]: but you have 132 supersoldiers

[Δ]: that’s 1 - 2 people

[Σ]: …

[Δ]: ...5% is 6 - 7

[Σ]: …

[Δ]: ...8% is 10-11

[Σ]: I can do math, Guskova

[Δ]: At the same rate of genetic colour blindness in men, you could have nearly a complete spec ops team of monsters

[Σ]: this is assuming a lot of things, Irina
[Δ]: is it, Marc??
[Δ]: we both know the director would jump at that opportunity
[Δ]: a whole special ops team of literal ghosts?
[Δ]: the person who commands that could rule the world
[Σ]: I am going to be blunt, Guskova
[Σ]: have you tried shooting her?
[Δ]: …
[Σ]: you’re making the claim that she’s unkillable
[Σ]: but even if they withstand nukes, cockroaches will still die when you step on them
[Δ]: …Guerra
[Δ]: do you not think
[Δ]: that was the first thing the GRU tried to do?
[Σ]: …oh
[Δ]: from what limited intel I now have access to, they’ve confirmed there are no nanobots currently in her system
[Δ]: she’s running purely on the serum injections now
[Σ]: …and what?
[Σ]: she automatically healed the shot wound?
[Δ]: …I don’t know for certain
[Σ]: I can’t operate on uncertainties, Irina
[Δ]: but there was one less GRU agent in the building after that
[Σ]: …
[Δ]: …and one more body in the morgue
[Σ]: …fuck

---

That was significantly worse.

The GRU agents shot her?? Gabriel thinks in utter terror and bewilderment, And she… somehow killed one of them - was it the same way as the doctors?
[Δ]: I don’t know much beyond that
[Δ]: they aren’t letting the doctors talk to us
[Δ]: I know they’re going to kill us all, Marc

[Σ]: …

[Δ]: you can’t tell the director

[Σ]: I don’t understand what you want me to do with this information then?

[Σ]: If what you’re telling me is true, then the serums could potentially make the supersoldiers unkillable? But you just said that some of the others in the Russian program offed themselves?

[Δ]: Like I said, if it’s only a percentage that works…

[Σ]: a percentage of what

[Σ]: you have to see why I’m just...not really buying any of this

[Δ]: MARC

[Σ]: seriously, Irina - you show me some ridiculous video, you make claims that this supersoldier cannot die, that the GRU is killing people off, that they’re going to wipe the program

[Σ]: and then you tell me that I cannot tell our boss - the only person who can coordinate a proper extraction for you??

[Σ]: I’m thousands of miles away from you and away from HQ - I’m sitting in a facility in Idaho watching drones monitoring a survival drill

[Σ]: what the fuck do you expect me to do?

[Δ]: what

[Δ]: you need to stop the American supersoldier program!

[Σ]: …

[Σ]: yeah, fuck this, Guskova, I’m calling D/NCS

[Δ]: if you call the director

[Δ]: I will give this conversation and all my files to the GRU

[Σ]: ...what the fuck

[…]

[Δ]: ...this is bigger than us

[Δ]: this is bigger than this crisis

[Δ]: I know what I saw
[Δ]: and I know we have done something we should not

[Σ]: …

[Δ]: this war will be fought between soldiers and machines
[Δ]: but the next will be between ghosts and monsters
[Σ]: ...even if you have discovered immortality, all wars are fought for the same reason
[Δ]: oh yeah? And what’s that?
[Σ]: power
[Δ]: …
[Σ]: if immortality is real, it is just another tool to that end

---

*Leave it to Guerra to be an actual asshole about this,* Gabriel thinks dryly -

Though, awkwardly -

He agrees with him.

*No invention has ever truly changed the goals of war,* he thinks bitterly, *Just the sizes and scopes of it at different times. First the bow, and then the gun, and the plane and the tank.*

And then Gabriel scowls, adding quietly:

*And we even tried to automate some of our weapons…*

*Until they gained sentience*

*And started to war back on us.*

...So while Guerra might be right in principle -

Guskova might not be wrong about the... *mutated* supersoldiers fighting back.

[Δ]: ...I hate that I have to trust you with this.

[Σ]: I know.

[Σ]: for whatever it’s worth, I am truly sorry for that
[Δ]: ...I know you are.
[Σ]: …
[[Δ] has sent a file.]
[Δ]: everything I’ve managed to collect
[Δ]: even if you can’t use it now, even if you can’t trust the SAD geneticists right now
[Δ]: maybe someday
[Δ]: it will be useful
[Σ]: ...I won’t understand any of this, even in English. It’s way too technical for me.
[Δ]: I know. I don’t either.
[Δ]: but maybe someday, you can find someone who can understand it
[Δ]: and who can stop her pain
[Σ]: ...Irina
[Δ]: compromised? Not in the way you think, Marc.
[Δ]: not in the way any of you ever thought
[Σ]: ...I see
[Σ]: I’m sorry for doubting you
[Δ]: I know you are
[Δ]: ...I know this part isn’t fair to ask of you
[Δ]: but when the Crisis is over, can you
[...]
[Δ]: ...Can you tell my parents I did it proudly?
[Δ]: ...And that I loved them?
[Σ]: I will. I promise.
[Δ]: ...Thank you.
[Δ]: Bai and I will be waiting for the rest of you

[[Δ] has signed out.]

[Σ]: …
[Σ]: god dammit

[[Σ] has signed out.]

---

Gabriel sits in stunned silence over the final part of the transcript. With a heavy heart, he closes it. In
the same folder, there’s a second transcript, a copy of the “Morena video” and another sub-folder, in Cyrillic - which is the file that Guskova had sent at the very end.

Gabriel taps the other transcript: the date is three days later, but the person Guerra is speaking to is different:

[D/NCS]: this is going to be a long shot

[D/NCS]: but did Delta contact you at all this past week?

[...]

[Σ]: no, she did not. Last time I spoke to her, she was in St. Petersburg, about a month before the Russian supersoldier program was supposed to start.

[Σ]: why?

[D/NCS]: Her extraction group in St. Petersburg said she went dark.

[D/NCS]: a secondary contact familiar with the Russian supersoldier program says that it has been shut down in its entirety.

[Σ]: what?

[Σ]: why?

[D/NCS]: I am trying to figure that out. None of our contacts within the GRU appear to be willing to exchange information.

[D/NCS]: they keep saying something about how we Americans “need to confirm a death.”

[Σ]: what the hell does that mean?

---

Guerra pretending like he doesn’t know, Gabriel thinks as he reads, but playing the “I have no idea” card is probably as good a strategy as the CIA agent can pull on his boss here:

[D/NCS]: your guess is as good as mine. I told them we were willing to share strategies for killing those damn “God A.I.” but that we haven’t killed the one in Detroit yet

[D/NCS]: but then they said it had nothing to do with the Omnis

[D/NCS]: it looks like the military wants to move towards using Volskaya mechs instead of supersoldiers, so it’s entirely possible the program simply shut down.

[D/NCS]: but still, no one can get in touch with Delta

[D/NCS]: it doesn’t look like she was able to get much information to a drop off point either.

[D/NCS]: real fucking shame - she was turning in semi-regular updates until about a month ago, then
she said that “things were starting to get crazy”

[D/NCS]: we had her St. Petersburg group ready for an emergency extraction at any time, but she never contacted them.

[Σ]: have you considered the other possibility…?

[D/NCS]: You mean that she sold out?

[D/NCS]: I definitely thought about it, but our trusted contacts say there’s no sign of that

[D/NCS]: just that...the entire supersoldier program seemed to disappear overnight

[Σ]: ...should I halt our program, sir?

[D/NCS]: don’t worry about it, Sigma

[D/NCS]: our geneticists have cleared everything in the serums

[D/NCS]: if the Russians have decided on the mechs over human enhancements, that’s their prerogative

[D/NCS]: continue with the program

[Σ]: understood

[D/NCS]: ...how is the program going?

[Σ]: ...well enough.

[D/NCS]: Sigma

[Σ]: what do you expect me to say outside of my standard reports?

[Σ]: we’re halfway through the Survival and Evasion training

[Σ]: the candidates are getting through

[Σ]: ...actually

[Σ]: if I asked for a few more drones

[D/NCS]: no

[Σ]: ...we have lost like, ten

[D/NCS]: ...how

[Σ]: ...it’s a long story. I’ll just send you the report.

[D/NCS]: ...I’ll see what the tech group says

[Σ]: thank you

[D/NCS]: is Flores giving you trouble?

[Σ]: not at all
Σ: the...candidates are the biggest wild cards

[D/NCS]: must be a special set of cards if they’re giving you trouble

Σ: not... *trouble* per se

Σ: just...things to consider

[D/NCS]: good things or bad things, Sigma?

Σ: ... *useful* things

[D/NCS]: you and your bullshit half-answers

Σ: you put me here for a reason

[D/NCS]: that I did

[D/NCS]: anyways, if you remember something about Delta, let me know

[D/NCS]: talk to you later

Σ: see you

[[D/NCS] has signed out.]

[[Σ has signed out.]

---

Gabriel reaches the end of Guerra’s conversation with the Director of the National Clandestine Service -

And weighs his possible options.

...He is *going* to get some sort of ass-kicking from Guerra - that’s a given.

The simplest solution to avoid *that* is to just

Delete his copies.

…

("- *You have met someone who makes you think you can be something other than what you are.*")

Jack’s smile is so bright.

("*And he makes you believe in heroes and hope once again.*")

Jack’s eyes are *so blue* - dense with *something new* rising in them -

A fierceness in *them*.

A faith in *them*. 
A fearlessness in them.

...You're right, Guerra, Gabriel thinks, staring softly at the dullish glow of the datapad -

I might never be a hero.

And then Gabriel smiles -

Just faintly.

But there are some things that make it worth trying.

And keeping a copy of the truth is one of them.

But keeping a copy puts him at risk of, well -

A pretty bad ass-kicking.

...I could rename the files, Gabriel thinks, but it's a weak cover. Even if he relabels and reformats
the files to be unsearchable by file name or text content (e.g. using a scrambler), Guerra will almost
certainly find those and decode them -

And then he'll know Gabriel has saved them.

Gabriel stares blankly at the screen, tapping the end of his pen to his lips, thinking quietly, Well, the
best place to hide a tree is in a forest, of course. But what do you do if you don't have a forest?

His eyes drift a little and then -

He

Stops.

In the dull, yellowish tint of the datapad’s night mode, his own untidy scrawl on the page of his
notebook is barely legible, but he reads:

“Mask - úntenated by any tângible form...had come like a thíef in the níght.”

Gabriel scowls as a

Slow

Sly

Smoky

Smirk

Twists mischievously at the corners of his lips.

As he opens the browser on the datapad, the little warning about “Your access has been restricted”
pops up, but Gabriel taps the “I accept” button and a severely limited but still functional search
engine site loads. He searches for the “The Masque of the Red Death full text” and

Sure enough

About twenty different “free public domain texts” sites are returned. He taps the first one and -
The browser loads it.

Gabriel grins.

*If you don’t have a forest in which to hide your tree*, he thinks vividly as he taps the “download pdf copy” -

*Then you just need to plant one.*

---------

*There ain’t no grave can hold my body down
There ain’t no grave can hold my body down
When I hear that trumpet sound
I’m gonna rise right out of the ground
Ain’t no grave can hold my body down*

*Well, look way down the river, what do you think I see?
I see a band of angels and they’re coming after me
Ain’t no grave can hold my body down
There ain’t no grave can hold my body down*

*Well, look down yonder, Gabriel,
Put your feet on the land and see
But Gabriel, don’t you blow your trumpet
’Til you hear from me
There ain’t no grave can hold my body down*

*Ain’t no grave can hold my body down*

Chapter End Notes

*Is that the plot of “Old Habits” and “New Wars” I see?*
Can you tell I had fun with all the different references in this chapter? :^)

Since people guessed it correctly: yes, the references to Sigma and Carolina are based on "Red vs Blue." Irina in this chapter is based on agent South Dakota - hence why her codename is "Delta".

Setting that aside, this was a big chapter to write and prepare for. Like most of the Resistance arc, I actually wrote most of this BEFORE "Retribution" came out, but this is the first chapter where I really went back after the "Retribution" reveal and edited in a few references. However, the references to "Masquerade" were written in March, before "Retribution" was revealed.

I figure Gabriel is a pretty, uh, consistent guy: he's a lifelong Edgar Allan Poe fan, he's going to be using his favorite stories often, right?

---

As a reminder: please use PINs that are like, relatively unique and creative. Please don't make your PINs "1234".

And before you joke:

Yes, that is actually the most common PIN in the world.

References:

1. PIN data analysis, original source, September 2012. Quote: "… nearly 11% of the 3.4 million passwords are 1234 !!!!" Second quote: "A table of the top 20 found passwords in shown at the right. A staggering 26.83% of all passwords could be guessed by attempting these 20 combinations!" Statistically, if the 20 PINs were genuinely random, they would account for only 0.2% of all 10,000 PIN combinations used. And yes, people do actually use "superstitious" numbers like 7777 and 1313. And - like Gabriel joked - people also used 6969.
2. "Tetraphobia", Wikipedia. Superstitions surrounding the number 4, based mainly on how the phonetic word sounds in East Asian languages. "Similarly, 14, 24, 42, etc. are also to be avoided due to the presence of the digit 4 in these numbers."
3. "New record set for world's most heat resistant material", Phys.org
5. "High Explosive: Innovations in Ammunition", Army Technology. Please keep in mind that this is technology which is available today. The FRAG-12 is pretty insane if you check out videos on it, and is designed to be a literal "tank killer" and armored vehicle destroyer. My idea here is that in an additional 30 years, when the army is fighting killer robots, concepts like the FRAG-12 have evolved to take out a Bastion or OR-14 at point-blank range (hence why Reaper's shotguns suck at range but are amazing "tank killers.").
7. "A Dream Within A Dream", Edgar Allan Poe

All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.
Chapter Summary

Article III of the Code of Conduct:

[The first virtue in a soldier is endurance of fatigue. Courage is only the second.]

If I am captured I will continue to resist by all means available.

[Because that which doesn't kill you -]

I will make every effort to escape and aid others to escape.

[Makes you stronger.]

(Nothing ever lasts forever.)

Chapter Notes

Do you know the boy scout motto?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

24: Resistance, Day 3 - There are two forces in the world

Wednesday, February 20, 2047: 0700 hours - guard staging room, auxiliary facility

Gabriel half-wanders, half-drags himself into the staging room, exhaustion and excitement simultaneously tugging at his eyes.

*I can’t fucking believe I finished it,* he thinks with a large yawn, wandering his way to the coffee boiler. It had taken him several hours to plant his “forest,” and it’s still an incredibly flimsy defense against all of Guerra’s power and skill -

But it’s all he has -

Smoke and mirrors and shadows -

“...You Bravo today?”

It takes Gabriel a long second to process that Tran is talking to him. He stares up at the lead trainer-soldier, blinking blearily, before he mutters dryly, “...Yeah.”

“...Took you long enough,” Tran sighs as he pulls the strap to an air rifle over his head, “You finally done playing doctor?”
Behind him, Michael snickers, pulling a magazine full of paintballs from the rifle supply closet. Next to him, Carlos shoots his fellow Bravo an ugly glare.

Gabriel’s gaze drifts back up to Tran’s, before he replies sarcastically, “That depends on who wants to be my patient.”

Tran scowls at him as Gabriel sips at his coffee.

Ick.

Too bitter.

Gabriel doesn’t flinch though, as he lowers the cup and grins, “...For you, my fee is double.”

Carlos chortles, but a sharp look from Tran shuts him up. After a pause, the lead trainer-soldier looks back at Gabriel, saying pointedly, “Afternoon, dinner, and night shift for you.”

... That wipes the grin off Gabriel’s face.

“...Yessir,” he mutters neutrally as Tran turns and leaves, Michael trailing shortly behind them. Carlos makes a sympathetic face at Gabriel, before he tugs his gaiter up around his nose and follows them out.

Gabriel heaves a sigh, and turns his attention back to the coffee boiler and mostly empty pot of hot chocolate. He stares dully at the powder creamer before he grips the container and dumps a ton into his cup.

Today’s gonna need all the sweetness it can get -

Even if it is as dehydrated and dry as Hell itself.

---

About twenty minutes later, Gabriel stares at his prepped “supply” tray in his interview room, running down a mental list of what he wants to discuss with this... particular interviewee.

They’re going to be watching the cameras, he thinks cautiously, Guerra especially. I have to be careful with this -

There’s a rap at the door, and then Carlos’ muffled voice saying, “I’ve brought him.”

“Bring him in,” Gabriel replies, trying to look friendly after two full days of talking and planning and scheming and being frustrated with himself and everyone -

The door slides open and Carlos gently but firmly guides the prisoner in, before he pulls the hood off of him -

And Adrien (75) shakes his head a bit at the bright lights, blinking as he reorients himself.

“Call when you’re done,” Carlos says to Gabriel, before the door slides shut behind Prisoner: 75.

Almost immediately, Adrien has his eyes set on Gabriel, and Gabriel is mildly surprised by how bronzy they are, a bottle-glinted brown, like warm tinted glass held to the sunshine -

Except that Adrien is scowling fiercely.
Gabriel tries his best to give him an apologetic grin, saying, “So you probably know how this scheme goes -”

“What the fuck are you doing.”

Adrien’s tone cuts like glass too.

The forced smile fades from Gabriel’s face as Adrien outright glares at him, snapping again, “Seriously? You’re still doing this? They’re straight up torturing Jack and you’re still here serving coffee to people? What the fuck.”

Gabriel starts to scowl a little, but Adrien just digs in deeper, his eyes flashing like a sandstorm as he rasps, “Jack’s always going on and on about how goddamn great you are, but look at you here, playing the good cop like an asshole. But let me guess - you’ll sweep in on Friday just like Survival and Evasion and make Jack get all starry-eyed and you’ll just keep stringing him along as usual.”

Gabriel

Inhales

Exhales

Slowly.

Because everything Adrien says has a twist of truth to it.

Undeniable.

“I would never do that to him,” Gabriel says quietly, though he is also incredibly aware of Guerra’s eyes on him through the camera. He pauses, picking over his thoughts, before he settles on saying, “Jack is...strong. He’s far stronger than this week.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Adrien retorts sharply, “I’ve watched him bust his ass through eight months of assessment and training - Jack could do this week and still run a full marathon on Saturday. It ain’t this week that’s wrecking him - it’s you.”

Gabriel’s chest hitches in raw-edged bitterness at that.

“I don’t know what the fuck you and Guerra did to him yesterday, but he’s losing his goddamn mind,” Adrien mutters darkly. The prisoner shakes his head with disgust, sneering with a heavy sigh, “Fuck off. Just put me in a goddamn box and be done with it. I’m not breaking bread with you this week.”

Gabriel watches him, small needles of you brought this on yourself and you reap what you sow sewing through his thoughts

Before he sighs gently, saying slowly

Carefully crafted

Smoke and mirrors and shadows:

“You want to know something I’ve learned recently?”

Adrien glances at him suspiciously, but Gabriel -
A softer, sweeter, stardusted smile has graced his face.

Truth. Undeniable.

“...There are two forces in the world,” Gabriel says gently, “The sword and the spirit. And despite what Napoleon says, both can be broken.”

Adrien glowers at that, but Gabriel gives him a smoky smirk, adding like shadows:

“But while the sword is weaker where it is broken, the spirit is strengthened by the welds at its seams. A sword is shattered, but a spirit scarred is made sublime, forged anew in a substance stronger than steel.”

And then Gabriel grins, “After all, that which doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

Adrien watches him cautiously, as Gabriel traces his right fingertips over the thermos of hot chocolate, saying serenely, “...Did you know Jack was a boy scout growing up?”

(A lie, crafted to pull smoke and mirrors and shadows over the gaze of the camera.)

“...I didn’t,” Adrien replies skeptically, but Gabriel smiles at him, adding, “Really? He’s the definition of it, don’t you think? All that honor and wilderness training and preparedness - he really lives up to that.”

(A message, coated in smiles and sweetness.)

“...He can take anything this week can throw at him,” Gabriel says with a knowing smirk, chuckling:

“Even me.”

---------

76: Resistance, Day 3 - The sword

Wednesday, February 20, 2047: 0800 hours - interview room

Jack had thought Night 1 was the worst physical experience he had ever been put through.

Now he knows -

Night 2 was a thousand times worse.

And Night 3 and Night 4 will be exponentially more so.

He had suffered through various stages of microsleeping throughout the night: he doesn’t remember eating the one meal they had gotten, but Adrien and Mari and Lucas insisted the three of them had basically forced him to eat it. Microsleeps on and off for the next few hours, only a minute at a time, frequently forced awake by an external stimulus (boots boots boots boots movin’ up and down again, nothing ever lasts forever, there is no discharge in the war, everybody wants to rule the world) or by his own brain, rushing through pseudo-fever dreams over and over

Outside an emergency room after his first real night working, when the patient - OD’d on prescription opioids - didn’t make it
The July night he was ten and got lost chasing lightning bugs and slipped and fell into the edges of the Empire Quarry and nearly drowned in the water, lightning green fires burning above him tauntingly until Peter found him.

His voice hoarse from screaming as he struggled against the stillwater.

His voice hoarse from singing that nothing ever lasts forever nothing ever lasts forever everybody wants to rule the world while trapped in the coarse-grained darkness.

Interrupted by a night march, under the bright lights and round the hallways round the hallways round the hallways.

Dreams of Gabriel in the interrogation room, fingers under Jack’s chin, making Jack look deep into those night-gold eyes and does it change anything does it change anything does it change anything.

Finding his brother dead on the couch, eyes glassy, empty needle on the table and screaming screaming screaming.

Moments where he’s in London, sitting in a chair by a fire, as a tall man who looks like Gabriel in a deerstalker hat stands next to the mantle, eyes focused on the fire, telling him that it’s elementary if you know nothing ever lasts forever.

Interrupted by paintballs shooting him in his back and neck and aching body under the bright lights.

His body is fighting him on this, he knows it - he’s probably accumulated about a grand total of an hour, maybe two of microsleeps, but it’s not enough. The simulation has just tipped over 48 hours, and the only thing he can think is:

This will end.

One way or another.

This will end.

Because nothing ever lasts forever.

(Everybody wants to rule the world.)

This time, Michael leads him to the interview room, and before his hood is even fully removed, Jack already knows what to expect.

So he’s pretty surprised when the coarse-grained darkness (a bittersweetness that he craves now) is removed -

And a friendly face greets him at the other end of the table.

“...Hey, Prisoner: 76,” Felix says with an apologetic smile as Jack’s eyes trace fiercely over his face, the table, the camping kettle, the thermos, the cups, the granola bars. Gabriel’s roommate asks him kindly, “You look like you could use some breakfast.”

“...Probably,” Jack says, his voice is roughed up from lack of sleep and oversinging, “...What’s your offer for it?”

“Boy, already getting straight to the business part,” Felix says cheerfully, as Jack pulls the other chair out and flops himself in it. Felix starts to rise, saying, “I’d tell you there’s no angle to this, but we both know that isn’t true. Coffee or hot chocolate?”
Jack would sell his soul for some of Gabriel’s “real” hot chocolate.

“...Neither,” he lies to Felix and himself, because if he’s this fucking far into the week - He’s going to force himself to be patient

And endure so that he can get that hot chocolate from Gabriel’s own hands.

(The first virtue in a soldado is endurance of fatigue, after all.)

Mid-grab for the kettle, Felix pauses, and glances up at him quizzically, asking, “You sure?”

“Foam mattress pads,” Jack growls, “How do I get more.”

“...Wow, you really did go straight for the business,” Felix mutters dryly. He instead pours just one cup, mixing in some powder creamer, and then settles himself back in his chair, saying, “Let me make you a different offer, Prisoner: 76 - I could give you one extra foam mattress pad, or I could give you an hour of sleep.”

Jack is pretty sure he just fever-dreamed that because no fucking way -

He scowls at Felix, trying to figure out the catch, knowing he’s absolutely going to have to break Article Five of the Code of Conduct, which at this point he’s absolutely willing to do, even though he also knows he’s going to be punished for it -

Before Jack realizes he is just so exhausted that he’s verging on true dumbassery and oh .

Oh .

This is why Gabriel says there’s no such thing as a “stupid question” or a “stupid answer.”

Jack has literally nothing to lose right now.

He can only gain.

So, since he’s so sleep-deprived dumb right now

Jack just straight up asks:

“What’s the catch.”

Felix’s brow furrows, just a bit, more in surprise at Jack’s abrupt, no-nonsense behavior than in confusion or anger, and the senior soldier pauses, thinking it over before he says, “...Are you actually friends with Gabriel? This is nothing like how he acts.”

Is that an answer, the sleep-deprived dumb part of Jack’s brain wonders, as the sleep-deprived not-so-dumb part singsongs, There’s a room where the light won’t find you -

Jack shoves the song worm in his head aside and thinks more resolutely, Okay, Felix knows we’re friends, but what does this indicate?

He doesn’t know me very well.
And -

More surprisingly -

He doesn’t know Gabriel very well.

Or more accurately -

Gabriel has put on a display of behaving a certain way to the point where Felix finds my direct questions contrary to Gabriel’s persona.

…

That’s a smart enough answer, right?

And -

Jack has no idea where his sleep-deprived dumbness finds the source of this

But he manages to mutter, “Are you actually roommates with him?”

…

He ignores that his voice-crack on the word “actually” sounds really squeaky and broken and embarrassing.

Felix now scowls in genuine confusion and disbelief before he retorts rather cautiously, “You know who I am, right? Do you recognize me? Do you know where you are right now?”

…He thinks I’m so disoriented that I’m not totally present, Jack thinks, as his sleep-deprived dumbness chants, Holding hands while the walls come tumblin’ down -

“…Can anybody ever really know where they are?” Jack asks with a sleep-deprived smartness.

…He ignores how dumb it sounds -

No stupid questions, he reminds himself, but he also isn’t really sure what the point of his remark was.

Felix’s expression grows increasingly concerned as he stares at Jack, before he asks, “What is your number?”

76?

Or

1824?

Is this a trick?

Jack blinks at him, before he asks dumbly, “Which number?”

Felix looks like he’s in disbelieving despair as he asks nervously, “Where are you?”

“Over here - where are you?” Jack asks with a sleep-deprived smirk on his face. Felix’s eyes narrow skeptically, as if he’s cluing in that Jack isn’t taking this seriously but that’s the joke, buddy -
Every question is smart.

Every answer is valuable.

“I’ll level with you, Prisoner: 76,” Felix says in a less cheerful, seriouser tone (is seriouser a real word? Jack doesn’t remember), “I’m here to be the Good Cop for you, but every moment you delay engaging with me is a moment where you lose more of what I can offer you.”

Jack stares at him blankly.

…

God, his eyes are burning and stinging with exhaustion at their edges. Corners - eyes don’t have “edges,” they’re round. If they’re round, eyes can’t have corners either, idiot -

Jack has to snap himself out of his own sleep-deprived argument.

“...So let me make this easy for you,” Felix says, “Work with me: four easy questions, and you can get a mattress or an hour of sleep. Your choice, but I promise it won’t be taken away. Good to start?”

Jack stares at him dully, but sighs, “Fine.”

“...What is your name?” Felix asks, and Jack can already figure out what the “easy questions” are going to be.

“Jack Morrison,” he mutters, “Or John. Whichever one is the correct answer to this question.”

Felix gives him a dry, sardonic look, but asks anyways, “What is your number?”

1824 -

“76,” Jack answers. Felix nods, then says, “What is your current official rank?”

“Special Forces 18X,” Jack replies and then -

“What is your date of birth?” Felix asks him.

Jack inhales steeply

And then exhales sharply, “February 18th, 2020.”

Felix suddenly looks surprised, saying, “Holy shit, your birthday was on Monday?”

“Starting off 27 with a strong week,” Jack replies wryly. Felix, however, just grins, saying, “Happy belated birthday, dude!”

Jack gives him a blank stare.

...He means well, the sleep-deprived not-so-dumb part of his brain says softly, as the sleep-deprived dumb part sings, When they do I’ll be right beside you -

...Still sounds pretty hollow from here, a sleep-deprived Jack thinks to his fragmenting sense of self, Then again, with this stupid song in my head, everything sounds pretty hollow right now .

Including the words
The first virtue in a soldado is endurance of fatigue.

“See, that was pretty easy, right?” Felix asks him cheerfully. Jack says nothing, with prompts his “interviewer” to say, “So - mattress or a granted hour of sleep?”

...The mattress is selfless, I guess, Jack considers, A choice that’s good for the team. An hour of sleep will be absorbed by my body and immediately rendered useless by being forced to stay awake for another three days and two nights again.

But then -

Jack digs deeper.

...On the other hand, the mattress won’t really make a massive difference in comfort, he counters himself, And...even though they’re being friendly now, who knows how Cell 4 will react to our group getting another mattress pad. Everyone is getting tired and tense - the last thing I need to do is make people more divisive.

And while an hour of sleep is like...a rainstorm into the ocean, it is better than the microsleep drops I’ve been having, and with how primed my brain is, I will almost certainly complete a full sleep cycle, maybe even two in a single hour...

Jack refocuses on Felix’s face - Felix is still smiling, a mix between a genuine, kind smile and something a bit more crooked, and -

There’s a moment of sleep-deprived clarity

Where Jack just knows three things:

His decision

His rationale

And

Himself.

...It would be easy to sleep, Jack thinks, It would be easy to take the hour, keep it to myself, go back to the cell and claim I was left in a box. It would be easy to take it, keep it to myself, go back to the cell and let none be the wiser. It would be easy to take it, keep it to myself, and immediately dissolve the nightmares into a rainstorm of sleep.

And in six months when we are in a real battlefield, will people even remember that I brought back a little bit of extra comfort in a week of suffering, or that I disappeared from the cell for an hour?

No.

People are stupid, cruel, and hopeless.

But Jack knows -

- People won’t remember what he decides right now at all.

Jack knows -

(And that spun-sugar and smoke-sunshine voice whispers to him in his head:)
- People will only remember how much this week *sucked*.

Jack *knows* -

("...The medic knows people are stupid, cruel, and hopeless, but chooses to help anyways. But the knowledge-bearer knows people are stupid, cruel, and hopeless, and sows abstract seeds anyways, fully aware they will reap the fruitless with the fruitful regardless.")

- People do not accept easy selflessness.

They only accept it when it *burns*.

And Jack does not act selfless to be *remembered*.

And so, even though Jack *knows* that no matter what he decides, his choice will not be remembered

And that the only reward for heroes is pain

And the only reward for soldiers is enduring nightmares

Jack still says, “Mattress.”

Sleeplessness is *his* to endure.

But selflessness is for *all* to endure.

He acts selfless when there is a genuine purpose to enact.

Felix looks mildly surprised that Jack picked the selfless choice -

But Jack *knows* -

*This will end.*

- Hell is not a place.

*One way or another*

Hell is the fever that threads his dreams

*Nothing ever lasts forever.*

And stitches them into nightmares.

The resistance right now is not with or against his cellmates, the guards, other people.

The resistance right now is

With or against

Himself.

He must endure himself with the recognition that he will not be remembered, or rewarded, or enriched -

And with the recognition that he will reap the fruitless with the fruitful -
But instead with the recognition that even as he sinks into the abyss
His undercurrent rises below.

“Mattress,” Jack repeats -
And he doesn’t know if he’s saying it as a confirmation to himself
Or as a declaration of war to his own mind.
Jack will pour water into the cracks in his own heart -
Not to erode himself -
But to craft a shore for the sea to sing to
And a tide for the stars to dream upon.
---
“...What the hell,” Derek says, after Michael leaves their cell unit, “You guys get another mattress? How is that fair?”
“It’s not,” Jack mutters, unrolling his new foam mattress as he heads to the bars. He glances up at the members of Cell 4, saying, “So you guys can have it -”
“Wait, wait -” Sam says, stopping Jack, “Dude, Morrison, you got rewarded for being nice for giving them your mattress and now you’re giving them your second one??”
“We still have more than them,” Jack replies dully, but Sam glances at the Cell 5 members, and he mutters, “Doesn’t even feel like it, to be honest -”
“Hey,” Derek snaps at Sam. The Cell 4 member mutters, “Let him do what he wants! We’ll take it, Morrison -”
“You know that thing about ‘fool me once’ -” Sam starts to murmur to Jack but -
“This isn’t about fooling anyone.”
Jack’s words are hoarse and broken
But somehow ring true.
Sam quiets up as Jack says honestly, “They have less than us. There are still two days left. We are all we have.”
The cell unit is silent over that (which says a lot, really) and Jack looks over his cellmates, asking, “Anyone else want it?”
Mari shrugs, Robin rolls her head, Nadia sighs, “Do what you want.”
Adrien looks quietly thoughtful.
Jack slides the wobbly foam pad through the cell bars, until the members of Cell 4 grab the other end and pull it through. He wanders back to Cell 5’s cluster of mattress pads, flumping himself down against the back wall and heaving a sigh.
Adrien takes a seat besides him, and there’s a brief pause before his roommate murmurs, “Jack...Gabriel pulled me in for an interview.”

Jack is somehow not surprised and yet just a bit bitter.

“Let me guess,” Jack rasps back dryly, “The hot chocolate was great and he figured out your preferred MOS, and your favorite sport, and where you had your first date.”

There’s a stiff, awkward pause before Adrien mutters (a little bit sourly), “We talked about you, Jack.”

“...Oh,” Jack says rather dumbly.

“So no need to be a dick about it,” Adrien adds with a small huff. Jack stuffs his hands in his pockets, his left thumb and index finger playing with the note (1824) nervously. He nudges Adrien’s shoulder apologetically and says quietly, “...Sorry.”

“...It’s okay,” Adrien sighs, nudging him back, “We’re all frustrated this week. I’ll just add it to the running tally of drinks you owe me.”

“...Gotta be a big number now,” Jack chuckles with a silly grin, “Maybe what - seventy-five? Seventy-six?”

“More like seventy-six-thousand,” Adrien snorts, but he’s grinning too over their dumb number joke, because it’s Wednesday and they’re about 52 hours into boots boots boots boots movin’ up and down again because nothing ever lasts forever -

“...What did he say?” Jack finally asks curiously (once he managed to get the songworms out of his thoughts).

“Uh, nothing crazy,” Adrien says, as if he needs to focus to remember a conversation he had only half an hour ago. His roommate scowls, concentrating as he mutters, “We talked a little bit about Assessment and Selection - I broke Article Five, I don’t give a fuck - how you and I met...uh...some training stuff...that time we got super in trouble and the trainers almost ejected us from the program.”

Jack grins just remembering it -

“Oh, he started off kinda...weird,” Adrien says hesitantly. Jack glances at him on his right, asking, “Weird how?”

“Like...I dunno,” Adrien mutters, “He was saying something about, uh, there were only two things in the world? Swords and spirits?”

Jack

Steeply inhales a small shock over that.
He glances wide-eyed at Adrien, as his roommate hums, “What was it -”

“There are only two forces in the world,” Jack exhales quietly, “The sword and the spirit.”

“Yeah, that was it!” Adrien beams, but then he scowls, asking, “Wait, how do you know that?”

“It’s a quote, by Napoleon,” Jack answers breathlessly and he feels

Lighter

Just knowing Gabriel did hear him, Gabriel is trying to respond -

“Huh…” Adrien says skeptically, and Jack grins, adding, “The full thing is, ‘There are only two forces in the world: the sword and the spirit. In the long run, the spirit conquers the sword -’”

“No,” Adrien says suddenly, “He didn’t say that.”

Jack

Stops.

“...What,” he says, “What did he say?”

“He got…” Adrien starts, pauses, thinks it over, then continues quietly, “He got kinda dark with it. Said that like, both the sword and the spirit can be broken, but the sword is weaker for it, while the spirit is stronger somehow?”

Jack scowls, thinking, Sounds like Gabriel alright -

“He even said that whole ‘whatever doesn’t kill you, only makes you stronger’ thing,” Adrien mutters dryly and oh -

That definitely sounds like Gabriel, Jack thinks dully.

“...Yup, that’s about as optimistic as Gabe gets,” he mutters with a deadpan expression, voice cracking and dry.

“Oh, yeah,” Adrien says, as if remembering something, “You never told me you were a boy scout growing up! That explains how you camp like a Discovery Channel documentary dude.”

...

What.

“Huh?” Jack says in confusion, “I was never a boy scout. I learned to camp from my family.”

Adrien blinks at him, before frowning, saying, “What. But Gabriel said you were.”

...

Even more what.

“Why would he say that?” Jack asks with increasing confusion, “Gabe knows I wasn’t one. He made a joke about it before Survival and Evasion and I told him I...wasn’t…”

The words die as
Somehow

The songworms dig up the moment with surprising, sleep-deprived, feverish clarity:

*Gabriel raises his eyebrows in mock surprise, chuckling wryly, “Well, well, what a boy scout you must’ve been, huh? What’s their motto - always prepared? You wanna pack my stuff for me?”*

“...Maybe he forgot?” Adrien offers with a slight shrug but -

“No,” Jack answers distantly -

*Be prepared.*

“He wouldn’t forget something like that,” Jack continues -

*Always prepared.*

“Gabe remembers details insanely well,” Jack knows -

*Because nothing ever lasts forever.*

“...So why would he say that?” Adrien asks, “Seems like a weird thing to lie about.”

*Because the first virtue in a soldier is*

“...What’s the boy scout motto?” Jack asks Adrien, even though he knows the answer -

*1824*

“Be prepared.”

...

It takes Jack a long second to realize that Lucas has spoken.

Both Jack and Adrien glance at their cellmate, who shrugs casually, saying, “I went all the way through Eagle.”

“Holy shit, Lucas,” Adrien mutters with shock and awe, as Vanessa asks, “Isn’t that a pretty big commitment?”

“Oh yeah, you gotta do a service project,” Lucas says, “Write the plan outline and report and everything. I organized a drive to refurbish all the drinking fountains at my high school.”

“What,” Selena states in disbelief. Lucas rolls his shoulders, adding, “Turns out, a lot of the high schools were super old and having water issues, so the city used my research and plans to fix a whole bunch of them.”

“Dude, that’s awesome,” Sam says to his roommate with a surprising amount of genuine joy for 52 hours deep into SERE. Lucas shrugs again, but there’s some faint color on his cheeks as he mumbles, “I mean, it was cool, I didn’t really expect it, though -”

“Do you want to be a Charlie?” Jack asks him, and in his peripherals, he sees Nadia - a former Charlie - perk up a bit. Lucas glances at him, grins and says, “That’d be pretty cool! But I’ll just wait and see where they think I should go -”
“Understanding water supplies and systems is a huge component of a modern combat engineer,” Nadia says, as she seats herself next to Lucas, “A lot of foreign internal defense missions involve improving access to clean water for our allies - digging wells, fixing filtration systems, maintaining ditches and flow.”

Lucas looks a little bashful but Jack can see that his curiosity is piqued, and Jack finds the words slipping from his mouth easily:

“The need for both combat and civil engineers is only going to pick up after the war, right, Nadia?”

Nadia flicks her gaze at him, but she beams, agreeing, “Right! Like Jack said - if we win this war, there will be a huge need to fix infrastructure and resources the world over!”

“...That’s a big if though,” Sam murmurs, causing Nadia to falter a bit but -

“Well, that’s why we’re here.”

The members of Cell 5 look at Jack, but he gives them all an exhausted smirk, as he adds, “We’re here to help make that if into a when.”

“...Someone’s feeling lucky,” Selena says, but Jack just smiles, saying, “There’s no such thing as luck - just preparedness.”

---

(About three hours later)

Jack stares into the shallow darkness of the box.

Be prepared.

“...Get in, 76,” the trainer-soldier mutters at him.

Always prepared.

Jack inhales slowly -

Because nothing ever lasts forever.

Exhales deeply -

Because the first virtue in a soldier is

He climbs in.

And settles into the coarse-grained darkness.

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24: Resistance, Day 3 - The sword

Wednesday, February 20, 2047: 1643 hours - blackout box room, auxiliary facility

Box seven hovers at the edges of Gabriel’s senses, patiently poking at his peripherals.
...So close, he thinks, keenly aware of both physical proximity and temporal nearness as he forces himself to glance at the other modified shower stalls in the converted bathroom.

Jack isn’t sing-shouting like yesterday.

...Gabriel doesn’t know if that’s a good or bad thing.

He heads back out of the converted shower room into the rest of the bathroom, where Carlos and Jim (Carlos’ senior Bravo, Carolina’s former junior) are going over something on Jim’s datapad - probably the scheduled rotation of prisoners, since Gabriel hears a few things like “another hour” and “still have three more in Cell 8” before he approaches them.

Jim glances at him, looking pretty tired and worn himself, sighing, “Shouldn’t you get dinner, Gabriel?”

“Can’t,” Gabriel mutters, “Your fearless leader put me on dinner duty.”

And then Gabriel makes a sardonic face, adding, “And night duty.”

Jim mirrors his expression, before he chuckles dryly, “This is why me and Caro always said you gotta work on that personality, Reyes.” Carlos gives a snort-giggle, and Gabriel shoots his friend a mocking scowl.

“Silvio used to say I was perfect the way I am,” Gabriel retorts sarcastically and that makes a wry smirk crack on Jim’s exhausted face, and the Bravo replies jokingly, “Don’t twist his words, Gabrieltito - he used to say you gotta work with what you have.”

“...Which is perfection, what’s your point,” Gabriel teases back, and both Carlos and Jim laugh at that - Carlos doing that wheezy, hacking laugh and Jim with his dry, cracking bark of a chortle. Gabriel gives them a wry smirk when -

“You taking your break or what, Reyes?”

The laughter stops as the three former 7436 members look up at the bathroom door, where Michael is standing. He rolls his eyes at Gabriel, muttering, “I mean, if you don’t want it -”

“Dude, calm down,” Carlos snaps at his fellow Bravo senior soldier, but Gabriel gives Carlos a small gesture, saying, “I’ll be back in fifteen.”

“...Go get dinner, Carlito,” Jim says to his former junior. Carlos glances up at him, but he sighs, “...Yeah, yeah, I’ll go. Be back in two hours.”

Michael shakes his head and steps aside as Gabriel and Carlos head out the door into the hallway. They take a right turn, wander a few steps before Carlos mutters tartly, “God damn, Michael’s been in a helluva mood today. Been tempted to shove him in a blackout box for six hours.”

“I’d bet good money that wouldn’t help,” Gabriel snorts, but Carlos just beams, “Well, not him, but it sure as hell would help my mood.”

“I love that you’re just as petty as me,” Gabriel grins. Carlos laughs brightly, “Well, birds of a feather and great minds and all that jazz.”

But then he sighs heavily, saying, “At least Day Three is almost over. God, this week is murder. I don’t know why they made this five days - it just seems excessive.”
And Gabriel thinks of the abyss of fire in Guerra’s eyes -

“...I’m sure that’s the point,” he murmurs bitterly.

...So close -

Carlos gives him a sympathetic pat on his left shoulder as they turn and enter the staging room. Gabriel continues towards the water supply in the corner, but Carlos turns towards the weapons case, disassembling different parts of his paintball rifle.

There’s a moment of cool calm before -

“...Are you ever gonna tell Jack about how you became a Fox?” Carlos asks quietly and -

There’s no bitterness, no judgment, no pressure in his tone -

Only sympathy and understanding -

But -

Gabriel stares at the water bottle in his right hand.

The fake ocean logo on it isn’t nearly as blue as the depth of Jack’s eyes.

“...Sorry,” Carlos apologizes, setting the empty air rifle in the case, “I shouldn’t have asked -”

“...It’s just a story.”

The words

Drip

Drip

Drip

Out of Gabriel’s mouth without his usual verve.

In his peripherals, Gabriel sees that Carlos watches him with a bittersweet expression on his face, but he ignores him, twisting the cap off the bottle with his left hand as he mutters, “Anyone can tell it.”

“...You know that’s not true,” his brother-in-arms says to him quietly, patiently, with more gentleness than Gabriel deserves, “And you know Jack knows that too.”

(And Adrien’s voice rings in Gabriel’s head:)

(“It ain’t this week that’s wrecking him - it’s you.”)

“...Jack’s a former emergency room nurse,” Gabriel mutters, his own words twisted with sad sweetness, “He doesn’t need some washed up Special Forces medic telling him the same story he’s seen before.”

He lifts the bottle to his lips and drinks.

...The water isn’t nearly refreshing enough to replace the bitter taste in the back of his throat.

“...You’re a smart guy, Gabriel,” Carlos says - still with more gentleness than Gabriel thinks he
should receive - as he heads for the door, “Too smart for your own good, really. But sometimes, you’re really dense about super obvious things.”

Gabriel lowers the bottle, a deadpan expression his face as he glances at the door. Carlos shrugs, murmuring, “Just saying. You really ought to ease up on yourself...and maybe you’ll find that burying your heart isn’t the answer.”

It is if nothing ever grows and I don’t have to reap what I’ve sowed, Gabriel thinks darkly but -

“You deserve good things too,” Carlos says gently - so gently.

(What seeds did he plant in the desert oasis in his concrete heart)

“...And you deserve dinner,” Gabriel states, turning his attention back to his water bottle.

(What could possibly grow there, fire-cracked rock and too much dry heat and raw-edged sunstrokes and not nearly enough water)

It effectively ends the conversation.

“...Good talk, coach,” Carlos sighs heavily, before he hits the button by the door. It slides open and he strides out, saying more conversationally, “I’ll be back in two.”

“Sure thing,” Gabriel calls back, and as the door slides shut, he looks at the empty water bottle in his hand, wondering.

Wondering.

(...Is it possible to drink the color blue?)

Wondering if anything could ever truly match the color of Jack’s eyes.

Gabriel inhales slowly -

It’s time to test the waters -

And then exhales sharply -

Hurling the empty water bottle at the bin in the corner of the room.

It banks off the wall and clatters in.

Three points, he thinks with a wry grin, Nice.

And then Gabriel gets to work.

He strides back over to the air rifle case, pulling out the one Carlos had just put away, making sure it’s all in working order. He snaps in a new clip of paintballs and slides the strap on his right shoulder, next to his own paintball rifle. The moment it’s steady, he starts another one, and then another one, loading up about eight on his torso. It’s bulky as all hell, but it won’t be for long.

He flicks a glance to his wrist monitor for the time:

1654.

Six minutes until “dinner” is formally started in the main SEP facility.
Six minutes until Jack’s time in the box is up.

Gabriel seats himself on one of the benches in the staging room, adjusting the awkward positions of the paintball guns and rifles hanging off of him, and digs his datapad out of one of his protected pockets in his tactical jacket. He logs out of [Reyes.Gabriel].

And then

He logs in:

[Enter Username]: [New.Admin]

[Enter PIN]: 6275

[Enter Password]: untenantedtangiblethiefnight

The datapad loads the New Administrator account without a hitch.

1655.

Gabriel taps through the different [Setting] options until he reaches [Facility Systems Management]. He opens that application, and a new window appears: on the left, it has a text-based branch system of the entire SEP facility (and even a few sub-options for the remote facilities they had used in Survival and Evasion). On the right, there’s a map of the mazelike facility, with the “main facility” at the center, and several long underground branches for the auxiliary portions -

Like the one they’re in right now.

1656.

Gabriel taps [North Branch Facility], and both the text branch and the map move, with the text listing a new set of “North Branch” specific options (doors, lights, computers, cameras, etc) and the map showing a closer viewer of the auxiliary facility. Gabriel can see the very room he’s sitting in, the security room just down the hall, the room where the Foxes have their meetings, the bathroom that’s been converted to the blackout boxes room -

Even the cell “units” at the end of connecting hallways.

1657.

Gabriel taps the [Doors] option on the text menu, and the map lights up all the electronic doors (pretty much every door in the North Branch facility), identifying a few new sub-options:

[Select ALL]

[Non-regulated]

[Card-regulated]

[PIN-regulated]

The non-regulated doors are the ones that anyone could open: the bathrooms and the “interview” rooms. The card-regulated ones are the ones that require a generic security keycard to open - like this very staging room…

Or the individual cell doors.
And then lastly…

The PIN-regulated doors.

The “highest security” level for the North Branch.

These were things like the door to the camera security room, or the Foxes’ meeting room -

Or the cell “unit” doors.

...Or even the door to access the main SEP facility from the North Branch.

1658.

Gabriel taps the [PIN-regulated] option, and once again, new commands appear:

[EMERGENCY LOCKDOWN]

Clearly separated from:

[Change PIN]

[Conduct Test Lockdown]

[Shut off system - Maintenance only]

[Shut off - specific locations only]

Gabriel taps [Change PIN] and -

*Finally.*

Loads the option.

As the window transitions, a new warning appears:

“WARNING: changing the PIN for this system requires a System Administrator’s Security Clearance level. Changing the PIN for this system will force a system-wide reset. Changing the PIN will NOT implement a system-wide lockdown. If this is an emergency, please return to [EMERGENCY LOCKDOWN].”

Gabriel *grins*.

And begins to fill out the options:

[Enter Current PIN]: 1568

*(Finally.)*

[Enter New PIN]: 1824

[Confirm New PIN]: 1824

*(Finally, patience will pay off.)*

“In order to proceed with the PIN reset, enter the following information:”
[System Administrator]: [New.Admin]

[Enter User PIN]: 6275

[Enter Password]: untenantedtangiblethiefnight

But before Gabriel confirms everything, he minimizes the window and opens a new [Settings] window. This time, he navigates to [Network] and opens up the options for [Communications]. He quickly finds the sub-network for the comms devices the trainer-soldiers and directors are using, labeled as [SEP Shared Comms].

And then -

1659 -

Gabriel waits.

...The first virtue in a soldier -

Is patience.

---

76: Resistance, Day 3 - The spirit

Wednesday, February 20, 2047: 1700 hours - “his box”

It’s

Quieter

This time.

Which is weird because the goddamn music is just as horrifically loud as yesterday, driving nails with the doo-do, da-doo-do, da-doo-do tinging synthetic beat of “Nothing ever lasts forever” and “Everybody wants to rule the world” into his ears, into his brain, drilling holes through his skull and tapping out rhythmic aches into his pressure points -

And though Jack isn’t fighting it this time

The “box” in his mind is somehow quieter.

The pain, the stiffness, the humidity are all stronger, the blood runs deeper, the songworms carve harder into his grey matter, the wood presses raw-edged and coarse-grained against the exposed parts of his skin, the darkness overwhelms all his senses -

And yet

Jack is quieter.

…

It helps that he had somehow managed to have like, a million microsleeps throughout the six hour period he was in here. It didn’t stop the nightmares or the surreal dreams - worsened with the effect
of odd beats and ugly synth notes in the background - but the harsh, unworn edges of the tiredness has lost its toothache-ish, blinding effect, moving from cutting at his head and jaw to something else, something deeper.

But the steadier it

Drip

Drip

Drips

Into the cracks in Jack’s soul -

The more it fulfills him.

And all throughout the six hours of being in here, Jack remembers:

_Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger._

And Jack would add with his own water-tempered twist:

_And I’m not dead yet._

So Jack has a fuller, song-dripped sense of self when the music stops and the lid to his box cracks open.

“That didn’t feel like singing today?” Morales asks him dryly. As he rises, Jack rolls his stiff shoulders and cracks his neck, muttering, “Why? Did you miss it?”

“Funny, 76,” Morales says as Jack takes several shaky steps out of the box and then out of the shower stall. The song chant-sings in his head, but Jack takes a moment to glance at his new guard -

_Soldier: 05 - Michael Tsang -

Before the coarse-grained, potato-scented darkness of the hood engulfs hims.

“Take him back, 05,” Morales instructs Michael, but adds quickly, “And don’t do laps like 04 did.”

“...Of course he made the prisoners do laps,” Michael mutters, but he sighs, and Jack feels his fingers wrap with a just-slightly-uncomfortable grip around his left arm. And then Michael snaps at him, “Let’s go, 76.”

They wander out of the first corner, from the “blackout boxes room” into the rest of the bathroom, down a short ways - pause as the door slides open -

And then a left turn into the hallway.

Even though Jack’s presence of mind is stronger this time -

His feet are just as numb and pulsatingly hot -

So he still half-stumbles, half-drag himself along.

The silence is awkward, but Jack is too focused on just making one foot accurately and consistently step in front of the other to care.
In fact, he’s so focused that he almost misses the muffled crackle of a voice on Michael’s comms device.

“- Prisoner: 76 out -”

Hearing “his number” makes Jack pause in the darkness.

It also apparently makes Michael pause, because his guard comes to a stop. There’s a heavy, impatient sigh from Guard: 05, some shuffling, a quick change of hands on his bicep, and then a soft tap against screenglass and -

“Could you repeat that?” Michael asks.

A short pause and then -

“Did anyone -”

Jack’s breathing

Stops.

“- Get Prisoner: 76 -”

His pulse floods with a rush of excitement.

“- Out of his box?”

Gabriel’s voice comes across with crystal clarity through the comms.

Gabe! Jack thinks, impulsively looking towards the sound even though he can’t see anything -

“...Asshole,” Michael mutters (clearly not into the comms), and Jack can hear him rolling his eyes as he taps the screenglass, snapping, “Yeah I did - is that a problem, 24?”

[24: Resistance, Day 3 - The spirit]

[Gabriel smirks as he hears Michael’s reply.]

[Of course he knew Michael would be the one to take Jack back to Cell 5. He’s been on Bravo duty all day - he knew there was no one else except Jim in the blackout box room during the dinner shift.]

[He just needed confirmation that Jack and Michael were out of the room.]

[Thanks, Tsang, Gabriel thinks as he deftly taps the icon to reopen the window with the PIN-reset option with his right hand. With the comms device in his left, he says with feigned concern, “...I was just asking -”]

“Yeah, well, it’s unnecessary as all hell, 24,” Michael snaps and Jack feels a bitter bite of frustration rise in his chest -

“Professionalism, Guard: 05.”

The new voice cuts like glass in the spine, and both Gabriel and Michael seem to shut up as Guerra silences their conversation. Jack can feel Michael tense up at the semi-public intrusion of one of the directors on what (Jack guesses) was a relatively “personal” tit-for-tat between the two senior soldiers.
“...Remember our rules, Guard: 24,” Guerra’s voice states neutrally over the comms and -

[“...Yessir,” Gabriel replies quietly, but his expression is *anything* but somber as he *grins* -]

[And taps the [Confirm PIN Reset] option.]

[...*Ding.*]

[A green checkmark appears and a new message appears, reading, “PIN reset authorized. System restart initialized. Resyncing to new PIN in 3...2...1…”]

[“New PIN confirmed.”]

[Gabriel puts his comms device away -]

There’s more shuffling as Michael puts his comms away, grumbling loudly, “Do you *actually* like that guy, 76?”

Jack says nothing, *resisting* the urge to blindly fight his guard off.

[Gabriel reopens the window for the [SEP Shared Comms] network -]

“He’s a serious asshole. Major tool,” Michael says bitterly as they start their walk back to the cells again, readjusting his grip on Jack’s arm. Guard: 05 exhaled surprisingly coldly, “Thinks that just because he’s seen combat a few times that he’s suddenly a super strategist and every decision in this program requires his input.”

...*Don’t say anything*, Jack thinks, even as the sleep-deprived part of his brain *sing sing sings* -

*He’s trying to get a rise out of you* -

[Gabriel taps the [Turn off network] option.]

[And as seamless as that -]

[All the trainer-soldiers’ and directors’ and “fake guards’” comms devices are totally cut off from each other.]

“Nobody cares, his questions are always dumb. Of course the directors thought of his stupid ideas - that’s what they’re paid for,” Michael huffs sourly and Jack finds it harder and harder to endure the fatigued fury in his spirit. The guard seems to roll his head, adding dryly, “And yet he thinks he’s hot shit anyways. But I guess that’s what you’d expect from someone who let his Fox die to steal his position -”

And Jack

Stops

Resisting his own bitter and bittersweet *rage*.

He rips his arm out of Michael’s grip, half-whipping around blindly, elbows out to bash his head, but to his much more well-rested and well-trained credit, the Bravo is *ready* for Jack, seemingly acting more on raw instinct than awareness, deftly blocking Jack’s flimsy flailing and jabbing the barrel end of the paintball rifle into Jack’s aching left ribs.

“Hey! Chill out, 76! What’s your problem?” Michael half-snaps, half-stammers, managing to
wrestle Jack’s handcuffed wrists into his grip. The guard sighs heavily, as if containing Jack’s well-worn, song-dripped fury is as easy as breathing, “Did he tell you some sob story about the guy dying in his arms or something?”

"Asshole!” Jack snarls in the coarse-grained darkness of his hood, but suddenly there’s a quick elbow in his ribs and he nearly doubles over in sudden, eye-watering sharp pain -

[ Gabriel rises, digging out the large sticker thing he had hastily printed out in the tech lab this morning. It’s a bulky, awkward grey-black skull, heavily stylized and darkly colored, framed by text that reads, “DON’T FEAR” in big, jagged letters.]

[It’s so over-the-top ridiculous that Gabriel loves it.]

[He hadn’t bothered to fix the labeling, instead prying the whole backing off.]

[He slaps the whole thing over the giant “24” on his left shoulder.]

There’s a half-minute of awkward fumbling and Jack finally forces himself to calm down, letting Michael half-drag him partway down the hall, as his guard mutters loudly, “...Let me give you some advice, rookie - the truth always gets out, one way or another. A junior Delta with only like two years of actual A team experience? No way he should’ve been promoted to Fox! But he weaseled his way in because Luna plays favorites! And how was she gonna say no when he totally saved her life.”

((Σ: Resistance, Day 3 - The sword))

((Marc stares at the camera feed of the drone patrolling the hall where Tsang is mostly pulling Morrison along, his eyes fixated on Soldier: 76 carefully. He’s not surprised that Morrison finally lashed back - if anything, he’s surprised it took this long for a soldier of his caliber to crack emotionally -))

((But he will make sure that Morrison gets back to his cell securely.)))

((It was weird that Reyes called about it a minute ago, Marc thinks as he, Ray, and Ray’s junior Echo, Luisa, watch the camera feed absently.))

((After all, Reyes is in the blackout box room -))

((And then Marc scowls , realizing that -))

((Wait, wasn’t Reyes supposed to have dinner now? ))

((He doesn’t actually know where Gabriel is -))

“And now no one wants to be on his A-team because everyone knows he’ll let people die if he wants to,” Michael says to Jack as he basically hauls him down the hallway. Jack groans a little against the pain that winds up his left half, and Michael just grunts, “Why the hell do you think they stuck him in this program in the first place? Only way they can get anyone on his team is if they stick a bunch of new recruits like you with him. But you can do better than him, 76.”

[And then, Gabriel pulls out the other item he took from the tech lab -]

[One of those new, single-lens “tactical glass” devices.]

[He fits it over his left ear, moving it until the blue-tinted lens covers the left half of his field of vision.
(his dominant eye, after all). It’s disorienting for only one side - crossing awkwardly in the middle of his senses - to be a slightly different color, but then the thing adjusts itself, the blue-tint fading into a clearer view as the device boots up.]

[Slick little thing, Gabriel thinks with a smirk as it tells him the time, his heartbeat, the temperature and humidity, the full works.]

[And then -]

[The device identifies the door and even the button to open it.]

[...If Gabriel grins any harder, his face will crack in half.]

((Marc pulls his comms device out and taps it, saying into it, “Guard: 24, where are you?”))

Jack says nothing, biting back his fury as Michael semi-props him up on his feet, letting go of Jack as he sighs, “Look, a smart recruit like you with previous medic experience? You could make or break an A-team - you don’t have to put up with Reyes’ shady shit. Hang on -”

There’s a beep -

Cell unit door, Jack thinks, straightening himself up.

Another beep -

((...Gabriel doesn’t answer on the comms.))

((Luisa glances up at him as Ray scowls, slipping a hand into his pocket to pull out his own comms device -))

((Marc taps the button and repeats, “Guard: 24, this is an order - what is your position?”))

Another beep -

Another beep.

And then

An angry buzzing sound.

…

The silence is awkward with a touch of surreal confusion.

Even without being able to see, Jack makes a skeptical, confused expression, glancing around in his coarse-grained darkness as Michael mutters lowly, “...What?”

[Gabriel steps up to the door, thinking with a tone crafted from smoke and mirrors and shadows:]

[Time to do or die.]

[He tugs his gaiter up around his nose -]

[And hits the button.]

[The door slides open.]
Beep-beep-beep-beep.

Buzz.

Michael’s second attempt also doesn’t work.

There’s low swearing, and Guard: 05 starts again: beep -

*Is it just 1739? Or a different code?* Jack thinks blearily -

Beep -

("...Uh, Marc?” Ray says slowly -)

((Marc glances at his former brother-in-arms, who is holding his comms device up -))

((And Ray taps at the small X over the network logo.))

Beep -

Beep -

Buzz.

“What the *fuck,*” Michael swears, “I know I did that one right…”

("...The Shared Comms Network is down?” Marc asks, scowling as suspicion crawls across his neck and -)

("Looks like it,” Ray says, turning his comms screen back, but -)

("Uh, sir?” Luisa mutters, gesturing towards the drone camera focusing on Tsang and Morrison -)

“...You sure you’re not using the wrong PIN?” Jack asks dryly, and Michael snaps at him, “Of course *not* - there’s only the one generic PIN for the North Branch. Maybe the damn thing is broken.”

“Maybe you’re just bad at numbers,” Jack retorts wryly but -

*The first virtue in a soldier is endurance -*

The coarse-grained laughter in his throat dies as -

*Be prepared -*

The strange, surreal clarity of *everything -*

*Always prepared -*

*Crashes* in on him.

It’s not *eighteen-twenty-four -*

It’s -

“How the fuck can you be *bad at numbers, 76?”* Michael grumbles loudly, the beeping indicating that he’s trying yet again but -
Slowly, steeply, sharply -

Jack holds his breath as he carefully raises his hands to his hood, pushing the coarse, woven mesh fabric up -

Lifting the darkness from his eyes.

Michael is not watching him at all, instead pouring all his attention on the lockpad.

("...Did he forget the PIN?" Ray asks with bored confusion and Marc’s scowl deepens into an outright glare -)

((Luisa has a short, small, sharp inhale of realization and -))

((Marc snaps his attention towards her, asking roughly, “What is happening, Gonzales?!”))

[Gabriel peers down the hallway -]

[The device over his left eye identifies the drone puttering away from his corner, not terribly fast, only “20 meters away” it tells him -]

("I - I don’t know, sir,” Luisa stammers back, pulling away from him in her seat, and Ray sits up a bit, saying defensively, “Back off, Marc.”)

[Gabriel lifts his paintball rifle with his right hand -]

[And pulls the trigger.]

("Are you in charge here, Delacruz?” Marc snaps right back and -)

[The paintball roars into the drone, splattering against the protective glass around the camera -]

[The drone whines -]

[And then Gabriel steps out and - with his left hand - hurls his combat knife at it.]

("Holy shit!” Luisa suddenly gasps, gesturing to the screen -)

((Marc whips back around -))

((Just in time to see the drone’s camera from “Hallway 4” flicker and die -))

Buzz.

Michael practically spits what Jack assumes is a number of swear words in Mandarin and -

Jack tugs the hood off his head entirely.

I’m handcuffed, sleep-deprived, low on energy, and completely out of practice, he thinks, even as his body defies him and drops into a “ready” combat stance -

But I have the element of surprise -

Michael furiously starts tapping at the lockpad again -

And that, Holmes, Jack thinks -
Is elementary!

Jack *whips* forward, throwing the hood over Michael’s head with a speed that shocks even him - Michael lets out an indistinct shouting howl as the fabric envelops him and he *flails*, flinging his hands up to try and grab at the potato sack, his elbows flying wildly -

But Jack wraps his right arm around Michael’s neck, jamming his right knee into the back of Michael’s right knee. The “guard” crumples with the surprise, scrambling to get a grip on Jack’s arm -

But Jack *locks* his right arm as tightly as he can, using his left hand to grip at his right wrist -

And he *squeezes* all the muscles in his right arm.

A chokehold.

Jack grits his teeth, exhaling steeply as Michael rapidly clues into what’s happening, smashing his left elbow against Jack’s ribs but -

*The first virtue in a soldier is endurance* -

Jack *resists* the pain, careful not to crush Michael’s upper airway, instead pressing his muscles in *hard* against the sides of the senior soldier’s neck, compressing the carotid arteries there. He can *feel* Michael struggling against him, his legs kicking -

But in a matter of *seconds* -

The lack of blood to Michael’s brain kicks in -

And his body goes limp.

(“What the fuck -” Ray states in horrified shock as their attention flips from the dead camera feed to where Morrison has Tsang in some sort of sleeper hold and -))

(“Lockdown!” Marc snaps at Ray, whipping his datapad out and unlocking it -))

((PIN: 6272))

((Password: Silvio))

((He’s immediately opening the Settings as he’s shouting, “Get ready to call Carolina -”))

((Sure enough, the Shared Comms network has been switched “off”.)

((Marc taps it back “on” -))

[Gabriel darts down the hallways, retrieving his combat knife from the plasticy and wiry guts of the drone, before he continues down the length of it and rounds the corner.]

A blood choke is relatively safe and easy to perform -

But just as quickly as consciousness fades -

It can reappear.

So Jack doesn’t bother with his handcuffs, instead pulling the rifle from Michael’s side as he lets the
limp body slump to the floor and -

There’s a *whirring* noise above him -

Jack drops low over Michael’s body as the paintball from the drone narrowly misses him and without thinking, he points the rifle at the little robot, pulling the trigger. The paintball misses the camera covering but hits the shell of the football-sized bot, and the thing *whines* with a strange sort of annoyance -

But Jack is ripping the combat knife from Michael’s jacket -

And (surprising even himself) -

He flicks the knife up with his left hand, drops the rifle from his right, catches the knife -

And then *whips* it at the drone with lightning speed.

[The smartglass identifies another drone about “15 meters away”, hovering away from him. Gabriel doesn’t even aim with the paintball rifle this time.]

[He steps out and *hurls* the knife at the drone -]

((“Oh my god!” Luisa shouts, her attention fixated on the screen, and Marc twists his gaze back up in time to see -))

((The drone monitoring Morrison and Tsang sputters out -))

((Only to be followed by the drone for “Hallway 3” to also suddenly go dark.))

It *smashes* into the plastic, daggering through it, and before the drone even fully hits the ground, Jack is locking his left knee over Michael’s neck, right leg supporting him, scooping up the rifle with his left hand, twisting himself around in an awkward crouch -

He presses the barrel of the paintball rifle to Michael’s groin just as a groan rises from the throat beneath his knee.

“Wha…” Michael mumbles, groggy as all hell, starting to shift uncomfortably beneath Jack, but Jack just snaps, “Gonna need you to stay still for a hot second -”

And he drops his right elbow into Michael’s gut.

The guard howls in pain, spasming from the blow, and with a slight fumble, Jack jolts and skids his way to the downed drone, diving awkwardly for the knife with his handcuffed hands. He’s quickly on his feet again, as Michael stands, gripping at the hood -

But then he *freezes* -

As Jack barely manages to press the edge of the knife - held awkwardly in his left hand as his right holds the paintball rifle upright -

Against the right side of Michael’s neck.

((“Luna!” Ray snaps into the now-working comms device. When silence answers him, he half-begs, half-pleads, “Carolina!!”))

((There’s a pause and then -))
— "Good God, I’m eating dinner, what," Carolina’s familiar voice grumbles back and —

— "We have a problem," Marc says into his own device, "A prisoner has probably taken a guard hostage."

— (And then he watches another hallway drone’s camera feed fade out —)

— "...Dude, I know I said some shit about Reyes, but this is going way too fucking far, 76," Michael mutters tensely, but Jack just rumbles, "I know it’s hard to believe, but this isn’t about you, Tsang. Handcuff key. Now. Other hand out where I can see it."

Leaving his left hand in the air by his head, Michael slowly lowers his right hand to his pocket, and pulls out a small, electronic chip key. He steadily brings it up to where Jack’s wrists are pressed against his right shoulder and the side of his neck, blindly shifting it around until it bumps against the receiver in the cuffs. The receiver chirps and unlocks, the cuffs slipping off Jack’s wrists to the floor.

[Gabriel retrieves his knife, sliding it back in its upside down sheath on his jacket.]

[And then he turns towards the door at the other end of the hallway.]

[The unit door for Cells 6 and 7.]

Jack carefully keeps his left hand steady, pressing the knife to Michael’s neck, as he moves himself around Michael’s body. He slips the rifle strap to his shoulder, leans over and taps at the lockpad:

[Gabriel approaches the door, and taps into the lockpad:]

1
Beep
8
Beep
2
Beep
4
Beep .
Ding.
The door slides open.

[The door slides open.]

— "...Wait," Michael murmurs, voice slightly muffled by the hood, "You knew the PIN? How?"

Jack wishes he had some sort of witty, snappy comeback or sharp, piercing retort or clever, funny one-liner to say - something that makes him feels strong and powerful and super smart for having figured out Gabriel’s crazyass, wild, whimsical plan -

But there’s only panic and adrenaline and crazyass, wild, whimsical excitement running like
songworms in his veins right now -

So all Jack can manage to say is:

“...I’m good with numbers.”

[Gabriel hugs the edge of the wall, peering in. The prisoners have automatically jumped up to line the walls of their cells, but he can hear some of them mumbling in confusion. The smartglass identifies the two drones hovering between the cells.]

[He unsheaths the knife with his left hand.]

With a fluidity he isn’t sure he has ever possessed, Jack quickly adjusts himself, slipping his left arm around Michael’s neck, keeping the knife pressed to his skin, but he lifts the rifle in his right hand and growls, “Move forward. Slowly.”

“Holy shit, your voice is deep,” Michael mutters blearily as they half-shuffled through the door and -

“Jack -” Adrien starts to say, as all the prisoners of Cells 4 and 5 start to move forward from the walls and

“Holy fuck,” Derek mutters in awe as Nadia hisses, “Morrison, what the hell -”

But Jack keeps his eyes trained on the drones, which are already turning towards him.

The door slides shut behind them.

((“...I’m sorry - what the hell did you just say?” Carolina starts to snap, but Luisa is suddenly shouting, “Cell 5!”))

((Marc watches the drones for Cells 4 and 5 as Jack guides a now-hooded Michael inside the cell unit, paintball rifle trained on the Cell 5 drone, knife pressed to Michael’s neck.))

((“...How did he know the PIN?” Ray murmurs in horrified awe -))

((“Does someone want to explain what the hell is happening?” Jim’s voice cuts in over the comms -))

“Jack, what the hell are you doing?” Adrien shouts as the prisoners crowd to the bars and -

“I need your help,” Jack says to all of them, slowly guiding Michael towards the bars of Cell 4, never moving his gaze from the drones. Michael shifts awkwardly, both drones whir threateningly but Jack just

Presses the knife against Michael’s skin harder.

Michael visibly winces.

The drones stop their whirring.

…

The silence is

Deafening.

[Gonna need to be fast with this , Gabriel thinks, Knife one, paintball the other, retrieve the knife,
“...They won’t shoot him,” Jack mutters lowly, “They have some sort of basic friend-or-foe identification - possibly the comms device or keycards on the guards work with their signaling.”

“...Shit,” Selena murmurs, “It seems so obvious now.”

“But once I let go of him, they’ll start firing,” Jack says, continuing to inch Michael towards Cell 4, “But if we’re fast enough, I can paintball then knife them. But I need you guys to be ready.”

“...What the fuck,” Michael says loudly, but Jack ignores him, glancing at the Cell 4 members, shifting his eyes from Jin to Ayinde to Maritoni to Derek to Cristina as he murmurs quietly:

“...Will you help me?”

The members of Cell 4 glance at each other, when -

“You’re crazy as all hell, Morrison, but you’ve got style,” Derek says, moving to position himself right behind Michael. A second later, Jin steps up beside him, murmuring, “We’re all in deep shit now.”

“Are you kidding me?” Maritoni chortles, “I’ve wanted to try a real SERE prison break for years now!” She joins them and then -

Most of the members of Cell 4 are crowded behind them.

Ready.

[Gabriel takes a steep inhale through his gaiter.]

Be prepared.

“Ready?” Jack asks.

[Gabriel exhales slowly.]

Always prepared.

“Ready!” Cell 4 choruses back.

And -

[Gabriel steps into the doorway and -]

Jack fires

One

Two.

[He flings the knife at Drone 6 and immediately pulls the trigger on Drone 7.]

The first paintball hits the camera cover of the drone by Cell 5, and the second splatters on the cover of the drone by Cell 4.

Both drones whir and whine electronically, struggling and shuddering the same way their counterparts did in Survival and Evasion -
Jack releases his grip on Michael.

But before Michael can even react -

Twelve pairs of hands reach through the bars of Cell 4 -

And seize him, dragging him back and restraining him solidly against the bars.

[Drone 6 drops like a brick as Drone 7 makes those eerie clicking noises of distress as its camera covering is suddenly splattered in paint.]

[But Gabriel is already racing to the knife in Drone 6 -]

Smooth as silk

Quick as lightning

Fluid as water

Jack drops the rifle, letting it swing on the strap on his shoulder - he slips the knife to his right hand

And rockets it towards the drone above Cell 4.

It slices through it and as the drone starts to drop, Jack bolts the one, two steps to reach where the knife hits the ground. The drone by Cell 5 is flipping around, spinning its camera and rifle barrel towards him, making ominous clicking noises -

Jack dives for the knife, scrambling to an awkward knee

And he snaps the blade in a struggling half-throw at the drone.

[Gabriel drops to a kneel and manages to torque himself around with a smoke-like fluidity, snapping the knife towards Drone 7.]

The blade pierces its head.

[The knife daggers into its side.]

And the drone crashes to the ground.

[And the drone crashes to the ground.]

The silence is

An immense relief.

Jack heaves a huge breath, his body feels feverish, covered in pins and needles and clammy aches from being stuck in the blackout box, burning with a lacy, jittery adrenaline in his blood, songworms still slithering in his brain -

[Gabriel rises, heading towards the crackling remains of Drone 7 as the prisoners of Cells 6 and 7 slowly move towards their bars. They’re hesitant for obvious reasons, but they’re also -]

“...Holy shit,” Sam says in awe as Robin gasps, “Is that what I missed during Survival and Evasion?”

“Sure is,” Adrien replies with a huge, smug, knowing grin on his face as Jack forces himself to stand.
[“Holy shit,” one of them says in utter awe as Prisoner: 102 - Wes - murmurs, “What the fuck …?”]

“So what now?” Cristina grunts, as all the members of Cell 4 struggle to keep Michael pinned to the bars.

“His key card,” Jack says, heading toward the drone. He pries the knife from its hull and stalks over to Michael.

And taps the edge of the steep, sharp blade against his Adam’s apple.

Michael stops resisting.

“...And then we get the hell out of here,” Jack mutters.

Because he is ready

To fight.

[Gabriel tugs his gaiter down, grinning at the prisoners of Cell 7 as he resheaths the knife, saying smokily:]

[“Who feels like playing soldier today?”]

Chapter End Notes

It took us like ten chapters but we’re finally here!
Resistance, Day 3 - Hour: ERROR [This program has been coup d’état]

Chapter Summary

From the ashes, a fire shall be woken,
(There's a room where the light won't find you -)
A light from the shadows shall spring;
(Holding hands while the walls come tumblin' down.)
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
(When they do -)
The crownless again shall be king.
(I'll be right behind you.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Welcome to your life.
There’s no turning back.
Even while we sleep
We will find you acting on your best behavior.
Turn your back on Mother Nature.

Everybody wants to rule the world.

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Σ: Resistance, Day 3 - Deep roots are not reached by the frost

Wednesday, February 20, 2047: 1704 hours - security room in the North Branch facility

One of the reasons the CIA and USSOCOM had agreed to using this monstrosity of semi-underground facilities in the middle of nowhere, Idaho for SEP was specifically so they could stage unique training sessions for the supersoldiers. At nearly two-full Special Forces companies (132 candidates, just twelve shy of true SF companies), about twenty-or-so trainers, about seven doctors and geneticists, six directors, and an Army cook, the location for the program had to be big enough to support full-scale training like SERE and the future MOS courses, and also small enough to be
“discreet” from both a military and intelligence operations perspective.

Four months ago, when the Director had put him in charge of organizing the CIA’s half of it, the location had seemed ideal from a “top secret CIA program perspective” -

And even if Marc had held...qualms about the state of the weird, turn-of-the-millennium facility -

It had seemed to support effectively everything the program had required.

(Much like the CIA “operative enhancement program” it had housed about six months before that.)

Marc had even rationalized that if the facility was attacked - or somehow infiltrated - the awkward “branching” of conjoined parts could easily be segmented upon lockdown: for example, if the central, main facility was attacked, personnel could quickly be evacuated to another part, and the central facility could be rapidly “locked down” by resetting all the doors, therefore isolating the problem like stopping the spread of an infection.

However, his focus had been on ensuring the secrecy of the program’s most…

Impactful and significant aspects:

The “soldier enhancement serum” contents -

The numerous modified biosynthetic genes, proteins, enzymes, and materials that would transform soldiers into unstoppable, unbreakable warriors.

So while he had anticipated the possibility of a hostile foreign group trying to infiltrate to get access to the biodata of the serums -

Marc “Sigma” Guerra will readily admit

He had absolutely not anticipated the program’s very candidates to god damn revolt in the middle of training.

We’re only two months in, Marc thinks with sarcastic despair as Carolina’s voice snaps through the comms:

“Let me get this fucking straight - something or someone changed the goddamn door PINs in the North Branch facility, Prisoner: 76 choked out Guard: 05, and he knows this...new secret PIN thing?”

Ray sighs heavily again, but taps his comms device and mutters, “That’s about right, yup.”

“And how many guards are present in the North Branch right now?” Carolina demands.

Ray glances at Marc, who just taps his own comms device and exhales sharply, “…I don’t know.”

…

The silence is

Really awkward.

“...You don’t know,” Carolina repeats, in that tone she gets when she’s about to go full “Team Sergeant” on all their asses. In their younger days, back when they were both 7436 juniors, she would’ve stormed off to do some cathartic target practice to release her anger and frustration before
Serena would’ve found her fuming by herself and calmed her down.

But they’re not rookies now.

And it’s entirely possible that one-hundred-and-eight semi-starving, sleep-deprived soldiers’ health and access to food and water now hangs on them not fucking this up.

Marc rolls his eyes, taps his comms and says, “There’s three of us in the security room, Jim in the blackout box room, and Tsang is in Cell Unit 4-5.”

And then Reyes.

Marc’s eyes narrow at the mere thought of Silvio’s ungrateful, petty apprentice running around, no doubt having the time of his life in the chaos.

_I will teach him respect if it’s the last thing I do -_

“We’re losing drones by the minute,” Marc continues into the comms, flicking his gaze to the drone security feed, where four of the eight “cell unit” drone cameras are dead, and three hallway feeds are out. Even as he watches, another “patrol drone” camera gets covered in paint and then disappears. Ray’s junior, Luisa, is frantically trying to salvage them, speeding the last two drones towards their security room as fast as she can, rerouting their patrols to bring them closer to their position.

“Get Sarge to run a crack on the facility door,” Marc tells Carolina, before he glances back down at his datapad -

Where the [Change PIN] option currently shows:

[Enter Current PIN]: 1568

[Enter New PIN]: 0000

[Confirm New PIN]: 0000

[System Administrator]: [Operative.Sigma]

[Enter User PIN]: 6272

[Enter User Password]: Silvio

His desperate attempts to reset the PIN in the North Branch but -

The tiny sub-window states in bold clear letters:

[“One or more input boxes is incorrect. Please try again.”]

As if on cue, Sarge’s voice cuts in over the comms with, “I’m on my way with my Chip Armory reader -”

And then his voice immediately cuts out

As the Shared Comms Network is disabled again.

Marc sighs, taps over to his window for the network, and reenables it, thinking bitterly, _Reyes, I swear to god, I know this is you -_
It takes a fraction of a second for the network to flicker back on, and Sarge’s voice comes back in part way through his explanation:

“- Still will take me about five minutes to run the program - these doors are military grade and the restricted-access locks will institute an automatic lockdown if I’m not careful.”

“But you can do it, right?” Marc asks, and there’s a brief pause before Sarge replies, “A PIN-restriction is simple enough, so I’m not nervous, if that’s what you mean...but uh -”

“I got a blowtorch, a buncha drills, some screwdrivers, and a sledgehammer ready,” Rick says gruffly, interrupting the Echo Director. The Charlie Director huffs loudly, adding, “And about three Charlies standing by for when this thing blows up in our faces.”

“...Please don’t break the door,” Marc says dryly, and Rick just snorts, “From where I’m standing, this thing is already broken. You can run all the tech you want on the damn thing - a grenade or several will solve this problem real fast -”

“Please don’t blow up the door,” Marc states, just as aridly but with a lot more urgency.

“...So we do have back-up, in the event of a lockdown,” Sarge concludes cheerfully.

Marc gives Ray a deadpan, borderline “just kill me” expression, which Ray mirrors back.

“Sir,” Luisa says, “The hallway drones are outside the door. I’m going for Cell Unit 2-3 right now -”

But before she can even finish the sentence -

The 2-3 cell unit door - in the “peripherals” of the two drones’ cameras - slides open -

A shadowy figure moves into frame with lightning fast speed -

And then both cameras are suddenly obscured with thick, gooey orange paint.

“...Never mind,” Luisa mutters, turning her attention to the 8-9 drones but -

The door to Cells 8 and 9 opens too.

“What -” Luisa asks in horror as Ray lurches to grab the controller for Drone 9 but -

“We have to move,” Marc says immediately, rising from his seat as he watches the camera feeds for Cells 8 and 9 get covered in more orange paint. He glares outright, saying, “If we stay here, we’re sitting ducks. None of us have rifles - we need to get to the staging room, and if we let Morrison’s group get there first, we’re done. Our best bet is getting there and defending the supplies until Sarge gets the access door open.”

Jim is a lost cause, Marc considers, No one has heard from him in two minutes. If Reyes didn’t force him into a blackout box, then he’s gotta be in a cell. But then that means Reyes is running around attacking drones. He won’t be at the staging room.

And then Marc scowls bitterly.

And once Reyes is done sowing his seeds of discord, he’ll throw himself in some obscure room and feign innocence when this is all over. And Carolina will defend him again, Serena will take her side, and Sofía will let him off easy -
Just like they did in Survival and Evasion.

The thought leaves a bitter taste in the back of Marc’s throat.

So much potential there, and yet he lets it rot, playing these dumbass tricks just to prove he can, Marc thinks, as Ray jumps to his feet, Luisa shortly after. Both Echoes are detaching the remotes to the two remaining drones, switching them over from “full autonomy” to “semi-autonomy.”

But don’t worry, Reyes, Marc thinks as he stuffs away his datapad and comms device -

And turns towards the door -

I’ll make you into something better.

He pauses by the door, adding abyssally:

Even if I have to hurt a brave little soldier like Jack Morrison to do it.

...The door to the staging room is only thirty - forty feet to their right, on the opposite side of the hallway, and it only requires a passcard to enter. There, they can arm themselves (admittedly, only with paintball guns) and basically hole up until the rest of the trainers, directors, and senior soldiers can get in.

But it feels like it’s a mile away.

Marc gives one last glance to the drone screen, where the remaining two drones (just outside their security door) show that the hallway is empty. He then looks towards Ray and Luisa, before he pulls his combat knife from its sheath on his jacket, saying calmly, “Let’s go.”

--------

It’s my own design.

It’s my own remorse.

Help me to decide.

Help me make the most of freedom…

And of pleasure.

Nothing

ever

lasts

forever.

Everybody wants to rule the world.

--------
“Director Watanabe says he estimates five minutes for his cracking program,” Selena says, pulling Michael’s comms device away from her ear. But the Junior Echo glances at Jack, saying lowly, “I would estimate closer to two, maybe three minutes. PIN-lockpads aren’t hard to crack, especially with a Chip Armory reader.”

“So we don’t have much time,” Jack thinks aloud. He looks about, assessing the group.

...There’s some truth to the old saying, “There’s strength in numbers.”

Now that both cells are open, the combined groups number twenty-four in total, though at least one of them (in this case, Prisoner: 72 - David) has to restrain Michael. The hood is now off their own “prisoner,” but the knife is still pressed to his neck, and Adrien has the one paintball rifle pointed towards Michael’s gut, just as back-up.

But despite their collective strength

The entire 4-5 group looks worn.

Well-worn, like the pages of old paperbacks: exhausted, fading fast without real sleep, real food, real comfort for the last three days, with none of them wearing boots boots boots boots, or even the heavier tactical gear like Michael.

Armed with a single knife and a single paintball rifle.

A few “low blow” paintballs to the gut or groin or even the head could probably severely shatter whatever tactical advantage the group has, downing or disorienting a number of them before the others could get to some sort of safety.

...They have only one other advantage.

Jack knows the PIN to every lockpad-restricted door in the auxiliary facility.

And with Michael’s keycard, they can get into every restricted room.

However, that advantage has an immediate counter:

The only person who has actually seen the majority of the facility -

Is Michael.

So now they have to make a decision:

“...We shouldn’t assume the drones are down just because ours are,” Jack says to the group, “Guerra said over the comms that a lot of them are going down, but we shouldn’t relax just because of that. They know that Michael’s comms are on - they could be trying to con us.”

“...You really think they’d plan that far in advance?” Lucas asks skeptically, but Nadia shrugs, saying, “Most of these prison camp training sessions end in a weird, fake break-out and escape plan. I wouldn’t be surprised if this was all orchestrated.”
“If it’s orchestrated, no one told me,” Michael grumbles from where David is holding him.

Jack scowls - not in anger, just in concentration, because -

...Gabriel is also running around somewhere.

It’s true that it’s entirely possible Gabriel is on the other side of the facility access door, stuck with the other trainers and directors and senior soldiers, especially since he wasn’t sure that anyone had gotten Jack out of his box only four or five minutes ago -

But somehow

Jack knows Gabriel is doing something else, right this very second.

*He planned this,* Jack thinks fiercely - pride mixed with awe mixed with admiration mixed with exhaustion, *He changed the PIN. He knew three days ago that he could - that he would - change the PIN.*

And despite how people perceive him -

Or rather, how he wants people to perceive him -

Gabriel never does anything halfway through.

Jack knows that now.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt.

...Though he definitely took his sweetass time about it.

And he could’ve just written that “1824” was a PIN.

...*Though from a man who idolizes Holmes and Edgar Allan Poe, I shouldn’t be surprised,* Jack thinks with a wry, admittedly pretty forgiving tone.

“So here’s the thing,” Jack says to the group, “Do we want to leave the knife on Michael, or do you want me to carry it, in case we cross any drones?”

The group looks at him, glances among each other and then -

“Just twist his arm.”

The twenty-three “prisoners” all stare incredulously at Jin.

The Junior Medic looks around, then moves over towards where David is holding Michael by the door to Cell 4 and goes, “Like this -”

And with shockingly fast movements -

The medic replaces David’s position, twisting both of Michael’s arms behind his back, elbows bent upwards, with his wrist looking painfully closer to his shoulder blades. Michael winces, grunting, “God damn, Kurosawa, you don’t have to be such an asshole about it.”

“I owe you one from training last week, Tsang,” Jin chuckles with surprisingly light humor. David shrugs, and then holds the knife out to Jack, before flipping it over so he can take it handle-first. Jack grins at him sleepily, but then concentrates again, saying to Michael, “Will you guide us?”
“...Are you seriously asking that -” Michael starts to snap but his words die into a high-pitched whine as Jin pulls on his arms a bit. When the medic eases up, Michael huffs, “I’m gonna remember this, Kurosawa.”

But then he looks more contemplative, glancing at Jack and the knife skeptically.

But Jack just smiles faintly, offering casually, “Sooner you help us, the sooner we all get dinner - you included.”

Michael seems to think it over, saying, “If I help you, they’ll just throw me in a cell.”

“Sure,” Jack agrees brightly, “They’re also tired and hungry so they might not care that much. Either you get us out the short way, or we all wander these halls until the trainers put us back here. Your choice.”

The “prisoner” stares at Jack, his expression oddly neutral, until he mutters, “...All the hallways loop back on each other, so any route could get you to the main access hallway, but once you’re there it’s a straight line.”

“We just need to find a place to hide until they pass us,” Jack says rather optimistically and even he is surprised by how quick and fluid the lie comes to him.

Michael clearly doesn’t buy it, as he asks suspiciously, “Do you actually have a plan?”

In his peripherals, Jack sees some of the junior soldiers glance at each other, and Adrien scowls nervously.

Of course they have no goddamn plan.

Jack did this on a whim -

And pure faith on a handwritten note tucked into his pocket three days ago.

So yeah, hiding could work.

But Jack doesn’t expect it will work.

Not for long.

What they really need -

Is control.

...But Michael doesn’t need to know that.

“Look,” Jack says conversationally, tapping the paintball rifle with the knife, “Get us to wherever they keep these, or maybe the food and water, and we’ll plan our strategy better from there. We gotta push the attack now, or we’re gonna lose our only advantages really fast.”

Michael still doesn’t look fully convinced, but he sighs, “Whatever. Let’s go.”

Jack glances at Adrien, who nods to him with a surprising level of seriousness, saying, “Ready.”

“...Stay close,” Jack says to everyone, “Keep your heads down. Protect each other. Paintballs hurt but they can’t kill us.”
And that which doesn’t kill you

Makes you stronger.

Though he’s feeling less and less confident about that with each passing second.

Jack turns around, and hits the button. The door slides open -

And the group moves outside.

Oddly, their cell unit appears to be “contained” at the end of some sort of branching hallway, because the space directly in front of them is a wall - about twenty to twenty-five feet away - and an immediate left turn. Jack and Adrien peek around the corner - it leads to another short hallway, also full of odd turns and doors lining the sides.

...It strangely reminds Jack of the barracks section of the main facility: a lot of “normal” sliding doors (unlike some rooms with double doors), spaced evenly apart, just big enough for bedrooms, like in a dorm complex.

It’s...a bit disorienting, actually -

Like a horror movie in an old, screwed up hotel.

“...Right,” Michael says hoarsely, and the group moves out, turning right up the short hallway, passing doors (some with big X’s spraypainted on them) that look like they haven’t been opened in years, some of them rusted at the edges -

“...What is the North Branch?” Miguel asks quietly as they reach the end of the hallway, hitting another cross-section. Michael doesn’t answer immediately, and Jack glances back at him to ask -

“...I don’t know,” their “prisoner” says, “Honest truth. They haven’t told us what it was used for. Take a left here.”

They turn left and pass a few more doors, going with a brisk but quiet walking pace, and Jack finally glances at one of the plaques by a door:

[Φ - Χ]

“...Aren’t those Greek letters?” Vanessa asks, and Michael mutters, “Man, I guess? I’ll be honest - I wasn’t asking too many questions because it was just awkward to think about.”

“...The US military uses the NATO phonetic alphabet,” Nadia says, and Jack hears the curiosity in her tone. The Junior Charlie explains, “That’s why we’re all called by those names instead of the letters - Alpha, Bravo, Charlie -”

The 18A and 180A - the “Commanders.”

The 18B - the Weapons Sergeants.

The 18C - the Combat Engineers.

“Delta, and Echo” Ayinde counts with her.

The 18D - the Combat Medics.

The 18E - the Comms Sergeants
But Jack adds quietly:
“Fox, X-ray and Zulu.”

The 18F - the Intelligence Sergeants.

The 18X - the Special Forces candidates.

And the 18Z -

The Team Sergeant.

The “true team leader."

“I can’t imagine any US military program would break that to use the Greek alphabet,” Aisha says as they reach another intersection. Jack, Adrien, and Robin check the corners, and -

No drones yet, Jack thinks suspiciously, glancing back towards the group when -

“A window?” he asks suddenly, as he realizes there’s an indoor-window to the room behind them. The others follow his gaze, but the room is too dark to see into. So some of them - Mari, Cristina, Lucas - step up and cup their hands around their eyes to peer inside -

“Oh fuck,” Lucas swears, jerking away as Cristina blanches. Mari turns back around, muttering with a horrified tone:

“...It’s an operating room.”

Jack wanders up to it, shielding his eyes to look inside and -

Sure enough -

A bunch of abandoned hospital equipment lies about: the table, the monitors, the trays and lights.

...But Jack also spots the tell-tale signs of recentness: a biotic field canister by the foot of the operating table, a refrigerator with the bright yellow “biotic” logo, the “nanobot” packets hanging from an IV rack.

“...CIA maybe?” David mutters, and Selena snorts, “I wouldn’t doubt it. Trust the CIA to be creepy as all hell.”

...Jack keeps his observations to himself.

Somehow -

Silence is the answer here.

“...I thought we were trying to be fast,” Michael mutters sourly, and Jack turns back around, saying, “We are. Which way?”

Michael seems to pause, as if hesitating, before he answers, “We’re just a hallway down from the staging room -”

“Perfect,” Jack says, but Michael continues:

“But the most direct route to the access door is up another way.”
Jack pauses, glancing up at Adrien. His roommate gives him a solid nod, shaking the paintball rifle in his hands, and Jack nods back, saying aloud, “Get us to the staging room.”

“Alright,” Michael mutters suspiciously, “Right here.”

The group moves into the hallway on the right and -

“This place really is a maze, isn’t it?” Sam murmurs nervously as they pass yet another small cross-intersection, and Michael just barks out a hoarse laugh, saying, “You have no fucking idea. They gave us Bravos this god awful map within the first hour because people were already getting lost. The other groups had it fucking easy, I swear - half of them never had to leave the main staging and interview area.”

The “prisoner’s” frustration is palpable.

“Only maybe like...eight or nine people had to do the actual grunt work,” Michael continues, his tone lower and more solemn, “They made Jim sit in the goddamn blackout box room for hours on end.”

“At least he didn’t have to sit in one,” Robin retorts sharply, and Michael just sighs, “God damn, are you jerks actually going to be resentful that we did our jobs? Sometimes, people have to play the bad guy, even if it is just for training. Wait -”

The group slows as they approach another turn, and Michael murmurs softly, “This is the main staging hallway. Interview rooms will show up first, both sides, and then the staging room door will be on the right.”

“So we’re close -” Adrien starts to say, but Michael scowls darkly, adding, “Yeah, but just like...thirty feet from it is the door to the security room. And across from that is the Fox room. No fucking clue what they got in there. After that is the cross-hallway, and then we make another right and that brings us back to the main access hallway, but that shit is long. And huge. Feels like it was designed for cars to pass through it.”

“So once we get the rifles, we have to hunker down or book it?” Jack asks him, and Michael rolls his shoulders as best he can, muttering, “Hunker down is probably your safe bet. They don’t have cameras in the staging room, and you got a keycard...but it’s risky as all hell. Might be a safer bet to grab the guns and fall back to one of these Greek rooms. Let them pass us there. Or grab the guns and take a side route.”

But either way -

“We need the guns first,” Jack says, glancing around the group. Despite their exhaustion and weariness, they look incredibly resolved, and Jack feels a small swell of pride over how everyone is willing to try for such a risky “reward” -

(The only reward for heroes is pain -)

And the more likely ending:

An extra round of “non-torture” torture.

Jack nods to the group, murmuring, “We go fast here. Quiet but fast. We have the potential to lose a lot of ground if they come out of the security room.”

“There’s only, what, three of them?” Derek says, before he actually makes a fist with his left hand and smacks it into his right palm, “Let’s just take them.”
Several members of the group look dully unimpressed by Derek’s suggestion, but Jack sees that a few of them look bolstered by the difference in numbers.

But Jack looks Derek dead in the eye and says:

“You’d get your ass handed to you.”

Because Jack knows it is true.

Jack has not a single doubt in his mind that Guerra could single-handedly fight off all twenty-four soldiers, weak and exhausted as they are.

Not even Carlos knew if Gabriel could outsmart Guerra, Jack thinks, And if Gabriel - in the best fighting condition of his life, an actual “battle-hardened” veteran, a skilled tactician, and a true combat medic - couldn’t take Guerra on, no fucking way will twenty-four exhausted, weary, sleep- and food-deprived “prisoners.”

But if they get some more paintball rifles…

They won’t be any less exhausted or less weary -

But they will be marginally better-armed.

And then -

Jack glances at Michael.

They have to try to gain the tactical “high ground” -

The security room and the “Fox” room.

And Michael is their only “bargaining chip.”

If we can control the drones, we can gain another advantage, Jack thinks, and he glances among the group, explaining, “Guns, and then we can try the security room. But guns and water first.”

Derek looks stubbornly insistent for a second, but then sighs, saying, “Sure thing, Commander Morrison.”

Jack makes a face, muttering, “You don’t gotta call me that -”

“Drill Sergeant Morrison is back,” Adrien chuckles lowly, and Jack replies dryly, “I’m going to make you do push-ups when we get out of here, Morris.”

“Oh no you aren’t,” Adrien retorts, “You owe me. For the mattress pad. And for all this shit. You owe me big time, Morrison.”

“Ain’t got nothing of value with me,” Jack admits, hoping to get Adrien off his back but his roommate just laughs, “You would think that.”

“What?” Jack asks in confusion but -

“Are we going or not?” Nadia hisses at them and Jack holds up his hand, checks the hallway again -

And then flags them.
The group effectively bolts into the quietest, sock-clad run Jack has ever experienced. Even Jin, half-hauling Michael by his contorted wrists, manages to keep up. They’re passing the first set of interrogation rooms, then the second, then the last set -

Jack can see the paper taped to the door that says, “Guard Staging Room” in big, blocky, handwritten letters -

And then it slides open

And Jack

Stops.

His breath catches bitter and arid in his throat as the rest of Cell Unit 4-5 skids to a stop around him -

“Saved me a lot of trouble from trying to find you.”

The words

Drip

Drip

Drip

Up Jack’s spine

Like shards of liquid glass.

And Guerra steps out of the room, paintball rifle in his right hand, combat knife in his left.

((There’s a room where the light won’t find you -))

And though Jack knows the director wouldn’t actually kill him

Every instinct, every sense, every feeling, every nerve in his body also knows that

Guerra could kill him in a heartbeat

With only paintballs and just six to seven inches of sharpened stainless steel.

Guerra squares up in the hallway, dead center in front of Jack and the others, and behind him, one of the trainer-soldiers follows after him, taking his left side (Jack’s right), closest to the door of the staging room. About a fraction of a second later, another person slips out from the room, taking Guerra’s right (Jack’s left), trailed by two drones and -

Jack’s eyes widen at Luisa.

She has a paintball rifle strapped to her shoulder, but she’s carrying what looks to be some sort of controller, and with the drones following her every step, it’s pretty clear that she’s guiding them.

She looks terrified.

Luisa says nothing aloud, but shakes her head at him fearfully, mouthing, “Stop. Please.”

But Jack immediately has his attention on Guerra, who takes a casual, easy, almost languid half-step towards him, saying conversationally, “I was worried you would use that PIN to hide somewhere
more secure, but you’re either braver or dumber than you look to put yourself out in the open like this.”

Jack takes a half-step back, but then -

He whips out his right arm -

And presses the edge of the knife to Michael’s left carotid artery.

Jack can feel Michael freeze next to him.

Guerra watches the motion impassively, before uttering, “...Oh, soldado ...How sad.”

“End the simulation,” Jack states to him, refusing to move the knife, “We won.”

Guerra looks at him almost sadly, saying calmly, “...You didn’t win anything. You made a ballsy move against a single guard and three drones. You are armed with one paintball rifle and a combat knife.”

“And a hostage,” Jack says, though he’s not thrilled with how his tired voice cracks over that, “Article Three says we will make every effort to escape. We captured one of your soldiers. We win.”

“Cute,” Guerra says dryly, “Soldier: 05, tell them what would happen in a real prison camp.”

Jack scowls, but then -

“...They would shoot me,” Michael says, his word vibrating against the edge of the knife, “And then they would shoot you.”

...Jack knows this is true.

“So here’s the deal, Prisoner: 76,” Guerra says, as casually as if they were getting coffee, “Instead of beating all twenty-four prisoners within inches of your lives, I will play nice and bargain with you for the release of Guard: 05.”

Jack can feel the others behind him glance and shift amongst each other nervously.


On his left, in his peripherals, Jack sees Mari glance at Vanessa anxiously.

But Jack also knows -

(The first virtue in a soldier is endurance of -)

“...End the simulation,” Jack repeats.

He will resist.

The abyssal depths of Guerra’s eyes only seem to deepen, and he states with a cold, otherworldly fury -

“...Perhaps I didn’t make this clear enough -”
Rising from the unknowable, unreachable depths of his heart -

“- If you refuse to make a trade -”

Or whatever is left of it.

“- I will cut you down where you stand, snap a few of your ribs, and then personally drag you by your Goldilocks hair to that blackout box, where you will sit for the next forty-eight hours,” the man named War informs him.

As darkly calm as if he were informing Jack about an incoming storm.

((- Holding hands while the walls come tumbling down.))

But still -

Jack does not move the knife from Michael’s neck.

“...Director Watanabe is running his cracking program on the access door as we speak,” Guerra continues, “He will be done in another minute or two. And then you will be outnumbered, out-armed, and outplayed. And I will call your bluff.”

Jack does not move the knife, but he lies, “I am not bluffing -”

“A soldier with a heart like yours would never harm a hostage,” Guerra tells him, as if reading Jack like an open book.

Jack

Wavers .

Just a little bit.

And Guerra’s gaze seems to soften -

Just a little bit.

((When they do -))

“...Even if your friends’ lives were at stake,” Guerra says quietly, contemplatively, as if seeing something else in Jack, or the moment, or even -

“He wouldn’t harm a hostage -”

Jack

Stops

Breathing

As a combat knife appears against Guerra’s left carotid artery -

And Gabriel’s voice rings out like the soft crackling of smoke from a fire:

“But I would.”

((- I’ll be right behind you.))
And suddenly -

*Every* door to the different interrogation rooms behind Cell Unit 4-5 slides open -

And candidates come **flooding** out.

“Holy shit,” Derek shouts as people seem to push the members of 4-5 out of the way, and Jack twists, as Wes, Sarah, and Jamie - all armed with paintball rifles, suddenly appear at his side, aiming the guns towards the three “guards.” But at the same time, Luisa *freezes*, slowly putting her hands in the air -

As several more soldier-candidates appear behind them.

The trainer-soldier quickly does the same, as it becomes apparent that the group Gabriel had been leading is pressing paintball rifles to their backs.

And for what might be the first time since the program started -

Guerra looks *frustrated*.

“I thought you were going to hide somewhere,” he states tersely, and Gabriel’s head - hooded, with a strange, blue-tinted lens thing over his left eye - appears over Guerra’s right shoulder.

“What - me, hide in the shadows while other people do the hard work?” Gabriel chuckles smugly, “Not my style. Though I do gotta thank you for so generously leaving the security room unguarded - I didn’t bother taking out the cameras in the interview rooms.”

“...You were in the Fox room,” Guerra suddenly says, figuring it out, “You went all the way around the facility.”

“Not all who wander are lost,” Gabriel says with a obsidian-radiant smirk and Jack -

Exhales softly.

A sigh of *relief*.

Because even though he is bone-achingy tired and well-worn like the edges of a paperback book -

Jack *knows*.

Jack just *knows* that this is the end -

“Renewed shall be -”

Guerra’s words drip-drip-drip and suddenly -

*Oh shit*, Gabriel thinks as he senses Guerra shifting and he -

“- Blade that was broken -”

*Barely* manages to jerk his head away in time -

As Guerra twists his left hand up over his right shoulder -

Nearly adding a scar to Gabriel’s face.
There’s hoarse shouting and yelling, but Gabriel ignores it, using his down-and-leftward momentum to swing down towards Guerra’s back, lifting his right knee to ram it into Guerra’s own right leg - Guerra jerks and jolts, whipping his left hand back around at shoulder-level -

But Gabriel ducks under his arm, sweeping himself out and forward, in between Guerra and Jack’s group -

But even with his increased vision on Guerra’s movements -

It doesn’t actually do anything to help him stop those movements.

And in the span of a second -

(Blink and you’ll miss it)

Guerra is immediately twisting his left arm forward in a short, quick thrust, jabbing the knife towards Gabriel -

Fuck, he’s fast, Gabriel thinks, barely getting his right arm up in time, using the paintball rifle as a shield - there’s the screeching of metal on metal as Guerra’s combat knife - clearly of better quality than these cheesy little recreation paintball guns - serrates through the rifle’s metal without a hitch -

And then Guerra is shifting forward, his right knee moving straight for Gabriel’s gut -

Gabriel gets his left leg up in time, blocking the jab, but the movement and the knife in his now-useless paintball gun force him to stumble back, more into the middle of the open space between Guerra and Jack.

Guerra is immediately in a ready stance, knees bent, right hand up with the paintball rifle, left hand falling back to protect his open left side, bright orange paint drip-drip-dripping down his combat knife.

Gabriel practically mirrors his motion, also in a ready stance, falling into his familiar in-fighter boxing pose, but he tisks at himself, because idiot, stupid, dumbass, now your gun is as good as useless - maybe he can still use it as a shield -

“Gabe!”

It takes only a fraction of a second

(A single heartbeat)

But Gabriel inhales something sweet and steep that stabs at his heart and guts in all the right ways -

As his brain shivers (the good kind) at hearing that nickname

Said by that voice

Ragged and tired and more fraying than he remembers

But still sweet and steep and sharp

Like the finest drink of whiskey.

His instincts - trained and honed and battle-worn - know not to look away from Guerra, but Gabriel takes a fraction of a second to glance over his right shoulder, back towards -
Jack twists the knife away from Michael’s neck, flipping it around to pinch it at the end of the handle, before he lightly tosses towards Gabriel -

Gabriel immediately drops the gun and whips his right hand out to grab the knife’s handle in a reverse grip. To match, he flips his own knife in his left hand and now -

_Duality._

One in each hand.

(Something about this feels so _right_) -

“...Holy shit,” Sarah mutters next to Jack as Wes whispers in awe, “Is he for real??”

Jack _grins._

_Malthael, eat your heart out_, Gabriel thinks with a smirk, and as Guerra scowls at him, his smile only twists further. Gabriel teases him, “Don’t you want to say the next line? It’s my favorite part of the poem -”

_(The crownless -)_

“...You’re ambidextrous,” Guerra says, both a question and a statement. Gabriel’s grin only deepens as he retorts sarcastically, “And you’re observant.”

“Silvio was right.”

Gabriel _freezes_ at the sudden mention of his mentor’s name and -

Guerra drops his own paintball gun, kneels a bit -

And pulls a second knife from his boot.

_(Again shall -)_

Gabriel’s eyes widen with _shock_ -

As Guerra readies himself again, knives in both hands, saying softly, “You _are_ more like me than I thought.”

_(Be king.)_

Gabriel exhales sharply as Guerra gives him that quiet, patient, _eerie_ smile, taunting right back, “Alright, Aragorn - you seem to want to learn this lesson the hard way...so come here and get taught.”

Jamie whistles low but Jack tenses as he realizes -

_Gabriel won’t win this -_

Gabriel tries to remain calm, but inside his thoughts are racing: _what will he do, is he truly ambidextrous, which hand does he favor, fuck, I’m totally fucked here, I’m not _great_ with knives - fucking hell, I didn’t even know how to throw them until a month ago -_

Jack holds out his left hand to Adrien, gesturing for the gun.
His roommate blinks once, realizes what Jack is doing, and then glares fiercely, snapping quietly, “No way!”

“Adrien, please -” Jack starts to plead, but Adrien just interrupts, “No fucking way am I letting you go out there -”

“What’s the matter?” Guerra taunts to Gabriel, “You only have courage if you’re attacking someone from behind? Or do you need some naive recruit from nowhere to take the first hit for you -”

Gabriel glares at that -

And with the fluidity of smoke and fire

He drops his right foot down on the stock end of the broken paintball rifle.

It lurches upright, maybe a foot, two feet off the ground with the sheer force of Gabriel crunching it -

And then Gabriel smashes it forward, kicking it at Guerra.

The gun whizzes towards the agent, but he jerks out of the way, orange paint splattering by and -

Gabriel closes the gap in an instant, aiming low, diving for Guerra’s feet, right arm up purely on the guess that Guerra will react “left” - his forearm bashes against Guerra’s forearm, blocking the agent’s downward strike and then -

Gabriel’s left knife is by Guerra’s right thigh -

Femoral artery -

But the tip of Guerra’s right knife is against the lens of Gabriel’s smartglass reader.

The little thing is going haywire, beep-beep-beeping about the knife right in front of it, and Gabriel stares up at Guerra, who looks down at him, expression completely neutral and unfeeling, gaze as calm and collected as ever.

And Gabriel knows -

Guerra’s right arm is absolutely, unflinchingly

Controlled.

The tip of the knife is so close to the glass of the lens but doesn’t scratch it.

*His right arm isn’t fully extended*, he thinks with soft realization, *He would’ve traded a major artery for my eye in a heartbeat.*

And as Gabriel stares up into the abyss of Guerra’s eyes -

He knows

That Guerra knows the exact choice he made.

*He would deliberately bleed out just to blind another.*

(A life for an eye.)

Jack watches in spellbound horror as Gabriel - practically on his knees, right arm raised to block
Guerra’s left, left hand tilting the reverse-gripped knife against Guerra’s leg - attempts to maintain his resolve -

But Jack can feel how Gabriel’s chest seems to shudder under the heaviness of his breathing and the raging of his pulse and -

“What the actual fuck is happening?!”

The tense, terse silence is shattered (kinda awkwardly) by a familiar voice no one has heard in three days.

Guerra’s empty expression transforms into a deadpan “oh shit” look - which Gabriel immediately mirrors

As they both realize together:

We’re fucked.

It’s hard to see over all the people clustered in the hallway, but the group behind Luisa and the trainer-soldier part a little bit to show -

General Flores - commander of the United States Special Operations Command - standing at the far end of the hallway (the way closest to the exit).

And she looks

 Fucking pissed.

Next to her, the other directors and a bunch of trainer-soldiers and senior soldier-candidates gawk at the scene in shock, awe, confusion, and embarrassment.

Gabriel and Guerra still haven’t totally moved, and Guerra mutters lowly, just enough for Gabriel to hear, “…We’re dead.”

“…That’s probably a safe bet,” Gabriel agrees, just as quietly.

“Marc Guerra Díaz, are you seriously about to stab a soldier-candidate in front of everyone in this goddamn program?!” Flores snarls at Guerra from down the hall, and there’s the sound of her boots movin’ up and down as she power-strides towards them.

Guerra sighs heavily, releasing all the tension in his body as he turns around, replying, “I stopped myself.”

“Not a great response, dude,” Gabriel whispers to him, steeply inhaling air as he anticipates the coming fury -

“You stopped yourself,” Flores repeats, her tone steely and sharper than a combat knife. The group by Luisa and the trainer-soldier part for her and she enters the informal “center” of the scene, flicking a dark, roiling gaze over Guerra, then Gabriel as he rises, then Jack who gives her an awkward, sleep-deprived grin as Adrien waves sheepishly. Her eyes trace over Michael, who still has his arms literally twisted behind his back by Jin, and then the -

“…What the fuck, Morales,” she states, looking at someone in the back of the big crowd, and Jack glances over his shoulder to see that James “Jim” Morales - the former Bravo of 7436 - is pressed in among the sea of soldier-candidates, his arms casually in the air, looking passingly bored. The
“blackout box room” guard just rolls his shoulders, replying calmly, “I got arrested or something.”

Flores inhales steeply, before turning an ugly, boiling, molten look back at Guerra, who looks like he’s finally, truly dead inside -

And the Commander of the Special Forces

Unleashes Hell on all of them:

“I have been in the Special Forces since I was twenty years old, Marc Guerra, and never in my life have I ever seen such wanton, petty, disgusting negligence and dismemberment of a SERE training course! This is beyond unprofessional - I can tell you right now that if you were under my command, you would be out of this program here, tonight, in a car down the side of this goddamn mountain in five fucking minutes. I leave here for three fucking days to check on my active duty forces and this is the shitshow I return to?? You ought to be on your goddamn knees, because you should have been begging for official pardon about ten minutes ago.”

Gabriel has to fight the urge to grin roguishly as the commander verbally rips Guerra to shreds. Just dices him.

Sashimis him.

For whatever it’s worth, Guerra takes her words rather stoically, refusing to look away from her burning gaze or flinch away from her wrath-weaving words. He doesn’t seem outright apologetic, but he does look a bit disappointed, though Gabriel can’t tell if he’s genuinely upset with himself or just frustrated he got caught in such an embarrassing display of personal pettiness.

But then

Flores flicks that furious gaze at Gabriel and -

Oh shit, he barely has time to think when -

“And you, Sergeant Reyes - what the fuck do you think you’re doing?? Did you ignore every single word this man said to you four days ago? Did you actively try to undermine the training of your fellow soldiers and future teammates? What kind of stupid, reckless idealism motivated you to endanger and possibly harm one-hundred-and-eight people who are starving, sleep-deprived, and clearly well beyond the capacity to make levelheaded judgment?” Flores snarls at him, “Do you have any idea what could have happened if you had locked all these people in a highly secure, highly contained military base without proper food, water, or medical care? Did you think that far ahead when you were planning... whatever it is you were planning??”

…

He has to admit

He did not think of that.

I knew the PIN to get out, the small, smartass part of his brain protests, but Gabriel mentally punts that part to the endzone, whispering internally, You are not helping -

“And you -”

Gabriel’s breath catches in his chest -
As Flores twists past him, moving right towards Jack -

Who goes wide-eyed at her

(and the entire crowd behind him takes a half-step back in nearly perfect, hasty unison).

“This is two in a row now, Soldier: 76 -” Flores snaps at Jack, “Did you know Sergeant Reyes was planning this? Did you assist him in this bullshit plan of his -”

“He didn’t know.”

It takes a surprisingly long second for Gabriel to realize that he has not only spoken - He has reached out and grabbed Flores by the arm.

…

She looks up at him, blinking in utter awe at his brazenness, and then glances down at his hand around her upper right arm and -

_Panic_ rises in Gabriel’s chest as he realizes that he has _totally fucking grabbed the commanding general of the United States Special Operations Command_.

Gabriel immediately releases his grip, stating softly, like shards of smoke:

“He didn’t know. Please, ma’am, he only did what he thought was right.”

Jack glances up at Gabriel and -

Gabriel has wanted _nothing_ more than to finally see the blue depths of those eyes again…

But he can’t bring himself to look at Jack.

“...That’s not true.”

Both Gabriel and Flores’ eyes widen in surprise -

Before both of them look at Jack, who looks back at Flores

And states with voice well-worn and coarse-grained:

“I did what I _knew_ was right.”

Flores stares up at him coolly, and Jack smiles _so brightly_, adding cheerfully:

“And I’d do it again if I need to.”

_As many times as it takes_, Jack thinks, knowing his words are truth undeniable.

Flores’ gaze does not waver, until she finally cracks a wry smile, asking dryly, “…How many drones this time?”

Jack _grins_ back sleepily, saying, “Only three. I think Gabe got most of the others.”

“You got one strike left, 76,” Flores says to him, holding up her right index finger at him, “And I will _personally_ watch your Escape training session to make sure no one in this goddamn program gives you a knife. You’re too goddamn expensive to keep here.”
“I’m a sunk cost now,” Jack laughs back, and his grin is so radiant and sunshine bright that Gabriel finds himself glancing away, his pulse hammering in his palms.

“That’s a logical fallacy, soldier,” Flores says to him with a smirk, before she turns around. She looks at Gabriel, murmuring quietly, “You’re as smart as you think you are, Sergeant Reyes, but if you keep fighting this program, you’re going to make your own life hell.”

...Gabriel knows her words are true.

The “forest” he planted lingers in the back of his mind.

He mutters, “…Understood, ma’am.”

And then Flores strides past him - Gabriel and Jack watch her walk right up to Guerra, who has sheathed his boot knife and is sheathing his combat knife -

Guerra looks like he expects another furious rant when Flores squares up against him - about a whole head shorter than him, but the epitome of power and command as she demands:

“And where the fuck is my 12K plumber, Marc?”

Gabriel half-chokes on his own breath, snorting-laughing, before he hastily turns to hack-cough-wheeze into his elbow.

“…You know, I ask myself that every day, ma’am,” Guerra replies, his tone dry but oddly genuine. Flores shakes her head in disappointment at him, before she twists around him, striding back down the hallway as she states loudly to everyone present:

“This simulation is over. The next four days are free time.”

A disjointed chorus of “what’s” and “holy shit’s” and “we actually did it’s” go up throughout the hallway as the different “prisoners” shout and holler and cheer with joy. Jack is suddenly overwhelmed by what feels like several arms embracing him, as Wes shouts against his back, “OH MY GOD, WE’RE FREE -”

“REAL BEDS TONIGHT!” Lucas is sobbing behind them and Derek is yelling, “FOOOOOOOD!”

One of the cell groups is singing, “Weeeeee are the chaaaaaampions -” behind them.

Gabriel heaves a huge sigh of relief, sheathing his knife as he finally relaxes, thinking, It actually fucking worked -

“Can I get my fucking knife back.”

The words are a question and a statement.

Gabriel turns, only to see a disgruntled Michael standing there, rolling and massaging his right shoulder as he grunts, “God damn, Kurosawa -”

“You know, I would’ve pegged you as a guy who likes it rough,” Gabriel says dryly, before he flips the knife in his right hand, holding out the hilt to Michael. Michael rolls his eyes, taking the knife and slotting it into the sheath on his chest, muttering, “Rough is only good if you’re getting fucked hard, Reyes.”

And then the Bravo smirks, adding tartly, “I would’ve expected you of all people to understand that.”
...Touché, Gabriel admits, watching him go but then -

Someone punches him in the meaty part of his upper left arm and Gabriel shouts indistinctly -

“Idiota! Cabrón! Pinche pendejo, qué carajos -” Luisa is swearing at him, alternating between smacking at his shoulder and shaking it, and all Gabriel can do is shout, “Fuck, Luisa - seriously, hang on, let me explain -”

But then she slowly stops shaking him to bury her head against his shoulder, whispering with a quiet, shuddering tone, “That was super illegal, Gabriel.”

Gabriel lifts his left arm and wraps it around her shoulders, squeezing her in a half hug, murmuring, “...I’m sorry. For putting you in that position.”

“...Next time you plan on getting in a fucking prison knife fight, warn me,” Luisa mutters softly, before she sniffles loudly and digs a sharp knuckle into his left ribs -

“SHIT!” Gabriel shouts, jerking away from her reflexively as she turns and walks away, saying jokingly, “Civil disobedience, my ass.”

Gabriel watches her go, rubbing at the sore spot between his ribs - people are starting to file towards the end of the hallway, the crowd of candidates and trainers following after the directors to get back to the main facility.

And suddenly

Gabriel becomes very aware of the feeling of deep blue eyes on his back.

Be cool, be cool, you’ve thought this over - remember your explanation, he tells himself, as he tries to turn around as casually as possible -

Jack watches Gabriel turn around and somehow -

His words are exhausted.

As though the loss of excitement and adrenaline has left him without clear thoughts.

Only the songworms and the well-worn, bone-aching exhaustion

And the steady

Swell of such pride and admiration

(And maybe some...soft, twisted, feverish anxiety)

(Nervous and a bit apprehensive because -)

(Does it change anything?)

In the rising tide of his heart.

Gabriel tries to give Jack an embarrassed but genuine grin but -

He stops

Because Jack is only half-smiling.
And yet somehow

*Somehow*

The expression on Jack’s face is *utterly* honest, *utterly* open -

*Utterly* resolved

In a quiet, steadfast, hopeful way.

It is

The softest smile

That stabs Gabriel in the sweetest, steepest, sharpest ways.

...All of them *good*.

And Gabriel’s wit *evaporates* to the point where all he can say is a nervous, “Hey, soldier.”

Something catches in Jack’s breath at hearing those words in that voice and somehow -

*Gabe.*

He seems to melt a little at it and -

Gabriel sees something change in the blue depths of Jack’s eyes and -

The way Jack’s expression twists in the smokiest, softest, *sweetest* ways makes Gabriel go:

...*Oh.*

That’s a *good* look for you, soldier.

And Gabriel is about to open his mouth and spill his truth to Jack -

(*Anything to see those seasung blue eyes shift like that, *anything* to make them deeper like the ocean under midnight -*)

When suddenly -

“Holy *shit*, man!” Derek says excitedly, suddenly overwhelming Gabriel’s view, and Gabriel half-jolts back in surprise as the 18X-er babbles wildly at him, “That was *badass as fuck*, dude! Who taught you those moves?? Can you show me how to do that??”

Gabriel jolts a little, flinching back in shock, and on the other side of Derek, Jack does the same, the sudden lurch of the Cell 4 candidate startling him. Gabriel blinks at Derek, and says awkwardly, “Uh...yeah, I guess I could? Knife-fighting is kinda a last-ditch move, though -”

“Nah, dude, it was *awesome,*” Derek informs him, as if Gabriel didn’t know how *awesome* it had been to stare at a knife literally an inch from his eye. The 18X-er beams at him, adding confidently, “And I also gotta get you to teach me to shoot right-handed.”

[Behind Derek, Jack watches the exchange in quiet confusion, feeling... *that shift* he had felt for Gabriel start to fade - not disappear, but just...]
“That’s what the trainers are for?” Gabriel says with slight confusion, not really sure why Krause is talking to him like this -

[“...I can shoot him now, right?” Adrien mutters dryly next to him, and Jack glances at his roommate blearily, mumbling, “Shoot who? Derek?”]

[“Yeah,” Adrien says, looking far more annoyed than Jack expects, and Jack just stares at him, asking, “Why?”]

[Adrien glances at Jack, starting to reply irritably, “Seriously, Jack, he just swooped in and took your moment...”]

[But his scowl lightens as he seems to realize something, and after a pause Adrien murmurs, “Wow...you’re really out of it, huh?”]

[Jack isn’t sure he understands what Adrien is talking about -]

“Reyes!”

Gabriel freezes as Davis’ voice pierces into his core from down the hall. He turns slowly, and sees that the crowd that’s heading towards the access hallway is moving around her near the end of the hallway - despite her short figure, Davis radiates a strong but rather amused authoritative presence, a slight smirk twisting on her lips.

“...Yes, ma’am?” Gabriel asks with a cheesy, apologetic grin to the cook, and Davis’s smirk just deepens as she says loudly, “I heard you help let aaaaaaaaaallllllll these hungry soldiers out of prison!”

Gabriel’s grin does not move, but it’s hard not to crack under the sheer, intense pressure she exudes -

“...Food for all one-hundred-and-eight of them won’t make itself,” Davis shouts smugly, “And since you were so kind as to help them, it’s only right you help me and the other three people on kitchen duty.”

...You reap what you sow, Gabriel thinks as he deflates a little, calling back, “...Yes, ma’am.”

“I suggest you hussle,” Davis replies brightly, as she turns to move back to the main facility with the crowd, punctuating the exchange with a devastating remark, “You don’t get to eat until after all of them have gone!”

...Wow, it sucks being the hero, Gabriel intones internally when suddenly he remembers -

Jack!

Gabriel whips around but Jack is just giving him a tired, well-worn, exhausted smile, gesturing that he can go.

Gabriel hesitates because -

Because he hasn’t actually told Jack anything yet and -

...He wants to tell Jack.
(...It’s just a story -)

(But it is *his* to tell -)

(His to share -)

(And even if it doesn’t change anything -)

(Gabriel *knows* he wants Jack to hear it.)

Jack can *feel* Gabriel’s tension - caught between going on to his kitchen duty, and coming back to him - but Jack just grins as brightly as his sleep-deprived, well-worn sense of self can manage, saying hoarsely, “Sounds like you have a lot of cooking to do.”

Gabriel lingers for a moment, before he gives Jack a bittersweet, complicated, slightly apologetic grin and says, “...You say that like I’m not *always* cooking up a plan.”

He turns and starts to rush off, shouting back over his shoulder, “We’ll talk later, okay?”

Jack waves at him sleepily, grinning faintly -

But his smile fades a little as he watches Gabriel go, feeling a deep, endless, bone-cutting fatigue settle into him.

“...You’re too easy on people, Jack,” Adrien mutters with a soft exhale, but Jack -

“It’s okay.”

Jack just smiles to himself.

“Food is more important,” he says quietly, before adding with a faint smirk:

“And I can wait.”

After all

The first virtue in a soldier

Is endurance.

--------

All that is gold does not glitter,

Not all those who wander are lost;

The old that is strong does not wither,

Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

From the ashes, a fire shall be woken,

A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,

The crownless again shall be king.

Chapter End Notes

This small, experimental group would bring together the best and brightest from around the world to wage asymmetrical warfare against the robots. Overwatch's short list of prospective agents included two members of the soldier enhancement program: Morrison and Gabriel Reyes, a senior officer. Reyes, a hardened and highly respected veteran, grew up about as far from rustic Indiana as you could get—the sprawling urban melting pot of Los Angeles. Despite their differences, the two soldiers became friends. Their decision to join Overwatch together would change the world, for good and for bad.

Leadership of Overwatch fell to Reyes, but Morrison would have a greater impact on the group in the long term. He brought out the best in the people around him and helped mold Overwatch's diverse (and sometimes conflicting) agents into a cohesive fighting force. In unity, they found the strength to defeat the robots and end the Omnic Crisis.

---

...You didn't think it would just end when it was over, did you? :P

After all that planning and plotting and scheming, we finally got to see Gabriel's plan - with Jack's help - in action. I knew from the outset that I wanted Gabriel to "mess with the lock system" in a variety of ways, and to get that access - whether it was a PIN or a key - to Jack somehow. I went through multiple "ending" scenarios during the creative process, but ultimately, I thought this was a great middle ground. I really wanted to showcase Jack as both a medic and a burgeoning team leader, while ALSO showcasing Gabriel's creativity, ingenuity, and tactics. He might not have Shadowstep yet, but he already knows how to flank pretty good.

...However, for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction -

And if you "don't play by the rules," you should expect some consequences.

(...Some "repercussions" if you will.)

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Congrats to every reader who survived the roughest parts of this arc! Your comments have absolutely made my day multiple times over the last few weeks. Thank you all so much for sticking with it.

We have a few chapters left to "wind down" the arc, including some much-needed resolution.
[SEP internal memo 1045: The candidate with the internal ID code of [Soldier: 24], legal name [Gabriel Reyes], was placed under investigation of UCMJ Article 134 violations. Flores aiming for violations of sections 77, 86, and 100a. Might be more depending on how it goes.]

Actions have consequences.

[Director [Marc Guerra] believes Reyes may have compromised top secret files about the program. Director [Watanabe] is assisting him in determining that.]

It's not the first time Gabriel has run countercurrent to Command and Control - nor will it be the last - but it's the first time the consequences have...escalated for him.

[Curious if we should pull in [Soldier: 76] for additional information on the situation?]

...And that won't be the last for him, either.

[- No, not sure what he could know if [Soldiers: (04), (16), and (23)] didn't know anything either.]

Chapter Notes

I did it.

I finally caved.

I'm writing parts of the next arc and I got myself so confused about my own fictional military facility that I had to sit down and force myself to create a map.

So here it is:

[The (fictional) Sawtooth Military Complex]

Warning: the image is massive (3000p x 3000p) and it may take time to load on slow internet or data.

This is actually roughly close to how I pictured 90% of the facility. I did have to make a few changes to the barracks hallways in order to "math it out" (e.g. 132 soldiers = 66 rooms; how do I arrange 66 rooms?), but otherwise this is pretty close to what I was personally mapping out in my head. This image will be added to the chapter where Gabriel describes the barracks, in case people want to go back and check things.

(It may also contain some...rooms for future plot elements, though I will warn you right now: the facility will not be attacked and the bunkers will not be "relevant" to the story. They're just there for standard military purposes.)
The Sawtooth Military Complex is a fictional military installation consisting of three main facilities located mostly "underground" in a series of mountains in the Sawtooth National Forest in Idaho. The three main facilities are: the North Branch, the Central Facility, and the South Branch. The Central Facility was originally designed as a backwards E shape, with its original purpose focusing on weapons testing and research. Its original "access route" was a large mountain tunnel oriented eastward that connects to external roads and then back to Idaho Highway 75. It was built into the eastern face of the mountain, allowing windows to be installed in the Mess Hall and Gym for natural lighting, and an artificial plateau was created on top of the Vehicle Bay for a small airfield. However, as the Army and USSOCOM's requirements for their special experimental programs shifted in the early 2030's, additional barracks and rooms were developed, expanding the Central Facility to the western slope of the mountain. Several of the barrack halls cut through the mountain's western and southern faces, providing windows into the rooms (these are more incidental than purposeful). The original "Western Pedestrian Exit Door" was knocked out during expansions.

Despite its physical size, the Complex is actually very ill-equipped to deal with approximately 150 people in the Soldier Enhancement Program. The barracks suffer from poorly-facilitated utilities and present a fire and quarantine hazard. Internal "priorities" in the program compound this issue: with an overemphasis on Weapons and Engineering, the remaining MOSes (as well as basic utilities and storage) are undersupplied. An entire room is dedicated just to the housing of the new prototype pulse and plasma weapons, and Medical Corridor has "shifted focus" from treating patient injuries to developing and administering the "enhancement serums". As Gabriel has noted a few times, there are two major disconnects: one among the directors themselves, and another one between the program as a whole and the design of the facility, allowing for chaotic situations to develop (or be "induced" with a...devious mind).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[Uniform Code of Military Justice - Article 134]: Though not specifically mentioned in this chapter, all disorders and neglects to the prejudice of good order and discipline in the armed forces, all conduct of a nature to bring discredit upon the armed forces, and crimes and offenses not capital, of which persons subject to this chapter may be guilty, shall be taken cognizance of by a general, special, or summary court-martial, according to the nature and degree of the offense, and shall be punished at the discretion of that court.

**Relevant sub-articles:**

77. **False or unauthorized pass offenses**: Wrongful making, altering, counterfeiting, or tampering with a military or official pass, permit, discharge certificate, or identification card.

86. **Impersonating a commissioned, warrant, noncommissioned, or petty officer, or an agent or official**: That the accused impersonated a commissioned, warrant, noncommissioned, or petty officer, or an agent of superior authority of one of the armed forces of the United States, [...] That the impersonation was wrongful and willful; and That, under the circumstances, the conduct of the accused was to the prejudice of good order and discipline in the armed forces.
100a. **Reckless Endangerment**: That the accused did engage in conduct; That the conduct was wrongful and reckless or wanton; That the conduct was likely to produce death or grievous bodily harm to another person; and That, under the circumstances, the conduct of the accused was to the prejudice of good order and discipline in the armed forces.

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**24: Explanations**

Wednesday, February 20, 2047: 1947 hours - leaving the kitchen, main SEP facility

Gabriel sighs, glancing at the time on his wrist monitor -

1947 -

*Almost three hours of kitchen duty* -

Before he exhales again with resigned frustration.

*Jack is probably asleep.*

And he’s not... *disappointed* in Jack - not at all. Jack *needs* sleep, and it would be a cruelty on Gabriel’s part to hope that he’s still awake after all this. But Gabriel *is* frustrated by the restrictions on the timing of it all (because he hadn’t anticipated Davis giving him kitchen duty). He heads to the corner where the kitchen “staff” stuff their personal gear and equipment, grabs his camo jacket, and tugs it on, turning for the door. As he leaves the kitchen, Gabriel scowls, thinking quietly, *Guerra has to know about the extra accounts by now - tomorrow’s going to be rough* -

But Gabriel

Stops.

His eyes go wide as he freezes just outside the door to the kitchen, because -

*Sit**ting on the opposite side of the hallway, nestled deep in his jacket, bright hair fluffing up from the hem of the hood around his head -

Is Jack.

He’s clearly asleep or falling asleep, his back set against the wall opposite Gabriel, his head slumped against his right shoulder, his arms folded across his chest, shoulders rising and falling rhythmically with his steady, sleepy breathing.

*Words cannot* describe the pangs of warm, fluttery affection that rush through Gabriel’s veins at the sight and the sweetest, softest smile twists on his lips as he takes the two, three steps to reach Jack, thinking smokily, *...I made you wait again - you’re too patient with me, Jack.*

Gabriel kneels, pausing briefly to take in the details of Jack’s face: he’s gotten cleaned up, it’s clear - the paintball splatters are gone, as is the scruff from his cheeks, and his jacket is different from the one he was wearing earlier. Gabriel exhales slowly, before he reaches out and gently taps Jack on his left shoulder -

Jack jolts awake, his whole body flinching at the motion, eyes wild and terrified, head jerking backwards and -
“What - oooooowwww,” Jack snaps and then groans as he bashes the back of his head against the concrete wall and Gabriel grimaces in both sympathy and apologetic awkwardness as he mutters, “...Ah...sorry, I was trying to...avoid startling you…”

Jack seems briefly confused by everything, lifting a pouting scowl to Gabriel’s face, eyes watering as he murmurs, “You could’ve said...something…”

But his words die as he processes who woke him up, his gaze shifting from a distrusting frown to wide shock and awe as he realizes -

“...Hey, soldier,” Gabriel says with a quiet, faint smile, “You didn’t have to wait for me - we can talk tomorrow, you know. Sleep is more important.”

Jack just kinda oggles him, before -

Gabriel doesn’t even have time to react -

As Jack reaches out and runs two gentle, calloused fingertips over Gabriel’s right cheek.

“Oh,” Jack exhales with obvious but sleepy relief, a tired, well-worn grin flickering onto his face, “You’re real.”

Gabriel feels his jaw drop a little as his thoughts whiplash into frenzied overload, all of them clamoring and shouting for Gabriel’s immediate attention and reaction, rushing through a panicky holy shit and a good-twisting Oh my god and a concerned Jack, you’re so fucking exhausted and lastly -

A quiet but hope-blooming

You dream of me?

Jack just gives him that exhausted, slightly surreal grin, saying warmly, “Hey, Gabe -”

“Soldier: 24.”

Gabriel freezes at the new voice (Jack seems to take a full second, maybe two, to realize someone else is talking), and he glances to the right -

Where a small group of people stand, as if waiting for him.

General Flores is at the front, standing next to a man Gabriel doesn’t recognize - he’s tall, well-built, looks mildly tired and cold but at least politely jovial, wearing civilian clothing and a heavy jacket. Partially behind them, Gabriel spots Carolina, Director Watanabe -

And Guerra.

The CIA agent isn’t...outwardly mad -

But Gabriel can see the cold, distant, abyssal fury in those dark eyes.

And all Gabriel can think is -

Oh.

This is the part where I get strung up in the mess hall.
Cool.

The man in the front turns his attention from Gabriel to Jack, who is suddenly looking more alert and focused, and the man asks hesitantly, “…Are we interrupting something?”

“Of course not,” Gabriel says dryly, even though it could not be more transparent that they are. The man gives Gabriel an apologetic smile, replying, “Well, isn’t that fortunate.”

Flores, however, is not playing this guy’s game of polite bullshit, because she rolls her eyes, and then states to Gabriel:

“Sergeant Reyes, you are under investigation of violation of Article 134 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice on multiple accounts, including impersonating an agent and reckless endangerment of military personnel. You will hand over your datapad, your keycard, your combat knife, and any other weapons or equipment you currently possess. You will be detained for questioning until full evidence of these criminal violations are confirmed or the charges are dropped.”

“…Wow, you’re being pretty formal about this,” Gabriel mutters dryly, but -

“What.”

The soft rasp of Jack’s voice cuts through him like an obsidian dagger.

Gabriel glances towards him, and Jack’s eyes are wide and blue, so blue, deep with heartbreak and confusion and -

“What did you do?” Jack asks him, and his tone is the softest, sweetest, most gut-wrenching sound Gabriel has ever heard -

“…I did what I knew was right.”

Jack looks overwhelmed by the way Gabriel says his own words back to him, soft, sweet, smoky, tone faint like starlight, with a gentle, almost playful smile on Gabriel’s face and -

The smile fades as a resolved scowl replaces it, and Gabriel rises, turning towards the group, pulling out his datapad, his keycard -

“No -” Jack starts to say, scrambling to his feet but -

Gabriel walks towards Flores, holding out the datapad and keycard. She takes them, and he unpins the sheathed knife from his jacket, flipping it over and offering the handle to the man -

“Wait -” Jack says, stumbling towards them, “He was only trying to help us -”

But Flores looks past Gabriel with a steely, strict gaze, saying, “He interfered with the training of active military personnel and stole the personal identification of a CIA agent. Sergeant Reyes is lucky that we are still in the investigation process, and not immediately conducting his arrest or ejecting him from this program.”

That apparently stops Jack from protesting, and Gabriel hands the little smartglass thing to the man, before he glances back at Jack, smiling as he bluff’s, “It’s gonna be okay -”

“If he leaves, I leave.”

Gabriel’s breath catches in his chest
As he sees
The fierce, full and fulfilling wash of Jack’s eyes deepen
As that slow simmer of a voice - cut from seashorn stone -
Drip
Drip
Drip with an intensity Gabriel is not sure he deserves
(But god damn, if he doesn’t want it for himself).
Flores and the other directors say nothing, but the man seems to chuckle politely, “Well...that is admirable of you, uh - who are you?”

“Soldier: 76,” Jack states with that same unwavering steadfastness, “Jack Morrison.”

“It is admirable of you to defend your friend, Soldier: 76,” the man says kindly but a bit stiffly, “But our decision on the consequences of Soldier: 24’s actions will be determined based on our investigation. I’m afraid your declaration means very little in the larger scope of the program -”

“That’s enough, Tom.”

Gabriel sees Jack’s surprise before he feels his own, and he flicks his gaze back towards the group, where the man turns towards Guerra, who is glowering at him. The man looks briefly confused, saying, “What? Marc, these are your claims about Soldier: 24 - I’m just -”

“This is about Soldier: 24, not Soldier: 76,” Guerra says to him coolly but controlled, and Gabriel - Gabriel knows immediately why Jack’s statement rings stronger for Guerra and the other directors than for… “Tom.”

Gabriel smirks a bit -

Because Jack Morrison is one of the strongest, most influential nodes in the SEP “network” -
To the point where not even Jack himself fully realizes it.

*If Jack leaves the program, Gabriel thinks, Undoubtedly, his most immediate friends would follow him. Perhaps their roommates would follow them. And after this week, many of the members of Cells 4 and 5 would leave too.*

And Gabriel knows that Guerra knows this too.

And Flores - though she has been gone for three days - probably knows this as well.

Gabriel glances towards her, as the general thinks over her words, her gaze fixed on Jack’s, before she says with a quiet but steady thoughtfulness:

“Remember what I told you last time, Soldier: 76.”

Gabriel scowls a bit, glancing towards Jack -
Whose gaze does not waver
Does not even ripple

Does not even crack

As he states back:

“I would never forget, ma’am. And I hope you have not forgotten what I told you too.”

There’s a small pause as the two stare each other down and then -

“Let’s go, Soldier: 24,” Flores says to Gabriel, turning around - she strides past Watanabe, basically tossing the datapad to him, and he barely catches it in time. The Echo director looks flustered but rushes after her.

Carolina, “Tom”, and Guerra wait for Gabriel but -

Gabriel gives Jack one last, cheesy grin, saying, “N’interrompez jamais un ennemi qui est en train de faire une erreur.”

Jack’s eyes grow wide with utter surprise and -

Gabriel sees the realization deepen in the blue of them and he smirks, waving Jack off as he says with a bright casualness, “Fais de beaux rêves, soldat.”

As Gabriel strides past the three of them, trying to look more confident than he actually feels, and as they fall in step around him, Carolina says with cool casualness, “I didn’t know you spoke French.”

Gabriel can feel Guerra’s gaze boring into his back.

“...I don’t,” Gabriel answers honestly, though the wide smirk on his face is probably unconvincing.

He has no idea how he’s going to get out of this one -

But -

(Jack watches Gabriel leave with the group, his eyes focused on Gabriel’s back, thinking about what he just said -)

Gabriel knows -

(“Never interrupt an enemy when they are making a mistake.”)

He has to try.

(And Jack knows -)

(He has another plan , Jack thinks slowly, He was prepared for this.)

(And then, as they reach the end of the hallway and round the corner, Jack sighs, adding with quiet humor, I guess I just have to wait a bit longer to know what it is.)

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24: Explanations
Gabriel swallows the last bite of kinda runny eggs, clinks his fork back down on the plate, and moves it to the right side of the table, sighing.

He’s not sure how “ready” he is for today, but it’s not like he has a choice.

They’ve stuck him in this...semi-empty spare room in the “classroom” hallway: it’s got a basic table, a few chairs, and what Gabriel presumes is a bed that had been hastily dragged in (the basic metal frame and a single, kinda dusty mattress with only a few space blankets). They had only shown up once, right about 2010 hours, when Flores had informed him they would be searching his personal chest for any evidence or additional items pertinent to their investigation. Gabriel had just rolled his shoulders and fallen back on his bed, writing things down in his notebook (which, to be completely honest, he was and still is surprised that they haven’t confiscated it). There were no...visible cameras or audio devices in the room, but Gabriel hadn’t taken any chances, refusing to say or do anything significantly suspicious. He’d debated if it was worth the risk to destroy the page with the fingerprints on it, or - if the directors were taking this matter this seriously - if doing that would only make the consequences more...Severe.

Otherwise, the other pages were so... “personally organized” that Gabriel feels 100% confident no one could decipher the entirety of it except for himself. He knows that Carolina, Carlos, and Luisa have attempted to understand his written thoughts, but without Gabriel’s guidance to explain his rationale or connections between the notes, they couldn’t follow them.

So while he knows his notebooks are probably suspicious as all hell - No one can fully interpret their meaning without his help.

And he’s not about to incriminate himself for messing with a single SERE training session.

...Though he fully expects Guerra to try to crack the secret “code” of Gabriel’s notes and also get him in a logical corner.

So Gabriel had basically entertained himself for another hour, two hours before he’d tucked himself under the space blankets, completely expecting to toss and turn and drift in and out of weary, tinder-dry, standard aching thoughts all night.

...Except he hadn’t.

Somehow, Gabriel Reyes had slept perfectly soundly - just shut his eyes and opened them again about seven hours later when Carolina had brought him a plate of food for breakfast.

And so now, here they are -

Her sitting on one side of the table, him on the other, feeling honestly pretty goddamn good between the full night of blissful sleep and the plate of Davis’ food.

Gabriel had basically scarfed down breakfast, so now that he’s done, he sits back, looking up at her as she rubs at her left eye - the one that gets a little teary when she’s tired - and just observes her for a second.
There’s no pressure between the two of them.

There never has been.

Gabriel knows she trusts him with her life.

And she’s one of the few people he would say the same for.

So he feels perfectly calm and perfectly fine with just asking her, “...Are you the good cop today?”

Carolina inhales deeply, dropping her hand, before she exhales slowly, “No. I told them I wouldn’t be an unbiased investigator or...witness or whatever. And they knew that from the outset. But I have to be here to take care of one of my soldiers.”

Gabriel gives her a bittersweet, soft, but genuine smile, saying, “Thanks.”

“But the next thing I say gets repeated to no one.”

“Understood, commander,” he says to her without hesitation. Carolina looks him over, but continues, “I agreed with you on Sunday, but obviously standard Special Forces training requires the Resistance course. It just seems like something we could do after…”

The words drift off, and after a beat, Gabriel fills in her thought, “After the war. When we have to fight humans again. When Resistance training becomes relevant again.”

“...God, you are too smart for your own good,” Carolina half-laughs, half-sighs, and Gabriel shrugs, grinning, “We all knew I was going to end up in this exact situation some day.”

Carolina smiles back, but there’s a patient weariness in her expression, and Gabriel’s cheery casualness falters. His commander says quietly, “...Some temperance in your own foresight wouldn’t hurt you, Reyes.”

“And then your voice drops to a low murmur as she warns him:

“You are too smart for your own good - you see things people don’t, several steps before they even begin to take shape, and you react well before anyone else can. You will be an asset to your team no matter where you go, what you do, or what you choose to be.”

And then Carolina pauses, thinking over her words, and she adds gently - more gently than he deserves, “But becoming a commander means recognizing that even your strengths may not be enough to account for everything you can predict. It means knowing when to be bold and brave, and when to accept a retreat or when to pull back to regroup.”

And then her voice drops to a low murmur as she warns him:

“It means that you know to pick and choose your battles.”
...Oh, Gabriel thinks, as he realizes what she means.

Carolina sighs, rising from her chair as she leans over and grabs his plate, saying, “I won’t lie to you, Gabriel - as your future company commander, this was a really weird way for you to take a stand against something that was effectively just temporary. It’s only a week of training - or at least, it was going to be only a week of training. Not exactly the hill I’d expect you to die on.”

Gabriel makes a chagrined expression as he watches her leave, but Carolina pauses by the door, and looks back at him, giving a much brighter, much wider grin as she says:

“But as someone who has known you for years, it’s nice to see you act like a giant dork to impress him.”

Gabriel’s stiff expression slackens in horror as Carolina smirks smugly at him, hitting the button and stepping out into the hall as she shouts back, “Hasta luego, Gabriélito!”

“That’s not -” Gabriel starts to sputter, snapping, “I wasn’t - I’M ALWAYS A GIANT DORK!”

Did I really just say that, a part of his brain chortles as Gabriel gawks at his own words and -

“...Should I put that on the record?”

A different sort of panic floods through his veins as Flores steps into the room, a rather kind but clearly humorous smirk on her face. She’s carrying a datapad and a mug of coffee, and as she moves in to take Carolina’s place at the table, “Tom” follows through the door after her, also carrying a datapad and a cup, but also what appears to be a small camera.

Gabriel calms down from his awkward, fumbling fear to a more controlled coolness, watching him closely even as he jokes to Flores, “Depends - is that considered incriminating self-evidence?”

“Well, that depends on why you did it, Sergeant Reyes,” Flores chuckles back, settling herself into the seat opposite him. “Tom” pulls up another chair and seats himself next to her, on Gabriel’s left. Gabriel watches him warily as he sets down his datapad and mug, and leans over the table, holding out his hand as he introduces himself, “It’s unfortunate we’ve had to meet like this, Sergeant Reyes. I’m Tom Bianchi, an operative for the Special Activities Division and one of Marc’s colleagues.”

Gabriel immediately picks over the details -

Dark hair, generic as hell face, green eyes, looks just about six feet, clean-shaven, well-dressed but trying too hard to be normal, not used to the cold - probably stays at CIA headquarters in Virginia -

Before he reaches out and shakes Bianchi’s hand, replying, “Gabriel Reyes, former 18 Fox and one of Marc’s disappointments.”

Gabriel sees a flicker of a smirk twist on Bianchi’s face, and in his peripherals, Flores shakes her head with resigned (dis)approval of the joke. Tom releases his hand and starts setting up the camera, saying jokingly, “Knowing Marc, I’m sure some part of him is actually probably impressed by all this -”

“Tom,” Flores states warningly, and the CIA agent shuts up, turning the camera on and setting it at the end of the table (on Gabriel’s left). After a small sigh, Flores says loudly and clearly, “This is General Sofía Flores of the United States Special Operations Command, here with Operative Tom Bianchi. Today is Thursday, February 21, 2047, at two minutes before 0600 hours. We are here with Sergeant Gabriel Reyes, internal Soldier Enhancement Program ID Number 24, to discuss the investigation of violations of Article 134 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.”
Gabriel listens to her statement with mild amusement, as Bianchi turns his datapad on and begins to write something. Flores looks at him, pausing after her statement on the record, before she says, “Director Watanabe has looked over the accounts on the system and has determined that seven brand new user accounts were made from Operative Marc Guerra’s account between 0100 and 0200 hours two nights ago.”

...Interesting, Gabriel thinks with a faint, wry smile, Guerra must have let Watanabe use his account to view that information.

“These accounts - including Operative Guerra’s - were determined by serial number id signature to have been accessed on the datapad assigned to you, Sergeant Reyes,” Flores continues, “At least one account had the operating permissions of a System Administrator. Under Article 134, both the use of Operative Guerra’s account and the creation of a false account as an SEP System Administrator fall under impersonation.”

There’s a pause as she lets her words hang in the air, and then -

In a much softer, more well-worn tone, Flores sighs, “…Were you really that upset over Resistance training being implemented, Gabriel?”

Bianchi looks up from his datapad curiously, but Gabriel just stares at the general, before he answers honestly, “I never do anything out of anger.”

Flores gives him a skeptical look, saying disbelievingly, “It doesn’t help you to lie, Sergeant Reyes…”

“Why would I lie about that?” Gabriel asks her plainly, folding his arms across his chest as he ‘settles in’. ‘Anger is never a good motivator - it burns hot and fast and you are left with nothing but frustration afterward. I don’t do anything out of anger. Out of…focus, or drive, or determination instead, sure. Maybe even some sort of retributive feeling. But not anger by itself.”

Flores still looks like she doesn’t believe him, but Bianchi speaks up, saying with a formal kindness, “I will cut to the chase, Soldier: 24 - has Operative Guerra abused his position or rank in this program against you or someone you care about? Is that why you did this?”

Gabriel glances at him, before looking back at Flores - her expression is exhaustedly resigned, as if she’s anticipating a certain answer - before he looks again at Bianchi, and states unapologetically, “Do you even know Marc Guerra?”

“Reyes…” Flores starts to say tersely, but Gabriel just flicks his gaze casually towards her, continuing, “I’m being serious here - do either of you actually understand him?”

“We’re trying to help you here, Soldier: 24,” Bianchi says, but it is -

“We want to know if you feel that Director Guerra is holding a personal grudge against you, Gabriel.”

General Flores’ softer words that carry more strength.

Gabriel looks into her dark, thoughtful gaze, thinking it over before he replies quietly:

“Nothing about Agent Guerra is personal.”

Flores’ eyes narrow a bit, and Bianchi frowns, saying rather obliviously, “I’m not sure I follow what you mean, Soldier: 24. Would you be willing to explain yourself?”
“Sure,” Gabriel says casually, trying to trace his thoughts as he threads them together into actual words, “Agent Guerra does not hold personal grudges. He does not do anything for personal reasons. Everything he is...is focused. Precise. Defined. Dude is selfless in the literal sense of the word.”

In fact, Gabriel thinks quietly to himself, *I opened up the one part of “Marc Guerra” that still retains some semblance of personal affect. He’s was probably frustrated that I messed with training, of course, but mad?*

*No, he wasn’t mad until he found out that I used the one part of him that still has a heart.*

(His password was “Silvio”.)

But then Gabriel scowls a little, remembering how Guerra had coolly placed two fingers under Jack’s chin -

And stabbed words of *utter fear* into Jack’s heart.

“So you didn’t do it because of him?” Bianchi asks bluntly. Gabriel looks at the CIA agent, expression deadpanned, before he thinks, *This guy isn’t half the terror or a percentage of the agent Guerra is.*

“I told you from the start,” Gabriel says coolly, “I never do anything out of anger. Not in the sense you’re thinking of.”

“If you have an issue with how this program is being run, then you should have placed a more formal complaint with myself or Commander Luna,” Flores tell him. Gabriel looks towards her, barely moving his head, barely changing his expression -

But then he smirks at her, asking back dryly, “You ask Agent Bianchi here why he won’t approve a 12K Plumber for you?”

The silence is

*So satisfying*

As Flores’ face shifts from being tiredly irked with Gabriel’s petty, circle-talking ass to outright shocked, wide-eyed *frustration* and - like a mirror - Bianchi’s pleasant, fake smile transforms into blank, awkward *surprise* -

Before Flores torques towards him, snapping, “*What* does he mean, agent?”

“...You - that’s -” Bianchi stammers, before he says loudly, “That’s another violation, Soldier: 24!”

“Cool, I bet that Article 134 infringement will show that flooded bathroom who’s boss,” Gabriel drawls sarcastically, and Flores practically grits her teeth, as if trying to force herself to refocus on the conversation, “This is very off-topic, Reyes -”

“Hey, so I was wondering,” Gabriel continues casually, as if neither of them are struggling with the moment, “If this program is like 50% Special Operations Command and 50% CIA, how come only Agent Guerra gets to be System Administrator?”

...The second round of silence is

*Even more satisfying.*
“This is an admission!” Bianchi says loudly, defiantly, but Flores is just *glaring* at the CIA agent as Gabriel watches the two of them with a faint smile. Gabriel shrugs, chuckling, “Just seems like a critical security oversight, sir.”

“He just admitted that -” Bianchi starts to say, turning towards Flores -

But the words die in his throat

As he sees the look of *incredible fury* on her face (like the one she had last night).

…”

The third round of silence might be

*The sweetest thing Gabriel has ever experienced.*

Flores grabs her datapad and mug, snapping to Bianchi, “This interview is over. Move, agent.” Bianchi fumbles, grabbing his own datapad, mug and the camera as he stammers, “General Flores - please, wait - we can talk about all this -”

“No *fucking shit* we’re going to talk about this,” she seethes, storming towards the door, “But we’re *not* going to do it in front of the soldier who just violated the military code of justice. I thought you CIA agents were supposed to be *smarter* about that kind of stuff.” She smacks the button for the door and strides out, quickly followed by Bianchi, who shouts back to Gabriel, “This isn’t over, Soldier: 24!”

The door slides shut behind him.

“...Pretty sure *you* aren’t the one who gets to decide that, Alpha,” Gabriel murmurs towards the door with a smirk.

He slides himself out of the chair, heads back to the bed -

And flops himself on it

Before he turns his attention back to his notebook.

--------

It takes them *way goddamn longer* than Gabriel expects.

He glances at his wrist monitor, and, yes, yup, it’s 1418 hours. He’s been given lunch and a bathroom break, both of them “guarded” by Jim, who (as tight-lipped as ever) just tells Gabriel that “It’s a shitshow out there right now” before he left.

Gabriel is about to attempt yet another failure of a nap when -

There’s the metallic hissing of the door sliding open.

He glances towards the door

And *immediately* sits up on the bed.

Guerra stands in the doorframe.

He’s holding only a datapad - no camera, no drone, no surveillance device of any kind - but just like
the room, Gabriel doesn’t trust him for a second. With the backlight of the hallway, it’s hard to see his expression clearly, but he looks less... *angry* than yesterday evening -

And more coldly cautious.

Guerra tilts his head towards the table, saying only, “Sit.”

A flicker of leery bitterness rises in Gabriel’s chest, but he pulls himself up off the bed and heads to the table. As he pulls out his chair and flops himself in it, Guerra steps inside, the door sliding shut behind him. It rings loud in the near-emptiness of the room, but as he walks towards the table, Guerra’s footsteps are effectively silent.

A reminder of how quietly *controlled* he is.

He seats himself in the chair Flores had used earlier, posture upright, shoulders squared, setting the datapad on the table before him. Gabriel *refuses* to back down, still sitting semi-slouched, arms folded across his chest, trying to get that perfect mix of “I’m perfectly comfortable here, thanks” confidence and “I’m already not okay with this” defiance. Guerra flicks his gaze up to him -

And once again

Gabriel stares into the abyss.

“Been waiting for you,” Gabriel mutters with a slightly taunting tone, the edge hemmed with a smirk, “When you weren’t the first one in to ask questions, I was surprised.”

Guerra remains undaunted by Gabriel’s casual demeanor, and Gabriel grins a little bit wider, saying, “You’re in bigger trouble than I expected, Operative Sigma.”

“Did you read -’

Guerra’s words

Drip

Drip

Drip like glass up Gabriel’s spine.

“- The files for this program,” the agent half-states, half-asks, a question and an indication of his priorities all rolled up into one.

Gabriel’s smile almost drops at that.

... *Almost.*

*Stay calm,* he thinks fiercely, *No weakness.* *Push questions.* *Gain insight.*

“...Not even gonna ask me how I did it?” Gabriel asks coyly, his grin mixing with a slightly mischievous scowl, “Personally, I thought I did a pretty damn good job -’

“You continue to be an irrepressible, insufferable *dumbass.*”

Gabriel shuts up at that, the smile finally fading a bit -

As the depths of Guerra’s gaze do not *crack,* but instead *intensify.*
“Make no mistake, 24,” Guerra states to him, in words carved of liquid glass, “I am far from upset about what you did, or how you did it. In fact, if it had been up to me, we would’ve had this discussion last night, and you would already be free. I don’t know how many times I have to remind you, but I am the only person in this program that sees what you are capable of, that approves of what you are, and would let you do whatever you wish so long as you learn the right purpose for it. If you think I have an issue with your means or methods, you are - once again - myopically mistaken.”

Gabriel watches him quietly.

“So let me make this crystal clear,” Guerra says with a glass-edge fury, “I not only do not care about what you did yesterday, nor how you did it, I approve of it. But that extends only as far as the training is concerned. Because the problem with you, 24 - as I have been saying the entire time - is that you are too unfocused. Not only for your own good but for everyone’s good. What I am concerned about is if your recklessness has put you and everyone in this program in significant danger because your inability to restrain your impulses led you to read something you should not have.”

…

Almost instantly, Gabriel knows everything he needs to from that response alone.

He isn’t worried about how I got his passcode or password, he immediately realizes, It’s not that he doesn’t care - he does. I used the one part of him that still has a heart. But his focus has already moved on, past his own personal grievances.

His priority isn’t on the program itself.

Because Gabriel knows:

His priority isn’t even on this war.

Gabriel knows:

His priority is already on the next war.

The war that comes after this one.

This war is about the robots trying to create themselves.

The war that comes after -

Will be the one to recreate the world.

…Which means… Gabriel thinks -

(This war will be fought between soldiers and machines.)

(The next will be fought between ghosts and monsters.)

…He thinks the footage is real.

Gabriel pauses his churning thoughts only for a fraction to think with a faint, internal smile:

Glad I planted that “forest” in time.
But now, his next issue is:

*How do I get myself out of this without digging my grave even deeper?* Gabriel considers carefully, still nonchalant, casual, and almost languidly confident on the outside, masking his thoughts as he adds with smoky, shadowy coolness:

...*Guerra does think that I believe I am...proud of being “too smart for my own good”*...

Gabriel inhales slowly -

Thinks, *Go big or go home* -

And then he exhales with a wide, smug, roguish grin, “Hell yeah, I read them.”

There’s a split-second of nothing -

And then *fury* - fury like Hell hath never seen - *shatters* across Guerra’s face, but as he starts to *seethe*, Gabriel unfolds his arms, shrugging casually as he says with obvious confidence, “But c’mon - I mean, smoke? People coming back to life? Lifesteal without physical contact? *Russians*?”

The utter rage flashfreezes on Guerra’s face, and the CIA agent cracks out a terse, controlled but confused, “...What.”

Gabriel grins at him, shaking his head with a wry disappointment, chuckling, “Passé as all hell, sir, seriously. I won’t lie, the suspense of it was cool, but then y’all got way too strong on the *ooooh creepy smoke effects oooh* and that just killed it, you know? The found footage horror genre is already oversaturated with cheap effects - a *subtle* hand is key.”

“What the hell are you talking about,” Guerra half-says, half-asks, half-mutters.

With a tone of disbelieving surprise, Gabriel smiles, asking, “Seriously? The video? The one with the ‘dead Russian supersoldier’ who comes back to life? Look, you don’t need to hide it anymore - I mean, I watched it, after all.”

Guerra, apparently struggling to catch on to the sudden emotional whiplash, says cautiously, “...The video. You watched the video.”

“Yeah, I mean, no lie, you legit *almost* had me,” Gabriel continues, pushing himself to be that casual, easy, almost languidly confident person he’d been in the Resistance training interviews. He folds his arms again, scowling in concentration, saying openly, “Like I said, I was all in on this spy conspiracy thing until it went from like… ‘cool plot about freaky effects of genetic mutations’ to ‘zombie but she’s got weird particle smoke effects’ story. I was expecting something on par with the ‘Alien’ chest-burst scene, you know?”

“...A movie,” Guerra states, more to confirm it to himself than as a question to Gabriel, “You’re comparing it to movies.”

Gabriel blinks at him once -

Twice -

And then *huffs* a small, indignant exhale of disbelief, as if he *cannot believe Guerra would insult him and his intelligence like this*, snapping a bit, “Comparing it to - dude, I grew up in LA. One of my mom’s friends was in special effects, okay? And I have friends who went into the industry, and me? Seriously, do you *know* me? I was *raised* on cheesy horror films. And *good* horror films, of course,
but the cheesy ones are some of my favorites.”

Guerra says nothing, just watches Gabriel closely, but Gabriel forces himself to keep going, to keep talking, acting like his own confidence in himself and his conclusion is all that matters, saying, “But I know every trick in the movie magic book, you know? And I get that the vampire...ghost...possession thing is coming back in style right now, but you guys came on way too strong with that baity jump scare clip. No one’s gonna buy it.”

And then, in a stroke of pure genius, Gabriel adds with a bright, vivid grin, “Hell, to be honest, you’re kinda lucky that I found it first.”

Guerra stares at him and -

*Take the bait, take the bait, take the bait,* Gabriel thinks, still smirking and -

“...Why the hell would that be lucky?” Guerra says, skepticism mixed with confusion mixed with disbelief.

(Never interrupt an enemy when they are making a mistake.)

Gabriel blinks at Guerra, his smile flagging just a little (just the right amount of confused), before he asks back, “...The false whistleblower thing?”

The silence is

*Perfect.*

Guerra doesn’t fully let down his guard - he never does, and Gabriel knows he never would - but something shifts in his gaze and it is transparent that his curiosity is...piqued.

*Hook, line, and sinker.*

Gabriel almost gawks at him, but then he bursts into a huge, smug, vibrant smirk, practically snorting, “Oh my god, sir, you don’t have to keep up the charade - I figured out you planted the video in the files to invalidate and delegitimize any potential SEP whistleblowers. Like, if someone leaked this, and people found that cheesy ass fake footage, no one would believe the legit parts about injecting us with super proteins and building plasma weapons, right? It makes the whole leak look like a huge publicity stunt to cause misinformation during the war.”

And - ever so subtly -

The softest slip of awareness shadows in Guerra’s eyes.

“...Right,” he says calmly, and Gabriel shrugs again, gesturing loosely to the datapad as he continues, “But I’m telling you, one cheesy horror fan to another, your fake Russian ghost zombie soldier is bad. If you want to catch an info leaker, you gotta be able to convince the person to leak the info in the first place.”

“...And what would you suggest instead?” Guerra asks him, with that eerie, uncanny patience again. Gabriel ignores it, scowling a bit in concentration, as if he’s thinking it over, before he murmurs, “...Honestly, something more classic, you know? Maybe even ditch the horror angle and go for like standard comic book supersoldier and supervillain stuff instead. People eat that up.”

“Hmm,” Guerra hums noncommittally, as if he’s considering it but doesn’t buy it, and Gabriel says, “Or if you got walk that line of ‘fake but just might be believable until you show the green screen,’
do like those super shopped stunt reels - people base jumping without chutes and surviving, you
know? Or make a clip of someone getting psychic powers or something. No one buys that these
days - it’ll be so old school that you’re actually back on trend. Avant garde in the horror genre
again.”

Guerra looks more contemplative, replying thoughtfully, “...These actually aren’t bad ideas, 24.”

Gabriel gives him a (semi-genuine) glower, retorting, “Would it kill you to give me a real
compliment for once?”

Guerra takes a second too long to open his mouth, but Gabriel just exhales exhaustedly, “Whatever.
Look, I know my movies, okay? And if you’re gonna seed your legit memos and documents and
transcripts with fake stuff to invalidate or corrupt potential leaked intel, at least do it in such a way
that any Hollywood director worth their salt could dissect your decoy info with some snappy talking
points. Fastest way to make any leaker or whistleblower look like some pettyass person on a weird
personal vendetta.”

“But you said the video was cheesy?” Guerra asks, again, with slightly real confusion this time.

Gabriel shakes his head with a bit of disappointment, saying, “Too cheesy. You gotta get to the
point where the Hollywood directors are ripping your fake footage apart on daytime news segments,
and you’ll never get there if my conspiracy-loving ass could see right through it.”

Guerra raises his eyebrows with mock surprise, nodding as he mutters, “...This is very true.”

And then -

*Hook, line, and sinker.*

“I get that truth is already stranger than fiction, but you don’t have to make it *that* ridiculous in order
to undermine it,” Gabriel says to him, twisting up the haughtiness and “naively smug” tone in his
words, “I mean, bait your hooks with caterpillars instead of worms if you want weird, but don’t bait
them with snakes. You won’t get any bites that way.”

Guerra watches Gabriel thoughtfully, before he glances at the datapad, tapping a finger on the table.

After a brief pause, he lies quietly, “...You’ve given me a lot to think about, Reyes. Maybe we’ll
make another fake video.”

Gabriel folds his arms again, shifts his face through a scowl into a bit of a terse, semi-apologetic sigh
as he murmurs, “Look, like...I mean, I figured out your password...”

*Instantly -*

Guerra’s gaze is back on him

*Endless and consuming.*

Gabriel bites back his words.

“...Walk this line carefully, *Gabrielito,*” Guerra says, twisting his nickname like a stab in the eye.

Gabriel chews over his words, before deciding on a slow, careful, mostly humble:

“...I just want to say...I think you got me all wrong.”

Guerra watches him like an obsidian dagger pressed to his throat, and Gabriel -
Gabriel soldiers on, explaining, “You keep saying stuff like I need more guidance or focus or...I dunno, the ‘right purpose,’ but I think that you think that I’m upset about these... enhancements or serums. Like I’m trying to fight this program or something.”

But Gabriel looks at him.

Gazes right into the abyss of War -

And the abyss gazes back.

“But that’s not the case at all,” Gabriel continues, walking that fine line of being openly honest and concealing the truths Guerra doesn’t need to know. He relaxes a bit, exhaling, “Yeah, I’ve got issues with some of the management of it, but I’m not... scared of this stuff the program is putting in us.”

Gabriel pauses, and then mutters, “If you really want to know the stuff I told Jack, it’s basically that. I’ve told him several times that I’m perfectly okay with getting turned into some half-plastic, jacked supersoldier if it means I get to live through this war.”

The sharp glint of Guerra’s gaze backs down a bit, and the agent also relaxes a touch, as if sensing that Gabriel is telling the truth here.

...A truth -

But not the most important one, of course.

“...If I had to put it into words,” Gabriel continues thoughtfully, pulling his words out carefully, “My problem isn’t with the injections, or the modified genes, or whatever is in those files. My problem is that you and the other directors want to turn these recruits into soldiers capable of fighting machines, yet you continue to use old methods to train them in ways that are irrelevant to the current war. We just spent three days doing music torture and blackout boxes instead of talking about like, the robot language or the different robot models or whatever. And now you have to give these people like four days to recover.”

Guerra looks like he’s actually listening, actually considering Gabriel’s words this time. Gabriel sighs again, saying, “I know - I know you want ‘my focus’ or whatever to be on the long-term, but...the long-term is this war. Everything is here, now: what we do here will change this war.” He gestures towards the door, saying quietly, “What they will do here will change this war. You can’t...”

And then Gabriel has to pause, has to scowl, has to pick over his own thoughts to settle on the right words:

“You can’t force innovation or creativity, just like you can’t force a new type of soldier. All you can do is provide them the environment and the tools to learn.”

And he looks up -

Gazes right into the abyss of War -

And the abyss gazes back -

And Gabriel tells the unknowable in Guerra, in a tone that is honest, genuine, true -

Enduring:
“Like I keep saying, you think you can plant all these seeds, but then you get upset when they don’t ‘grow right’ - as if you aren’t missing that they require more than just soil to bloom. We all reap what we sow, and if you plant the roses in the shade, don’t be upset when they don’t blossom.”

The silence is

Surprisingly serene.

After a moment, Guerra looks away from him, turning his attention to the datapad. He taps the screen awake, and then twists it around toward Gabriel. As the agent slides it towards him, he says with that patient, gentle coldness:

“Prove it.”

Gabriel glances down at the datapad, on the [Enter Username] screen, and then back up at Guerra. Guerra folds his arms, and nods a little, stating, “Log in, and delete your copy of the files.”

Gabriel’s eyes narrow, just a little bit -

_Time to see if you’ve learned to see the forest for the trees -_

And then he picks up the datapad, and logs in as his standard username:

[Enter Username]: [Reyes.Gabriel]
[Enter PIN]: 5225

The green checkmark appears, and the datapad logs into Gabriel’s profile. He taps to the folder viewer application, and finds his copy of the SEP folders he had sent to himself from the [New.Admin] account. He highlights all of them, then sets the datapad back down on the table.

Gabriel glances at Guerra, who watches him closely -

And then looks back down and holds the selection.

When the list of options pop up, Gabriel taps [Delete].

A new window appears, asking if he wants to move the folders and all the files inside to the trash bin application. Gabriel taps yes, there’s a small loading circle -

And then all the folders vanish.

He navigates back to the main screen, presses and holds the “now full” little trash bin, and selects [Empty].

Another loading circle -

And then they’re all gone.

Gabriel spins the datapad back around and slides it back towards Guerra, saying, “You want me to sign a statement in blood too?”

Guerra gives him a small little sarcastic glare, pressing his fingertips to the edge of the datapad, stopping its movement, and he mutters, “And despite what you may think of me, Reyes, I have only ever wanted to do right by this program and the people in it. And this is your data...pad…”
His words drift into the air as his eyes fall on the main screen, a scowl quickly flitting on his face and -

“Oh, cool,” Gabriel says, about to pull the datapad back to his side of the table, “I can go now, right -”

“What the hell is that.”

Gabriel

Stops.

As he realizes Guerra’s eyes are lingering on a different folder on his main screen. There are all the little app logos - Network Modeler, the document processor, internet browser, a bunch of little folders of odds and ends that Gabriel has saved - like one labeled [SERE Interviews] and another that says [Model Notes] -

And another

That says:

[Gabe’s Favorites].

The silence is

Really awkward.

“Dude,” Gabriel says, with a little too much panicky haste in his voice, starting to tug at the end of the datapad, “You just wanted the SEP folders gone, and now they are -”

“What the hell is in there, 24?” Guerra asks, the suspicion and mistrust etched deep into his words, as a dark, bitter glare flickers in Gabriel’s direction -

“Seriously, I’m sorry about the passcode thing, I swear I didn’t look at the rest of your stuff,” Gabriel stammers, trying to grab the datapad back -

But it slips through his fingers as Guerra yanks it back, muttering quietly, “You almost had me believe you for a second there.”

“Sir, I promise - it’s not -”

“Cállate, soldado,” Guerra snaps at him, and Gabriel quiets, sighing softly, “...You’re going to be disappointed -”

“I said -” Guerra starts to say, tapping the folder, but as his eyes drop to the screen -

The words die in the air like thinning smoke.

And while Guerra is mesmerized by what’s on the screen

Gabriel gives himself a moment to smirk, muttering, “Told you.”

He drops the smirk just as Guerra looks up at him, his expression incredulous and openly disbelieving, before he looks back down and scrolls a little. Gabriel puts on an expression that’s less panicked and more resigned nonchalance, as the CIA agent says, “...What. The hell.”
“I get bored easily, okay?” Gabriel retorts with casual defensiveness, and Guerra suddenly flips the datapad around -

Revealing folder after folder after folder -

Of authors.

“How many books do you have in here?” Guerra asks, and Gabriel acts like he’s thinking it over, saying, “Uh...authors is close to like...a hundred. Books...I think I lost track -”

“How many of these have you read,” Guerra states with blatant shock, and Gabriel shrugs, replying, “I mean, I’ve already read them - that’s why they’re favorites -”

Guerra looks completely dead inside as he flips the datapad back around, scrolling through it, and Gabriel semi-rambles, “I was going to start downloading free pdfs of stuff I’ve never read before, but then I got put in here so that got put on hold -”

Guerra frowns as he spots something and taps it, muttering, “Why is there a document that’s titled ‘Happy Birthday -’”

Gabriel Stops. Again.

“Oh my god, no -” he stammers, half-reaching across the table in a mixture of genuine impulsiveness and feigned urgency, but Guerra deftly moves the datapad out of his reach, reading aloud:

“‘Dear Jack - sorry I couldn’t get you a real birthday present earlier. Kinda hard when you’re stuck in a secret military base in the Boise Mountains, haha -’ holy hell, Reyes, did you actually write this -” Guerra asks with open disbelief.

“Please, sir, have some mercy,” Gabriel groans and sinks his head in his hands.

“‘Anyways, I know this isn’t much but hopefully it kinda makes up for the terrible Resistance week. Maybe I can buy you a drink when they let us go into town -’ good lord, you’re terrible at this,” Guerra half-states, half-snorts and Gabriel whines, “Please.”

“God damn, Reyes - I knew you were a coward at times, but this is next level,” Guerra says with obvious, mocking glee, a thin, mischievous smirk on his face, “Just pull him into a quiet hallway and give him -”

But the words die yet again

As a scowl of realization flitters across Guerra’s face.

“...This is elaborate as all hell, 24,” Guerra says, as Gabriel slowly lowers his hands from his face, looking dead and tired. The CIA agent watches him closely, muttering, “And almost ingenious enough to have actually worked.”

Gabriel blinks at him. States, “What are you talking about.”

“...You expected me to delete whatever copies you made of the SEP files, so you just reformatted them as new pdfs and then renamed the files,” Guerra says suspiciously. Gabriel states at him blearily, before he sighs heavily, “Are you still freaking out about that? I just deleted my copy. And
seriously? Go through all that effort to try and hide stuff I just told you I don’t actually care about?

“We are going to go through every single page of these, together, until I know for certain,” Guerra states to him. Gabriel gives him a look of genuine disbelief, stating, “You’re shitting me. There’s like ninety authors in there! Some of those folders have like... thirty books in them!”

“Consider this a lesson in - what was it Morrison said? - *endurance of fatigue,*” Guerra says to him, in that quiet, eerie tone. Gabriel slumps in his chair, muttering with a small whine, “We’re gonna be here for hours.”

“Get comfortable, 24 - this is a teaching moment right here,” Guerra snarks.

Gabriel just watches him, before he asks quietly:

“...Can we at least do some literary analysis while we wait?”

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76: Evening

Thursday, February 21, 2047: 1724 hours - Room 75-76, main SEP facility

- Gabriel slips rough, calloused, but teasing fingers beneath Jack’s chin and tilts his head up. Jack stares, breathless, into those eyes of smoke and gold, the smirk radiant on Gabriel’s face, as Gabriel asks him slyly:

“And if it is, does it change anything?”

...

Jack wakes up.

The room is dim, steeped in shadows as the sunlight - just barely visible between the trunks of the pine trees outside the room’s south-facing window - dies off in the mountains beyond the facility. There’s a languid sort of stillness in the air - the kind that is faintly exhaled by people deep in dreams - that settles over the room like an invisible blanket, warm and surprisingly cozy but a bit heavy, difficult to shake off in slow-waking moments.

Curling on his side, Jack’s sleepy, only semi-awake eyes drift over the room, cast in the near-darkness of a dense winter evening: Adrien’s bed is empty and neatly made, which means he’s probably off at dinner or something, leaving Jack to his sleep.

...What time is it? Jack wonders, fighting his sheets and his own sleep-sluggish body to get his left arm out from underneath his chest. He flicks a glance over his wrist monitor - 1725 - and exhales deeply.

He’d gone to bed at about 2100 hours last night. His sleep hadn’t been perfect - he’d woken up frequently from nightmares or feverish, bizarre dreams - but he’d only gotten up once to semi-deliriously drag himself to “breakfast” and use the restroom before returning to bed.

...And yeah, okay -

Part of the decision to stop...resisting his desperate need for more sleep was due to the fact that Gabriel wasn’t “out” yet at breakfast.
No point in forcing himself to keep “waiting” for Gabriel if he had no idea when Gabriel would be released.

...But now…

Jack’s stomach gurgles loudly at him.

*Yeah, yeah,* Jack thinks back in its general direction, yawning deeply. He unfurls himself, both hating and relishing in the aching stretch of his paintball bruises, the contented stiffness of his muscles, the way the awkward springs of the mattress dig *perfectly* into his ribs.

God, even the dull discomfort of everything feels *great* compared to the hard, daggering edges of the jail cell.

Jack takes his sweet time, slowly slipping himself out from beneath the sheets and thick comforter, shivering against the still chill of the air, switching his desk light on, letting his eyes adjust to the new glow in the room. He drags himself to his effects chest, digs out a sweatshirt and one of his tactical jackets. He puts them on, slips his feet into his boots, laces them, and -

Jack pauses, staring into the effects chest.

The Sherlock Holmes anthology sits nestled among his clean socks, where he’d chucked it yesterday in his exhausted haste to grab a change of clothes and rush to the showers.

Jack’s gaze traces thoughtfully over the etching of Holmes and Watson on the cover, before he reaches in and takes the book out of the chest, flipping through some of the pages until he finds -

The spot where the small slip of paper “bookmarks” where he’d left off -

Where

1824

the first virtue in a soldado

is endurance of fatigue

Waits patiently for him.

...Had it only been twenty-four hours?

Twenty-four hours since Jack had just

*Known*.

Known what Gabriel had planned, known what Gabriel had organized for him

Known that he had *wanted* to participate.

Twenty-four hours in the simulation had felt like Hell, carved into his brain like songworms gnawing on the inside of his skull, cut into his body like stabs of pain from sleeping on unforgiving concrete.

And twenty-four hours “back in normalcy” had evaporated into the dredges of dreams.

...*Nothing shows you the value of numbers better than differential experiences,* Jack thinks, placing the note back in the crease between the pages. He snaps the book shut and tucks it into his jacket
pocket, before he closes the lid to his effects chest. Jack rises, goes to leave, but stops by the door.

(“Does it change anything?”)

He’s hungry - he’s finally ready to eat.

But there is something else, a different sort of raw-edged want, tugging at him, like fingertips pulling at his hips, hands holding his wrists, a smoky smirk against the back of his neck, tasting the rough, calloused, sugary energy inside him.

…

It twists inside him in all the right ways.

...But it’s hollow, intangible, untenanted -

More like a shadow of a shadow, cast under the dying sunlight, than something he can fully grasp, and Jack can’t even entirely...describe it.

More like the promise of potential, the whisper of want, the lingering of a new, unidentified ache in everything he is.

…

Nah.

He just needs to eat something...right?

Jack hits the button, the door opens, and he steps into the hallway.

The world is a lot brighter out here, and Jack immediately wishes he was back in the sweet, shadowy darkness of his room, missing the way it was soft and subtle and serene to his semi-still-overloaded brain, but his stomach pokes him again from the inside out, and he forces himself to stay, turns left to head down the hall towards the “junction” of the different barrack hallways (where the bathroom is, still, not fixed).

Most of the halls are (unsurprisingly) empty, but Jack meets a few people on the way, waving to them (“Hey, 76!” “Damn, 76, you look like hell.” “You finally awake, Morrison?”). As he reaches the mess hall, Jack finds a small group heading inside, and he grins at the familiar faces.

“Adrien!”

His roommate glances up when he hears his name, and when he spots Jack striding towards them, Adrien beams, laughing, “Look who’s finally awake!”

“Did Goldilocks join us?” Wes asks, peering around Adrien, and Sarah waves, adding, “You sleep well, Jack?”

“The ‘well’ part is debatable, but I slept at least,” Jack says, joining them. Sarah hugs him and Wes gives him a fist-bump, saying, “Glad you got some rest, dude - you looked like shit yesterday.”

“We all looked like shit yesterday,” Adrien corrects him, but Wes just snorts, “Yeah, but Jack looked like extra shit.”

“...Great to see you too, Polizzi,” Jack mutters dryly at him, but then Wes beams, asking excited, “But, damn, Jack! I heard you like, choked out Tsang?? And then orchestrated a break out? How in
“...It’s one hell of a story,” Jack says with a slight smirk, “I can tell you at dinner -”

“Why is no one in line yet?” another familiar voice asks, and Jack glances around to see Jamie pop up from around a corner. The junior soldier blinks at him, and then breaks into a huge smile, saying, “Holy shit, Morrison! You’re actually alive!”

“I feel like I might not be, but apparently that’s not the medicolegal definition of it,” Jack retorts, but he grins at Jamie all the same. Jamie whaps him on the back, laughing, “Yeah, that’s SERE for you. Be sure to see the docs if you can’t sleep right - they’ll give you some therapy sessions.”

But then Jamie makes a small, neutral face, adding, “Though no guarantees on their, uh, ‘bedside manner,’ to be honest with you. They’re mostly combat medics, not actual therapists.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jack chuckles as they enter the mess hall. Most of the soldier-candidates are there, either in line for dinner or starting on their meals, and Jack’s eyes immediately drift to the spot at the end of the “senior soldier” table -

...Which is empty.

...He’s still not out yet? Jack thinks, as his group of friends start to file towards the line but then -

There’s a friendly fist bumping against his right shoulder.

Jack twists around, only to come face-to-face with -

“Hey, Jack.”

Carlos and Luisa.

The two senior soldiers look relaxed - like they enjoyed their first free day in awhile - and Jack smiles at them, saying, “Hey, guys.”

But as he glances past them

Only Felix (23) and Mary (22) show up behind them.

“...Gabe’s not with you?” Jack asks quietly, as his friends drift back towards them. A nervous look passes over Luisa’s face, but Carlos just folds his arms and huffs, “What’d I tell you? Dumb jerk was too smart for his own good and got himself in serious shit this time.”

“Oh yeah - what exactly did he do?” Sarah asks as Felix and Mary join them (Jack notices Felix give a small wave to Adrien, and he smirks a little). Adrien waves back, but Jack knows his friend well enough to see the nervousness in his posture, and he elbows Adrien jokingly.

“Yeah, it was like Reyes just showed up out of nowhere,” Wes says, and Jamie murmurs lowly, “And that...fight at the end...”

“I’ve heard like twenty different versions today,” Mary sighs, “Honestly, all of them sound completely ridiculous. Stuff about like Gabriel hacking the doors, or hacking the drones, or just magically appearing in different cell units.”

“I heard he stole the passcodes of one of the trainers,” a new voice says, and the group glances at Derek (65) and Jin (66), who have entered the mess hall behind them -
“Nah, dude, he totally used the general’s passcodes,” says Lucas (82), who suddenly appears by Adrien, carrying a full tray of food.

“She wasn’t even here this week,” Mary points out, with some frustration (Sounds like she’s sick of the rumors, Jack thinks), and Jin asks patiently, “…So no one actually knows what Reyes did? Do we know why they’re holding him?”

Jack says nothing about the scene he “witnessed” last night.

Silence...feels like the right answer here.

But he does think:

Flores said that Gabriel “impersonated” an “agent.”

...And as far as Jack knows -

There is only one “agent” who was present in SEP all week.

“We should bust him out!” Derek says eagerly, smacking a fist into his palm, “Repay the favor!”

“Oh, Jack broke us out,” Adrien retorts, and Jack tries to not think about the note in his book.

He fails, obviously.

Jack glances at Carlos, who is looking mildly annoyed by the entire conversation, which is steadily devolving in the background, and he remembers:

“How you think Gabe could outsmart him?”

...It was only two days ago that Carlos was skeptical Gabriel could outsmart Guerra, outsmart the program, outsmart secrecy and conspiracy and paranoia incarnate.

And it was only two days ago that Jack probably would have agreed with that skepticism.

...But Jack remembers the knife appearing beside Guerra’s neck, Gabriel’s smoky smirk over Guerra’s shoulder -

The note with a number and a reassurance in his pocket -

The way Gabriel had smiled at him, and warned him about “enemies” making mistakes.

...Gabriel outsmarted Guerra by using something against him, Jack thinks softly, patiently, Something Guerra normally took for granted. His passcodes? Maybe.

...But there’s more to it than just that.

“You seriously don’t know anything?” Michael Tsang - who has now joined the discussion along with Monique Carter (01) - asks suspiciously. His voice snaps Jack back to the conversation, which has turned into everyone bombarding Felix with questions -

“Oh my god, how many times do I have to explain this?” Felix groans, “I legitimately did not notice anything unusual with Gabriel! I wasn’t even in the North Branch facility when the door thing happened!”

Jack’s eyes narrow just a bit, as he thinks, So I was right - Felix had no idea what was happening.
And he doesn’t know Gabriel as well as people - including Felix himself - think.

“I find it impossible that Reyes did something of this caliber and not even his roommate noticed it,” Michael states authoritatively but -

“Alright, kids, look.”

The group’s noisy chatter fizzes down as Carlos snaps with a surprising amount of command and control in his voice, addressing them:

“I’ve known Gabriel Reyes for as long as he’s been in the Special Forces, and - trust me - if Gabriel Reyes does not want you to know something, you will never know it. If he wants a secret or intel from you, he will get it, without needing to interrogate anyone. And if he gets himself in trouble, it is because he put himself there, because even if he didn’t intend for that to occur, he almost certainly predicted the consequences of...whatever he decided to do.”

There’s a brief moment of thoughtful silence, before -

“That’s giving him way too much credit, Rives,” Michael mutters, “Reyes totally thought he could just dick around in this program and the directors would never do anything about it because Luna has a soft spot for him -”

“You know nothing about either of them!” Luisa hisses at him and a look of real, raw anger flashes on Carlos’ face. Michael also looks genuinely angry, as he retorts, “Reyes needs a lesson in humility because you people keep boosting his damn ego and letting him think he can do whatever he wants without consequences -”

“Gabriel Reyes did what he believed was right.”

Michael shuts up, twisting a bitter look towards Jack -

Who refuses to back down against him, his own gaze deep, resolute, and entrenched.

“And here comes the brave little soldier, ready to defend Reyes’ recklessness as courage and arrogance as valor,” Michael snaps at him, “You mad because they didn’t give you a chance to jerk him off before they put him in holding?”

Jack stares at the senior soldier, before he mutters - his voice low like the rumble of the sea carving out the cliff:

“Remind me again who kicked your ass yesterday?”

A series of “ooohs” and “get ‘em, Jack” and “you tell him” go up around the small crowd that has gathered around them. Michael, however, looks undaunted, replying back sharply, “That all you got? Violence? Nothing of actual substance to protect Reyes’ giant ego?”

Jack says nothing.

Michael shakes his head, looking like he’s about to rattle off more, but Monique puts a hand on his shoulder, and he stops. The “first” senior soldier looks at Jack, saying in a calm but strict manner, “Reyes has always been a bit of a wild card, but yesterday went too far, Morrison. And we all know it. Reyes was reckless and could’ve easily gotten himself or someone else hurt.”

Jack stares at her, then at Michael, then back go her, before he asks in a low tide voice that
Drip
Drip
Drips as it cuts down rocks:

“Because in this war, the robots are going to worry about ‘getting hurt,’ are they?”

Monique’s eyes narrow a bit, but Jack just roils - the calm that conceals the storm, “...Do you know why General Flores sat me down after Survival and Evasion? She and the other directors were upset that myself and a few others knifed down some of the drones. And that confused me, because I thought that learning how to kill robots was the point of this program.”

The group is silent.

Hell, even parts of the mess hall have quieted around them.

Jack just

Knows.

And so he says, in a voice like an underwater cavern - hollow but full, stone and sea:

“This program wants to make a new kind of soldier out of us, but when we do things differently than expected, people get mad. But isn’t this what this program wants? Isn’t this what this war requires? The training forced us to sleep less, eat less, endure more, resist everything, and didn’t we accomplish that? Were we not successful? Is this not the new soldier this war demands?”

“Don’t act like you did anything major!” Michael snaps at him, “You didn’t accomplish shit - Reyes did it, and he did it by cheating!”

“Cheating ?” Jack asks bitterly, “I didn’t realize outsmarting the obstacles in his way was cheating -”

“You know that isn’t what he did -” Michael starts to retort but -

“Gabriel Reyes thought of a strategy and enacted it successfully, against all of the guards and several drones, with no support, armed with a paintball rifle and a knife,” Jack states, “And if that isn’t a perfect representation of what this program wants to achieve, then I don’t know what is.”

Michael glowers at him, but his silence says everything.

And Jack murmurs low, the depths of the sea beneath a dying sun:

“This program does not get to demand success from us and then get upset about the way one of us chooses to achieve it. Or how any of us choose to achieve it. It does not get to make us into enhanced soldiers who need less sleep and less food and then get scared when we are too successful at those things.”

“That’s a nice spin on what you and Reyes did,” Monique says, “But it doesn’t excuse the fact that Reyes apparently did something so severe that the directors need to investigate his actions.”

Jack says nothing.

Monique shakes her head, walking past him, and Michael trails after his fellow Bravo a second later, striding by to the line for food, saying, “I don’t know what I saw in you yesterday, 76 - you’re going to end up just like him some day.”
“...And what did you do all week?”

Monique and Michael stop, before both of them glance back at Jack, who has turned to watch them. Jack stares them down, saying, “What was your training this week? You’re gonna put the Bastions in nice little boxes and play music for them?”

Michael looks irate over that, but again, Monique manages to beat him to the punch, saying lowly:

“You all need to remember that there’s nothing wrong with just being a soldier - not everything needs to be some huge statement on life, or morality, or even idiots like Reyes.”

And then she turns, continuing towards the line, saying:

“Some of us are just here to find a way to survive the war.”

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24: Embrace

Thursday, February 21, 2047: ???? hours - the holding room, main SEP facility

It’s a day of drizzly rain in the Valley. More of a dense, chilled mist than true raindrops, the sky a slate grey that caps the metropolitan area.

He’s apologizing to Jack - they’ll have to move their plans for Disneyland for tomorrow.

The interior of the Reyes’ family house remains unchanged: bright and warm inside (even though Gabriel thinks maybe the walls are slightly the wrong color? He doesn’t know why), sounds of his parents talking happily from the living room.

Gabriel’s room looks...a bit off, though? He’s not sure. It’s kind of a dullish concrete with two really uncomfortable beds in the corners. He and Jack are sitting on the edge of his bed, and Gabriel is looking up nearby restaurants for them to try (when did all his favorite places change? He doesn’t remember).

“We can try anywhere,” Jack says cheerfully, as a drone passes through Gabriel’s room. Both Gabriel and Jack watch it as it does its circuit and then leaves -

And as it leaves, Jack places a hand on Gabriel’s -

And in that rich, low, whiskey-smooth voice, he murmurs:

“It’ll be fine as long as we’re together.”

Gabriel opens his mouth to say something, but instead -

“- up.”

Gabriel faintly hears a voice he totally does not want to hear.

Jack’s smile doesn’t change but Gabriel briefly realizes, Wait, we’re not at home, this is my room in SEP -

“- wake up.”
That unwanted voice sounds a bit louder.

“I don’t know any restaurants in Idaho,” Gabriel says lamely but Jack just beams at him, laughing, “Well, neither do I, but we can be brave and try new things together.”

“- Reyes!”

*I’m always brave when we’re together,* Gabriel thinks and -

*Something jolts him awake.*

Gabriel snaps his head, jerking upright, inhaling steeply as the world shifts and falls into place around him - a dullish concrete room, a table, some unwelcome lighting, his neck stiff from sleeping on the nest of his arms, almost “face down” on the table’s metal surface, his beanie askew but his hood retaining all the warmth around his face, his neck, his shoulders.

He blinks once, twice.

There’s a face he does not want to see, staring at him unimpressed and deadpan, completely unfazed by his waking shock -

*Oh fuck, literary analysis,* the only functioning part of Gabriel’s brain remembers -

“The raven does not actually symbolize the certainty of death, but rather humankind’s instinctive nature to question things of uncaring, unemotional certainty, because our minds cannot process the true depths of death being eternal,” he exhales out, words choppy and strung together.

…

The silence is *palpably awkward.*

Guerra looks like he’d rather swallow screws than reply to Gabriel’s analysis.

*Nailed it,* Gabriel thinks with bleary confidence. The CIA agent stares at him for a second, before he asks, “…Do you just *dream* of this shit?”

“Only when I’m stressed,” Gabriel replies dryly, finally remembering where he *actually* is and *why.* He licks his lips, mouth dry, and mutters, “You never get those stress dreams about being late for class or forgetting your essay?”

Guerra continues to stare at him, completely nonplussed, and Gabriel sighs, thinking, *Well, so much for that try -*

“…My stress dreams are about being chained to chairs in dark rooms.”

Gabriel blinks once.

Twice.

*Completely* stunned that Guerra actually said something that was honest, open even.

Guerra’s expression has not changed at all, but something about him is just a little bit gentler with those words. Gabriel relaxes a bit, and adds quietly:

“Well…those kinds of stress dreams for me are about something else, sir.”
The back of a moving armored truck.

People shouting frantic, desperate orders in a mix of Spanish and English.

The smell of brush burning, smoke clinging to them all even as they tear out of the wilderness.

Blood up to his elbows.

Silvio’s normally deep, rich skin dimming as his eyelids flutter.

Panic.

And then he wakes up.

Guerra watches him with a softer, more thoughtful gaze, before he glances down at the datapad between them, asking, “How the hell did you get around the firewalls for these?”

Gabriel looks at the datapad, which is open to a sub-folder labeled: [Favorite Videos].

In it, there’s a bunch of video files, each one titled after a movie or tv show (or different parts of movies): Predator, different versions of Holmes adaptations, one of the more recent Broadway productions of “The Phantom of the Opera,” The Thing, different Marvel films, the “Lord of the Rings” movie set, etc.

Gabriel looks back up, and grins smokily, asking, “Are you gonna watch all of those too?”

Guerra finally cracks a dry smile, snorting, “Fuck off, Reyes.”

“I take it you didn’t find anything interesting in my literature collection,” Gabriel chuckles, pulling the datapad back towards his side of the table. Guerra rolls his eyes, muttering, “I had to check. You know that.”

“...Did you, though?” Gabriel asks skeptically. Guerra flicks his gaze back to his sharply, smirking with that eerie grin, “Don’t push your luck, Reyes - I could keep you here while I check every video file too.”

“No such thing as luck -” Gabriel starts to snark, but when Guerra snaps his hand back out for the datapad, Gabriel shuts up, adding quietly, “...I’d rather not make this dinner and a movie too.”

“Learn to keep that attitude in check, 24,” Guerra warns him, eyes flashing a genuine, chilling coldness, “Your future enemies and allies won’t be as forgiving as me.”

Gabriel wishes for his lighter again.

“...Understood, sir,” he replies instead, swallowing the urge to burn the room down, stuffing the datapad in his interior jacket pocket. Guerra tilts his head towards the door, saying with a smug smile, “Passcode is 0024.”

...Oh, what a dick move, Gabriel snaps internally, though there’s a tinge of begrudging respect as well. He rises, heading to the door, but he stops by the door.

Gabriel looks back at Guerra, asking suspiciously, “...You aren’t going to be watching my activity
on the datapad, right?”

Guerra raises an eyebrow skeptically, replying, “Are you going to conduct more identity theft?”

Gabriel stares at him before -

_Sell it or lose._

He states bluntly, “I’d like to be able to read a book or watch porn without feeling like you’re judging me.”

…

The look of _gutted disgust_ on Guerra’s face says _everything._

_(Hook, line, and sinker.)_

“What the hell, Reyes,” Guerra says with ugly horror and shock in his voice, “How the _hell_ are you getting around those firewalls?”

“You just gotta use unconventional sites for source material,” Gabriel continues, completely forcing himself to maintain a straight face, and Guerra just shudders a bit, adding, “Forget I asked. No, I’m not going to - _Christ_. Also - seriously, just take 76 to a secluded corner and…Whatever. This program was a mistake.”

Gabriel shrugs, turns to tap the passcode into the lockpad, saying loudly, “Suit yourself. I don’t think we have the same tastes anyways.”

There’s a loud groan of despair behind him and Gabriel smirks as the door opens -

And he steps out into the hallway.

Freedom never felt so…

Hungry.

He glances at his wrist monitor and feels the growls of his stomach sink even deeper.

1935 hours.

...Fuck.

The kitchen is probably _just_ closing.

...Gabriel Reyes does not _run_ unless something truly life-changing (or life-ending) is on the line.

So yeah, no shit -

Gabriel bursts into a full _sprint._

_Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck_, Gabriel thinks eloquently, _hurling_ himself down the directors hallway, skidding into the “classrooms” hall, sliding into the main access corridor down by the gym, nearly slamming into the corner as he whips around it, startling a small flock of soldier-candidates who squawk at him -

Before he blurs past them -
(He distantly hears one of them ask loudly, “Wait - was that Soldier: 24?” and another go, “Did they let him out??” -)

And he barrels into the double-doors of the mess hall on the east side of the main access corridor.

Gabriel always takes in the details first.

The mess hall is, essentially, empty, with only a few soldier-candidates sitting around in little clusters - small groups of only two or three people still scattered among the tables, socializing after an admittedly long week. The illumination comes solely from the lights overhead, as the sun has fully set and the stars are beginning to glint out of the darkness between the pines outside. The sound is low, quiet, soft conversations, full of little laughs and the murmuring of indistinct voices.

And off on the north end, where the kitchen connects to the mess hall via a bunch of long “serving counters -”

Davis shuts off the lights -

And Gabriel stares hopelessly at all the empty tray slots, gleaming under the bright lights of the mess hall.

…

Fuck.

Gabriel feels the tension leave his shoulders, resigning himself to the thought, *Guess it’s more protein bars and electrolyte packets tonight.* He has no idea if they changed the passcode to the kitchen after yesterday’s events, but even if he knew it, he wouldn’t be selfish enough to try to make his own food -

“Oh, Reyes.”

Gabriel glances at Alexei, who is heading up the short steps to the doors of the hall. He nods to the Echo, sighing, “Sup, Stepanov.”

“You just get out of holding?” Alexei asks, and Gabriel knows the Echo genuinely doesn’t care much about the internal SEP issues, so he feels relaxed enough to answer, “Yeah, Guerra just let me go. Damn, I just missed dinner -”

“Oh no,” Alexei says nonchalantly, “Your friend has a tray saved for you.”

…Oh. Sweet.

Gabriel raises an eyebrow, saying with obvious relief, “Damn, I really owe Carlos for this one -”

“Not Rives.”

Gabriel scowls at Alexei in confusion, and the Echo points to the far table (the “senior soldier” table) where a lone individual is sitting near Gabriel’s usual spot, back facing towards the door, generic “night ops” tactical jacket on, hood pulled up. Alexei hums noncommittally, “He’s got your food. It was just grilled chicken and pasta today - hopefully he actually got some of the meat sauce before everyone ate it.”

Gabriel blinks once.

Twice.
Before he knows -

“Hope it’s still good cold,” Alexei says obliviously, patting him on the shoulder before he heads out
the doors.

Gabriel

Inhales

Exhales

And then heads to the far table, the one closest to the windows of blue tree shadows and increasing
starlight.

Gabriel approaches as softly, as gently as he can, peering around “his friend’s” left shoulder as he
comes closer.

He’s reading a small but thick book, paperback, the pages soft with edges well-worn by the warmth
of hands - *judging from the length, he’s finished the second novel, and now he’s in the short stories*,
Gabriel smiles.

That was the part they had started on nearly a month ago.

Gabriel watches him for a moment - watches how engrossed he is, how he doesn’t hear the approach
of soft combat boots on concrete, the rustle of weatherproof jacket fabric, the faint sounds of a person
being comfortable in another’s presence; watches how he turns the page, still reading, a small scrap
of notebook paper held absently between his right index and middle finger -

Watches how the small tuffs of blonde hair - unruly even after a shower and some sleep - fluff up
from under the hem of the hood.

(*There is something growing in the concrete desert oasis of Gabriel’s heart*)

(*A place where he thought nothing could survive*)

(*And what will blossom there?*)

(*He doesn’t know yet*)

(*But all the same*)

“...Hey, soldier.”

(*He is ready to nurture it.*)

At the sound of that soft, smoky rasp of voice, Jack jolts upright, lifting his eyes from the page,
twisting himself around to see -

Gabriel stands there, looking a bit tired, a bit well-worn, a bit unhemmed.

But he gives Jack that slightly twisted smile, happy and bright and warm, like starlight on a deep
night, adding gently, “...Another time I kept you waiting - I’m gonna owe you a lot.”

Jack blinks at him once.

Twice.
And then -

He instinctively tucks the note in the crease between the pages, sets the book down by the tray of food, and rises. 

And then -

Before Gabriel can just...*react* - 

Jack hugs him.

*(24+76: Embrace)*

Jack wraps his arms around Gabriel’s shoulders, holding him tight, relishing how solid, how real, how tangible he is, warmth and life, chest hitching on his breath and -

Gabriel thinks he *melts* a little as Jack squeezes his shoulders, and Gabriel finds himself automatically wrapping his own arms around Jack’s chest, instinctively rubbing at his back like he had the night Jack had the double-injection, only now -

Gabriel drops his head to Jack’s left shoulder, resting his everything on the dense, sweet warmth of cotton and comfort there.

...Something

Anything

*Everything*

About this feels

Complete.

Right.

True.

Undeniable.

And Jack exhales with that smooth, stormy contentment:

“...I’ll always be here.”

“...I appreciate that,” Gabriel murmurs genuinely, in a voice like spun-sunshine and smoked sugar.

...They part slower than they should, but as he leans back, Jack grins mischievously at Gabriel, adding, “After all, my first virtue is endurance of your cryptic-ass, Holmesian *schemes* -”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Gabriel zings right back, a wide, brilliant smirk on his face, “You can’t blame this all on me! You were my partner in crime!”

“You left me a *note* with a *number* and half a quote by Napoleon on it,” Jack retorts, even as he’s grinning, “And even then, I *still* had to figure out what it meant, even though I was sleep-deprived and singing terrible last-century pop songs the whole time!”

“Look, I knew you could do it,” Gabriel smirks, “I trust you, Watson - you’re a smart cookie. And
“You’re always prepared.”

“See, the difference here is that I know me better than you know me,” Jack counters brightly. “And that is still not a gamble I would’ve taken.”

Gabriel shakes his head in mock disagreement, moving around the table to take his seat on the other side, back towards the stardusted night. Jack seats himself, adding confidently, “Also, I realized today that you didn’t need to involve me at all.”

“What, no, not true,” Gabriel says totally unconvincingly, “You were absolutely vital to making this work. Total crux of my whole plan. The axis mundi that everything revolved around.”

“You took out like, all of the drones by yourself and opened all of the other cells!” Jack points out, and Gabriel forces himself to put on a serious face, saying, “Technically, I only opened two and then divided up the groups into different routes. It was the only way to make the timing work.”

“Timing which could have operated without me,” Jack says with a scowl-smirk. Gabriel shakes his head, explaining, “Not at all! You were the focus point - when Guerra was focused on you, I was able to sneak up on him.”

“So, in essence, I was a distraction? An accessory to your genius?” Jack snorts, but Gabriel states with perfect deadpan:

“You were the most beautiful, dazzling accessory, Jack. A diamond in the rough. A trophy in the spotlight. A shiny coin on the sidewalk.”

…

The silence is loudly humorous and comfortable.

Jack raises an eyebrow at Gabriel, who can barely manage to keep a straight face, and he has no idea if he’s trying not to grin from the excessive “honesty” of his words or the mere fact that being in Jack’s presence makes him smile uncontrollably -

“There!” Jack says, pointing at Gabriel’s face, “I saw a smirk!”

“I’m just happy to see you,” Gabriel replies, but each word has a choking wheeze of a laugh interwoven into it -

“Don’t lie to me,” Jack laughs, and Gabriel pouts sarcastically, “What - Jack, I would never lie to you!”

“You don’t need to ego-boost me,” Jack says with a low chuckle, but there’s a twinge of honesty in his tone too, and -

I’m okay with just helping you in your plans -

He adds with a softer, more earnest voice, “And really, I did actually want to help you. I mean it. I just figured I might have been more of a hindrance than a…an accessory -”

“And I mean it when I say you were central to the idea.”

Jack

Stops.
Gabriel is giving him that spun-sunshine, sugar-smoked, star-dusted smile, framed by the blue shadows of night pines and deepening darkness.

...Oh, Jack thinks, as that feeling twists inside his veins, sweeter than song, sweeter than starlight, and he -

“...I spent most of Sunday being conflicted on the idea,” Gabriel says calmly, gently, but perfectly content with his decision, “And by the time you found me in the snow fort, I had made up my mind not to do it. Why risk getting myself in trouble like that? Or you? Or anyone else? But as we talked, I...changed my mind. It’s like you said: it’s time to try anything for the sake of trying it.”

And then Gabriel grins, regal and radiant, like the sun bursting through the night, and he half-laughs, half-beams, “And trying to help you seemed like the right thing to do.”

Jack feels spellbound.

He stares at Gabriel with an open, genuine look of awe on his face and -

...Oh, Gabriel thinks, his pulse thrumming pleasantly as all the stars seem to deepen the blue of Jack’s eyes and -

Jack grins back, his smile mischievous and yet so happy, like the sun over the ocean, and he pushes the tray of food towards Gabriel, saying wryly, “You sure know how to earn a free dinner from a guy.”

“Yeah, well, considering I broke him out of prison, I kinda think I deserved that to begin with,” Gabriel smirks, reaching out to grab the nearest end of the tray, “Even if he did get me the sauteed greens and not a salad -”

“Oh, Gabe,” Jack says brightly, pulling the tray back towards his side, “How nice of you to insist that I have it instead -”

“Nonononono - wait,” Gabriel laugh-wheezes, reaching out for it desperately, “Sauteed greens? Jack, you know my tastes so well! It was so nice of you to save dinner for me! Whatever would I do without you?”

“You’d apparently starve in a holding cell,” Jack retorts with a laugh, pushing the tray back and letting Gabriel grab it this time. Gabriel flashes a wide, mischievous smirk at him, shrugging casually as he says, “See, Jack, the difference is that I know me better than you know me -”

“Smartass,” Jack snorts. Gabriel grins, then grabs his fork and knife and begins to cut into the grilled chicken, adding more gently, “But seriously - you did a great job handling this week. That interview with Guerra was…”

The senior soldier pauses, knife still sunk in the meat, staring at it distantly before he says:

“...Unfair and excessive.”

...

The silence between them isn’t... uncomfortable, nor tense, nor bitter, nor angry.

Just...understanding. An awareness.

Of all the stories they still have to share.
“...I’m sorry you had to deal with that,” Gabriel says, genuinely apologetic, cutting off a strip of the chicken meat. Jack observes him, the feeling bittersweet in his heart, before he replies softly:

“...Carlos told me, about the drone...and about Silvio.”

Again, the silence between them isn’t uncomfortable, nor tense, nor bitter, nor angry.

It simply...waits.

Patient. Calm.

Enduring.

“...I didn’t mean -” Jack starts to say, before he pauses, thinks over his words, the feeling of heartbroken sympathy in his chest, and then exhales gently, “If you don’t want to talk about it, I completely understand. I just...I just wanted you to know that I’m here. I - that probably doesn’t mean much compared to another veteran or...I don’t know, but I’ll be here if you just…”

“It’s not like it’s anything new.”

Jack stops his small ramble as Gabriel stares blankly at his tray of food, before he exhales sharply, “It’s a story as old as war. All the other veterans here have a story like it.”

...

And the silence between them fills their world -

“It’s your story, Gabe.”

...

Gabriel lifts his gaze, eyes open and wide and honest -

(“...For the first time in years - perhaps the first time in your whole life - you have met someone who makes you think you can be something other than what you are.”)

As Jack gives him a sea-softened, storm-sweet smile, saying, “And I always want to hear your stories.”

(“And he makes you believe in heroes and hope again.”)

And then Jack grins that same sunbright smile, adding warmly, “And I bet you’re a great narrator.”

...

And Gabriel gives him a slight, soft smirk, asking wryly, “You sure about that? I’ve heard I’m pretty unreliable.”

Jack gives him a deadpan stare, before he mutters sardonically, “That’s too bad. I only enjoy stories if they’re told in the third person omniscient.”

“Pfft,” Gabriel wheezes, unable to hide his laughter, “Nerd.”

“Oh, I do not want to hear that from the man who gave me a Napoleon quote on his note this week!” Jack fires back, but he can’t hide his grin either. Gabriel just jabs his fork - strip of grilled chicken and all - in Jack’s direction, saying, “Hey! You deflected Guerra with a Napoleon quote in fucking
French! Who’s the bigger nerd here?”

“You, clearly,” Jack says as Gabriel crams the bite into his mouth. And Jack smirks smugly, saying, “I mean, you understood the quote, soooooo…”

“...Shit,” Gabriel mutters appreciatively as he swallows the bite, “That’s a good point.”

“And I still have to hear how you managed to outsmart Guerra of all people,” Jack says eagerly, “Because I have a sneaking suspicion that it somehow involves flooding the bathroom…?”

...No, see, we don’t need to go over that part,” Gabriel says unconvincingly, and Jack practically rolls in his seat, asking with clear excitement, “Wait, are you kidding me?? Did you actually flood the bathroom?? Why??”

“Shhhhh,” Gabriel says loudly, as the small group of three people a table over look in their general direction. Jack quiets, but he has to muffle his giggles by biting his fist, and Gabriel can still hear him muttering, “Flood the bathroom, what the hell…”

After the other people look away, Gabriel huffs, “...You sure you wanna hear about this, Jack?”

Jack stares at him blankly before he snorts with mock indignation, “Oh, hell no, you do not get to rope me into this scheme of yours and then not tell me how it all went down. That is not how we play this game, Reyes.”

“This story involves illegal actions against the U.S. military and Central Intelligence Agency,” Gabriel says with a smug, self-satisfied smirk, “It’s gotta be told on a need-to-know basis.”

“I am the one person who deserves to know,” Jack retorts with a vibrant grin, before he adds coyly, “After all, I was the whole reason you did it, right?”

...The silence between them says everything -

“Alright now, boy scout - don’t go getting a high opinion of yourself,” Gabriel retorts, but his massive smirk gives away just how badly he’s lying, and Jack returns the favor with the widest, smuggest shit-eating grin of utter joy Gabriel has ever seen on him, laughing, “I told you not to boost my ego, Gabe!”

“Damn, I played myself,” Gabriel snorts, diving in for more chicken again. He cuts off another strip, and - pointing it towards Jack - says, “But I’m not telling you here.”

And with a slightly softer, more concerned tone, he asks gently, “…You up for some book club? Or do you need more sleep?”

Jack stares at him - Before he suddenly leans across the table and bites the strip of chicken off the fork.

Utter shock and bright bewilderment blossoms across Gabriel’s face as Jack chews triumphantly, saying confidently (even with the food in his mouth), “Never interrupt an enemy when he’s making a mistake, Gabe.”

“Holy shit, you definitely got enough sleep,” Gabriel says with a slightly dazed grin. He shakes his
head, cuts another strip, exhales, “I feel like I’m slowly making my greatest enemy here - my future arch-nemesis, training you in all my methods just for you to use them against me.”

“That would sure suit this comic book backstory we got going on here,” Jack hums, enjoying how good the grilled chicken is, even when it’s cold. He pauses, thinking, before he asks thoughtfully, “Or are we going for more of a classic literary rivalry? Holmes versus Moriarty?”

“Oh my god, Jack,” Gabriel says with clear excitement, his eyes bright, like gilded fire behind smoke, “Saving me dinner and bringing up Professor Moriarty? Please, I can only fall so far -”

“Oh boy, classic literature - your greatest weakness,” Jack grins, but then he huffs, “Don’t you ever want to talk about something different?”

“Want me to go back to talking about stupid questions?” Gabriel offers with a wry grin, “Or oil fields?”

“No, no - I stand corrected,” Jack chuckles, but then -

And then digs a hand into his jacket, muttering, “…Speaking of my favorite topics…”

Jack raises an eyebrow skeptically, as Gabriel places a small datapad on the table and slides it towards him. Jack picks it up, as Gabriel takes another bite, instructing him, “You should log in under your username. The passcode for your first login is 0076. You should probably change it to something new.”

Jack blinks at him, before he says with a smirk, “Considering what you got in trouble for, I’m surprised you didn’t just log in as me on your own.”

“I wouldn’t -” Gabriel starts to protest fiercely, before he glances towards the other group behind Jack, and then - dropping his voice to an apologetic murmur - continues, “…I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” Jack says brightly, as he wakes the datapad from sleep mode, “But I trust you even if you do.”

…

The silence is stunned.

“What,” Gabriel half-asks, half-snaps at him, but Jack just hums nonchalantly, saying, “Mi casa es tu casa -”

“That’s not -” Gabriel says, struggling with how shocked and admittedly slightly awed he is over Jack’s openness, “That’s really not - you’ve known me for two months!”

“And when you held the equivalent of a master key, you chose to hand it over instead of using it,” Jack says, giving Gabriel that slightly crooked, seasung smile, a hint of the storm that brews deep deep deeper in the younger soldier than his demeanor reveals -

And as Jack fills out the form:

[Enter Username]: [Morrison.John]

[Enter Passcode]: [0076]
He exhales with vivid, vibrant brightness:

“And you trusted me this week. So I’ll trust you too.”

Gabriel sits there, reeling under the way Jack’s words sweep through him, tide and toil carving at the shore and -

As the datapad loads the profile, Jack grins at Gabriel, asking jokingly, “So what should I make the new PIN? 1824? What does that even stand for...anyways…”

But his words drift off into the air

As his gaze drifts back to the datapad

And it pings with a new notification:

[[Reyes.Gabriel] has shared a new folder with you: [Gabe’s Favorites]].

Gabriel watches as confusion and surprised happiness bloom on Jack’s face -

(Just like when he had given him the Holmes anthology the other day)

And Jack looks up with the widest, brightest, most radiant smile, asking breathlessly, “What is this?”

“...You should read the note first,” Gabriel says quietly, both overjoyed to see that smile again And softly nervous.

“Note?” Jack asks, opening the folder and the window pops up with tens of subfolders - maybe even close to one-hundred, all labeled with authors. Sure enough, at the top, there’s a text document labeled “Happy Birthday.”

“Holy shit, Gabe...” Jack starts to say, his pulse thrilling with sheer excitement as he opens the document:

[Dear Jack,]

[Sorry I couldn’t get you a real birthday present earlier. Kinda hard when you’re stuck in a secret military base in the Boise Mountains, haha. Anyways, I know this isn’t much but hopefully it kinda makes up for the terrible Resistance week. Maybe I can buy you a drink when they let us go into town.]

---

“I thought I was supposed to buy you that drink,” Jack murmurs with distant joy as he reads:

[Or anything else. Well, maybe not anything else. But you get it.]  

[Anyways, Happy Birthday, and congrats on surviving Resistance week!]

---

“Aww, Gabe, how sweet...” Jack starts to say but then he realizes…”

There’s a second page to the note.
He scowls, scrolls down, and reads more seriously:

[Hey soldier:]

[I’m sorry in advance if this part is a bit messy - I’m writing this at like 0300 hours the day before I break you out of the prison camp. And it’s been one hell of a night.]

[If I’m not in SEP anymore, it means I failed to convince Guerra I wasn’t a threat. If I’m still in SEP, then I was successful. Hopefully it’s the latter. If it’s the former...well, I hope you can still trust me after all this.]

[Super long story short: contained in these folders is all of the information on the Soldier Enhancement Program that I copied from Guerra’s account. In order to make them as untraceable as a limited access, non-encrypted datapad could, I converted each file into a “textless” image, then back into “textless” pdfs, then saved those pdfs at the end of different story pdfs. It’ll take some searching but you’ll find them. This page is also an image file. There’s also a video clip that I cut into the second half of The Phantom of the Opera. As a decoy, I have saved the original book and movie files unaltered on my own account - hopefully that’s enough to distract Guerra from reading the copies I’ve sent you.]

[Regardless of if I’m still around or not, I want you to get these files to a secure location. I know that isn’t fair to ask of you, but having read these, I know it is imperative to keep them safe. They will not survive the world after the war.]

[When you have finished reading this image, delete it and save the birthday note.]

[(For what it’s worth, I meant every word that I wrote in that part.)]

---

Jack

Has to remember to breathe.

He doesn’t even know what he should be feeling, or hell, even what he is feeling - a bittersweet mixture of shock and horror, skepticism and confusion, and maybe -

Surprisingly -

Fear and utter relief.

Jack looks up at Gabriel, who has a solemn look on his face, but it cracks into a bittersweet, slightly twisted grin as he says smokily, “...At least I’m still here, right?”

“You...you really thought -” Jack starts to stammer, chokes on his words like bitter glass, forces himself to steady his thoughts and get out, “You actually thought you weren’t...going to make it…”

“I always get told I’m too smart for my own good,” Gabriel says wryly, “And sometimes, it’s so incredibly true that it even surprises me.”

“You...flooded the bathroom,” Jack mutters, still in shock, “Stole a CIA agent’s identity, copied all of the program’s classified files, converted them to images and back, sent them to me...and just... why . Why go this far??”

Gabriel looks Jack dead in the eye - smoke against sea, molten gold stardusted against midnight blue
stormed -

And he asks quietly:

“Why did you knife the drones during Survival and Evasion? Why did you help your friends with their injections? Why did you give Cell 4 your mattress? Why did you hide the note from Guerra? Why did you speak up to Flores yesterday?”

And Gabriel asks softly, in a voice as low as blue night shadows:

“Why did you save me dinner?”

And Jack stares straight back at Gabriel, relishing how his gaze is smoke and shadow, but gilded with the lacy fire of galaxies -

And Jack smirks, and says in that stormtide voice:

“...Tonight is gonna be one hell of a book club meeting.”

Chapter End Notes

[MORRISON]: Alright, Gabriel - start from the beginning.

[REYES]: We arrived in the Venice safehouse and set up surveillance on the manor. We executed our plan under cover of darkness.

[...]

[REYES]: ...You sure you want to hear about this, Jack?

[MORRISON]: You haven't left me much choice.

[REYES]: Whatever happened to "plausible deniability"?

[MORRISON]: ...Little late for that. Tell me what actually happened.

[...]

[REYES]: Hahaha, well, Jack...That's one hell of a story.

---

I miss "Retribution" so much. TT A TT

I know I probably sound like a broken record at this point, but - like the last two chapters - you can really see the impact that "Retribution's" reveal had on this chapter. According to Google Doc's changes, I started this on April 7th and wrote the majority of it throughout the month. I really, really, really wanted to jump straight to the fluffy, angst/comfort reunion, but: 1) I needed a chapter that showed the "consequences" of Gabriel's actions and 2) I needed a moment to really emphasize the themes and motifs that were developed in "Resistance".
Next week, the moment we've all been waiting for. :D

---

Question for people who have commented on this fic:

I know I'm not great at answering comments (I'm coming back to a bunch of them, I promise TT_TT) but I was curious if you guys would give me permission to screenshot and share some of your past ones? They'd mainly be posted to tumblr and twitter - I'd like to do a big post on tumblr linking to the fic and showing some of your guys' comments on it, if that's alright. If it's not, no worries!
Chapter Summary

["War is life multiplied by some number that no one has ever heard of." - Sebastian Junger, "War"]

Gabriel tells a story.

[His story.]

Jack listens.

[And helps Gabriel hold together.]

Chapter Notes

When the darkness don't let you sleep
I'mma hold you close
And when space is all you need
I can let you go
And if the spark in your eye goes out
I can be your glow
Bringing you home, yeah
Bringing you home

I see your hurt, I feel your pain
All of our dirt is washed in the rain.
I've walked that road, I've felt that shame
No place is home but times, they are changin'

This is our sanctuary
We can find shelter and peace
This is our sanctuary
You are
You are
Safe with me

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From childhood’s hour I have not been
As others were—I have not seen
As others saw—I could not bring
My passions from a common spring—
From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow—I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone—
And all I lov’d—I lov’d alone—

Then—in my childhood—in the dawn
Of a most stormy life—was drawn
From ev’ry depth of good and ill
The mystery which binds me still—
From the torrent, or the fountain—
From the red cliff of the mountain—
From the sun that ’round me roll’d
In its autumn tint of gold—
From the lightning in the sky
As it pass’d me flying by—
From the thunder, and the storm—
And the cloud that took the form
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)
Of a demon in my view—

- Edgar Allan Poe, “Alone”

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24+76: Exposition

Thursday, February 21, 2047: 2313 hours - the northwestern corner of the SEP facility

Jack glances at his wrist monitor, checking the time as he stands in the spot that the two hallway cameras can’t see.

...Did he get caught? Jack wonders absently.
They had spent

**About two hours**

Just sitting around in the mess hall.

Ostensibly, Gabriel had been “eating” and Jack had been, uh, keeping him company or something, but in reality, Gabriel had finished his dinner, like, thirty minutes in.

So really

They had just...stayed there.

Talking.

Joking.

Laughing.

Enjoying.

Hell, they had stayed there for so long that everyone else had trickled out, until - at about 2145 hours - a trainer-soldier had popped his head in through the double doors and told them to “get the hell to bed, it’s lights out”, and they had hastily cleaned up the plates and tray of Gabriel’s food and rushed back to the barracks section.

“2300 hours,” Gabriel had said to him as they had parted for their separate hallways. Jack had grinned, giving him a mock salute as he’d chuckled, “You’re the boss.”

“...Sorry I’m late,” Jack hears from down the hall, and he glances up to see Gabriel approaching - he’s carrying a lantern and the small spade that’s part of their camping gear.

“Oh,” Jack says with a slight scowl of confusion, “Should I have brought mine?”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Gabriel replies, rolling his shoulders, “A blizzard came through when you guys where in the cells. Just figured we might have to clear camp a bit.” He nods to the door, and Jack steps up and -

Without thinking -

**Taps in:**

1824.

**Buzz.**

...

The silence that follows is

**Hilarious.**

“Oh my god,” Gabriel wheezes as Jack twists back around, stammering, “Look -”

“Did you put in the other passcode??” Gabriel asks, his whole face beaming with a huge smile and Jack exhales loudly, “Look -”
“Holy hell, Jack, I really got under your skin,” Gabriel *smirks*, and Jack just gives up, muttering, “Three days of no sleep didn’t help, Gabe. I…”

And then Jack pauses, makes a deadpan face, and admits:

“…I don’t think I remember the other passcode.”

“Aw, *pobre soldadito*,” Gabriel snickers. Jack just scowls a bit, before a coy, wry smile twists on his lips, and he murmurs dryly, “Well, it’s cause *you* are the only thing I’ve been thinking about, Gabe.”

…

**HOLY SHIT**, Gabriel practically shouts in his head, because *that* wipes the smug smirk right off his face. Jack turns back towards the door, asking more genuinely, “What was it? 137 -”

“One-seven-three-nine,” Gabriel barely manages to choke out, his breath snagged in his chest like Jack has actually hit him. Jack taps that in, and the lockpad beeps, unlocking the door.

“Thanks, Gabe!” Jack says cheerfully as he steps outside, and - with a determined, well-worn exhale - Gabriel follows him out, murmuring, “...Yeah, no problem.”

The blizzard had definitely passed through: the banks of the snow are built up around the above-ground parts of the facility, reaching about waist-height from the level of the door. Jack semi-steps, semi-climbs up the snow drift and stands at the top, eyes gazing out across the light-flooded sections, into the dark of the trees -

And then up

To the seasky

Filled with stars.

And Jack

*Breathe*.

The air is cold shadows and crisp softness and sweet starlight.

It tastes like life.

Gabriel hauls himself up the snow drift and pauses, watching Jack just absorb the moment, admiring how the harsh contrast of the floodlights around the facility and the dense depths of the night cut across Jack’s figure, wrapping him in duality.

The silence between them is

Weighted with understanding.

“...It was only three days,” Jack says quietly, as if afraid to break the beautiful stillness of the world around them, “...I feel like that’s...not really that long at all…”

“It both is and it isn’t.”

Jack glances over his left shoulder as Gabriel approaches, also looking up at the stars. He pauses by Jack’s side, and says slowly, with a voice of soft gilded shadows, “What moments like this...this week show is the value of time, both how...precious and how worthless it is. Three days where
every second is hell and yet time itself is meaningless. Three days where you learn just how small you are, but three days where you learn how strong you are. Three days where you realize both the worst and the best is yet to come...but you have to fight to get there.”

But then Gabriel looks at him, and smiles, adding, “But you are strong enough to get there.”

...That sugary, flittery feeling of shadowy sensation shivers through Jack’s veins again at Gabriel’s smoke-sweetened grin, eyes like obsidian over gold, the light in them only enhanced by the way they shimmer in the darkness.

...And Gabriel doesn’t know how Jack manages to look so bright - half in light, half in night - eyes swelled with stars, hair like woven gold, but god damn, if he doesn’t have to fight the urge to reach out and hold him -

Jack grins at him, teasing Gabriel lightly as he laughs, “You mean there are worse things than listening to ‘Everybody Wants to Rule the World’ all day?”

“I know it’s hard to believe,” Gabriel smirks right back, “But shockingly there is. And it’s called the original version of ‘Mad World.’”

“Look,” Gabriel says insistently as Jack flicks the flashlight on. As they begin to head into the trees, Gabriel states emphatically, “It all makes perfect sense once you know it -”

“Right, I wouldn’t expect any less from Guerra,” Jack agrees. Gabriel nods, saying, “Exactly. So I knew which doors were PIN-protected in the North Branch facility. But like I said, I wasn’t actually planning on doing all this until after our talk on Sunday night, or Monday morning. Whatever. Point is, I had like, three hours to think of something.”

“And your first thought was, ‘Yes, I, Gabriel Reyes, must flood the bathroom,’” Jack jokes with a wide grin. Gabriel shoots him a scowl-smirk, but he laughs back, “Hang on, don’t jump the gun here, Watson! After all, ‘crime is common. Logic is rare. Therefore it is upon the logic rather than upon the crime that you should dwell.’”

“The logic that led you to flooding...a bathroom...” Jack says skeptically, but Gabriel just beams proudly, a full Cheshire Cat smile on his face as he says, “Exactly! So! First things first - I knew the North Branch uses PINs on a lot of doors, including the Cell Units. I could’ve just given you the PIN they gave us, but then what would have happened?”

Jack scowls a bit in concentration, then murmurs, “The guards - they would’ve still had access. Guerra was worried I was going to lead Cells 4 and 5 to a different room and hide there.”

“Yes, perfect,” Gabriel grins, “So what I needed - what we needed - was a PIN that no one else knew. But it was Monday morning, and there was no time for me to tell you in advance -”

“So you gave me a note with the number you were going to use,” Jack says, “I did figure that part out. Why you didn’t just write ‘this is a PIN, Jack,’ is the part that kinda confuses me, Gabe -”
“Because I have to be honest with you, Jack,” Gabriel replies, “You were going to be tortured. Or well, ‘not torture’ tortured. And while torture doesn’t work to produce a truth that isn’t there - aka, if you didn’t do a crime, torture isn’t going to magically make you responsible for it, though you could lie and say you did just to get out of it - torture can make people crack in ways they don’t expect. And that is the problem. Remember what we talked about - stage three of no stupid questions. When you get punished for curiosity and knowledge -”

“You fall under other people’s control,” Jack answers. Gabriel nods, saying, “I didn’t want to put that risk on you. Guerra is like…”

He pauses - even physically stops walking - and Jack stops with him, turning a bit to watch him. Gabriel’s eyes are distant, his eyebrows furrowed, as if he’s seeing something Jack cannot see -

In his thoughts, Gabriel sees the table, with the beautiful bird resting on it, abyssal eyes consuming his every movement. He sees the interrogation room through the camera, the look of fear on Jack’s face, the chair tossed aside like nothing.

“...I know, Gabe.”

Gabriel looks up, focuses on the quiet, somber understanding that graces Jack’s face, and Jack repeats, “…I know now, Gabe. I get it. If I had...known the number was a PIN, he would’ve figured it out. He got…”

And then Jack pauses, his own gaze looking distant, as he murmurs, “...He almost got it anyways.”

...Jack pulls his mind back from the interrogation room, looking at Gabriel in the present, as Gabriel says quietly, “…I didn’t want… I thought that - if something were to go wrong - then you would be able to claim a true, genuine plausible deniability. Because when I wrote the note with the new PIN number for you on Monday morning, I knew I would have to steal someone’s identity in order to change the PIN.”

“But that’s another thing,” Jack says as Gabriel approaches him again. Jack scowls, thinking it over, before he asks, “How did you figure that part out? Shouldn’t there just be a reset protocol on the lockpad? Or a security room? Michael said yesterday that there was a security room.”

“There was, and there’s a security room in every major section of the facility,” Gabriel says, “But the security rooms only have emergency lockdown measures in them. You know, that big red button that says ‘Lock’ or whatever on it. The rest of the security room is dedicated to the cameras and the drones.”

“That seems...relaxed,” Jack says, suddenly a bit concerned about how easy it would be to take over the facility. Gabriel shrugs, replying, “There are pros and cons to the set up. The downside of a static, physical location for resetting the PINs is that, if that location is ‘lost’ in a tactical way, there’s no recovery, and your enemy has gained the ability to control your access at their leisure. It doesn’t even need to be militant in focus - a fire could wipe out all control, or electrical failure could trigger a lockdown.”

Jack nods slowly as Gabriel adds with a sly grin, “Then again, I just proved all the downsides of using a wireless control system, so maybe a physical location reset mode ain’t looking too bad here.”

Jack snorts, and they start their walk again. As they start through the shadows of the pines and the dappling of the stars through the branches, their feet crunch the crisp, fresh snow, and Jack says
above the rhythm of their walk, “So you knew you needed to get access to the wireless control system? And in order to do that, you basically needed to figure out who had access to it to begin with. That makes sense.”

“Yeah,” Gabriel says, before he adds with a slow, slightly nervous tone, “...I’m...kinda surprised you’re taking this so…”

But his words run dry in his head, his feelings so...torn.

Jack glances at him, asking genuinely, “So what?”

Gabriel chews over his thoughts, before he picks, “...So easily.”

This time, Jack stops, and Gabriel follows a second later, watching him as Jack scowls a bit, saying with some confusion, “I don’t understand - why wouldn’t I?”

Gabriel makes a face of resignation, hating that he has to elaborate on this, but he pushes himself to say, “Because at like 3 am before any of this began I basically made up my mind to conduct serious identity theft and override the security system of a secret military base?”

Jack actually has to

*Contemplate that*

As Gabriel adds quietly, “And I mean, General Flores was right. I didn’t even...really consider what could have gone wrong. Carolina - she told me this morning that I need to think about the consequences a bit more before I...I pick my battles, basically.”

Jack just...observes him for a second.

And for a second

Time seems to slow down and move too fast simultaneously.

Gabriel looks

So uncertain

Over himself

His decisions

His actions.

And Jack *knows*.

“...You’re a good person, Gabe.”

Gabriel’s eyes somehow grow wider in shock even has his eyebrows furrow

As Jack *smiles* at him - not that sunshiny, radiant grin he gets when he’s overwhelmed with joy, but that same sort of soft half-smile he’d given Gabriel after Flores had broken up the fight yesterday.

“I don’t -” Gabriel starts to protest, his words dying before reviving again, “I’m not sure you get it -”

“No, I do,” Jack replies, with a low wash of patience and kindness and warmth - more than Gabriel
thinks he deserves - in his voice, “Just because you make different decisions and use a different strategy than what’s expected does not mean you were wrong.”

And then Jack pauses, taking a step closer to Gabriel, and says to him in that deep, smooth tone:

“After all, you had the chance to access my profile and you didn’t.”

They’re close enough that the glow from Jack’s flashlight is behind Gabriel, so that, drowned in the darkness and a sea of stars, there is only the shadows of themselves standing together and yet -

They can still see each other.

“...I said I wouldn’t do that to you,” Gabriel murmurs quietly, but Jack’s smile just softens a bit as he replies, “And that’s how I know - you have a tremendous talent, yet you have such restraint for it. You did right by one-hundred-and-eight people yesterday, and today, you continued to do right by just one.”

...A shiver creeps up Gabriel’s spine at the look in Jack’s eyes.

...A good kind of shiver.

...A good kind of look.

“It is not the flexibility of our methods or means which make us good or bad, right or wrong,” Jack says gently - so gently, like his words embrace Gabriel’s senses, “But our intentions behind them.”

“...The road to Hell is paved with good intentions,” Gabriel murmurs back, but Jack just smiles deeper, replying, “And as I told General Flores after Survival and Evasion, if I get dishonorably discharged or court martialed for doing what’s right by me and my companions, then that is a bolder badge of courage than any medal or reward.”

...I don’t need medals, Gabriel thinks to himself, Or recognition. Or anything.

I just need -

“...Though, I’m going to be honest,” Jack says with that coy, mischievous grin again, so close that Gabriel can practically feel him smirk, “I still don’t understand how the bathroom is part of this.”

“...Smartass,” Gabriel smirks back, and Jack’s chest hitches at just how close that sly, twisted smile feels -

“Gabe, there’s unconventional, and then there’s you ,” Jack retorts with a faint laugh.

“Yeah, it’s called creativity, Watson - you should try it sometime,” Gabriel fires back, and Jack just twists around him, starting to walk backwards towards the camp, saying, “Maybe you should explain your idea before you call it creative , Holmes.”

“Look,” Gabriel says, striding up after him, “Okay, so here’s where you gotta stick with me, right?”

“Have I left yet, Gabe?” Jack teases back, and Gabriel rolls his eyes, saying, “You know what I mean. So people reuse their PINs all the time, right?”

“Yeah, of course they do,” Jack says, letting Gabriel take the few short steps to catch up to him. Gabriel grins, explaining, “Right, so - at least one of the directors or trainers has to reuse their PIN, right?”
“And out of all of them, Guerra is the one you pegged as the ‘reuses his PIN’ guy, huh?” Jack asks wryly, and Gabriel smirks back, saying, “Alright, chill. First off, I wasn’t just grabbing some random trainer’s PIN. No way did they have access to changing the lock system of a whole base. So then I figured it had to come down to three people with that access, right?”

“Wait, wait, let me guess,” Jack says excitedly, “Guerra, Flores, and...Luna?”

“Close, but Watanabe was my third guess,” Gabriel says, happy that Jack got that close, “But also, I wasn’t gonna steal Carolina’s PIN...though she probably wouldn’t have been too surprised if I did.”

“...Is this a recurring habit for you, Gabe?” Jack asks slyly and Gabriel smirks, laughing, “I plead the fifth. But my guess was basically that these three had access to the wireless control system. My initial plan was to get the PIN to one of their rooms and either sneak off with a datapad or try to figure out one of their passwords.”

And then -

Jack suddenly knows.

“...But they gave you a datapad,” he exhales with excitement, and Gabriel beams at him, bright and bold even in the nightfallen darkness, “Exactly! That made it ten-times easier. I could experiment with different options from the get-go. And best of all -”

(“These things,” Gabriel says, holding up his datapad in his other hand, “Are using the same usernames and logins as the ones from the tech lab, right?”)

(Guerra seems to pause, before saying, “That’s right. Same username login, but due to these being datapad tablets, they require a four-digit numeric passcode instead of your usual password. I’m sure you can set up double-security in the settings, though, if you want to require both the number code and password to log in.”)

“I found out that the login profiles on the datapads were the same as the ones on a regular computer,” Gabriel grins royally, “So I knew that if I logged in as - say - Guerra on the datapad, I would have access to everything his profile could normally access.”

“So you wouldn’t have to worry about being in the tech lab when you changed the PIN,” Jack breathes with sudden realization. Gabriel practically lights up over that, saying, “Yes! Exactly! Initially, I thought I would have to change the PIN and then trust you to be the only person on the ‘inside’ to know it. Some of my other ideas involved getting a comms device to you or giving you another message once all the prepwork was complete. But once I had the datapad, I knew that I could help you out.”

“But you still had to get a director’s PIN, right?” Jack asks, slowing his excitement a bit, thinking it over, “Or did you just find access to the wireless system right away?”

“No, so that was the next step,” Gabriel says, “Get the PIN for a director. But Flores was gone for three days, and Watanabe and Guerra were both sharp. Neither of them would use their PINs on their datapads in an...obvious way.”

“Okay, so, how were you going to get a PIN?” Jack asks, and Gabriel smirks at him, saying, “You know...you never asked me how I got the PIN to this door...or to the kitchen.”

Jack suddenly

Stops.
He stares distantly into the shadows, as Gabriel pauses beside him, that wry, knowing smirk on his face. Jack suddenly shifts his gaze to him, murmuring with warm awe, “I just...I never even questioned it.”

“I’m aware,” Gabriel says with that Cheshire Cat grin. He pauses, then digs a hand into his pocket, pulling out his notebook as he hums lightly, “It’s kinda surreal, you know? Like, here we are with those augmented tactical lenses and AI drones, getting injections of super serums, ready to wage war on robots.”

And then Gabriel holds out the notebook - open to one of the first pages - and smirks at Jack, saying, “And yet, people forget the oldest and most basic aspect of forensic science and HUMINT missions.”

Jack takes the notebook, and shines the flashlight on the page.

There are two pieces of big, packing tape - clear with one side adhesive - stuck to the page, roughly square shape. And on them - in greyish white powder -

Are smudged fingerprints.

Jack’s jaw drops a little as he flicks his gaze over the rough “grid” that Gabriel has drawn over each piece of tape, segmenting the squares out into a number pad, 1-9 from top to bottom, with the 0 hanging on. Though smudged and blurry, each fingerprint clearly fits into four particular digits, and next to the tape, Gabriel has written down each possible combination of PINs.

The top one is labeled “Kitchen”, and Gabriel has circled his third guess - 0514.

And the bottom one is labeled “NW Door”, with the second PIN - 1739 - circled.

“I don’t -” Jack starts to say, find his thoughts evaporating, stammers, “You just - how did you get tape like this?? And fingerprint powder??”

“Oh no,” Gabriel says brightly, “That’s not fingerprint powder, though I’m pretty sure there’s some official stuff in one of the storage closets, for the Fox course when it launches. No, that’s some powder laundry detergent, and then, when I got access to the kitchen, I made a mix of baking soda and pepper for a finer-grained one. I brought the tape and they just let me keep it.”

Jack just gawks at it for so long that Gabriel grows a bit nervous, muttering, “Uh, I mean, look - it’s just for fun, I would never .”

“That’s ingenious.”

Gabriel

Stops.

As Jack looks at him, eyes effortlessly bright and somehow completely aglow in the darkness, the light from the flashlight giving them a beautiful, surreal shimmer, as though the light is cast from beneath the surface of water.

Gabriel finds himself

Spellbound.

“You’re ingenious,” Jack says to him with a huge, wondrous smile on his face, “Gabe, this is so
goddamn smart, holy shit, this is an incredible idea.”

But then Jack pauses, glancing back down to the notebook with a small scowl, before he wonders aloud, “But how the hell did you get Guerra’s PIN like this? They have security cameras, right? Wouldn’t those cameras see you do it?”

And Gabriel grins.

“You’re pretty fast yourself, Watson,” he says with a smirk, “You can see immediately how I got stuck for a second. All my actions in the main hallways would be recorded. The door we use to get out - well, the cameras point down the hallways, so we can use the lockpad as we need to. But just strolling down to Guerra’s or Watanabe’s door and trying to lift fingerprints off of their lockpads would be noticed immediately. So what could I do to change that?”

Jack lifts his head again, thinking it over, before he says, “You could’ve tried disabling the cameras, but someone would’ve fixed them.”

“Right, and since most of the hallways have another camera pointing from the other end, that camera would’ve caught me disabling them,” Gabriel agrees, urging him on, “So if I couldn’t touch the cameras, what could I do to make my actions less obvious?”

Jack scowls a bit in confusion, saying, “Well, I mean - you said you flooded the bathroom, but I don’t see how that would…”

But then his eyes go wide as he realizes, exhaling excitedly, “The directors’ bathroom.”

“Exactly,” Gabriel says, beaming at him knowingly, “The last time the barracks bathroom broke down, the candidates had to use the gym showers and the directors’ bathroom -”

(At least once, maybe twice a week, several of the drains would clog, and over the course of a month and half, at least two of the showers had required new pipes and showerheads, one of the trough sinks had clogged at the central drain, and three of the toilets had, for about three days, stopped refilling. The shower and toilet incidents had required calling out an Army-certified, third-party-contracted construction and plumbing crew from Boise to fix them. While the soldier-candidates had managed to work around those problems, this had only increased the chaos of early mornings, post-workout problems at the gym bathroom, and late evening frustrations (and “frustrations”) when people just wanted to crash in bed.)

(And though the vast majority of the soldier-candidates are now in “prison” -)

(Gabriel needs that mismatched amalgamation of disoriented chaos again.)

“So I knew that if I flooded or broke part of the barracks bathroom, they would have to let us use the directors’ bathroom for our showers,” Gabriel explains eagerly, “What I really needed was to change the situation to make it easier for me and the other senior soldiers to move around the facility freely - no one would question someone with a towel going down the directors’ hallway towards the bathroom because they would be just heading to the showers.”

“Holy shit,” Jack murmurs with awe, and Gabriel grins at him, adding pointedly, “And if one of those senior soldiers - say, I dunno, my roommate Felix, ‘Soldier: 23’ - was wandering down that hallway -”

(This guard’s jacket also says “23” on it.)

(Jack frowns in confusion and lifts his gaze to his guard’s face (or whatever he can see of it) and he
(Stops)

(Breathing)
(As his mind - still half asleep and full of the shattering ring of the alarm - picks out those eyes -)

(Smoke crystallized into obsidian shards, flaked with stardust and wisps of the galaxies, sewn with small threads of beaded gold and dancing sunlight -)

(That meet his own.)

“- And he just happened to be clumsy and drop a bunch of his shower stuff by Guerra’s room -”
Gabriel continues knowingly -

(Everything drops from Gabriel’s right hand-forearm-elbow.)

([Marc blinks once, twice in bored exasperation as he watches Félix drop a razor, a bottle of shampoo, a bar of soap, a pair of boxer-briefs, a container of lotion or something, a packet of something, his own towel -]

(The items scatter across the floor - the bottles roll off in different directions, his electric razor falls at an awkward angle on its rubber grip thing and bounces once, twice in an odd momentum, and his boxer-briefs flutter unceremoniously to the ground.)

“...Well,” Gabriel smirks, “If you’re a good actor, or someone pretty ambidextrous, maybe you could use some quick... tricks to lift some fingerprints.”

He leans over, and flips the notebook to the page with the tape of Guerra’s lockpad fingerprints, along with all his possible combinations and descriptions on PINs.

Jack breathes out, “Oh my god, you actually did it.”

“Of course I did,” Gabriel chuckles wryly, “We wouldn’t be here right now if I hadn’t been able to.”

“Hindsight is 20/20,” Jack jokes but as his eyes drift down the combinations, he scowls, realizing, “Wait, only three digits?”

“Yup,” Gabriel says proudly, “That one took some sleuthing. And Luisa’s uh... advice, I guess.”

Jack looks up at him, an eyebrow raised skeptically, and Gabriel gives him his trademark shrug, grinning cheesily, “She didn’t really know, you know? But she’s a good friend and gave me some advice, even though she knew I was up to something.”

“Is that why she was upset with you yesterday?” Jack asks with a grin. Gabriel rolls his eyes, but says back teasingly, “Look, everyone tolerates me, okay? I know that.”

But then his smirk drops to a softer, kinder, gentler grin as he murmurs quietly, “...I have better friends than I deserve.”

Jack looks at him, before -

“That’s not true.”

Gabriel blinks once, twice, then looks into the depths of those eyes - as strong as the nightfallen blue
shadows around them, full of stardust and submerged light - as Jack grins back, “Friendship and trust are earned, Gabe, and you have a light inside you that draws the brave and the true to you.”

Gabriel stares at him, his eyes wide with hesitant hope and soft sweetness and Jack -

...*Some of us would follow you into Hell and back,* Jack thinks quietly.

But he cannot say it.

...Not yet.

“...I just…” Gabriel starts to say, but stops, his words fluttery and free and feeling fine inside him, but too loose and airy to get out. Jack watches him, and then glances down at the page with the tape of Guerra’s fingerprints, and he murmurs gently, “You were right, Gabe - you are creative. And incredibly smart. And driven. You outplayed the director who might be the smartest person in this program by utilizing everything in this program in a way no one - not even him - expected.”

And then Jack looks up, and grins at him, his voice humming low and serene like a hymn, “Your friends are lucky to have you.”

Gabriel watches him, and thinks softly, so softly, so tenderly:

*Isn’t it the other way around?*

Before he smiles back to Jack, his grin wide and honest and true and happy, even as he says wryly, “No such thing as luck, Jack.”

“Don’t be a jerk about it,” Jack retorts, but even he can’t hide his smile - Gabriel’s joy is infectious, a thrill that Jack can feel in the air between them. Even as he grins, Jack shakes his head, asking smartly, “Besides, wasn’t it lucky that Guerra reuses his PIN?”

“No, that’s not luck - that’s a statistic,” Gabriel smirks, “There’s only pure, psychological skill here, Watson.”

“Mmhmm,” Jack hums noncommittally, starting to walk again, stepping past Gabriel as he shines his flashlight into the darkness. In the decreasing distance, they can see the rough outline of the A-frame, covered in snow, and Jack asks curiously, “So that was all it took? Four numbers and Guerra was vulnerable? That seems too...simple for a spy like him. The whole program could be undone with a simple cracking program.”

And then Jack adds wryly, “Or some baking soda and tape.”

“Man, less than thirty seconds ago, you were saying how badass that was,” Gabriel says with teasing indignation. He flicks the light of the lantern on, and they assess the state of the camp - it’s not too bad, but snow has filled the semi-circular area, covering the fire pit and pine-bough-and-tarp-covered ground.

“I never said it was badass, Gabe,” Jack teases him right back, “Just creative.”

“Uh, your exact word was ingenious, thank you very much,” Gabriel reminds him smugly. He hops into the area first, hanging the lantern from the main branch of the A-frame, and Jack follows a second later, switching his flashlight off to preserve the charge as Gabriel explains, “Besides, it wasn’t just his PIN - Guerra had the two-password security feature on.”

“So you had to figure out his password anyways?” Jack asks as he starts to push some of the snow
out of the clearing and into the short “windbreaker” wall that surrounds the camp. Gabriel starts clearing the fire pit with the shovel, saying, “Yup, and crazy enough, that was the easiest part.”

“Why?” Jack asks, taking the snow that Gabriel digs from the fire pit to the wall and dumping it there, “Was it like, ‘Guerre’ or something?”

Gabriel

Stops.

He *freezes* mid-scoop, pulling the last bit of snow out of the fire pit. Jack, meanwhile, drops to his knees and crawls into the A-frame, pulling some of the “drier” twigs and small branches they have stored off to the side. He loads up enough to start the fire, but scowls a bit when he realizes…

“...Gabe?” he asks, sliding back out, seating himself behind Gabriel’s still, crouched form, “Look, if it’s sensitive info, you don’t have to tell me -”

“Forest for the trees.”

Jack’s words die as Gabriel speaks, but his voice sounds just a bit hoarse, fraying under a pressure Jack isn’t sure he can truly place.

And then

Gabriel adjusts himself, sitting on Jack’s right, by the opening of the A-frame, and he glances hesitantly at Jack, murmuring lowly:

“That was his ‘hint’ to himself. Like he could ever forget it.”

Jack starts to arrange the twigs and branches in the fire hole, and he tries his hardest to be as soft as he can when he says, “...If it’s uncomfortable, you don’t have to say it.”

“It’s not...uncomfortable,” Gabriel murmurs as he watches Jack pull the firestarter bar from his pocket. As Jack unsheathes his knife to scratch off the flakes, Gabriel *breathes* out softly:

“Silvio.”

Jack

Hesitates.

Before he flips the bar over and strikes the flint strip -

“Guerre’s password was ‘Silvio,’” Gabriel says, more to just say it than to inform Jack, “He used to say that phrase a lot, as a joke on his name.”

The spark catches the flakes.

Jack leans over, and breathes gently into the opening of the pit, pressuring the softest guiding of air and life into it.

And the fire catches.

And begins to burn.

And Jack sits back -
Taking his place by Gabriel’s side

Asking him softly, “...Will you tell me?”

Gabriel stares at the thin trail of smoke rising from the ground - a silver thread against the blue darkness, small flakes of gilded wood and embers rising alongside it until the cold snaps them out of existence.

“...Only -” Jack says quietly, pressing his shoulder against Gabriel’s, “Only if you want to -”

“I want to.”

Jack

Inhales

With a soft steepness to his breath.

And he glances to his right, where Gabriel’s gaze - smoke gilded with stardust - meets his.

“...I want to,” Gabriel repeats, this time with more smoky vividness but with even less force, “I think you deserve to - well, okay, maybe not deserve, that feels like I’m pressuring you but...damn, I don’t know how to say it.”

Because he wants to.

He wants to tell Jack.

He wants Jack to know.

He wants to try them.

Jack’s eyes are as deep as the night around them, blue with stars submerged.

And Gabriel wants to know

How deep they will go.

“I know.”

Jack’s voice is low like a tide come to shore, smoky sweet like the smoothest drink, and Gabriel watches as Jack gives him that faint, soft smile, saying, “I know what you mean. And I’m happy you want to tell me. I...I’m here, Gabe. And I want to listen to any stories you want to tell me.”

And then Jack adds with a starbright grin, “Your stories especially.”

And Gabriel -

(He makes you believe in heroes and hope again.)

He wants.

But he also knows.

“There...isn’t a great starting point,” Gabriel says quietly, but Jack’s grin just gets cheesier and more lighthearted as he teases back, “Well, the best stories always start in the middle, don’t they?”
“Ha,” Gabriel says with a dry grin, “You read some classic lit for a week and you suddenly think you’re an expert, huh?”

Jack positively *radiates* a smile as he says brightly, “It’s elementary, my dear Holmes!”

“Does that mean this is the part where the villain monologues his whole life story to explain his actions?” Gabriel asks with that smug, knowing smirk. Jack laughs, but also states with increasing seriousness, “Dude, look - *nothing* is going to top the mini...I don’t even know, book-rant-tirade against the Mormons in ‘A Study in Scarlet’ that I’m still not sure was entirely real or if I hallucinated that part as some guy whined about boots for hours.”

“That -” Gabriel snorts and chuckles, “That’s about as accurate a representation of ‘The Country of the Saints’ as I’ve ever heard.”

“Oh,” Jack says a bit lamely, trying to convince himself that part was real, “Oh, okay, so that part of the book *was* real. That...just kinda makes it weirder, if I’m being honest.”

“Yeah, it’s uh...” Gabriel replies in a more deadpan tone, “It’s definitely one of the weirder parts of the Holmes stories. Kind of a hard novel to start with too.”

“So you’re not gonna do that, right? There’s no revenge plots about Salt Lake City and whatnot in your backstory, right?” Jack asks Gabriel with a cheesy, sly grin. Gabriel rolls his eyes, but he’s still smiling as he laughs smokily, “My stories are honestly pretty mundane in the grand view of military stories, and I’m not a villain worthy of a Holmesian mystery.”

Jack gives him a skeptical look as he asks teasingly, “You sure? You really sure about that, Gabe? Cause I mean, I’ll be pretty honest with you - your plan for this week was pretty par for the course for Holmes villains.”

Gabriel pauses, nods contemplatively as he thinks it over, murmurs appreciatively, “Damn, that’s high praise in my book. Maybe someday I can be a Moriarty-tier criminal mastermind. The Napoleon of crime.”

“Well,” Jack says wryly, “You *did* already quote Napoleon like, several times this week, so I guess you’re off to a good start...?”

“Oh shit, you’re right,” Gabriel grins brightly, flooring Jack with his enthusiasm, “Hot damn, that part of it wasn’t even intentional. I was just quoting Napoleon because that’s a kickass quote.”

“Well. I mean. It got me an asskicking, so I guess that, by technicality, you aren’t wrong. But I do question your idea of ‘kickass,’” Jack says, urging him on with a playful smile, as if he’s piling tinder onto Gabriel’s fire -

“Dude, no, Napoleon was like. An *actual* military badass,” Gabriel states with genuine awe and clear respect, his whole face alighting with sheer excitement, “Like holy shit, if I had half the tactical genius Napoleon had, I would’ve already become a general at 24...”

“Damn, you’re already 29, you’re slacking big time, Gabe,” Jack jokes, still playing along but trying to drip his sarcasm up more -

“Look, I can’t set the bar *too* high, okay? Like, Moriarty might be doable. Maybe. If I really gun for it,” Gabriel continues, still *burning* with smoky silk enthusiasm, completely genuine, “But Napoleon? French emperor by 35? That’s not even ambitious - that’s literally impossible these days.”
“Hmm,” Jack hums noncommittally.

“Like, at best I might get a promotion out of this war or something. Maybe. I’m not aiming too high here. Captain maybe?” Gabriel asks him but also doesn’t really ask him, just kinda rambles. Jack lolls his head onto Gabriel’s left shoulder, muttering in that low rasp of dryness, “Gabe.”

“Captain Reyes has a nice ring to it, right? Although I guess if I end up with my own ODA, it would be ‘Commander Reyes -’” Gabriel wonders aloud. Jack rolls his eyes with wry humor, saying pointedly, “Alright, Commander Reyes, I’m happy you’re shooting for the stars here, but let’s come back to earth for a little bit, okay?”

Gabriel just sighs happily, still letting Jack rest his head on his shoulder, and he hums contentedly, “Think I could ever pull off a Napoleon outfit?”

...

The silence as Jack considers it is

So warmly humorous -

“...You might be too tall,” Jack answers with a dry honesty and lightness.

“...Damn,” Gabriel states with joking disappointment.

Jack shifts his head to look up towards Gabriel, as Gabriel gives him a totally genuine, totally real, totally authentic pout-scowl expression, his lips wavering just at the corners. Jack continues to stare deliberately at him, saying with a sly smirk, “Oh no, you poor thing - too tall and too muscular and too handsome to be Napoleon.”

“...This is my curse,” Gabriel retorts with a perfectly sarcastic deadpan smokiness.

...

Jack’s own smirk slips off his face as he lifts his head off Gabriel’s shoulder, quirking a skeptical, questioning eyebrow at him.

“Heavy lies the crown,” Gabriel continues, still attempting to hold his deadpan.

Jack resists the urge to crack first, continuing to stare impassively at Gabriel.

“...Get it?” Gabriel asks, his pout-scowl finally cracking into a smug smirk, “‘Cause ‘Reyes’ means -”

“Ya sé,” Jack finally retorts with a grin, and Gabriel murmurs, “...Oh right.”

“Después de todo, soy tu soldado,” Jack hums at him with a teasing smile. Gabriel blinks at him, but then relents, giving Jack a soft, sweetly smoky smile as he replies, “Don’t you think you should hear the story before you defend that?”

(Does it change anything?)

“That would involve the narrator actually starting his exposition,” Jack says back. Gabriel scowls a bit, and Jack just knows that he isn’t conflicted on telling it.

Just that he doesn’t know how.
You really don’t tell this often, Jack thinks, a small burst of honored joy thrumming through his veins at the realization. Gabriel continues to scowl, looking contemplative, and Jack leans against him again, saying slyly, “I was joking about starting in the middle, Gabe.”

“What, no, seriously? I had no idea,” Gabriel retorts, voice dripping with sarcasm. Jack just laughs, and both of them watch the thin thread of silvery smoke rise to the pine branches -

And then to the stars above.

...The silence is

Whole.

Serene.

Patient.

Gabriel feels no pressure, no stress, no impatience from Jack - all he feels is just Jack’s head on his shoulder, his comfortable weight against his side, the soft rhythm of his breathing.

And a sense of

Enduring trust.

Finally, after sorting his words out in his head, slotting them into sentences like lining up puzzle pieces, Gabriel asks, in a low but easy smoky tone:

“...When did you know you wanted to be a nurse?”

Jack listens, and - after a heartbeat of a pause - answers gently, “Well...I knew for awhile but I really made up my mind after Peter died. Knew I couldn’t do much on my own, but just...really wanted to make a difference in the area...but that was before…”

“...Before the war started,” Gabriel replies, the words both a statement and a question. Jack shrugs a bit, muttering, “...It was either get drafted or enlist on my own terms, and you know what I picked.”

“...I think you’re brave for making that decision,” Gabriel murmurs quietly. Jack glances up at him, asking with a crooked smile, “Really? Brave to try to force my way into the Special Forces instead of be a regular Army medic or doctor like I should have been?”

“It’s not an easy choice, between trying to accept the inevitable or fight for a different path,” Gabriel says gently, “When the war broke out, there was...no choice for me. Or Carlos. Or Luisa. Or the majority of the people in this program. We never had to grapple with that decision, never had to think about...being or choosing something else.”

And then Gabriel’s gaze - watching the smoke - softens a bit, as he continues, “In a strange way, it makes it easier. A war? A draft? Giving up a civilian lifestyle? Letting go of a different dream? Foregoing who you had decided to be in order to become what others needed you to be?”

Gabriel glances at Jack, saying with all the quietness of stardust:

“...I’m not sure I could’ve done it. Even for the apocalypse.”

Jack looks back, sees all the soft gilded galaxies behind the obsidian smoke of Gabriel’s eyes -

“...I’m not sure I can do that now,” Gabriel says, in a voice so low Jack feels his words more than he
hears them.

“...Is that selfish of me?” the soldier with smoke-and-gold eyes and a smoke-and-gold heart asks him.

And -

Even though it’s been less than a week since he thought it, but couldn’t say it -

Jack says softly:

“If that’s selfish, Gabe, then I like your style of selfishness.”

*And I want you to be selfish with me.*

Gabriel looks into those eyes of depth, blue upon blue upon seasunken stars, and sees only honesty, a genuine truth, a patience that spans oceans and midnight skies.

And Gabriel knows.

“I just…” he murmurs, still looking at Jack, “I just wish that I had had *that*, you know? That choice. That feeling that I could have been…”

He stops.

Struggles with his words.

Wishes it wasn’t so difficult to find them sometimes.

Especially the ones about himself.

But then

He feel Jack lean against him a little more, a little firmer, a little sweeter, as Jack’s low tidal voice - soft with stardust - soothes him:

“It’s okay, Gabe. I’m here. There’s no rush.”

Gabriel

Stops.

Inhales.

Exhales.

And then

Begins:

“...I wanted *so badly* to succeed at college. *I loved* learning - think I’m pretty damn good at it too. If I can compliment myself on anything, it’s that. I’m *great* at knowledge. And analyzing. And connecting. And despite how I might seem, I did fine academically in high school. Dipped a few times in like, Sophomore year when my brother Rafael was constantly getting shitfaced and making the house feel miserable. Pulled it together after my uncle got me into boxing and my history teacher gave me a book on Caesar. I think I read every book on military history in the school library before that school year ended.”
“Holy shit,” Jack says with a laugh. Gabriel grins, glancing at him as he continues, “I’ve never had a problem concentrating on things I liked, but the stuff I found boring...those classes were pure torture. I rocked history, lit, biology, but then it was like...calculus made me want to die. Physics was and is pure bullshit, and I stand by that.”

“That might be the truest statement you’ve ever said,” Jack snorts with a smirk. Gabriel practically laughs, “Really - that’s the truest statement I’ve ever said?? Have I ever lied to you, Jack?”

“Do convoluted Napoleon quotes count as lies?” Jack asks smugly. Gabriel scowl-smirks at him, teasing, “Both Napoleon and I only speak the truth. I thought you would know that after this week.”

“Mm, week isn’t over yet, Gabe,” Jack hums wryly - he cannot keep a straight face, bursting into laughter as mock indignation blossoms across Gabriel’s face, as Gabriel scowl-grins, “Oh, I see how it is! Bust you out of fake prison and I’m still in trial friendship mode!”

“I’m surprised you didn’t just steal the password to unlock the full license,” Jack retorts, but the words are half-wheezy with low laughter, and it is totally worth it to see Gabriel’s jaw drop (even as those obsidian-gilded eyes crinkle with joy) -

“You’re a real little smartass sometimes, Watson,” Gabriel teases him right back. Jack just grins, saying, “We make our greatest enemies, Holmes. Or are you still on Moriarty right now? I forget.”

“Dude, I lost the plot a long time ago,” Gabriel smirks, before muttering, “Oh wait, shit, what was I saying? Physics...high school - oh right, yeah. So I got into UCLA, nearly full ride on scholarships. Was pretty proud of that.”

“Oh, damn, congrats,” Jack says honestly. Gabriel shrugs as best he can with another soldier slugging around on his left shoulder, and he states plainly, “I hated every second of it.”

...

“...What,” Jack half-states, half-asks, half-gawks, actually lifting his head up to look Gabriel more clearly in the eye. Gabriel shrugs again, saying, “I didn’t make it the full way through Spring Quarter. I...it’s hard to say what exactly killed the idea for me. Maybe it was being forced to take college-level Calculus or Chemistry. Maybe it was that the History 101 course was drier than the Mojave. Maybe it was that the books in Lit 101 were beyond boring.”

And his voice gets a little less wry and a little more contemplative:

“I couldn’t do it. I hated every second of it. I ended up spending more time at my job. The only thing that I enjoyed was the mixed martial arts class I took for fun.”

Jack rests his head on Gabriel’s shoulder again, the soft silence answering Gabriel better than anything Jack could say.

And Gabriel finds the stardusted stillness...

Freeing.

“...A friend got into the Special Forces Initial Accession - the 18X program. I think you’re probably familiar with it,” Gabriel continues, adding a slight smile to the last sentence. Jack chuckles a bit, but Gabriel adds quietly, “...I kept in touch with her through her X-ray program. And honestly? Every part of it sounded better than what I was doing.”

...
The silence is
Steadier than a heartbeat.

After a pause, Jack glances up at Gabriel, who also flicks his gaze down to meet his, and Gabriel murmurs hesitantly, “...This is usually the part where people ask what’s wrong with me.”

Jack stares at him, expression completely neutral, before he states:

“...I mean, I already know that you picked the Special Forces over college, so I’m really not surprised?”

And Gabriel -

Something faint and small starts to bloom in his chest -

Suddenly, Jack grins a wry, mischievous smirk, laughing as he says, “I mean - oh no, the spoilers -”

And suddenly -

Gabriel can’t fight it anymore.

A twisted smirk cracks across his face as something alights inside him -

“Please, won’t somebody think of the lore -” Jack teases him, and Gabriel snort-laugh-wheezes, “Okay, look -”

“I can’t believe the writers are ruining this character arc - it has so much potential -” Jack says with mock frustration and Gabriel hacks a cough, “Alright, jerk -”

“God, this is just so out of character for Gabriel Reyes from nine years ago -” Jack huffs, folding his arms, attempting to scowl but his own smile gives himself away. Gabriel gives him that smoky smirk, saying, “Look, I already told you I lost the plot a long time ago. Truth is stranger than fiction, yada yada -”

“I don’t know why you don’t sell it like the ‘I was alive the whole time’ plot twist,” Jack chuckles. Gabriel rolls his eyes, saying in a “fake spooky” voice, “Ooooh, I only faked my death! Don’t ask me how I survived an 800-foot drop into rocks, we’re just gonna ignore that part -”

“...God damn, Gabe - who just knows that the Reichenbach Falls are 800 feet??” Jack asks, cracking up, and Gabriel continues with his fake spooky tone, “Ooooooh, I know a lot of useless facts, Jack, ooooh.”

Jack beams a bright smile at him, teasing right back in the same fake spooky tone, “Ooooooh, they’re only useless until I want to leave Jack a really cryptic ass quote by a French emperor.”

Immediately, Gabriel drops his smirk to make a deadpan scowl, stating with sarcastic disgust, “That is the worst way I have ever heard someone describe Napoleon.”

Jack rolls his eyes, still saying in that teasing, “haunting” voice, “Heeeeee’s dead, Gabe. He’s been dead the whole time! I’m nooooot gonna hurt his feelings, oooh -”

Gabriel snorts, laughing, “Oh my god, Jack.”

“I’m not here to listen to stories about Napoleon, ooooh,” Jack says pointedly, and Gabriel shakes his head, muttering, “Yeah, yeah, fine, okay. So basically I got into one of the X-ray programs,
passed Initial Accession, survived my Q-course, and you know what?”

“No, what?” Jack asks, humoring him. Gabriel grins, saying brightly, “...I was great at it. At all of it.”

Jack grins back, and Gabriel just…

Just goes.

“I don’t know what it was. It was deadass the opposite of trying to get through college,” he says excitedly, eyes lighting up with that obsidian fire, “There I was, some young, dumbass 20 year old kid from LA who had never left California and had maybe been camping a grand total of twice in his life, marching 14, 16 mile treks across North Carolina, hauling half my weight in a backpack, crawling through mud and sand and swimming in the humidity -”

And then Gabriel smiles at the thin thread of smoke in the air, saying gently, “And I felt alive for every second of it.”

Jack watches him for a moment, before he adjusts his head on Gabriel’s shoulder, saying sweetly, “...We don’t know what we’re capable of until we face specific adversities head-on.”

“...Ain’t that the truth,” Gabriel hums, but then he murmurs contemplatively, “I...I didn’t know who I was until then. And then suddenly, I knew everything I was all at once...It was like I could suddenly see myself for the first time.”

And Gabriel doesn’t need Jack to respond to know:

Jack is listening.

Jack wants to hear it.

And Gabriel knows:

He wants to tell it.

“...I didn’t suddenly and magically find a deep love for this country or military. I didn’t suddenly and magically find some noble heart or courageous spirit or common cause,” Gabriel - made of smoke and gold, night obsidian and stardust - says quietly, honestly, opening up his truths undeniable, “...But I did find me.”

...And I am grateful that you did, Jack thinks, though he knows...he cannot say it.

So he compromises, moving himself a bit closer to Gabriel -

Hoping that

Someday

He can have the courage to say it, honest and true.

...

And the silence between them is

Stardusted
And silver-smoked-threaded

Sewn with things they cannot say now

(But that, maybe one day, when the things they have planted are grown, they can share together).

After a moment, Gabriel sighs abit, exhaling with a little more humor, “...And I guess I found Carlos too. Or met him. Assessment and Selection. That was fun. He taught me to be a friend and a teammate again. I’m not...I don’t ever think I’m doing wrong, but I got problems with tone -”

“Just tone?” Jack asks knowingly, and Gabriel smirks, snorting, “Alright, fine, and maybe a sarcasm problem -”

“Just sarcasm?” Jack continues, lifting his head to give Gabriel a skeptical, teasing stare. Gabriel grins at him, adding smugly, “And you know what, maybe I am just too badass -”

“Your ego is the size of Napoleon’s empire, I’ll give you that,” Jack states, but it’s hard to maintain a serious composure with Gabriel’s humor filling them -

“And apparently, I sound pretentious when I talk about literature and history -” Gabriel continues, and Jack asks wryly, “How tall are the Reichenbach Falls again, Gabe?”

“If you think goading me is going to make me stop, you clearly don’t know me very well -” Gabriel tells him with a smug smile, and Jack just rolls his eyes, saying with a genuine affection, “No shit, goading you won’t stop you. Goading you just fuels your fire. I’d say you’re the most froward person I know, but that’s putting it too nicely."

Gabriel wheeze-laughs over that, and Jack just beams, saying brightly, “What was it that you said? ‘60, 70 percent of your raison d'etre is pure, concentrated, salt-spiked spite to prove people wrong?’”

“Holy hell, you actually remember that??” Gabriel asks, half-coughing out the words through his laughter. Jack just smirks at him, teasing, “I’ve got a long memory. And I also operate on pure, concentrated, salt-spiked spite.”

“We gotta watch our blood pressures with all this salt,” Gabriel snorts, and Jack just shakes his head, replying earnestly, “Look, this week alone almost doubled my blood pressure, so believe me, any more salt is just a grain in a salt mine.”

“Congrats, you’re a SERE-trained soldier now! Pettiness and spite and bad tastes in music are all that we have,” Gabriel beams at him. Jack heaves a big sigh, saying dryly, “I should’ve stayed with the main army, damn.”

“But me though,” Gabriel states with serious deadpan, to the point where it confuses Jack. He raises an eyebrow at Gabriel curiously, and Gabriel just grins smugly, saying, “I have great taste in music.”

“...Just tell me why you stole the painting, Moriarty, and get on with it,” Jack states, neutrally unimpressed. Gabriel sighs dramatically, muttering, “Fine, fine - no appreciation for the classics around here, geez. Uh, what was I talking about - oh, right. Carlos. Assessment and Selection. Survived it. Passed with flying colors or whatever my trainers said about me. Then it came time to do the placement ‘wish list.’”

There’s a brief pause as Gabriel recollects his thoughts - how is it so easy to lose track of time and focus and yet remain so... honest and bright with Jack? - and then he continues, saying slowly, “7th
Group was basically a guarantee for me, though I was always honest about the fact that both my English and Spanish were undeniably Angeleno, and with my Language Aptitude score, it might be worth trying to teach me French or Portuguese or something else just to modify my accent, but apparently it wasn’t worth the effort. So really, 7th Group wasn’t a surprise at all.”

And Jack, attentive as he is, asks patiently, “But...?”

“...My MOS was,” Gabriel answers truthfully.

Jack watches him, watches how Gabriel’s whole face goes through a range of emotions - a scowl, a contemplative glance, a nervous look towards the smoke, then a small, soft scowl again - before he says quietly, “...I thought about it. I really did. It sounds like one of those intellectual ‘I could never figure out what field I was destined for because I was so gifted’ whiny stories, but picking my MOS was honestly a hard choice. Carlos wanted me to to take Weapons with him, and a part of me really wanted to. And even though I was terrible at building stuff, the part of me that loved military history wanted Engineering or Communications too.”

And then, Gabriel sighs, staring back at the smoke as he murmurs, “...But in the end, I ranked the Medical Sergeant the highest on my list, though given my ambidexterity I expected Weapons or Engineering.”

...Jack leans against him, saying with a soft, seasung warmth, “...But you got it.”

And Jack can feel the smoky, gilded-stardust smile that graces Gabriel’s words as he hums, “Hell yeah, I got it. 18D, Medical Sergeant Gabriel Reyes. It sounded outrageous even to me, but god damn, if I wasn’t proud of that.”

Jack smiles with him, and Gabriel continues quietly, “God, what else...it’s crazy to think that was almost ten years ago. Well, because we were both 18X candidates, Carlos and I went straight into the rest of the Q-Course. Ours followed the standard program, so we did about eight months together before we split at the occupational training section.”

And then, Gabriel grows silent again, and Jack shifts his head to glance up at him, watching the emotions flicker across his face again. After a moment, Gabriel says somberly:

“Training to be an 18D was...I won’t lie, it was intense. The rawest thing I had ever done until then. Practicing on real wounds, training in real emergency rooms. The military has all sorts of programs to let their combat medics get real world experience in hospitals around their bases. I don’t scare easily, but that was the first time I really had sleepless nights. That was another long 8 months. When I started the 18D MOS training, I couldn’t legally drink.”

Gabriel glances up, looks at the thread of smoke dripping up into the stardusted sky, and he states with a quiet but raw-edged resolution, “Not that it ever stopped me, of course, but...makes you think a lot. Makes you rethink how we treat people who hit 18 and suddenly have to decide the entirety of their lives. Makes you rethink how we handle voting and alcohol and education. Makes you rethink things like life and death. Makes you rethink if a program like this isn’t actually as fucked up as it sounds.”

...Gabriel feels Jack.

Feels the soft, seasung, sweet hesitation there.

And Gabriel glances towards the soldier with midnight eyes and a smooth whiskey voice, and says gently - so gently, “...But you know that, don’t you?”
Jack stares at him and he -

Jack opens up, admits a truth he’s been scared to say, “...I was an ER nurse in a college town in the middle of Indiana. I’m...It’s nothing like what you’ve been through.”

“...Don’t discredit yourself, Juanito,” Gabriel replies patiently, kindly, honestly, “That’s way more hands-on experience is more than what most people get. And you did that and still decided to enlist when the Crisis hit? Combat medics and military doctors and nurses see some of the worst, most horrific things in the world.”

Jack stares at him, feels his heart sink a little more with sweet and bittersweet sympathy, murmurs quietly, “...Gabe -”

“You think you know where I’m going with this. But you don’t. Not yet,” Gabriel says to him, a soft, gentle, but slightly terse warning. He glances back towards the smoke, exhaling steeply, “I love Carlos like a brother who never failed me. But he has a tendency to tell this story wrong. Or well. He has a tendency to tell it from his own perspective which - as we are all unreliable narrators - has emotionality and flaws.”

Jack settles himself back on Gabriel’s shoulder, watching the smoke with him, feeling Gabriel’s word through his chest as he continues, “...After graduation, I was put on an ODA that was deploying for a short foreign internal defense mission almost right away. I was slapped on as the new junior 18D, because one of the two combat medics had been promoted up.”

Gabriel has to pause for a moment, chewing over his words, but he decides to go with the straightforward version of it, explaining, “Standard assignments aren’t like what we’re gonna get here in SEP. Specific ODAs are assigned on an as-needed basis. You go where there are gaps in your larger Special Forces group, and then you typically stick with that A-team until retirement, or some sort of structural reshuffling requires you to swap out somewhere else. This is why ODAs basically turn into small families. Blood of the covenant born from bullets.”

“Right,” Jack says, “This is why you guys have that reputation.”

“Exactly,” Gabriel replies, “But in the beginning, you never know what you’re going to get. So I was pretty shocked when I found out I got put on the same A-team as Carlos, even though by that point, our Q-courses had diverged. Turns out, this particular ODA had undergone a number of changes in the last 6 months between deployments - the old Team Sergeant had retired, so they had to promote the senior 18B to the Zulu position, which bumped up the junior 18B to the senior spot, and that opened up the slot for a new Weapons Sergeant.”

“Commander Luna and...Jim?” Jack asks, trying to remember what Carlos had told him. Gabriel nods, saying with a faint smile, “You got it. Carolina was the senior position, and when she switched, Jim got promoted. So Carlos came on as his new junior. At the same time, the old Intel Sergeant had left - he got headhunted by Delta Force, so the Fox position was open. One of the combat medics who had been close to him and effectively helped him maintain his contacts in Central America got the slot, so they needed a second combat medic.”

And that -

“Guerra,” Jack says quietly, “...And Silvio.”

“...Yes,” Gabriel tells him after a heartbeat, “Guerra left for Delta Force before I began, and Silvio took the training to replace him as the Fox on the team. And so I came in as the new junior medic, to work under Serena, the senior.” He pauses, adjusts how he’s sitting a bit, and Jack adjusts with him.
As he resettles, Gabriel explains, “Because this team had two new, inexperienced soldiers join at basically the same time, the 7th Group Command and Control put us on what they considered an ‘easy’ deployment. Foreign Internal Defense in west central Mexico, helping train up *rurale* forces while conducting lowkey HUMINT collection on a drug trade network through rural villages west of Mexico City, in a region known as la Tierra Caliente. This ODA had already done this type of mission like, two or three times in the last four or five years, so none of the older soldiers were too nervous.”

And then Gabriel laughs a little - a wry, smoky sound that is as dry as the desert oasis in his heart:

“I’ll be honest, I was nervous as all hell. Had never left the country before, had never done emergency medicine outside of an operating room aside from some practice scenarios, had never tried speaking any of the dialects in Guerrero and Michoacán. And of course, I had heard all the same stories about how cliquey ODAs could be against newcomers. Was worried that I would have to cut my teeth before anyone was nice to me or Carlos. I don’t think I slept at all that week before deployment.”

“Oh man, even badasses like you get nervous?” Jack asks teasingly, and Gabriel laughs - a more genuine, truthful sound this time, “Shocking, I know, but even someone as amazing as me gets worried sometimes, Watson. But in retrospect…”

He pauses, picking out his words slowly, before he continues gently:

“...In retrospect, they were good to us, the senior 7436 soldiers. Chill, relaxed, it was such a relief. Oh man, I mean, they could be strict, god damn, they could be strict. Carolina was one hell of a Team Sergeant, but she ran our camps and host housing like a machine. But she was never unfair, and we at least had Silvio around - I swear, it was like…”

And then he really has to stop.

...This is normally the part of the story when it starts getting difficult to continue - not necessarily because Gabriel gets choked up, or too emotional, or too nervous, but because describing how they had all been, what they had once been like, years and years ago

Is beyond what his words can usually express.

...But Jack is patient.

And Gabriel can feel how calm, how soothing, how easy - like the tide shifting in and out, sweet and low - his presence is.

And so

Gabriel

Goes:

“...Silvio had a way with people. It was an art, but he was just...genuine. Everyone on the team and in the villages liked him,” Gabriel says, feeling his way through his words and his past as if by touch and sensation instead of sight and memory, “Serena was the senior 18D when I joined, but Silvio was really like, the people’s go-to, you know? They liked and respected Serena, and god, I swear, I saw her work miracles. There was one case where I was convinced the kid was gonna lose his leg - trampled when the cattle spooked - it was hard enough just to get him resuscitated, and with the
blood loss from the crushed leg, I thought he was gone. But Serena got him breathing and even saved the leg at the knee. He was conscious in less than twenty-hour hours, and she got him fitted up for an Ogundimu cybernetic prosthetic in three weeks.”

“Holy shit,” Jack reacts with genuine awe, and Gabriel twists his head a bit to grin at him, saying, “Right? Yeah, she honestly made miracles happen. But Silvio? I never got to see him in full capacity as a medic, but he charmed everyone he met. He got me and Carlos squared away, got us acquainted with most people in all the villages, got us helping out with the rurales training. Between him, Carolina, and Serena, 7436 felt...welcoming. Not easy, never easy, but...accepting. Entertaining. As the junior 18D, I picked up a lot of his patients and informants. I was always around to help Serena on emergency cases or teach about combat medicine, but Silvio was the one who got me in the habit of routine check-ups.”

(And he can still see it. Can still feel it.)

(The winding roads to low-slung houses, passing fields of grey-green scrubs, dust and arid air.)

“...Visit this farm, stay with the family for a bit, joke with the kids, check their teeth for cavities,” Gabriel continues, speaking distantly, “Tend to the grandparents, ask about their aches and pains, talk to the farmhands running the herds or tending the crops, look over the animals, test the water supply.”

(And he can still see it. Can still feel it.)

(The way the sunlight hits the windshield. The humor in the cab of the convoy truck. The way Silvio’s voice threads the different locations together better than the highway itself.)

“In the villages, we’d visit in on the different major families, and Silvio always made it look so simple, so casual,” Gabriel says gently - so gently, “He was one of the first people to tell me like, ‘Gabriel, you don’t have an attitude problem, but you have to learn how to make your humor and your personality work for you.’ And then he’d show me how. You could be as sarcastic or as crude or as dry as you wanted, but it should never cut. Jokes should never be hurtful, humor should never be mean.”

And Jack just listens.

Just feels the rhythm of the story in his chest.
Just feels the rhythm of Gabriel’s story in his heart.

“...Silvio was the first person to get me to realize that everything we have, everything we are as individual people can be impactful in ways we never realize, so long as we are thoughtful and critical about how we work with them,” Gabriel explains, putting feelings and sensations into words for the first time in years, “He was the first person to teach me how to think about the concept of questions and answers, first in terms of medic-patient work, and then in terms of pure human interactivity.”

(And he can still see it. Can still feel it.)

(Asking questions - simple questions. Learning answers - complex answers. Talking, listening, understanding.)

“The child who lies about their cavities - why are they lying?” Gabriel says, his eyes not seeing the silver smoke, but instead seeing the different people, the different places, the different times where he had learned, “The old woman who refuses to accept painkillers - why does she do that? Can you help her another way? The young man walking with a clear limp - how did he get it? Why won’t he
tell you the truth?”

“...And that was how you learned it,” Jack says, both a statement and a question, a response and a request. Gabriel inhales slowly, then exhales softly, “Yeah. It was an eye-opening experience. I learned so much that words could not do it justice in the way that I want. And...I won’t lie - I’m worried I didn’t...that I can’t…”

Jack lifts his head to look at Gabriel more clearly, as Gabriel glances at him, admitting quietly, “That I can’t teach you the way I was taught. That this...program is too small for it.”

“...Gabe,” Jack starts to say, but then -

He stops.

At the gilded, raw-edged glaze of starburst fire behind the smoky shadows of Gabriel’s eyes.

“...But you survived an interrogation with Guerra,” Gabriel says resolutely, “More than survived - you killed it. And given your personality, you could easily do much better than me at rapport-building.”

Jack is Spellbound.

And then Gabriel grins, laughing a bit as he murmurs, “After all, my bedside manner is pretty tragic, so since you’re way better at this friendliness thing than me, you could really rock it. You could be a great Fox if you wanted to be.”

...It’s a thought

Jack has never had before.

He had always... assumed he would be put in the medic course when SERE was done.

He had never even dreamed he could be anything like Gabriel, who seemed to be made of pure talent, perfected skill, pristine intelligence, powerful tactics.

And yet -

(What will they plant together, in a desert oasis by the shore, as the storm in them grows stronger?)

Jack lets the seed of the idea rest in his mind.

Gabriel watches Jack for a moment, admiring how the expression of confused but proud resolution looks so good on Jack’s face - cut with chilled lanternlight and snowy stardust - and Jack glances at him, asking quietly, “...You think so?”

I know so, Gabriel thinks, but instead he looks back at the smoke, humming thoughtfully, “I think you can do anything you set your mind to, Jack. Most people don’t totally realize it, but Delta and Fox work go hand-in-hand. The best medics make the best intelligence officers, because their personalities, the trust they build with their patients, the rapport they establish in communities, their genuine desire to help others all work so perfectly with the goals of HUMINT operations. Silvio taught me that.”

But then, Gabriel scowls a bit as he concentrates, explaining, “That year, our ‘public’ objective was just to help train the rurale forces alongside Mexico’s own military groups, but I figured out what
Silvio was up to pretty quickly. He was trying to track some of the different trafficking routes for heroin that moved north from our position into what’s called the Texas corridor to cross the border.”

“Right,” Jack says quietly, “La Tierra Caliente is Mexico’s major opium production region.”

Gabriel looks at him - sees the exhaustion and weariness etched into the shadows on Jack’s face - and he knows.

“...Oh, Jack,” he murmurs gently, “...I’m sorry.”

“...Truth is stranger than fiction, isn’t it?” Jack asks with a bittersweet wryness to his voice, “...The things that connect us as human beings are...so strange.”

And then -

“...There’s nothing strange about it,” Gabriel replies softly, “Humanity is a nexus of connections that bind us together, and when something pulls a single thread, we all collide. But that doesn’t detract from the emotions that we feel. After all - it’s how we know we are human.”

Jack watches him for a moment, feeling his heart crack a little as he asks with a teasing sweetness, “Which Holmes story is that quote from?’’

And Gabriel smiles - spun-sunshine and smoked-sugar - saying serenely, “Not Holmes. Contrary to popular belief, I can wax poetic all on my own.”

And Gabriel shifts his body a bit, holding his arms open.

Jack initially resists, but then he -

The tide in his heart caves into the shore -

And he leans into Gabriel, wrapping his arms around Gabriel’s chest, whispering quietly, “I thought I was supposed to be comforting you.”

“...You do comfort me,” Gabriel replies, leaving off the words ‘just by being here’ and ‘just by being you’, hugging Jack close, close enough that he hopes Jack can feel the words even if he cannot say them. Jack says nothing but buries his head against Gabriel’s neck, exhaling a soft sigh, wishing he could stay like this, wishing they could stay like this.

They part slowly - much more slowly than they should - but Jack doesn’t move away. Instead, he stays close, right up against Gabriel, resting his head in the crook of Gabriel’s neck.

...Gabriel relishes it.

“...Was it scary?” Jack asks quietly, and Gabriel thinks about it -

(And he can still see it. Can still feel it.)

(Talking with Silvio about the drug network, about the collapsing cartel power structure, about how the region was dissolving into shifting alliances and fear, the buzz of the heat of late spring stinging at his skin.)

“...Not scary, not like a...tangible fear,” Gabriel replies contemplatively, “More a...lingering feeling. A sensation of something you can’t see but you knew existed, you know? Like a haunting. The whole region goes through cycles: an uneasy but compromised peace exists as long as a single major cartel retains power. But...all it takes is one bad year - a drought year, a misstep by some carriers, a
bought official gets caught - and all hell breaks loose. And then the cartel splinters. Rivals and factions appear. La Tierra Caliente becomes a war zone.”

...Is it possible to be retroactively afraid for someone else? Jack wonders dryly, upset that he already knows where the story is going and yet is helpless to stop it -

“Sometime in the first few years of joining 7436, things had changed in the region, just a little bit,” Gabriel explains, far too calm for what’s coming, even in his own past, “The major cartel running the corridor had splintered, resulting in several sub-groups vying for control. Things were tense. At least two groups had paramilitary security contracted out to guard their plantations and chem labs, as well as ‘run towns’ through fear and terrorism.”

“...It sounds terrifying,” Jack murmurs, resisting the urge to pull Gabriel in closer, as if that could change something that’s already happened. Gabriel gives a small, broken laugh, “So many ODA deployments are just like that, you know? Mexico, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Ghana, Spain - it’s all connected. But it’s all bigger than what ODAs can manage. All we can do is small things. Play doctors and engineers. Ask questions and get answers. And hope that the drop in the water is enough to create bigger ripples.”

“Mmm,” Jack replies, still a bit nervous. Gabriel sighs, explaining more, “Silvio had his pulse on these two major factions in the region. Again, our main goal was assisting Mexico’s own military forces in training their *rurale* militia forces to operate internally against the cartels, so while helping gather HUMINT against them was good, it wasn’t our focus. So we finished my first deployment pretty smooth - I think it was about four months, probably some of the most insane four months of my life. By the end, I knew.”

Jack shifts his gaze to look up towards Gabriel’s face, as Gabriel glances towards the stars studding the sky between the pine branches and needles.

“I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt who I was, what I was capable of, what I was made of,” the soldier with a heart of smoke-liquid obsidian and melted stars murmurs, “It’s a hard lifestyle, you either live it whole or you fall back into the reserves or cop out. I don’t blame anyone who does it for a few years and quits - it isn’t stable. Isn’t sustainable. The people who do it for ten, fifteen years...There’s nothing else for them.”

And Jack -

He doesn’t care if the question is stupid, or silly, or sappy -

He *needs* to know -

“...And you?” Jack asks gently.

Gabriel does not look away from the stars beyond them.

“...I said it, didn’t I?” he replies gently - so gently, “I know what I am.”

*(You have met someone who makes you think you can be something other than what you are.)*

The way he says it sends cracks into the depths of Jack’s heart.

“...You know the concept of liminality?” Gabriel asks slowly. Jack contemplates it, then answers hesitantly, “That’s like...between places, right?”

“Yeah, exactly,” Gabriel says with a faint smile, adding, “The original concept was used to describe
the middle period during a ritual or ceremony, where you exist between the pre-ritual status and the after-ritual status, but now it more broadly describe being between two states of existence, social or otherwise.”

But his smile flags as he murmurs gently - so heartbreakingly gently, “The life of a special operations soldier is liminality. Never fully here, never fully there. Never fully deployed, never fully home. Never fully alone, never fully accompanied. You exist between realities - the reality of your place of deployed operations, and the reality of whatever you return to in the U.S. Four months on, four months off, rinse and repeat for decades until it ends, one way or another.”

Jack adjusts his head, just a bit, just to be closer, and says in that low wash of storms, “…Sounds pretty lonely.”

And Gabriel -

This is the part where he normally...brushes it off.

Talks about something funny Carlos did at some point. Brings up the time 7436 got wasted on real, genuine pulque. Deflects to something someone else said, did, thought, whatever.

This is the part where he puts on a thin mask - smoke and mirrors and shadows and casual, irreverent humor - and lets it go.

(And he makes you believe in heroes and hope again.)

But this time.

(Jack’s head rests on his left shoulder, Jack’s right shoulder presses warmly against his chest -)

(Right where his heart beats.)

(Right where something is starting to grow.)

And Gabriel

Stops

Resisting himself.

And so he says, honestly, in a voice cut from threads spun from midnight sunshine and smoked out of stardusted sugar:

“…From that same source I have not taken - my sorrow, I could not awaken - my heart to joy at the same tone - all I loved, I loved alone.”

…

Jack feels the words - the rhythm in them, the heartbeat in them, the life in them - more than he hears them.

He shuts his eyes, closing out the lantermlight, the snowy stars, the serene darkness enveloping them.

And he -

“...Sorry,” Gabriel murmurs with an apologetic chuckle, glancing back down towards Jack, “That was kinda melodramatic, huh -”
“Then, in my childhood, in the dawn -”

In a voice deep like the sea that the skies descend into each night, like the tide that the stars drift upon, a hymn and a hum, a song to be sung -

“- Of a most stormy life, was drawn -”

A poem from heart to heart:

“- From ev’ry depth of good and ill - the mystery which binds me still.”

Gabriel’s breath snags in his chest -

As the words -

In the voice like a steady seasung dream -

Ripple through his chest like a wave coming ashore.

...It takes him a full second to practically rip himself away from Jack, who rights himself, giving Gabriel the slyest, smuggest, smokiest smirk Gabriel has ever seen on him, clearly beyond self-satisfied with Gabriel’s utterly shocked reaction.

“You - I - what -” Gabriel sputters, at a complete loss for words that someone -

Someone has answered him back

In the same rhythm and rhyme and repose as his own spirit.

“I had a lit teacher who made us recite poems each week to have us practice public speaking,” Jack explains, still insufferably coy and teasing about it, “And everyone has an edgy Poe phase at some point, right?”

Gabriel continues to reel -

First the quote on the note, and then the interrogation, and understanding my plan, and then waiting for me -

Jack leans in closer with a wry grin, peering at Gabriel’s awe-struck expression, saying jokingly, “C’mon, Gabe, snap out of it. Moriarty was never beguiled by Holmes’ quoting bad poetry -”

“Ba - bad poetry -” Gabriel suddenly snaps, and Jack sits back, laughing loudly, “Oh look, that did the trick -”

“Bad poetry -” Gabriel repeats, as his utter joy at finally meeting someone who just kindles with him - fire and smoke, sea and stars - does not disappear with the humor, but instead melts into it, mingles with it, sublimates into a new state of boundless light -

“Alright, easy does it there, Mister Tell-Tale Heart -” Jack snort-laughs at him, and Gabriel - even though his wide grin gives him away - states with mock indignation, “That’s not even one of his poems!!”

“Oh my god, you make it too easy, Gabe -” Jack laughs, his whole face alight with radiant joy and Gabriel just scowl-smirks at him, taunting right back, “Look, you being you isn’t going to stop me
from giving you a well-deserved asskicking if you continue this, John Morrison -”

“Oh my god, my real name, I’m in deep shit now -” Jack wheezes. Gabriel shakes his head, refusing to cave in, stating, “There’s goading me and then there’s just being plain wrong -”

“Because you’re such a champion for the truth, right?” Jack retorts, wiping a tear from an eye. Gabriel just grins mischievously at him, saying, “I will fight you on this, Morrison - don’t tempt me -”


“That’s not a very Moriarty-tier level of strategy, Gabe,” Jack taunts him.

Gabriel pauses, thinks it over, and mutters, “...Damn. You’re right.”

“You’re going to have to run a massive criminal network to undermine me for this one,” Jack chuckles, his smile still shit-eating levels of smug. Gabriel scowls, but his grin only deepens as he rises to Jack’s challenge, saying, “I did say don’t tempt me, right? I’m in it for the long con.”

“I better watch my back, huh?” Jack laughs, shrugging as he adds, “The only question is if you’ll do a Doyle or a Poe revenge story.”

“I’ll keep you second-guessing for years, maybe even decades,” Gabriel “warns” him. Jack snorts, “Decades? What are you, some kind of snail assassin?”

“Be careful when you mock the tortoise, Mister Hare,” Gabriel states sagaciously, “A careful plan, delayed until perfection, is better than efficiency.”

Jack just gives him an arid, deadpan stare before he mutters, “You can admit you don’t run fast. It’s okay. We can’t all be sprinters.”

“Endurance is more important than speed, soldado,” Gabriel replies in a fake “wise” tone.

Jack rolls his eyes, grinning as he says teasingly, “I mean, in SERE and in sex, sure.”

Gabriel choke son his own goddamn air.

“- After all, the first virtue in a soldier is endurance of fatigue,” Jack says coyly, and Gabriel manages to hack out, “Using my own words against me again! That’s playing dirty, Watson.”

“What did I tell you?” Jack says confidently, “I have learned your methods and can use them against you!”

“Ah, but education never ends, Watson. It is a series of lessons, with the greatest for the last,” Gabriel replies with a softer grin. Jack’s own confident, smug expression relaxes a bit, as he realizes what Gabriel just said from his tone alone.

“...Another quote,” Jack says, both a statement and question, “You have every line memorized?”

“Only the quotes that matter the most,” Gabriel says quietly, with a kinder smile on his face, “Aptly, Holmes himself has an appropriate line for this: ‘I am an omnivorous reader with a strangely retentive memory for trifles.’”

“...That’s definitely appropriate,” Jack agrees. Gabriel smiles faintly, before he continues, “There’s not a lot to do on deployments to rural zones, in between foreign defense training schedules. You’re
lucky if you get data maybe 40% of the time. And I’ve never had bad motion sickness, so I would read in our convoys between locations and villages. It was either late in my first deployment or early in my second when I picked up the habit of always carrying a notebook, just to write stuff down. You should see my early books - totally disorganized, no real flow, just a bunch of garbled book quotes and bad ideas in my terrible handwriting.”

Jack laughs, moving himself closer again, and Gabriel lets him back into his space, exhaling softly as he explains, “Luisa joined us for that second deployment. So now we had three new kids to take care of, myself included. So our next deployment was another easy four-monther, same region, same set of rounds, same militia to train with, only now it was fall instead of spring.”

“We have different definitions of ‘easy’, then,” Jack says with a low chuckle. Gabriel laughs a bit at that, replying, “Well, it was supposed to be easy, but hindsight is always 20/20. Though…”

His voice grows more contemplative as he thinks it over, before he goes on in a gentler, but more bittersweet tone, “...I was less anxious that time. We were doing the same things as last time, keeping the focus on training and building rapport and trust. Things were pretty easy, straightforward. And that was just…”

Gabriel pauses, eyes a bit distant, murmuring, “That was just the way things were, how life was. Four months there, training, working, talking, encouraging, doctoring. Four months here, at base, going back to LA for a month or two. I did some trauma nursing in my off months those first two years - the job is fucked as all hell, but it was my main skill set. You lose track of time. The Earth rotates around the Sun, the year goes back, and somehow, every deployment that you swear is unique and different and interesting ends up blurring. You are both worlds and you are neither, like you are only a shadow in half of people’s lives.”

Jack listens quietly, as Gabriel shakes his head a little, saying softly, “…When it happened, that year was no different. Four years of being Special Forces, about two full years being a Delta in a real A-team, I felt... stable, you know? Drifting but stable. We were a crew together, a family. Everything seemed fine. Contacts were all friendly, the militia forces were shaping up, Silvio seemed to have a beat on things. There had been some run-ins with the cartel groups the deployment before, but fortunately nothing serious, so that deployment we were on our toes but...so far, nothing direct, just rumors and hearsay. The prevalent one was that the group in the east end of la Tierra Caliente had cleared out as more Mexican soldiers moved in, so we felt...not that we blended in, but that their presence helped mask ours.”

(And he can still see it.)

“...Our presence wasn’t a huge secret or anything, but our camps, bases, and safehouses were secure - camps in particular. Pretty remote, usually close to whatever group of rurales and military police we were helping out, but distant enough to keep us feeling safe,” Gabriel says, the words starting to slip, starting to slow, “Usually holed up in semi-permanent buildings tucked on the edges of wilderness, in between small towns and the scrub brush mountains around la Tierra Caliente lowlands.”

(Can still feel it.)

The words stick like smoke in his throat.

His breath catches on them.

And Jack can feel it.
Jack sits up a bit, shifting to face Gabriel better, as Gabriel
Struggles.

(*He can still *)

“...I can still,” he starts, soft, quiet, stops, tries again, “I can...I can still hear them. Talking. Outside the shelter we had. Silvio was... damn.”

(*He can’t.*)

Jack watches him - watches how the words seem to weigh on Gabriel, as if he can feel them, resting on his shoulders and filling his lungs and holding him down and -

There are soft, quiet glints starting to appear on the edges of Gabriel’s eyes.

They aren’t stars.

And Jack’s heart

Cracks.

And he reaches out for him - the one with smoke obsidian and star gold in his heart and soul - and murmurs in a voice that aches, “Gabe…”

“...I can do this,” Gabriel insists, but it’s a hard truth, a broken one, and as he feels Jack’s arms wrap around his shoulders -

Gabriel falls into him.

“...Don’t force yourself,” Jack says softly, as Gabriel leans against him. Gabriel places his forehead on Jack’s right shoulder, still insisting, “I want to. I can. I just...I can still hear him. Worried about possible flash floods. Wanted us to move up higher. Carolina was nervous we’d push into bad territory. Opium plantations. ... God dammit :”

Jack says nothing.

He just holds him.

Lets the feeling embrace him.

“We were trying to make contact with the 35th Military Zone group. Make sure we knew where they wanted us to be,” Gabriel starts again, as if stating the unemotional aspects of it gives him some strength.

But then -

(*He can still hear it.*)

(*The first bang.*)

(*Like the sound of air shattering.*)

“...God, that first shot was...I thought one of our Bravos had misfired a weapon check,” Gabriel says, so quietly that the smoke from the fire sounds louder than his words.
And he can still feel it.

“And then - it was like slow motion -”

(The confusion first.)

“- There were hundreds of shots.”

(And then the world-ending fear.)

Jack holds him.

And for the first time

Gabriel feels.

He feels the words - words which he had thought were dead, seeds in a desert oasis without sun or water -

He feels them release:

“I don’t - I don’t remember thinking. I just remember moving - I hit the ground so hard I chipped a tooth. I was inside the structure - it was like half cinder blocks, half plywood, tin roof. The plywood half honestly just... exploded. Like the gunfire was so goddamn dense it cut everything in half and that part of the shelter just collapsed."

(And he can still feel it.)

(Crawling on hands and knees through the dust and the splinters of wood, smoke and bullets all around, gasping for air and for something real, heading for the door in the structure’s frame - )

And he feels him -

Jack pulls him as close as he can, fingers gently tracing circles up and down his back, Jack’s chest shuddering against his own shaking one, so close that Gabriel thinks he might just feel Jack’s heartbeat hum against his own -

So solid and so real and so true and yet

If Gabriel lets go

He will be lost among the sea of drowning stars and -

Gabriel wraps his arms around Jack, tight, trying to feel him, trying not to feel anything else -

(But he can still feel -)

“I didn’t - I couldn’t - I failed, Jack -” the words shard through him like obsidian glass fragments cutting their way out of his heart, his chest, up his throat and through his teeth and -

“You didn’t fail, Gabe,” Jack says with a fierce quietness, knowing his words are true, they are true, he can feel them -

“I came outside and - him and Carolina - by the cinderblock side and -” Gabriel shudders, each word is glass smoke, raw-edged and enduring, ephemeral and yet resisting -
“You didn’t fail, Gabe -” Jack repeats, he knows if he says it, it will be true -

“They had both been - his chestplate took the worst shots - but he had a gut shot and I -” Gabriel exhal es. Starts. Stops. Shivers against himself.

Holds onto the only thing that is real.

(Because he can still feel -)

Jack’s heart erodes with the sound of Gabriel’s own heart breaking.

He bows his head against Gabriel’s left shoulder, and continues to hold him.

“But Carolina, she had a neck shot and I just -” Gabriel whispers, the words crumble.

“Oh, Gabe,” Jack murmurs, his voice fraying and -

(“He made the hardest choice any medic has to.”)

“I couldn’t -” Gabriel says, and his voice cracks with a low, quiet sob, “I couldn’t get both of them - so he told me - her first, worse wound -”

Jack holds him.

And Gabriel holds back

Even as the words slip out of him like smoke.

(Because he can still -)

“I remember - I still - I still feel it sometimes, Jack - my fingers on her neck, dragging her out -”

(Feel.)

“I left him with a biotic field - pulled her to cover. Field deployed, half-did the surgery right there, by the bullet-proof convoy and just -” Gabriel says, his voice trembling, his chest heaving.

(He can still feel her veins between his fingers, the light of the biotic field reflecting on the convoy and her blood -)

“It must’ve been...a minute? Two? I don’t - I don’t know,” Gabriel says, lifting his head a bit, staring off into the darkness of the night around them, but he can still see it, can still feel it, his voice distant as he continues, “I got a biotic sealant in on the damaged vessels and half-sutured them and then sprayed down more sealant and just -”

Jack adjusts a bit, settling back now that Gabriel isn’t clinging to him like he’s all that exists in the world, but they continue to hold each other all the same -

“I don’t remember - I swear I just don’t remember but - but Carlos says I was saying things to him -” Gabriel insists, feeling vaguely desperate, wanting to convince Jack that he isn’t like that, he isn’t like what they’ve said, but he doesn’t know, not for sure -

“Telling him to launch firebombs off into the heaviest side of the attack,” he continues, rattling off the words, feeling, still feeling, “The area was...dry. Tierra Caliente. It had been a dry summer, and we were entering an even drier autumn. I just - make a barrier, even out of fire. Between us and the attackers -”
Jack watches him, listens patiently -

Lets Gabriel’s story settle into his depths like obsidian sand drifting to the ocean floor.

“We started just piling in the convoys and I - I went back for him -” Gabriel starts. Stops. Shakes a bit, the words shuddering, “Right where I left him - biotic field fading out but he was still bleeding - I carried him back to the convoy and threw him in and we started driving and -”

And Jack sees the small glints of silver appear on the edges of Gabriel’s eyes.

They are not stars -

“I failed - I failed, Jack -” the man born of smoke and gold, with obsidian shadows and stardusted galaxies in his eyes, murmurs quietly - so quietly that the night around them seems to engulf his words -

“...You didn’t fail -” Jack starts to say, a truth so undeniable that he would stake his life to defend it -

(And Gabriel can still feel -)

“His wound was worse than hers,” Gabriel says, so softly that it breaks Jack’s heart.

“...Gabe, you couldn’t have known -” Jack starts to say, starts to reassure, starts to comfort -

“Hepatic portal vein and the liver bleeding out, stomach punctured - if I had just been -” Gabriel shivers, the words sweet and bittersweet like shards of smoke, “I should’ve left Carolina with Carlos, just told him to put pressure -”

“Gabe, no, don’t say that -” Jack says, because he knows.

He’s felt it too.

The constant questioning.

The mind-numbing fear.

The plague of doubts.

“A minute more and I could’ve packed it -” Gabriel denies, refuses to say -

“...You know that isn’t true.”

Jack’s words are gentle.

So gentle.

Sweeter and softer and more sorrowful than Gabriel thinks he deserves.

“...A liver shot? A ruptured hepatic portal vein?” Jack asks, his voice deeper than the ocean but kinder than his heart, and Gabriel shakes his head once, fiercely denies it, “No -”

“...You made the best choice you could -” Jack continues, and he knows his words are true, but Gabriel insists, muttering with a voice raw-edged, “Don’t say that -”

“You acted fast -” Jack murmurs, and Gabriel -

He bows his head
And his words break him:

“Don’t excuse - don’t forgive me.”

...Jack didn’t think his heart could break any further.

And yet it does.

“I wasn’t fast enough - I wasn’t good enough,” Gabriel says, voice fraying under the weight of words he has never said but has always known, has always felt in his heart of hearts, in the desert oasis where nothing grows, where the words are truth undeniable -

And he finally

Gives them life:

“...What dream was I living in? Me, a medic? As if I was ever going to be a hero and save people?”

Gabriel lifts his head, star-threaded tears in his eyes, and looks into those eyes of midnight depths, of submerged stars and sunsets, and murmurs with a voice that rasps and frays, obsidian cracking apart:

“...What foolish hope was I trying to carry?”

...

The silence engulfs them -

Suddenly

There are

Hands

Rough, slightly calloused, but warm, so warm, the tips of the fingers well-worn and gentle, so gentle Caressing the sides of Gabriel’s face, the edge of the palms just underneath the sides of his jaw, lifting his head up, just a little bit more, just a little bit higher -

And Gabriel stares wide-eyed

Into eyes of utter resolution, true trust

Boundless courage

Full of stars that shimmer out from beneath their blue surfaces, the lanternlight somehow making them deeper.

And the voice that

Drip

Drip

Drips

Up through the air like a thread of smoke
Wraps itself around Gabriel’s heart

Like truth undeniable:

“...There are multiple people alive in that building because of you.”

Gabriel watches

Spellbound.

As Jack states, with a gentleness that endures and burns into his soul, “There is a future commander in that building right there, alive because you saved her. And more than that - you suggesting a fire barrier saved your team. Carlos, Luisa - they’re alive because of your tactic.”

Gabriel’s breath catches in his chest, like a different, sweeter sort of smoke caught in the shadows of his lungs.

“Your decisions changed lives. Your decisions got your team out of hell,” the man with seasung stars and midnight blue eyes says, believing every word he himself speaks, “You live up to your name -”

Gabriel inhales steeply -

As Jack exhales sharply:

“Not a king, but a revelation. You change destinies. Twelve people should have died there. I look at you and do you know what I see, what I know is true?”

Gabriel exhales slowly as Jack -

Jack gives him that faint smile - wrought from the thin light of the lantern and all the stars in the sky:

“I know you faced Death, and you chose to resist anyways.”

“I didn’t...” Gabriel says, still partially spellbound, “I’m not...a hero for that -”

“You are,” Jack says, undeniable, “Because being a hero means making decisions that are beyond you. Being a hero is not about the grandiose display of courage, going in guns blazing, taking bullets and spotlights. True courage is...quieter, softer. Not all courage burns bright.”

(“Loyalty only earns you more pain, soldier! He will never be loyal to you the way you are to him -” Guerra rasps at him, and there’s a hand pulling at his face again, as the disembodied voice snaps, “He’s a coward, soldier! He will never be a hero! Your courage in him will never be reciprocated -”)

("You’re - wrong -” Jack whispers, doing his best to breathe in fresher air, blinking away his burning tears. He can vaguely see Guerra kneeling beside him, those abyssal eyes watching Jack with a dark, deep assessment. Jack looks up at him, murmuring fiercely, “…Not all courage...burns bright...”)

“Sometimes, courage is about making the decisions that others cannot,” Jack says, his voice is a hymn and a hum and a truth, “And despite what some French emperor said, some courage is endurance of hurt and endurance of Hell.”

And
At last
A heartbroken but relieved smile cracks across Gabriel’s face.

Because

For the first time
Gabriel feels like -

“...How do you...” he starts to say, struggling to be honest and true, lifting his left hand to press it to the back of Jack’s right, still holding his face, “...Always know exactly what to say?”

And the words “to make me feel like I can try again” remain unspoken.

But they are sewn into the silver-threaded night air.

And Jack sees him, and says with all the raw-edged and well-worn honesty he can find in his heart:

“Because it is the truth.”

Gabriel’s breath hitches slightly, and Jack gives him that slightly crooked but genuine grin, saying brightly, “Because sometimes we need friends to tell us the truths we are not yet able to tell ourselves. And because I am your friend, and I will have your back even when you yourself cannot.”

Gabriel exhales, shocked and still spellbound, saying, “It’s been two months - how can you possibly...say that?”

“...Because I know,” Jack says truthfully, “Because we will have to make the decisions that others cannot or will not. Because we will have to be willing to try anything and everything. Because we will have to burn courage - sometimes bright, and sometimes enduring - to resist this war.”

And then Jack’s smile deepens as he says - almost with a gilded-edged laugh:

“And because you were the only person who looked at this week and saw a plan to change things.”

Gabriel smiles back wryly, saying dryly, “You shouldn’t be too hard on the others, Jack - they’re just trying to survive this program.”

“Of course, of course,” Jack says with joking reassurance, “But I will defend your plan if they try to be assholes about it.”

“Mn, what a brave soldier I have,” Gabriel chuckles, his voice like smoke, and Jack shivers a little at the tone of his voice -

“Soldier: 76, reporting for duty,” Jack says, trying to play off the way his pulse thrums at the soft yet shadowy look in Gabriel’s gaze -

“You’re more than just a number, you know,” Gabriel says coyly, entwining his index and middle fingers with Jack’s, and Jack -

Jack murmurs back, “And you are worth more than words and numbers can show.”

Gabriel pauses at that, growing contemplative again, before he replies quietly, “It’s...not that...straightforward, Jack -”
“If I say it a lot, would you believe it more?” Jack asks with a sly grin. Gabriel briefly flashes a mischievous smile, retorting, “Weren’t you the one complaining about the size of my ego earlier?”

“Both statements can be true and do not disqualify each other,” Jack says with fake innocence, causing Gabriel to snicker, “Smartass.”

Jack grins slyly at him, retorting, “I am what you make me.”

Gabriel smirks at him, but then his smile flags a bit as he mutters gently, “...You don’t know what I’m...capable of.”

And then he pauses, and adds quietly, “Or what...people like me are capable of.”

Jack listens and -

(Does it change anything?)

He says to Gabriel with patient honesty, “...Will you tell me? Please?”

Gabriel flicks his gaze to Jack’s -

And sees only an open, true trust there in the blue depths.

And so he

Inhales

Exhales

And dives in:

“We managed to get to the temporary camp set up by the 35th Military Zone brigade. They performed some more thorough operations on Carolina and Jim, stabilizing them for flight, and then we got airlifted back to Eglin.”

Gabriel pauses, as if steeling himself, before he continues, “C2 handled...Silvio, notifying his family, and they got our injured members hospitalized. I...couldn’t honestly tell you if I slept a lot or a little those first few days - the...the fight itself felt... so slow, but everything after felt mind-numbingly fast. But everything felt...surreal.”

And Gabriel stops, before he says the word, “Nightmarish.”

...Jack is silent.

But he knows the feeling.

Like standing in a living room, tv still on, syringe on the table, his brother on the couch, in a house both too narrow and too empty for life.

“...At some point, I found out from Carolina that she had recommended me for the Fox course,” Gabriel says softly, “And that the team’s decision had been unanimous. And I...”

He stops. Shudders a bit against his own words. Looks at Jack. Drops his voice to a whisper and murmurs almost pleadingly, “…I want...I need to be honest with you.”

(Does it change anything?)
“I’m here,” Jack replies instantly, his words truth undeniable, “I’m listening.”

Gabriel looks briefly uncertain, but he feels the words ache in his chest.

And so he releases them:

“...I knew, Jack - even before I ever took the course, I knew. The moment she told me, I knew, I knew. I knew that was what I was meant to do, who I was meant to be.”

And a heartbroken smile twists across Gabriel’s face, as if his own words hurt him to say:

“...And I embraced it. I dove right in. I knew exactly that I wanted it and it wanted me. And I would take it and use it to find those who had hurt us, and break them apart, just like they had done to us.”

Jack watches him, listens quietly, and replies softly, gently, so gently, “...And you did.”

“...I did,” Gabriel says, still with that heartbroken but resolved smile on his face, “The Fox course was...short compared to other MOS training programs. Only like six weeks. Felt like sprinting a marathon. 7436 got a new junior medic to replace me. And when C2 thought we were ready, they put us back out there.”

And then Gabriel scowls a bit, stating in a voice like obsidian smoke, “And I started asking questions.”

(And he can still feel it.)

(Mapping out the network, using Silvio’s previous data, visiting people, putting on the mask of former friendliness, asking and talking and learning and asking again -)

“...And that was when I learned,” Gabriel murmurs, bitter and bittersweet, “That someone can answer you honestly and still manage to hide the truth. And that the connections, the people, the very thoughts we take for granted can change how we perceive things. That you can see and hear and experience things and somehow not realize anything at all.”

“...Like a mystery,” Jack says, “Where the author gives the audience the clues throughout the story, but they never seem important until the end.”

“Exactly,” Gabriel says with a vivid, slightly vicious grin, “We hadn’t missed anything in particular, but we had somehow failed to perceive the truth. The dominant cartel in the eastern half of La Tierra Caliente had never fully left - instead, a more aggressive, more militant sub-faction had developed, pushing to use their paramilitary mercenary group in a more...extreme way, to more directly counter us and the Mexican military forces.”

“...So you were ambushed?” Jack asks intensely. Gabriel shakes his head, explaining, “Yes...and no. Our base at the time had been compromised, that was certain - but how? Where was the intel leak? As I found out more about the sub-faction from different informants, I figured out what we hadn’t fully perceived.”

And then a soft, sorrowful scowl shifts across Gabriel’s face as he murmurs, “One of the zone commanders was compromised - his family’s safety was being threatened. And he had been the one our ODA commanders had been meeting with that day.”

Jack inhales steeply, saying sharply, “Oh my god -”
A gentle, quiet expression flutters across Gabriel’s face as he says lowly, “I...this is why I said you didn’t...you didn’t know. Because when I finally got a chance to talk to him, I...I offered to help his family seek asylum.”

…

The silence engulfs them -

“What,” Jack half-states, half-gawks, half-stammers, and Gabriel winces, as if in pain, muttering, “I will use whatever I have to make whatever choices I need to, Jack -”

“But you said - how could you offer that to him?” Jack asks, reeling under the weight of Gabriel’s words -

“Him?”

Jack

Stops.

As he process the sharpness in Gabriel’s gaze, like the edge of an obsidian dagger, pressed to the pulse in a neck and -

“...I never offered him anything,” Gabriel says, his voice quiet but the edges of each word are cutting, “I told you - I would do what had been done to us to those who had harmed us. An eye for an eye, one family for another. His family would be safe, away from harm, but him? I promised nothing. And he would get nothing.”

But then Gabriel smirks - just a bit, just like a thin thread of smoke, “Not that he fully realized that either.”

“...That’s…” Jack starts to say. Stops. Struggles with his words -

“...Immoral? Unfair?” Gabriel offers quietly, resigned to receive Jack’s judgment -

“- Incredible.”

Gabriel

Stops.

And then his eyes go wide as he gawks, “What.”

“How did you not crack?” Jack asks earnestly, “I would’ve freaked out -”

“Jack,” Gabriel states, shocked, “I like...broke a lot of laws with that interview. Though I guess legally it falls under warzone stuff but seriously -”

“But you did the right thing?”

Gabriel blinks as Jack looks at him with what seems to be genuine confusion, as he elaborates, “You offered to help his family, people who were innocent of the situation, people who didn’t deserve to be either threatened or punished. And I mean, did you harm him?”

“Well...no, but you don’t -” Gabriel starts, but Jack gives him that crooked smile, saying, “Then what part of that was unfair?”
“I mean, when that interview was done, I gave the evidence to the Mexican military,” Gabriel explains, “They secured his family and then arrested him, and we set out to find the safehouses of the militant sub-faction. We managed to find a lot of them, plus a bunch of the poppy plantations they were operating...but…”

“...But?” Jack asks cautiously. Gabriel frowns a bit, before he sighs, “...The zone commander was released within like two or three weeks of his court martial.”

“... What, why??” Jack asks, horrified and fully enraptured. Gabriel’s expression is...darkly complex -

And Jack can feel that something is...off.

“...Gabe?” he murmurs gently, so gently that Gabriel lifts his gaze to his, and Jack can see something...scared in it. Gabriel’s fingers on his left hand squeeze a little tighter, as if Gabriel is trying to feel him more -

“...He was released,” Gabriel says quietly, “And then found dead on the edge of Chilpancingo the next day.”

Jack’s jaw drops a little as he murmurs, “...Retaliation? By the cartel? Or the military outside of the law?”

“I…” Gabriel starts to say, “I don’t know...but…”

And then his frown deepens and he says, his voice barely audible above the smoke from the fire:

“But...I found out later that...someone had visited him a day or two before he was released. When I asked around, people told me he was an American soldier - ‘one of yours,’ they said, ‘The one who taught Silvio.’”

And Jack’s eyes -

(“Oh pobre soldado - I made him.”)

Go wide as he feels a chill drip-drip-drip up his spine.

(“Few things are scarier than someone as smart as Guerra hellbent on some sort of revenge.”)

“...You think Guerra killed him?” Jack asks, unnerved. Gabriel’s frown shifts to one of contemplation, as he mutters, “I...don’t think so. I mean, I know Guerra is capable of it. But he’s also...impersonal. Cold. And it just...doesn’t suit him. Dead body on the edge of a large city? That’s...not a message. No, I think that whatever Guerra said to him or to other people got him killed, which is exactly the method Guerra would use. Guerra...is the kind of person to tell someone their death is coming...and then let them walk straight into it.”

And Jack thinks.

And he knows.

And he says quietly:

“...Maybe it’s wrong of me to say, but...I guess I can at least understand Guerra, or understand why he would do it. It’s...it has to be so...”

Jack stops, trying to find the words -
Wondering what he would do.

It’s only been a few months, but if anything happened to his friends, Jack would fight a war to save them.

...And…

It’s only been two months since they met -

But if anything happened to Gabriel, he would fight the world for him.

There’s an intense, fiercely conflicted look on Jack’s face, yet it is somehow so vivid, so vibrant, that it seems to say everything, even in the silence.

It’s the same expression he’d held throughout his interview with Guerra.

That’s a good look on you, soldier, Gabriel thinks, his own expression softening a bit at that. He sighs softly, “Well…yeah. I mean, I get it too - even sympathize with him. God knows what I would do if someone hurt or betrayed my husband like that.”

…

“…Husband?” Jack asks blankly.

Gabriel’s softer expression twists into confusion as he says dryly, “Guerra? Marc Guerra Díaz?”

Jack just continues to blink and -

“…Oh, god dammit,” Gabriel says exasperatedly, making a frustrated face as he mutters, “Carlos Rives, I swear to God, I’m going to - Jack, Silvio’s original surname was Díaz, but when we met him, he had just gotten married -”

And Jack suddenly realizes -

“- To his partner of like, ten years - Marc Guerra” Gabriel explains, “Who had just left the ODA, partially to let Carolina take the Team Sergeant spot, and partially so they could finally get married without getting in trouble with C2 and fraternization rules.”

“Oh my god, I’m an idiot,” Jack states with genuine horror and self-disappointment.

But somehow -

A small miracle occurs

As a wide grin spreads on Gabriel’s face, and he laughs, “Holy shit, Jack - did you really think Guerra would just use Silvio’s name as his password if they were only friends??”

“I just - I thought - it seemed reasonable, okay??” Jack sputters, but Gabriel just laughs - a wheezy, smoky sound that lights the whole world with gilded stardust. Jack watches in awe as Gabriel’s laughter simmers into a happy, sly smirk, and Gabriel chuckles, “Ha, I’ll be sure to try Adrien’s name for your password -”

“Why not your name?” Jack retorts instantaneously and…

The silence is stunning
As Gabriel’s eyes go wide and
A faint, rosy bronze blush dusts the curves of his cheekbones beneath Jack’s fingers and -
And Jack suddenly realizes the implication of what he said -

*(Even if it is very true.)*

“I mean - you said it!” Jack stammers, his own face suddenly very warm and flushed, but he manages to joke, “And if I change the I to a 1 and the E’s to 3’s, it’ll be impossible to crack, right??”

Gabriel’s mesmerized expression cracks into another grin as he laughs smokily, “So wait, it’s G-A-B-R-1-3-L R-3-Y-3-S?”


And Gabriel **wheezes** at that, laughing genuinely, “Jack, holy hell - do not make that your password, please, for the love of -“

“No, no, it’ll be way more complex than that, trust me,” Jack teases him back, “There will be like - way more numbers and words. It will be uncrackable.”

“All the hackers hate him, click to find out why,” Gabriel grins, but Jack just snaps with fake horror, “You can’t give it away!! Then all the hackers will know my secret!”

“This just in - ethical hackers have found Jack Morrison’s browsing history. More at 11,” Gabriel jokes, but Jack drops his expression into a sarcastic deadpan, muttering, “Okay, now you’re getting too real here. I can’t let people know I’m searching for Edgar Allan Poe books or trying to figure out what an orange pip is.”

“You jerk,” Gabriel snorts, but his smile gives away how happy he is. Jack grins, saying brightly, “I have an image to maintain, Gabe.”

Gabriel’s smile fades a bit, softens at that, and he tightens his grip on Jack’s hand gently as he thinks quietly, *An image…huh?*

And somehow -

“…You’re not like him, Gabe.”

Jack knows exactly what to say.

Gabriel smiles sadly at him, saying, “You say that, but…”

He stops, picking over his thoughts, settling them into words, before he continues softly, “Do you know the phrase, ‘He who fights with monsters should see to it that he himself does not become a monster’ -?”

Jack knows

Exactly

What Gabriel means

As he thinks of boxes full of coarse-grained darkness and songs where nothing ever lasts forever.
And he replies quietly, "'And if you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.'"

Gabriel stares at him with that sweet and bittersweet look, before he murmurs, "...I don't want to be like that, but...but I'm so good at this. I know I am. But what if...what if this is all that I am? All I can ever do?"

What he's sown -

What if it never grows?

What if he reaps only dust and ash?

And then -

"Gabe..."

The hands on the sides of his face - well-worn with warmth and tenderness - gently guide him towards -

"Please...look at me."

Those eyes of endless depths, full of seasung, submerged stars.

And Jack speaks so honestly:

"You qualified for the Special Forces at 20, the youngest age allowed. You chose to pick one of the hardest specialities to save lives. You helped trained soldiers - people who are still fighting out there, right now, because of that. You kept children and elderly individuals alive and healthy."

And Gabriel

*Breathes*

Like the words are the cool air of a rainstorm.

Jack *smiles* at him - like light rising from beneath water - and says in a low, rich tone, "...You saved the life of your future commander. Your idea saved the lives of your team. You were the first person to capture an Omnic drone. You helped your team leave one of the worst warzones in the world with all of them alive and unharmed."

And then Jack *grins* mischievously at him, adding, "You put up with my dumb ass when I had a double dose of injections."

Gabriel smirks wryly at that. Jack pauses, then says more somberly, "...You orchestrated a god damn prison break."

"It was a fake prison, Jack." Gabriel starts to point out, but Jack shakes his head, saying, "No, Gabe, it was *actual* torture."

Gabriel quiets at that.

Because he *knows*

It's true.

And Jack *smiles* again - that soft, faint, half-smile that is somehow so stardusted and sunbright that
Gabriel would trade anything and everything to keep seeing it.

And Jack says so truly:

“...And here you are, trusting me with a truth so personal and so powerful that I am humbled to be here.”

Gabriel inhales steeply -

As Jack exhales softly, “The world is a better place with you in it, with you being true to yourself.”

And Jack can see something shift in Gabriel’s gaze, as if the obsidian smoke and the gilded galaxies in his eyes melt together into something...new, something different -

Something that Jack wants to see grow and blossom and flourish.

“Even if you choose that path, you could never be a monster - for you have been hurt, and you have healed stronger, better,” Jack says to him, tells him true, knows it to be real, “The power inside of you is a force for good, no matter how you wield it. By your very doubts, your fears, your experiences, you show temper, patience, endurance...resistance.”

And I will do whatever it takes, for however long it takes, to show you that, again and again and again, Jack thinks, as Gabriel shuts his eyes and falls into his touch.

“...You are a revelation. You are a revolution. You are whatever you choose to be, however you choose to be it,” Jack speaks to him -

(Does it change anything?)

“And I will be here for as long as you need me to be,” Jack says from the depths of his soul, “Because you inspire me.”

Gabriel’s breath catches in his lungs, as his heartbeat thunders in his veins.

(He makes you believe in heroes and hope again.)

“Everything about you inspires me,” Jack smiles at him, radiant with a surreal lantern-lit, stardusted glow, “Your ideas, your humor, your efforts, your courage inspires me. You don’t need to be sunshine and fireworks, Gabe - after all, the stars are beautiful because they shine in the darkness. And you being the best at whatever you choose is worth far more than trying to force yourself to be something else. And I would be proud to follow you - whoever you choose to become, whatever you decide to be - anywhere you go.”

Gabriel

Feels

Jack.

Feels his words - deep like a current that changes tides, in a voice as rhythmic and as rhyme-like as whiskey-smooth poetry; feels his hands - rough and slightly calloused, but well-worn with a tender warmth, strong and steady without being forceful; feels his heartbeat - however faint, however muffled by jackets and shirts and skin and lungs - rise and fall, hum and thrum like the tempo of something new, something different, something growing alive and living.

Feels his eyes - a world of midnight that is somehow sunbright and radiant, stars in the blue velvet
sky and stars submerged in the moon-tinted seawater - linger over him

So that when Gabriel opens his own eyes

He already knows.

Because he could feel the way Jack was smiling at him.

And Gabriel says honestly, “...I don’t think anyone’s...ever said that to me before. Not like that.”

Jack stares at him, feeling something catch in his chest, and as he opens his mouth to speak -

“Thank you, Jack.”

Gabriel says it before he can, a smoky, gilded smile - soft like stardust, threaded with gold and obsidian - on his face as the words nestle into the water-filled cracks of Jack’s heart.

And Gabriel continues, “Thank you for being patient with me this week, and for listening to me, and for…”

He pauses, thinks over the feeling in his veins, his chest, his heart, and then adds quietly, “And for believing in me.”

Jack is spellbound for a moment - a heartbeat, maybe two - before he grins back, replying with a wide, sheer joy, “Thank you, Gabe!”

And Gabriel melts - just a little, just a bit - at the sight he has been hoping to see since midnight on Monday.

“Thank you,” Jack repeats, his grin easing into a gentle smile, “For telling me. For trusting me. I’m happy just to hear your stories.”

“Well,” Gabriel says slyly, pressing Jack’s right hand closer against his cheek, “You don’t have to just listen, you know...My stories could use a deuteragonist…”

Jack raises a skeptical eyebrow, saying sarcastically, “Funny, I seem to recall someone saying I was ‘critical’ to his plot for this week, and I’m pretty sure I was playing the ‘tragic hero’ role -”

Gabriel grins mischievously, laughing lowly as Jack jokes, “I think that makes me the second protagonist.”

“Oh wow, would you look at that,” Jack teases him wryly, “I am gonna call you a ‘nerd.’ And one with a modern, critical interpretation of literature at that. Which is strange for you, considering the types of stories you like to read.”

“Jack Morrison, you little smartass,” Gabriel laughs at him, “This is the worst case of ‘pot calling the kettle ‘nerd’” that I’ve ever seen -”
“I never said I wasn’t a nerd as well,” Jack smirks, “Just that you are, very clearly, a nerd all on your own protagonistic right.”

“How sweet of you,” Gabriel chuckles, before he remembers…

The datapad in his pocket.

He scowls a bit, finally lowering his hand from Jack’s, saying slowly, “…Speaking of getting you involved…”

Jack frowns in confusion as Gabriel unzips his jacket, and then pulls out the datapad from the protected inner pocket. He holds it out towards Jack, and -

Jack exhales softly

And removes his hands from holding Gabriel’s face.

...Perhaps a bit too slowly.

But he takes the datapad, staring at it solemnly.

“…Look,” Gabriel murmurs, “I know this is a lot to ask. The stuff in those files - it’s way bigger than a dumb SERE program or personal problems with directors.”

Jack glances back up at Gabriel, asking him honestly, “How bad it is?”

And Gabriel thinks it over, before he sighs softly:

“If it’s all real…it would be world-changing.”

Chapter End Notes

We share this hurt, we share the pain
All of our dirt is washed in the rain
We've walked that road, we've felt that shame

Mmh, times, they are changin'

(Our sanctuary) Oh, oh
(Hold onto me)
(Our sanctuary)
You are, you are
(Hold onto me)
You are safe with me

---

When I was sixteen, my history teacher gave my class an assignment: interview a veteran from World War II, the Korean War, or the Vietnam War. My childhood neighbor is an older man who fought in WWII. With my mom present, I went to his house and asked him questions - about training, how old he was, where he fought (German Front), when he fought (later in the war).
Somehow, through this pretty casual interview -

My mom and I got to hear the story about how he and his squad were captured by German forces during one of his night watches.

...

I will never forget how he cried talking about how his friend - who was also on the night shift - was stabbed through with a bayonet. My mom and I were in tears. I'm tearing up writing this right now.

It was the first time he'd talked about the event since coming home from the POW camp in Germany.

Since that interview, he's actually talked about it, and his other war experiences, more openly. He had denied himself therapy and an emotional outlet for decades. He is one of the most physically-able people I know: he drives, he takes care of his house and garden, he regularly has activities with his wife and kids and grandkids.

Not every veteran is physically wounded by what they experience.

---

I would like to remind readers that:

"At any given moment, 8,000 of the country’s most elite forces, including Navy SEALs, Army Delta Force, Army Special Forces and others, are operating around the globe. In 2001, that number was 2,900. So far in 2017, the service members have deployed to 143 countries, or nearly three-quarters of the nations in the world, according to data provided by U.S. Special Operations Command."

"Milliken was killed as part of a so-called “train, advise and assist” mission. To fully appreciate the dangerous overextension of the nation’s Special Operations forces, you have to know that what are being billed as training missions are often indistinguishable from traditional combat. “It’s easier to put ‘trainers’ and ‘advisers’ in a country and say we don’t have ‘boots on the ground,’” says former Navy SEAL Scott Taylor, who is now a GOP Congressman from Virginia. “Well, that’s bullshit. They’re combat boots, every one of them.”"

---

When I set out to retool "How We Were Made", I wanted to take new canon information about Gabriel, Jack, SEP, characters like Akande and Moira, and merge them with real world military training and U.S. Special Forces topics. I was interested in trying to see how characters like Gabriel Reyes and Jack Morrison form, and what events lead them to each other and eventually to leave the military.

Again, it's not that I think this specific story is "as close to canon as possible," though I have tried to put effort into that based on what evidence we have.

Rather, I was interested in trying to understand and explore the feeling of what creates characters and who they become over a fictional thirty-year span.

What does it take to be a hero?
And what does it take to believe in hope again?
Chapter Summary

[Cryptobiosis: a state of life in which an organism is capable of suspending all or most of its metabolic activities to preserve itself from extremely adverse or hostile conditions.]

Jack may not be a doctor, but he's a pretty damn proficient trauma nurse.

[This ability is typically only found in small invertebrates and a few plant species.]

Gabriel is not a commander, but he's a pretty damn proficient strategist.

[Many of them survive by making the sugars trehalose and sucrose, which are capable of protecting cellular structures against denaturing and destruction.]

And together -

[When adverse or hostile conditions return to more favorable states, the organism will reverse the process and reanimate metabolic activities.]

They start to piece together the new mysterious condition that can result from enhancement.

[This process is not known to occur in vertebrates.]

[However, when trehalose is supplied to human eukaryotic cells, such as fibroblasts, these cells may survive dehydration and desiccation for longer periods than normal.]

Chapter Notes

This chapter is an immediate continuation from 15.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Well,” Gabriel says slyly, pressing Jack’s right hand closer against his cheek, “You don’t have to just listen, you know...My stories could use a deuteragonist.”

Jack raises an eyebrow skeptically, saying sarcastically, “Funny, I seem to recall someone saying I was ‘critical’ to his plot for this week, and I’m pretty sure I was playing the ‘tragic hero’ role -”

Gabriel grins mischievously, laughing lowly as Jack jokes, “I think that makes me the second protagonist.”

“Oh, you’re going to call me a ‘nerd’ -” Gabriel starts, and Jack smirks, “Oooh, a self-fulfilling prophecy - I like it -”

“- But I’m pretty sure the concept of the deuteragonist has expanded to basically mean the ‘second
protagonist,’” Gabriel continues, “Styles of narrative storytelling have changed so much in the last century or so that, more often than not, most deuteragonists are just as important as the starting protagonist.”

“Oh wow, would you look at that,” Jack teases him wryly, “I am gonna call you a ‘nerd.’ And one with a modern, critical interpretation of literature at that. Which is strange for you, considering the types of stories you like to read.”

“Jack Morrison, you little smartass,” Gabriel laughs at him, “This is the worst case of ‘pot calling the kettle ‘nerd’” that I’ve ever seen -”

“I never said I wasn’t a nerd as well,” Jack smirks, “Just that you are, very clearly, a nerd all on your protagonistic own.”

“How sweet of you,” Gabriel chuckles, before he remembers…

The datapad in his pocket.

He scowls a bit, finally lowering his hand from Jack’s, saying slowly, “...Speaking of getting you involved…”

Jack frowns in confusion as Gabriel unzips his jacket, and then pulls out the datapad from the protected inner pocket. He holds it out towards Jack, and -

Jack exhales softly

And removes his hands from holding Gabriel’s face.

...Perhaps a bit too slowly.

But he takes the datapad, staring at it solemnly.

“...Look,” Gabriel murmurs, “I know this is a lot to ask. The stuff in those files - it’s way bigger than a dumb SERE program or personal problems with directors.”

Jack glances back up at Gabriel, asking him honestly, “How bad it is?”

And Gabriel thinks it over, before he sighs softly:

“If it’s all real...it could be world-changing.”

...

The silence is

Skeptical.

Jack raises an eyebrow at Gabriel, clearly not buying it, before he looks back down at the datapad, waking it up as he mutters wryly, “Oh my, what a plot twist.”

“...You don’t believe me,” Gabriel says dryly as Jack taps in his username and passcode (still 0076). As the datapad loads his profile, Jack replies teasingly, “I trust you.”

“That’s not the same as believing me,” Gabriel retorts, “But...I mean, I get it. I don’t...fully believe it myself.”
“Hmm,” Jack hums thoughtfully as he opens up [Gabe’s Favorites], “How ’bout I ask you a different way?”

“Go for it,” Gabriel offers, and Jack adjusts his position again, sliding right up next to Gabriel, who jolts a little bit as his pulse suddenly spikes with Jack so close -

“You’re skeptical of these files,” Jack says, as he glances at Gabriel with a contemplative look, “And yet you called them ‘world-changing’ if they turn out to be true. So no stupid questions, right?”

“...Right,” Gabriel replies, scowling lightly in concentration. Jack glances at the sub-folders, all of them labeled with authors, and he focuses, organizing his thoughts as best he can.

“...If these files are true, will they help us defeat the Omnics?” Jack asks quietly -

“Yes,” Gabriel states without hesitation, “Absolutely.”

“...Well, that was quick,” Jack says with a scowl, but he refocuses, asking, “If these files are true, will...whatever they contain have a greater impact on the world than armies of giant killer robots?”

Gabriel pauses.

He can feel Jack’s gaze watching him thoughtfully as he runs down a list of possibilities, branching options, the scenarios splitting out from one another like dendrites of a nerve cell.

And after a long moment, he replies slowly, “...I don’t...know. It depends on a lot of small things, but there are two main sticking points: the first is, if we win the war, do we let any of the Omnics survive. But we’ve already been over that. The second, though, is if this information...remains contained, or if it...spreads.”

Like a virus, Gabriel thinks, his thoughts like dust and ash, Or like a fire…

“If the information spreads,” Jack asks, not poking at Gabriel’s thoughts like an annoying stick, but instead carefully taking his mind’s hand and holding it, “Is that the part that would be world-changing?”

“Yes,” Gabriel replies immediately, “Beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

Jack frowns, looking away from him back towards the datapad, and Gabriel can practically see the thoughts shift with the subtle changes of expressions on his face.

“The information contained in here is all about our injections?” Jack asks, glancing back towards him. Gabriel lolls his head a bit, thinking it over, and then replies, “Essentially, yes. There’s a number of documents about the prototype weapons they want us to try, or files on like...personnel and stuff. But in retrospect, those are a pretty small percent of the overall file count.”

“Is the purpose of the program still the same?” Jack asks keenly, “Are they still injecting us with this stuff in order to make us...capable of using those prototypes?”

Gabriel blinks once at him and -

God damn, he’s sharp, he thinks, grinning wryly at Jack as he answers, “In theory, yes. I don’t think that focus has changed in particular...just that…”

And then Gabriel pauses, scowls deeply, and mutters, “…There are...potential side effects -”

“Are we gonna turn into the Hulk?”
Gabriel actually chokes on his words as Jack’s voice cracks gamely across the camp.

“Holy shit,” Gabriel wheezes, struggling to regain control, “No - no - we’re not going to -”

But then he stops

As the realization dawns on him.

And he scowls, saying quietly, “...Actually. The comic book example isn’t a bad comparison. But not the Hulk. More like...Wolverine and Deadpool. Or something. That healing factor stuff.”

Jack stares at him intensely, before he mutters, “...You’re serious.”

Gabriel makes a small, skeptical face as he murmurs, “Well. We’re playing no stupid questions and assuming this information is true...so yeah, I’m serious.”

“...Damn,” Jack swears, and Gabriel says quietly, “I mean, it all hinges on if it gets...leaked, or spread, or revealed publically or not. And I don’t know for certain if it has quite the same...effectiveness or impact as fictional supersoldier stuff. Most real world things don’t really work like fiction -”

“But truth is stranger than fiction,” Jack retorts softly, before he glances at Gabriel, adding, “...Right?”

Gabriel looks at him, assessing the depths of his blue eyes, before he says gently, “...You don’t have to do this. I can transfer the files back to myself and you can...you can claim plausible deniability.”

Jack frowns, sweetly and bittersweetly, as Gabriel adds quietly, “This...won’t be like novels, or comic books, or video games. This is classified information stolen from the U.S. military, and, if it is true, it will have the ability to change our understanding of life as we know it. This is the kind of information that - if it is used ethically - could end things like cancer or degenerative diseases or...I don’t know, but stuff of that caliber.”

“...And it if is abused?” Jack asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

Gabriel

Inhales

Exhales

And answers, just as seriously:

“In one of those files, someone wrote, ‘This war will be fought between soldiers and machines. But the next will be fought between ghosts and monsters.’ They also wrote that, ‘The person who commands that could rule the world.’”

Jack shuts his eyes, breathing in slowly as the severity of the words sink into the depths of his soul.

And, in the sweet and soft darkness behind his eyelids -

He feels Gabriel take his right hand and squeeze it - his palm calloused from years of guns and hard work, his fingertips well-worn, but warm, so warm. And Gabriel speaks, in a voice cut from soft obsidian and sweet smoke:

“...You don’t need to risk yourself for this.”
(It would be easy to make the selfish choice.)

(To protect himself.)

(To claim ignorance and innocence.)

(It would be easy.)

(But that is not right.)

(And that is not what Jack wants.)

(Because he wants to be -)

“I told you -”

Jack’s voice draws from the unknown depths of his seasing heart.

“- I will be proud to follow you anywhere you go.”

And he opens his eyes, and stares straight into the sweet, soft, stardusted shadows of Gabriel’s. And Jack states softly:

“Even into Hell and back.”

Gabriel smiles - sweetly and bittersweetly - but his hand holds Jack’s tightly.

As if he is afraid to let go.

And then Jack grins, adding sarcastically, “Besides, I’m the deuteragonist, and this is the part where my version of the story gets interesting.”

…

And Gabriel cannot resist -

He breaks with laughter.

It’s a ragged, wheezy, almost hoarse sound, but it’s smoky and sugary, sweet like sunshine and silver-threaded like starlight, and Jack relishes in the sound of it, settling his head against Gabriel’s left shoulder again as he grins.

“One of these files has a prophecy foretelling about a bunch of chosen heroes, right?” Jack asks teasingly, and Gabriel wheeze-laughs, “Ah yes, that’s under the file called ‘The Chosen Heroes Who Will Totally Win the War.’”

“Knew it. See, this plot thing is easy!” Jack says smugly, “Now, the question is if we’re following like, Avengers-type band of heroes or the Fellowship of the Ring sort of thing -”

“This - is - serious -” Gabriel chokes out in between laughter, and Jack grins at him, retorting, “I’m not the one who’s laughing! And I call dibs on Aragorn.”


“I mean, clearly you are Boromir -” Jack starts to tease him, and Gabriel just lolls his head, retorting,
“Aw, hell nah, do I look like a ‘death in the second act’ kinda guy to you?? Please, I’m totally Aragorn. You’ll have to be Legolas or Frodo or something -”

“Look, if you’re too tall to be Napoleon, then you gotta admit that I’m too buff to be Legolas,” Jack counters with a smirk. Gabriel scowls a bit as he feels a faint blush rise to his cheeks, murmuring, “...Well, when you’re right, you’re right…”

“Glad that’s settled,” Jack grins at him, before scrolling down the folders in the datapad, asking, “So...where do I start with this world-changing conspiracy thing?”

“Oh, uh,” Gabriel says, shuffling a bit to pull his notebook from his pocket. Jack watches as he flips past pages of that looping scrawl, until he reaches a long list of what appears to be titles. Gabriel glances back up, asking, “Do you want to start from the beginning or -”

“The best stories start in the middle,” Jack says slyly, smirking at him. Gabriel cracks a wide grin, laughing a bit, “Smartass. Alright, let me see…”

As Gabriel skims down the list of story titles that had the SEP files attached to the ends, Jack settles his head on Gabriel’s shoulder again, eyes tracing over the increasingly familiar handwriting - Trying to fight the sweep of mixed emotions simmering inside him.

Because Jack already knows.

If Gabriel says it’s potentially as bad as that, then it probably is, Jack thinks, his words a churning mixture of nervous resolution. Part of him wants to ignore this - ignore everything about this weight, this pressure -

This feeling of...inadequacy -

Take Gabriel’s hand and disappear into the nightblue shadows of the trees, letting the stars guide their way to elsewhere, anywhere elsewhere.

“...You know I’m not…” Jack starts to murmur, but the words get stuck in his throat, which is an odd feeling, because normally he can say them so easily - so defensively -

Like they can excuse him from being more.

Gabriel pauses, shifting his head towards Jack a bit, his gaze drifting over the way Jack’s fingertips run along the edges of the datapad, turning the device around and around in his hands.

And Gabriel can feel it.

But still, he knows to ask - gently, so gently, “...Not what, Jack?”

Jack

Exhales

The words softly, changing them too, “...You know I’m not a doctor, right? That I was just a nurse? I never even…”

And then -

Jack draws the words from the depth of his sunken heart:
“...I don’t know if I’m...as capable as this situation requires.”

Gabriel watches him for a moment

Before he -

“Hey -”

Slips his right index and middle fingers under Jack’s chin -

“Mírame, soldado -”

And gently - so gently -

Tilts Jack’s head up towards his.

And those eyes - midnight blue skies submerged beneath water, the chilled lanternlight casting stars across them - meet his and -

Gabriel smiles, telling quietly, “What did you just tell me? You are whatever you choose to be, however you choose to be it.”

And Jack melts at the sight and the words, the feeling spinning a song in his heart.

“You figured out my plan on your own, with only a number and half a stupid quote,” Gabriel reminds him, patient and smokily sweet, “You held your own against a man who drives his opponents to their own deaths. You led a prison break even though you were tortured and sleep-deprived.”

And then Gabriel gives him the most stargilded smile Jack has ever seen, adding softly, “You waited for me. And after all of this, you’re still here.”

Jack has to choke back the way his heart cracks and shatters - glass dripping up into a sea of stars - murmuring with a low rasp, “Gabe…”

“You are capable of anything you set your mind to, soldier,” Gabriel tells him quietly, honestly, truly, “I don’t want or need someone who can define every ten-cent word in these papers. I want someone who is capable of asking questions and perceiving answers.”

And then Gabriel grins at him, stating with the radiance of an obsidian sunburst, “I trust you, Jack. And I want and value your insight. On books, on crazy military programs, and on life. You said you...always want to hear my stories…”

Gabriel’s grin fades back into a patient, soft smile as he says, “And I always want to hear yours too. You can tell me anything because I want to hear it.”

Jack is spellbound, breaking the sweet silence after Gabriel’s words to rasp in a low, almost fraying tone, “Gabe, I’m...that means a lot to me.”

“You…” Gabriel starts to say, but then he scowls - not in anger or frustration, just deep concentration - before he continues thoughtfully, “...Understand things...differently than other people. You...you always know just what to say, or just what to ask and I...I value that. I want to hear it.”

Jack watches him in awe as Gabriel smiles again - raw and genuine, threaded with silver smoke and stargold - and adds happily, “Any question, any answer, any story - I’m here for you.”
And then Gabriel *smirks* - that rich, regal, smoky grin that sends sweet shivers up Jack’s neck - as he adds with a low, gilded twist, “I’m here for my deuteragonist.”

And Jack

*Laughs.*

It starts as a deep, raspy sound, the tide crashing it, before it shakes its way up his chest, dry and yet stormy, smooth and yet gravely, until it shifts into a bright, sunburst smile and -

Gabriel inhales steeply at how light the expression looks on Jack’s face, cast beneath the lantern’s glow.

“Oh, Gabe,” Jack murmurs warmly, so gently, “You’re such a *nerd* -”

Gabriel scowl-pouts, opening his mouth to retort when -

“- And I’m so honored you value my ideas like that.”

He stops, the jokes and casual humor stuck in his throat, feeling himself drift deeper into the nightfallen blue upon blue upon blue in Jack’s eyes, how the lanternlight fills them like seastrewn stars.

Jack grins, and then glances back down at the datapad, asking wryly, “So, where does this plot begin?”

---------

It takes them longer to reach the parts on biochemical healing and repair than it had when Gabriel had read the folders and files alone -

But the conversation seems to just *flow* by.

The thing that strikes Gabriel the hardest is how incredibly *patient* Jack is: like the conversation on Sunday night/Monday morning, Jack frequently pauses to ask questions in ways Gabriel doesn’t fully expect, gently pulling apart Gabriel’s thoughts and ideas, helping him piece them back together in new and insightful ways. It’s clear to both of them that neither of them are doctors, or scientists, or engineers, or biochemists, so things like understanding the chemical-mechanical differences between one model of the prototype pulse rifle and another, or between one particular fibroblast-enhancing gene and another, is effectively impossible for both of them on a technical level.

But instead, Jack - like Gabriel - seems to grasp the larger or more impactful implications of certain technicalities, like the realization that one pulse rifle will be more effective at a longer range than the other, or that one gene will increase internal biochemical activities in fibroblasts while another will increase their microcellular preservation.

And Gabriel *appreciates* that.

More than words could ever describe.

But as Jack finishes skim-reading through a paper on microcellular protection for fibroblast cells, Gabriel scowls at the next item on his list:

The video file from a recording of “The Phantom of the Opera”, where he’s attached the Russian supersoldier clip at the end.
I guess we need to start with Guerra and Delta’s chatlog, though, Gabriel thinks, as he starts to say cautiously, “So, uh, the next set of files are...well, they’re pretty out there.”

“Where is the transgenic trehalose-phosphate synthase paper?”

Jack’s words - intense and deeply-focused -

Stop Gabriel dead in his tracks.

…”The what paper?” Gabriel asks, glancing up at Jack as he attempts to remember the words. Jack, however, remains focused on the datapad, pointing to the last page of the paper visible on the screen, explaining, “The authors here say that their research was part of a much larger project focusing on integrating the transgene coding for trehalose-phosphate synthase into mammalian DNA coding and enzyme production. In fact, from their notes here, it looks like we should have like, forty or fifty papers explaining the sub-projects from that research group alone.”

Gabriel scowls darkly, asking with more seriousness, “Who funded this group?”

“Man, I know why you’re asking that,” Jack mutters, scrolling back up the acknowledgements section of the paper, but he shakes his head a bit, adding, “But on the surface, it doesn’t look like the military or other agencies were involved? This paper says a number of different national health institutes and universities across the globe contributed to the project. If it helps, the entire research group or collective - or whatever you want to call them - originally branched off from the Applied Biotic Nano-deployment Project - oh!”

Jack glances up finally, grinning at Gabriel as he says, “That was the project that basically made biotic fields!”

The name rings a bell in Gabriel’s memories, and he hums, “Oooooh, right. The Delta course covered them at one point. The first successful use of biotic fields was about...ten years ago? Though they had been used in operating rooms before that.”

“Right,” Jack replies, “It’s been a long process of getting the artificial and synthetic material for current emergency nanobots and nanobiology away from hospitals - most of the biotic material required to keep the platelets and fibroblasts alive need refrigeration. But that project made a huge breakthrough by adding innate preservation to the biotic materials themselves and also redesigning the field container to increase longevity.”

“Riiight,” Gabriel says, as a lot of his knowledge from the medic course comes back to him, “This was a pretty big deal when I was training. But I don’t recall the technical information for all this - just the applied stuff. You know, using the biotic field in combination with biotic sealants and nanobot serum injectors.”

“Makes sense,” Jack answers thoughtfully, looking at the datapad contemplatively, “I say the process was long, but if you think about it, even the difference of a few years can have a huge impact in biotechnology. My advisors at school told me to take all the entry classes for nanobiology and biochemistry, even though I was aiming to be an emergency or operating room RN. It’s become increasingly important for even the applied medicine doctors, nurses, and technicians to know the cellular and nanobiological basics - you never know when you might have to create additional biotic fields mid-emergency.”

Then Jack looks back up, adding, “Trehalose is part of the innate preservation of the biotic materials
used in biotic fields and nanobiology. It’s...a pretty significant component.”

“Jack, it’s been like, four or five years since I last attempted to learn anything about this beyond an applied level,” Gabriel says to him honestly, “You’re gonna have to remind me what some of this stuff is.”

Jack stares at him thoughtfully, before he states in a low, deep rasp:

“Trehalose is the resurrection sugar.”

…

The silence is

*Shocked*

“The what?” Gabriel asks with horror, his mind immediately jumping to images of the supersoldier lying on an operating table.

“I mean, it’s a bit of a joke,” Jack explains, “But also not really? Trehalose is a sugar composed of two glucose molecules. It’s not...super complex or anything, and it doesn’t really store a ton of biochemical energy the way other, longer sugars do. But what makes trehalose important in biochemistry and nanobiology is that they can form temporary crystalline structures with each other. On a practical level, these sugar crystals can be used to protect microcellular structures from damage or denaturation.”

[Trehalose-loaded platelets were successfully freeze-dried, with excellent recovery of intact platelets. Rehydration from the vapor phase led to a survival rate of 85%, with a shelf life of at least 6 months at room temperature.]

[Introduction of trehalose into plant and mammalian cells using transgenic techniques increases resistance to drought and desiccation. Similar results were obtained with human fibroblasts that had the otsA and otsB genes inserted and expressed. These cells could be maintained in the dry state for up to 5 days, as compared with control cells that were very sensitive to drying (Guo et al., 2000). Trehalose at 50, 100 and 200 mmol l–1 protected corneal epithelial cells in culture from death by desiccation (Matsuo, 2001).]

“Many invertebrates use trehalose to protect everything from their DNA to cellular proteins during times of high stress,” Jack continues thoughtfully, “It sounds...kinda ridiculous, but organisms like brine shrimp use trehalose to live in suspended animation without water or oxygen for essentially infinite amounts of time -”

“Hang on,” Gabriel says, interrupting him, struggling to get past all this, “Are you saying a simple sugar can make people immortal?”

“N-no,” Jack mutters, looking a bit more confused, “I mean, you can’t just like, eat it and suddenly become immune to freezing. The human body has no way of sustaining trehalose.”

…

“...Oh,” Gabriel says, and he’s not sure if he’s relieved or disappointed. Jack sits up a bit more, explaining with more verve, “No, what’s important is that as part of the process of making biotic fields viable, this group figured out that you can basically load up the biotic components like platelets and fibroblasts with trehalose and let the properties of the sugar keep them ‘safe’ without refrigeration. You can dehydrate them, and then the canister and the nanobots will rehydrate them
upon the field canister’s activation.”

“...So what happens to the trehalose?” Gabriel asks. Jack rolls his shoulders, saying, “The nanobots and some of the added enzymes in the mixture break the trehalose down into the two glucose molecules, and then the human cells are able to use it for energy, so the biotic field process completes its cycle.”

“And that’s how we use biotic fields today?” Gabriel both asks and states. Jack nods, saying, “Right. They made the basic applied model ten years ago, and it’s been working with only minor adjustments since. Almost every biotic field canister used anywhere - hospitals, military deployments, first aid kits, paramedics, and so on - use the system this group developed.”

But then Jack glances back at the datapad, tapping on the part where the fibroblast paper says it was conducted as part of the larger project. He says, “But from the sound of it, the new research group wants to incorporate the actual synthesis and production of trehalose into transgenically modified mammals, so I'm guessing everything from mice to primates to us? Then we could produce trehalose in our own cells…”

Gabriel remembers -

The supersoldier on the operating table -

The numbers on the monitor dropping -

The long, ringing silence as she flatlines -

And then -

The screaming -

And he asks softly, “...How bad would that be?”

Jack looks up from the datapad, blinking at him before he states with raw-edged, genuine awe, “‘Bad?’ Gabe, if this works, this would be revolutionary.”

Gabriel’s scowl deepens, but Jack seems to alight at the idea, grinning as he says excitedly, “This has incredible potential, like - I mean, it would have to come with a series of genetic and phenotypic safeguards, but like - everything that makes biotic field deployments possible could be contained in our own enzyme pathways. Not only would we have our own innate microcellular and tissue healing processes, we would have this additional mechanism to help keep cells alive in semi-suspended animation in high-stress situations.”

Jack looks back at the datapad, radiant with sunburst optimism and sheer hope, as he adds, “Imagine if we could incorporate enzyme regulation pathways in place so that the same stresses that trigger the development of additional trehalose crystals in these long-living invertebrates could cause the same effect in our cells! Freezing temperatures, high heat, hypoxia, dehydration - like if these stresses start the process of traumatic cell death, the actual process of the cell ‘dying’ could then trigger the transcription of trehalose-phosphate synthase...or maybe the enzyme would already be functional in the cell but exist in a deactivated state, and it then becomes reactivated as the cell undergoes stress. Then, instead of using glucose for glycogen, the synthase enzyme would start producing trehalose, and under biochemical pressures, the trehalose would form protective shells around microcellular structures and proteins!”

Gabriel watches him, torn between admiring the way Jack’s excited energy lights up his face and the deepening realization that the video…
“The sheer audacity of it is genius,” Jack continues, his voice ribboning with enthusiasm, “The effects this could have in emergency and trauma medicine could absolutely change the world! I mean, it would still take a million transgene inserts to work properly, but if it all worked, certain types of traumatic mortality rates could drop. Like, if someone is undergoing rapid blood loss, in those moments the brain starts shutting down because it’s experiencing a rapid decrease in oxygen and blood sugar, and it needs huge amounts of both to survive.”

Jack taps the datapad again, adding optimistically, “But this - if this trehalose-synthesis transgenic ‘bundle’ of genes could work, even things as complex as neurons and glial cells could theoretically preserve themselves until the injury is patched and blood sugar and blood oxygen levels are restored. Then you reverse the molecular process - you break down the trehalose back into glucose and the tissue and organ system biochemically reanimates.”

In Gabriel’s mind -

He sees how the blood pressure stabilizes on the monitor and -

“I mean, you would still have to perform surgery, or some sort of biotic field deployment to stop the actual injury - or if these advanced transgenes they’re injecting into us work, then maybe enhanced individuals like supersoldiers could self-heal,” Jack says in a more contemplative but still excited tone, “But the real benefit would be that cells affected by these biochemical stresses wouldn’t just die - they’d just suspend their cellular activities until homeostasis is restored, through whatever alternate mechanisms are available.”

In Gabriel’s mind -

He sees how the first technician falls over dead -

“...Hypothetically,” Gabriel murmurs, thinking intensely, “Let’s say this concept works: under intense stress, like lack of oxygen or rapid blood loss, one of the candidates starts this...dying-but-not-dying process. How fast would our enhanced innate healing processes have to work to stabilize them into homeostasis again? Does this dying-but-not-dying process require an additional energy input?”

Jack looks at him quizzically, before he scowls in concentration, humming, “Hmm, I mainly know how to modify biotic field contents for emergency ward patients - I took the courses required for emergency and operating room technicians to know. I’d probably have to keep skimming these papers - I’m sure some of them would describe the process in more detail. As for the biochemical energy required for this, I don’t remember the exact equation for trehalose synthesis, but…”

He pauses, thinking hard, before he adds thoughtfully, “Well, my guess would be burning glycogen like a normal process would, but if you’re losing blood that fast, the stress response would have to be nearly instantaneous. I have no idea if they’ve found a method to accomplish that. Wound-healing does occur a lot faster than people think - blood-clotting begins within seconds of trauma, so if our platelets and fibroblasts get enhanced, I suppose it could be possible?”

Gabriel scowls as the words settle uncomfortably into his thoughts -

“There are a number of popular hypotheses and ideas in nanobiology and regenerative medicine,” Jack says after a short pause, trying to remember some of the ideas he’s learned about, “And it’s not that they ‘compete’ with each other - not exactly. Many of them are compatible with one another. Like there’s a popular idea about trying to get the human body to produce the biotic equivalent of our current, biosynthetic nanobots. The counter to that is that we kinda already do, like the cells of the immune system. The reason we use nanobots is because they can survive in the biotic field mixture
without refrigeration - that’s the whole point. Currently, the nanobots in deployable biotic fields reactivate all the biological parts - the platelets and all their extra fibrin and proteins, additional collagen, macrophages, fibroblasts - and function as mediators who help speed up the process of cellular and tissue-level healing. When the process is done, they break down any of the extra stuff and then self-terminate, allowing our own white blood cells to break them down further. They don’t...really do anything that our own innate cells are not already capable of doing - they just get to the wound site faster via aerosolization, which is why we use them in trauma treatments.”

Jack then glances back down at the datapad, saying quietly, “But this idea is...it isn’t really about us growing the biotic, synthetic version of regenerative nanobots in our bodies. No, this is…”

He stops, the words twisting inside him like the lyrics of a song he’s not certain he wants to sing.

Jack glances back up at Gabriel, looking deep into the gold-and-stardust obsidian of his eyes, and murmurs contemplatively - no frustration, no anger, only patience, only softness, “This is more like our bodies would be capable of innately producing the effects of a biotic field within ourselves, without the assistance of nanobots or anything else. Our immune systems would have the enhanced speed and capacities to immediately streamline the wound healing process - you could jump from blood-clotting to scar tissue formation in...minutes? An hour or two? Several days to several week? Depends on the severity of the wound, like usual, just that the whole thing could be faster by proportionately significant numbers.”

And then Jack states, with the low tide swelling beneath the water’s surface:

“Combine that with the proposed trehalose synthesis process and maybe throw in a biotic field and some stitches when required, and well…that would make ‘enhanced’ soldiers pretty damn hard to kill.”

Gabriel assesses him for a moment -

Realizes that Jack genuinely believes his words are true

(Even though he hasn’t seen the video yet) -

And then asks - with a soft seriousness, “Would it be possible for all these things to occur after someone dies as well?”

Jack gives him that same confused look, before he mutters, “After...death?”

“Let’s say the heart stops beating,” Gabriel replies calmly, “Then what? Could these processes revive a whole person?”

Jack scowls deeply, thinking it over, and Gabriel feels a soft pang of affection over the fact that he treats the idea with such honest seriousness. After a moment, Jack starts slowly, with that river-deep voice that sounds like a hymn:

“This is...an interesting question - it’s a big topic in operating room ethics. The practical discussions focus on organ transplants - when is the whole person ‘deceased’ versus when does an individual, donated organ ‘die’ - because in reality, if someone is lost, there are very few circumstances where they can recover.”

And then Jack looks back, saying openly, “In fact, with stuff like the nanobots and biotic fields, it is unfortunately - and tragically - easy to save most of a patient’s body, but many times, hypoxia puts them in a coma, or they suffer some sort of peripheral nerve or limb damage. Limb damage, you can at least look into therapy and prosthetics, but the death of brain cells is heartbreaking. The
unfortunate tragedy is that a whole organism can die while their individual cells live.”

“Right,” Gabriel says, encouraging him, “Then, in normal situations, the process of decomposition begins. But if those cells have the means to preserve themselves, even if the heart loses enough blood to radically drop the body’s blood pressure, then what?”

Jack considers it, then admits, “Well, you can’t fix what isn’t there. Blood loss is still blood loss - it would require transfusion still. The idea of using the trehalose synthesis process is that you can at least stabilize the sensitive neural and muscle cells before homeostasis is returned…”

And then Jack realizes -

“Ooooh, is that what you meant about biochemical energy?” he asks brightly, “Like, if a person undergoes so much stress and trauma that this process requires an input of biochemical energy to keep it going?”

Gabriel blinks at him, because -

“Damn, how do you know how to word this stuff?” he mutters with slight awe and appreciation, “Yeah, that’s basically it. What happens when the whole person’s life starts to end, but on a cellular level, that healing process is still going? Where does the energy and materials come from to amp it back up?”

Jack thinks it over, but then he frowns, because the logical conclusion is -

“Isn’t that...just...basic physics at that point?” he asks Gabriel quietly, “A system of biochemical energy still has to follow the basic rules of physics: if the non-isolated system does not have enough energy to sustain itself, it stops? Or...collapses or whatever?”

Gabriel looks unnervingly contemplative over that, so Jack reaches out and takes his hand - warm, clenched into a tense fist - and murmurs gently, “...They might be making us hard to kill, Gabe...but nothing could make us truly immortal. Death...always happens in the end - for supersoldiers, for stars…”

And then Jack adds with a soft but wry smile, “And even for shrimp full of sugar crystals.”

Gabriel stares at him, but then crack his own soft smile, saying, “You almost sounded poetic for a second there, Jack.”

“Shrimp can be poetic too, Gabe,” Jack grins back, before he looks a little more solemn, adding gently, “...And like you said…”

Gabriel looks at him questioningly, as Jack smiles that stardusted, seasung soft smile, saying, “If their genes help us survive this war a bit better, then we need to be willing to try anything.”

Gabriel watches him with a quiet, contemplative expression, before he asks Jack in a low, smoky tone, “...Do you think seeing is believing?”

“Well, hindsight is 20/20,” Jack teases him wryly, and Gabriel cracks another grin, muttering, “Smartass.”

But then he gets quieter again, murmuring, “You should load ‘The Masque of the Red Death’ next.”

Jack rolls his shoulders casually, laughing a bit, “You’re the boss.” He lets go of Gabriel’s hand, but moves closer to him again, scrolling back up to [Edgar Allan Poe], saying jokingly, “You know, I
kinda thought these were going to go in alphabetical order or something. Something sequential.”

“This is the first file I saved.”

Jack pauses as the shadowy sheerness of Gabriel’s words falls over the camp. He glances up at Gabriel’s face -

And is only passingly surprised to see that Gabriel is already watching him, his expression almost...mournful?

“...This is the file where I knew I had to try saving all of them,” Gabriel tells him, as kind as a song, as soft as starlight.

...Oh, is all Jack manages to think in the moment, This is the one he risked everything for.

Jack looks back down at the datapad, scrolls down to [The Masque of the Red Death], and loads the pdf file directly. As he starts to tap through the pages, Gabriel explains to him in the same low, shadowy voice, “...This one is a bit different. It’s...not a research paper. It’s a chatlog between two people.”

Jack reaches the end of the text for the story story and -

“The first person is the triangle symbol,” Gabriel says, watching Jack over the fluff of his blonde hair, “Operative Delta, real name is Irina Guskova. She was the CIA agent sent to infiltrate the Russian version of the Soldier Enhancement Program, which began before ours did, and had fewer candidates. Most of the enhancements in our serum are based on theirs.”

“...I shouldn’t be surprised, but somehow I completely forgot that other countries are probably doing this too,” Jack mutters, a bit disappointed in himself. Gabriel hums a bit lighter, “You shouldn’t be too hard on yourself - we’ve had a lot of other things to focus on in the last year. What’s important is that Guskova is the one who leaked some of their files to the CIA, and possibly to the Chinese supersoldier program as well - I’m not entirely sure about that.”

“Right,” Jack says, reading the first few lines of the chat:

[Δ]: 4 sentries at the gate

[...]

[Σ]: 5 are spies

[Δ]: 1 delineates the truth

[Σ]: ...Must be pretty serious if you’re using the emergency code with me of all people. Do you need me to contact the director?

[Δ]: No

[Δ]: I need to send you something

[Σ]: right now? Really? You remember where I am, right?

[Δ]: I needed to send this to you about an hour ago, but it took me this long just to get back to a secure position

---
“The other person - Operative Sigma,” Gabriel says quietly, “Real name -”

[Σ]: ...Seriously, Irina, if this is an emergency, you need to call for extraction right now. I’m in goddamn Idaho using military satellite data - I can’t promise I won’t get disconnected

[Δ]: Please, I need to send this to you, Marc

---

“- Marc Guerra,” Gabriel ends lowly, “CIA director of our Soldier Enhancement Program.”

Jack scowls deeply.

“She was still under cover when she sent this?” he asks Gabriel, glancing up at him. Gabriel nods, adding, “Yeah, she...she was. This was sent only a month ago, during our Survival and Evasion week.”

And Jack catches the word.

“She was?” he asks pointedly, still looking at Gabriel. Gabriel gives him that soft expression, saying quietly, “You should read until the video file.”

“Alright,” Jack says cautiously, looking back at the datapad:

[Σ]: ...Fine, hang on

[Δ]: I don’t have time to wait

[Σ]: Well, you’re going to have to. I have to change the security settings on both this messenger and the device to receive files. Give me thirty seconds

[...]

[Σ]: Alright, you’re clear. Send it through.

[[Δ] has sent a video file.]

[Σ]: ...What the hell, Guskova?

[Δ]: You need to watch it

[Σ]: if you’re in danger, we don’t have time for this.

[Σ]: I’m calling the director right now

[Δ]: Marc, I’m not

[Δ]: I’m not in immediate danger but I need to know you have actually watched this, at least once, please

[Σ]: ...Fine, how long is it?

[Δ]: It’s only 2 minutes and 23 seconds long
“Okay,” Jack says, “I’ve reached the part where Guerra watches it.”

“Leave the chatlog open, but open up the video folder and search for the second half of ‘The Phantom of the Opera,’” Gabriel instructs him. Jack chuckles a little, muttering, “I sense a running theme here, Gabe.” He opens another folder window and navigates to the [Videos] and then to [The Phantom of the Opera]. In it are two video files.

“The second one,” Gabriel says, “15 minutes in.”

Jack taps the second video file. As the media player opens up, he scrolls the playback bar to 15 minutes, and then begins the clip.

This time, Gabriel doesn’t watch the clip.

This time -

Gabriel watches Jack.

As the clip starts with Irina and the emergency group rushing down the hall, Jack’s focus is deep: not the confused pout-frown Gabriel had worn the first time, nor the intense scowl he’d had for the viewings after that, but instead a look of thoughtful concentration, eyebrows lightly furrowed as those midnight blue eyes follow the action on the screen.

It’s the same sort of look Jack had worn when Gabriel had found him reading in the mess hall.

Jack watches closely as the group hauls the soldier’s limp body into a brightly-lit room. When Irina and the camera leave and take up a position in a viewing window outside, Jack immediately knows -

Small operating room, he thinks, eyes darting from one person to the next, Hooking her up to IV’s, doctor is doing palpation, ultrasound tech setting up -

His gaze lingers over the rapidly fluctuating numbers on the monitor.

Ruptured liver or spleen, or possibly gastrointestinal perforation, he roughly determines, Given the situation, almost certainly a horrific training accident.

As the ultrasound tech begins searching, Jack’s deep focus softens into a mournful, almost heartbroken gaze.

If the doctor doesn’t already know, it’s probably too late.

The numbers are a terrible truth.

Outside, in the hallway, a soldier leaves, and the camera catches the doctor looking up through the window, shaking her head even as she reaches for a surgical knife -

There’s a muffled yell, the numbers fall -

And then
That loud ringing of death.

Asystole.

Jack says nothing, and even though his expression has shifted to one of quiet, sympathetic sadness, he continues to watch.

And Gabriel continues to watch him.

Irina looks down the cross-hallway, where more people are arriving, but when she looks back -

Jack’s eyes flick immediately to the monitors.

Her blood pressure has stabilized. It’s still dangerously, lethally low, but the blood loss has stopped.

*If this is related to the trehalose synthesis idea, he reminds himself, Then the nanobots in her system may have stopped the bleeding, and now she has reached the semi-animated phase. If her stomach or intestines are torn, they’ll still have to perform surgery but otherwise just giving her more blood will help.*

But…

No one does anything.

The other people approach the window, the doctor and some of her assistants look up at the clock, the oxygen assistant leans over to remove the mask -

And then -

Jack’s eyes go wide -

As the oxygen assistant starts shaking violently.

“What -” Jack starts to gasp, but then the man doubles over on himself, spasming and shuddering, his eyes rolling -

His skin becomes deathly pale -

And then he just drops.

Jack sits up, clutching at the datapad, watching in abject horror as the sheer shock of what just happened stuns everyone in the video into silence.

And -

Amid the ringing silence of asystole -

A

Single

Beep

As the dead-yet-not-dead soldier’s heart begins to beat again.

And Jack holds his breath -
As all hell breaks loose in the operating room - people are screaming and shouting, two of the technicians are bolting to the door, the numbers on the monitor begin to rapidly spike and drop, spike and drop - the technician standing by it collapses to the floor, the ultrasound tech slumps over, the doctor claws at her throat -

And then

Among all the shouting and yelling

The eyelids of the supersoldier shift open -

And she starts to scream.

As the two surviving technicians bolt through the door, the utter panic stills into a deep, wordless horror as the group of people outside watch the supersoldier lift her hands to her eyes - IV still in her arm - and her screams turn to quiet sobs.

The clip ends. There’s a flicker of a black screen, and then low, deep-toned singing resumes.

Gabriel leans forward, unable to directly see Jack’s face from behind his hood and right shoulder, and taps at the datapad, pausing the rest of the video. He glances up at Jack.

Jack has almost hunched over himself, elbows on his thighs, right hand made into a fist, left hand over it, pressed to his mouth. From his posture alone, Gabriel would’ve thought he was angry or frustrated but -

The expression on Jack’s face is

Almost heartbreakingly thoughtful.

His eyebrows furrow with dark concern, the faint laughter lines on his face still with consternation, and his eyes…

His eyes are *deep*, as if the midnight world around them has been *drowned* in shadowy, still water, all the stars submerged, glinting just below the surface of the water, his focus *beyond* himself.

*(When you gaze long enough into the abyss -)*

And Gabriel does not know *how* it is possible, but his heart both *cracks* with a panging sympathy and *melts* with a soft, smoky ache at the sight of Jack so incredibly *torn* by what he has just witnessed.

The silence slips and shadows around them, soft and steady, stardusted and smokethreaded.

After a moment, Jack feels a hand - gentle, so gentle - rub at his right shoulder soothingly -

And that voice - spun-sunshine and smoked-sugar and starred-shadows - murmurs to him quietly, “...You alright, Jack?”

And at that -

Jack finally *breaks*.

He shudders, inhaling steeply as a *flood* of emotions - disbelief, skepticism, panic, terror, pain, heartache, and *fear, such fear* - torrents through him like a storm undeniable and -
Gabriel wraps his left arm around his shoulders -

And pulls him in for a hug.

Jack shifts, falling into Gabriel’s embrace, burying his face against Gabriel’s left shoulder, chest heaving a bit, even as the solid warmth of Gabriel steadies him, and he -

(There’s a room where the light won’t find you -)

He rasps out, in a low, broken murmur, “How many.”

Gabriel _feels_ Jack’s words more than he hears them, and he answers quietly, “Only one, or at least...only one that Guskova knew about. According to a later conversation Guerra had with his director, the CIA found out that the Russian soldier enhancement program was shut down three days after Guskova sent her message. The American intelligence on the situation has been in the dark ever since.”

The calm, soothing evenness of Gabriel’s tone helps settle Jack’s nerves, even as the fearfearfear still bites its way through his veins, and he adjusts himself, turning his head so that he leans in on Gabriel’s shoulder instead. Jack mumbles, “So this is why you asked... Did she actually die?”

“...I don’t know,” Gabriel answers honestly, moving himself so he can hold the datapad up in his right hand. He scowls, trying to ignore how perfect it feels to have Jack curled up against him, and mutters, “Guskova never says if they ever confirmed that, but later, she does say that the GRU shot the supersoldier...and apparently one of their agents died from that, not her.”

“...I said that ‘hard to kill’ part as an idiom,” Jack murmurs hoarsely, “Not as a literal statement. And this stuff is in us?”

“Yes. That was Guskova’s main concern, actually,” Gabriel says, “She basically begs Guerra to shut the program down. Her argument was - hang on.”

He scrolls to the part where the lines linger, and reads aloud:

“If this only happens one-percent of the time, but you have one-hundred and thirty-two supersoldiers, that’s one to two people. Five-percent is six to seven. Eight-percent is ten to eleven.”

Jack shuts his eyes, exhaling a slow but sharp breath, air like glass in his throat.

Ten to eleven people.

He sees the supersoldier on the operating table lift her hands to her eyes and start to cry, dead bodies all around her.

All of them like that.

“A whole special ops team of literal ghosts?” Gabriel reads smokily, “The person who commands that could rule the world.”

(Everybody wants to rule the world.)

“...Dammit,” Jack whispers fiercely and furiously, trying to fight the songworms in his veins. Gabriel adds softly, “This one stuck with me the most: ‘this war will be fought between soldiers and machines; the next will be fought between ghosts and monsters.’”

“...Was that Guskova or Guerra?” Jack asks, and Gabriel replies, “Guskova, though after today, I
think Guerra believes it too. Actually…”

He pauses, remembering the long gap between Flores and Bianchi’s visit, and then Guerra’s, and he says with a slow, but steady focus, “At first, I thought Guerra was keeping this information a secret. And I think that’s partially true. But I have the growing suspicion that he’s...”

Gabriel scowls, trying to pick the right words, remembering how Guerra hadn’t been worried about the data breach - just that his dark, abyssal focus had zeroed in on the files. Jack glances up at him, admiring how the lanternlight accentuates his features, before Gabriel says lowly, “I think that Guerra has already taken Guskova’s words of caution to heart: this war will be won by humans, like we talked about on Sunday. But the next war...that will be between people like her…”

And then Gabriel looks at Jack, saying with a soft, conflicted bittersweetness, “And people like us.”

Jack stares back before he replies, “And Guerra is already focusing on that war, right?”

“Yes,” Gabriel agrees quietly, “And he will do whatever he thinks he needs - and tell whoever he thinks he must - to achieve that. If a nurse or a medic could figure out part of this...dead-not-dead process, then imagine what someone specialized in this knowledge could achieve with Guerra’s guidance or help.”

Gabriel looks back at the datapad, saying calmly, “War...is a numbers game, enhanced with force multipliers. A soldier that’s effectively immortal - that’s not a simple enhancement, that’s a war-ender. But what happens when your enemies have one as well?”

“...A war of attrition?” Jack half-asks, half-states wryly, “Or mutually-assured destruction?”

Gabriel huffs a small laugh over that, saying, “Be careful, Jack - I know firsthand what it’s like to be too smart for your own good.”

Then he looks at Jack again, adding more thoughtfully, “A person like Guerra and anyone who sides with him would never settle for a war where the numbers are the same. If their future enemies have one, they would have two. If their enemies have two, they would have four. Extras are...failsafes. Safeguards.”

A second password to crack.

A second knife to wield.

A second strategy to hide.

“...Extras are...numbers you can afford to risk,” Gabriel says, words soft like a dagger between their ribs, “Or that you can afford to lose.”

Jack says nothing.

Gabriel looks...not heartbroken, but conflicted, saying, “They won’t get all one-hundred and thirty-two of us to be like that. But they are going to try.”

Jack watches him for a moment, before he asks, “...And what do you think?”

Gabriel pauses, pulling the words from his thoughts slowly, before he answers - smoke and obsidian mirrors and shadows, “I think that...they should be careful what they wish for. Because those who create monsters should take care that they do not end up fighting monsters.”
And then he glances at Jack, smirking, “And there is strength in numbers.”

Jack stares at him, before he also grins, like midnight water reflecting the moon, as he asks wryly, “You think the monsters would stick together?”

Gabriel watches him, again threading together his words carefully, and then he answers quietly, “...I think the kind of people who join secret military programs that could risk their health and lives to make themselves stronger in a war for the global good of humanity are the not kind of people who...would abandon their comrades...or who could hate kindred spirits.”

Jack’s grin softens into that sweeter, fainter half-smile, and Gabriel resists the urge to pull him closer, feeling a low blush rise to his cheeks. He glances at the datapad, scowling in concentration as he mutters, “Guskova and Guerra both seem to think that once the war against the Omnics is over, nations will go back to warring with each other, and these...dead-not-dead soldiers will simply be more chess pieces in the game of international politics and war. Guskova was worried their very boss, one of the directors in the CIA, would abuse this knowledge, which, you know, is probably a pretty legitimate concern given the CIA’s storied history. And of course, Guerra was the one who said any sort of virtual immortality would simply be used as a weapon or force multiplier.”

He pauses, then looks back at Jack, stating smokily, “But I think that’s missing the forest for the trees. As expected.”

“How so?” Jack asks, calmly encouraging Gabriel to keep going, the pull to his push, the questions to his answers. Gabriel hums a bit, replying, “It’s like what we talked about on Sunday: the plan was always to look beyond this war, to the next one, when humans fight each other again. And I don’t think that part is wrong - it never really is. But...you can’t just ignore a war, especially not one like this. History doesn’t work like that.”

Gabriel glances down, and, for a second, Jack thinks he’s looking at the datapad again -

But Gabriel sets the datapad down in his lap and -

Takes Jack’s left hand in his right - gently, so gently, Gabriel’s fingertips tracing over Jack’s knuckles and -

“This war will leave scars, and it will have consequences,” Gabriel murmurs softly, “It will reshape everything as universal as our concept of humanity, down to things as small as our literal genetic cores. It is naive to think it will be the war to end all wars, as our predecessors have said of global-scale conflicts in the past...but it is also badly shortsighted to think this war won’t change anything. And the ones who feel the cascading effects of war first are the soldiers.”

Gabriel looks back up, staring straight into the depths of Jack’s soul - gold-threaded smoke weaving itself into his core - as he says quietly, “They want to make a new kind of soldier, for a new kind of war...and they will reap the consequences of that, both the ones they expect...and the ones they have been blind to.”

Jack’s breath catches in his chest as Gabriel asks him intensely, “That supersoldier in Russia...do you think she was happy, knowing what the GRU did to her fellow soldiers? Do you think she wants to be treated like some sort of monster, unleashed on a battlefield only to be put back under some handler’s bed when no one wants to face the truth of what they’ve made her into? She will live with the consequences of this bizarre accident of military science for the rest of her life. What about her family, her friends, her hopes and dreams? Do they think they can convince her to give those up for this?”
And then Gabriel pauses, watching Jack closely before he asks gently - so gently - that his words feel like smoke in the air, “...And what about us? When the day comes where we become more valuable than the weapons we carry, will they stockpile us the way they do with other munitions? Will we just be numbers added to a military statistic? When this program manages to make three or four or five of us into these dead-not-dead soldiers, do they think that will suddenly change our spirits too? That we could or would abandon aspects of our lives to become some sort of ‘higher level soldier,’ dedicated to a cause we don’t actually care about?”

Gabriel does look at the datapad now, thinking it over, and then he says:

“If I became like that tomorrow, do they think I would use this power for them? For their wars?”

Gabriel scowls, thinking darkly, *Do they think this will suddenly make me a “better” soldier for them? A “better” weapon for their vision?*

Then they don’t know me at all.

“Gabe.”

Gabriel blinks at the sound of that deep voice - a rhythm and a rhyme, a low tidal song sung beneath stars - and he glances up at Jack who -

Suddenly, Jack’s left fingers are entwined in his right, rough and calloused and warm, so warm, as Jack looks straight into his eyes, saying quietly, “I said it earlier and I’ll say it again - as many times as I need to: whatever you choose to be, wherever you choose to go, I will follow you. No matter what happens, no matter what they try to do to us, I will be with you.”

Gabriel feels the hum and the thrill of it sing inside him -

And then Jack grins mischievously, teasing him, “And if you want to lead the zombie soldier revolution, I’m here for that too.”

A wry, twisted smile cracks on Gabriel’s face as he retorts, “Smartass -”

“We can even dress you up as Napoleon, really push the historical parallels,” Jack laughs, his smile bright and radiant. Gabriel beams back, chuckling. “Don’t tempt me, Jack. And wouldn’t it be a lot more appropriate if I was like, dressed as the Grim Reaper or something?”

“Damn, that sounds like it would be actually badass,” Jack mutters appreciatively, and Gabriel grins, saying, “Right? That would be pretty sick - wait...what do you mean, ‘actually’ -?”

Jack gives him a pointed look before he unwinds his fingers and pats Gabriel’s hand sympathetically, saying, “It’s okay, Gabe - you can admit you have questionable tastes -”

“I have questionable tastes?” Gabriel asks Jack with mock indignation, even as a smile gives him away, “Alright then, John Morrison, you think you’re so slick? What would you wear for the zombie soldier revolution?”

“Uh, something that’s classic and vintage but not too old,” Jack grins at him, “Probably like a leather jacket, go for like a Terminator look -

“That has nothing to do with zombies,” Gabriel retorts, and Jack fires back with, “No, but at least it looks cool.”

“How dare you insinuate that my nonexistent Grim Reaper-inspired zombie commander outfit would
not look cool,” Gabriel fake-pouts. Jack grins but rolls his eyes, teasing him, “I’ll believe it when I see it, Gabe.”

“Damn, first the stuff about pulling the long con on you, and now some sort of cool, badass version of the Grim Reaper?” Gabriel asks with joking thoughtfulness, “You really know how to challenge a guy’s ultimate dare list.”

“The requirements for my eternal loyalty are steep, Gabe,” Jack chuckles lowly, settling his head back on Gabriel’s shoulder. Gabriel huffs a bit, muttering, “You would think breaking you out of fake prison would be enough for most people but, noooooo, Jack Morrison just has to think he’s special.”

“This program might call me Soldier: 76, but I want to be Number 1 in your book,” Jack states coyly, tilting his head to glance up at Gabriel’s face with a bright, cheesy grin. Gabriel twists a deadpanned, dry look towards him, before he asks wryly, “Cute. How often does that line work?”

“If you like it, then it’s got a rockin’ 100% success rate,” Jack beams at him. Gabriel gives him a skeptical glance, before he squints, thinking it over -

“...Your silence says a lot,” Jack mutters with a jokingly arid tone. Gabriel lolls his head a bit, humming, “I mean...I appreciate the attempt?”

“That’s not the same as liking it,” Jack fake-pouts, tilting his head back towards the datapad. Gabriel chuckles lowly, saying, “Look, being number 1 is overrated anyways. ‘Soldier: 76’ is a much more memorable title.”

“...Is it, Gabe?” Jack asks, glancing back up at him, “Is it really? There are one-hundred and thirty-two of us - why would ‘Soldier: 76’ be any more memorable than the others?”

And then -

Jack feels two fingers slip beneath his chin, tilting his head a bit higher -

As Gabriel gives him that rich, regal, smoky smirk, saying coyly, “Because numbers can’t show how much you are worth.”

Jack’s breath snags in his lungs as his pulse thunders in his head -

He exhales sharply, “Oh, damn, that one was way better than mine. You managed to make it not sound cheesy.”

Gabriel’s thoughts stop dead in their tracks as he blinks at Jack, and mutters, “What.”

“How am I ever going to beat that one?” Jack murmurs, thinking it over. Gabriel watches him for a moment, before he chuckles dryly, “I’m sure you’ll think of something, Watson.”

Jack glances back up at him, grinning brightly, radiantly as he laughs low, “When I do, you’ll be the first person to hear it!”

“...You don’t need a cheesy number-based pick up line, you know,” Gabriel offers him both wryly and a bit more genuinely than he probably should -

“No, no,” Jack jokes back, smirking at him, “This is a war of attrition now, Gabe.”

Gabriel stares at him nonchalantly, before he mutters teasingly, “You might even call it a...numbers
“Dammit, you’re too good at this,” Jack huffs with light, fake anger. Gabriel chuckles at that, murmuring warmly, “You gotta step up your game, Jack. Carlos is like ten times better at this than me, and Luisa is even better than him.”

“Somehow neither of those statements are surprising,” Jack hums coyly. Gabriel smiles, saying, “Right, they’re pretty good at - wait, what do you mean by that?”

“You’re smart about a lot of things, Sherlock, but sometimes you miss the simple answers,” Jack chuckles, settling himself back on Gabriel’s shoulder. Gabriel grumbles a bit, and the silence that steeps around them is warm and comfortable, sweet and shadowed -

But a little bit sorrowful.

And a little bit... unhemmed.

“...So what do we do now?” Jack asks quietly, looking at the datapad, “How could we possibly prepare for something like this?”

“That’s a good question, Watson,” Gabriel says with a slight grin, “And not one that has a clear answer. I think it’s pretty safe to say that Guerra is going to want to turn as many of us into these zombie soldiers as he can, but he probably won’t be successful with all of us. And I feel pretty confident that he has to have told other people, because while he might be Mister Secret Agent incarnate, he’s not a scientist and he’s definitely not the one who had the final say on the transgenic packages in the serum.”

Gabriel lolls his head a bit, continuing, “And if he wants to increase the rate of successful transgenic uptake, he’s going to need to improve the serum again, which means going back to whoever the CIA trusted on this bs. Maybe it’s the group that developed these transgenic projects in the first place. Not sure…”

But he pauses as he glances towards Jack in the edge of his vision, watching how Jack stares solemnly at the datapad in his hands. Gabriel quiets, and then asks softly, “You okay, Jack?”

Jack looks at the datapad for a moment longer, summoning his courage, telling himself, You have to ask, you need to be honest with him -

If you can’t be honest with him, then who can you be honest with?

And then he glances up at Gabriel, asking back in a nervous tone, “…Should we leave?”

Gabriel stares at him, and Jack thinks darkly, bitterly and bittersweetly, He’s going to hate me, he’s going to think I’m a coward -

He’s going to think I’m not strong enough to be his soldier after all -

But then -

There are fingertips - rough, calloused but warm, so warm - threading through his fingers as Gabriel - gaze softened like obsidian smoke gilded with galaxies - murmurs, “…Are you scared, Jack?”

There is

No judgment
No anger
No bitterness.

Only shadow-softened, smoke-sweet, stardusted understanding there.

Patience.

Trust.

Jack stares at him for a moment -

Before he finds his voice, deep as the tide undeniable in his chest, and he says:

“Maybe it’s selfish, but yeah, I am. Look, Gabe, I -” Jack starts, stops, pulls his fingers from Gabriel’s and then clamps them around his hand instead, squeezing hard. Gabriel’s eyes grow a little wide and he looks at it, at Jack’s white knuckles, how his hand trembles a bit, and then he looks back at Jack, who gives him a terrified smile, explaining, “I don’t want to die, Gabe, and I don’t want to see anyone in this program die...but if I have to see Adrien, or Sarah, or Wes, or...”

And then Jack pauses, the words sticking in his throat like shards of glass bittersweet, before he manages to murmur, “Or you in pain like that...then yeah, I’m scared.”

Gabriel watches him, as Jack strings his thoughts together, saying softly, “You said this war will leave scars. I was...prepared for that. As much as a naive recruit could be.”

And then he looks straight into Gabriel’s eyes, stating bittersweetly and sweetly sorrowfully, “…I expected to die for this war. I didn’t expect to die and then live for this war and other wars - I didn’t expect to be reused over and over and over. So...yeah, I’m scared of that. Scared to watch that happen to people I care about. Scared to think that people will use our lives and our deaths and our second lives to play politics.”

Jack’s stormy defiance in his gaze shifts to soft nervousness as he adds quietly, “...Is that weak?”

Gabriel stares at him, before a soft, sweetly-shadowed smile slips across his face, and he tells Jack, “Of course not. And who the hell expected them to break all known laws of existence?”

And Gabriel lifts his right hand, gently - so gently - tracing his thumb across Jack’s left cheek. The touch almost makes Jack melt, and Gabriel says - in a voice like spun-sunshine and smoked-sugar, “But maybe this makes me too flexible or something, but I’ll use any tools given to me to protect the people who matter the most.”

And then Gabriel scowls deeply, murmuring fiercely, “And if one of those tools requires me to become unkillable, then I’ll make a deal with Death itself to achieve that.”

Jack watches him, before he replies in that low, sweetly bitter and bittersweet tone, “Gabe...even though I think you’re brave for doing it, I still wish you wouldn’t have to. Or me. Or any of us.”

And Jack shuts his eyes, exhaling slowly, “And I wish it wasn’t under such a...terrifying pressure to choose.”

A pang of fierce, dense, quiet fury flutters through Gabriel’s veins at the look of exhausted, well-worn hurt on Jack’s face, and he thinks coldly, If they make you look like this again, I will ruin them for it, Jack -

But instead, he gives Jack a soft, faint, almost sorrowful smile, offering, “Tell you what, Jack - when
you think it’s time to leave, I’ll go with you.”

Jack’s eyelids snap open and he scowls, almost painfully so, asking, “What?”

“When you think it’s time for the zombie soldier revolution, I’ll be there to help you lead it,” Gabriel says to him with a grin, “You raise the flag, and I’ll draw up the strategy -”

“That’s not -” Jack starts to stammer, stunned by what Gabriel is committing himself to, “I’m not - I don’t have nearly the military capabilities you or some of the others do -”

“Military capabilities?” Gabriel asks him with a soft, slight smirk, “Revolutions aren’t about military capabilities, Jack - revolutions are about human capabilities, and human decisions.”

And then Gabriel’s smirk turns into that softer, stardusted smile as he says quietly, “And this is my decision. You said you would be here no matter what I choose or what I become...and I choose to stand by you. Because no matter what you choose or what you become, it will be worth fighting for.”

Jack stares at him, awed and stunned, before he murmurs hoarsely, “You...you know I’m just a nurse, right?”

Gabriel blinks at him, before he grins -

Oh, Jack thinks, spellbound -

And Gabriel says with all the brightness of the stars, “No, you’re Jack Morrison, Soldier: 76, and you led twenty-three people to break out of prison with nothing but a knife, a single paintball gun, and sheer force of will.”

And then Gabriel gives him that slight smirk again, teasing him gently, “And you are exactly the type of person I want to follow during the zombie soldier revolution.”

And that -

Gets Jack to crack a crooked smile, laughing a low rasp of, “You need some higher standards, Gabe -”

“And you -”

Gabriel’s words are silversmoke-threaded and strewn with small galaxies -

“- Are worth so much more -”

Gabriel’s eyes are liquid obsidian, casting sweet shadows over molten gold -

“- Than any number,” Gabriel murmurs, voice made of stardusted smoke, “Or any war.”

Jack stares at him, speechless, feeling a million emotions roll like the tide in his head and his heart, before he finally manages to ask, in a soft but ocean-deep tone, “I’m...I’m not sure I deserve that, Gabe - what if I make the wrong choice?”

What if I’m not able to?

Gabriel watches the shifting emotions on Jack’s face, before he traces his thumb on the edge of Jack’s cheekbone, and smiles, saying with soft, stardusted shadows, “I believe in you.”
Because you understand in a way no one else does.

And then Gabriel adds gently - so gently, “And you won’t have to make that decision alone.”

Because you make me believe again.

Jack slips his hand against the back of Gabriel’s, and asks - with a crooked grin, “No more cryptic notes?”

Gabriel pauses, and then smirks back, replying coyly, “Look, Jack, a guy’s gotta have style -”

“Style?” Jack repeats with a brightly shocked tone and a wide, charming smile that gives away his joy, “Gabe, I am not helping you lead the zombie soldier revolution based on another terrible Napoleon quote -”

“Terrible?” Gabriel asks back in the same joking tone as Jack, “How dare you -”

(And the bluenight shadows between the pines envelops the sounds of their laughter, one rolling like a seastudded storm, the other smoky and wry like the rasp of a soft fire.)

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XVII

No te amo como si fueras rosa de sal, topacio o flecha de claveles que propagan el fuego:

te amo como se aman ciertas cosas oscuras, secretamente, entre la sombra y el alma.

(I love you not as if you were rose of salt, topaz or arrow of carnations that spread the fire:

I love you as one loves certain obscured things, secretly, between the shadow and the soul.)

Te amo como la planta que no florece y lleva dentro de sí, escondida, la luz de aquellas flores, y gracias a tu amor vive oscuro en mi cuerpo el apretado aroma que ascendió de la tierra.
(I love you as the plant which blossoms not and yet carries within itself, veiled, the light of those flowers, and thanks to your love lives obscured in my body the full aroma which rises from the earth.)

Te amo sin saber como, ni cuándo, ni de donde, te amo directamente sin problemas ni orgullo: así te amo porque no sé amar de otra manera,

(I love you knowing not how, nor when, nor from where, i love you directly with neither worries nor pride: in this way I love you because I do not know to love in any other,)

sino así de este modo en que no soy ni eres, tan cerca que tu mano sobre mi pecho es mía, tan cerca que se cierran tus ojos con mi sueño.

(except in this way which has no I nor you, so close that your hand upon my chest is mine, so close that your eyes drift shut with my dreams.)

- Pablo Neruda, Cien Sonetos de Amor

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76: Emergent

Friday, February 22, 2047: 0543 hours - mess hall, main SEP facility

Jack sighs with contentment, rolling his shoulders as he picks up his tray of food.

*Been a long time since I could do a real run,* he hums to himself, pleased with the deep but satisfying ache of sprinting in his thighs and calves, each step to the junior and 18Xer tables perfect in well-stretched stinging.
The “book club” meeting had lasted until two-thirty in the morning, when Jack’s overabundance of sleep had given way to the lingering exhaustion behind his eyes. He scowls a bit, thinking quietly, *I’m almost positive I fell asleep at one point …*

But Jack can’t fully remember.

At one point it had been like, 2:15, and then the next minute it had been like 2:27 -

And Jack had blinked blearily at the dying thread of silver smoke in the lanternlit dimness -

Before he’d fully realized he’d *still* been leaning on Gabriel’s shoulder.

...If Gabriel had noticed that Jack had *probably* fallen asleep -

He hadn’t woken him.

“...Tired?” Gabriel had asked with a wry smile. Jack had adjusted his head, glancing at him, before he’d murmured, “I guess...kinda thought the like, nineteen hours of sleep would fix that.”

“Resistance is no joke to try and recover from,” Gabriel had answered, before he’d dropped a handful of snow in the firepit, putting out the smoke and faint warmth with a sizzle. Jack had slowly sat up, as Gabriel had smiled, saying, “You should get all the sleep you need, Jack.”

And yet -

His dumb runner’s morning rhythm had *irritatingly* kicked right back in, just a little bit later than usual, switching his brain awake at 0447 instead of 0400.

Jack had stared at the dull, boring concrete ceiling, listening to Adrien’s sleepy, deep breathing, *willing* himself to try and shut his eyes and embrace the blessed heavy warmth and hard-sprung-mattress comfort -

Before he had stopped *resisting* -

And had caved to the old habit.

*Totally worth it*, Jack admits to himself, feeling wonderfully refreshed from the run and the subsequent shower, *ready* for some real (and actually conscious) breakfast this time.

“Oh, would you look at that,” Wes says with a sly grin as Jack reaches the end of the table, “You don’t look like a zombie today!”

*How unnervingly on-point,* Jack thinks dryly, but he jokes back, “That’s because I don’t feel like death anymore.”

Wes beams a bright grin as Sarah - across from him - glances up at Jack, asking, “You actually went for a run?”

“I gotta stay energized somehow,” Jack answers, sliding himself in at the end, left of Wes. It’s their usual table, the second one in the middle, and Jack instinctively glances to the food line, where he pretty quickly spots Adrien (now awake) with Jamie and -

Jack raises an eyebrow, surprised to see Derek of all people chattering away with them (Adrien briefly makes a deadpan face over *something* the other 18Xer says), and then -

*Huh*, Jack thinks, as he realizes the person in front of them - Nadia - turns around to say something.
He can’t hear her, but her stance and expression are quite calm, and Adrien and Derek listen to her with earnest attention.

Jack pauses, then grins a bit, and turns his focus back to the east-facing windows at the far end of the mess hall, and then to the senior table…

He frowns slightly.

Carlos and Luisa are in their usual spot, talking to some of the other senior soldiers, but the spot at the very end is empty.

\textit{Guess he’s not awake yet}, Jack figures, turning back towards Sarah and Wes as he grabs his fork, asking them, “So since I was dead to the world yesterday, what exactly do we do on free days -”

“It okay if I join you?”

Jack stops.

Diagonal to him, Sarah pauses, glances up behind him, and then \textit{gawks} a little. Wes shifts himself, also looks past Jack, and then asks hesitantly, “Uhhh, are you \textit{allowed} to sit here?”

“I dunno - do I gotta get initiated first?” the familiar voice asks smugly as its owner takes a step, then a second step, appearing on Jack’s left and -

Jack glances up, \textit{awake}, as his eyes meet Gabriel’s, that rich, regal, sly smirk crowning his expression.

\textbf{(+24: Emergent)}

And then -

Jack \textit{grins} brightly, laughing back, “\textit{Look, sir }, this table is for the uncool kids only.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m king of the nerds,” Gabriel teases back, sliding himself into the spot across from Jack. Sarah blinks at him as Wes asks with joking disgust, “The \textit{uncool} kids, Morrison??”

“Polizzi, please, have some grace in front of our new king,” Jack grins at Wes, as Sarah snorts, “Can I start a coup?”

“Uh, rude,” Gabriel retorts, ripping a piece of his bread off, “I took one look at this sorry fellowship, and knew y’all were missing an Aragorn, so here I am -”

“Oh my god, you \textit{are} a nerd,” Wes gawks as Sarah raises an eyebrow, muttering skeptically, “Aragorn? Please. You’re a Boromir at best -”

\textit{Not you too,”} Wes wheezes at Sarah, and Gabriel nearly \textit{chokes} on his bread as Jack taunts him, “See? Sarah agrees with me!”

“\textit{Why does everyone think I’m Boromir??}” Gabriel hack-wheezees, “I’m \textit{definitely} way more of an Aragorn than this guy -” He gestures towards Jack, who - mid-laugh - rasps out, “Hey!

“…I never said \textit{he} was Aragorn either,” Sarah huffs, and Jack snaps his head towards her, stammering, “Hey!”

“…Which really only leaves \textit{me} as Aragorn,” Wes says with contemplative decisiveness.
The silence that settles over the four of them is -

Skeptical.

Wes glances between the other three, muttering, “Well, it seemed obvious to me -”

“Look at Pippin over here, tryna act like he’s not upset the military doesn’t have second breakfast,” Gabriel smirks, and Jack and Sarah laugh as Wes gawks, “H-hey! Aragorn bowed to the hobbits in the end!”

(As Marc rises from the directors’ table with his tray of empty plates, he glances over the mess hall, thinking, Well, at least Tom caved and we’ll get a 12K plumber in base now -)

(He pauses briefly, a little confused to see Rives and Gonzales at the far end of the senior soldiers’ table by themselves, before his eyes drift to the line, where and increasing number of semi-sleepy candidates are appearing…)

(But then -)

(His gaze flickers to one of the regular tables -)

(And his eyebrows rise in mild surprise -)

(As he sees Reyes talking emphatically with Morrison, Hidalgo, and Polizzi.)

(Marc watches the scene for a moment, before he smiles faintly, heading off towards the tray return, thinking, …Maybe this week wasn’t a total loss.)

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[Marc.Guerra]: I have some news.

[...]

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Must all spies be so bloody cryptic?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Is it good news or bad news, Sigma?

[Marc.Guerra]: …Both?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: You are horrifically unhelpful.

[Marc.Guerra]: It’s a change in plans.

[Marc.Guerra]: Or rather, a change in offers.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: …So bad then?

[Marc.Guerra]: I didn’t say that.

[Marc.Guerra]: Due to some…internal events here in the program, I was forced to give up quite a bit of my intel to both my bosses and General Flores.
[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: *What*.  

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Does that mean the video of Morena??  

[Marc.Guerra]: It does.  

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Are you *mad*?? How are you still in the program??  

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Better yet, *how are you still in the CIA*??  

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Were our negotiations brought up??  

[Marc.Guerra]: Holy hell, doctor, give me a second.  

[Marc.Guerra]: I won’t beat around the bush: it took *a lot* of negotiating. Flores was obviously not happy. Alpha was...well, himself.  

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: How...succinct.  

[Marc.Guerra]: Part of it was I had to convince them that the transgenic enhancement serum contents and the video were not compromised.  

[Marc.Guerra]: ...Well, first I had to convince them that the video was real, but *then* I had to convince them the files weren’t compromised.  

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...Compromised *how*, Sigma?  

[...]  

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Do I want to know what this “event” was?  

[Marc.Guerra]: It’s hard to explain.  

[Marc.Guerra]: Long story short, the files are all secure, but in the process of ensuring they were secure, I had to reveal them to Flores, Alpha, and the D/NCS.  

[Marc.Guerra]: We are still deciding how to approach the subject of the Death soldiers with the other directors  

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: So now everybody knows?  

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Grand.  

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I suppose this is the end of it, then.  

[Marc.Guerra]: Far from it.  

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...Again with the *bloody cryptic messages*  

[Marc.Guerra]: Exactly like Delta predicted, the D/NCS wants in.  

[...]  

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...Somehow that both is and is not surprising.  

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Do we *want* him involved?
Marc.Guerra: That’s why I said the news was complicated.

Marc.Guerra: Him being involved does free up several things, chiefly your access to formally join the program and our funding for increasing the enhancements.

Marc.Guerra: But on the other hand, he will try to influence the objectives. And he will almost certainly attempt to do what Russia and China have done and pull any successful Death soldiers straight into the CIA under his direct command.

Marc.Guerra: There’s also the high likelihood that he will attempt to make Alpha the direct handler and influencer of any Death soldiers. Bianchi is...more of a sycophant than I am.


Marc.Guerra: Please, doctor, it’s been a long week. I’m trying to be blunt for both of our sakes’.

Marc.Guerra: But those are the long term issues. At the moment, the more immediate ones are getting you into the program and...

Marc.Guerra: ...“Undermining” is such a cold word, but yes, undermining the D/NCS’ attempts to restrain your research.

Mayegun.Mulcahy: Restrain it how?

Marc.Guerra: Knew that would get your attention.

Marc.Guerra: D/NCS wants only a limited pool of candidates to receive your additional experimentation.

Mayegun.Mulcahy: ...How limited, Sigma?

Marc.Guerra: ...Only 12.


Mayegun.Mulcahy: Does he understand how the transgenic enhancement model works??

Marc.Guerra: My guess would be no.

Mayegun.Mulcahy: “No” is an understatement.

Mayegun.Mulcahy: The Russian and Chinese programs had about forty soldiers each. And they only managed to produce one each.

Mayegun.Mulcahy: How in the world does he expect me to make any progress with only twelve??

Marc.Guerra: I’m trying to convince him to increase the number.

Marc.Guerra: And if that doesn’t work...then I’m going to try a few work arounds.

Mayegun.Mulcahy: ...Ah, I see.

Mayegun.Mulcahy: “Undermining”, was it?

Marc.Guerra: Flores’ patience with the D/NCS is at an all-time low, and Alpha has been annoying
her the last few days.

[Marc.Guerra]: She isn’t…very fond of me at the moment either, but she is amenable to…discussions about her regaining overall control of the program.

[Marc.Guerra]: And while a large part of the funding and program planning is from the CIA’s end, the candidates are legally under USSOCOM’s command and military jurisdiction.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: So she could override the D/NCS, you mean?

[Marc.Guerra]: In this program, specifically pertaining to the candidates? Yes.

[Marc.Guerra]: The chain of command at this level is…dicey. It was hard enough getting this whole joint program up and running, which is why we only just started pooling candidates in the end of the November.

[Marc.Guerra]: Neither my director nor Flores wants to get more bureaucrats or politicians involved. There are already too many cooks in the kitchen and too many problems with clearances.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: And yet you think Flores would relent for a non-American scientist like me? You overestimate the generosity of your military, Sigma.

[Marc.Guerra]: And you underestimate how badly Flores and her superiors want to regain control of the U.S. warfronts.

[...]

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I see. Is it that bad?

[Marc.Guerra]: Things are starting to compound. Small issues that should have been solved easily, immediately at the start of the war are snowballing.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: You’re starting to sound like Delta.

[Marc.Guerra]: I’m trying to see both ends of it, especially if I have to convince Flores that my intentions are genuine.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: And there’s the Sigma I know.

[Marc.Guerra]: The D/NCS wants Death soldiers for his own purposes. Flores wants them for hers. Ultimately, her interests will win by sheer virtue of being necessary for the entire nation’s survival.

[Marc.Guerra]: But that does not mean the D/NCS and his followers like Alpha will not try to reroute her.

[Marc.Guerra]: And neither Flores nor the rest of the U.S. military need self-reviving soldiers to succeed. They can do it with just the supersoldiers. Going the extra step isn’t a tactical requirement.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: …But that’s not what you want, is it?

[Marc.Guerra]: …Who said anything about what I want?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Because, Sigma, your interests align with my own.

[Marc.Guerra]: Oh yeah? And what’s that?
[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: It’s quite simple, actually.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: You want to see if a single seed of inspiration, experimentation, and vision could change the world.

[Marc.Guerra]: …

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: You plant anything and everything just to see if any of them will sprout and flourish, but you prefer to watch your crops struggle on their own.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: You relish watching the struggle between life and death, creation and destruction, order and anarchy.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: You are a scientist of your craft, just as I am of mine.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: And I believe - in your hands - a Death soldier would achieve their pinnacle, unmatched by all of life itself.

[Marc.Guerra]: …

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Contact me when you have outmaneuvered both the D/NCS and Flores.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I will be waiting for your actual offer.

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[Author's notes because I completely broke AO3 trying to write this:]

Cryptobiosis is a broad term used to describe a state of suspended animation in which organisms (mainly invertebrates) slow or effectively stop all metabolic functions, but are capable of resuming them when better conditions return.

Most vertebrates are less dependent on surrounding environmental conditions than invertebrates - for example, many people do not realize that our skin (an organ) is one of our biggest immune defenses, and protects us from a variety of issues that would normally harm or kill cells, including extreme heat and cold, UV radiation, salt and water changes, atmospheric changes, etc. These issues can and do still affect us, obviously, but a human being does not directly expose delicate cells like neurons, muscle cells, and critical blood cells to “the elements.” A complex organism self-regulates internal states of equilibrium, which is one reason why inherited conditions, degenerative diseases, and acute or lifelong health issues are increasing priorities as modern medicine and treatments improve.

Traumatic injuries and emergency conditions cause or are a result of rapid fluctuations in an organism's internal equilibrium states. In super short and non-technical terms, the things you would rush an individual to the emergency room for are impacting a body's abilities to function on every scale - microcellular, cellular, tissue, organ, macroscopic, and systemically. The human body’s innate healing capabilities relies on the cells of the blood circulation and immune systems to critically repair wounds on a cellular and tissue level while fighting off invasive infectious elements or hostile conditions. Wound healing actually begins very rapidly, theoretically within seconds and definitely within minutes. Then, depending on the severity of the wound, the body goes through longer, more sustained periods of healing. If skin is broken, this process may result in scar tissue due to the uneven healing processes (see: "repair" versus "regeneration").
Understanding the different processes and metabolic pathways that underlie cryptobiotic states in invertebrates may produce interesting and unique results for vertebrate organisms. Already, research shows that the simple inclusion of trehalose sugars in eukaryotic cells or platelets may extend their external and dry-state life by days, weeks, and possibly months.

If you were to hypothetically combine these cryptobiotic pathways with advanced stem cell regeneration and accelerated innate wound healing...

Well.

I wonder what you could get.

---

Welcome to my pseudo-scientific explanation of the inexplicable.

The current theoretical model for trehalose and intrinsically disordered proteins (IDPs) works like this: during extreme conditions, these molecules are produced and biochemically attracted to more vital cell molecules and structures. As water equilibrium changes, these sugars and/or proteins are capable of surrounding cell structures and "solidifying" them into a preserved, "bioglass-like" state. As water returns, the biochemical attractions recede or are "replaced" by attractions to water molecules, allowing the cells to resume their normal functions.

Additional research shows that the death of an organism and fluctuating states of internal equilibrium may actually increase gene activity and protein/sugar production immediately following organismal death. Only recently have researchers discovered that thanatotranscription has the potential to "revive" previously "locked" gene transcriptions:

[Many of these postmortem genes are beneficial in emergencies; they perform tasks such as spurring inflammation, firing up the immune system, and counteracting stress. Other genes were more surprising. “What’s jaw-dropping is that developmental genes are turned on after death,” Noble says. These genes normally help sculpt the embryo, but they aren’t needed after birth. One possible explanation for their postmortem reawakening, the researchers say, is that cellular conditions in newly dead corpses resemble those in embryos. The team also found that several genes that promote cancer became more active.]

Chapter End Notes

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References:

3. "Wound healing", Wikipedia. WARNING: this page contains images of small injuries and the human healing process (e.g. scabs and scar tissue). Reader discretion is advised.
4. "The animal that lives for 10,000 years", BBC
5. "Tardigrades return from the dead", BBC
7. "Role of trehalose phosphate synthase and trehalose during hypoxia: from flies to
mammals", Journal of Experimental Biology
8. "Effect of Trehalose on the Properties of Mutant PKC, Which Causes Spinocerebellar Ataxia Type 14, in Neuronal Cell Lines and Cultured Purkinje Cells", Research Gate. Note: this paper (as best as I can describe it) examines the effects of trehalose on disease-causing genes and their proteins (specifically in neurons), and found "these results suggest that trehalose counteracts various cellular dysfunctions" stemming from genetic-based degenerative diseases. "In summary, our data suggest that trehalose may be applicable to the treatment of various other neurodegenerative diseases in addition to SCA14."

9. "Water Bears Turn Into Glass When They Dry Out", Science Alert. Trehalose is not the only molecule capable of protecting cellular structures during dessication. More modern/current research on tardigrades show that intrinsically disordered proteins (IDP) can also cause a "bioglass" form of cryptobiosis.

Please: DO NOT DIRECTLY CONSUME TREHALOSE SWEETENERS.

Direct ingestion of trehalose is causing the development of some superbugs/super bacteria in different human populations.

Thanatostranscription:

1. "'Undead' genes come alive days after life ends", Science. Note: this article contains an image of a dead (but not decomposed) rat.
2. "Thanatotranscriptome: genes actively expressed after organismal death"
3. "Tracing the dynamics of gene transcripts after organismal death"
Chapter Summary

Jack earns a reward.
And so he gets one.

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains detailed, sexually explicit content.
Reader discretion is advised.
And so is, like, a quiet moment alone to read it.
Just in case you, uh, end up needing it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

76: More than just a

He’s back in the chair in the “interview room.”

Jack doesn’t fully remember how he got here - there are the handcuffs on his wrists again, back in his fatigues and jacket, disoriented but in a…

Different way.

There’s something stirring and twisting inside him, a shadowy sort of hunger, and he’s pushing himself to look up and face Guerra -

Or is it Felix -

Or is it -

He

Stops.

His breath sticks steep in his chest.

His heart beat-beat-beats, pressing up against the coarse-grained wood box he’s stuffed it in.

And Gabriel stares at him from across the table -

Before that gorgeous, smoky, deadly smirk spreads across his lips, rich and regal and raw-edged, as
he says:

“Hey, soldier.”

His voice

Drip

Drip

Dripping

Like water into the depths of Jack’s heart and -

(God damn, the way Gabriel says the words twists the want inside him -)

“...Gabe,” Jack says, the word breathless and excited like exhaling bittersweet air, and for some reason he asks:

“Is it true?”

Gabriel stares at him coolly, his smirk fading a bit, before he rises from the chair on the other side of the table and -

“Is it true?” falls out of Jack’s mouth and why is it so hot, he’s not in the box, but his clothes seem to be sticking uncomfortably -

(Maybe he should take them off -)

“What they said -” just rambles out, and Jack needs to stop himself -

Gabriel comes to a stop on the same side of the table as Jack, leaning against the edge of it, and Jack admires how cut he is, even covered in camo tactical gear -

How the dappling of nightfallen blues and greys and black just accentuate Gabriel’s regality…

His

Sheer presence.

How close he feels.

Jack lets his eyes trace over Gabriel’s broad chest, the brawn of his shoulders, arms, how easy and effortless a sweet, smoky sort of power oozes from him and -

That want shifts inside Jack, raw-edged and needy, as Jack’s eyes drop to Gabriel’s waist, his hips but -

Rough, calloused fingers slip under the scruff on his chin -

(The coy control of it sends a sweet shiver down Jack’s spine -)

And tilt his face up towards Gabriel’s.

And Jack finds himself

Wanting
At the depth of the star-dusted, smoke-hued gleam in Gabriel’s eyes, gold behind the simmer of shadow and -

Gabriel gives him the most incredible, sly smirk Jack has ever seen -

(That ache inside Jack twists and he doesn’t know if it’s his gut or his -)

“And if it is,” Gabriel asks him, voice like liquid obsidian pouring straight into Jack’s spine, “Does that change anything…?”

Jack draws him up for a moment, shifting his head just a bit to drag his eyes down and up Gabriel’s form again, before he looks at that wonderfully deadly gaze, and replies with a voice steeped with want:

“...How ‘bout you try me and find out?”

There’s a small flicker of surprise in Gabriel’s eyes, but then the fingers slip a bit stronger under Jack’s chin, moving closer, gripping a bit firmer. Gabriel smirks, and the look sends a jolt of desire straight to Jack’s groin -

“...Do you really want to play this game with me, Jack?” Gabriel asks slyly, and - though he refuses to look away - Jack practically hitches as Gabriel slides his thumb across Jack’s lower lip.

Knots twist the want inside Jack, and there’s a shadowy, hollow neediness that drips with ache -

“Oh, I want to play, alright,” Jack smirks back, his words humming against Gabriel’s thumb - skin to skin, makes the breath of Jack’s words feel close and sweet.

The gleam in Gabriel’s eyes deepens, as he hums with a voice as raw as smoke and as rich as shadow, “...I like it when you play soldier for me.”

And damn -

Jack’s about to get on his knees for that alone.

The want inside him coils hot and heavy behind his cock, and Jack practically melts into the palm of Gabriel’s hand, murmuring coyly against his thumb, “I’ll play whatever you want me to, sir.”

A dark, vivid desire flickers across Gabriel’s gaze, and Jack feels his whole body ache at the sight -

“...What if I want to make you beg for it first?” Gabriel asks, and the words are music to Jack’s ears.

Jack looks straight up into that smoky, obsidian gaze

And lets his

Raw-edged

Silversmoked

Desire

Burn.

Jack kisses his lips to Gabriel’s thumb and rasps out, “I did say, ‘try me.’”
And then he slips his tongue out and licks at the tip.

Gabriel’s eyes go wide at the sight, and Jack can see the look in them shift from that sly, teasing flirtation to deep, smoky *thirst*, full of an intensity that Jack wants, he *wants* -

He *needs* to feel it -

“...And what do you want to try first?” Gabriel asks him, voice tinted with that shadowy sensuality, eyes locked to Jack’s with such a *focus* that the ache behind Jack’s cock coils tighter at the sight.

And Jack *knows*.

Because the words linger in his mind, like claws gripping him down -

(“Skilled with both -” )

“Hands,” Jack exhales fervently, kissing the words to Gabriel’s thumb, “Your hands.”

He *needs* to feel them -

“Tell me more, soldier,” Gabriel smirks, moving his thumb to press on Jack’s lower lip, opening his mouth just a bit. Gabriel bites at his own lower lip, and *damn*, the rough, barely restrained *want* in him makes Jack want to *beg for anything, Gabe, anything you want*. Jack tries to swallow a faint moan, but the soft sound of it hums against Gabriel’s thumb, and Gabriel’s smirk *deepens*, asking, “My hands *what*?”

*Grab me,* rushes through Jack’s head vividly, burning his senses down, *Hold me down, push me, feel me* -

“...Touch me,” Jack barely manages to rasp out, and he nips lightly at Gabriel’s thumb because he wants he wants he *wants* -

He *needs* to feel him -

The look of sheer, rough desire in Gabriel’s smoke and gold eyes *flares* like a fire, but Gabriel does not crack, unmoving, remaining firmly in control of himself and *god damn* -

If that doesn’t make Jack just want him *more*.

And Gabriel *knows* it.

Gabriel’s restraint on himself, his raw power, his deep, dense fullness will make Jack - already in handcuffs, already under his spell - *ask* for it.

*Beg* for him.

And then -

Gabriel shifts his thumb, pulling it away from Jack’s mouth, removing his hand from Jack’s face, and Jack almost *whimpers* at the sudden loss of his fingers, his touch, his feeling, but then -

Gabriel moves.

He slides himself right in front of Jack’s chair, and steps in between Jack’s legs. Jack’s breath hitches as Gabriel leans over, planting both hands on the edges of the chair’s seat, wrists pressing against the outsides of Jack’s thighs -
And Gabriel comes face-to-face with him, only an inch or two away.

So close that Jack can feel Gabriel’s rich smirk and his smoky words murmured across his lips:

“...Where, Jack?”

And Jack melts for him:

“Everywhere, Gabe.”

In an instant -

Gabriel’s hands are on him.

They grip at his thighs, and Jack shudders, his cock twitching at the touch, but he never looks away from Gabriel’s gaze, fixated on his. Gabriel smirks a little more, deadly and gorgeous, and Jack shivers as he slides his hands up to Jack’s hips, to the line of his pants and the hem of his jacket -

Deliberately and coyly avoiding the outline of Jack’s cock.

Gabriel pauses for only a moment, before his smirk - so close Jack can feel it - twists a bit deeper -

And then his fingers tug at the hem of Jack’s jacket, then his shirt beneath -

And then slip under it.

And Jack melts again

As he feels those rough, calloused fingers - warm, so warm - set fire to his skin, tracing up the curves of his abs, exploring across the lines of his hip bones -

Feeling him shiver underneath them, every touch making his breath gasp and the want in his groin and cock stiffen and ache -

“Gabe,” Jack gasps, shivering under the intensity in Gabriel’s gaze, feeling like Gabriel could hold him down with that look alone and Jack would still beg for him -

“Yes, soldier?” Gabriel asks coyly, as he reaches the top of Jack’s abs, Jack’s whole torso flinching and rising under his touch, before he drags them back down, spreading his fingers to sweep over the edges of Jack’s waist -

“More,” Jack groans, as Gabriel thumbs at the line of his pants, “Please, Gabe -”

“Mm, I like hearing that,” Gabriel chuckles, lifting his hands. He reaches up to Jack’s chest with a grin, slowly - agonizingly slowly - pulling the zipper on Jack’s jacket. When it reaches the bottom, the two halves unhook, and immediately, Gabriel’s hands are back under Jack’s shirt, pushing the hem of it up -

But this time, Gabriel’s fingers grab.

They grip and they press, running over Jack’s hips, his ribs, his stomach, diving upwards, palming perfect heat across Jack’s skin -

Jack groans, his whole body shuddering, cock jolting with that coiled desire, wanting wanting wanting, his everything wants more, wants to beg for more -
“G-Gabe,” Jack gasps, as Gabriel fingers thrum over the serratus muscles across Jack’s ribs and then -

“Ask for it, Jack,” Gabriel states to him teasingly, squeezing at Jack’s chest before he Flicks his thumbs across Jack’s nipples.

The feeling sends a jolt of pure pleasure straight to Jack’s cock, which twitches and strains against the tightness of his pants, and Jack moans a low, shivery growl, “Please, Gabe - I want to feel you -”

“Aren’t you?” Gabriel asks with a smug, knowing smirk, “Or did you want something more...specific?”

He rubs his thumbs over Jack’s nipples again, causing another spike of good, shadowy ache to bolt in Jack’s groin, up his stiff cock and -

Jack wants he wants he wants -

He needs to feel Gabriel’s hands on -

Jack looks straight in Gabriel’s deep, smoky eyes and practically commands, “I want you to touch my cock, Gabe -”

Gabriel’s eyes flare with that shadowy sensuality, wide with pleasure but -

“I want you -”

Jack isn’t done with -

“- To make me beg -”

Asking for him -

“- for you, Gabe.”

As he moans the words hot and sweet against Gabriel’s smirk.

So close that Jack practically kisses them to his lips.

Gabriel is almost frozen against him, eyes wide with obvious, obsidian desire, until Jack murmurs with a wry, teasing smile of his own, “...Please?”

Immediately -

Gabriel’s hands dive for Jack’s hips, skillfully unbuckling his belt, popping the button and -

There’s the feeling of relief as the rough, tight pressure of Jack’s pants on his cock releases -

Followed immediately by the rough, tight, perfect pressure of Gabriel’s right hand palming his cock through the fabric -

As Gabriel’s left hand unzippers his fly.

“Oh, Gabe, yes -” Jack moans, rolling his hips up, rubbing his cock harder into Gabriel’s palm, and Jack finally feels Gabriel groan back, watches him gasp a little, “God damn, you’re big, Jack.”

And then Gabriel smirks again, chuckling, “And so hard for me.”
Jack grinds his cock harder against Gabriel’s palm, and for a moment, Gabriel grinds back, slipping his right hand under the fly to rub Jack’s cock through the cotton of his boxer briefs -

But then he lifts it, and impulsively, a small whine heaves in Jack’s chest -

But then Jack feels Gabriel’s fingers back at his hips -

And they tug and pull his pants and his boxer briefs down.

Jack immediately shifts for him, helping Gabriel work his pants down to his thighs, his cock free from the fabric, and Jack shivers at how cold it is but -

For the first time, Gabriel looks away - he drags his eyes down Jack’s chest, jacket open, shirt raked up, past his heaving torso to his waist, his hips -

To where Jack’s cock waits for him.

Jack shivers again, but this time, from the feeling of Gabriel’s gaze - dark and desirous, heavy and hot - on him. Gabriel flicks his eyes back to Jack’s face and smirks smugly, vividly, and Jack wants he wants -

“Such a good soldier,” Gabriel says smokily, “Waiting for me.”

And then -

Those rough, calloused fingers wrap around Jack’s cock - warm, so warm, and tight, so tight -

And start to stroke -

And Jack finally feels Gabriel.

Jack moans loudly, his whole body tensing and relaxing, surging and rising as Gabriel pumps his cock, pure pleasure and relief twisting the want want want inside him, hot and full. He bucks under the feeling of Gabriel’s left hand, the pressure just right, nice and tight, a heated grip that jolts pleasure up and down up and down up and -

Jack rocks his hips up, grinding his cock into Gabriel’s grip, moaning a low, wanton gasp of a “Gabe, oh god yes, harder -” and Gabriel tightens his control, jerking faster, his gaze still fixated on Jack’s face -

Jack pants for him, as the ache and the roil of pleasure inside him surges tighter, harder, hotter, and Gabriel chuckles that perfect, smoky laugh, “C’mon, soldier - don’t you want more?”

“Gabe, yes,” Jack groans, trying to fuck himself into Gabriel’s hand because he still wants he wants -

He needs to feel -

“More, Gabe, please,” Jack moans for him, his commander, his friend, his everything -

“What do you want, Jack?” Gabriel asks, and there’s an edge of his own desire threading the words -

Jack stares straight up into those perfect, starstudded eyes and murmurs breathless against Gabriel’s lips, “Kiss me.”

Gabriel exhales out sharply, “Where?”
“Everywhere,” Jack begs him.

And then -

Gabriel’s lips are pressed against his.

The kiss is everything: hot and sensual, Jack opens for him immediately, moaning against Gabriel’s kiss, needy and wanting, and Gabriel claims his groans and whimpers of, “Gabe, yes” like he’s drawing breath. Gabriel nips at his lower lip, stroking Jack’s cock harder, and Jack practically trembles under both his kiss and his touch, nearly comes as Gabriel thumbs his cockhead, the pressure of it blissfully perfect -

“Gabe, oh god -” Jack rasps out, words hot and breathless against Gabriel’s lips, and he feels Gabriel moan back against his, murmuring, “That’s it, Jack - be a good soldier for me -”

Gabriel slows his strokes but tightens his grip, and Jack’s whole body jolts with a twist of pleasure, eyes wide as his hips roll his cock harder into Gabriel’s hand, gasping as he really starts to lose control - all he can see is Gabriel, all he can feel is Gabriel, all he can taste is Gabriel -

And yet

He still wants he wants he wants

He needs to feel -

He lifts his own hands, still cuffed, to grip at Gabriel’s jacket, in a desperate attempt for even more, more, Gabe, don’t stop, as Gabriel shifts his head, pressing needy, hungry kisses to Jack’s neck, nipping at his skin, smirking as Jack shudders under his hands, his lips, his breath -

“Gabe, fuck,” Jack groans, and -

Gabriel drifts further down, kissing hot and heavy across his neck, past where Jack’s shirt is pushed up, lavishing more smoky, smirking kisses across Jack’s chest. Jack’s hands adjust automatically, moving from the front of Gabriel’s jacket to his shoulders to -

Gabriel slows his stroking to a stop -

As he kneels between Jack’s legs -

A wide, smug, shadowy smirk on his lips.

Jack freezes at the sight, chest rising and falling, his cock mere inches from Gabriel’s face, his hands on Gabriel’s head, fingers in Gabriel’s hair and -

He wants.

Gabriel grins deeper as he chuckles, “Kiss you...everywhere, right?”

Jack shivers at the look of raw-edged, barely restrained desire in Gabriel’s eyes, and nods, whispering with a voice fraying with want:

“Please, Gabe.”

He wants.

Anything.
Gabriel laughs a low, liquid laugh that ripples and surges the ache in Jack’s cock all on its own, humming as he leans in, “Because you asked so nicely -”

Jack watches, baited breath, as Gabriel’s gaze shifts to his cock, eyes half-lidded, that look of deadly, gorgeous want in them deepening and burning, dark and shadowy, focus tracing over the thick length of it -

Before Gabriel flicks that gaze back to Jack’s -

And kisses the head of Jack’s cock.

Jack flinches with hot, aching pleasure as he feels Gabriel’s rich, smoky chuckle against the head, the feeling of it making his whole body shake, fingers threading harder through Gabriel’s hair. Gabriel’s laughter turns into a low moan, which only makes Jack roll his hips again, groaning back as the head of his cock presses against Gabriel’s lips and the shaft grinds in Gabriel’s hand and -

Gabriel scowls so hard, those obsidian-gilded eyes smoky and clouded with desire -

And then he parts his lips and licks at Jack’s cock.

“GABE,” Jack yells, body shuddering, thighs flexing, fingers tightening - pleasure, hot and sweet and sticky, thrills in him, and god, he wants he wants he wants as Gabriel lavishes his aching, needy cock with attention, kissing and licking, hand stroking slightly.

And yet

He wants.

He wants.

He needs.

“Gabe, Gabe, don’t stop, please, fuck, please,” Jack begs, shuddering and shaking as Gabriel starts to suck, and fuck, it’s such a sweet, perfect feeling, half his cock in Gabriel’s mouth, tight and wet and heated, the pleasure coiling and twisting harder in his groin, and -

He needs to feel .

“Gabe, that feels so good, Gabe, more, please -” Jack is begging, the words are slipping from his mouth like a chant, fingers wound in Gabriel’s hair, cock hot and wet and dripping, so good, so perfect, his senses are falling, all he has is Gabriel’s, all he is is Gabriel’s, he -

He wants to be Gabriel’s -

He needs to feel -

There’s a deep roil of pleasure but Jack needs to feel full, fulfilled, hot and thick and sweet and sticky and -

Gabe.

He needs to feel.

(Something isn’t quite right.)
“Gabe,” Jack gasps, eyes fixating on Gabriel’s face as Gabriel looks up at him, licking a long, hot stripe up Jack’s cock -

“I want to feel you,” Jack says, pleads, begs, voice cracking with desire, words dripping with want. Gabriel - eyes dark and yet glowing with his own desire - smirks at him as he teases, “Don’t you feel me?”

He strokes Jack’s cock hard, and Jack rocks with the motion, yelling hoarsely -

“Or did you want more?” Gabriel asks smugly, licking at Jack’s cock again.

(He’s so hard.)

Jack shudders and gasps, coming down from the spike of pleasure, and he stares at Gabriel, feels Gabriel staring straight back, wanting him wanting him -

Wanting Jack as much as Jack wants him back.

(It aches so bad.)

And Jack needs to feel Gabe.

Full.

Fulfilling.

(Everything.)

“I want you to fuck me,” Jack asks, plain and simple and honest and full of want.

Gabriel’s eyes go wide with surprise at how straightforward he is, and with that look, Jack can see everything inside him - how badly he wants Jack, how much he aches too, how he thrills in Jack as Jack thrills in him and -

The thick, steeped shadows of raw-edged want cloud Gabriel’s gaze again, as he chuckles royally, “That’s what I’ve been waiting to hear, Jack.”

Jack watches spellbound as Gabriel - never breaking eye-contact - strokes lightly at Jack’s cock, as he draws his right hand up to his lips -

And starts to lick his fingers, hot and wet.

Jack shivers under Gabriel’s gaze, hot and sultry, as Gabriel lavishes his index and middle fingers sweet and sticky and wet,slicking them up, stroking little twists and pumps of pleasure into Jack’s cock and -

(He’s so hard, it’s almost uncomfortable -)

Gabriel pulls his fingers from his mouth, smirking roguishly as he slips his right hand between Jack’s thighs, murmuring coyly, “You sure you want this?”

“Gabe, Gabe, please, I’ll do anything -” Jack asks, pleads, begs and he feels the sweet, wet tips of Gabriel’s fingers slide to the curve of his ass and -

Jack shimmies a little lower in the chair, spreading his legs as far as his pants will let him, still rocking his hips to fuck his cock into Gabriel’s left hand. Gabriel chuckles richly, “What a good
soldier, opening up for me -”

Jack groans as he feels Gabriel’s right fingers press against his tight ring of muscles as Gabriel’s other hand strokes him tighter and harder and -

“Let me hear you beg, Jack,” Gabriel says, voice cut with desire and want and -

Jack

Wakes up.

…

It is ugly hot under all his sheets and blankets, the mattress springs dig painful little twists across his back, his clothes stick sweaty and clinging awkwardly across his body -

His cock is achingly, mindnumbingly hard -

His body is painfully, unbearably empty -

And Jack pretty much hates himself for waking up from the unbearably hottest, mindnumbingly sexiest thing he has ever experienced.

He groans out loud, furious with himself, dragging his hands down his face as his sleepy, dream-delirious brain begins to process what’s happening - his dick is stiff and almost uncomfortable in his boxer briefs and sweatpants, and the thickness of the heat on him is cloying and breathless.

Weakly, Jack twists his left wrist to peek at the time on his monitor -

0218, Saturday morning -

And he almost whimpers in frustration.

Both physical...and emotional.

He lies there, hands rubbing at his eyes, trying to press the darkness of sleep back into them, feeling his cock ache with a hot, tight, thick want , unbearably mad in his own bed and clothes and skin -

(The ghost of a dream kisses his lips and strokes him like smoke, sweet and shadowy -)

And all Jack can think miserably is:

*God damn.*

*That was the hottest thing I’ve ever felt.*

*(Gabriel’s smirk against his own breathless moans haunts him -)*

Jack stares angrily at the dull, shadowy ceiling, listening to the deep, sleep-blissful breathing of Adrien on the other side of the room. He flops himself on his right side, glaring at the wall, fitfully shutting his eyes, willing himself back but…

…

Nothing.
Painfully, twistingly, achingly

Nothing.

Jack scowls a bitter, heated look at the wall and he -

(*Gabriel gives him a wide, smug smirk by his cock, left hand pumping Jack hard, as Jack shudders and moans under his gaze and touch and -*)

Jack’s right hand is on his cock.

He’s still curled over on his right side, hand down the front of his boxer briefs, eyebrows furrowed in a dense scowl of concentration, attempting to remember how Gabriel had gripped him, stroked him - Touched him.

It’s been embarrassingly long since he’d last had sex - almost two years ago, roughly - and, oddly enough -

A long time since he’d masturbated too.

Maybe...three or four months?

Feeling like he had been dying in the 18X course had been a pretty big factor in that.

...And the war too.

Jack frowns, trying to push the fearfearfear down and away, trying to think of -

(*Gabriel’s thumb rubs gently across Jack’s right cheekbone, his palm is rough and calloused but warm against Jack’s skin, and Jack practically melts into the touch, as Gabriel smiles at him, saying softly, “I believe in you -“*)

Jack bites at his left knuckles, groaning against his skin as he strokes harder, remembering how Gabriel had caressed him and -

Somehow, the thought makes him want more.

He shudders, right hand pumping hard as he remembers phantom fingertips on his cheek, under his chin, down his chest - he muffles a groan against his knuckles as he rocks his hips, fucking his cock into his fist.

He thinks of Gabriel -

Laughing a low, smoky chuckle against Jack’s lips -

Between his legs, smirking richly at Jack’s melting pleasure -

Smiling softly at him under cool lantern light and shadowy starlight -

Wanna feel you, Gabe, runs through Jack’s hazy thoughts, and he tries to shift his grip on himself to get that feeling back but...

His cock is achingly, frustratingly hard

And he is twistedly, yearningly empty.
As his eyes flutter open again, Jack practically *glares* at the wall, slowing his strokes until he is just languidly, miserably rubbing at his cock. Instead of moaning, he huffs angrily against his left hand.

...It’s been awhile since he’s felt *this* hard -

And it’s been *even longer* since he’s wanted to get bent over and *wrecked* inside to out

Full and fulfilled.

But he wants it so, *so* badly.

And *god damn* -

That is *exactly* what Jack wants Gabe to do to him

(Dream or not).

...*God dammit*, Jack sighs, rubbing his eyes with his left hand. He removes his right hand from his cock, flopping over on his back. Steeling himself, Jack forces himself to drag the blankets and covers off of his body, shivering slightly as the tepid chill in the air hits him. He pulls himself out of bed, slinking his way to his effects chest. Even semi-blinded by the night dimness, Jack spins the unlock combo code and pries the lid open.

He first yanks out a sweatshirt, fumbling it on, before he sighs again. He reaches back in the chest, groping around for the telltale scruffy fabric of a towel - when his fingers find it, Jack pulls it out and plops it over his left shoulder, before…

He puts his hands in again, and finds the small, plastic box.

Even without fully seeing it, Jack knows a first aid and basic medical supply kit by touch.

He flicks the tabs on it, cracking the case open. His fingers root around inside until he feels them -

Several small packets of lube.

Jack makes a face to himself, trying to decide if just one will be okay or if he should bring more, and then grabs three - one because that’s basic, two because he hasn’t attempted this in a while, and three because why the hell not at that point.

He stuffs the lube packets into his right pocket of his sweatpants, and then shuts the lid, irritated with himself but still *too goddamn hard* and wound up to really care. He tugs his hood up over his head, rising, stepping to the door with a huff.

And then he hits the button.

The door slides open and Jack squints against the glare of the hallway light, but he slips out of their room all the same, taking several steps down towards the cross hallway where the barracks bathroom is -

Wait, he stops himself, blinking blearily against the light.

...*The showers there are flooded*.

Jack makes a dry deadpan face, adding, *Dammit, Gabe* -

(*Let me hear you beg, Jack,* ” Gabriel smirks as he pressed slicked fingertips against *)
Jack grimaces as pleasure spikes through him from the mere *thought* of Gabriel.

He shakes his head (mainly at himself), and then turns around, heading the other direction, towards the opposite hallway which will lead him to the directors’ bathroom faster.

*It’s like 2 a.m., no one will be there,* Jack reassures himself, rounding the corner at the far end of the 121-132 hallway, into the cross-section with the “officer quarters” section. The directors’ bathroom is just a short ways down, but every step aches and twists inside him, barely noticing the chilled concrete beneath his bare feet.

He’s too hot and heated to care.

Jack ducks into the bathroom, grateful to *finally* be out of sight of the cameras. When he sees that the main part of the bathroom (with the sinks and stalls) is empty, he palms at his cock through his sweatpants, exhaling his relief. He stumbles into the shower sideroom, slipping into the first stall on his right, latching the door hastily.

He practically rips off his clothes, happy to be rid of the uncomfortable feeling of them clinging awkwardly, but he shivers in the slight cold. He slings his clothes and towel over the door, away from where the radius of the water will hit, before he turns and scowls at the shower itself.

*...Just like diving into a pool,* Jack tells himself, stepping up underneath the showerhead, left hand gripping the water handle. He grits his teeth, and turns it.

The spray *blasts* across his skin, chilled and icy, nearly shocking the heat from his body and the hardness from his cock. Jack sputters and gasps, water drenching him, and for the first time since he’s woken up, it feels like he can breathe a little. He turns the handle a bit more, and the water doesn’t get warm, but does get milder, more room-temperature.

Jack eases into it, sighing with a mixture of exhaustion, frustration, and contentment, gripping his cock and slowly, steadily stroking. It’s not as *urgent* or *needy* as before, but more of a normal, almost lazy rhythm - a familiar kind of pleasure.

Jack actually manages to think, *Alright, this is doable. Maybe I can just get this over and done with.*

He shuts his eyes against the water.

...*Which was a mistake.*

The backlit darkness of his eyelids is *so* soothing -

And almost immediately -

Jack *feels* Gabriel’s smirk kissing against his lips, laughing that mischievous, smoky chuckle, “*What a good soldier you are, Jack -*”

Jack actually *gasp*, his whole body *shuddering*, hips jerking and cock aching as the *thrill* of it rushes through him, twisting and spiking in his cock, his groin, his lower back -

“*Work it harder for me, soldier,*” Gabriel teases him in his mind, and immediately, Jack strokes himself harder, groaning weakly as he rolls his cock into his hand, tightening his grip. Jack bites at his lower lip, holding back a moan as Gabriel hums with smug satisfaction, “*That’s it, Jack, show me how bad you want it.*”

*Gabe,* Jack thinks, his thoughts hot and heated, nothing will cool them down - they’re threaded with
smoky smirks and wry laughter and gilded obsidian gazes and -

*God damn.*

He’s *miserably* hard again -

And *achingly empty.*

Jack opens his eyes, left hand wiping at some of the water on his face, right hand still stroking himself, and he glances back at his sweatpants, hanging off the door. He makes a skeptical face but -

“I want to see you *fuck yourself,* Jack,” Gabriel commands him, the words laced with that rich, sensual smile, “*Open up for me.*”

...Jack is rifling through his sweatpants pockets in an instant, pulling out the first lube packet. His grip is wet and clumsy, hasty, but Jack wants he wants he wants -

*Dammit,* Jack thinks, ripping a tear in the packet with his teeth. He squeezes the lube onto his right fingers, coating the slip over his fingertips, down the lengths. He braces himself, left forearm set against the left shower stall wall, facing the water, shifting his legs apart -

“*Good soldier,*” Gabriel chuckles darkly as Jack slips his right hand under his cock, into the curve of his ass, pressing his slicked fingertips to the tight ring of muscles. Jack rests his forehead against his left forearm, shutting his eyes as -

*(“I like you like this, bent over and begging for me,” Gabriel says, as he leans Jack over the interrogation table, Jack’s arms holding him up as he moans, “Gabe, hurry, *please* -”)*

*(“What happened to being patient, Jack?” Gabriel chuckles, and Jack feels Gabriel’s left hand grip at his left hip bone, fingernails scraping into his skin -)*

*(And then Jack feels Gabriel press his right fingertips to his ass and -)*

*(“You did so good this week,” Gabriel murmurs sweetly and smokily against Jack’s neck, “Here’s your reward, soldier -”)*

Jack moans openly as he eases his fingers inside him, the pressure inside to out is *so good,* *so satisfying* - he shudders as he works himself open, pleasure spiking and throbbing inside him, the ache of it coiling in his groin, up his cock.

“So tight,” Gabriel teases him, half in his mind and half in his dream, and Jack exhales sharply as he pushes his own fingers in more -

*(“...Where is it, Jack?” Gabriel asks him, kisses the words hot and sweet against Jack’s neck, as his fingers steadily begin to fuck in and out, in and out of Jack’s tight, twisting heat -)*

*(“H-higher, Gabe,” Jack groans, struggling to keep himself upright as Gabriel’s fingers work him open, make him *melt,* dextrous and skillful and *god,* he could come from being fingerfucked alone -)*

*(Gabriel smirks against the back of his head, chuckling wryly as he -)*

*(“Oh, Gabe, *yes -*” Jack moans as Gabriel’s fingers push in in in, higher deeper *harder,* full and fulfilling, stroking and working against Jack’s pressure point. They *twist* -)*
(And a burst of pleasure throbs through Jack’s body - )

(“Yes,” Jack shouts, shivering and shuddering, as the feeling - hot and slick and perfect - melts inside him, and he’s squeezing around Gabriel’s fingers, tight and taut for him, begging, “Harder, Gabe, harder, more -” )

(“Mm, keep saying my name like that, Jack,” Gabriel moans, nipping at Jack’s left ear, his words heavy and lilting, and Jack groans, voice cracking as Gabriel fingerfucks him harder harder harder, thrusting and twisting his fingers in in in - )

Jack slumps his left shoulder against the stall wall, head thick and hazy, gasping loudly as his own fingers push and pressure against his aching sweet spot, left hand stroking his cock hard - he can’t fully tell where the water ends and his own, dripping heat begins -

“Close, soldier?” Gabriel’s voice murmurs in his head, against his ear, and Jack pushes his own fingers in harder, fucking himself as he groans low, “Gabe, please -”

(“- I want you to fuck me,” Jack gasps, pleads, begs, shuddering as Gabriel’s fingers work him open, pushing shivery spikes of pleasure through him, his whole body taut and tense, waiting waiting waiting for - )

(“I love hearing you say that,” Gabriel moans against his ear, and Jack practically whimpers as those rough, calloused, skillful fingers push in in in, harder hotter deeper than ever, and then pull out - )

Jack shuts his eyes, panting dense, sticky breath as he strokes his cock faster, grinds down on his own fingers harder, the edge of pleasure coiling tighter and tighter, shuddering against himself, and all he can see hear feel is -

(There’s shuffling as Gabriel’s hands leave his ass and hips and Jack is so perfectly and hotly fucked out of his mind that he’s about to beg Gabriel for his hands, his fingers, his touch when - )

(There’s the feeling of hot, slick skin - slightly wet - thick and hard, long and full, grinding against his ass and Jack exhales easily, “Yes -”)  

(And Gabriel presses a kiss to Jack’s ear, murmuring richly, “Say my name when you come, soldier -” )

(And pleasure throbs through Jack as Gabriel pushes his cock - full and fulfilling - inside him - )

(Perfect inside to out, hot and thick and everything Jack has ever wanted - )

(And Jack gasps, shuddering as Gabriel fills him so good, so right, hard and deep, and as Gabriel kisses and moans against his neck, Jack tilts his head back, moaning out - )

“Oh, Gabe -” he exhalles breathlessly, stroking fast fast fast, fingers fucking himself in in in and - Jack comes hard.

He groans openly as his whole body shakes, pleasure full and fulfilling from the inside out, curling up every nerve, dripping white hot as he thrusts his cock into his own grip, and god -

He hasn’t had a deep, hard, hot end like that in forever.

Jack slumps his head against the wall on his left, panting heavily, eyes still shut, darkness and water
satisfying -

(As he thinks, he feels Gabriel’s fingers digging into his hips -)

(Gabriel’s cock thrusting inside him -)

Jack shivers as his cock twitches, another small wave of pleasure fucking through him at the thought, and he hisses as he strokes a little more, some more of the wet, slick heat dripping out of him. He continues to lazily stroke as the waves simmer, his right fingers teasing in slowly, massaging at his aching spot -

But the aftereffects linger in him - his nerves on smoky, sensual sweetness, his breath dense and twisted, his body warm and soothed -

And as he opens his eyes - half-lidded against the water and the shadowy neediness -

All Jack can think is:

...So it **might** be more than just a crush.

He stares blankly at the tile of the shower wall, letting the water run down his skin, just under lukewarm temperature, before he slowly eases his fingers out of himself, rolling his shoulders. After another small, languid pause, Jack manages to pull himself off the left stall wall, taking a half step into the proper center of the shower.

He shuts his eyes, exhaling slowly and steeply as the water soothes over his heated skin.

He takes a moment.

Just to acknowledge it to himself.

_You're in deeper than you thought you would be - take it for what it is._

**Don’t run from it.**

He’d let the last several months of Selection and Assessment and Q-Course training lull him, ease him in. Almost a full year of focusing on that - on preparing to soldier through the war, on preparing to see nothing but glassplate eyes of Bastions as he died, on preparing to give all of himself to a potentially lost cause in the exception that it was not.

He had let friends and whatever shreds of courage and humor he could find guide him. He had let the comfort of having them convince himself that it would be okay to die surrounded by the glassplate eyes of Bastions, so long as his friends were unharmed in the end.

He had let time and a belief in hope temper him, age him, tell him that “this is the end, and in the end, you did it as right as you could.”

He had let himself believe a life half lived -

A life half loved -

Was still enough to give to a war that could be the end of the world.

And then.

...And then.
Amid snow and stars.
Between smoke and smirks.
Gabriel.
Jack opens his eyes.

So you’re in deeper than you expected, he thinks calmly, refusing to let his swell of mixed emotions rise above a simmer, asking himself:

*Does it change anything?*

Jack pauses for a moment -

(The ghost of fingers inside him -)
(The whisper of breathless kisses against his ear -)
(The curve of a smirk chuckling against his neck -)

Before he shivers slightly, feeling trace heat singe his nerves, and then leans over and twists the shower handle.

The water snaps off.

*No.*

The thought is quiet, bittersweet and sweetly bitter, like the taste of melted chocolate -

Or like the feeling of leaning against Gabriel’s strong, but comfortable shoulder.

And Jack decides:

*No, it doesn’t change anything - not between us.*

...*But I won’t fight it.*

It’s been far, far too long since he’s felt like this.

And if life is going to give him a taste of stardusted sweetness

(And smoky, sly smirks)

Before the end of everything

Then Jack will savor it

(Like tenderly caring for a blossoming cactus while slowly dying of thirst).

Jack wipes the water from his face, inhaling slowly, exhaling deeply, before he turns around and takes one, two steps to the stall door. He tugs his towel down, first scrubbing it over his head, soaking up the excess water from his hair, and then he dries himself off, starting to shiver from the actual chill in the bathroom (and not the heat simmering in his nerves).

He pulls his clothes back on, relishing their faint warmth while regretting the fact that - in his, uh, *urgency* to get to the bathroom - he had forgotten socks. Jack unlatches the shower door, slinging
the towel over his shoulder. He steps out, careful not to slip, and works his way around the stall corner, back to the main part of the bathroom. He’s rounding the part to the sink section on his left -

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Jack freezes like a soggy, wet deer in a pair of sleepy headlights, a rather cold droplet of water running deadline perfect down the back of his neck, from his hairline to his t-shirt collar, wet towel feeling heavy on his right shoulder.

Guerra looks at him and it’s the bleakest, most uncharacteristically-unaware look that Jack has ever seen in those dark, whipsnap-fast eyes. The agent looks exhausted, like a breeze could knock him over, dressed in sweatpants, an open sweatshirt, and an undershirt.

It’s the first time Jack has ever seen him look normal.

It’s also the first time Jack has ever seen -

_Holy shit_, Jack thinks, trying not to ogle at the massive scar on Guerra’s neck, or the smaller scars peeking out from under the deep hem of the undershirt. Guerra yawns, and the action instinctively reminds Jack of a lion or tiger in the sun, dozing and indulgent but dangerous on a moment’s notice.

“I, uh…” Jack starts to say, rushing to try and think of a real excuse, as Guerra mumbles dryly, “The plumbing crew fixed the barrack showers...didn’t you know that?”

“Uh, no...actually,” Jack manages to get out, honestly, “I really didn’t know. I slept through Thursday.”

Guerra blinks at him, before he sighs, “Sure, whatever.” The agent turns to the nearest sink, washing his hands, and Jack slowly exhales with relief, starting to shift on his feet again, glancing at the door -

“Wait, why did you take a shower at two a.m. anyways?” Guerra asks sleepily, turning back around as he wipes his hands dry.

Jack freezes again.

And _Gabriel moaning, his cock deep inside Jack, his fingers digging into Jack’s hips, Jack’s own, tangible fingers working his need inside and out and -

_Idiot_, the only sensible part of Jack’s brain snaps at him, but it’s too late -

The clear and obvious blush rises to his cheeks.

Guerra stares at him, and Jack can basically see the gears in his head turn -

“Oh god dammit, really?” Guerra asks with obvious sleepy and exhausted frustration, and Jack mutters hastily, “I uh - my sleep schedule isn’t back to normal yet.”

“Don’t you two like, spend all that secret time together?” Guerra asks with exasperation, “Is that seriously not enough?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jack says with the worst poker face of all time. Guerra gives him a deadpan look before he mutters loudly, “I don’t get paid enough for this. Just use your own bathroom next time -”

But as Guerra turns to leave, the fluorescent lights catch on something small and metallic, just about
sternum-height, and Jack flicks his gaze to -

...Oh, is all he can think, barely, as he realizes:

Dog tags, on their usual ball chain.

Except.

Also on the chain

Are a pair of rings.

Jack watches for a second as Guerra continues towards the door, as he’s saying blearily, “Or better yet, save us all from Reyes pulling more dumb stunts like Wednesday and just drag him into the shower with you -”

“Do you hate him?”

The words are out of Jack’s big, dumb mouth before he can stop himself.

Guerra pauses, and then twists himself back around, squinting at Jack as he replies with a dry confusion, “Do I hate Reyes?”

“Because of -” Jack starts to says, even though the smart part of him keeps kicking the rest of him to stop being an idiot, don’t ask questions you aren’t prepared to hear the answer to -

“Because of...Wednesday?” Guerra says, with obvious confusion and then -

Jack doesn’t fully know where the question comes from but -

(No stupid questions.)

“No, because of Silvio.”

The words rise from his chest anyways.

The exhaustion evaporates from Guerra’s eyes in a fraction of a second.

Though his demeanor or posture don’t change at all, the man named War is awake instantly.

Jack stares straight into those abyssal eyes but then -

For what might be the first time since they met -

Jack sees something...soften in Guerra’s gaze.

And Jack realizes -

It isn’t War at the bottom of the abyss -

“...How -”

But a single grave.

“- Could I ever hate the man who tried to save my husband?” the shadow of a soldier asks quietly -

His words dripping into the air -
Like rain onto the dirt.

Jack feels something twist inside his chest - not fear or anger but...a sliver of a glass that shatters further, sharp but small, endless as fractals.

And the words slip out of Jack’s mouth:

“Then why are you so hard on him?”

Guerra observes Jack for a moment, before he replies thoughtfully, “Because I know what he is capable of, but someone has to give him focus, or a vision.”

And something slightly...stronger surges in Jack, as he mutters in a low voice, “That’s it? You’re just handing out tough love?”

“I don’t expect you to see it now,” Guerra states, his voice regaining some of his usual dryness, “But maybe someday, you’ll understand. Les hommes de génie sont des météores destinés à brûler pour éclairer leur siècle.”

That strength in Jack only deepens, eyebrows starting to scowl, mouth in a tight line -

-Men of genius are the meteors destined to burn to enlighten their century.

Guerra looks tired, sighing as he starts to turn, muttering, “You’re all the same - you think some fast reflexives and a gun is all it takes.”

“Did you kill him?”

Jack doesn’t resist the words this time.

He lets them drip into the air like oil rising.

Guerra pauses, and then slowly turns back around, staring impassively at Jack as he replies sarcastically, “...Well, I certainly came close to trying to kill Reyes, but obviously I did not.”

But Jack just states - words laden with endurance:

“No, I mean the soldier who betrayed Silvio.”

The glimmers of softness on the edges of Guerra’s gaze vanish, like light into the density of the void.

Once again, Jack gazes into the abyss of his eyes -

And asks again, the words rising from the depths of his soul unknowable, “...Did you kill the man who betrayed him?”

Guerra assesses him for a moment, before he says quietly - almost gently, “...So, Reyes finally told you, did he?”

“...He did,” Jack says, knowing that lying wouldn’t stop this conversation. Guerra watches him before he asks impassively, “And what did he think?”

Jack traces over the deep, impassable shadows in Guerra’s eyes, the lines on his face, before his gaze drifts down to the scar on Guerra’s neck -

And then Jack snaps his eyes back to Guerra’s and answers honestly, “He thinks you didn’t do it, but
that maybe you told...other interested parties that the man was getting released.”

Guerra shifts a bit, folding his arms, watching Jack almost neutrally, even as he smiles faintly, saying lightly, “Interesting. And you?”

Jack stares at him, as the man named War asks him quietly, “...What do you think?”

The water
Drip
Drip
Drips
Down the knob of his last cervical vertebra
Onto his spine.

Jack drops his gaze to the two rings on the chain, before he looks back up at Guerra’s eyes, and states honestly, “...You’re not that kind of soldier, so I don’t think you did.”

Guerra’s smile twists into something almost coldly amused, and he starts to chuckle but -

“But you should have.”

The smile freezes on Guerra’s face
As Jack’s words
Drip
Drip
Drip
Into the air between them.

There’s maybe only six or seven feet between them, but Guerra’s smile remains frozen and stillframe, even as Jack takes a step forward, stating with a truth undeniable, voice deep and focused, “If someone my husband trusted betrayed him, I would do everything in my power to destroy them.”

With the step, they’re closer now, maybe three feet, and Jack can see something change in Guerra’s gaze - something unknowable -

But something Jack immediately recognizes exists in himself too.

“...You surprise me,” the man named War says to him, as that cold smile twists even further, and for the first time, Jack seems something genuinely amused hidden in it, like a blade concealed, “I thought you were just a pair of pretty blue eyes that made Reyes weak…”

And then Guerra grins, the shadows of his eyes flashing eerily as he adds, “But maybe there is more to you than meets the eye, Soldier: 76.”

Jack refuses to back down.
He stares straight into Guerra’s gaze
And - with a voice of an enduring storm - says with a roguish smirk:

“Well, you know how the saying goes: don’t miss the forest for the trees.”

Guerra’s gaze flashes dangerously, as he replies in a low, dark tone, “And here I thought it was just Reyes who was too damn smart for his own good. Be careful about pushing your luck with me, soldier.”

Jack refuses to look away, even as he mutters, “…There’s no such thing as luck, sir.”

“Another crack like that, and you can go back in the box,” Guerra chuckles cruelly, but Jack is undaunted by his threats.

Because he knows now.

He knows.

The truth does win.

And courage does endure.

And he is stronger than anything they could ever do to him.

And so Jack smirks back at him, saying lowly, “I’d like to see you try.”

Guerra stares him down for a second, before he laughs to himself, muttering, “You’re just like him, aren’t you?”

Jack pretends to consider it for a second, before he gives Guerra a wide, smug grin, saying richly, “I’m better with a knife than Gabe is.”

“…You two will be the death of me,” Guerra sighs wryly, before he turns and heads for the door, calling back, “Use your own damn bathroom next time, Soldier: 76.”

Jack watches him go, the smirk fading from his lips as the door shuts.

(Two rings on a ball chain, by a dead man’s dog tags.)

Beneath the glare of the lights, he scowls slightly.

(A dead supersoldier who wakes up screaming and crying.)

And Jack thinks softly:

(Gabriel smiling at him, sunbright in the darkness of night, saying, “Thank you, Jack.”)

I’ll go deep for him.

And nothing you can say or do will take that from me.

Chapter End Notes
Me: oh, ho, you'll see >:D

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So I heard you people wanted some more romantic tension.

Luckily, so did I.

Yes, Jack's entire "nightmare" of Gabriel in the interrogation room was specifically included for this chapter.

(And don't worry.)

(Gabe gets his "due" next week ;) )
24: A statistic

Chapter Summary

Jack earns a reward.

And so, Gabe gives him one.

Chapter Notes

Buckle in, everyone: this one is even more of a roller coaster than the last. :^)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

24: A statistic

“The requirements for my eternal loyalty are steep, Gabe,” Jack chuckles lowly, settling his head back on Gabriel’s shoulder. Gabriel huffs a bit, muttering, “You would think breaking you out of fake prison would be enough for most people but, noooooo, Jack Morrison just has to think he’s special.”

“This program might call me Soldier: 76, but I want to be Number 1 in your book,” Jack states coyly, tilting his head to glance up at Gabriel’s face with a bright, cheesy grin. Gabriel twists a deadpanned, dry look towards him, before he asks wryly, “Cute. How often does that line work?”

“If you like it, then it’s got a rockin’ 100% success rate,” Jack beams at him. Gabriel gives him a skeptical glance, before he squints, thinking it over -

“...Your silence says a lot,” Jack mutters with a jokingly arid tone. Gabriel lolls his head a bit, humming, “I mean...I appreciate the attempt?”

“That’s not the same as liking it,” Jack fake-pouts, tilting his head back towards the datapad. Gabriel chuckles lowly, saying, “Look, being number 1 is overrated anyways. ‘Soldier: 76’ is a much more memorable title.”

“...Is it, Gabe?” Jack asks, glancing back up at him, “Is it really? There are one-hundred and thirty-two of us - why would ‘Soldier: 76’ be any more memorable than the others?”

And then -

Gabriel slides two fingers beneath Jack’s chin, tilting his head a bit higher -

As he gives Jack a smoky smirk, saying coyly, “Because numbers can’t show how much you are worth.”

Jack’s eyes go slightly wide, his chest hitching a little against Gabriel’s -
It’s hard to tell under the mix of harsh, chilled lantern light and snowcovered shadows, but Gabriel thinks he sees a faint blush rise to Jack’s cheeks and -

...That’s a good look for you, soldier, Gabriel thinks, as the urge to pull Jack closer closer closer to him rises, a thrum and a thrill in his pulse and -

Jack exhales sharply, “Oh, damn, that one was way better than mine. You managed to make it not sound cheesy.”

Gabriel’s thoughts stop dead in their tracks as he blinks at Jack, and mutters, “What.”

“How am I ever going to beat that one?” Jack murmurs, thinking it over. Gabriel watches him for a moment, before he chuckles dryly, “I’m sure you’ll think of something, Watson.”

Jack glances back up at him, grinning brightly, radiantly as he laughs low, “When I do, you’ll be the first person to hear it!”

“...You don’t need a cheesy number-based pick up line, you know,” Gabriel offers him both wryly and a bit more genuinely than he probably should -

But he can’t stop himself.

Jack is so close - the first time he’s been within reach all week, curled up against Gabriel’s side, warm and thick and perfectly weighted against Gabriel’s shoulder, all coy, flirty smirks and teasing jokes, and those deep, melting blue eyes that only make Gabriel want to go… Deeper.

Jack is so close -

But Gabriel wants him closer.

And Jack tilts that sly, smug smile up at him, asking in that low, frisson-inducing wash of a voice, “...And what do I need, Gabe?”

And then -

Jack cups the back of Gabriel’s right hand with his left, and pushes his hand a little higher, so that Gabriel’s palm presses against the edge of his jawline, fingertips tracing across his left cheek -

Gabriel’s thumb so close to Jack’s lower lip.

Gabriel inhales steeply, a sharp, perfect pang of desire jolting through him, as Jack grins mischievously, humming out coyly, “Give me some guidance, Gabe.”

Gabriel draws his gaze down to Jack’s lips, before he glances back up to the depths of those eyes, raw and unending, and he chuckles wryly, “ Haven’t you learned, Jack?”

And then he rubs his thumb over Jack’s lower lip, and there’s a flicker of a shadowy, sultry surprise in Jack’s gaze and -

“...You just need to ask,” Gabriel murmurs, and god damn, Jack’s lip is softer than he expected, his breath warmer than he thought and -

Gabriel wants those lips closer.
Wants that breath hot against his skin.

Wants Jack closer -

Deeper.

Jack’s expression seems to melt, the depths of his eyes shifting to a hazier look, his left hand presses a little firmer against Gabriel’s, and the feeling of heavy want draws tighter in Gabriel’s groin and -

“Gabe…” Jack murmurs, in that low, rich voice, words exhaled against Gabriel’s thumb, “I did a good job this week, right?”

Fuck, the look in Jack’s eyes churns hard and hot inside Gabriel, a jolt of pleasure spikes in his waist and cock and -

“…You did,” Gabriel replies, adjusting himself, sliding his left hand from Jack’s shoulders, down down down towards his lower back. Jack’s grin twists a little as he feels Gabriel’s embrace get more intimate, and he slides himself even closer, spreading his legs as he almost gets on his knees, practically wrapping himself around Gabriel’s left leg and -

_Holy hell_, Gabriel’s chest heaves as Jack’s right thigh rubs against his left, and Jack _smirks_ at him - a gorgeous, mischievous flash of a smile, an eyebrow piqued, as if he’s just barely on the verge of murmuring some sweet, sensual secret.

“…Don’t you think I deserve a reward?” Jack asks teasingly, invitingly, the words drip-drip-dripping with a raw, drawn depth, and he punctuates the slow, steady question with a kiss to Gabriel’s thumb.

God damn, Gabriel’s about to push him down and do _anything_ - everything - to make him shiver and moan and -

“…What kind of reward did you want?” Gabriel asks, the words sharp and hot in his chest, rolling out like a slip of smoke, and _damn_, Jack’s gaze just seems bluer, deeper as he gets closer -

Jack slips his right hand to Gabriel’s chest, right over his heart, and though there are like two layers of thick clothes between it and Jack’s palm, it _feels_ like Jack can sense the _pounding_ of his pulse -

Jack _grins_, biting at his lower lip, his gaze hot and heavy as he asks:

“Can I have you as a reward, Gabe?”

“Hell yes,” Gabriel breathes out instantly and -

In a fluid, slick movement, Jack is straddling his lap, his weight is heavy but _perfect_ against Gabriel’s hips, his chest, and even with all the clothes between them, Gabriel feels something hard and thick rub against his own stiff, aching cock and -

Jack slips both of his hands to the angles of Gabriel’s jaw and the sides of his neck, his fingertips sliding beneath the hem of Gabriel’s beanie, nails lightly scratching at the edge of his buzzed hair, and Gabriel gasps, the feeling shivering all down his back, pleasure rippling through him -

His own right hand is automatically sliding to the back of Jack’s head, guiding Jack in closer closer _closer_, his left hand pulling Jack’s torso flush against his and -

Jack leans in, tilting his head, and breathes the words against Gabriel’s lips:

“Will you make me yours?”
And then he kisses Gabriel.

The feeling is hot, sweet, sultry - slow but with a steady pull, as Jack’s lips are soft and coy, inviting, and damn, he’s wanted this, Gabriel doesn’t know for how long but he has wanted it, wanted him. Gabriel kisses right back, all poise and decorum gone, he has wanted wanted wanted and Jack has been so patient, so good, so honest and -

Jack opens for him, lips parting with small breathless moans, and Gabriel claims them, kisses and nips at Jack’s bottom lip, teasing out the rich sounds from the back of Jack’s throat and god damn -

It’s music to Gabriel’s ears -

Jack’s fingernails dig in harder at the back of his neck and Gabriel groans as the small pinpricks shudder through him, Jack kissing him back, hot and whispering, sweet little hums and -

“Gabe -”

The way his nickname

Melts

Off Jack’s lips and tongue

Hot and raw and effortless

Kissed to his own lips

Murmured like a song

Makes everything inside him

Stop

And then -

“Oh, Gabe -” Jack moans again, kissing him needily, breathlessly, his voice rough and raw and cracking with pleasure -

Everything inside him

Burns.

Gabe kisses Jack hard, stealing his breath, claiming the rasp of his own name, as Jack gasps against the sudden hot, heady hold, kissing back, whispering more, pulling Gabe in in in -

Gabe nips and bites at Jack’s lower lip, rough and barely restrained, but Jack only fuels his fire, gasping low, whispering urgently, “Gabe, fuck, Gabe, more -”

And damn, the words are like tinder on a blaze, as pleasure daggers through Gabe, his cock shuddering at the mere feeling of Jack’s voice against his lips, and Jack is exhaling hard, fingers pulling him closer closer closer, as if kiss and breath and low groans aren’t enough -

Gabe’s fingers are dragging down Jack’s scalp, threading through that blonde hair, and Jack moans, the sound perfect, head tilted back, neck exposed. Gabe dives for it, kissing and nipping at it, at the side of his Adam’s apple, at the underside of his jawline
“Gabe, yes -” Jack urges him on, his hands pulling Gabe’s beanie off, nails running up and down his head and Gabe shivers, shuddering under Jack’s touch, Jack’s moans, Jack’s body -

Jack glances back down at Gabe, panting hard, eyes glazed with a heady, smoky look, and there’s a moment where they just take in each other, gazes locked, and Gabe can see -

Jack wants him.

Jack wants him as badly as he wants Jack.

And in an instant -

Jack is diving back, pulling him closer, kissing him hot and hard and heavy, and Gabe burns with it, relishes it, whole body thrumming and tense under Jack’s -

Ready to do anything -

Everything -

Jack asks for.

And then, Jack leans back a little, giving Gabe a coy, sly smirk -

Before he rolls his hips in Gabe’s lap.

A sheer, raw desire floods through him as he feels Jack’s cock - hard and thick - grind against his, chest hitching, whole body shuddering as Jack kisses his smug, self-satisfied smirk to his lips, murmuring deeply, “You like that?”

“God damn, Jack - hell yeah, I do,” Gabe groans, his left hand automatically pushing Jack’s lower back closer, and Jack grinds against him again, saying, “God, you’re big, Gabe -”

Jack rocks his hips a few more times, pressing the thickness of his cock against Gabe’s, both of them moaning hard, and god, even through layers of clothing the feeling of Jack sends a wave of pleasure through him. Gabe gasps against Jack’s smirking lips, shuddering as Jack drags the outline of his cock down the length of Gabe’s, chuckling a low, liquid lightning sound.

And then, as he rises again, rolling his hips -

Jack slides his right hand back, pulling Gabe’s left from his lower back -

As he murmurs coyly:

“Why don’t you show me how good you really are with those hands, Gabe?”

And he guides Gabe’s left hand to his cock, tight and thick under the fabric of his pants.

Gabe freezes, as the ache inside him jolts straight to his groin -

And then he is immediately fumbling with Jack’s pants, right hand diving to join the left. Jack gives a low, rich laugh that quickly turns to hot, heavy moans, his hands gripping at Gabe’s neck as he steadies himself in his lap. Gabe pops the button on Jack’s pants, fingers tugging at the zipper of his fly as Jack murmurs urgently against his lips, “God, Gabe - want to feel you -”

Gabe kisses him hard, Jack gasping against his lips, his hands, his body, still grinding even as Gabe
pulls at the waistline of his pants. Gabe nips at Jack’s lips, grunting with laserlike focus, “Up.”

Jack rises on his knees automatically, hands still cupping at Gabe’s head, and Gabe just can’t look away, his gaze locked to Jack’s open, hazy expression, desire hot and thick in his cock at the way Jack moans. His hands instinctively, immediately tug at Jack’s pants and his boxer briefs, pulling them down down down, past his hip bones, past the long, lean lines of his waist and -

Gabe flicks his gaze down -

As Jack’s cock - long and hard and heavy - slips out of the fabric.

“Fuck, Jack,” Gabe groans, biting at his lower lip, his own cock shuddering with a twist of pleasure at the sight. He feels Jack press a sly smirk to his forehead, chuckling, “I’ve been so patient, Gabe -”

“Yeah, you have,” Gabe says, voice cracking with want -

As he wraps his left hand around Jack’s cock.

And immediately -

Jack just

Goes.

He reacts like Gabe has shocked him with raw pleasure - Jack shudders, his whole body shivering, thighs tensing against Gabe’s waist, hips jerking, cock rolling hot and thickly hard in his hand, and fuck , it’s the hottest, sexiest thing Gabe has ever seen, watching and sensing and feeling Jack recoil hard and rough like a bolt of lightning -

“Gabe, oh god, yes -” Jack moans against his head, and the sound frissons down Gabe’s scalp, perfect and low and guttural and -

Gabe tilts his head up, looking up at Jack’s face and -

Jack looks perfectly and hotly fucked.

Just from a single touch.

And all Gabe can think against his own thick, heavy haze of pleasure is:

More.

Give me more, Jack.

And - gripping his right hand on Jack’s hip -

Gabe starts to stroke.

...Hard.

Jack gasp , eyes flashing wide, torso surging, hips rocking hard, grinding his cock into Gabe’s fist, in and out and in and out and damn, Gabe’s own cock jolts with want want want as Jack starts to work himself into Gabe’s hand and -

“Gabe, fuck -” Jack moans, rolling his hips, cock pushing in in in, hot and full against his palm, his fingers, thick and smooth and slightly wet already and -
Gabe strokes even harder, faster, gripping tighter and Jack almost melts from the touch, thrusting his hips harder, fingernails digging into his scalp, small pinpricks of pleasured ache that shiver down Gabe’s skin. As Jack grinds his cock into his left hand, Gabe slips his right up Jack’s waist, across his ribs, pushing his jacket and shirt up and -

“God, I’ve wanted this,” Jack gasps, kissing the words to Gabe’s head, and Gabe shudders on his own, just from hearing that, words with that deep voice with the thick cock in his hand, all of him hard and heavy and incredibly hot against Gabe’s body, and -

“Me too, Jack,” Gabe manages to groan hoarsely, words cracking with ache, as he drops his gaze to Jack’s chest and his bare abs, admiring how Jack’s whole torso flexes and strains and shivers as he fucks himself into Gabe’s hand -

Gabe leans in, pressing himself against Jack’s chest, kissing his flushed skin just above his stomach, and Jack gasps, groaning, “Gabe, oh god, yes - don’t stop -”

Gaberelishes in the heat of Jack’s body, the warmth of his skin, the sheer closeness of him, kissing and nipping at Jack’s chest, as Jack’s body rolls with hot, tight pleasure, grinding his cock into Gabe’s hand. Dark, dense desire coils hard and full in Gabe’s groin, up his cock as Jack practically begs, pressing breathless gasps to Gabe’s head, “Gabe, oh god, Gabe - I want -”

Gabe leans back slightly, glancing up at Jack as Jack gazes down at him, chest heaving, cock starting to drip in Gabe’s hand and -

God, Gabe wants he wants he wants -

He wants Jack closer -

“What do you want, Jack?” Gabe asks, voice raw with want, his own cock aching for him, he’ll do anything Jack asks -

Jack shudders for a second -

Before he leans down slightly, exhaling the words hot and heavy against Gabe’s lips:

“I want you inside me.”

And Gabe

Burns

As the words shudder liquid lightning through his nerves, the ache hot and hard in his cock, his nerves on fire, thrumming a dark, deadly, vivid pulse in his chest and -

He kisses Jack hard, drinking each word like the sweetest drops of Jack’s breath, twisting his grip on Jack’s cock hard and tight - Jack practically melts into his hand, gasping hotly, “Fuck, Gabe - so good -”

“God damn, Jack,” Gabe groans back, breathless against Jack’s lips, his own cock so tight in his pants, pleasure aching through his body, but he struggles to barely keep control of his senses, his thoughts, murmuring raggedly, “I don’t have - fuck - we have to go inside, I didn’t bring anything -”

And damn, he’s disappointed they’ll have to pause, but he’ll do anything Jack asks, will drag him into a dark corner, push him up against a wall -
But then -

Gabe feels Jack’s left fingers grip around his right wrist.

Gabe flicks his gaze up to Jack’s face, where those endlessly blue eyes drown him, hot and simmering strong, and Jack pulls Gabe’s right hand from his hip, up to his face, his lips, saying in a voice dripping with ache:

“I don’t want to wait, Gabe.”

And then -

Jack licks a long, hot stripe up Gabe’s index and middle fingers.

Gabe’s chest heaves as desire jolts through him, never breaking gazes with Jack, shivering as the pleasure coils hot and thick and tight in his cock, as Jack licks and sucks hard on his fingers, lavishing wet and slick heat on them. Gabe presses his fingers against Jack’s tongue, and Jack gives a muffled, dripping moan around them and fuck -

“Fuck, that’s hot, Jack,” Gabe gasps, as Jack rolls his hips, grinding his cock in Gabe’s left hand as he sucks and hums on his right fingers. Jack pulls Gabe’s fingers from his mouth, smirking smugly as he chuckles, “So are you, Gabe -”

And he gives one last, long lick to Gabe’s fingers -

Before he kisses the tips, murmuring hotly:

“Fuck me, Gabe.”

“Yes, sir,” Gabe says immediately, his body shivering at that way Jack’s voice melts, at how Jack wants him so badly. As Jack rocks his hips again, pushing his cock in in in Gabe’s fist, Gabe drops his right hand, back to Jack’s hip, then around the curve of his ass to -

“Gabe -” Jack moans, as Gabe presses the tips of his wet fingers to the tight ring of muscles, hot and tense under his touch, and fuck, he wants he wants he wants -

Gabe massages the muscles with his fingers, easing a slicked pressure to them and at the same time -

He tightens his grip on Jack’s cock -

And strokes harder -

“Fuck!” Jack shouts, his whole body bucking, hips jerking forward, shuddering as he fucks his cock in and out and out in and out of Gabe’s fist, and damn, the ache in Gabe’s own cock as he feels Jack writhe and shiver in his lap, Jack’s cock wet and leaking in his hand and -

Gabe slips his index finger into Jack’s ass and -

“Gabe, yes -” Jack gasps, and Gabe groans at how tight he is, all melting heat and clenching muscles, pressure tensing around his finger. He pulls out, just a bit, before he pushes in deeper, harder, twisting in in in more and -

Jack practically whimpers, shifting his hips forward, sliding his cock hard and hot in Gabe’s left hand -

Before he rocks back, fucking himself on Gabe’s finger.
“Oh damn,” Gabe gasps, pulling his finger back, slicking up the insides and the rim of Jack’s ass, before he slides in again, raw heat and shuddering muscles and -

Jack grips at Gabe’s shoulders, steadying himself -

And then he goes -

Fucking his cock hard hard hard into Gabe’s grip, wet and hot and dripping with want, before tensing up, rocking back, fucking himself tight tight tight against Gabe’s finger, hips rolling back and forth, back and forth, in and out, in and out and -

Gabe groans, the ache inside him is so hard, so heavy, so thick, his cock practically throbbing with stiff pleasure and -

“Look at me,” Gabe murmurs, but his words are steeped with heated breath and smoke slicked desire.

Still fucking himself in and out, in and out, Jack glances down at him, chest heaving, hips rolling, eyes glazed over, as deep as midnight and -

Gabe slips his finger back back back and then -

Pushes both fingers inside.

“Fuck,” Jack gasps, eyes going wide with shocked pleasure, shuddering as Gabe works him open, both fingers twisting in in in, hot, wet, tight pressure tensing and clenching around them -

Want shivers through Gabe, through his groin and up his aching, stiff cock as Jack’s muscles squeeze thick and hard around his fingers, Jack practically melting in his lap as Gabe pulls his fingers out, out -

And then pushes them in in in in -

Hard and sticky, slipping in and out, in and out, harder and faster and hotter and deeper -

“Gabe, fuck yes -” Jack moans, rocking his hips back, fucking himself hard on his fingers, legs shuddering, torso flexing, and Gabe can feel how close Jack is getting -

“Where, Jack?” Gabe asks, kissing and nipping at Jack’s chest, relishing how Jack’s whole body seems to react to him, his fingers, his lips, his grip -

“Higher, Gabe, more -” Jack gasps, his fingers digging hard into the meat of Gabe’s shoulders -

And Gabe

Twists his fingers

Deep into Jack’s dense heat and -

“Gabe!” Jack shouts, as his whole body recoils and rolls, rocking back onto Gabe’s fingers as he teases at Jack’s aching pressure point, and Gabe groans, his own pleasure spiking through him at the way his name shivers through Jack’s voice, the way Jack clenches down hard and tight on his fingers, the way Jack’s cock throbs in his hand and -

“Gabe, don’t stop, don’t stop, please -” Jack begs in a chant, in a song, his voice rippling across Gabe’s senses like a flash of fire, and fuck, Gabe wants him like nothing else -
Wants him to fall apart in his hands -
Wants him to come undone as close as they can get -

_Gabe deep_ and _full_ inside him and -

Gabe groans, fingerfucking Jack in in in, harder deeper faster, as Jack practically _melts_ in his lap, his hips starting to jerk and shake faster, unevenly, grinding his cock into Gabe’s palm before - almost half desperately - pushing himself back onto Gabe’s fingers and -

“Gabe -” Jack gasps, shuddering and shivering, legs shaking, “Gabe, fuck, I’m gonna come, Gabe -”
“Keep saying my name, Jack,” Gabe moans, stroking Jack’s cock as hard as he can -
Before he _pushes_ his fingers as _deep_ as they’ll go -

“Fuuuuck!” Jack yells, every muscles tensing, eyes flashing wide, hips shaking -
Gabe relishes at how _incredible_ he looks, expression open, full of _want_ , ready to break -
Before he chuckles -
And bends down.

“What -” Jack starts to gasp, when Gabe releases his grip on Jack’s cock -
But leans forward and licks up the length of it instead.

“Holy _shit_, Gabe -” Jack almost _sobs_ , as Gabe steadies Jack’s hip with his left hand, pushes his fingers in in in, fucking them against Jack’s ache -
And relishes the feeling of Jack’s cock - hard and hot and dripping - in his mouth.

“Gabe, _fuck_ -” Jack gasps, body shuddering, before he tenses, arms wrapped around Gabe’s head. His hips give heavy thrusts, pushing his cock in and out, in and out in Gabe’s mouth and -

“Ah, _Gabe_!” Jack shouts -
And comes hard and sticky hot.

_Fuck_, Gabe thinks, groaning around Jack’s cock as the taste fills thick and full in his mouth. He sucks for a moment, delighting in the feeling of Jack - tight and tense around his fingers, hot and wet on his tongue -

The feeling of Jack coming for _him_ -

Jack becoming _his_.

Gabe swallows, licking his lips as he lifts his head, smirking with a huge, smug, self-satisfied smile at Jack -

Jack stares down at him, panting hard, chest heaving -

His eyes as _blue_ as Gabe has ever seen them.

_(There’s something raw and deep in them, a sensation of something blossoming for Gabe, for him, for _them_ -)_
“...Good soldier,” Gabe says, chuckling lowly as he smirks but -

Jack leans down and kisses him.

...Oh.

The kiss is...soft but full, sweet with a long, smoky sensuality, deep and drawn with desire, but tinged with a satisfaction beyond just this moment and -

Gabe falls right into it.

His smirk fades in an instant, as Jack kisses him raw with a reckless tenderness, heady and yet light, and -

(Just when Gabe thinks he can’t want Jack more -)

Gabe wants.

He drinks every small, breathless kiss Jack gives him, holding him close close close, as Jack’s hands cradle his head, fingers brushing through Gabe’s hair, kissing Gabe like -

Like Gabe is all that he sees.

All that he feels.

(And Gabe is so hard, it’s almost painful how badly he wants him -)

“...That was...so good, Gabe,” Jack murmurs, kissing the words to Gabe’s lips. Gabe smirks, pulling back slightly to grin up at Jack as he laughs low, “I told you I’m good with my hands.”

Jack gives him that faint half-smile - gentle and deep and -

Suddenly, Gabe sees something transform in Jack’s gaze, hot and heavy and dense, and a jolt of desire aches in his cock as Jack’s smile twists into a stormy, sly smirk -

“...And I told you -”

And the words drip in that deep, rich voice -

“- That I want you -”

And Jack lowers his hands from Gabe’s head to his chest -

And he pushes him down.

Gabe thumps onto his back, eyes wide, body thrilling at how Jack leans over him, those blues eyes drawn dark with smoky shadows into the depths of the A-frame hut, that slight, sensual smirk smug and satisfied on Jack’s face -

As he settles himself on Gabe’s hips -

Grinding his cock against Gabe’s.

Gabe groans, as the feeling - thick and full - rubs through the fabric of his pants, his cock tight and hard against the pressure and fuck, Jack looks good like that, straddling Gabe’s lap -

(Where did Jack’s pants go? He’s not sure but he sure as hell doesn’t care -)
Jack pops the button on his pants and Gabe moans slightly as the tight pressure of fabric around his aching cock releases. Jack grins mischievously at him, rising on his knees again as he starts to pull the waistline of Gabe’s pants and boxer briefs down and -

Gabe fumbles for a moment, lifting his hips, using his hands to help Jack push his pants down and -

Jack’s eyes drift from Gabe’s face -

Down down down

As his cock slides free from the cloth and -

Gabe shivers at the look of obvious want in Jack’s gaze, how Jack bites at his lower lip, before he flips his eyes back up to Gabe’s face -

Pleasure ribbons through Gabe, up his cock and into his groin and lower back, taut like a wire, at the look in Jack’s eyes -

As Jack says wryly, “I want my reward, Gabe.”

And fuck, Gabe will give him anything he wants -

His hands automatically move to Jack’s hips, digging in sharp as he pulls Jack forward. Jack moans loudly, almost giddy with pleasure as he relishes the pinpricks of sweet pain along his hips, and together -

They position Jack right over his cock.

Gabe looks up at Jack’s dark, deep eyes, and says with his own voice dripping with want:

“Come and get it, soldier.”

Jack grins at him, mischievous and smug and so damn gorgeous as he reaches back and -

Gabe feels his fingers grip at his cock and -

He shivers as he feels Jack guide it up, and the tip of it presses hot and hard against Jack’s slicked, tight muscles and -

“Fuck me hard, Gabe -”

And Gabe

Wakes up.

...

He blinks once, twice at the dull, concrete ceiling - still darkened by shadows - before he truly processes how infuriatingly awake he is . His clothes stick to him, ugly humid and uncomfortable, his sweatpants and boxer briefs tight (and not in a good way) around his hard, stiff cock, almost unbearable how they cling to his skin, still shivering with dreamlike pleasure. The mattress is taut, all the little springs digging into his back, bedsheet and comforter torqued around his body like a shroud.

He rarely sleeps soundly, but when he does, he sleeps like death.

So finding himself tangled up in his bed, dick aching and painfully hard, his throat dry -
His desire cranked to eleven and still spiking -

Is pretty uncharacteristic.

...To put it mildly.

Gabriel stares expressionlessly at the ceiling, furious and completely fucked out of his mind, before he manages to wiggle and untwist his left arm from the clinging grip of the blanket -

And he flicks his gaze to his wrist monitor.

[04:38].

Sunday morning, not even 0500 hours.

Gabriel shut his eyes, rubbing his hand across his forehead, his exhausted eyelids, his sleep-strung cheeks.

And he finally thinks in a quiet, almost miserable way:

*Oh my god, I’m screwed.*

(And not in a good way.)

...

It has been…

*Years*

Since Gabriel has fallen *this deep* for someone.

He hasn’t had a serious, committed partner in almost twice as long.

...He knows the statistics: a lot of military personnel marry young for the benefits, struggle with the long deployments, the distances, the tension, the fear, and either separate early or suffer through years of stress and complications. Fifteen to thirty percent of military marriages end in divorce before 30, but that doesn’t count the other issues, like stress, trauma, alcoholism. And with the high and frequent deployment rates for Special Forces units, Gabriel has never felt compelled to…

To stay with anyone.

...Or to ask them to stay with him.

And actual deployments are usually too focused, too intense, too emotionally demanding for anything beyond a raised eyebrow at a passersby, or a glance around a new town or village -

And then an eyeroll and his attention back into a book, or on a map, or writing down questions.

And lastly, the rule unspoken among 7436 and other A-teams:

Learn to live without -

Or fall for someone in your team.

...And risk all the consequences of *that.*
(He tries not to think about that one.)

(Fraternization rules are the least of an in-squad couple’s fears.)

(...He still remembers - alone in a quiet room in Eglin - how Serena had held his hand, tears in her usually stoic eyes, and murmured, “Thank you, Gabriel. For saving her.”)

(...And he still remembers -)

(How he had replied -)

(“...I don’t think I deserve the thanks, Rena.”)

(...It had been one life for another -)

(And one love for it too.)

He is self-aware enough to have recognized the sparks in his veins and the twists in his guts around Jack the last two months. He was even aware when the intensity of them had kicked up a notch this Resistance week.

And he had wanted to dive in deep.

(Had wanted to see what would blossom in the desert oasis in his heart.)

...Gabriel pulls his hand from his face, staring at the ceiling.

What he hadn’t been prepared for -

(Jack’s eyes are so blue -)

Was how Jack had been willing to pull him in -

(Jack’s eyes are a brilliant midnight blue, glowing in the draw of the night like stars underwater, as he smiles at him, tells him, “Thank you, Gabe -”)

Even deeper.

(Jack’s eyes are full with a hazy want, glazed over with desire, that deep, rich voice dripping with “Gabe, Gabe, more -” as he rocks his hips hard and -)

Gabriel’s cock throbs with ache as he remembers soft lips against his, kisses that both burn and melt, pleasure like liquid lightning inside him as Jack tightens around his fingers -

Gabriel scowls at the ceiling, contemplating, Do I just make it quick here? Or run to the barracks bathroom?

He gives a sidelong glance towards Felix, who is curled up on his side, facing towards the wall. Gabriel watches his back, seeing how shallow his breathing is, how Felix shifts a little. Gabriel makes a face to himself, thinking, He’s going to wake up soon.

Gabriel exhales slowly…

And then forces himself to sit up.

The air is that strange, tepid chill, the way it gets when people sleep in cold rooms - comfortable and
warm beneath blankets but crisp around the edges. Having occasionally camped in the cold, he’s learned the basics of “maximize sleeping warmth”, so he’s already wearing a sweatshirt, sweatpants, and socks. He shuffles himself out of the bed, grimacing slightly at how hard his dick is, how uncomfortable it feels to walk, even in sweatpants. As he approaches the door to their room, Gabriel scowls harder, bracing himself mentally for the impeding awkward jog-run-shuffle-stride down the hall to the barracks bathroom.

Not even 0500 hours on a free day, no one’s going to be awake yet, he tells himself in the least reassuring tone he can manage. All the same, he adjusts his dick a little, trying to make it less stupidly obvious, but there’s no helping the way the fabric of his sweatpants basically frames the thick outline.

So with even less reassurance, Gabriel sets his face, and thinks bluntly:

Screw it.

He smacks the open button -

And semi-bolts out the door, whipping right down the hall.

He sock-skids into the corner with the next barracks hall (25-48) and then hunches over a little, walking with what must be the most obvious, blatant stride in the world. As he slips past rooms 29-30 and 31-32, Gabriel thinks dryly, Maybe I should just head back and wait it out -

( I want you inside me,” Jack moans, kissing his desires to Gabe’s lips, words melting with want, fingers curled in Gabe’s hair, grinding his cock into Gabe’s palm and -)

Gabriel immediately picks up his pace to the bathroom, turning the corner into 49-72.

He reaches the end of the hall in record time, cutting left to the bathroom, and the door slides open automatically. He breathes a small sigh of relief at how empty it is - the sinks are open, there’s no water running in the shower room, and (from what he can see) all the toilet stalls are open.

(“Gabe, fuck, I’m gonna come, Gabe -” Jack gasps, his hips jerking sporadically, writhing in Gabe’s lap as he desperately tries to fuck himself on Gabe’s fingers deep inside him, before rocking himself forward to thrust his cock hard into Gabe’s fist and -)

Gabriel groans quietly to himself, left hand palming at his aching, stiff cock through the fabric of his pants, stumbling into the first available toilet stall. He shuts and latches the door, bracing himself against the right plastic wall -

As he finally -

Finally -

Slides his left hand down the inside of his boxer briefs -

And grips his hard, thick cock.

Sweet, hot relief floods through him as he strokes lightly, nearly moaning at his own touch, biting at his lower lip as he screws his eyes shut -

Which is -

Immediately -
A miserably perfect mistake.

“Harder, Gabe -” Jack pants in his head, moaning the words against Gabe’s lips, phantom fingertips gripping at Gabe’s chest as -

Gabe actually bites at his right knuckle, stifling a low, guttural groan of pleasure in the back of his throat, as he strokes harder, stronger, faster at the feeling of Jack’s voice and words and fingers in his head, the desire coiling hot and tight in his groin and -

(“Oh fuck yes, Gabe -” Jack gasps as he lowers himself, tight and wet and hot, so hot, onto Gabe’s cock, his muscles squeezing and clenching around Gabe’s stiff, aching pleasure and -)

(“God damn, Jack -” Gabe groans, his fingers digging hard into Jack’s hips as he almost rocks up into Jack’s dense, taut heat, his whole body surging to meet him, his other’s -)

(Jack gives him a heady, sensual smirk, so obviously self-satisfied and proud of himself - of them - as he straddles Gabe’s lap like a throne -)

(Like he belongs there -)

(Cock deep in Jack’s tense ache, Gabe almost comes right then and there as Jack places his hands on his chest, leaning forward slightly as he hums in a low, pleasure-rich voice:)

(“Show me how good you are, Gabe.”)

Pleasure spikes through him as Gabe tightens his grip, rolling his hips, thrusting his cock into his own fist, stroking hard hard harder at the same time. The edge lances burning and white hot - thick and full and wanting - inside him, burning heavy and sharp in his groin, up his throbbing cock and -

Gabe exhales breathlessly against the skin of his knuckles, moaning softly to himself as he strokes hard harder, fast faster, in and out, in and out as -

(“Oh fuck, Gabe -” Jack almost whimpers, starting to bounce up and down, up and down as Gabe thrusts his hips up up up, cock fucking deep deep deep in Jack’s thick, clenching heat and -)

(Gabe grits his teeth, concentrating hard as he digs his fingers into Jack’s hips -)

(And forces him down -)

(At the same time that he thrusts up -)

(Hard.)

(“Gabe!” Jack shouts, eyes wide with shocked pleasure, his whole body recoiling, back arching, grinding down on Gabe’s cock, his muscles squeezing hot and thick and full, so full, and fuck, it’s all Gabe can do to hold him there as he thrusts up up up, into that dense, perfect heat -)

(“Yes, right there, Gabe, yes, more -” Jack begs him, his voice cracking and fraying as pleasure pulses deep and taut and close, heavy and hard in Gabe’s cock, Jack is so tight and easy around him -)

Gabe’s hand squeezes reflexively, and he shudders, shivering against his own touch, brow furrowed deep as the ache and the pleasure start to twist tighter and tighter, he’s stroking harder, harder, his cock starting to drip -
Fuck - Jack, that’s it, nice and tight for me -” Gabe groans as they work and work each other in unison - Jack rocking and writhing on his lap, bouncing up and down, up and down, his muscles gripping Gabe’s cock wet and sweet, hot and hotter still -

(As Gabe fucks up up up, into that dense, clenching heat as deep and as hard as he can, thrusting and fucking faster, faster, the head of his cock rubbing heavy and dripping against Jack’s pressure and -)

(The want starts to unwind hard inside him and -)

Gabe’s stroking is uneven, unwound, fast, losing his own tempo, his hips thrusting shallow but fast, his grip tight and pressuring -

The ache in his cock is so full and so hard and -

(“Oh, Gabe, yes - give it to me, give it to me good -” Jack moans, leaning forward, kissing the words breathless and raw against Gabe’s lips -)

(As he squeezes Gabe so close -)

Gabe comes blissfully hard.

His whole body shudders, clenching down, tilting into the toilet as the edge comes white hot and wet, pleasure bursting hard and full inside him, and god, the release of it is sticky sweet and achingly perfect -

He opens his eyes, barely seeing as he pumps - one, two, one, two - more little strokes, shivering as he thumbs as the base of his cockhead -

And Jack’s voice murmurs sensual and coy in his head:

“So good, Gabe, I could ride you forever -"

Gabe groans, a few more waves of pleasure shuddering through him, some more of that wet, slick heat coming out of him. He just...breathes for a moment, inhaling sharp and exhaling slow, stroking softly to bring himself down from the hard high -

But every nerve coils at the ends, burning hot still, the sex of it still smoking at a simmer, muscles relaxing steadily -

And as he pulls the pieces of his undone senses and self back together, Gabe thinks softly:

Yeah.

I’m in deep.

…

He knows the statistics.

Four months on, four months off.

Never fully living - or loving - here or there.

Years upon years upon years of wandering hot mountains full of bristling grasses and blooming
poppies, putting on smiles in villages even as he feels eyes boring into his back, planning where the knife or the bullet goes, but he helps keep their children healthy and their livestock well, even if he will dismantle the cartel that secures the only fulltime protection they have -

Years upon years upon years of going back to base, back to L.A., back to places with clean water and rose gardens and shops that pay real taxes and restaurants that have healthcode permits, back to a sinking sense of surrealism as billboards advertise new cars or dentists -

Years upon years upon years of wondering when it will be his neck split open or his liver blasted out -

Wondering if he will have to do surgery on himself, half dying under blinding sunlight and smoke and bullets.

He knows the statistics.

How could he ever hope to find a partner that could take half that life -

Carry it with him -

Live and breath and love with Gabe’s heart transplanted in his chest, willing to stand for four months in one world, four months in a realm beyond touch or sight or sound -

Willing to hug Gabe when he comes back -

Or willing to kiss the flag on Gabe’s coffin when he doesn’t?

Gabe opens his eyes.

The toilet is hard and real and surreal, porcelain and awkward and unbearably tangible. His cock is softening in his hand, which is sticky with the remains of his pleasure. He’s still leaning up against the plastic wall of the stall, head empty, heart overwhelmingly lovesick -

Because he knows the statistics.

And yet…

All the same -

*I’ve never met anyone like him,* Gabe thinks quietly.

If there is one person who can make him see past the numbers -

It is Jack Morrison.

(What will blossom where the rich, deep rain falls in his desert oasis, seaswept stars blue in the eye of the storm?)

Gabriel sighs, pulling himself up off the wall, grabbing some toilet paper from the roll. He wipes the rest of his mess off his left hand, chucking the tissue in the water of the toilet, and cranks the handle.

As the water drains, he readjusts his pants, pulling the waistband back up around his hips, settling his shoulders as well as he can.

He turns, unlatching the door, wandering into the sink area. He approaches one of the faucets over the right trough, turning the water on, and thinks, *...I guess I need to just...be honest with him. Need to tell him that things will get difficult the longer this goes on -*
He rotely pumps some soap into his hands, scrubbing the bubbles across his fingers, palms, adding internally, *But god damn, only two months, Reyes?*

As he turns the faucet off, water dripping to a stop, Gabriel stares hard at the stainless steel of the trough, his gaze unseeing as he thinks:

...*Maybe I am just like Guerra said.*

He sighs, pulling some of the paper towels out of the dispenser, drying his hands as he rolls his eyes, twisting the self-deprecating knife into his thoughts, *I'm probably just being a dumbass like usual -*

“Oh, hey, Gabe.”

...

Gabe doesn’t even have time to *think* -

He just reacts on pure, *internally screaming PANIC.*

*AH FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FU* - shatters through his mind as he whips around to the left, eyes wide in shock and *abject terror*, floundering as he nearly smashes his hip against the steel trough and -

Chest heaving, body torqued around, Gabe struggles to stabilize himself against the trough and -

...Everything inside his head *breaks* again -

As Jack enters the bathroom -

Looking like he has stepped out of a dream.

*(24+76: More than just a statistic)*

Gabe has always found it a little awkward to compliment people for their physical appearances after some sort of physical task or labor - exercise, lifting weights, doing work, whatever. Complimenting the sheer act or effort is something he can do easily, but it’s a little different to say someone “looks good” when they just ran a marathon and are *drenched* in sweat and heat and uncomfortably-sticking clothes.

So the fact that Gabe’s mind *immediately zeroes in* on *“How the hell does he look so good at 4:45 am?”*

...Is uncharacteristic.

...To put it mildly.

Jack is not “cover of Sports Illustrated fake wet” attractive, but somehow he *is* photogenic: even under the harsh fluorescent lighting, he seems to *radiate* a brilliant, bright glow, a broad, mischievous grin wide and sly on his face. He’s dressed in a skintight running shirt and pants, the flexible fabric not *clinging* to his body in a droopy, awkward way, but instead hugging every dip and curve of his muscles *just right*. His hair is fluffed at slightly skewed angles, as if he got out of bed in a windstorm, but that plus the faint rosy flush on his cheeks somehow just makes the whole appearance attractive *and* charming, coyly roguish in a raw, rough, down-to-earth sort of way.
Jack doesn’t know why Gabriel is giving him that wide-eyed, almost horrified stare - maybe he’s not totally awake? he thinks passingly - but the older soldier looks a little... off; dressed in a sweatshirt and sweatpants, he still looks slightly roughed up from sleep. Both the thick, dark brown hair of his head and beard are fluffed in uneven, tousled ways, and there’s one lock on his head in particular that is curling over his right eyebrow with a little extra flair.

(Jack wants to reach out and comb his fingers through it.)

Jack gives him a big, slightly crooked smile as he says cheerfully, “You’re up early!”

“Wh-what are you doing?” Gabe stammers, words thick and hot in his throat and -

Jack tilts his head slightly, a little confused by the question, and answers honestly, “...Taking a shower?”

An image of steamy, glistening water dripping down Jack’s bare, broad back courses through Gabe’s head and -

Oh holy hell, end me, is all he can think -

“Did you forget that I run each morning?” Jack laughs, because there’s something incredibly endearing about the battle-hardened, nearly-thirty veteran being this flustered in the morning.

It’s only now that Gabe processes that Jack’s got a towel and another pair of pants over his right shoulder and a couple of shampoo and soap bottles cradled in his right arm.

“Although this week threw my game off,” Jack continues, as if Gabe isn’t struggling to hold himself together only a few feet away.

“Yeah, I uh - sorry, I forgot,” Gabe manages to grit out, “I’m not much of a runner.”

“Haha, I’ve noticed,” Jack chuckles, and there’s a genuine spark of soft, almost sweet humor in the blue of his eyes. And he adds, with that same gilded tone, “People usually tease me for it, but I’m just a morning person. Running in the morning just...gets me motivated.”

And then -

Jack thinks coyly, Time to savor this -

As he gives Gabe a rich, smoky grin, chuckling lowly, “Plus, having all that energy in bed at night and no one to share it with makes me restless, you know?”

Well, if you’re taking volunteers to help sate that, the one remaining witty braincell in Gabe’s head manages to offer coyly, as Gabe himself almost chokes on his own air -

“- So I prefer to run in the mornings instead of the evenings,” Jack says, his smirk fading into more of a pleasant smile, “You said you prefer more sports, right? Like basketball and football -”

“Y-yeah,” Gabe coughs slightly, recovering a bit, “And a little bit of soccer -”

“We should play sometime!”

Gabe freezes -

As Jack gives him a wide, happy grin, brilliant even in the hard-cut light of a bathroom in the middle of a secret military facility.
“Though, I’m gonna warn you right now, I’m terrible at one on one in any of them,” Jack laughs.

But all Gabe can think is:

**I need to tell him.**

*I need to tell him how difficult it is going to be.*

“Though maybe if I get Adrien to help me, I’ll stand a better chance -” Jack starts to say but -

“...Jack.”

The quiet, heavy tone of Gabe saying his name makes Jack stop immediately, a focused, concerned expression replacing his smile, his gaze concentrated on Gabe’s face.

There’s something...*different* about Gabe’s gaze now.

Something...*stronger.*

Like the smoky darkness has thickened, or the gilded flakes have deepened -

Or the whole *glow* of his eyes has gotten…

More spellbinding.

Gabe takes a half-step forward, pulling himself away from the sink, and Jack asks lowly, “...Gabe? Are you okay?”

“...Yeah,” Gabe says, taking another half-step closer to Jack, his voice low but his purpose clear, his need sharp and heavy and -

“...Yeah, I’m actually feeling great,” he continues, stepping closer and closer still to Jack, who is watching him almost...nervously, but Gabe can see -

*Can feel*

The slight tint of *hope* in the blue of Jack’s eyes and -

“I like being with you, Jack.”

...

The words *stun* Jack, his whole body *freezing*, breath catching in his heartbeat and -

He can’t stop himself -

As a massive, *radiant* grin spreads on his face -

And Gabe almost *melts* at the sight of it, his pulse *thrilling* in his veins as Jack *smiles*, half-laughing, half-giddy with himself, “Gabe! I’m! That’s - *fuck*, sorry, I wasn’t expecting that this morning - I like being with you too -”

“...But.”
Jack freezes again.

This time, the word feels like a shard of chilled glass in his veins.

And Gabe can feel how the word -

Once again -

Changes everything in Jack’s demeanor…

And in the space between them.

Jack looks frozen, eyes wide, smile cut, as if a surreal horror is splintering inside of him -

But Gabe remains -

Focused -

(He needs to know.)

As he continues quietly, “…It’s not what you’re thinking.”

Gabe comes right up into Jack’s space -

So close they could almost kiss -

His chest only inches from Jack’s, as Jack exhales the words, “I - I don’t understand -”

“I like being with you, I want to spend more time with you, and I will fight anything and anyone to keep it that way,” Gabe states, trying his hardest to keep some composure, trying not to wrap his arms around Jack and hold him until the look of guarded hurt and sweet caution leaves his face -

Jack’s brows scowl slightly as he murmurs, “I...I’m confused, Gabe. I mean, I feel the same way, but why -”

“But I need you to understand.”

Jack falls silent at that, just listening, as Gabe continues softly, “…Sometime soon - probably in the next month - they’re going to tell you to stop calling me ‘Gabe.’”

And Jack suddenly knows.

He realizes what Gabe means -

And Gabe asks quietly, “...Do you know why?”

(He needs to understand.)

“...Fraternization rules?” Jack answers, just as quietly, both a question and a statement.

“...Yes,” Gabe says, the word driving small shards of glass into his heart -

Because he will take his name in Jack’s voice, in Jack’s words, on Jack’s lips to the end of everything and -

“...Do you want me to stop calling you ‘Gabe?’”
Jack’s voice is soft - so soft - but so earnest, so honest -

That it cuts through the grim thoughts in Gabe’s head like water shattering dry stone earth and -

Jack’s eyes - peering into his own - are a starstudded sea blue, almost aglow, as if a light shines up from underwater -

“...Never,” Gabe exhales -

As gentle as a wish
And as enduring as a promise
Almost kissing the word to Jack’s lips.

Jack’s chest hitches slightly, as he inhales sharply, drinking Gabe’s response like a breath of fresh air, before he murmurs back, also almost against Gabe’s lips:

“...Then I won’t stop.”

Gabe shivers slightly at the look of firm resolution in Jack’s gaze, but he forces himself to say cautiously, “I just...want you to be careful, Jack. Do you understand?”

(He needs to understand -)

And Jack leans in slightly, murmuring the words breathlessly against his lips:

“...Yes, Gabe.”

...

It takes every ounce of willpower for Gabe not to crumble over that, swallowing his own heart hard in the back of his throat. Jack leans back slightly, his gaze just gently observing him, before he asks calmly, “...Did you want to slow down meeting each other?”

And the words alone, together hang unspoken in the air between them.

Gabe pauses for a moment, letting the feeling of them settle on his tongue, before he replies gently, “No.”

And then he asks Jack, “...Did you?”

Jack pauses - only to inhale softly - before he exhales honestly, “Not at all.”

Gabe watches him for a fraction of a second, before he closes his eyes, concentrating hard, He needs to understand...I need to stress to him that...

“...I want -” he starts to say, scowling as he fumbles over the words, because no, those aren’t -

And Jack waits, listening to him.

“...No, sorry, that’s not the right way to say this,” Gabe continues, struggling to make sense of the weight in his head and -

Jack looks at him, feeling no pressure, only curious patience, watching the range of emotions shift across Gabe’s regal face and -
Gabe opens his eyes, concentrating on Jack’s gaze, as he says carefully, “...I hope you’ll think about what that means, Jack.”

Jack says nothing -

But he knows.

“...I don’t want you to make this harder on yourself,” Gabe says, and each word is laden with both want and caution, the weight of words and rules unspoken - both hopeful and fearful - and he adds quietly, so quietly, “...I don’t want you to get hurt by something...avoidable.”

And Jack stares deep into those smoke-and-spun-gold eyes, seeing stars and sundrops behind the shades of obsidian and -

“...What if I want to?” he asks Gabe tenderly, brushing the tips of his left fingers against the back of Gabe’s right hand.

A small pang of bittersweet affection and thudding pulse jolts through Gabe’s right hand, and he finds himself automatically entwining his fingers with Jack’s, even as he says, “...Just... please. Think about it. Seriously. About what it means.”

And he squeezes Jack’s fingers waringly as he murmurs, “...About what I told you about Marc and Silvio.”

Jack grows somber at that.

“...C2 is always trouble. But that’s not the kind of hurt I’m talking about,” Gabe says, as Jack shifts his gaze downward, and Gabe can feel the way his thoughts are turning as he thinks over what he is saying.

“...You have one month before MOS placements,” Gabe reminds him patiently, “And then in another three months we get deployed. I...need to stress that I don’t get a say in what speciality or A team you get assigned to.”

A slight panic trips through Jack’s brain as he hears that because -

You knew that, the tired, cautious part of his mind chides him, as he looks back into Gabe’s patient gaze, You know you probably won’t ever see him again after SEP.

But even though he knows that -

Small, bitter fear slips glass shards in the back of his throat.

And Gabe almost Chokes at the look of nervousness and exhaustion in Jack’s eyes, because -

I hate making you look like that, Gabe thinks softly - so softly -

But we both need a dose of reality, Jack.

We both need to understand.

“...I need you to tell me that you’ll think about that,” Gabe murmurs quietly, sweetly, his voice like shadows drawn from broken twilight, “About all of it. That you’ll weigh each part seriously.”

Jack pauses, eyes downcast for a moment, before he looks back up at Gabe, asking a small
confirmation, “...In one month we get MOS assignments?”

“Yes,” Gabe answers him honestly, “Right after we finish Escape.”

Jack says nothing -

He just looks

Quietly contemplative -

The same look he’d worn as he’d watched the video of the Russian supersoldier, brows furrowed slightly, but eyes glazed over with a soft, shadow-tinted sadness.

And then -

Gabe lifts Jack’s left hand - fingers still entwined -

And carefully kisses the back of his fingers.

Jack’s breath catches in his lungs, heart pounding -

Gabe’s heart aches quietly, small perfect miseries as he murmurs against Jack’s skin:

“...Promise me you’ll think about what’s best for you first and foremost.”

Because he had to say it.

The words had to be spoken.

There are parts of life that are out of their hands.

And Gabe would rather burn his own blossoming oasis than let Jack mourn a love so subject to the chances of fate.

As Gabe lowers his hand, Jack swallows down the fear - a hard, bitter lump in the back of his throat - before he replies as honestly as he can, “...I’ll try, Gabe.”

Soft, tiny relief ripples through Gabe’s chest over the words -

“...I can’t promise that’s what I’ll decide.”

Gabe stops -

As he sees the stormy, fierce, tender darkness in Jack’s eyes -

And he rasps out warningly, ”Jack -”

“But I will think about it,” Jack answers.

Gabe scowls slightly, saying with a more serious tone, “...Six months of training and enhancements are not something to break a heart over.”

But then -

“No -”

Gabe’s heart almost stops -
As Jack lifts his hand to his lips -

And kisses his fingers so tenderly in return, saying with that beautiful, quiet half-smile:

“...But training and enhancements aren’t the parts worthy of a heart, Gabe.”

And Jack glances up, smile still pressed to the tips of Gabe’s fingers, and he smirks coyly, his eyes flashing a deep blue as he hums against Gabe’s skin, “...I meant every word I said the other day.”

Gabe shivers, as he barely manages to think:

*That is a good look for you, Jack.*

But then Jack’s smirk twists into a bittersweet smile, as he lowers Gabe’s hand and lets go of his fingers, saying more conversationally, “...But for you, I will think about it.”

Gabe already misses the feeling of Jack’s hand in his -

But it’s an honest, hard reality they must acknowledge.

And he stares straight into Jack’s eyes as he asks, “You mean it?”

Jack observes him for a second before -

Gabe almost gasps -

As Jack leans in a little -

But just enough to smirk so close to Gabe’s lips that he can feel the deep, rich draw of Jack’s grin, can feel the slow, sensual roll of Jack’s voice against his breath -

As Jack hums, murmuring the words to the ghost of a kiss between them:

“...I promise, Gabe.”

And then Jack settles back, looking every bit as self-satisfied, proud, and deeply content as he had in Gabe’s dream.

*(Like he belonged there.)*

Jack smirks at him, giving him a sly, sidelong glance before he turns to his right, heading into the shower section of the bathroom -

And Gabe finally exhales the breath caught in his heartbeat -

As he grumbles loudly, “That’s playing dirty, Morrison.”

“I’m only playing the way you taught me, Reyes,” Jack calls back, as he stops by the first shower. Gabe watches him for a moment - watches him set the bottles down on the raised tile of the shower stall, watches him fling the towel and pants over the door -

And then -

Blush flooding to Gabe’s cheeks -

Watches Jack tug the back of his skintight shirt up and over his head -
He’s pale from the lack of real sunlight they’ve had for the last few months, but *hot damn*, he is *toned*, all slick muscle and cut lines -

And Jack glances up at Gabe, who is still *gawking* -

And the coy *jackass* grins mischievously at him, saying tauntingly, “...Maybe you can join me in here soon.”

Gabe *choke*s , barely managing to sputter, “You - you *said* you’d think about it seriously!”

“And I will,” Jack says, still smirking as he adds, “And I’ll think about you seriously as well.”

And *god damn* -

The words and that smug smirk go straight to his cock.

Gabe grimaces, groaning loudly, “*Please*, Morrison -”

“Gabe?”

The quieter, smokier sweetness of his nickname catches his attention, and Gabe looks up from his floundering scowl -

As Jack gives him that miserably perfect half-smile again, saying in that low, tide-washed voice:

“...Thank you. For telling me.”

Gabe watches him for a moment, before he sighs slowly, saying, “...Thank you for listening, Jack.”

Jack grins at him, before he slips into the shower stall, latching the door behind him.

Gabe inhales slowly -

Before he exhales quietly -

And takes a half-step towards the bathroom door -

“It’ll be a real tight squeeze with two of us in here,” Jack says loudly from the shower section, his voice echoing slightly in the emptiness of the bathroom.

Gabe inhales sharply, furiously *willing* himself to concentrate on thoughts about Detroit, or Omnics, or runny eggs for breakfast -

“But you like it *tight*, right?” Jack asks with a loud and obvious smirk and *god dammit* -

Gabe’s cock *aches* at the mere suggestion and -

“You can be a real smartass, Jack!” Gabe calls back, but he can’t hide his own wide grin and deep blush from coloring the tone of the words.

*And I wouldn’t have it any other way*, he thinks, as he heads towards the door.

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[Marc.Guerra]: Alright, I have significantly better terms for you this time.
[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: not even a hello to start?

[Marc.Guerra]: I’m running on a tight schedule here, doctor

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: oh please

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: you Americans never have a true sense of time anyways

[Marc.Guerra]: You understand that if you agree to the offer, you’ll be working with Americans in the United States, right?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Yes

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But we all must make sacrifices in the name of science.

[Marc.Guerra]: ...How noble of you.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Though I’m afraid I have some...news.

[...]

[Marc.Guerra]: ...Let me guess:

[Marc.Guerra]: *Complicated* news?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Oh, you *do* have some humor, Sigma!

[Marc.Guerra]: You did make it obvious you wanted that answer.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: And just like that, it’s gone again.

[Marc.Guerra]: I’ve used up most of it trying to get back on Flores’ good side and haggling with a plumbing crew.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...What.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: What *was* this…“event”??

[Marc.Guerra]: It’s...really not something I can say over messages, to be honest

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...Now I’m not sure I want to know.

[Marc.Guerra]: Can we just get to your “news” and be done with it?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Fine, fine.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Though it is probably “bad” news to you.

[Marc.Guerra]: Oh great.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: China has made me an incredibly tempting offer.

[Marc.Guerra]: what?

[Marc.Guerra]: I messaged you *two days ago*
Marc Guerra: there’s no way they could have topped that [...]  

Mayegun Mulcahy: [...]  

Marc Guerra: ...I should have known  

Marc Guerra: Is it Tran? Bianchi?  

Mayegun Mulcahy: Now, now, agent - I simply don’t know what you’re talking about.  

Marc Guerra: who is selling our internal information to the Chinese program?  

Mayegun Mulcahy: I’m afraid I have not a clue.  

Mayegun Mulcahy: I’m a doctor, not a spy.  

[...]  

Marc Guerra: did you just quote Star Trek at me  

Mayegun Mulcahy: Are you going to get to the meat of the matter, or shall I settle in and make some tea?  

Marc Guerra: ...fine, tell me what they offered, and I’ll see if ours is better.  

Mayegun Mulcahy: You have no sense of romanticism, do you?  

Marc Guerra: Did you want me to send you a bouquet of roses and a bottle of wine?  

Mayegun Mulcahy: ...ew  

Marc Guerra: my thoughts exactly.  

Mayegun Mulcahy: I meant that a little tit-for-tat wouldn’t hurt your bidding odds, Sigma.  

Marc Guerra: There’s nothing sophisticated about living in a bunch of bunkers in the middle of Idaho, doctor.  

Marc Guerra: I will never be able to one-up the glamor of doping up soldiers in Shanghai, so believe me: “romanticism” isn’t really something I can offer you.  

Marc Guerra: All I have is the pragmatism of numbers, so let’s start there and negotiate.  


Mayegun Mulcahy: How did they say it to me…?  

[...]  

Mayegun Mulcahy: Ah, here it is:  

Mayegun Mulcahy: “If you can make a second Ghost, we will give you full dual citizenship here, the offer to work anywhere in China after the war, and full funding negotiations with the Ministry of Science and Technology for ten years post-war.”  

Marc Guerra: …
[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I pushed for a little more, however.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I asked for the use of the first, post-Omnic supercomputer in China as well.

[Marc.Guerra]: I see

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Technology and research will change after this war, agent.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I hope the United States has the foresight to understand that.

[Marc.Guerra]: You are aware that we are the number one military science country in the world, right?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Oh, believe me - I am keenly aware of U.S. military hegemony on technology and science research.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But that’s not what I want or am interested in.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: You might say that being stuck in bunkers in Idaho is “unglamourous” compared to Shanghai

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: but both are far, far better than being locked to a CIA laboratory in Virginia for the next thirty years

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Because above all else, Sigma…

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I have no interest in being restrained by your director’s petty ambitions and personal politics.

[Marc.Guerra]: China is far from the gold standard for scientific freedom, doctor.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: It’s not gold I’m after, Sigma.

[Marc.Guerra]: You think MSS is any different from the CIA? If not worse?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: No, but China is focused on the future, agent.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Do not misunderstand me: I am aware politics will invade my work no matter where I go. It is the unfortunate truth of conducting experiments in an imperfect, too-human world. There is no organization in the world committed to giving scientists and researchers of my ken the freedom and opportunities to experiment to their fullest capabilities.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But at the very minimum, China is attempting to broaden its own boundaries.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I do not need to remind you which company has literally established a functional, livable colony on the Moon, do I?

[...]  

[Marc.Guerra]: Point taken.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: So, agent, while I am eager to hear your offer, I am not unwise as to the strings that will be hidden within it.

[Marc.Guerra]: Everyone has a number they’ll accept, doctor.
[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Having my services and research bought out by the Central Intelligence Agency is valueless.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...No matter how many zeroes you put on the cheque.

[Marc.Guerra]: ...Those aren’t the numbers I was interested in discussing, doctor.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...??

[Marc.Guerra]: ...I’ll be honest: I didn’t expect China of all places to give you such a tepid offer.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...Hmm. Is that so?

[Marc.Guerra]: It reads to me like China is scared of you

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...

[Marc.Guerra]: and of the actual value of your work.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...

[Marc.Guerra]: Here’s the formal counter-offer from the United States Central Intelligence Agency:

[Marc.Guerra]: Unlimited budget. Right now. Tomorrow even, if you say yes today. As many biotic 3D printers and nanoproductive machines as you require, plus developing more equipment as you see fit.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: What

[Marc.Guerra]: We do have a tight schedule to follow, but you have the remaining four months of the formal training portions of the program, plus as much time as you need during deployment.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Locations?

[Marc.Guerra]: Current plans are for Company 1 to be in Detroit, Company 2 in Bakersfield.

[Marc.Guerra]: Should you join us, you will never have to be at the front lines if you don’t want to.

[Marc.Guerra]: LA and Chicago have some pressures on them right now, but accommodations and a research facility will be immediately available in both locations at your behest.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...

[Marc.Guerra]: I know they’re not Shanghai or Beijing, but...you know, a penthouse in LA is still a pretty great view.

[Marc.Guerra]: Let’s see, what else...oh yeah

[Marc.Guerra]: A director’s position in the U.S. SEP

[Marc.Guerra]: you will have the authority to override both myself and Flores on any medical matters.

[Marc.Guerra]: Dual citizenship with the United States, effective immediately if you agree.

[Marc.Guerra]: And the part that you actually want to hear
[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: …

[Marc.Guerra]: Any and all of the 132 candidates.

[…]

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Are you serious?

[Marc.Guerra]: 100%

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: any and all of them??

[Marc.Guerra]: If I could recruit more, I would. But my bosses wouldn’t budge on that.

[Marc.Guerra]: Between you and me, doctor - I would be content with two Death soldiers at minimum. But I also recognize that simple numbers is not how this works.

[Marc.Guerra]: Each candidate is an internal spectrum of probabilities.

[Marc.Guerra]: So I want to increase the odds for both of us.

[Marc.Guerra]: You can work on as many of the 132 candidates as you want. Whatever your research and ideas show.

[…]

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: So

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Flores proved amenable, did she?

[Marc.Guerra]: She was receptive to the discussion, yes.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Now, don’t toy with me, Sigma:

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: What are the strings in this?

[Marc.Guerra]: ...Both sides think you’re working “for them”, if you get my drift.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Of course they do.

[Marc.Guerra]: D/NCS thinks you’re going to want to join his ranks after the war.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I’m sorry - his ranks?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Why not the Science and Technologies Division?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Actually, where are all the DS&T members?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: They were the ones I worked with six months ago.

[Marc.Guerra]: I thought you weren’t interested in politics “invading” your work?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...It seems like you have a greater capacity for humor than you thought, Sigma.

[Marc.Guerra]: Sorry, couldn’t help myself with that one.

[Marc.Guerra]: Because it’s important for you to understand this: the D/NCS had a very serious
falling out with the director of DS&T after the SAD Enhancement Program.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Should I ask why?

[Marc.Guerra]: You can hazard a guess - not enough power, control, authority, etc, etc. “Us agents were his to direct, not DS&T’s.” “DS&T didn’t consult with him enough.”

[...]

[Marc.Guerra]: Didn’t help that the directors were sleeping with each other. Made things real ugly.

[...]

[Marc.Guerra]: You still there, doctor?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Why did I bother to ask?

[Marc.Guerra]: I did warn you about the politics part.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I need to learn to really listen to you when it’s about actual episonage...bullshit and not science.

[Marc.Guerra]: Worst part is I’m pretty sure they’re still sleeping together because my boss sent me a, “Why don’t you come to my office, baby?” text and I replied with, “Little hard to do that when I’m several thousand miles away, sir.”

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Sigma: S T O P.

[Marc.Guerra]: Someone needs to understand the bullshit I put up with for the sake of this program, Mulcahy.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: And you had to pick me?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: This is the worst selling point you could’ve ever made.

[Marc.Guerra]: I did say I haggled with plumbers, right?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Can we just get back to the main point, please?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: So D/NCS expects me to become a SAD agent somehow?

[Marc.Guerra]: Not strictly that, but yes - he’s almost certainly going to bend classifications to keep you in his directorate.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: That is exactly what I feared, agent.

[Marc.Guerra]: I’m aware, doctor.

[Marc.Guerra]: The other side of it is that Flores thinks you genuinely want to make...strides, improvements, progress in the war - however you want to call it. She thinks you’re invested in making sure the supersoldiers succeed.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...Clever how you bent the truth like that.

[Marc.Guerra]: Learning how to “not lie” is a skill in and of itself.

[Marc.Guerra]: Anyways, because I pushed that you were truly interested in ensuring all the
candidates are sufficiently enhanced, she overrode the D/NCS and Alpha and approved the use of all the candidates. Again, D/NCS and Alpha think they got the better end of the deal because they believe you’re headed for the CIA.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Hmm, but Flores doesn’t? Or she doesn’t know?

[Marc.Guerra]: She doesn’t think you are. She thinks that helping the CIA guarantee your dual citizenship access means she can get the Department of Defense and eventually the general CIA director to throw their weight around and stop the D/NCS.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Of course. So she expects me to be an Army scientist, does she?

[Marc.Guerra]: She’s entertaining the notion. She seems to believe that if SEP “Round 1” is a success, we can start phasing additional rounds all throughout the Special Forces and the main Army.

[...]  

[Marc.Guerra]: ...Did that get your attention?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: You’re being genuine, are you?

[Marc.Guerra]: You should consider your messenger, doctor.

[Marc.Guerra]: I am being genuine, but I have no way of guaranteeing that you’ll be put in a position where enhancements on that scale can be approved.

[Marc.Guerra]: Something of that magnitude would require an Executive Order.

[Marc.Guerra]: ...And if you dislike the petty internal politics of the CIA, you do not want to escalate this to the President of all people.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...Touché.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: So let me ask you one additional thing, Sigma:

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: What is your offer?

[...]  

[Marc.Guerra]: Carlyle once stated that the history of the world is but the biography of great men.

[Marc.Guerra]: But that is untrue.

[Marc.Guerra]: The history of the world is but a song of war, and the peaces in between but interludes.

[Marc.Guerra]: We tell our songs and our stories like victory is all that matters: introduction, exposition, build up, conflict, climax, and resolution.

[Marc.Guerra]: No matter if the heroes triumph or fall to tragedy, the end brings accomplishment. Finality. A sensation that nothing ever lasts forever.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...

[Marc.Guerra]: But the song does not end. And neither does history.
[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I did not take you for an anarchist and a nihilist.

[Marc.Guerra]: I am not either of those.

[Marc.Guerra]: I do not want to end it.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ?

[Marc.Guerra]: I want to write the next stanza.

[Marc.Guerra]: Craft me the instruments, doctor, and I will play you a symphony.

[Marc.Guerra]: Build me soldiers, and I will make a choir.

[...]

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I take back what I said about you being unromantic.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I never took you to be such a poet, agent.

[Marc.Guerra]: I have my moments.

[Marc.Guerra]: I can offer you the resources that have been given to me: unlimited budget, equipment on-hand, labs close to the front, dual citizenship, and - for now - 132 candidates.

[Marc.Guerra]: But I need an answer now.

[...]

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...Well, congratulations.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Those are the only numbers I’m interested in.

[Marc.Guerra]: In three days I’ll get you from Dublin.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: A week.

[Marc.Guerra]: We don’t have time for that, doctor. Five is the most I can afford to do.

[Marc.Guerra]: With the entire Great Lakes region blacked out, the flight there and back is arduous and almost double the regular travel time.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Fine. Five days. I have to get my affairs in order.

[Marc.Guerra]: What are you going to do - video chat your goodbyes to the gorillas on the moon?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: you think you’re so clever, don’t you?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But some of us are not super secret agents who can just jet somewhere for four months with no notification.

[Marc.Guerra]: ...Fair enough.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...Four months, you said?

[Marc.Guerra]: Plus deployment, so really, there isn’t a time cap.
[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Not in an ongoing experiment sense, perhaps, but logistically, the ability to supply routine injections in the field will be a...nightmare.

[Marc.Guerra]: We haven’t fully figured out our plan for that.

[Marc.Guerra]: The original plan was to leave that for our company-level medical coordinators.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Please, these contain almost 100x the temperature-sensitive biotic materials as a biotic field

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: The hazards of the transgenic DNA denaturing are immense. The truth about the situation is that we effectively only have four months to get viable candidates past the 99.9% enhanced cells threshold.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Hitting the threshold itself is easy enough.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: It’s the last .1 to .001 percents that are the most difficult parts.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: The occasional non-enhanced white blood cell is fine, but if that fraction of a percent contains a neuron? Or a cardiac myocyte?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: All you get is another dead body.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Only instead, 99% of the heart or brain is turned to trehalose sugar crystals.

[Marc.Guerra]: uh what

[Marc.Guerra]: I thought the whole point was to not have dead bodies?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: …

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Did you just attempt to secure my research services without knowing how the enhancements work

[Marc.Guerra]: Mulcahy, I know how they work. I get the general principles of it.

[Marc.Guerra]: But to turn this back on you

[Marc.Guerra]: I’m a spy, not a doctor.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...I suppose I deserve that one.

[Marc.Guerra]: Are you saying it’s impossible in the timeline we have proposed?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...No, it’s not “impossible” per se…

[Marc.Guerra]: C’mon, Mulcahy, we don’t have time to dance around this.

[Marc.Guerra]: You told me two days ago that it was doable, and I’m aware that the Russian and Chinese programs have produced at least one Death soldier each.

[Marc.Guerra]: Gene therapy is a matter of probabilities - if you throw enough numbers at the situation, realistically, some of them will hit and that’s what we want, right?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: That is one of the most horrific ways I’ve ever seen it described, but sure, whatever works for you.
[Marc.Guerra]: Work with me here, doctor. You’re coming into the world of soldiers and spies - there won’t be many academics in the middle of Idaho for you to consult with.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Fine. How do I put this…

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Doable? Yes, of course.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But guaranteed? That is a different story.

[Marc.Guerra]: …

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: You’re right, as you usually are: the Chinese program lowballed me and themselves. But it’s not entirely a matter of “numbers”, to put it in those terms.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Getting all 132 U.S. candidates to have the majority of their entire cells enhanced is actually quite easy. You have probably accomplished it already. Or, if you have not, your program will almost certainly do it within the next two weeks.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Assuming you are on a schedule similar to the one we used for the CIA and the one I developed for Russia, before they closed the program.

[Marc.Guerra]: I would say that we’re effectively keeping pace.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Good. And if all you want are tough, hard-to-kill soldiers, then you could ship the entire lot of them out tomorrow.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Getting to 99% is far, far trickier, but with rigorous testing, a careful schedule, and the right vectors, we will get there, probably within a month or two.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But it is hitting 99% and then all the minute “fractions” of the remaining percent which are the most difficult challenges.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: The issue is one of permanence and precision.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Transgenic package uptake is relatively meaningless when it occurs in short-term cells like white blood cells. Most of them die fast even under normal circumstances.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: What you truly want is targeted transgenic uptake in the stem cells in the bone marrow, because those will continue to produce enhanced white blood cells for the rest of the organism’s life.

[Marc.Guerra]: Right. And from my understanding, we’re following the list of enhancements you gave the program, so we should be doing that, right?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Yes, in theory.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But even then, the true problem is beyond that.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: The cells that - in theory - should never die in an individual’s lifetime…or rather, should only start dying with natural causes of death.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Neurons in the brain and spine, cardiac myocytes in the heart, all of the body’s stem cells.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: If these start to die off - either via trauma, disease, or simply age - then you have a problem well beyond what transgenes can solve.
[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: *These* are the cells that truly require the enhancements.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But for obvious reasons, they are also the most difficult, most complicated, and most delicate to deliver and ensure transgenic package uptake.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Crossing the blood-brain barrier with a high enough percent of efficiency *and* actually getting successful transfection remains the biggest hurdle in all of applied genetic therapy.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Even my own refined vectors only hit approximately 63% efficiency.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: To compensate and reduce the risk of immunogenicity, cerebral neural vectors are spread out into multiple low dosages.

[Marc.Guerra]: Right, which is why I’m offering you any and all of the candidates that you think are the closest to achieving that.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Aside from protein activity imaging, there is *no way* to guarantee that all 100% of a candidate’s cerebral neurons or cardiac myocytes *have* the transgenic enhancements.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: These are *lifetime* cells that do not replicate themselves once an individual has reached physiological adulthood.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: All non-vector methods of transgene insertion are far, *far* too invasive for these cells and risk killing them. Therefore, we must operate with imperfect vectors, and continuously push for low dosages to overcompensate to increasingly narrow our odds.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Imagine a standard target 200 metres away. This target represents the brain. Your weapon is a shotgun with pellets. But your objective is not to merely hit the target.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Your objective is to cover every last millimetre of red and white paint in pellet shot.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: You will see diminishing returns with every shot you take.

[Marc.Guerra]: ...Well, damn.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: It doesn’t end there.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: That is simply your objective.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Imagine two more targets, on either side of the first. These represent organs like the liver.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: However, these are only 100 metres away.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But there is a problem.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: If your pellets cover a certain threshold of *these* targets - say 40% - your patient gets liver damage.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Do you understand, *spy*?

[Marc.Guerra]: ..*Oh*.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: In more...remedial gene therapy for neurodegenerative diseases, the objective is more impactful but also more lenient. You only want to apply enough transgenes to remediate
enough of the condition-causing neurons so that the “corrected neurons” outweigh and counteract the lingering uncorrected neurons.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: In our metaphor, so long as the majority of the brain target is covered, you have succeeded.

[Marc.Guerra]: Right.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But fighting death itself?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: No one has attempted this.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: And here is the true risk of your so-called numbers, Sigma:

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: You will almost certainly get one self-reviving soldier.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Probability indicates you will likely get two or three in addition.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But it is not a simple matter of “throwing numbers” at the problem, not truly.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: To put it simply, the problem is thricefold:

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: The first, as I said above: transgenic enhancement is not perfectly precise in terms of guaranteeing that all the vital, long-living cells have succeeded in transgenic uptake.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: The second is that no vector is perfect and with every dosage, we run the risk of hitting “nontargets” accidentally.

[Marc.Guerra]: ...I think I can guess the third.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...Probably.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: The third is that we do not fully know or understand the phenomenon behind activating the so-called “vitality drain”, resulting in a successful self-revival.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I simply do not have enough data - enough consistent data - to discern a full pattern.

[Marc.Guerra]: Could all 132 candidates help?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: They’ll...help in the sense that they will help me narrow down a long list of plausible hypotheses.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But in terms of developing a true, working, applicable understanding of the vitality drain and self-reviving condition and abilities?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...I do not want to get your hopes up, but the truth is that: no, they will not be enough to refine the transgenic enhancement model past an experimental phase.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Maybe with a thousand soldiers. Maybe with several thousand, you could achieve some level of consistency and replicable effects.

[Marc.Guerra]: I hate to break it to you, doctor, but not even the United States could provide that.

[Marc.Guerra]: The magnitude of it would never get past Congress’ approval.
[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I am aware of that, yes.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: And I hate to break it to you, Sigma, but the fine line to this is that…

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: A true understanding of this condition will likely never exist in our lifetimes.

[Marc.Guerra]: ...I see.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Even if we were optimistic about our chances of winning this war with the Omnics, you would effectively need to experiment on a small army - one that sees regular and consistent combat - to achieve anything close to it.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: And considering that Russia closed their SEP, China refuses to fully engage with me...the odds are not good for that.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: It would have to bank on a country like the United States, India, or Brazil to come into greater fruition.

[Marc.Guerra]: So even if I could secure another two Companies for a second US SEP with Flores’ help, it wouldn’t be enough?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: As I said, progress is progress. Another two Companies would still be valuable from a pure data perspective.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: All research is worth pursuing, no matter how...terrible the odds.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But again...you will lack consistency or a fully-realized transgenic enhancement model predictor for likely decades to come.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I will be able to tell you, based on imaging and general arrays, which candidates at the end of four months are the closest in probability to achieving the self-reviving abilities.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But if you want to continue to increase your odds, we are going to need to devise a way to deliver consistent transgenic injections at high frequencies for some time to come.

[Marc.Guerra]: Then how in the hell did Russia and China already make some?

[Marc.Guerra]: Pure luck?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...Let me repeat this:

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: “But for obvious reasons, they are also the most difficult, most complicated, and most delicate to deliver and ensure transgenic package uptake.”

[Marc.Guerra]: ...Oh damn, seriously??

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...Incredible how your program is shockingly naive on these things.

[Marc.Guerra]: ...mierda.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Why do you think the Russian and Chinese programs had such high mortality rates for the “training” parts of their enhancement programs?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: They changed their transgenic vectors to target these cells, which is something I explicitly advised them not to do without my direct supervision.
[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Even the most skilled applied nanobiologists and geneticists would hesitate to alter the vectors or target such vital cells.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: The potential destruction of specific neurons or even several cardiac myocytes results in death of the individual.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: On top of that, a poorly chimerized vector may “hit” other vital organs like the liver, or trip an immune reaction.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: As I wrote above, both the model and the technique are still far too experimental to simply “adjust” parameters on the fly.

[Marc.Guerra]: ...Next you’re going to tell me that double or triple doses are a bad thing.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: Ha! Of course they are!

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But as long as the vector and the internal transgenic packages haven’t changed, and the candidates’ immune systems aren’t reacting to them, then concentration can vary from time to time.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: When you change vectors, or alter transgenic packages, or rework the core components of the enhancements, you play with biotic fire. The lucky Russian and Chinese candidates got intensely ill as their immune systems went haywire, or the transgenic package vectors broke down and destroyed their liver cells.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...The lucky ones.

[Marc.Guerra]: I see.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: In four more months - at a cumulative total of six months - the US program will statistically have crossed at least ten soldiers into the 100% zone. Again, this is based only on probabilities and likelihoods. So it could be more, it could be fewer. And how many of those trigger the self-revival ability is completely unknown.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: If you want to increase those statistics, then we will need to think of a way to safely and consistently provide transgenic vector injections during deployment.

[Marc.Guerra]: ...You said it was more delicate than the contents of a biotic field, right?

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ...Yes. The nanobots in the biotic field help revitalize the biotic components, so even without refrigeration, they can be easily stored and carried in the desert.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: But the transgenic enhancements are a different beast. Not only will they need to be produced within a few hours’ travel - so LA and Chicago could work - but they will need to be stored and injected safely.

[Marc.Guerra]: ...

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: I imagine this might change some of your deployment tactics?

[Marc.Guerra]: ...Not necessarily.

[Mayegun.Mulcahy]: ? Oh? Have you thought of something already?

[Marc.Guerra]: ...I might.
Marc.Guerra: Have you seen the new chestplates being used?

Mayegun.Mulcahy: ?

[[Marc.Guerra] has sent a picture.]

Marc.Guerra: These ones.

Mayegun.Mulcahy: Oh! The ones that have the biotic field storage and emitter in the center!

Mayegun.Mulcahy: I have. They seem to be working decently well for combat medics.

Marc.Guerra: ...If we were to modify those to store and carry the enhancement serums, and potentially inject users…

Marc.Guerra: ...Could that work?

...]

Mayegun.Mulcahy: ...And here I thought you were just a spy.

Mayegun.Mulcahy: Send me your blueprints or schematics or whatever. I’ll get started on redesigning them.

Marc.Guerra: I thought you were a doctor, not an engineer.

Mayegun.Mulcahy: And I thought we were working on a tight schedule?

Marc.Guerra: I deserve that one.

Mayegun.Mulcahy: ...My mother was an engineer. I have some familiarity with designing things, especially biomedical equipment.

Marc.Guerra: Hm, I didn’t actually know that?

Mayegun.Mulcahy: Really? She received a good offer from the founders of Ironclad to help them develop the guild, which is why she left Nigeria.

Mayegun.Mulcahy: And then she met my father here in Ireland and well…

Mayegun.Mulcahy: the rest is history.

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Chapter End Notes

Welcome to your life
There's no turning back
Even while we sleep
We will find you acting on your best behavior
Turn your back on mother nature
Everybody wants to rule the world

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And with that, Resistance week is concluded!

I normally prefer NOT to put story-heavy/plot-focused moments at the beginning or ending of smut chapters, but it felt...really difficult to break up the follow of the conversation between Gabe and Jack from Gabe's thoughts immediately before it. Like the previous chapter, this whole thing was meant to wrap up the emotional and romantic aspects that had been building for a long while now.

And like I said at the very beginning of the Resistance arc, I really...wanted to try to balance "the personal vs. the impersonal" aspects of military programs like this. Part of that is building up how the military itself can be restrictive to emotions and romance all on its own, the other part is making background characters who can "enforce" that. I am positively THRILLED you guys are so receptive to Guerra - he was always meant to be the personification of the program itself and the larger war.

However, he is a spy.

...Not a doctor.

And behind every brilliant scientist -

Is their teacher.

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Máyégún: Yoruba for "Make living perfect"

Mulcahy: Irish Gaelic, meaning "a descendant of a devotee of Cathach", a personal name meaning "warlike" or "battle". An Cathach was used as a rallying cry and protector in battle.

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Chapter Summary

"We are bedeviled by the mysteries of creation."

It takes War to create soldiers.

"Science can reveal the truths that lie behind these many questions."

But it takes Life -

"What we learn can unlock the true potential of humanity."

To create Death.

(And it takes a professor to inspire a student.)

Chapter Notes

Tags have been updated! Please be sure to review them!

In case you need it again, this is the map of the main SEP facility. This chapter is located mainly in the Upper Access Hallway and the Medical Ward Hallway

Partial transcript of Doctor Moira O'Deorain’s expert witness testimony during the 2065 United States Congressional investigation of the Omnic Crisis Soldier Enhancement Program

Principle investigative committee: A joint committee between the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the United States Senate Committee on the Armed Services

Date: March 18, 2065

Date leaked to the public: March 19, 2065

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RODRIGUEZ: Doctor, I and the other committee members appreciate your insight on the scientific aspects of the transgenic enhancement model.

O’DEORAIN: Thank you, Senator.

RODRIGUEZ: However, there has been another subject which has - quite frankly - concerned me far more seriously than the actual scientific model itself. And that is the subject of Doctor Mayegun Mulcahy.

(Audible background discussions)
CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Silence please.

RODRIGUEZ: From my understanding of it, doctor, you were a student under Doctor Mulcahy at the time, correct? Both at the start of the Omnic Crisis and when the U.S. Soldier Enhancement Program began?

O’DEORAIN: I was. I was a doctorate candidate in her nanobiology and genetics program at Trinity College in Dublin.

WONG: Pardon me for interrupting, Senator Rodriguez, but - doctor, did you say a doctorate candidate?

O’DEORAIN: Yes, I did.

WONG: If I am not mistaken, doctor, you were nineteen when the U.S. Soldier Enhancement Program began, correct?

O’DEORAIN: I was. I completed my undergraduate degree at Trinity College at the age of seventeen, and was immediately accepted as a Ph.D. candidate afterwards.

(Audible discussions.)

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Order, please, order.

WONG: Thank you for the clarification, doctor. That is highly impressive.

O’DEORAIN: Thank you, Senator.

WONG: Sorry for the interruption, Senator Rodriguez. Please continue your line of questioning.

RODRIGUEZ: Thank you, Senator Wong. Doctor O’Deorain, were you aware of Doctor Mulcahy’s involvement in the U.S. Soldier Enhancement Program?

O’DEORAIN: I had my suspicions, but no, I was not formally informed of her decision to join the program.

RODRIGUEZ: Could you elaborate on that, doctor? And could you describe when you became aware of Doctor Mulcahy’s involvement?

O’DEORAIN: At the risk of being overly honest, Senator, I will admit that I do not know if I can give you a precise timeline of the events. When the Crisis began in 2046, the situation in Dublin - indeed, in Ireland as a whole - was very different than that of mainland Europe, or here in the United States. I am no military historian or strategist, but most Irish citizens are very...aware of our long and storied history as an island nation, both in relation to Europe and to the United Kingdom.

O’DEORAIN: The Crisis was not significantly different in that regards. Our distance from the main fronts in Europe and even our relative distance from the small Central Core in southern Britain protected us from the worst effects. The harshest impacts to the Fórsaí Cosanta (translation: Irish Defence Forces) were under the jurisdiction and command of the United Nations.

RODRIGUEZ: If I may interrupt for a brief moment, doctor - just to clarify, you are NOT talking explicitly about Overwatch, correct?

O’DEORAIN: No, Overwatch had not been formally created at the time. The Fórsaí Cosanta have provided services to the United Nations well before the Crisis, so when the war began, many soldiers
and military medical personnel were already organized within the United Nations.

RODRIGUEZ: I see. Thank you for the explanation, doctor. Please continue.

O’DEORAIN: I would say that Ireland’s greatest...impacts, if you could call them that, were in resource organization. Keep in mind that I worked only as a civilian student at the time - I could not tell you how the government operated specifically during the Crisis.

RODRIGUEZ: I see.

O’DEORAIN: If Doctor Mulcahy had any formal discussions or advice for the government, I was not aware of that either. However, I will say that when the Crisis began, Doctor Mulcahy began receiving numerous calls and meetings, which were unrelated to her then-current research.

RODRIGUEZ: Unrelated? You mean unrelated to the transgenic enhancement model?

O’DEORAIN: My apologies - no, I did not specifically mean that. All of Doctor Mulcahy’s research pertained to the transgenic enhancement model. It was and is a vast umbrella term for a number of specific experimental therapy forms related to improving a multitude of health issues through transgenic package uptake.

O’DEORAIN: At the time, Doctor Mulcahy was conducting transgenic research on a number of animal specimens with different partner organizations. My doctorate topic was a research question related to the improvement of genetic diseases and degenerative conditions, so I was permitted to explore the topic in her lab and through these animal specimens.

O’DEORAIN: However, when the Crisis began, she started receiving a number of...engagements, shall we say, that I and her other students were not permitted to attend or be involved in.

WONG: Pardon my interruption, doctor, but was this common behavior? Letting graduate students attend research meetings or call?

O’DEORAIN: It depends on what the topic of the meeting or call was about, but yes, Doctor Mulcahy was quite...forward about her expectations of our involvement in her overall research and her daily activities.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Is that not overly familiar? It appears to toe the line between professionalism and personal relationships. Or at least, that is how it appears to me.

O’DEORAIN: As an academic then and now, I would describe this as rather typical of many advisor-student relationships. The whole purpose of the relationship is to develop a mentor-mentee attitude and open discussion on the student’s research.

O’DEORAIN: However, I will say that...Doctor Mulcahy had a certain laissez-faire attitude towards research that...hmm...

(Slight pause.)

O’DEORAIN: Apologies to the committee - it is difficult to put this subject into words.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Please take your time, doctor.

O’DEORAIN: Thank you, Chairwoman.

(Slight pause.)
O’DEORAIN: Doctor Mulcahy had a very open ideological belief towards research - her research, her students’ research, all research, in fact. She was not one to shy away from difficult topics or intense theoretical models. And she encouraged the same approach to developing and conducting research in us...and in everyone she worked with, regardless of their actual scientific background.

O’DEORAIN: She did not believe in being...restricted by situation or circumstance. The Crisis was little more than a change in the weather to her. Her work, her ideas, her research would not be tempered by something as...malleable as a war.

O’DEORAIN: As graduate students, we were expected to rise to the challenge of her research or transfer to another department. In my time there, both as an undergraduate and as a doctorate candidate, I saw many students who could not handle the freeform pressure of her focus.

WONG: Excuse me, doctor, but as you said earlier - you were quite young during this time. Did Doctor Mulcahy’s attitude intimidate you?

O’DEORAIN: I have never been frightened or overwhelmed by others’ expectations of me, Senator. In fact, I would say that Doctor Mulcahy’s attitude in my late adolescence was...quite freeing.

WONG: If it is not too personal, doctor, would you care to explain?

O’DEORAIN: As best as I can, Senator. I entered university young by many standards. Intellectually, keeping up with the rigors of the work was hardly a challenge, but...socially, emotionally, physiologically, the difference even between a fifteen-year-old and an eighteen-year-old is...daunting. The brain undergoes quite a rapid series of development in late adolescence and early adulthood.

O’DEORAIN: Doctor Mulcahy did not care about how young I was: she treated me with the same compassion, respect, and focus that she gave all her students. She would tell me that those destined to conduct research that could reshape humanity would rise to the top regardless of circumstances, but that she was prepared to facilitate and encourage that growth as necessary.

O’DEORAIN: By the time that the U.S. Soldier Enhancement Program began, she saw me as less of a student, and more of a protégé. An assistant. Someone she could trust to handle her day-to-day work as greater ideas - and greater challenges - came her way.

RODRIGUEZ: Do you think this influenced her decision to join the U.S. Soldier Enhancement Program?

O’DEORAIN: In retrospect, almost certainly.

WONG: Did this attitude of very open freedom in her research and her department not worry you, doctor?

O’DEORAIN: As I said before, no, not at all. I was never worried about it.

O’DEORAIN: In fact, I believe it encouraged me to become the scientist that I am today.

RODRIGUEZ: But does this not seem extreme to you, doctor?

O’DEORAIN: Extreme? Science is not concerned with extreme, Senator - science is the pursuit of truth and the understanding of the phenomena which shape life.

RODRIGUEZ: And that was Doctor Mulcahy’s belief as well?
O’DEORAIN: Beyond a shadow of a doubt, yes.

RODRIGUEZ: By almost all other witnesses and accounts here, doctor, what occurred in the U.S. Soldier Enhancement Program was extreme. Several of the other scientific expert witnesses have gone so far as to describe the entire program as an abuse of the transgenic enhancement model. One of those witnesses called it “a perversion of the model’s original objectives” - that is, the model is intended to benefit those who receive the treatment. Instead, much of the evidence shows that the enhancements the candidates received went well beyond these parameters.

RODRIGUEZ: Do you disagree with these other accounts then?

O’DEORAIN: So the Strike-Commander of Overwatch did not benefit from these enhancements, did he, Senator?

(Shouting in the room.)

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Silence! Silence!

(Room quiets.)

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: I understand that this is a very sensitive topic, but we will have order and organization in these investigation hearings. Please continue, Doctor O’Deorain.

O’DEORAIN: It seems to me that the soldiers who survived the war have benefited greatly from their enhancements, Senator. From what I can see based on the list of declassified candidates, many have gone on to achieve very accomplished careers.

O’DEORAIN: I have yet to see a single one of them with serious side effects resulting from the enhancements. Unless, of course, there is additional classified information which is not being shared with me or the other expert witnesses?

(Slight pause.)

RODRIGUEZ: You have all the information that this committee has access to, doctor.

O’DEORAIN: Then perhaps, Senator, this committee ought to spend less time questioning the nature of Doctor Mulcahy’s research principles and more time investigating the efficacy of her actual work.

RODRIGUEZ: This committee is concerned with uncovering the truth about human rights abuses and the breaking of ethical boundaries as committed by the United States’ military during the Omnic Crisis, doctor. Part of that is investigating Doctor Mulcahy’s research philosophy, which directly impacted the Soldier Enhancement Program and individuals within it. As the chief medical director in the program, Doctor Mulcahy was responsible for both the implementation of her transgenic enhancement serums and the consequences of them.

RODRIGUEZ: That includes the treatment of the candidates under her ministrations and the impacts to their lifelong conditions resulting from it. Not all health and wellness are exclusively in physical fitness, Doctor O’Deorain.

O’DEORAIN: And I would remind you, Senator, that the mere fact that you can conduct this investigation is because humanity won the Omnic Crisis.

(Slight pause.)
O’DEORAIN: So easy to establish concerns for ethics in a time of peace, isn’t it? Where was this concern when the war was going on? You called me in to offer testimony on the nature of the enhancements, but it is your country which actually used them. To condemn my predecessor and mentor for her assistance in your success when the tides of history have turned looks an awful lot like scapegoating your own military’s decisions on one person.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Doctor, we have appreciated your insight on the transgenic enhancement model, but I will remind you to stay on topic.

O’DEORAIN: Forgive me, Chairwoman, but is this not exactly what this committee is investigating? The ethics and quality of the Soldier Enhancement Program run by the United States military?

O’DEORAIN: Obviously I cannot speak to the nature of the program itself, but if you are asking for my testimony on the nature of the enhancements, then this is entirely within my expert qualifications.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Doctor -

O’DEORAIN: You call it unethical, but was she cutting eyes open and inserting cybernetic lenses for snipers to kill better?

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Doctor, that is enough -

O’DEORAIN: Or putting physiological giants in rocket armor with photon shields and then sending them to their deaths against Bastions?

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Doctor O’Deorain, you will stop -

O’DEORAIN: Or perhaps you consider it unethical for a corporation to design massive, gun-wielding robots with no oversight and then refusing to properly prosecute the corporate decision-makers who created them?

O’DEORAIN: Why are you so keen on vilifying a dead doctor’s research when the former heads of Omnica have reaped profits off their own war??

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: ENOUGH.

(Slight pause.)

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Doctor O’Deorain, that is enough. The committee thanks you for your testimony. You might be summoned for additional investigation questions in the future, but for now, you are dismissed.

O’DEORAIN: Very well. But I hope that the next time this nation rides on the coattails of Strike-Commander Morrison and his successes, you remember who made him what he is.

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24+76: Escalation

Sunday, March 3, 2047: 0600 hours - in the mess hall in the main SEP facility

“Alright, everyone, listen up!”

It’s getting easier for Carolina to take command of the group’s attention: this time, almost everyone
quiets immediately, their attention towards the end of the mess hall, where she stands before the directors’ table.

*Maybe they’ll actually make soldiers out of us yet,* Gabriel thinks dryly, chuckling as he lifts his mug of coffee for a long sip.

(The words of Wes’ joke die off as he glances towards the directors’ table, and Jack sets his fork down, thinking quietly, *I guess we should’ve expected an announcement today - new month and everything.*)

It’s not nearly spring, not yet, but the effects of time slipping forward *are* becoming more noticeable. The sun doesn’t fully rise until roughly 0700 hours, but the dawn is already starting to crack behind the mountains - a soft simmer of night giving way to twilight, the edges tinted purple fading into pink. Gabriel has his back turned to it, sitting at the end of the senior soldiers’ table as usual, but the cascading impacts of increasing daylight have been palpable: more people awake *earlier*, more energy -

But not necessarily more *focus*.

There’s an obvious, eager restlessness among the group, stemming almost entirely from being kept *contained* within the facility. After the free days following Resistance had ended, they’d practiced a few more “snow drills” outside (though the first one had been a borderline disaster as nearly all of the Junior and 18X candidates had steadily abandoned their drills to throw snowballs at each other). But relatively short, relatively controlled drills weren’t enough for most people.

...Especially since it *appeared* like the enhancements were finally, *truly* starting to kick in.

People were - *are* - energized, blurring through basic fitness drills and weight training and sparring. Even for Gabriel, it’s difficult to say if they’re *actually* improving in their hand-to-hand combat or tactical coordination, or just getting *faster* and more *reflexive* at them. The senior and junior soldiers still dominate the sparring matches and fake team fights, but the 18Xers are getting…

...Gabriel won’t *say* it’s specifically due to Jack’s influence -

But there is a *noticeable* change in the 18Xers numbered 73 through 96.

*And if I’ve noticed it, you can bet that Guerra and Flores have too*, he thinks, glancing towards Jack at the end of his usual table.

…

Their conversation from last Sunday *lingers*.

Like a second pulse in his veins.

...On the one hand, Gabriel is glad their discussion had a clear impact: Jack appears to be focusing on training, taking both the physical work and the education coursework seriously. And Jack’s obvious interest in being focused *appears* to have sparked something in his immediate friends, as many of them had doubled down on drills and efforts last week.
There hasn’t been much time for *anything* since their free days ended last Sunday: the drills and training sessions have kept them busy, and - though it has *slightly* cut at him to try and do so, Jack has put all his effort, all his zeal into taking them and the coursework seriously.

(He’s done his best to take Gabe’s words to heart.)

(After all, what Gabe has said was - *is* - true.)

(He - *they* - cannot...entertain the hope that “something more” can or will happen.)

(Too much is out of their hands.)

…

But on the other hand -

(But even so -)

There’s a brief moment where the group is quieting down, turning their attention towards Carolina, but Jack glances towards Gabriel.

(Jack flicks his gaze from the end of his table, past the next -)

(To the one at the far end where -)

(Framed by the pastel tint of the rising twilight -)

(Gabe spots him.)

Gabe’s heart *thrums* at it -

(And there’s a sly, slight smile on Gabe’s face and Jack feels his pulse *sing* a little -)

Before Jack gives him a small smile and looks back towards the directors’ table.

…

But on the other hand, there’s a *very* obvious change *between* them.

(But even so, there’s something quietly blooming between them, no matter how much they focus on “the program.”)

…

And Gabriel won’t lie -

He *likes* it.

(And Jack *thrives* with it.)

It’s a sugary, almost syrupy kind of *thrill* in his chest, a sweet drop of water on his mind, like drinking in a richness that textures everything in a veil of stardusted twilight. It’s in the small moments where they cross in halls, exchanging smiles and coy banter, or when they share a meal together, warm food and friends rolling their eyes, or how Jack always - quietly but deeply - wishes him a nice night when they leave the mess hall or the bathroom or the tech lab.

(It’s a soft song in his chest, a quiet hum that melodies in his spirit, something that he feels slipping
through him in sweet, sunrise ways. It’s in the note he still carries in the book’s crease, or the jokes
when they have dinner, or the way Gabe’s gaze will drift to his - and his to Gabe’s - when they
think.)

...Because there’s been one more thing:

Exactly as Gabriel had predicted a week ago -

They clearly weren’t - or aren’t - the only ones paying attention to their transforming relationship.

(But even Jack can see that the last week has been...different - not just for their small flirtations or
little conversations -)

(But for others as well.)

Though they haven’t had a chance to talk about it -

It’s obvious they are deliberately not being paired together for drills, exercises, or sparring matches.

And oddly enough -

Gabriel is actually pretty sure it’s not Guerra.

*Because even though Guerra wants me to “focus more” or whatever, he doesn’t actually give a
rat’s ass about fraternization, Gabriel chuckles internally, Not in that sense, anyways.*

At least, he better not.

...Gabriel hasn’t checked to see if his login password is still “Silvio” or not.

Plus Guerra has barely been in the program since Resistance ended.

He’d left on Wednesday last week, and for a brief, couple-hour period, Gabriel had entertained the
sheer blissful notion that he’d been kicked from the program (like Flores had threatened).

...But Tom “Alpha” Bianchi had still been around.

(Jack hasn’t had a chance to ask Gabe for his thoughts on “Agent Bianchi” but he can sense that
Gabe’s...assessment is probably similar to his own.)

(In a way, he’s startled by the details he’s picked up on, the small things, the little mannerisms, the
subtle distinctions that stand out now: how Bianchi seems to despise the cold, or his disdain for the
mess food, or the way he sort of follows Flores like a not-so-subtle shadow. Bianchi isn’t half the
terror that Guerra is, but there’s something...more humanly irritating about him.)

(*It’s like he just wedged himself into the program*, Jack thinks, glancing at the agent behind
Carolina. He’s clearly not ex-military, or if he is, he’s completely forgotten the elements that make a
soldier.)

(Jack just can’t quite figure out how he fits into “the puzzle” of the program.)

(*Gabe probably figured it out*, Jack thinks, *If we can meet tonight, I’ll ask him what he thinks.*)

With only a few days available (and most of them being free days), Gabriel had barely had time to
gauge the relationship between the two CIA operatives. It wasn’t immediately clear if the D/NCS
had demoted Guerra and made Bianchi the CIA SEP director in his place, or if Bianchi had been
added to the program to keep a closer eye on Guerra’s “borderline treasonous” activities. Whatever the case may be, it was clear that things were getting more…

Complicated.

...Exactly as he and Jack had talked about.

It had been hard to notice past the giddy, infectious energy of the Juniors and 18Xers, who were almost enraptured with the basic thrill of being actually alive after Resistance week -

And harder still to observe beyond the sweet song of Jack in his heartbeat (pun...only kinda sorta intended) -

But there was something…

Different

About the directors now.

...A tension.

Like a calm before a storm.

(...Jack hasn’t shared his conversation with Gabe with anyone else - not even Adrien, who he trusts with his life.)

(For starters, it was obviously an intensely private, intensely personal discussion between the two of them - not just in the words they said but…)

(In the way they had said them -)

(The shadows of kisses between them, soft breath and sly smiles almost shared.)

(...No, Jack wouldn’t share those - even the mention of them - with anyone else.)

(But in addition...the subject of the program getting...harsher or stricter was something that Jack...wasn’t sure he could express to his 18X friends.)

Maybe they’re finally going to talk about it, Gabriel thinks, setting his mug down as he looks up towards Carolina. Next to him, Carlos swallows a bite of his sausage and hums softly, “Think they’re going to start putting us in charge of drills?”

“If they want us to be Zulus and 180A’s, then they should,” Luisa murmurs across the table, “It’s hard enough coordinating the Juniors and 18Xers during team fights - I can’t imagine doing it during a real battle.”

“We have a number of administrative and general topics to go over for this month,” Carolina - future Company Commander Luna, Gabriel reminds himself - says to the group. Her gaze is calm and her stance is poised but eased.

He’s happy to see her steadily adjust to her new role.

“The first and most important,” she continues, “As you know, we have one final component for SERE training, and that is Escape. In most traditional SERE courses, Escape is included as part of Resistance training, or it is usually a special segment where you coordinate a simulated rescue mission. As we are in a predominantly underground facility, the latter is difficult to attempt on this...
And then she glances sardonically at Gabriel, saying bluntly, “And as you are well aware, someone ran us through his own little Escape plan during Resistance week.”

A chorus of laughter and whoops goes up from the group, as most look towards Gabriel - but he just keeps his eyes locked on Carolina -

Before he shrugs, giving her a big, cheesy, super totally innocent grin.

(Jack grins at Gabe’s obvious, endearing little shrug, a big, wide smile on his face.)

(The moments where Gabe clearly enjoys himself are Jack’s favorites.)

“Oh, don’t try to play coy with me, Reyes - I know how you operate,” Carolina says loudly, but there’s a wry smirk on her face, and she languidly looks forward again, glancing over the group as she continues, “But putting that aside, Escape will likely be the shortest and fastest simulation for our program’s version of SERE. There is some minor preparation to work on, but when the actual simulation occurs, it will likely only take a grand total of a day or two.”

A small but collective sigh of relief ripples through the candidates, and even Gabriel exhales softly, thinking, *Oh thank god.*

(“Christ, that’s a relief,” Wes mutters as Sarah sighs, her whole shoulder slumping. Adrien next to him murmurs, “I don’t think I could handle another week-long simulation.”)

(“Man, even three days in Resistance was brutal,” Derek says a little ways down the table.)

(Jack says nothing, but frowns slightly.)

(They forced us through Resistance, but Escape is the simulation that gets the short straw? he thinks cautiously, Isn’t that the one that could actually be useful if we get trapped behind Omnic siege lines? )

“We don’t want you to stress or worry significantly about the Escape simulation,” Carolina explains, “While it will certainly be training for all of you, the current concept for it is mainly to provide us directors one final data set about your personal growth and team coordination. Unlike Survival and Evasion, and Resistance, Escape in this program is intended to be a series of small, quick simulations that will give us a sense of where you stand entering the second half of the program. Which brings me to the next topic: MOSes.”

The small murmurs and little sounds of human activity - mugs clinking, clothes rustling -

_Immediately _stop.

(Jack scowls a little harder as he watches Commander Luna, eyes narrowing slightly as he thinks, _So Escape got cut a little shorter to push up the MOS training? Or is it the other way around? What could they “assess” from Escape like that? _)

“...Ooooh, that got your attention, huh?” Carolina chuckles mischievously at them, but she smooths her expression, saying in a more casually commander-ish tone, “For the Junior and 18X candidates, it is time for you to start seriously considering what military operational specialty you want to focus on for the remainder of this program. For Juniors, we would like you to start thinking about a potential secondary specialty you want to train in. For 18X candidates, we hope you will consider which MOS suits both your civilian skill set and your current adaptabilities here in the program.”
Gabriel glances at Jack, who is still watching Carolina -

But there’s a look of quiet, slightly-scowling concentration on his face.

(...He hasn’t said it to anyone - not even Gabe -)

(But Gabe’s words ring in his ears):

("You could be a great Fox if you wanted to be.")

(...Don’t kid yourself, Jack, he thinks softly, They’re going to make you a medic.)

“As an important addendum, the directors will do our best to accommodate both your personal interest and the different data sets we have been collecting for the last couple of months,” Carolina explains, “But we’d like you to be aware of the fact that this program is highly irregular, even by Special Forces standards. Under normal circumstances, most new Special Forces soldiers are allowed to train in their top-requested MOS.”

But she shakes her head slightly, adding, “But obviously, these are not normal circumstances, and this program must organize twelve Operational Detachment Alpha teams from your group in significantly less training time than most Special Forces soldiers receive. That means, if you have a medical background, you will likely be a Delta. If you have a coding or programming background, you will likely be an Echo.”

A difficult truth, but an expected one.

(See? Don’t dick around trying to play spy or detective, Jack sighs slowly.)

(Besides, he adds with a more even tone, There’s only twelve spots for Foxes anyways. They’ll pick twelve Juniors and be done with it.)

“Juniors, this applies to you as well,” Carolina says, “We will give our best effort to get many of your cross-trained into a second MOS, because it will be imperative to your survival skills, but there are constraints on how we can approach the organization of the A-teams. Is that understood?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the group choruses back to her.

Carolina nods, and continues her announcement, saying, “As part of our preparations for the MOS assignments, we will begin adjusting both our physical training regimens and our educational coursework starting this week and continuing through the month of March.”

She holds up her right hand, counting off with her index finger, “First, our educational coursework: we will continue focusing on group and team-based tactical strategy education, but starting today, we will begin incorporating information from the current warfronts on Omnic units.”

(“Oh shit,” Wes says excitedly as Sarah raises an eyebrow towards the directors. Adrien looks a little skeptical, saying, “Have they even broken the Omnicode yet?”)

A small, excited buzz of little whispers and activity hums throughout the group, with pairs and trios and little friend groups exchanging murmurs or glances amongst each other - even Luisa flicks her gaze towards Gabriel, and Carlos nudges him slightly with his elbow, chuckling lowly, “You gonna give us all a talk on quetzals, Professor Reyes?”

“Oh my god, don’t even joke about that,” Gabriel mutters, as Carolina ahems loudly at the group. The noises simmer down, and she laughs lightly, “Well, I’m glad you all are interested in the topic,
at least. We’ve entered the second year of the war, and for the first time, we have some serious long-
term data sets and patterns that we can start utilizing, both here in SEP and in the larger military
strategies.”

And then she grins slyly, saying, “And for those of you interested, we have started developing
working models on the Omnic coding as well.”

The shift in mood is palpable - Luisa and several of the other Echoes (both Seniors and Juniors) perk
up at that, and in his peripherals, Gabriel sees his fellow Foxes exchange looks.

(“Huh, I guess they’ve made some ground,” Adrien answers himself, looking more impressed. Jack
frowns a little, thinking, There’s no way we can learn a whole language in four months. I know any
progress is good, of course, but who are we going to practice with - the Bastions? )

Hell, even Gabriel’s own eyebrows raise automatically at that.

A breakthrough in the Omnic language would be a game-changer, he thinks, If we can figure out
the keys used to access any systems or signalling patterns, we can attempt decoys.

An authentic Omnicode drone code could potentially let us infiltrate via our own drones.

Carolina says loudly, “Alright, alright, settle down. We’re nowhere near a complete decoding, but
we have basic lettering and syntax down. Part of the issue is that the Omnic language appears to be
rapidly evolving to outpace our efforts, but we will still have some tools and computer simulations
for the more tech-savvy of you to mess around with.”

As the group quiets again, Carolina adds, “Furthermore, as part of this shift from SERE training to
MOS training, the directors are going to start giving all of you more free time.”

Before she even finishes the sentence -

A number of cheers and shouts of “HELL YEAH” thunder through the candidates -

“HEY!” she shouts right back at them, “Did I give you permission to talk?!"

The group shuts up immediately.

“Oooh, we are going to have to work on your basic discipline,” Carolina huffs, “Now, if you all
would let me finish - we are going to start giving you more free time to explicitly work on the
coursework and hands-on practice you are interested in.”

...A small symphony of “Awws” murmur around the room.

“Yeah, this is why you don’t assume, rookies,” Carolina snorts at them, “The other directors and
myself will begin scheduling available time slots for you to work or train with us under our own
specialties. For example, Director Watanabe will be providing basic coding classes in the tech room.
He will also allow people who are interested to check out his Echo gear, so you can get some time
trying to crack a fake passcode-protected door or practice with the drone system.”

And then Carolina makes a small face as she mutters, “And Director Cruz -”

“We’re gonna be buildin’ shit and blowin’ it up!” Cruz shouts from the table behind her, and several
of the former Charlies whoop in the room -

“...Director Cruz will be teaching additional lessons on combat engineering - some indoors and some
outdoors,” Carolina continues dryly, a deadpan expression on her face, “So if you want to dig ditches or play with some fake explosives or even just want to spend a few hours outside, find him somewhere. Or something.”

(“How could they possibly achieve hands-on medic practice?” Jack asks quietly. His friends glance at him, as Sarah murmurs, “Huh...uh, dummies maybe?”)

Gabriel chuckles -

“And that brings me -”

But then -

“- To the changes to our physical training segments -”

The topic shifts -

“Starting today -”

Like the inevitability of the changing seasons.

“- We will begin training and practicing with the pulse and plasma weapons,” Carolina states.

…

The room is almost stunned into utter silence.

(And Jack quickly flicks his gaze to the directors at the table behind Carolina before he -)

Gabriel scowls intensely as Carlos - a Bravo himself - mutters, “Wait, this soon?”

“We’ve only had injections for seven weeks,” Luisa murmurs back, “Surely that’s not enough time for the phenotypic changes?”

(He immediately -)

But immediately -

(Reflexively -)

Reflexively -

(Jack glances at the other table -)

Gabriel glances at the other table -

Where his eyes meet with Jack’s.

(Where his eyes meet with Gabe’s.)

They’re both scowling heavily.

And they share an immediate, reflexive understanding:

*The serums are working.*

*And working better than expected.*
Which can only mean -

*The program is going to intensify*, Gabe thinks softly.

*(It’s going to get more complicated*, Jack thinks quietly.)*

They won’t be thrown into the cold and snow like Survival and Evasion.
They won’t be “not tortured” tortured like Resistance week.

But things are going to *escalate* in new, significant ways -

Ways that will look...*normal.*

*Acceptable* even, especially compared to Resistance.

But ways that are going to steadily change *everything.*

(And Jack *knows* Gabe asked him to take it seriously -)

(But it’s hard to fight the feeling of choosing *them*, *together* over *everything else.*)

And as Gabe’s gaze traces over Jack’s, he struggles to hold steady against his own resolve to reap his heart and let Jack go, if Jack chooses to walk away from it - from *them.*

Even with all the distance between them, Jack tilts his head slightly, towards the directors’ table on his right (Gabe’s left) and holds up his left hand, silently but obviously counting off “One-two-three” on his fingers.

Gabe scowls, eyes narrowing a little, before he glances towards the directors table.

And he outright *gleares.*

(Jack can see from Gabe’s expression that he got the message.)

Behind Carolina, the directors are arranged in a loose semi-circle: since Carolina is standing and Guerra is missing, there are a few gaps in the seats, but the arrangement, from left-to-right is:

Tom “Alpha” Bianchi, CIA operative; Sofía Flores, general of the USSOCOM; a gap in the seats where Carolina had been sitting; Serena Jones, his former Senior Delta; Sarge Watanabe, the Echo Director; and Rick Cruz, the Charlie Director.

But just as Jack had “counted” -

The first three - Bianchi, Flores, and Serena - have the most *informative* expressions.

Bianchi has a small, almost wry little smile on his face: it’s not *terrifying* the way Guerra’s expressions can be, but it’s more...haughty, more smug, as if he is *enjoying* Carolina’s statement about the new weapons.

Flores is scowling, almost resolutely. She does not seem *happy* the way Bianchi does, but she’s clearly not *mourning* this decision to move the weapons testing up the schedule. If anything, she huffs a little, shaking her head, before focusing her own attention back on Carolina.

But Serena.
Gabriel’s heart *hurts* a little.

Silvio had been a deep mentor for him in 7436, but Serena had been his senior Delta, a rock in the group, a calm and steadfast anchor when life had become a storm. Few things daunted her - not war, not disease, not destruction, not chaos.

But this.

Serena looks *angry*.

Almost *defeated*.

It’s hard to see from here, but it’s obvious in all the small signs: she’s barely touched the food on her plate, she looks deeply uncomfortable to sit at the directors’ table, her expression is grim, almost wan.

And it’s *clear*.

The tension that had been underlying the directors for the last week or so…

Serena Jones - a former combat medic, a former wartime doctor, a woman who has seen the worst of the world and stood strong against it -

Had *lost* whatever internal “issue” had developed.

Horror wells up inside Gabriel.

*The serums are working too well* -

And now -

*They’re going to test that.*

And *that* means -

Gabe glances towards Jack, who is watching him with a similarly grim, dark expression.

(Gabe’s look is deep, like midnight flooded, the obsidian in his eyes stormy, and Jack can tell they both understand.)

If they are “testing” the weapons now, that means *all* the candidates are ready to handle pulse stocks and rocket rifles and plasma-slag shotguns.

Which means they could *stop* having injections *today, forever*.

But if Serena’s expression means anything -

(*Things are about to get worse, Jack thinks.*)

*Things are about to get brutal,* Gabe thinks.

“Practice with the weapons will be *heavily* monitored by the Bravos and Charlies, including me,” Carolina says loudly, over the quiet, confused-but-excited shock in the room, “Unlike the other hands-on MOS practice times, Bravo practice times will be highly regulated and scheduled. We expect to begin drills with the weapons in place of our usual firearm training period, and a rotation of twelve-candidate slots will begin starting today.”
Carolina snaps her fingers, and the giant set of holo-capable screens behind the directors and trainers’ tables changes into a list of twelve-person groups arranged into a weekly schedule.

Gabriel scowls still.

The twelve person groups are actually semi-randomized, and each one is a little bit different -

“In the effort of fairness, all the groups are randomly organized,” Carolina explains, “We hope to provide you individually with several time slots per week, but keep in mind that times will fluctuate. You may have a drill session at 1600 hours one day, and 2000 hours the day after. Part of this will be discerning which prototype weapons you are most comfortable with at any given time. There will be no free-practice or free-drill time with these weapons until I and the other Bravos approve it. This schedule will be posted in the barracks hallways for you to consult and plan around as needed.”

(It’s hard to read at this distance, but Jack thinks he spots a few sessions that he and Gabe do share, if only out of randomness. And as much as the thought of spending more time with him thrills Jack, he thinks softly, That’s helpful - I can ask him his thoughts on the weapons when we can actually hold and use them.)

Next to him, Carlos hums curiously, “I’ve been waiting to see what these ‘robot-killing’ weapons are. Aside from armor-shredding frags, I can’t imagine anything more useful than a typical bullet.”

Gabriel says nothing.

It may be...unfair, but he hasn’t told them he’s read the classified program files. It’s not that he doesn’t trust them - he does, with his life - but he’s...he’s not sure he can expose them to the truth like that.

“Couldn’t plasma pulse damage an Omnic’s energy systems?” Luisa asks him, and Carlos grins at her, replying, “Yeah, but if you shoot a computer with a bullet, does the computer still work?”

Luisa nods a little, making an “I guess so” expression.

Gabriel glances at the schedule, squinting a little. It’s difficult to read, but he thinks he spots a few sessions with Jack. Good, he thinks with a resolved scowl, Neither of us are weapons engineers, but we did go over the weapons last week. He’ll have some more ideas once he’s practiced with them a few times.

“And lastly,” Carolina says with a big grin, “Some news I think all of you have been waiting to hear.”

That regains the group’s attention, as they all focus on her again and -

“Starting this upcoming weekend, we will begin organizing trips down into Sun Valley and Ketchum,” she beams at them and -

“YES!” someone in the group shouts before a whole roar of joy floods the room -

(Jack’s eyes go wide with pleasant surprise as Wes shouts, “YES!” Sarah and Kassandra exchange happy grins at each other, and even Adrien mutters excitedly, “Damn, they’ll finally give us pass time!”)

Gabriel raises his eyebrows in surprise as Luisa hums wryly, “Weekend pass time?”

“EY!” Carolina shouts over them, “Hang on! Seriously, we have got to work on your discipline!”
The group calms a little, but the buzz of excited energy pulses among them, and the future commander sighs, “They’re small towns. We’re going to do our best to give everyone an even spread of trips, but just practice some common courtesy, alright? Don’t get wasted, don’t eat every New York steak in town, don’t try to buy any crazy bullshit from the stores. It’s like 90% ski lodges and hotels anyways, so just keep your expectations appropriate, okay?”

Carolina rolls her shoulders a little, saying more conversationally, “They know we’re here, and they know we’re doing some ‘special Army program.’ So you don’t have to hide that we’re all soldiers, but try to keep a little common sense, okay? Don’t tell them anything you wouldn’t tell your families back home or send in a message to a friend. Even though there’s a war, these people still have lives, and they still have to do their jobs. Don’t jeopardize that for them, and don’t give away shit like we’re using pulse weapons or translating the Omnic language.”

Carolina ends her announcement, glancing over the candidates, the vast majority of whom seem wound by the sheer statement of free time and trips to a real town. She gives them a more tired, patient smile, asking calmly, “Are there any questions?”

Immediately about a dozen hands shoot up, and Carolina gestures to the first one on the far side, away from the senior table (so her left) as she says to them all, “We’ll just go down the rows. You first, Soldier: 106.”

Candidate 106 - a Junior named...Kate? Gabriel tries to remember - says loudly to the room, “How much free time will be we given on the weekends?”

“We’re not setting that in stone yet, because it will fluctuate with the training schedule,” Carolina says, “But we’re currently expecting Saturday afternoons and most of Sunday to be available to you. Granted, once you begin MOS training, that will likely overlap with coursework time, so don’t bank on all your free time just yet. Next one,” she adds, gesturing to another person down that table.

“If it’s free time, will we be allowed to use the lands around the facility?” another candidate - Andres, Gabriel thinks? - asks, “I’m a pretty big hiker, but I don’t really see the point in going all the way to town if I just want to spend a few hours outside.”

(Jack’s interest piques at that one.)

(He’s been itching to start running outdoors again - even in the snow.)

“You will be allowed some freedom in our government-permitted land starting on Saturday,” Carolina nods, which gets some shouts of excitement from a few other people as well, “But obviously, the weather is going to stay like this for some time. You will also not be allowed in drill-sectioned areas. But we’ll try to get you a map before Saturday. You’re next.”

“If you’re just going to assign us MOSes based on our previous jobs, is there even a point in practicing the others?” the next candidate - an 18Xer named...Terry - asks. Carolina folds her arms, scowling at him as she says, “All Special Forces soldiers are expected to have some basic skills in all the assigned MOSes, so yes, we do expect you to at least try to make an effort with them. If you discover you’re terrible at coding, then sure, we get it - no one is great at everything. But every soldier here could tell you of a time where basic knowledge or awareness of the other MOS skills assisted them in some way, even if it’s just knowing that your Charlie knows how to dig a well or your Echo can fix a program deadlock.”

Terry shuts up at that, and Carolina sighs, “As someone who has been a Bravo and then a Zulu, general awareness of all the MOSes is vital to a team’s basic coordination and cooperation. You want to know what your Charlie or your Echo or your Delta is capable of. You want to know how
to use each other’s skill sets and how you can help each other. The Echo might understand the technical aspects of why the radio isn’t working, but the very least any member can do is get the basics to help them. A good Special Forces soldier isn’t specifically a technological wizard or a deadeye sharpshooter, but is a little bit of everything with a proficiency in one or two specialties.”

The room is actually quite contemplative at her statement, and the future commander glances among them, saying, “Give everything a try. You never know what part of an MOS will be useful during a deployment...or even just in civilian life. Next question.”

“Oh uh, I think that’s me?” an 18Xer - Julian - says, glancing around, before he asks, “Okay, so I know you said to keep it appropriate...”

Carolina quirks a skeptical but amused eyebrow as he grins sheepily at her, asking, “Like, if we get Saturday afternoon free and most of Sunday, can we just stay the night in Sun Valley?”

…”

Now that -

That question gets people going.

A loud chorus of “ooooohhhhs” and “oh my gods” and “holy shit, I hadn’t even thought of that” sings out from the crowd of 20 to 30-year-olds who have been pent up - and pent up - in an underground facility for the better part of two winter months.

(“Oh shit,” Adrien mutters, as Sarah murmurs, “You know...it’s hard enough getting alone time with people, but yeah, it’ll be easier to do that in town.”)

(“Oh my, Hidalgo, are you already planning on some dates?” Jamie teases her, and Sarah grins at him, saying, “Just wanted to buy a friend some coffee is all -”

(But Jack finds the words distant to his own ears -)

(As his pulse spikes in his veins, heartbeat hammering in his chest as -)

(The image of Gabe, setting a glass down in front of him, rich smirk as he says, “I did owe you a drink, soldier” flashes through his mind -)

Gabe coughs slightly, trying not to blush as he pictures Jack grinning at him from across a dinner table, laughing brightly at some joke he just said -

(Or the idea of pulling Gabe into a hotel room, whispering against that smirk, “Show me how good you are, Gabe” surges through Jack’s thoughts -)

Or the thought of Jack leaning in close, murmuring against his lips, “Maybe we should go somewhere quieter, Gabe...” flutters in Gabe’s imagination -

But he does not miss how both Luisa and Carlos shoot him smug smirks -

“Don’t you dare -” he rasps at them, but his protest sounds weak to his own ears. Luisa tilts her smirk towards Carlos, saying, “Did I ever tell you what Gabrielito’s new PIN is?”

“You mean it isn’t ‘king’?” Carlos snorts -

Carolina - wisely - does not answer the question addressed to her, but instead glances over her shoulder at General Flores, who looks highly unamused by the situation she’s been put in.
“...The plan -” Flores starts to say, as everyone falls silent over the authority in her tone, “- Was to coordinate a series of bus and convoy vehicle trips down the mountain into the valley at approximately 1300 hours on Saturday, and then coordinate those trips back up at about 2100 hours Saturday, and then repeat the process Sunday morning and Sunday evening.”

The group watches her expectantly, but Gabriel can sense the optimism fall dramatically.

Flores sighs heavily, saying, “We understand that you want to maximize your free time, and it is also free time for us and for the trainers, but we still have a responsibility to ensure that you return to the program safe, accounted for, and with the decorum and standards of the Army. Because you are in an active duty and military training status, you are all subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice at all times, including your pass time. As this is not a traditional training program, pass time has been reworked to suit the program’s needs, but the Uniform Code of Military Justice still applies even under these circumstances.”

And then Flores looks across the group with a deep, fierce scowl, stating bluntly, “You are only human, as are we. I know many of you will break Article 134, especially under ‘drunkenness’, and a number of you will - or already have - violated fraternization laws. And a significant portion of these future misconducts will be outside of our ability to observe it or actively stop it.”

And then she stares straight at Gabriel, saying authoritatively, “But make no mistake: we will know. We are not blind to these things. So while we may not be able to actively stop you, we will be incorporating these factors into different decisions when it comes to assigning MOSes and ODA teams.”

The entire room is deathly silent over that.

And Gabriel now knows.

He knows who has been actively preventing him from being paired with Jack in drills and training.

(Jack’s friends somber up at that, as Jack thinks softly, You knew this. You keep getting your hopes up. They’re going to be watching you. And him.)

(The program might like what they’re capable of -)

(But it doesn’t have to like why they’re capable.)

Flores turns back towards Julian, saying honestly, “So to put it simply, soldier: no, we cannot stop you from staying the night. Like any military base or training camp, your pass time is your pass time and you may use it as you choose. But before you make that choice, I would urge you to consider what it could mean for the rest of your military career.”

Gabriel just picks up his mug and takes another sip of coffee.

Exactly as he expected.

They’re intensifying the core components of the program -

And cracking down on the “fluff” and extraneous developments.

But he also knows -

Gonna be hard to convince one-hundred and thirty-two young soldiers to give up their emotional support and relationships for “the rest of their military careers” if they could potentially die in six
months, he thinks quietly.

...It’s one thing to ask soldiers to be responsible and think long-term when the “wars” are...smaller, condensed to regions and zones and rural villages and four months on, four months off. There’s always risk, always the ever-present shadow of injury or death or worse -

But at least that can shift into a sense of “four months on, four months off” normalcy.

...But it’s another thing when the war is global, all-encompassing, ever-present even in the light of day -

When the enemy soldiers cannot starve, cannot bleed, and cannot be heartbroken.

...Gabriel can and does respect Flores for a lot of things -

But a tough adherence to “the rules” is not one of them.

...But I guess that’s what you get when you stick to torture training when the robots don’t do torture, he sighs to himself.

(...It’s a strange feeling, suddenly understanding why Guerra left the Special Forces.)

(To be that competent...and yet that restricted by rules and internal military politics, Jack thinks darkly, reaching for his coffee mug, taking a long sip -)

(And then, as he lowers it, starting into the inky liquid of it, he adds with quiet fierceness;)

(...No wonder he left so he could marry his partner.)

“...Well then,” Carolina says, taking the silence to be her cue to continue, “Who had the next question?”

(Jack settles his mug back on the table, thinking sternly to himself, Well, if they want us to play by the rules, then I can game that.)

(And he glances up towards Commander Luna, adding softly, I can be a good little soldier for them.)

(Because no matter what happens -)

(They will not take the feelings swelling stardusted in his heart from him.)

(Jack raises his hand.)

“...Soldier: 76,” Carolina says, perhaps with a little less authority - or a little more consideration - than she had asked the other candidates -

Gabriel blinks once, and then glances at Jack -

(“You mentioned Bravo, Charlie, and Echo,” Jack says loudly, but clearly to the entire room, “But how will Delta and Fox practice for the next month?”)

...

The question clearly catches Carolina - and most of the other directors - off-guard.

Gabe grins, thinking brightly, Look at you, Jack - asking all the right questions.
(Jack’s gaze does not waver, even as a few small, little murmurs hum among the crowd, and Commander Luna makes a slightly...softened expression, saying calmly, “Director Guerra has not yet decided what sort of Intelligence gathering practice he will be holding. As for Delta…”)

(She pauses, and then glances over her shoulder at Jones -)

(Who still looks rather calmly conflicted, but appears to brace herself, saying coolly, “Unfortunately, there is simply no way the next four months will be enough time to properly train future combat medics.”)

The room is silent over that.

“...That does not mean we shall not try, but the simple truth is that no matter what or how I teach, there will never be enough time or situations to practice in,” Serena continues, “At the moment, the plan is to incorporate basic gross anatomy into the educational coursework for all of you, and then offer hands-on practice and lab work with artificial organs and pig cadavers.”

(Immediately, Jack scowls and -)

“Pardon me, director -”

Gabe blinks again, this time more surprised at the tone of Jack’s voice than his interruption -

As he asks loudly but controlledly:

“But will we not be allowed to assist you in treating potential medical injuries?”

(Jones watches him, with almost a faint sadness, even as Jack adds, “Weren’t the Senior Deltas assisting you with the minor training injuries? Will that opportunity be provided to the rest of us?”)

(There’s a slightly pause, and Jack briefly wonders, Did I cross a line -?)

(But then -)

“...While I, the program medics, and the Senior Deltas will continue to provide medical support for training injuries and any potential emergencies that occur in the next few months,” Serena says - loud enough for everyone to hear, but soft enough for Gabriel to hear the quiet sorrow in her voice -

“I do not have the authority to make those decisions for the rest of you.”

( What?? Jack thinks, his eyebrows furrowing into a deep scowl as a loud fervor of confusion rises from the other candidates. Even Wes looks conflicted as Jamie asks the group, “What does that mean?”)

“Did they demote Serena?” Carlos asks as Luisa mutters, “What in the hell -”

Gabriel feels the scowl harden on his face as he thinks, thoughts snapping together rapidly, So Guerra wasn’t demoted, which means he’s still running the Fox course. And Serena implied she’s still in charge of training the future Deltas -

But she’s explicitly no longer in charge of candidate injuries -
Which is normally a strange distinction to make…

And then Gabriel glares, as he realizes -

Except…

The image of the Russian supersoldier burns through his thoughts and -

As if on cue -

Gabe glances towards Jack -

(Jack glances towards Gabe -)

And they understand.

The program is escalating anything and everything.

(Jack sees that Gabe understands, but -)

“Quiet!”

The whole cohort silences as Flores’ voice rings out over them, and they all give her their attention as she stands, saying loudly, “As the last part of this announcement, there is one more thing we need to go over -”

But before she can finish -

One of the doors to the mess hall suddenly slides open -

And -

“Hey, can I get some of the...oh.”

Guerra stands in the doorway, wearing some snow gear and looking expressionless as everyone turns their attention to him instead.

Flores, however, seems unfazed, as she sighs loudly, asking him, “What do you need, Director Guerra?”

“...Ah, well, we’ve got a lot of equipment to unload,” he says back, “So the more hands, the better.”

“I see. Candidates, return your trays and plates to the cleaning receptacles,” Flores orders the group, “Candidates who are on kitchen duty, return to the kitchen to assist Cook Davis. Everyone else, return to your room, get your jackets and gloves, and head to the equipment hallway.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the group choruses back. Flores nods towards them, saying, “Dismissed.”

As people rise, Gabriel scowls, finishing the rest of his coffee.

The sweetness of milk and sugar isn’t enough to clear the bitter, rough feeling at the back of his tongue.

...Like the taste of ash in his lungs.

(Jack rises with his friends, eyebrows furrowed hard as he grabs his tray.)
(He can’t shake the feeling of sick songworms twisting in his veins.)

(As he heads towards the tray return, he thinks deeply, Early weapons testing, moving up the MOS practice schedule, cracking down on minor infractions, Director Jones losing the ability to direct the medics freely...)

(He’s so deep in his thoughts, trying to remember the whirlwind of information they just got that he -)

“Hey, Morrison.”

(- Almost misses that voice.)

Jack glances up from his spot in the tray return line: there’s enough movement in the room now that no one seems to notice how Gabe falls in step beside him.

Gabe, Jack thinks, smiling impulsively at him.

...It takes all of Gabe’s willpower not to crack and call him “Jack” or “Watson” or “soldado” or -

He’s such a little charmer, Gabe thinks, before he opts to just nudge Jack with his left elbow lightly, saying out loud, “Lotta information this morning, huh?”

Jack picks up on the catch in Gabe’s tone, replying thoughtfully, “...Yeah. some pretty heavy topics.”

They move down the line of the tray returns, setting their utensils in the first bin, as Gabe answers, “...Kinda hard to unpack it all here. The weapons thing was…”

His voice trails off into open ambiguity as they set their plates in the next bin, but Jack knows what he means, humming back, “Yeah, it was a big decision, but I’m more...concerned about what Director Jones said.”

They place their mugs and bowls in the next bin, and Gabe murmurs, “Yeah, that part was…”

“...Unnerving?” Jack offers as they put their trays in the final bin. As they step out of line and start heading towards the doors, Gabe murmurs, “That’s a good word for it.”

“...You think this is related to what we talked about on Friday?” Jack asks softly - so soft that only Gabe can hear him over the din of the other candidates discussing future pass time plans.

Gabe pauses - only for a second - before he answers just as quietly:

“Almost definitely.”

As they move up the steps to the doors, Gabe leans in slightly, saying with a deep but soft tone, “You need to be careful, Morrison. They’ll have their focus on me - remember, enemies and mistakes.”

Right, Jack thinks, reminding himself, They think only Gabe has read the files. They think he deleted his copy.

“...Right,” Jack says, “All I’ve gotten from you are digital books and a birthday note.”

They head into the main access hallway, heading south with the rest of the group towards the barracks halls, and though the others are chattering around them -
There is only silence between them.

...It is actually quite comfortable.

Contemplative, yes, but comfortable.

...Don’t do it, be patient, you need to let go, the responsible part of Gabe’s brain chants to himself, but a smaller, more... hopeful part says, You promised him.

And wouldn’t you rather do it now than let it sit for forever?

...Still.

The words get a little stuck in his throat and -

“If I had to start with the quintessential, ‘Get-to-know-Reyes’ book,” Jack says, in that low tone where he’s enjoying himself but just lightly teasing Gabe, “Which one should I pick?”

...

Gabe tilts his head towards him, deadpan expression, one eyebrow raised -

As Jack gives him a cheesy, saccharine grin as a reply.

You smug little smartass, Gabe thinks affectionately, before he retorts, “Well, they’re all my favorites, Morrison. I don’t think I could ever possibly pick an ultimate title -”

“So I’ll just start with Poe then,” Jack decides brightly, and Gabe -

Gabe cracks, a sly grin twisting on his lips as he mutters, “But you’ve already read Poe.”

They pause briefly at the intersection of the barrack halls, and Gabe murmurs, in a softer, more teasing lilt, “Don’t think I forgot that part of Friday, even if you did call it ‘bad poetry.’”

“Oh, wow, you really hold a grudge, huh?” Jack says, but he’s smirking too. He teases Gabe, “Maybe I’ll just start with Walt Whitman or something -”

“Okay, wow, way to completely change the game, Morrison,” Gabe snorts, “And Whitman? He’s good, of course, but definitely not a classic ‘get-to-know-me’ starter -”

“Well, if you won’t tell me what to start with, I’ll just have to pick at random,” Jack starts to say, turning to head towards his hallway but -

“Wait.”

He pauses, turning back towards Gabe, who looks a little bit...nervous? Anxious?

“...I thought you said to be...careful,” Jack murmurs more seriously, even though he’s unable to leave Gabe while he looks like this -

“I...did,” Gabe mutters, “And...look, I get it if you get mad at me for bringing this up after Sunday -”

Jack’s eyes deepen with understanding but -

“- But I did...” Gabe starts. Stops. Flusters over his own stupid inability to just let this go, but -

“...I did offer to get you a drink,” he finally manages to get out, “And I did mean that genuinely.”
...Oh, Jack thinks, something feeling smooth and sweet in his chest and -

And then Gabe’s voice grows softer as he murmurs, “But...yeah, I understand if that feels...weak of me to say after the things I said on Sunday -”

“I’ll take it.”

Gabe blinks at him, as if startled that Jack didn’t actually call him out on oscillating on his own position.

But Jack just smiles that soft, half-smile, patient and genuine as he answers, “I’m gonna take you up on that.”

And then that half-smile twists into a knowing, smoky smirk as Jack adds with a deliberately coy tone, “I promise.”

(The words alone spark the shadows of a kiss across Gabe’s lips and -)

Gabe inhales steeply, willing himself to remain resolute, before he exhales sharply, “...You like to play with fire, Morrison.”

“Mm, not the only thing I like to play with,” Jack smirks, and Gabe feels the words spike a rush through him -

“Plus, I’m gonna milk this for all it’s worth, Reyes,” Jack says -

Before he turns and heads towards his hallway.

Gabe admires the way his pants frame his waist and his -

Focus, idiot, he snaps at himself, forcing himself to jolt down his hallway instead.

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[Five minutes later]

...They were not messing around with “escalating” the program.

The entire group (minus the people working kitchen duty) have reconvened in the equipment and storage hallway: it’s the long, east-west oriented “access corridor” that runs perpendicular to the main north-south hallway. The two intersect just north of the mess hall, kitchen, and kitchen storage, making a giant, asymmetrical T that forms the structural cornerstone of the Central Facility. Heading west down this Upper Hall leads to the secondary, north-pointed access corridor that goes to the North Branch Facility, and aaaaaall the way at the far western end is the northwest pedestrian door that Gabe (super totally legally) has the PIN for.

Though most of the actual training and drills take place in the Main Hall (where the Gym, Indoor Shooting Ranges, and most of the “classrooms” are), the Upper Hall has the majority of the storage, maintenance, and medical rooms, including the two main Tech Labs. The eastern side of the Upper Hall has access to the Vehicle Bay, the industrial Elevator to the airfield, and the Main Exit tunnel that connects back to exterior, civilian roads.

So the Upper Hall is functional, but significantly less active than the Main Hall or even the Barracks.

...Except for now.
I wasn’t expecting this, Gabriel thinks, as the candidates crowd on the southern end of the intersection, just next to the Kitchen and its associated storage rooms.

There’s a whole fleet of vehicles entering the Upper Hall through the Main Access door to the east.

Guerra, Flores, Bianchi, Watanabe, Cruz, and Carolina - Commander Luna, he tells himself again - have clustered by a parked “regular” all-weather Jeep thing, talking to a few people in thick winter gear - some sort of specialized transport escort, Gabriel thinks, barely able to see through the crowd of candidates -

“Man, this is serious, huh?” Carlos mutters next to him, as Luisa murmurs dryly, “Think they finally got us new drones?”

Gabriel snort-chuckles at that, replying, “You just know they didn’t.”

(“I shouldn’t be surprised that Guerra managed to understate ‘needing a few hands’, but somehow I am,” Adrien sighs sarcastically. Jack laughs slightly, saying, “At least we know whatever they’re bringing in is new, right?”)

(“Wish they’d put this kind of effort into bringing in better food,” Derek mutters on Jack’s left -)

(“Or medical supplies,” another voice snaps lightly, and Jack glances towards a Senior soldier - Riya, one of the Deltas if he remembers correctly. She shakes her head a little, muttering, “This is probably just more Bravo bs.”)

(“Alright, no need to be mean about Bravo equipment, Riya,” Monique - Soldier: 01 and the “leader” of the Bravos - says back to her -)

The directors and organizers of the transport convoy seem to reach some sort of understanding, because the group breaks up, with Luna turning towards the candidates as she shouts out, “Alright, we’re breaking you guys up into groups of forty-eight! We’ve got three main cargo types to organize and store in their proper places! Number 1: Weapons and live munitions! Groups 1 through 48, you’re assisting on that!”

“Well, maybe we can finally look at some stuff,” Carlos mutters to Gabriel under his breath -

(“Groups 49 through 96, you’re moving new medical equipment into the Med Bay. Director Jones is already in there, prepping to clear the space,” Luna shouts.)

(Jack hears Riya hum in pleasant surprise.)

(Even his own eyebrows rise in mild shock.)

(New medical equipment? he muses, Interesting.)

(“Lastly, Groups 97 through 132,” Luna yells, “You’re a little bit under the other two groups, but you’ll be helping the crew move the armor and gear into the main storage unit.”

New armor? Gabriel thinks, looking at Luna skeptically as Carlos murmurs, “Oh? I wasn’t expecting that part.”

“Does everyone understand where to report to?” Luna asks them one last time, as more transport trucks - this time actual armor trucks and Humvees - start lining up in the Upper Hall.

(“Yes, ma’am!” the group chants back to her. Luna nods at them, saying, “Head out and work fast,
everyone!"

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76: Enhanced Production

(About 40 minutes after unpacking started - in the Medical Ward hall)

There’s a reason the transgenic enhancement model and therapy never really caught on in applied biomedical treatments outside of specialized genetic degenerative diseases.

And it’s not because of everything that can go wrong with vectors once they’re in a patient.

No, it’s because upscaled production of vectors is:

Expensive

Time-consuming

Pain-staking

And

Boring

As all hell.

The great debate in modern traumatic and degenerative therapeutic sciences comes down to two very expensive and very permanent popular topics: advanced human augmentation - typically through cybernetics - versus advanced human enhancement - typically through the injection of transgene-carrying vectors. Biprinters and nanoproduction reactors have made each method more feasible, and both still have their pros and cons, but when it comes to speed, major-surgery augmentation wins out. It’s faster, easier, and - with machine-assisted surgery - safer to go with augmentation.

Hell, Jack himself has participated in his fair share of emergency augmentation installation surgery: it’s more common, more widely practiced, and more accepted these days (or at least, it was in the years leading up to the war). Whereas a bad car accident or a mistake on a construction site or negligence from addiction previously resulted in permanent nerve damage, these days a lost limb or severed nerve could be cleaned up in surgery, a biosynthetic nerve cap connected, and the patient could start augmentation therapy in a day or two.

And some people who could afford it even wanted augmentation.

The only current hang-up with augmentation and the Omnic Crisis is that no one really knows what the Omnics are capable of: if they can interfere with the biosynthetic signalling between natural and artificial nerves, then augmentation becomes a critical and terrible weakness for any soldier with it.

That hang-up hasn’t been enough to stop most countries from “going deep” on augmentation for their “supersoldier” programs: rumors abound that a collection of countries in the Middle East have figured out “fast, quick” augmentations that give their snipers and long-range weapons specialists a “fast, quick” edge over the bots, and there are additional rumors that India is attempting some sort of “mass augmentation development program” (though who knows what that entails).

And honestly?
Any sane country would go for augmentation.

Jack would bet good money (or a nice dinner or something) that there’s probably a parallel “Soldier Augmentation Program” in some secret military facility in Colorado going on right now - no way would a country as military-tech-heavy as the United States not be double-dipping into both treatments.

Hell, if a “Soldier Augmentation Program” does exist, it’s probably completed by now.

And it’s because transgenic vector production absolutely sucks.

Nanoproduction machines have helped facilitate the process, but it’s still miserably slow relatively-speaking: first, the transgenes actually have to be physically produced out of biosynthetic nucleotides by nanoproduction machines; then they have to be inserted into either the actual vectors - usually non-infecting biosynthetic viruses - or directly inserted into a “cell culture line”; then the cells have to grow in the bioreactor machines, allowing the vectors to cultivate in the cells; and then, when the vectors have reached suitable quantities, the cell feedstocks have to be destroyed, denatured, and purified from the cell suspension solution.

And then the transgenes-carrying vectors can get injected.

And yes, for individuals with genetic degenerative diseases, the therapy can be helpful, life-changing even, repairing and curing health problems that reduced quality of life or even ended it only a generation ago.

But those therapies are usually a few sessions of specialized, personalized injections, targeting only a specific type of cell.

…

A program trying to use transgenic vectors to “enhance” every major cell type in the human body, in order to make the whole person virtually and effectively unkillable?

It isn’t just ambitious.

It’s borderline psychotic.

It’s not a surprise that most of the biomedical scientific community has basically advocated for a combination of augmentation, advanced medic training, and increased production of biotic fields during the war.

And it’s also not a surprise that most countries followed that plan.

Nor is it a surprise that it’s really only the countries that can afford to “dabble” in enhancement programs that have actually attempted them - the United States, Russia, and China (according to what Delta said, anyways).

However, the other asterisk to the debate is the hypothetical long term costs between augmentation and enhancement.

Augmentation and cybernetics will require routine reconfiguring and upgrading, usually out of the pocket of the patient-user themselves (especially for “recreational augmentation”, which no health care company or insurer in their right “corporate” mind wants to fund).

In animal test subjects and clinical trials, when enhancement is successful:
It’s successful for life.

…

Hypothetically, anyways.

\textit{Whatever happened to the Russian supersoldier throws a very clear wrench into that argument}, Jack thinks as he helps Adrien, Lucas, and Jin move a brand new industrial bioreactor machine into the biotic production room.

Unpacking and moving the new medical equipment and supplies has been a real surprise in a multitude of ways. Normally when the program gets new medical stuff, it’s just a resupply of biotic and biosynthetic material to start the next “batch” of serums - create the transgenes, create the vectors, “infect” the culture cells, cultivate, purify, and then inject the final product. Typically, that simply means restocking the biotic materials into the temperature-controlled storage rooms, and then letting Director Jones, the qualified medic-trainers, and the senior Deltas run the actual production process on whatever schedule they’re working off of.

But today’s supply has been different.

Group 49 - 96 has unloaded, moved, and rearranged several new high-level, industrial-grade machines: at least ten new “desktop” nanoproduction machines (which are basically hyper-teched 3D bioprinters), eight new mass-cultivation bioreactors, and three new ultra high-end computers were unloaded by the different convoy vehicles at the entrance to the “small” Medical Ward hallway, and then they had to be carefully maneuvered into the Biotic Production Lab adjacent to the large Med Bay.

Taken with the transgenic vector production equipment that’s already in place (so computer-nanoproducer-bioreactors), the whole thing will probably double or triple transgenic vector output.

As the group eases the stainless steel, shoulder-height bioreactor into place, Jack glances over the current Biotic Production Lab set-up.

There are four doors, one in each direction: north leads to the hallway, east to the adjacent Med Bay (currently set up as a mass-serum clinic), south to the main temp-controlled storage room, and west into the “Medical Director’s office”.

In the northern half of the room, there’s now six high-end computers, with at least three of them currently being integrated into “smart-desks” (those new, all-touchscreen things) - there’s a small group of people actively working on getting the computers running and online, including Director Jones, Director Watanabe, two senior Echoes (including Luisa), and five Junior and 18Xers, who were all programmers and developers at some point in time (or something.)

Arranged along the “northern” east and west sides of the walls are the nanoproducers: they look like standard 3D bioprinters, mostly see-through where the material-printing arms can descend and microscopically rearrange nucleotides and biotic materials into transgenes and viral vectors. They’re inset into special lab vacuum hoods, which will keep them free from contamination (but since the team is steadily setting them up and getting them connected to the computers, the vacuum hoods are turned off).

Lastly, in the southern half of the room, arranged into rows, are the bioreactors: tall cylinders of stainless steel that will be connected to the nanoproducers and infused with the culture cells and suspension liquid matrix. With the eight new bioreactors, the machines now total seventeen.
As he watches the group work on getting the new computers integrated, Jack scowls faintly.

This new set up isn’t just increasing or escalating the production of the transgenic enhancement serums.

No, it’s practically industrializing it.

*Most civilian hospitals would envy this arrangement*, he thinks critically. *Lots of civilian hospitals have a laboratory department with one or two of these transgenic production systems running, just for quick, in-house treatment and testing. For actual clinical therapies, they usually outsource to a biotech company that specializes in producing patient transgene serums.*

Jack glances towards the nanoproducers, and then he looks over the rows of the bioreactors, thinking quietly:

Twenty nanoproducers and seventeen bioreactors with four internal sub-unit chambers…

He frowns, doing some quick math.

*...That’s enough to almost evenly divide 132 candidates into two groups…*

And then Jack glares outright.

They’re going to start personalizing the serums.

...It’ll be almost easy.

With injections every two-to-three days - though that might change depending on intensification - it’ll be easy to start a mass cultivation of individualized vectors. The nanoproducers will rapidly escalate the production of the transgenes and vectors, and then the bioreactors and their sub-units will be put on a rotation, assigned to a few candidates to reduce any potential cross-contamination -

And then be made to churn out personalized, individualized, specialized serums.

Deep in his thoughts -

Jack almost jumps when someone taps his left shoulder.

He whips his head towards Adrien, who gives him a skeptical look, asking, “You okay there, Jack?”

“...Yeah,” Jack mutters, pulling himself out of it, “Yeah, I’m just...thinking.”

Adrien nods to the west door - the one that connects to the “office” - and says, “C’mon, let’s get out of their way.” As they duck through the bioreactors, Adrien murmurs, “...This seems like a lot.”

Jack is quiet, contemplative for a moment before -

“...It definitely is.”

The words slip out.

Adrien gives him a deep, understanding glance as they enter the office, and Jack adds, “...Around central Indiana, you don’t get production lines like that in hospitals. We usually outsourced gene therapy production to the university or a few contractors around Indianapolis.”

“I mean,” Adrien says, “This is the military. They got all kinds of money…”
Both of them pause as Derek walks in from the north door to the office, looking very, very confused.

The office is sparsely furnished, mainly because it’s been barely used: there’s a smartdesk (powered down) with an integrated computer and a couple of monitors, some mostly empty filing cabinets, and a couple of chairs in the room. Director Jones has used it from time to time, but she tends to prefer the “office” they gave her in the Lower Hall, down by the Barracks and the Directors Hall.

Jack and Adrien spot the small storage “lock box” in Derek’s hands, and Adrien gestures to the door that connects to the Biotic Lab, saying, “The PC Geek Squad is still setting up the computers, but this door is open.”

“...No.”

Derek’s voice is just as confused as his expression.

Jack raises an eyebrow as the other 18Xer sets the box down on the desk and -

“...They said this box was for this office.”

...Jack scowls.

Adrien tilts his head slightly, asking, “What? What’s inside it?”

“Dunno,” Derek mutters as he lets it go, “It’s got a combo lock on it.”

“How did you lose her??”

The voice is Bianchi’s, echoing down the Medical Ward Hallway.

All three candidates blink in surprise, before they all move towards the north door -

Just as -

“She’s like thirty-seven and smarter than all of us, Tom -”

Guerra suddenly appears by the doorframe, looking irritated and about ready to stab someone (a look Jack knows (un)surprisingly well) -

The CIA agent pauses as he glances at them, saying with a slight sigh, “If you guys are done, report to Carolina by the Weapons Armory…”

But then he raises an eyebrow at Jack, murmuring slowly, “Wait...Morrison, you were a nurse.”

Jack gives him a confused look back, saying slowly, “...Yeeees?”

“You stay here.”

Jack’s expression falls into neutrally contemplative as Guerra glances to the other two, saying, “You two, to the Armory. Hey, Serena -” And as he starts to head to the Biotic Lab, Bianchi’s voice rings out from the rest of the hallway, “Smart people don’t just wander around military bases, Marc!”

“...Guess we get to play with the cool new weapons before you, Morrison,” Derek says as they watch Guerra duck into the Biotic Lab.

As they leave, heading towards the short hallway that connects the Medical Ward Hall to the Upper Hall, Jack hums a distant, “I guess so.”
His breath clouds slightly in front of him as Gabriel does one last trip east down the cargo ship line. They really were not messing around with this, he thinks, chest heaving, skin feeling that awkward, tepid “too warm under layers of clothes” that happens when one exercises hard in chilled, frosted air. Most of the cargo and new supplies had been in the trucks, but a few exceptions had been flown in, which was yet another surprise for this morning. They’d come in on the smaller, lighter transport ships, the “packages” clearly important enough to be flown in ASAP, but small enough to be “stealthy” slipping past the various warfronts and aerial siege lines around the country.

Not sure where this all came from, he continues heading towards the last ship - a small, slick flier that had apparently brought in some additional “special transport” live munitions. Most weapons experimentation gets developed in various secret and semi-classified labs around the U.S., but actual large-scale testing and prototype firing usually occurs in the desert in Nevada and Arizona.

But if it’s all personal, small-scale weapons, then maybe it came direct from the CIA in Virginia? he considers, glancing into the small cargo hold of the ship but -

“Didn’t you hear? This one is done,” the pilot says, glancing at him from inside the hold. Gabriel frowns slightly as the pilot snaps a few of the safety cables back into their retractable cases. As the pilot heads towards him, Gabriel sighs, muttering, “Oh, sorry, missed it, I guess.”

“Mm, they’re a little disorganized around here, aren’t they?” the pilot asks him, stepping out of the hold. Gabriel rolls his shoulders shrugging nonchalantly as he answers, “Yeah, they’re still...not quite sure how to handle all of us. Where’d you guys fly from? Langely?”

“Little ways off there,” the pilot laughs lightly, “We’re with ARL, so we flew straight out from the APG, Maryland.”

Gabriel blinks at him - just once - before he scowls, thinking, Aberdeen Proving Ground? That’s Army research, not CIA.

“So you had to go past the Detroit warfront?” he asks, genuinely interested but trying not to pester the guy. The pilot sighs, muttering, “Well, we flew way south, crossed up into Idaho from Nevada.”

“Sounds miserable,” Gabriel replies, sympathetic. The pilot adjusts his helmet a bit, adding, “Yeah, tell me about it. They don’t even want us to refuel here - we gotta go south because you guys don’t have enough fusion chargers up here.”

“I’m sorry, man - have a safe flight back,” Gabriel says, holding up his left fist. The pilot bumps his own fist against it, gloved knuckles knocking against Gabriel’s as he says quietly, “Yeah, well, I could say the same to you, man. Don’t get in too deep out here. I’m gonna go gear up for...the flight...back.”

His words trickle off as he gazes at something east, right up on the edge of the airfield plateau, where the artificially-leveled rock drops off into the actual mountain face.

Gabriel follows his gaze towards it, leaning past him slightly to see -
“Hey!” the pilot calls out, “You supposed to be out there? You’re real close to the edge!”

There’s a person standing there, right on the edge of the paved airfield, the tips of their dark boots just barely avoiding the line of powdery snow there.

As always -

Gabriel notices the details first.

*Those shoes aren’t military-grade, steel-toed, or snow-proof,* he immediately realizes, *They have two-inch heels too - jacket is designer, high-quality wool, very feminine, cape-style cut. Pretty sure that’s real fur on the lining.*

*Dark hair, thick - that curled texture is natural,* he continues, noting the sheer poise of the figure - the woman - standing there, how she is both precise in avoiding the line of the snow, and yet enraptured by the vista beyond -

As the sky begins to hue gilded and rose pink against the rough, snow-capped mountains in the east.

“...You go ahead, I’ll see if they’re okay,” Gabriel says to the pilot, before he strides out to the figure. As he approaches, boots crunching on the pavement and small patches of snow and ice, the woman - her back still towards him, barely reaching his shoulder height - says in a low but almost songlike voice:

“...I always thought the stories of the American West to be quite hyperbole, but I see that they are true indeed.”

...

Gabriel cannot immediately place her accent.

*Not American, not Canadian, not Mexican,* he can deduce, but her voice doesn’t quite have the accent he expects from Britain -

“...No wonder this place captured such imaginations,” she continues, observing the sunrise, barely moving even with her own words, “Your land is as wild as your spirits.”

Gabriel watches her for a moment -

Before he drawls in a dry deadpan tone, “I mean, I’m from LA, so it’s really more of an urban spirit thing.”

...

There’s a bit of a sigh to her as she finally turns slightly and -

It takes all of his willpower not to gawk.

He’s not normally one to be dazzled or awe-struck by appearance - growing up in LA and traversing different parts of the U.S. and Mexico for work has led him to see a rather wide sweep of humanity, a multitude of visages and countenances that are ever unique and yet trend together in his mind as just “people.”

But never - never - in his life -

Not as a techie on a Hollywood set, nor as a training Delta in emergency rooms around Florida, nor
as a qualified medic helping families in Guerrero, nor as a Fox meeting cartel members on the fringes of the lowlands -

_Never_ has he _ever_ seen someone like her.

Her skin is a rich, earthen tone, deep and regally dark like antique oak, ancient in its boundlessness, softened in the sunrise light with low hues of mahogany on the rounded arcs of her cheekbones and jawline.

But all across her face - dusting the curves of her cheeks beneath her eyes, trending in swirls from her broad nose, framing her lips, trailing up her forehead and into her hair, folded into the creases of age lines and soft mid-life wrinkles -

Are traces of soft, tawny speckles.

They’re scattered across her skin like small flakes of bronzed gold, not dissimilar to his own skintone, looking like shifting sand under the growing glow of the rising sunlight, making Gabriel think they’re almost an illusion.

She looks like she has stepped straight out of the pages of a fairy tale...or perhaps a myth.

…

And as much as he likes them -

Gabriel isn’t sure he actually wants to be _part_ of one -

Not one that involves _this_ program -

And _especially_ not if she is who he suspects she might be.

The woman sighs, her hazel-amber eyes looking him up and down, unimpressed with his quip and his own appearance before she mutters dryly, in that same low voice, “I supposed LA also taught you a sense of impropriety, did it?”

“Just trying to let you know this, uh, _rugged spirit_ isn’t really applied to all of us,” Gabriel chuckles, attempting to regain his composure. He adds with a mischievous grin, “Also, some of us like to watch the sunrise somewhere a little bit safer than an active military airfield. Like the Mess Hall or something.”

She harrumphs at that, and it’s only just now that Gabriel realizes she’s holding a thermos of something steaming - _probably tea, based on the tag hanging out_, he thinks - in her gloved hands. She lifts the thermos, sipping lightly, and after a moment -

And reminding himself, _No stupid questions_ -

Gabriel asks openly, “Are you supposed to be up here, ma’am?”

She quirks an unimpressed eyebrow at him, before she coolly lowers the thermos, saying with a slight irritation, “Truth be told, I’m _supposed_ to be in the medical ward overseeing the set up of the new biotic equipment, but I’m not interested in _wasting_ my first morning in the Rockies listening to Bianchi blither away while he tries to impress me with his grossly unimpressive knowledge of genetics.”

…
Hot damn, coming into the second act with a strong first impression, Gabriel thinks wryly, before he chuckles, “I mean, you don’t have to listen to him, ma’am - there’s about one-hundred and fifty other people who have grossly unimpressive knowledge on genetics here as well.”

She gives him a bland look, before her lips curl into a sly smile, and she chuckles, “Are you one of them?”

“Oh, absolutely, but you won’t get me blithering about it,” Gabriel says with his own mischievous smirk, “I never want to demonstrate how grossly unimpressive I really am.”

And finally -

At that pithy self-deprecating remark -

He gets her to crack a real laugh.

“Ha!” she laughs brightly, adding, “My, you may possess an urban spirit, but at least it’s charming. Here - lead me back to the medical ward. I suppose I should actually attempt to do my duties instead of waxing poetic about sunrises in my head.”

“Some of us do that anyways,” Gabriel says, still in the same self-deprecating tone, thinking guardedly, So she likes it when the humor is dry, huh?

“How droll - next you’ll tell me you have a poet’s heart too,” she laughs again as she starts to head west, towards the Vehicle and Regular elevators that will take them back down to the main facility.

Gabriel scowls briefly.

...Somehow -

He has a similar sort of feeling as when he’d met Guerra alone in a basic meeting room in Eglin.

...Like he could set the whole damn airfield on fire.

And he thinks, For a moment out of a fairy tale, this sure feels like a bad omen.

And then he follows after her.

Despite his height and her heels, she actually has quite the powerful stride, easily passing one, two, almost three of the small cargo ships before he properly matches her pace, and as he finally catches up, he slips back into that same, sarcastic tone of voice, saying wryly, “So it sounds like you’re not from around here.”

She snorts, but her attention is almost laserlike on her path forward, even as she chuckles, “Poetic and observant. You’re the whole package, aren’t you?”

“I try to consider myself something of a modern Renaissance man,” Gabriel retorts, falling back on his standard quip, thinking, Let’s see where this one goes.

“I suppose try is the operative word in that sentence,” she fires right back, and Gabriel internally finds his innate sense of “people are puzzles” intrigued, thinking, She is very receptive to sarcasm. Gotta keep that in mind.

“Isn’t that all we can do in life? Try?” Gabriel asks in a feigned philosophical tone as they continue down the line of ships to the Elevator hub. She finally glances sidelong at him, before she zings
again, “...I see that try was, in fact, the operative word.”

*Good God, she is relentless,* Gabriel thinks, starting to open his mouth to say something about trying to not appear grossly unimpressive when -

“We can do more than try.”

Her words are low and melodic, but undercut with an almost feverish intensity.

Gabriel shuts his mouth, flicking his gaze towards her.

She is staring forward as they get closer to the elevators, a determined look on her face as she says bluntly:

“We can set progress in motion. We can force the hand of fate over and over until it winnows down to a single card that we have already predicted.”

And as they head past the last ship to the elevator hub projecting up into the airfield -

An image of a regal quetzal, “dead” on the table in front of him -

An image of Jack in a chair, hands cuffed in front of him, eyes wide with terror as Guerra slips two fingers under his chin -

An image of a tip of a knife, just barely not touching the lens over his left eye -

Cuts through Gabriel’s thoughts -

As he thinks smokily:

*Ah.*

So you’re just like him, huh?

As they come to a stand by the regular elevator, Gabriel leans over and presses the call button, saying in the same dusty tone:

“...Sounds like you are absolutely supposed to be here.”

---

Over the last few minutes, more people from the other groups have arrived in the Medical Ward.

And the single unifying thing is -

*We all have some sort of medical training,* Jack thinks as they mill about in the hall outside of the Biotic Lab. Inside the room, Directors Jones, Watanabe, Guerra, and Bianchi are discussing something rather emphatically - so emphatically, in fact, that they hardly seemed to notice when the Echoes and the other “geek squad” candidates (as Adrien had called them) had slipped out of the room, making neutral “we’re gonna die if we stay here” faces as they had passed the other people in the hall.

In the hall proper, there’s about roughly thirty-five people, and it’s not hard to figure out their commonalities:

There’s the five senior Deltas (Soldiers: 11 - 15) - Hala, Riya, Rosa, Delacruz, and Ahmed.
There are the six trainers who were clearly also Deltas at one point - he’s seen them with Director Jones a lot.

And then -

*There are twenty-four Juliors and 18Xers,* Jack thinks, quickly tallying it up in his head.

A perfect amount of future Deltas for future ODAs.

“Hey Jack.”

Jack glances up as Jin sidles up towards him, slipping through Francis – an 18Xer who was a med student – and Rachel – a Junior who must’ve also been a Delta.

“Crazy seeing you here,” Jack grins wryly as Jin laughs softly, “Yeah, what a chance encounter.”

“I guess they got all of the equipment?” Jack asks. Jin had been helping restock biotic supplies in the temp storage room, and he shrugs lightly, saying, “They told me to head back over here when I was done.” Then the former Delta scowls, peering into the room as he mutters, “Is something wrong?”

“The answer is probably yes, but they haven’t asked for help yet,” Jack snorts. Jin chuckles at that, retorting, “Typical commanders.”

“Management is the same anywhere, huh?” Jack asks with a cheesy, knowing grin.

“You can say that again,” Jin grins back, adding slyly, “The military is just good at formalizing it.”

But then he pauses, his dark gaze looking contemplative as he watches Bianchi point to something on a datapad and Jones rolls her eyes.

And then Jin adds quietly, “Well...usually they’re good at that.”

(“Left here,” Gabriel says, as they approach the short hallway that connects to the main Medical Ward corridor. She chuckles, “What brilliant timing - I’ve just finished my tea.”)

(But as they round the corner -)

(Gabriel frowns.)

(There’s a small crowd milling about at the end of the connecting hallway.)

(“...Are they still not finished?” she asks as they stride towards the Medical Ward hallway -)

(Some of the people in the group - Riya, Hala, one of the trainers named Jorge, another trainer named Ifasola - absently glance towards them as they approach -)

(But then Gabriel sees eyes go wide, mouths drop slack -)

(He can literally see their conversations die mid-sentence -)

(There’s an abrupt, discordant -

*Hush*

That suddenly falls over the people standing closer to the connecting hallway.

And Jack finds whatever reply he was thinking up evaporates with the rest of the sound. Jin turns to
his right, and Jack peers around him looking to see what the commotion (or sudden lack thereof) is -

When…

Gabe appears in the Medical Ward.

Followed a second later by -

Jack feels his whole face contort into a shocked, jaw-dropping look of awe -

As Mayegun Mulcahy appears next to him.

…

Why did they stop talking? Gabriel thinks, glancing around, as the sheer silence compounds his feelings of being unnerved -

The woman next to him also looks around, a wry little smile on her face as -

“Oh - oh my god.”

Riya speaks first, practically shaking as she steps towards them, saying with a tone of barely-contained awe, “D-Doctor Mulcahy - you’re part of this program?”

…

Oh shit, I’m supposed to know who she is, Gabriel immediately realizes, as Mulcahy chuckles lightly, “Well, I am now.”

Riya looks dazzled, like she’s just met her favorite rockstar.

And all Gabriel can think is:

Oh god.

I’m really supposed to know who she is.

Mulcahy looks around, casting a keen eye over the group, saying, “Are you still...moving...things?”

“Oh, um!” Riya says, glancing around, her look turning from awe to quick panic as she mutters, “I - I don’t know -”

“They’re in there.”

Gabe’s pulse nearly spikes from the sound of Jack’s voice alone.

As the group parts a little, Jack can see both Gabe and Mulcahy are looking at him, but he gestures to the Biotic Production Lab -

Where, with how quiet the hallway is now, they can clearly hear Director Jones snap bluntly:

“I am not the Medical Director anymore, and I refuse to be held legally accountable for any part of this change in production plans. This is a disaster waiting to happen.”

…

There’s a slight pause -
Before Mulcahy glances up at Gabriel, smirking, “I will say, to your credit, you have almost poetic timing.”

Gabriel could *kick* himself, even as he sighs as dryly as he can muster:

“Just one of my many talents.”

“I shall keep them in mind,” Mulcahy smirks, before she heads for the Biotic Production Lab. The group parts instinctively for her, nearly every single person there wide-eyed, and Gabriel can hear the murmuring start like a wave as -

“...I hear the Medical Director is required to push a button?” Mulcahy asks, as she steps into the open doorway of the lab and -

Gabriel cannot *see* their reactions, but he can just barely hear Guerra mutter something -

Before Bianchi’s voice practically *sings*, “Doctor Mulcahy! We’ve been wondering where you were!”

“I needed some fresh air after that flight,” Mulcahy says to them, entering the room -

And as soon as it’s clear none of the directors are paying attention to the people in the hallway -

Gabe *darts* through the group, flitting and sliding his way through -

Before he suddenly and abruptly appears -

“Morrison.”

Jack has to snap his attention away from the directors’ conversation -

To peer past Jin, who is attempting to press himself back against the wall -

As Gabe basically *wedges* himself against the Junior, leaning in conspiratorially towards Jack, muttering, “Mooooooooorrison.”

“...Reyes,” Jack mutters back, his tone deadpan, trying his damnedest not to laugh at the super not stealthy look of utterly flustered *panic* on Gabe’s face. Gabe gestures back with his head, before he pulls himself back from nearly crushing Jin, and drifts back into the cluster of people -

Away from the door to the lab.

Jack sighs with a light, humorful patience, before he slips past Jin -

And follows Gabe into the small crowd of medics and doctors, who are starting to talk excitedly and giddily amongst themselves.

At the T-intersection with the connecting hallway, Jack finds Gabe standing there, scowl on his face but still looking slightly panicked -

Before Gabe suddenly lurches forward, grabbing Jack by the shoulders as he mutter-whispers loudly, “Who is she??”

Jack struggles to brace himself from Gabe’s grab, shoving down the remark of “*Pushing me up against the wall in my room would be better, Gabe*” -
As he actually manages to croak out, gawking, “Wait...you don’t know who Mayegun Mulcahy is??”

Gabe gives Jack a wide-eyed stare before he says in the same super-not-whisper, “No??”

“Wait -” Riya says, as some people around them hear it, “Reyes, you don’t know who Doctor Mulcahy is??”

“...What did I just say ??” Gabe asks-states to her, and Hala peeks around Riya, asking, “Weren’t you a Delta at some point?”

“Why does that matter?” Gabe asks, getting desperate and terrified that he has somehow missed something major in life -

“Doctor Mulcahy is one of the co-creators of the biotic field.”

Gabe stops.

Before he looks at Jack -

Whose expression has gone much, much more serious.

...Please get it, Gabe, Jack thinks, staring straight into Gabe’s smoke and gold eyes, before he adds softly, “She’s also the leading proponent of the transgenic enhancement model.”

“Leading proponent?” Riya asks, almost appalled, as Jorge sighs with more patience, “She basically developed it. This entire program is founded on her theoretical model.”

Gabe glances from Riya and Jorge -

Back to Jack -

As the blue depths of Jack’s eyes bore into his.

And Jack says in that low, tide-washed tone:

“She basically wrote the book on enhancements. A lot of her papers are critically formative on this topic.”

And then Jack makes a very obvious Get The Hint face at him.

Wrote the book - papers - this topic, Gabe repeats quickly, snapping the pieces together as he realizes:

(Jack, however, remains focused on the datapad, pointing to the last page of the paper visible on the screen, explaining, “The authors here say that their research was part of a much larger project focusing on integrating the transgene coding for trehalose-phosphate synthase into mammalian DNA coding and enzyme production. In fact, from their notes here, it looks like we should have like, forty or fifty papers explaining the sub-projects from that research group alone.”)

(Gabriel scowls darkly, asking with more seriousness, “Who funded this group?”)

(“Man, I know why you’re asking that,” Jack mutters, scrolling back up the acknowledgements section of the paper, but he shakes his head a bit, adding, “But on the surface, it doesn’t look like the military or other agencies were involved? This paper says a number of different national health institutes and universities across the globe contributed to the project. If it helps, the entire research
group or collective - or whatever you want to call them - originally branched off from the Applied Biotic Nano-deployment Project - oh!”)

(Jack glances up finally, grinning at Gabriel as he says, “That was the project that basically made biotic fields!”)

...Well, shit, Gabe thinks, making a face of miserable realization, almost mad at himself for not knowing -

When he feels Jack’s right hand gently pat his own right hand.

Gabe glances up, meeting those eyes again - so empathetic, so patient, so tender that he could drown in them - as Jack briefly -

So briefly -

Caresses the back of his hand.

_Hate seeing you look so defeated_, Jack thinks, even as he asks softly, “Do you _remember_ now?”

“...Yeah,” Gabe murmurs, “I do.”

Jack lowers his hand and Gabe lets go of his shoulders.

They both understand.

_Things just got ten-thousand times more complex._

Gabe folds his arms, leaning his left shoulder against the wall, sighing as he continues to share a knowing, understanding look with Jack. Jack, meanwhile, puts his hands behind his back, as he murmurs lowly, “...They brought in a lot of new nanoproducers and bioreactors.”

“...And what does that _mean_, Morrison?” Gabe asks him, not in a terse or harsh way, but in softer, smokier tones -

_Follow your own thought-process -_

Jack takes a half-step closer, saying in the same deep, quiet ocean current:

“...I’m no expert, but if a schedule is set up, the new machines could probably triple vector output _or_ create personalized transgenic vector cultures.”

Gabe watches him for a moment, as the sound of the excited buzz from the Medical Ward Hallway makes a disjointed symphony of quiet but interested voices -

Before he asks, “...Which is a higher priority for this...enhancement theory?”

Jack stares straight into those midnight-gilded eyes, before he answers gently - so gently, “Personalized vectors. Outside of the development of the biotic fields, Mulcahy’s greatest claim to fame is creating hyper-specific transgenic treatments and then marrying them together into a total enhancement...package, if you will.”

Gabe hums slightly, as Jack continues, “That’s the core component of the enhancement model: holistic phenotypic improvements through specific transgenic transfections.”

And then he pauses -
Before he adds quietly:

“It’s exactly like you said: if they’ve brought her into the program, then they’re trying to…refine it.”

(“That’s a good question, Watson,” Gabriel says with a slight grin, “And not one that has a clear answer. I think it’s pretty safe to say that Guerra is going to want to turn as many of us into these zombie soldiers as he can, but he probably won’t be successful with all of us. And I feel pretty confident that he has to have told other people, because while he might be Mister Secret Agent incarnate, he’s not a scientist and he’s definitely not the one who had the final say on the transgenic packages in the serum.”)

(Gabriel lolls his head a bit, continuing, “And if he wants to increase the rate of successful transgenic uptake, he’s going to need to improve the serum again, which means going back to whoever the CIA trusted on this bs. Maybe it’s the group that developed these transgenic projects in the first place. Not sure…”)

There’s a serious, stern but soft expression on Jack’s face and -

*You look good when you’re focused, Jack,* Gabe thinks, his own expression softening a little -

Jack’s pulse shivers slightly at the shadowy, smoky look in Gabe’s gaze, the way he seems to truly think over Jack and his words and -

“…Book club soon?”

Jack’s eyes get a little wider with hope as Gabe asks -

But then Gabe gestures with his head towards the Medical Ward Hall, adding cautiously, “We have a lot of...reading to discuss.”

…

*Ah, Jack thinks, Right. Escalating the program.*

But he smiles that half-smile at Gabe, saying, “Sure. Just tell me when.”

Suddenly, over the din of the other voices, they can hear Director Jones call out from down the hall, “Quiet!”

The whole group immediately falls silent and -

Jack turns around, leaning into the hall -

And Gabe stealthily slides in next to him, on his right.

The rest of the group has their attention towards the lab door near the east end of the hallway. It’s difficult to see over the varying heights, but it looks like the directors have reached some sort of conclusion -

As they drift out of the Biotic Lab and into the hallway proper.

Mulcahy sort of stands at the “head” of the group, her expression a mixture of skepticism and slight admiration as the individuals gathered there *immediately* focus on her and the other directors.

“So...these are the people with medical training, are they?” she asks, probably to the other directors because Serena - *Jones,* Gabe reminds himself - says with a slightly terse edge, “They are. Most of
them are 18 Deltas, or specialized combat medics."

Again - it’s difficult to see clearly, but they can hear the slightly confused scowl in Mulcahy’s tone as she asks bluntly, “...Combat medics? So no one here is a doctor?”

“Oh no,” Director Jones says with that dry, slightly rough laugh she gets when she’s feeling sarcastic, “Several of us are fully certified and trained M.D.s. Raise your hand if you have a doctorate of medicine degree.”

Gabe is not surprised to see three of the six trainers, two of the Senior Deltas (Ahmed and Rosa), and at least one Junior raise their hand.

Jack, however, makes a curious face in his peripherals, and Gabe leans over, murmuring as quietly as he can, “Many either join after completing med school, do cross-training, or do it on a leave period.”

Jack nods, replying in a whispers, “Makes sense.”

But still, the scowl lingers in Mulcahy’s tone as she asks pointedly, “How many of you are research physicians?”

Everyone with a raised hand lowers it.

…

The silence is…

Awkward.

“...We’re combat medics, not academics,” Jones says in a very bluntly loud whisper. Mulcahy sounds tangibly frustrated by that as she asks, “What are the rest of you?”

There’s a pause and then -

“Mostly nurses, technicians, and Physician Assistants, ma’am,” they can hear Jin answer.

“...Unbelievable,” Mulcahy states in a openly appalled tone, “Has anyone here worked in biotech?”

...No one raises their hand until -

“What do you consider ‘biotech,’ doctor?” Riya asks with slight confusion. Neither Gabe nor Jack can clearly see her -

But everyone can feel her staring the group down -

Before she sighs loudly, “Alright, allow me to refine that question: who has worked on biotic nanoproduction using machines like these, either in this program, or in another working situation?”

This time -

All six of the trainers and all five of the Senior Deltas raise their hands.

That part isn’t surprising - after all, they’ve been helping Jones run and administer the serums.

No, the surprising part is that three Juniors and three 18Xers also raise their hands -

Including Jack.
Gabe briefly quirks an eyebrow in Jack’s direction, before he thinks lightly, *Well, well - you learn something new everyday.*

After a moment, Mulcahy sighs, and then states, “Those of you who have worked with Doctor Jones on producing the enhancement serums in this program, you will join me to receive further instructions. The rest of you who have previous biotic nanoproduction experience will remain in this hall so that we can discuss your background and qualifications. Is that clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the group chants back at her.

Another pause, and then Mulcahy chuckles, “Well...I could get used to that.”

As the trainers and Senior Deltas start to move towards the lab, and the other candidates begin to disperse -

Jack feels a strong but gentle hand pat on his right shoulder.

And he glances towards Gabe, who is looking at him with a soft scowl as he murmurs, “Remember, Morrison - you made a promise.”

And Jack remembers -

*A sweet, bittersweet kiss against his fingers and knuckles -
That soft smoke voice whispering against his skin -
“...Promise me you’ll think about what’s best for you first and foremost.”

And he pauses, thinking sweet and bittersweet, *Take the program seriously, Jack.*

*Mulcahy is an opportunity to learn.*

*Working with her could change your life.*

But as he meets Gabe’s contemplative gaze - nightdusted shadows swept over gilded stars -

All Jack can think is:

*(A kiss on his hand, Gabe’s words against his skin)*

**You’re what’s best for me, Gabe.**

But he keeps the thought close to his heart, as he says with a slight smile, “...As if I could ever forget it, Reyes.”

---------

76: Playing Boy Scout

(About 30 minutes later, in the Medical Ward hall)

“- So at this point,” Jack says with a huge grin, gesturing for emphasis, “I’m trying to convince this dude that he straight up is *not* dying because - and I quote - ‘getting really, really high and eating six Big Macs is *not* a medical emergency’ - like, it’s a very different kind of emergency, but it’s not
something I can help with -”

Angel Santiago - Soldier: 121, 18Xer and an ICU nurse - is practically *crying* into her hands, her laughing sobs muffled by her palms. Dani O'Connell - Soldier: 85, a Junior Delta and former operating technician - is sitting next to her, wheezing as she wipes tears from her eyes.

“- When I kid you not, like, a freaking van pulls up in the ambulance ramps,” Jack continues, “And *like a goddamn clown car*, about ten of these *sobbing* sorority girls come piling out and they are *gone*, they are just *faded* -”

“Jeeeesus,” Dani cough-laughs as Jack says, “And there’s very clearly the *one* -” he holds up his right index finger, “- The *one* sober girl who they made drive them who looks like she’s about to kill someone because she doesn’t want to be there either. Anyways, they like, almost *break* the EMT entrance doors because this gaggle of them almost bulldozes the doors before they’re totally open -”

“Let me guess,” Angel hiccups, “Too many weed brownies?”

“Oh no,” Jack says, in the least reassuring tone ever, “No, no, they actually had a semi-real emergency. They were dragging in a girl with pretty severe alcohol poisoning.”

“Oh shit,” Dani says, “No way -”

“Yeah, so suddenly I’ve got a real emergency like, half-stumbling through the EMT entrance, except she’s like, being crushed by all her high-as-a-kite friends, and this one dude is still begging me to help him gag up his Big Macs,” Jack says conversationally, “So I manage to get the alcohol case into a room and get her set up for hydration and a stomach pump and once she was cleared, I went straight up to the charge nurse and told her, ‘Please, for the love of god, *never* give me a shift on 4/20 again.’”

“Shit, I don’t blame you,” Dani wheezes, trying to catch her breath. Jack rolls his shoulders, leans back against the concrete wall as he sighs, “Lesson learned: an eight-hour shift on 4/20 is like 99% high college kids, except for the *one* case that is inevitably an *actual* emergency -”

Suddenly -

The door to Mulcahy’s new office slides open

And Jin steps out, looking *exhausted*.

Jack’s grin fades a little.

Francis Brady - Soldier: 35, an 18Xer and med student - had been called into Mulcahy’s office once her instructions for the trainer-medics and Senior Deltas had been complete.

...He had looked almost the same.

Jin shakes his head, muttering, “Felt like I was in a job interview or something.” And then he glances at Jack, saying quietly, “Good luck, Jack.”

Jack sighs, bracing himself internally, before he rises to his feet, saying back, “Thanks, Jin.” He steps past the Junior Delta, rolling his shoulders slightly -

Before he steps into the office.

And the door shuts behind him.
The room is still barely set up: Mulcahy sits at the now-powered-on computer and smart desk, typing away rapidfire at the touchscreen keyboard, the tips of her fingers making a strange, dull tapping sound. There’s almost nothing else worth noting, except…

Jack raises an eyebrow at a small, stainless steel electric kettle - still steaming - and a small box next to it. His eyes shift to a small ceramic teacup, also steaming, on the smartdesk beside the computer monitors.

...He tries not to ogle -

But his eyes drift slightly over the swirling patterns on her skin, how the bronzy flakes seem backlit with the glow of the monitors.

...Mulcahy is not simply renowned for being the leading enhancement theorist, or the co-creator of the biotic field.

She herself is one of the most unique case studies of genetic chimerism in modern history.

*Genetic chimerism along Blaschko Lines*, Jack thinks, as he waits patiently by the door.

There’s not a biology or biomedical textbook in the world that doesn’t mention her - either for her contributions to nanobiology and genetics, or for being one of the best examples of a human multi-genotype individual. Her case - two fraternal zygotes fused into a single individual - is taught in every introductory biology class pretty much everywhere.

*Is it any wonder she basically single-handedly redefined genetic therapy from the ground up?* Jack considers, forcing his gaze back to the filing cabinets -

But Mulcahy finally states, “Sit.”

Jack lightly steps towards the chair on the other side of the desk. As he seats himself, Mulcahy - not looking up from the monitors at all - instructs him, “Monitor.”

Jack holds out his left arm, extending the monitor on his wrist towards her. Mulcahy just briefly looks up to tap a chip reader to the device, saying nothing as it beeps -

Or as she sets it back down.

*No wonder Jin was so exhausted,* Jack thinks as he lowers his arm. Mulcahy continues to tap at her keyboard, before she finally sits back as the computer loads his profile, grabbing her cup of tea, humming mainly to herself, “Alright. Let’s see...Soldier Number 76… John Morrison -”

“It’s Jack.”

...

Jack could *curl up into a ball and die right about now* -

As the words fall out of his mouth impulsively.

Mulcahy finally *looks* at him, giving him a bewildered blink, teacup midway to her mouth, before she half-asks, half-states, “I beg your pardon?”

Jack openly grimaces, saying apologetically, “Sorry, ma’am. Bad habit. My name is John, yes, but everyone calls me Jack.”
Mulcahy blinks at him -

Before she suddenly sets the teacup back down and puts her hands back on the keyboard, saying completely honestly, “Well. Let’s just fix that right now.”

And she starts to type something into what he assumes is his SEP profile.

“Uh…” Jack says hesitantly, scowling slightly, “…Are you allowed to do that, ma’am?”

Mulcahy barely turns her head past the monitor -

But she manages to give him a dead, blank, unimpressed stare.

*God, why do I keep putting my foot in my mouth* - Jack starts to think in a blind panic when -

“Listen, *Jack.*”

Mulcahy suddenly takes on a very blunt, very straightforward -

And yet, a very genuine -

Tone as she says:

“I’ve just been assigned one-hundred and thirty-two new clinical trial patients, on top of meeting all these *combat medic* doctors and soldiers. I will forget every single person’s name for the next three weeks, so whatever the system tells me when you check in for injections or do *whatever,* then *that* is what I will remember.”

…

Jack gives her a pretty honest, open, genuine look of incredulity back.

Mulcahy sighs, continuing with, “So if Jack is what you prefer, then Jack is what this damn program will call you. I have no patience for bureaucratic *legalities* or ridiculous military protocol *nonsense.* There is work to be done and it will *get* done.”

She turns her attention back to the monitor, typing in a few more things -

“...Thank you, doctor.”

She pauses, before she glances at him, giving him a slightly more contemplative look.

Jack just smiles at her, saying brightly, “For what it’s worth, I appreciate it.”

Mulcahy seems to consider him for a moment, before she answers, “...Speaking frankly with you, Morrison, I do not have time to play by whatever rules the military believes are worth enforcing. In my lab back in Dublin, I expect my students to get use to my informal behavior.”

And then she gives him something of a sly smile, chuckling, “And I expect the military to do the same here.”

Jack laughs lightly, saying, “I know a lot of people here will appreciate that.”

“Well,” Mulcahy grins, “I was never much of a *nice* doctor. Never had the bedside manner for it.”

“If you don’t mind me saying it, ma’am -”
Jack never fully knows where he finds the courage for this sort of thing -

“- I don’t really think this program needs a nice doctor.”

Or the wit to be this charming -

“It seems like it could just really use a good one.”

But the words fall from his mouth, impulsive but roguish, clever and surprisingly charismatic.

Mulcahy gives him an incredulous smile -

Before she suddenly laughs, her words almost melodic as she says, “Ah, I did not expect to find such wit in this program. I expected the candidates to be the standard soldier through and through.”

Jack grins back at her, saying slyly, “Well, not all of us are really soldiers yet.”

“And one can only hope we’ll manage to keep it that way,” Mulcahy smirks, before she settles back in her chair, reaching for her cup again, asking him, “So Jack - your profile says you’ve been an emergency nurse in…”

She squints at the monitor, as Jack sighs, “Bloomington, Indiana.”

“...Never heard of it, I’m afraid,” she says, taking a sip from her teacup, before she gives him a sardonic smile, “Sounds... flowery.”

“Yeah, most people haven’t heard of it,” he says dryly. Mulcahy looks at him appraisingly, before she says, “I did not think most emergency nurses had nanoproduction experience.”

Jack looks at her coolly, folds his arms across his chest, says, “Cross-training and overlaps are a growing trend in trauma and emergency medicine. The usefulness and capabilities of applied nanobiology tech are too significant and relevant to trauma and intensive treatment to ignore.”

“I see,” Mulcahy says nonchalantly, “And you received some of this cross-training, did you?”

“I did, pretty early on,” Jack says, just as nonchalantly, “I was the primary nanobiotic emergency and trauma nurse in the emergency department in my hospital.”

Mulcahy’s eyebrows rise with her clear interest, and she asks pointedly, “Primary nanobiotic emergency and trauma nurse? I haven’t heard of that particular classification.”

Jack observes her for a moment -

Notes, Black tea, a little bit of milk -

Before he says calmly, “I was in charge of creating rapid response personalized biotic fields and biotic IV drips for patients, in addition to all the other stuff emergency and trauma nurses do.”

For a moment -

Mulcahy actually looks impressed.

“Interesting,” she says, very honestly considering his words, “I thought most hospitals had separate technicians for that.”

“They do, and we did,” Jack answers, “But like I said, the emergency department saw the
importance of getting its nurses and doctors cross-trained for accurate and efficient nanoproduction responses."

“What did your duties entail?” Mulcahy asks. Jack thinks back, saying, “Let’s see...we’d get a patient in, and the priority was always on assessment and stabilization. Both of these were handled with standard treatment protocols, so talking to the patient, getting their own assessment, taking their blood pressure, hooking up IVs or oxygen if required. But we also ran immediate biodata collection and processing. The goal was to get the nanoproducers making a continuous output of personalized biotic materials.”

Mulcahy hums with interest, taking another sip from her tea, as Jack says, “Biodata for personalized assessment and stabilization was crucial. We didn’t want to run the risk of overloading a patient’s immune system, especially during times of traumatic stress. Getting the biotic fields to match a patient’s biodata increased the rates of successful transfusions and stabilization.”

“But you didn’t actually engage in long-term enhancement therapy?” Mulcahy asks him. Jack answers honestly, “No, I was in emergency only. But I know the core components. And part of my duties for discharging or transferring patients required assigning or developing a longer term treatment depending on the patient’s case or condition.”

Mulcahy looks interested again, saying, “And some of that involved developing enhancement therapy?”

“As well as I or the other nurses or doctors could assign,” Jack admits, “Longer term treatment would be decided by whatever department emergency patients needed to be transferred to. But in many cases, short term stabilization required the nanoproduction of personalized biomedicine and biomaterials to get the patient cleared.”

“If I gave you permission to operate that lab right now, could you produce a working biotic field without instruction?” Mulcahy asks and -

(There is a soft, sweet kiss on the back of his fingers -)

(And Gabe’s voice murmuring words against his skin -)

(Asking for a promise that Jack’s heart can never truly make)

(But he will try.)

Jack gives her a bright smile -

Thinks gently, Because you asked, Gabe, I will try my best.

(There are no stupid questions -)

(And there are no inopportunities.)

(There are only answers -)

(And chances to learn -)

(So that when the time comes -)

(He can answer Gabe honestly, truly, genuinely.)

As he answers, “As long as the biotic materials are actually there, yeah, I think I probably could.”
Author's notes because I keep breaking AO3:

In Greek mythology, a chimera was a hybrid creature composed of different parts of different animals, typically "depicted as a lion, with the head of a goat arising from its back, and a tail that might end with a snake's head. The term Chimera has come to describe any mythical or fictional animal with parts taken from various animals, or to describe anything composed of very disparate parts, or perceived as wildly imaginative, implausible, or dazzling. The sight of a Chimera was an omen for disaster."

In modern day biology, a "chimera" is an organism with two or more genotypes contained in its cells.

Genetic chimerism can naturally occur in humans. The most typical example is when two fraternal twin zygotes (in other words, two individual, usually separately fertilized eggs) merge together to form a single embryo, and yes, this can occur with eggs of two separate biological sexes. There are a handful of examples of phenotypically feminine and/or masculine individuals carrying the genotypes of a fraternal twin opposite-sex sibling in some of their cells. A remarkably dramatic case of confusing genetic chimerism occurred in 2002, when DNA tests showed that Lydia Fairchild was somehow not the biological mother of her own children; eventually, it was discovered that her own eggs carried the genotype of her fraternal twin sister.

Genetic chimerism is one of the possible origins of naturally-occurring heterochromia.

Moira is - in my opinion - one of the coolest syntheses of "gameplay chimerism", "design chimerism", and literal "genetic chimerism" in modern media. Every single part of her character is a hybridization of elements: her gameplay is a hybrid of Mercy and Reaper, her design has heterochromia and she is asymmetrical in the use of her Biotic Grasp, and her actual character backstory heavily implies that she is a natural genetic chimera. Her Archives spray (the one of her as a child) implies that her heterochromia is naturally-occurring (though obviously elements of her design are drawn from David Bowie, who developed his "heterochromia" after an accident). Personally, I interpret her right eye as red and a consequence of chimeric albinism.

Most naturally-occurring genetic chimeras do not actually know that they have this condition. For most individuals - human or not - the condition does not actually result in noticeable phenotypic or physically-expressed differences. This is because typically fraternal twins will still look relatively similar to each other, and have similar eye color, hair color, and skin color, or have similar long-term health changes.

However, when it comes to mixed race and mixed ethnic phenotypes, these attributes are not simple binaries of "one parent's traits" or "the other parent's traits." The expression of these traits occurs on a spectrum, and as a reminder, "race" itself is not a biological "attribute", but a social modifier of identity that different cultures apply different concepts to. Children of multiracial couples - including my sibling and myself - may look very different than what others or a culture may assume. This beautiful article dispels a number of myths about how red hair - typically a recessive trait - may be expressed among mixed-heritage individuals.

There are, in fact, a few instances of fraternal twins of mixed-heritage couples looking very "not twinlike" based on our perceived concepts of how twins and siblings "should look". Marcia and Millie Briggs represent perhaps the most famous case of "different phenotype" fraternal twins, but they are not the only example: Lucy and Maria Aylmer are another example of fraternal twins with different appearances.
There are several ideas behind Mulcahy: the first is that - like Moira - she is a human with genetic chimerism composed of two fraternal twins who have two different genotypes for two different-appearing phenotype expressions. The second is that she is meant to a character who - like Guerra - helps explain the founding motivations for Moira and why Moira makes some of the "early" (Crisis-era) decisions that she does. Lastly, Mulcahy is meant to be Guerra's opposite: while Guerra appears relatively unassuming, the more the story progresses, the more we have seen some sinister and horrifying elements of his personality and demeanor get revealed.

As for Mulcahy's personality...

Well, we shall have to see more. :^)
Special Treatment / Questions

Chapter Summary

["Never accept the world as appears to be."]

Mulcahy starts collecting data to move her schedule for the enhancement serums forward.

Gabe encounters "Nurse Morrison" for the first time.
(And maybe gets a little special treatment from him.)

A student has a few...questions for a scientist.

And Guerra helps Mulcahy find a pattern among her patients.

["Dare to see it for what it could be."]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Partial transcript of Overwatch agent* Gabriel Reyes’ testimony during the 2065 United States Congressional investigation of the Omnic Crisis Soldier Enhancement Program - Part 2

* 2068 update: This transcript was written prior to the public revelation of the Overwatch Special Operations Division (internal codename “Blackwatch”) and Reyes’ role as the commander of the division. Additionally, former Senators on the SEP investigative committee have commented that they were unaware of Reyes’ position as Blackwatch commander during the 2065 SEP investigation.

Principle investigative committee: A joint committee between the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the United States Senate Committee on the Armed Services

Date: March 23, 2065

Date leaked to the public: March 23, 2065

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CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Welcome back, esteemed committee members. And welcome back, Agent Reyes.

REYES: Thank you, chairwoman.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: The topic of today’s session will be discussing the nature and development of the prototype pulse and plasma weapons and armaments utilized over the course of the Soldier Enhancement Program and the Crisis beyond.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Some of the matters that have concerned this committee in regards to the development of the pulse and plasma weapons are focused around the usage of the weapons,
their physical-tactile relationships to human enhancements, and the legally stated purpose of the Soldier Enhancement Program to “transgenically enhance trained soldiers to specifically carry, use, wield, and proficiently act with pulse and plasma guns - including but not limited to: assault rifles, shotguns, sniper rifles, and pistols - and other weapons such as grenade and frag launchers, rocket launchers, remote-detonating mines and devices, plasma-carrying drone weapons, and other armaments”.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: I would like to remind the committee that we have heard expert witness testimonies on the development of the pulse and plasma weapons, as well as the mechanical aspects of whether un-enhanced human users would be able to adequately carry, use, and act with the weapons. Today we will begin hearing accounts from former candidate-soldiers on their training and using the weapons during the program and onwards.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Once again, I would like to thank Agent Reyes for joining us here, and would like to acknowledge for the record that Agent Reyes has an international and supranational protected intelligence and classification status as enforced by the United Nations and the Overwatch Executive Strike-Commander’s Office and Judicial Divisions. Agent Reyes may refuse to answer questions on the ground of both national and international security concerns.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Additionally, much of the Crisis-era intelligence, information, and data collected and utilized by Agent Reyes as a candidate-soldier is still classified by the United States Army and the Central Intelligence Agency, and do not have to be disclosed by either Agent Reyes himself or any other candidate-soldier who testifies.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: We will now begin today’s proceedings. Committee member Wong will start with the first question.

WONG: Thank you for attending today’s investigation, Agent Reyes. The committee appreciates you taking your time to be here.

REYES: I do what I can.

WONG: I’d like to start with the question everyone on the committee is interested in asking: were the pulse and plasma weapons essential to your strategy for breaking the Siege of Bakersfield in 2047?

REYES: ...No.

(Audible discussion.)

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Order! Silence please.

WONG: Thank you, Agent Reyes. Can you elaborate on that?

REYES: Without getting into specifics, not really. I will repeat that they were not key components to the final and successful assault on the Bakersfield Central Core.

WONG: If I may ask, Agent Reyes, without getting into strategic specifics, what would you describe as the key component or components for the success of the final assault on the Bakersfield Central Core?

[...]

REYES: That is a difficult question to answer, Senator, and I’m not sure any single word or term can adequately cover the core elements of the strategy that was involved.
REYES: ...If I had to identify one particular element that changed the situation and strategy, I would say that ‘unconventional intelligence’ helped provide the most security in the strategy.

WONG: And this particular element was why you eventually became the Overwatch Crisis Strike-Commander?

REYES: ...More or less.

RODRIGUEZ: If I may ask, Agent Reyes, would you say that carrying and using the weapons during this assault on the Bakersfield Central Core made a difference in its success? As opposed to using non-pulse and plasma weapons?

[...]

REYES: In my assessment, no, they did not.

(Audible discussion.)

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Order! Quiet down!

RODRIGUEZ: So would your strategy have been any different if your squad and the other SEP squads were armed with traditional ballistic weapons?

REYES: ...No.

RODRIGUEZ: Can you elaborate on that at all?

REYES: No, I cannot.

[...]

REYES: However, I will say, in my combined twenty-seven years of active military and intelligence work for both the United States and the United Nations…

REYES: If it helps the committee to know this.

REYES: A weapon is merely a tool. A highly specialized tool, but a tool all the same. It is the soldier who uses it who is valuable.

RODRIGUEZ: Is this philosophy part of why the Crisis-era Overwatch Strike Team recruited Captain Amari and Engineer Lindholm, despite knowing both their backgrounds?

REYES: Absolutely.

(Audible discussion.)

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Silence please!

REYES: The Crisis Strike Team was interested solely in the caliber of the soldiers and agents, not in their preferred weapons…or tools. The best sniper in the world carrying a mediocre rifle is orders of magnitude more valuable than a mediocre sniper carrying the best rifle.

REYES: Military force multiplication through weapons development means nothing if the object being multiplied - the soldier - isn’t a valuable asset on their own.

DAVIDSON: If I may, Agent Reyes - the cost and budget of the Soldier Enhancement Program’s
weapons development would suggest otherwise.

REYES: So you compared that to the cost of the enhancements themselves, did you?

REYES: Or the cost of managing the facility? Running the training itself?

REYES: Money does not always represent qualitative development, senator.

DAVIDSON: So you would contest that the ultimate purpose of the Soldier Enhancement Program was to enhance Special Forces soldiers to be physically capable of using and wielding the pulse and plasma weapons?

REYES: No, I think that that statement is correct. And was felt by the majority of the candidates to be the primary objective of the program.

REYES: That does not mean that was the final result.

DAVIDSON: If I may ask, Agent Reyes - if you felt that the result of the program was different than its stated objective, and that your early success at the Bakersfield Central Core was not dependent on the weapons used, then why did you and Strike-Commander Morrison keep variants on the heavy pulse rifle prototype and the ravager shotguns when you left for Overwatch?

REYES: They suited our needs.

DAVIDSON: Do you not see the contradiction in your statements?

REYES: Contradiction? What contradiction?

REYES: The best sniper carrying a mediocre rifle is a great asset. The best sniper carrying the best rifle is a war-changing asset.

REYES: Q.E.D. a great soldier carrying a good rifle is a strategic part of an army, but a great soldier carrying a great rifle with proper training and tactical skills is an army unto himself.

DAVIDSON: But you just said -

REYES: Senator Davidson, I am aware of what I just said. I’ve spent nearly three decades in this line of work. Pulse and plasma weapons - no matter how cutting edge - spread out over one-hundred and thirty-two individuals do not necessarily have the same impact as five to six individuals armed with everything else that is more essential than the best gun in the world.

REYES: That is not how military science and force multiplication works.

REYES: I would rather arm the best six individuals in their respective fields with the best equipment, tools, and weapons available to them than budget out that same skill and caliber of agent or soldier over ten to twenty times that amount.

REYES: Nothing - nothing - is better than quality tactics, strategy, intelligence, and information granted to the most-qualified individuals to use.

REYES: If you see a contradiction in me carrying two SEP shotguns for the length of the Crisis versus everything else in the program itself, you’ve missed the forest for the trees.

[...]

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Agent Reyes, given what you just said, allow me to ask: if you do not
think the testing and handling of the prototype weapons were the important result of the program, in your assessment, what was the most important end result stemming from it?

REYES: …

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Was it the enhancements and the phenotypic changes you and the other candidates experienced?

REYES: ...No.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: ...Then what was it?

REYES: I cannot say.

(Audible discussion.)

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Is that a classified answer?

REYES: ...Yes.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: For the United States or for Overwatch?

REYES: ...For everything.

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[Messages between [Gabe] and [Jack], from March 23, 2065]

[Jack]: Awwww

[Jack]: The most important end result of SEP is “classified for everything”

[...]

[Gabe]: LOOK

[Jack]: And calling me an army unto myself.

[Jack]: You make me feel like such a king, Gabe.

[Gabe]: …

[Gabe]: Yeah, I totally meant for that to be cute like that

[Jack]: Of course you did, Holmes

[Gabe]: All part of my master plan

[Jack]: lol, master plan for what

[Gabe]: To charm you, of course

[Gabe]: Come to my room when I get back to the hotel?

[...]

[Jack]: Gabe, where do you think I am right now?
[Gabe]: ...Oh. Damn, I really am that good.

[Jack]: Yeah, yeah mister mastermind

[Jack]: See you in a few <3

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24: Special Treatment

Monday, March 4, 2047: 0848 - In one of the partially-enclosed clinic stalls in the Mass Serum Ward room

The rest of this morning had been…

Well.

Rather intense, mainly in terms of information overload.

While new Medical Director Mulcahy had been doing...whatever with the trainers and candidates she’d kept in the Medical Ward, the rest of them got the rundown on the new pulse and plasma weapons from Flores, Luna, Cruz, and some new weapons engineer named Luke Edwards from the Army Research Laboratory (ARL) who was clearly the physicist behind the weapons and not an actual handler of them.

No, the actual users of the guns and weapons

Were Guerra and Bianchi.

Not that there had been much in terms of a physical demonstration or anything: mainly standard shooting range stuff, firing at targets, showing the size and scope of some of them.

“Currently, we have prototypes for four main, non-artillery guns,” Edwards had explained to the group, as Guerra and Bianchi had stood next to him. The weapons engineer had continued, “We have the standard carbine pulse rifle -“

Bianchi had held up the carbine pulse rifle, which looked very much like a more bulbous M4A1. Next to Gabriel, Carlos had snorted in a mixture of derision and humor, as someone else - Michael Tsang, from the sound of it - had whispered, “Are you kidding me? A Stormtrooper blaster looks cooler than that.”

“- The heavy pulse rifle -”

Guerra had hefted the so-called heavy pulse rifle, which - unlike the carbine a moment before - actually seemed to look like the name. Though it was roughly the same length as a SCAR-H Standard (maybe a little over at about 40 inches), it was maybe twice as large as one, all grey-tan gunmetal and boxy angles.
At the sight of it, Carlos had actually hummed, clearly impressed, and even Luisa had muttered, “Shit, no wonder they’re enhancing us.”

Gabriel had just stared at it, eyes tracing the thickness of the receiver and the barrel, trying to remember the diagrams from the SEP files.

Almost twice the size and less than a fourth of the range of a SCAR, he had thought, But pulse stocks are intended to melt Omnic armor. ...Or so they say.

Edwards had adjusted his glasses, droning on, “The pulse pistol -”

Bianchi had held up the pistol - laughably small.

“...The Army spent time and money on that?” Michael had muttered loudly.

But then -

“- And the plasma combat shotgun.”

Guerra had held up the new plasma-slag combat shotgun.

And the small pockets of laughter over the pistol had died.

It hadn’t been what he had expected based in the (mostly colorless) models in the SEP files.

The thing had been…

Ugly

Unwieldy

And

Boring as all hell, Gabriel thinks, remembering it as he looks over his notes from the announcement.

Like the other firearms, the combat shotgun had been boxy and yet somehow rounded at the edges, a sandy tan color with chunky off-white parts. It had been big, that’s for sure, but the barrel was also ungodly short - the effective range is something like under 15 meters, Gabriel remembers, Comes with stock attachment, selective fire modes of semi-automatic, burst, and automatic, multiple ammo types but the base munition was the plasma slag pellets.

He leans back in the chair, sighing as he shuts his eyes, thinking quietly:

What a tactical nightmare.

Combat shotguns are more operative multitools than pure firearms like carbines or assault rifles: their short range but multitude of ammo types makes them ideal for urban close-range combat. Busting down doors, launching frags and grenades with attachments, using non-lethal pellets in denser close-quarters combat situations, “downing” a combatant without killing them, providing close-range cover fire (down halls or around corners) - they’re useful, especially for Special Forces or Special Operations squads, and he’s used his fair share during raids on cartel strongholds or dense opium labs.

Hell, his ambidextrity means that in some tight situations, he’s been able to change hands or
occasionally dual-wield on the fly, which is why Carolina had assigned him one of the squad shotguns to carry.

(And he had been one of the only people he’d known in the Special Forces to have it set up on his left thigh, ready for a quick pull if he needed it.)

But to reduce that functionality for short-range lethality?

Against robots with *Gatling guns*?

Virtually suicidal.

…

But then he opens his eyes, staring absently at the curtain divider, thinking darkly:

...*Unless they think we can’t be killed.*

...Which is probably why - now that lunch is over - they’ve broken up the candidates into their usual groups of twenty-four -

And have partitioned out the rest of the afternoon for the serum clinic.

Mulcahy had (briefly) introduced herself to the rest of the non-medically-trained candidates at lunch (and at least a few of the ones with backgrounds in the sciences seemed to recognize her) before she had disappeared again, clearly focused on her task of reinvigorating the enhancement part of the program.

...The trainers and candidates that had stayed for her “instructions” that morning -

Had not joined the rest for lunch.

*Hope she actually let them eat something,* Gabriel thinks dryly, flipping a page in his notes again.

He has his datapad in his right hip pocket, but…

He hasn’t actually asked Jack for a copy of the SEP files back on his login.

Mainly, he’s concerned that Guerra is still trying to track his profile somehow, or monitor file sharing - *if no one has asked Jack for anything, or removed the files from Jack’s login, then they’re safe for the time being,* Gabriel reminds himself, *Not at all secure, but we’ll have to try and formulate a plan moving forward.*

Making physical copies or transferring the files to a secure, offline digital storage device would be ideal.

And also the riskiest part.

...*If they don’t check purchases coming back from pass time to Sun Valley, we could do it,* he considers, adding a small note of “DSD?” in a corner of his current page, *And some DSDs are small enough to be easily carried in inner pockets or boot holsters. Lots of DSDs are like their USB precursors - lots of different styles, shapes, sizes…*

*But where do we keep it?*

And then -
Gabriel stops.

Frowns slightly.

And then writes down:

“Locker rental?”

...

*It just might work*, he thinks, about to pull out his datapad to start searching locker rental locations in town when -

“...Hmm, you look too strong to need a doctor.”

That voice - deep, rolling like the tide, with undercurrents of playful smoothness -

Slips into the space of the small partitioned check-up area and -

Gabe nearly *choke* on his own *tongue* -

As Jack steps in, smirking roguishly -

Dressed in dark blue scrubs.

(+76: Special Treatment)

...It had been hard for Gabe to concentrate when Jack was in his running clothes.

It’s about *ten times harder* to concentrate with Jack in scrubs.

*How does he keep doing that??* Gabe manages to think - the scrubs aren’t even as formfitting as the running clothes, but there’s something *ridiculously attractive* about seeing Jack in them. The top half of the shirt hugs his broad shoulders tight, accentuating his arms, and even though the pants aren’t snug, they cling to his hips just right and -

*It’s definitely getting easier to notice when you’re flustered, Gabe*, Jack thinks as he grins, relishing in the faint glow on Gabe’s cheeks, rosy on his skin, the way his eyes almost *drag* over Jack.

And somehow -

Gabe barely manages to rasp out:

“Well, doc...It’s an internal sort of pain.”

“Oh no,” Jack says, moving to the small, portable computer set up on a table-tray on the left side of the patient chair (but set to Jack’s right). As he seats himself on the stool next to it, he flashes a bright, smug smile at Gabe, asking coyly, “Is it lovesickness?”

His eyes are *so blue* against the color of the scrubs.

*This is going to fuel my dreams for weeks*, Gabe at least as the awareness to think, even as he chuckles dryly, “No. More like heartburn.”

And Jack can’t hide it.
His smirk cracks into a bright, humorous grin, as he laughs, “Oh my god, Reyes -”

“You started it, Morrison,” Gabe grins right back, pointing at him, his eyes lit with laughter, “Don’t you put that on me -”

“Mmm, I can start something else if you want,” Jack chuckles, his own eyes mischievous and delighted, and Gabe just snap-grins, “You keep trying to start something, alright.”

“Is it working?” Jack smirks at him, waking up the computer. Gabe rolls his eyes, sighing warmly, “I’m pretty sure it started a week ago.”

“Oh, so this condition has been going on for a week, huh?” Jack asks humorously, logging into the computer. Gabe sits back in the chair a bit, his gaze tracing over Jack fondly, before he murmurs softly, “...I didn’t know you worked on nanoproduction stuff.”

Jack doesn’t look away from the computer, but the smile grows softer as he opens up the Medi-Reader program, saying back in a more serious tone, “Mm, not a ton. Only for emergency and trauma biotic fields and infusions. This level of nanoproduction is still pretty new to me.”

And then -

As the computer loads up -

Jack sets his new datapad down next to the keyboard -

And swivels towards Gabe.

There’s a moment of shared understanding between them -

Eyes locked together -

Before Gabe asks quietly, “...She let you guys eat lunch yet?”

“...Yeah, before the rest of you,” Jack answers, just as softly, and he smiles faintly, adding, “...Thanks for asking.”

“...Someone has to look out for you,” Gabe replies gently.

...You make it hard to try and keep my promise, Gabe, Jack thinks, chuckling a little, mainly to himself, before he answers honestly, “Well, I’m glad it’s you.”

...

...Oh, Gabe thinks, I walked right into that one.

He doesn’t mind.

The silence between them is…

Yearning.

(And they both know it.)

The Medi-Reader program dings.

Jack shifts slightly, grabbing the monitor chip-reader as he says, “Monitor, please.”
Gabe pauses, before he sits up, closer to the edge of the chair, and holds his left arm out, wrist towards Jack.

And Jack…

Hesitates.

Only for a second.

Before he moves the stool slightly closer, chip-reader in his right hand and -

…

There are rough, slightly calloused fingertips tracing the base of Gabe’s palm, slipping to the inner, softer part of his wrist -

As Jack’s left fingers caress him gently - so gently.

The feeling of it is -

Somehow -

Just as intimate as when they had held hands in the snow camp.

Words and thoughts struggle to connect in Gabe’s head, there’s only a fluttering, pulsed feeling in his breath as he feels the way Jack steadies his hand, the sheer tenderness of how Jack’s index and middle fingers leave faint trails of their warmth over his palm and -

Jack’s heart is caught in his throat in the best way, chest deep and aching with something he wants to indulge in, feeling the tender part of Gabe’s wrist, the warmth of his palm.

The moment lasts only a few seconds -

Maybe a few heartbeats -

But it is full.

Not in a jittery, excited, lovestruck sort of way -

But in a quiet, patient, sweet little sense of awe.

And then, exhaling the heartbeat he’d been holding in -

Jack sighs -

And turns Gabe’s wrist slightly before he taps the chip-reader to it.

The Medi-Reader program on the computer dings again, loading Gabe’s patient and candidate information. Jack twists himself towards the monitor, as Gabe sighs - the ghosts of fingertips still lingering on his skin - and settles back in the chair.

Jack skims through the top part:

[Candidate ID]: 06 0000 0024

[Candidate Name]: Reyes, Gabriel
[Candidate Age]: 29

[Candidate Status]: ODA 7436, 18F

[Candidate Base]: Eglin Air Force Base, 7 SFG

[Blood Type]: AB Negative

Jack blinks -

And then suddenly twists a bright, bewildered grin towards Gabe, asking excitedly, “You’re AB Negative??”

…

Gabe blinks back at him for a second, before he gives Jack a wry, knowing smirk back, chuckling, “Unfortunately.”

“Unfortunately??” Jack gawks, “Wha - that’s so cool -”

“Oh my god, Morrison,” Gabe snorts, a genuine smile cracking on his face, “You’re such a med nerd.”

“Less than a percent of the U.S. population, Reyes!!” Jack says, his whole face lit up with such real enthusiasm that Gabe still feels that fluttery, pulsed feeling in his chest and -

“Do you know how unique you are?” Jack asks, still full of that boundless enthusiasm, his own thought flooding rapidly with sheer, utter thrill as he thinks, Of course Gabriel Reyes is a statistical anomaly -

“God damn, Morrison - you are so good for my ego,” Gabe says, barely stifling a laugh, “And I was a medic, so yeah, I know the numbers.”

“Six in a-thousand for the entire U.S. population and only one in a-thousand Latino American patients, Reyes!!” Jack says, still bursting with energy, before he hums thoughtfully, “I wonder if anyone else in this program even has AB Negative - holy hell, you’re a universal plasma donor too.”

Gabe just sits back, highly amused, relishing the sight of Jack’s excitement -

Before Jack adds brightly, “God, my hospital would’ve tried to bribe you to come in and donate.”

Gabe tilts his head slightly, and he chuckles lowly, “Oh yeah? Bribe me with what, Morrison?”

Jack pauses -

Before he gives Gabe a sidelong glance, with that smoke and twilight smirk as he hums deeply, “Well, whatever you want, Reyes - you’re the king, after all.”

And then Jack winks at him.

Yup, another one for the dream bank, Gabe’s one living brain cell thinks, as he sighs heavily, “...God damn, I walked myself right into that one.”

“You keep lobbing them straight over the plate, so I’ll keep taking swings,” Jack laughs, as he turns his attention back to the computer.
But as he starts to scroll -

He hears Gabe ask softly, “What about you?”

“Hmm?” Jack says, glancing up at him. Gabe just looks at him with a faint, warm expression and -

Jack’s heart thunders in his chest -

As Gabe asks, “What’s your blood type?”

Jack pauses, before he gives Gabe a sly smile, saying, “...You better not laugh -”

A mischievous, delighted smile cracks on Gabe’s face as he already starts saying, “No way -”

“I’m O Negative,” Jack admits, biting back his own laughter, even though he can’t hide his smile. Gabe’s eyes light up over that, as he teases Jack, “You are such a little saint, Morrison -”

“Hey, I break just as many rules as you!” Jack fake-protests, but Gabe just shakes his head, saying, “Emergency nurse with O Negative blood type - aren’t you just the dream medic in the making?”

Jack fake-pouts, and then smirks slyly at Gabe, humming teasingly, “I’d rather be your dream medic, Reyes.”

WHEN WILL I LEARN, Gabe’s brain screams at him, as he groans with a laugh, “I just keep giving them to you!”

“They’re not the thing I want you to give to me, though,” Jack grins roguishly. Even as the words thrum Gabe’s excitement, he drags his hands down his face, fake-grumbling, “One month - I asked you to just chill for one month, and you can’t even go a week -”

“You’re just such a temptation, Reyes,” Jack continues, laying it on thick, even as he scrolls down to the most recent notes on Gabe’s medical profile - all regular dosages, none missing, no immunogenic reactions, the actually-focused part of his mind notes -

“You’ve given me such a fever, Reyes,” Jack jokes, creating a new entry in the record -

“...And the only prescription is more cowbell?”

...

There’s a pause -

Before Jack finally glances at Gabe, his expression deadpan, as Gabe gives him a big cheesy grin.

“...I try to flirt with you to the best of my abilities, dressed in scrubs, as your nurse,” Jack states, completely dryly, but he can feel the edges of his lips quirk into a slight smirk, “And you drop a forty year old joke on me.”

“You reap what you sow, Morrison,” Gabe says, shrugging smugly, “If you’re gonna keep swinging, Imma throw you a curveball every once in awhile.”

Jack stares at him, before he grins radiantly, laughing, “Joke’s on you - I don’t fear the reaper.”

The smile evaporates on Gabe’s face as he buries his head in his hands, mumbling, “You’ll be the death of me, Morrison.”
Jack just laughs as he fills out the date, time, and his name, saying more conversationally, “Plus, 70’s rock is some of my favorite, you know?”

Gabe lifts his head from his hands, assessing Jack, who is focused on the computer, before he replies with an honest rasp to his words, “God, and you have good tastes in music. Can you do no wrong?”

“No,” Jack says with a coy grin, “But I can be a real bad nurse if you want me to, Reyes.”

I can’t win, I just can’t, his dying brain cells think as the joy of it fuels him, and Gabe finally calls it, admitting, “Damn, dude, you gotta - you gotta stop. My heart can’t take this.”

“Did I win the cheesy pick up line contest yet?” Jack beams at him, rising from the computer. Gabe just shakes his head, muttering, “You can take this round. I just. I need a timeout. I gotta talk to the coach, redo the playbook.”

Jack laughs brightly, heading to a small storage cabinet on the other side of the patient chair. As Gabe catches his breath, he watches his “nurse” settle on another stool by the cabinet. As he opens the drawer, Jack asks his patient, “Which arm do you prefer to get blood drawn from?”

...Blood drawn? Gabe asks quietly, his tone pinpoint and precise.

Jack pulls on some fresh latex gloves, glancing knowingly at Gabe, before he murmurs, “...You know what I said earlier.”

(Jack stares straight into those midnight-gilded eyes, before he answers gently - so gently, “Personalized vectors. Outside of the development of the biotic fields, Mulcahy’s greatest claim to fame is creating hyper-specific transgenic treatments and then marrying them together into a total enhancement...package, if you will.”)

...Oh, Gabe thinks, before he asks quietly, “So that’s already starting, huh?”

Jack doesn’t look away, as he simply murmurs, “She wants to see where the candidates are at. Blood tests, maybe bone marrow biopsies.”

Gabe hums curiously, asking, “...Where are people at so far?”

But then he cracks a wry grin, chuckling, “Or does that violate HIPPA, Nurse Morrison?”

“Pretty sure this whole program violates HIPPA,” Jack laughs back. But he grows more solemn, thinking about the few other candidates he’s already drawn blood for during the early afternoon - including himself and the other “medical technician” candidates Mulcahy has assigned -

And he murmurs lowly, “It’s...difficult to say. My own...background in this - if you want to call it that - is mainly limited to emergency and short-term treatments. The ICU and therapy candidates will understand it better than I do...but…”

He pauses, thinking it over, trying to remember...

Gabe just waits, listens, admires the way contemplation seems to grace Jack’s features.

“...Like this morning.” Jack says, deciding on his words, “It’s clear even from the first twenty-five, thirty candidates that we’re effectively capable of handling the weapons. She’s not showing us the full results, but she’s definitely been really pleased by the DNA samples from the white blood cells.”

Gabe scowls slightly. Jack frowns a little, continuing. “The plan is to do biopsies on all the non-
Delta Senior soldiers, but use results from blood tests to develop biopsies for the Juniors and 18Xers."

"Any patterns?" Gabe asks lowly, his thoughts sharpening, but Jack just shakes his head, answering, "Not that I can see. But the results of the biopsies for the other Senior soldiers are all virtually the same."

Gabe braces for the worst as he asks, "And that is?"

Jack gives him a serious, understanding glance, saying softly:

"We’ve already started inputting their biodata for the accelerated growth of personalized vectors for them."

…

*She definitely wastes no time getting right into it,* Gabe thinks, as he asks carefully, "Any additional thoughts?"

Jack raises an eyebrow -

("You…" *Gabriel starts to say, but then he scowls - not in anger or frustration, just deep concentration - before he continues thoughtfully, “…Understand things...differently than other people. You...you always know just what to say, or just what to ask and I...I value that. I want to hear it.”)

And Jack scowls slightly, saying, “It’s...definitely going to require additional reading on my part. She did give us those -” he gestures towards the new datapad on the computer desk, continuing with, “- And transferred a series of papers and files for us. I’ve skimmed them.”

And then he lowers his voice, murmuring deeply, “They don’t really overlap with...the stuff from last Friday. Maybe three or four. The ‘easy’ ones, if you will.”

And then Jack raises his voice, just slightly, going on with, “The rest are mainly generalized papers and textbook segments on gene therapy and the transgenic enhancement model, as well as, like, a primer on how to run the biotic production lab set-up.”

*So she only wants to bring them up to speed on the techniques, not the actual enhancement serum content,* Gabe figures out, saying pointedly, “So in essence, she just needs lab assistants? Not analysts?”

*Leave it to Gabe to know exactly where the real truth is,* Jack thinks, nodding as he says, “Effectively, yeah.”

But then Jack pauses, scowling slightly, before he adds quietly:

“I know enough about making personalized biotic fields for emergency and trauma patients to…pick up a few clues. Everybody is going to eventually get personalized vectors and serum contents, that’s pretty clear, but…”

He chews over his words, trying to pick out the right ones, and Gabe once again admires how deep, focused concentration only accentuates his features.

“…At the moment, the schedule for the nanoproducer scripts for the biopsied soldiers are very different from the others,” Jack says quietly, deeply, but almost -
Gabe frowns -

Almost *furiously*.

“To put it simply, the majority of the non-biopsied candidates are getting a two-fold nanoproduction set-up,” Jack murmurs lowly, “The nanoproducers are making biosynthetic bone marrow stem cells preloaded with the transgene scripts *and* also making more virosomes that will specifically target those stem cells -”

“For when they’re injected back in the candidates themselves,” Gabe murmurs, finishing the sentence. Jack nods, “Right, this helps the enhancement packages skip past the threat of immunogenicity in two ways. The biosynthetic stem cells are...failsafes, in case the virosomes trip up the candidate’s immune system. But they take longer to produce, and they don’t solve the problem of innate stem cells *not integrating* the enhancement packages.”

“Right,” Gabriel mutters, “Efficacy is a problem.”

Jack nods again, saying, “Exactly, but it’s not those candidate serums that are...problematic.”

He pauses, frowning, and then says in a low, tidal tone barely above a whisper:

“The ones who received biopsies have different nanoproducer scripts. Those scripts are producing modified versions of adeno-associated viral vectors. From what I can tell, these protein modifications will improve the AAVs’ ability to get through the blood brain barrier and transfect neurons at higher efficiencies.”

Gabe frowns, mostly in confusion as he asks, “Wait...weren’t the serums already doing that?”

Jack considers it, before he says, “Yes...and no. From what I can see, the serums for the last two months were largely generalized. AAVs work well for that too, but they had different protein modifications that made them more broadly applicable. With each injection, the proteins coating and structuring the outside of the AAVs had to be tweaked slightly to avoid tripping immune responses.”

Gabe nods, muttering, “Right, that makes sense. But weren’t they already affecting neurons? Or supposed to, at least? I remember that being part of the...terms and conditions.”

“Those were mainly non-cerebral neurons, especially the motor neurons to create superhuman reflexes,” Jack says, “Along with the accessory cells like glial cells. But the goal wasn’t specifically to target the brain.”

And *that* -

Is when Gabe outright *glares*, murmuring in a low, smoke-sharded voice, “Why are they targeting the brain now?”

And Jack gives him a long, deep stare, eyebrows slightly furrowed - not out of anger or concentration, but simply out of that same patient, earnest *sorrow* that he’d had last Friday in the snow fort.

And he answers back, in a voice almost songlike and submerged:

“You know why.”

(“The sheer audacity of it is genius,” Jack continues, his voice ribboning with enthusiasm, “The effects this could have in emergency and trauma medicine could absolutely change the world! I
mean, it would still take a million transgene inserts to work properly, but if it all worked, certain types of traumatic mortality rates could drop. Like, if someone is undergoing rapid blood loss, in those moments the brain starts shutting down because it’s experiencing a rapid decrease in oxygen and blood sugar, and it needs huge amounts of both to survive.”)

(Jack taps the datapad again, adding optimistically, “But this - if this trehalose-synthesis transgenic ‘bundle’ of genes could work, even things as complex as neurons and glial cells could theoretically preserve themselves until the injury is patched and blood sugar and blood oxygen levels are restored. Then you reverse the molecular process - you break down the trehalose back into glucose and the tissue and organ system biochemically reanimates.”)

“...Securely and consistently crossing the blood-brain barrier will be Mulcahy’s biggest challenge,” Jack continues softly, in a voice made of seashorn stars, “But if she succeeds -”

“In theory, cerebral neurons will be able to survive hypoxia, glucose, and cerebral fluid fluctuations,” Gabe says, his voice carved from snowy smoke and gilded shadows.

Jack watches him for a moment -

And then murmurs quietly:

“Whatever you choose to be, wherever you choose to go.”

(I will follow you.)

Gabe watches him for a moment -

Before he breathes out just as quietly, “To Hell and back.”

(I will be with you.)

And then Gabe starts to roll up the sleeve on his right arm.

Jack retrieves an empty, sterile auto-injector, removing it from its casing: it’s a clear tube with a “one-use” safety needle and a perfectly sealed injecting-or-contracting cap. He flicks the switch on the cap, setting it to contract, and places it on the sterile tray on the storage cabinet. He also grabs several disinfectant swabs, a cotton puff, and some medical tape.

When he rises again, Gabe has his right arm laid out on the seat armrest, sleeve rolled up to his lower bicep and -

Jack pauses -

Eyes tracing over a series of scattered scars on the rich, bronzed skin of his forearm.

Gabe watches Jack observe him and, god, that fluttery, sweet feeling sings through him at the look of deep, stormstudded tenderness in Jack’s gaze.

And all he can think is:

You’re a dangerous man, Jack Morrison.

Your affection is more powerful than your charisma.

And as Jack pulls his gaze away, breaking the sterile, plastic cap on the needle-end of the auto-injector, Gabe adds thoughtfully:
And that’s going to make this a **miserably** long month.

(But Gabe wouldn’t trade it for the world.)

Jack adjusts himself, moving closer to Gabe’s right side, opening up one of the packets of the disinfectant swabs. He exhales -

Before he presses the cool, chilled sheet to the crook of Gabe’s elbow, massaging it across his skin in small circles, trying to focus on the action of it, gaze narrowing in on the dark, shadowy veins beneath the layers.

Gabe watches as Jack puts the swab back on the tray, grabbing the auto-injector, pinching and prodding slightly at the vein in his elbow with his left fingers, before his “nurse” glances up at him -

Those eyes are *so blue* against the color of his scrubs.

And then Jack *beams* at him, asking mischievously, “Favorite 70’s song?”

“‘Back in Black,’” Gabe says instantly.

“That’s not at all surprising,” Jack says brightly, “But that’s also incorrect.”

And then he pops the needle in Gabe’s vein.

Gabe flinches slightly at the steep, sharp sting of pain, hissing a little, muttering, “Wha - What do you mean, *incorrect?*”

“‘Back in Black’ was released in 1980,” Jack chuckles, flicking his gaze back to the needle, reaching the right depth, before he deftly snaps the contraction switch on the cap. Gabe inhales tersely as he feels the injector pull slightly -

“Man, I don’t remember numbers like that,” Gabe mutters, as Jack focuses on him again. Jack grins, teasing him, “Well, you spent your entire internal database on Holmes and Poe quotes, so I guess that makes sense.”

“And what - you spent yours on music release years?” Gabe teases right back, giving him a weak smirk.

But Jack just laughs, “No, I spent mine on blood type statistics.”

And *that* -

Gets Gabe to *crack*.

He bursts into a raspy, smoky laugh, head forward first, before the feeling surges up from his lower chest, and he tilts his head back, the sound gilded like spun-sunshine and genuine like a heartbeat.

And Jack feels

*Spellbound* -

As Gabe settles his head forward again, light *radiant* in the obsidian glass gaze of his eyes, warmth and rich as he murmurs, “...So much for you being a *bad* nurse, huh?”

Jack exhales a soft laugh before he hums, “Well, there’s still time for that.”
“That’s a very different sort of prick,” Gabe snorts, and Jack’s own chest starts to shake with laughter as he glances back at the auto-injector, chuckling, “Reyes, please, I’m trying to concentrate here.”

“You look good when you concentrate.”

The words die in the back of Jack’s throat as he gives a wide-eyed, heart-swallowed look towards Gabe - And Gabe just smirks, adding lowly, “Been meaning to say that for awhile.”

Jack just stares at him, awed - Before he scowls, forcing himself to focus as he presses the button on the auto-injector again, stopping the contraction - And then carefully withdraws the needle from Gabe’s arm.

Gabe grimaces a little as the needle slides out, but for all of his wisecracking banter, Jack is good at this, immediately replacing the needle with another swab, clearing the blood welling up with his left hand as he rotates with the auto-injector with his right, thumb hitting the small switch to retract the safety needle. He deftly sets the auto-injector down on the tray, grabbing the cotton puff instead - And quickly removes the swab, placing the puff on the tiny wound site, applying a firm but gentle pressure - Before he murmurs lowly but sweetly, “That’s not fair, Reyes - breaking your own rules.”

“...I never said I’d play by the rules,” Gabe hums back, his tone just as smoky-sweet as Jack’s, admiring how focused Jack is on his task, as Jack applies a few quick, small strips of medical tape to the cotton puffball.

And then Gabe adds in that raw-sugar, unhemmed tone:

“And if you’re going to give me special treatment, Morrison, then I don’t want to play fair either.”

Jack finally glances up from the application, his gaze meeting Gabe’s as he chuckles dryly, “I deserve that one.”

Gabe stares him straight in the eye - (His gaze is so blue like this -)

And states softly, “You promised me you’d think seriously about what’s best for you, Jack.”

... Jack’s whole heart aches at the sound. It’s been the first time Gabe has said his name in a week. But from the depths of his seashorn heart - Jack just murmurs: “And you promised me a drink, Gabe.”
He tugs off his latex gloves, setting them on the tray.

Gabe pauses -

Thinks, *I've missed hearing you say my name* -

Before he chuckles dryly, “Threw you another straight one, huh?”

“Right over the plate,” Jack smirks back, before suddenly -

There are

Rough, slightly calloused fingertips

Tracing light, soft trails of warmth and life

Down the tender skin of Gabe’s inner forearm.

His whole chest *shudders* at the feeling, as Jack’s fingers feel out the scars crossing his skin like seams in a fabric, and Gabe finds his gaze *enraptured* by the look of clear, contemplative longing on Jack’s face, the way those deep blue eyes follow after his fingertips like a second shadow.

“...You’ve got a little bit of a morbid streak, huh?” Gabe asks him with a teasing gentleness. Jack glances up, giving Gabe that faint half-smile as he hums, “Maybe a bit.”

But then he looks briefly conflicted, before he murmurs, “I hope...I say this the right way but…”

Gabe observes him for a moment, and then he smiles back, saying, “I’m sure you will. You always seem to know how.”

*Oh,* Jack thinks, feeling a light blush spread on his cheeks and -

*This is exactly why you’re dangerous for me, Jack,* Gabe thinks, as he admires the way the look of gilded, sweet affection makes Jack all the more charming.

Jack glances back down at Gabe’s arm, with that quiet, pleased smile on his face as he murmurs, “A little asymmetry, small imperfections…”

And then -

He looks back up at Gabe, saying in that low, stormsweet voice:

“Scars are not flaws. They are reminders we have been healed.”

Gabe’s heart *floods* with vivid rushes of tenderness and ache.

Jack looks back down at Gabe’s arm, eyes continuing to caress his skin even more than his fingertips, before -

He carefully rotates Gabe’s arm -

And lifts it.

Gabe almost stops breathing -

As Jack tenderly presses his lips to Gabe’s knuckles.
Jack relishes in the warmth of Gabe’s fingers against his lips, the way his breath seems to entwine with them, how he can feel the flow of Gabe’s life against his own

He flicks his gaze up to Gabe’s face, which is filled with Longing.

Jack smirks coyly against Gabe’s skin, chuckling lowly, “But sometimes, a kiss helps make it better, right?”

“...God, you can be such a smartass,” Gabe grins back. Jack hums, kissing the words to the warmth of Gabe’s skin, “Admit it - you like it when I am.”

“I sure do,” Gabe says honestly, and there’s a draw of depth in his gaze and voice that makes Jack want to climb into the patient chair and -

Let go.

Jack forces himself to lower Gabe’s hand, resuming his normal tasks. He turns, throwing the gloves and swabs in the trash, grabbing the auto-injector with Gabe’s blood sample in it -

He...stops.

Staring at the sample for a moment before -

“You’re doing good, Jack.”

Jack glances at Gabe, who is watching him closely, a soft, sweet and bittersweet expression on his face.

Their eyes meet.

And Gabe murmurs with a faint smile, “Keep focused and do right by yourself.”

Jack almost -

Almost -

Cracks

As he replies with a yearning undercurrent in his words, “Gabe…”

“Don’t worry too much about me,” Gabe reassures him, “No matter what you choose this month, no matter what you decide, I believe in you. Remember: whatever you choose, wherever you go -”

I will follow you.

Jack stares at him for a moment, before he inhales slowly, and exhales softly, “…Right.”

And then he sets a determined look on his face and -

You’re going to make a great medic and soldier, Jack, Gabe thinks, as Jack sets his shoulders, heads to the computer desk, and grabs his datapad. As he strides towards the space in the partitions, Jack says in an informative tone, “I’ll be back in five minutes.”

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(Five minutes later)

As Gabe finishes scribbling down his hasty notes from his conversation with Jack, he hears footsteps approaching his patient partition room and -

He snaps the notebook shut, sliding it into his left thigh pocket, saying loudly with a confident grin, “Got any new statistics for me, Nurse Morrison -”

“I’m afraid not, Soldier: 24.”

Gabe freezes -

Before he shoots his gaze wildly towards the space in the partition -

Where Mulcahy stands, grinning slyly at him.

Behind her, Jack is semi-visible through the crack -

And he looks

Sweetly and bittersweetly resolved.

Mulcahy chuckles knowingly, “Well, well, the Renaissance man himself. So you’re Gabriel Reyes.”

Gabe gives her a weak, cheesy grin, saying, “I should be flattered that my reputation precedes me, but I get the feeling it’s not a good one.”

“Well, you know how to leave a stunning first impression, I must say,” Mulcahy zings right back.

And then she cuts straight through the banter to state at him, “We’re going to need to perform a bone marrow biopsy on you, Soldier: 24.”

…

*Talk about poetic*, Gabe thinks, as she informs him, “The procedure is quite simple and painless: we will take the sample from one of your iliac crests. A local anesthesia will be applied there, and within a few minutes, the whole thing will be done.”

“…So I’m one of the lucky ones, huh?” Gabe jokes, starting to rise from his seat -

“Luck?”

Mulcahy’s wry, highly *amused* tone catches him off-guard.

As he stands, the doctor grins at him, saying, “There’s no such thing as luck, Soldier: 24 - only good genetics.”

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**Student: Questions**

Monday, March 4, 2047: 09:03 a.m. - Mulcahy’s office in Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

“I’m not usually one to fawn over animals, but *my*, he is *adorable,*” Moira says brightly, twisting the last word with about as much genuine emotion as her normally dry, sarcastic voice can handle.
It’s not...unusual for her to take calls in the professor’s absence - she’s done it many times in the last few years - but there is something novel about this time around.

(“Four months?” Moira had asked only a few days ago, as Mulcahy had collected some additional items from her office - a few hardcover, dense technical books on nanobiology and genetics, some physical copies of her and others’ research, her favorite “work tea cup and kettle” along with her box of favorite teas, an extra work laptop -)

(“I don’t know why we need to keep going over this, O’Deorain,” Mulcahy had replied dryly, setting her kettle into a portable storage lock box, “Yes, it will be four months before I am able to return to Dublin - if even that.”)

(Moira had watched her carefully seal the lid on her tea box, before Mulcahy had looked at her, those hazel eyes assessing her coolly as she’d murmured, “You’ve handled work of this caliber before, Moira. I don’t understand why you of all people sound nervous.”)

(“Four months with only sporadic communication is radically different than you attending a week-long conference somewhere, professor,” Moira had quipped back -)

She’s sitting at Mulcahy’s desk - one of the brand new, state-of-the-art, “all in one” “smart-desks”, the tech industry is calling it. It’s all sleek, dark screen glass, fully integrated and functional with the computer and monitors, capable of holo-projecting images and screens. Mulcahy had gotten it only a month or two ago, and had deftly dodged all of Moira’s questions about where it came from (or who had been so generous to fund its purchase).

But despite the professor’s reluctance to say its origins, Mulcahy’s open and freeform policy about her graduate students using her equipment or resources when she was out of her office or on-campus laboratory meant that she had no qualms about Moira using the desk.

So Moira had adjusted to it...as well as she could, she guesses, getting used to the slick interfaces and holo-projections, touch-gestures and swiping things to move them around, adapting to the receptive digital keyboard.

(“And I have faith that you are more than capable of handling it,” Mulcahy had said, adding the tea container to the storage box. The genetics professor had continued in that brisk, informative manner, “You have the schedule for Lucheng’s trials and your own research to work on - four months will be over before you know it.”)

(As Mulcahy had carefully wrapped her favorite tea cup in a towel for travel, Moira had made a small, skeptical expression behind her back, her long fingers tensing slightly at that -)

“Isn’t he just the cutest?”

The bright, blindingly optimistic tone of the man’s voice pulls Moira’s focus back to the moment: she blinks once, her mismatched eyes returning to the video call - shot with nearly crystal clarity - on the monitor in front of her.

Moira is aware that her own appearance is...rather exceptional. And she’s spent far too long with Mulcahy, who also possesses a one-in-a-million (if not a billion) visage, as well as the other “talented” graduate students Mulcahy’s presence and research has gathered to her department in Trinity College.

So “appearances” are not something that weighs heavily in her mind -

But goodness -
The man on the screen is…

Borderline unremarkable in every sense.

Average height and build for a Caucasian American man, with a narrow face that is not dramatically angular or model-esque but instead just softened at the cheeks - he is nothing to write home about. Dark brown hair close-cropped on the sides with only a slightly longer length on the top, the edges starting to grey, giving away his increasing age. He wears thin-framed glasses - a standard black plastic - that do little to accentuate his nondescript appearance. His voice is mild but cheerful, she supposes - about as casual as she expects from Americans, but lacking all of that gruff, gung-ho, stormy depth Hollywood likes to glam up in military action flicks, but also lacking the smart-talking, wise-cracking wryness from snazzy protagonists in spy thrillers or superhero dramedies.

If it were not for his world-renowned astrophysics research and his ability to put not just one or two people, but a whole colony of living organisms, animals, and people on the Moon -

Many would never recognize him.

Harold Winston:

Lucheng Interstellar’s star scientist (both literally and figuratively) and leading Horizon Lunar Colony researcher.

He’s sitting at his Lucheng “Earth office” in Nanning in southern China, smiling happily -

Not directly at her -

But at the tiny, three-week old infant gorilla in his arms.

The long-awaited, much-anticipated

Gorilla Specimen: 28.

The infant ape is hardly bigger than Harold’s forearm - in fact, as he cradles the baby gorilla in the crook of his right arm, he’s got the left tilted towards the sleeping gorilla at a slightly awkward angle -

The baby’s small fists bundled into the fabric of his left forearm’s sleeve.

Specimen: 28 is clearly perfectly content with the position, sleeping soundly in Harold’s arms. His hair is little more than dark fuzz at this point, and like many primate babies, his head looks too big for his scrawny body, more ears and forehead than anything else right now.

“Have you named him yet?” Moira finds herself asking, uncharacteristically invested in her new, distant charge.

Harold glances up towards the screen, smiling as he answers earnestly, “No, not yet. We usually don’t name them until they’re ready to be sent to the colony.”

The implied words “we don’t name them until we know they’ll survive the early transgenic trials and augmentation surgery” lingers in the air.

Moira watches the ape distantly -

("I’m leaving you in charge of Specimen: 28’s trial schedule - I want you to actually put your research into practice with him,” Mulcahy had said, putting the tea cup in the box. As she had
locked it, she had looked up at Moira -)

(Before she had scowled slightly, asking quietly, “Moira? Is this bothering you?”)

Research, O’Deorain, Moira chides herself, scowling, This isn’t just a cute courtesy call. You have work to do.

“She’s my first real ape specimen,” Moira informs the astrophysicist, “I hope you’ll be patient with me as I learn the primate trial process.”

Harold gives her an openly assessing look, before he grins, saying with that same bright cheer, “Don’t worry, Moira - every researcher has a beginning. Just think of it as the next big step in your work!”

“Thank you, sir - that’s very kind of you,” she replies, also genuinely.

It’s rare for her to feel...hesitant when it comes to research -

But right now she just feels like a nineteen-year-old set adrift with far, far too many responsibilities -

And far, far too much power.

...And the hesitation comes not from fear -

But from -

“I understand that ensuring his condition is stable for the first few months is our priority, but his rapid growth phase is crucial,” Moira states, glancing towards her notes on the trial schedule she has drawn up for Specimen: 28. She taps a finger at the upcoming “month”, saying just as efficiently, “I want to preserve his current genetic arrays as soon as possible - we need to see which gamete transgenes he inherited from his parents so that I can start tailoring his lifelong enhancement uptake packages. How soon can you get me a bone marrow sample?”

Harold still has that same expression of mild happiness on his face -

Before he grins optimistically, “Well, the caretakers here in Nanning think his current trajectory looks good - I’m no geneticist, but they’re estimating we can get you a digital sample in three weeks.”

“Fantastic to hear,” Moira says, smiling back, “What about spinal fluid?”

“Hmm, hang on,” Harold says, shifting himself to wiggle towards the screen. He taps something on his computer with his left elbow, scanning the text before he says, “Sorry, translating - uh, spinal fluid in four to five weeks.”

“Oh, that’s sooner than the other primate specimens,” Moira says with pleasant surprise. Harold rolls his shoulders lightly, saying, “What can I say - we’re all eager to see you start your research on him.”

Moira pauses -

Caught off-guard by the genuine admiration in Harold’s tone.

...Her hesitation is not from fear -

(“...Professor, may I ask you a...personal question?” Moira had asked quietly. Mulcahy had looked at her with a confused scowl, saying, “It is unlike you to be this coy with your questions, O’Deorain.
What are you afraid of?"

("...Not afraid, professor," Moira had answered, before she had inhaled deeply -)

(And asked:)

("Am I difficult to work with?" )

No, her hesitation is from her *sheer* competence.

“...Are you serious?” she asks him quietly, and Harold -

He blinks at her once -

Before another wide grin spreads on his face, as he almost laughs jovially, “What? Moira, *of course* we’re happy to see you finally achieve your full potential as a researcher!”

("...What? Difficult to -?” Mulcahy had started to repeat in confusion, before her eyes had narrowed, asking, “O’Deorain, are the other students giving you a hard time?” )

(“No, not like that, professor,” Moira had answered honestly, but then she pauses.)

(Before she had admitted - but this time with traces of that honest hesitation, “But...I’ve been told by...others that I can be quite...intimidating.” )

(And that she has felt just...a little…)

(Singular…)

(In small moments of honest hesitation -)

(Where the other students had watched her like their own distant experiments -)

(Not alone ...but unreachable .)

(“The others can find me...unapproachable at times,” Moira had added quietly.)

(That the others had…)

(Struggled to *work* with her -)

(Not out of fear, nor dislike of her personality -)

(But that her mind, her focus, her *ability* -)

(Had been too *unique* to coalesce around -)

(As distant as stars -)

(Or as endless as the abyss.)

...Moira’s words catch in her chest.

“Listen, Moira,” Harold says patiently, “Lucheng has very few geneticists of your and Mayegun’s caliber here: we were very hopeful when Mayegun said you were accepted into her doctorate program, and look! Our hopes were right!”
Moira just…

Gawks at him

In almost wide-eyed wonder.

(Mulcahy’s expression had shifted from one of confused impatience to a softer, kinder consideration, before she had replied quietly, but in a firm tone:)

(“…Moira, those of lesser qualifications, abilities, or ambitions will always be intimidated by those with greater potential than themselves.”)

(“They will do their worst to try and restrict you, to bring you down to their level, to tell you what you are and are not capable of.” Mulcahy had continued, her words still wrought from that double-helixed tone of both kindness and confidence.)

(Moira had watched her, had listened to her, absorbing her words like air -)

(As Mulcahy had added, “Those who recognize what you are worth - what you are capable of achieving - will be the ones to offer you a hand, to push your progress forward, to encourage your best.”)

“My colleagues? We’re all very excited by your preliminary trials on the rabbits and hamsters,” Harold continues, just radiating sunshine, “And while it’s disappointing to hear Mayegun will be difficult to contact for four months, we’re also very excited she’d handing over the responsibilities on the primate research to you.”

And then, Harold gives her a sly, mischievous grin, saying, “Some of my colleagues wanted to break our rules for this little guy.” He wiggles his arms a little, barely disturbing the baby gorilla, and chuckles, “They wanted to name him Sun Wukong before we could even determine his sex.”

“My, what a heroic name for him,” Moira grins back. Harold laughs, “And quite a confident one too, considering what happened with Specimen: 27! But the caretakers say his condition is significantly better than 27’s ever was.”

“Ah, Specimen: 27…” Moira murmurs, glancing at her notes, “That one was born...two months ago?”

“Yes, sad that he didn’t survive - born with a mutated liver that didn’t work properly,” Harold says with a sigh, “But his parents’ gametes had only partially successful transgenic uptake, so even Mayegun was prepared for those risks.”

“Right, Specimen: 28’s parents are sitting at 100% for his mother and 99.99% for his father,” Moira says, “And his mother is producing enhanced milk, correct?”

“Yes, the caretakers have been testing it frequently,” Harold replies, glancing at his own notes again, “28 is being kept strictly on her milk until he’ll be ready for additional dietary supplements in a year.”

And then Harold laughs brightly, saying, “She’s been very protective of him! She kept grunting ‘no, no’ and signing that we had to leave. We had to tranq her just to get him out of her containment.”

“And according to this timeline, surgery for his cerebral augmentations will not occur until he’s four?” Moira both says and asks. Harold sighs again, rolling his shoulders, “Unfortunately, that’s just how it goes. His immune system needs to be strong enough to survive the surgery and adapt to the implants, which means he’ll need to be independent from his mother.”
And then Harold smiles patiently, saying more optimistically, “And once that is done, he’ll be sent to the colony with the rest of his age-group.”

But Moira pauses, before she adds quietly, “…Assuming the war is over by then.”

Harold also pauses to assess her words for a moment, before he hums, “Well, I believe in humanity’s ability to accomplish anything.”

And Moira -

“…May I ask you something personal, doctor?”

The words slip from her mouth, hesitant but necessary.

Harold looks surprised by her sudden change in tone, but -

(“But how?”)

(Mulcahy had stopped as the words fell almost impulsively from Moira’s mouth, but she couldn’t stop them, asking, “How do you know this is where it should be channeled? How can you just…”)

(And she had stopped, almost biting back the rest of her words -)

(“Say it.”)

(Moira had glanced at Mulcahy, her mismatched eyes wide, as her professor had stared her down, repeating, “Ask your question, O’Deorain.”)

(Moira had...almost hesitated.)

(...Almost.)

(She had looked Mulcahy straight in the eye and asked bluntly:) 

(“How can you just leave in the middle of a war, professor?”)

(Mulcahy had stared right back, before stating just as bluntly, “Am I a surgeon, O’Deorain?”)

(“You are one of the co-inventors of the biotic field, professor,” Moira had retorted immediately, “How can you just abandon that...legacy for some...secret pursuit you might not even survive?”)

(Mulcahy had opened her mouth but -)

(The words had already started to fall from Moira’s lips:)

(“...Isn’t it selfish to choose the luxury of research over becoming a medic?”)

(And Mulcahy’s mouth had close into a line, as that softer, kinder expression had returned to her face -)

(As the truth about Moira’s hesitation had fallen from her hands.)

“Well, sure,” Harold grins, “I’ll do my best to answer, but it might be a little tricky with this guy.”

Moira pauses, picking over her words more carefully this time, before she asks:

“...Is it...difficult for you to choose to stay with your research instead of returning to the U.S.,
Harold grows somber at that, almost contemplative, as Moira elaborates, “Someone of your expertise - surely the military could use someone of your expertise on fixing the satellite communications being blocked by the Omnics - or work on high atmosphere alternate solutions...or…”

Her words slow -

Not because she is afraid.

But because how could she hold others to that standard but not herself?

(“...Moira, look at me.”)

(Moira had looked up from her hands, staring into Mulcahy’s laserlike focus, as Mulcahy had said, “You have a brilliant passion for all that you do, Moira...but I would never forgive humanity if it took you in this war, whether in death or in a tragic betrayal of your potential by making you a common medic.”)

(...Moira had almost reeled from her statement.)

(“I’m... what, professor?” she had stammered, as Mulcahy had stated with that same double-twisted tone, “You heard me. I would never stop you from joining the Forsai Cosanta, if that is truly what your heart believes you must do, but that passion would be utterly lost on the battlefield.”)

(Moira had gawked at her.)

(“What we will accomplish - what you will accomplish - is worth far, far more than any singular medic, soldier, or commander,” Mulcahy had told her, taking a step towards her, “Our research - your research - has the potential to reshape life as we know it.”)

(Her professor - her mentor, her guide - had placed her hands on Moira’s shoulders, saying with that raw brilliance twisted into controlled confidence, “You must not be held back by others’ expectations, nor be daunted by things as ever-changing as war. Let not even your own fears or cautions constrain you.”)

(And then Mulcahy’s voice had softened slightly, her tone still twisted as she had said, “You must be willing to see a future that no one else dares to see...and carve your own path towards it, no matter what anyone says. Do not let them take that from you.”)

(And Moira had looked straight into her eyes -)

(Seeing the deep, hazel-helixed resolution contained in them and -)

(“...Is that why you’re doing this?” Moira had asked, letting the words “selling out to the U.S. military” hang in the air between them.)

(But she had looked at Mulcahy and known.)

(Known that Mulcahy was absolutely, completely, unhesitantly -)

(Unafraid.)

(“...Maybe one day, you’ll understand,” Mulcahy had replied, her answer more genuine than Moira had expected. And her professor - her mentor, her guide - had looked at her with an expression of)
bittersweet hopefulness, adding softly, “Sometimes, the ones who encourage our full potentials are the ones we least expect.”

(And then -)

(Mulcahy had given her a bright, vivid, vicious grin, saying bluntly, “And we must use them when they make themselves available.”)

“Moira…”

Moira scowls, watching Harold closely as he looks more contemplative, saying quietly, “Please don’t take this the wrong way - I’ve been told by some of my Chinese and other non-American colleagues that...sometimes Americans are too friendly with their tone.”

Moira snorts, rolling her eyes as she says dryly, “At least you’re not one of those Americans who pretends to be a gun-slinging cowboy all the time.”

Harold grins at that, laughing, “No, I’m afraid I’m just an unassuming guy from Ohio.”

But then his expression grows softer again, more serene as he says, “Please, I hope it comes across as a compliment, because I mean it as one.”

Moira watches him, listening, absorbing his words like air -

As the man who put life on the Moon says patiently:

“When I was nineteen, I was still in undergrad at MIT. At this time of the year, I would’ve been debating where to go for Spring Break.”

Moira snorts slightly at that, but Harold just gives her a cheesy grin, saying, “C’mon, cut me some slack. I was nineteen.”

“As am I,” Moira retorts, and Harold laughs, “Fair enough! But my point is two-fold.”

Moira quiets again as Harold says earnestly, “One: I don’t have half the capabilities you do, whether then or now. And two: I never had to grapple with the magnitude of a war like this.”

Both of them pause - Moira considering his words, Harold picking his next.

“...I do not envy your position, or others like you,” he says quietly, almost apologetically, “The weight of the decisions you and other young scientists are facing is, putting it honestly, world-ending.”

But then -

His tone gets a little…

*Twisted*

As he continues:

“I never had any love for American patriotism - after all, I had to turn to Lucheng just to get any sort of traction for my... *idealism,*” the scientist who had *dragged* life onto the Moon states coolly, “So you should be aware that I have my inherent biases towards your question.”

But then Harold gives her a lightly twisted smile, saying with a steel-soft tone, “But if I may say it...I
“Mayegun has spoken highly of your qualifications and character,” Harold continues honestly, “And as a fellow researcher, sometimes we must make the choice that is both selfish and noble. Your work cannot - will not - be achieved by those of lesser minds or ambitions.”

And then he adds with a sly, wry, little grin, “And science must never falter in the shadow of war.”

Moira watches him coolly -

His words falling over her like the umbra of the Moon.

(“I’m leaving you access to this office, the PC, and my desk,” Mulcahy had said as Moira had helped her move the last storage lock box to the hallway. As Mulcahy had shut the door, she had glanced towards Moira, adding thoughtfully, “…There are some files on the PC in a folder labeled with your name. I want you to read them.”)

(An assignment outside of research? Moira had thought, though she had asked, “Did you want me to incorporate them into my research? Or answer any questions?”  )

( No. )

(Moira had scowled slightly, as Mulcahy had looked a little more distant, before she had said, “No...I simply want you to read them. I trust you to come up with your own ideas about them.”  )

“Science is humanity’s greatest accomplishment,” says Harold Winston, the scientist who carved life from the void of space, “For without it, we are little more than animals or machines.”

“...I thought that was art,” Moira says quietly, while thinking, Or more poetically - love.

But Harold just smirks, asking:

“...Is there a difference between the scientist and the artist?”

Moira stares at him -

As Harold chuckles mildly, “I suppose I know the answer, but are you a fan of Oscar Wilde?”

“Ha, what Irishman isn’t?” Moira laughs and Harold grins brightly, adding, “I should have known. One of my favorite quotes is by him. ‘A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight -’”

“'- And his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world,’” Moira ends, completing the quote from The Critic as Artist.

Harold nods appreciatively, saying, “One of my favorites for obvious reasons, of course, but also because Wilde agrees that we must consciously and critically contemplate all of life - art and science and creation - before we can create again.”

And then he pauses, adding quietly, “And if I may add a more...optimistic quote from one of my own professors.”

Moira listens, as Harold explains, “I had just completed my dissertation, but was upset that every job offer wanted me to pursue the development of advanced communications. No one believed that establishing a base on the Moon was even possible.”
But then he glances down at Specimen: 28, and smiles gently, saying:

“My graduate advisor gave me some advice. He said, ‘Never accept the world as it appears to be.’”

And then he looks up, and grins at Moira, saying:

“‘Dare to see it for what it could be.’”

Moira stares at him -

Before she grins back, a sly, twisted little smirk as she says, “That is eerily similar to what Mulcahy said before she left.”

Harold laughs lightly, saying, “That doesn’t surprise me - we’ve always shared a similar research philosophy, her and I. I was the one who really pushed for Lucheng to give her an offer for developing the transgenic enhancement model.”

And then he looks back towards Specimen: 28, before he tilts the baby gorilla slightly towards the camera, adding brightly:

“And look, have we not found the dawn?”

Moira considers the small creature -

*Hard to believe he’ll be a 200 kilogram silverback some day, she thinks -*

As she glances at the window open with the folder labeled [For Moira O’Deorain] -

Which contains numerous papers on the genetic and nanobiological mechanisms behind different states of cryptobiosis -

*And how to potentially incorporate them into mammalian -*

(Human) -

Genomes -

Before she laughs back:

“One can only hope he’ll reach his full potential.”

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Sender: Moira O’Deorain

To: Mayegun Mulcahy

Date: 4 March 2067

Subject: Update 1 and papers

Hello, Professor.

I hope this email finds you well. I must admit, it feels a little strange to write one. I guess I’m just too used to the convenience of direct messaging.

The last week has been smooth. I had a video call with Doctor Winston from Lucheng. He brought
along Specimen: 28. According to the caretakers, 28’s progress is good; the specimen himself looks quite healthy, though God knows I am far from either a veterinarian or a pediatrician. They hope to have his genome prepped and digitized in a few weeks.

I have started reading through the papers you left me. They are rather radical choices for transgenes and protein expressions, are they not? They seem especially intense for mammal transgenic experiments. Not that the intensity should halt efforts to try them, but I am curious how upscaling into tissues, organs, and the whole organism works? For example, the efforts to establish innate cryptobiotic responses and protections in mammalian cells: I saw that many of the trials were successful at the cellular and culture levels, but how are these enzymes and protein pathways sustainable on the larger scales? Wouldn’t you run into the threat of the organism’s metabolism and cryptobiosis collapsing on itself? Is cryptobiosis even sustainable in cerebral spinal fluid? Without significant data it is difficult to hypothesize upon, but from the enzyme cascade pathways I have traced out, it seems like you might rapidly run into an imbalance of innate glucose versus trehalose, correct? Couldn’t this cause severe side effects?

I suppose it would be too late to try, but I can attempt to run a few rabbit and hamster trials on the matter, if you would like, though small animal models will not quite have the same energy and sustenance issues as a larger mammal like a human.

Weather remains fair here in Dublin, which is a pleasant surprise. I hope wherever you are stationed, the climate is agreeable to you.

Sláinte,

Moira

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**Sigma: Correlation**

Sunday, March 3, 2047: 22:57 - leaving the security room/Tech Lab 2 in the SEP main facility

*Tomorrow they’re going to start the drills with the pulse and plasma weapons,* Marc thinks as he taps through his datapad, setting a reminder to himself, *I should probably make a new category in the candidate profiles to determine which firearms suit each candidate.*

And then he makes a slight face, adding, *If only Bianchi actually did shit around here.*

(At least he can count on Carolina.)

(She’s always been good at keeping notes on anything he’s asked about.)

(Jim will help her, of course.)

(From what he’s heard from other former SOFs, Marc has actually encountered some truly unique Bravos in his life.)

(So that, at least, counts for something.)

*Did Mulcahy finish her blood tests and biopsies?* he wonders, heading west down the Upper Main
Access corridor as he leaves the security room. He’ll have to get the information from her.

Let’s see...she wants to start production on the personalized serums ASAP, he adds to his notes, heading past the two medical “special wards” or whatever. He turns left, cutting down the connecting hallway to the main Medical Ward Hallway, reminding himself, *Flores approved the draft NDA and updated medical rights agreement, so I’ll print out...I guess whatever copies Mulcahy tells me to -*

As he hits the Medical Ward Hallway, almost turning right -

Marc

Stops.

He lifts his head, scowling slightly -

Before he glances to his left -

Where he can see that a light is on under the slight crack of the door to the Medical Director’s office.

He stares at it for a moment, before he glances at the clock on his datapad -

[22:59] -

And then turns slightly to the left and heads to the door.

There is a lockpad on it, but the little interface simply reads: [OPEN]. He presses the screenglass and it beeps slightly, sliding the door open.

Sure enough, the office is still on: the lights are bright but warm, darker shadows clinging to the edges of the room, boxes of stuff barely unpacked, except a stainless steel tea kettle on the low table surface built into the back wall. The monitors of the computer are aglow, casting a lightly off-radiance on the figure sitting behind the desk.

He can barely see her over the screens, but he sighs patiently, “Doctor, you’re still up?”

Mulcahy doesn’t even look at him, still focusing intensely on the monitors, tapping something on her smartdesk keyboard as she barely hums, “Mm.”

Marc sighs again, saying gently, “Doctor, it’s been a long day for you. You should sleep.”

Again, Mulcahy doesn’t look at him, her eyes reading something rapidly, before she -

She frowns -

And mutters sourly, “I don’t understand.”

Marc refrains from a sarcastic remark, instead asking, “Is something wrong?”

Mulcahy sits back in her chair, looking frustrated and rather frazzled, saying, “The bone marrow biopsies - they make zero sense.”

“...As in the serums haven’t reached high enough efficiencies?” Marc asks, stepping into the room. As the door shuts behind him, Mulcahy shakes her head, saying, “No, not that. We conducted fifty-three biopsies today, which is nearly half the group. But of those biopsies, only forty-one are showing the threshold levels for uptake in bone marrow stem cells. The remaining twelve are very
close, and will likely cross that in another few injections.”

Marc heads closer to her desk, trying to remember whatever...numbers and proposed schedules she had been rattling off at him for the last week, and he asks, “So...that’s bad?”

Mulcahy still doesn’t fully look at him, still staring absently at her monitors as she states, “No, it’s very good. It makes adjusting the new schedule much easier, should all forty-one begin the next phase of the trial this week.”

“So what’s the issue?” Marc asks, standing by the left side of her desk, but not crossing to the “user” side just yet, clearly waiting for her to show him “the problem.”

…

But she doesn’t.

Mulcahy just frowns slightly at the monitors, obviously deep in her own thoughts again.

Marc makes a deadpan face, thinking, Great. Our specialist is willing to deprive herself of sleep. Perfect.

He just states dryly, “...Mulcahy.”

She snaps to it, finally looking up at him, wide-eyed as she mutters, “Huh?”

“So what is the issue with them?” Marc asks her again, “The remaining twelve?”

“Oh. No, no...not that,” Mulcahy says honestly, “These numbers are actually significantly better than I expected. Just under a third of the candidates can begin the updated serum immediately. This is fantastic.”

But then she looks back at the screens, frowning again, murmuring, “But the issue is... why.”

Marc simply…

Waits.

And sure enough -

His mere presence gets her to speak.

(He’s always had that ability:)

(The ability to intimidate just with himself -)

(Or conversely -)

(The ability to encourage just by being there.)

(They are not opposites.)

(They are edges of the same knife.)

“They have no...pattern that unifies them - no correlations,” Mulcahy murmurs, the words falling from her like rain starting to slip from clouds, “Nineteen of them are the non-medic Senior soldiers, but even then… The whole group spans the full range of candidate ages. They are varied in their...
ethnic backgrounds. They are from all across the country. The new recruits have worked a wide range of occupations. For the former soldiers, no particular speciality is favored.”

Marc quirks an eyebrow.

A demographic issue.

A profiling problem.

“Since joining the program, they have not eaten anything different from each other,” Mulcahy continues slowly, as if her thoughts are unravelling inside her but reforming externally, “They do not possess shared impactful phenotypic traits like blood types or select protein types. Nothing sets them apart from the others, except perhaps the Senior soldiers, but that was to be expected.”

“Can I see the list?”

He does not demand.

He simply asks.

(One way -)

(Or another.)

Mulcahy scowls, looking back up at him, asking bluntly, “Why?”

Marc gives her that dry look as he thinks -

She does not like to share, whether that’s seeking genuine help or trusting only her own competency. And he says, “To see if I can help you, doctor.”

Mulcahy frowns, muttering, “You’re going to tell me something that the data does not?”

Marc observes her for a moment, before he sighs, “Data is not interpretation, doctor, especially not when it comes to people.”

And then Marc gives her a faint, almost gentle but twisted smile as he adds, “And I specialize in interpreting people.”

Mulcahy assesses him and he can feel the exhaustion in her, how it wears at her sharp mind like water pulling and pulling at stone, and he thinks, You do not like to seek help, but your haste to overburden yourself with your own genius will make you...vulnerable.

And it will be up to him to prevent either Bianchi or Flores from discovering that.

Mulcahy shrugs, rolling her chair back slightly as she murmurs, “Very well.”

Marc slips around the corner of the desk, peering at the monitor as Mulcahy adds, “Though I’m not sure what else to tell you. Doctor Jones has taken meticulous notes, including recording meals and calories for each day. There’s even data on side effects that different candidates have experienced.”

Of course Serena did that, Marc thinks, starting to skim the list of profiles of the biopsied candidates. He scrolls past the Senior soldiers to the rest of the candidates, and reads: [Soldier: 29], [Soldier: 34],
[Soldier: 37], [Soldier: 43], [Soldier: 47] -

(After all -)

(He was the one who asked her too.)

(...Though she would have done it without his request anyways.)

He leans over and swipes up with his right hand. The smartdesk responds, sensing his movement, scrolling the list down as -

[Soldier: 75]

Marc frowns slightly -

[Soldier: 83]

_I know these numbers._

He scrolls more -

[Soldier: 102]

“Not that it matters much,” Mulcahy continues behind him, “In fact, if there’s any one thing that seems to unite this group, it is that none of them have a recorded immune response to the serums at any point in the last two months.”

[Soldier: 111]

Marc’s frown returns to a neutral, but suspicious stare as he leans back from the computer, eyes narrowing at the end of the list as -

“However, it is strange,” Mulcahy murmurs more contemplatively, “Some of the twelve non-threshold biopsied candidates also have no recorded immune responses, but they have obviously not crossed threshold values.”

“...I know these Soldier IDs.”

The words slip from him, with careful, calculated impulsiveness.

Behind him, he can hear Mulcahy huff wryly, “Well, I should hope so - you _have_ been running this program.”

But Marc is -

“No, I mean as a _set_, doctor.”

Already pulling out his datapad.

“Oh?” Mulcahy asks, her tone clearly more interested. Marc steps back from the desk, unlocking his datapad (new PIN and password, thanks to Reyes being an insufferable brat), thinking quietly, _No immune responses in two months, forty-one candidates biopsied, she didn’t biopsy the Senior Deltas_ -

As he opens Social Network Modeler, he murmurs, “These forty-one candidates - none of them have had a double or triple dose, right?”
He can feel her eyes observing him as she replies contemplatively, “That’s correct. However, as I said, there are candidates that did not pass the threshold.”

*Nineteen Senior soldiers*, Marc thinks as Network Modeler loads and in profile-view, he starts tapping the soldiers from the list, *Which means twenty-two Juniors and 18Xers.*

He taps: [Construct model].

As the program snaps to an actual model view -

Marc’s eyes briefly flare wide -

As the little nodes representing candidates snap lines to each other -

And a few additional, *non-selected* candidates appear to create links in places where the connection would have been missing otherwise.

And suddenly -

The commonality between the remaining, non-Senior soldier candidates becomes

*Elucidated.*

“Oh,” Marc says, eyes narrowing again, because -

*Of course.*

*The perfect little soldier.*

“Did you find something between them?” Mulcahy asks, finally fully intrigued. Though many of the twenty-two remaining candidates are directly connected to each other -

There is a “non-selected” node that links eighteen of them.

“...Not something,” Marc murmurs, tapping the node.

Network Modeler loads the candidate’s profile -

And as he turns the datapad towards her, he chuckles with a soft, endless tone:

“Someone.”

Mulcahy’s eyebrows rise as she takes the datapad -

And reads:

[Soldier: 76 - Jack Morrison].

“I told you, doctor,” Marc chuckles with a shadowy tone, “Data itself cannot provide interpretation.”

*But I can.*
I'm SO excited to introduce "student Moira/Lucheng Moira" to the story! Absolutely one of my favorite underexplored "potential" topics in Overwatch: how and why did Lucheng have genetic modification experiments on animals as endangered as great apes? Who conducted the experiments for them?

As I wrote waaaaay back when Resistance first started, my preference is to always use canon characters where links and connections exist whenever possible. While Moira herself isn't in SEP, I was interested in exploring how her predecessor (Mulcahy) managed to influence Moira to make decisions that parallel - but also run counter to - Gabriel and Jack's. She isn't (and never will be) fully "involved" in the Soldier Enhancement Program (so no, we won't get any Gabriel-Moira snark just yet), but I am really interested in exploring how these different "connections" influenced Gabriel/Jack in one direction, and Moira in another.

(Also baby Winston askldjfjhsdj)

And just as a head's up:

With the main Blizzcon announcement for Overwatch being at 11 am my time (Pacific) next Friday (November 2), I don't plan on posting a chapter next week. There will be too much going on with fandom stuff and my own personal life for me to have the time to prep a chapter for AO3. The week after will have a regular chapter.

And in a few weeks, you can expect to see another double-chapter of some...special moments between our two protagonists ;)

Thanks, everyone! See you on tumblr and twitter for Blizzcon!
"Then why won't you exhibit his portrait?" asked Lord Henry.

Jack assists Mulcahy.

"Because, without intending it, I have put into it some expression of all this curious artistic idolatry, of which, of course, I have never cared to speak to him. He knows nothing about it. He shall never know anything about it. He shall never know anything about it. But the world might guess it, and I will not bare my soul to their shallow prying eyes. My heart shall never be put under their microscope. There is too much of myself in the thing, Harry—too much of myself!"

Gabriel signs an agreement.

"Poets are not so scrupulous as you are. They know how useful passion is for publication. Nowadays a broken heart will run to many editions."

Jack makes a decision.

"I hate them for it," cried Hallward. "An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty. Some day I will show the world what it is; and for that reason the world shall never see my portrait of Dorian Gray."

In 2065, Moira is given an offer by someone unexpected.

The story is simply this," said the painter after some time. "Two months ago I went to a crush at Lady Brandon's. You know we poor artists have to show ourselves in society from time to time, just to remind the public that we are not savages. With an evening coat and a white tie, as you told me once, anybody, even a stock-broker, can gain a reputation for being civilized. Well, after I had been in the room about ten minutes, talking to huge overdressed dowagers and tedious academicians, I suddenly became conscious that some one was looking at me. I turned half-way round and saw Dorian Gray for the first time. When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself. I did not want any external influence in my life. You know yourself, Harry, how independent I am by nature. I have always been my own master; had at least always been so, till I met Dorian Gray. Then—but I don't know how to explain it to you. Something seemed to tell me that I was on the verge of a terrible crisis in my life. I had a strange feeling that fate had in store for me exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows. I grew afraid and turned to quit the room. It was not conscience that made me do so: it was a sort of cowardice. I take no credit to myself.
for trying to escape."

"Conscience and cowardice are really the same things, Basil. Conscience is the trade-name of the firm. That is all."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

76: Routine

Monday, March 4, 2047: 04:36 - near the Utilities room for the Barracks, at the end of the Trainer hall, SEP main facility

There isn’t really an easy way to do laps of the main facility -

But that hasn’t stopped Jack from trying.

He exits the north end of the 96-120 barracks hall: the Utilities room for the Barracks is on his left, and the west end of the Trainers hallway is on his right. He usually does his best to make a zigzag out of the mess of hallways and access corridors in the building, shifting between endurance running via increased laps and speed running via shorter times. It’s working...well enough for being trapped indoors for like, two, almost three months -

But he’s definitely starting to crave being outside.

It’s just not comparable, Jack sighs as he glances at his wrist monitor, checking the time, his heart rate, and “distance”. Sure, he could hop on a treadmill in the Gym, stare out the window and attempt to focus on the dark, snowdusted night through the glass, but it just...makes him feel antsy to run in one place for an hour.

Makes him feel...trapped.

Not that running around the facility is any better, he admits, cutting the slight corner to the north-running storage hallway, But I can at least pretend to be in a maze or something.

As he lines himself up with the hallway on his right (the hall between the “bunker rooms” or “emergency failsafe rooms” or whatever they are, and the north end of the Trainers hall), Jack flicks the wrist monitor back to the music player where (probably unsurprisingly) he’s got AC/DC on pause.

Jack smiles faintly, adjusting the earbud in his right ear, thinking affectionately, Damn Gabe for getting it stuck in my head all day yesterday.

He stops for a moment, rolling his shoulders before he bends and massages his thighs briefly - the sting of the last two “hard sprint” laps still burns like a low ache in his muscles -

Before he taps “play” -

And bolts down the hall.

Jack rushes past the emergency failsafe rooms, alternating arms and legs in sync, chest rising and falling, gaze focused on the secondary entrance to the Directors Bathroom at the end of the hall. He
skids to the end, twisting left, crossing up the short connecting hallway to the next (between the Medical storage rooms and the emergency failsafe ones) -

And then he sprints down to the left.

He’s not concentrating on anything in particular, just relishing the feeling of being alive, the sensation of movement and resistance - against the air, against the concrete floor, against his own body - breath sharp and steep in his nostrils, letting the rhythm of the drums and the screech of the guitar sing in his lungs and his blood -

He hits the end of that hallway, twisting right, heading north up the storage hallway - he can see the Northwest exit as a distant square shape at the end -

(Gabe’s door -)

He’s just about to hit the cross-section with the Medical Ward hallway - his focus is still going, he’s still moving, body and mind and effort, but his thoughts are on the feeling of Gabe’s hand in his -

The back of Gabe’s fingers against his lips -

Something switches in him and he’s -

The movement inside him starts to churn faster and -

A figure appears out of the cross-section with the Medical Ward hallway.

OH FUCK, Jack suddenly screams internally, his feet jamming into the concrete, hitting the brakes on everything, song and movement and life lurching all around and through him, his momentum hauling forward -

The person barely glances at him -

Before that something that switched -

Twists inside him -

And Jack narrowly torques around them, turning his whole motion, flowing with it like wind and water, correcting himself to slide right past them, arms in the air, his chest practically parallel with them -

Before he skid-stumbles the rest of the way past them, nearly smashing his left shoulder into the wall by the Northwest restroom door.

…

Jack’s mind finally stumbles back into his head.

He twists back around, chest heaving, breath still shuddering, snapping the earbuds from his ears as he stammers, ‘Oh shit, did I get you? Oh my god, I am so sorry -’

Before the words die in the back of his throat -

As his thoughts finally catch up with his mind -

And he processes Mulcahy’s appearance.
She’s not nearly as poised as she was yesterday, looking instead like she’d just stumbled out of her new Medical Director office: exhaustion clings to the faint wrinkles around her eyes, long shadows under her eyelids, mouth set in a grim line, facial expression not a lethal one -

But definitely an “I am not a bloody morning person” one.

Mulcahy blearily flicks her gaze towards Jack, as if she is still processing what almost happened, her normally-sharp eyes looking sleepy.

Jack finally realizes she has a steaming teacup in one hand -

And a few sheets of standard, 8.5x11 paper in the other.

Jack instinctively hits the monitor on his wrist, and the small sounds of guitar strumming coming from around his neck stop. Mulcahy blinks once at him, and then mutters in a low, morning-tinted rasp of a tone, “Jack?”

“Uh, director, are you alright?” Jack asks, both cautious and genuinely concerned, taking a few steps towards her. “I didn’t get you, did I?”

“...I’m sorry, what?” Mulcahy asks, obviously still confused. Jack says, “Uh, like...hit you?”

“Oh,” the director replies, sighing, “No, you did not.”

She stares at him for another moment before she asks bluntly, “What are you doing?”

“...Laps?” Jack half-states, half-asks. Mulcahy watches him dully, asking, “...For fun?”

“...Yes?” Jack answers in the same, just-as-confused tone. Mulcahy lifts her teacup and takes a sip slowly, still staring at him. As she lowers it, she sighs, “Well then. Carry on.”

Jack scowls slightly in concern, muttering, “Uh...sure thing, director.” He starts to reach for his earbuds when -

“Wait.”

He pauses, watching her again, as Mulcahy asks tiredly, “Where do I post things?”

“Post...Oh, like notices?” Jack says. Mulcahy nods, humming, “Mm.”

“There’s a board by the barracks bathroom and one in the Mess Hall,” Jack explains, and Mulcahy looks like she’s barely processing his words when -

“Actually, director, I’m on my last lap,” Jack offers, “I can put them up for you.”

Mulcahy finally looks a little more awake at that, asking with a soft, honest tone, “Oh, will you?”

“Sure,” Jack confirms, stepping closer. As he approaches, Mulcahy holds out the sheets of paper to him, saying, “Cheers.”

“No problems, director,” he grins, taking them from her. He takes a step back, towards the north, and he gives her a small wave, saying brightly, “See you at breakfast, director.”

But as he starts to turn to continue his run -
“Jack.”

He pauses -

Glancing back towards her as she addresses him one last time, saying in a quiet tone he cannot fully place:

“When the announcement after breakfast is done, I’d like to see you in my office.”

…

*That can’t be good,* Jack thinks, but he smiles at her, saying, “Understood.”

Mulcahy gives him one last look of sleepy appraisal, before she turns and heads back down the Medical Ward hallway.

Jack continues to smile as she drifts away -

And then he flicks his gaze down to the papers in his hands.

They’re just duplicates of each other, and all they say, in simple standard font:

>[If you had a bone marrow biopsy performed yesterday, please stay in the Mess Hall for an announcement about the changes to your enhancement serums.]

The smile fades from Jack’s face.

And the only thought that moves through his head is -

*(Gabe’s laugh is bright, the sound gilt at the edges, like sunshine in sound form -)*

*That can’t be good.*

--------

**24: Signature**

Monday, March 4, 2047: 06:45 - Mess Hall in the main SEP facility

Gabriel stares at the single sheet of plain, unadorned, printer paper in front of him.

And if he glares any harder -

His eyebrows might break.

The paper reads:

[CLASSIFIED NONDISCLOSURE AGREEMENT]

[An Agreement between (______________) and the United States Army]

It lists most of the standard NDA language: they’re fairly routine for all branches of the military and upper levels of government, and he’s signed several himself.

Hell, they had to sign one just to get into the program.
But it’s not the NDA stuff that’s making him break his own face.

The trays have been cleared away, the dishes put in their bins, and the people on kitchen duty sent to help Davis clean up and prep the start work for lunch. The majority of the other candidates have left: many will go to the Gym for more weight training and combat practice, but a subset will start their new weapons drills with Carolina and the other Bravos. There will be classes on tactics and Omnic units in the early afternoon, then more drills and training, along with the next set of candidates handling the weapons. Late afternoon, the directors will start having their different “hands-on” practices.

Rinse and repeat for another two weeks.

There is, however, yet another thing to stack onto the increasingly hectic pace of the program.

And that is -

“Thank you for staying,” Mulcahy says to the group, “This should not take very long.”

The enhancements.

True to what Jack had said yesterday, there are the eighteen Senior soldiers still at the table - he’s the nineteenth. Scattered among the tables seemingly at random are a bunch of Juniors and 18Xers - maybe twenty or so, Gabriel thinks, just doing a quick estimate.

Gabriel glances down the Senior table: none of the Deltas are present, since they’re probably helping her and she doesn’t want to risk complications right now, Gabriel thinks, but the rest are all still there.

And Gabriel can’t help but wonder:

*Is she preventing the Deltas from being in the first group to lower the potential for complications and burn out?*

*Or does she want to prevent the people who actually understand the transgenic enhancement model - and who are helping her produce the serums - from figuring out the truth?*

Gabriel’s eyes narrow as he assesses the Senior soldiers, his thoughts racing as he considers, *How did we all “pass” the blood tests yesterday? There must have been one or two of them that didn’t make it? Is that just coincidence, or is it intentional? Pretty diverse set of heritages represented as well.*

He flicks his gaze to the Juniors and 18Xers around the rest of the Mess Hall, thinking fiercely, *Same with them. Heritages vary, almost fifty-fifty on biological sex, none of the medically-trained individuals she was using as assistants yesterday. I’d guess a wide range of MOSes for the Juniors and job skills for the 18Xers.*

But then -

Gabriel quirks an eyebrow slightly -

As he realizes that -

*Adrien Morris, Soldier: 75, his gaze darts to Jack’s friend, thinking of his SNA model, Next to him is Soldier: 47, Sarah. That tall Junior - his name was Jamie, right? Another direct node connected to Jack.*
His eyes drift to an 18Xer sitting just a little ways off from Sarah, and adds, *Her...I remember her from Survival and Evasion. Cassandra? And there’s Wes. And that one is Soldier: 65 - Derek. I interviewed him - he’s left-handed.*

*And there’s Soldier: 83 - I think her name was Sima? She was in camp at one point...*

Gabriel gives small, furtive glances to the rest, noting quietly to himself, *Barely remember half their names...but weren’t a lot of these people in Jack’s Survival and Evasion camp?*

After a moment of rapid, shifting thoughts -

Gabriel finally realizes that Carlos is watching him.

Gabriel glances to his left, scowling again before he mutters lowly, “What.”

Luisa glances at them, one eyebrow raised, also interested.

Carlos observes him briefly, and then he says back in a quiet but knowing whisper, tilting his head slightly towards the rest of the Mess Hall, “What’s the pattern?”

…

*Darn him for being so observant,* Gabriel thinks, but he murmurs, “I’m not sure if it’s a pattern, but -”

“As you can see, a classified non-disclosure agreement has been written up for you,” Mulcahy continues. Behind her, still at the Directors table, are Flores, Guerra, Bianchi, and Jones (the other directors and trainers have left to organize drills).

Mulcahy continues to look starkly out of place compared to the others: at 06:45, she’s once again dressed chic and suave, her clothes a mix of muted neutral tones (dark brown and taupe today) with a pop of rose pink accents. Meanwhile, the other directors (and, like, everyone else in the program) are dressed in fatigues or winter jerseys for the gym.

The other exception is Bianchi, who - like Mulcahy - is dressed in civilian clothing, though his “look” is not nearly as poised and put-together as hers.

In fact, Bianchi leans over and murmurs something to Guerra, who looks like he would rather swallow staples than listen to his coworker.

“...I’ll tell you later,” Gabriel mutters back to Carlos and Luisa -

As Mulcahy adjusts her shoulders slightly, glancing at her own copy of the agreement in her hands, explaining:

“As you are aware, the candidates present had bone marrow biopsies conducted on them. These tests were performed to allow myself and the medical team better evidence for analysis on your current state of transgenic enhancement uptake.”

Mulcahy looks back over the group, and Gabriel can see “the professor” in her take over as she continues, “The results are very promising, which is why General Flores, Director Guerra, and I rushed to get this agreement and medical rights disclosure to you as quickly as possible.”

That.

It’s not the NDA part of the paper that’s making Gabriel scowl.
It’s the medical rights part.

“Presented to you are a formalized Classified Non-Disclosure Agreement, approved by General Flores, and an additional experimental medical rights agreement that grants the program and the Army the right to conduct further transgenic enhancement trials on you,” Mulcahy states, “The experimental medical rights agreement is simply an update on the one that you signed when you first joined the program, and does not contain anything radically different than the first.”

But then the medical director sighs, adding more conversationally, “To put it in layman’s terms, the transgenic and phenotypic enhancements have not changed in scope, but the model requires some adjustments in order to increase efficiencies. What is being presented to you in writing is an agreement to have the enhancement target cerebral neurons.”

…

The group is deathly silent.

“The program plans to provide this treatment and this agreement to all of the candidates in the near future,” Mulcahy says to them, in the same tone as if she were lecturing on a topic she could live and breathe on, “So I’d like to reassure you that this is not something targeting you in particular. This group -” she gestures to the scattered candidates around the tables, “- Has the highest levels of current transgenic uptake and expression in the program at the moment.”

At this point, some of the candidates look mildly impressed, and even Carlos hums with interest. Luisa makes a skeptical face, but glances back at her copy of the paper anyways. Down the Senior table, a few people whisper to each other.

It isn’t...a surprise the Senior soldiers hit that mark better than most of the other candidates: they did have all the advantages going for them. Zero days of Resistance, familiarity with standard training procedures, a subset of them were highly medically trained, active combat duty for longer periods of their lives - these details add up.

No, the surprising part is that there are more Juniors and 18Xers present than just the Senior soldiers alone.

And that makes Gabriel...pause.

His expression over Mulcahy’s words does not change.

And in his peripherals, he sees that Adrien is also very, very skeptical of this statement as well.

“In a couple of weeks, it is likely that the remaining candidates will be in a similar situation,” Mulcahy explains, “However, the biotic production laboratory is structured in such a way that it can only produce and culture about sixty to seventy unique serum contents at a time. This requires us to develop a working schedule in which we can rotate out specialized serums for different groups of candidates at different rates. Your group is poised to be the first set.”

Mulcahy glances over her shoulder towards Jones, saying, “Thanks to Doctor Jones and her meticulous efforts to keep individualized running medical records, it is easier for us to see patterns emerging from the biotic and genetic data sets among the candidates.”

She looks back towards the group, explaining, “The candidates present here have never required a double or triple dosage of the generalized serum, and have not had any known or recorded immune responses to the serums.”
That explains it, Gabriel thinks, flicking his eyes towards the rest of the candidates, Or at least, explains part of it: the members of Jack’s Survival and Evasion camp had his medical care to help make sure they kept up with their serums that week, and also that they had access to food and shelter in a way smaller groups didn’t.

Because of the improved access to food and shelter during that week, their immune systems weren’t compromised compared to the others.

“The reason for the updated experimental medical rights agreement is due to a remodeling of the particular vectors for the next phase of transgenic enhancement trials,” Mulcahy says to them - again, not in the way Guerra talks, nor with the authority of Flores, but with that sort of academic nonchalance that she’d spoken with all of yesterday. The “doctor” says, “Targeting cerebral neurons requires a different type of remodeled vector. The actual process and vector does not harm neurons themselves, and the transgenic package being delivered is no different than the ones in the generalized serums. In simplistic terms, only the vectors have changed.”

Like that isn’t the shadiest way of trying to handwave the issue, Gabriel thinks, dropping his eyes to the experimental medical rights section of the paper:

[I, the undersigned (___________), permit the U.S. Special Operations Command to conduct additional transgenic enhancement trials on my person. I have read the following statements and agree to their enactment:]

[1. Contents of Updated Transgenic Enhancement Serum:]

[1.1. The contents of the updated transgenic enhancement serum may target the neurons and cells of the brain, including the tissues described as “grey and white matter”. I, the undersigned, recognize that these contents may alter and enhance the neurons and cells of the brain.]

[1.2. The contents of the updated transgenic enhancement serum may provide neurons and cells of the brain with increased and/or different molecular enzymes, proteins, and sugars. These increased and/or different molecular enzymes, proteins, and sugars may alter neuronal and cellular activity in the brain. These increased and/or different molecular enzymes, proteins, and sugars may alter metabolic activity in the neurons and cells of the brain. I, the undersigned, recognize that these biological changes may occur to my person.]

[1.3. The cellular and/or metabolic changes described in Section 1.2 may result in changes in organismal physiology, metabolism, energy activity, and/or behaviors. I, the undersigned, consent to disclose any significant changes to my overall physiology to the Medical Director or any representative of the Medical Director. I, the undersigned, recognize and consent that the Medical Director will retain the right to utilize my information disclosure for additional modifications to the updated transgenic enhancement serum as required by my biological, genetic, and phenotypic medical needs.]

[2. Permissions of Medical Actions:]

[2.1. In the event that non-targeted changes begin to occur in my physiology, metabolism, energy activity, and/or behaviors as described in Section 1, I, the undersigned, consent to seek and accept the medical advice of the Medical Director or a representative of the Medical Director. I, the undersigned, will disclose if these non-targeted changes affect my mental health and physical wellbeing, and will accept the advice and treatment supplied by the Medical Director or a representative of the Medical Director as being potentially or clinically curative of these non-targeted changes.]
[2.2. In the event of a medical emergency, I, the undersigned, consent to allow the medical staff of the Soldier Enhancement Program to perform any emergency medical care or actions required to sustain or save my person. I, the undersigned, consent to allow the medical staff of the Soldier Enhancement Program to perform any and all resuscitation methods required to sustain my life and the life of my body.]

[3. I make this agreement without mental reservation or purpose of evasion.]

---

“You do not have to sign this updated experimental medical rights agreement,” Mulcahy says, “If you choose not to, we will create a new group of candidates who will continue on the enhancement schedule and pattern developed at the beginning of the program.”

Gabriel glances back up -

“...However…”

Just as she says:

“Should you sign, you will gain the opportunity to outwit death itself.”

Gabriel stares at her - the doctor who can rewrite life itself - as she smiles wryly, murmuring, “Science and life are ever-changing. I hope that you are willing to do the same.”

(And Gabriel lifts his right hand, gently - so gently - tracing his thumb across Jack’s left cheek. The touch almost makes Jack melt, and Gabriel says - in a voice like spun-sunshine and smoked-sugar, “But maybe this makes me too flexible or something, but I’ll use any tools given to me to protect the people who matter the most.”)

(And then Gabriel scowls deeply, murmuring fiercely, “And if one of those tools requires me to become unkillable, then I’ll make a deal with Death itself to achieve that.”)

Gabriel just... observes for a moment -

Shifting his gaze among the directors -

Noticing how the other candidates sort of lean in and murmur to each other -

How Adrien’s expression does not change -

How he can feel Carlos watching him -

(Jack watches him, before he replies in that low, sweetly bitter and bittersweet tone, “Gabe...even though I think you’re brave for doing it, I still wish you wouldn’t have to. Or me. Or any of us.” And Jack shuts his eyes, exhaling slowly, “And I wish it wasn’t under such a...terrifying pressure to choose.”)

And Gabe thinks:

(Jack presses his lips to the back of Gabe’s fingers, reverential and beloved, as if the mere act of them, together is beautiful and worthy all on its own -)

Whatever it takes.

He picks up the pen they had handed out with the papers.
I’ll do whatever it takes to keep him alive -

And he presses the tip to the signature line.

Even if I have to destroy death itself.

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76: Decision

Monday, March 4, 2047: 07:03 - outside Mulcahy’s office, Medical Ward Hallway

“Through continual refinement of both naturally-occurring serotypes and synthetic serotypes, we have been able to narrow down a list of capsid proteins that result in increased efficiencies of targeting specific cells and tissues.” Jack reads, his eyes flicking through the electronic text, “When we combine these capsid proteins with particular serotypes of AAV, we are able to produce AAV vectors capable of reaching their target cells while dramatically reducing hepatotoxicity and cytotoxicity.”

He’s outside of Mulcahy’s office, waiting for her to arrive from her announcement after breakfast, reading through some of the papers she had assigned her new “assistants.”

“Crossing the blood-brain barrier (BBB) remains the largest challenge for genetic therapeutic treatments,” he continues, absorbed in the words - he already knows the core concepts behind this stuff, but not the -

“What the transgenic enhancement model proposes is a hyper-chimerization of all parts of the adeno-associated virus, so that for every situation of specialized treatment, a highly-efficient, low-dosage, low-risk serotype variant exists as a solution to the condition. For crossing the BBB, we propose a combination of four different serotypes (AAV1 modified, AAV2, AAV8, and AAV9) with three main capsid models (AAVrh. 10, AAVga. 3, AAVga. 5) along with a list of identified capsid proteins that result in positive BBB shuttle peptide movement.”

The specifics, so to speak.

Jack pauses in his reading, tapping his datapad to switch to the document application, where he’s been attempting to take notes that effectively “translate” the denser parts of the jargon for himself. He writes:

[BBB enhancement model vectors: like rest of the model, the BBB vectors use “hyper-chimerization” of AAV. Includes four AAV serotypes (1mod, 2, 8, and 9), three capsid structures (rh. 10, ga. 3, and ga. 5) plus capsid proteins for crossing the barrier]

[Supposedly “highly-efficient, low-dosage, low-risk”]

And then he frowns slightly, thinking hard:

We barely dealt specifically with targeting the brain in the emergency ward.

Because...well -

If a patient was in the emergency ward for a brain issue -
They were probably in a situation much more critical than genetic therapy could solve.

In fact, Jack’s nanoproduction background was basically in everything else in a human body: typically, the number one priority was making biosynthetic plasma and blood cells just to stabilize a patient without triggering an immune response, and after that it was mainly boosting fibroblast count and culturing the patient’s own bone marrow stem cells and white blood cells to assist in the innate healing processes. Biosynthetic nanobots could help, of course, but after the emergency situation was stabilized and completed, reduction in reliance on the nanobots was important in order to get the patient back to their own internal equilibrium.

He’s nanoproduced serums or biotic fields that target specific cells or systems for other “typical” emergency responses - the heart, the lungs, the liver, kidneys, the usual - things that when they fail result in immediate critical care or an emergency response.

But “the brain” (or more accurately, the central nervous system as a whole) is much, much more rare.

Because if your brain is bleeding out, you’ve got bigger problems, Jack thinks, before he refocuses on his notes, scowling.

She claims that these chimera vectors result in better efficiencies and lower risks of dosage-dependence toxicity, Jack considers, tapping an idle hand on the back of his datapad, Which is probably true - she wouldn’t be THE enhancement doctor if it wasn’t - but…

In his head -

He sees the Russian supersoldier on the operating table -

And Jack thinks with a quiet, stormy darkness:

Perhaps that...wasn’t caused by internal trauma, but hepatotoxicity instead.

Hepatotoxicity is responsible for 40 to 50% of acute liver failure cases…

And then Jack practically glares, as he adds:

But was that caused by an inherent risk in Mulcahy’s enhancement model? Or did the Russian supersoldier program do something incorrectly?

Jack turns it over in his head, noting, Mulcahy might not be outright lying, but...there are ways to twist the truth. But then he writes in his notes to himself:

[How to stop hepatotoxicity with BBB enhancement model? Would it be better to do targeted liver enhancement first? Or was that what the blood tests showed?]

[Could synthetic hepatocytes be cultured in the event of an emergency?]

And he thinks softly:

Better yet - if the hepatocytes are producing trehalose or other cryptobiotic-responsive molecules, they can effectively preserve themselves, reducing toxicity inherently…

“Oh, good, you’re already here.”

Jack glances up from his datapad, tapping “save” automatically on the document, just as Mulcahy appears from the cross-connecting hallway. She’s looking far, far more awake and put together
now, again wearing stylish civilian clothing, carrying her thermos of tea in her left hand, and a small stack of papers in her right.

“I was worried I would have to double back to one of those shooting ranges to find you,” Mulcahy states to him as she strides to the door. Jack pulls himself up from leaning against the wall, tucking the datapad in his back right pocket, smiling brightly, “I told Director Luna that you had requested a meeting with me.”

Though she did say, “Well, you’re Mulcahy’s problem now, Morrison” before she laughed and left for the weapons armory, Jack adds dryly in his head, remembering the smirk Commander Luna had carried when she had said it.

“Well, at least someone is reasonable around here,” Mulcahy huffs, stepping past him to her office door, “I abhor having to put every request in writing in triplicate. What an archaic system of protocols. Here, hold these for me.”

She practically stuffs the stack of papers at him, and Jack - blinking in surprise - grabs them from her.

As she starts to tap her PIN into the lockpad, Jack briefly glances at the title on the page - [CLASSIFIED NONDISCLOSURE AGREEMENT] -

And thinks, Whelp.

*Here comes the fun part, Morrison.*

The lockpad beeps cheerfully and the door slides open: Mulcahy strides inside without a word or even a look back, and Jack exhales softly - 

*Do or die -*

Before he follows her inside.

She’s already swinging around the left side of her desk, snapping her right fingers and setting the thermos down in sync. Immediately, the “smartdesk” chimes to her presence, booting back up from sleep mode, but she doesn’t sit right away, instead extending her left hand as she says, “I’ll take those again.”

Jack approaches the other side of the desk, giving her the NDAs and seating himself in the chair. Mulcahy glances to the filing cabinet and drawers on her right (Jack’s left) starting to open one before she hums to herself, “Oh...no, I need to scan these first.”

She sets the NDA stack down on the right side of the smartdesk instead.

Meanwhile, Jack is idly drawing in the details of her office: everything still looks incomplete, but there are small signs she’s already making the place her own. There’s the tea kettle he saw yesterday, along with the box of teas and the cup, but there are also a series of different books and folders next to it, a laptop plugged in (but powered off) on the other side, and a small stack of folded clothes (they appear to be lab coats).

He looks back towards her just as she seats herself, tapping something through the motion sensor of the desk.

And then she leans back, looks at him appraisingly, and says, “How many of the biopsied candidates do you know?”
Jack stares at her with open confusion, before he answers honestly:

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I don’t fully understand the question. I don’t know how many candidates were biopsied. I only assisted on the ones I was assigned to see in the clinic.”

Mulcahy looks briefly sardonic, mainly with herself, before she mutters, “Oh, right.” She swipe-gestures something with the desk and it dings as -

The datapad in Jack’s pocket beeps.

He jolts, reaching for it as Mulcahy says, “I sent you the list.” He pulls it out from his pocket, as she takes another sip from her thermos.

Jack unlocks the datapad, and a message of [[Mulcahy.Mayegun] has sent you a file [Group 1]]. He taps [Accept], and double-taps the file in the folder. The Medi-Reader program opens, loading the list of candidates in “Group 1”.

As he scrolls past the Senior soldier section -

Jack immediately scowls -

Not in anger, but in confusion -

As he reads, Cassandra, Luke, Marla -

“Are you familiar with most of these candidates?” Mulcahy asks him bluntly.

Sarah - holy shit, Jack thinks, his mind starting to race as he skims the list faster, What the hell -

“You mean...like as friends?” Jack asks her cautiously, glancing up from Wes’ profile near the end of the list. Mulcahy shrugs, setting her thermos down, saying, “Friends, acquaintances, however you wish to categorize them.”

Again, Jack just gives her a quizzical look before he says, “Well, I mean...I know all of them. I know everyone in the program.”

Mulcahy outright frowns, saying, “What.”

“Why...wouldn’t I?” Jack asks, getting increasingly confused by her confusion, “There’s only one-hundred and thirty-one other candidates here. I have drills, training, and classes with different people every day.”

Mulcahy looks even more confused, but Jack just glances at the list, humming thoughtfully, “Well, let’s see...I know all the 18X candidates from our Q-course. I know a lot of the Juniors just from drills and training. I don’t like - spend all my free time hanging out with all one-hundred and thirty-one people, but you know, I socialize as well as I can.”

He looks back up, shrugging as he says, “It happens a lot. I’m a naturally energetic person so I’m just...around, I guess.”

And then Jack grins, adding mischievously, “And you’d be surprised how many people like hearing weird Emergency Room stories. People love that stuff.”

Mulcahy looks contemplative, her eyes narrowing slightly as she considers his words, and Jack adds
thoughtfully, “Now, if you asked me like, what Luke’s birthday is or where Marla is from, I can’t tell you that. But I can tell you that Marla is really good at reading a map because she likes to backpack, and Luke is good at working on cars because he was a mechanic before the war.”

“Would you call yourself an extrovert?” Mulcahy asks curiously. Jack pauses, thinking about it, before he says, “That’s…difficult. Maybe when I was younger? The older I’ve gotten, the more I value my personal time, though. I’m more…”

An image of Gabe grinning at him in the snow fort cuts through his mind -

And Jack says with a softer tone:

“…I’m more selective about how I spend my time and energy these days.”

_And who I spend those with._

Mulcahy observes him for a moment, before she says, “I have been informed that the majority of the non-Senior soldiers on that list had some sort of…special cooperation with you during one of the drills. Is that true?”

Jack raises an eyebrow, looking down to skim the list again, murmuring, “Special…cooperation - oh, I guess they were talking about Survival and Evasion.” He looks back up, shrugging slightly as he chuckles, “They told us we were allowed to help each other, so a group of us - mostly 18Xers but a few Juniors too - we all decided to meet in visible locations depending on where they dropped us. So I ran a camp with…”

He pauses, glancing through the list again, saying, “Twelve of these candidates, and another…six were in a separate camp on the other side of the training grounds.”

“What does that mean, ‘ran’ a camp?” Mulcahy asks. Jack shrugs again, saying, “Like, I guess management? We pooled our food supplies and helped each other build shelters and fires. And I helped the people in my camp with managing their serums for that week.”

But he grins mischievously again, adding lowly, “I did get in trouble for killing the simulation drones, though.”

Mulcahy frowns blatantly, reading something on the monitor before she states bluntly, “It says here on your medical profile that you received a double dose of the enhancement serum on that Friday. If you were doing all of this, how did you miss one?”

Jack’s grin gets more sheepish as he chuckles, “Aha, we uh…split up duties and one of the groups that went to retrieve the second set of serums forgot mine.”

Mulcahy raises an unimpressed eyebrow at him, tittering, “Pity that they forgot.”

“It’s alright, I managed to survive,” Jack laughs wryly.

Mulcahy leans back in her seat, shaking her head as she says, “It also says that you did _not_ have an immune response to the double dosage? Is that true?”

“Oh, well,” Jack starts, remembering that night as he hugged a toilet for an hour, “I had mild, cold-like symptoms. The strongest effect was nausea. I didn’t have any effects that caused serious concern, from my own knowledge.”

“What did you do to treat it?” Mulcahy asks and -
Gabe’s jacket on his chest -

Gabe’s beanie on his head -

A spare granola bar in his pocket -

Gabe’s strong shoulder to lean on -

Gabe’s voice, threaded through the air like soft smoke and gilded velvet, reading through a story -

As the small, silver light of the stars flickers through the blue shadows of pine trees -

Jack pauses, only for a split second to think: A guardian angel took care of me.

Before he says brightly, “I drank a lot of water, made sure to eat a few snacks, regulated my temperature, and slept most of it off.”

Mulcahy seems to weigh every word for a moment, as if trying to determine if he’s holding something back, before she asks honestly, “I did not intend to include any of the medically-trained candidates in the first group. I did not want to risk the potential of losing an assistant in the most experimental phase of the trials to either their own serum side effects or any sort of stress and burnout.”

“That’s understandable,” Jack agrees, “You wouldn’t want a nurse to be exhausted or running their own side effects while trying to treat others.”

“Exactly,” Mulcahy says, “And in your case, I did not want to include any of the multi-dosage candidates in the first group. This is a delicate phase, and I did not want to risk the overlap. Only a few of the candidates biopsied yesterday had double-dosages in the past, but they were quickly discovered by the Medi-Reader program and I shifted them to the schedule for Group 2.”

“Also reasonable,” Jack replies, “No need to stack potential risks at this point.”

“...However.”

Mulcahy’s hazel eyes are bright in the glow of the monitors.

And Jack braces himself with Here it comes -

“I am curious about your condition, Jack,” the doctor who will change everything says to him, in a low but interested tone, “Though you did have a double dose at one point, your side effects sound minimal at best and you still managed them well. More importantly, your work during this particular training week appears to be a running commonality between nearly half of the candidates in Group 1.”

Jack just…

Waits.

(The first virtue in a soldier is -)

“For you, we’d have to run three tests,” she continues, in that same low but concentrated voice, “Blood work, bone marrow biopsy, and a liver biopsy. And we can move your serums into the schedule for Group 1.”

Jack’s heart is in his throat, dense and stormy.
In the artificial light of the room, tinted by the faint off-glow of the monitors -

The doctor gives him a sly, _too saccharine_ smile as she adds:

“That is, if you agree to it, of course.”

(“And you -”)

(Gabriel’s words are silversmoke-threaded and strewn with small galaxies -)

(“- Are worth so much more -”)

(Gabriel’s eyes are liquid obsidian, casting sweet shadows over molten gold -)

(“- Than any number,” Gabriel murmurs, voice made of stardusted smoke, “Or any war.”)

(Jack stares at him, speechless, feeling a million emotions roll like the tide in his head and his heart, before he finally manages to ask, in a soft but ocean-deep tone, “I’m...I’m not sure I deserve that, Gabe - what if I make the wrong choice?”)

(What if I’m not able to?)

(Gabriel watches the shifting emotions on Jack’s face, before he traces his thumb on the edge of Jack’s cheekbone, and _smiles_ , saying with soft, stardusted shadows:)

(“I believe in you.”)

And Jack gives his own sugary, slightly crooked smile back as he chuckles:

“Where do I sign?”

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**Saoi: Potential**

March 18, 2065: 17:36 - leaving the United States Capitol building, Washington D.C., U.S.

A hot-and-cold, blood-and-water _viciousness_ seethes through her as Moira _strides_ out the west end of the U.S. Capitol, her fury burning so numbingly hot in her head that she barely notices the security members around her hollering after her -

Or the crowds of press members and gaggling onlookers nearly _swarming_ towards her.

_Vile, petty, pathetic, narrow-minded little politicians_, she spits out in her own head, twisting the last word like a swear, blindingly ignoring how microphones and recorders and actual cell phones are jammed in her face, a flurry of words and strings of questions streaming by -

“Back off, back off! No questions!” a thug of a security guard manages to say, as the poor lot of them finally catch up with her, surrounding her like some sort of awkward meat shield as they wedge through the crowd. The press do not seem daunted by _them_ , but they do see the look of thunderous contentious concentration on Moira’s fierce, hawkish face -

Several of them attempt to push more microphones through the arms of the security guards, but they’re buffed back a few more times.
Eventually, as the little micro-bubble of her and her assigned guards drift through the crowd, the press falls away.

Not before snapping a few front-page grabbing pictures of her bitter, irate expression, of course.

...

As they disperse, Moira watches one of them distantly, growing contemplative as she thinks in a softer tone, *I never understood how you tolerated the popular science limelight, professor.*

Even now, twenty years later, tempered with age and decades and more *methodical* patience - Moira still doesn’t completely understand.

Not *that* part of it, anyways.

Mulcahy had always used her appearance - spellbinding, one-in-a-million, unique and timeless and yet ephemeral, like a passing comet - to sell her science, to enchant an audience, to pull power from the sheer mystique of herself to craft progress wherever and however she could.

And despite the similarities of their “one-in-a-million” appearances, Moira had never felt compelled to do the same - not in a grandiose or public kind of way.

*In a quiet dinner, negotiating terms and funding and grants? Of course, every scientist does what they can, she thinks musingly, But the public face of popular science? No, I'll just let Morrison and Ziegler and Overwatch do that.*

It’s not her preference to put herself in public view - and public *jeopardy* - like that.

After a moment, she pauses, gaze turning towards the low clouds on the horizon as the light draws longer and longer -

“...This way, doctor.”

...

Moira sneers slightly as she glances back down, towards the lead member of her security team - Smith, or whatever - as he gestures to a nondescript black luxury hovercar that’s pulling into the open pavement space.

Moira stares unimpressedly at the car, before she mutters, “No, not today.”

“...What?” Smith asks with obvious confusion, “But, ma’am, we must ensure that you get to your hotel safely -”

“The real *monsters* are in the building we just left,” Moira snaps blithely at him, before she twists to her left - towards the north - and glowers at the security members there, stating wryly, “Do you mind?”

They blink at her, baffled, before they part for her mere presence of will alone and -

“Ma’am, wait, please -” Smith starts to say, but Moira just flicks a stray lock of her hair over her right ear, calling back, “If you need me to sign a waver so you don’t get fired, agent, then whatever, I will.”

*But I need a goddamn drink and a real *pub* and something that isn’t that *overpriced*, ridiculous*
hotel food, she adds in her head, her long strides easily outpacing them. As she rapidly closes the distance towards Constitution Avenue, they eventually fall away, muttering to each other.

She does not look back.

Spring is starting to truly settle into the Northern Hemisphere it seems - Lijiang, Dublin, even here. The clouds are a soft, windswept grey across the chilled March sky, like a veil over the blue. It sets a surprisingly romantic, picturesque mood for the capital of the United States, draped in clouded lace across the sky as the faint pink tint of the budding cherry blossoms cast a quiet blush among the trees. They’ll be a spectacular bloom soon, maybe in the next week or so -

But for now -

They just grow quietly amongst themselves.

Awaiting their moment to paint the gutted, conniving core of the nation a beautiful tone.

Art, in the lair of thieves and liars.

...Not enough to ever keep me here, Moira thinks, pausing at the crosswalk to Constitution Avenue, stuffing her hands in her coat pockets, adding, I'd rather just visit Japan - much shorter flight from Lijiang.

And then she scowls faintly, thinking, ...Wait, damn -

The current tests.

She pulls out her phone, unlocking it rapidly as her thoughts churn stormy and laced in her mind, Did Yang give the rabbits their dosage this morning? Or wait, bloody hell - would that have been last night? I hate timezones.

But she pauses -

Raising a long eyebrow in curiosity -

As she sees:

[One Missed Call - Harold Winston, Base]

On her phone.

...He's back on Earth? she thinks, tapping the notification for details, Wasn't he supposed to return next week? Did they ever locate where Hammond ran off to last week?

She makes a dryly amused face to herself, chuckling, This is why I don’t work on the Moon either.

As the crosswalk light changes to the walk symbol, Moira puts the phone to her ear, listening as she starts to cross:

“Hey, Moira -”

That same, nondescript tone speaks out through the voicemail, sounding just as bright as ever…

But maybe a little more tired than usual.

“Sorry, I think I’m calling in the middle of the SEP trial stuff,” Harold’s recorded message plays,
“We’ve been getting snippets of that on Horizon - crazy stuff, weird that they’re doing this investigation now, twenty years later -”

You’re telling me, Moira snorts, rolling her eyes as she reaches the other side of the street, heading up Delaware Avenue. Harold’s message continues, “But you know how politicians get. Actually, knowing you, I’m sure you’ll have some choice words when you call me back.”

Moira laughs lightly at that, a genuine smile flittering across her face -

But then -

Harold’s tone gets more serious as he says:

“Sorry, me and Chen had to get back to Lijiang sooner than expected. I think…”

He pauses and then murmurs, “…I think we’re going to need to have a serious talk about the enhancements for Simon and the others. They’re...they’re growing in ways we aren’t expecting, Moira.”

Moira scowls faintly, as -

“I’m not doubting your work, I promise. You know I’ll keep defending it to the CEO,” Harold continues, still with that same focused tone, “I think what you’re doing is good, and if every one of the ape specimens had the same level of raw potential as Winston, we’d have a much easier time convincing him. But we might need to consider altering some of their enhancements.”

Moira sighs.

She’s been expecting this discussion for awhile now.

Simon and Hypatia are getting increasingly erratic, she thinks, And there’s the very real possibility some of their enhancements have mutated with their regular growth. The added risk of UV radiation disruption is also no joke.

And then she makes another face, thinking, God knows Hammond’s enhancements are unstable.

“Anyways, no rush on that, hope the trial isn’t too infuriating,” Harold says, regaining some of his usual pep, “Call me back when you get the chance - I need to know when you’ll be back so we can coordinate our meeting with the CEO.”

The message blips, and her phone begins to chant through the rote options for voicemails.

Ugh, what time is it there? Moira thinks, pulling the phone away and closing the voicemail app, starting to tap through her contacts for Harold’s base number -

She

Immediately

Stops.

She doesn’t...outright change her posture, poise, or demeanor -

But she does slow her pace…

And observes.
She’s at the corner of Delaware and D Street - if she makes a right on D, she’ll reach the nearest restaurant just up the way (an “old fashioned”, high end Americana cuisine place), which is sort of where her intuition was taking her…

But there’s something else.

There’s a car - smooth, dark exterior, with those brand new hover wheels and heavily tinted windows - idling at the intersection on her left.

At simple glance, it looks like it’s simply waiting for her to cross the street.

But Moira can feel the eyes of the inhabitants of the car watching her.

Carefully avoiding looking at the car, Moira turns to the right, continuing to tap through her phone, pretending like she’s sending a message as she slowly ambles up D street. There are pedestrians and other cars around, yes, but many of them are also preoccupied with themselves, as other people in the park talk loudly or concentrate on their own activities.

The car ambles along behind her, clearly in no rush to go anywhere.

...An oddity in this city of all places.

...

However -

Even after decades and age and patience have tempered her -

At her core -

Moira remains

Unafraid.

Rather conveniently (if the act is not, in fact, coordinated by the two), another dark car leaves its parallel parking spot right next to her, pulling out into the main lane and puttering off. Moira pauses by the now-open spot, glancing nonchalantly as the main hover car slips into the space, smooth as silk.

The engine turns off.

She puts her phone away, glancing more openly towards it.

The driver gets out - a short man in a crisp, nicely-pressed formal suit, wearing sunglasses and an earpiece, his dark hair slicked back. He moves fluidly around the car, stepping up to the sidewalk, getting the right rear passenger door -

(The one closest to her)

Before he bows sharply and stiffly towards her, backing off, turning himself around to face down the sidewalk.

Moira quirks an eyebrow again -

As the real danger steps out of the back passenger seat.
He’s...short, yes, roughly the same height as the driver, but the difference between the two of them is undeniable: the passenger is dressed in devilishly sleek, slick clothes, the luxurious black fabric lined with small white pinstripes, up and down his pants and vest. He’s not wearing a tux or suit jacket, clearly having taken it off to relax, and the cuffs of his pressed white button up have been folded up around his forearms. His hair - dark and suave like everything else about him - has been smoothed back into a controlled style, with a few strands loose and falling dramatically over his forehead. Paired with the trimmed beard, it gives him a classic, timeless look.

But there are small things that give him away:

The regal blue silk lining the inner paneling of the vest, textured richly even under the cold March light, like serpent scales catching the glow.

The black leather gloves, pristine but broken in, clearly worn-well.

The curves and angles of his face, as if carved from polished marble - an appearance that, in another time and place, would’ve earned him the loyalty of armies and politicians alike, and would’ve spurred an author to write *The Tale of Genji* about a different folk hero instead.

Moira’s eyebrows dart as high as they can go, her blood-and-water eyes wide with shock -

Before she gives the man a wry, twisted grin, saying lightly, “Well, well - we are two exotic creatures out of place in Washington D.C., aren’t we?”

“...A dragon’s home is wherever it wishes it to be,” the man states, in a tone that is not gruff nor soft, but rather... *polished, poised*, like a stone worn from a slow, sweeping current. And he grins at her, saying, “Though I imagine it is the same for one such as yourself.”

Moira continues to smirk, saying, “...I’m afraid it is not as easy for me as it is for dragons, sir. Home is wherever my science is permitted to be done.”

“That would be Lijiang these days, correct?” the man asks, immediately showing he knows exactly who she is and what company she works for.

“...I should not be surprised that the dragon has eyes wherever it wishes as well,” Moira says after a small chuckle, before she holds out her right hand, saying, “Doctor Moira O’Deorain.”

The man pauses, assessing her, before he carefully takes her hand, giving her a firm but brisk handshake, replying, “Hanzo Shimada, at your service. I have been following the Enhancement Investigation with...”

Hanzo pauses again, before he gives her a knowingly little smirk, saying, “With great interest, doctor.”

“...I thought the majority of the investigation was classified, sir,” Moira says, raising an eyebrow. Hanzo chuckles lightly, “It is.”

*Well, Moira thinks, That says a lot, doesn’t it?*

“...Forgive my blunt nature, but I am quite curious,” she says, taking on a more conversational tone, “What *interest* the...Shimada business group has in the Soldier Enhancement Program of the *United States*.”

“Please, doctor,” Hanzo smiles, “I appreciate your forwardness. It is an important trait in the pursuit of the truth.”
Moira tilts her head at that.

Just slightly.

…

Criminal empires like the Shimada-gumi are typically too...emotional, too volatile for her own interests: just like business, never let family work together under the umbrella of science.

But Hanzo’s demeanor, his words…

They exude the temperance of renowned samurai steel.

Hanzo glances among the budding cherry trees around them, saying nonchalantly, “…Americans are so trusting, are they not? They believe that putting the word ‘classified’ on something means it will be protected.”

And then he glances back at her, dark eyes focused and dangerous, as he murmurs, “But they do not realize that sometimes simply speaking a truth gives it power...or gives it life.”

And then he grins slightly, chuckling, “No matter how much they try to cage it in their files or buildings.”

…

Well.

Now she is certainly curious.

“...Perhaps you did not hear, Mister Shimada,” Moira says with a faint sigh, “But I did not actually work for the program when it was on-going. I am simply here to give expert witness testimony -”

“On the nature of the enhancements.”

She stops as Hanzo assesses her again, telling her, “Yes...I know that. I am aware that your...predecessor, shall we say? Yes, your predecessor was the one who worked as the doctor for the program. But you are one of the few scientists still practicing transgenic enhancement theory in any serious form.”

…Oh, it’s the enhancement model he’s interested in? Moira thinks, assessing him back, before she replies coolly, “Well, yes, I suppose you could say that. Many other biomedical researchers have turned to cybernetic augmentation, or are more interested in Ziegler’s rapid response nanobiology tech. The transgenic enhancement model is primarily used for disease and degenerative treatment conditions, not for…”

She considers her words, before she murmurs, “Not for its potential, if you will.”

“...A pity,” Hanzo says, just as coolly, “For the...Shimada business group is interested in its potential.”

…

...What, Moira barely has time to think -

As excitement surges in her.
“I have a few questions, doctor, if you do not mind,” Hanzo says, and Moira - almost *beaming* at him - chuckles loosely, “Well, that depends, sir - is my *safety* at risk if I choose not to answer them?”

“...Of course not,” Hanzo says, giving her a skeptical look, “Dragons possess a sense of honor, after all. I would never permit any harm to befall you for a simple question or two.”

“Well then,” Moira says genuinely, “I will do my best to answer.”

Hanzo pulls out a phone from an inner pocket, tapping at something on the screen, before he reads aloud carefully “If I were to say the terms ‘cryptobiotic collapse’ and -”

“‘Vitality drain.’”

Hanzo stops -

Before he glances up at her, eyes wide.

Moira is outright *smirking* now, confident and pleased and ready.

“...I see,” Hanzo murmurs, “So you are aware of them?”

“...Aware of them?” Moira answers back, before she laughs wryly, “Pardon me, Hanzo, but I *coined* the terms.”

Hanzo’s eyes grow wide as he murmurs, “What.”

“You’re right - my predecessor was the one who worked with the Soldier Enhancement Program,” Moira explains with a dark but *thrilled* energy, “But I was the one who created the term ‘cryptobiotic collapse’ when she did not yet fully understand the phenomenon.”

*And if you are asking me about cryptobiotic collapse...*

*Then you are interested in -*

“So you are familiar with her papers on the topic?” Hanzo continues, and Moira laughs, “Did you read the full list of names and acknowledgements on those papers? I drafted many of them.”

Hanzo observes her for a moment, before he asks bluntly:

“Does the word ‘reaper’ mean anything to you?”

Moira *grins*, chuckling, “...Only in hearsay, I’m afraid. Though I do not...live in that line of work, like you do.”

Another pause and -

“*Why* are you working for *Lucheng Interstellar* of all companies?” Hanzo asks, his tone shifting from guarded caution to outright awe and dismay. Moira rolls her shoulders casually, muttering, “The work they’re conducting is in my interests.”

“Hmph,” Hanzo hums, completely unconvinced, “A waste of your talents, watching hamsters and rabbits grow.”

...*Fascinating*, Moira thinks, wondering which of her colleagues the Shimada empire had bought out, even as she says noncommittally, “I take it all in my stride. We all must start somewhere.”
“There is a difference between starting with humility and abandoning yourself to it,” Hanzo states bluntly, “If you possess the awareness of cryptobiotic collapse and what occurs from it, surely you are not content to stay focused on the rabbits and hamsters.”

Moira assesses him quietly before -

“And if you are interested in cryptobiotic collapse -”

Her words drip from her -

“- And what can potentially be created with it -”

Like blood drawn from the stone of an abyss -

“- Then surely you are not content to simply be aware of it,” she grins at him.

Hanzo’s gaze is dark and deep and almost endless under the soft light of the budding cherry trees.

“...You want a Death soldier,” Moira says bluntly.

...And I have always wanted to try creating one.

“...No.”

Hanzo’s word sinks like a rough stone into the slow-moving current, settling in to be polished over aeons.

Moira scowls -

But then -

Hanzo taps something on his phone -

And holds it towards her.

His words not water nor stone -

But the build up of lightning between petalled clouds:

“...The clan does not want a Death soldier.”

Moira cautiously takes the phone and -

She inhales sharply -

“The clan wants a Death dragon,” the scion of a criminal empire states darkly.

Her fingers clamp around the edges of the phone, hands shaking with shock and horror and thrill -

As her gaze tears through the listed genetic profiles of -

“...No,” she states, almost shaking, “No, no, this is - I thought this was propaganda - I thought it was a lie -”

Hanzo chuckles mischievously, saying, “Dragons do not lie ...though my father has used this information in ways disingenuous.”
Moira lifts her gaze from the phone, eyes wide, chest surging as she practically beams, “So the ‘dragon’ mutation is real?”

“Rare, even in the family, but real, yes,” Hanzo says, nodding towards the phone, “We have profiled most of the main branch and three of the matriarchal lineages from the last century. For those of us who are carriers, the correct mutation appears among the main branch and one matriarchal lineage, and a variant exists in the other two.”

[The ‘Dragon’ Condition: a series of related genetic mutations among a family in Japan resulting in higher stores of metabolic energy, rapid reflexes, and rumored psychic abilities. All information about the condition is elusive and tightly controlled by the family that possesses it. Intel leaks occurred during the Omnic Crisis, when various foreign intelligence agencies worked with the Shimada yakuza group to bring down the Japanese Omnium.]

Moira stares back down at the phone, scrolling through lists of identified genetic sequences and cell structures, asking bluntly, “Is it true that the condition induces pseudo-genetic chimerism among carriers?”

Hanzon looks at her, raising an interested eyebrow, before he chuckles, “Only among correct mutation carriers, yes. If you’re asking about the dragons, yes, they are quite real.”

“It’s…it’s all a little fantastical, if you don’t mind me being blunt again,” Moira says, looking back down at the phone, and then back towards Hanzo, saying, “I understand that there is still phenomena in life that defies most scientific rationale, but…genetic mutations resulting in phenotypical paranatural conditions certainly sounds like hyperbole.”

“And how is it any different than what cryptobiotic collapse can potentially create?”

Moira stops -

As Hanzo’s tone roils like low, rumbling of thunder and -

His eyes flash a bright, poisonous -

Blue.

…

A thrill of unreal excitement pulses through her and -

“…The clan is prepared to offer whatever you require to begin the work,” Hanzo says, the glow in his eyes fading as he settles his shoulders, “We do not wish to take you from Lucheng - we know how important it is to… appear normal, on the surface of things. But we are interested in working with you, if you are interested in trying.”

Moira assesses him for a moment -

This could get dangerous.

Very, very dangerous.

Before she grins, almost laughing as she says:

“Why don’t we negotiate this with some dinner as well?”

But when has that ever stopped me?
Health and Medicine: Stunning new research claims a major breakthrough in gene therapy treatment methods

Atlas News: December 17, 2065

Lijiang, China - New research into a radical transformation of gene therapy methods was announced early this morning by the Health and Medicine Division of Lucheng Interstellar.

A series of papers presented in both English and Mandarin Chinese documents a brand new system of applied biosynthetic vector methods and details a set of fine-tuned molecular and vector pathways to create pinpoint changes in the DNA of active, living cells in a patient.

The medical community has reacted with resounding excitement.

“If this research is viable, this will be revolutionary,” said Doctor Diana Richards, head of the nanobiology department at Stanford University. “It will fundamentally change how we approach gene therapy and gene treatments.”

The research is spearheaded by Doctor Moira O’Deorain, funded through Lucheng Interstellar’s health-focused research division. O’Deorain has been working on longevity and degenerative studies for Lucheng’s residents in the Horizon Lunar Colony, assessing damages to their genetic structures resulting from long-term habitation on the Moon, and then adapting her treatments with the changes.

“When we accepted Doctor O’Deorain into the research program, our focus was on ensuring the health and safety of our scientists and animal specimens in the Lunar Colony,” said a spokesperson for Lucheng. “We were just as shocked and profoundly amazed as the public by the incredible research she showed us earlier this month.”

O’Deorain’s research claims to solve a longstanding issue and complex hurdle in the field of applied genetic therapy and modifications: the ability to target specific cell types and guarantee uptake of new genetic packages into a cell’s nucleus.

“Genetic therapy works by using biological vectors that have the ability to insert new genetic material into a cell host,” explained Doctor Markus Miller from John Hopkins University. “Typically, this involves using modified, non-threatening viruses that have specialized genetic packages created specifically to improve a problematic genetic condition.”

However, most viral vector types are imprecise, or run a variety of additional health risks or side effects.

“Prior to this, the best that the model offered was a series of modifications to adeno-associated viruses, which could target cells like neurons that are extremely difficult to access,” said Richards, “But even those have wildly varying rates of success, and the ability to target specific cells was restrictive and a delicate process.”

O’Deorain’s research presents a brand new, entirely human-created set of artificial vectors designed to function as broadly or as cell-specifically as a treatment or therapy requires. The papers detail a massive new program - partially human-curated, partially automatic - that will tailor these biosynthetic vectors to specific cell-types and ensure increased efficiencies in genetic uptake.
“The ability to simply program specific genetic vectors has never fully existed before, not in this capacity,” said Miller.

Part of the issue is that it is extremely difficult to “reprogram” a viral vector. While researchers have had the ability to change the genetic contents of a viral vector, as well as modify different “strands” to varying degrees of efficiency, actually getting a vector to target specific cells as needed has remained a challenge.

“The simplest way to put is that all vectors basically have their transfection paths set for them,” said Miller, “They follow the biological routes ingrained in them. We’ve been able to give biosynthetic guiding signals, if you will, but actually guaranteeing that the new route was secure without risks of infecting the original biological pathway was borderline impossible.”

Viral vectors are “guided” to their host cells by the proteins that coat their bodies, either in the viral shell called a “capsid” or in a protein coating covering it, called the “envelope”. Researchers have been able to modify the different proteins on both the capsid and the envelope to create chimera vectors that can target cells they normally don’t, but complications remain where the chimera vectors may accidentally target additional, non-affected cells as well, resulting in toxicity or unintended infections.

O’Deorain’s paper proposes a remarkable systematic shift away from vectors normally used in gene therapy like the adeno-associated virus (AAV), and instead puts forth an inherently chimeric, “programmable” biosynthetic viral vector instead.

“Transgenic therapy treatments have concentrated on refining and hybridizing the different serotypes and tropisms of traditional viral vectors like the adeno-associated virus, but little research has been put forward on trying to create a baseline vector model that can be adapted to unique genetic conditions and phenotypic expressions in patients,” reads part of O’Deorain’s abstract. “These papers propose a systematic way of creating, modifying, and preparing the actual transgenic payload vectors themselves to create hyper-targeted genetic therapeutic delivery methods that dramatically decrease the risk of toxicity and non-targeted infections and transfections.”

O’Deorain’s research can be conceptualized as developing a brand new “suite” of biosynthetic viral vectors, said Richards, including a handful of smaller, neuron-dedicated vectors that her research claims can cross the blood brain barrier (BBB) at a stunning 95% efficiency.

“If this new suite of vectors work, this research will not only change gene therapy, but provide a new nanobiological toolkit that will revolutionize medicine as we know it,” Richards added.

However, some are concerned.

“Where did she find the ability to conduct the sheer amount of trials needed to refine these new viral vectors?” asked Marcia Lopez, head of UC San Diego’s Nanobiology program, “The only individuals approved for her human clinical trials are select members of the Lucheng colony team, and even then, their dosages were small and intended purely to provided genetic therapy treatment to genes damaged by increased UV radiation exposure. And at what point did both her and Lucheng receive approval to test vectors across the blood brain barrier?”

Lucheng Interstellar itself says that O’Deorain has been working for the company for nearly two decades, and accumulated the data over the course of her lifelong research with them.

“Even though her sample size is small, the consistency and frequency of her therapies have resulted in this study focusing on both methods and efficiency for longevity of the treatments,” said the Lucheng spokesperson, “Her data shows the steady and complex refinement of the vectors utilized in
treateding these conditions. However, O’Deorain took it upon herself to develop a brand new viral vector framework that builds on the benefits of different traditional transgene viral vector models but reduces their innate risks of complications.”

However, others have also put forward concerns that this method verges on hyper-industrialization of transgenic-delivering payload vectors, an ethical issue which has plagued the development of gene therapy for most of the Post-Crisis era. Many are worried that this research will only encourage the militarization and weaponization of gene therapy and modification, an issue which created the Soldier Enhancement Programs of the Omnic Crisis. However, the Crisis-era techniques were limited in what they were capable of “enhancing.”

“The upscaling of genetic therapeutic treatments was one of the biggest issues in the early 2040’s,” said Richards, “In fact, it was O’Deorain’s former professor, Doctor Mayegun Mulcahy, who created the theoretical transgenic enhancement model to offer a solution.”

Mulcahy’s model, however, differs from O’Deorain’s in a key way: Mulcahy’s model utilized hyper-chimerized adeno-associated virus vectors, which radically improved efficiency percentages at the time (up from varying 20-30% BBB efficiencies to clinical trials of 50-70% BBB efficiencies), but still struggled with hitting past 70-75%, even with continuous refinement and patient-specific proteins on the viral capsid and envelope. While this was an improvement over earlier vectors and methods, Mulcahy’s model still required multiple small dosages spanning several sessions, varying from a few weeks to several months depending on the objectives of the therapy being applied.

“Prior to Mulcahy, gene therapies were shots in the dark - the treatment hit, but not optimally, or it hit but also hit non-targets, or it missed entirely. Worst case scenarios missed targets but hit non-targets,” said Miller, “If we extend the metaphor, Mulcahy’s model gave us thermal vision to improve our aim. And going one step further, O’Deorain has basically turned on actual spotlights and a laser sight.”

“It isn’t that O’Deorain is competing with the old model,” said Richards, “But that she has appeared to achieve its highest, systemic structure.”

Indeed, O’Deorain herself credits her predecessor’s work and says that the research presented today is the maximized potential of Mulcahy’s transgenic enhancement model. In an informal blog post released by Lucheng today, O’Deorain writes that, “These papers are a cumulation of a lifelong, dedicated effort to push the transgenic enhancement model to its optimized efficiencies and greatest potentials. They focus on ensuring that the model itself is robust enough, secure enough, strong enough, and powerful enough to provide coherent transgenic delivery and uptake so that the real objective of the model can be fully accomplished: the treatment of difficult and often heartbreaking degenerative genetically-expressed conditions.”

The entire matter - the transgenic enhancement model, Mulcahy’s research, and even O’Deorain herself - captured national and international attention earlier this year, when O’Deorain gave expert witness testimony at the Congressional investigation of the Crisis-era Soldier Enhancement Program. The program was a highly secretive military effort to utilize Mulcahy’s transgenic enhancement model and vectors and genetically modify - or “enhance” - Special Forces soldiers and recruits. A leaked transcript of O’Deorain’s classified testimony revealed that Mulcahy herself had direct involvement with the program, a revelation which stunned the medical community.

“She had always said she believed her model was for the benefit of humankind,” said Miller, “So to discover that she herself was actively involved in guiding the Soldier Enhancement Program for militaristic and weaponized use of the model was astounding. Words cannot adequately describe how this truth impacted the medical community.”
However, it was O’Deorain’s passionate and remarkable defense of her predecessor and mentor that won over a myriad of professional and amateur fans.

“O’Deorain called those liars and cowards out on their hypocrisy,” wrote user Return-to-Midnight, “It’s not about how ‘good’ the enhancement serums were, but the principle of the matter. The U.S. used the enhancement model, plain and simple. It violated medical ethics. Pinning the blame on Mulcahy doesn’t solve the root problem, which is the U.S.’s disgusting dependency on the military industrial complex. Only this time, that complex took ideas that were supposed to be applied to improving the lives of the chronically and acutely ill, and instead made soldiers that could handle weapons with molten plasma slag in them.”

The comment on the article was posted to the social media site Redux, and was the second-highest in terms of user votes. The topmost comment was a plain and simple “Holy s***, Mulcahy herself was in the program?”

As the investigation hit snags and hang ups, the public approval for it dropped sharply. After a particularly contentious set of testimonies from Overwatch agent Gabriel Reyes, in which Reyes adamantly defended his and Overwatch Strike-Commander Morrison’s decision to leave not only the Soldier Enhancement Program but the U.S. military entirely, the Congressional committee was unable to conclude anything concrete about the program and stopped the investigation.

Instead, public interest in the abilities and methods of the transgenic enhancement model have only skyrocketed, with a series of renewed clinical trials being reviewed by the FDA this year.

Fear of complications and ethical issues restricted the use of genetic therapy to individuals who required it for serious conditions and diseases only. However, O’Deorain’s testimony in March and her current proposals have revived an interest in expanding the application of the model to a broader range of health topics, including more discussions on how enhancement serums can potentially work in tandem with - or even bolster - cybernetic augmentation.

“She has almost single handedly reinvigorated a field that was haunted by its past failures and was daunted by fears of its own power,” said Richards, “And in doing so, it is likely that all fields of medicine will benefit.”

“Progress is too often hindered by methods and an overarching methodology that is stagnant and unchanging,” O’Deorain’s post continues, “We as researchers fall into conceptualizing problems and patterns in a set and rigid way, which impedes on our ability to think and strategize beyond this restrictive mindset. So much attention has been placed on forcing the superficial adaptation of vectors - such as altering protein structures on a vector’s envelope - that little attention has been directed towards breaking down and reconstructing the vectors and their whole framework themselves. Many have let themselves be daunted by the adage ‘Why reinvent the wheel?’ and yet auto engineers themselves have done precisely that by creating the hover wheel. We must be willing to learn from other technologies and disciplines and apply their flexibilities and concepts to radicalize our own dessicated ideologies and theories.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello all, thank you for your patience this past week!

Were you expecting Hanzo to show up? :>
This has actually been a speculative idea that I've been wanting to explore since I started drafting "Old Habits." I'm 100% it's completely wrong, but we'll see how it goes.

I also did my best to attempt to translate the super sci-fi elements of Moira's Hero Profile into an actual vector model in transgenic therapy. Her profile says:

[Over a decade ago, O'Deorain made waves when she published a controversial paper detailing a methodology for creating custom genetic programs that could alter DNA at a cellular level. It seemed like a promising step toward overcoming diseases and disorders and maximizing human potential.]

[Dissent among her peers soon followed. Many considered her work to be dangerous because of its perceived ethical shortfalls, and O'Deorain was even accused of having the same unchecked desire for scientific advancement that some believed had caused the Omnic Crisis. In addition, other geneticists were unable to reproduce the results of Moira's research, which further called her discoveries into question.]

The wording is vague enough that it could cover pretty much any version of hybridizing vector serotypes, but I figure if Overwatch's future is pushing quantum computing, regenerative medicine, heavy cybernetic augmentation, and talking super intelligent animals, then the idea of Moira's biosynthetic "programmable vector" could exist.
Chapter Summary

*How do you define something which defines you?*

"...It is that it is a deep, complex relationship that’s not necessarily only driven by romance..."

In 2065, former Overwatch Strike-Commander and former Special Forces soldier Gabriel Reyes participates in the U.S. Senate investigation of the Soldier Enhancement Program.

His interview starts strong, but, uh...some curveball questions are thrown his way.

*How do you define "love" without using the word itself?*

"These guys loved each other."

In 2047, Gabe and Jack start making plans for their first pass time weekend.

"Gabriel Reyes was Jack Morrison’s partner."

*Can poems and songs ever do it justice?*

Chapter Notes

And they were war buddies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Partial transcript of Overwatch agent* Gabriel Reyes’ testimony during the 2065 United States Congressional investigation of the Omnic Crisis Soldier Enhancement Program - Part 1

* 2068 update: This transcript was written prior to the public revelation of the Overwatch Special Operations Division (internal codename “Blackwatch”) and Reyes’ role as the commander of the division. Additionally, former Senators on the SEP investigative committee have commented that they were unaware of Reyes’ position as Blackwatch commander during the 2065 SEP investigation.

Principle investigative committee: A joint committee between the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the United States Senate Committee on the Armed Services

Date: March 20, 2065

Date leaked to the public: March 20, 2065 (within an hour of the testimony being concluded)
CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: To our guests and honorable committee members, welcome to the fifth day of the investigation into the Omnic Crisis Soldier Enhancement Program. This past week we have heard from many perspectives, including expert witness testimony on the weaponry and medical aspects of the program. Several declassified trainers and organizers of the program also gave their testimony on the formation of the program and its stated goals and objectives.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Yesterday, we started taking testimony from former candidate-soldiers, whose identities and involvement in the program have been declassified as necessary. Today, we will continue hearing testimonies from additional former candidate-soldiers, also of declassified identity status.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: However, I would like to remind all committee members, witnesses, and guests that while the general elements of these soldier-candidates' identities have been declassified, some aspects have not been declassified, and will continue to be retained by the United States Special Operations Command and the Central Intelligence Agency as top secret until the year 2147, one-hundred years after the program ended. These classified details include soldier-candidate identity numbers, Operational Delta Alpha team assignments, military operational specialities unless already declassified, and biomedical data. All soldier-candidates have the right to request anonymity on part of the committee.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Today, I would like to welcome and thank Overwatch agent Gabriel Reyes for joining the committee to provide his witness testimony on his experiences during the Soldier Enhancement Program. Agent Reyes, thank you for joining us.

REYES: Thank you, chairwoman.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: All committee members should have a copy of the official United Nations file in front of them, but for the transcript record and as a verbal reminder, Agent Reyes has an international and supranational protected intelligence and classification status as enforced by the United Nations and the Overwatch Strike-Commander's Executive Office and Judicial Divisions. Because of this protected status, Agent Reyes may refuse to answer questions on the ground of both national and international security concerns.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: To begin today's proceedings, Agent Reyes, I would like you to describe your general background heading into the Soldier Enhancement Program, your general candidate status within the program, and where you were assigned in the immediate aftermath of the dissolution of the program.

REYES: ...Really? Hasn't everyone seen that ridiculous documentary about -

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Please, Agent Reyes: we are requesting this introduction from all declassified candidate-soldiers regardless of...reputation.

REYES: ...Alright, well in that case…

REYES: Name's Gabriel Reyes, age 47. I entered the Special Forces at the age of 20 through the Initial Accession X-ray program. My secondary language aptitude is in Spanish, and I was assigned to the 7th Group. Without violating classified mission details, my team was deployed through different parts of Central America. I operated as an active duty Special Forces soldier for about...six years before the Omnic Crisis began. During the first year of the war, my team was stationed at the 7th Group headquarters at Eglin.

REYES: Let's see...my team was informed about our selection for the Soldier Enhancement Program in...either late September or early October of that year? I don't fully remember, you'll have to check
a timeline of events. We were given a few months of leave time to make any arrangements with our families.

REYES: The program formally started on New Year’s Day of 2067, but candidates arrived in, like, different waves or groups about a day or two before? Again, not entirely sure on that, but I do remember the New Year’s Day part. Myself and a few other candidates from my former A team were given senior soldier status.

REYES: When the program dissolved...Well. I helped form a tactical task force team for the United Nations that we called some long and obscure name before someone thought of the much shorter and brandable version called Overwatch.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Thank you, Agent Reyes. We will begin the questions with Senator Rodriguez.

RODRIGUEZ: Thank you, chairwoman.

RODRIGUEZ: Agent Reyes, I hope you do not mind my bluntness, but I will begin with the obvious question: did you make the decisions to leave the U.S. military for Overwatch before the program itself was dissolved?

REYES: For Overwatch, no.

REYES: The decision to leave? Yes.

(Audible discussions.)

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Silence, please!

RODRIGUEZ: Are you able to clarify that statement, Agent Reyes?

REYES: Sure. We decided to leave the U.S. military before the program was formally dissolved. It was not a decision made specifically with the intention to join Overwatch, though the two moments happened within a few days of each other.

DAVIDSON: Senator Rodriguez, pardon my interruption, but Agent Reyes, are you saying you made the active decision to desert the Special Forces?

(Audible discussions.)

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Quiet! Please!

REYES: ...Senator Isaiah Davidson, from Maryland.

(Silence.)

REYES: Attended Harvard during the war. Became a senator at age 33, that’s impressive. You’ve been here a long time now.

REYES: ...It’s strange to me that no one on this committee has a background in military service, considering what it is trying to investigate.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Please answer the question, Agent Reyes.

REYES: I am answering the question.
REYES: No one on this committee has any idea what it takes to drive a soldier with nearly a decade of training and active service to leave the people and force he has committed himself to fight for or die trying.

REYES: When a division of that force actively undermines its own soldiers by becoming a bloated corpse of its original intentions, then it is not merely tactical and strategic dead weight but a weakness that an enemy can exploit.

(Slight pause.)

DAVIDSON: Those are some strong words, Agent Reyes. Is that how you truly feel about the Soldier Enhancement Program?

REYES: Without revealing still-classified details and secrets…

REYES: Over the last eighteen years since that moment, various branches of the United States military and different agencies within the United States government have made attempts to bring me back into their services or restore my military status.

REYES: I have formally turned down every offer.

REYES: So I suppose that will be a testament to the strength of my words, Senator.

(Slight pause.)

RODRIGUEZ: Was it a particular moment, event, protocol, or action that made you decide to leave before the program was dissolved, Agent Reyes?

REYES: If you are specifically asking about our general decision to leave, no. That was the result of an accumulation of multiple...issues. As for the actual moment of the decision or the timing of it...well, I think the timeline of events shows that.

RODRIGUEZ: You are referring to the Siege of Bakersfield, correct?

REYES: I am.

RODRIGUEZ: I understand there is some...disagreement on the source of the winning strategy -

REYES: Excuse my interruption, but there is no disagreement, senator. The United States military publicly denied it was my strategy for the duration of the war, even though every person involved in the program would have agreed it was mine. And it wasn’t until after the smoke and dust of the Crisis had cleared that it suddenly became politically safe for this government to publicly support Overwatch and officially reverse those denials.

DAVIDSON: So did you decide to leave the U.S. military due to the lack of recognition, Agent Reyes?

REYES: Lack of recognition? You think that’s why I left?

REYES: I already said it in pretty strong words. The program became a mess to the point where it was absurd to stay.

REYES: Believe me, senator: I don’t need a gold star pinned to my jacket to tell me how good I am at what I do.

(Slight pause.)
CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Senator Wong, you had a question.

WONG: Thank you, chairwoman. Agent Reyes, I apologize if this is off-track from the topic at hand, but you keep using the terms “our decision” and “we left”. Are you confirming that Strike-Commander Jack Morrison agreed with your decision, or was actively part of that decision-making process?

REYES: …

WONG: The United Nations has always stated that it formally requested your and Commander Morrison’s service in the Crisis-era task force. But you stated that this apparent request came days after - and I quote - “our general decision to leave.” Was this a joint decision between you and Commander Morrison?

REYES: …Yes.

(Audible shouting.)

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Quiet! Silence please!

WONG: Thank you for clarifying, Agent Reyes. Was the decision to join Overwatch also a mutually-made agreement between you and Commander Morrison?

REYES: …Yes.

(Audible shouting.)

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Silence! Order! If the guests will not behave themselves in an orderly manner, I will remove all non-committee members and witnesses from this room!

(Silence.)

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Please continue, Senator Wong.

WONG: Thank you, chairwoman. Agent Reyes, from my understanding of the situation, at the time that these decisions were made, Jack Morrison was below your rank both in the Special Forces as a whole and in the program specifically, correct?

REYES: …Correct.

WONG: Just to be entirely clear, Agent Reyes: both of these decisions were 100% mutually-agreed upon by both yourself and Jack Morrison?

REYES: Absolutely. If…Morrison wishes to testify, he can confirm this himself.

(Audible discussions.)

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Quiet! I will start removing people from this room.

WONG: If you are able to answer, Agent Reyes, why were these decisions made between the two of you?

REYES: As I already said, senator, the program had become -

WONG: No, pardon me, agent - let me be clear.
WONG: Why did you make these decisions with Jack Morrison above all others in the program? Why did you not bring your grievances to the program directors?

REYES: I obeyed the chain of command for as long as it actually functioned.

(Silence.)

REYES: ...I already said that it was not as simple as a cut-and-dry decision. I followed the rules until the rules themselves were so broken that they were beyond fixing. When the building is starting to collapse, all you can do is try to get yourself out.

WONG: Will you address my first question, then? Or is the answer classified?

REYES: …

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Agent Reyes, please state if the answer is classified or not.

REYES: It is partially classified.

CHAIRWOMAN BROWN: Will you address the parts that are not?

REYES: ...It is difficult to describe the parts that are not from the parts that are. As I stated before, our general decision was the result of multiple issues being piled up. Some of those are still classified.

REYES: For simplicity's sake...I will put it as...Jack Morrison proved himself a formidable soldier, a capable leader, and an irreplaceable...uh, war buddy. Or something.

WONG: ...An irreplaceable war buddy.

REYES: ...Uh, yeah, that.

WONG: Agent Reyes, how exactly would you describe your relationship with Jack Morrison? You two have worked together for eighteen years, correct?

REYES: Yes.

WONG: How did you come to make these decisions with him at the end of the program?

REYES: ...It was an accumulation of multiple issues -

WONG: Again, Agent Reyes, I must stress, I am not specifically talking about the issues or problems you had with the program, but why you ended up developing such a specific relationship with another candidate-soldier under these circumstances.

REYES: ...When you are under stress in a do or die situation, you learn who your true friends are very, very quickly.

REYES: ...And you learn what is worth fighting for in life.

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[Messages in the group conversation [THE Strike Team] dated March 20, 2065]

[[Ana] has sent a screenshot.]
[Ana]: Don’t worry, everyone: I got picture proof of the most important part of Gabriel’s leaked transcript, lolololol.

[Gabriel]: ANA NO

[Ana]: I’m CRYING, Gabriel. CRYING.

[Ana]: Reinhardt is going to LAUGH HIMSELF TO DEATH.

[Gabriel]: gfdi

[Rein]: WAR BUDDY

[Gabriel]: jfc I knew it

[Ana]: WAR BUDDY

[Rein]: W A R  B U D D Y

[Ana]: \^[ 이루움표] / W A R  B U D D Y \^[ 이루움표]

[Gabriel]: That’s it

[Gabriel]: I’m throwing myself off a cliff.

[Ana]: Oh, like that will do anything.

[Rein]: WAR BUDDY ALSDKJFHSD

[Ana]: oh my god, he might actually be choking

[Torby]: Gabriel Reyes, I want you to know my wife is actually in physical pain because you made her laugh so hard

[Gabriel]: oh great and now Ingrid too??

[Torby]: To be fair, I’m the one that sent her the screenshot lol

[Gabriel]: I hate you

[Ana]: Has anyone seen Jack’s reaction?? I NEED it

[Gabriel]: OH GOD NO

[Gabriel]: I GOTTA TEXT HIM NO

[[Jack] has sent a screenshot.]

[[The image says, “Change [Gabe] to [War Buddy]?” in his phone contacts]]

[Ana]: LAKSHJDFALS KDJFASDDFASD

[Rein]: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

[Torby]: HOLY SHIT

[Gabriel]: NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
[Jack]: How’s my irreplaceable war buddy doing?

[Jack]: Was your first day with the committee hard?

[Gabriel]: JOHN FRANCIS MORRISON ISTG

[Jack]: You remember three days ago when I said that testifying in front of the committee was a bad idea?

[Gabriel]: OKAY LISTEN

[Gabriel]: I DIDN’T EXPECT THEM TO DIG INTO MY FREAKING PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

[Jack]: They’re politicians, what else do they do

---

[Messages between [Gabe] and [Jack] dated March 20, 2065]

[War Buddy]: Did you actually change my name

[War Buddy]: OMFG U DID

[Jack]: ;)

[War Buddy]: This isn’t the end of this, Jack Morrison.

[War Buddy]: You’ll be singing a different tune when you’re begging me to fuck you tonight.

[Jack]: Right, it’ll be like, “Harder, war buddy, fuck me harder”

[War Buddy]: i hate

[Jack]: Aw, you love it

[War Buddy]: make it stop

[Jack]: I can even dress up in my old fatigues, just to really get that roleplaying down

[War Buddy]: DO NOT

[Jack]: Ooooh, Commander Reyes, was I a good soldier today?

[Jack]: Should I call you “sir” tonight? “Yes sir, let me get on my knees for you.”

[...] 

[Jack]: wait

[War Buddy]: okay look

[Jack]: did that actually GET TO YOU

[War Buddy]: that was kinda hot

[Jack]: GABE OMG
[War Buddy]: Jack Morrison, I can feel your thirst from three states over.

[War Buddy]: Are you getting off to me calling you “irreplaceable” in public?

[War Buddy]: ...You are, aren’t you?

[…]

[War Buddy]: When are you flying into Washington D.C. to come see me?

[Jack]: ...The ship lands at 16:35.

[War Buddy]: Hahaha, you’re so predictable <3

[Jack]: Dinner first.

[War Buddy]: And you’re dessert?

[Jack]: ...If you’re good, you can get it ;)

[War Buddy]: Aren’t I always good for you?

[Jack]: Most of the time. And then you go and call me your “war buddy” in front of Congress

[War Buddy]: Irreplaceable war buddy

[War Buddy]: I wouldn’t trade you for the world, Jack.

[War Buddy]: My heart is in your chest.

[…]

[Jack]: God damn, I am a sucker for that line every time.

[Gabe]: hehehe >:)

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24: Plans

Wednesday, March 6, 2047: 1853 - leaving the Mess Hall, main SEP facility

“I’m just really not sure about the usefulness of the pulse pistol, you know?” Carlos says as they leave the Mess Hall, entering the Main Access Corridor.

They had stayed a few minutes after finishing their dinner to talk about the pulse pistol and pulse carbine: though Luisa had been interested, she had basically crammed food into her mouth (which is how she gets when she’s so focused she forgets her sense of manners) and then bolted, saying something in a rapid string of English (and maybe a little Spanish?) about Watanabe opening the tech lab for experimenting with the Omnicode.

It’s been like that with the majority of the candidates for most of the week: with the late afternoon and evenings “opened up” for a wider range of training and activities, fewer and fewer candidates linger in the Mess Hall to socialize or head to the rec room lounge, instead choosing to head to the Tech Labs or the Gym or even some of the empty classrooms to work. “Assignments” from the
educational parts of the program have lessened - the first two months focused a lot on ground level
tactics and strategies, discussing the ODA structure, the different landscapes around Detroit, Seattle,
Bakersfield, Mexico City, covering basic Survival-Evasion-Resistance topics, the usual Q-course
kind of stuff.

But this week the difference in both “educational coursework” and the lack of supplementary reading
and “assignments” was obvious:

A shift in focus on the Omnic’s themselves, which was something that should have started a month
ago (in Gabriel’s opinion) -

And a shift in “channeling” the candidates into spending their evenings in training or technical
sessions, either with a director and trainers or with each other.

There had been a…

Slight “problem.”

...If Gabriel could even call it that.

Three of the five main MOSes - Charlie (engineering), Delta (medical), and Echo (comms and
computing) - had pretty clear “sessions”, and the Senior soldiers with backgrounds in those MOSes
basically gravitated to them again, assisting the directors and trainers or devoting themselves to
furthering their own skill sets (like Luisa). The Junior soldiers - who also had their former MOSes -
were a little more varied, but typically jumped around between the two specialities they were most
skilled in or wanted to start exploring further. And the 18Xers drifted to whatever caught their
interest for the evening: many of them would still go straight to the rec room or Gym, but Gabriel has
seen several start heading to the Tech Labs or talking to the former Deltas.

But that left the former Bravos and Foxes with...not a ton to do or focus on.

To her credit, Carolina had amped up a number of technical sessions in one of the unused
classrooms, working with Edwards to get into the finer engineering details of the new pulse firearms
and heavier munitions. These weren’t quite the same as the hands-on drills that had started the other
day, but they still gave some of the former Bravos a “place” to retrain some of their skills. In fact,
Carlos and the other Senior Bravos had spent most of dinner discussing the technicalities of the pulse
carbine and pistol with each other, with Gabriel and Alicia listening in.

...Gabriel still hadn’t told anyone he’s already seen and read most of the firearm blueprints, files, and
“debriefings”.

(Revealing that seems...unwise at this point.)

“Look, man,” Gabriel says as they start heading slightly south, to reach the hallway that will lead
back to the candidate barracks, “You don’t have to convince me: I think it was a waste of time and
effort too.”

“I just…” Carlos starts to say, before sighing heavily and gesturing emphatically, “I just can’t see a
scenario where that little thing will be any better than one of those plasma shotguns. The Special
Forces already use the carbine, both ballistic and pulse, to replace the standard service pistol, and I’ll
be damned if they try to hand it out to Commanders and Assistant Commanders instead of the
carbine or shotgun.”

“Could be for Deltas and Echoes as a secondary firearm,” Gabriel offers, though even he’s not
buying it, “They already have to carry a ton of sensitive equipment - they can’t waste extra body
space and armor on holstering those shotguns.”

“Damn, that might be just as terrifying,” Carlos mutters as they head up the main Barracks hallway -

“I mean, if you have to pick between a Bravo or a Delta with a shotgun, hell yeah, I’d rather arm the Bravo as the breaching unit,” Gabriel counters -

But Carlos just gives him a blunt, deadpan look before he states:

“Gabriel Reyes, are you telling me you’d be okay with seeing Jack try to perform combat medicine with only that tiny pulse pistol as his emergency weapon?”

…

Damn him for being so stupid observant sometimes, Gabriel thinks -

Even as the mere idea of Jack bent over a still body, his carbine or rifle abandoned somewhere behind him, those deep blue eyes laserlike on some wound pooling blood, hands moving to a biotic field and packs of stitches -

A shadow of a Bastion cutting over him -

Flashes a bolt of utter fear in Gabriel’s chest.

Despite his background as a Bravo, Carlos has the same depth of reading his teammates as Carolina and Jim before him, because he immediately rolls his shoulders, chuckling dryly at Gabriel, “Yeah, I thought not.”

“…I would arm my Deltas and Echoes with whatever secondary firearm they’d feel comfortable with,” Gabriel states, the words are honest -

Even if the emotion behind them is not.

“Sure you would, Gabrielito,” Carlos snorts with obvious disbelief, “Like you wouldn’t just put a giantass force field around Jack and also relegate him to camp duty 90% of the time.”

“How you’re just making me sound overprotective,” Gabriel grins back, “But man, I’m going to have to remember that force field idea - that sounds useful.”

Carlos gives him a mischievous, knowing grin back as the reach the first set of candidate halls. There’s a brief moment of comfortable silence between them before Carlos murmurs, “…You going to Delta today?”

And that.

That -

Is the real “core” of Gabriel’s “problem.”

Since Carolina, Edwards, and the other Bravo trainers are running technical debriefings on the weapons -

It’s really just the former Foxes that have no specialized “sessions” to focus on.

Guerra had pulled the four of them aside on Sunday evening and had informed them, “I’m spending this week getting the legalities of Mulcahy’s position together. You guys can consider a free week
but like Resistance, I do expect you to make an effort to work with the other MOSes. A good Fox always retains their former skills."

And while Gabriel agrees with the idea in principle…

He hadn’t...*really* made an effort to see Serena in the Delta Classroom.

“...No,” Gabriel says honestly to Carlos, “No, I’m gonna go join Luisa and work through parts of the Omnicode with her.”

Carlos’ gaze softens slightly, before he mutters, “...Ah.”

As if Gabriel’s response somehow says something *more* .

...Granted -

Gabriel also isn’t making an effort to dispel any...ideas Carlos and Luisa have about *why* he hasn’t tried joining the Delta sessions.

*It’s not for the reasons they think,* Gabriel sighs internally.

*Jack* has been making a serious effort to both work with Mulcahy’s other “medical assistants” *and* join the Delta training sessions.

...*I don’t want to disrupt that,* Gabe thinks, both sweet and bittersweet.

He’s *trying* to honor his own request and give Jack all the space he needs to focus on himself.

(Even if both he *and* Jack are...doing a pretty miserable job at it when they *do* end up together.)

...

He tries -

And pretty spectacularly *fails* -

To *not* think about Jack in those blue scrubs and *god damn.*

*C’mon, Reyes, keep your shit together,* Gabriel snaps at himself, before he says hastily, “What are your plans?”

“How?” Carlos stammers, glancing at Gabriel before he replies, “For what - for today?”

“Yeah,” Gabriel says back, even as there’s the trace of ghostly fingertips up his forearm and *stopstopstop* -

“Oh, today I was just going to go listen to Edwards drone on about how *cool* the pulse pistol is,” Carlos snorts, rolling his eyes, “Why - did you want to join me?”

“Hell no,” Gabriel snorts as they reach the intersection in the middle of the 49-72 hall, just before the full intersection with the Barracks Bathroom. There are more candidates moving around here, since the 49-72 is the unfortunate “center” of the Barracks - many of the candidates are grabbing things like notebooks or datapads from their rooms or grabbing their heavier gear before heading back to whatever training or technical session they want to go to.

[+76: Plans]
“Hmm, it hasn’t fully charged from this afternoon,” Jin hums thoughtfully, looking at his datapad. Jack stands in the doorway of Room 65-66, as Jin (66) peers at his datapad by his bed, where he left it charging on his desk throughout dinner, and Derek (65) grabs a heavier jacket.

They’re both getting ready to head to Director Jones’ evening session on gross anatomy up in the Delta Classroom, but they had spent most of dinner talking with Francis (35) and Angel (121) about Mulcahy’s readings. Francis had been a med student when the Day of Crisis had hit, and Angel had worked as an ICU nurse for several years before enlisting, so the four of them had been trying to parse through the density of Mulcahy’s work for the last few days.

“Maybe bring the whole charger?” Jack offers as Derek starts to head towards the door. Jack steps out of the way for him, nodding to him. Derek nods back, even as Jack speaks to Jin, “I’m sure Director Jones will let you plug it in somewhere.”

“Yeah, I can try that,” Jin says, kneeling to reach under his desk, “One sec -”

“No, I was curious if you wanted to spar tomorrow,” Gabriel says, as they step off to the right, keeping close to the corner as other candidates move past them -

“Oh yeah, sure,” Carlos says, before he grins mischievously, “It’s been awhile since I threw you across the room -”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen, Rives,” Gabriel grins right back, “See, I don’t know about you, but I went toe-to-toe with a superspy a week ago -”

“Two weeks ago, Reyes,” Carlos corrects him pointedly, “And you also would have lost that fight, if you two had actually drawn blood.”

“Excuse me, I would’ve gotten his femoral,” Gabriel states, but Carlos just rolls his eyes, adding, “Yeah, but you would’ve fulfilled Guerra’s stupid death wish and would’ve lost an eye, so who’s the real winner in that, Gabrielito -”

“Hey, Reyes.”

It takes both of them a long second to realize that a relatively deep voice has addressed Gabriel and -

They both stop mid-step and mid-banter to glance back -

As Derek (Soldier: 65) approaches them.

Gabriel blinks once in surprise -

Before he more formally turns and faces him, saying, “Oh hey, uh - Krause, right?”

Derek grins at him, saying brightly, “Aha, yup, Derek Krause - you interviewed me during Resistance week.”

And Gabriel thinks blunty, No, I know.

I didn’t actually forget.

(He almost never forgets individuals in whatever social network system he’s analyzing.)

(But there are times when it is better to act nonchalant or unassuming to draw more intel from a source.)
Jin pops back out, rolling up the cord of the charger around its plug-in base, saying conversationally, “Thanks for waiting, Jack.”

“Hey, no worries,” Jack grins, resettling against the doorframe, “I’m just glad you’re willing to share your anatomy diagrams for this week.”

“Yeah, uh,” Jin says, giving him an almost worried glance, “I’m not really sure how you got through undergrad with your sketches, Jack.”

“Nursing doesn’t require artistry,” Jack says sagely, but as Jin rises he mutters, “No...but getting a passing grade in anatomy requires that your work be - you know - legible.”

“To be fair, I’m supposed to be getting lessons soon,” Jack counters teasingly, “So when that happens, you won’t have me holding you back.”

Instead, Gabriel just smiles back, attempting to be casually friendly as he says, “Oh right! The other leftie around here! You doing okay with the pulse weapons, man?”

In his peripherals, Gabriel sees Carlos quirk an eyebrow and give him a patented “Gabriel, what the hell” look.

“Oh yeah, they’re not too bad,” Derek says conversationally, “But they haven’t let me try the heavy pulse rifle or the shotguns yet. I hear those are harder to reload.”

“Right, the heavy pulse rifles have be fed through the top,” Gabriel says, not even thinking about it.

Both Carlos and Derek just kinda -

*Gawk* at him a little before -

*OH SHIT*, Gabriel thinks in a blind panic, saying as coolly as he can, “Commander Luna mentioned it to me. She, uh, said that’s part of why they’re waiting to introduce the bigger guns next week. Want to get people used to the carbine first.”

“Oh,” Derek says thoughtfully, “Yeah...yeah, that makes sense then.”

Carlos just continues to give Gabriel an unimpressed stare.

[“Oh please, Jack,” Jin laughs lightly, putting the rolled-up charger cord on one pocket and his datapad in another, “Helping you is actually helping me a lot. I haven’t reviewed gross anatomy in like, two years. You definitely remember more than I do even though I finished Delta training when you finished college.”]

[“Ah, I’ve just got a long memory,” Jack jokes as Jin heads towards him -]

“...Moving on,” Gabriel says, avoiding Carlos’ blunt stare and giving Derek a cheesy “don’t look at him” smile, “What’s up?”

“Oh uh,” Derek suddenly looks a little more hesitant, flicking a nervous look towards Carlos, before he says, “I, uh, I had a question for you, Gabriel. About this weekend.”

…”

There’s something -
Just a little bit surreal -

About hearing someone who isn’t a former 7436 member or Jack call him “Gabriel.”

In his peripherals, Carlos’ look of skepticism suddenly transforms into one of utter, mischievous glee.

The worst, most awkward poker face settles on Gabriel’s face as Carlos states in a loud, obvious tone, “Well! I’ll let you two sort that out! See you later, Gabriellito!”

And he practically skips off into the intersection with the bathroom.

Gabriel tries his hardest to ignore the curious glances other candidates give them, gesturing more “in” to the 49-72 hallway proper, saying, “Let’s get out of the way.”

“Oh! Yeah, sure,” Derek says nervously, stepping back a few feet, edging into the hallway, past Room 61-62 and 63-64. Gabriel follows a step or two after him, and as they stand in the “gap” between the doors for 61-62 and 65-66, he asks, “What was your question?”

“Oh, uh, nothing major,” Derek says, before -

Almost in heightened contrast to a second earlier -

He grins at Gabriel, saying with a surprising amount of charisma, “I was wondering if you had any plans for your pass time this weekend.”

...I can’t even remember the last time someone tried to ask me out, Gabriel thinks dryly but -

That’s not true, the back of his mind whispers -

As an image of Jack grinning at him, offering to get him some top shelf whiskey -

Flickers through his head.

...Correction, Gabriel thinks, trying not to smile over the memory, I can’t remember the last time a near stranger tried to ask me out.

[“Some of these things just click for me, you know?” Jack jokes as they step out into the hallway and -]

“If you’re not too busy, I was hoping I could get a drink with you.”

Ooops, we walked in on something, Jack thinks, as he (and Jin) glance to the right -

Where -

Jack suddenly feels his heart sink -

Where he can see Gabe staring at Derek over Derek’s right shoulder.

“Oh, we should go -” Jin starts to whisper to him but -

“Sorry.”

Gabriel is semi-aware that some people have left Derek’s room directly behind him -

But he just focuses on giving Derek an honest, genuine half-smile - his words filled with a tempered
warmth - as he says:

“I’m flattered, really, but I have other plans for this weekend.”

[And in the span of a single inhale -]

[Jack’s heart soars again.]

[He quickly glances away, both attempting to let Gabe have a bit of space and trying to force himself to calm down from the way his pulse thuds in his palms and -]

For what it’s worth, Derek takes it well, nodding appreciatively as he sighs, “I thought you might, but I figured I’d ask anyways. You’re going to be busy the whole time?”

“I haven’t figured out Sunday yet, but I expect to be busy most of Saturday,” Gabriel says, again, still being honest about it, “But I don’t want to get your hopes up or keep you on the hook.”

Derek rolls his shoulders again, saying, “Fair enough. Thanks for the clear response, at least.”

“No worries, man,” Gabriel replies, truly apologetic, “I do appreciate you asking upfront.”

[Jack gestures to the left, ignoring how Jin is very clearly observing the pink tint on his cheeks, and both the “medics” set off north up the 49-72 hallway -]

“Least I could do was take the shot,” Derek chuckles, stuffing his hands in his pockets, “I knew I didn’t stand much of a chance but thought it wouldn’t hurt to try.”

And then the 18Xer - tall, broad, blonde, but just not the one that simmers in Gabriel’s mind and heartbeat - grins at him, saying with a wry smirk, “I was at least hoping I could beat him to the punch.”

Gabriel gives a soft rasp of a laugh, answering, “Believe me, he’s a helluva lot faster than he looks.”

And then Gabriel lowers his gaze a little, smiling to himself as he murmurs, “And I owe him a drink already.”

[As they exit the 49-72 Hallway, Jin asks Jack with a pointed tone, “I’m guessing you have plans for this weekend, Jack?”]

[And Jack -]

[He grins brightly at Jin, saying with a slight laugh to his words, “Yeah, I do.”]

[Jin smiles back, saying genuinely, “Good. I’m glad you’re planning to enjoy your pass time. The hardest part of enlisting is not getting into trouble when you finally do get free time.”]

[“Well,” Jack smirks roguishly, “I’m making no promises about that, Kurosawa.”]

[“Look, Morrison,” Jin says honestly, “There’s the good sort of trouble that everyone in the military gets into, at least once or twice, and there’s the truly bad sort of trouble which is when people start to spiral.”]

[As they head left into the 121-132 hallway, the Junior Delta murmurs quietly, “…Fraternization is one of the biggest open secrets around here. Everybody knows, and everybody knows who everybody is fraternizing with, but it will only become a problem when the upper officers make it one.”]
[And Jin glances at him, saying softly, “Do you understand what I’m saying?”]

[“...Understood,” Jack says honestly, “And don’t worry, Jin - Reyes already had this exact conversation with me.”]

[“Well,” Jin sighs, relaxing a little, “As long as you two are aware of it. The enforcement of fraternization rules can be arbitrary. I’d hate to see you get caught in that.”]

[“What - you think I don’t know how to be sneaky?” Jack grins at him. Jin snorts, laughing back, “Stealth is not a word I would use to describe you, Jack.”]

[“I’m sorry - who broke us out of fake prison again, Kurosawa?” Jack asks, eyebrows raised in mock indignation. Jin gives him a sly, sidelong smirk, as he retorts, “If you think that was stealthy, you still have a lot to learn, Morrison.”]

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76: Plans

Thursday, March 7, 2047: 2034 - Mess Hall, SEP Main facility

...I can put any emergency stocks of hepatocytes in biotic field containers, Jack thinks, running an anxious hand through his hair - it’s a bad habit and he knows it, but attempting to concentrate on the details of his ideas is stressing him out.

It’s been five days of grinding through the papers Mulcahy assigned him and the other medical assistants, and four days since he signed the release and NDA forms…

Four days since his biopsies -

And he still doesn’t know how to approach his idea about trying to produce extra hepatocytes.

Jack sighs as he glances up from his usual table towards the east-facing windows. The sun has already set, letting the night envelop the mountainside, drenching the shadows of the pines in blue, stardusted hues. The mess hall is...relatively quiet, since it’s well after dinner hours, with most of the evening training sessions complete. Most of the candidates have drifted off to the Gym for personal training, the regular lounge for socializing, or their rooms for actual peace and quiet.

This time of day always reminds him of nights in the snow fort, sharing stories and hot chocolate, listening to the way Gabe laughs over some ridiculous joke Jack said or the way Gabe gets excited over some idea or…

Feels like it's been longer than two weeks since we were last out there, Jack thinks idly, his eyes tracing over some of the distant stars.

Only a few small clusters of candidates are still around: some Juniors and 18Xers talking about the Charlie “demolition demonstration” that Director Cruz will have tomorrow afternoon, a few other 18Xers talking about the new weapons drills -

Another group chattering happily about their plans for the free pass time on the upcoming weekend.

…

Jack’s pulse thrums a little at the reminder.
The last four-to-five days have been busy: he’s spent an inordinate amount of time in the Medical Ward, learning the schedule for the vector production from Mulcahy, the medic-trainers, and the Senior Deltas, trying his damnedest to remember all the fine details of the machines, the set-ups, the controls, shifting his mindset towards being half-nurse, half-soldier, half-a-wreck…

He’s only been scheduled for one weapons drill in the last few days, where his group was introduced (very slowly and cautiously) to the tiny “pulse pistol” and then the standard “pulse carbine rifle”. The pulse pistol was laughable - a regular ballistic pistol was absolutely more effective - but the standard pulse carbine was useable. Despite the lighter frame, it had a helluva lot more kick to it than the older M4s, and most of the steel-rolled targets just melted under the fire. In fact, the most “confusing” part to adapt to was the reloading: no more traditional magazines or clips, just “stocks” of pulse ions or something that need to be loaded in through the top of the gun - something about slotting it into the superconductor feed chamber.

...He hasn’t had a chance to look at the weapon prototype files from Gabe again.

...Too busy.

In fact…

The most irritating part of the week isn’t that he’s been too busy - he thrives under the pressure of it all, relishes it, lives under it.

No.

It’s that he’s barely had a chance to do anything more than say “Hey” to Gabe in the halls.

(He hasn’t even heard from Gabe since yesterday evening -)

(When he had accidentally heard Derek ask him for a drink -)

(Only to also hear Gabe gently turn him down.)

You really don’t know how good you have it until it’s gone, Jack thinks, exhaling softly.

Sometimes…in the quiet of the night -

He can still feel Gabe’s kiss pressed tenderly to the back of his fingers and -

“...You seem tired, Morrison.”

The words rush through Jack’s veins like a second pulse -

And he flicks his gaze up towards the left -

Just as Gabe rounds the end of the table to slide in across from him -

A sly, but happy smirk on his face as he settles in, the blue night framing him beautifully.

[+24: Plans]

Gabe! Jack thinks, starting to say, “Ga - Reyes” before he catches himself impulsively.

Gabe chuckles at the way Jack’s whole demeanor seems to transition: stoic and serious only seconds before, but now his posture straightens, his lips quirk into a roguish grin, those blue depths of his eyes alight. Gabe’s gaze traces over how awkwardly fluffed and skewed Jack’s hair is as he thinks,
They’ve got you pretty beat if your hair is that much of a mess, Jack.

God, Gabe looks good - a warm, handsome relief to Jack’s overclocked mind. His hair is only half-dry on his head, flopped over in slightly wet waves, mustache and beard looking cleaned up for the week, a fresh change of clothes on. Jack grins at him, asking, “Have a good work out?”

“It was alright,” Gabe chuckles, setting a thermos of water on the table as he rolls his shoulders, “People kept trying to interrupt me and Carlos from sparring - always gets a little frustrating.”

“Well, who could blame them? You’re just so badass,” Jack teases him, a mischievous twist to his words. Gabe gives him a skeptical glance, one eyebrow raised as he mutters, “Why, Jack Morrison, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re messing with me.”

“Moi? Jamais!” Jack fake-protests, “Reyes, please - I would never mess with you.”

Gabe does his best to give Jack a deadpanned, unimpressed stare, as the corners of Jack’s lips quirk into a slight smile before he attempts to fake another serious poker face -

“It’s too late, Morrison,” Gabe states with feigned melodrama, “You’ve already messed with...my heart.”

And that -

Get Jack to crack a wide, delighted grin as he laughs a slow, deep chuckle, melodic in his chest, and Gabe feels something strong and sweet settle in his soul as -

Jack glances up at him, his eyes so blue under the cool lighting and darker night shadows, as he says, “Alright, Reyes, you win that round.”

“I had to get you back for Sunday,” Gabe grins, taking a sip from his thermos. As he sets it down, his eyes drift to Jack’s datapad, and he murmurs softly, “Still getting through Mulcahy’s stuff?”

“Yeah,” Jack answers, his own tone getting quieter, “It’s...not as dense as the stuff from...you know, but I’m trying to really understand this set. I just...”

He stops, the words stuck in his throat.

It takes all of Gabe’s willpower not to reach out and hold Jack’s hand. Instead, he asks quietly, “Is something wrong?”

Jack glances back up at him, searching the fierce, tender concern in Gabe’s expression, before he says, “I just...I have some ideas, but...I’m not really sure what to do about them. Or if they’re even worth it. And I just...”

He pauses, lowering his voice again, eyes locked with Gabe’s as he hums, “I just want to talk to you about it first.”

A faint blush rises to Gabe’s cheeks and, spellbound, Jack thinks, Oh.

And Gabe grins brightly, chuckling, “Well, I’m flattered. I barely know anything about this stuff, but I can try.”

But then Gabe’s smile grows softer, as he murmurs, “I’m sure it’s a good idea, Morrison.”

Jack feels his breath catch in his chest -
As Gabe adds tenderly, “You have more of them than I think you realize.”

...A pinkish glow dusts across Jack’s cheekbones and Gabe hums internally, *There’s something real powerful about making you look like that, Jack.*

Jack *grins* with a mischievous brightness, saying, “Well, I’m no criminal mastermind like yourself, but I do try.”

Gabe snorts as a laugh shakes his chest, “I wouldn’t discredit yourself: you’ve gotten pretty close to it before.”

“Mm, I could get closer though,” Jack grins playfully, stretching his left leg forward to rub it teasingly against Gabe’s right calf. A brief look of surprise graces Gabe’s face, before he grins back, “Jack Morrison, that is a cheap tactic.”

“Criminal masterminds don’t play by the rules, Gabriel Reyes,” Jack smirks back. Gabe pauses, but then nods begrudgingly as he admits, “Fair enough. What’s this idea of yours? Or -”

He lowers his voice again, asking, “Is it too...important to say here?”

“It…” Jack starts to say, but stops, churning over the words -

The image of the Russian supersoldier flashes through his head -

And he decides, “It...might be, yeah.”

“Can it wait until Saturday?” Gabe asks.

*The serum cultures won’t be ready for the first set of injections until Monday...* Jack remembers, muttering, “Yeah, it can wait a bit.”

“Cool,” Gabe says, before he nods towards Jack’s datapad, saying, “And speaking of Saturday…”

Jack watches as Gabe pulls his own datapad out of his sweatshirt pocket, holding it towards Jack’s. Jack leans forward a little, moving his datapad forward across the table, until Gabe taps his against it. There’s a small dinging noise, and Jack brings it back looking at the notification:

[Reyes.Gabriel] has shared a location.]

“I don’t fully know if they’re going to drop us off in waves or groups or what,” Gabe says, as Jack opens the map viewer and it loads the location -

“So we should try to meet around here as soon as both of us are in town,” Gabe explains quietly -

As the map shows -

*An electronics store?* Jack wonders, scowling slightly in confusion, as the store [Ray’s Electronics and Computers] displays.

Gabe notices the confusion on Jack’s face as the electronics store pops up, and he adds softly:

“You know...so we can figure out what to do with all those *books* first.”

*Ah, the SEP files,* Jack realizes, humming nonchalantly, “Understood. Do you have something in mind?”
“I’ve got a few ideas I’m kicking around,” Gabe says, just as nonchalantly, “Depends on what the store has. The easiest one is just getting a storage drive and renting some sort of secure locker for the next four months.”

“A bank safe.”

Jack looks up from the datapad, and the depths of his eyes are so blue, his expression fierce and focused.

Gabe pauses -

Before he raises an eyebrow and thinks, Not bad, Jack -

But he mutters, “Paper trail?”

“No one’s going to check,” Jack replies quietly, “A locker isn’t bad, but in a town like this, most of them are going to be run by ski lodges or sports centers. We don’t want to just leave it there or have it exposed to the cold. But a small, local bank will have cheap safes for rent for longer periods of time.”

Gabe turns the idea over - Don’t love the idea that we have to leave official names attached to this, but he’s right - before he grins, “See, Morrison? You have good ideas all the time.”

“Just here to be the Watson to your Holmes, Reyes,” Jack chuckles, saving the location to a temporary “Favorite places” slot in the map viewer.

“And I appreciate that.”

Jack glances up from the datapad again -

To see Gabe observing him with a fond, sweetly smoky look and -

Jack swallows his heart in the back of his throat.

“...I appreciate you,” Gabe adds richly, a regal smirk on his face, the words thrilling through Jack, causing him to inhale steeply.

Jack exhales a heartbeat, the ache churning inside him as he murmurs deeply, “Damn, Reyes - I already said you won this round.”

“...I’m a sore winner,” Gabe chuckles in that raw-sugar tone, textured with heat, “When I win, I take it all.”

Something deeper, something heavier draws in the blues of Jack’s eyes as he bites at his lower lip, before smirking, “I’d love nothing more than to give you whatever you want, Reyes.”

...God damn, he just plays hardball right back, Gabe thinks, feeling his own desire twist tight inside him, even as he says, “Be careful what you wish for, Morrison - you just might get it.”

“Good,” Jack states immediately, his tone rich and layered, “I want it.”

Gabe exhales a slow sigh of temperance, willing the want inside him to simmer instead of burn, saying more conversationally, “...Be sure to think of whatever drink you want.”

And then he smiles more genuinely at Jack, adding, “I’ll treat you when we’re done with...whatever time the books take.”
“Hmm,” Jack hums, looking at the datapad again, tapping at the map to move around the little town of Sun Valley and Ketchum. Gabe rolls his shoulders, saying, “There’s a bunch of bars and breweries - resort valley kinda places, you know? And cafes and bistro-y type restaurants. So whatever you feel like.”

“God, real alcohol would be nice again,” Jack mutters and Gabe laughs, “Right? God, it feels like it’s been so long.”

“I was supposed to show you some good whiskey, but that seems a little intense for our first -” Jack starts to say -

Before he deadstops over the word “date.”

Gabe watches him for a moment, fully knowing what Jack was going to say, before he offers wryly, “Our first pass time weekend?”

“...Yeah,” Jack rasps hoarsely, giving Gabe a sly smirk, “Pass time weekend.”

“To be honest with you, Morrison,” Gabe chuckles dryly, “I would think whiskey tasting would be pretty tame compared to Resistance week. Or literally any other part of this program.”

“That just means you haven’t had good whiskey, Gabe,” Jack zings right back. Gabe tilts his thermos towards him, acknowledging it as he laughs, “I’ll defer to the expert here.”

“Hmm...maybe we should put the whiskey tasting on hold,” Jack murmurs warmly, “I gotta scope out if any of these bars are good.”

“And what, I can’t help with that?” Gabe asks teasingly. Jack looks up, a slight smile on his face as he says, “Awww, Reyes - I just want to impress you is all.”

“Dammit, I thought you said I had already won this round,” Gabe snorts. Jack just beams at him, “You sure did, you big, bad winner you.”

“Why do I always walk right into those?” Gabe groan-laughs. Jack grins, looking back at the datapad, tapping through different cafes and restaurants, thinking, Coffee is...kind of a boring first date, to be honest...

We should really do something interesting, but how do you do that when every other place in town is a ski resort -

Jack pauses -

As he stops on one in particular -

Eyes skimming the menu.

Gabe notices how a mischievous, bright smile flutters across Jack’s face and he thinks warmly, Oh boy - another “good idea”, Jack?

(The thought is pleasant and excited, thrilled and sweet all at once.)

Jack gives him a crooked, radiant grin as he glances back up from the datapad, and Gabe asks playfully, “Find something?”

“You’ll do any drink, right?” Jack asks coyly. Gabe raises an eyebrow over that, retorting, “Short of drinking poison, sure. I’m game.”
“Good,” Jack laughs, “Because it’s going to be a surprise.”

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Chapter End Notes

They're definitely not going on a date.

Nope.

Definitely not.
Chapter Summary

The best dates are the ones where everything is
Mundane
And yet every moment together feels
Right.
Sometimes those are first dates.
(And sometimes, those are the ten-thousand-and-first dates.)

Chapter Notes

You are a sight for aching eyes
A river for my thirst
When all the world is harsh and dry
And wasted by the curse
All words seem beggarly and poor
Unset to sing your grace
What could I've know of love before
My eyes had seen your face?

My love, how beautiful you are
My love is ever where you are

See the end of the chapter for more notes

24: First

Saturday, March 9, 2047: 1438 - outside of Ray’s Electronics and Computers, Main Street, Ketchum, Idaho

Gabe taps through the Department of Defense webpage on his datapad again, doing some basic math in his head as he runs down the list of credits in his name.

About an hour before lunch, they had brought the different drill and training groups back into the mess hall, where they had given the rest of the candidates datapads. Director Watanabe had then walked the entire group (plus most of the trainers, it seemed) through connecting their DOD IDs to their civilian bank accounts in order to start shifting their “financial compensation” credits into useable money.
...He won’t lie -

He was **pretty impressed** by the amount of compensation they were getting.

*There’s about one more zero on the end of that than I was expecting*, he thinks, scrolling through. The DOD had been operating in both U.S. dollars and credits for some time now, a move which had proved surprisingly beneficial when the war had effectively tanked economies the world over. Relatively-speaking, the dollar wasn’t in a *bad* place, but it certainly wasn’t at its pre-war levels.

*Though considering the history of this country, it'll bounce back when the war starts winding down*, Gabe thinks dryly.

...So long as the U.S. secures its own warfronts first, of course.

*God, we could be actually trying to find shit out about Omnic hierarchies and global organization if we actually put our damn efforts towards it*, he adds, the thought bitter in the back of his mind.

Certain Omniums had to be more “valuable” than others, there was just *no way* each one had the same strength or capacity as others. Not only was it statistically unlikely, each one had to be subject to the pre-war “whimsies” of its location: geography, resources, materials, support - all these things matter.

...*Of course, we could also just drop bombs on them, but we still haven’t tried that*, Gabe reminds himself, darkly furious at the thought.

(But then -)

(Beneath the storm of his thoughts, roiling and snapping -)

(A deeper, seaswept voice seems to murmur, *Patience, Gabe.*)

Something seems to calm him down, just a little, and he reminds himself, *One step at a time, Reyes. You're here and now. Thinking large scale won’t help you yet.*

*You have to get there first.*

“Hey, sorry I’m late!”

Gabe looks up from his datapad -

As Jack wanders up the street from the south.

(+76: First)

The day is brisk down in the valley, just a degree or two warmer than being up in the mountains themselves. Sun Valley and Ketchum are...pretty typical mountain resort towns: small towns that relied on farming and ranching in the last century, turned to tourism and outdoor attractions to rebrand themselves and survive in the current one. Pretty much everything around is either a ski lodge, motel or hotel, tourist-chic restaurant or brewery, or the rest of the economic “life support” that gives these places structure. Warehouses, little branches of big companies, tiny retailers eeking out a living, pockets of actual residential housing, the usual.

“Ray’s Electronics and Computers” is definitely in the “tiny retailers” category: the shop is little more than a one to two room generic storefront, painted some non-intimidating grey-green with red-brown trim. It’s definitely past the “tourist-oriented” center of town, straddling the three-way cross section of “quaint town square” to the south, the warehouses and storage buildings to the north, and clusters
of residential houses and apartments to the west.

Here on the street level, the snow is mostly slush from the cars and trucks passing by, the heat of the buildings and general humidity of human activity melting everything, but the chill in the natural air still keeping the snow and frost around. The view is, at least, cutely picturesque, with large snowcapped mountains rising steeply against marbled grey-blue skies, casting the world in a sort of pearly hue, as if the whole valley exists in a shabby-chic snow globe.

Jack somehow looks warm against it all, as if perfectly at home in this kind of warm-not-warm atmosphere, his head bare, blonde hair tuffing out like usual, heavy snow jacket unzipped (of course, Gabe thinks dryly, even as he appreciates the way the thermal shirt underneath stretches across Jack’s chest), cheeks rosy-gold from his rush to get to the store from where the buses had dropped the soldiers off in the center of town.

“Our bus got stuck behind a ski lodge shuttle,” Jack sighs as he gets closer to where Gabe is standing in the small, corner parking lot of the electronics store. He huffs, “I swear, they stopped at every resort and lodge on the way down.”

“Typical,” Gabe chuckles, feeling warm just looking at him.

Jack runs his eyes up and down Gabe, before he grins mischievously, teasing him, “Aww, are you cold here?”

“Anything below fifty is ‘stupid cold’ for me,” Gabe snorts, and Jack thinks, It shows alright.

Gabe is just as bundled up as if he were still in the SEP reserve area: beanie on tight, looks to be wearing at least a sweatshirt under his heavy snow jacket, hands stuffed in his pockets, his cheeks flushed from the cold, a copper tint beneath his bronzy, gilded skin, eyebrows furrowed into a slight scowl from the effort of keeping himself warm.

Jack finds it endearing.

“I could warm you up just right, if you’d like,” Jack offers playfully, stepping closer, leaning in a little, getting more into Gabe’s space.

Gabe doesn’t stop him.

Instead, he sigh-laughs, “You play hard, don’t you, Jack?”

And Gabe pulls his right hand from his pocket, holding it out to him.

Jack pauses, his breath caught in his ribs for a second -

Before he grins radiantly, saying, “I don’t know any other way to play with you, Gabe!”

And Jack takes his hand.

…

There’s an

Immediate

Surge of warmth and relief through both of them - not electric, not racing or thrumming or thrilling, but a soft, sugary warm pulse that ripples through them at the touch, as they entwine their fingers.
Holding hands again for the first time since Jack took Gabe’s blood on Sunday.

…

It lasts for a fraction of a second -

Before Gabe laugh-hisses, “Oh my god, your hands are cold!”

“You are such a wimp,” Jack laughs back buoyantly at him, the sound surging up from the depths of his chest like water bubbling up, deep and rich, “You can let go, if you want -”

“Jack, I have waited all goddamn week to hold your hand,” Gabe grumbles teasingly, a wide, regal smile on his face as he squeezes his fingers tight, happiness simmering warm inside him, “And nothing - not even your poor, O negative blood circulation - is going to stop me from having my moment, okay?”

“Poor blood circulation,” Jack chokes out in a laughing wheeze, his whole face lit up with sunshine and humor, “Oh my god, Gabe -”

“I’ll warm your damn fingers up by sheer force of will, if I have to,” Gabe grins at him. Jack smiles right back, joking, “And also being inside, of course.”

“Meh, details,” Gabe snorts, as they start to drift out of the parking lot and to the front of the store proper.

Things still look routine, except that hanging on the cheap plywood is a big banner displaying “Emergency generators IN STOCK” and another one reading “We have portable camping generators!” Both of them briefly pause, assessing the signs, but Gabe pushes the door open and they step inside.

Like the exterior, the interior is nothing special: in fact, the surprising thing is that there are even other customers inside. From the “atrium” of the one-and-kind-of-a-half room store, they can see about three people milling around near the portable car chargers, another couple over by the camping generators on the far wall, a man dressed in snow gear by the waterproof phone cases, and one obviously bored employee behind the checkout stand on their immediate left.

The guy - young, maybe early twenties, lightly-trimmed beard, toeing the line of being clearly more tech-savvy than 70% of this town’s population while also belying his more rural roots by being brawnier than anyone in Silicon Valley and wearing a standard fare flannel shirt - glances up at them from his phone. He gives them a “friendly acknowledging nod,” saying rote, “Welcome to Ray’s. If you’re here for the backup generators, they’re in the back room. Car chargers are 25% off from now through Spring Break.”

Jesus, Spring Break - I completely forgot the rest of the world existed, Jack thinks, the mere phrase jarring him slightly, as Gabe (closer to the clerk) says casually, “We’re good, thanks. Where are the digital storage devices?”

“Fifth aisle,” the clerk says, “We’re out of the 10 petabyte drives - you want one, we’ve got a list for our incoming shipments for the next four months.” And his eyes narrow slightly - not in judgment, just in casual assessment - as he asks, “You two aren’t from around here, right? Skiing for the weekend?”

“No, we’re up at the base,” Gabe says, just as casually -

But he squeezes Jack’s hand affectionately as he says it.
The clerk’s eyes briefly go wide with knowing surprise as he mutters, “Ooooh, are they finally letting y’all out of quarantine?”

“Much to their regret, I’m sure,” Gabe says with dry, wry humor. Jack laughs a slightly hoarse, slightly all-too-bitter sound. The clerk leans in a little, glancing towards the nearest set of customers by the car chargers, before he asks in a loud conspiratorial whisper, “They’re doing something _big_ up there, right? Something that’s gonna change the war?”

Gabe scowls a little, before he opens his mouth to say “Sorry, can’t say much -”

But then -

“The bots won’t know what hit ‘em.”

Jack cuts in -

Glancing past Gabe’s shoulder to grin mischievously at the clerk.

The clerk somehow looks both impressed and confused.

Gabe leans back just a little, just enough so that Jack is more in the view of the clerk, as Jack chuckles brightly, “If you get what I mean.”

“Oh, uh...right, yeah,” the clerk starts to say, straightening back up -

Gabe quirks a skeptical but sly eyebrow towards Jack -

Before Jack gives one last grin towards the clerk, saying, “Remember, loose lips.”

“Right...got it,” the clerk says, a little more confident, even though Jack obviously didn’t actually _tell_ him anything.

And with that, Jack starts to guide Gabe right, towards the fifth aisle.

The aisles aren’t very big, just mostly floor-to-ceiling adjustable shelving units. Most of the aisles have small accessories - chargers, cords, individualized parts - with bigger stuff on the outer walls, showing off monitors, displays, computer towers, and on and on.

As they round left into the fifth aisle (“Drives and Digital Storage”), Gabe mutters, still clearly impressed, “‘If you get what I mean,’ huh? You used to shooing off nosy store clerks, Jack?”

“More like nosy relatives of patients who aren’t actually primary caretakers or next of kin,” Jack chuckles back, “But I guess the principle element is the same. You give people a little reassurance but nothing sensitive and they ease up.”

“Hmm,” Gabe hums, still impressed. The aisle is a lot more secluded -

And much more narrow than the main opening of the store -

And it sort of forces them even closer.

As they move in a little, Gabe leans in, murmuring closer to Jack’s ear, “You’re good at handling people, hmm?”

The sudden _warmth_ of Gabe’s words by the shell of Jack’s ear - full of smooth smokiness and slow-simmer sugar - sends raw shivers across his skin.
Gabe can feel Jack almost melt under his words and, god, the sheer taste of it makes him want to tease Jack more -

Jack glances towards him and the feeling twists hot inside Gabe -

At the deep, dark look in Jack’s gaze.

And Jack pauses only briefly -

Before he leans in and murmurs against Gabe’s lips:

“I’d like to get better at handling you, Gabe.”

The moment lasts…

Only a second -

Maybe two -

But it spans shivering, entwined heartbeats -

As Gabe hums a low, smoke-thread laugh back, low and sultry against Jack’s lips:

“Oh, you sure as hell will, Jack.”

(We’re already in deep -)

(And you’re going to pull me in deeper.)

There’s a moment where Jack almost falls in -

But Gabe carefully and tenderly puts his left hand against Jack’s chest, saying with a more clearheaded tone, “Concentrate, Jack. Files first.”

“...Right,” Jack sighs, the word coming out like an exhale. He glances over Gabe’s face with a calmer assessment, but it’s obvious.

There’s still a rich, star-submerged depth to Jack’s eyes.

And a gilded, silk-smoke look to Gabe’s.

The feeling lingers like a low, steady simmer between them.

Jack focuses his attention on the storage devices on the right, and Gabe lets his gaze drift to the shell of Jack’s left ear, the angle of his jawline -

The line of the muscle in his neck -

And the thought that flitters through his head is: Right there.

And he manages to pull his thoughts back to the moment as he asks, “What’s the file size?”

“Of all of it?” Jack asks back, pulling his datapad out of his pocket, “Or should we actually try to extract the pages.”

“Let’s just go with all of it,” Gabe mutters, forcing himself to look at the devices, “Too much work to try and extract them on a datapad. If we get the time we can look for a computer in a library or hotel
on another pass time weekend.”

“Works for me,” Jack hums as he navigates to the [Gabe’s Favorites] folder. He reads the overall size and sighs, “It’s...pretty big for pdfs and videos.”

*Don’t do it, don’t go for the obvious, you can’t tell him to chill and then wind him up again,* the small but still focused part of Gabe’s brain practically *screams* at him, so Gabe swallows the obvious “That’s what you’ll say tonight” joke and instead states dryly, “Like a terabyte?”

“No, not that big,” Jack says, “It’s 52 gigs with the videos.”

“Oh, damn, that *is* big,” Gabe mutters, the joke immediately vanishing from his mind.

“The datapad has a two terabyte mini-hard drive, a one terabyte mini-solid, and a 64 gig semi-graphene state,” Jack adds, reading the breakdown of the storage on the device, “So I’m not worried about actual storage.”

“But as long as it’s on the shared drives of the SEP network, it’s a liability,” Gabe reaffirms, “And the sooner we can make a backup copy, the better everyone will be.”

“Right,” Jack says, glancing back up towards the shelves, “So I guess 64 gigs to be safe? Or should we go up a level in the event of…”

And then he pauses, looking towards Gabe as he asks quietly, “In the event of more?”

At that, Gabe raises an eyebrow, humming, “Well, that depends on what more is, Jack. Are you thinking of something specific?”

Jack churns over the idea that he’s been holding onto for the last several days, before he murmurs:

“Our biodata...and the enhancement nanoproduction scripts.”

…

Gabe’s reaction is *immediate.*

His eyebrows furrow into a heavy, concentrated scowl, his mouth dropping slightly, his gaze deepening as he finally realizes -

*Días mio, qué carajos -* he starts to swear, English completely failing him -

As a light, faint smile graces Jack’s face.

And Gabe lifts his left hand, practically dragging it down his face, leaving it over his mouth, attempting to muffle the small, ragged breaths of understanding -

Before he barely manages to rasp out, “Oh my god, you have access to that.”

“There are a few safeguards in place, like I can’t just pull Adrien’s biodata without his wrist monitor. And Mulcahy can login and get access to everything,” Jack says, but then he *grins,* chuckling, “But uh, I’m not going to follow in your footsteps and attempt that.”

But then -

Jack reaches out, datapad still in hand -
But taps his right index finger against the back of Gabe’s monitor on his left wrist -

And says, “But your biodata and mine? That will be easy with these. And the nanoproduction scripts are effectively open to anyone Mulcahy permits access to.”

He lowers his hand, explaining, “That’s the trade-off in security. She basically has to let all of her assistants have access to them if she wants to run mass production. She can’t be in there every two or three hours checking on them, and she can’t overload just one or two of us with that job. Plus, just from working with her the last few days, it’s clear she just…”

Jack pauses, trying to organize his thoughts -

Before he says, “She just doesn’t care about military-level security.”

Gabe’s scowl eases slightly into a more suspicious look, but Jack continues, “She’s just too used to research and running her own labs. She leaves everything except her computer unlocked, and even with that big smartdesk, she only puts on password-protection. I don’t know if it’s due to her chimerism or what, but she doesn’t even use her own biodata or scanners for securing it.”

“All right,” Gabe hums contemplatively, and Jack -

Jack grows more determined as he states:

“I think...I think I can get our medical files to my login. And I can start duplicating the nanoproduction scripts. And that means…”

And Jack lowers his voice, leaning in a little - not sultry this time, but controlled, fierce, focused as he murmurs:

“That means if anything goes wrong, we have back-ups.”

“...Right,” Gabe says back, just as focused, just as pinpoint, adding, “We need that. The CIA is going to attempt to purge and secure the most important parts of these files the moment Mulcahy says she’s done advancing her research. They might not even survive the month before they get pulled from the nanoproducers and locked in virtual storage.”

“Exactly,” Jack agrees, “She’s going to be adjusting the vectors often and frequently. I don’t know what will happen to the vector combinations once she finishes using them.”

Gabe looks at him, and then he smiles - a regal, true, genuine smile that makes all of Jack’s control almost burn away, as he thinks quietly, Oh god, Gabe, that’s not playing fair.

“I’m weak to your smile.”

And Gabe says to him, with that voice like nightswept sunshine:

“You are so, so much more than just a nurse, Jack. You’re brilliant.”

Jack just watches him, and Gabe can feel the way that blue gaze deepens for him. Gabe grins, glancing up at the shelves as he chuckles, “Alright, so a bigger storage unit for more stuff. Let’s see what they have.”

---

It takes them a few minutes to decide on a size, brand, and model, but ultimately, they agree that “more” is better.
As they exit the store, Jack assesses the two terabyte device - complete with a mini-screen interface - before he says, “You didn’t have to pay for the whole thing, you know.”

“Meh, it was only 60 credits and worth it for getting one of the big ones with a screen,” Gabe says, closing his credit app on his datapad, “We never know when the directors will take the datapads back.”

“True, but I was willing to go half with you,” Jack says, breaking the seal on the lid of the device’s box. Gabe chuckles as he slides up next to Jack, saying, “Well, let’s see how much one of these bank safes cost to rent before we break down costs.”

“Speaking of the banks, I think we have to head back to the center of town to find them all,” Jack adds, prying the soft cardboard casing out of the box. Absently, he starts holding out some of the trash bits to Gabe, who - amused by Jack’s sheer ease of familiarity around him - takes it without complaint.

“Which is a real shame because the place I want to try is diagonal from us here,” Jack sighs, unwrapping the device from its plastic sheeting. As Gabe takes it, he chuckles, “I’m just gonna toss these.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, thanks,” Jack says, as Gabe wanders towards the trash can out front. He dumps it, and heads back to see Jack connecting the storage device to his datapad.

“...So should we get *that* *drink* first?” Gabe asks slyly, but Jack - still fairly engrossed in his activity - just hums, “Nah, let’s drop this thing off somewhere secure first.”

And then he gives Gabe a roguish smirk, chuckling, “We might not be in any condition to make...levelheaded decisions after the drink.”

“Oh well, now I’m *definitely* intrigued,” Gabe laughs, as Jack taps through the folders on his datapad. He starts copying [Gabe’s Favorites] to the device, and it pops up with a little text window of: [Copying folder [Gabe’s Favorites]. Estimated time is 20 minutes.]

“Should be enough time to head back,” Jack says, tucking both the datapad and the connected device securely into his right jacket pocket, before he zippers it shut to make sure they stay put.

“So back to town it is,” Gabe says - Before he holds out his right hand again.

Jack grins brightly -

And takes it.

As they start to head towards the edge of the parking lot and the sidewalk on Main Street, Gabe asks, “So copying the nanoproduction scripts...was that the main idea you wanted to talk about?”

“Mmm,” Jack hums, leaning against him slightly, feeling more reassured knowing that the first half of their plan is complete; “Not just that. There’s...”

He pauses, thinking, *How do I say this...?*

And Gabe just...

Waits.
Patiently.

Knowing Jack will find the words.

As they start to head south on Main Street, Jack explains, “In the only real way I can describe it, all gene therapy vectors have potential side effects.”

“Right, that makes sense,” Gabe says, encouraging him, “Would be pretty fantastical to find some sort of magic ‘cure all’ without consequences.”

“Yeah,” Jack chuckles, “Basically, the biggest issue with most of the viral vectors is that they can accidentally transfect non-target cells, or build up cytotoxicity in organs like the liver.”

Gabe shakes his head slightly, tittering, “Of course. It would be too easy, otherwise.”

“The good thing is Mulcahy’s, uh, expertise, if you will, is that she’s got several versions of these vectors that she’s basically bio-engineered to be better than the ones before it,” Jack continues, “Otherwise, a program like SEP wouldn’t even really be possible.”

Gabe nods along, murmuring, “Again, makes sense. The military and the CIA are willing to do a lot of experimental shit, of course, but they wouldn’t be spending this kind of money unless they knew some of it would be successful.”

And then -

There’s a small pause of silence

As Jack thinks over the problem.

And Gabe asks softly, “Jack...what’s wrong?”

Jack sighs, and says quietly, his voice low and drenched with bittersweetness, “I haven’t seen everything, but the results I have seen are…”

He looks at Gabe, his expression conflicted as he says, “They’re good, Gabe - they’re actually successful.”

“Right,” Gabe reaffirms, “We knew that. Things are going well. Most of SEP is about the soldiers, Jack, not just the enhancements.”

“I know, Gabe, but that’s the part that’s worrying me,” Jack says, “We’re already pretty much there. If anything, we’re going to be over-enhanced.”

“To become those weird zombie soldiers,” Gabe adds for him. Jack nods, saying, “And that’s where my concern is. What if we run into the same issues that Delta said the Russian program did? Where some candidates are just dying and not even getting - I don’t know - transformed or revived or whatever? The loss of four doctors for one of those zombie soldiers is…”

He stops, the words and fearfearfear choking up in the back of his throat and -

“Soldado -”

Gabe’s voice is soothing, sweet like pine smoke, slightly husky like simmered sugar -

As Jack feels warm, rough but tender - so tender - fingers brush against his right cheek -
And he looks straight at Gabe -

As Gabe pulls him closer.

They stop, just before Main Street makes a subtle curve to the southeast, and Jack allows -

No -

Jack falls into Gabe’s embrace -

Letting himself get pulled closer to Gabe’s chest, one set of hands still together, fingers entwined, Gabe’s left hand caressing his cheek -

His right hand pressed against Gabe’s chest -

(Right where Gabe’s heart is -)

And Jack looks straight into Gabe’s gilded, stardusted eyes as Gabe murmurs quietly, “We’re going to get through this, one step at a time. Remember, Jack, no matter what happens, no matter who we become -”

“I will be with you,” Jack says back, the words like a hymn and a hum, a prayer and a promise.

Gabe nods gently, saying with a fierce gentleness, “They will never take our true strength.”

*Endurance.*

And then Gabe’s gaze softens, just slightly, just enough to make Jack feel like he’s being embraced fully and wholly, beloved throughout -

As Gabe whispers, “And they will never take what you have given me, Jack.”

*Hope.*

*Inspiration.*

And maybe -

In the garden oasis that they are starting to grow -

Just maybe -

*Love.*

“...Gabe,” Jack whispers back, almost kissing the name to Gabe’s own lips, melting into the feeling of Gabe’s palm and fingers against his cheek -

And Gabe promises, “I trust you, Jack. To get us through the enhancements. You are far stronger, far smarter than you know. This time, you guide me through this, and I will follow your lead.”

“...Right,” Jack says, mainly to reassure himself, but Gabe’s heart *floods* with admiration and pride at the look of tender, stormy resolve on Jack’s face.

“We’re going to copy our biodata and the nanoproduction scripts,” Gabe reminds him, guiding him through their shared plans, “And you have an idea for something else - something to reduce our chances of... *whatever* happened to that Russian supersoldier.”
“...Right,” Jack says, and they sort of ease out of the tension of their embrace -

But they don’t fully part for it.

“I’m...not sure if it will work, and I think I’m going to have to talk to Mulcahy about it anyways,” Jack says, even as Gabe still caresses his cheek, “But basically, from reading her papers, it sounds like there’s still the possibility of low dosages of hepatotoxicity even with her improved vectors.”

“And you think that will build up or somehow trigger the reaction?” Gabe asks, still trying to guide him through his thoughts.

Jack pauses, saying slowly, “I...I don’t know about that. I don’t think anyone except maybe Mulcahy herself could know. But I think that...might have been what happened to the Russian supersoldier.”

And then Jack frowns slightly, mainly in concentration, explaining, “I think we all accidentally misdiagnosed her problem: it’s possible she was bleeding out internally, almost likely, but I think she was suffering from acute liver failure as the main cause.”

“And does that somehow change your understanding of the video?” Gabe asks him contemplatively. Jack considers it, before he adds, “It...helps, I guess. The rapid onset of acute liver failure is...almost ideal to test the efficacy of trehalose production in the host. Abnormal oxygen uptake resulting in tissue hypoxia, decreased blood coagulation properties, problems with cerebral fluid...”

Gabe frowns as he thinks, Jack’s right -

*That sounds...almost too perfect.*

“I don’t know what vectors the Russian program was using,” Jack continues, “But Mulcahy’s current...vector schedule is designed to try to mitigate levels of hepatotoxicity.”

But then Jack scowls, saying with more concentration, “Not because they don’t want that weird...reviving ability in us, but because they want to...control it more. They can’t risk losing multiple people or even the whole program to make a single soldier. Like you said, Guerra will want extras anyways, so they...”

“They want to regulate it,” Gabe says immediately, the ideas clicking into place, “They want to understand how and why it happens.”

“Exactly,” Jack says, giving Gabe a proud grin that they both get it, “It’s more like Mulcahy has blocked out these different...stages, like she can start to narrow down how it occurs, where it happens in the process. She’s not out to overdose and poison us, but she does want to refine it.”

“So what was your idea in response to that?” Gabe asks, letting go of Jack’s cheek and hand to pull his notebook from his left pants pocket.

“Biosynthetic hepatocytes,” Jack says, as Gabe starts to write their conversation down. Jack continues with that concentrated tone, “They aren’t difficult to produce - in fact, it’s actually a pretty standard option for liver failure in all forms. Sometimes, it’s as simple as taking a small portion of a person’s healthy liver and culturing it to grow *in vivo* in case of a future problem.”

“Seems like a reasonable idea to me,” Gabe says, adding another bullet about culturing the liver cells, “Is there a reason you haven’t asked Mulcahy about it? I think it should be an easy sell, even without mentioning the weird zombie condition.”
Jack…

Hesitates.

Just long enough for Gabe to sense it.

He glances up from his notes, asking softly, “Or is it more complicated than that?”

“…Hepatocytes are difficult to cryopreserve,” Jack adds slowly, “So you either have to actively culture them for near-immediate use, or figure out a way to protect them. The problem is that the obvious answer to protecting them from freezing and thawing is -”

“The same stuff as the vectors,” Gabe figures it out, “Trehalose and the other stuff.”

“Right,” Jack says, “However, the saving grace is that you can pair them with biotic nanobots in a biotic field, or have them in semi-assembled states ready for activation. The risk we run is that in a true emergency, minutes matter.”

“That’s the unfortunate risk we’ll have to take, but it’s better to mitigate the overall risk of toxicity than not have a plan at all,” Gabe says, writing down the last part about storing them in biotic fields. As Gabe tucks the pen in the crease, Jack asks cautiously, “So you think I should say it to Mulcahy?”

“I don’t see any harm in it,” Gabe says, rolling his shoulders slightly, “Just frame the question as coming from her papers or whatever. Sell it as concern for the overall side-effects, not this…specific thing.”

And then he levels his gaze with Jack, saying clearly, “Remember, Jack: even if she turns it down, every answer provides intel. There are no -”

“Stupid questions,” Jack says, with a small sigh of relief, happy to finally have the fear and idea out in the open, “Right. All answers are good answers.”

And then -

Jack gives him that sweet, tender half-smile, saying, “Thank you, Gabe.”

And Gabe feels something rich and deep in his chest, as he replies, “You got it, Jack. You’re doing good. You just remember our promise.”

Jack chuckles weakly, “Remembering and keeping it are two different things, Gabe.”

Gabe looks little sweet and bittersweet over that, saying quietly, “I know. But I have to do the responsible commander thing and remind you from time to time.”

“You? Responsible?” Jack grins at him, teasing him lightly, “That’ll be the day.”

“Alright, boy scout, don’t go gettin’ a high opinion so fast,” Gabe snorts, teasing him right back but -

His dry sarcasm dies out -

As Jack takes his hand again, interlacing his left fingers with Gabe’s right once more -

And -

With that charming, gorgeous little half-smile -
Jack murmurs so warmly:

“But I don’t want that day to be today. Because today, you’re just Gabe, and I’m just Jack.”

And Jack looks up at him, those blue eyes deeper than the marble-swirled skies above them, and he grins:

“And today, we’re just going to be us, together.”

A faint, pinkish glow dusts the edges of Gabe’s cheeks, and he pulls Jack’s hand slightly, muttering hoarsely, “C’mon. Let’s go find a bank so we can get that drink faster.”

---

There is

An obnoxious amount

Of banks

Along Main Street east of the central town square.

“How the hell does a town of like three-thousand people support five banks on the same block?” Gabe grumbles. They’ve let go of each other’s hand again, not strictly because of the location: they’re basically in the central “heart” of the town, and they’ve already seen like, thirty or forty other candidates and trainers wandering around, mostly heading towards the different, centralized bars and restaurants.

No, they’ve let go of each other’s hand because they’re both on their datapads scouring the map viewer for bank options.

Gabe mutters something that sounds like some low-volume swear words, as Jack sighs, “God, there’s three more around the corner too.”

“Let’s just use a local one,” Gabe says, gesturing to the “Idaho Mountain Bank” sign on a faux-rustic “stone and mortar” building right next to them.

“Right, but I have an account with the national one over here,” Jack says, nodding down the block to a big brick building.

Gabe immediately makes a face of skeptical disgust -

And Jack starts to sigh again -

As Gabe mutters, “Evil, corrupt, institutionalized pieces of -”

“Gabe,” Jack groans, “Listen, I get it. I don’t like them either. But we have to be pragmatic about this. We’re physically stuck here, in this tiny town in the middle of nowhere in Idaho, and we have to deal with this. You know that it doesn’t matter which bank we go to: they are going to ask us to either use an account we already have or open a new one in order to even rent a safe.”

Gabe continues to look scowling-ly disgusted with the idea.

Jack gives a slow exhale again, setting his datapad - still connected to the storage device - back in his pocket -
And he slides his right arm around Gabe’s waist.

Gabe doesn’t actually look directly at him - not right away - but the rest of his reaction is immediate: the tension in his posture melts slightly, the furrowing of his scowl eases up, the glinty anger in his gaze softens, and he slowly breathes out the bitterness in his chest as Jack half-hugs him.

As the embrace soothes him, Gabe offers more cooperatively, “I can open an account with the local one. It’s not a big deal.”

“I don’t want you to dump like, two-thousand credits into some random bank in Idaho for this... program, Gabe,” Jack murmurs, “What if you forget it after three months?”

“...It’s a nest egg?” Gabe states, half-joking, giving Jack a mischievous sidelong smirk.

Jack gives him a joking deadpan stare back, stating just as dryly, “Oh yeah? You gonna come back every year to check on it?”

“We’re going to have to renew the rental fee on this stupid safe anyways,” Gabe says, “Might as well do it with people who aren’t going to rob us blind on weird contract and account rules.”

“But I’ve already made this contract with the other bank, Gabe,” Jack sighs, “Nothing is going to change except that they’ll take, like, a hundred credits directly from my account to pay the rental fee for the year.”

Gabe’s teasing expression grows more thoughtful at that and -

Jack hugs him a little tighter -

Looks into his soft, smoke-and-stardust gaze and murmurs wistfully, “...The further you go to secure this information now, the harder it will be to remove yourself from it in the future.”

...Ah, Gabe thinks quietly, as Jack leans his head on his left shoulder -

(Right where he belongs -)

And adds in that quiet, seashorn voice:

“Don’t bury yourself in this further...Please, Gabe.”

...

How, Gabe thinks, wrapping his left arm around Jack’s shoulders and squeezing back, How does he do that?

“...You always know exactly what to say, Jack,” Gabe murmurs aloud, as Jack lifts his head, those nightshadowed blue eyes searching him deep and long.

(They’re going to pull Gabe in deeper and deeper.)

(And Gabe wants to fall.)

And with near-perfect timing -

The storage device in Jack’s pocket dings as it finishes copying the folder over.

Gabe gives Jack a warm, soothing smile as he says, “I’m trusting your lead on this one, Jack. Let’s
Jack grins as they let go of each other, and he reaches back into his pocket to pull out his datapad. He disconnects it from the storage device, putting the cable back -

And they head down the street to the brick building.

The town is much more postcard-perfect here than up by Ray’s shop: the town center is mainly a lot of one-to-two story buildings, all early-21st-century quaint rustic in either rust-red brick, or that trim grey stone-and-mortar, or decorative rich wood. The mountains are most prominent to the west, but the whole valley is framed with snowcovered peaks daggering into the sky. The heart of the town is far, far more lively, even in the middle of the war: more cars and trucks rumbling up and down Main Street, the sidewalks bustling with pedestrians.

The details always stand out to Gabe.

The tourists (and some candidates, he thinks) move slower, window shopping or just taking in the views, talking in animated conversations, lively and even possibly excited just to be there. The actual locals just go, focused so much more on whatever task they’re heading to or from, concentrating on phone calls or carrying groceries or even simply getting from Point A to Point B.

As they idly stroll towards the brick bank, Gabe asks conversationally, “This anything like Bloomington?”

Jack glances towards him, mildly surprised Gabe is even asking, but he chuckles, “Not really. Bloomington is all rolling hills and historic buildings. It gets cold, but we don’t get snow to this level.”

And then Jack pauses, smiling that half-smile as he murmurs fondly, “I like seeing the mountains around here, though. Central and southern Indiana is so flat compared to this. Our little hills seem so small.”

Gabe just... Observes him for a moment -

Feels the way Jack is entranced -

And replies with a soft, gentle hum, “When they give us real leave time, I’m taking you to LA.”

Jack gives him a wide-eyed but excited glance, saying, “Really?”

“Yeah, really,” Gabe chuckles, “You’re going to love seeing the San Gabriel Mountains from the valley floor -”

“Oh my god, are they really named that?” Jack asks, practically giddy. Gabe rolls his eyes, but even he’s grinning as he explains, “It’s cause of the mission, Misión San Gabriel Arcángel. The Spanish went nuts with naming everything in the area after it. There’s the town, the river, the mountains - every other street is named ‘San Gabriel.’”

“What, you mean they didn’t name it after the great Gabriel Reyes?” Jack teases him. Gabe elbows him lightly, laughing, “Ease up on my ego boosting, Morrison.”

But then -
Gabe grows a little...softer -

As he murmurs warmly:

“I never...really thought this name was anything special until you came along.”

Jack also quiets, but that warm, sugary feeling surges in his chest.

They stop for a crosswalk, just quiet and quietly comfortable with each other, as Gabe continues in the same tone, “...Always thought my parents were a little uncreative with picking it. I mean, I got a sister named María, like we’re not totally living up to the Californiano Catholic textbook.”

“Oh yeah?” Jack chuckles, “You want an uncreative Catholic name? Try being named John Francis in the middle of Indiana.”

...

Sheer, utter joy wells up inside Gabe as -

“NO,” he gasp-wheezes, his tone awe-struck, but his whole face delighted with the fact, whipping towards him to grab at Jack’s shoulders, and Jack groan-laughs, “Shit -”

“Is your middle name really FRANCIS?” Gabe practically chokes -

“I’m going to regret this -” Jack half-whines, half-sobs, half-laugh, fake-fighting against Gabe to get him off -

“Oh my god, JOHN FRANCIS MORRISON,” Gabe sings at the top of his lungs, startling at least two other pedestrians waiting at the crosswalk and three tourists rounding the corner -

And he hugs Jack so, so tight, practically clinging to him as a series of boyish, bubbly giggles rack his body -

The sound surging through Jack’s chest as Jack thinks happily, Worth it.

The pedestrians around them give them weird looks before they start to cross the street, and Jack murmurs, “Gabe -”

“Oh my god,” Gabe sobs, leaning back, a huge grin on his face, near-tears in his eyes as he babbles, “That is adorable.”

“Man, you couldn’t have picked like, ‘handsome’ or ‘rugged’ or something?” Jack teases him, but Gabe just grins harder, laughing, “No, no, you don’t understand. You got this like, all-American lumberjack jock look going on, but your middle name is Francis -”

And then Gabe dissolves into incoherent giggles again.

Jack just laughs with him, grinning, “Look, you’re pretty adorkable yourself, Gabriel Reyes - big, badass supersoldier losing his shit over my dumb middle name -”

“I can’t -” Gabe wheezes, lifting his head again to beam at Jack, “I can’t help myself - ‘John Francis Morrison’ is just so -”

And then he bursts into laughter again.

Jack observes him for a moment, before he grins and leans in, right next to Gabe’s left ear, and
“Just wait until you find out I sang choir for ten years.”

Gabe’s laughter is broken by a ragged intake of steep, sharp breath of shock -

Before Jack disentangles himself from Gabe’s arms -

And bolts across the street.

“JOHN FRANCIS MORRISON, NO -” Gabe gasps, rushing after him, “YOU CAN’T DROP TWO BOMBSHELLS ON ME AND THEN RUN .”

“JUST WATCH ME, REYES!” Jack laugh-shouts, weaving through a group of ambling tourists, who squawk at him like disgruntled chickens -

Before they shriek as Gabe stumbles through them a second later.

But Jack barely skids to a stop in front of the bank doors -

And barrels his way in.

It’s obvious he shatters whatever peace and quiet the atrium and reception area of the bank had had: three tellers, two customers, and some person over in the little “loan office area” all look up at him, jarred by his sudden appearance, before the soft pop music in the background settles back in and they all resume their work. Quiet conversations between the tellers and the customers pick up again, the loan officer goes back to typing -

And the security guard right next to the door gives Jack a long, lean, withering stare.

“...Sorry, sorry,” Jack murmurs to him in a hushed tone before -

“JACK YOU LITTLE -” Gabe shouts, also bashing into the atrium -

The security guard takes half a step towards them, outright glaring -

Jack throws out his right arm, pressing it reassuringly against Gabe’s chest behind him, as he says appeasingly, “Sorry, really sorry, sir.”

He can feel Gabe shudder and attempt to calm down in the span of like, 0.003 seconds.

“...You two actually here for business?” the guard grunts at them, clearly suspicious, and Jack nods, murmuring, “Yeah, again, really sorry, sir.” The guard tilts his glare towards Gabe, who mumbles, “Yeah, what he said. Sorry.”

“...Alright, Carol is open,” the guard mutters, hooking a thumb towards the third teller, who looks up from her little window and waves at them.

“Thank you, sir,” Jack says, still trying to be apologetic. Gabe, even though he’s calmed down, makes a face but says nothing as they step past him -

But as soon as they’re in the open area of the bank proper, Gabe leans over and whisper-hisses-teases, “This isn’t over, Jack Morrison.”

Jack gives him a wry smirk over this shoulder, chuckling, “It’s only over when John Francis Morrison sings, right?”
Gabe’s scowl doesn’t ease up, but he gets that utterly delighted look in his eyes again, smiling broadly as he snorts, “You goddamn tease.”

“Hi there!” the teller - Carol, apparently - says brightly and bluntly from her window, “How can I help you two today?”

“Hi, ma’am,” Jack says politely, smiling as he steps up to the counter, Gabe hovering over his right shoulder behind him. Jack reaches for his wallet in his right back pocket, saying, “We were interested in renting a safety deposit box with this branch.”

“I see,” Carol says, tapping something into her computer on her right (their left), “And do either of you have an account with us?”

Typical big bank bs, Gabe grumbles internally, but he keeps his mouth shut as Jack opens his wallet, saying, “I do. Here’s my debit card.”

“Well, you are quite prepared,” Carol grins right back. Jack slides the card into the money well, and she takes it, humming along to whatever pithy pop song is playing in the background. Gabe folds his arms across his chest, trying his damnedest not to roll his eyes -

“Let’s see, John Morrison? From Bloomington, Indiana, I see - goodness, you’re a ways from home, Mr. Morrison,” Carol chuckles cheerfully. Jack just gives her a winning smile, saying slyly, “I just go where they station me, ma’am.”

Carol looks surprised for a moment, before a knowing smile spreads on her face and she smirks back, “Got it, dear. People here - we understand.”

Gabe raises a curious eyebrow.

He’s deft at this, he thinks, as Carol turns back to the computer, reading something before she says, “Ah, yes, I see your Department of Defense number right here. Do you have your Common Access Card?”

Jack pulls the military ID card from his wallet and slides it into the money well.

“Thank you.” Carol says, double-checking it: she taps it against some basic card reader thing, and then slides it back to Jack through the well. Jack grins as he puts it back in his wallet, saying, “No, thank you, ma’am.”

Little smooth-talker, Gabe chuckles to himself, as Carol says, “So, you said you were interested in renting a safety deposit box? You’re quite lucky, we only have a few left.”

At that, both Jack and Gabe share a surprised look with each other, before Jack asks, “Really?”

“Yes, all of our boxes are twenty-four inches long, but the width and height vary. Here at this branch we offer three standard sizes: five inch by five inch, five by ten, and ten by ten,” Carol explains to them, as she opens some drawer they can’t see. She pulls out a two-page lease form with some dense, small-font writing on it, continuing just as cheerfully, “Currently, all of our ten by tens are rented and most of the five by tens. Our main branch in Boise offers more sizes but, as I’m sure you know, that requires traveling to Boise.”

Gabe humphs a little behind Jack’s shoulder, but Jack just smiles at her, saying sunnily, “That’s fine, a five by ten or five by five should suit our needs.”

Carol smiles back at him, saying, “Excellent. Currently, we have standardized our rates to match the
branch in Boise. Our nationwide policy has switched over to credits for internal transactions while the dollar continues to fluctuate, so at the moment, our rates are 150 credits for the five by fives and 225 for the five by tens.”

Gabe’s jaw drops a little, but Jack manages to maintain some semblance of control as he says, “Those are the annual fees, right?”

“Correct,” Carol chuckles, “Rates are a little higher than normal due to the increase in demand. However, we do offer benefits for current account holders. Rental fees are reduced by 25% for account holders, so the five by fives are only 112.5 credits and the five by tens are 168.75 credits. We also offer an additional 10 credits off if you sign up for automatic fee renewal.”

Gabe scowls at the obvious wheeling and dealing, but Jack just asks, “And how long are those leases for?”

“Automatic fee renewal can be set up for three years, five years, and ten years, though we are willing to negotiate lifetime offers with account holders,” Carol smiles right back.

Jack hums thoughtfully, but Gabe just leans in, murmuring against his right ear, “Let’s just try the other banks for their offers first -”

“And one last thing.”

Carol interrupts them, her smile obviously still bright -

Before she makes a very pointed, obvious glance towards Gabe, even as her words are directed to Jack:

“We offer no charges on signing a co-lessee from any background.”

Both soldiers freeze for a moment, before Jack asks, “Can you explain what that means, ma’am?”

“Of course, dear,” Carol says, spinning the lease form around to face them and tapping a capped pen at the fourth paragraph, “Our policy is actually very straightforward: we permit up to five additional co-lessees or safety deposit box tenants, at no additional cost or charges. These co-lessees do not need an account with us or any of our direct affiliate institutions, but in the event of a main lessor’s death or emergency, a co-lessee will be contacted for additional arrangements and procedures. All lessors must have a legal established residence in the United States, a valid form of identification, and a stated relationship to the main lessor.”

And then Carol beams at them, saying, “In fact, the majority of the boxes rented this past year were between multiple family members or collective groups such as neighbors or business partners. Again, just as a friendly reminder, the main lessor is the guarantor of the initial deposit fee and the renewal fee, so any divisions of costs would have to be decided between the main lessor and their co-lessees on a private basis.”

But she glances back at Gabe again, saying with that same cheerful but businesslike bluntness, “But so long as all fees are paid on time, a co-lessee’s identification information will be stored for safekeeping, and they will be given their own key to access the box during business hours.”

Carol gives them both a big, broad grin as she says, “So, how does that sound to you two? Do you require more time to discuss the decision?”

Gabe and Jack glance at each other -
And Gabe can see that the addition of signing him on has won over Jack -

So he sighs, “…Fine.”

Jack grins, radiant like sunshine, before he glances back to Carol, saying, “That’ll work. What have other people picked up? The five-year lease?”

“That is our most popular at the moment, yes,” Carol says, turning the lease form back around and uncapping the pen, “Speaking frankly with both of you, many customers are very nervous about the war. We have seen quite the upswing in customers here and at our other...less metropolitan branches, shall we say.”

*People are fleeing the cities, Gabe reads between the lines, And while the war hasn’t reached Idaho and the inner West yet, it’s only a matter of time at this rate. Idaho will get sandwiched between the Pacific Northwest warfront and the Great Lakes warfront if nothing dramatic is done soon.*

Jack can practically see the thoughts churning in Gabe’s head, and he thinks, *Gabe is thinking about the war again.*

“A five-year lease sound good to you?” Jack asks him. Gabe rolls his shoulders, disgruntled by the concept but too affectionate towards Jack to turn the idea down, and he mutters, “If you’re up for it. You’re the main lessor.”

And the truth remains unstated but understood between both of them:

*Who knows where we’ll be in five years.*

*(Who knows what we will be in five years.)*

Jack observes him for a moment before he murmurs back - in a quiet, gentle, patient but pointed tone, “*You’re the one who made me promise to think long-term, Gabe.*”

“And I very clearly said to think about your own best interests, Jack,” Gabe zings right back in a tone mirroring Jack’s, adding in a low but dense whisper, “This is why I was willing to make an account with another bank -”

“What - do you think I’m just going to walk away from all this?” Jack asks back, scowling fiercely and -

His right fingers find the back of Gabe’s left hand -

And Jack murmurs protectively and bittersweetly, “*I meant* what I said, Gabe.”

Gabe watches him - they both stare at each other with stubborn frustration and obstinate affection - before -

Gabe sighs -

And interlaces his fingers with Jack’s.

“That’s not the part I’m worried about, Jack, and you know it,” Gabe mutters to him, even as he squeezes his fingers against the back of Jack’s hand.

*(Too afraid to hold him forever -)*

*(But in too deep to let go.)*
But Jack just squeezes back, his fingertips firm against the back of Gabe’s hand, murmuring softly, “I want to be prepared for all outcomes, Gabe: the bad…”

And then Jack looks straight into his eyes, blue depths cut against gilded obsidian, and he adds like water to Gabe’s oasis:

“And the good.”

And Gabe almost melts at how Jack hints at the promise of more -

Of more of them -

(Not Soldier: 24 and Soldier: 76 -)

(But Gabe and Jack -)

(Just Gabe and Jack -)

Together.

“...You’re always so prepared for the worst, and I know why you are,” Jack pleads with him quietly, hopefully, gaze sweet and strong at the same time, “But today, won’t you try being prepared for the good outcome, Gabe? For me?”

...Damn him, Gabe thinks with fierce affection -

He always knows exactly what to say.

“...Fine,” Gabe relents, “But I pay half of it.”

Jack gives him that relieved, sweet little half-smile, murmuring, “Thank you, Gabe.”

Before he glances back towards Carol -

Who has observed the exchange with that businesslike smile plastered on her face, before she offers in that chipper tone, “If it reassures your partner, a safety deposit box lease may be canceled at any time. The only requirement is that the fee must be paid for the year in full.”

And Gabe cannot stop himself -

As the words “your partner” rush the blood through his veins something fierce -

Jack feels the thrill of her polite, kindhearted interpretation of them flush across his cheeks as he replies brightly, “He’s just being a bit stubborn -”

Before he leans into the window a little and says in a loud, obvious whisper, “He’s a worrier.”

“Jack!” Gabe manages to grit out through his teeth, caught in a flurry of a storm of both embarrassment and excitement and sheer panic and -

“Ahaha, my wife is the same,” Carol says happily, “Fortunately, I’m the policy reader in the household, so I always have to remind her that as long as we read the fine lines, I would never put us in a bad deal.”

“...What,” Gabe states, completely overwhelmed by his own emotions and the clear casual dropping of information about this random bank teller’s wife -
“I’m glad you understand, ma’am,” Jack says to her, obviously managing his own surging emotions better than Gabe is. Carol just nods, saying, “I understand the concerns, Mr. Morrison - lotta folks are getting real nervous these days. And having a worrier be your better half does help when the going gets rough.”

Both men quiet a little as she hums contemplatively, “I’m better with the finances, but she has the stronger plans in the long-run. But in the end, all that matters is we make a good team and a lasting partnership. Love is a better investment than fear.”

And then Carol beams brightly at them, asking, “So, we’re confirming the five year lease with automatic renewal, right?”

And Jack squeezes Gabe’s hand again -

Before he grins at her, “That works for us!”

******

24+76: First

Saturday, March 9, 2047: 1513 - leaving the bank in Ketchum, Idaho

As they leave the bank, Gabe still has a slight scowl on his face, concentrating on some distant thought.

He leaves the building just a step or two before Jack does, as Jack is folding their copy of the lease to stick it in his wallet. Jack watches him for a moment, absently tucking the quarter-folded paper into the leather, before he murmurs, “Thinking heavy thoughts again, Gabe?”

Gabe snaps out of it, glancing back towards his left as Jack puts his wallet away. A slight pause to collect his thoughts, and then Gabe replies back in a low, but pleasantly contemplative tone:

“Actually, I was thinking about how I’m labeled as your partner on the lease.”

Jack freezes, flicking his gaze wide-eyed towards Gabe, who still has that thoughtful look on his face.

“Oh, well,” Jack gives him an apologetic grin, “Not much we could do about that. ‘Friends’ doesn’t quite carry the same legal weight.”

And even though it slightly crushes him to say it -

Jack broadens his grin into a cheesy smile, saying as brightly as he can, “If it helps, just think of it as business partners -”

“No.”

The word slackens Jack’s smile a little -

But Gabe has a soft, rosy tint to his cheeks and a small, gorgeous half-smile on his face as he says, voice like silk smoke:

“I like it as it is.”
Jack feels his heartbeat catch in his chest, high and thrumming -

As Gabe adds wryly, “It’s a little optimistic, but like you said, sometimes it’s...okay to be prepared for the good outcome.”

There is a

Dangerously entrancing

Look of utter hope on Jack’s face

And a depth of utter affection in his eyes.

And all Gabe can think is:

Pull me in deeper, Jack.

(If only for today.)

And then -

Jack grins -

And holds out his right hand -

As he laughs brightly, “I like it when you’re optimistic, Gabe!”

Gabe gives a small, half-sigh of a laugh before he takes Jack’s right hand with his left, replying teasingly, “It’s a new look for me.”

“Sometimes a change in style can really help spice up life,” Jack teases him right back, before he gestures west (left) on the cross street, saying, “This way.”

“You got it,” Gabe says as they head up past the end of the bank and around the corner.

There’s a moment of quiet, serene contemplation between them as they start heading east down the cross-street (4th street, from the sign) -

Before Gabe states in a deadpan tone, “Did you think that bank shit was going to make me forget about choirboy John Francis Morrison -”

“Oh god dammit,” Jack half-chokes, half-laughs as they wander past more kitschy tourist-shop stores, “I was really hoping calling you ‘my partner’ on the lease was going to be a good distraction -”

“Oh, it was a distraction, alright,” Gabe snorts, not even entirely sure of what he means as they reach the crosswalk for the next street. They both pause, but there are no cars, so they step into the intersection. Still walking forward, Gabe half-turns towards Jack, gesturing emphatically, “But seriously - a choirboy too??”

“What’s wrong with that?” Jack asks brightly, glancing towards Gabe slyly before he grins, “My mom always volunteered to play piano for our church and well, me and Peter got corralled into it until about...fourteen, maybe? Then I picked up track and field.”

As they step onto the sidewalk on the other side, Jack laughs mischievously, “Also my voice started hitting the low notes a little too low -”
“Yeah, I bet,” Gabe chuckles, before he suddenly -

Gets a moment of inspiration -

And twists towards Jack, saying excitedly, “Wait, does that mean you can sing some Dies Irae type songs??”

Jack stares at him in a neutral, unmoved expression -

Before his lips crack into a crooked smirk, and -

“Maybe if you hit all my right notes -”

Jack tugs a little at the upper collar of Gabe’s jacket, his left index and middle fingers tracing over the curve of Gabe’s right collarbone through the fabric of his thermal shirt -

“You could make me sing some Hallelujah for you,” Jack hums teasingly, biting at his lower lip.

Gabe practically freezes as every thought in his head comes to a screeching, sensual halt and -

*Oh my god, he’s going to be the death of me,* the dying parts of Gabe’s brain wheeze but -

Gabe slides his right hand around Jack’s waist, pulling him right up against his chest -

And Gabe chuckles with a low, liquid smoke laugh:

“I’d rather hear you sing my name instead.”

Jack looks -

Beautifully surprised -

As if he didn’t fully expect Gabe to fall right into his flirting.

And Gabe leans in a little, almost kissing the words to Jack’s lips as he murmurs:

“...Who takes this round?”

A happy, roguish laugh bubbles up in Jack’s chest, and he’s grinning as he hums back, breathing the words to Gabe’s lips, “Let’s call this one a draw.”

They unwind slightly but continue to hold hands, and - with a faintly sweet and bittersweet exhale -

Jack mutters, “...I really thought you might do it that time.”

“Here?”

He looks at Gabe, who has a devious little smirk on his face. And Gabe chuckles lowly, “Please, Jack - I’m not doing that here in the middle of some side street in some tiny town in Idaho.”

And then - with a faint, rosy blush on his cheeks - Gabe grins, adding:

“Have a little romanticism.”

*Oh, how cute,* Jack blinks at him in surprise, before he sighs with affectionate ease, “I should’ve known you were trying to be more poetic about it.”

“Listen, there’s only so much magic you can carve out of stuff like this,” Gabe says more
conversationally, as they start to walk up the street again. He smirks at Jack, “I don’t know what kinda drink you want, but it’s gotta be better than this, right?”

“Ooooh, that’s putting a lot of faith in my drink preferences, Gabe,” Jack teases him as they step up to the crosswalk of another intersection, but this one is even smaller than the last - little more than a one-car back alley between two bigger streets. As they cross, Gabe rolls his shoulders, shrugging mischievously as he chuckles, “What can I say - I like the risk.”

“How brave of you,” Jack snorts as they reach the other side -

But then -

“Being with you makes me feel brave again.”

The words slip from Gabe’s chest, honest and true, ephemeral like smoke -

But tangible like obsidian.

Jack glances towards him, eyes wide as that sweet, sugar feeling simmers in his chest -

As Gabe gives him that slight, beautiful half-smile.

Gabe can see the way Jack’s gaze deepens, can feel the way his words make Jack melt a little and -

Jack smiles, leaning his head on Gabe’s left shoulder, as he murmurs warmly:

“And every moment with you is romantic, Gabe.”

Gabe’s pulse thrills at the words, even as he chuckles aloud, “You might be the only person in the world to think that, Jack.”

“I sure hope I am,” Jack laughs lowly, “That would make me feel real unique.”

Gabe laughs lightly, saying back, “Like you aren’t already.”

Before he leans his own head against Jack’s, letting the fluff of Jack’s hair cushion him -

Feeling perfect and perfectly content together.

They reach one last cross street - 1st Avenue - and wait for a car to pass before they set off across the intersection. As they reach the other corner, Jack lifts his head a little and Gabe rights himself as well and -

“Right,” Jack hums, leading them up through the intersection again -

“...Preston’s?” Gabe asks, as they approach the building on the corner.

It’s a standard...little cafe and bistro-type restaurant: same as the rest of the town, it looks like it was built late last century or early in this one, with a wood exterior painted a creamish color. A short outdoor seating area hugs two sides of it, with a couple of those tall outdoor flame heaters spaced throughout - only a few tourists brave sitting outside, but between the heaters and the afternoon sun, it’s actually a pleasant atmosphere. There’s the sound of easy, lighthearted conversations, the tinkling of utensils on plates, the rumble of nearby cars, and Gabe reads on a small awning: “Breakfast - Lunch - Dinner - Take Out - Espresso - Bakery - Cafe - Deli”.

*Guess he decided on coffee?* Gabe wonders as they wind past the corner to the entrance on the left.
They have to descend a few steps of a small sidewalk stair to get there, but Jack grabs the door handle and pulls.

They’re immediately in a short line of customers before a cafe-style counter, the transparent kind that shows an array of baked goods and ready-to-go deli sandwiches in neat little shelves. There’s a big, digital menu hanging over the cash register in four screens, and off to the right is an aisle of coffee makers, soda machines, and more bakery counters before it leads to the interior of the restaurant proper.

Gabe’s eyes drift to the coffee section but -

There’s the feeling of Jack’s left hand patting his left bicep -

And Gabe glances at him as -

Jack’s eyes practically **twinkle** with radiant mischief as he asks:

“What kind of soup do you want?”

…

Gabe’s jaw drops slightly -

Before -

He can’t stop himself -

A wheezy, raspy laugh **bursts** from the core of his chest, half startling the couple in front of them -

But he sputters out, “**Jack Morrison** -”

“See, they have a bunch of daily soups, so I couldn’t really plan what to get in advance,” Jack continues, obviously **beyond pleased** with himself, “Looking at today’s menu, I’m thinking -”

“You are **absolutely** -” Gabe laughs -

“Maybe the bacon and potato cream and -” Jack continues -

“One-hundred-percent -” Gabe hums -

“And whatever you want,” Jack grins at him.

“**Utterly** unique,” Gabe ends with a sigh of heavy, deep affection.

“We’ll get them to go, get some bread and water maybe,” Jack adds brightly, “And then head to a park nearby for a little picnic.”

They both just **observe** each other, drinking in the moment, eyes tracing over each other, before Jack smiles, “Just wanted to do something a…”

And then he **grins**, a faint blush on his cheeks as he laughs:

“Something a little romantic for our first date!”

“Yeah, well, you sure found it,” Gabe grins back, “A winter picnic in a park. How did you even **think** of that?”
“You started it!” Jack laughs, overjoyed and excited and nervous all at once, “You made a goddamn snow fort outside of a secret military base, where you read classic literature and drink hot chocolate!”

And then Jack grabs at Gabe’s jacket in fake desperation, saying, “Do you know how high you set that damn bar??”

“It’s -” Gabe chokes out in between cracks of laughter, “It’s not a contest, Jack!”

Jack just stares at him -

Before he laugh-snaps right back:

“Of course it’s not a contest, Gabe! It’s about being romantic.”

Gabe rolls his eyes, but he’s grinning all the same as he says, “Right. Poetic. How could I forget -”

“And if all I ever get is today -”

There’s the feeling of soft, warm lips against the back of Gabe’s left fingers -

And he whips his head back towards Jack -

As Jack kisses the words to his skin:

“Then I want today to be something worthy of a poem.”

And Jack looks up at Gabe’s awestruck expression, his eyes so blue, as he smiles, “I want it to be something you’ll remember forever.”

And Gabe feels something strong yet sweet, soft yet steady

Blossom in his chest and he -

He twists Jack’s hand towards him instead, saying with a voice raw-edged and surging with hope:

“As if I could ever forget any part of you.”

And he kisses Jack’s knuckles, half-murmuring the words to rough but warm skin -

As Jack’s breath catches in his ribs, a rich, deep sweetness storming inside him.

Gabe smiles at him, humming the words against the back of Jack fingers, murmuring softly, “Believe me, Jack - you’ve given me more than words could ever describe.”

Gabe lowers their entwined hands, and under the soft, welcoming lighting in the café, his eyes are dark but carry that gilded, stardusted glow and Jack -

Jack murmurs back, “...Will you show me instead?”

And he starts to lean in -

Gabe’s right hand drifts to Jack’s waist again, his eyes never leaving the quiet but alluring draw of Jack’s own gaze and -

“Hi there, welcome to Preston’s - oh.”

…
Both men

**Deadstop -**

As the cashier’s cheerful but flustered voice suddenly hits them with a blustery brightness.

They both look at her awkwardly and she looks right back at them - just as awkwardly, her face chagrined and beet red under the brighter backroom lights - before she mutters, “Um...do you need another minute before ordering?”

And suddenly -

Both men torque away from each other so fast that they almost get whiplash, with Gabe burying his burning face in his hands - almost thirty-god-damn-years old, Reyes, compose yourself! he’s screaming in his head - as Jack stammers with floundering gestures, “Oh - oh my god, we are so sorry - we’re uh - we didn’t mean -”

“No, no, sir, really, I’m uh, sorry for interrupting?” the cashier half-states, half-asks, half-apologizes, though she sounds just as confused and anxious as them, “We get couples here all the time, I just wasn’t even looking, you know?? I - um - let me get your order and you can find a table -”

“No nononono, we’re good, we just - uh -” Jack continues to stumble over his own tongue and fluttering feelings and low voice, “We just wanted some soup to go - wait, you were okay with soup, right??” he whips his head towards Gabe, barely remembering if Gabe actually agreed to a winter picnic or whatever -

“Yeah,” Gabe grunts, lowering his hands from his face, doing his best to settle a focused expression on his features, slowly recovering, “Yeah, that was fine.”

“Yeah, just some lunch to go,” Jack exhales, the words starting to come back to him, as the sheer normalcy of the act of ordering lunch is starting to ground all three of them. The cashier nods, mumbling, “Right, okay,” before she taps something on her register -

And she shifts back to “customer service mode”, offering cheerfully, “Okay, we have five daily soups on our menu today! Customers really like the traditional Idaho potato cream - it’s got bacon, ham, green onions, baked potato chunks, and a little bit of fresh gouda cheese melted in. We also have a local favorite with the Basque soup with local-made pork chistorra, garbanzo beans, a little red pepper and garlic, and potato wedges. Our vegetarian option today is the broccoli cream with broccoli, zucchini, garlic, and gorgonzola crumbles. And lastly, we have our traditional beef stew and chicken cream. All of our soups have a bread bowl option, but we can also bake the beef stew and chicken cream into a pot pie shell.”

*Oh my god, how do I pick,* Jack thinks, staring at the menu as -

“Chistorra?” Gabe asks, raising an eyebrow, “Is that like chorizo?”

“Yes, sir!” she grins at them, “Chistorra is a form of dry-cured chorizo. We get ours from a family-owned butcher shop making traditional Basque dishes in Boise.”

Gabe glances at Jack, who is observing him as well -

Before a wry smile cracks on Jack’s face -

“Okay, just hear me out,” Jack starts to say -
“Oh boy,” Gabe mutters dryly, but there’s a smirk curling at the edges of his mouth too -

“Let’s just get all five in the small cups and share,” Jack grins, “Plus some bread and some water.”

Gabe laughs, as Jack loops his right arm around Gabe’s left, teasing him brightly, “You said you would treat me!”

“...Fine, fine,” Gabe sighs, still smirking as he addresses the cashier, saying completely unapologetically, “Sorry about us. Let’s just get all of them in small containers to go, please.”

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(Serena settles back into her chair, sighing contentedly under the warmth of the outdoor standing heater. Across from her, Carolina cuts into her pork chop, humming with pleased satisfaction as she wedges the chunk into her mouth.)

(Serena quirks an eyebrow at her, but says nothing.)

(These days, they’re too familiar with each other and too in love to care much about manners.)

(Instead, Serena’s gaze drifts south, towards the cross-street and intersection just outside of Preston’s -)

(When she sees two familiar figures - carrying three big take-out bags between them - head up the small steps from the door to the sidewalk -)

(And then south down the north-south street.)

(She gives them about a five-second start to finish crossing the street -)

(Before she asks Carolina absentely, “Aren’t you supposed to be stopping fraternization among your soldiers, commander?”)

(Carolina stops mid-cut of another slice of pork, before she glances over her shoulder towards the couple -)

(And then chuckles as she recognizes Gabriel and Jack continue on their way.)

(“...You act like I haven’t been sleeping with my senior medic for nearly fifteen years, my dear,” Carolina says as she turns back towards the table, grinning at her. Serena smirks back, but asks her teasingly, “Isn’t that the exact reason you should stop Gabriel from making the same mistake as you?”)

(“Never said it was a mistake,” Carolina smiles at her, before she adds softly, “Best decision of my life. I can only hope Gabriellito discovers that for himself.”)

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24x76: First

Saturday, March 9, 2047: 1426 - Forest Service Park in Ketchum, Idaho

“...Okay,” Jack says with more decisiveness, as Gabe scrapes the last bit of the beef stew clinging to the waxed paper container with a chunk of French bread. As he wedges the stew-soaked bread into
his mouth, relishing the savory flavor, Jack states, “I think the best one was the Basque soup -”

“Definn-ate-ly fhue tast -ti-est,” Gabe mumbles thickly, agreeing with him. Jack nods, still taking the decision with the same level of gravitas as before, “Right, that was the most flavorful. And I can see why the potato cream is a standard favorite, but I think I’m ranking the broccoli gorgonzola second -”

“Mhmm, de-bat-able,” Gabe mutters -

“Then maybe the beef stew? And then the potato cream, and last the chicken cream,” Jack says. As Gabe swallows the bite of bread, Jack glances towards him, asking, “Why wouldn’t you put the broccoli gorgonzola second?”

“It was good, but it could’ve used a little more, I dunno - zest?” Gabe says with a shrug, picking up the container of the chicken cream, “Also needed some chunkier bits. Like big zucchini pieces or carrot or something.”

Jack nods appreciatively as Gabe drinks down the last bit of the chicken cream soup.

True to the, uh, “drink” concept, they had turned down the cashier’s offer of (several) plastic spoons, and had taken only the five soup containers, two loaves of sourdough, and two water bottles to go. The park was only four blocks south of Preston’s: it was little more than a standard block itself, devoted to some sort of “parks service storage” units, a few benches and picnic tables, and some barely-landscaped open space.

The ground around them is still covered in snow, the white powder stronger and more shapely than the slush around the town center and streets. There are a few sparse but full pine trees around the park, providing some shade that’s rather chilly but also providing a decent amount of noise-cancellation and a small sense of privacy. There are some picnic tables on the west side of the park, and in typical…”them” fashion -

They had cleared off some of the snow from the bench and table part -

And had seated themselves on the table part, facing west-southwest under the gilded, mid-afternoon sunlight -

Jack on the left, and Gabe on the right.

As Gabe sets the now-empty chicken cream container into their stack of the other empty cups, Jack glances towards him, asking, “So what’s your ranking then?”

“Hmm,” Gabe hums, scowling slightly with concentration, “Definitely the Basque soup. Then the potato cream? Then broccoli gorgonzola, beef stew, then chicken. The chicken one really needs to be like, a pot pie or something. Just isn’t enough on its own.”

“Yeah, I agree with that,” Jack says, his tone content -

Feeling a soft, sweet happiness rise in his chest.

There’s a moment of comfortable, easy silence between them, full and fulfilled -

As Jack rests his head on Gabe’s left shoulder.

A shadowy but sugary feeling simmers through Gabe’s heart as Jack leans his perfect weight against him.
After a few happy, quietly thrilled heartbeats, Gabe adjusts his left arm slightly -

Holding his hand out, palm up, fingers extended -

A clear offer.

Jack shifts slightly, resettling himself as he moves his right arm, letting his right hand hover just slightly over Gabe’s -

Before he traces small fingertip kisses over Gabe’s palm, the motion soft and fluttery, barely touching.

Gabe shivers a little, heart skipping a beat as the small, tender touches ribbon up his skin -

And then -

Jack settles his hand against Gabe’s -

Interlacing their fingers.

They close them, holding hands for a brief moment before -

Gabe flinches hard, laughing loudly, “HOW.”

Jack starts to snicker with laughter -

“How are your hands freezing?!” Gabe jokingly demands, shifting his posture to more directly twist towards Jack, his whole face aglow with a playful mischievousness -

Jack adjusts himself too, but it’s a little (or a lot) less graceful than Gabe, mainly because Jack is borderline falling over with laughter -

“Did we not just eat five cups of soup together, how in the hell -” Gabe joke-rants at him as Jack wheezes a ragged laugh -

“It’s not my fault you’re such a wimp,” Jack manages to hiccup in between laughter and Gabe shakes his head in mock disbelief, stammering, “I’m sorry - I’m what, Jack Morrison??”

“Oh my god, Gabe, don’t even pretend,” Jack coughs back, patting his left hand against Gabe’s jacket collar, adding, “Look at you! You’re wearing like, three layers and a beanie -”

“I am perfectly comfortable, thank you very much!” Gabe snorts.

But Jack just gives him a devilish little smirk, unwinding the fingers of his right hand from Gabe’s left, saying coyly, “Oh, are you, Gabriel Reyes?”

Gabe can see the gleam in Jack’s eyes before he even moves, and he mutters loudly, “John Francis Morrison, don’t you even -”

But it’s too late.

Jack reaches out -

And clamps his hands on the sides of Gabe’s face.

...
“JESUS CHRIST,” Gabe shout-wheezes as the chill of ten air-crisp fingers ripples across his skin, floundering to fake-fight Jack as Jack *howls* with laughter, shifting forward, edging towards Gabe’s lap -

They fake-wrestle with each other as Jack manages to snake a few of his fingers under the hem of Gabe’s beanie, right over his tenderly-warm ears -

“No!  Stopstopstop, this is playing dirty, Jack -” Gabe fake-sobs, grabbing Jack’s arms by the wrists and clamping them together in a weak hold, as Jack’s laughter dissolves into playful little giggles, low and sweet and stormy.

“What did I say?” Jack hums lightly, grinning brightly, even as he lets Gabe continue to hold his hands together by the wrists.  Gabe scowls at him with mock indignation before -

Jack’s laughter -

And his heart -

Catch in his throat -

As Gabe shuts his eyes -

And presses soft, warm kisses to Jack’s fingers.

The moment is *crystalline*, clear and sweet and cut from snowdust and starshine and dripping sunlight, almost endless in how it feels, as it *melts* between them, soft and songlike, with Gabe kissing his easy, heartfelt joy to Jack’s skin -

And there is only

The low, quiet entwining of breath and warmth

Lips on fingers

Like they are

Dipped in slowly-blossoming

Winter sunlight.

And as Gabe opens his eyes again, seeing how Jack’s gaze is starstruck and spellbound and beloved, he murmurs against Jack’s skin, “...Try it again, Jack.”

And releases his grip on Jack’s wrists.

Jack breathes, only for a second, a fraction of a second -

Before he slowly, carefully, tenderly -

As if he were reaching for a frost-covered rose -

Caresses his now-sunkissed fingers to Gabe’s cheeks.

And Gabe -

He *falls* into Jack’s touch, easy, effortless, as if Jack’s breath is his own -
As if their heartbeats are one.

Jack slips in, a little closer, a little more, his eyes tracing Gabe’s features, like he’s fully seeing him for the first time, fingertips feeling over his curving cheekbones, the outer creases of his eyes, the small edges of shaved hair just barely peeking out from under the beanie -

And he slips his fingers under the cotton-woven hem, still carefully, gently - lovingly - exploring Gabe, every detail, every small shape and feature -

Gabe slips his own hands to the sides of Jack’s waist, pulling him in closer, ever closer, so that their legs are semi-entwined on the bench part of the table, boots thudding together slightly, chests pressed together -

Jack’s fingers trail skintip kisses down the back of Gabe’s neck, tracing down the edge of his hairline, full of warmth and a growing need, down down down to the collar of his thermal shirt -

Where they playfully slip under, feeling out the knob of his spine there, the muscles arching off -

“...How’s that?” Jack asks, and his eyes are so blue the closer they get -

“...So, so much better,” Gabe chuckles lowly, so close that he’s practically murmuring the words against Jack’s lips.

Jack glances down a little, moving his fingers forward, still under the hem of Gabe’s shirt but up, over the rise of his shoulders, around the lower part of his neck, to his collarbones in his chest, feeling the strong muscles connecting to them -

Before he follows the muscles back up the sides of Gabe’s neck, to the angles of his jaw -

Where Jack cups his hands against Gabe’s face once again.

They wait, simply soaking each other and the sunlight in, letting the feeling of holding each other settle in and between them.

And Jack -

He pulls Gabe a little closer, pressing his forehead against Gabe’s murmuring quietly, “Gabe, I...I had a lot of time to think this week.”

And Gabe shifts slightly, pulling Jack’s body a little closer as he hums back, “And what did you think about, Jack?”

“I thought about...pretty much everything in the program,” Jack says, as soft as a sigh, “Had to think about the serums, the vectors, the risks, the weapons, the files...the soldiers...us.”

And Jack slips back a little, just enough to look Gabe in the eye, to search those beautiful, smoky swirls for the gold they veil, and he says quietly, “...But every thought ended the same.”

Jack traces his thumbs over the curves of Gabe’s cheekbones, as he says - honest, true, genuine from the depths of his heart:

“All my thoughts come back to you.”

And Gabe -

He melts under the words, soft and heartfelt, barely keeping himself together as he replies, voice
cracking, “Jack -”

“I promise, Gabe,” Jack says, speaking with slightly more intensity, “I really did think about it. And I realized that… It isn’t that the whole thing is meaningless without you…”

And Jack shuts his eyes, pressing his forehead to Gabe’s again, murmuring with words enduring, “But you make it...so much better.”

And the words simmer through Gabe like liquid sunlight poured into his core.

“Being with you makes it worth all the risks,” Jack continues, feeling the way Gabe shivers with it - not cold, but warm, endlessly warm between the two of them - and he just goes, “Things as simple as holding your hand, having a picnic with you, listening to you laugh -”

Jack pulls himself away again, and the depths of his eyes are so blue under the gilded light and the longing between them, Gabe’s heart full as Jack says, “When this is all over, all I want is another day like this. Whether it’s the worst ending or the best outcome, all my thoughts are the same - I want to be by your side when it ends.”

Gabe feels his heart deep in his throat, his chest surging with something he feels growing - Blossoming -

Under tender light and tender words and tender gazes.

“...I want this,” Jack says quietly, as if there is nothing in the world but them and the ever-smaller spaces between them.

And Jack leans in - just a little bit more - and murmurs against Gabe’s lips:

“...I want you.”

Gabe exhales the heartbeat he was holding, caught in his chest and his pulse and -

It takes him a full minute, maybe two, just to hold himself together, letting Jack’s words, Jack’s feelings -

Jack’s heart -

Pour honesty and trust and life into his own and -

“Gabe…” Jack murmurs, a flicker of concern and doubt slipping across his beautiful gaze, “Please say something…Did I say something wrong -”

“No.”

The word falls from Gabe’s heart like a drop of light into the air.

Jack’s eyes flare wide for a second but -

Gabe pulls him even closer, so close that Jack is just on the edge of his lap, and he murmurs back against Jack’s lips, “I have...never wanted anything or anyone the way I want you.”

Jack’s reaction is immediate.

He shivers, the words slipping into his skin like a song, shadow and smoke and good, so good and -
“You are the only person in the world to ever make me want to try for the best outcome,” Gabe continues, his voice low but full, words carved from liquid obsidian but gilded with stardusted hope, “The only person to make me believe it could be true.”

And then -

Gabe shuts his eyes -

Lifting his left hand to cup the back of Jack’s right, pressing it warm and firm against his cheek -

As he says, “Holding your hand gives me a form of courage I never thought real.”

And then he opens his eyes again, and Jack can see -

Can feel -

The deep, brilliant, gorgeous draw in them, the radiance of the sun shadowed by smoke and shards, but ready for him -

Waiting for him -

As Gabe smiles quietly, ephemeral and yet real, regal and yet humble as he says:

“And I want to hold it the whole way down.”

And Jack’s heart swells with a song that has no words, no lyrics -

But a melody and a beat all their own -

As Gabe murmurs against his lips:

“...If you feel ready, Jack, I am here to take the fall with you.”

And Jack melts over that, his words low and dripping with longing as he leans in, whispering, “Oh, Gabe -”

And he presses his lips to Gabe’s, saying to him, to them, to all the life between them:

“I’ve already fallen for you.”

And Jack kisses Gabe.

It is

Everything

They have wanted -

Soft melding with strong, sweet sublimated with smoke, sunlight sewn with stardust, they slip right into it, into each other, into breaths and warmth shared: Jack teases Gabe out with small but easy motions, ebbing in nice and slow but drawing back just a little, and Gabe burns for it, simmering hot and shadowed, following him in in in as -

They just fall in deeper, kissing a little more, pulling for it a little more -

Jack’s fingers guiding Gabe in -
Gabe’s fingers gripping Jack tighter -

And they -

They pause, breaking apart for a second, just to exhale soft puffs of breath and to catch their hearts, still close and entwined, legs and chests together -

And this time -

They both *rush* for it.

The second kiss is *heavy*, hard and harder, hot and hotter, as Jack pulls Gabe in and Gabe grips at Jack’s waist, but the feeling of it is *easy*, smoke and shadows and storm-cut songs, low and sensual and *burning* with desire, breathless as small sounds - soft moans and gasps - break in the back of Jack’s throat and, *god*, Gabe *drinks* them like the sweetest water he’s ever tasted, *aching* for it -

And it is

Not *enough* -

They *pull* each other, Gabe dropping his left hand to Jack’s waist again, both hands gripping him, drawing Jack into his lap, and Jack cups at Gabe’s face, kissing him with a growing need, a growing *ache*, falling right into him.

The motion is fluid -

*Easy* -

As Jack slides his left leg over Gabe’s waist, straddling him on the table, and they slip backwards, Gabe lying back on the table as Jack follows him down down down -

But they’re too deep into each other to even care, still kissing each other deeper and deeper still, hotter and harder and heavier -

But they *slow* a little, the kiss simmering low and tense, the haste turning steady -

Turning sensually soft.

And after a long moment, they part, still breathless, still dazzled by and drawn to each other, Jack cupping Gabe’s face as Gabe holds his back, eyes tracing each other’s faces -

Before Gabe smirks dryly at Jack, saying low, “Making out in the park like a couple of lovestruck teenagers, huh?”

Jack grins - bright and roguish, faint blush on his cheeks as he laughs, “Look, you got the Jack Morrison brand of romantic, okay?”

“You do this a lot, Jack?” Gabe teases him, rubbing his hands up Jack’s back, relishing the feeling of Jack’s thick muscles, delighting in how incredible his whole weight feels against him -

But then -

Jack gives him a sly, coy smile, saying, “Actually, Gabe...you’re my first picnic date ever.”

And then Jack leans back in and gives him the smallest, sweetest kiss, half-bewildering Gabe as -
Oh my god, he has no right to be that goddamn adorable, Gabe barely manages to think as Jack smiles against his lips.

And Gabe grins, “I’m pretty sure this isn’t how they’re supposed to go.”

But Jack pulls back just slightly, dragging his eyes down Gabe’s chest, sitting back a little and -

Oh god, suddenly flitters through Gabe’s head -

As Jack sits up more -

Looking exactly like Gabe has dreamed -

(Only better -)

And Jack smirks, humming with a more obvious tone, “Looks to me like the best part is now on the table.”

Gabe raises a teasing, appraising eyebrow, casting his own gaze up and down Jack’s form, resettling his hands on Jack’s hips -

Jack shivers at the look of deep, obvious desire in Gabe’s eyes, relishes in the way his hands grip at his waist and hips -

Barely restrains himself from grinding down on Gabe’s lap.

And Jack leans back in, tracing his hands up Gabe’s chest, back to his neck and jawline -

And Gabe opens for him immediately, accepting the kiss with an easy, deep heat, letting the simmer of them burn on their lips, slow and smoky and smooth -

Before Jack murmurs with a low, deep desire:

“...We don’t have to stay on the table, you know?”

“I’m aware,” Gabe chuckles back, voice silken with want, “But I’m taking my time to enjoy the view.”

Jack grins against his lips, humming, “You know...you could have a better view in a hotel room.”

Gabe just smirks at him, eyebrows raised, both impressed and desperately trying not to get hard as he replies teasingly, “Man, I know we were talking about happy endings but -”

“Oh, no, I think the words were ‘best out come ,’” Jack laughs low and stormy, and pleasure snakes through Gabe hard as Jack adds, “And believe me , Gabe - I’ve wanted to make that happen for a long time now.”

Gabe stifles a groan, barely rasping out instead, “I promised you a drink, Jack -”

“Don’t worry,” Jack kisses hotly to Gabe’s lips, “This is dessert.”

And then he leans back slightly, biting at his lower lip as he hums richly, “My treat.”

And that -

That -
Gets Gabe to lean up to him, kissing Jack’s lips as he murmurs back, “And you’ll be my treat, right?”

Jack shivers slightly at the draw of sheer desire in Gabe’s words, and he kisses slow and hot:

“I’ll be whatever you want me to be, Gabe.”

Gabe chuckles a deep, rich laugh, like liquid fire in Jack’s chest, as he hums back, “I’d like you to be mine all night long, Jack.”

And Jack whispers against Gabe’s lips:

“I can be yours for far, far longer than that, Gabe.”

Gabe bites at his lower lip, restraining himself a little before he replies in a dry rasp, “Let’s figure out tonight first, Jack.”

----------

**Jack: Of many**

Friday, March 20, 2065: 16:59 - exiting Washington National Airport, Washington D.C., United States

It never fails to amaze him how many people *never* recognize him without the bright blue overcoat.

Though it *probably* helps that he’s wearing a beat up leather jacket, a dusty baseball cap, and regular jeans, while carrying a standard, green-grey duffel bag over his shoulder.

People *probably* don’t expect the Strike-Commander of Overwatch to dress like a Midwestern, middle-aged dad who’s exhausted and jaded from a long business trip cross-country.

...Even if that is exactly how Jack *feels* half the time.

*Less than a half-hour jet flight from Watchpoint: New York, and yet it still sucks,* Jack sighs internally, weaving through the crowds of people to the passenger drop-off and pick-up zone just outside the terminal.

He’s old enough to remember pre-war commercial jetliners and everything, yet he *still* finds himself impatient with dropship flights.

...*Convenience makes fools of us all, I guess,* he adds, deftly side-stepping a gaggle of tourists trying to work a bag cart.

When he comes to D.C. for official Overwatch matters, they always route his ships to the Air Force base nearby, but today Jack actually managed to convince Fio to run the civilian code and land him at Reagan.

And yeah, *okay* -

He’s not *supposed* to abuse his power *or* run Blackwatch ships for his own private flights -

But Fio is too used to dealing with Gabe’s secretive, covert ops “drop me in the hot zone, I’m going in deep” missions to care about Jack’s short hops between NYC and DC.
And -

Technically-

He is meeting the Blackwatch Commander -

For... business.

Just.

You know.

Personal business.

People would be considerably less supportive of Overwatch if they knew 90% of it was just me and Gabe making thirst trips to each other, Jack chuckles dryly.

Though technically...

It is -

As it always has been -

Impossible

For the two of them to separate work

(And power -)

From pleasure

(And promises).

They do not exist without each other -

Just like they do not exist without each other.

Their lives are whole and all encompassing -

As it has been from their very first date

Where they stole military secrets

Before sharing soup

And spending all night ravishing each other.

Though Overwatch wouldn't exist without me and Gabe taking the risk on each other, so people don't have much of a choice there, Jack notes, exiting the large, stately building to the long line of cars outside. Even out here, the busy-ness of D.C. just flows, with people rushing in and out and around like semi-liquid, some bustling towards cars, others rushing down crosswalks, some loading into shuttles, the usual.

The air here is just a touch balmier than up north, and Jack can feel the way spring is settling into the region: it’s not hot enough to force him to remove his jacket (not that he would, to be honest - his heat tolerance is higher than his cold tolerance is low), but it’s not cool enough to make him feel chilled. There's just a slight breeze, soft with a sweet crispness, that makes him long for home -
Watchpoint: Geneva -

Just a little.

Jack glances at his phone, rereading the messages:

[Gabe]: Alright, I’m at the curb outside Premium Air

[Gabe]: car’s just a blue four-door Ava, regular wheels

[Jack]: I like that you have to specify the wheel type, lol

[Gabe]: dude, they OFFERED me a black Rex, luxury model WITH hover wheels and auto-drive

[Gabe]: I had to remind them I’m trying to just be a normal guy this week

[Jack]: ...wait

[Jack]: so you DIDN’T want to be able to have sex in the back of a luxury, self-driving car after picking me up?

[...]

[Gabe]: you know what

[Gabe]: when I got the rental car yesterday

[Gabe]: I hadn’t thought that far

---

Jack grins over their ridiculous little banter, lifting his eyes to skim the line of cars and -

Three cars down, he spots the deep, navy blue Ava -

And -

Jack *smiles* on impulse as he starts to stride to the car -

Where a tall, broad, familiar figure is leaning up against the passenger’s side door.

As expected, somehow, mid-March in D.C. is *too cold* for him, based on the fact that he’s bundled up in his usual grey hoodie, black beanie, dark jeans, and thick boots -

An “I’m thinking” scowl set on his graceful, regal features as he taps something into his phone and -

“...Gabe.”

The name slips from Jack’s mouth *so easily* -

Like a breath of air -

Or the first line of the song of *them*.

(+ **Gabe: Of many**)

Gabe glances up from writing down some notes -
As that voice -

Smooth like the best whiskey, enriched and deepened by time and temperance -

Addresses him and -

Gabe smiles, putting his phone away as Jack steps around another traveler -

And right into his space.

Automatically, immediately, instinctively -

They’re hugging -

With Jack nestling his head against the crook of Gabe’s neck -

And Gabe pressing an affectionate, loving kiss to Jack’s exposed cheek, murmuring, “Hey, Jack.”

“Hey, Gabe,” Jack hums back, kissing Gabe’s jawline, just next to the fluff of his beard - his stubble is short, Jack thinks fondly, He cleaned it up today.

Gabe feels Jack move his hands from his shoulders to run his fingers through his beard, as Jack lifts his head, observing him with a warm, sweet look. Jack grins, teasing him, “Did you get cleaned up for Congress or for me?”

Gabe smirks at Jack wryly, chuckling, “You, of course.”

“Haha, smooth talker,” Jack laughs low, leaning in and giving Gabe a sweet, sultry kiss. Gabe hums contentedly, accepting the soft traces of heat and desire, letting Jack nip lightly at the small scar on his lower lip -

Before they part, both leaning back a bit, still giving each other slight, soft smirks.

(Time and age and decades of pleasure and promises have tempered them.)

(At least...in public.)

And then Gabe grins mischievously, laughing, “C’mon, Jack - remember how I would show up to the U.N. Security Council in my fatigues, covered in Omnic oil, eating a burger -”

“Oh god, I forgot about that -” Jack wheezes, but his whole face crinkles with laughter -

“Why would I ever look nice for Congress, of all things?” Gabe asks jokingly. Jack lowers his head, muttering dryly, “That’s...yup. You got it.”

“So I cleaned up real nice and pretty for you, sweetheart,” Gabe says happily, before he gives Jack a small, easy kiss on his forehead. Jack flicks a skeptical but bright-eyed glance back up at him -

Before he leans in and gives Gabe one last quick kiss on the lips, murmuring, “‘Pretty’ is an understatement for you, Gabe.”

“You are the only person in the world to think that,” Gabe chuckles as they ease themselves apart. The decades of being together show: they move easy, with Gabe reaching for the rear passenger door and cracking it open. As Jack chucks his duffel bag inside, Gabe is already rounding the front of the car back to the driver’s seat -
“Your legions of fans on social media would agree with me,” Jack retorts mischievously, shutting the rear door. Gabe rolls his eyes as he opens the driver’s door, saying over the noise of cars and shuttles rumbling by, “Like you aren’t fueling their ridiculous ideas with your anonymous accounts.”

Jack giggles - a cute sound that’s somehow both deep and coy in a way that literally no one would expect from the forty-five year old Strike-Commander of a global peacekeeping agency - as he glances over the top of the car to Gabe, saying, “I swear, it wasn’t me leaking the transcript this time.”

“No, you’ll just post some candid picture of me wedging a cheesesteak in my mouth sometime this weekend and get about twenty-thousand reblogs,” Gabe snorts, but there’s an exhausted-but-too-enamored glow to his gaze as he adds, “I know exactly how you operate, Jack Morrison -”

Jack just winks at Gabe as he opens the passenger door and slides in -

And Gabe follows him into the car a second later, sliding into the driver’s seat as he continues, “I know your every move before you think it, so I just know you’re going to try it -”

“Wait, so did you get cheesesteaks for dinner?” Jack asks eagerly, glancing to the back seat -

Where a large brown bag is securely tucked into the passenger seat behind the driver.

There’s a delicious smell in the car, something rich and flavorful, but Jack can’t place the exact scents -

Gabe watches the excited, brilliant look on Jack’s face -

How humor and happiness and love do not override the soft crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes, or cover up the grey tints at the edges of his hair -

But instead, sweeten them.

Enrich them.

Bring out the timeless glow that had enraptured Gabe’s heart nearly twenty years ago.

And when Jack turns his gaze back to Gabe, Gabe can see all the depths of them in the blue of Jack’s eyes.

And Gabe grins, “Well, the cheesesteak was a hypothetical example -”

“Ooooh, so it’s a surprise,” Jack says, raising an eyebrow as they both settle back in their seats. Gabe clicks his seatbelt in place, echoed a second later by the click of Jack’s -

And Gabe hums mischievously, “Well, Jack…”

Before he gives his partner a sidelong glance, saying with a wry smirk, “You know how March is.”

And Jack blinks once -

Before his whole face lights up with a beautiful radiance, with laughter and love, “Oh my god, Gabe!”

And as he turns the engine on, Gabe laughs back:

“It just always puts me in the mood for a picnic in the park.”
“Haha, how romantic of you, Gabe,” Jack teases him, taking his cap off and running a hand through his ruffled hat hair.

As he turns the blinker on and starts to ease the car out of the parking spot, Gabe adds wryly, “I wasn’t happy about this stupid Senate investigation, but the one good thing is that all the cherry blossoms are in peak bloom right now.”

“Ooooh,” Jack hums sweet and low, “That actually is romantic.”

“Jack, I don’t care for what you’re implying,” Gabe jokes back, “I’m always romantic.”

“You sure are, Mister Tell-Tale-Heart,” Jack teases him right back -

(And the car - just a standard old thing with regular wheels - putters into the driving lane -)

(To head back towards National Mall -)

(Where they will circle around, trying to find parking for like, twenty minutes -)

(And then spend another ten minutes finding a decent spot to sit under the trees that isn’t crowded with tourists.)

(But it will be well worth it when they start with the first soup -)

(And Jack will lean against Gabe’s left shoulder, and settle his head there -)

(And they’ll hold hands -)

(As they admire the blushing tint of the trees around them -)

(And quote jokes and crack poems with each other -)

((Or maybe it’s the other way around?))

(Endlessly entwined and still deeply -)

(Deeply -)

(In love.)

Chapter End Notes

I know you fear the wounds of time
The wandering feet of crows
But I am yours and you are mine
And none but me could know
How all of you enraptures me
Til I can’t look away
I pray that I will live to see
You wear a crown of grey
My love, how beautiful you are

My love is ever where you are.

---

Congratulations on surviving the slowest of slow burns!

I won't lie; after going through a lot of your guys' comments and feedback at the end of Resistance (when Gabe and Jack have their big cathartic talk), I ended up changing a lot of the structure and pacing of the rest of the fic. The fic was originally intended to jump straight to Escape and then jump ahead like the final four months to a first date that had a very different tone and feeling (so yes, the original chapter count was meant to be roughly 20-ish chapters).

However, like all of you guys, I also felt like the way the fic had been folding required a completely different, slower pace. After several chats with my dedicated beta reader and partner (who quite literally inspired Chapter 23 with their love of soup), we both agreed that it would be better to add Mulcahy's character and change the first date. Along the way, Moira and a few surprise characters also popped up (and there will likely be more in the next several chapters as well).

I also need to be honest: I'm 110% exhausted with bar dates and coffee dates in fics. We will probably (eventually??) get to Jack's idea of a whiskey tasting date (oh boy, that ought to be fun), but I really wanted this date to be something on par with Gabe's snow fort reveal. I picked soup pretty early on (again, you can thank Gonzo for that, lol), and spent a good deal of time Google Mapping Ketchum and Sun Valley. All real world names of places have been changed, but the locations are pretty much dead-on to the real world counterparts.

(There might also be some interesting little plot bits in there, if you squint just right.)

Otherwise, the date ended up being a lot of self-indulgent flirting and hand-holding and sitting on park benches, which are all A+ romantic activities in my book.

And now that you've read through my blatherings...

Enjoy Chapter 24! ;)
Chapter Summary

Gabe and Jack break the rules.

And spend a night together.

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains A LOT of detailed, sexually explicit content.

Reader discretion is advised.

And so is, like, a quiet moment alone to read it.

Just in case you, uh, end up needing it.

---

62 pages and 23,009 words.

Enjoy.

24x76: First

Saturday, March 9, 2047: 1833 - entering a king room on the third floor of the Starlight Lodge and Inn, on the southern end of Ketchum, Idaho

There are an absurd number of banks in Ketchum and Sun Valley -

And an even more absurd number of hotels, motels, lodges, and inns in the tiny, double-town valley.

Gabe sighs as he presses the keycard to the heavy door of their room: it had taken them like half-an-hour just to narrow down the long list of choices to something under 120 credits a night, then another ten minutes just to figure out which ones of those weren’t booked up with tourists trying to vacation for Spring Break or people simply rushing away from the ever-expanding fronts on the east and west of Idaho.

They had finally settled on a contemporary little three story hotel on the southern end of town (where several of the more “business-focused, big chain” hotels were). It had decent reviews, looked clean and comfortable in the pictures, but its biggest drawback was that it lacked charm…

Or style.
Or, like, anything unique.

The hopeless romantic in Gabe had wanted to push for the Hillcrest Inn, which (according to the online pictures and reviews) had more of a modern cabin feeling to the rooms, with earth tones and rich reds for its colors. Some of the balcony rooms of Hillcrest had views of the mountains, and - Gabe won’t lie - the idea of holding Jack as they watched the sun rise over the mountains was very appealing.

But Starlight Lodge and Inn had won over because, as Jack had charmingly put it:

“Are you really going to be looking at the aesthetics of the room all night, Gabe?”

Before he had given Gabe a long, sensual kiss, adding quietly, “Wouldn’t you rather look at me all night?”

...Which Gabe had quickly admitted he would.

(...Also because Starlight was 30 credits cheaper per night.)

The lock on the door beeps and Gabe twists the handle, pushing in, Jack following a second behind him and -

The room is...

Unimpressive.

It’s going for some sort of clean-cut, modern chic look (maybe?): there’s a small entryway with the bathroom on the left, which is similarly unimpressive, the countertop and shower tiles a bland grey-white speckled granite. Taking a half-step further opens into the main room proper: on the left side, is the majority of the furniture - the king-sized bed, two bedside tables with square lamps, two armchairs situated on the side closest to them. On the far wall is a window with a dark, up-rolling shutter installed, with the low light of the setting sun dripping through the opened top-half. On the right wall is a writing desk (close to the window), dresser, a standing tv, and a small trash can.

The furniture just...is.

There’s nothing particularly charming about any of it: the armchairs are just a basic beige faux-leather, and all the non-bed furniture (the bedside tables, the desk, the dresser) are made out of a rich brown wood, styled in simple cuts and small flourishes that could fit in anywhere, anytime, any place. “Classic” is solid enough, especially for a hotel that probably has to make some sort of budgeting choices -

Except then there is the bed itself.

It’s big, of course, being a king, but the headboard is a sleek, tall frame, textured with dark, black leather in big, bold squares, contrasting against both the grey wall behind it, and the plain white pillows and sheets on it. A spare blanket in a deep, brilliant blue is splashed on the edge of the white comforter, and Gabe’s detail-oriented mind immediately notes:

*It matches Jack’s eyes.*

And the thought of Jack, naked, on his back, moaning as he’s buried against the white sheets, the
blue blanket popping out from behind his right shoulder, the blue of his eyes accentuated by its single dash of color -

Rushes through Gabe’s head and -

Immediately changes his entire opinion of the place.

Worth it just for that, he thinks, but that’s before -

“Oh, wow,” Jack says, his tone caught between a small gasp and an excited laugh.

Gabe glances at him, but Jack is staring up at something on the ceiling.

Gabe follows his gaze to -

“Oh, what,” Gabe mutters, his jaw dropping a little -

Because built into the ceiling molding -

Are tens of little cut outs

Of stars.

The ceiling is mostly white, like all of the non-grey walls, but there is a series of blue waves and lines threading between the (literal) starlights, perhaps attempting to evoke the Milky Way, but the effect is actually quite pleasing, looking like an inverted river of stars that wind in a soft diagonal across the square cut of the ceiling.

Immediately -

Gabe is twisting left and right, searching the wall for the light switches and -

Jack laughs brightly as Gabe finds it, flicking the main lights switch first and then -

He tries the little “slider” switch -

And the starlights burst into a bright radiance.

Gabe slides it back down, dimming them into a sweet, burnished gold glow, his eyes fixated on the ceiling and -

He’s so transparent sometimes, Jack thinks, as he leans to his right, threading his right arm around Gabe’s left as he murmurs teasingly, “And you were worried about this place not being romantic enough.”

“Listen,” Gabe says jokingly, but there’s a raw rasp to the edge of the word that makes it more honest, “After that kiss, we needed to go somewhere with some sort of charm.”

“Right, because nothing says ‘sexy’ like paying 150 credits for some fake lumberjack aesthetic in a chain hotel,” Jack chuckles, pressing a happy kiss to Gabe’s cheek. Gabe can’t stop himself from smiling either, grinning brightly as he laughs, “Look, I really wanted to see if Hillcrest actually had bearskin rugs -”

“And you were going to miss the place with actual romantic lighting,” Jack snorts, as Gabe turns towards him, his grin twisting into a softer, wryer smirk -
Before he leans in and kisses Jack slow and sweet.

Jack hums with a soft, easy happiness, letting the heat of the kiss simmer against his lips, sliding his other arm around Gabe’s waist, as Gabe mirrors him, his hands shifting to Jack’s hips as -

They part just a little, just enough for Jack to murmur, “I told you, Gabe - everything with you is romantic.”

“You say that, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to stop,” Gabe chuckles back, before he smirks a little, “I have an image to maintain, after all.”

Jack laughs - a rich, low sound that Gabe feels deep in his chest - as he retorts, “Right, badass snow fort for secret book club meetings and hot chocolate.”

“Criminal mastermind extraordinaire,” Gabe grins back, leaning in to kiss him again. Both men sigh with contentment, before they part again -

And this time Gabe smirks, “Though, I won’t lie - the contrast of the black leather and star ceiling thing is really vibing with me.”

Jack bursts into laughter, his whole face glowing with happy, lovestruck radiance as he says, “It does actually fit us -”

“And it’s going to look real good -”

Jack’s laughter cuts off into a sharp gasp -

As Gabe leans in, kissing him hot and sultry -

As he murmurs deeply:

“- When I push you against the headboard and fuck you under the stars.”

Gabe loves how Jack’s gasp turns into a low, sensual moan, deep in the back of his throat as they kiss, and as Gabe pushes a little, Jack pulls, dragging his hands up his back -

As they half-step, half-stumble, half-fall against the wall between the bathroom and the main room.

Jack’s breath is steep, broken with soft ragged inhales of pleasure as Gabe kisses him hard, shifting to kissing the corner of his lips, down to his jawline, nipping at the side of his neck, just below his right ear -

Gabe’s hands gripping tight on his hips as -

Gabe chuckles with a low, smoky rasp as Jack pulls him even closer, his fingers starting to twist in the fabric of his jacket, and Gabe moves closer, sliding his legs between Jack’s -

Before he grinds their hips together.

Jack groans with a throaty, stormy sound as pleasure rides through both of them at the feeling, both of them already half-hard, and fuck, it takes all of Jack’s willpower not to beg for Gabe to fuck him right there but -

He somehow barely manages - even with Gabe kissing and nipping at his neck, rolling his hips against Jack’s own - to gasp, “Let me shower first, Gabe -”
Gabe sighs, both with pleasure and a tinge of frustration, muttering, “Yeah...fine.”

And then he admits, “...I should probably go get lube and condoms, huh?”

But then -

Jack shifts his head, pressing his own hot kiss to just below Gabe’s left ear as he murmurs in a sultry tone:

“I’ll be thinking of you the whole time.”

Gabe grimaces, a soft moan rumbling in his chest as pleasure snakes through him, his cock already feeling stiff and aching as Jack rolls his hips back, rocking against him as he laughs teasingly, “Just like the last few times I’ve showered.”

“Fucking hell,” Gabe mutters, lifting his head to glower at Jack, “How the hell do you do that?”

Jack gives him a roguish, charming grin as he chuckles, kissing Gabe’s lips, “Well, it’s simple - I think of your fingers inside of me -”

“That was not what I meant,” Gabe half-laughs, half-groans back, and Jack laughs a low, liquid chuckle back, muttering, “I know what you meant, but it’s soooo much fun to tease you.”

“Yeah, well, it works,” Gabe mutters, only partially faking his frustration. Jack kisses him again, this time softer and sweeter, saying more tenderly, “Admit it - you like it.”

“‘Like’ is an understatement,” is the quiet, smoky reply that slips out of Gabe’s mouth and -

Jack pauses, as the words make his pulse thrum and -

He kisses Gabe again, harder, deeper - sensually, yes, but with more raw emotional intensity. Gabe falls into it, kissing him back, letting the feeling of Jack rush through him, slip under his skin, into his heartbeat and -

Jack parts, saying quietly, “Remember, Gabe - I’m yours tonight.”

And I could be yours every night, drifts through Jack’s head, but he holds it back, lets it simmer -

He doesn’t know when he’ll say it -

But he knows it’s only a matter of time before he does.

Gabe presses his forehead against Jack’s, swallowing part of his heart caught in his throat as he mutters, “I know. And I’m yours.”

Jack shuts his eyes, as the feeling between them -

A feeling with such a small name -

But such a strong depth -

Grows quietly between them and -

“...I’m gonna shower,” Jack says, both to remind Gabe and to refocus himself. Gabe nods a little, reminding himself to stay responsible, to keep levelheaded as he replies, “Right. I’m gonna go grab stuff. Anything else you need?”
Jack opens his eyes, chuckling, “We might get a little thirsty.”

“Oooh, Jack, I’ve been thirsty for a long time now,” Gabe grins mischievously and Jack laughs back. Gabe sighs contentedly, adding, “But sure, I’ll grab some water and snacks or something.”

“Whatever you think we need,” Jack hums happily -

Before he leans in and kisses Gabe again, sweet and sensual, murmuring against his lips:

“And when you get back, I’m all yours.”

Gabe falls into the kiss, humming back quietly:

“That’s music to my ears, Jack.”

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(45 minutes later)

As he leaves the steam-laden warmth of the bathroom, the tepid chill of the main room hits Jack’s bare legs and arms, crawling small shivers up his skin. It settles on him, dampened by the layer of heat still surrounding him -

But it just can’t break through his focus -

The heat thrumming and roiling inside him.

He is -

Hot and heated

Inside to out

Craving -

“..Jack.”

Him .

Jack glances to his left, where, lit by the soft, richly gilded glow of the starlights -

Gabe sits in one of the armchairs.

And that -

That -

Is when Jack shivers.

(A perfect kind of shiver, hot and sensual, twisting in his groin.)

Gabe sits there, looking every bit like a king upon a throne, the low mood lighting bathing him in traces of gold and bronze. He’s taken his jacket, beanie, and boots off, so the thermal shirt is tight on his broad chest, and his thick, dark hair is tousled roguishly over his forehead.

But most of all -
Even in the dim, simmering light -

His eyes are *almost glowing* -

Somehow heavy and dark, *dripping* with obvious desire, layered like smoke and shadows, but the *heat* behind them burning hard and slow.

*Oh god*, Jack thinks, feeling like Gabe can see him inside to out in *all* the right ways, *Fuck me, he’s going to ruin me*.

(In all the right ways.)

Gabe languidly traces his gaze over Jack, raking his eyes down his wide chest, his cut hips, his bare legs, looking all the more enticing by wearing even less. His blonde hair - only half-dried from a towel - is fluffed but damp, falling in easy waves, aglow in the tinted lighting. His skin flushes pink on his cheeks, parts of his neck and legs, and Gabe picks out the spots easily, marking each one as a target.

But most of all -

The blue of Jack’s eyes is *melting* under the light and the sheer heat of Gabe’s own stare, the depths drawing him down down down, like midnight come ashore -

And all Gabe can think is:

*Show me how deep they go, Jack.*

*Show me how deep you go.*

…

There’s a brief moment where all they do is assess each other -

Before Gabe holds out his left hand and tilts his fingers towards Jack, saying softly, “Come here, Jack.”

Jack steps towards him, no haste, just a languid walk, Gabe’s eyes absorbing every movement like water in dry soil.

As Jack approaches him in the chair -

The motion is…

*Easy*

*Fluid*

*Seamless.*

Jack slides himself right onto Gabe’s lap, his legs straddling Gabe’s hips and thighs -

As Gabe immediately wraps his arms around Jack’s waist -

And Jack’s hands cup Gabe’s face -

And they fall
Into each other

Easy.

The kiss is slow but sensual, smoked and sugary, raw with a barely restrained hunger behind it: Jack kisses his steamed heat to Gabe’s lips, breathless and wanting, and Gabe kisses right back, claiming each smooth slip before he -

Nips lightly at Jack’s lower lip -

His tongue teasing Jack’s breath and -

Jack moans faintly, already ready for him, opening more, letting Gabe draw the gasping ache from the back of his throat and the twist of desire from behind his cock.

And fuck -

The sound - the feeling - of Jack already cracking under his kisses sends a spike of raw, liquid pleasure down Gabe’s gut and into his groin and, god damn, he wants the sound of Jack melting - melting for him - to sing through his pulse and his thrusts and -

They part only briefly, eyes dragging up and down each other -

Before Gabe leans in and murmurs the words heated and rich across Jack’s lips:

“Tell me how you want me.”

And Jack practically crumbles -

As he kisses the words back to Gabe, aching and searing:

“Fuck me hard, Gabe.”

Gabe groans as they kiss hot and heavy and hard, rising up to meet Jack’s lips as Jack pushes back down, grinding slow and simmering against Gabe, but already starting to get faster -

More urgent -

More needy.

Gabe breaks their kiss only to rasp breathlessly against Jack’s lips, “Keep talking, Jack - I love hearing you -”

Before he kisses Jack again, his ache starting to burn, hands starting to grip at Jack’s lower back, his hips, his ass -

Jack shudders as he feels Gabe’s words, kissed like sweet smoke to his lips, Gabe’s hands starting to touch him everywhere and -

Jack moans into the kiss, “Gabe, fuck -”

Jack’s own fingers are slipping past Gabe’s face, to the edges of his shaved hair, nails skimming through the fine fuzz and Gabe groans over it -

“I want you, Gabe,” Jack gasps, as he feels Gabe’s fingers dig into the hem of his shirt, “Want you to - ah - fuck me hard - want you to make me scream -”
Gabe’s cock *aches* with the sound of Jack’s voice, his words kissed deep to Gabe’s lips, Jack’s fingernails scratching across his scalp, the *need* growing *hard hard harder*, twisting deeper -

“Want to feel you with every step tomorrow -” Jack pants, as Gabe kisses the underside of his jaw -

And Gabe nips fiercely at the angle of Jack’s neck -

“*Fuck!*” Jack shouts, his whole body recoiling with perfectly pained pleasure, his cock twitching *hard* as the thrill of it spikes through him, Gabe’s hands keeping him grounded -

Gabe’s left hand slips up under his shirt, dragging long fingertips up Jack’s back -

Jack own fingers are twined in Gabe’s hair, impulsively pulling Gabe in close close closer, his own head tilting back as he moans, “Oh, Gabe - *more*, don’t stop -”

Gabe kisses and licks at the spot that he bit, murmuring hot against Jack’s skin, “*Fuck, it’s hot when you beg, Jack -*”

“Oh, fuck, I’m gonna be - *ah* -” Jack gasps as Gabe kisses down his neck before biting at the curve of his neck and shoulder, “*Be begging all night, Gabe -*”

“God, hearing you moan my name is driving me *wild* ,” Gabe heaves, kissing along Jack’s left collarbone -

Before he nips at it.

“Ah, *Gabe!*” Jack groans, fingers twitching in Gabe’s hair, cock shuddering, whole body reveling in Gabe’s kiss, Gabe’s touch, Gabe’s control -

Gabe scowls slightly as he reaches the hem of Jack’s shirt, muttering tersely, “*Shirt. Off.*”

“*Yessir,*” Jack gasps, and *fuck*, the sound of *that* does more to Gabe than he wants to admit, pleasure pulsing through his cock and groin, deep and *rolling* -

Jack leans back, letting go of Gabe’s hair to reach his arms back in one fluid motion to yank his shirt up, over his head - the motion is *easy*, Jack’s whole chest fluid with it, all curving muscle and hard and soft angles and -

Before he even has the shirt fully off -

Jack feels Gabe’s lips press to his chest, kissing at the dip just above his sternum and -

*Fuck*, the feeling of Gabe *wanting* him - hard and thick and *heavy* - melts in his groin and Jack *aches* -

Jack drops the shirt somewhere, anywhere, he doesn’t care, his focus is already back on feeling Gabe’s fingers pull and grip across his broad back, feeling Gabe’s lips kiss hot and needy on his chest -

Feeling *Gabe* -

Gabe relishes as Jack shivers and shudders under his kisses, his fingers, loves how hot Jack’s skin gets where he leaves small marks - little nips, teasing bites - loves how thick and full Jack feels in his hands, his lap, muscles hard and curving even as -

Even as Jack begins to *melt* -
“Gabe, Gabe, ah -” Jack starts to gasp as Gabe kisses and licks along the underside of his pecs, shuddering hard as the feeling spikes heavy, thick bolts of pleasure straight to his cock -

Jack’s fingers are back in Gabe’s hair, scratching lightly across his scalp, sending frisson shivers over his skin, the depths of Jack’s voice making Gabe groan, his cock twitching hard at the sound and feeling and -

Suddenly -

Jack’s hands are back on the sides of Gabe’s face -

Pulling his head back up -

And Gabe looks up, straight into Jack’s eyes -

Where he can see

The full depths of Jack’s desire -

How badly he wants him -

How hot he yearns -

The blue darkness lit faintly with the soft light -

Dripping with a deep, rich sensuality and -

Right on cue -

Jack lowers his hips -

And grinds - hard and furiously slow - in Gabe’s lap.

Gabe shudders hard as the curve of Jack’s thick cock - barely restrained by thin, woven cotton - rides and rubs against Gabe’s own, pleasure flooding hot and twisted in his groin -

Jack delights in the way Gabe’s eyes flare with steep pleasure as he rolls and rocks his hips in Gabe’s lap, his ache thudding and thrumming as he feels the thick, heavy tilt of Gabe’s cock against his and -

Jack leans in, kissing a smirk to Gabe’s lips -

Before he hums low and rich, “...You’re bigger than I dreamed you were -”

And

Damn

That -

That -

Shatters Gabe’s composure -

As the furious, aching need to fuck Jack to incoherence burns inside him.

“Fucking hell, Jack -” Gabe rasps, kissing Jack so hard that Jack actually gasps from the pressure of
it, Gabe’s hands grabbing at Jack’s waist and forcing him down down down, pushing Jack’s slow grind hot and heavy against him, their cocks rubbing together -

Jack’s smirk melts into low, aching moans as Gabe’s fingers slip down down down, under the band of his boxer briefs, under the woven cotton -

To grip the rounded muscle of his ass -

Gabe heaves a hot, searing kiss on Jack’s lips as he feels the hard, dense flexing of muscles beneath his fingers, as Jack’s hips and ass work and ride in his lap, thick pleasure pulsing in his cock and groin as he feels Jack’s own want grow harder -

“Gabe - fuck - ah,” Jack gasps, kissing the moans to Gabe’s lips, rocking his hips as Gabe’s fingers squeeze at his ass, delighting in Gabe’s touch -

Delighting in how good they feel together -

Gabe drinks down Jack’s moans like liquid fire, his hands pulling Jack closer even as he mutters, “Up.”

Jack rises automatically, lifting his hips and settling more on his knees, his hands still in Gabe’s hair, cupped to the sides of his face, admiring how incredible Gabe looks, all brilliant focus, deeply hot.

Gabe drags his gaze down Jack’s chest, to his waist, eyes raking over the arcs of muscles -

Down to where the elastic band and cotton fabric sit low across his hips, the curves of his hipbones peaking out -

Down to the thick silhouette of Jack’s cock, heavy and hard, straining against the fabric.

God damn, Gabe thinks, pleasure daggering through him hard, as he pulls his hands up from cupping Jack’s ass to tug at the sides of his boxer briefs -

Almost instinctively, Jack rolls his hips slightly, dropping his hands over Gabe’s, guiding him down down down -

And they tug Jack’s boxer briefs down down down, past the curve of his ass, to the top of his thighs -

And Jack shivers a little as the tight, rough pressure of the fabric leaves his cock -

And the heat of Gabe’s gaze melts over it instead.

“God damn, you’re big,” Gabe groans, a thick, heavy heat coiling through his own cock at the sight of Jack’s. Jack shudders a little, laughing low and stormy, “You like what you see, Gabe?”

“Hell yeah I do,” Gabe grins, biting at his lower lip as he starts to lift his eyes but -

There are fingers cupping at his cheeks again -

And they tilt his head back up -

As Jack leans in, kissing breathlessly against his lips, “Good, because tonight I’m all yours .”

And Gabe’s brain almost breaks at that as -
Jack removes his right hand -

Reaching to the table between the chair and the bed -

Grabbing the bottle of lube there as he pleads, voice dripping with rich heat:

“Make me nice and wet...please, Gabe?”

There’s a fraction of a second where Gabe’s head is empty -

Before he scowls, focus dark and thick and hot, kissing hard against Jack’s lips, hands gripping everywhere across Jack - his hips to his ass to his lower back to his ass again -

And Jack gasps with pleasure as Gabe rasps against his lips, “God damn, Jack -”

“Hands, Gabe -” Jack teases him back, smirking as they kiss and Gabe gives a frustrated and conflicted little grumble -

Before he pulls his hands off Jack’s ass and cups them between their chests.

Jack laughs hoarsely, delighted in how Gabe is almost overwhelmed by everything in his (literal) lap and hands, saying, “You can’t keep your hands off me, hmm?”

“Hard not to when everything I want is sitting in my lap,” Gabe mutters, relishing in the way Jack smirks, the rough-edged power between them and -

Jack grins against Gabe’s lips, humming richly as he uncaps the lube bottle, “Here, this will help -”

And he tilts the bottle -

And drizzles some of the clear, slick liquid over Gabe’s fingers.

As Jack caps the bottle, Gabe starts to roll the thick lube between his fingers, feeling it spread. Jack sets the bottle back on the table with his right hand -

Left fingers tilting Gabe’s head back towards his as he kisses Gabe’s lips:

“Show me how good you are with your hands, Gabe.”

Gabe groans slightly as he kisses him back, murmuring with words like thick smoke, “Be careful what you wish for, Jack. You just might get it.”

“Gabe,” Jack smirks back, “I have wanted it for so long -”

As Gabe slips his hands past Jack’s hips, down down down, squeezing at the curve of his ass, slick and hot and pressing, feeling him out, fingertips leaving searing touches as they press in -

And Gabe smirks back, kissing Jack as he chuckles in a dark, low tone, “If I hit the right notes, you’ll sing for me, right?”

As he presses the tips of his left index and middle finger to the tight, hot ring of muscles, massaging them teasingly, slicking them up with even more wet heat -

Pleasure shivers through Jack at the feeling of Gabe’s fingers starting to work against him, nerves slipping and muscles clenching a little, the raw intimacy of it melting his spine as his right hand slips through Gabe’s hair -
And Jack kisses back, “I’d rather moan for you instead.”

Gabe grins, humming wryly, “Both are music to my ears, Jack.”

Before he nips at Jack’s lower lip -

And slips his index finger in Jack’s ass.

“Oh!” Jack gasps, jolting a little at the easy, teasing pleasure of it, little ribbons of hot, firm sweetness inside him. Gabe kisses him hard and tender, careful and claiming, his also-lubed right hand holding Jack’s left hip just to steady him, as he eases his finger into Jack’s dense, tight ache -

Jack is hot, his muscles thick and squeezing but relaxed enough from showering that Gabe slides most of his finger in, working the lube in and out, in and out with a smooth, easy rhythm -

“Oh fuck,” Jack breathes, a sharp little exhale - Gabe isn’t going hot and heavy yet, just a few short, simple motions, pulling his finger back out, massaging a little more lube to the clench of his rim, then back in in in, spreading the thick wetness more and more -

“Mmm, you’re tight,” Gabe chuckles, again nipping at Jack’s lower lip as small shivers and trembles shake Jack.

“I - I worked myself a little,” Jack murmurs, his hips shaking slightly, as Gabe pushes in in a bit further -

A bit deeper -

“But I wanted you to do it -” Jack starts to say -

As Gabe twists his finger, starting to press harder against the slick, shuddering walls of Jack’s heat -

“Fuck -” Jack gasps, eyes flaring, pleasure lancing up through him, his cock twitching at the feeling of Gabe starting to work him, groaning against Gabe’s lips, “I wanted to feel you open me -”

Gabe moans back, low and liquid, impulsively working his finger in more, deeper, harder, pushing up and in, up and in against Jack’s tight throb and -

“Oh fuck, Gabe, fuck -” Jack moans, his fingers winding harder in Gabe’s hair, fingernails scratching lightly against his scalp, the frisson and the pleasure of it snapping down Gabe’s spine, burning hot in his groin and up his cock -

Their movements are easy, fluid and flowing, Gabe’s right hand slipping forward forward forward, moving away and down from Jack’s hip to his cock hard and aching and -

Jack’s hips start to move impulsively, instinctively, rocking back a little, pushing down down down on Gabe’s left hand and -

“Oh Gabe, more, give me more -” Jack begs, words dripping, his body starting to shudder with pleasure and the thick work of Gabe’s finger, rubbing and grinding inside him, wet and full. Gabe’s chest heaves as he feels Jack tighten around his finger, raw and tense and -

He runs his right palm up the rich, smooth skin of Jack’s cock and -

“Gabe, fuck -” Jack gasps, shuddering, his hips rolling forward to grind his cock against Gabe’s palm, before rocking back to work himself down against Gabe’s finger -
“Look at me,” Gabe rasps, his own body starting to shiver under the pressure of desire burning inside him, his own cock hard and straining against his pants.

Jack pulls back slightly from moaning against Gabe’s lips, eyes half lidded, the blue of them marbled with a hazy sensuality and -

Gabe stares straight at him, his eyes gilded under the rich light -

Before he pulls his index finger out out out -

And then -

Pushes both his index and middle fingers in deep, hard, twisting them in in in -

As he grips Jack’s cock with his right hand and strokes down over the smooth, slightly wet head of it nice and tight.

“FUCK!” Jack shouts as pleasure bursts through him, up his cock and deep in his ass, flooding through his groin into the pit of his stomach, snaking hard up his nerves like they had been lit on fire, blazing thick and full, tight and hot -

Raw, heavy desire shudders in Gabe’s cock and groin as he feels Jack recoil strong, every muscle contracting, his whole body flinching with rich, hard pleasure, his inner heat tight and squeezing, his slicked cock twitching in Gabe’s grip.

And Jack just -

Falls into it.

He rolls his hips, pushing them forward, grinding his cock hard in Gabe’s tight, wet fist, before moving them back, riding himself down on Gabe’s fingers, pleasure lightning through him as he works himself in Gabe’s hands, straddling Gabe’s lap -

Under Gabe’s fierce, heavy gaze.

Jack’s hands drift to Gabe’s shoulders, steadying himself on Gabe’s broad strength as he gyrates, whole torso flexing and rolling, hips rocking, body tight and throbbing as he goes -

And Gabe groans, his right hand stroking hard, pumping Jack’s thick cock even as his own aches, left fingers twisting in in in, hard hard harder, deep deep deeper as -

“Fucking hell, Jack,” Gabe rasps as Jack squeezes thick around his fingers and -

“Gabe, Gabe, yes -” Jack gasps, chest heaving as pleasure spikes and ribbons through him, his focus both unraveling and tightening, losing himself even as Gabe gets sharper, clearer -

Stronger -

Inside and outside him and -

“More, Gabe, more, fuck me harder -” Jack begs, the words melting deep in Gabe and he -

Practically snarls against Jack’s chest, nipping at his pecs, stroking faster and tighter around Jack’s cock, his fingers twisting in in in, spreading wide and then letting Jack squeeze them close again.

Jack shivers as Gabe kisses the words hot and searing to his chest, “Where is it, Jack? Higher?”
“Yes, Gabe, higher, deeper, go deeper -” Jack answers, words falling from him like melting drops, his voice rolling with his hips, ass squeezing hard against Gabe’s wet, slicked fingers and -

Gabe pushes them in in in, further, higher -

*Deeper*

Pressing hard and -

“YES!” Jack shouts, pleasure bolting up his body, down every nerve, curling his toes, fingers digging into Gabe’s shoulders as Gabe’s fingers work hard and heavy against his *ache*, his thick pressure point, rich and raw and -

Gabe smirks against Jack’s skin, kissing right where his heart is -

Before he strokes Jack’s cock *tight* -

And fucks his fingers into Jack’s sweet, melting heat even *harder*.

“Oh, *Gabe*, fuck!” Jack gasps, his body tensing *deep* as Gabe’s fingers push and twist and grind against his pressure point, pulling down only to thrust in in in, and Jack groans, *pleading*, “Oh Gabe, fuck yes, right there, keep going -”

“Mm, tell me how good it feels, Jack,” Gabe chuckles, pleasure tight and *aching* inside him as Jack shivers and groans, tight around his fingers, hard in his hand and -

“So *good*, Gabe, fuck, so good -” Jack moans, as the dense heat of Gabe fingerfucking him starts to cloud his head, building hard and deep in his groin as he gasps, “Fuck, I might come -”

“Do you want to come for me, Jack?” Gabe hums, his tone as rich and as tight as his fingers and -

“Oh god - yes, Gabe, *please* -” Jack groans, feeling his edges, his control *melt* into nothing but raw pleasure, Gabe’s hands and Gabe’s kisses and Gabe’s voice -

And *fuck* -

Jack *begging* in his lap as he falls to *utter pieces* drives Gabe *wild*.

Gabe asks, kissing the words to Jack’s chest, “Do you want me to make you come now, or do you want me to fuck it out of you?”

The question almost *breaks* Jack, pleasure too deep and too tight for him to think, the hot, heady haze of Gabe fingerfucking and stroking him inside and out starting to melt down *everything* inside him and he -

“I don’t - *ah, fuck* - I don’t know -” Jack gasps as Gabe twists his fingertips *hard* against his inner ache, the pressure thick and deep and *perfect*, and Jack *begs*, pleads, “Oh, Gabe - more, keep going - fuck -”

“I’m going to make you come,” Gabe chuckles, his voice *dripping* with raw-edged pleasure and slicked power, “You know that, right?”

As he says the lilting words, Gabe strokes Jack’s cock *hard*, squeezing as he rubs down down down, Jack’s hips shuddering and fucking his cock in in in and -

“I - I know, *please*, Gabe -” Jack moans, his voice catching on the thrill in his chest, the pleasure
starting to fray him, wet hot and deep tense and tight grip - 

His hips are starting to really shake and shudder, his motions becoming more erratic, winding himself down down down down, as Gabe fucks his fingers in in in, rubbing and twisting against his heat, muscles tight and clenching and -

“Look at me, Jack.”

Gabe’s words are gentle but pull him in.

Jack looks down at him, gaze heavy and unfocused, Gabe’s own brilliant, rich focus driving more shivers of raw pleasure through him and -

Gabe’s cock twitches hard at the sight of Jack coming utterly undone in his lap, from his hands, moaning and singing his name, Jack’s fingers gripping tight and fierce on his shoulders -

The blue of Jack’s eyes so deep they seem almost endless -

Like a sea of stars.

(Just for him.)

And Gabe stares up at him, feeling Jack melt tight around his fingers, all thick, squeezing wet heat, feeling Jack grind his slick, smooth cock in his hand, hard and velvet soft, head dripping -

And Gabe murmurs in a voice from stardusted smoke:

“Sing my name, Jack.”

And he thrusts his fingers in in in, hard and fast, fucking them in short, hot little bursts against Jack’s pleasure -

As he grinds his hand up to the head of Jack’s cock and squeezes, stroking in a rough but raw rhythm and -

Jack

Comes

Undone.

“GABE!” he shouts, as pleasure - deep and fucking, tight and squeezing - bursts through him, searing up every nerve, flooding through his body, muscles tensing, hips spasming as he rocks himself into Gabe’s grip, back onto Gabe’s fingers, letting Gabe touch him straight into raw, endless ache and -

Jack’s eyes lose all focus, the blue almost glowing under the rich light -

As his fingers dig hard into Gabe’s shoulders and -

His whole body tenses and he -

Jack sings, “Gabe, Gabe - fuck - I’m coming -”

And Gabe shudders with his own pleasure, relishing how Jack falls for him, murmuring hot and encouraging, “Come for me, Jack -”
And Jack -
All he feels is Gabe
As he comes -

“Gabe -!”

Hot and melting.

Jack’s cock spasms in Gabe’s grip, hot and thick, liquid white heat spurting against Gabe’s palm, his fingers, slipping through them, some sputtering onto Jack’s chest, as Jack’s inner heat tightens strong, squeezing down on Gabe’s fingers, muscles clenching and shuddering and fuck -

Pleasure lances through Gabe’s own cock hard and deep, dense and thick in his groin, hot and ready to be inside Jack’s rich, tense fullness -

Hot and ready to be inside Jack.

Gabe bites at his lips, eyes raking over Jack as he comes, saying in simmering sugar tones, “That’s it, Jack - come hard for me, soldado, you’re so hot like this -”

“Gabe -” Jack half-moans, half-breathes, the edge of it almost blinding him with white hot pleasure, full of Gabe’s fingers and the texture of Gabe’s touch, thighs shaking slightly, hips softly rolling, pushing his cock in and out, in and out, letting Gabe twist and tease sweeter, easier pressure inside him.

Jack’s grip on Gabe’s shoulders relaxes slightly, blinking a few times, his eyes starting to process things again -

Gabe watching him intensely as Jack comes down from the high of it, humming in a teasing tone, “...Good, huh?”

Jack still doesn’t quite have his usual sharp focus back, still slightly lost in the sweet, sensual haze of their sex -

(A look that Gabe would give everything to see more of, for hours on end -)

But Jack does grin a roguish, languid, hot little smile -

Before he leans in, kissing Gabe soft and sensual, all smoke and song as he murmurs, “Better than I dreamed.”

Gabe groans a little at that, his cock shivering under the rasp of Jack’s voice, kissed to his lips.

They kiss for a moment, just drinking each other in, with Jack humming in between small gasps, “I’ve wanted you to fingerfuck me ever since you told me you were ambidextrous.”

“God damn, that’s hot,” Gabe murmurs back, still kissing him.

And Jack smirks against their kiss, saying deeply, “Fingerfucked myself in the shower imaging it.”

Gabe inhales sharp and steep at that -

“The acoustics in the bathrooms are so open,” Jack continues, a lilting tone to his words, “I was worried people would hear me moaning your name -”
And then he leans back a little, smirking at Gabe as he bites at his lower lip, saying, “But I couldn’t help myself.”

Gabe’s eyes are somehow dark and dense but also radiant with desire -

As he almost seethes, “You’re trying to drive me crazy, aren’t you?”

And then -

Jack’s left hand is around Gabe’s right wrist -

Pulling Gabe’s hand, still covered in Jack’s own wet heat -

Up towards -

“Yes, I am,” Jack grins, “Is it working?”

Before he shuts his eyes -

And licks a long, sultry stripe up Gabe’s palm and fingers.

Pleasure floods through Gabe at the sight as Jack sucks his fingers, humming hot as he licks at his own come, eyes half-lidded, whatever sex-steeped focus remains in his eyes tilted towards Gabe’s own gaze -

And Gabe’s left fingers - still deep in Jack’s ass - feel Jack’s hot, tight muscles squeeze around them.

“God damn, Jack,” Gabe groans as his cock aches at the sight, “Hell yeah, it’s working.”

Jack grins hazily around Gabe’s fingers but then -

Gabe smirks, a roguish yet rich grin, smoky and sexual -

Before he pushes his fingers in a little farther, pressing them against Jack’s tongue -

As he twists his fingers in Jack’s ass harder.

Pleasure lightnings through Jack at both feelings, thick firmness in his mouth and thick firmness in his tight ache, and he moans around Gabe’s fingers, his hips rocking a little as he squeezes even more and -

“I want you like nothing else,” Gabe says, voice dripping with desire, gaze deep with intensity, as he shallowly slides his fingers against Jack’s tongue, the low whimper of Jack’s voice deep and full around them. Pleasure twitches in Gabe’s cock as he murmurs hoarsely, “Want to feel you fall apart from the inside out.”

And Gabe fucks his fingers in in in, deep against Jack’s still-sweet pressure -

And Jack recoils like a gun, hips shuddering, eyes flashing wide before his eyelids flutter close, relishing the feeling of Gabe overwhelming his already melting heat -

“Want to feel you drive me to the edge and ride me over, Jack,” Gabe says, his gaze fixated, as he pulls his fingers from Jack’s mouth, Jack’s eyes half-lidded and fully satisfied.

Jack hums a soft sigh of deep, sensual contentment, grinning as he leans in, kissing the words low and rich to Gabe’s lips, “Keep going, Gabe.”
And as Jack pulls away from the kiss, he slowly eases Gabe’s fingers out of his deep, tense heat, moaning, “I love hearing you talk.”

Gabe scowls, chest heaving as Jack slips backwards, right leg off the chair, then the left, his perfect weight rising from Gabe’s lap, but he mutters, voice cracking with want and honesty, “I want to fuck you senseless, Jack.”

Jack grins as he stands in front of Gabe, sliding his boxer briefs the rest of the way down, and Gabe’s eyes drag down his body, bare chest and cut waist, Jack’s cock still semi-hard. Gabe bites his lower lip, murmuring, “Want to feel you move when I move.”

As he drops to his knees between Gabe’s legs and -

Gabe barely restrains the shudder in his breath as he snaps deeply, “Want to feel you squirm as I fuck you for hours.”

A soft hum of utter, melting delight sings through Jack’s chest, slipping out through his throat, as he reaches for Gabe’s waist, tugging at his belt. Gabe instinctively slips forward slightly, his cock straining against the tight fabric of his pants as he watches Jack undo the buckle, Jack biting at his lower lip, blue eyes hazy with deep desire as -

“I want you to moan my name with each thrust,” Gabe says lowly, as Jack pops the button on his waistband and unzips his fly and -

Jack’s own cock and the deep, needy thrum inside him shiver with ache at the thick, heavy frame of Gabe’s cock in the fabric of his pants and boxer briefs.

Jack slips his fingers under the lining of the waistband and - with a little bit of shuffling - they get Gabe’s pants and boxer briefs down around his thighs -

And Gabe’s cock - long and full and stiff - slips out from under the constraints -

“Oh god, you’re big,” Jack murmurs, his body shivering slightly at the sight alone, Gabe’s cock hard and ready -

And there are fingers gently but firmly cupping beneath the angles of Jack’s jaw -

Lifting his head up slightly.

Jack stares up into the dark, deep gaze of Gabe’s eyes, the gilded hue alight beneath the sultry smokiness, as Gabe murmurs deeply:

“I want to fuck you so hard you feel me inside you when you dream.”

Jack shudders as pleasure twists and coils hot and heavy inside him.

As Gabe slips his right thumb over Jack’s lower lip, Jack asks in a heady, blissful haze, “Will you pull my hair?”

Gabe raises an interested eyebrow as he smirks, chuckling, “I finally get to feel that silver tongue, huh?”
Jack grins with a languid, easy confidence, dropping his gaze back to Gabe’s cock in front of him, murmuring almost dreamily, “I just want a taste before I put the condom on.”

Gabe shivers as pleasure snakes through him at that, his cock twitching reflexively under Jack’s gaze and Jack’s words. Jack’s breath catches in his chest as he watches Gabe’s small motions of desire slip through him, and he leans in, closer to the velvety skin, murmuring hotly, “Once you’re inside me, I won’t want to stop.”

And Jack shuts his eyes, borderline blissed out -

And licks a long, easy stripe up the length of Gabe’s cock.

Gabe groans as the ache of it shudders through him, wet and hot, smooth all the way up, Jack’s tongue thick on the underside of it, his fingers threading through the back of Jack’s hair, and Jack hums with utter joy, delighted in how Gabe reacts, relishing the slick feeling of easy heat and solid hardness -

Jack’s tongue traces out the edge of the head of Gabe’s cock, hot touches and slick swirls, and Gabe groans again, smaller, higher pleasure bolting through him, cockhead flooding with pleasure as Jack licks it.

Jack grins against the smooth surface, his own ache thrilling at how Gabe reflexively tugs at his hair, the feeling of Gabe’s stiff, thick fullness pressed against his lips -

He kisses the tip once, humming lowly, “You taste good, Gabe -”

Before he slips his lips around the thickness of it -

And slides back down.

“Oh, fuck, Jack -” Gabe practically recoils as pleasure daggers through him - hot and wet and tight - Jack’s tongue still massaging the underside of his cock, the head of it pushing deep deep deeper into the melting heat at the back of Jack’s mouth, Jack’s lips sealed around the width, and fuck, Jack is good at this, sucking hard but controlled, delighting in Gabe’s own pleasure -

Jack moans at how good Gabe feels in his mouth, full and fulfilling, hard and thick against his tongue and throat, but smooth and velvet soft, the head of his cock slightly salty and bittersweetly satisfying, his own pleasure dripping down through his core as Gabe himself drips inside him -

“Oh god, yes -” Gabe murmurs hoarsely, head lolling back a little, eyes shut with bliss, relaxing into the sweet, sensual relief of Jack sucking and teasing and tonguing at this cock, the deep ache of it twisting and coiling tight tight tighter with each motion, his hands easing up on gripping Jack’s hair, switching to guiding him down down down -

Jack’s eyelids flutter open, shifting his gaze as far up as he can to watch Gabe shudder under the feeling, pleasure pulsing in his groin as Gabe’s hips roll slightly, Gabe’s hands caressing the back of his head -

Gabe glances down at him, and god damn, Jack’s eyes are so blue at this angle, hazy with desire, lips tight around his cock -

Jack shivers at the smoky, sensual bliss in Gabe’s eyes, the gilded glow of them looking deeper and deeper, hot and heady and full of want and -

Jack feels Gabe’s fingers gently but firmly push at the back of his head, as Gabe says lowly, “Little
more, Jack, c’mon - be good for me -”

Jack moans hot and thick around Gabe’s cock, the depths of his voice spiking extra pleasure up its length -

Before he slides down even lower, taking Gabe’s cock as far as he can go.

“Oh, yes, Jack -” Gabe moans, hips rising to push himself in deeper with Jack’s motion, and Jack groans again with more pleasure, eyes shutting as Gabe fucks his cock into his mouth. Pleasure melts through Gabe, coiling hot and tight as Jack’s thick, wet heat drips around him, smooth and slick yet tight, so tight, nearly perfect, and the words fall from his mouth breathlessly, “Yes, that’s it, Jack, nice and easy -”

Jack starts to bob his head, moving with a steady rhythm of it, loving how Gabe’s cock pressures against his tongue, the back of his throat, hot and hard, dripping a thick but perfect taste, Gabe’s fingers starting to grip at his hair again, pulling him up before pushing him down, his thighs shaking with pleasure -

“Fuck, Jack -” Gabe pants, eyes half-lidded, watching Jack work, cock starting to shudder as the melting, hot pleasure of it winds tighter and harder and thicker inside him, hands pulling and pushing with Jack’s hair as Jack’s low, liquid voice hums and moans with small, sultry sounds, and fuck, the back of his throat is tight and deep, hot and clenching as Jack moves and sucks and -

Gabe almost winces as the pleasure jolts hard through his cock, into his groin, tight and throbbing and -

He pulls at Jack’s hair hard, slipping him back, practically lifting Jack off his cock, but damn, Jack outright moans with deep, satisfied pleasure as Gabe pulls and -

Jack starts to move forward, sliding deeper again and -

“Mm, I like how eager you are,” Gabe pants, pulling again, a thrilled little groan vibrating from the back of Jack’s throat against his cockhead, but Gabe says with more control, “But -”

He reaches over to the bedside table to grab a condom with his left hand -

And he pulls Jack off of his cock, twisting his right hand harder in Jack’s hair and -

Jack winces with pained pleasure, eyes half-lidded, glancing up at Gabe with a hazy, stormy look -

As Gabe stares down at him, eyes full of smoke and shadows and endless desire as he states, “Get up here and let me wreck you.”

Gabe holds the condom packet out in front of Jack, and Jack stares at it for a moment, still caught up in his own deep ache of pleasure, before he grins roguishly, biting at his lower lip as he takes the packet, chuckling lowly, “But you look so good like this, Gabe.”

“But you’ll look even better when I’m inside you,” Gabe mutters back, words heavy and dripping, exhaled sharply, smoke and shadows and raw power, “And I’ve wanted you to ride me for a very long time now, Jack.”

Jack shivers as he takes the condom from Gabe’s hand, eyes still locked to Gabe’s, the deep glow in them captivating - Jack would do anything to stay under their spell forever. He rips the packet open only half-looking, Gabe’s grip in his hair loosening a little, fingers unwinding to stroke the back of his head with a fierce tenderness and -
Jack glances back down at Gabe’s cock, thick and heavy, slicked up with his own warmth, and restrains himself from taking another lick. He fits the condom on the tip before unrolling it with hasty little strokes, Gabe groaning lowly at the feeling of Jack’s fingers and the thin membrane tightness over him.

And then -

Jack moans with utter delight -

As pleasure, rippled with pinpricks of pain, drips through him -

As Gabe tugs at his hair again, pulling him upwards.

Jack rises, upright on his knees, eyes half-lidded as he tilts his head up, sensing Gabe’s movement inwards instead of actually seeing it, practically melting as Gabe kisses him, hard yet soft, easy yet focused, teasing little sounds of want from the low rasp in the back of Jack’s throat -

Gabe burns with deep, acheing pleasure at how easily Jack falls into their kisses, how Jack just follows his touch and his movements with an almost instinctive flow, kissing him back with a hot, smooth openness, soft moans whispered against Gabe’s lips -

“I’ve wanted this for a long time too, Gabe,” Jack murmurs achingly against Gabe’s lips, “Want to ride you so hard -”

Gabe groans low at the feeling of Jack’s desire hummed hot and searing against him, unwinding his fingers from Jack’s hair, as Jack still rises - to his feet now, in a slight crouch to keep breathlessly drinking in Gabe’s kisses -

Gabe’s hands drop to Jack’s hips but -

Jack stands up completely now, grinning down at Gabe as he murmurs, “Let me make you feel like a king, Gabe.”

Gabe watches intensely as Jack slips around, facing the other direction before he starts to lower himself over his lap, Gabe dragging his gaze up Jack’s broad back -

As Jack peeks over his shoulder, smirking with a sultry look as he reaches his right hand back and -

Gabe angles his cock forward, shifting Jack slightly with his own right hand, left hand aligning the tip of his cock with the curve of Jack’s ass and -

Jack moves down -

“Fuck,” Gabe mutters hoarsely, as Jack moans openly, “Oh, god, Gabe -”

As Gabe slides his aching, stiff cock into Jack’s tight, thick heat and -

“Ah, Gabe -” Jack gasps, almost laughing with the pleasure of it, sinking back onto Gabe’s lap as that hard, heavy thickness fills him, perfect in how it pressures him from inside to out, strong and steady and solid in all the right ways and -

Gabe digs his fingertips into Jack’s hips as Jack’s dense, wet pressure slides around him, soft but squeezing tight, smooth but so, so hot, practically melting around the deep, throbbing ache in his cock and -

“Yes, Jack,” Gabe gasps, pulling Jack’s hips down, his own hips moving up a little to push his cock
deep deep deeper into that tense, slicked tightness, “That’s it - keep going -”

“Gabe, fuck -” Jack groans, tilting his head back, eyes fluttering shut as he falls into the pleasure spreading through him, tight and coiling in his groin, up the length of his own cock, lower back aching with it - his legs shake a little as he lowers himself further, arching into it, hands gripping the chair’s arms as he sinks, Gabe pushing higher and higher, deeper and deeper inside him -

“Oh god, you feel so good,” Jack moans, as he presses himself firmly into Gabe’s lap -

And they are finally -

Finally -

Feeling each other.

Gabe exhales a heavy sigh - both relieved and tensed - as he settles back in the chair, eyes dragging down the curve of Jack’s back as his hands instinctively trace up the curve of his hips, biting at his lower lip as he sees how perfect they fit together, saying lowly, “And you feel good too, Jack -”

Before his left hand slips down to grip at Jack’s ass, admiring the way his cock fits inside him, as his right hand slides forward around Jack’s hip, fingers tracing into the fuzz of hair at the base of Jack’s cock -

“So tight for me,” Gabe murmurs, shifting his hips up - just a quick, short motion, but it thrusts his cock in deeper, harder, and Jack flinches with pleasure, the thick stiffness of Gabe’s cock pushing full and steady against the ache inside him, and he moans openly, “Oh god, Gabe -”

And he rocks back instinctively, also pushing Gabe’s cock deep deep deeper inside him, muscles clenching reflexively around the perfect hardness, the feeling of it twisting a hard, hot coil inside him and -

Jack groans lowly, a wordless sound that comes straight from the need in his core, shifting his hands to the end of Gabe’s thighs and knees, opening his own legs more, planting his feet hard on the carpet -

As he rolls his hips and waist unthinkingly, the haze settling deep over him as he rides down on Gabe’s cock deep inside him.

Pleasure roils through Gabe as he moans, the tight tension of Jack’s heat thick and perfect around him, moving his left hand back up the curve of Jack’s lower back as his right hand grips the base of Jack’s cock, squeezing as Jack -

Jack rocks his hips again, riding down down down on Gabe’s cock, pleasure fucking up against his aching pressure, gasping lightly as he feels Gabe’s fingers glide up his back, grip around his dick. His hips and thighs start to move, rocking him up a bit, feeling the incredible thickness of Gabe’s cock slide out, smooth and firm, before pushing himself down again, Gabe’s cock fucking in against his melting need, perfect pressure overwhelming, the edges of his senses starting to blur -

“That’s it, Jack,” Gabe murmurs, voice encouraging but dripping with desire, gaze fixated on how Jack starts to rock on him, Jack’s tightness hot and thick, a raw sweetness that burns the whole way through, the ache coiling harder and harder in his cock and his groin. Jack’s whole body moves with him - his cock and his hands, riding in his lap - hips and waist winding back and forth, and Gabe snakes his left hand up and up, rasping out, “Yes, Jack - let me see you work it -”

“Gabe! Gabe - fuck -” Jack gasps, shuddering as he fucks himself down on Gabe’s cock, pushing it
deep deep deeper inside him, grinding it hard hard harder against his ache, the feeling starting to unwind him, pushing down and rising up and pushing down again, eyes fluttering, light and shadow and sex melting together - Jack rocks back, squeezing hard against Gabe’s cock, groaning, “Oh god, Gabe, Gabe -”

Gabe grunts as Jack clenches tight around him, his cock aching with Jack’s strong pleasure, as he strokes his hand up Jack’s own stiff cock, left fingers tracing up Jack’s left shoulder, up the arc of his neck before -

Eyes barely seeing, glazed over with smoky haze, Gabe leans in -

And whispers against the curve of Jack’s spine:

“Let me hear you sing, Jack.”

Before he winds his left fingers in Jack’s hair -

Right hand slipping to Jack’s hip -

And as he pulls on that blonde fluff -

Gabe thrusts up

Hard.

“GABE!” Jack half-gasps, half-screams as the feeling bursts inside him, blossoming out in hot waves, lightning up every nerve even as pain ribbons across his scalp and neck, the mixing of pain and pleasure and strong and sensual perfect throughout him, deep across every sense, eyes flaring open wide as Gabe pulls him back even as Gabe’s cock fucks up up inside him and god, it’s all he can do to rock his own body back down down down, moaning in a half-dazed chant, “Yes, Gabe - fuck me, fuck me - oh god, don’t stop -”

Gabe can feel how the thrust makes Jack surge with pleasure, can feel Jack’s thick heat clench around him, deep and throbbing, tight yet tighter, and Gabe groans as his own pleasure rocks through him, the feeling fucking up and down the length of his cock deep in Jack, murmuring hot and breathless against Jack’s skin, “You sound good like this, Jack - fuck yeah, that’s it, nice and tight for me -”

Gabe thrusts up again and again, rocking his hips harder and harder each time, and fuck, the pleasure of it nearly fucks Jack out of his mind, as he starts to writhe and squirm in Gabe’s lap, his own rhythm getting sporadic as he rides down on Gabe’s cock. Gabe’s fingers pulling at his hair, his hips, and he’s panting and gasping, “Gabe, Gabe! Oh god, Gabe, you feel so good - harder, harder -”

Gabe practically glares as Jack squeezes and throbs around him, trying to concentrate on the steadiness of his thrusts, as pleasure lances and ribbons through him, but Jack’s heat is tight and soft, slick but strong as Gabe fucks into it, and fuck, all of Gabe’s sense of control is starting to unravel as they work each other, and -

“Gabe, yes, Gabe, Gabe - more -” Jack moans, words dropping in a discordant but blissful haze -

Gabe nips at the thick muscle under Jack’s right shoulderblade as Jack starts to bounce in his lap, short little up-down motions as he loses himself in the motion, fucking himself on Gabe’s cock, mind falling apart as Gabe Gabe Gabe becomes all he can feel, all he wants to feel -

Fuck, Gabe almost glowers as Jack squeezes him, and he pulls on that blonde hair again, making
Jack arch into his hard, deep thrust as he rasps beneath Jack’s right ear, “How bad do you want me, Jack?”

Jack shivers, feeling pulled apart in all the right ways as Gabe grinds his cock hard against the tight but bursting ache inside him, and Jack moans, low voice cracking with want, “So bad, Gabe, so bad - you’re so good .”

Gabe jerks his hips up hard, pushing his cock in as deep as it’ll go, relishing the way it makes Jack tremble and squeeze around it, murmuring, “I want to make you come again, Jack -”

And Jack -

Jack’s whole body tenses deep with that -

Pleasure bursting through both of them -

As Jack manages to turn his head towards the right, murmuring closer to Gabe, “Make me, Gabe .”

And that -

That -

Sets Gabe

On fire.

He lets go of Jack’s cock, snapping his right hand up to Jack’s abs, thrusting his cock in in hard, before he pushes both of them up up up and -

Jack gasps, eyes flaring open wide as he feels Gabe’s cock fuck into him hard, pushing in deeper than ever, Gabe’s whole body rising, Gabe’s right hand steadying him as they stand, Gabe’s left hand shifting to his left shoulder and -

“Oh god, Gabe!” Jack shouts, pleasure rushing through both of them as they rise from the chair, hot and tight and entwined together, Jack squeezing down as the sheer pressure of Gabe’s cock pushes all the way in, and Jack almost sobs with pure, sensual bliss as he shakes -

“Mm, you’re tight like this, Jack,” Gabe chuckles, pressing his lips to the space just below Jack’s right ear, as pleasure melts through him from Jack’s tight muscles, up his cock, deep into his groin, and damn, Gabe takes a moment just to pull his hips back a little before he rocks in deep again, enjoying how Jack shudders around him, humming as he nips at Jack’s ear, “You like me this deep?”

“Yes, Gabe, yes -” Jack gasps, voice low and liquid but cracking like smoke, pleasure burning through him as -

Gabe rolls his hips again, and both of them shudder as pleasure coils through them, hot and hard and thick, and he teases Jack, “Keep saying my name like that, Jack -”

Before Gabe manages to torque them to the left -

And he bends Jack over the side of the bed.

Jack gasps as he falls forward into the soft fabric of the comforter, hands gripping at it, twisting his head to the left to barely look up at Gabe over his shoulder, vision glazed over with a sultry smokiness -
Gabe smirks as he sees Jack look up at him in profile, his cock still deep inside Jack’s tight heat, and fuck, this is a good look for him, broad body nestled in white cotton, blonde hair ruffled from Gabe pulling it, blue eye hazy with endless desire, ass still tight around his cock and -

Gabe bites at his lower lip, reflexively rolling his hips, pulling his cock out a bit before thrusting back in, and Jack twitches with the feeling of it, his inner muscles tightening instinctively, strong and slick around Gabe’s cock and damn -

Gabe could get used to this.

Jack shivers as pleasure ripples through him from Gabe’s short little thrust, watches as Gabe rolls his shoulders and lifts his arms, tugging his shirt up over his head and -

A low, guttural moan of want slips out of the back of Jack’s throat as his gaze drags down Gabe’s thick chest, how beautifully bronzed it is in the gilded light, every muscle curved perfectly, eye catching on the scars scattered like small stars and traces of smoke through Gabe’s skin -

As he drops the shirt somewhere (anywhere), Gabe smirks again, chuckling lowly, “That’s a good look for you, soldier - you like what you see?”

“Yeah,” Jack cracks hoarsely, giving Gabe a sly half-smirk, “You look like you belong there.”

Gabe grins back, saying richly, “I do belong here, Jack -”

As he thrusts deep into Jack.

Jack shouts indistinctly, eyes shutting, gripping down hard in the blankets as he shudders with the pleasure of it, thick and hard and full, Gabe fucking into him with that perfect depth, as he feels Gabe’s fingers dig into the sides of his hips and -

Jack’s shouting turns to easy, liquid moans as he feels Gabe’s chest - smooth, warm skin and thick, broad muscles - press down against his back -

And Gabe’s lips also press against his left ear as that voice - like sultry smoke and sensual shadows - whispers enticingly, “Because tonight -”

And Gabe rocks his hips hard, fucking his cock deep against Jack’s aching, melting point, pleasure bursting blinding hot inside Jack as Jack almost whimpers -

“You promised to be mine,” Gabe murmurs.

Gabe grips Jack’s hips fiercely, keeping Jack in place as he starts to thrust a steady but dense pace, pushing in deep deep deeper before pulling out and pushing in in again, biting down at the spot on the line of Jack’s neck as Jack gasps beneath him, body shaking, muscles tightening with each thrust, hot and thick and strong around Gabe’s cock and -

“Oh, god - Gabe, Gabe! Fuck yes, oh god, fuck me -” Jack moan-sings, hands scrambling to cling to the sheets as pleasure rocks through him with each push of Gabe’s hips, Gabe’s cock fucking a thick, heavy rhythm inside him, whole body shuddering with each thrust, as he feels the pressure in his ache, his cock, his groin coil hotter -

Gabe nips at the curve of Jack’s shoulder, groaning as he presses his cock deep into Jack’s tight, slicked heat, murmuring, “You like getting bent over and fucked like this, Jack?”

“God, yes, Gabe, fuck yes -” Jack gasps, voice low and dripping the words like liquid smoke into the
fabric of the sheets, his own hips rocking on impulse, grinding his stiff, aching cock into the edge of the bed, even as Gabe fucks deep, hard pleasure inside him -

And Jack manages to get his eyes half-open, barely focused on Gabe’s intense look over his shoulder -

As he gasps, “I’ve wanted you like this for so long -”

Gabe glares, concentrating hard as pleasure pulses through him at Jack’s words, the low, moaning rasp of Jack’s voice, the way Jack tightens thick and hot around his throbbing cock, even as he refuses to change his pace and -

“I’ve dreamed of you like this,” Jack moans, eyes fluttering shut as -

Gabe breaks -

And thrusts in hard hard harder -

Both of them flooding with pleasure as Gabe rides his cock in full and deep -

Grinding the head against Jack’s thick, tight pressure and -

“Fuck!” Jack sobs with ecstasy, writhing beneath Gabe, panting heavy as he recoils with a hard, deep burst of pleasure burning inside him, murmuring in a dazed song, “I dreamt you bent me over a table -”

The words crash through Gabe’s senses and he fucks his cock out and in, hard and relentless -

“Yes!” Jack groans, whole body shaking, muscles spasming as he squeezes around Gabe’s cock, still muttering uncontrollably, “I dreamt you bent me over in the shower -”

Gabe digs his fingers in above Jack’s hip bones even harder, his thrusts getting stronger, deeper, faster -

“God, Gabe - you’re perfect -” Jack whimpers, barely able to see, all his senses blurring - all he feels is Gabe, holding him down, fucking him endlessly, cock thrusting waves upon waves through him, the feeling starting to overwhelm, and Jack groans, “I dreamt you put me on my knees and made me beg for it -”

Gabe groans against Jack’s shoulder, nipping at the swell of it, his own pleasure starting to build hot and hard and dense deep inside him, up his cock, in his groin, winding tighter and tighter and tighter as Jack squeezes and squeezes more and more sporadically -

His pace accelerates, deep deep deeper but fast fast faster, and fuck, he can barely handle how Jack is talking to him - voice low and silken but broken with rasps of raw pleasure - hard sex starting to crash and shatter through both of them and -

“Gabe, yes -” Jack begs, pleads, sobs, “Give it to me, give it to me - make me come for you -”

“How close are you?” Gabe asks, words falling out of him in a half groan, murmured in hot kisses against Jack’s skin, and Jack - eyes half open, relishing the way Gabe fills his vision - chants back, “So close, Gabe, so close - wanna come for you -”

Gabe shuts his eyes, glaring fiercely, before he -
Slides his cock all the way out of Jack’s deep, thick heat -

Jack gasps, eyes flaring wide, delighting the feeling of Gabe’s hard, heavy cock pulling slick and strong out of him before -

Gabe leans back, briefly admiring Jack bent over and shuddering for him, buried in the white fabric -

Before he tugs at Jack’s hips -

And flips him over.

Jack groans, shifting and rotating as he feels Gabe start to flip his hips and waist, lifting himself up and flopping over, too fucked out of his mind to care about awkward elbows or his broad movements and -

There’s a small moment of adjusting, with Jack sliding up a little more onto his back, ass right on the edge of the bed, chest heaving as he stares up at Gabe and -

Jack shivers a little under the raw intensity in Gabe’s gaze, brilliant with a gorgeous, smoke-laden and sensual radiance, rich in the low light, how perfect every angle of his body and every curve of his muscles look and -

Gabe catches his breath, observing Jack for a moment, assessing how good Jack looks, how the blissed out glaze in his eyes only deepens the endless blue of them, the red bite and kiss marks across his neck and shoulders, the way his hair fluffs gold against the white sheets, his cock hard against his waist and dripping with precum -

And -

Without thinking -

Jack spreads his legs, gripping at the back of his knees and -

Gabe smirks, cock twitching at the sight as he mutters hoarsely, “Fucking hell, that’s hot, Jack.”

“You said it,” Jack murmurs back, his own voice shaking slightly, the pleasure still hot and ready inside him, “You belong inside me.”

Gabe bites back a groan as he strokes himself a little, chuckling lowly, “I sure as hell do.”

He glances down, lining the tip of his cock up with Jack’s hole, and -

Gabe flicks his gaze back up, staring down at Jack as he adds deeply, “And I’m going to make you watch me -”

Jack gasps, eyes wide, tightening up reflexively -

As Gabe pushes his cock miserably slow and miserably perfect -

Back into Jack’s ass -

“- As I make you come,” Gabe smirks, self-satisfied as Jack squeezes around him, hot and full again, pleasure lancing up his cock as he grinds in.

Jack groans, head falling back as his body reacts to Gabe filling him again, muscles shuddering and tightening around Gabe’s hard, thick cock, how it presses and pushes pleasure through him inside to
out. Gabe briefly shuts his eyes, delighting in the smooth strength inside Jack, exhaling low as Jack throbs and shakes around him, pleasure thick around his cock -

Before he settles his hands on the back of Jack’s thighs, just below Jack’s own hands -

And rolls his hips, fucking his cock in deep and hard.

“Ah, yes -” Jack gasps, voice cracking, as pleasure crashes through him from Gabe’s cock, deep and full inside him, his own fingers shaking on his skin, legs trembling as the feeling of it starts to get overwhelming, and - with eyes half-lidded - Jack practically chants, “Oh god, Gabe, yes - fuck, you’re so deep -”

Gabe opens his eyes, his own expression intense as he starts to thrust again, pulling back and pushing in in in, his rhythm hot and heavy, relentless as pleasure starts to fuck up from Jack’s hot, throbbing ache, his cockhead starting to feel tight, the need in his groin winding and twisting harder and harder -

“Gabe, Gabe - yes, more, oh god -” Jack moans, words falling from his mouth in a daze, “Fuck, Gabe - right there, right there - give it to me -”

And fuck, Jack looks and feels perfect like this, splayed out for him, shuddering and shaking from his cock, from his thrusts, broad body shivering with each roll of his hips, muscles squeezing and clenching around him, legs open wide even as Jack’s inner heat tightens hard, long dick starting to drip across his abs, eyes almost glowing blue with a melted, dreamlike haze as Jack pants and moans beneath him.

Jack can barely keep himself together as Gabe starts to fuck him utterly senseless - the edges of his senses starting to blur, thoughts fumbling, mind unraveling as the hot, tight core of pleasure bursts and rattles with each of Gabe’s deep, hard thrusts inside him, and fuck, he can’t even hang onto his own legs, hands slipping to ball into restless fists in the loose fabric of the comforter and -

“Oh, god, fuck, fuck -” Jack gasps, eyes flaring wide as -

Gabe fucks his cock deep against his bursting pressure point and -

“Fuck, Gabe!” Jack shouts, squirming as light and heat burn at him, hot and hard and perfect, and all he can see

All he can feel

Inside to out

Everything he is

Is -

“Gabe -” Jack sing-sobs, eyes focusing solely on Gabe above him, all deep, gilded bronze and thick muscles, dark hair tousled over his forehead -

Gabe’s eyes like silk smoke - laced with gold light - staring down at him -

Raw power and sheer control and endlessly enticing and -

Gabe smirks, half-chuckling, half-flinching as he feels Jack squeeze hard around his aching, stiff cock, how Jack’s fingers twist knots in the sheets as he clings to them for control, for something to
grip to -

But Gabe knows.

Because he can feel it -

Can feel how Jack is falling apart, melting beneath him, legs shaking, whole body shuddering, ass tight and hot, as Gabe fucks him to the edge of himself and fuck -

“You wanna come, Jack?” Gabe gasps, his own hips jerking sporadically, hard and rough as Jack’s inner muscles tighten and clench in waves around his cock, pleasure rocking through both of them, hot and thick and full, deep in both of them and -

“Yes, Gabe, fuck - make me come -” Jack pleads - he’ll do anything Gabe wants, anything Gabe asks for, he loves seeing Gabe like this -

He loves feeling Gabe like this -

“Fuck me, fuck me -” Jack is rambling, everything is starting to slip in his mind, his body is hot and tightly fucked, his dick is aching, he can feel each thrust of Gabe’s cock driving him closer and closer and -

“Make me come for you -” Jack begs, his words are almost incoherent but damn

His voice is music to all of Gabe’s senses.

Gabe glares, forcing himself to concentrate as pleasure jolts up his cock, into his groin, ribboning through his body with each of Jack’s squeezes. He shifts he slides his left hand higher on Jack’s right leg, gripping the back of his knee -

As he moves his right hand to grip and squeeze around Jack’s dick.

Jack shouts hoarsely, eyes open wide as pleasure floods through him, inside and out, feeling Gabe’s cock fuck him hard as Gabe’s hand strokes at his aching dick and -

“Look at me, Jack.”

Through the haze of his pleasure, Jack stares up at Gabe and -

He practically sobs

At how incredible Gabe looks

Acts

Feels.

Gabe stares down at him, those dark eyes beautiful under the soft, sweet glow of the starlights, the deep desire and raw pleasure looking endless in the shifting smoke and shadows, and Jack can feel the rich, perfect warmth of the gold underneath cast over him and -

Jack melts.

Gabe feels Jack tighten deep around his cock, how all of Jack tenses for him, ready for him -

And Gabe grins -
But before he can say anything -

Jack

*Comes.*

“*Gabe!*”

Just the *look-sense-feeling* of Gabe perfectly content and perfectly *deep* inside him makes Jack come *undone* - hard, tight pleasure *bursts* through him, deep from where Gabe’s cock grinds against his aching, unraveling pressure and from the unending edges of his stiff, throbbing cock, spurting white hot from where Gabe’s thumb rubs at his cockhead and *fuck*, he almost *sobs* through the blissful, strong sting of it, moaning openly as he full-body shudders in the sheets, fingers twisting tight in the fabric -

As all of *Gabe* blurs his boundaries -

And overwhelms him in hot, hard perfection.

And - eyes open, toes curled, legs shaking, body shivering, fingers gripping, chest heaving -

Jack squeezes down *tight* around Gabe and

Feels

*Full and fulfilled.*

A low groan rasps in the back of Gabe’s throat as he *feels* Jack come - Jack clutches down *hard* around his cock, endlessly tight, *incredibly* thick and hot even through the condom, smooth but *so satisfying*, fucking back wave after hot wave of pleasure into his body, and it’s all he can do to push his hips in as *hard* as he can, grinding his cockhead against Jack’s velvety but thick tightness -

And he *feels* Jack come - wet heat spurts from Jack’s dick against the rim of his right hand, across Jack’s trembling torso and chest, muscles spasming, white drops splattering across Jack’s skin -

And he *feels* Jack come - the way Jack shouts his name like a pitch-broken musical note, perfect to his senses, the way Jack’s eyes are locked to his, hazy and yet brilliantly clear, the blue in them deeper than ever before -

The way Jack *looks* at him, without Gabe ever saying another word -

The way Jack *comes for him*, how

Easy

Jack falls apart just with him.

Only with *him*.

And Gabe

Feels

*Full and fulfilled.*

Even without coming himself
Gabe knows -

“God damn, Jack,” Gabe murmurs, borderline blissed out, right on the edge of his own orgasm, shuddering as Jack’s dense, deep heat squeezes and shudders around him, “I could fuck you like this forever.”

Gabe knows he could spend the rest of his life -

The rest of their lives -

Doing this.

One deep in the other -

The other holding the one deep -

Entwined in each other -

In pleasure and in promises.

Jack pants and gasps as he comes down from the high of it, blinking blearily a few times, slowly processing how Gabe is still watching him, and -

Instinctively -

Jack is pulling Gabe’s right hand from his cock, guiding it to his mouth and -

Gabe raises an eyebrow in slightly surprise, but he doesn’t resist it - instead, he lets go of Jack’s right leg, bending over and gliding forward, letting Jack pull his right hand to his mouth and -

Jack sighs with deep, heavy contentment, clearly only half present as he murmurs in a low, liquid purr of a voice, “So good, Gabe.”

“...I can tell,” Gabe chuckles, also deeply satisfied as Jack - somewhat reflexively - licks at his own white, sticky mess on Gabe’s hand, humming against his skin and his fingers. Pleasure simmers in Gabe’s groin at the sight-feeling of it, still hard and deep in Jack’s heat.

As Jack licks up the salty, bitter stickiness on the side of Gabe’s hand -

Something in his mind half-clicks in place -

And he…

Pauses mid-kiss -

Scowling slightly at Gabe.

Gabe gives him an amused if confused look back, laughing lowly as he settles his left elbow in the sheets by Jack’s right ribs, saying, “...Something wrong, Jack?”

Jack squints at him, and it’s the most blissed out but somehow skeptical stare Gabe has ever seen on him, like Jack is still partially riding the high of his orgasm but also focused on something completely out of place.

But then -
Gabe inhales steeply as pleasure *bolts through him* as -

He feels Jack *squeeze* **hard** around his cock.

And suddenly -

There are hands on the sides of Gabe’s face -

And he blinks in bewildered but sensually surprised pleasure -

As Jack gives him a bizarrely sultry *glare* as that low, tidal storm voice rumbles angrily, “You didn’t *come*, Gabe.”

…

And **fuck** -

Jack being blissed out sexy-angry shouldn’t be *hot* -

But god damn -

It *is*.

“…It was hot seeing you come,” Gabe says honestly, but there’s a tint of laughter to his words, because **damn**, Jack is still mostly fucked out of his mind, but there’s something undeniably attractive about seeing him with this frustrated but oddly sensual bittersweetness to him, blue eyes still clouded over with sensual smokiness but also his eyebrows frowning, his features pulled into a pout and -

Suddenly -

Jack’s hands are gone from the sides of his face and -

Gabe feels them grip **hard**, just below his ass and above his thighs and -

“What -” Gabe starts to say -

Before Jack suddenly pulls him in in **in** -

As **deep** as his cock will go and -

Gabe *groans* automatically as Jack’s ass squeezes around his aching, throbbing cock again, burying his face against the curve of Jack’s chest and -

Without warning -

Gabe finds everything torquing and twisting -

As Jack turns them both over.

…

Gabe blinks once, flopped over on his back, knees over the side of the bed, feet against the floor, the fluff of the comforter settling around him -

And he practically *gawks* -

As Jack rises, shifting slightly, adjusting his knees on either side of Gabe’s hips, planting his hands
on Gabe’s chest -

Before Jack rolls his shoulders a little, eyelids fluttering open into a sultry, half-lidded look -

And Jack states with a voice that sounds like the richest whiskey:

“**You are going** to come inside me, Gabe.”

…

And **god damn** -

Gabe almost comes from that statement **alone**.

A groan breaks in the back of his throat, even as Gabe manages to half-croak out, “I’m - I’m wearing a condom, Jack.”

“I don’t care,” Jack says with a deep, rich tone of command, squeezing **tight** around Gabe’s still-hard cock, and Gabe flinches as pleasure spikes through him. Jack settles his hips a little, still stating with that tone of full, utter authority, “I **want** to feel you come inside me.”

Gabe just continues to gawk even as pleasure and utter delight flood through him, slipping his hands to the sides of Jack’s hips as he mutters, “Won’t you get overstimulated?”

“I sure as hell hope so,” Jack half-says, half-sighs with that deep, blissed-out contentment as he straightens his back a little more, settling back on his ass, “I want to come constantly for you.”

“**Holy hell,**” slips impulsively from Gabe’s throat, as Jack shifts himself -

Grins a devilish, satisfied little smirk at Gabe -

And then sinks himself down the full length of his cock, tight and squeezing the whole way.

Gabe **moans** openly, his own muscles clenching in his abs and thighs, toes curling as that hot, dense pleasure slides down his aching cock, Jack’s weight settling hard and heavy on his hips - perfect in how **solid** he is - and **fuck**, even though he just came, Jack’s inner heat is still **incredibly tight**, full and fulfilling around his cock and -

Jack settles his hands on Gabe’s abs, as a low, rich groan of deep and deeply satisfied pleasure rolls out of the back of his throat, head tilted back a little, his own cock - only half-hard but still hot and aching - spasming slightly as he feels the full, thick **pressure** of Gabe’s hard cock fill him again, almost **painful** in how **good**, how **perfect** it feels inside him.

They just shudder and shiver together for a moment, Gabe struggling to refocus on Jack straddling him -

As Jack looks down at him, grinning with a charming, sensual smirk as he murmurs hotly:

“**My turn.**”

And then

Jack

**Goes.**
Gabe barely has time to do anything more than shout hoarsely and dig his fingers into Jack’s hips, gripping tight as pleasure rocks through him, up and down up and down up and down his aching, thick dick as Jack rides him hard, rising and arching his hips, ass squeezing, before he grinds back down, tighter than before, muscles hot and slick around Gabe’s cock and fuck, Gabe’s whole body is shuddering with the full, thick pleasure of Jack fucking himself on his dick and -

“Oh, god damn -” Gabe gasps, head falling back in the softness of the comforter, chest heaving as pleasure undulates through him, his cockhead tight and throbbing as it grinds and rubs in Jack’s thick, wet heat, the feeling winding tight through his cock, coiling and pulsing hard in his groin - fuck, his legs shudder and shake, still constrained in his pants, feet barely feeling the carpet and -

Jack nearly sobs as pleasure - deep, overwhelming, miserably perfect pleasure - spikes through him again, pressure points inside him aching and so sore, so blissfully sore as he fucks himself up and down up and down up and down on Gabe’s cock, his mind edging out again, consciousness barely together, all he can see-feel-want is Gabe Gabe Gabe, inside and out, full and fulfilling and overflowing, and -

“Fuck, fuck yes, Gabe - oh god, so good, so good - want you inside me forever -” Jack murmurs in a near-chant, words falling in a disorganized haze, voice low and shredded from shouting but still, he’s just going, riding Gabe because it’s all he can sense, all he can feel -

All he wants -

“Gabe, fuck, wanna feel you come -” Jack sings, words like a prayer, an incantation, a spell on his senses, because the feeling of Gabe’s cock inside him, the feeling of Gabe’s fingers dragging across his hips and ass is overwhelming and -

Gabe shudders hard as pleasure burns and lightnings through him, hot and hotter, thick and thicker as Jack bounces and rides on his cock like there’s nothing but them in the world - Jack is tight and deep and incredible, getting tighter and deeper and better with each push down down down, fucking Gabe’s cock up and in up and in up and in, squeezing and throbbing around him and -

Fuck, Jack looks-acts-feels amazing like this, better than Gabe ever imagined - his body arched into the curve of their sex, his hands planted on Gabe’s abs, cock half-hard but getting harder again, leaking more liquid white heat from its tip, mouth open as he moans and sings Gabe’s name over and over, eyes half-lidded but the blue of them is practically endless in the low light -

And Jack -

Jack gives him that sweet, sensual, almost delirious little half-smile -

(The one that haunts Gabe’s dreams)

And hums in that raw, deep voice:

“I love feeling you inside me.”

And Gabe

Falls.

Something inside his mind shatters as his fingers grip hard at Jack’s hips, forcing Jack down as his own hips thrust up, fucking his cock in in deep, his lower body shuddering and rocking as he pushes inside Jack, cockhead rubbing and throbbing hard at Jack’s pressure point, and -
Jack shouts, rocking back as he grinds his ass down on Gabe’s hips, head thrown back as Gabe’s cock fucks unbelievably hard and deep against his ache, the pleasure burning and boiling over, flooding through him, his own cock spasming more white hot wetness across Gabe’s abs, voice cracking and fraying as he pants wordless moans as -

Something rough and hoarse cracks from the back of Gabe’s throat as he pounds into Jack’s tight, strong pressure, fucking his cock in in in furiously, hips thrusting and rolling sporadically, rhythm completely uneven and unrelenting, his cock aching and throbbing as Jack’s muscles tighten and squeeze around him and -

“Ah, ah - Gabe, Gabe -” Jack gasps, whole body shaking, tremors of pained-pleasure racking his hips, his waist, his torso, thighs shaking on either side of Gabe’s hips, fingernails scratching down Gabe’s abs as he begs, “Oh, fuck, Gabe, yes - give it to me, fuck me - oh Gabe, come for me -”

Pleasure sears through Gabe’s cock, up his groin, in his waist and lower back, coiling hard and harder, tight and tighter, deep and deeper, and he groans, fucking his cock hard into Jack’s heat -

And fuck -

The edge of it is so close, so tight -

Jack is so hot, so tight around his cock and -

“Fuck, Jack -” Gabe gasps, fingers squeezing, thighs shaking, toes curling reflexively, as his cock aches, tightness winding in and around it and he moans, “Oh fuck, gonna come -”

Jack shudders, barely hanging on himself, but he manages to sing, “Oh, please, Gabe, please - I need to feel you come -”

And then -

Jack rides himself as far down as he can go, squeezing hard -

As Gabe fucks up, deep into Jack’s tightness, as hard and as high as he can go and -

“Oh, fuck, Jack -”

And Gabe comes

Hard.

He shudders and shakes, pleasure breaking hard inside him, crashing through his senses, burning through his core as it melts back down and fucks up, his cock twitching and spasming as his pleasure unravels, thick and white hot from the tip of his dick, liquid heat searing and full inside Jack, wet and slick and perfect -

And Jack squeezes him through it, tight and thick and incredible, full and fulfilling in a way Gabe hasn’t completely felt before, heavy and dense around his cock, heavy and dense in his hands, voice low and moaning as they melt together.

And Jack feels Gabe come - even with the condom on, Jack can feel the way Gabe’s cock grinds and rubs inside him, pressure full and fulfilling, how he can feel the tightening and shuddering of Gabe’s cock in his own dense, squeezing heat, how Gabe’s cock seems to fill him all the way to his core -

How Gabe - his cock, his hands, his body, his orgasm - pushes Jack right over the edge again,
pleasure overwhelming as Jack’s own begging turns to moans turns to little soft, melted whimpers -
As more of his own white hot pleasure spurts from his aching dick.
They shudder and tremble together, bodies shaking with the way the sensuality of the moment blisses through them, barely able to think, barely able to breathe -
Only able to touch and hold each other -
Only able to feel and ride each other’s highs out -
Tight around and tight inside each other.
They both take a moment just
To
Be
Together.
No thoughts, no words, no charming teases, no clever quotes.
Just
Them
Together
Inside
And out.
...After a moment, Jack starts to slide forward, as Gabe instinctively moves his hands from Jack’s hips to his lower back, rubbing soothing circles in his skin -
As Jack leans in, settling on his elbows, framing Gabe’s face -
As Gabe looks up at him, completely blissed out, completely full and fulfilled -
And Jack looks down at him, completely full and fulfilled, completely satisfied -
And Jack closes the last bit of space between them
And kisses Gabe.
Gabe accepts it easily, immediately, kissing back honestly, earnestly. They open for each other, small motions of sweet, soft sighs of contentment, Jack brushing his fingers on the sides of Gabe’s head, tips tracing through the soft buzz of his hair, and Gabe practically hums with a lyricless joy, as a quiet, smoky happiness drifts between them.
After a moment, Jack pulls back slightly, eyes opening slowly, still savoring the taste of Gabe on his lips and the feeling of Gabe deep inside him, exhaling a sweet, satisfied sigh as his gaze traces over Gabe’s, admiring the way the low lighting catches on the tints and hues of gold in them. Gabe settles back a bit, his own eyes drifting down Jack’s content expression, caressing over his little half-smile and the velvety blue in his gaze, still relishing in the tight but relaxed warmth of being inside him.
“...Looking pretty pleased with yourself, John Francis Morrison,” Gabe teases him, his own lips quirking into a sly smirk. Jack laughs - a rich, full sound that rumbles low in his chest, and Gabe can feel it press into his own, a smooth, satisfying feeling - before he grins that crooked, happy smirk back at Gabe, chuckling, “I did just have really great sex, Gabriel Reyes.”

“‘Great,’ huh?” Gabe asks pointedly, quirking an eyebrow as his smirk only deepens.

But -

Instead of playing coy or tossing out a smartass remark -

Jack just grins completely genuinely -

Before he murmurs:

“You might say it was some of the best sex I’ve ever had.”

And -

With Gabe gawking a little over his honesty -

Jack kisses him slow and simmering.

A small noise that sounds like something in between a pleased purr and a soft choke of pleasure hums from the back of Gabe’s throat, cause Jack to laugh low against his lips, utterly delighted at pulling the shocked reaction from Gabe. Jack leans back again, his gaze so warm, so tender, so beloved, that all Gabe can manage to mutter is:

“...Seriously?”

Jack grins again, a faint blush on his cheeks as he rubs his thumbs over Gabe’s own blushing cheeks, saying brightly, “Believe me, Gabe: it definitely was.”

And -

Oh, Jack thinks, caught slightly off-guard

As an expression of quiet, but gorgeous joy spread across Gabe’s face, his lips curving into a soft grin, his eyes alighting with a deep, beautiful glow, the white fabric framing his whole head and upper body like light-gilded clouds and -

Jack would give anything and everything to see him look like this again.

And quieted by Gabe’s expression, Jack leans back in, murmuring honestly against Gabe’s lips:

“...But I’m happy to do it a few more times to prove it’s the best.”

The words - said in that deep, tidal rhythm of a voice - slip under Gabe’s skin in the best, most sensual ways, and he shivers a little, loving how Jack kisses him with a sultry, smooth earnestness.

When Jack breaks the kiss, Gabe assesses his open but slightly heated expression, before he chuckles with a dry rasp, “And I would be more than happy to help prove that, Jack.”

More color flushes on Jack’s cheeks, and he grins, biting at his lower lip as his gaze drags down Gabe’s face. A small rush of pleasure pulses through Gabe’s body at the look in Jack’s eyes, his cock tightening in Jack’s heat.
When Jack glances back up at Gabe’s eyes, Gabe smirks at him, murmuring with a smoky rasp, “C’mere, Jack.”

Jack grins back, leaning in to press his lips against Gabe’s, humming deeply, “Are you starting that right now?”

“Only if you want to,” Gabe chuckles -

As Jack gives him a slow, sultry, simmering kiss.

As the kiss burns through them, hot and steady, long and lasting, both men exhale with a deep, pleased contentment, and Jack whispers richly, “...I want to.”

“...I love hearing you say that,” Gabe chuckles, nipping at Jack’s lower lip as he slides his hands down Jack’s lower back to the curve of his ass, squeezing at the rounded muscle teasingly. Jack shivers, his inner muscles tightening reflexively around Gabe’s cock, and Gabe moans a little as pleasure throbs up it, making it stiffen more.

Jack gasps with slight surprise as he feels Gabe’s cock shift inside him, getting harder and thicker again, soft, sugary pleasure melting inside him as Gabe kisses him with a deep, steady heat - not rough and raw like before, but with a slower yet stronger intensity, like a fire burning full or a storm building its thunder.

Jack shivers as Gabe slowly rocks his hips, once again pushing his cock deeper into Jack’s ache, both men shuddering as Jack squeezes around it, with Jack moaning into the kiss, “Oh fuck, Gabe -”

“Gonna fuck you nice and slow this round, Jack,” Gabe murmurs hotly, voice low, melting like smoked sugar, pulling his hips down, sliding his cock halfway out before slowly but steadily pushing his way back in, the full thickness of it pressing hard and incredibly full inside Jack as he almost whimpers from the overwhelming feeling of it. As Jack groans with a deep tone, Gabe grins against his lips, chuckling, “Gonna make you feel every thrust.”

“God, Gabe - I want that so bad,” Jack whispers encouragingly, shuddering as Gabe rolls his hips nice and slow, his cock working in and out, in and out, in and out of Jack’s deep, throbbing pressure and -

Gabe smirks -

Before he lowers his hands even further along the curve of Jack’s ass -

And presses both index fingers against Jack’s tight, clenching ring of muscle around his cock.

“Ah!” Jack gasps, eyes flaring wide with surprise as pleasure spikes sharp and full through him -

And he gives a full body shudder as Gabe teases both index fingers in on either side of his dick.

“Oh fuck, Gabe!” Jack half-moans, half-whimpers, the tension in his body collapsing as tight, thick pleasure bursts through him, his ass feeling so full, so perfectly full as Gabe slow fucks him nice and hard, steady and strong, fingering the inner rim of his ass even as his thick, hard cock grinds and rubs inside his aching throb.

“You like that?” Gabe asks smugly against Jack’s lips as Jack shivers and shudders in his hands, squeezing and tightening around his increasingly-hard cock, pleasure throbbing and riding through him as he fucks Jack hard and easy -
“Oh, fuck yes I do,” Jack moans, kissing him in between soft, breathless gasps, panting, “Oh god, Gabe, fuck - that feels so good -”

Gabe nips at Jack’s lips -

And slips the tips of his middle fingers in as well.

“Oh god, Gabe!” Jack groans openly, practically melting as pleasure burns hot and overflowing through him, the feeling searing all over that he barely notices how his dick drips white hot again, how his ass feels smooth and overfucked in all the best ways, every muscle twitching and curling as he huddles against Gabe’s chest and torso, ass squeezing and clenching as Gabe slowly thrusts his cock in and out, in and out, in and out of his aching, wet heat -

“Mmm, you’re still so tight for me, Jack,” Gabe chuckles, fucking his dick at a miserably slow, miserably hard, miserably perfect pace, both men shuddering as pleasure simmers hot and steady through them, and Gabe smirks, “I love it when you’re good for me.”

“Oh, Gabe -” Jack gasps, writhing with the motion of Gabe slow fucking him, “I always want to be good for you -”

“God damn, that’s music to my ears, Jack,” Gabe laughs a low, liquid smoke laugh before -

He pulls his fingertips out of Jack’s ass -

Gives one last, hard roll of his hips, fucking his cock in deep -

And - adjusting his grip on Jack -

Carefully and tenderly rolls them over.

Jack moans with deep, easy contentment and satisfaction, letting himself fall back into the fluff of the comforter again, a little bit higher on the bed this time, squeezing his inner muscles around Gabe’s thick, heavy cock as Gabe rises above him. Gabe pushes his hips in more, grinding his cockhead hard and firm and blissfully slow against Jack’s inner ache, and Jack moans openly, body shaking as pleasure rocks through him, hands trembling on the sides of Gabe’s face -

As Gabe kisses him hot and heavy.

Gabe chuckles with a low, melting rasp to his tone, delighting in how Jack squeezes his stiff, thick cock nice and tight, savoring the kiss between them as pleasure burns and winds hot and dense in his dick, his groin, his lower back. He slowly lifts himself up off of Jack, relishing in the deep, blissful haze that’s glazed over Jack’s eyes again, how Jack’s mouth slips open a little, soft moans and sweet sounds of heady pleasure slipping from the back of his throat instinctively, body shivering as Gabe pulls his cock out and rides it back in, deep and full.

Gabe gives him one last, hot kiss, lifting his left hand to pull Jack’s right from the side of his face as he murmurs with deep desire, “Keep yourself hot for me, Jack. I gotta change the condom.”

And as he rises, Gabe drags Jack’s right hand down to his stiff cock between them, dripping with slow-fucked pleasure.

Jack seems to only barely understand what Gabe said, but he complies all the same, wrapping his hand around his cock, pumping slow and steady as Gabe straightens up, rolls his hips once more -

Jack shudders, tightening with a perfect, hot squeeze around his cock -
Before he pulls it out completely.

The condom is slicked up and stretched out, and Gabe admires his own liquid white heat caught in the tip of it, carefully rolling it off. He groans a little as the thin tightness of it slips off his aching cock, relishing the chilled freedom of the air. He ties the end of the condom, glancing to his right, where he spots the small trash can by the dresser a little ways past the end of the bed.

Gabe gives one last glance towards Jack, who melts with pleasure under his gaze, stroking harder at just the *sight* of him, before he chuckles lowly and shuffles off to the trash can.

Jack gasps, his cock shuddering in his own grip as he strokes at himself, body tensing and relaxing in the same miserably slow, miserably hot pace Gabe had fucked into him only moments before, biting his lower lip as he watches Gabe toss the condom in the can. Gabe turns around, easing his boxer briefs and pants off the rest of the way, watching Jack the whole time as he shucks the clothes to the floor and -

“That’s it, Jack,” Gabe mutters encouragingly as he heads back towards the side of the bed, “Keep touching yourself for me -”

“Gabe -” Jack murmurs, shaking as pleasure cuts through him with a particularly good stroke. Gabe chuckles again, eyes dragging down Jack’s body as he reaches for the box of condoms on the bedside table with his left hand.

As Gabe pulls one packet out of the box, Jack - mostly because he’s now fucked out of his mind and steeped with pleasure - manages to say softly:

“...You don’t have to wear one.”

Gabe *freezes* mid-tear, eyes flicking up to Jack’s face as Jack continues to slowly and steadily pump his cock, expression open and honest and *wanting* -

“...I’ve seen your medical records, Gabe,” Jack continues, still honest, still full of pleasure and wanting Gabe Gabe Gabe, “I know we’re both clean -”

Gabe shuts his eyes, scowling a little, mostly in deep concentration to force himself *not* to give in to Jack’s sultry, smoky words, and he mutters back just as honestly, “...Let’s save this conversation for next time, Jack.”

Jack opens his mouth to say more but -

His words die

As Gabe opens his eyes

And gives him a *gorgeous*, regal smirk as he murmurs:

“I just want to slow fuck you until you come -”

And Jack *shudders* as pleasure burns through him *hard* -

As Gabe pulls the condom out, chucking the packaging on the bedside table with his left hand as his right hand rolls the tight sheeting over his cock -

But his gaze never leaves Jack’s face as he continues to hum in that sugary, sultry tone:

“- For hours and hours, all night long.”
“Gabe -” Jack gasps, his chest heaving as Gabe moves towards him, sliding his left knee onto the bed first, then his right, still rising above Jack even as he slots himself between his legs. Right hand on Jack’s left knee, left hand at the base of his own cock, Gabe chuckles in a dark, sensual smokiness, “Want to make you forget where you end and I begin -”

Jack is lifting his right hand from his own dick, also raising his left hand -

As Gabe glances down, aligning the tip of his stiff, aching cockhead with Jack’s hole, the rim of muscles already shuddering and squeezing -

Before he glances back up at Jack -

And Gabe murmurs quietly:

“Want to feel you for the rest of the night, Jack.”

And Jack -

“...I’m here, Gabe,” Jack answers back, “Come fuck me again.”

(Come back to where you belong.)

Jack is ready for him -

As he lifts his arms -

Welcoming Gabe back.

Gabe steadies his resolve -

And, with a soft groan, pushes his cock slow and hard into Jack’s tight, throbbing heat -

Before he shifts forward -

And slides into Jack’s embrace.

Jack exhales a low, rough sigh of satisfaction as Gabe fills him again, relishing the feeling of Gabe’s cock pushing deep inside him, content as Gabe’s heavy, broad chest rests against his, skin on skin, warm and rich and -

“Oh, Gabe -” Jack murmurs with a soft, rolling happiness as they settle into each other, content together, warm and comfortable, tight and full. Gabe exhales slowly, adjusting his knees a little as he places his arms on either side of Jack’s face, elbows and forarms resting into the fluff of the comforter.

And Jack wraps his own arms around Gabe’s back, palms caressing the curve of muscles and stretch of ribs, fingertips tracing up his spine and -

Jack curls his legs around Gabe’s waist, relishing how the angles of Gabe’s hip bones press into his thighs, and -

Gabe feels Jack’s legs squeeze around him and he sighs again with low but sweetly smoked satisfaction.

They fit together, entwined and interlocked
Like they were made for this.

Gabe slips his fingers through the unruly tuffs of Jack’s hair, his eyes tracing over the curves and angles of Jack’s face, more gentle and tender than Jack has ever seen him before, the dark obsidian smokiness looking quiet but content, the gilded glow looking beloved and beautiful -

And Jack gives him that faint, slight half-smile, his joy quiet but his joy full and -

A feeling of sugary, gilded pleasure smokes through Gabe at the sight-touch-feeling of Jack softly happy, perfectly tight in and around him, and he murmurs gently, “...You’re gonna call me boring -”

And Jack grins, a low, rich laugh bubbling deep in his chest before the joke even fully begins -

“- But I think I like you like this the best,” Gabe smirks at him, leaning in to kiss Jack. Jack’s low laughter turns to melting moans as the kiss simmers hot and sultry on their lips, and Gabe rolls his hips, pulling out long and slow before he pushes his cock back into Jack’s tight heat with a steady but hard stroke.

“I don’t -” Jack starts to say, but his words break into a shuddering gasp as Gabe rocks his hips again, fucking his thick cock in and out of Jack’s squeezing ache, and Jack barely manages to hum with a pleased thrum to his voice, “I don’t think that’s boring, Gabe -”

Gabe chuckles, the raspy, smoky sound hot and smooth on Jack’s lips as he continues to roll and ride his hips, grinding his cock out and in, out and in, out and in against Jack’s thick, hot pressure, Jack’s thighs shaking slightly as he squeezes, his hands gripping at Gabe’s back and -

“Look, Jack,” Gabe murmurs, still fucking Jack with an easy, rhythmic motion as Jack shivers beneath him, body tensing and flexing with each thrust, and - even as tight, hot pleasure squeezes across his cock - Gabe still manages to continue with, “It’s okay to admit it -”

“No, Gabe.”

And then -

Gabe’s eyes grow wide

As Jack shifts his arms, moving his hands higher up his back, fingers clinging to his shoulders and the curve of his neck -

As Jack gives him the sweetest, most sensual little smile Gabe has ever seen, laughing with that rich, stormy sound as he hums:

“I think it’s romantic.”

And Jack kisses him, slow but smooth, with a flicker of heat on the edges of it and -

He squeezes around Gabe’s cock hard.

And Gabe

Breaks again.

He groans against the kiss, his hips rocking forward hard, fucking his stiff, aching cock in deep into Jack’s thick tightness, and Jack reacts just as good, just as hot, gasping against his lips as his whole body shudders, fingers digging into the curve of his shoulders, clinging for life, muscles clenching strong around Gabe’s dick -
Pleasure spikes through both of them, bolting through Gabe from the tip of his dick, up the length, hot and heavy and dense with Jack’s squeezing tightness, as it burst inside Jack, hard and thick from Gabe’s cock, fucking into him inside to out in all the best ways, overwhelming and blissfully sore and -

Jack gasps again as Gabe thrusts his hips, hard and harder, hot and hotter, fucking that thick, long cock full and deep into him, and Jack rocks back, body rolling and muscles squeezing reflexively, legs shaking even as they wrap tighter around Gabe’s hips and ass, words starting to fall from the back of his throat like a chant:

“Oh, Gabe - yes, fuck, that’s it, that’s so good -”

Gabe rises a little, adjusting his back for a better, rougher angle, fucking his cock out and in, out and in, out and in hard and full, chest heaving as he watches Jack’s eyes flutter, his head slump back against the white fabric, his fingers starting to claw at his shoulders with perfect little stings of pain, legs locked around him, skin flushed with tension -

His ass tight and perfect inside, throbbing and squeezing around his cock, pleasure coiling hot and tight up his dick, in his groin, his lower back and -

“Gabe, Gabe, fuck me, fuck me, just like that -” Jack moans, shivering as Gabe fucks hard, thick pleasure through him, toes curling and legs shaking as his inner tightness melts with the feeling, slick and smooth but so stiff, so deep as Gabe’s cock pushes and pressures inside him, his own dick dripping again with each thrust -

“God damn, Jack -” Gabe murmurs, words raw in the back of his throat, his hips still going but his rhythm’s getting erratic - Jack’s just so tight, squeezing and throbbing melting, slick heat around his dick, aching and stiff and hard, so hard again, the tip feeling tight with pleasure as it grinds and rubs in Jack’s sweet heat and -

“Gabe, fuck -” Jack groans, fingers scrambling, legs shaking as Gabe’s thrusts rock deep and deeper, his cock pushing hard and full inside him, pace getting stronger and stronger and fuck, it’s hot, Gabe’s perfect like this, hard and thick, strong and smoky, holding him down with raw pleasure and full weight and -

Pleasure snaps and sings inside him with each roll of Gabe’s hips, each thrust of his cock and -

“Gabe, fuck, I’m close again -” Jack pants, body shaking and fuck, Gabe can feel how it’s true, how both of them are starting to unwind as pleasure coils hot and thick and tight between them, inside them, from where they fuck in and around each other, locked in hard but full motion -

Each thrust and each squeeze pushes them closer, closer -

“C’mon, Jack,” Gabe murmurs hotly, kissing the words to Jack’s lips even as Jack shudders, and he nips at Jack’s lower lip, rasping out, “Tighten up for me -”

And Jack - only half-seeing through the haze of the low lights and the thick feeling of sex between them -

Digs his fingers into Gabe’s shoulders and squeezes hard around Gabe’s cock -

“Oh, fuck, ” Gabe groans, almost laughing with the joy of it as pleasure bursts across his dick, from the tip of his cockhead all the way down, winding tight and thick and full, so full as Jack tenses and squeezes, and Gabe shudders, rolling his hips hard as he moans encouragingly, “Fuck yes, Jack,
that’s perfect - nice and tight for me -”

And Jack recoils just as hard, just as full as pleasure rocks through him

As Gabe thrusts hard hard harder into his dense, tight ache and -

“G-Gabe -” Jack gasps, body trembling as his mind starts to fray again, the edges burning, his dick dripping, inner heat blossoming thick and heavy as Gabe’s cock pounds into it, “Fuck, Gabe - gonna come, fuck, you’re so good -”

“Look at me,” Gabe says, the words slipping impulsively - but honestly - from his mouth and -

Jack blinks a few times, eyes still glazed over with the pleasure fucking through him, but he stares up at Gabe, chest heaving as he gasps with each thrust and -

Jack looks incredible like this, blissed out and fucked out of his senses, hair mussed by the bed and the rocking, skin flushed with a heated blush and the burnished glow of the lighting, making him look rose-kissed, his eyes a brilliant, endless shade of blue, deep with all the stars and promises between them and -

Jack shivers because -

Gabe looks gorgeous like this, his expression open and honest, a scowl of concentration rough in his brows but the pleasure deep and full in his eyes, hair tousled over in thick waves, messy from where Jack’s fingers had twisted through it, his skin a rich, gold-tinted bronze under the light, faint reddish glow on his cheeks, brushed across the swells of his shoulders, beautiful under the tips of Jack’s own fingers that curl over the curves and -

His eyes are thick with a dark but deep desire, the obsidian haze of them looking incredible, the gold hues behind them melting with a starlight glow and -

“Gabe -” Jack sings, squeezing reflexively around Gabe’s cock, and Gabe shudders as pleasure lightnings through him and -

“...Let me feel you come again, Jack,” Gabe murmurs, as he leans in and kisses Jack lovingly -

Before he thrusts his hips hard

And fucks his stiff, thick cock deep into Jack’s aching pressure point.

Jack gasps breathlessly against Gabe’s kiss and

The pleasure

Breaks through him.

Every muscle tenses, every nerve flares as pleasure bursts through him like fireworks burning, like lightning shocking, the edges all snapping as it bolts up his ache, into his back, across his groin, through his dick, and he’s melting under the feeling of Gabe Gabe Gabe, Gabe deep inside him, Gabe heavy on top of him, Gabe holding him through it, Gabe kissing him soft and sweet as -

“Gabe, oh yes -”

As pleasure overwhelms and overflows, searing and spurting white hot as every part of Jack curls up and clenches tight and thick, shaking against him, his other, his partner -
His Gabe -

Gabe groans as Jack’s orgasm fucks pleasure back through him, tight and full around his hard cock, pressing and squeezing and throbbing as Jack shudders in his arms, legs trembling, fingers scratching and gripping, whole body tensing and shivering as Gabe fucks him through it, cock feeling so, so hard and fuck, Jack’s body is so, so hot and so, so tight -

“Jack, fuck - I’m -”

Gabe can’t even finish the words before Jack’s slick, strong heat is squeezing him through it, fucking around his cock as pleasure tightens hard -

And then breaks -

Unwinding its hot, sensual coil in his groin, up the length of his cock, cockhead tight and bursting with it, wet white heat searing out of him, as he groans, riding and grinding it deep deep deep inside Jack, deep where it belongs -

Deep where he belongs -

And fuck, Jack is full, tight and tense and perfect inside to out, holding him down and squeezing him through the rolling waves of hot, hard pleasure, incredibly thick and miserably tight as Gabe comes undone by him, his other, his partner -

His Jack.

They both pant and gasp, coming together, coming through it together, holding each other as they kiss soft, breathless moans to each other’s lips, bodies shaking, fingers trembling, thighs shivering as Gabe’s hard, heavy thrusts slow into softer but deeper strokes, long and pressing as they push his cock as far into Jack as it can go, Jack shuddering and squeezing through the pleasure they’ve fucked into each other, his own dick dripping with heat and pleasure, wet across both of their abs and -

Gabe parts from the kiss -

Only to press his forehead against Jack’s, breathing hard as his hips steady their slow, sensual roll, his stomach and groin still tensing as the last hot waves of his pleasure shudder through his cock.

The tension in Jack’s muscles starts to relax, even as small waves of throbbing pleasure still make his inner muscles squeeze and roll, Gabe groaning lightly from how good it feels, and Jack sinks back against the comforter, chest heaving as his fingers caress down the back of Gabe’s neck, across his shoulders -

Shutting his eyes as he gently presses his own forehead back against Gabe’s, Gabe’s fingers gently stroking his hair and -

They simply

Are

Together.

And there’s a warmth spreading between them, blossoming in the space between their hearts, full and fulfilling -

A feeling that has such a sweet, short little name
But is far, far too important

So that no name truly gives it form

And no words truly give it justice

But still -

“...I think I love you,” Jack says honestly, the words raspy and raw in this throat, but he can’t stop himself - his heart might burst if he doesn’t give them life.

(They will try.)

The words sink deep and good in Gabe’s heart and it’s all he can do not to hold Jack tight and fuck him to sweet oblivion again, but he manages to chuckle dryly, “...Bold move, saying that right after the hottest sex of my life, Jack Morrison.”

Jack laughs weakly, but there’s a small shiver of nervousness that he said it wrong, he said it too soon, he’s put too much of himself into them -

But then -

“...I think I love you too,” Gabe murmurs back, his own heart soft and sweet, pulled in as deep as they’ve fallen, drowning in the feeling of them together and -

Gabe tilts his head, kissing the quiet words to Jack’s lips -

As easily as if he were drawing breath.

Jack exhales a quiet, small shuddering breath of relief, his lips quirking into a smile instinctively, fingers spreading so that he holds Gabe fully as he hums back, “Sorry if that was too much too fast, I -”

He pauses, catching the words in the back of his throat as Gabe breaks the kiss, leaning back a bit and propping himself up on his right hand and -

Jack swallows his heart in his throat, saying in a low, deep roll, “I just...haven’t felt this much with someone before.”

Gabe’s own heart thuds hard in his chest - a good, bittersweet kind of ache, perfect in how beautiful it feels - and he gently teases his left fingers through Jack’s hair, replying in the same silken smoke tone, “...That makes two of us, then.”

Jack’s chest heaves as the feeling swells in him and -

I knew your affection was more dangerous than your charisma, Jack, Gabe thinks with a lovestruck ache as a bright, radiant smile spreads on Jack’s face.

“No one’s ever got me quite like this,” Gabe says, a faint, wry smile twisting on his own lips as he curls his fingers around a lock of Jack’s hair.

And then Gabe smirks a little more, chuckling smokily, “But my heart comes with a heavy price, Jack Morrison.”

Jack raises an eyebrow, skeptical as he asks teasingly, “Oh yeah? And what’s that?”
There’s a pause and then -

Gabe grins joyously, whole face lit up with utter delight as he says:

“Me!”

Jack howls with laughter as Gabe slips in and kisses him fiercely on the cheek, on his jaw, on the corner of his lips as -

“Gabe, oh my god,” Jack laughs - almost giggles - as Gabe grins against his lips. Jack gives him a full, quick kiss before he leans back, eyes glowing with love as he sighs, “Your heart is nice, Gabe, but honestly, I fell in love with you.”

“God damn, you’re way too good at this pickup line nonsense,” Gabe says with laughter twisting in his words, following Jack down to kiss him more. The kisses start soft and sweet, happy and full but -

Steadily turn back into a hot, steady simmer.

Jack sighs with smoky, sugary satisfaction as Gabe nips at his lower lip, pleasure starting to light between them again.

They part briefly, eyes tracing over each other, before Jack leans in, shutting his eyes as he kisses the words to Gabe’s lips:

“Again, Gabe.”

Gabe raises an eyebrow but smirks back as he chuckles against the kiss, humming, “You’re insatiable, huh?”

But then -

Pleasure spikes through Gabe, his eyes flaring wide as a soft groan escapes his throat.

As Jack squeezes tight around his half-hard cock and fuck, he can feel the blood and pleasure rush to his groin and dick again as

Jack whispers hotly against his lips:

“I just can’t get enough of you.”

“Fucking hell,” Gabe mutters, his hips rolling reflexively, Jack’s low teasing turning to moans as pleasure pushes raw and rough inside him again, causing him to squeeze and tense again and -

Jack groans openly as Gabe rises, pulling his cock all the way out of Jack’s tight heat, wincing with pleasure as he slides out. He barely manages to step off the bed, left leg first, grimacing a little as he rolls the condom off his increasingly hard cock again and -

Gabe glances at Jack, which is

A miserably good, miserably hot mistake.

Jack is already thumbing at his own increasingly-hard dick with his left hand, as his right hand drifts even lower, slipping past his balls to where his rim of muscles squeeze and clench reflexively -

“God damn,” Gabe mutters, his own cock twitching hard at the sight of Jack fingering and stroking
himself, legs spread, bite and kiss marks covering his neck and shoulders and -

Jack *grins* a charming, roguish smirk, saying confidently, “Get the lube when you get the condom, Gabe.”

“Jesus, Jack, don’t you want to be able to walk tomorrow?” Gabe asks, only half-joking even as his own dick *still* gets harder and stiffer, taking a half-step towards the dresser before he throws the condom into the trash bin -

“I’m okay with limping,” Jack answers with a sexy honesty, and Gabe bites back another small groan as he turns back towards the bedside table, grabbing another condom packet and the lube bottle. Jack shudders, fingering himself harder as he watches Gabe - all broad chest and curving muscles - tear the condom packet and start to roll it onto that thick, long cock again and -

“Though I won’t complain if you would rather carry me everywhere,” he adds teasingly.

Gabe flicks his gaze up from his dick to Jack’s face - that smug smile looking *perfect* on him - before he smirks back, “My services have a fee, Jack.”

“Oh?” Jack asks slyly, biting at his lower lip, “And what do you charge?”

Gabe climbs back onto the bed, left knee first and then the right, popping the cap on the lube bottle with his right hand as he chuckles, “For carrying you...that’s another drink. Or sex in the shower.”

“Mm,” Jack grins, “Won’t that just perpetuate the problem?”

“Yes. Such a cruel cycle,” Gabe chuckles, drizzling lube over his left fingers again, before he gives Jack a wry smirk. Jack laughs, saying earnestly, “Oh no, another date with you or more sex with you. What a difficult choice.”

“Life is full of hard decisions,” Gabe says, capping the bottle and dropping it on the bed as he leans forward -

And slides his left fingers back into Jack’s tight squeeze of muscles -

Even with Jack’s own fingers still inside.

“So, so hard -” Jack shudders, gasping a little as Gabe plays with both his ass and his fingers, slicking up Jack’s own as he grins at Jack, muttering, “But you like it hard, don’t you, Jack?”

“I do,” Jack murmurs, muscles squeezing reflexively as Gabe’s fingers slide in deeper, coating up his smooth walls as he shivers, “I like you hard.”

“Good,” Gabe laughs low, voice smooth like smoke, enticing like sugar as he pulls his fingers back out -

And strokes his long, thick cock with them, spreading the rest of the lube over it.

“Cause that’s how you’re going to get me,” Gabe murmurs, moving closer, eyes raking down Jack’s body as -

Jack pulls his own fingers out, spreading his legs again as he shudders, saying softly, “You’re all I want, Gabe.”

“And you’re all I want, Jack,” Gabe answers -
Before he presses the tip of his cock against Jack’s tight rim -
And slides himself back inside.
Both men groan with hot, hard pleasure as it surges through them -
Before Gabe leans forward and slips into Jack’s arms -
And both of them fall into each other.
Again.
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Gabe x Jack: Of many

Friday, March 20, 2065: 22:48 - Gabe’s hotel room in Washington D.C., United States

It doesn’t matter how many years pass.
“Harder, Gabe - oh god, please - ”
It doesn’t matter how many times they do this.
“Oh Gabe, fuck - right there, right there -”
It doesn’t matter where or when or how.
“Fuck, fuck - so close, Gabe -”
They are still all the other wants.
“Nice and tight, Jack - that’s it, be good for me -”
And they are still -
“Gabe!”
All that they want to feel.

The light is low and rich in the hotel room: it’s honestly an unimpressive space, given that D.C. runs
the full range of hotel and motel types for every politician and lobbyist and diplomat in existence.
When either of them comes to the city on official (and public) business, they’ll get put somewhere
“nice”, somewhere “classy”, somewhere that some Senator or military officer will feel confident to
walk into or out of in the presence of the former and/or current Overwatch Strike-Commander.

This is not one of those hotels.

It’s just standard fare with a little bit extra that Gabe had booked for them: the small entryway with a
nice bathroom off on the side, where Jack’s duffel bag had been dumped unceremoniously as Gabe
had pushed him up against the wall; Jack’s hat and leather jacket also dumped on the floor as one of
Gabe’s hands had grabbed for that short but so, so pullable blonde hair, the other hand working with
Jack’s to undo his belt buckle, both men panting and gasping -

The spot by the hanging mirror above the dresser and tv stand where Jack had gripped the wall -
both of them still fully dressed - as Gabe had fucked him hard and relentless, the mirror crooked slightly as Jack’s hands had scrambled to blindly brace him against the thrusts, even as his voice had moaned low and enticing, “More, Gabe, oh god, I missed you, more -”

The clean but boring carpet where their clothes are strewn about in oddball piles - Gabe’s belt on the floor by the wall where Jack had dropped to his knees to lavish his cock with attention, Gabe’s beanie, his sweatshirt, and both of their real shirts on the floor at the end of the bed where Gabe had pushed Jack down to fuck him more, skin on skin as Jack’s fingers had scratched through Gabe’s buzzed hair, their jeans around the side of the bed where they had somehow shifted to, Jack face down in the sheets as Gabe had fucked him hard -

The king-sized bed - once clean and well-made in grey and white cotton sheets and comforters - is now a mess, fabric pulled every direction, half the pillows on the floor, the other half basically thrown around the bed for whatever position had required them - one had gone under Jack’s back as, legs over the side of the bed, Gabe had fucked him on the edge of the mattress, another had a few bite marks as Jack had moaned and gasped into its fabric as Gabe had held him face down to fuck him rough and raw.

But it doesn’t matter how many positions they try, how many hotel rooms they borderline ruin, how many cities or countries or continents they travel to -

“Gabe, Gabe, please -”

“I’m here, Jack, I’m here -”

They always end up like this:

One on his back, face up, legs and arms curled around the other, face to face and skin on skin -

As the other fucks him senseless, raw and full and fulfilling -

All their boundaries blurring

All their pleasure hot and hard and shared

As they kiss each other through the rush of it.

Because to them, it’s not boring.

It’s how they were made for each other.

Jack gasps, back arching as his hips surge on their own, dragging his fingers down Gabe’s back as Gabe rocks his own hips forward, thrusting his cock deep into Jack’s tight, wet heat, and fuck, they both know they’re on the verge of coming - Gabe can feel the way Jack is squeezing and throbbing around him, hot and ready, already full of his slick white heat from earlier, but still begging, still squeezing him for more -

And Jack can feel how Gabe’s thrusts are getting erratic, hard and rough and deep, his cock thick and perfect inside him, fucking through Jack’s tight, tense wetness -

And even though he doesn’t have to ask for it, Jack still does -

“Gabe, come inside me, c’mon, fill me up -”

Because he needs him.
He needs to feel him.

Gabe scowls - not in anger, but in utter concentration - as he rolls his hips, grinding his tight, dripping cockhead against Jack’s deep, heavy pressure, and Jack shudders in his arms, blue eyes hazy and endless with their sex, Jack’s own dick dripping between them and fuck, Jack is close, Jack is so close and -

Even though Jack has already come three times since they got to the hotel -

“Tighten up, Jack - let me feel you come -”

Gabe still wants more.

Jack shivers, wrapping his legs tighter around Gabe’s hips and ass, before he squeezes hard around Gabe’s thick, stiff cock and -

Pleasure bursts through both of them, hard and hot, tight and thick, both men groaning openly as Gabe fucks his cock out and in, out and in, out and in in in and -

“Gabe, Gabe - fuck, I’m gonna come -” Jack moans, his whole body tensing and flexing, as pleasure burns through him, hard and searing from where Gabe’s cock pushes tight and full against his ache and -

Gabe leans in, kissing his lips, murmuring as he rides through the waves of pleasure, “Come for me, Jack -”

And he fucks his cock in deep -

Right where he knows Jack’s fullest, hottest, hardest ache is.

Jack’s eyes open wide as he shouts hoarsely, clamping down around Gabe’s body, his muscles squeezing and tightening as pleasure explodes through him, his own dick spurting more liquid white heat across their abs and chests, shivering as lightning jolts through him, edges blurring, senses whiting out and -

Gabe groans openly, his cock staying deep but his thrusts getting shallower, harder, thicker as he pumps his aching, dripping cockhead against Jack’s tight, throbbing pressure, shutting his eyes as he presses his forehead to Jack’s lips and -

“I love you.”

Jack kisses the words in a blissed out, pleasure-rocked haze to Gabe’s skin

Because the words are true.

They have always been true.

And when the two of them are entwined and interlocked like this

The feeling between them - three little words - comes alive

Given breath from their chests

And a beating pulse from their hearts.

And Gabe -
He gasps, flinching as pleasure bolts through him, tight and thick, striking up through his cock and into his groin and lower back, before it breaks and shatters, unwinding hot and hard, back down the length of his dick to the tip of its head, where it bursts hot and wet and **full**, deep and hard inside Jack and -

Gabe shudders, pumping through the wave of it, fucking out more of his white hot pleasure, deep into Jack’s tightness, and Jack shivers again, feeling the hot sticky wetness spasm and spill inside him, slick and perfect, full and fulfilling and -

Gabe lifts his head, kissing Jack even as his hips still rock, his cock still shudders tight and thick, and Jack **melts**, feeling warm and wet inside and out, as Gabe murmurs against his lips, “I love you too.”

Jack gives him a crooked, hazy grin, eyes still glassy with pleasure, body still trembling a little as he kisses Gabe again. Gabe chuckles, brushing his fingers through Jack’s hair, falling back into the kiss willingly.

They stay like that for a moment, just lingering with each other, full and fulfilled, fingertips tracing soft motions across each other’s skin, breaking the kisses only for small breaths, Jack adjusting his legs a bit as Gabe shifts his arms, leaning in to kiss Jack’s jaw, his neck -

And Jack sighs with easy, full contentment, “I missed you, Gabe.”

“...It’s been like, two days, Jack,” Gabe chuckles against Jack’s right shoulder, kissing along his collarbone. Jack smiles languidly, murmuring, “Yeah, but I was empty the whole time.”

“That’s not true,” Gabe says, leaning up again and propping himself up on his elbow, “You rode me hard the morning before I left.”

“Yeah, and then I had a meeting with Petras so I had to shower after,” Jack answers, before He **smirks at Gabe**, adding, “And besides, I missed my **irreplaceable war buddy.**”

“You **little smartass** -” Gabe half-stammers, half-shouts, half-laughs as he semi-leaps for Jack, pressing little nips and kisses along Jack’s neck and jawline, as Jack bursts with laughter, a deep, rolling sound that fills the air between them and -

Gabe winces suddenly -

As the tips of his right fingers feel

**Sharp**

On the inside.

Jack pauses a half-second later, *feeling* rather than seeing Gabe’s reaction, immediately more alert as he asks deeply, “What’s wrong?”

Gabe scowls, blinking as he lifts his right hand, looking it over in the low light. There’s nothing **visibly** different about it, and he’s definitely felt worse pain before -

(Like when he took the shot to his liver in the Siege -)

(Jack’s hoarse shouting haunting him as he fell -)

(Jack’s shaking, blood-soaked hands on the sides of his face as the world fuzzed out and -)
(Jack’s lips pressed against his -)

(And Gabe had drank life for the first time -)

But there’s something...a little bit off about the sting in his nerves -

Like there are small fragments of sugar-stained glass deep inside them.

And they won’t

Completely

Dissolve.

In a second though, the pain is gone -

Replaced with that other feeling:

The shadow in his blood

The second heartbeat in his veins

The smoke that threads through his nerves

The life which Jack’s kiss had given him.

Gabe rolls this shoulders, muttering, “It’s not a big deal. The trehalose crystals aren’t breaking down as fast as they used to. I probably didn’t drink enough water today, or something.”

Jack frowns slightly.

Gabe isn’t lying.

(Mainly because he can’t lie to Jack.)

(Not only is Jack the only person who can totally, completely read his every bluff -)

(But Gabe’s heart beats in Jack’s chest.)

(Jack can feel him.)

Jack shifts his arms, slipping his left one out from under Gabe’s, and carefully takes Gabe’s right hand. Gabe watches him quietly, as Jack turns his fingers gently under the dim lighting, asking, “Does your movement feel restricted?”

“Only when the crystals don’t dissolve properly,” Gabe answers honestly. Jack frowns more, adding, “Has your sense of touch changed?”

“You mean since I died eighteen years ago, or since I came a minute ago?” Gabe jokes back. Jack gives him a pointed look, but there’s the quirk of an unrestrained smile on the corners of his lips.

“You know what I mean,” Jack chuckles, “Does it change when the trehalose lingers?”

“Well, yeah,” Gabe sighs, “Gets hard to feel or do anything. You know how it is. Nothing any different than wraithing or wound healing.”

But then -
Gabe shifts his right hand, reaching out to touch soft fingertips along the side of Jack’s face, his index finger carefully feeling the soft crow’s feet wrinkles lining the corner of his left eye -

And Gabe murmurs quietly, “Don’t worry, Jack - the trehalose is gone now.”

Jack shuts his eyes as Gabe presses his palm against his right cheek, but Jack murmurs quietly, “You didn’t take any energy today.”

Gabe watches him for a second before he asks just as quietly, “...Did you want me to?”

“...Always,” Jack says back honestly, opening his eyes again as he pleads, “I’ll feel better if you do.”

Gabe seems a little conflicted over it, his expression contemplatively neutral, caressing Jack’s cheek for a moment -

Before he leans in -

And kisses Jack.

Jack gasps as he feels the deep, heavy draw inside Gabe pull at his pulse, a slow, sugary pleasure inside both of them as Gabe nips at his lower lip, claiming Jack’s breath and drinking small shards of his life -

The sweetest drink Gabe has ever had -

The sweetest drink Jack has ever shared with him.

Jack’s whole body tenses with it, shivering and trembling a little as Gabe chuckles against the kiss of life, rolling his hips again, pushing his cock - starting to get hard again - back deep inside Jack and -

“Again, Gabe.”

Jack’s already panting the words, eyes glazed over again with pleasure -

And the shadow in Gabe’s veins thrills at the sight of him - his other half, his partner, his life - already burning for more and -

Gabe licks at his lips, feeling the pleasure coil hard and tight in his cock, as Jack squeezes wet and thick around him, already filled with two or three bursts of Gabe’s passion and -

“Oh, Jack,” he chuckles as he pulls his hips back again -

Before -

Jack gasps, body arching as

Gabe thrusts his cock in hard and deep -

Fucking it against his sore, overpleasured pressure point, pushing another hot, full wave of ecstasy through Jack -

“You’re insatiable,” Gabe murmurs smugly against his lips as a low, heady moan escapes the back of Jack’s throat

And his fingers dig hard into Gabe’s back -
“And you taste so good,” Gabe says -

Before he kisses Jack again, drawing another drink of small, succulent life from him, as pleasure shudders and shivers through Jack at the feeling, Gabe’s cock fucking deep inside him, Gabe’s body hot and hard on top of him, Gabe’s fingers curling through his hair -

And Gabe’s kiss drawing raw, sensual breath from his chest.

“Gabe - oh, fuck me -” Jack gasps as Gabe breaks the kiss, and - thrusting his hips and cock in hard - Gabe laughs low, “Don’t worry, Jack - I will.”

“Promise -” Jack pants as pleasure spikes through them, as Gabe starts to rock his hips, fucking his cock in hard hard harder, and Jack moans, “Promise me you’ll fuck me ‘til you’re full.”

Both men shudder as pleasure bolts through them again, harder and hotter and deeper this time, and Gabe grins, kissing Jack as he hums, “I promise, Jack - I’ll fuck you until we’re both full.”

Full and fulfilled.

Content and satisfied.

Pleasure and life and breaths shared with each other.

Until they both forget where one ends

And the other begins.

Until there is only the feeling

(Such a small, sweet little name for it)

Of them

Sharing in each other.
Chapter Summary

Gabe and Jack wake up from their night together.

In the main SEP facility, Marc has an honest discussion with General Flores over expectations for the candidates.

Chapter Notes

Short chapter this week since I'm still getting resituated at work and preparing for the holidays, but this is a chapter that's pretty near and dear to my heart.

24x76: Early

Sunday, March 8, 2047: Too Early A.M. - hotel room in the Starlight Lodge and Inn, Ketchum, Idaho

The routine part of his brain wakes Jack up.

Granted, he’s not really awake all at once. Usually when his dumb early bird brain kicks in, it takes him five, ten minutes tops to pull his consciousness together and force himself out of bed. If he’s really in a rush or stressful situation - harvesting time when he was young, early shift at the hospital when he was working, running in Assessment and Selection, rough coldness in Survival and Evasion

Blinding screaming and loud paintballs and painful lights in Resistance -

Jack can be completely, 110% alert in seconds.

But this.

This.

This might be the first morning since the war started that Jack wakes up slowly.

Like the sweet, syrupy flow of molasses -

Or perhaps the languid, slow shifting of the tide

As the moon settles into the edge of the sea

Drifting down with the stars
And tugging at the draw of the dawn once again.

Mind still softened with sleep, consciousness still blurred by dreams he’s already forgotten, Jack only half-opens his eyes, body heavy and so, so satisfied with warmth and sugary, sweet soreness.

Reality is…

Dreamlike.

It feels less like they’re in a hotel room, and more like they’re in a planetarium, or perhaps an aquarium.

There’s a river of delicate, dewy stars above, pale and dimly lit, their light casting a faint, lacy glow about the room, like cream mixed with honey, and - wordlessly, incoherently - Jack realizes that somehow, they forgot to turn off the starlights. There’s a quiet, living sort of atmosphere, hued in the dim lights they had forgotten, sugared with the sensual, smoky tint of their heat and pleasure, lingering in the shadows that drape around the room. The bed is blissfully warm to his wonderfully sore body, the sheets are cotton blended with polyester blended with snooze buttons, the mattress springy and padded beneath his stiff muscles.

And -

Layered in forgotten starlights and seafoam sheets -

Are they.

Jack does not have wakeful enough words for they.

Just that the sensation of they lingers in his body - deep muscles perfected with that dreamy, sensual soreness, thighs aching from where curving hip bones embraced them, lower back reformed from the pressure that had made him melt.

And the sensation of firm, solid body heat and gentle, deep breathing is lying next to him -

Enchanting reality with his half of the quiet, sleepy pre-morning they gave each other.

Jack has no words for him -

Or for they.

He shifts, humming a sleepy, dreamy sigh of contentment as his whole body aches with the sultry sensuality still steeped inside it -

Before he slips on his right side -

Curling up against Gabe’s left -

Head settling partially on a pillow -

And partially on Gabe’s left shoulder, comfortable and warm, skin on skin.

Jack feels good like this.

Gabe stirs a little but doesn’t wake, exhaling a little bit deeper, as if satisfied with Jack snuggled up against his side.
Jack’s eyes slip shut again, no words thought, no thoughts worded.

Some distant part of him knows he’ll be fully awake soon -

Far, *far* too soon -

But Jack tucks it in, beneath warm sheets and shallow, riverbed stars -

And he drifts off, back asleep with Gabe -

Comfort in the king bed -

And a whole morning to let reality wake him real slow.

Because for now -

*They* are still together.

And *they* are still asleep.

--------

(Sometime Later A.M.)

Existence slowly makes itself more real -

But Gabe doesn’t *want* that.

His eyes aren’t awake, and neither is his mind...not *really*, anyways. He *feels* things more than he thinks or processes them: the way the air in the room lingers dense and comfortable, like another blanket heaped over the cotton-and-polyester blend, layered thick and slow. It tastes like little sparks of lights *they* forgot to turn off, dim and moody, a soft gilded glow that’s too loud and too ephemeral all at once.

The room vibes a slight chill, just a touch colder than *them* -

But beneath sheets steeped in smooth shadows and sugared sensuality -

*They are.*

Gabe feels *good* under the deep blankets, feeling himself breathe in the unhewn edges of the morning -

*Completely*

*Utterly*

*Spellbound*

By the feeling of Jack breathing against him.

Jack curls against his left side, warm and solid, skin comfortable on his, the softness of his cheek cushioned against his shoulder, one hand sweet on Gabe’s left bicep, one leg slipped over his -

*Chest rising and falling evenly -

Completely entrusted to Gabe.*
And Gabe just falls *deeper.*

He barely moves, barely changes - he could not define when his consciousness shifts from asleep to lazily less asleep, but he tilts his head, resting his left cheek against Jack’s forehead, the soft fluff of Jack’s hair brushing against the outer curve of his eye and the edge of his eyebrow -

Moving his right hand up, slowly over his chest -

To slip it over Jack’s curled around his left arm.

...Jack *feels* more of Gabe touch him, warm and rich on his skin, softening fragments of his consciousness just enough to melt little bits of sleep off of the fragments and -

Gabe *feels* Jack stir a bit, the way one particular inhale of breath is deeper, heavier than the others, the way Jack’s hand twitches a bit beneath his.

And -

Still lazily less asleep himself -

Gabe exhales with a thick rasp, “...You awake, Jack?”

It takes several heartbeats for the words to slip into Jack’s skin and carefully touch parts of his brain before Jack manages to murmur back:

“No.”

And then he nuzzles himself closer around Gabe’s side.

A low, soft chuckle barely rumbles in Gabe’s chest, turning more into a sweet hum of satisfaction as Jack curls closer, more skin on skin, sensual and sleepy, and Gabe sighs back, “...Sounds legit.”

And he gently tugs at Jack’s left hand, feeling Jack hum back in sleepy but pleased confusion -

Before Gabe carefully guides it up to his chest -

And tenderly settles it over his center -

His hand still holding it.

Jack inhales deeply again, a rush of wordless affection surging through him as Gabe presses his hand to his chest, and Jack uses the gesture as an invitation to move himself even closer, practically wrapping himself around Gabe’s left side, slipping his left leg higher over Gabe’s -

Resting his head further on Gabe’s shoulder -

Feeling his own warm breath sigh against Gabe’s smooth skin.

A feeling of hopeless tenderness tightens in Gabe’s chest, his heart thrumming with it, as Jack slips deeper around his side, soft and strong, heavy and yet perfect all at once. Gabe presses his cheek more firmly against Jack’s forehead, resting his own head on the unruly tufts of Jack’s hair.

And Gabe sighs with

Complete
Utter
Fulfillment.

Jack feels the small ease of happiness slip through Gabe, and he half-smiles against Gabe’s skin, murmuring quietly, “I missed cuddling with you.”

Gabe, eyes still shut, raises his eyebrows as he chuckles lowly, “Is that what we were doing all those nights?”

Jack, also with his eyes still closed, smiles wider, humming, “What did you think we were doing?”

“Tactical warmth sharing,” Gabe murmurs wryly and -
Jack grins, a sleepy, tidal laugh almost bubbling in his chest, raw and warm -

As Gabe feels it skin on skin, pressed through Jack’s chest against his arm.

It catches on the faint sparks in Gabe’s own chest, and a small smile flutters across his face, pressed lovingly to Jack’s forehead as Jack sighs happily, “Well, that explains why it took two months to get you in bed.”

Gabe snorts dryly, muttering back, “You know I was joking, right?”

“Sure you were,” Jack hums wryly, breathing the words sweet and soft against his shoulder.

“Listen,” Gabe mumbles warmly, “They can’t getcha for breaking fraternization rules if it’s tactical warmth sharing.”

“Ah, so you were just thinking two steps ahead,” Jack chuckles lowly, shifting even closer to Gabe’s warmth, “Brilliant strategizing, sir.”

A small bolt of pleasure rushes through Gabe’s groin and he half-laughs, half-groans, “Careful, Jack - that’s a dangerous word to be throwing around in bed like this -”

“Let me guess: is something else starting to wake up?” Jack asks with a deep, pointed tone, smirk pressed to Gabe’s skin -
Before he slowly grinds his own hips against the side of Gabe’s.

Gabe gives a low, raspy groan as he mutters, “God damn, how do you just keep going like that?”

“The supersoldier juice they’re injecting in us, probably,” Jack answers back teasingly, and - eyes still closed - Gabe makes a face, nodding a little as he mutters, “Fair enough -”

“But I…”

Gabe falls quiet again as Jack sighs, catching the words on his heartbeat, before he kisses them to Gabe’s shoulder:

“...I have never felt so right with another person like I do with you.”

At that -
Gabe’s heart drowns with soft, sugary, storm-rushed emotion -
And he opens his eyes a half-crack against the sweet lighting in the room -

Before he adjusts his head again, shifts more onto his left side -

And he catches Jack looking up at him, the blue of his eyes *deep* under the gilded starlights.

And Jack’s heart *sings* at the way Gabe looks at him, how the dreamlike lighting catches on the tints of gold behind the soft smoke in his eyes, the gently complex emotion across his face and -

Gabe slips his right hand from holding Jack’s left against his chest, reaching forward, brushing the back of his index and middle fingers against Jack’s cheek, saying with a faint smile and a sleepy rasp to his voice, “…Same for me, Jack.”

But then Gabe’s smile twists into a light smirk as he asks teasingly, “But seriously, you *really* aren’t sore?”

“Oh no,” Jack grins back, a mischievous glow catching in his gaze as he lilts back, “I am *so* sore and it feels *incredible*, Gabe.”

Gabe struggles to hold back against both the rush of pleasure (and blood) to his groin *and* the rise of a complex, nameless emotion deep in his chest and veins, and he barely croaks out, “I’m - I’m glad that you enjoyed it -”

Jack watches him, quietly relishing the sweet, shadowy pleasure of flustering Gabe, how he can feel the way Gabe’s words and thoughts are tripping over themselves in his chest and -

Sugary, fluttery affection slips through his heart again as -

Jack chuckles, biting his lower lip as he shifts his head up, closer to Gabe’s, murmuring with a sultry yet honest tease:

“I could wake up like this *every* morning, Gabe.”

Before he leans in and kisses Gabe -

Slow but simmering *deep*.

It’s a strong kiss, layered with heat, but it’s richer than just desire: there’s a dreamy undercurrent of something real, something genuine, raw and regal, softly shared between them in the twilight hours of gilded, forgotten starlights and tangible, easy warmth. Gabe sighs with contentment as he feels it pull the fumbling from his words, draw a sweet, satisfied breath from his lips as Jack kisses him slow.

They part just a bit, just for some air and a heartbeat, and Gabe smiles as he murmurs against Jack’s lips:

“That’d be nice.”

Jack grins lazily against Gabe’s smile, laughing low, “Well, then, glad that matter’s settled.”

Gabe laughs back, before the soft sound slips into a pleased hum as Jack kisses him again.

(And though neither of them have the words or thoughts for the moment -)

(Growing deep in the small space between their chests -)
(They intuitively and incoherently know -)

(They want more mornings like this.)

But somewhere, deep inside -

Something too real, something too tangible twists in Gabe’s blood and he -

(Too afraid to hold onto him -)

(In too deep to ever let him go -)

His soft touch on Jack’s cheek pulls a little more -

As he kisses Jack deeper, stronger, fiercer and -

Jack feels it more than he knows it:

It’s not a sultry, smoky, sensual turning -

But something more bittersweet and sweetly bitter.

And Jack kisses back with the same roughness, same richness -

Before he breaks the kiss, eyes searching Gabe’s soft expression -

And Gabe opens his own eyes to see Jack watching him with that quiet but earnest understanding.

They share a look - sleepy at the fuzzed edges still, dreamy and satisfied, but swirled with a tang of that complex bittersweetness - but as Gabe starts to open his mouth -

“Stay with me, Gabe.”

The words slip from Jack’s mouth -

Like drops of light into the twilight atmosphere.

Gabe shuts his mouth, as Jack stares gently, traces of sweet, sugar-smoked longing there - the blue deep and endless, starlit and soft - as he murmurs, “...We both know what we said last night.”

And Jack shuts his eyes, nuzzling into Gabe’s palm as he sighs with that mixed happiness:

“I know you meant it. I could feel it.”

(He can still feel it.)

(He can still feel how Gabe loved him, deep in the sweet soreness in his body, the shadowy ache inside him, the satisfaction that murmurs soft stars in his core.)

Gabe swallows his heart in the back of his throat, even as his hand caresses Jack with fierce tenderness. He murmurs back with a slight, sleep-tinted rasp to his voice, “...I did mean it. I do mean it. But that doesn’t change reality, Jack.”

“No,” Jack says, opening his eyes again, “Gabe, this is reality.”

And then -
Jack slips his hand from Gabe’s chest -

To gently trace fingertips down Gabe’s cheek -

As he whispers honestly:

“...It’s okay to relax.”

And Gabe -

He shivers as he exhales the soft, ragged-edged heartbeat he’d been holding in his ribcage and -

Jack pulls himself even closer, shutting his eyes, resting his head in the crook of Gabe’s shoulder, kissing against his warm skin:

“...It’s okay just to be with me, Gabe.”

Gabe breathes deeply, frissons scattering across his skin where Jack kisses him, Jack’s words tracing like ghostly fingertips across his scalp, down his neck, and he sighs, feeling the twist of tension leave him slowly as he murmurs, “I’m... Yeah.”

Jack glances up again, watching Gabe from his low angle, admiring the curves and angles of Gabe’s face in profile as he whispers, “...This is a morning for us. No soldiers, no enhancements.”

(No war.)

Gabe looks towards him, those beautiful eyes tracing like gilded smoke and shadows over him, and Jack leans in, kissing him with the words:

“...Just us.”

Gabe lets Jack’s kiss roll through him - not rough like thunder, but gentle, easy, like a slow rainstorm or the turning of the tide. And as Jack breaks the kiss, Gabe murmurs against his lips:

“...You always know exactly what to say.”

And he shifts his right hand, slipping it slow and gentle to the back of Jack’s head, threading his fingers through the spun starlight of Jack’s hair -

Pulling him in deeper.

And Jack -

He slips right in, curling even closer, as they shift together, entwining themselves around each other. As easy as taking a breath -

Or sharing a kiss.

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Σ: Early

Sunday, March 8, 2047: 0623 - Directors’ table in the Mess Hall, SEP facility
He’s not really thinking of anything.

…

That’s not exactly true - Marc is always thinking of something. But right now, he’s enjoying his leisurely morning, sipping on some cream-rich coffee, scrolling through the news -

Relaxing in the sweet, soft silence of the completely empty Mess Hall.

Setting his mug back down, Marc scowls as he loads an article about the ever-expanding Mediterranean Front pushing northwards out of Switzerland and into southern Germany -

*They might actually lose Munich, holy hell* - he starts to think -

When one of the double-doors to the Mess Hall cracks open -

And there are two solid but controlled thud-thud of boots into the peaceful stillness of the room.

And, without ever looking up from the article, Marc says conversationally, “Good morning, General.”

…

There’s a moment of *blatantly frustrated silence* before -

“...Good morning, Marc,” Flores sighs to him - loud enough for him to hear her words

And quiet enough for him to *feel* her disappointment.

“I’ve made some coffee in the boiler, if you’d like some,” Marc replies, still as conversationally as before, scrolling down the article to a list of new statistics about the Mediterranean Front. In his peripherals, he sees Flores waver by the door -

More out of utter exhaustion than hesitation.

After a few passing moments where all they can hear is the wind brushing loosely through the evergreens -

Marc hears her sigh softly -

And then she steps towards the serving section in the north end of the hall.

Her footsteps ring out like a rhythmic beat, dull across the concrete but snappy in the air, almost comical in how they tap-tap-tap across the hollow quietness. Marc patiently reads about decreasing distances and increasing Bastion numbers, listening to the sound of the industrial coffee maker hum as Flores grabs a mug and twists the faucet.

The sloshing of liquid into ceramic.

Setting the mug down on the serving surface.

The pouring of the powder creamer, a shaky hissing sound.

Pause to cap the creamer container.

The tap-tap-tapping of a wooden stirring rod stirring against coffee and thick creamer, ceramic and
disappointment.

The rustling of the stirring rod hitting a nearby trash bin.

And then the thud-thud-thud of steady footsteps too disciplined to be outright irritated -
And too irritated to be outright bitter.

Marc still doesn’t look up as she thud-thud-thuds across the full length of the hall, approaching the directors’ table. He switches to another article - a statement by the United European Defense Group - and starts to read it as she pulls out the chair on his right -

And seats herself, poised with shoulders set, expression neutral but barely restraining how

*Disappointed*

She is.

Marc still doesn’t look away from his datapad, but one eyebrow quirks with internal interest, noting to himself, *She really wasn’t ready for a program like this.*

(Granted -)

(Most people never are.)

They sit in stiff silence - him nonchalantly, her clearly preoccupied with her inner thoughts -

As the first signs of dim, bronze-flaked light

Bleed through the blue hour of the twilight

And slip oil-paint lacquer over the sawtoothed silhouettes of mountains.

The world wakes slow.

Easy.

Too slow for her impatience -

And too easy for his.

Another long moment as Marc lifts his cup, taking a quiet sip of the cream-coated bitterness, savoring the full flavor of cheap Army supplies before -

“Say it.”

Her discipline finally

Chips

(Sawthoothed silhouette as the light drips in.)

Marc pauses, cup just barely parted from his lips, as he finally shifts his head a little bit, barely glancing at her. She’s not looking at him: her gaze is set bleeding into the blue hour barrenness of the hall, eyes tracing vacant tables like vitreous enamel dripping into the corners. Marc observes her for a fraction of a second before he says conversationally, “…Weather’s supposed to be mild again -”
“Marc,” she states, flickering her sawtoothed silhouetted eyes towards him, “Say. It.”

Marc stops again, taking a moment to appear contemplative before he finally murmurs - words gentle and patient for a morning that spills the sunrise far, far too slowly:

“...If you give people leeway, don’t be surprised when they take it.”

Flores stares him down, her lips a thin, terse line, barely restraining whatever impatient disappointment brews in her mind, as Marc casually sets his cup back down. As the small ceramicy tap of mug on table clicks in the air, the general of the United States Special Operations Command states quietly, “Leeway does not equate to permission to abandon all the rules.”

“Then you know the drill,” Marc replies instantly, his own easy impatience starting to wear, “Feel free to investigate or prosecute them to the fullest extent of the Military Code of Justice. You’re their commander.”

“If I did that, we wouldn’t have any of the candidates left and only half of the trainers,” Flores snaps back, and Marc makes a small face, muttering, “‘Half’ is generous -”

“Guerra,” she says darkly, her fury starting to bleed across the blue hour and -

“What did you expect them to do, ma’am?” he flicks right back, “What does anyone do with pass time? If you wanted them to not engage in human vices, then we should just build more robots -”

“They need to be better than any human soldier that came before them,” Flores states fiercely, but there’s a soft, bittersweet mournfulness bleeding across her words, “This is a war unlike any the whole of humanity has ever seen before, Marc! This is a training and enhancement program unlike any before it!”

Marc makes another face as he mutters, “Not according to the CIA databases -”

“Don’t pull that bullshit with me right now, agent,” Flores daggers at him, “You know exactly what I meant, and you know exactly how important this program is. This is a war to save humanity, and the soldiers who will secure victory will be the best humanity has to offer -”

“Now, that is bullshit and we both know it, Sofia.”

Flores shuts her mouth back into a razor-thin line as Marc sets his datapad down and shifts towards her more squarely, saying in that low, dense, abyssally patient tone he gets when his anger is starting to deepen, “The soldiers who win this war don’t have to be the best at anything - they just have to be better than machines. And humans will never be better than a machine at discipline, because that’s the whole point of a machine.”

Her expression tints a little -

Faintly lit by the bronze sunrise starting to glow.

Marc exhales slowly, grounding himself again as he murmurs, “Research shows that relaxation helps facilitate creativity, innovation, and adaptability. Pass time does more than just give soldiers an excuse to get wasted or cover the military’s own ass from liabilities by its units.”

And then he gives her a softer, blue hour look as he says:

“I thought you of all people would understand that, Sofia.”
Flores looks thoughtful, as if she’s actually contemplating his words, and Marc starts to reach for his datapad again when -

“...I’ve worked through three decades of service to get here, Marc.”

He looks back up at her - the impatience and disappointment in her eyes are gone, solidified into that precision, that authority, that raw power that made her the commander of USSOCOM in the first place.

“You think I don’t know how it feels, taking injections every two weeks while still on active duty?” the woman who had carved her existence out of soaring successful missions and gold star medals - who had transformed the Special Forces overnight with just a word, just a statement on herself, her truths - who had fought tooth and nail and pride to craft her way through marble mountains and hellfire forests - states to him, her words wrought not from gold and presidential honors but from raw stone and blue hour bloodshed -

“You think I haven’t had to do everything they’ve done - everything you’ve done - but for my whole life instead of six months?” four-star General Sofia Flores says in a tone that is soft but pure, tempered power, “You think I didn’t have to prove my worth over and over and over just to justify my existence in this branch? Half of the people in this program wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for me.”

Marc listens.

It’s all he can do.

The world is still waking -

Except for them

Two people who are far too awake for their own good.

“...It’s not machines they have to be better than,” the general named Flowers says quietly, “It’s us they have to be better than.”

And then she adds with a bittersweet, blue hour twist:

“I thought you of all people would understand that, Marc.”

There’s a deep silence between them -

As the sunrise starts to bleed its colors.

“...Fraternization isn’t just about liabilities,” Flores murmurs after a heartbeat, “So, yes, I’m surprised you’re defending this -”

“Really?”

The word falls from his mouth with genuine impulsiveness and impatience.

Flores quiets again as Marc -

(He misses them.)

“...Are you actually surprised by that?” he asks her, words bleeding light sorrows in the blue hour and -
Those mornings where the world wakes slow.

“Is that all we had?” he asks her, the depths of his heart -

(Or whatever’s left of it -)

Cracks open and -

“Fraternization? Is that all you want to call it?”

(The warm softness of Silvio breathing patient and easy next to him.)

For whatever it’s worth, she doesn’t look away from him -

From the quiet, broken pieces of him left down in the darkness.

(Resisting the light as it starts to rise, fighting off the wakefulness as he steals five more minutes, five more minutes from his own time just to be.)

(Just to be together.)

A pause and then -

“You have every right - hard-earned right - to be proud of your accomplishments, ma’am,” he says to her -

(Feeling Silvio pull back, curl up, as he also fights off the slow-waking world and bleeding sunrises to stay with him, deep in the blue hour twilight.)

“...But so do I,” Marc states - quietly, so quietly that the sunrise is louder than his words, “And what he and I accomplished by being undisciplined made us better.”

(He misses them.)

Another pause of sunrise silence and -

“Only a few weeks ago, you were furious with Luna for not being hard enough on them,” Flores says softly, her tone pointed and obvious, “And yet here you are, forgiving them for breaking the rules for a single night of alcohol and sex, trying to tell me you’re doing it from the goodness of your heart. What you and Diaz had spanned years - not a weekend.”

But Marc -

[“You can’t force innovation or creativity, just like you can’t force a new type of soldier.”]

The words have slipped in -

[“You’re not that kind of soldier, so I don’t think you did.”]

Whispering beneath his skin.

[“...But you should have.”]

“...This program is an experiment unlike any other,” he says quietly, “But it took me some time to realize there are more experiments than just the ones I anticipated.”
He’s being won over, he knows it.

He can feel it, echoing in the shadows of Silvio slipped into his heart.

It calls for him -

It sings for him.

It’s enticing, watching them work together, watching them put notes to sheet paper, craft songs out of struggle, harmonies out of hardship, crescendos out of chaos. He thought he merely had the one - mind carved out of obsidian, sharper than steel - a weapon which merely needed honing, whetting to make it to so fine it could cut the thread of life itself.

But to discover a second -

Who sings to the first in all the right ways.

A song of only two -

Who will make a symphony out of all the rest.

What a masterpiece they will make -

As they raise their voices in war -

And burn the world.

Flores makes a face - exasperated but also perhaps a little relieved - sighing with a teasing tone, “And that’s more like what I was expecting: justifying fraternization for some bizarre tactical nonsense that didn’t work for Achilles and Patroclus and certainly won’t work now.”

“Maybe it will, maybe it won’t…” Marc chuckles as he reaches for coffee again, savoring the way the blue hour fades across the room, nice and slow -

(He’s missed this.)

As he laughs low:

“But it makes for such beautiful poetry.”
76: Node of Influence

Chapter Summary

As the first pass time weekend winds down, Jack puts himself back in "soldier" mode.

(And he begins to set gears in motion.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

76: Node of Influence

Sunday, March 10, 2047: 20:45 - outside Mulcahy’s office, main SEP facility.

Jack…

Pauses.

A small strip of light slips out from the seams of the sliding door to Mulcahy’s office, and the lockpad reads [OPEN] on its screenglass interface. Distantly, Jack can hear the tap-tap-tapping of fingertips rapidly typing across that high-tech desk keyboard, before the clicking of fingernails on glass

Pauses.

And there’s a quiet, contemplative sigh from within the office that slips out from the seams.

Jack stares at the [OPEN] display and takes

One

Second.

…

It’s

Damn near impossible to put anything - everything - into words right now.

Into coherence.

Almost 30 full hours of sweet, smoky perfection thrum through him: a feeling of them lingering in an ache deep in his core, a sugared soreness in his muscles, kiss marks on his shoulders -

The feeling of a smile slow and sly against his forehead -

Ghosts of fingers interlaced with his -
The press of a warm body - strong and solid but sweeping with curves - against his -

The whisper of a kiss on his lips.

Almost 30 full hours of clouds in his head, stars in his eyes, laughter in his chest, a raw rhythm in his heartbeat: the excitement of being *them* - just *them* - singing in his veins like lyrics he can’t remember but a melody he could never forget.

Almost 30 full hours with *Gabe*.

(And a distant part of his mind thinks that -)

(Maybe he is actually beginning to understand the value of *time*.)

They had woken up slow with the slip of the sunrise through the seams of the window shades, mingling with the quiet light of the artificial stars, a riverbed atmosphere as they had teased each other in easy whispers, gentle laughs with little touches even as they were wrapped around each other, jokes that made Gabe quirk wry grins against his skin, warm humor that made laughter sugar and bubble in Jack’s chest -

Stealing time from the sunrise to stay entwined under humanmade stars.

At some point they had reluctantly pulled themselves from bed, and Jack had seen himself in the mirror for the first time - his hair a frazzled *mess* of blonde fluff, eyes looking bleary but happy, but his *neck* and *shoulders* had been -

“...You really didn’t hold back, huh?” Jack had asked, turning sideways to try and peer at the back of his right shoulder as Gabe had pulled his pants back on. There had been a small mark under his right shoulder blade, barely visible but -

“I did say I would wreck you -”

That smoky voice had murmured simmering and soft against the back of his neck and -

Jack had hummed with pleasure as Gabe had slipped in behind him - skin on skin still - wrapping his arms around his waist as he’d kissed the words to the curve of Jack’s spine:

“...And you were *very* encouraging.”

“I didn’t say it was a bad thing,” Jack had smirked as Gabe had chuckled against his skin before -

They had both glanced at the mirror - Jack upright, Gabe’s arms around his waist, with Gabe peeking out from over his shoulder, and Jack had almost laughed at how *cute* Gabe had looked, all broad muscle, dark hair falling in tousled waves, the most attractive person Jack has ever met -

Looking almost shyly *pleased* with himself as he had barely peered over Jack’s shoulder.

“...Proud of yourself?” Jack had chuckled, lifting his hand to brush his fingers through Gabe’s hair.

“...A little,” Gabe had murmured against his skin, but Jack had *felt* how wide and happy his smile had been, pressed against his shoulder, framed with the fringe of a mustache and beard, before Gabe had said quietly:

“...You look good like this.”

And Jack -
His heart had fluttered with the soft, sweet look in the smokiness of Gabe’s eyes, traced with flakes of gold under the artificial starlight and seams of sunlight -

Before he had turned his head slightly, giving a sideways kiss to Gabe’s forehead, laughing low:

“You too, Gabe.”

...It had been difficult to get dressed.

(Probably because Jack had pulled him back in bed for another round.)

(Though Gabe had followed him into the mess of sheets very willingly.)

After that, it had been a hasty rush to actually get dressed and make it to the last half-hour of breakfast before the lodge closed the serving area. To their surprise (or rather, utter horror), they had encountered -

“Oh,” Jin had said, completely unfazed by their appearance in the breakfast area, while Jamie had nearly choked on some coffee next to him. The Junior Delta had barely glanced over them before giving them a totally poker faced smile as he’d chuckled dryly, “What are the odds.”

“...Pretty damn high, apparently,” Gabe had managed to mutter as Jack had tried to grin wide through his horrified embarrassment, saying, “We all had a good night, huh?”

“I’ll say,” Jamie had coughed, eyes watering, but Jin had just stated, with that same poker faced smile on his lips, “Just guys being dudes.”

...

And they had all burst into awkward but relieved laughter, cheesy grins and wry smiles before -

“Oh.”

A familiar feminine voice had fallen over them…

And all their laughter had turned to embarrassed gurgles -

As they had twisted towards Cassandra -

Who had stood there looking just as embarrassed as them when -

“Hey, Cas, I got some more coffee - oh,” Wes had said appearing behind her a second later, carrying two paper cups of the supposed coffee, steam rising from the little vent holes in the lids.

...Another pause before -

Jack had given the two of them the biggest, smuggest grin he thinks he’s ever had -

And both of them had dissolved into incoherent, stammering babbling -

Before the deep, wheezy sound of Jamie howling with laughter had filled the air -

And the rich, raspy sound of Gabe’s happy chuckle had filled Jack’s heart.

The six of them had managed to enjoy whatever remained of breakfast, cramming themselves at a table clearly only meant for like four people, more than content just to drink the dreges of the
lodge’s mass-boiled coffee and eat the picked-over lemon poppy muffins and lukewarm sausages. They had all avoided the elephant in the room sitting at the table with them, deftly ignoring conversations about their separate nights and instead sharing info about some of the restaurants in town, which other couples - or threesomes, as Wes had pointed out - they had spotted, if they thought anyone else in the program had gotten wasted on the first pass time weekend, the usual.

They had eventually left when the staff had started to give them long, pointed stares, going their separate ways, with the two of them heading to the lobby to check out. As Gabe had gone through the motions with the receptionist, Jack had felt a ping on his datapad and pulled it from his pocket to see:

[Morris.Adrien]: you survive?

Jack had grinned, typing back:

[Morrison.John]: never felt better, tbh

[Morrison.John]: I have a few battle scars

[Morrison.John]: and a slight limp

[Morris.Adrien]: lmaoooooo

[Morris.Adrien]: jfc Jack

[Morris.Adrien]: you are begging to get kicked out of this program

[Morrison.John]: oh, I was begging, alright ;)

[Morris.Adrien]: Ahdkahfke

[Morris.Adrien]: leave me OUT of this

[Morrison.John]: lmao yeah right

[Morrison.John]: how’s Ochoa this morning, Morris?

[Morrison.John]: you two get breakfast yet?

[...]

---

When Adrien hadn’t replied right away, Jack had grinned as he had realized -

[Morrison.John]: omg

[Morris.Adrien]: istg Jack

[Morrison.John]: he’s still asleep, isn’t he??

[Morris.Adrien]: ...

[Morris.Adrien]: ;)

[Morrison.John]: holy shit Morris
“What’s up?” Gabe had asked, putting his wallet away as he’d approached Jack. Jack had grinned brightly, saying with a laughing tease to his tone, “Your roommate had a really good night with my roommate. He’s still asleep.”

Gabe had laughed brightly, that radiant grin spreading across his face as his laughter had stirred something deep and rich in Jack’s chest -

“Oh man, I’ll never let Felix hear the end of that,” Gabe had smirked, “He’s got no right to tease me about you now.”

“Mm,” Jack had hummed wryly as they’d headed out of the entrance of the lodge, “Oh no, he definitely still has the right to tease you about me -”

And he’d leaned against Gabe’s left shoulder, slipping his arm around Gabe’s -

Interlacing their fingers as he’d murmured, “Though I might brag about it first.”

Gabe had shivered against him, and Jack had felt the small slips of joy frisson through him, even as his partner had rasped back, “John Francis Morrison, don’t -”

“Just teasing you, Gabe,” Jack had whispered back, even though the half-worded warning had rippled quiet pangs of bittersweet ache through him. As they had stepped out into the morning sunlight, Jack had added softly:

“I know we’re just friends.”

But Gabe had squeezed his hand with tight, sugar-smoked affection, slowing their walk for a second -

And Jack had felt rough, calloused fingertips - well-worn with hard work but gentle with easy tenderness -

Slip under his chin -

And tilt his head up towards Gabe.

And Jack had

Paused

Just for

One

Second

At the way the morning light had caught on the thin edges of sweet smokiness in Gabe’s eyes, alighting the glimmer of gold behind it -

And Gabe had leaned in, pressing a simmering smile to Jack’s lips as he’d hummed back:

“...Just tactical warmth sharing, Morrison.”

And Jack -
He had laughed - a deep, roiling, tidal sound of waves on the shore, a spring storm on the horizon - bright and restless and deeply enamored -

Before he had fallen right into Gabe’s kiss.

They had headed off to a small supermarket, grabbed a few snacks and some more water, and drifted off to the edges of town, half-hiking sideways up the smaller mountains around the valley, half-wandering in a haze of sunlit, sawtoothed sweetness, happy just to be together. There hadn’t been a destination, or a focus, or an objective - not in real, coherent ways.

There had been just

Them.

(And there had been a moment, sometime deep in the afternoon, when the sunlight had twisted into wrought rays of silken gold -)

(Where they had just sat on the edge of a rise in the east, stealing the last few moments of time together -)

(Content from just cheap but filling food -)

(Slumped into a small, half-padded out plateau of snow -)

(Hand in hand, Jack resting slightly on Gabe’s shoulder -)

(Gabe’s head against his -)

(Where Jack had felt the words slip out from the seams of his chest:)

(“...Thank you for this weekend.”)

(And Gabe had shifted his head, half-kissing Jack’s forehead -)

(As Jack had shut his eyes, letting the fullness of the moment fulfill him -)

(As Gabe had murmured back, warm and perfect against his skin:)

(“...Thank you too, Jack.”)

...

So even though they’re all back in the facility, and he’s taken a shower, put on fresh clothes (and a shirt with a thick collar to hide the kiss marks on his neck) -

Sorted his mind back into “Reyes, just Reyes” mode -

It still takes him

One

Second…

Because it’s hard to put coherence into feelings -

Or feelings into coherence -
When Jack still *feels* Gabe inside him -

Stirring in the depths of his wordless thoughts like artificial starlight in a slow-painted riverbed, or melded from quiet gold drawn in the low afternoon sun -

Or like the slip of a sweet, simmering shadow in his heartbeat.

There’s the huffing of a sharp sigh on the other side of the door, and then the steady, almost discordant tap-tap-tapping of Mulcahy’s typing resumes.

And Jack pauses

Because the only coherent thing inside him is -

("I trust you, Jack.")

And Jack inhales deep and raw -

("I am here to take the fall with you.")

Before he -

("I think I love you too.")

Exhales low and slow -

And sharpens a dark, almost abyssal sense of focus inside his head

(Like pouring lightning into a dagger…)

(Or possibly a gun).

And Jack knocks calmly, coolly on the door.

There’s a pause.

And then Mulcahy calls out, “Come in.”

Jack taps the [OPEN] on the lockpad interface, and sets a faint, slightly crooked smile on his face - a little bit sly, a little bit charismatic, a little bit silly (just enough to feel *genuine*) - before he casually steps his way inside, posture upright but relaxed -

His whole demeanor inviting.

Mulcahy is sitting at her desk, as expected, her eyes aglow from the screens and holoprojectors as she reads something quickly, typing out one last thing. The hot water kettle is steaming, as is the teacup by her side, and the light is bright but…

Artificial.

Not dreamlike the way small rivers of humanmade stars are.

But...a bit colder.
More clinical.

More focused.

Jack patiently waits in parade rest, just offset from the door that slides shut behind him, observing her with that quiet friendliness. Mulcahy finishes whatever she was writing just to briefly flick her eyes towards him and -

“Oh, Jack,” she says, her tone a little surprised but her whole figure seems to relax at the sight of him. She briskly turns her gaze back to one of the screens, typing something else as she continues evenly, “I thought you were Bianchi.”

“Sorry to interrupt you, ma’am - I just had a few questions about the enhancement model, if that’s alright,” Jack says pleasantly, conversationally. Mulcahy glances at him again, exhaling slow -

And Jack can sense a sort of...

Excitement that seems to buzz through her at the suggestion.

...She’s more approachable than initial appearances belie, Jack notes, filing that away in the back of his storm-threaded mind -

Where soft words - like gilded smoke - sew his pieces together.

“...Of course. Here, let me save my work,” Mulcahy says, immediately turning her attention back to the screen, tapping and clicking and swiping at things. Jack takes that as a sign to fully enter the room, heading with an easy but controlled stride to the guest chair in front of her desk. As Mulcahy pauses, assessing something on one of her holoprojections, Jack asks easily, “...Did you work all weekend, director?”

“What?” Mulcahy murmurs, only half-paying attention, before the question seems to fully process in her mind, and she laughs lowly, “Please, Morrison - I may enjoy my research, but I am keenly aware of the value of time, you know.”

“Just checking, ma’am,” Jack grins at her, “Wouldn’t want you to miss out on all the beauty of Idaho.”

“Mm, yes, it is a fine little town, isn’t it?” Mulcahy says, closing the holoprojection with a wave of her hand, “The views here truly are spectacular, even if the town itself is lacking.”

And as the lights of the holoprojections fade, Mulcahy looks him over with a wry, skeptical glance, before cracking a slight smirk, murmuring, “…Did you enjoy your pass time weekend, Jack?”

Jack beams at her with a bright, genuinely happy grin, saying honestly, “Yeah, I did. It was the first one they’ve given us since the program started - I was committed to enjoying it to the fullest.”

“How honest of you,” Mulcahy chuckles, reaching for her tea. As she takes a sip, Jack’s grin twists into a mischievous smirk as he adds, “Well, you know, doctor - between you and me, I’m not about to let ridiculous military protocols get in the way of having a good time.”

Mulcahy laughs at that.

Jack feels his surprise more than he lets it show: her whole face glows with sheer delight, eyes crinkling with joy as the shifting tones on her skin seem to dance with the emotion. The sound that bubbles through the air is low and raspy but deeply entertained -
And Jack watches, slightly entranced, as she lifts the cup to her lips, beaming at him through the steam of her tea as her laughter fades into softer giggles, “Ah, you can be quite brilliant, Morrison, I must say.”

“Careful,” Jack teases her back brightly, “I hear enjoying my absurd sense of humor is the first sign of cabin fever.”

“Ha,” Mulcahy half-laughs, half-snorts as she sips from her cup, “You’ve got a real silver tongue, don’t you?”

“...Funny enough, you’re the second person who’s said that to me this weekend,” Jack says wryly, giving her a sly grin. Mulcahy tilts her head a little, eyebrows raises, interest piqued as she sets her cup back down, saying dryly, “Curious...Was that other person Sergeant Reyes, perhaps?”

Jack

Pauses

Before he gives her a deliberately roguish, mischievous smirk, saying teasingly, “A good soldier doesn’t give away his commander’s secrets, ma’am.”

“Hmph,” she chuckles, “That’s one way to put it, isn’t it?”

But then -

Before he can retort -

“...I’m glad you had a good time, Jack.”

Jack finds himself a little bit awed -

As Mulcahy gives him a genuine, pleasant smile, saying kindly, “It’s important to remember to relax.”

Jack shuts his mouth, pausing for

One

Second

Before he murmurs genuinely, “...Same to you, director.”

There’s a slow-brewed silence as they just observe each other for a moment, and Jack thinks he might see something a little…

Bittersweet -

Maybe distantly nostalgic -

In Mulcahy’s gaze -

But then she sighs, blinking once, muttering a little more coherently, “Apologies - we’ve gotten a bit off track. What did you want to ask me?”

“Oh, right,” Jack says, also pulling his thoughts back together.
He already knows what he needs to do -
What his... objectives are...
But now, it isn’t a matter of what or why, but how.
(How does he get Mulcahy to agree to the idea of emergency hepatocytes?)
And Jack thinks quietly:

Follow the rules for now -
And play the part.

Because deep in his core, he can still feel -
“...You always know exactly what to say.”
(The perfect little soldier…)

Jack digs into his right pants pocket, pulling out his datapad.
(Or the saintly little student.)

As he taps in his PIN, Jack murmurs absently - but with just enough rasp to his voice to make it feel genuine, “One moment, ma’am - I took a few notes…”

But in his peripherals -

He sees Mulcahy make a slightly impressed expression, eyes going wide a bit, eyebrows raising again, a look of appraisal and modest approval on her face and -

“Did you now…” she hums back, less a question and more a note of interest, and Jack looks back up at her, grinning brightly, “I find it helps me process information better.”

“Taking notes does help facilitate learning,” Mulcahy says approvingly as Jack looks back at the datapad, tapping the document app open. He pulls up his last file, scrolling past some of his notes to himself to find:

[How to stop hepatotoxicity with BBB enhancement model? Would it be better to do targeted liver enhancement first? Or was that what the blood tests showed?]

[Could synthetic hepatocytes be cultured in the event of an emergency?]

And Jack
Pauses
For just
One
Second -
Before he exhales slowly -
And smiles at her -
A little bit sly, a little bit charismatic, a little bit silly

(Just enough to feel genuine) -

Before he says, “I’m grateful you don’t mind me asking questions, ma’am. My background in emergency trauma medicine is...well, it’s not quite as specialized or as specific as the transgenic enhancement model.”

“Hmm,” Mulcahy hums thoughtfully, “But you did say you understood the method, correct? You seemed familiar with the model when we last covered it.”

“I am, yes,” Jack says, still with that same easy grin on his face, “But, for example, the blood-brain barrier paper -”

And Jack just barely -

_Barely_ -

Sees a small shift of awareness in Mulcahy’s gaze -

“...I’m curious about the model’s inherent risks of cytotoxicity,” Jack explains, still keeping his easy-going tone, “From my understanding of the paper, highly intensive treatments like the chimera vectors capable of crossing the blood-brain barrier are _typically_ used in small dosages, right?”

“...Indeed,” Mulcahy says coolly, and Jack - not hastily, but very casually - says with an apologetic but easy grin, “Sorry, this isn’t particularly my specialty - I had to ask some of the other medical assistants for some insight. Like, I think it was Francis - oh, sorry, Brady - who mentioned that under normal circumstances, treatments with these chimera vectors that specifically target the brain are only administered a few times, right?”

And at _that_ minor deflection -

Mulcahy seems to relax again, humming, “Ah, I think I see where this is going...”

“I’m just a little nervous about the amount of serum that the candidates here will receive,” Jack says, still smiling but rolling his shoulders in an easy-but-anxious manner, “Even though the actual dosages we’ll receive are low, the schedule for the injections seems significantly higher and more frequent than a typical treatment plan -”

“And you’re worried about increased risk of higher cytotoxicity levels, hmm?” Mulcahy asks him easily -

As easily as she’s reading a book.

And Jack -

He gives her a _huge smile_ of _utter relief_, as if she’s figured him out, saying happily, “Yes! That, that’s it! Thank you, I was having a difficult time putting it into words.”

“Well, it is a nuanced topic,” Mulcahy says, reaching for her cup again, “You’re getting very deep into the particulars of the model, Jack, but yes, it is true: the enhancement model’s application to the central nervous system is a very delicate one, and it requires a lot of patient-specific fine-tuning.”

Jack nods, listening attentively even as Mulcahy takes a sip of her tea. As she sighs with contentment, she murmurs, “I have worked on all parts of the enhancement model for the majority of
my career now, but the BBB chimera vectors have been the most difficult and intensive part of my research for nearly a decade. Reaching just this state of capsid and envelope hybridization has taken years to achieve, and unfortunately, it is still imperfect.”

Jack watches her as she sets her cup back down, and Mulcahy looks him in the eye, explaining earnestly, “The model is designed to reduce the risk of cytotoxicity, but like all genetic therapeutic methods, it still retains some innate risks, like cytotoxicity build up and immunological responses.”

Mulcahy gives him a serious, empathetic look, adding in a quiet but calm manner, “I do not mean to...downplay your concerns, Jack, and I am impressed that you and the other assistants are thinking critically about the enhancement model and its impacts, but unfortunately, this program is one of its kind - we stand on the cutting edge of groundbreaking experimental science. In order to reduce both cytotoxicity and immunological responses, the schedule incorporates a strict rotation of all the hybrid combinations of the chimera vectors, but we shall still have to mitigate risks and impacts as they come. I am trusting you and the other assistants to help me document changes and observe symptoms so we can adjust the vectors as needed.”

Jack listens closely, nodding along, a pleasant but contemplative look on his face, deeply thoughtful even as he actually thinks:

...Is that how you sold these vectors to the U.S. military in the first place?

...And is that what you told Russia and China as well?

But that gilded smoke of a voice murmurs wryly in the depths of his head:

Not that the risks would have ever stopped any of them.

...Sugar-coating the complications has never been an issue for the U.S. military.

And in the artificial, clinical light of her office, Mulcahy gives Jack an easy smile, saying brightly, “Like I said, I am quite pleased that you are giving this model deep, critical thought. That’s the hallmark of a true researcher, Jack -”

“Pardon me, director -”

Mulcahy

Pauses

As Jack

Smiles at her -

Brilliant and charming in his own way -

As he offers her -

“- But have you considered the benefits of utilizing emergency traumatic medicine to preemptively prepare for the risks?”

A solution to her sugar-coated complications.

And that.

That.
That clearly catches Mulcahy’s interest.

Her face shifts immediately from that pleasant, if apologetically kind expression to one of an intense, deeply contemplative scowl as a “what” mutters impulsively from her mouth and -

Still smiling, Jack glances down at his datapad, pretending to scroll through his notes as he hums easily, “You see, director, I’m not super familiar with the specifics of the different versions of the enhancement model, but what I am specialized in is dealing with a wide array of traumas, emergencies, acute organ failures, overdoses, and toxic states. Something I noticed in your papers on the enhancement model and its different versions or hybrids is that you don’t really propose actual application processes for the model -”

Mulcahy’s scowl of confusion shifts to a more focused frown of frustration as she replies, “That’s because the actual application of the model is patient-dependent, Morrison -”

“Right,” Jack says, giving her an easy but apologetic grin, “Sorry, director, I didn’t mean to imply anything. Just that - like you said, this program is different than that. It’s much larger, much more intensive. The model here isn’t really like how you apply it to a patient requiring genetic therapy for one particular condition; the model here is much broader, so even with the rotation of the vector combinations, we still increase the risk of cytotoxicity simply due to injection rate.”

“...And you believe there’s a way to preemptively mitigate that risk?” Mulcahy asks, her frown drifting back into contemplation -

And Jack

(“I trust you, Jack.”)

Pauses

For

One

Second.

(Just one.)

Before he gives her a crooked smile -

A little bit sly, a little bit charismatic, a little bit silly

(Just enough to feel genuine) -

And says, “Well, yeah. Begin constructing stockpiles of healthy patient stem cells and replacement tissues.”

And at that -

Mulcahy’s expression of concern and slight irritation -

Slips into one of open, brilliant realization -

(Just enough for Jack to know it’s genuine).

And with that easy, casual demeanor, Jack continues conversationally, “Cytotoxicity build-up in the
liver accounts for forty to fifty percent of acute liver failure, and is one of the leading causes of liver injury and disease. We used to get emergency cases of it on a regular basis, and that was just in a college town in Indiana. Because biosynthetic materials are cheap now - or uh, at least they were cheaper before the war - most emergency and ICU departments use their nanoproducers to create patient-specific stem cells. We would print therapeutic, healthy replacement tissues or organs all the time, or well, we’d hand off their biodata to the laboratory which would make it for us.”

Mulcahy looks

Deeply attentive

As Jack explains, “We’d make replacement liver tissue and hepatocytes on a regular basis. The difficulty is in storing them, because hepatocytes don’t respond well to preservation, but if you approve it, we could start developing a database of candidate biodata in case of emergencies. If a candidate shows symptoms of liver failure or disease, then we can use the database to make the nanoproducers print replacement tissue. We can also incorporate liver enzyme tests into routine check ups to monitor potential hepatotoxicity in candidates on an individual basis -”

Mulcahy looks away from Jack, but he can tell she’s still focusing on his words as she wakes the computer back up, starting to swipe and tap at the screen glass keyboard -

“I understand that for individualized enhancement treatments, you’d apply the model based on the patient’s needs, their personalized medical history, monitor their dosages and changes carefully,”

Jack continues as Mulcahy starts typing out his idea, “But a program this big doesn’t really have that luxury, but that doesn’t mean we have to just accept the risks or complications as they come.”

And then -

Jack gives her a radiant, bright grin as he says with a low laugh:

“And while a database of candidate biodata sounds like a dystopian sci-fi idea, I think the potential of keeping candidates alive in an emergency really outweighs the ethical dilemmas.”

Mulcahy stops typing, staring at whatever she’s written down on one of her monitors -

As an easy, sugar-coated silence settles over them.

Just for

One

Second

Before she murmurs contemplatively, “I will admit, Jack, I had not thought of something like this. I am already in the process of developing a candidate database - it’s just good science to do so...but I hadn’t considered the idea of using it to combat the risk of cytotoxicity or prepare replacement tissues.”

Jack grins at her, saying, “Just doing my duty, ma’am.”

Mulcahy glances at him, a sly, knowing smirk on her face as she chuckles, “You could be quite good at organizational management, you know.”

And that -
Catches Jack a bit off-guard

(Genuinely)

And he

Pauses

Before he rolls his shoulders, laughing lightly:

“I appreciate the compliment, director, but for now...I’m just a soldier.”

(Just playing the good little soldier.)

---------

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone!

Another short-ish chapter this week due to the fiasco over at tumblr. I have a few points that are relevant to my fic writing that I'd like to go over, just to keep everyone updated:

1. Here is my Pillowfort account. I'm going to make an active effort to start using it more in the coming months.

2. Here is my explanation on tumblr why I will be moving away from tumblr to pillowfort and twitter much more exclusively. The short version is that I mainly liked tumblr for its ability to freely embed large images in text posts, and since the bots will be scanning those (and have already flagged several of my essay posts for just images from official Overwatch content), I've lost my main interest in using the site. Additionally, while I love writing general action and sci-fi stories for Overwatch, I got started by writing smut, which several NSFW fandom artists supported early on. Lastly, as a transman, I'm really not okay with the fact that the bots are flagging positive LGBTQ+ content.

3. "24x76: Force Multiplication" is definitely starting to wind down. I don't know if the fic is going to be just over or under 28 chapters, but that's looking like the ballpark.

There is no way we're going to cover everything the story brought up.

This is intentional, tbh. The "scope" of the fic was always focusing on just the main SERE portions. I never planned on fully covering the rest of Special Forces MOS training because the sheer amount of research into the topics would be overwhelming. We will cover the sci-fi version of Escape that I have planned and effectively wrap up the "first three months of SEP" in this version of the program.

I AM planning a sequel.

My beta and I had a long chat last weekend about the scope of the sequel, what contents it will cover, what characters, etc, and I'm very excited for it! The sequel will make it much easier to bridge the recurring ideas and thematic elements found in "Force
Multiplication" with the larger Overwatch universe (such as the global nature of the Omnic Crisis, Moira's research, the formation of Talon, etc) while reducing the pressure to constantly research real world military training and technology. The research side of "Force Multiplication" is arguably the part that has taken me/is taking me the longest, so shifting away from "the real world" into Overwatch lore and canon will hopefully be easier on me.

I know we're not done yet, but I really do want to take the time to thank all of you for your comments, your feedback, and your enthusiasm! You guys have really kept me going over the last several months and seeing people's responses here, on tumblr, and on twitter has been so humbling and inspiring.
Chapter Summary

As the snow slowly melts, the drills are starting to escalate for the program.

In the run-up to Escape, Gabe and Jack carve out small slivers of time for each other.

And they learn a little bit more about themselves.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.

---

24x76: Encouragement

Thursday, March 14, 2047: 04:45 - the hall outside of the Barracks bathroom, Main SEP facility

Another day of explosions, Gabriel thinks, yawning as he slips past Rooms [1 - 2] and [3 - 4] on the northern “end” of the Senior Soldiers’ hallway.

There’s the standard amount of movement in the open area in front of the bathroom, with candidates heading in and out, speaking in loud whispers and stiff murmurs, trying to retain some semblance of “night hours” before the clock hits 0500. Candidates with morning kitchen duty are long gone, so most of the people here, now, are in various states of “fatigue-ready” and...not “fatigue-ready”.

It’s easy to see that the ever-shifting of the seasons into spring is starting to impact people: the clocks have jumped forward an hour, so everyone’s internal rhythm is completely off. Some people have decided to fully embrace the pressure, heading to the gym before breakfast, pushing themselves into adjusting. Others are still struggling to adapt, taking their sweet time right up until 0600, reluctant to give up those ever-precious hours of sleep.

And then there’s people like him.

Awake enough to glower and make a few wisecracking remarks.

Asleep enough to not enjoy being awake enough.

Gabriel casts a sweeping gaze over the intersection of the hallways, watching a group from [49 - 72] head east to their rooms, and he sighs lightly.

The theme for this week appears to be heavily skewed on weapons and engineering: after the careful introduction to the standard pulse rifle last week, Edwards has apparently approved moving the
weapons testing forward. The entire program spent most of yesterday outdoors, making use of the steadily-warming weather and increasing daylight to start running longer drills and tactics practices with the pulse rifles outside. The trainers had broken them up into semi-randomized teams of eleven (with an assigned trainer filling out the twelfth spot), and pushed them through different engagement strategies, routes, basic maneuvers, etc.

They had even let the candidates start handling some of the new prototype bombs and smoke screen grenades, demonstrating that the specialized bombs and flares emitted a wide range of infrared radiation with alternating hot-cold patterns.

And of course -

The whole concept had just made Gabriel think back on Survival and Evasion -

Where Jack had lured drone after drone by openly displaying a stream of smoke.

Just outside the bathroom door, Gabriel…

Pauses

As his thoughts -

Only half-awake themselves -

Start to storm.

A simple tactic, but one that can be greatly effective, his mind churns even as his eyes barely see through his morning bleariness, We could easily set ambushes - if the Omnic drones in Detroit or Bakersfield are anything like the ones in Mexico, they’ll be drawn in by sounds, images - differences in their pattern-recognition sensors will be enough to set them off.

Bring them in close, EMP or electro-wave them, hit them with a pulse blast.

But then he scowls a little, adding:

But that still doesn’t solve the core problem of breaking through the Omnicode.

But, another stream of his mind counters, You can start funneling them. Breaking off squads and packs. Isolating them. Force the main line to make the decision to expand to save troops and retain ground, or retreat to cover gaps. Hit hard at the flanks, create holes in their sides, make ’em double-down or attack.

And Gabriel thinks -

(He remembers holding the Artificial Quetzal in his hands, one wing shredded by a sniper shot, how it trilled and tweeted in a discordant cadence, up-up-up before down before up again -)

(And somehow…)

(Somehow he had known, in that exact moment that -)

...They feel fear.

He shifts his gaze up, refocusing on the bathroom door in front of him and -

And fear is the greatest weapon of all.
And what is unconventional warfare if not the strategic creation of fear in the enemy -
And the weaponization of hope in the ally?

Gabriel reaches for the button to open the door but -

“Oh!”

The door slides open and -

He blinks

As Jack nearly collides with him.

Both men jolt at each other’s sudden appearance, nearly crashing into each other before they reflexively lurch backwards, more on basic instinct than actual intention. As they take half-steps back, Jack’s look of wide-eyed shock suddenly transforms into -

Jack feels the smile shift broad and bright on his face as he processes Gabe in front of him, starting to say with clear delight, “Oh, Reyes -”

When the door slides shut again.

...

Gabe stares at the blank door in bewilderment, before he reaches for the button again and -

[Jack reaches for the button and -]

The door starts to slide open -

[The door slides shut again.]

...

Gabe frowns, and presses the button again -

[Jack’s hand is tapping the button before he fully realizes -]

The door slides open -

[And it slides shut.]

[...A wry, slightly crooked smirk spreads on Jack’s face as -]

Gabe hits the button again and this time, the door actually slides open -

To show Jack doing a pin-up pose in the doorframe, right arm up at an angle, cushioning his head, left arm jutting out, hip popped, right leg leaning against the wall and -

*What the* - is the only coherent thing that rushes through Gabe’s head -

Before Jack wiggles his eyebrows at him, muttering in a low, growly tone, “You can press my buttons anytime, Reyes.”

And sheer, utter *laughter* bursts from Gabe’s chest.
“Ja-” Gabe starts to say, but chokes on his own laughter, barely switching to “Morrison, what the hell -”

“I saw an opportunity and took it,” Jack laughs back, stepping through the doorway as it’s still open. Gabe takes a half-step back, letting Jack slip through and off to his left [Jack’s right]. As the door slides shut properly this time, Gabe wheezes, “God damn, I was not prepared for that this morning.”

“Well, that was your first mistake,” Jack smirks at him teasingly, “Remember, Reyes, boy scouts are always prepared!”

“Yeah, yeah, rub it in,” Gabe chuckles, sighing a little as he glances towards Jack -
His eyes tracing over the fluff of Jack’s hair, still slightly damp from his shower, cheeks and jaw still a bit pink from both the heat of the water and a fresh shave -
Down to the line of muscle in his neck -
Where a faint mark just barely peeks over the hem of Jack’s high thermal collar.

Jack watches Gabe observe him, small pangs of affection fluttering through him at the way Gabe’s eyes - still dimmed with a little bit of sleepiness but bright with the glow of humor - trace over him and -
He resists the urge to reach out and rub his thumb over the arch of Gabe’s high cheekbone and -
“You adjusting to the time change well?” Jack asks quietly, and Gabe glances back up to his face, their eyes meeting.
Even under the cut of the fluorescent lights, there’s that deep, almost dreamy draw to Jack’s eyes and -
“...Yeah,” Gabe cracks out, his voice hoarse not from sleepiness but from the feeling that slips through his heart and chest, murmuring softly:
“I’m...sleeping pretty good this week.”
And Jack -
He gives Gabe that slight, sweetly crooked half-smile, saying with a raw genuine tone, “I’m glad.”
Gabe smiles back before he asks quietly, “...And what about you, Morrison?”
But then Gabe’s smile fades into a concerned scowl, eyebrows furrowing slightly as he murmurs, “You’ve been pretty busy this week.”
Jack pauses for
One
Second
Because it’s true.

On top of the new outdoor drills with the pulse rifles and the evening MOS classes, he’s been helping Mulcahy in what little spare time he has - both with starting the round of the newest
injections and with setting up the emergency biodatabase. And even with the time change and nearly nine or ten hours of slogging up and down mountains covered in semi-muddy slush and layers of half-refrozen snow, he still has his need to run ingrained deep in his spirit - *old habits die hard*, he thinks absently - so he’s still doing laps and spending an extra 30 minutes at the gym after Delta training each evening.

And to really layer it on...

He’s been getting his own injections with Mulcahy too.

[...And copying the files for his and Gabe’s biodata as well.]

“...You’re not overextending yourself, are you?” Gabe asks, feeling a soft twist of bittersweet and sweetly bitter affection as he watches Jack think it over, those deep blue eyes drifting down as a quietly contemplative look slips across his face.

Jack can *feel* Gabe’s concern as he turns it over because -

“I’m…”

...*This is one of the things I tried to warn him about,* Gabe thinks gently, his own gaze lingering on the thin shadow of a mark on Jack’s neck and -

But then -

Jack looks back up as -

[Inside Jack, there’s something that thrums in the shadow of his heartbeat - something *strong,* something *true* -]

[Something *enduring* -]

Gabe’s own eyes grow wide as he sees -

“I’m actually feeling *great* this week.”

Jack’s eyes are *endlessly* blue -

As blue as they were the night in the hotel.

[It’s something impossible to put into words -]

[Into coherence.]

[But he *feels* it, alive, growing in the flood of his heart, and he doesn’t know if it’s watered with the sweetness of them or the rich tang of his blood or something deeper than that -]

[Something deep in *them* -]

[But he *feels* it -]

[And he loves it.]

And Jack *grins* at him, saying with a brilliant tease, “This weekend really did wonders for me -”

And then his grin twists into a smirk as he gives that cocksure, charming smile to Gabe, saying, “If
you know what I mean.”

Gabe raises an eyebrow, his expression deadpan and unimpressed but -

Inside, he thinks affectionately, _It’s nice to see that you’re exactly the same, Jack._

Before he smiles wryly at Jack, saying teasingly, “A little R&R goes a long way, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, it wasn’t _little_, Reyes,” Jack retorts immediately, “And it sure went for a _long_ time -”

And -

A broad, happy grin breaks across Gabe’s face and he snap-laughs, “God _dammit_ -”

Before a mirrored smile burst across Jack’s face and he’s laughing too -

“T’m just _losing_ these -” Gabe says dryly, even as his eyes have a gorgeous gleam of delighted mischief under the bright lights. Jack rolls his shoulders, saying, “You gotta step it up, Reyes -”

“You are gonna reap what you sow this weekend, Jack Morrison,” Gabe snaps back with a roguish gleam in his eyes and -

Jack _smirks_ back, taunting him, “If it’s anything like what I got last weekend, I’ll embrace it with open arms -”

And then he winks at Gabe, adding smokily, “And spread legs.”

A brilliant, deep blush tints rose gold across the bronze of Gabe’s cheeks, and he half-smacks, half-buries his face in his left hand, wheezing, “Oh god, you’ll be the death of me -”

“I’d be glad to help you experience _la petit mort_ again,” Jack grins, quirking an eyebrow. Gabe peeks over the edge of his hand, just those gorgeous rich eyes peering at Jack, radiant with a happy, humorous glow and -

_Flustering you is too much fun, Gabe_, Jack thinks, feeling that same urge to tease him, spark his laughter -

Ignite his brilliance again with the sweet elegance of smoke and the raw glow of the edge of a fire.

“I’d rather share it with you again.”

The words catch Jack off-guard as -

Gabe lowers his hand, wearing that deep, rich smile, wry and roguish -

And there’s that _glow_ his eyes had in the hotel and -

“I could spend hours feeling it with you.”

Gabe _smirks_ at him.

And suddenly -

Jack feels his pulse spike -

As Gabe leans in, murmuring like smoke, “T’d be happy to give you whatever you want, Morrison.”
Jack’s breath catches on his heart and -

“Anything?” Jack asks back, the word dripping between them and -

“If it’s in my ability or power to do so, sure,” Gabe chuckles lowly and -

Jack murmurs close, almost kissing the words to his lips:

“Drawing lessons”

...

Gabe feels something in his mind break as whatever sultry expression he’d been holding shatters into a deep, heavy scowl of utter confusion -

And Jack grins triumphantly at him and -

“...Well, that was a plot twist I didn’t see coming,” Gabe mutters, leaning back. He folds his arms, quirking a curious eyebrow at Jack, asking, “You mean for teaching me how to throw knives, right?”

Jack beams with boyish innocence at him, saying, “You got it!”

And then -

It clicks for Gabe -

And he mutters knowingly, “Ah...I forgot Serena is actually a legit doctor -”

“She’s threatening to grade work, Reyes,” Jack says with a raw rasp of real desperation cracking through his voice, “Help. Me. Please.”

“Thiiiiiis might be beyond my help,” Gabe grins at him, before he frowns in confusion, saying, “Wait, this isn’t even assigned MOS training yet - it’s still the free week -”

“I can’t have my future medic commander hate me for my awful sketches, Reyes,” Jack says, reaching out and grabbing at the fabric of Gabe’s sweatshirt, and -

“She’s been staring me down all week,” he mutters in a frantic rush, “I’ve been wearing thermals even though I’m dying in them -”

And Gabe -

A broad, ridiculous smile cracks across his face and -

“I feel like she can see all the hickeys on me -” Jack continues in a hasty flow as -

Gabe starts laughing -

“What’s so funny? This is serious, Reyes,” Jack says, even as his own expression breaks into a grin -

“Dude,” Gabe says, wheezing between his laughter, “Serena has been fraternizing with Carolina for as long as I’ve known them.”

...

Jack’s smile slips off his face into deadpan as he mutters, “What.”
“You know we saw them at the restaurant this past weekend, right?” Gabe asks teasingly, “I saw them on our way in -”

“What,” Jack repeats, eyes growing wide, “They know??”

Gabe stares at him, before stating dryly, “Morrison, you got back on the return shuttle with like ten marks on your neck, a noticeable limp in your strut, and the biggest shit-eating grin I’ve ever seen - everybody knows.”

Jack looks slightly bashful as he almost giggles, “...Ahaha, right -”

_How the hell is he this cute,_ Gabe thinks with fierce, bitter sweetness as he sighs, “But so did like, most of the other candidates and at least half of the trainers, so even though everybody knows, we’re all in this bs together.”

And Jack relaxes as -

Gabe smiles at him, the perfect blend of sweet and smoky, saying quietly, “But yeah, I’d be glad to give you some pointers, if you’d like.”

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76: The Portrait of the Artist

Thursday, March 14, 2047: 2004 hours - heading back to the Barracks from the Medical Hallway

“I should’ve just stayed in the Echo class,” says Erica (Soldier: 64) as the group of candidates who attended Jones’ Delta class round the slight corner between the Storage Hallway and the Trainer Rooms. There’s actually more candidates showing up to the Delta class this week than Jack had expected, and he’s not 100% sure why.

The unsurprising part was that of the four main MOSes offering free week classes, Delta had the fewest “dedicated attendees” last week - maybe twenty, twenty-two candidates who attended all five days last week, with fluctuating amounts drifting in on random days. Of the 108 non-Senior Soldier candidates, a disproportionate amount had spent time in the Bravo and Charlie classes, _because guns and explosions are cool,_ Jack sighs dryly. Another factor was _probably_ Doctor Jones’ breakneck pace: because this two-and-a-half week period was little more than an open trial session for the different specialities, she was pushing through basic first aid and trauma medicine with little emphasis on detailed anatomy.

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“_Only twenty-four of you are going to end up in the full Delta training session after Escape,_” Jones had said to them last Wednesday, when someone had asked her why she wasn’t covering the major vessels of the circulatory system, “As I said to the general group, there’s just not enough time to teach any of you proper medic training and proper anatomy, so while I have a few extras, we’re going to gun through wound-healing and trauma medicine. For some of you, this might be the only time you get to learn how to pack a wound before a real battle.”

And the group had fallen silent as she had added in a softer, more bittersweet tone:

“I have to make this time count... If any one of you uses this knowledge in a true emergency situation, then I will have done something right in this program.”

...But for some reason -
Attendance had picked up this week.

Not including the Delta Senior Soldiers who were helping Jones teach the class, there’s currently thirty-three of them - clumped up into groups of friends - drifting down the hall towards the north end of the Barracks. Some of them - like Wes - had mumbled something about “Edwards is real goddamn boring” before the Delta class had started; others had shown up because “I want to make Franken-pig”, like Jamie, who despite being a Junior Bravo had sat in the class with a mischievous gleam in his eyes as Riya and Delacruz had demonstrated stitching on two pig cadavers.

Still others had just seemed...well...

Genuinely curious.

The Delta classroom was arranged like a pretty typical medical classroom or lab room: lots of big, long, stainless steel tables with easily washable surfaces and tiles on the floors and cabinets. While the steel tables were some sort of cheap, military-industrial basic things, they were big enough to seat like four (pretty big) supersoldier candidates in a line.

Except today -

Jack had found his table crowded with three more people trying to slide in.

“...Guys, we can’t all sit here,” he’d muttered with wry humor, as Adrien had been wedged in on his left and Jin wedged in on his right.

“Aww, don’t you want to cuddle with us, Morrison?” Jamie had laughed on Jin’s right -

“Krause, go to another table,” Erica had whispered loudly to Derek (65), but he’d just retorted, “Dude, Kinsley, I was here first -”

“There’s no room at the other tables either,” Angel (121) had said on Erica’s left -

And sure enough, when Jack had glanced around the room -

Most of the other tables were crowded with five or six candidates -

“Also, Jack has the best notes,” Derek had stated smugly -

Causing Jack to make a deadpanned expression.

“You didn’t like it?” Adrien asks Erica as they slip past the tiny Barracks Utilities closet. Erica sighs, rolling her shoulders as she mutters, “It’s not that - I just think like 90% of it went over my head.”

And then she makes a face, muttering, “Didn’t help that Krause was blocking me from seeing Morrison’s notes -”

“Did everyone copy off of me?” Jack asks, making an “I don’t know what I expected face” as they enter the [97 - 120] hallway.

“Dude, you just make it all so organized,” Erica says, leaning around Adrien to beam at him, “I don’t know how you do it.”

“It helps that most of this is review,” Angel - a former ICU nurse - points out, but then she sighs, “But Morrison is really good at keeping his notes clear.”

“Damn, Santiago, you too?” Jack asks, teasing her. Angel, who’s walking in front of him, twists
around, winking as she laughs, “I copied your notes on Mulcahy’s readings too -”

“Don’t you specialize in enhancement treatments?” Jack asks her incredulously. As they reach the intersection between the [73 - 96] hallway (west) and the [121 - 132] hallway (east), Angel waves as she says, “I’m not the one who’s teacher’s pet. Buenas noches, muchachos!”

And she twists herself back around and heads to the left.

Jack pauses for a moment, watching her go, only half-listening to the candidates bidding each other “good night” and “see ya” when -

There’s a set of knuckles bumping against his right shoulder -

And Jack glances towards Adrien, who’s looking at him with an expression of faint concern as he asks, “You alright, Jack?”

“...Yeah,” Jack murmurs, slight rasp to his voice.

Adrien raises an eyebrow, clearly not buying it, but he sighs and starts to drift towards the [73 - 96] hallway.

Jack pauses for just

One

Second

Before he follows his roommate.

There’s a little bustle as they weave around the other [73 - 96] candidates who are moving in and out of their rooms, and - in the quietness of their little space - Jack asks softly, “Am I...Is that how people really see me?”

“You just figured that out?” Adrien cracks completely dryly.

…

After a split-second of disbelief at his bluntness, Jack tilts his head, giving him a skeptical squint -

As Adrien gives him a smug, wide smirk back.

“Oh, c’mon, Jack - it’s not a bad thing,” Adrien snorts, “You’re a doer, and you help people. What else you trying to be?”

“Well... cool, for starters -” Jack retorts sarcastically, which gets his roommate to laugh loudly, “Jack, no one here is cool.”

Jack quirks an eyebrow skeptically, but Adrien just gives him a genuine grin, saying, “No one who agrees to this shit is cool. We’re all a bunch of nerds dreaming about being Captain America and Wolverine - don’t act like that’s cool.”

And then -

Adrien’s smile grows a little softer, a little sweeter as he says:

“This weekend was good for you, huh?”
“...What?” Jack asks, as they start to reach the end of the hall -

“You seem like you’re doing better this week,” Adrien says honestly, “I won’t lie, I was kinda worried for you last week.”

“...Oh,” Jack murmurs, thinking about how intense he’d been about reading Mulcahy’s papers -

About thinking over this program -
About thinking about the candidates -
And about thinking through -

“...I was worried he wasn’t serious about you,” Adrien mutters back.

And before Jack can ask “what -”

“...But I’m glad I was wrong.”

Adrien finishes his words with a quiet, cool smile, staring straight ahead to the end of the hallway.

Jack scowls in confusion, before he turns his eyes to follow Adrien’s gaze and -

His heart jumps to his throat -

As he sees Gabe leaning against the far wall, between their [75 - 76] room and the [73 - 74] at the end of the hall.

[x24: The Portrait of the Artist]

[“...If one puts forward an idea to a true Englishman—always a rash thing to do—he never dreams of considering whether the idea is right or wrong. The only thing he considers of any importance is whether one believes it oneself. Now, the value of an idea has nothing whatsoever to do with the sincerity of the man who expresses it. Indeed, the probabilities are that the more insincere the man is, the more purely intellectual will the idea be, as in that case it will not be coloured by either his wants, his desires, or his prejudices,” Gabe reads, his eyes flicking through the electronic text on his datapad. Today is a gray kind of mood - beside being outside in the grey weather and the grey snow and the grey shadows of the trees, he’s got a hankering for rereading Dorian Gray, and he’s swapped into his grey tactical night gear, wearing his grey hoodie and sweatpants to keep warm after dinner, completely not caring that he looks like a schlub because -]

[His mind has been blue all day.]

Gabe is engrossed in reading something on his datapad - a book, Jack somehow knows instinctively, because Gabe gets a slightly different expression when he’s reading something for pleasure instead of tactical or intellectual purpose - dressed in his grey tactical jacket, hood up around his head - because he’s still cold, even inside , Jack also knows immediately - leaning against the wall, offset against the small window that peers westward out from the side of the mountain -

[“...However, I don't propose to discuss politics, sociology, or metaphysics with you. I like persons better than principles, and I like persons with no principles better than anything else in the world. Tell me more about Mr. Dorian Gray. How often do you see him?” Gabe continues, feeling the blue flicker soft and starlike in the red-tinted glow of his heart because -]

The twilight that casts in through the window is a slow-sweeping blue, drifting across the left side of
Gabe’s hood, his shoulder, down across the drape of his arm, dusting him with the veil of the night and-

*Gabe,* Jack’s heart hums but he calls out:

“Reyes.”

At the sound of his name in that familiar voice tinted with the depths of night -

Gabe glances up and -

He smiles, murmuring quietly, “Hey, Morrison.”

(“*Every day. I couldn't be happy if I didn't see him every day. He is absolutely necessary to me.*”)

“Were you waiting long?” Jack asks excitedly, taking the last few steps towards him in an eager rush, almost *bounding* towards him. Gabe sees Adrien make a wry face behind him, but he focuses his attention on Jack, shrugging loosely as he tucks the datapad away, saying, “Nah, we finished a few minutes ago.”

“Bravo again?” Jack asks brightly, but Gabe grins, saying with a genuine chuckle, “No, Echo today.”

Jack blinks, before he hums mischievously, “Oh, what a twist to your character. Did you crack the Omnicode, detective?”

“Ha, if I was capable of doing that, they wouldn’t keep me here, that’s for sure,” Gabe snorts, but there’s a delighted glow to his gaze and a genuine tilt to his smile, “I’d be locked up in some secret CIA base, crunching letters all day.”

“Are you telling me this place *isn’t* a secret CIA base?” Jack teases him brightly, but Gabe just rolls his eyes, chuckling, “Nah, see, this one is a secret *Army* base. Big difference.”

“And what’s that?” Jack asks, very blatantly indulging his humor.

Gabe grins roguishly, “Probably better plumbing.”

And Jack

*Bursts*

Into brilliant laughter.

It’s deep but somehow light, lighter than air, buoyant and almost bubbly with a stormy rasp to it, low and throaty but also strong with the full sound of his chest, and he almost doubles over, eyes crinkling at the corners, shoulders rolling and -

A rush of sugared affection shivers through Gabe’s core as his own smile slips into something stardusted and lovestruck and -

“That’s -” Jack wheezes, lifting his head as he straightens up from laughing hunched over on himself, head tilted, eyes alive with delighted mischief, “That’s not a fair benchmark .”

Gabe shrugs again, a supremely self-satisfied smirk on his face when -

“Alright, kids, all this flirting is cute,” Adrien’s voice cuts through them dryly, “But some of us are
tired and just want to get a towel for a shower.”

Gabe scowls slightly, but Jack grimaces with apologetic friendliness, twisting around to his left to say, “Sorry, Adrien. Here - let me grab a notebook -”

Jack rapidfire taps their PIN into the door lock. It beeps and slides open, and he darts inside -

[Gabe watches his excitement with a fond expression as -]

[“...Do I gotta come chaperone this?”]

[Adrien steps closer, between Gabe and the doorframe to Room [75 - 76], eyeing Gabe skepticaly. Gabe sighs pleasantly, chuckling, “Bold words from the guy who banged Ochoa so hard he passed out.”]

Jack dives to his personal effects chest, quickly spinning the lock combo on it -

[Even in his peripherals, Gabe sees the smirk flitter unrepentantly across Adrien’s face before he hastily attempts to straighten his expression out, muttering, “Alright, fair play, Reyes. You guys doing your reading thing tonight or what?”]

It clicks, and he slides the lid open, reaching for his stack of notebooks and binders. He keeps them mainly for filing paperwork and keeping information from the different training classes over the last year, but he pulls out one of the rare sketchbooks he has.

[“No book club tonight,” Gabe says honestly, “He asked for drawing lessons.”]

[In his peripherals -]

[Gabe sees Adrien make an outright “oomph” face and -]

[“Alright now, be nice, Morris,” Gabe snorts dryly, and Adrien shakes his head a little, muttering, “Look, Reyes, I love Jack like a brother, but man - there are some things that just can’t be fixed, you know?”]

[Gabe just smiles faintly, murmuring quietly:]

Jack slides the lid shut, locking it again and -

[“...Everything is worth trying.”]

He skitters from his bed -

Back out the door, beaming at them as he pops out, saying, “Okay, I got a notebook and my datapad and a pencil - anything else I need, Mister Renaissance Man?”

“The patience to struggle through a tedious process multiple times and the determination to keep trying in the face of failure?” Gabe offers with a completely deadpan tone.

Adrien makes a horrified face at that -

But Jack just grins slyly, saying brightly, “Oh, I didn’t realize Resistance week was still going.”

“Ha,” Gabe laughs coarsely, but his smile is broad, “Smartass.”

“Why, yes, hello, Mr. Pot, my name is Mr. Kettle,” Jack states in that raw, deep cheerful tone
without skipping a beat. Gabe pulls himself up from leaning against the wall, stretching as he mutters, “Yeah, yeah, I brought that on myself -”

But his smile is still *so damn charmed* and *so damn infectious*

That Jack has to stop himself from reaching out to kiss him -

“Good luck,” Adrien mutters as he shuffles through the doorway, “You’re gonna need it.”

“No such thing as luck, Morris,” Gabe says loudly, with a smug lilt to his words -

“Yes, just *pure skill,*” Jack calls back, also grinning.

...

“...You might want to wait for a drawing lesson before you say that,” Gabe adds dryly -

“Oh,” Jack says, blinking at him, “I thought we were just talking about general skill -”

[And they set off down the hallway, their bantering quickly turning back into flirting -]

[And then back into bantering again -]

[And again.]

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“Okay,” Gabe says as they slide themselves in at the end of the Senior table in the Mess Hall about five minutes later, “So what’s your drawing experience: just medical stuff? Anything else?”

Like the last few weeks, the Mess Hall is relatively empty after dinner and speciality classes: most candidates prefer to spend their final “daylight hours” in either their rooms or the Candidate Rec Lounge, winding down from drills, training, and classes. Strangely enough, this makes the Rec Lounge absolutely *obnoxious* to be in for studying, reading, or anything else requiring peace and quiet (and is a big part of why Gabe made his snow fort in the first place), and that also makes the Mess Hall rather ideal for anything that needs to be done at low volumes.

There are a few other small groups scattered sporadically around the tables: one playing poker or some sort of card game, another set just hanging out, and another group comparing notes on something or another.

As they settle in, Jack chuckles, “You got it. It’s all anatomy stuff and maybe a map or two.”

Gabe hums contemplatively as Jack opens his sketchbook, flipping through some of the pages, grimacing with a self-abashed smile as he laughs, “Ooooh, yeah, these are rough. Here -”

He sets the sketchbook down and twirls it around to face Gabe and -

Gabe tries his damnedest not to make a face -

But a small wince of pity slips across it and -

“Ah, see,” Jack chuckles knowingly, “This is what you’re up against.”

“I mean,” Gabe says in a dryly optimistic tone, “I can tell it’s the muscles of the neck, at least.”
But -

Jack blinks in surprise, asking, “Wait, you can?”

“...Wait, that’s what it is, right?” Gabe asks, second-guessing himself, but Jack just grins at him, saying, “No, you’re right. I’m just impressed you figured it out.”

“Well, it’s not...” Gabe starts to say, but the longer he stares at the sketch -

The harder his words die in his throat.

Jack observes him with an almost clinical patience, watching as Gabe reaches across the table for the sketchbook, his eyes quietly tracing over how Gabe’s fingers carefully turn the pages -

How those beautiful eyes flick over his page-smudged pencil lead and ragged lines and rough concepts of humanity.

And Jack’s heart suddenly catches in his ribs -

As Gabe slips through the pages of his completely unimpressive, stiff attempts at representing life -

“...Listen,” Jack says, this time genuinely nervous, “I appreciate you humoring me, Reyes, but you really don’t have to...”

But his words die off -

As Gabe pauses on a page with a ragged sketch of the bones and muscles of the hand -

But his eyes linger over a much smaller image at the bottom of the page:

A long, rough-cut shape, almost rectangled, with jagged steps rising on one side, and a mess of pencil-smudged flittering and fluttering on the other.

An aimless doodle.

One Jack isn’t even sure he remembers drawing.

But his brain is already processing it, even upside down and -

“...What is this?” Gabe asks, his voice quiet, his tone gentle.

Jack pauses for

One

Second

Before he murmurs just as softly, “...Old limestone quarry. Near my house.”

Gabe glances up from the page, his expression deep and enchanting like the night sky behind him, and he asks with a sweet-smoke tone, “Can I see it?”

Jack quirks an eyebrow, but digs his datapad out of his pocket, humming, “Sure. Let me find it.” He taps through the browser, quickly searching for images of the Empire Quarry, before selecting the first one and -

“Here,” he says, handing the datapad off to Gabe as the image loads on the screen, “Supposedly
used to supply the limestone for the Empire State Building.”

Gabe takes the datapad and -

His eyes grow wide as they skim over the image -

Because it is inspiring.

There’s something hauntingly beautiful about the image Jack has handed to him: sheer walls of pure limestone fall and drop into each other, perfectly vertical, like a steady hand has cut them clean. Framed by the brilliant green of leaves, trees overgrown and dripping off the sides like moss clinging to a cave, the walls drop endless into a pool of water, glassy and smooth, but the color -

The color is the most perfect shade of turquoise he’s ever seen.

It’s not a mirror of the sky, not at all.

No -

It is a stained glass window into the raw, hand-carved depths of the earth -

Eerie and yet quietly stunning.

Gabe stares at it for a long, lingering moment -

Before he flicks his eyes back to the small scribble in black and white and smudges of grey, dancing over the outline of Jack’s imagination and he thinks:

*The...framing is different.*

Before he realizes:

*Oh.*

*Jack’s sketch is from inside the quarry.*

He can see it clearer now: the low “plane” of the water, close to the eye of the tiny viewer, looking up the sheer geometric cuts of the stone, the trees tresling over like fabric caught on the edges -

How the rest of the page

Is the vastness of the sky

And Gabe murmurs, “You went here a lot?”

“Oh yeah, all the time,” Jack says nonchalantly, rolling his shoulders, “Though we weren’t supposed to. But if it wasn’t this quarry, it’d be another one.”

And as Gabe looks up at him, Jack grins with that charming, roguish, mischievous smile, bright and wide, laughing, “We swam in them all the time, even though we *definitely* weren’t supposed to.”

And Gabe thinks he can see it:

The boy on the edge of a stained glass pool, water brittle with limestone and beautiful like jade, the sticky sweetness of a summer’s day rising -

His gaze staring up the outline of the stone that made a building of empires -
His eyes bluer than the sky
And deeper than the water.

Gabe pauses for
One
Second

Dropping his own eyes to look at the rough scratching of an image -

Before he flips the page.

And he’s greeted with more roughly-proportioned sketches of skeleton hands and awkward tendons -

But again at the bottom is something different.

A small slice of a view:

Dark, heavily shaded lines, long leaves furling off of them, curling like tendrils, laid out in almost menacing rows, like staring down a line of soldiers, armed with hard shadows, tops of their heads crowned with pebbled daggers and -

Tiny, cute V’s slipped over them -

A pair -

With streaks of fluff-sketched strips behind them.

And somehow -

Gabe doesn’t need an explanation for this one.

He can hear the image:

The rustling of dry leaves against their neighbors -

Two ravens calling to each other, a mated pair -

Clouds pressed slim across the ears of corn.

Gabe flicks his eyes back up to the gnarled skeleton hand, stiff and uncomfortable in its barrenness, proportions awkward.

Jack watches with quiet, humbled sweetness as Gabe assesses the sketches on the page, those gilded eyes dancing back and forth between the bland diagrams of hands and the cornfield on the bottom.

(His datapad is still in Gabe’s left hand, open to the image of the quarry.)

Gabe frowns slightly, flipping to the next page.

This is similar: more hands, overly-shaded, phalanges knobbed and raw, but along the outer margin of the page is a long column, lines cut into stone bricks, repeating endless in textured patterns, stacked clean-cut, rising up into a small detail of an ornamental lanternlike light fixture, with a deeply-shaded parapet capping the top -
And Gabe asks neutrally, “You had to take an art class for a general ed requirement, right? Or did they not do that?”

Jack raises an eyebrow, intrigued by Gabe’s curiosity, before he hums playfully, “No, they did. I took a basic photography class and passed.”

And then he grins abashedly, “Not that it helped with this, obviously.”

“That’s not true.”

Gabe’s words fall like quiet spring rain across Jack’s thoughts.

And it takes him a

Full

Second

Before he mutters confusedly, “Excuse me?”

Gabe flips to the next page, eyes drawn immediately to a doodle of some cluster of trees, but he says gently, “It shows. You have an eye for framing and landscapes. But you don’t practice. How often do you doodle?”

Jack blinks at him, bewildered by the questions -

Before he reminds himself, No stupid answers -

And says, “I try not to.”

“Do it more,” Gabe states, flipping to another page, “You do it only when you have a blank page?”

The words are both a question and a statement.

“...I guess so?” Jack answers and asks, “I...never really paid attention to that, to be honest. Always thought doodling meant I was slacking off.”

“Like everything, it depends on moderation,” Gabe says informatively, “But there are some studies that show doodling helps memory retention and keeps the brain focused when it would otherwise zone out. It also helps open minor creativity in daily routines.”

And then he looks up, and gives Jack a brilliant, radiant grin as he chuckles, “I was always a doodler. My teachers hated it. But it’s hard to stop when you can take notes with one hand and draw with the other.”

“Well, that’s not a fair advantage,” Jack grins back, “They didn’t know they were teaching a future criminal mastermind.”

“Ha!” Gabe laughs brightly, “You make it sound like I was up to no-good all the time.”

Jack raises a skeptical eyebrow, asking pointedly, “You mean you weren’t?”

Gabe gives him a dry look back -

Before he grins mischievously, “Only when I wanted to.”
Jack smirks back, chuckling, “Show-off.”

“Hate the game, not the player, Morrison,” Gabe teases him, giving him a roguish smirk back, a brilliant gleam in his eye and -

Jack’s pulse thrums at it, even as he chuckles, “Wait, were you seriously trying to game school?”

“The hustle life starts young,” Gabe retorts in a deadpan tone, but Jack can see the obvious glow of delight in his eyes and -

“I don’t believe that for a second,” Jack says back, humor and warmth in his voice even as he gives Gabe a skeptical look, “Like you aren’t the biggest book and history nerd I know.”

“Alright, Nurse Morrison over here doesn’t get to judge me for that, thank you very much,” Gabe chuckles, rolling his eyes jokingly. He drops his gaze back to Jack’s sketchbook, muttering with a sweet if sarcastic sigh, “Mr. Tries Not To Doodle over here -”

“It just -”

The words slip from Jack’s mouth -

But then he stops

As the remainder catch in his teeth and…

Flipping the page to another rough sketch of hand anatomy, with a few doodles of JACK in big, block-design letters in the corner -

Gabe looks up -

Eyes tracing over the soft, bittersweet, complex expression on Jack’s face -

How distant the depth of those blue eyes look -

As they drift absently over the paper of the sketchbook.

“It just...always felt like I was wasting time.”

Jack’s voice is low, deep with the weight of twenty-seven years, raspy with a sweet spring storm - a little bit mournful, a little bit older.

And Gabe’s heart aches with a sweetly bitter songlike feeling -

A feeling of soft sorrow for someone he had never met -

A retroactive emotion of wishing he could hand that boy with the sky in his eyes a piece of paper and a pencil -

And tell him it’s okay to break rules

(And find his freedom).

“...Doodling, I mean,” Jack continues, his voice catching a little more normalcy, as if the words ground him in something, “Always felt like...things needed a purpose, you know?”

In his mind -
Jack pulls himself away from pages of rough paper and rough sketched stiffness -

And blinks, lifting his gaze to Gabe -

Who is watching him with a complex, sugar-smoked emotion in the amber depths of his eyes.

And Jack grins bashfully, saying, “Like if I wasn’t doing something for a reason, it wasn’t really worth doing.”

Gabe observes him for a moment before -

“Creativity is reason enough.”

Jack

Stops

His eyes growing wide at

The softest, sweetest slip of a smile on Gabe’s lips -

And the warmest, tenderest gilded glow in his eyes.

And Jack feels his heart swell with an emotion he can’t give voice to -

Not here

Not now

But in quiet, tender moments of just them alone -

Gabe scowls a little, which in turn causes Jack to frown as well, but then Gabe murmurs, “...Hmm, I’m not really sure how to ask this -”

“You know, there’s no such thing as a stupid question, Reyes,” Jack zings back immediately, which gets Gabe to give him an unimpressed look as Jack grins at him.

“...I just keep walking into them,” Gabe sighs, more disappointed in himself than anything else, but Jack’s playful grin softens into a sweeter smile as he murmurs, “You can just ask.”

And Gabe glances back up -

Right as Jack gives him that beautiful half-smile, saying, “...I’m always honest with you.”

And Gabe pauses for a moment

Before he smiles back, “And I appreciate that. You always know exactly what to say.”

A faint, rosy tint flushes along Jack’s cheekbones, sweet under the bright fluorescent lights in the Mess Hall, and Gabe thinks affectionately, Cute.

I could get used to complimenting you like this.

But then he frowns a little, refocusing again as he sums up the courage to ask earnestly:

“...What do you do for creativity?”
Jack’s smile disappears - not in a sad or mournful way, just in contemplation as he thinks it over, humming to himself. Gabe watches him briefly, before his eyes drift back to the big block text of JACK on the page -

“Well…” Jack says slowly, churning it over in his head, running through video games, movies, music in the last few years, “I’m guessing you mean like, what do I create for myself, right? Artsy stuff?”

“Well, sure, but not that strict,” Gabe says, looking back up at him, “I mean, I know you like to run, you enjoy the same games as me, you’ve got a wide taste in music.”

And then he pauses as Jack frowns a little in confusion -

Before he adds as an explanation, “Look, I know you know how to have fun, you know? You have hobbies. Interests. Passions. Lots of people, especially in the military - they get caught up in just the grind of life, or jobs, or deployment. It happens. Few people ever completely lose hobbies, but many people just fall into easy habits.”

Jack’s frown lessens a bit as Gabe grows contemplative, saying, “And that’s not bad, of course - we all gotta do whatever makes us happy at the end of the day - but vets in particular, those abrupt transitions between duty and civilian life can be hard. And that makes it easy to fall into the traps of more dangerous pastimes.”

Gabe settles back a little, ending it with, “So I guess the real question is...where does your creative energy go? What do you channel it into? It doesn’t have to be ‘artsy’ - if you pour your time and energy into unlocking achievements in video games, that works. Whatever leaves you feeling fulfilled when the day is done.”

Jack actually shifts forward, putting his elbows on the table, one hand cupped around the other, eyebrows furrowed as he thinks about it -

But the blue of his eyes has deepened again -

As if they’re reflecting the depths of the night sky behind Gabe.

And Gabe thinks wryly, I love it when you look like that, Jack.

And after a long moment, Jack answers lowly:

“I...don’t think anyone’s ever asked me that.”

And a sly smile quirks on Gabe’s lips over that.

And Jack looks up at him, still murmuring behind his hands, “I mean, people have asked about my hobbies, like you said. Interests. Things I do. And I mean, I have those: I run, I work out, I enjoy a lot of music, I play games. Before the war, I’d see local bands or artists or get drinks with friends or visit my parents or...you know, little things”

Gabe observes him quietly, the night falling in soft blue drifts behind him, and Jack finds that that something that’s been humming in his chest all week thrills

*Stronger*

Than ever and -
“...I get enjoyment out of challenging myself,” Jack continues, his thoughts just going, feeling that flow, “Running farther, lifting more, completing a difficult level. Camping somewhere new. Hiking a rough trail. Trying a new recipe. I just…”

Jack falters -

Because he’s never had to put these things into words before -

Into coherence.

“I never felt unfulfilled by those things, if that’s what you meant,” Jack murmurs, but Gabe shakes his head, saying, “It wasn’t. Like I said, you like what you like, and most importantly, you push yourself to do more with those things. That’s dedication. And that’s creativity, even if many people don’t think of it that way.”

Jack frowns again, considering Gabe’s words as he says, “I’ve always found the hard sense of division between the classic ideas of creativity and personal pleasure to be so constraining. Why do we praise the people who read a lot or write a lot or draw a lot as somehow doing better or accomplishing more than the people who try a new recipe or explore new music or take a new trail?”

A pause and then -

“Why do we praise the action of drawing over the action of doodling?” Gabe asks, more rhetorically, “Are they not the exact same activity? Where is the dividing line?”

“...When does a doodle become art?” Jack asks back, but Gabe just grins at him, saying, “That’s a brilliant question, Ja-Morrison. How much money would you pay for a single piece of paper with notes by Leonardo da Vinci on it? What would you pay for draft sheets of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony?”

Jack frowns -

Because he’s not sure he’s ever thought of those before.

Gabe taps at the page of Jack’s sketchbook that he currently has open - another image of hand anatomy, this time with the blood vessels outlined against the bones, with a little sketch of a motorcycle at the bottom - and he says with a terribly gentle affection in his tone, “This is what I see here: one, like pretty much all amateur artists - including myself - you just don’t do it enough. I’m not talking like classical still life lessons bullshit - I mean just doodling, pure and simple. You don’t do it enough. Two: when you do doodle, it’s because you’ve got a blank page open. You’ll start doing a rough drawing for a purpose - like you said - and then because that’s actually warming up your creativity, you occasionally start something you actually like or are interested in. And then you stop yourself halfway because you think you’ve caught yourself doing something pointless, even though you’ve actually just did something for the pure pleasure of it and to keep your mind focused.”

Gabe flips back to the page with the image of the cornfield, continuing with, “Three: from what I can tell, you’ve actually got a really great mind’s eye, but like all amateur artists, you just don’t have the skill to convey it, and that’s because we loop back to Point One, you just don’t do it enough. All art is more like exercise and physical activities than anyone ever wants to admit: you have to practice, you have to practice a lot, and once you’re good at practicing, then you can learn to challenge yourself.”

And then -

Gabe looks up at him -
And he grins, saying radiantly, “But here’s the real secret to everything ‘creative’: you don’t ever have to be good at art - you just have to enjoy it for yourself. Because when you enjoy things, the rest will come in time.”

Jack blinks at him -

Before he mutters breathlessly, “Ga-Reyes, what the hell.”

Gabe’s grins twists into a sly, self-satisfied smirk as Jack half-states, half-stammers, “Seriously, how do you do that?? How do you just look at that -” and Jack gestures at the sketchbook, “- mess and see anything of value in it? How do you make sense of it?”

But then -

“No one’s...ever said anything like that to me before.”

The truth slips out from Jack’s heart.

And Gabe’s smirk softens back into a sweetly smoked smile.

“...I can tell.”

Jack looks up from the sketchbook -

And his breath catches in his ribs -

At the look of fondness - deep and yet ephemeral, regal and yet grounded - spun in the dark gold of Gabe’s eyes.

There’s a slight pause and then -

Gabe murmurs, “There’s...a part of the Hound of the Baskervilles where Holmes tells Watson, ‘It may be that you are not yourself luminous, but that you are a conductor of light. Some people without possessing genius have a remarkable power of stimulating it.’”

He pauses, as the words sink into the depths of Jack’s heart, and Jack mutters, “Well...I mean, some people are good facilitators, you know?”

Gabe watches him for a moment, before he says, “While that’s true, it’s probably the one part where I completely disagree with Holmes’ assessment.”

Jack

Frowns slightly

As he hums, “Huh.”

“Don’t get me wrong: Holmes has a lot of pseudo-philosophical lines like that which are really meant to sound impressive and build his character,” Gabe says, rolling his shoulders, taking on that roiling tone he gets whenever literature gets brought up, “But this is the one where it gets more and more hollow the more the reader realizes how important Watson is. It sounds deep in the beginning, but it’s that sort of mindset which favors drawing over doodling, or precision of expression over freedom in it.”

And Jack -
He feels the wry, affectionate smile spread across his face as he watches Gabe just go.

And Gabe shakes his head, muttering, “It’s just like the no stupid questions thing: anyone is capable of creating light, as Holmes put it, just as anything can be an answer if you think through it. The quote also values inherent talent over hard work, and then it values hard work over effort, which effort in and of itself is perfectly good. Again, it’s exactly like you asked, when does a doodle become art? I don’t know, but why will people pay millions if not billions of dollars to own a single piece of Da Vinci’s notes? Why is the Vitruvian Man considered art when the thing itself is literally just a sketch with some notes?”

Jack rolls his shoulders but humors him, saying, “Well, for starters, the Vitruvian Man is beautiful. That -” he gestures again to his sketchbook, “- is not.”

“Says who?”

Jack

Stops

As he blinks at the mischievous, delighted, beloved twinkle in Gabe’s eye.

And he sighs with patient, tender frustration, “Reyes...I appreciate the effort, but you don’t have to be cute with me over this.”

“I’m not being cute with you, Morrison.”

Gabe’s words ring out with a note of smirk-twisted honesty.

Jack stares at him, scowling a little.

But then -

“What was it that you said?” Gabe murmurs, flipping back two pages, “I’m always honest with you?”

Jack just watches -

As Gabe opens the sketchbook to the page with the skeleton hand -

And the rough image of the inside of the quarry.

And then -

With a smoky softness in his voice -

Gabe says quietly:

“Art never has to be beautiful. Art never has to be anything. Do you remember what I told you last week? About good ideas?”

(You have more of them than I think you realize.)

Jack observes him for a moment before he whispers lowly, “As if I could forget any part of last week.”

(You always know exactly what to say.)
Gabe glances up, smiling at him as he says, “There’s a perspective inside you that no one else can see - only you.”

And Gabe glances back down at the image of the quarry, adding with stardusted sweetness:

“And only you can give it shape.”

And Jack -

His heartbeat catches in his ribs -

As Gabe looks back up, gaze gilded and full of smoke-dusted stars, the night drifting in around him in layers of blue, and he smiles, saying, “All I can do is encourage you to share it.”

And -

Ah, Gabe thinks, at the way Jack looks at him - his eyes are the bluest Gabe has ever seen them, full of the draw of the night, not reflecting it but encompassing it, expression filled with wonder, pink on his cheeks under the bright lights, hair feathered in gold and -

*You look good like that, Jack.*

But -

“You too.”

Gabe

 Stops

As a beautiful, bold grin spreads across Jack’s face and -

“All I ever want to do is encourage you,” Jack says, his voice deep and honest and *true*, tone enduring and -

*Oh, Jack thinks -*

As the sugar-smoked stardust in Gabe’s eyes deepens, as the gold in them burns quieter but stronger, sharp like flints of amber but soft like songs that ebb and flow -

And a faint, gorgeous smile slips across Gabe’s face -

And he looks like a king under the veil of the night dripping in around him -

*I love it when you smile like that.*

“You do,” Gabe says quietly, as the stars start to rise outside, “More than words could ever describe.”

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Chapter End Notes
Sorry for the delay this past week. Life picked up steam and decided it wasn't going to stop.

I'm hoping once the holidays calm down that I can just sit down and write. I know where the rest of this story is going to go, and I know where/how the sequel will shape up, but just finding time to sit down and do it has been the hard part.

Since I will probably miss this, I want to wish you all Happy Holidays! Happy belated Hanukkah, Merry Christmas, and Happy Kwanzaa!

See you all next week!

Empire Quarry.

Indiana Limestone, Wikipedia. "Indiana limestone — also known as Bedford limestone — is a common regional term for Salem limestone, a geological formation primarily quarried in south central Indiana, USA, between the cities of Bloomington and Bedford."

Hidden Places: Indiana's Limestone Quarries.

(Thank you to MissCin101 who told me about the limestone quarries around Bloomington - especially the Empire Quarry - like a year ago. I've never been able to get those images out of my head. They're hauntingly beautiful.)
24x76: Round Two

Chapter Summary

Gabe has a plan for their second "totally-not-a-date" pass time weekend.
Jack doesn't know what it is -
But he's happy to go along for an adventure.
(And Gabe only wants to encourage the best in him.)

It was one Sunday evening early in September of the year 1903 that I received one of Holmes’s laconic messages:

*Come at once if convenient — if inconvenient come all the same. S. H.*

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76: Round Two

Saturday, March 16, 2047: 11:43 - Bioproduction Lab, Medical Ward in the Main SEP Facility

“...You’re still here?”

Jack jolts a little, spinning around on the stool to turn away from the bioproduction computer he’s been using -

Towards the door that connects the lab to the Medical Director’s office -

Where Mulcahy stands in the doorframe, quirking a curious eyebrow at him.

Her lab coat is gone, no doubt hung up in her office, and she’s already dressed in casual - yet still polished - clothes, obviously getting ready for the trip down into the valley. Unlike her, Jack is still dressed in his blue scrubs, having worn them most of the morning as he’d helped administer injections and tests before the second pass time weekend began.

Jack gives her a genuine if apologetic grin, saying, “Ah, yeah, sorry, director - I thought you knew I was in here. I just wanted to finish updating the biodatabase with today’s check-ins, before I forgot for like, three days.”

It’s not…

*Entirely*

A lie.

He *is* actually finishing updating the check-in and injection information from this morning: if he can finish putting in the information today, the results from the blood tests will be ready for Mulcahy and
the rest of the medical team by Monday morning, which will let them get a little bit of a head start on figuring out which chimera vector to switch to for the second half of the month.

However…

Connected to the PC’s tower, blocked from her view by his left shoulder -

Is his datapad

As it rips the last bit of biodata and information the database contains about Gabe and himself.

True to the…rigorous and high-bar informality that Mulcahy had stated to him on the first day they met, she barely gives the displays and windows on the dual monitors and the holoprojections a passing glance, briefly flicking her gaze over them before turning her attention back to Jack as she hums, “I see. I appreciate it, Jack. I’ve been very impressed with your level of drive and focus on this task.”

Jack smiles brightly at her, saying honestly, “Thank you, ma’am. It feels good knowing I can help this program, even in small ways, you know?”

“Well, I wouldn’t put a task like this as ‘small,’” Mulcahy chuckles dryly, adjusting the collar on her thick, wool coat, “It’s been a tremendous helping having you and the other assistants develop the database as-needed.”

And then she gives him an earnest, if slightly embarrassed smile back, laughing, “I’d lose track of my own research at Trinity if it wasn’t for the assistance of my graduate students.”

Jack listens to her with a patient, slightly crooked smile on his face, before he says back, “It’s a big theory and model, director - even the best scientist would need help with it.”

“All the same,” she says, “It’s something I’m grateful for.”

But then she glances at her own wrist monitor, checking the time as she adds, “But still, Morrison, I don’t want you to be late for the shuttle departures. I’ll be back in the facility tonight, so I can finish updating it then.”

Internally -

Jack’s mind flicks to the datapad behind him, where he knows he needs roughly another five minutes to finish copying the biodata.

Externally -

Jack rolls his shoulders, saying with an easy kindness, “There’s not much left. It’ll be done in five minutes.”

And then -

He adds a little twist of truth -

As he smiles wryly, saying more mischievously, “Believe me, ma’am - I have no intention of skipping out on pass time.”

Mulcahy gets a knowing twinkle in her eye as she chuckles in a teasing tone, “How transparent of you. I suppose you’ve made plans with Reyes again?”
Jack continues to grin at her, but he admits, “Well, it’s his turn to plan things this time.”

Mulcahy laughs brightly, a low, melodic sound that almost jingles among the hum of the bioreactors in the room, saying, “How droll! Are you nervous? I’m curious what a man like him would plan for…”

She pauses, and then picks over her words wryly with, “Free time.”

Jack just grins at her - absolutely, 110% genuine - as he answers honestly, “I’m adventurous.”

And he thinks with quiet affection:

*And anything with Gabe is enjoyable.*

There’s a pause -

And then Jack blinks, faint blush rising to his cheeks -

As he realizes Mulcahy can see the soft, overjoyed expression on his face and -

“...Well,” Mulcahy says with her own quiet kindness, “I hope you have a good weekend, Jack.”

Jack smiles at her with cheerful embarrassment as he says, “Same to you, ma’am!”

“I’m locking this door,” Mulcahy states to him with more authority, “Be sure to lock the main lab door on your way out.”

“Understood,” Jack says back dutifully. She waves to him as she turns on her heel, heading back into her office -

And the door between the rooms slides shut, and beeps once.

Jack exhales slowly, releasing the small tension of poised posture he’d been holding, before he slides around to face the computer again, glancing at the small window showing the copying to the datapad.

There’s still another three and half minutes left.

He sighs, settling his left elbow on the surface of the desk, resting his cheek against his fist.

His eyes drift right -

To where his lined notebook sits open, detailing a list of notes and things to-do.

But because the bullet points only take up half a page -

There are a series of small, essentially aimless doodles on the bottom portion of the page.

A curvy, slicked motorcycle. A hard-angled virus. His wrist monitor and faint lines indicating his own arm and hand. Swirls turned into snail shells. A glass with an awkward amount of transparent thickness he doesn’t really know how to convey.

Blocky text of the numbers 24 and 76.

…

His evening drawing session with Gabe still lingers in the back of his mind -
Like songworms swimming through the shadows of his veins.

After the conversation about “art” versus “drawing” versus “doodling”, Gabe had shifted gears, completely bucking the whole objective about anatomy and map-making to pull up images of oddball things: motorcycles, cars, mountain landscapes, jackets and sweatshirts, whiskey bottles and soda cans, robots and medieval armor, shotguns and coffee mugs and dinner plates.

But like all of their conversations and personal time together -

None of it had ever felt…

Random.

Incoherent.

Purposeless.

If anything, Jack had found himself utterly enchanted as Gabe had walked him through different, basic ideas - concepts of proportions, simple linework, using a sense of geometry and the mind’s eye to change angles, valuing style and aesthetic over precise recreation - threading them together as seamlessly as he had talked about questions and answers, Omnis, oil fields, and highways, making Jack chum through fast little doodles of motorcycles, rushing into quick sketches of mugs and mountains, slipping into delicately outlining bottles of Jack Daniels and Crown Royal.

If anything…

Jack hadn’t felt that free with a pencil in his hand and nothing but Gabe’s smoked-sugar voice and spun-sunshine laughter in his head

(and heart)

In…

...He doesn’t know how long.

If ever.

Just being with Gabe had a way of

Slipping Jack open

And pouring out shards of stars and half-thought ideas

That he had never realized existed inside him.

Jack pauses, his thoughts drifting like a half-formed, half-coherent dream, wrapped in smoke and gold-inlay shadows, broad, bronzed hands that trade the pencil effortlessly, easy smirks and steady, songlike conversation and -

He picks up his own pencil and -

In his mind’s eye, he feels -

(The steady curve of a shoulder he leans against -)

(The low rumble of a voice murmuring something sweet and easy -)
(His own hand on the arc of a broad chest, tracing soft circles above a heart he would give anything to hold -)

(Lips against his forehead, kissing a smile there and -)

He could never hope to convey them, not with his rough, ragged lines of lead and awkward sense of proportions but -

The pencil sweeps out a thin line, a slow curve - the rise of his chest - and a wave beneath it - the line of his collarbone. Dips and U-shapes above the chest - the tips of his fingers - tracing over the top -

Images he can feel so rich and full but -

There’s a knock on the main door, directly to his left.

Jack lurches on the stool, nearly falling off as he scrambles to grab the screenglass of the desk, feet skittering on the floor a little, chest heaving as he bites back a hoarse yell of shock and -

“...Morrison? You in there?”

In less than a heartbeat -

Pure, utter relief floods through him -

As Gabe’s voice drifts muffled through the door.

Jack heaves a steep sigh, rising from the stool as he rasps, “...Yeah. Yeah, I’m here.” He slips around the edge of the desk, moving to the door only two feet away. The inner side of the door has a lockpad like all the others, but it’s currently set to a one-way [OPEN] system, where the pad on the other side requires the PIN, but this one is just the press of the [OPEN] button. Jack taps it -

And the door slides open to show

Gabe blinking at him.

He’s dressed almost exactly the same as last week: grey tactical jacket, beanie, gloves, and snowproof boots, but he’s got civilian hiking pants on - thick, cotton-synthetic fabric dyed a deep black - and Jack can see his favorite grey hoodie on underneath the jacket. He’s got a small backpack strapped to his shoulders, rustic but durable, like most military-issued things.

Jack leans against the doorframe, blocking the door from sliding back out, and drags his eyes up and down Gabe’s figure, chuckling teasingly, “Oooh, looking hot there, Reyes.”

Gabe snorts in derision, but Jack sees the smile flicker impulsively across his face, and his partner mutters wryly, “No lie, Morrison - I like that your bar is set real low. Makes it nice and easy.”

“But then -

Before Jack can fire back with another flirty remark -

Gabe looks past him, into the Bioproduction Lab, and scowls, asking, “Wait, you’re alone?”
“I was,” Jack says, folding his arms as he grins mischievously, humming invitingly, “But now you’re here.”

And Jack wiggles his eyebrows, chuckling, “And I always enjoy your company, Reyes.”

But then -

“You’re copying the biodata, right?” Gabe asks bluntly, a bright glow in the deep gold-inlay shadows of his eyes and -

Ah, Jack thinks, dropping his flirty front, smiling genuinely instead, He’s excited about something. Cute.

“Yeah,” Jack answers honestly, glancing back a little, squinting at the barely-visible datapad, “Looks like I have...just under two minutes left.” He turns his attention forward again, chuckling, “And then I gotta run and get changed.”

But before he can charmingly suggest that Gabe could help him with that -

“Oh, okay, good, good,” Gabe says, almost rambling to himself, his eyes filled with an almost starlike glow, a playful smile dancing across his lips and -

Jack pauses, quieting his internal quips as he thinks gently:

Oh, you’re really excited for something.

“Okay, so you’re gonna have to go to the bank again, right?” Gabe asks, pulling his own datapad out of his pocket and tapping at something eagerly. Jack observes him with a lovingly amused fondness in his chest, saying, “Riiight. I’m guessing you aren’t coming with me this time?”

“Well, see, we need to go -” Gabe starts to say, but then he frowns hard, as if shutting off his own words -

Before he glances back up at Jack, giving him a wide, brilliant, gorgeous smirk of utter delight and mischief.

Jack raises an eyebrow, but keeps his expression deadpan.

“...Actually,” Gabe says with a pointed, playful tone, “Right. Okay. You go to the bank and do the data transfer. That’ll take - what - ten minutes?”

“Might be more, might be less,” Jack says, still feeling that rich tenderness in his chest, “We did get the bigger drive, so even though there’s a ton of information in here, it’ll probably be a quick transfer.”

Gabe nods, glancing back at his datapad, saying, “Cool, good, so when that’s done, I want you to meet me outside Davidson’s Market, over on 4th and East.”

At that, Jack frowns in confusion, muttering slowly, “Is that...a grocery store?”

“You got it, soldado,” Gabe says easily, and at that, Jack thinks, Oh, wow.

This is a big idea if it’s got you slipping up on nicknames, Gabe.

“Anyways,” Gabe continues, looking up, eyes bright and beautiful, “I’ll meet you down there. I’ve
gotta check us in at the lodge, and then go grab -”

But he shuts off his words again, even as his lips quirk into an excited little smile, almost Cheshire Cat-like in the light and -

“...You’re gonna grab...what, exactly?” Jack asks him, knowing full well he won’t get a real answer but -

“No,” Gabe states, almost more to himself than to Jack, “No, you got to surprise me last week, so it’s my turn this week.”

Jack chuckles, murmuring fondly, “I love your surprises.”

And then -

Gabe outright beams at him, grinning widely, the corners of his eyes crinkling warm and radiant, the sweet gold behind the shades of smoke glimmering and -

...Worth it for that alone, Jack thinks softly and -

“This one’s gonna be better than a secondhand airport anthology,” Gabe laughs deeply, as he starts to move back towards the T-intersection with the hallway that leads to the North Access Corridor, “I promise.”

“You know that I actually like the anthology, right?” Jack asks, watching him go, and Gabe says brightly, “Yeah, but this is still better. Trust me!”

Jack hums thoughtfully, before he calls out, “Did you get a room at the Starlight Lodge again? Or somewhere else?”

Just before the T-intersection -

Gabe pauses to glance back at him before -

Jack’s pulse lurches with hot, thick desire -

As Gabe’s smile shifts from one of almost giddy playfulness -

To a sensual, sly smirk, the glow in his gaze melting deep and smoky in an instant -

As he murmurs back to Jack:

“...I booked it last week during check out.”

Jack blinks at him, stunned, knowing full well that his blush and startled affection shows easily on his face as -

“...I like making you look like that,” Gabe chuckles charmingly from the hallway, before he drags his eyes up and down Jack’s figure, adding richly, “If you want, I could help you get out of those scrubs in a minute.”

And then -

Gabe murmurs with that low, lilting tone, “I’ve already done it a few times in my dreams.”

Jack can feel the blood rushing to his head and his groin before he -
(Gabe’s lips pressed against his -)
(His hands gripping down Gabe’s back -)
(His legs wrapped around Gabe’s hips and -)
He manages to stammer, “You - you take this round, Reyes.”

From the intersection, Gabe grins at him, biting his lower lip before he chuckles, “Oh, I know I did.”

Jack stands there, completely flustered and trying to stamp down how *easily* Gabe gets under his skin and just turns everything on inside him -

When Gabe gives him one last gorgeous smirk, chuckling, “See you in town, Morrison.”

And he disappears down the hallway.

As Jack screws his eyes shut, forcing his heart to slow down, trying to contain the urge to dart after him and pull him into a dark corner -

The computer dings behind him, indicating that the biodata transfer is done.

And all Jack can think -

In a voice like sweet smoke and slips of sunshine -

is:

*Finish your work, Jack.*

*And then you can play.*

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**76: Round 2**

Saturday, March 16, 2047: 14:27 - outside Davidson’s Market, 4th and East Streets, Ketchum, Idaho

Jack puffs a soft sigh as he slips up the one-way sidestreet on the southern end of the grocery store, meandering between the parallel-parked cars and the poured concrete sidewalk surrounding the store.

It’s taken him more time to do his little errands than he had expected: he’d bolted out of the lab, dressed hastily, packed his own small backpack of a change of clothes (since he *knows* he’s staying the night this weekend), and then *rushed* to the Mess Hall to be on time for lunch at 1200 hours. Like last week, most people were done eating (and practically bouncing off the walls) within twenty minutes, but then…

The first little hang up.

The civilian buses that the military had contracted to take them out were delayed.

...*All* of them

As the collective group had idled about in their usual cohorts of twenty-four, just outside the East Access Gate, and the directors and several trainers had attempted to contact the bus company,
someone in the candidates had pointed out something...rather obvious.

“...Isn’t it the Sun Valley Film Festival this week?” someone - Jack thinks it might have been an 18Xer named Rachel - had asked, just out to the crowd and...

The silence that had fallen had been...awkward.

“...And are we supposed to be impressed by that?” Director Cruz had grumbled loudly, when -

“...Well, since most of the other ones have been canceled, and celebrities have all left LA, maybe?” Rachel had said back dryly.

And sure enough -

The one-two combo of both a tourist-trappy film festival and a tourist-trappy Spring Break week in a relatively safe and secure part of the country had basically overwhelmed the twin towns in the valley.

The buses had arrived about twenty-five minutes late, and with another fifteen minutes of shuffling people into them, they had then slowly crawled back down the mountain roads to the main highway.

To top it off, the central area of town had been so heavily impacted by the influx of visitors that they had had to reroute to one of the effectively empty golf courses and let people off there.

Jack had joined up with the majority of the candidates who had just headed straight south down Main Street and into town, where people had then split off like streams off a river to whatever called their interest.

(He hadn’t been able to see where Gabe had run off to - the hotel, or whatever his “surprise” was.)

Quick stop at the bank, an awkward fifteen minutes of small talk with the banker who had let him open the safe as he’d transferred the biodata files to the digital storage device -

And then a two-minute walk here to the store.

Like the rest of the town, the store is...generically kitsch, to say the least. It’s got a basic faux-rustic but still-attempting-to-be-boxstore look going on, with an off-key color that Jack doesn’t know if he should label grey, brown, or rust red. Fake wood paneling decorates the sides, but at least it has big windows opening to displays of bread over in the bakery section, floral arrangements in another part, and a small corner cafe in another.

The tiny parking lots around the single-story grocery store are packed: cars of all shapes and sizes, but mostly off-road-worthy trucks, vans, and Jeeps, all of them trying to wedge themselves into what is not nearly enough space. People - mostly dressed in a variety of winter and snow gear, either headed into town from a morning on the slopes or heading back out to finish off the afternoon with a few more runs - bustle and burst their way out of the diagonal corner entrance-exit doors. The stockpile of firewood and twenty-four packs of disposable water bottles are mostly gone, though a clearly underpaid, overworked teenage clerk chucks new stacks of wood packs nonchalantly against the wall. Distantly, Jack can hear the jingling of some synth, last-decade pop tune playing from the outdoor speakers, but the sound is mostly drowned out by the rumble of cars, the chattering of people -

And the whispers of the wind against his ears -

Threading through his hair like fingers.

Jack leans against a big support column of concrete, enjoying the feeling of being
Calm
In the center of a human flow.

The weather is nice, even nicer than last week: the sunlight is crisp but clear, just faintly warm around the edges even as the wind sweeps in the chill off the mountains. The snow glitters pure on the ranges surrounding the valley, but it’s still a deep, muddy slush on most of the streets around town.

But even here, cars trawling by and people pushing shopping cars -

The air feels
Sweeter
Than back home.

A colder spring than he’s normally used to -

But a richer one as well.

Jack watches a family of four exit the store, pushing a cart full of bags into the parking lot -

As a couple - hand-in-hand, cheeks flushed, dressed in snow gear - head inside.

And absently, he thinks, ...Should I message him that I’m by the corner entrance?

Jack starts to reach for his datapad in his right pocket when -

Pleasure shivers across his skin, burning hot-cold down the back of his spine -

As he feels that sweet, rich smirk press against the exposed left side of his neck -

And that voice hums like smoke just below the angle of his jaw:

“Miss me, Jack?”

And there are those broad hands slipping against his waist, his hips -

As he feels that chest - bundled and warm - press against his back and -

A shivery smile flitters across his face as Jack chuckles back, “Did I walk right past you like an idiot?”

“Noooo, of course not,” Gabe says, but Jack can feel the grin hot and smooth against his skin and -

“That doesn’t sound remotely convincing,” Jack retorts, turning to his left to face him -

His partner.

(x24: Round 2)

Gabe watches Jack twist towards him, his hands never leaving Jack’s waist, admiring the way the sunlight shows the full blueness of his eyes. As Jack faces him, Gabe teases him, “Look, I’m always honest with you.”

“Sure you are,” Jack hums back, a wry little smile on his face as -
He leans in, pressing it to Gabe’s own and -

Kisses him, warm and full.

The feeling is raw, rich contentment: full and fulfilling, warmth over thinly-veiled heat simmering underneath, the feeling is deep satisfaction, the tension of holding back for a week, slips of longing and sweet tenderness. Jack sighs with the fulfillment of it, letting himself linger on Gabe’s lips, and Gabe drinks in his soft breaths and little hums, letting Jack pull him in Deeper.

They stay like that for a moment, Jack lifting his hands to brush gentle, slightly chilled fingertips through the sides of Gabe’s beard, relishing the warmth of his skin, and Gabe smirks a little wider, delighting in how easily Jack falls for him -

How quickly they come together again.

They part from the kiss, but only barely, just enough for Jack to murmur low and sweet against Gabe’s lips:

“Hey, Gabe.”

Gabe smiles reflexively at that, heart full, chuckling back, “I’ve missed hearing you say that.”

Jack grins back, his own pulse shivering a little at how Gabe kisses his smile to his own, laughing, “Well, I can say it nonstop this weekend, Gabe.”

Gabe rolls his eyes, even as his smile stays pleased like a purring cat, snorting, “You know that’s just going to backfire on you later, right?”

“Mmm, maybe I want it to backfire on me, Gabe,” Jack chuckles lowly, leaning in to kiss Gabe with a slow, sensual heat. Gabe lets it slip through him, thick and sweet, syruppy as it drips into his core and -

“...Doesn’t have to be later, Jack,” Gabe murmurs back, smirking through the kiss, “We have the room now, if you really need it.”

“Define ‘really,’” Jack hums, leaning back a little, “Because trust me, Gabe, I always want it.”

And then he slips in again, kissing a deep, rich heat to Gabe’s lips as he teases him:

“And I always want you.”

Pleasure flares through Gabe as that low, deep voice - kissed to his smile - sends frisson across his skin and down his spine, deep into a dark ache in his groin, but he bites it back, muttering hoarsely, “Somehow you always derail my plans, even when I make them for you, Jack -”

Jack laughs warmly, a stormy, happy sound pressed against Gabe’s chest, before he pulls back again, beaming wryly at him, asking, “Fine, fine - what’s the plan today, Gabe?”

Gabe gives him a skeptical scowl, before -

He grins with a mischievous smirk, saying, “So after our little drawing session on Thursday, I had this idea...”

Jack quirks an eyebrow, an amused but happy smile on his face as Gabe lets go of his waist, digging
his left hand into his jacket pocket and -

“Hold out your hands,” Gabe says to him slyly.

Jack pauses but -

He lowers his hands from Gabe’s face to just about level with Gabe’s pocket and -

Gabe suddenly *grins* at him, bright and regal, smile like smoke-threaded sunshine as he laughs,

“Here, Jack.”

And he places a small, thin, rectangular device in Jack’s hands.

Jack blinks at it: it’s roughly the size of a small smartphone, about the length of his palm and the first joint of his fingers, a pale white silver stripe on one end, with a rustic brown color covering the rest of it, made out of thick, cool-to-the-touch plastic. There’s a little, dark-glass lens in one corner, no bigger than a dime, with a small power button next to it, and a few more little switches and buttons on the edges.

He frowns in confusion, turning it over and -

His eyes trace the large, dark-glass circle on the front, the little clear lens on the opposite side of the small one and -

His eyes grow wide -

He inhales sharply, heart *flooding* with a rush of lovestruck, spellbound affection as he realizes -

“...A camera,” Jack murmurs, his voice chipping a little with the sheer speed of the emotion in his chest and -

“Just a cheap little one,” Gabe says, still with that same incredible, excited tone, “But it’s one of those instant-print kind! Here -” he doesn’t really take the camera, but instead takes Jack’s hands themselves, guiding Jack’s fingers with gentle but intimate touches as they turn the camera to one of its shorter sides, “- See, this is where the print will come out. It’s just a 2x3 but!”

And then -

Gabe lets go, returning his hands to his right jacket pocket to dig out -

“Look, I got you the brown retro one, and me the black retro one!” Gabe continues, his tone burning bright with excitement, his eyes aglow with energy, as he pulls an identical camera from his pocket, only his has a smoky black-grey tone to it.

But he also slides a small slip of paper out of his pocket too, holding it out for Jack to cast a shocked, bewildered, beloved gaze at it and -

It’s a picture of *him*, from only a few seconds ago: his back is towards Gabe’s view, right shoulder leaning against the concrete pillar, head slightly turned towards the store on his left, eye just barely visible and a little distant -

The raw sunlight catching in his hair like threads of liquid gold.

It’s an…

*Honest*
Earnest

Depiction of him -

A sweet, subtle expression on the half of his face barely visible -

But it’s immediate even to him that…

(I was thinking of you.)

Jack takes the little 2x3 picture with his left hand, gawking at it, and Gabe’s sheer excitement tempers into a deep sense of love and tender patience as he observes Jack staring openly at the picture -

Before he murmurs softly, “…Not bad, huh?”

“…I don’t know if my back is all that interesting to look at,” Jack chuckles hoarsely, but the weak rasp of aching love undermines the humor in his words, and -

“…So today, I was thinking,” Gabe says with an easy, sweet casualness, “We head in here, grab some stuff for a lunch, take one of the shorter trails for a quick hike, come back to town for dinner and drinks. And we both take pictures of stuff we think is interesting, and then we show each other later.”

And then Gabe grins happily, adding, “You have a great sense of framing, Jack - I want to see the stuff you come up with.”

And Jack…

He glances up, his eyes searching Gabe’s beautiful, gold-lacquered gaze as he asks honestly, “…You’re serious about…about…?”

He doesn’t really have the

Coherence

To put the flood of grateful, wistfully happy emotion into words but…

…

But then -

There’s the feeling of warm, rough-but-tender fingers caressing the back of his right hand -

And Gabe smiles at him -

So honestly, so earnestly, so lovingly that it melts Jack’s whole heart into a sweet sensation of song.

“…You have -”

And Gabe murmurs with an -

“- Such an interesting perspective -”

Honest, earnest -

“- That only you can share with the world -”
Loving tone -

“- And all I ever want to do -”

That Jack finds himself -

“- Is encourage that...and encourage you, Jack.”

Falling in love with him all over again.

And as the words slip sweet and true from Gabe’s lips -

He suddenly shudders -

As Jack leans in and kisses him fiercely.

There’s a raw, ragged, genuine need behind it: simmering hot, stormy sultry, but underneath those is a real, rough richness, a depth that draws them both in, hard and heavy, lovestruck smoked with a sugary pulse that churns between them and -

Jack pulls for him, each kiss slipped in with soft breathlessness, low sounds from the back of his throat, an almost songlike hum that melts through Gabe, and he kisses back, gasping hard, shivering as Jack pours himself - themselves - into the moment and -

As they part, chests heaving a little, drawing in breath -

Jack suddenly leans in again, kissing him quick but raw, murmuring in that low, dangerously good rasp:

“I’ve never had anyone like you in my life.”

And Gabe falls into the sweet, storm-starred depths of Jack’s eyes as he murmurs back, “…I could say the same to you.”

And Jack watches him for a second, his own eyes sweeping through the smoke-and-gold-inlay of Gabe’s, seeing stars shift behind the amber glass shadows -

How the sunlight slipping in from the awning on Gabe’s right -

Shifts like liquid glass gold through the one, as the other retains its beautiful, twilight-soft allure and -

Without even thinking about it -

Jack lifts the camera

And snaps a picture of it.

Gabe almost recoils in shock, blinking a few times at the suddenness of it, before Jack lowers the camera and he can see

A look of honest, earnest wonder alight on Jack’s face as -

Jack grins, laughing with that rich, storm-strong sound, his chest heaving as his whole face lights up with sheer joy as he giggles, “Oh my god, this is gonna be so much fun -”

“Are you just going to take pictures of me all day?” Gabe asks, but there’s a playful smile twisting
across his lips as -

“Now, now, Gabe,” Jack chuckles as his camera beeps, “Never ask an artist about his inspiration process.”

And Jack shifts his hand, watching as the small picture prints out and -

“Am I your muse, Jack?” Gabe teases him, but Jack’s gaze flicks to the picture -

Before he glances up, smirking as he replies, “Of course you are, Gabe.”

And he flips the picture around to show Gabe his own image.

Gabe frowns a little, taking the small image, his eyes searching it and -

Jack watches, heart full and gilded, as a faint blush dusts across Gabe’s cheekbones as he looks at his own lovestruck expression and -

Jack leans in, kissing his cheek sweetly as he murmurs playfully, “I told you - I’ve never had anyone like you in my life.”

And Jack gently tugs the picture out of Gabe’s hands, and when Gabe lifts his eyes to his face -

Jack kisses the picture, winking at Gabe.

_Holy shit_, Gabe thinks, his thoughts crashing to a halt as Jack smirks coyly, half of his smile hidden by the little picture, before he starts humming something soft and low, slipping the camera to his left hand as his right digs out his wallet.

Jack relishes the bright, brilliant flush across Gabe’s cheeks as he slides the picture into a card slot in his wallet, chuckling, “This is the best gift anyone’s ever given me.”

“...God damn, you’re going to be the death of me,” Gabe heaves, dragging his left hand down his burning face, pleasure and sweet sensuality churning hard and hot in his groin and -

“We already went over this,” Jack laughs lowly, putting his wallet away, “I’m _thrilled_ to share _la petite mort_ with you again.”

And then Jack leans in again, nipping lightly at Gabe’s lips as he hums in that low smoky tone:

“And again...and again.”

Gabe shuts his eyes, inhaling sharply even as he kisses Jack back, relishing in the way Jack smirks into it.

They part a little, and Gabe murmurs hoarsely, “...Yup, I have _definitely_ never had anyone like you in my life, Jack.”

“...Is it bad that I’m kinda happy about that?” Jack asks, pulling back as he grins mischievously over it. Gabe exhales slowly, heart full and deeply in love, before he sighs honestly, earnestly, “No, because I feel the same way.”

And there’s a soft, pinkish tint to Jack’s cheeks as the words settle rich and sugary in his core.

Gabe raises a sly eyebrow, chuckling, “I should pay you back for that picture right now - give you a taste of your own medicine.”
Jack snickers, his smile twisting into a wry grin as he laughs, “I’d like to see you try, Gabe.”

“...Just you wait,” Gabe says, shifting his stance and stepping off to the side, “This is all gonna backfire on you later, Jack.”

“Are you already planning your revenge?” Jack teases him, as he turns as well, taking Gabe’s right hand with his left as they head towards the corner entrance to the grocery store.

“Don’t encourage me,” Gabe grins back -
As they fall in behind a cluster of college-aged kids -
Heading inside.

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24x76: Round 2

16:49 - knoll ridge on the western side of Proctor Mountain, overlooking Ketchum and Sun Valley

“Okay,” Jack says, swallowing a bite of his sandwich, “If you could go anywhere in the world, right now, where would you go?”

Gabe slows down his chewing as he scowls, thinking it over, savoring the rich flavor of the deli sandwich as he contemplates it.

They’ve spent the last two hours on their hike: the first hour was more urban, getting from the grocery store, through the town, up the northeastern side of the valley, to the start of the Proctor Mountain trailhead. The trail itself was relatively relaxed compared to others in this area - a three to four mile loop around the mountain it’s named after, hiking up the side of the mountain, leveling out to hug it, and then down an abandoned historic ski lift to connect back to the starting point. It’s not a rough trip for either of them, though the varying states of semi-melted snow-into-slush-into-scrub brush earth gave the trek a little twist to it.

Otherwise, the afternoon has been…
Ideal
For both of them.

They’ve passed a few other hikers on the trail - mostly college students and tourists with a more adventurous streak than “just skiing” would fulfill, but a few locals making a weekend walk, and even some other candidates, who had opted to go the other way around. But other than that, the trip has been comfortable, easy, pleasant -

Outright fun in a relaxed sort of way.

They’d spent the majority of the hike taking their respective pictures, joking and laughing and teasing each other, taking competing shots of the same aspens, or the same ridgeline, or each other, getting increasingly more playful with it -

Kneeling for footprints and snow-capped boot shots -
Leaning against each other for funny close-ups of squinty side-glances and sly smirks -
Stealing small kisses as the other had tried to line up a semi-decent landscape shot -

(Falling more in love with every shutter click and every awkward angle and every full laugh).

The sun had hit the edge of its peak at just about 15 to 16-hundred hours, starting its slow, lazy descent over the rise in the west, past the more prominent ski slopes and mountaintops -

Reaching that golden, sweet-dripped look just about ten minutes ago -

Perfectly timed with their arrival at the last major landscape viewing point.

It’s not really a sunset yet, and it won’t be for some time, but it’s more of that beautiful, hazy honey glow, rich across the low blue of the sky, gilding the lining of the clouds with a sugary warmth, dappling the first spring grasses with fingertip touches of light, catching the hidden edges of snow across the landscape.

They’re sitting on an exposed outcrop of rocks just on the edge of the knoll, looking west towards the valley and the rest of the mountain, munching away on the sandwiches and snacks they’d ordered from the store’s deli. The wind rustles the dry scrub grasses around their feet, tickles through Jack’s hair and the fringes of Gabe’s beard -

And as expected -

Jack leans closer to Gabe’s side, settling comfortably against his left shoulder.

A smile flickers reflexively across Gabe’s face as he feels Jack warm up against him, and he swallows his bite, answering, “That’s a tough one. Are we talking like, with or without the war?”

“Wiffout, fo shure,” Jack mumbles through a thick bite of sourdough, fatty ham, fancy cheese, and preserves. Gabe hums, settling his head against Jack’s, relishing the small laugh of almost giddy excitement Jack has over the feeling and -

“...Okay,” Gabe says, deciding, “Like, places I’ve been that I would really want to go back to - no war - gotta be LA and Mexico City, for sure.”

Jack nods appreciatively, thinking, Ah, right, he hasn’t been home since the siege began -

And his team had to flee Mexico City.

“New places...” Gabe murmurs, his mind drifting to cities and globes, “Rome, London, Istanbul, Cairo...those are definitely up there.”

“All good choices,” Jack says, after swallowing his bite.

Gabe nods back, before he starts to chuckle, muttering, “God...you’re gonna tease me for these ones -”

“Oh boy,” Jack grins, moving his head, smirking at Gabe -

As Gabe grins back mischievously, saying, “But, c’mon, I gotta say stuff like, you know, Sleepy Hollow, Transylvania, Venice -”

“You are such a lit nerd,” Jack laughs brightly at him, teasing him warmly, his heart full of light joy and -

Gabe laughs back, his chest heaving with a sunlight-spun happiness, feeling warm and rich, relishing
how Jack smiles at him, and he grins, retorting, “Listen, Jack, I know what I am and I like what I like.”

“I never said it wasn’t cute,” Jack chuckles lowly, before he wedges the last bite of his sandwich in his mouth. Gabe observes him for a moment, watching him affectionately as Jack starts to dig through his backpack for more food and -

He adds softly, “...I hear Bloomington, Indiana is nice too.”

Jack

Stops -

His fingers wrapped around the neck of the bottle -

Before he glances sideways at Gabe, who is giving him that teasing, playful little smirk -

Before Gabe takes another big bite of his sandwich.

“...Smooth,” Jack smiles at him, quirking an eyebrow, “You don’t have to put it on your list, you know.”

“I know,” Gabe mumbles, before he swallows the bite, saying more clearly, with a rich tone, “But I’d like too.”

And then -

With an honest, earnest lilt to his tone -

He adds gently, “Those quarries look beautiful.”

And then -

Jack shivers a little -

As Gabe slips his left index and middle fingers under his chin -

And smiles that gorgeous, regal smirk, expression rich and sunkissed, as he murmurs quietly, “Especially the way you see them, Jack.”

Jack watches him for a moment, eyes tracing the way the sunlight just melts through Gabe’s gaze, thick, sweet gold for both of them, and he smiles shyly, saying, “Sweet talker.”

“You’re the only person in the world to think that,” Gabe chuckles right back -

As Jack hauls their little secret out of his backpack:

A sleek, slick bottle of whiskey.

Jack had picked it out for them, of course: some top-shelf brand with a rustic-but-adventureously-romantic sounding name (Rockies’ Ten Year, or something, Gabe only half-remembers), supposedly aged like twenty years in some stout oak barrels, hinted with a berry accent or some bs - he had been more enamored by Jack getting excited over it in the store than really paid attention to the numbers and figures.

The bottle is clear, allowing the liquid to really shine for itself: the whiskey is a beautiful reddish
copper, almost honey-gold under the rich afternoon sunlight -

And it looks as enticing as a kiss.

Jack settles back, cozying up against Gabe’s shoulder again, breaking the tape label seal and twisting the cap -

And Gabe exhales slowly, savoring how perfect this moment feels -

Sliding his left arm around Jack’s waist as they ease into the relaxation after their little meal together.

“You first,” Jack holds up the bottle to him, and after a slightly contemplative pause, Gabe takes it with his right hand, chuckling, “Am I supposed to do one of those like, wine sniff test things?”

“Ahaha, only if you want to,” Jack laughs back. Gabe gives him a mischievous grin, before he wafts the bottle under his nose -

And mutters in a deadpan tone, “Ah yes, the scent of alcohol accented with more alcohol.”

And Jack -

The laugh breaks rich and raw in the back of his chest, full and stormy, almost bubbling to the surface as he manages to mutter, “Yup, that’s whiskey for you.”

“You know I’ve had whiskey before, right?” Gabe grins at him, starting to lift the bottle to his lips, but Jack just retorts wryly, “But not like this, right?”

Gabe pauses -

Before he shrugs lightly, muttering, “Fair enough.”

And takes a quick drink.

…

...Well, he thinks briefly, *He’s right about that.*

Because he’s had whiskey before -

But not like this.

It’s got a wrought-richness to it, full and full-flavored, hot across the back of his throat but smooth, not like the swallowed-glass feeling of rougher, lesser blends. It’s not even all that bitter - just enough that it accents with the dripping sunlight and the feeling of Jack pressed against him.

It settles warm and thick in his chest -

Right next to the sugary, slow-steeped feeling of *them* in his heart.

“...Well?” Jack chuckles, slipping the bottle from Gabe’s hand, watching him as he thinks it over. He lifts it to his lips, taking his own meltingly-good sip, letting the liquid heat slip down his core -

As Gabe smirks next to him, “Ha, not bad.”

“You’re tough to impress, huh?” Jack asks back wryly, giving him a sidelong smirk -

But then -
“You know me, I gotta have the sweet with the bitter,” Gabe laughs lowly -

“Sorry, there’s no hot chocolate here,” Jack starts to retort but then -

Jack’s heartbeat melts with his core -

As Gabe kisses him slow and sultry.

The kiss is rich, accented with that slow-aged bourbon, slipped through them as Jack gasps against him, and Gabe hums a low laugh against his lips, nipping lightly, the feeling of it dripping between them like wrought-sunlight and sugary simmering -

Before he pulls back, licking his lips, smirking with a huge, self-satisfied grin as he murmurs, “Don’t worry - you’re more than enough.”

Jack outright gawks at him, blush bright on his cheeks, hot from the whiskey and the kiss, eyes wide, the blue in them is a beautiful, sun-dripped dreaminess and -

Perfect, Gabe thinks -

Before he whips his right hand out of his pocket and -

CLICK -

Snaps a picture.

…

“Oh, god dammit,” Jack half-groans, half-laughs, as Gabe howls with laughter, the sound rolling in his chest, happiness flooding through them, as he wheezes, “Yes!”

“I should have known,” Jack semi-sobs, as Gabe watches the picture print out, saying, “I told you I’d pay you back.”

“God, you and your smooth talking,” Jack sighs, lifting the bottle to his lips and taking another pity sip but -

Gabe smiles at the picture, admiring the way the camera managed to capture Jack’s eyes, before he slips both the device and the paper back into his pocket.

And he chuckles lowly, “I wasn’t lying though.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re always honest with me, right?” Jack sighs, but there’s a good-natured lilt to his tone, but then -

There are fingertips under his chin and -

Jack feels his heart catch a second time -

As Gabe guide his attention back towards him -

And he kisses Jack smoky and simmering again:

“It tastes better on your lips.”

And Jack
Falls right into it.

He kisses back, hot and sultry, sun-and-bourbon-dipped, like water in a desert, and they relish the steady heat between them, thick and full-flavored, rich like liquid amber and barely-tempered patience, slipping closer to Gabe, the feeling easy and heady down to their cores.

And when they part -

Jack breathes against his lips:

“...Smooth.”

“No only for you,” Gabe laugh back, the sound low and smoky.

A faint blush dusts across Jack’s cheeks, and he settles his head against Gabe’s shoulder, enjoying the slow-simmering, rich feeling in his chest, letting Gabe gently tug the bottle from his hands -

Sighing with contentment as Gabe leans his own head against his.

There’s a pause of easy, sun-dripped sweetness -

Before Gabe asks genuinely, “What about you?”

“What about what?” Jack asks, shifting his head a little, and - lifting the bottle to his lips - Gabe clarifies, “Where would you go? No war, anywhere in the world.”

Jack pauses -

Hesitating for only a split second -

And as Gabe takes a sip -

He answers wrly, “Well, like you, I’d probably want to do London, Rome, Beijing, Mexico City -”

Gabe laughs a little, savoring the liquid heat slipping down and the feeling of Jack content against him, Jack’s low stormladen voice humming through his chest.

But then -

Jack’s voice drops a little, and he admits honestly -

 earnestly:

“...I’d like to see the ocean someday.”

...

The silence is

Loud -

“What,” Gabe states, sitting upright again, twisting towards him -

And Jack mirrors his movements, only his expression is more one of sly, bittersweetness in contrast to Gabe’s neutral deadpan.

“...Tell me you’re joking,” Gabe states, a tinge of desperation slow creeping into his tone and -
Jack just observes him, one eyebrow raised -

Thinking happily, *God, I love you like this* -

Before he leans in and lightly kisses Gabe’s cheek and -

“John Francis Morrison, don’t hurt my soul like this,” Gabe says, the mixture of genuine horror and radiant humor sweet and bitter and *perfect* all at once inside him and -

“...I’ve been to a great lake?” Jack offers with a smile, grinning cheesily and -

Gabe

*Breaks.*

“That’s not the same!” he half-shouts, half-sobs, as Jack bursts into brilliant, overjoyed laughter at his dismay, retorting, “Oh, c’mon, you know they *look* the same!”

“They absolutely do not, Jack Morrison - don’t you dare -” Gabe stammers back, sputtering through his words as Jack continues to giggle mischievously, taking the bottle from him -

Before he kisses his cheek again, adding dryly, “Well...true, I technically wouldn’t know.”

As he takes another sip, Gabe drags his right hand down the side of his face, groaning, “Oh my *god*, you’ve never seen the *ocean* -”

“Aren’t you happy? You’re dating an authentic Midwestern boy, born and bred.” Jack grins brightly at him but -

“God damn,” Gabe sighs, that beautiful sarcastic look on his face as he huffs, “I gotta take you to the mountains *and* the beach *and* like sixty million restaurants *and* Disneyland - and that doesn’t even begin to cover like, the different parks we gotta see -”

Jack’s heart surges in his chest yet again -

As his playful grin fades into a look of genuine, loving shock -

And he murmurs faintly, “Wait...are you already planning our trip to LA?”

And Gabe looks at him blankly -

Before -

*Oh, Jack* thinks, utterly spellbound -

As Gabe *grins* at him, gorgeous in the bourbon-gold glow of the sunlight, dripped and honey-warmed, rich and full-flavored -

As he laughs with that smoky, sugared voice:

“Of course! I’ve got like, a billion things to show you!”

And then -

“And...it’s nice...”

Gabe’s grin softens into a sweet, sunlight-dripped smile as -
“Planning for the good outcome -”
he adds in a softer, more beloved tone:
“- Because I want to share it with you.”
And Jack -
He can’t stop himself.
He kisses Gabe.

It’s the same as the one by the store: hot and simmering, yes, but deeper, fuller, richer, accented with longing and stardusted love, fulfilled with a sugar-smoked texture, dripped through it like honey and afternoon sunlight, golden and amber-flavored, lingering in the chest and heart like a good blend.

And Gabe drinks it completely.
He savors it - savors how Jack pulls for him, draws him in, kisses him with a raw, lovestruck fierceness, how he can feel Jack’s need for him, how much he wants him, how it mirrors the feelings in his own pulse, how they’re drawn to each other like tide and shore -

And when they part -
Jack has that beautiful, sea-deep look in his eyes, a gilded glow to his face, lips still carrying their kiss -

And Gabe chuckles a low, liquid gold sound:
“...It really does taste better on your lips.”
“...God damn, you’re smooth today.” Jack says, and while there’s a slightly mischievous laugh to his tone, there’s something raw-edged and wanting mixed in too -
The perfect blend.
“Just trying to be romantic for round two, Jack,” Gabe hums royally, before he smirks roguishly, asking teasingly, “Is it working?”

Jack pauses for
One
Second
Before he lifts the bottle to his lips and takes a big drink -
And then -
Gabe blinks as Jack shoves the whiskey into his right hand -
But before he can state “what -”
There are rough but wanting fingertips on the sides of his face -
And Jack draws him in -
Kissing him deep and hot.

Gabe shudders against it, groaning as he tastes the rich, full flavor of Jack’s kiss, dripped with the heat of the bourbon, amber-tasting and ribboned with gold-wrought sunlight, savoring it all the way down as it burns like thick pleasure through him. Jack twists a little, melting in a little sultry smokiness, sweet and smooth all throughout, and Gabe hums as he drinks it up, lets it fill him through.

And when they part -

Gabe catches his breath -

(and his heart -)

As Jack licks his lips, smug and self-satisfied, looking gold-dripped in the sunlight, as he hums in that low rasp of a voice:

“Sure tastes like it is.”

Gabe gawks at him for a moment -

Before he smirks back, leaning in again, kissing him slow and rich.

And Jack

Falls deeper

Into them

As the sunlight drips across the sky.

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24x76: Bourbon

Saturday, March 16, 2047: 20:33 - leaving the Bourbon Jack bar, Main Street, Ketchum, Idaho

“I just don’t think Duke has it this year,” Adrien states bluntly, as the small group of candidates slip out from the humid heat inside the bar, through the wooden double doors -

And into the crisp, sweet chill of the street.

“They don’t got the team for it,” he continues, speakingly mainly to Luisa, who’s shaking her head as she mutters, “Please, their stats are still way better than Virginia’s, and Michigan can’t even compete this year -”

“Man, I went to Duke, and I can wholeheartedly tell you, it is not their year -” Adrien retorts -

Causing Felix to sigh next to Gabe, “I just don’t get March Madness.”

“I get it, I just don’t care for it,” Gabe snorts, “The Lakers are already bad for my blood pressure, I don’t need some NCAA team to add to that -”

Which gets Jack to laugh happily on his left.
(And that’s the only thing that matters to him, at this point in the night.)

The rest of the afternoon and into the early evening had been…

A mix of things, to be honest.

They had spent another several minutes essentially making out and flirting hard with each other at their picnic spot on the trail, when - in the midst of starting to basically undress each other - Jack had pointed out they were still technically in public. So they had (reluctantly) capped the bottle, picked up their stuff, and finished the remainder of the trail, spending another hour to head back into town, letting the heat linger in the background between them as jokes and playful teasing had taken the forefront of their conversations.

They had made their way across town, back to the hotel, where they had dumped their stuff and each hopped in the shower - mostly with more hard flirting but ultimately separately because “okay, but seriously, do you want to help me soap up, because this prepwork isn’t going to be pretty,” Jack had stated bluntly, getting Gabe to laugh and let him go do what he needed to do. After Jack had finished his, uh, “clean up and preparation”, Gabe had swapped out with him -

Only to come out of the bathroom about ten minutes later to Jack giving him a sly, if slightly apologetic smile -

Drinking from the bourbon bottle and holding his datapad and -

“...What did you commit to?” Gabe had sighed, and Jack had beamed at him, “Adrien says like eight people are getting together for pizza and then doing a little bit of bar hopping.”

Gabe had scowl-pouted a little, frustrated at the idea of sharing his one free evening with Jack with the same old people he has to see all the time anyways but -

“Aw, Gabe, please?” Jack had semi-simpered, in that low, sugary voice he gets when he’s flirting relentlessly with him, or giving him whiskey-rich kisses, “I’ve never been to a saloon before.”

“You what,” Gabe had stated, his pout immediately evaporating into horror again -

“Oh, man, that got your attention again, huh?” Jack had laughed brightly at him, and Gabe had muttered, “Y’all don’t even have a saloon in Bloomington?”

“Well, not an authentic one,” Jack had grinned, “We’re in the Midwest, not the true West.”

“Far as I’m concerned, this isn’t the true West either,” Gabe had grumbled, but Jack had just rolled his eyes, chuckling, “Yeah, yeah, tell me where you’re from again? I think I missed it the last thousand times.”

“Smartass,” Gabe had teased him, grinning back -

But then -

Jack had grinned at him again, adding, “Plus, there’s a bar in town called Bourbon Jack!”

And Gabe -

He had sighed with a soft exhale of contentment, relenting affectionately as he’d answered, “Well, now we have to go there.”

Granted, between leaving the hotel and arriving at the reserved group table at the pizza place, Gabe
had completely changed his mind.

The valley was way more overrun with tourists than either of them had realized.

The walk from the Starlight Lodge at the southern end of town back into the “downtown” core had been long just due to the sheer number of people on the streets: in cars, in vans, on bikes, in large, slowly-meandering groups. The forced slowdown had frustrated both of them, but about halfway, stuck behind another aimlessly-stumbling group of half-drunk college boys -

Jack had felt Gabe’s left hand - interlaced with his right - squeeze his -

And he’d glanced over to see Gabe holding up his camera, saying, “Don’t forget, if you see something you like…”

“...Oh, that’s not a bad idea,” Jack had smiled, settling his left hand in his pocket where his camera had been.

There hadn’t been much that had caught either of their attention on the way there, though they had stopped a few times to snap pictures of certain cars, or motorcycles, or street angles - pleasant under the early evening sunlight. The pizza place had been packed, almost bursting with diners, the air almost stifling with how humid and hot it was, both from the ovens and the people. They had stood awkwardly by the door until Gabe had spotted Luisa waving them down from the side of the room.

Much to Gabe’s relief (and a little bit of Jack’s), the group had been relaxed: Adrien and Felix, Luisa, Maritoni (70), and Ami (69), Sima (83), Lucas (82), and Sarah (47).

“No Carlos?” Gabe had asked Luisa as he and Jack had slid into the remaining seats. Luisa had stared at him, before grinning mischievously over her beer, chuckling, “Oooooh, Gabrieltto, he didn’t tell you? He’s got plans tonight.”

And Gabe’s jaw had dropped a little, caught between gawking and laughing as he’d stammered, “What? Who??”

“You didn’t know?”

And Gabe had flicked his gaze to his left -

Where Jack had grinned at him, saying, “He’s been flirting with Khan at the gym.”

“Khan? Khan Nguyen, Soldier: 79, right?” Gabe had asked, shocked. Luisa had giggled, “Apparently they were in one of the big groups last weekend but ended up getting some drinks alone.”

“And he didn’t tell me?” Gabe had stammered, a little bit of genuine hurt underneath his sarcasm, but -

“Gabrieltto, you’re the last person he mentions his crushes to because you’re basically his older brother,” Luisa had stated completely nonchalantly, “You’re like his last seal of approval for this stuff. He looks up to you for this.”

...

“...Oh,” Gabe had stated, completely floored, a blush rising to his face -

As Jack had squeezed his hand affectionately beneath the table.
The group had originally split three pizzas, but with the wait time for cooking, by the time the third had arrived, the first two had been demolished and they ordered a fourth plus several sides of fries and wings.

(And in the back of his mind, Jack had distantly thought, *How are they going to feed us all when we’re deployed?*)

With the pizzas done, they had scrounged up the credits for the bill and tip, then wandered around the block to Main Street proper, heading first to the Frontier Saloon, which - true to its name - was indeed a Western-themed bar.

And Gabe had smiled -

As he’d seen Jack take several quick pictures of the old style saloon bar -

How he’d seemed thrilled by the deep, red light over the shelves of bottles and row of barstools.

“...What’s up with the camera?” Adrien had asked Jack when they had gone to get a round of drinks for the group, “You being a tourist today?”

“Just letting my inner creative spirit be free,” Jack had grinned at him. Adrien had raised an eyebrow skeptically, saying, “...By taking pictures of a bar?”

And Jack had just -

*Grinned* at him

Saying brightly, “I’m a sucker for kitsch.”

The group had done two rounds there, then headed down Main Street (less than a block away) to Bourbon Jack’s. Like the last two places, this one had also been packed with people - groups crowded at the tables, people all around the bar, an overwhelming *sea* of sound, drowning them out, with some sort of weird, synthy country song surfing on top. They’d ordered and spent most of the time in the back of the room, snagging one of the pool tables and playing pairs as Jack had ordered them all different types of whiskey.

And at some point in that round -

With the warm glow of the rich lighting and the sound of people laughing and the rhythm of watching friends woefully suck at pool -

And the feeling of a deep, heady scotch in his chest -

Gabe had thought absently:

...I *don’t* remember the last time I did this.

And Jack had laughed low and stormy over something Luisa had said -

And Gabe had felt him press his shaking, easy happiness - warm and solid through his chest - against the side of Gabe’s arm and -

In his peripherals, Jack had seen Gabe smile quietly to himself -

Before he had instinctively switched his glass from his right hand to his left -
And slipped his fingers between Gabe’s.

Gabe had squeezed back, affection flooding his heart -

Before he had smirked at Felix from across the pool table and taunted him about not making the corner pocket.

But about ten minutes ago -

Even more people had started to crowd the room.

And that was when Jack had seen Gabe start scowling more -

And he’d casually suggested to the others that they should head out.

Much to his surprise (and to Gabe’s), the others had agreed.

“God, it was getting so hot in there,” Sima sighs as they stumble their way out the double doors, stepping off to the side, and Sarah huffs, “Yeah, tell me about it. I didn’t think this place got this busy.”

“I’m more surprised anyone wants to visit a town like this,” Ami mutters, but -

“It’s a safe choice.”

...

Gabe is surprised by his own words more than any of the rest of them.

Adrien, Luisa, and Maritoni are still deep in a heated discussion about March Madness, but the others glance at Gabe, who isn’t sure if he’s flushing a little from the heat of the whiskey inside him or if he’s overwhelmed from the lingering human humidity clinging to him -

(Or if he’s just feeling a little out of his element now -)

But he murmurs dryly, “Can’t go too far towards the Pacific Northwest, can’t go south to California, can’t go east to the Midwest.”

He pauses as they all suddenly move, squishing themselves towards the brick wall, as the double doors swing wide open and another gaggle of Spring Break college kids jostle out, laughing and shouting and whooping at each other. As the group staggers past them, heading towards more bars, the candidates watch them go -

(Perhaps all of them a bit more sober than even they had realized -)

And Gabe finds himself saying distantly, “…It’s easy to forget there’s a war here.”

And his eyes drift past the group of college kids, down the length of the street, where cars rumble past lazily -

Up to the soft sweep of twilight, dimming ever bluer as the last rays of the sunlight drip across the wisps of the clouds in the sky, dipping them in bourbon golds and amber tones and rose-blushed hues -

And the blue evening hour slowly sings across the sky.
And Gabe -

He doesn’t mean to but -

“...A tiny town, sheltered from the worst of it, virtually unchanged in the last forty years, equipped with everything we led ourselves to believe was normal before the war began.”

The words drip out of him -

“- Bars where miners and writers sat and drank, mountains we’ve carved up for the sole purpose of sliding down them, film festivals where we pretend that a fluff piece about a quirky family full of faults is the best thing we’ve seen all year.”

Like bourbon going down slow and hot -

“- If all you want is one last taste of the illusion of Americana, why wouldn’t you come here?”

Or like the night settling over the valley like a shroud.

...

It takes him an embarrassingly long second to realize that the others are dead silent -

Even Luisa, Adrien, and Maritoni have stopped discussing basketball -

And only the muffled sound of the crowd laughing and shouting in the bar can be heard through the doors.

[Adrien gives an awkward “dude, what the hell” look towards Jack but -]

[Jack just smiles quietly because -]

[He can see -]

Gabe glances towards the others, giving them a dry smile as he chuckles, “...I get told I’m real fun at parties a lot.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

He stops

As Ami looks thoughtfully up the street -

Before she suddenly grins at him, saying, “But at least this town is kinda cute, right?”

[You put on such a tough front, Gabe, Jack thinks with quiet affection, But deep down -]

And Gabe blinks at her -

Before he smiles back wryly, saying, “...You been to the bar that Hemingway drank at yet?”

[You care for stuff like this a lot more than you let on, Jack knows.]

“...Wait, Hemingway came out here?” Lucas asks, and Gabe grins at him, saying, “You didn’t know? He died out here, dude. He’s buried in one of the cemeteries here.”

“You’re kidding,” Sima says in disbelief, but Gabe just shrugs at her, saying, “Look it up. Ketchum,
Idaho. They got a memorial for him on one of the trails. He used to drink at a bar in one of the ski lodges -"

[“Hmm,” Adrien hums, observing the other part of the group thoughtfully -]

[And Jack murmurs with a sly happiness, “You seem surprised.”]

[“...I thought it was weird that you just ended up with a Sherlock Holmes anthology in the middle of a secret military base,” Adrien chuckles back -]

“You know who really likes classic books? Khan,” says Lucas, and Gabe raises an intrigued eyebrow, humming, “Oh, does he?”

And in his peripherals, he sees Luisa roll her eyes, but she’s got a slight smile on her face -

“Yeah, he’d really dig seeing this Hemingway bar,” Lucas continues, “I gotta remember to tell him -”

[“...He get you the camera too?” Adrien asks bluntly, and Jack just grins at him -]

[Before his smirk slips into a softer, blue hour smile -]

[And he says gently:]

“I didn’t know you were so into books, Reyes,” Felix says appraisingly, and Gabe just smirks at him, murmuring, “Well, I don’t really like to read in our room -”

[“I’ve never met anyone like him before.”]

[And Jack sees how Adrien’s gaze softens a little at that, honey-warm in the twilight, before his roommate says quietly, “...I can tell.”]

“Oh, yeah?” Felix snorts, “And where do you like to read?”

“It’s a secret, Ochoa,” Gabe grins mischievously at him -

[“Hey.”]

[Jack blinks, regaining focus -]

[As Adrien holds up his right fist, saying brightly, “I got you, Jack.”]

[Jack raises an eyebrow, but knocks his own fist against it, half-saying, half-asking, “I thought I already paid for your drinks tonight, Morris.”]

[“Nah, that’s not what I mean,” Adrien grins at him, before adding, “Besides, I got plans tonight too.”]

[Jack frowns in confusion, muttering, “What -”]

“Oh, alright, kids,” Adrien suddenly says loudly over the whole group, “It’s been real fun pretending to be cowboys and pool hustlers with you, but I got a bottle of champagne in my hotel room that needs nursing.”

Gabe raises an eyebrow -
As Felix mutters quietly, “...Wait, we do?”

... 

Gabe squints at him, asking, “Do you not know what’s in your hotel fridge, Ochoa?”

“Well, I know we grabbed some wine earlier -” Felix starts to say, but then -

He chokes on his words -

As a radiant, overjoyed, devious grin cracks across Gabe’s face and -

“Don’t you dare, Reyes!” Felix snaps at him, a bright blush spreading across his cheeks and -

“You’re already calling it quits, Morris?” Sarah teases Adrien, but he just rolls his eyes, saying, “Listen, I’m Duke alum, but I can’t party like that anymore. I’m going back to my room, finishing this night off with some bubbly, and enjoying sleeping in.”

There’s a slight pause before -

“That actually doesn’t sound like a bad idea,” Maritoni says -

But Gabe sees the pointed glance she gives Luisa and -

He quirks an eyebrow, thinking teasingly, Oh my.

Carlos isn’t the only one not telling me things, is he, Gonzales?

“Man, you people,” Sarah sighs with mock disappointment, as Sima asks, “Alright, who’s up for another one? I hear the Sawtooth next door is pretty good. Or we could find out where Wes and Cas ended up.”

“I’m down,” Ami says, and Lucas rolls his shoulders, saying, “Sure, I could do more.”

Gabe scowls but -

“I think we’ll tap out for the night.”

Jack speaks suddenly from his left side.

On the edges of his vision, Jack sees Gabe give him a sidelong glance, but he just grins at Sarah and Sima, saying, “Thanks for inviting us out tonight.”

“No problem,” Sima grins back, but Sarah just smirks, “Look, I knew we needed our whiskey guy here to help us out.”

“Yeah, those were some good choices, Jack!” Lucas says brightly, and even Ami laughs, “I don’t normally like whiskey, but those were pretty good.”

“You guys wanna write this down so I can show my friends back home that I have good tastes?” Jack asks wryly. Sarah just laughs, “Oooh, I don’t know if our opinions will weigh that much, Morrison -”

“Oh, Cas says they’re at Sawtooth right now!” Sima says, scrolling through her datapad, which grabs Sarah’s attention immediately as she grins, “Excellent, tell them we’re coming. See ya, guys!”
“Have a nice night,” Jack says to the four of them as they head south to the club next door. Adrien lifts his hand to wave, starting to head north and -

“Reyes.”

Gabe glances at Felix, who smirks at him, muttering, “Below his collar this time.”

…

“...Thanks for the advice, Ochoa,” Gabe states dryly, “You tell Morris to ease up a little.”

Felix just laughs, before he twists and follows after Adrien. A second later, Luisa and Maritoni wave them off, and follow after the other couple, the four of them rounding west to head back towards whatever hotels they have rooms at.

Gabe watches them for a moment, before he glances at Jack, asking quietly, “You ready to go, or...?”

But his words trickle off -

As Jack slips his hand around Gabe’s left arm, murmuring in that low, rich wash of a voice:

“No, not yet.”

Gabe raises an eyebrow, assessing him, before he asks wryly, “...Looks like I wasn’t the only one making plans tonight. Where are we going?”

Jack grins roguishly at him, saying, “This way.”

They head north, just to the end of the block, but instead of turning west like the others -

Jack gestures east, across the street.

They pause at the corner, waiting for the crosswalk light, letting a car rumble past but -

For the first time since the evening began -

The world around them is…

Empty.

Peaceful.

The world around them is the glow of red traffic lights and gilded streetlamps across grids of pavement and low-story brick buildings, the electricity vibrant in the blue hour but the rest of the view softened by the night, sunlight all but disappearing, little more than an impression of pale pinks and sweet purples across the western sky.

And it’s hard to put reality into words -

Into coherence -

As it slips into something that blurs into the twilight -

More a feeling than a moment -

Something that can only be experienced on a corner of the main street of a small town unchanged by
time
By war
By reality.
And as Jack settles his head against Gabe’s shoulder, he asks quietly:
“...Could a camera ever capture this?”
Gabe doesn’t answer right away -
But instead rests his own head against Jack’s, relishing the warmth and fluff of his hair -
Before he murmurs encouragingly, “You won’t know unless you try.”
And Jack feels his voice - low and whiskey-dripped - hum through his head.
And without moving, without shifting his stance -
He reaches into his left pocket, pulls out the little camera -
And just presses the shutter
Lens just…
Out into the world.
Into the moment.
Gabe frowns a little - not in disapproval, just confusion - and asks, “Did you...frame that at all?”
“Nope,” Jack hums back, putting the camera back in his pocket, even as it beeps for the little printer.
Gabe raises an eyebrow over that but -
“Composition won’t matter here.”
The words slip warm and amber-flavored from Jack’s chest.
“There isn’t one particular angle or shot or object to focus on,” he continues softly, “It’s just a street in a small town in some mountains in America. It’s like you said earlier. I can have my illusions too, Gabe. But the important part isn’t any one thing.”

And Gabe
Listens
As Jack says softly:
“The important part is the feeling.”

And Gabe
Shifts his head slightly
To glance at Jack
Who looks up at him
And his eyes are bluer than the twilight steeping in around them
With a faint glow of red from the stoplights
Tracing the subtle curve of them.
And Jack admires how the twilight makes Gabe’s eyes darker but softer
But how the streetlights cast a stardusted hue at sweet angles
Like catching the color of bourbon on the curve of the bottle.
They observe each other for a moment, feeling the heat of the whiskey and the flicker of longing between them, before Gabe murmurs quietly:
“I’ve been having a lot of whiskey without sweetness, Jack.”
And Jack gives him that sultry, charming smirk as he answers:
“...This place will be better for that.”
Now that -
That -
Gets Gabe to quirk an eyebrow, his interest piqued, that low churning building in his groin and -
The crosswalk light turns green.
Jack grins at him, then starts to guide them - arm-in-arm - across the street.
As they approach the other side -
“Here,” Jack says, gesturing just slightly to their right -
Gabe more fully processes the building on the corner in front of them.
Like most of the other buildings on Main Street, it’s got that renovated-historic look to it: low, long rust-red bricks stacked a little too evenly to make it truly historic, the front facade too modern and clean to be actually as old as it wants to imply. Dark, rich-stained wood paneling accents the ground-floor windows, the double-door entrance, and the “roof” which Gabe just realizes is actually a deck. There’s a line of durable dark glass paneling on top, and as they get closer, he sees that there are figures up there, talking and chattering and drinking under low, bronzy lighting and outdoor heat lamps.
But most of all -
His eyes flick to the signage - also in that dark stained wood - above the double doors -
And he raises his eyebrows in mock disbelief, muttering, “Bold move, taking our second date to a place called ‘Armament Distillery and Brewery.’”
“Would you believe me if I said this is actually their rebranded name?” Jack asks with a laughing lilt to his words, and Gabe glances at him, chuckling, “Oh god, it was worse?”
“Let’s just say no one wants to get a drink at a place that started with the word ‘war,’” Jack grins as they head to the doors, “But this place actually makes a nice malt and bourbon.”

And as they pause by the doors, Gabe suddenly realizes -

“Wait, so you know this place?” he asks, looking impressed, “They’re legit?”

Jack pauses -

Before he grins again, teasing him, “Ketchum isn’t just known for Hemingway, you know.”

And then he leans over, and pulls the door open.

…

It’s immediately obvious that this one is…

**Distinct**

From the others.

The last few places - including the pizza restaurant - had tried capitalizing on romantic notions of Old West kitsch, going with gold-grain wood, paintings of cowboys on horses and dry scrub mountains, historic leather pieces and metal works decorating the walls, vibrant gold-red lighting over pool tables and worn-down barstools.

This place is

**Not** that.

It’s immediately much darker - much *smokier* on their senses: the wood is the same dark, rich staining as the paneling outside, with booths of high seats, padded with black leather cushions. The individual tabletops are similar, all that deep, dark wood, accented with polished copper and black steel. The walls that show through have been left undecorated, allowing that slow, simmering red of the brick to show through - except for the bar areas, where simple shelving of copper and steel hold hundreds of bottles above the copper taps.

The lighting is low, dim - a sort of tarnished gold color, rich and heady -

Like the whole room is dripping under an amber bourbon glow.

There are people here, true - talking, laughing, clinking glasses and enjoying themselves - but even with the high volume, the sound of them is more...subdued, as if the thickness of the colors and feeling of the establishment presses down on it, containing it -

Giving it privacy through sheer presence alone.

And in the background -

There’s a deep, low music playing.

**Not** synthy country like the last few places -

But slow and steady, full with a rich bass and the grain of a grinding guitar -

A sultry, dirty rock -
Accented with copper and leather blues undertones.

And a wry, crooked smile immediately twists on the edges of Jack’s lips -

As he feels the way Gabe seems to alight from just being here.

Jack leans over, pressing a slow, smooth kiss to Gabe’s cheek as he hums against his skin:

“Thanks for humoring me earlier, but this is more our aesthetic, right?”

“Like I said, Jack -” Gabe chuckles lowly, pulling his arm from Jack’s -

To wrap it around his waist instead -

“- I love your perspective on things,” he smirks -

Turning to kiss Jack’s lips hot and slow.

Jack hums with low, melting pleasure, savoring the feeling of Gabe on his smile, inviting him in - more, deeper - with soft rumbles from the back of his throat, and Gabe takes them, relishes the feeling of Jack falling into it, the sweet little sounds he makes -

As they fall harder for each other.

It’s a brief kiss, but one that’s

Full

And full-flavored.

And they part, just observing each other in the amber lighting, before Jack grins that teasing little smirk and says:

“Let’s get some drinks and find a spot.”

---

Gabe sighs with contentment as he slides onto the bench seat, settling back against the sturdy glass-and-steel railing, more reclining than sitting at this point, placing his glass of bourbon on the table. On his left, but more at a slight, cozy angle, Jack slides in on the adjacent bench seating, setting his own glass on the table too.

They barely found a spot in the far back corner of the roof patio: the chairs by the fire pits are all full, the seating at the roof bar packed in, and most of the deck tables filled.

People probably avoided this spot because of the awkward corner, Gabe thinks, because they are, in fact, literally at the corner of the railing and part of the building that leads to the stairs, with an outdoor speaker just off-set but thumping overhead.

But then -

Jack sighs happily -

As he leans up against Gabe’s side, warm and thick -

And all Gabe can think is:
Worth it.

The whole moment is Worth it.

The view isn’t quite as nice at the far western end of the patio, since, well, it’s mostly just a view of the rest of the rooftop area itself, but the soft, warm lighting is inviting -

And they’re just barely in time

To watch the snowdusted mountains settle

Into the slow, steeping blue of the evening twilight

Under the raw-edged grind of a guitar

Full with the rich, deep simmer of bourbon inside them

Accented with the feeling of them curled up against each other.

And they fall into it, saying nothing

But making small motions that show Everything.

Gabe switches hands, taking his glass with his right, sipping slowly as he slides his left under the table -

Relishing how Jack’s right fingers find it reflexively, tracing slow, steady fingertips over the rough, calloused lines of his palm.

Jack traces the rim of his glass with his left fingertips, small circles against the smooth chill, but he’s warm on the inside, full of that amber flavor -

Fulfilled by Gabe’s presence -

Languidly savoring the feeling of his arm across his right thigh -

The raw-edged heat of his skin under his finger tip touches.

And Jack murmurs in a low, dense rasp:

“Well?”

Gabe pauses for

One

Second

Before he hums a teasing voice:

“The view’s not bad…”

But he tilts his head towards Jack, smirking richly in the gilded light -
Like the king he is -

And adds in that smoky, sugared tone:

“...But you know how to make it better, right?”

Jack watches him for a moment, eyes tracing over his gorgeous face, before he smirks, biting at his lower lip -

And leans up

To kiss Gabe

Slow and sultry smooth.

And it is

A sweet, sensual release.

The kiss is amber and gold-dipped, copper and grinding blues, chilled with the slow twilight but hot with the full flavor of them, stained dark and accented with a thick bass beat of pleasure between them, heavy and hard, and god, it’s good, it’s everything they’ve been missing all day, all week -

Since they last melted together on twisted sheets and under a riverbed of stars.

Jack groans low into it, that ache twisting raw and rich inside him, lifting his right hand to cup at Gabe’s chin, pulling him into it a little more, a little harder, and Gabe chuckles a liquid smoke laugh, drinking Jack’s pleasure like the sweetest, deepest draw, slipping his left hand to caress and tease at the inside of Jack’s right thigh -

Relishing how the muscles there shiver a little under his touch -

As if remembering the last time they had felt each other.

And Jack gasps a little as they part, breathless, feeling the whiskey and Gabe’s kiss churn hot inside him -

Their eyes tracing over each other -

Before Gabe licks his lips slow, humming richly:

“...You’re right - I like this bourbon the best.”

Jack smirks at him, slipping his fingertips through the fluff of Gabe’s beard before he -

Leans in

Pressing a soft, smoky kiss to Gabe’s lips -

Just a quick one -

And he laughs lowy, “I’m glad we found something that you like, your majesty.”

“Hey now, I liked the other ones,” Gabe grins at him, as they part a little to assess each other in the low, twilight glow, “They just all taste better like this.”

But then -
“I know they do,” Jack says in that deep, dripping tone, “Because the whiskey today -”

And he leans in again -

“- Has been some of the best in my life.”

Kissing the full-flavored, rich words to Gabe’s lips.

Gabe smirks against it, relishing how Jack teases him with it, how they draw each other in - Gabe pulls a little on his thigh, urging him closer, and Jack runs his fingers along Gabe’s jawline, encouraging him to kiss a little hotter, a little heavier, that thick, smooth texture ribboning between them.

As they separate, Gabe chuckles wryly, “I’m glad we like to drink the same way.”

Before he smirks at Jack, adding, “Makes handling the alcohol a lot easier.”

“Considering this whole relationship was founded on secret drinks, I guess we shouldn’t be surprised by this,” Jack laughs with an amber-flavored contentment. He shifts, moving his hand to wrap his right arm under and around Gabe’s left, and settles his head against Gabe’s shoulder and the crook of his neck, exhaling deeply -

And Gabe loves the way he feels against him, the way he feels how happy and pleased Jack is, the deep, easy breathing of his chest against his arm and -

“Drinking...is all atmosphere, anyways.”

Jack feels the words drift out of him, liquid and sweet, tinted in warm light and -

Gabe listens, feeling the low rumble of Jack’s chest as he speaks, in that voice like the smoothest whiskey.

The texture of the low chattering around them, the whining groan of the guitar winding down into a slide of notes, the liquid warmth smoothing over his words inside him -

The feeling of Gabe solid and perfect against him -

Intimate and real and so good -

And Jack just…

Finds himself feeling…

Freer.

“They’ve done studies that people can’t actually taste the difference in alcohol past a certain price point,” Jack continues, just letting his thoughts go, eyes tracing the distant mountains as they fade into chilled blues, “People are notoriously bad at picking out ‘the good’ wines and whiskeys, and everything - everything - can change our perception of a drink. Food, smells, location -”

And then -

Jack grins languidly, adding, “Even music.”

Gabe huffs a small laugh at that, taking a sip from his glass as he savors the way Jack’s voice melds perfectly with the slow grit of the song fading out on the speakers.
“...But that just makes the real truth clearer.”

Gabe lowers his glass, glancing at him -

As Jack lifts his own just slightly off the table, swirling the amber and gold liquid, eyes admiring the way it spins the gilded light through it.

“Drinking has never been about the alcohol,” he says, his voice amber and gold-dripped -

“Drinking has always been about feeling.”

And Gabe

Smiles

Sweet and smooth

Over that.

“Drinking has always been about the food we eat with it, the places we drink at, the atmosphere we drink under,” Jack says -

As a new song starts up with a thick, sultry bass with a thumping drum beat -

Low and rich and hard -

Stained-dark by the gilded glow of the bourbon.

And then -

Jack looks up at Gabe -

Slowly lifting his glass to his lips -

Before he murmurs softly:

“The people we drink with.”

Gabe watches him take a drink, gaze lingering long and low, carrying a heavy heat to it, the gold-inlay shadows in his eyes dripping with a stained-dark amber and -

Jack pulls the glass away from his lips -

Just barely tilting his head more to kiss him again -

With a thick, sultry smoothness and a thumping pulse of pleasure -

Low and rich and hard.

Gabe savors it, groaning a little as Jack drinks him up, takes the smoky, dark-stained sensuality dripping between them and twists it hot and hotter, nipping a little at Gabe’s lips -

His right hand sliding down the length of Gabe’s left arm -

To move Gabe’s hand higher on the inside of his thigh.

And Gabe
In that encouragement.

He nips back at Jack’s lips, teasing a soft, amber-tinted moan from the back of Jack’s throat, the sweetest sound that drips with a slow-grind guitar, his hand slipping right to the angle of Jack’s thigh and groin, squeezing coy at the muscle there -

Relishing how Jack shudders with pleasure from it.

As they part, Jack gasps breathlessly -

At the dark-stained look of heavy, hard desire in Gabe’s gold-dripped gaze -

And that pleasure coils hot and tight inside him and -

“...You know what you’ve done, right?” Gabe asks him, his voice smoky like grinding guitars and twilight-cut mountains.

Jack pauses -

Before he smirks sensually, biting at his lower lip as he asks teasingly, “What’s that?”

And -

Gabe squeezes his thigh, fingers getting dangerously close to Jack’s deepening ache in his groin -

“You’ve raised my expectations for whiskey,” Gabe mutters, leaning in again -

As Jack’s fingers continue to guide his hand even higher -

“How am I ever going to drink this without you again?” Gabe asks, not with a genuine tone of complaint -

But with a thick, sultry sound of gold-dripped want -

“Simple,” Jack says, his tone pulling Gabe in even closer -

As he slides himself deeper against Gabe’s side -

“Just drink it with me.”

And they pull each other in -

Low and rich and hard -

Dripping gold and dark-stained guitar grinds between them -

As the blue atmosphere falls deeper.
Chapter Summary

Gabe and Jack spend their second night together -
And experience another "first."

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains A LOT of detailed, sexually explicit content.
Reader discretion is advised.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

24x76: “First”

Saturday, March 16, 2047: 22:28 - their king room in the Starlight Lodge and Inn, on the southern end of Ketchum, Idaho

They’ve only been back in the room for about two minutes -
But they’re already pushing and pulling each other to the bed -
Hands grabbing everything, tugging at fabric, a trail of jackets and shirts on the floor -
Lights off except for the artificial stars dimmed low, dripping a raw, thick golden glow over the room -
Bottle of whiskey on the nightstand by the left side of the bed, catching the rich, deep glimmer -
And the
Thick
Sticky
Swagger
Of a wailing guitar
Grinding low and rich and hard
Coming from Jack’s datapad on the dresser -
Where a minute ago he’d turned the music on -
Before he’d felt Gabe’s hands slip up under the hem of his shirt -

And pull it off.

Jack gasps as Gabe nips at his lips, hot and needy, both of them pulling and grabbing at each other, his hands dragging across the angle of Gabe’s hipbones as they both start scrambling for his belt -

“Fuck, wait,” Gabe grunts, even as Jack’s hands keep going, starting to pop the leather strap -

And Gabe reaches into his side thigh pocket with his left hand, pulling out his wallet -

And the small bottle of lube.

Jack’s barely seeing anything but how gorgeous his face looks, his mind focusing hard on undoing this damn belt -

Feeling his own ache spike and twist hard inside him -

His cock already hard from the way Gabe had teased him during their drinks and -

Gabe has to hold back his own stiff, thick pressure, forcing himself to look away from Jack to drop his wallet and the lube bottle on the bedside table -

But his concentration quickly cuts off into a wave of pleasure and a soft, low groan, mingling with the whining grit of the guitar -

As he feels Jack unthread the belt around his waist -

And pop the button on his pants.

And he’s already turning back around, his left hand slipping under Jack’s chin -

Pulling him in for another hot, hard kiss -

As his right hand joins Jack in tugging at his waistband.

Jack moans low and stormy into the kiss, his own pleasure twisting deep inside him as his fingers pull at the zipper -

And feel that incredible, thick, hard outline of Gabe’s cock in his boxer briefs.

The drum pounds out a steady, steep beat, hot and rich like the feeling of the bourbon - amber and gold - inside them, and they only barely manage to get Gabe’s pants to his feet -

Before -

“Fuck, Jack -” Gabe gasps, breathless against his lips -

As Jack grinds his right palm against Gabe’s thick, aching cock, sending sweet, deep pleasure jolting up the length, into his core, burning hot and blinding and -

They’re still kissing, gasping for short, sharp breaths but refusing to pull away, drinking each other in, smooth and smoky, like dark-stained liquor and -

Gabe’s hands are on Jack’s waist, deftly undoing his belt, even as Jack’s clinging, gripping fingers continue to rub and roll against the curve of his cock -
“Gabe -” Jack gasps, his mind drowning in gold-dripping, guitar-grinding sex, fingers slipping down the waistband of Gabe’s boxer briefs, “God, I want you to fuck me so bad -”

Gabe hisses as that smooth, distilled-storm voice rolls against his lips, drinking that low tone like pure whiskey, undoing the zipper of Jack’s pants and tugging the fabric down -

Jack - already halfway gone - just barely manages to get his left hand under his own waistline, half-helping Gabe pull his pants down -

But as they hit the floor, his left hand is already slipping back to Gabe’s hips, pulling him in, skin on skin -

Before Jack grinds his aching, stiff cock against Gabe’s.

Both men groan openly as pleasure throbs between them, Gabe reflexively slipping his hands to the arch of Jack’s lower back, squeezing at the curve of his ass -

Before he also pulls Jack in, urging him closer, urging him for more, Jack, more -

And Jack rolls his hips again, rubbing their cocks hard against each other as the guitar drips its crooning notes into a rocking grind.

Gabe feels Jack starting to push him back towards the bed and fuck, wait, you need to ask -

“Jack -” Gabe grits out, his voice cracking as Jack rocks his hips again, slipping his right leg around Gabe’s left and, fuck, he’s weak to feeling Jack grind his cock against his inner thigh and -

“Jack, wait -” Gabe grunts, forcing himself to shift his hands up to Jack’s waist, pulling him back a little -

And it takes Jack a full second to realize that Gabe is slowing them down -

As the song winds down, guitar simpering down into only the slow, steady thump of the bass.

“What -” Jack half-asks, half-breathes, trying to concentrate as he mutters, “What’s wrong?”

Gabe pushes down the waves of pleasure ribboning through him, sighing slowly to steady the rush of his thoughts and his hard, hot need to feel Jack against him, around him, moaning and -

C’mon, Reyes, do this right, the non-liquid, non-sex-hazed part of his mind chides him, and Gabe manages to

Slow down his thoughts

And say more calmly, “…Are you sure you want this, Jack?”

Jack stares at him blankly, not fully processing it -

Before he states bluntly, “Gabe, I’ve wanted you to fuck me for a week straight -”

“No, Jack, c’mon,” Gabe mutters, pleasure rushing through him again at the words alone, before he sighs, calming himself down again and saying as honestly as he can:

“Do you really want this raw?”

And -
Ah, Jack thinks, finally getting it -

As another song - one with a slow but heavy bassline - starts up in the background.

And Jack’s mind clears through the haze of pleasure and amber bourbon glow -

To see the faint blush on Gabe’s cheeks, and the soft cloud of concern in his dark gold eyes.

“...Look, I brought the rest of the condoms with me, they’re just in my bag -” Gabe starts to say, turning his attention to their backpacks on the floor by the dresser -

But then -

The drumline starts a thick, rolling beat -

And there are hands on the sides of his face -

Pulling him back towards Jack’s and -

Good, sweeping shivers crawl across his scalp and neck -

At the deep, gold-dripped want in Jack’s eyes, smooth and rich across the endless blue tones.

And Jack states in that low, smooth voice, dark-stained and heady:

“Gabe...I have never met anyone like you.”

And Gabe’s heart jumps to his throat -

As pleasure rushes hard and thick to his cock -

As Jack leans in, kissing him hot and sultry slow, all steep, thick bass and the rhythm of a drumbeat, murmuring in a tone full of desire:

“And I have never done this with anyone else.”

“Oh god,” Gabe moans a little, voice cracking with pleasure in the back of his throat, as Jack kisses him like there’s nothing but them in the world, hot and steady, words melting against Gabe’s lips, “I want you, Gabe -”

And Gabe -

His hands drift back, slipping down to Jack’s ass again -

Letting him move back in, rolling his hips -

Grinding that thick, perfect cock against his.

“I want you to fuck me like no one else has,” Jack hums, the words almost a sultry, gravely chorus as the bass drops low -

And the guitar almost whines -

Hot and dirty and raw.

“God damn, Jack,” Gabe moans, as pleasure starts to throb and twist between them again, Jack slow grinding their cocks together -
“...Do you want to?” Jack asks, nipping lightly at Gabe’s lower lip, as the guitar starts to wind and ramp up and -

Jack gasps a ragged breath -

As Gabe squeezes his ass **hard** -

Half-dragging him even **closer** -

Pressing their hips together and -

Jack moans openly, hot and throaty -

As Gabe grinds back against him -

Rubbing that stiff, perfect cock against his, low and thick and **hard**.

“More than anything,” Gabe murmurs back, voice **dripping** with gilded desire, liquid smoke and smooth bourbon, hot and full and -

The guitar rolls into a thick, dirty wail.

And suddenly -

Gabe groans as Jack kisses him hot and heavy, open and drawing him in, rocking his hips hard to rub their aching cocks together, and Gabe shudders a little as pleasure spikes through him.

Jack smirks against his lips, murmuring in a dark, liquid tone:

“That’s music to my ears, Gabe.”

And then -

His hands slip back under the waistband of Gabe’s boxer briefs -

And in a drippingly-smooth motion -

Jack tugs the fabric down

And drops to his knees.

Gabe shudders with thick, tight pleasure coiling deep in his groin as he stares down at Jack -

Who is looking up at him next to his hard, stiff cock -

The blue of his eyes gilded under the light.

“...God **damn**, you look so good like that,” Gabe murmurs, left hand automatically brushing through Jack’s hair -

Right hand beneath his chin -

Thumb tracing over his lower lip -

As the guitar wimpers

And the bass thuds low.
Pleasure winds hot and tight in Jack’s cock and groin as he looks up at Gabe, relishing the dark, hazy look in his gold-shadowed eyes, how Jack can see the raw desire in them, smoky and full -

How amazing he looks from this angle, all deep, rich skin and curving, tight muscles and rough angles.

“How amazing he looks from this angle, all deep, rich skin and curving, tight muscles and rough angles.

“Same to you,” Jack half-says, half-laughs, almost giddy with the sugary, syrupy feeling of sex between them -

And he flicks his eyes to that long, thick cock, his own throbbing with a pulse of pleasure at the sight alone.

And Jack murmurs against Gabe’s thumb, “I’ve wanted a taste all day, Gabe.”

Gabe bites back a groan as his desire jolts raw and hot up his cock - Jack could tell him anything in that voice, like whiskey and honey gold, dripping wet through his senses and -

Gabe shifts his right hand a little -

Tilting Jack’s head closer to his cock -

Relishing at the delighted, excited look of hazy surprise in Jack’s eyes -

(And there’s a slight pause in the music where only the beat thumps hard against the bass -)

And Gabe states in that smoke and sugar voice:

“Go ahead, Jack.”

And Jack

Smiles

With excitement

Before his eyes get half-lidded with a deep, shadowy lust -

And he tilts his head -

And licks a wet, hot, dripping stripe up the length of Gabe’s cock.

(And the guitar starts another grinding, gritty riff.)

Gabe groans, his fingers and toes curling reflexively as pleasure melts through him, like amber and gold, up the stiffness of his cock, deep into his groin and lower back, legs shaking a little as Jack lavishes his ache before -

“Oh, fuck -” Gabe moans, pleasure flaring as Jack tongues at the underside of the cockhead, wet and hot -

Almost playful

As he savors Gabe.

Jack laughs a low, melting liquid sound, his own pleasure churning hard and hot inside him, cupping the other side of Gabe’s cock with his left hand to steady it -
Before he teases his tongue at the very tip -
Savoring the hot, bitter and thick flavor dripping there -
And loving how Gabe recoils with pleasure.
(And the guitar almost screams with musical joy -)

“Oh, Jack, oh fuck -” Gabe gasps, his left fingers gripping hard in Jack’s hair, right fingers squeezing Jack’s chin a little, thighs flexing hard as Jack teases small but hot bursts of pleasure, fuzzing out the edges of his vision and senses -

And Jack grins -
And he kisses the tip -
Before he opens up
And slides down around the thickness.

“Oh, fuck yes -” Gabe gasps, voice breaking sharp and smoky in the back of his throat as pleasure bursts and melts all around and inside him, sweet, hot, dripping relief around his aching cock as he fills Jack’s mouth - so wet and warm and tight - the head of his cock pressing deep deep deep against the back of Jack’s mouth, his gasps turning into low, rich groans -

And Jack almost whimpered at the full, smooth hardness of Gabe’s cock in his mouth, thick and heavy and perfect, pressuring his lips, his tongue, the back of his mouth in all the right ways, as his own pleasure simmers and burns hot and low in his throbbing cock -

And Jack starts to suck

Hard.

(And the song begins a guitar-grinding, bass-thumping, screaming roll.)

Gabe’s words fall into hazy, incoherent sounds, low moans and soft rasps of “Jack, fuck -” and the tight, wet pleasure of it is so strong, so drippingly hot that he has to let go of loosely gripping Jack’s chin to slip his right hand around the side of Jack’s head, the fingers of both hands threading through his hair, pulling it with encouraging little twists -

And Jack moans as the little pinpricks of pain mix and melt with the velvety hard thickness of Gabe’s cock in his mouth, wet and thick and full, his own pleasure hot and starting to ache in all the right ways, music grinding hard, Gabe’s cock pushing deep deep deeper and -

“God, you’re good at this,” Gabe gasps, his hips starting to shake and rock a little, pulling back just a bit to push his cock in a little more, the feeling twisting hot and hotter, hard and harder inside him, coiling tight, cock aching with a mix of wet pleasure and smooth relief, mind fraying with white-dripped pleasure as he glances down at Jack -

Who looks completely blissed out, eyes fluttering shut as he sucks and teases at his cock -
(And the guitar starts to grind hard into a skittering, nail-scratching crescendo -)

And fuck -
Feeling Gabe’s hips rock and his thighs shudder -
Feeling his cock hard and thick and *dripping* white-hot in the back of his mouth -

Full and full-flavored -

Sends a burst of pleasure, aching and almost painful, up Jack’s own cock and -

He moans low and throaty, deep around the head of Gabe’s dick, and immediately feels Gabe shudder and groan himself, as the low roll of his drenched tone hums tight around the cockhead, up its length and -

(The bassline grinds too, hard and slow, rocking through the guitar and -)

Jack’s right hand drops to his waist, slipping hasty and needy down the front of his boxer briefs -

To palm and grip at his own dripping cock -

And *fuck* -

Sweet, aching relief thrums through him, like the singing of the guitar, hot and heavy but so mind-breaking good, stroking himself hard as he pleasures Gabe, licking and sucking and lavishing that thick, dripping cock, his own already stiff and leaking from hours of being tense, hours of feeling Gabe’s raw strength, his deft, teasing fingers -

Plied with that smooth, rich bourbon.

Gabe’s stomach starts to shudder, his muscles starting to clench because *fuck*, there’s only the dim, hazy gold glow of the lights and the loose feeling of the whiskey and the hard, frisson-grind of the guitar -

And the hot, wet tightness of Jack Jack Jack -

Full and thick around his dripping cock, sucking and teasing and excited -

Gabe’s hips rolling and rocking in tight little thrusts to press and pressure the tip of his cockhead in the back of his mouth -

Where that *voice* that’s richer than whiskey and deeper than a hard bass -

Groans and moans, throbbing pleasure hot and low and sticky up into his core.

“Fuck, Jack - that’s it, so good -” Gabe murmurs, words cracking a little as Jack sucks more pleasure around his cock and he glances down, gasping, “Look at me -”

Mouth full, core hot and pleasure-pulsed, hand working his own dick -

Jack flutters his eyes open, looking up -

And *fuck* -

Gabe looks *amazing* like this.

His whole body is tensed and tight with pleasure, strong and smooth, hands holding the sides of Jack’s head -

Eyes glazed with a dark-stained desire but *aglow* with that gold-dripped richness, smoky with amber notes and -
That *ache* throbs through Jack deeper and he strokes his own dick *harder* -

Before he sucks a little more reflexively -

Humming a hot, low moan around Gabe’s cock and -

Gabe winces as pleasure bolts through him, gasping as Jack looks up at him, his eyes a hazy, nightdrenched blue, small glimmers of the gold light dripping through them, lips tight and wet around his cock, amber-tinted blush on his cheeks -

Gabe’s fingers wound tight in his hair -

And -

“Fuck, are you touching yourself?” Gabe just barely realizes, seeing Jack’s right hand moving in short, hard little strokes down the front of his chest, the fabric of his boxer briefs shaking, Jack’s own thighs shuddering and -

“Mmm,” Jack moans, deep and low and *hot*, so incredibly *hot* around Gabe’s aching, dripping dick and -

*Damn* -

Gabe’s hips thrust impulsively at the tight, thick feeling, his hands gripping tight as pleasure coils like a sharp, white hot bolt inside him -

“Fucking hell, Jack -” the words fall rich and dripping from his throat as he rocks short, tight little thrusts into Jack’s mouth, “Fuck, that’s so hot -”

And Jack squeezes his own cock tighter, stroking himself harder as pleasure floods through him, tightening up around Gabe’s dick, delighting in how he’s starting to taste wetter and hotter, cockhead pushing towards the back of his throat, full and fulfilling, his fingers twisting and pulling through Jack’s hair and *god*, Jack could almost come like this alone -

Feeling Gabe’s heat and rich power and thick hardness hold him down -

And fuck him raw.

(The song *whines* into a gritty, heavy grind, the guitar screaming into a crescendo and -)

“Fuck -” Gabe pants, because the pleasure is getting hot hot hotter, hard hard harder, coiling tight and thick and perfectly wet around his cock, all tongue and low, stormy moans and gold-dripped blue -

And his hips rock and writhe, starting to get erratic as pleasure pulses in white hot and honey-sticky-dripped, grinding like the wail of the guitar -

Riding hard like the rhythm of the bass and -

Rolling deep and tense as he watches Jack touch and stroke himself.

His legs are starting to shake, muscles starting to clench -

As the pleasure winds tighter and hotter and harder in his groin, at the base of his cock, thick around the head of it and -
“Fuck, Jack -” Gabe gasps, starting to lose himself in the raw, bassline waves of it, hands gripping hard through Jack’s hair, trying to steady his hips as his cock *throbs* with it, “Fuck, I’m getting close -”

And Jack shuts his eyes, moaning deep around Gabe’s cock -
Savoring the lingering taste of it -

*Of him -

Hard and velvety smooth in his mouth -
Dripping white-hot down the back of his throat.

And he gives himself one last, hard, *good stroke*, relishing how pleasuring Gabe and pleasuring himself mixes and blends like the richest of amber-tinted, guitar-grinded bourbon -

And he pulls himself off of Gabe’s cock, lips releasing, sliding back -
So that only his tongue is teasing the underside of the head -
Licking up the last few drops leaking out.

And as that hot, tight pressure releases around his dripping, pleasure-wet cock -
Gabe’s eyes flare wide, his gaze heated and *melting* with gold -
As he stares down at Jack’s smug, self-satisfied face -
And Jack languidly licks the small drop of white heat dripping out of the tip of his dick.

And *damn*, Gabe is torn between almost coming from the sultry, smooth look on Jack’s face alone -
And pushing him back on it, encouraging him to finish it - finish *him*, finish his pleasure - with tight power and rich recklessness -
And they both know Jack would do it -
Would *love* to do it -
Would come himself if Gabe came in his mouth, down the back of his throat -
Hot and bitter and *perfect*.

And the song grinds to a screeching, gritty halt as it ends on a low, hard note.

They stay like that for a second, Gabe heaving, chest rising and falling, hands still twisted through Jack’s hair, cock dripping a little onto Jack’s tongue, eyes locked to Jack’s -
That deep, tight, hot tension riding hard and grinding heavy between them.

Jack licks his lips, murmuring in a low, deep rumble, “Do you want me to finish?”

Before -
Gabe shivers hard, pleasure spiking through him again -
As Jack kisses the tip of his dripping cock, asking in that beautiful sultry tone:

“Or do you want me to touch myself for you?”

And a deep, steady thud of a bassline starts with the next song.

And Gabe’s mind breaks a little -

His cock twitching hard against Jack’s kiss -

But -

“I want to see you touch yourself,” falls out from his chest -

He already knows exactly what he wants -

What they both want.

(They’ll edge each other, pushing each other on, dancing and twisting and riding each other right to it -)

(Because it’s not about the actual act -)

(But always about the feeling -)

(Of savoring each other.)

Jack grins a beautiful, smoky smirk against the skin of Gabe’s cock -

And he shuts his eyes, giving one last, sultry little kiss to the tip of it -

Rushing a bolt of pleasure up the length and into his core -

Before Jack rises from the floor, somehow managing to smoothly slip his boxer briefs off in the same motion.

(And the song starts a slower, heavier, but still gritty guitar riff.)

As Jack stands, he leans in, kissing Gabe hot and gold-dripped, lightly palming at Gabe’s cock, relishing how Gabe shudders with a softer pleasure at that, and fuck, Gabe groans a little because it’s hot tasting the salty bitterness of himself on Jack’s lips, so hot feeling Jack continue to tease him with little touches -

And Jack chuckles, loving how Gabe shivers for him, muscles still tense with that hot pleasure inside him and -

“...You’re fucking good at that,” Gabe murmurs against him, slipping his hands around Jack’s waist, fingers tracing the curve of his ass and -

“Well,” Jack says with a low, liquid laugh, raw and low-grinding in the back of his throat:

“You taste good like that.”

Fuck, Gabe thinks, mind cracking a little again, his cock twitching impulsively and Jack laughs a little more, feeling Gabe’s cock shudder against his palm -

Before he slips his right hand higher, to Gabe’s chest -
And pushes him gently but firmly -

Back into the bed.

Gabe falls back, eyes a little wide with a syrupy, pleasured surprise, settling into the cotton-blended fabric and the plush of the pillows, shoulders and neck against that leather-padded headboard and -

“Sit back and relax,” Jack states, his voice low and dark-stained, reaching for the lube on the table with his left hand -

(And the guitar rolls into a harder, hotter grind -)

Gabe’s gaze follows every move of his body -

As Jack says in a deep, teasing lilt of a tone:

“Let me show you how badly I want you.”

And in a smooth, rich motion -

He straddles Gabe’s lap, high on his knees -

Just above his waist -

The tip of Gabe’s cock almost hot against the curve of his ass -

And the tip of his own dick just barely tracing the top of Gabe’s abs.

Gabe’s chest heaves a little, pleasure waving through him as he drinks in Jack’s presence - big, broad chest and curving waist, thick muscles with smooth angles, thighs straddling Gabe’s own waist -

His cock already dripping wet.

And as the bass thuds low -

Gabe’s eyes trace over the length of Jack’s dick, as he murmurs in a tone oozing want:

“...You really enjoyed that, huh?”

Jack grins at him, his smile crooked and sultry, eyes hazy with gold-dripped desire -

And he pops the cap on the bottle of lube, saying deeply:

“I like being with you, Gabe.”

Pleasure shivers through Gabe as the words spark ghost kisses and long promises in the back of his mind, frisson skittering across the back of his neck -

And the guitar churns low -

As Jack drizzles the sticky-smooth liquid over his right fingers, saying in that slow, deep bassroll of a voice:

“No one’s ever been with me the way you have.”

And god damn -
The rhythm and rock of a song grinding and rushing hard and low -

The sound of Jack’s frisson-inducing stormtide voice -

The light dripping them in amber and honey-gold tones -

The sight of Jack naked and excited and wanting him -

Tense with desire, strong and broad and ready for him -

Makes Gabe shudder with a hot roll of thick pleasure, his cock aching again.

Jack caps the bottle, fluidly putting it back on the nightstand as he warms and spread the lube on his right fingers, feeling hot and smooth under the dark but gold-dripped gaze of Gabe’s eyes -

“No one’s ever seen me the way you have,” Jack says, the words falling out of him gold-dripped but honest and true, enduring -

Deeper than ever -

(And the song slips harder into a deeper grind, the low crooning of the bass and the singer’s voice smoky and wry -)

And Gabe stares him down, intense, gaze hot and hard -

Like feeling those dexterous hands on his skin -

Or that thick, incredible cock inside him -

And Jack smiles at him, his smirk gorgeous and deadly under the dim lights and the heavy music and the rich liquor -

And states:

“I want this, Gabe - I want you.”

And then -

Jack slides his right hand between his legs, fingers slipping to the curve of his ass -

And he presses the tips to the tight, already shuddering ring of his muscles -

And pushes the first two in.

Pleasure jolts through him, more from the sheer intensity of Gabe’s gaze drinking him in than the actual sensation, but sweet, heavy relief floods through him as the empty, needy ache inside him starts to throb and shudder away, and Jack gasps, shivering at his own fingers, slicking up the entrance with lube first -

But then -

(The guitar shifts into a new, grinding riff and -)

He goes.

Jack rolls his hips, sliding his fingers in deeper, groaning openly as he starts to twist and rub them, pulling them out a little only to push in harder, hotter, heavier, thighs shaking and muscles clenching,
his cock twitching as pleasure spreads up and inside him, shifting and moving, and he shivers at how good it feels -

And how good Gabe looks.

And fuck -

Jack looks good like this.

A hard, thick pleasure burns deep inside Gabe, his cock throbbing with an almost melting, needy ache, muscles tense as the waves of it shift over him -

As he watches Jack finger himself open over his lap -

Jack’s body looking tense and tight and amazing under the gold-dripping glow -

His cock leaking white hot on Gabe’s abs and -

“Fuck, Jack -” Gabe groans, his hands squeezing and caressing the outside of Jack’s thighs, eyes flicking up to the hot-pleasured expression on Jack’s face, down to his hard dick, back to his rocking, writhing hips, back up to his face -

“Gabe -” Jack pants, pushing his fingers in harder harder harder, twisting them deeper, pleasure blurring all his boundaries, mind melting at how good it feels, how good they feel, Gabe’s hands on his legs, Gabe’s body hot and strong beneath him -

Gabe’s eyes holding him down hard and tight -

The look in his eyes deep with a heavy, gold-dripped need -

And Jack can’t stop himself.

He rocks his hips forward, music rolling hard and thudding deep in the background -

And grinds his cock against Gabe’s abs.

Gabe drops his gaze to watch, mesmerized, pleasure spiking through him hard as Jack rolls his cock over his muscles, riding his own fingers deep and tense -

His blue eyes looking hazier and more gorgeous with each shifting motion -

Jack’s left hand slipping forward to thumb at the tip of his cock -

Pressing it harder against Gabe’s chest.

“Fuck, Gabe -” Jack gasps, pleasure jolting up his cock, pleasure bursting inside him from fingerfucking himself -

Pleasure melting through his core over how the look in Gabe’s eyes almost drowns him in dripping, grinding gold and -

“Fuck yeah, that’s it, Jack -” Gabe rasps out, fingers squeezing Jack’s thighs hard as the smooth hardness of Jack’s cock grinds against his tense stomach, his own pleasure lightnings through him because fuck, the feeling of Jack getting off on just him and him alone is

Intoxicating -
Like he could drink this sight sound moment

(Feeling)

Forever -

“God damn, Jack, you look good like this,” Gabe murmurs, hot and sultry, sliding his hands a little higher to squeeze at the curve of Jack’s ass, relishing how Jack’s muscles clench and tense beneath his fingers and -

“Just for you, Gabe -”

The words practically break with low, guttural pleasure in the back of Jack’s throat -

As he fingers himself harder -

And his cock throbs against Gabe’s rich skin -

(And the guitar almost screams with rock-and-roll ecstasy -)

And Gabe

Freezes

Gaze mesmerized

As Jack gives him that gorgeous, gold-dripped half-smile, saying in that low, dreamy voice:

“I love the way you see me.”

And Gabe

Breaks.

A low, almost furiously needy rasp cracks from the back of his throat -

And Jack gasps a little -

As he suddenly feels Gabe’s hands drag him forward, pulling him right up against his chest, shuddering as the motion grinds his stiff, aching cock against the lower half of Gabe’s pecs, the inside of his thighs basically pressed against Gabe’s ribs and -

“Oh, fuck, Gabe -” Jack gasps, his voice fraying with a small whine of pleasure as his hips rock impulsively, rubbing his cock against Gabe’s chest, still fingerling himself hard -

Staring down into the deadly look of incredible, dark-stained intensity in Gabe’s eyes and -

“You’re not the only one who’s wanted a taste, Jack,” Gabe says lowly, loving how Jack shudders and writhes against him, his cock hot and hard and velvety smooth against his chest, his thighs shivering against his sides -

The curve of his ass tight in his hands and -

Gabe’s own cock aches with pleasure -

As he slides his hands further and -
“I’ve wanted you all week,” Gabe hums, in that smoky sweet tone, pressing a hot, sultry kiss to Jack’s chest -

“Fuck!” Jack shouts, pleasure spiking through him hot and hard and deep -

As -

“Gabe, oh god -”

Gabe slips his right index and middle fingers into the tight, thick squeeze of Jack’s ass -

Twisting and pushing in alongside Jack’s own fingers.

Pleasure bursts inside Jack, hot and full and sticky smooth, dextrous and skillful, practically making him sob with sheer, burning joy, every muscle squeezing and tensing as they fingerfuck him together, pressing and twisting and grinding inside him, the ecstasy of it melting his senses, and Jack rolls his hips impulsively, rubbing his cock against the hot, flushed skin of Gabe’s chest, dripping more as white hot pleasure shudders through him and -

“Gabe, fuck, oh my god -” Jack gasps, the rush of it making him incoherent, every boundary blurring, as all he can sense feel love is Gabe Gabe Gabe -

Gabe gripping his ass with his left hand -

Gabe fucking him hard with his right fingers, guiding his own in higher harder deeper -

Gabe’s skin hot and smooth against his cock like sweet, sugary bronze -

Gabe’s eyes dark-stained but dripping gold.

“Oh, Gabe - fuck - that feels so good -” Jack pants, voice sounding like a deep, stormy chant against the screech of the guitar -

As Gabe’s fingers play him hot and hard and strong -

And Gabe shudders as his own cock aches with pleasure, pulsing through him at the sight touch feeling of Jack hot and unwound and falling apart in his hands, against his chest, strong, thick body trembling as they fingerfuck him together -

Those endlessly blue eyes - tinted with raw-dripped gold - looking hazy and overpleasured and full of a dark-stained lovestruck dreaminess -

And Gabe

Smirks

Chuckling in a raw smoky tone as he -

Jack shudders hard -

As he feels Gabe’s fingers push his own up, in in in, encouraging them to fuck himself deep deep deeper -

And they both press hot, hard, teasing twists against Jack’s thick, roiling ache, pulsing his pressure point -
“Oh, fuck yes, Gabe!” Jack shouts hoarsely, pleasure flooding through him in hot, tight waves, back arching with it, legs flinching and shuddering hard as every muscle inside him squeezes down around their fingers, moaning openly, “Fuck, I love your fingers - so good -”

“That’s it, Jack - little harder for me, soldier,” Gabe groans, voice dripping a raw, dark-sugary tone as he kisses and licks Jack’s chest, relishing how Jack’s cock spasms and drips against his skin, Jack’s body shuddering like a grinding guitar, gritty and hard rock -

“Good, Jack - nice and tight,” Gabe chuckles, twisting his right fingers in harder, delighting in how Jack shudders from it, hips rocking, back arching again -

How he’s so far gone -

That his left hand snakes across Gabe’s scalp, fingertips scratching across the skin.

“Gabe!” Jack gasps, edges of his vision getting blurrier, not sure if he’s seeing the fake stars in the ceiling or feeling the hot snaps of dark-dripped pleasure bolting through him, raw and melting and lightning together all at once, thick and hard from Gabe’s fingers, smooth and sensual from Gabe’s chest -

“Gabe, fuck - I’m close -” Jack pants, hips jerking forward again, as Gabe twists his fingers - their fingers - in hard, sending another wave of pleasure coiling through him, tight and thick -

More white hot drips leaking out of his cock and -

(And the drum edges the guitar on on on -)

Gabe kisses a raw-edged, sensual smirk to Jack’s chest, just over his heart, asking in that smoke-and-shadows voice:

“...You’ll sing my name for me, right?”

Jack glances back down at him, about to moan that he always does, even alone -

But -

(And the guitar whines as it climbs up several high, rocking notes -)

Jack’s whole body bolts with pleasure -

As Gabe

Grinds his fingers against Jack’s hot, throbbing pressure -

As he bends down a bit -

And tongues at the tip of Jack’s cock.

“Gabe!” Jack shouts hoarsely, voice breaking with pleasure, nearly doubling over on Gabe’s head as the wet hot feeling bursts through him, shaking as his whole body rocks with it, cock spasming and twitching against Gabe’s tongue and lips -

Only for more pleasure to burn through him as Gabe’s fingers twist in tighter and harder and deeper and -

Gabe groans with his own sticky, thick pleasure as Jack clings to him, left arm bracing his head,
fingernails scratching blissfully across his scalp, Jack’s broad chest pressed to his forehead -

Jack’s hard, hot smooth cock dripping against his tongue as he licks at the head -

Jack’s slick, dense tightness squeezing around his fingers, clenching and shuddering as the pleasure undulates through him -

And Gabe opens his lips -

And slips down further, relishing the bitter, white hot taste of Jack’s ecstasy, how thick his dick is against his tongue, his cheeks, his lips, hard and incredible -

(And so, so good -)

Before he hums a low, delicious sound -

And sucks hard.

(And the guitar screams with hard-note joy -)

And Jack -

“GABE!”

Comes

Hard.

Pleasure rocks through him as all he feels is Gabe Gabe Gabe - hard and twisting and fucking him inside to out, fingers playing him with a gold-dripping, melting hot grind, low like bass but dirty raw like a screaming guitar, lips hot and tight and wet, so good around his aching cock, tongue teasing at his head even in the sweet, dark-dripping perfection of his mouth -

And all his senses blur and break and melt -

As it bursts through him, thick and full and wanting because all he sees hears feels loves is

Gabe

And

The feeling of him, hot and dark-stained and gold-dripped -

Jack shudders, eyes fluttering shut, left fingernails scrambling across Gabe’s head, muscles clenching tight, toes curling, legs trembling -

As the feeling rides up hard through him -

And he comes - white hot and thick - in Gabe’s mouth.

Gabe moans low and raspy as he savors the sharp heat of Jack coming undone for him, sucking and swallowing with delighted little hums as he twists his fingers in hard, grinding them strong and steady against Jack’s pressure point, his own pleasure flaring as he relishes how Jack trembles - hot and thick and melting - against his chest, squeezing around his fingers -

His cock twitching and spasming against his tongue -
Jack’s hips rolling in tighter, shorter waves as he falls to pieces in Gabe’s hands.

And Jack shivers in the sweet, dark-stained darkness of them -

Blissed out, thinking nothing -

Only loving the way Gabe loves him, loving the way Gabe makes him feel -

(Loving the way Gabe makes him his -)

His eyes shut, face buried in Gabe’s thick, tousled hair, chest heaving, lower body still shuddering -

As Gabe laughs lowly, opening his mouth to lick lazily at Jack’s cock, delighting in how it still shakes for him -

Before he twists his fingers in - hard - again and -

Jack gasps and shudders, hips rocking forward as pleasure sunbursts inside him, hot and hard -

Coming a little more white hot thickness against Gabe’s tongue.

(And the guitar grinds down into a hard, dirty riff, rough and gritty, as the bass thumps low against it.)

And even though his mind is still hazy -

Jack slips his fingers through Gabe’s hair and pulls back roughly -

Tilting Gabe’s head up and back -

Before he kisses him -

Hot and heavy and raw.

The kiss is rough but dripping with melted desire - wet gold and leaking blue against a thick, sultry guitar riff and heartbeat bassline, coiling hot and deep in their groins. Gabe’s low laughter quickly melts into dark-dripped moaning, as pleasure snaps through him, relishing the way Jack nips and sucks at his lips, how Jack claims his groans and gasps hard and fierce, how Jack’s fingers twist in his hair, how he can feel Jack’s deep, grinding intensity -

As they kiss and drink each other down -

Rich and smooth and bitter.

Jack gasps and moans against it, shifting his hand from Gabe’s hair down to his neck, his right shoulder, bracing himself on Gabe’s strong upper body as they kiss each other breathlessly, greedily -

And he slides his own body down from Gabe’s chest -

Back towards Gabe’s waist and hips -

Groaning openly as Gabe’s right fingers slip out of his tight, aching heat, only to squeeze and grip at the curve of his ass -

And he pulls his own fingers from inside him to reach for -
They part from the kiss, chests heaving, eyes soaking each other in with a dark, rich intensity -

As Jack’s right fingers blindly trace over the thick length of Gabe’s cock.

Jack rises on his knees a bit, adjusting himself, and - wordlessly, instinctively - Gabe has both hands on his hips again, helping him stay steady -

But their eyes never leave each other -

Dark-stained smoke with dripping gold melting hot and heavy against endless blues and liquid stars -

(And the guitar fades for a moment, leaving only the bassline and the drum pounding against each other, thick and dirty.)

“...You want it?” Jack asks in that low, whiskey-rich tone, words like liquid.

“...More than anything,” Gabe states back, words dripping desire like gold smoke.

And Jack’s eyes flare wide with hazy, deep pleasure -

And Gabe’s own gaze burns darker, melting hotter as pleasure throbs through him -

As Jack lowers himself -

And slides Gabe’s aching cock inside him -

Hard and thick and full.

“Oh, fuck, Jack -” Gabe groans openly, whole body flinching and shuddering as wet hot, tight, thick-dripped relief floods through him, squeezing and clenching around his stiff dick, the pleasure twisted so dense and tight inside him that he almost comes right then and there -

Almost comes from how incredible - how perfect - Jack

And just Jack

Feels alone.

He’s hot, slicked up with a sticky smoothness that just makes him feel hotter, muscles tight and thick and amazing around his cock, like a perfect, tense pressure, throbbing wet and velvety strong around him -

Feeling so good that Gabe almost cries from it -

Head lolling back against the leather-padded headboard -

As pleasure throbs and bolts inside him, wet rich and thick hot and deep-dripping up and around and through him.

“Ah, Gabe -” Jack gasps, feeling amazing, feeling tight and thick and full - so full - with Gabe’s dick inside him, hard and deep, pressuring him inside to out, pleasure already starting to burn inside him again, and he moans in that low, deep roil, “Oh, fuck, Gabe, you’re so big -”

“Mmm, fuck, Jack - you feel so good -” Gabe murmurs, struggling to keep his eyes open against the tight pleasure coiling and clenching hot around his cock -
“Oh, Gabe, fuck yes,” Jack moans, biting his lower lip as he smirks, almost giddy with the overstimulation of Gabe’s thick, hard cock shifting deeper inside him, “Oh god, let me be good for you -”

And -

Jack grins at him, eyes aglow with a deep-pulse pleasure as -

Gabe’s eyes flare wide with dark, thick-shocked pleasure -

As Jack starts to ride him -

Hard and heavy and raw.

“Fuck!” Gabe shouts, fingers gripping hard at Jack’s hips as he starts to bounce, his body shuddering and flinching - toes curling, muscles spasming - as pleasure rocks and writhes through him, from the tight, dripping hot pressure around his cockhead, wet and squeezing up the length, pushing slick, sexy smooth waves into his groin, his lower body -

And it is a raw, rich ecstasy, white hot and velvet smooth and gold-dripping, riding hard and thick like the grind of the guitar, unrestrained and heavy -

And Gabe gasps and shudders against it, thighs shaking as his fingernails scratch frantically over Jack’s hips, moaning and panting, “Oh, fuck, Jack - holy shit - oh, god, that’s it, that’s it, you’re so good -”

“Gabe, Gabe -” Jack moans openly, his own body shuddering and rocking, rolling his hips, gasping with each hard, thick thrust of Gabe’s cock, full and tight, the head grinding deep deep deep against his already overpleasured ache, the pressure of it so good, so heavy, so strong that it fucks stings of sugar-stars zinging hot and overburned through him, pleasure overwhelming him, his sense blurring out, the relentless edge making good tears sting in his eyes -

His motion rocking his dripping, twitching cock - still painfully, blissfully hard - against Gabe’s abs, wet and sticky hot -

(And the song screams into a fierce, hard crescendo -)

“Fuck yeah, Jack - that’s it, ride me hard -” Gabe rasps, scowling furiously just to concentrate, dark-gold eyes tracing over Jack’s body - all trembling, shuddering muscles - his back arching into the curve of their sex, both hands on Gabe’ shoulders, bracing himself so his hips can just go, moving up and down up and down -

Making Gabe flinch and shiver with each roll, the tight, thick squeeze inside him - hot and dripping - feels incredible -

“Gabe, fuck -” Jack gasps, eyes fluttering against the waves of overwhelming pleasure, high on the hard, thick grind of Gabe’s cock inside him, fucking him so good, so full, making him almost sing with a broken sob, “You feel so good, oh god -”

“I love you like this,” Gabe says, slipping his fingers to the curve of Jack’s ass, squeezing the firm muscle there, shivering as Jack’s hot, tight ache squeezes back around him, thick and full, wet and meltingly smooth around his cock, groaning over the dark-dripped sweetness that throbs around the aching head, encouraging Jack with a low murmur, “You look so good like this, riding my dick, begging for me -”
Jack groans, back arching again -
As Gabe thrusts his hips upwards -
Fucking his cock in deep -
Grinding it inside Jack’s velvety, tight heat

Hard and heavy and raw.

“Fuck, Gabe!” Jack shouts, fingers digging into the meat of Gabe’s shoulders, whole body recoiling with the searing explosion of pleasure inside him, burning through him in painfully perfect waves, hot and tight and deep, his vision whiting out for a moment, every muscle tensing and squeezing so tight -

That Gabe groans beneath him, rocking his hips up again, thrusting his cock in hard hard harder, savoring the thick, heavy squeeze of Jack around it, how amazing he feels inside to out -

Hot and wet and dreamy tight like melting stars, dripping gold and squeezing out white heat -
(And the guitar sobs with a hard-note grind -)

And fuck -
Jack feels so good -
Gabe could do this forever -

The hard, hot ache in his cock, in his groin, is starting to edge out, blurring with thick-stained sugar and dark-drenched heat -

Blurring with the feeling of Jack’s full, hot, smooth squeeze, grinding him through it, riding him down down down -

As he fucks and rocks his cock up up up, in in in.

Jack is just in it: completely lost in the smoke-dripped haze of their pleasure, the gritty screech of the guitar, the low thumping of the bass, perfectly mingling with the hard, hot thrusts of Gabe’s cock, how it grinds and fucks sticky thick against his pressure point, fucking blissed out waves of hot, hard ecstasy through him, muscles tensing -

Before -

“Look at me.”

Gabe’s voice is dark-stained and hot.
Jack shudders, forcing his eyes open, glancing down at Gabe -
Who is staring up at him with a beautiful, deadly look of raw-soaked desire and -
Jack shivers at how good Gabe looks sounds feels -

And Gabe scowls harder, concentrating deep on the way Jack’s eyes are gorgeously blue, completely glassy with ecstasy, how every thrust of his cock into Jack’s deep, tight heat makes Jack tremble and gasp and -
Gabe slides his hands in, further along Jack’s ass -

Before he presses the tips of his index and middle fingers against Jack’s tight ring of muscles and -

“**AH!**” Jack practically *sobs* with joy, eyes flaring wide -

As pleasure *rocks* through him -

As Gabe slips the tips of all four fingers inside his ass, stretching him a little wider, even as he thrusts his cock in **hard**, grinding the head against Jack’s pressure point -

Making him feel **incredible**, blissfully overfull and overwhelmingly overfucked -

Whole body tensing and tightening at that -

And Jack comes again -

Spurting out more small waves of that white hot stickiness across Gabe’s stomach.

Gabe shudders, his own senses whiting out sharp with a beautiful burst of pleasure as *everything* about Jack tightens up, as every muscle spasms and squeezes, Jack clenching down sticky hot and so **incredibly tight** as he comes, and Gabe’s hips roll reflexively, fucking his cock into that amazing, dripping-sexy heat as he chuckles darkly, “God, you really like that, huh?”

“Fuck, Gabe -” Jack pants, tears of aching joy stinging at the edges of his eyes, pleasure burning at the edges of his senses -

Seeing blinding hot stars -

As Gabe continues to fuck him relentlessly, his cock still thrusting *in in in*, hard and hot deep against Jack’s pressure, his fingers twisting and teasing along his rim, and **god** -

It’s all Jack can do to just *cling* to him, his fingers scratching hard on Gabe’s shoulders, his back arching with the curve of Gabe’s intensely good cock, thighs shaking with every sharp, painfully perfect thrust and -

“Gabe, Gabe, *Gabe* -” Jack *sings*, almost sobbing with how **incredible** everything feels, how **perfect** Gabe feels inside him, hard and thick and *full, so full*, how he fucks him like the scream of a grinding guitar and -

Gabe winces as Jack squeezes *tighter* around him, pressing that gold-melting heat back so hard that his cock spasms with it, his edges whiting out as he drips into Jack’s dense, deep ache and -

Pleasure *coils* **hotter** and **hotter** and **tighter** inside him, tensing up up up, riding down down down down -

“**Fuck, Jack -**” Gabe gasps, his own eyes fluttering as his hips thrust erratically, fucking his cock out and in **hard**, out and in **deep**, feeling the ache inside him start to build thick and hard and tense up the length of his cock, and he groans openly, “Fuck, I’m getting close -”

Suddenly -

There are hands on the side of his face - fingers slipping across his buzzed hair -

And Gabe feels a frisson crawl across his scalp -

As Jack tilts his head up, making him stare into those **dangerously** blue eyes, dripping with raw gold
and dark-stained with melting sugar -

And Jack *begs* in that amber-tinted tone:

“I want you to come inside me.”

And Gabe -

His whole body *shudders* with a raw, silk-smooth pleasure at that, a dark-sugary *rush* lancing through him, hips writhing and rocking as he fucks his cock into Jack’s dripping-tight, thick heat, flinching with hot, hard, deep ecstasy, the feeling fucking down through his cock into his groin, his body and -

Jack’s hands hold firm, keeping his head in place, those eyes drawing him in *deep deep deeper*, his muscles riding Gabe *hard* and *heavy* and *tight*, gasping as pleasure fucks through both of them, small stars in his eyes as he pants, “Oh god, I want it so bad, Gabe - wanna feel you come -”

“*Fuck*, Jack, god, gonna come for you -” Gabe rasps out, unable to look away as his fingers twitch, gripping hard over and in Jack’s ass, his cock shuddering as he feels the pleasure wind *tighter tighter tighter* -

(As the guitar grinds into a high, hard-note *scream* -)

And *fuck*, there is only the endless, hot thickness, the edge of it burning with pleasure, dripping raw and rich through them and -

And Jack feels his own cock twitching and spasming with each thrust of Gabe’s inside him, how Gabe’s fingers fuck his rim as Gabe’s cock fucks his overwhelmed, overpleasured *ache* and -

Jack *gasps*, eyes *deep* and wet with stars:

“Fill me up, Gabe -”

And Gabe

Comes

*Hard.*

Pleasure *breaks* inside him, hot and heavy and raw, spasming and riding through him, as the edge frays white hot and shuddering, every muscle in his body tensing, hips thrusting up *hard*, fingers squeezing tense -

As sweet, dark-sugary thickness writhes up the length of his cock, deep from inside him, as he *grinds* his aching, stiff cockhead against Jack’s tight, meltingly good pleasure -

Gasping and groaning in a smoke-threaded tone -

As he comes *deep* in Jack -

White hot and thick and *raw* -

And *fuck* -

He *feels* Jack squeeze and clench around him, pleasure throbbing through him in hard, sticky waves, and he rocks his hips again, fucking out a little more, coming another small burst hard and hot and
drippingly good -

Feeling perfect like this -

Savoring them like this -

Letting himself come undone inside Jack

Sticky and full and incredible.

Jack tenses, tightening up around him as he feels Gabe’s cock throb and spasm with ecstasy -

His core melting as he feels the sticky, hot bitterness burst inside him, drenching him inside to out, rich and thick and full, so full,

Wet and hard and raw -

As he feels Gabe shiver and shudder beneath him, shaking with his orgasm, grinding the throbbing cockhead inside Jack, spurting out more of his sultry, sticky good pleasure and -

As he watches Gabe’s whole expression contort from hard, heavy desire into an open, honest look of deep, blissful pleasure -

(And dark-dripped love -)

Before he gasps -

“Gabe!”

And comes

Again -

His cock shuddering against Gabe’s abs as it spurts white hot across his skin.

There’s a moment where all they do - all they can do - is stare at each other, soaking each other in, feeling hot and thick wet inside and around each other, eyes of dripping dark gold threading with melting blue and bourbon amber -

As the guitar drops off into a hard, screeching stop -

And the song ends.

It only lasts a split second -

Before -

(The next song comes, grinding in hot and hard -)

They’re pulling each other in, kissing rough with a raw, sticky thick love, Jack moaning low and hot from the back of his throat, Gabe drinking in the sounds like the smoothest whiskey -

And he’s pulling his fingers out of playing the tight squeeze of Jack’s ass -

Fucking his still-aching cock in hard, deep -

As Jack is singing:
“Fuck, Gabe, your cum feels so good -”

Pleasure grinding between them as Gabe rocks his hips up, gripping at the curve of Jack’s ass -
“- Keep going, Gabe, more, please -”

And Gabe grits his teeth -

Before he twists them over -

Pushing Jack down into the soft, thick cotton-blend -

Eyes dragging over how the artificial stars drip gold over him -

And Jack shudders as he stares up at Gabe, haloed in melting starlight -

“- Don’t stop, Gabe, I want you -”

Jack threading his arms around Gabe’s shoulders, pulling him in tighter -

As Gabe shifts his hands to the back of Jack’s thighs, hitching his legs higher around his waist -

Before he rides his hips in hard -

Pushing his cock in even deeper -

And Jack recoils with sticky, full pleasure, gasping as the stars burst inside him again -

Words dripping white hot out of him:

“Gabe! More, please, I need you -”

And they pull each other in for another hot, raw kiss -

As Gabe starts to roll his hips -

And the guitar grinds a dirty, hard riff

Against a low, heavy-dripping bass.

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...Jack traces soft, sugary fingertips over the curve of Gabe’s left pec, right over his heart -

Skin on skin -

His head comfortable against the warm rise of Gabe’s left shoulder and the fluff of the pillow -

Thoughts completely, totally, blissfully empty -

But a dripping, white hot, sticky thickness lingering deep and incredibly satisfying inside him -

Full

And fulfilling -
Along with overfucked, overpleasured rawness still surging and melting through him, hot and fluid, like a slow, slicked down guitar grind, gritty and rich, amber and gold bourbon.

Gabe exhales slowly, eyes barely able to stay open, feeling that hard, deep pleasure sing and simmer through him, rich and syrupy, like thick-dripped honey, sweet and smoky in the afterglow, his whole body tense with exhausted but completely, blissfully content soreness -

Left arm curled around Jack’s neck, fingers curling lazily through that sunlight hair -

Relishing the way Jack curls against him, Jack’s head on his shoulder, Jack’s fingertips on his chest -

Jack’s slow, even breathing - overwhelmingly content and so blatantly pleased with himself, with themselves - warm and soothing next to his own -

And Gabe sighs again, deep and fulfilled -

Feeling like they’ve finally -

Finally -

Fucked each other to complete, total

Bliss.

It’s been almost three hours of rough, raw, incredible sex, and Gabe is pretty sure they’ve probably destroyed these bedsheets: the room is bathed in the dull, gold-dripped glow from the artificial stars above them, the atmosphere still rich with thick heat, but the bed is so comfortable beneath them, the sheets twisted up around them. Neither of them remember when Jack’s playlist of hard, dirty rock songs had ended, and both had completely lost track of how many times they’d come, just furiously fucking and edging each other on for hours and hours, coming undone for each other over and over and over.

Jack nuzzles closer, kissing some of his scratches on Gabe’s shoulder, and Gabe shivers with how good it feels, how incredibly sweet it is, and he pulls Jack in a little closer -

Making Jack hum with a contented smirk, slipping himself tighter around Gabe’s side, threading his legs through Gabe’s.

Gabe tilts his head a little, pressing a quiet kiss to Jack’s forehead, saying in a cracking rasp, “...I had... no idea people could come that much.”

“Haha - are you talking about me or you?” Jack chuckles low, the laugh more deep in his chest than actually being voiced, rumbling against Gabe’s side, and Gabe smirks back, humming wryly, “Both, but it’s definitely not a complaint.”

“Hmm, I sure hope not,” Jack says, shifting his head upwards, giving Gabe a soft, sultry-slow kiss on the lips, both of them savoring the low, raw heat that still simmers between them, as Jack murmurs richly, “Because I loved feeling you come every time.”

Gabe quirks an eyebrow, more at the feeling of slow, sensual pleasure that pulses through him than anything else, his half-hard cock twitching a little at it, but he chuckles back against Jack’s lips, “The feeling is mutual, Jack.”

Jack grins back, kissing him a little longer, slow and sugary, the feeling dripping in melted gold and low heat, before he pulls back, settling his head on Gabe’s shoulder again -
Relishing the sticky, hot reminder of Gabe deep inside him.

They drift into a moment of comfortable, easy silence, just savoring the feeling of being together, skin on skin -

Until Gabe asks softly, “...Can I ask you an honest question?”

The words “no stupid question” drifts through Jack’s head impulsively, but he’s too fucked and blissed out of his mind to care, instead humming happily, “Sure.”

And Gabe

Pauses -

Loving the feeling of Jack warm and thick against him -

Before he murmurs gently, “...Why me?”

...His tone is not judgmental, nor bitter, nor intimidated - the words are calm, soothing even, tempered with a low-simmering heat and a deep love, rumbling comfortably against Jack’s chest, Gabe’s lips pressed to his forehead.

And Jack says with a slow, syrupy smirk, “...We’ve been over this, Gabe: we like each other. We’ve even dropped the hard L word a few times.”

And Gabe *laughs* at that - a genuine, honest sound, rich and warm in his chest, shifting through him like smoke, a little bit hoarse from the hours of moaning, but so, *so nice* -

Music to Jack’s ears, pressed skin on skin through their chests.

But Gabe’s low laughter fades into a faint inquisitiveness as he murmurs, “You know what I meant.”

And Jack…

Pauses -

Eyes opening against the dim, sweet sugar lighting in the room -

Listening quietly.

And Gabe says - with no pressure, no timidness, just honest and loving curiosity:

“Don’t get me wrong - I love every second of this. I could do this with you every night, Jack, and there’s absolutely nothing hotter than seeing you come for me for hours on end. But it’s obvious that you’ve got more experience in this than me.”

And Gabe grins a little, lazily and sultry, humming with a low heat, “And that’s *hot* as all hell - it’s been a long time since I’ve had a serious partner, but none of them ever nearly had the chemistry that we do -”

But his tone shifts back to that calm, soft, loving concern as he murmurs:

“- But we’re just barely over three months. You’re sure this is where you want to take this?”

And Jack
Before he chuckles in that low, deeply contented voice:

“Easy to say after you’ve come inside me several times, Reyes.”

Gabe quirks an eyebrow at that, chuckling a bit, but saying softly, “I’m just asking if this isn’t too big a step.”

And there’s another small moment of comfortable, if curiously concerned silence -

Before Gabe kisses his forehead, murmuring gently:

“...What are you going to do if we survive the war?”

And Jack

Shuts his eyes

Savoring the slow, sugary darkness

And the feeling of Gabe kissing him with a soft, gold-dripped glow -

Like Jack is the only thing in the world right now.

And Jack feels

(Full and fulfilled)

So loved -

That he smiles serenely, saying in a teasing tone:

“Gabriel Reyes, you’ve committed to a five year lease on a bank safe containing a storage drive of crazy military secrets with me -”

Opening his eyes and tilting his head up to kiss Gabe sweeter than sugar as he hums playfully:

“- If you think you can bareback me and then run from committing to this, you ain’t seen me angry.”

Gabe laughs at that, a bright, rich smile flitting across his lips, even as they kiss, the sound smoky but warm, twisting with threads of gold, and he lifts his right hand, rubbing his thumb affectionately across Jack’s left cheek -

Before he cups the angle of Jack’s jaw, pulling him in for a deeper, stronger kiss.

They both savor it, slow and rich, with just a little raw heat on the edges, but mostly enjoying the way they draw each other in, soothing and smooth -

Falling harder in love with each other.

They break the kiss slow, eyes tracing over each other, with Gabe gently caressing Jack’s face and -

Jack melts a little at his touch -

At the sight of the utter love and contentment in his eyes, dark-stained and rich, sweet with a honeyed gold.
“...No, this...”

Jack starts, but his words falter a little, catching on the thrum of deep, aching love in his chest and the hot, full stickiness in his core -

And he shuts his eyes, leaning into Gabe’s touch, saying softly:

“This is something I’ve...been thinking about. And the feeling has only gotten stronger in the last few weeks.”

He lifts his left hand, pressing it to the back of Gabe’s, opening his eyes as he adds, “...The last few days in particular.”

Gabe shivers a little at how blue his eyes are, rich and stormy under the gold light.

“This isn’t just...a short term whim, Gabe,” Jack says, quiet but strong, voice full of deep, loving conviction, “You don’t just make me feel good. You make me feel like a better version of myself. You make me think about things I have never dared to think about, in ways I never challenged myself to think.”

And as Jack loosely entwines his fingers with Gabe’s, he leans in a little, kissing the words soft and strong, gold-dripped and smooth, to Gabe’s lips:

“...You make me feel whole.”

Jack delights in how the kiss pulls quiet, melting little sounds from the back of Gabe’s throat - how he seems to fall into the kiss fully and wholly, how both of them love the feeling of them, together -

And Jack parts just a little, to say gently, “Like I said the other day, I never felt...unfulfilled without you. But now that I’ve met you, now that I know you -”

Jack smiles so, so honestly, so genuinely -

The same smile he’d given Gabe by the store -

“- Now that I’ve loved you, and have been loved by you -”

Jack kisses him with a raw, rich love, singing low:

“- I could never be the same.”

And Gabe -

He shivers a little -

Before pulling Jack back in for another kiss, sweet still, but with that stronger tint, richer -

Hotter.

They don’t fully part, but as they gasp a little against each other, Jack murmurs breathlessly, “I love the way you make me feel -”

Gabe nips at his lower lip, and Jack twists his words with a small moan, “I love who I am with you - I love who you think I can be with you -”

“God, I love the way you talk,” Gabe murmurs back, kissing him hard and fierce. They shiver
against each other, that heat starting to burn again, and Jack sing-whispers, “I love this - I love us -”
And then he kisses Gabe with a deep, raw, sensual longing, murmuring lowly:
“I love you.”

Good, steep frisson crawls across Gabe’s skin as he feels the words kissed to his lips -
Jack pulls away only slightly, his eyes searching Gabe’s, before he asks quietly, “...Is that intimidating to deal with?”
And Gabe looks him over with such a quietly loving gaze, before he whispers back, “Never.”
Jack shivers a little at how good he looks - how good he feels - as he says that.

“...You keep saying you’ve never met anyone like me, but it’s the same for me to you,” Gabe says tenderly, brushing his thumb lovingly across Jack’s cheek, before he scowls a little in concentration, adding deeply, “No one understands me the way you have. No one encourages me the way you do.”
And then Gabe grins mischievously, saying in a playful, wry tone, “And maybe it’s the borderline insane sex -”
Jack laughs a warm, heartfelt sound at that -
“- But no one has driven me absolutely crazy the way you have,” Gabe says, a flicker of heat in his tone, sliding his hand from Jack’s cheek to his shoulder, pulling him in a little more as he murmurs, “...The way you do.”
Jack shivers as they kiss again, softer, hotter -
Pressing his left hand to Gabe’s chest again -
And they part, and Gabe almost frowns with a bittersweet look, saying in a tone rich with love:
“...And no one has listened to all my secrets and told me that I was…”
Gabe
Pauses
Because the word is caught on his heartbeat, full of an aching love -
Before he almost whispers:
“...Courageous for them.”
And Jack gives him that beautiful little half-smile, slightly crooked, but completely, totally, deeply
In love -
And Gabe thinks softly, If I could see you look like that every night -
“...You make me believe in trying anything and everything again,” Gabe says, shifting a little, turning towards Jack more, sliding his right hand down to Jack’s waist, murmuring encouragingly, “Being with you makes me want to bank on the good outcome.”
And Jack shifts to his back, moving his right hand to cup at Gabe’s face, his left hand slipping around to Gabe’s back -

Legs spreading easily -

Letting Gabe settle between them and -

They kiss again, the feeling turning hotter and hotter, the simmering rising harder, sultry and sensual, as Jack shifts his legs higher around Gabe’s hips and waist -

And Gabe grinds his aching, hard cock against Jack’s.

Jack shivers, moaning into the kiss as pleasure rolls sticky sweet through them, his fingernails starting to scratch across Gabe’s upper back and scalp again -

And Gabe shudders a little at feeling Jack’s cock rub against his, how easily Jack wraps his legs around his waist, how Jack is already moaning at his touch, his cock, his kiss, and Gabe murmurs hotly, “I thought of you all last week -”

“Gabe -” Jack gasps -

As Gabe shifts back a little, still rocking his hips, rubbing their aching dicks together hard -

“Touched myself as I thought about you -” Gabe continues, giving himself a better angle, moving his hips and cock lower, lower -

Before he nips hard and hot at the base of Jack’s neck, just above his collarbone -

And Jack moans openly -

“And I remembered how good you felt as I was fucking you -” Gabe kisses against his skin, relishing the hot flush it gets from him, how Jack is starting to tremble beneath him -

“Gabe - fuck -” Jack groans -

Before -

He gasps sharply -

As Gabe presses the tip of his cock against his still-hot, still-slicked ring of muscles -

And -

“But most of all,” Gabe murmurs against his neck, “I remembered how you said my name -”

And Jack shouts hoarsely, “Gabe!”

As Gabe pushes that hard, thick, dangerously good cock back inside him, blissfully and wonderfully slow, filling him up again -

“- As you came for me over and over again,” Gabe groans, his body shuddering at how tight, how hot, how good Jack feels - still feels -

And how absolutely incredible it feels

To feel his own white hot, thick cum slick and squeeze over his dick -
As Jack tightens and throbs around him.

Jack shudders, muscles tensing, legs locking as Gabe rolls his hips, fucking that thick cock deep inside him, almost singing at how good it feels to be fucked and overfucked by him, to feel Gabe’s thick, white hot wetness twist and coil with his hard cock inside him -

And Gabe

Goes.

“Oh, fuck -” Jack shouts hoarsely, as Gabe rocks his hips forward, starting to thrust at a deep, hard, grinding pace, fucking his cock in hard hard harder, wet and sticky-slicked and hot, and Gabe almost glares, concentrating fiercely as he mutters, “So I hope you’re prepared to survive the war, Jack -”

“Gabe, Gabe - oh fuck -” Jack pants, as pleasure starts to burst and throb through him, as Gabe starts to fuck his overstimulated ache again, cockhead grinding hard, so blissfully hard against his pressure point and -

“And I hope you’re prepared to say my name every time you come -” Gabe continues, shuddering as Jack squeezes and clenches around him, hot and thick wet, full of his dripping white pleasure, as the feeling of it starts to coil hot and tight and relentless in his cock and groin again and -

Jack’s eyes are starting to get hazy with it again, as he gasps, “Oh, Gabe, fuck - that feels good -”

“Because I want this too,” Gabe says, biting at Jack’s neck again, his cock feeling so incredibly tight inside Jack’s sticky, thick heat -

Pleasure starting to burn and lance inside them -

And Jack -

His eyes flare wide -

As Gabe’s hips rock in harder -

And he fucks his cock in deeper -

And Gabe shuts his eyes, gasping as he kisses Jack’s skin, “And I love you too.”

“Gabe, Gabe, I love you -” Jack moans, his fingers scratching hard across Gabe’s back, legs shuddering, muscles squeezing tighter around that perfect cock, so hard, so thick, so deep and hot inside him, don’t stop, don’t stop -

“Right there, Gabe - don’t stop -” Jack chants, as the feeling of being wonderfully overfucked starts to writhe and burst inside him -

“Don’t stop talking, Jack -” Gabe groans, pushing his hips forward, relishing how his hipbones dig hard into Jack’s inner thighs -

Fucking his cock in as deep and as tight as it will go -

“So good, Gabe, so good - don’t stop - don’t stop -” Jack begs, as the stars start to melt inside him again -

As Gabe starts to drip - wet hot and so good - inside him again and -
“Come inside me again, Gabe, please -” Jack gasps, wanting it -

Wanting him -

And Gabe -

He presses his forehead against the side of Jack’s neck, shuddering with every thrust, pleasure squeezing tight and sticky and white hot around his aching, throbbing cock, already feeling the hot, thick pressure in his cockhead -

Knowing he’s going to fill Jack again

(and again)

(and again)

And Gabe moans against Jack’s skin, smoky and raw as he murmurs:

“I love you like this, Jack.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I never like doing serious chats after smut, but I need to.

It's...hard for me to put in words what Monday's reveal about Jack being gay means to me. If you follow me on twitter, you've seen me go through several stages of emotion: excitement, fear and concern that Blizzard would warp this reveal into forcing Jack to be "heartbroken and alone" for his entire life, calming down, re-reading, making sense of the nuances and details in the text, and coming to realization that certain plot revelations are now closer than ever before.

But let me try to put it into plain terms:

1. I am **beyond thrilled** that one of my favorite male characters of all times is confirmed gay. I honestly got **giddy** selecting him in Overwatch the last several days. I main Soldier and it just feels so, **so** validating to see all these personality bits - his background, his romantic orientation, his mischievous personality, his determination, his closeness to Gabriel - all get confirmed as canon in a way I never dreamed Blizzard would.

2. We are closer to Reaper76 being confirmed canon than ever before. I believe it. The writing is on the walls - er, in the text. :P If you haven't seen it, I have several tweets analyzing "Bastet" and how there are several clues - including the artifacts - that point to Jack repairing his relationship with Gabriel, if they are not, in fact, working together.

[What does this mean for this fic?]

Being honest with you all, I'm just going to say it:

I think this is the end.

...Force Multiplication has been a labor of love for the last year. I am so, **so** grateful I got the chance to write it and that people responded so, **so** profoundly to it.
It means the world to me, and I honestly wouldn't change any parts of it at this point (well...besides a few mistakes :P). I had a vision for this fic and set out to achieve it, and honestly, I feel pretty good about where it went and how it shaped up. So much of it is written from a very genuine place as a pan transman who is reexperiencing a genuine love for the first time in a long time, under situations and constraints that are bigger than either person can control. I wanted Force Multiplication to merge real world military training with Overwatch's science fictious future, literary references and musical motifs, spy thrillers and genuine growth - all with a budding romance blossoming slowly underneath it all. I set out to make a version of SEP that was detailed and vivid, at times fun and challenging, at times horrifying and eldritch, all while showing how two characters could get pushed together to bond and find strength in each other.

I think I accomplished that.

Unfortunately, I know that canon means a good deal to me personally, as an author and a fan, and I don't like the idea of just ignoring the now-canon decision Jack made near the end of the Crisis to choose Overwatch over a normal relationship and life.

...However, I'm not letting the ideas in Force Multiplication go.

Not yet.

This fic lays a lot of groundwork and ideas for me, so rather than just end it entirely, I'd like to rework my plans for the original sequel to Force Multiplication to integrate Jack's canon decision (and adjust a few details on Gabe's background to incorporate his likely-canon child).

We will see many of these characters - both canon and OCs - return in slightly-adjusted ways soon.

Once again, a massive THANK YOU to everyone who read and commented. You guys gave me such strength, especially in the last several months. I'm so deeply honored that people have sent me comments for this fic over tumblr and twitter, that people have made ART (??) of all things?? I love it, I am so, so grateful!

I'll be back with a renewed vigor, an updated storyline, and a newly-single Jack -

Who realizes that the man who understands him best - and who is ready to love him in a way that suits them -

Has been his best friend and commander for several years.

(And that Overwatch and Gabe are worth fighting for.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!