May Your Past Be the Sound of Your Feet Upon the Ground

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/13725327.

Rating: Explicit
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death, Rape/Non-Con, Underage
Category: F/F, F/M, M/M, Multi
Fandom: Metal Gear
Character: Liquid Snake, Psycho Mantis, Ocelot (Metal Gear), Sniper Wolf, Decoy Octopus, Vulcan Raven, EVA (Metal Gear), Naomi Hunter, Original Characters, Gray Fox (Metal Gear), Solidus Snake, Otacon (Metal Gear), Next-Generation Special Forces (Metal Gear), Meryl Silverburgh, Solid Snake, Kazuhira Miller, Mei Ling (Metal Gear), Catherine Miller, Nadine (Metal Gear), Gary McGolden, Holly White (Metal Gear), The Boss AI, Raiden (Metal Gear), Rosemary (Metal Gear), Fortune (Metal Gear), Vamp (Metal Gear), Olga Gurlukovich
Additional Tags: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, twice!, buckle up kiddos it's gonna be a wild ride, reupload, Established Relationship, Mommy Issues, OCs as the plot demands, fake vacation, Mission Fic, Kojima's genetics apologism, Relationship Problems, the CDC, Car Chases, partially inspired by The Last Days of FOXHOUND, Abusive Relationships, Decoy Octopus is the sanest most competent person here, Pokemon - Freeform, Neon Genesis Evangelion - Freeform, New Years, Shadow Moses, dragging the Genome Soldiers, awkward family reunion in Solid's cabin, Puppies, Mei Ling... with a GUN, Animal Death, Hind D vs F-16s, ft. the music of Queen, Virtual Reality, Torture, diazepam, LDS trivia night ft. Ocelot, Amnesia, Sex Jokes, confronting past abuse, Drugs, Side Effects, Manipulation, Mental Breakdown, Suicide Attempt, couple's therapy with mommy, APA cited, Bipolar Disorder, Gaslighting, narrowly avoided fake relationship subplot, Wolf has no sense of boundaries, Cancer, Liquid has a bad day
Series: Part 5 of White Diamond
Stats: Published: 2018-02-18 Updated: 2019-06-10 Chapters: 107/? Words: 366002
Summary

Ocelot brings FOXHOUND aboard the ‘Down with the Patriots’ bus instead of throwing them under it. Or: Local Man Sets Out on Revenge Quest, Saves World and Makes Friends Along the Way

13/6/18 update: Reupload is complete and chapter 72 is posted!! It's all original from here on out, baby!

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

IT'S BACK, BITCHES

I know Wherever I Go, I'll Make It Home ended with Shadow Moses being pretty much the same just to assert that Venom adopting Liquid wouldn't change the overall plot of the game, but I decided I didn't like that! So I'm retconning it!! And I already know that retconning it ended up being a popular choice. New readers rejoice! No slog through 71+ chapters - you can get in on this action AS IT UPDATES!

And yes, the title is taken from a fun. song. I'll admit I do kind of consider the song ("Carry On") to be the theme song of this fic... so sue me. Incidentally, Make It Home's title was also taken from a song, but it was one I wrote. Maybe one day I'll post the whole thing. Maybe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ocelot came to a decision.

He’d initially thought that Liquid’s hatred of his biological father would only prove to be a liability (the ultimate liability, really, as far as Ocelot was concerned), but after a few years at FOXHOUND and a lot of careful observation - very much to Mantis’ irritation - he’d decided that all things considered, it was workable. Well, as long as Ocelot didn’t immediately mention the fact that Big Boss was still, technically, alive. But he could talk around that.

So he and Liquid had a little chat. About Cipher. About the Patriots.

It… was interesting.

“What?” Liquid said, eyes wide, brow furrowed.

“It’s a simple yes or no question, boss,” Ocelot said. “Are you in or not?”

“I… well, in theory, yes, but what-?”

Ocelot raised an eyebrow. “Do you believe me?”

“It makes sense as far as everything else I know goes, but—“
“But what?”

“What brought this on, Ocelot?”

“Nothing in particular.” His eyes drifted down to the leather collar around Liquid’s neck. He’d worn it so long that at this point, no one really commented on it anymore. “You trust me, don’t you?”

Liquid hesitated, very slightly but Ocelot still noticed it. “Of course I do.”

“Then you’ll help?”

Liquid was silent for a moment, and Ocelot suppressed a sigh. If only he’d managed to catch Liquid in one of his alarmingly frequent impulsive moods.

“They’re the ones responsible for Father’s death, aren’t they?” Liquid said, “it was they who ordered Big Boss to send someone from FOXHOUND to Galzburg, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Ocelot said, “they’re the ones who are responsible for Solid Snake killing V.”

He wasn’t actually sure if that was true or not. Yes, it had been Patriot interests that had ‘necessitated’ Operations Intrude N312 and N313. Yes, there had been pressure on Big Boss to send someone in to kill Venom, and all the Outer Heaven personnel that had been at that particular FOB with him.

No, he didn’t have to do it. There probably had been another way, Ocelot knew that. He just didn’t like to think about it - didn’t like to think that perhaps Big Boss had wanted Venom dead. He liked to think it was all a misunderstanding, an accident waiting to happen, an unfortunate but ultimately unavoidable circumstance, and maybe the blame could be placed on those who got a bug up their collective ass about Outer Heaven having an actually functional Metal Gear.

So that entirely justified Ocelot telling Liquid that.

“Then I’m in,” Liquid said immediately.

“Excellent,” Ocelot purred.

“What about the others?” Liquid said, narrowing his eyes slightly, “Wolf and Raven have lost people to Ci- I mean, the Patriots as well. And you know Octopus, he isn’t particularly trusting of anyone with more power than the immediate authority, so I can’t imagine he’d stand for a worldwide shadow government.”

“They could be valuable allies,” Ocelot said, “and if they don’t believe you about the Patriots’ existence, I could always provide proof.” Liquid blinked at him. “I used to be a Patriot agent myself.”

Liquid took a step back, then frowned, and waited.

Ocelot followed his cue. “I still am, technically. But I’ve already fallen from grace. There are already those who suspect I’ve been working to bring them down from the inside.”

“And I suppose…” Liquid said, “that bringing FOXHOUND over to your side would be more of an external assault.”

It evidently didn’t occur to Liquid to wonder if they could have any impact in this secret war with as small as FOXHOUND was and as sprawling and inescapable as the Patriots were. Ocelot answered
that question anyway. “It wouldn’t just be FOXHOUND. You aren’t the first one I’ve extended this offer to - you aren’t the first one with good reason to see them destroyed.”

“What else do you have, then?”

Ocelot glanced at the clock. “I’ll tell you later. For now I think I had better take my leave before Mantis gets in a snit about me talking to you for so long, alone.” Ocelot had never particularly cared to find out what arbitrary rules, exactly, Mantis had forced on Liquid a few years back, only that Liquid seemed to more or less follow them and one of them was that he wasn’t allowed to be alone with Ocelot for too long. Ocelot and other company, sure, that was fine, but alone was unacceptable and quite frankly the thing Mantis threw the biggest tantrums - and Liquid presumably got the biggest punishments - over.

Liquid’s jaw briefly flexed. “Tch. Very well then, but if the others are up for this as well, then you might as well tell me in front of everyone else.”

“We’ll see, won’t we?”

“I suppose we will…”

“So basically the Illuminati,” Octopus said, “except real.”

“Well…” Liquid said, “yes.”

“And you believed him?”

“I’ve dealt with Cipher before,” Liquid pointed out. “Or at least, I’ve come into contact with them. I find it perfectly believable that they managed to expand their influence since 1984.”

“I remember hearing about Cipher,” Wolf said thoughtfully. “I had heard that they disappeared, but - no, I suppose I heard that the name ‘Cipher’ was no longer in use anywhere. If they changed their name…”

“They are the ones responsible for the destruction of the Galzburg FOB?” Raven said.

“According to Ocelot, anyway,” Liquid said.

Mantis snorted. “He cannot be trusted.”

“You always say that,” Wolf said.

“He admitted to working with the Patriots,” Mantis said, “how do you know this is not a ploy on their part? This could be a trap, Eli.” (Sometimes Liquid wished he could get Mantis to stop calling him that in front of his other subordinates, at the very least.)

“If it were,” Liquid said, “why would he admit to working with them?”

“Hold on,” Octopus said, “Mantis, you buy this, too?”

“…I find it plausible, yes. But Ocelot—”

“Yes, we know,” Raven said, “you neither like nor trust Ocelot. We have all grasped that by now.”

Mantis narrowed his eyes at Raven, then looked at Liquid again. “For all you know, the Patriots have already put a target on your head for telling Ocelot you like the idea of destroying them. It is
entirely possible that Ocelot is here to spy on us.”

“I was the one who invited him to this unit,” Liquid said stiffly, “I know you remember that, Mantis.”

“You only invited him to the unit because he-!” Mantis cut himself off, deliberately loosened his fists, and took a deep breath. “This plan could have been a decade in the making, Eli. How do you know this was not his end goal in 1994?”

“How the hell was anyone supposed to know I’d end up in FOXHOUND in 1994?”

“Why exactly would the Patriots need a spy in FOXHOUND?” Octopus said, raising a hand.

Wolf shrugged. “Perhaps they realize how easily we can be turned against them.”

Raven nodded. “Except for you, Octopus,” he said, “all of us are former members of Outer Heaven. We all would have a vested interest in taking them down, even if that interest is mostly vengeance.”

“…assuming the Patriots are real,” Octopus said, but he was kind of outnumbered here, so he shrugged and decided to roll with it for now.

“Anyway, I don’t think Ocelot’s true loyalties lie with the Patriots,” Liquid said, “he sounded sincere about wanting to take them down, at least. And he has already gathered… other forces.”

“Who?” Wolf said.

“Not sure yet. Hasn’t told me.”

Mantis scoffed.

“But I don’t think he’d betray us like that - does anyone, besides Mantis?”

Everyone besides Mantis shook their heads, while Mantis threw up his arms and walked to the other side of the room.

“I’d kind of like proof, though,” Octopus piped up, “that the Patriots, well, exist.”

“And it would be nice to know who else is supposedly working against them,” Wolf said.

“And what we would need to do,” Raven added.

“I suppose we’re really just all talking in hypotheticals right now,” Liquid said, “hm… oh, dammit. Does anyone know where Ocelot is right now, anyway?”

“Probably off relaying every detail of this discussion to the Patriots,” Mantis said snidely.

“Oh, ha ha. He was in here for exactly none of the conversation, Mantis.”

“I think he was making some phone calls,” said Wolf. “But from his cellular phone, not the base’s landline. So he would be up on the roof.” It was the only place in the whole building where anyone could get any reception - although it didn’t tend to be very relevant, while everyone on the team had a cell phone it was really only Ocelot who had reason to use it frequently. Apparently it was more secure than the landline.

“I’m done now,” Ocelot said, opening the door to the break room they had all congregated in. (Mantis audibly hissed at him, but was ignored.) “Boss. What’s the verdict?”
“We want proof,” Octopus said before Liquid could answer. Liquid nodded, though.

“Proof of the Patriots’ existence…” Ocelot said, then glanced at Mantis, who was glaring at him. “Or proof that I can be trusted?”

“Both would be nice,” Liquid said lightly.

Ocelot shrugged. “As it happened I was just getting in touch with someone who’s already been working against them from the inside. One of my - our - more valuable allies.”

“Oh, perfect,” Mantis snarked, “another Patriot agent to vouch for Ocelot, the Patriot spy.” Again he was ignored.

“Who is it?” Wolf asked.

“The boss’ mother.”

There was a very, very long pause.

“What,” Liquid said eventually.

Ocelot shrugged.

“What,” Liquid said again, “wait, hold on, what—-“

“He has a mother?” Octopus said, incredulous. “I thought he was just grown in a test tube.”

“She is actually very nice, and rather pretty,” Wolf said thoughtfully. “She used to come around Outer Heaven once every several months.”

“What did you—" Liquid started, “what did you even say to her, Ocelot? What were you calling her about?”

“I figured you all would be wanting proof,” Ocelot said, “so while she’s a bit too busy to stop by—" "Thank God.”

“—I can call her right back and we can speak to her up on the roof, on speakerphone.” He glanced at Octopus. “I assume my claims about the Patriots will be a little… easier to swallow if verified by someone else?”

Octopus tilted his head. “Works for me, honestly. I always thought there was something funny about the American government.”

“I do not care who is on the other end of the line,” Mantis hissed, “I still do not trust you.”

“You never will,” Ocelot said dismissively.

They all, except Mantis, went up to the roof, although Liquid lingered uncomfortably in the doorway while everyone else almost crowded around Ocelot as he dialed EVA’s number again and it rung a few times before she picked up.

“So they wanted to talk to me after all, ADAM?” she said. The sound quality was… not very good.

“It’s really not all that surprising,” Ocelot said. “You’re on speakerphone, EVA.”
“Are you really the boss’ mother?” Octopus asked, again before anyone else could say anything.

“I gave birth to him, if that fits your definition of ‘mother’. Of course, I didn’t actually see him again until he was thirteen, but that wasn’t exactly my… oh, is he there right now?”

“Yes,” Wolf said. “Hello, EVA.”

“Wolf, is that you? Good morning. Or, I suppose it’s afternoon there… Eli?”

“Hi,” Liquid said loudly from the doorway.

“…we haven’t so much as talked in nine years, and all I get is a ‘hi’…”

“That is not why we called,” Raven said.

“Hello to you too- Vulcan Raven, was it? And no, it isn’t. ADAM…?”

Ocelot sighed slightly. “They want some kind of proof, EVA.”

“Have you told them about Naomi yet?” EVA said.

“Not yet.”

“Naomi?” Wolf said.

“Don’t you have a Dr. Hunter on your medical staff?” EVA asked.

“We do,” Liquid said, still refusing to move any closer, “she’s the chief, actually. Although, we don’t really have the budget to support our own medical staff, so truthfully she’s just a contracted civilian from some private biotech company or another…” He trailed off into grumbling about budget cuts, an age-old pastime of everyone who had ever ran FOXHOUND, aside from Big Boss himself.

“ATGC, right?” EVA said, “that’s her. She helped Ocelot and I out last year, but her current pet project is a Patriot one.”

“I’ve been meaning to do something about it,” Ocelot said, “but I couldn’t do anything too drastic without arousing suspicion…”

“But now that the rest of you are on our side,” EVA said, “that should be much easier. Right, ADAM?”

“Why do you keep calling him ADAM?” Raven said flatly.

Ocelot twitched his moustache. “Long story,” he said, at the same time as EVA also said it over the phone.

“Anyway, with regards to Naomi,” EVA said, “if you’ll look into what she’s actually working on now, you’ll find she’s engineering a virus that-“ There was a loud screech that was audible even over the phone, then a crash. “Sleduj cestu, pičo! Chceš mě kurva zabít?!?”

“EVA,” Ocelot said patiently.

“You’re the one who knows all the details about FOXDIE, not me, ADAM,” EVA snapped, “you tell them. I have to go. Call me back later.” She hung up abruptly.

They all listened to the long beep of the dial tone for a few moments, then Ocelot sighed and clacked
his phone shut.

“What the hell is FOXDIE?” Octopus said.

“…Dr. Hunter is the one who broke up that marriage, is she not?” Wolf said. “Between the DIA agent and that woman from the NSA?”

“Seriously? …that’s what you’re stuck on?”

“The medical staff never gives me diazepam, they are useless and I only know of their existence through gossip.”

“FOXDIE,” Ocelot said loudly, talking over Wolf and Octopus, “is a retrovirus that targets highly specific DNA sequences - that is, it can be ‘programmed’ to affect only certain people. To leave out all the gory details, once it identifies the sequence it’s after, it simulates a heart attack and they die. Also, it’s airborne and can be carried by a person whose DNA is not in the virus’ coding.”

“Sounds like the perfect assassination tool,” Liquid said, finally walking over. “No traces, perfect deniability, and I suppose there’d be no risk of collateral damage, barring exposure to the target’s nearest blood relatives.”

“Is such a thing really possible?” Raven said.

“Well, it’s currently under development,” Ocelot said, “it isn’t completed yet. That’s what Dr. Hunter has been working on these past few years… from this building’s laboratories, even, right under our noses.”

Wolf raised her hand. “Is it only for specific people, or could it be programmed to target anyone with… I don’t know… naturally blonde hair?”

Ocelot raised an eyebrow. “From my understanding of it, it does seem plausible that it could be programmed to target anyone with any kind of commonality in their DNA.”

“So it could also be used for ethnic cleansing,” Raven said, his brow furrowing.

“It’s possible. But as of right now it’s only being designed to target specific people. And there are some interesting names on the list for its initial run, too…”

“You’ve seen it?” Octopus said.

“Who’s on it?” Liquid demanded.

“Oh, only people who would need to be taken out as contingencies for now,” Ocelot said, “a few key employees of that corporation that’s been working with DARPA lately, some ambassadors, a couple reporters…” He narrowed his eyes slightly. “Everyone in this unit.”

“What?” Wolf said, taken aback.

“Us?” Raven said.

“Oh, come on,” Octopus said, “even you?”

“Not me, actually,” Ocelot said, tilting his head, “the Patriots think I’m valuable, remember? There’s a reason why I work against them from the inside instead of outright breaking my ties to them.”

“Hm.” Liquid frowned. As often as he dismissed Mantis’ histrionics about Ocelot, perhaps he had a
point when it came to this…

“Ah, that reminds me,” Ocelot said, glancing at Liquid, “boss, your name was double underlined on Dr. Hunter’s list.”

“Out to get him in particular?” Octopus said.

“I don’t know. I only saw the list, never spoke to her about it.”

“I’ve never done anything to cross her,” Liquid said, blinking, “I don’t think I’ve ever even talked to her outside of what’s strictly necessary for our respective jobs.”

“Maybe you crossed someone she knows,” Wolf said.

“That certainly would not narrow it down,” Raven said, nodding.

Liquid scrubbed a hand over his face. “Okay,” he said, “Ocelot - why didn’t you do anything before?”

“If anything happened to her… well, considering that lab ‘accident’ last year, it might be a risky move. The Patriots know that I am aware that she’s working on something for them, and it might raise a few eyebrows that I failed to protect their interests… assuming they assumed that I had nothing to do with it.”

“Lab acci…? Oh, the one where Dr. Clark died. Wasn’t Dr. Hunter involved in that?”

“She was,” said Raven.

“But,” Ocelot said, as though Liquid or Raven hadn’t spoken, “if she were being investigated by, say, the officially appointed commander of FOXHOUND, then no matter what happens to her I could be excused for not acting, in order to maintain my cover. This is hardly the first biological weapon the Patriots have come up with, so Dr. Hunter is fairly expendable, but there’s only one me.”

“…I see,” Liquid said at length. “An investigation…”

“Seems easy enough,” Octopus said, crossing his arms, “Liquid goes around, asks a few questions, sticks his nose where it doesn’t belong—”

“—hope the Patriots do not send someone to assassinate him…” interjected Wolf.

“—and if he finds that she’s been working on some virus called FOXDIE, then we know Ocelot and the boss’ mom are right about this whole Patriot thing,” Octopus continued, “with the added bonus of… hm… taking her out, I suppose?”

“Taking her out before her virus takes us out,” Raven said, “yes.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Wolf nodded.

“Lovely,” Liquid said flatly. “Alright, then. I suppose I’ll pay a little visit to the medical labora—”

“Hold your horses, boss,” Ocelot said, “this needs to be an official investigation, or else I’m done for.”

“Wouldn’t that just attract the Patriots’ attention?” Liquid said… mostly not wanting to do the paperwork that opening an investigation involved.
“Somewhat. However, you have no reason to know about FOXDIE. If you give an excuse, they will take it. They have a nasty habit of assuming they’re too powerful to be double-crossed.”

“So I suppose in the meantime, he cannot go talk to her at all,” Wolf said, frowning, “since Naomi might tamper with or delete her data. She must be caught by surprise.”

Liquid ran his hand back through his hair, sighing irritably. “Fine, fine. I’ll go fill out those damned forms - oh, I need a reason to put for this. I can’t exactly put down that Ocelot or Mo— …or EVA tipped us off about FOXDIE.”

“I’m sure you won’t have any trouble figuring that out, boss,” Ocelot said.

Liquid stole up behind Mantis, grabbed him around the waist, pressed him to his side, and murmured against his ear: “How many people on the medical staff have cybernetic implants?”

Mantis sighed. “This is insane, Eli.”

“I just want to put Ocelot’s information to the test.”

“Oh, I do not doubt that he is feeding you technically accurate information. I only think this is a honeypot.”

“I trust him.”

“You shouldn’t,” Mantis snapped, stepping away from him.

Liquid glared, his playful sensuality evaporating in an instant. “How many of our medical staff have cybernetic implants, Mantis?” he said in a hard, authoritative voice. Oh, god. His boss voice. Mantis had to answer. Whatever other relationship they had, Liquid was still his commanding officer and he used this tone of voice to remind him of that.

“Only a handful,” Mantis said grudgingly, “Dr. Hunter is one of them, and if anyone else is working with her on the FOXDIE program, then they would be one of the others. If anyone on the medical staff whose mind I could read were working with her, then I would have heard of FOXDIE before now.”

“I don’t need specific information about FOXDIE - not from you, anyway.” Liquid said, “I only need you to pull from the mind of someone who doesn’t have implants something that I could use as an excuse to officially investigate Dr. Hunter.”

“Like what?”

“It doesn’t matter. Anything. Idle gossip could just as easily be twisted into the justification we need. But I do need something that someone on the medical staff could verify if it comes to that.”

“…fine. I will find something for you.” He turned his head deliberately. “Only because you ordered me to. I do not like this, Eli.”

“You’ll come around.” He felt Liquid press a kiss to his jaw. “You always do,” he breathed, then straightened himself. “Try to get something good as soon as possible. Our next course of action entirely depends on the results of this investigation.”

“Yes, boss.”

He felt a little twinge of self-conscious irritation come from Liquid at Mantis calling him ‘boss’ for
once — as much as it annoyed him to be called by his given name in front of others, at this point he was so used to it that Mantis calling him anything else was practically an insult. So deliberately impersonal. Nonetheless Liquid didn’t comment out loud and walked curtly off, leaving Mantis standing alone in the hallway.

He sighed. Liquid was no stranger to stupid plans, but it really was troublesome that his - and everyone else’s! - first response to finding out about the Patriots was wanting to go straight to war with them. Alright, perhaps Mantis couldn’t really argue with that… as he’d said earlier, he really did find this whole Patriot business perfectly believable, considering he’d had a much more intimate experience with Cipher than most of the rest of the unit. And that experience hadn’t exactly left a pleasant taste in his mouth.

But trusting Ocelot…

Certainly he was with the Patriots, there was no doubt in Mantis’ mind about that, but while everyone else was all too eager to buy his story about wanting them gone and sabotaging the organization under the convenient guise of their trusted agent, Mantis didn’t believe that for a second. He was hiding something. He was definitely hiding something.

Something that might just get all of them killed.

He started stalking over to the medical laboratories, tucked off to one side of the FOXHOUND headquarters — up until last year they’d been a separate building on campus entirely (bringing the total number of buildings up to three - medical, R&D, and everything else) but that building had burned down following a fatal explosion, and some unused barracks on the west end had been refitted. Mantis still remembered with displeasure the minds of all the planning, construction, and installation personnel that had come back then.

Maybe he should just kill Ocelot.

He shook his head to himself. No, Liquid would never forgive him, for one thing. And, less importantly, the rest of the unit wouldn’t either. And there was another reason, too, one he knew Liquid suspected on some idle level but didn’t properly know because Mantis had never told anyone.

The med labs all had lead-lined walls, for reasons no one entirely knew, which was annoying for Mantis since that meant he actually had to stand inside the rooms in order to read the minds of anyone in there; lead blocked his psychic powers as effectively as his gas mask made them selective. He didn’t know why this was but truthfully if it wasn’t for that he would have starved to death in Moscow. But on the other hand, he already had a decent enough premise for intruding, anyway: he frequently dropped by the med labs to get potent multivitamins, since he found them more convenient than actual food most weeks. The door swung open seemingly by itself in front of him.

“Um… afternoon, sir,” said one of the interns with a name Mantis didn’t remember and an ID card pinned to his labcoat that Mantis didn’t bother to read. “Here for your pills?”

“Mm.”

The only interesting thing in the intern’s mind was a thought about how Mantis really should be taking antipsychotics instead of multivitamins, or perhaps in addition to multivitamins, but the point was that he really should be on some kind of neuroleptic, and while he was at it so should the FOXHOUND commander and possibly their sniper, too… and Mantis didn’t find that interesting so much as he found it offensive (and stupid, Wolf was already on tranquilizers), so he glared at the intern when he handed him this week’s allotment of pills. It unnerved him enough that he didn’t dare say anything when Mantis wandered further into the med labs instead of back into FOXHOUND’s
What was anyone going to do to stop him? Really now. Besides, he’d leave as soon as he’d found some sufficiently scandalous information about Naomi Hunter from one of the other hapless, mentally defenseless interns.

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_Napping at your desk, Eli, really? Wake up._

“I wasn’t sleeping,” Liquid blurted out, pushing himself up off his desk so fast it was almost dizzying. Mantis was standing in the doorway to Liquid’s office, arms crossed and looking entirely unamused. “Did you find out anything?” Liquid asked, stifling a yawn.

“Yes,” Mantis said, walking up to the desk as Liquid rubbed the back of his neck. Napping— that is, resting his eyes wasn’t exactly best done slumped over a hard wooden surface. “One of the interns, something-or-other Hamel, actually suspects Dr. Hunter of embezzling.”

Liquid blinked. “Seriously?”

“She has not shared her suspicions with anyone, but she does think it’s odd, Dr. Hunter cooped up in her own office working on her computer and being so secretive about it. Now, is this sufficient, or is a charge of embezzling too easy to dismiss since you have control over FOXHOUND’s entire budget and can see where all the money goes?”

“No, this is perfect,” Liquid said, “both medical and R&D have a lot of unnamed categories on their invoices. It’s more than reasonable for me to take a close look at what they’re doing if I suspect that some of the ‘other projects’ funding I allot to them just goes straight into someone’s pockets.”

“Good, then,” Mantis said dryly. “I would like to wash my hands of this.”

“No you don’t,” Liquid said, rifling through one of his desk drawers, looking for the form he needed— this would be so much easier with a computer if Liquid actually knew how to use one, which he didn’t— “as long as you’ve got your knickers in a twist about Ocelot ostensibly working with the Patriots, you won’t be able to leave this alone.” He glanced up at him, and grinned boyishly. “You’ll need to be by my side every step of the way in order to protect me, after all, won’t you…?”

“Hmph.” Mantis turned on his heel, slunk out of the room. “It is late, Eli,” he said as he passed through the doorway, the door slowly closing behind him without being touched, “come to bed as soon as you are done with that paperwork.”

“Of course.”

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**Chapter End Notes**

EVA’s phrase in Czech is an extremely vulgar way of saying “Watch where you’re going! Are you trying to kill me?!” Yes, I am implying that she was having that conversation while on her motorcycle, in MGS4’s not-Prauge. Special thanks to Brambora for the translation.
“You can’t do this,” Naomi said flatly.

Liquid smirked at her, and smugly held up the official inquiry notice between two fingers. “Oh yes I can.”

“This is ridiculous. I’m not embezzling.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

Liquid had brought Raven along to spring this surprise investigation on Naomi mostly because he was larger and therefore more intimidating than Liquid on his own, but it came with the added bonus of him picking up both of Naomi’s computers, one in each arm. (Good thing Liquid didn’t do it himself. What he’d thought was the computer turned out to be a monitor - fortunately he’d kept his mouth shut about it.)

“I- I can’t work without my computers,” Naomi said, flabbergasted.

“Well,” Liquid said brightly, “good thing you’re suspended with no pay pending the results of our investigation. No need to worry about that pesky work thing now!”

“I have bills to—“

“Surely all the money you have saved up from embezzling can cover that.”

Naomi looked like she was positively going to murder him. “I’m not—“

“Boss,” Raven said, “now you are just antagonizing her.”

“Oh, fine, fine,” Liquid said, cocking his head, “it’s true that you’re still technically innocent right now, doctor. I don’t know that you’ve been embezzling.”

Now Naomi was silent. Still looked like she was positively going to murder Liquid, though. But hey, if he was going to be double-underlined on the FOXDIE kill list, he might as well deserve it.

“Don’t worry,” Liquid said, rolling his eyes, “if we can’t find any evidence against you, then the whole matter will be dropped and you’ll be generously compensated for the inconvenience.”

“FOXHOUND doesn’t do anything generously,” Naomi pointed out.

“I know, I’m the one who has to deal with the budget cuts every quarter. But you’ll get a personal apology from me, which I think that’s quite generous, doctor. Adieu.”

As soon as Liquid and Raven left the med labs, Naomi’s impounded computers in tow, and the door slammed closed behind them Raven said, “what is the likelihood of this ending with her in a shallow grave behind the airfield?”

“We might as well put her in the airfield,” Liquid replied, “it’s not like we’ve got anything else in it.”

Naomi did what an unfortunate amount of people do after being effectively fired: she went straight into town, found the seediest bar there (it wasn’t hard, small towns tend to only have seedy bars), and got completely wasted.
“Fucking Hamel,” she slurred, leaning over the counter with her sixth glass of whiskey, neat. “That bitch. I’ll bet it was her, but who knows if she actually fuckin’ tried to rat on me or some shit or if that goddamn bald psychic bondage leather asshole just read her mind. But I bet it was her. Fuck her, I’m not embezzling, goddamnit.”

“Why would she think you’re embezzling?” said the woman at the bar next to her, a middle-aged office lady who was also drinking hard liquor like she was having boss problems too. “Y’know, in my experience, when somebody accuses someone of something in the office, it’s because they’re the ones doing it. Like that sexual harassment suit I… nevermind.”

Naomi shook her head. “She’s just an intern, how the fuck is she gonna embezzle anything? Not a single dime of our shitty fucking budget actually goes through her hands, like, ever. I think she… ugh, I think she thinks I’ve gotta be fuckin’ embezzling because I’ve got this project I’m working on that she’s got literally nothing to fucking do with, so like obviously she isn’t in the damn loop about it but does that occur to her? Nooooo, precious little fucking Allissa Hamel the goddamn intern thinks that I should just, like… fucking violate my security protocols?”

“So you’re working on a secret project?” the woman next to her asked, with no real interest aside from tipsy curiosity.

“Yyyyyyes,” Naomi said, then knocked back the rest of her whiskey and slammed the cup on the counter, signalling for the bartender to come refill it again. “Top fuckin’ secret. And my stupid fucking boss confiscated the computers I was programming this shit with, and I didn’t have time to, like, delete anything and I’ve already put so much work into it and our budget’s so shit that I didn’t wanna, like, spill my fucking coffee onto the motherboard while his dumbass big henchman bird fetishist asshole was grabbing my shit, like… I should have.” She shook her head. “I should have. If they find out about what I’ve been working on, I’m as good as dead.”

“That bad, huh?”

“No, I mean, like, literally someone is going to put a goddamn bullet in my goddamn head. Who knows if it’s gonna be the jackoffs who gave me this project in the first place, or my stupid idiot dumb fuck boss…” She laid her head down on the bar, whining. “I know he’s on that goddamn list, I know I fuckin’ double-underlined his name, and I know that backstabbing, lying gay furry cowboy son of a bitch saw my list when he was, like, snooping in my office for no fucking reason… god, he’s really got me by the balls… or the tits, I guess… fuck, he’s got me by the tits.” She slumped even further against the bar, like that was possible. “I know he’s gonna tell the boss about the list if it actually comes up…”

“What’s this list about?” the office lady said, seeming genuinely confused.

“Fuckin’… doesn’t matter,” Naomi mumbled. “I wasn’t even the one who put the goddamn thing together. I only underlined his name because of his fuckin’…”

“His what? Who?”

“He used to fuck that cowboy furry homosexual sadist, you know,” Naomi said, sitting up and wiping her face with the heel of her hand. Didn’t do much for the indeterminate sticky residue transferred to her skin from the surface of the bar. “Like, ten years ago I think. Way before either of them joined the unit. Orrr… I think it wasn’t too long before my asshole boss joined, but the cowboy dickhead didn’t show up until like four years ago I think? I don’t fuckin’ know, I only joined in, uh, 2001. But anyway that’s what I hear and I’m pretty sure it’s true, I mean they look at each other like they want to just fucking eat each other all the time. God, I hate it.”
“Is that so?” the office lady said, clearly delighting in the gossip. “Is that why the cowboy man is going to rat on you?”

“Fuck, he’d better not,” Naomi said, loudly enough that a couple nearby other people glanced at her. “Like, shit. What’s it even gonna do besides fuck me over? This has nothing to do with him. And you know,” she continued, abruptly changing the subject again, “it’s not like they are fucking now, or at least I’m pretty sure they’re not. The boss is actually shacked up with that bald jackass dominatrix psychic douchefuck who got fuckin’ Hamel to set me up. He wears a collar, you know. Not the bondage guy, the boss. Well I mean I guess the bondage guy does too, it’s like part of his outfit? and I guess this kind of also makes the boss a bondage guy, but—he wears a goddamn collar everyday. Who the fuck does that?”

“Is that why you underlined his name on your mysterious list?” the woman asked.

Naomi leaned her head against the bar and made a long sound like a tired horse. “No,” she said, “I really don’t give a shit about him. He’s annoying and bipolar as fuck and I’m pretty sure his accent is some fucking My Fair Lady shit but oh my god I don’t care. His name is underlined because of someone else entirely, okay?”

“Who? C’mon.”

Naomi looked blearily up at her, then sat up and drank her entire seventh glass of whiskey in one breath. “No fucking way,” she said again, “that’s classified as shit. Besides, you don’t have a damn clue what I’m talkin’ about anyway. What’d you say you were? An actuary?”

“An accountant.”

“Same fuckin’ thing. Paperwork and shit. Whatever.” She stood up, tottering a bit. “Hey, you don’t have, like, AIDS or something do you? Nevermind, I don’t care. Let’s get out of this shithole, I’ll eat you out in the back of my car, I don’t give a shit.”

“Okay,” said the office lady, “why the hell not?”

“I will admit,” Liquid said as Octopus came swaggering back into FOXHOUND’s conference room, still in his disguise, “it’s uncanny how easily you can predict someone’s movements.”

Ocelot shrugged modestly. “At this point, it was really just statistics.”

“Did you learn anything?” Liquid asked Octopus, resting his head on his hand, elbow propped on the table.

“Yeah,” Octopus said, leaning dramatically against the doorjamb, and it was kind of weird to hear a distinctly male voice with a light Mexican accent come out of the mouth of a middle-aged white woman in half a business suit but everyone here was so used to dealing with Octopus in general that it hardly registered. “Dr. Hunter gives really good head.”

“Thank you, did not ask. Anything relevant?”

“For the rest of our sakes, Octopus,” Wolf said, “you could have picked a more attractive disguise if you were going to seduce her.”

“I didn’t seduce her,” Octopus said in mock indignation, “she was completely plastered and offered.”

“…is that not legally considered nonconsensual?” Raven said flatly.
“Ehh, maybe? Pretty sure the courts don’t care unless there’s a dick going where it doesn’t belong while the girl’s drunk.”

Liquid covered his face with both hands. “Oh, for god’s sake,” he muttered.

“Octopus, focus,” Ocelot said mildly.

Octopus shrugged, then sat down, kicking his legs up on the table - really not caring that he was wearing a skirt - and started to peel his mask off. “She’s actually pretty hilarious when she’s smashed,” he said, “swore like a sailor and her accent was just all over the place. But she definitely has a tendency to let things slip, don’t get me wrong. I’m not just talking about her drunken bi-curiosity, either.”

“So she said something about FOXDIE?” Wolf said.

“About the list Ocelot mentioned, yeah. Specifically about the way she singled out the boss’ name.”

“So?” Liquid said, sitting up again and looking at Octopus intently. “What is it?”

“Not entirely sure, she kept changing the subject. But she was pretty clear that it wasn’t actually about you.”

“How could it not be?” Wolf said, “it was his name that was double underlined.”

“Boss, do you remember what you said about exposure to the target’s nearest blood relatives?” Raven said.

Liquid blinked. “Hm? Oh, right. If it affects people based off of their DNA patterns, then it makes sense that it would also attack someone with very similar genes, like the target’s parents, maybe, or sib—- oh my god.”

“Your genes aren’t exactly unique, boss,” Ocelot said.

“So that’s it. She’s paying special attention to ensuring that the virus recognizes my DNA because that same virus could be used to kill- well, my biological father is dead, good riddance, so there can’t be anyone else she’s after here except my twin.”

“The fabled Solid Snake…” Raven said.

Liquid’s eyebrows drew together. “But why would she be after him…? Didn’t he move to Alaska? I thought no one had seen any of him in several years.”

“He moved to the Alaskan wilderness right after the Zanzibar Land incident,” Ocelot confirmed, “and as far as I’ve heard, the only human contact he’s had since then has been the occasional supply run to a nearby town. He’s known as a paranoid, alcoholic hermit, and that’s about it.”

“I suppose if Ocelot says he heard it,” Wolf said, “then it must be true.”

“Obviously,” Octopus said. “He puts the rest of our idle gossiping to shame.”

Ocelot smiled wryly. “Gossip is exactly where I get all this information, Octopus.”

“Ocelot,” Liquid said, “do you know if Solid Snake is supposed to be on the kill list? I suppose it wouldn’t be strictly necessary to add him as long as I’m also on it, but it seems odd to leave him off.”

“You mean to ask if Dr. Hunter is after him based on some personal grievance she has with him?”
Ocelot said, “I’m afraid I don’t know. I know the list of targets for the initial run of FOXDIE came from the Patriots, and that’s all I know about it. This isn’t my project; I’m in the dark about their intentions.”

Liquid noticed the careful neutrality in Ocelot’s tone that indicated he was mulling something over, but figured - as he usually did - to wait until Ocelot decided if it was important enough to bring up or not. It could be nothing. As far as he could tell, it often was.

“Hold on,” Wolf said, “why would Dr. Hunter have any hatred for Solid Snake? Have they ever met?”

“Impossible,” Octopus said, “she joined years after he left the unit. I can’t think of where else they might have ran into each other, either…”

“They have never even lived in the same place?” Raven said.

“Not unless you count the entire country of America as ‘the same place’,” Ocelot said, “so far as I know, they’ve never so much as been in the same state at the same time. They’re complete strangers.”

“And she wants to kill him,” Wolf said. “Whatever happened to getting to know someone before you kill them?”

“You have to admit it is more efficient like that,” Raven said.

“Yes, well… this is not a hit, is it?”

“Perhaps the Patriots really did order her to take out Solid Snake with that virus,” Liquid said thoughtfully, drumming his fingers on the table. “Or to give them an easy way to do it themselves at any time, I suppose. But… it is odd…”

“He really should be on the list,” Ocelot said.

“It does make sense that, if FOXDIE is their contingency plan against us, they would have a plan against him, too,” Wolf said.

“But he really should be on the list,” Octopus said in a perfect albeit pointless imitation of Ocelot’s voice just now. He continued in his normal voice. “So, basically, we know Dr. Hunter singled out the boss’ DNA because she wants to make sure the virus affects his twin brother, too. That’s our conclusion here, right?”

Everyone else nodded and/or mumbled assented, except for Ocelot, who only tilted his head slightly, eyes narrowed.

“But,” Octopus continued, “it doesn’t make sense that the Patriots told her to do it, because they’re the ones who wrote the kill list in the first place, so if they wanted Solid Snake on it they could have just put him down. Hell, he could have been on the same line as the boss, it just doesn’t make sense that they’d leave him off it.”

“Yes,” Raven said, “it would be a completely illogical move. It would be unlikely for an organization that has amassed the power of a worldwide government to make illogical moves.”

“Yeah. But we also know it doesn’t make sense for Dr. Hunter to do it for personal reasons, either,” Octopus said, “because Solid Snake’s never done anything to her. I mean, this is a virus we’re talking about, one that might not get unleashed. That’s not something you’d try to kill someone with
if you’re just trying to commit insurance fraud or have an uncontrollable impulse to murder. That’s something you’d do for revenge.”

“But she’s got no reason for revenge on Solid Snake,” Liquid said, “at least, so far as we know. But there is another possibility here…”

“…a third party directing her actions,” Wolf said, “someone other than the Patriots who wants FOXDIE to be a threat to Solid Snake as well, and is using Dr. Hunter as a tool.”

“If that’s the case, she certainly doesn’t seem to resent it,” Octopus said, “it didn’t exactly come up during her drunken ranting.”

Liquid glanced over at Ocelot. The other day EVA had mentioned Naomi helping her and Ocelot with something the previous year (Liquid still hadn’t gotten around to asking about it, and no one else had brought it up yet), but somehow he doubted that either of them fit the bill for a third party putting pressure on Naomi to design a biological weapon against Solid. Admittedly he was unsure what, if any, relationship existed between Ocelot and Solid - he suspected he might have heard about it at least at some point if Ocelot had ever even met Solid - and EVA, well, considering Solid was Liquid’s twin, he felt fairly certain that EVA would have the same ridiculous maternal attachment she had for Liquid with Solid, too. Hell, maybe she’d actually been with him more growing up than a handful of awkward encounters when he was thirteen. Judging by the bits and pieces Liquid had gathered or been told over the years, Solid had been afforded everything else.

“It’s worth looking into,” Ocelot said, with that same careful, pensive neutrality.

Liquid nodded. “Right,” he said, “in the meantime, we’ve got to actually… well… figure out this whole FOXDIE thing.” He stared at the two computers sitting in the middle of the conference table, and frowned. He really didn’t know anything about computers.

Mantis, he thought, get in here, will you?

By the time Mantis sourly slunk into the conference room, Wolf and Raven had appropriated cords and monitors and mouses and keyboards and such, and Octopus was assigned to see what files he could access because he was arguably the best in the room at using computers. Which wasn’t to say he was a programmer or hacker or anything, but he did spend a lot of his off-hours on the internet and he did know how to type.

He was also preternaturally good at reading people, rivalling even Ocelot or Mantis (if Mantis counted), thanks to a lifetime of observing others so he could imitate them perfectly later. His observations of Naomi lead him to correctly guess that she used her birthday as her password.

“Huh,” he said under his breath, “now that I think about it, it completely figures that she’s a Scorpio.”

“I am really not as good at technology as you all think I am,” Mantis said in an undertone to Liquid, as everyone just kind of watched Octopus click around Naomi’s files and pull up whatever wasn’t encrypted.

“Oh, hush,” Liquid said, “you don’t have to understand any of this nonsense in order to be good at it. You can read the computer’s memory or whatever just fine.”

“I have no idea if I can do anything about encryption. I do not think I can.”

“You’ve never tried, have you?”
“I suppose I could attempt for you, but if I cannot figure it out - which seems likely, I would probably have to understand the encryption program itself in order to disentangle it, and that sort of thing is simply over my head, Eli—…”

“We’ll find another way to work on the encryption, then, if it comes to that,” Liquid said, “just give it your best shot.”

Mantis sighed irritably, then leaned over Octopus’ shoulder, muttering to him what folders upon folders to look in to find the encrypted files that would, in all likelihood, contain the information about FOXDIE. Upon pulling them up they found that the files could be easily decrypted if they had a password - which turned out to not be the same as Naomi’s login password.

“Shocking,” Octopus said, trying different rewordings of her birthdate, “she definitely seems like the type to use the same password for everything.”

“Perhaps someone made her change it,” Mantis said.

“True. Hmm… maybe the birthday of someone close to her? Judging by how she acts, I’d say she doesn’t really have parents but she definitely has an older brother. Don’t think she’s ever had a lover she cared enough about to use their birthday as a password…”

“You could just guess dates until it works,” Mantis said, “there are only 365 days in a year, and if you think she would use her brother’s birthday, then you can rule out any year after the one before she was born.”

“Do you have any idea how long that would take? Plus I don’t know if it would be just numbers, or written out, or what…”

“I thought Dr. Hunter didn’t have any family,” Liquid commented.

“Is that what she said?” Octopus said, “because that’s not how she acts. Maybe her ‘big brother’ figure wasn’t related to her by blood…?”

So while they worked on that, everyone else hung back and waited to see what would happen. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Wolf and Raven started an inopportune conversation.

“How does he imitate a woman to the point of receiving oral sex with his target still being none the wiser?” Wolf said.

“I am not sure,” Raven said, “now that I think about it, he does imitate women a lot, does he not?”

“He does… and almost always, the woman he plays is his target’s lover. Either way I know for a fact that this is not the first time he has had sex with his target to maintain the role.”

“Or for fun.”

“True. But I am slightly confused as to how—“

“You don’t want to know,” Liquid interrupted. He’d asked the same thing once, not long after he joined FOXHOUND. Except he’d asked it to Octopus directly instead of just wondering out loud about it in the same room as him.

“…what?” Raven said, blinking.

“You just don’t.” Octopus had told him about how it was easier to add something than to take it
away — that is, a highly realistic, functional even, prosthetic penis was entirely possible with his skills and resources, but it was impossible to imitate a vagina and have it hold up to scrutiny while the body space for it was otherwise occupied. So he’d had a vaginoplasty. He even offered to show it to Liquid.

Which, actually, Liquid took him up on after spending almost an hour trying very hard to get the mental image out of his head. It really wasn’t much to write home about when he finally gave in just so he could stop thinking about it - it was just a vagina, and evidently Octopus shaved down there, and that was about it - but really, it kind of weirded Liquid out to think that that, combined with the one time he’d accidentally seen Wolf’s bare breasts during his temporary exile to the women’s showers following a protracted controversy about his shampoo, meant that he’d seen the bits of every member of FOXHOUND except Raven.

He really wasn’t interested in seeing them. Raven made him feel small with his pants still on.

(“I will just ask him myself later,” Wolf said to Raven.)

Liquid’s wandering thoughts were interrupted by a sharp psychic tug at his collar, and he glanced at Mantis, gathering immediately that he hadn’t just half-choked him only because he was annoyed at hearing him go off on a mental tangent about the hypothetical size of Vulcan Raven’s cock. “What is it?”

“We can’t come up with a password,” Octopus said, pushing his chair back from the table. “And Mantis isn’t having any luck getting through the encryption without it, either.”

“I could keep trying,” Mantis said, “but it seems likely that the data itself may be affected if I do.”

“I don’t think we can risk losing this,” Liquid said. “We’re just going to have to find another way to look at those files.”

“All this effort, just to confirm that FOXDIE and therefore the Patriots exist?” said Octopus, “I mean, at this point, I buy it anyway.”

“We’re trying to find out how much progress she’s made on it, Octopus. And, if it’s not too late, prevent her from completing the virus that the Patriots would most certainly use on us the second they find out we’re starting to brew a revolution here.”

“Okay, true.”

“If all we need to do is get past the encryption,” Wolf said, “why not get someone from R&D to do it for us? I am sure there are hacker types there.”

Ocelot finally spoke up, the gun that he was twirling on his finger absent-mindedly stilling. “We don’t know yet if there’s anyone in the R&D department that we can trust with the information that we’re going to rebel against the Patriots.”

“Even if we claimed that we suspected she was hiding records of her supposed embezzling behind the encryption, they would still suspect something as soon as they saw what was actually encrypted,” Liquid agreed.

“You know, boss,” Ocelot said, “I could always get the password out of Dr. Hunter directly.”

“I take it way less delicately than how I got the information about the boss’ name on the kill list,” Octopus said.
“You started a conversation with her while she was already drunk and then let her perform cunnilingus on you. That is hardly what I would call *delicate*.”

“Would we still need her alive?” Raven said.

Ocelot bristled at him. “Do you think there’s even a *possibility* I would kill her during an interrogation unless it were necessary?”

“I am only wondering, General Ivan.”

“Not that damned nickname again…”

“Is there a reason we need her alive?” Liquid said, “aside from getting into her files. If she’s made too much progress on FOXDIE, would she be the only one capable of undoing it?”

“It is a virus,” Mantis said, “it should not be too hard to destroy the specimens.”

“It may be dangerous to get near them, if they are close to completion,” Wolf pointed out.

“Mantis wears a gas mask,” Raven said. “FOXDIE is supposed to be airborne. He would be perfectly safe.”

Mantis snorted derisively. “It’s unlikely I would even need to get *close* to the specimens in order to destroy them either way.”

“Do you know where the specimens would be?” Ocelot asked dryly. “If they were on the base here, then there would be isolation protocols for the medical research team’s sake. We don’t have anything like that.” Mantis didn’t respond.

“Their location’s probably in the encrypted files,” Liquid said at length.

“So what’ll it be, boss?” Ocelot said, “let me get the password from her, or involve someone from the R&D group?”

Liquid deliberated for a moment or two, then said, “I don’t doubt she’ll figure out what it is we’re *really* after as soon as she gives it more than two seconds of sober thought. That might make leaving her alive a risk in and of itself. She may go to the Patriots with her suspicions.”

“So, let Ocelot at her,” Octopus said, raising one… well, he didn’t have eyebrows, but he got the gesture across nonetheless.

“Precisely,” Liquid said. “Of course, if Ocelot can simply throw her off the trail, that should prove more convenient for us in the long run…”

“Ahh, a no-touching interrogation,” Ocelot said, “very well. It’s no trouble, boss.”

With that decided, the computers were turned off for now, and Raven carted them off to a storage closet where no one would bother looking for them if they were looking for them, and Wolf and Octopus gathered up the technological accessories to return to the R&D building before someone raised a fuss over them being borrowed. That left Liquid alone in the conference room with just Ocelot and Mantis, and Ocelot was on his way out the door with a polite nod and a stupid hand gesture when Mantis turned to Liquid and said, “Eli, I want to sit in on Ocelot’s interrogation of Dr. Hunter.”

“Oh?”
“What, you don’t trust me with her?” Ocelot said, with a sarcastic amount of indignation in his voice.

Mantis ignored him. “Is it allowed?”

Liquid had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. “I don’t see the problem with it. Just don’t interrupt Ocelot while he’s doing his work.”

“Fine,” Mantis said.

Ocelot narrowed his eyes at the two of them for a brief moment, then turned on his heel and started walking off again, spurs clinking as he went. “Fine.”
“I assume you remember that Liquid told you not to interrupt me while I’m working,” Ocelot said, turning onto the main street of the little town about an hour and a half’s drive from the FOXHOUND headquarters, not bothering to signal.

“Yes,” said Mantis stiffly. He had pointedly sat in the passenger’s seat to emphasize the fact that he wasn’t cowed by Ocelot, but for the whole drive so far he’d regretted it and wished he’d swallowed his pride and just sat in the backseat, further away from Ocelot’s infuriating face.

“Good. That means that you don’t say a word to Dr. Hunter while I’m talking to her. In fact, don’t say a word to her in general, and if you can just make yourself invisible and pretend you aren’t even there, that would be ideal.”

“…”

“Oh, that’s right,” Ocelot said with an unpleasant grin, “you’re starting to get old - your powers are starting to diminish. You can’t turn yourself invisible anymore…”

“I can still cut the brakes on this car without lifting a finger, any time I like.”

“The point is, don’t bother me. I won’t have time to entertain your curiosity.”

“Curiosity is not the reason why I decided to tag along.”

“Oh?”

Another turn, onto a side road that lead to the hotel where Naomi was staying — all FOXHOUND staff lived on-base, but ever since the med lab building had blown up the medical research team had been moved into the ‘barracks’ at the R&D building. The potential bitching about no longer being able to get from their living quarters to their work labs without going outside was belayed by the fact that the living quarters in the R&D building were really more like small apartments while the living quarters in the main building were actual barracks, where everything was communal. Segregated by sex, of course, so Wolf had the run of the place, and sharing the bathroom between only five people meant that showers virtually never overlapped, but still. (Not that Mantis had room to complain about the sleeping arrangements. He shared Liquid’s private quarters.)

“…don’t say things like that and then not follow up on it, Mantis,” Ocelot said, “no one likes a tease.”

“You’re up to something.”

“I always am.”

Mantis glared at him. “You know what I am referring to.”

“The fact that EVA mentioned Dr. Hunter helping her and I out last year,” he said, and Mantis was, despite what he’d just said, somewhere surprised that Ocelot knew what he was referring to. In that level of detail, anyway.

“Are you ever going to tell us what she ‘helped’ you with last year?”

“When it becomes relevant, and no sooner.”
There was silence for a time.

“I do not trust you,” said Mantis abruptly.

Ocelot didn’t even glance at him. “This isn’t new information.”

“Just a friendly reminder. You have never given me reason to trust you.”

“I thought I gave you plenty of reasons back at the KGB,” Ocelot said.

Mantis made a small derisive sound that probably would have been a snort if he’d actually had a nose. “Ancient history,” he said coldly, “nowadays I more concerned with the fact that you raped Eli.”

Ocelot sighed. It was clear he didn’t want to have this discussion again, although Mantis didn’t particularly care for what Ocelot wanted. “Even if it had been as malicious and self-serving as you think it was,” Ocelot said, “it was still ten years ago. He’s moved on.”

“Do you honestly believe that, Ocelot?”

The question hung in the air of the car for a while before Ocelot spoke.

“He still has nightmares, doesn’t he?”

“…not as frequently as he used to.”

“About me specifically?”

“Sometimes. Not often.”

“Does he think about me during sex?”

“…not often.”

It made Mantis’ skin crawl to think that maybe, just maybe, Ocelot was asking these questions because he was concerned about Liquid.

And God forbid him noticing Mantis’ discomfort be the reason he suddenly glanced off to the side, muttering about how the hotel should be around here somewhere.

Mantis didn’t know what the difference between a hotel and a motel was, exactly, because he’d never met someone who did know, but looking at the place where Naomi had put herself up during her unpaid exile from FOXHOUND… he would have called it a motel. It wasn’t really all that ratty, in fact it was perfectly average, the kind of place a comfortable middle-class family from the suburbs might stop during a road trip, but Mantis found even the exterior to be cheap and boring.

“You can stop looking at it like that, it isn’t going to bite you,” Ocelot said, stepping out of the car.

“Does this town even have a nicer place to stay?” Mantis said disdainfully, also stepping out.

“I’d heard you liked to stay at four- and five-star hotels when you were traipsing around as a psychic spy, but this kind of elitism is just obnoxious.”

“I have stayed at awful hotels before, too.”

“That’s what makes it obnoxious. And considering Dr. Hunter’s paycheck was just cut off and this
was incredibly short-notice, there’s really no point in commenting…”

When a very obviously hungover Naomi opened her hotel door after Ocelot knocked on it, she stared tiredly at Ocelot and Mantis for a moment or two before her eyes widened in realization that she was staring at Ocelot and Mantis, who had shown up at her hotel room, and slammed the door. Or tried to. Ocelot caught it with his foot, which had to hurt but he made no indication of it. (Of course, Mantis could have easily held or forced open the door with his psychic powers, be he just knew Ocelot was going to do that.)

“We only want to talk, Dr. Hunter,” Ocelot said smoothly.

“What is Mantis here for?” Naomi demanded.

“Backup. He won’t say a word to you, isn’t that right, Mantis?”

“Mm.”

“Backup?” Naomi repeated incredulously, “what use is he? I know you’re here to question me about the alleged embezzling, but I got those cybernetic implants for a reason.”

Mantis opened his mouth to make a nasty comment about that, but was cut short by Ocelot’s pointed glare. Or rather, by the fact that if Mantis ‘interfered’ at all, Ocelot would get him in trouble with Liquid, which Mantis was not in the mood for.

“May we come in?” Ocelot said instead of answering her.

Naomi narrowed her eyes at the two of them, then gave up and undid the chain lock and opened her door the rest of the way. Evidently she was well aware that she didn’t really have a choice about having this… discussion.

“But why is he here?” Naomi asked, her eyes flicking towards Mantis for a second before returning to Ocelot.

“Observation,” Ocelot said, “this isn’t a proper interrogation, Dr. Hunter, I’m only asking a few questions. He’s here to make sure I play nice.”

“Mantis. Here to make sure you play nice. Mantis.”

“Yes.”

“Doesn’t the ‘Psycho’ in his codename stand for ‘Psychopath’?”

“It stands for ‘Psychokinesis’,” Ocelot said, although Mantis didn’t actually believe that. He wasn’t entirely sure what it did stand for, but considering it was a holdover from Outer Heaven, where assigning noms du guerre had been delegated to Ocelot back in the seventies, ‘Psychotic’ was anyone’s best guess. “But we’re getting off-topic.”

Mantis comfortably settled in the overstuffed corner chair while Naomi and Ocelot remained standing, with Naomi sizing Ocelot up and Ocelot with the same expression he always wore during an interrogation: detached and professional, almost bored, perhaps a bit condescending, but there was a gleam in his eye that betrayed the fact that he loved this kind of thing. Well, sort of. Right now the look in his eyes was a bit different in a way Mantis couldn’t place, which was strange — Mantis would have expected him to be genuinely bored in this case, since “interrogation” failed to be euphemistic this morning.
“The main issue at hand,” Ocelot said, “is that we need to view the encrypted files on your computer. If you’d be so kind as to give us the passw-“

“No,” Naomi said firmly, sitting down heavily on her bed and rubbing her temples. “Absolutely not.”

“Oh?”

“You don’t need to access my project files during an investigation for *embezzling.*”

“That’s exactly what you want us to think, Dr. Hunter. Any records of your embezzling would be kept somewhere we have no business accessing.”

“Why would I keep records if I was embezzling?” Naomi said, irritated.

“So you don’t accidentally overstep your budget and arouse suspicion.”

“And to prevent that, I would leave hard evidence of what I was doing lying around? Better to take my chances with misremembering the budget. I’m sure you know this, Ocelot, I think *you’re* the most likely candidate for *embezzling* on the entire base.”

Mantis couldn’t help but snort amusedly at that. He was ignored, though.

“I have never embezzled money,” Ocelot said calmly, “from FOXHOUND.”

“And if you think you can even *find* records of my alleged embezzling, why not go harass my bank?” She narrowed her eyes. “Wait a minute…”

“Yes?”

“This isn’t about Hamel accusing me of embezzling, is it? That was just an excuse to open an investigation. It’s something else you’re after…”

Mantis expected Ocelot to mislead her, per Liquid’s instructions, but instead he said, “Let’s not mince words, then. You’re right, the embezzling is a completely fake charge and no one seriously suspects you of it.”

Mantis sat up in his chair, torn as to whether or not he should intervene on Liquid’s orders’ behalf, wondering about the impossible possibility of Ocelot having entirely forgotten that Mantis was in the room and letting what he was up to slip while talking to Naomi.

“What is this about, then?” Naomi said stiffly.

“Last year.”

Hm?

“Dr. Clark…?” Naomi started.

Ocelot shrugged. “Did you really think it would escape everyone’s notices forever? Oh, certainly the ‘lab accident’ explanation was plausible enough, but remember that that damned cyborg ninja has been periodically haunting the base ever since then. Trying to hunt down the boss…”

“…”

Mantis narrowed his eyes. Now that he thought about it, yes, that occasional annoyance, the man
with the armored exoskeleton and a mind full of pained static, had first shown up a mere three days after the medical research building had burned down. But no one had ever associated him with the accident - how could they? There was no logical connection between the two aside from the time frame. His reason for jumping the FOXHOUND headquarters’ fence had yet to be clarified other than an odd but perpetually distracted fixation on Liquid, and he never stuck around for long. The last time he’d shown up, only a week ago, they’d tried to tail him on his way out, but he eluded everyone.

“I don’t know anything about that,” Naomi finally said.

“You’re sure?”

She gave Mantis a significant glance - so, if they had forgotten he was in the room, his relative invisibility had just been shattered. He settled back in the chair again, glowering. It was pathetically obvious that the two of them had some kind of collusion.

“There’s nothing you know that I wouldn’t mind getting out to the rest of FOXHOUND at this juncture,” Ocelot said dryly.

“Is that so,” Naomi said. “Well, I’m not certain I wouldn’t mind discussing my involvement in that incident. I don’t see what it has to do with the files on my computer.”

“Neither do we,” Ocelot said, “considering we have no idea what the files on your computer are, not until we can access them and read them ourselves.”

“And what are you expecting to find?”

“Records, of course,” Ocelot said, “of correspondence with the cyborg ninja you released on the world.”

“Because you and that woman forced me to,” Naomi snapped, standing up.

Ocelot raised an eyebrow. “We didn’t force you. We barely even convinced you. It was something you were going to do on your own for the sake of revenge — we merely gave you the opportunity.”

What on earth was going on?

“…I don’t have any correspondence with him,” Naomi said, looking away deliberately. The cybernetic implants did nothing to hide from Mantis the fact that she was lying - and it was quite clear that Ocelot picked up on it, too. She only needed a glance at him to realize that. “What happens if you find records of it on my computer?”

“That depends on the content. But certainly communicating with someone who has attempted to assassinate the unit’s commander on multiple occasions over the past year would be a more dire and immediate charge than embezzling.”

She stared at Ocelot for moment, then glanced at Mantis before asking, “What are you intentions as far as my medical research files go?”

“We’ll look through them to make sure you didn’t hide your correspondence anywhere in them, but otherwise leave them alone,” Ocelot said, “after all, it would be disadvantageous to us to interfere with your research, wouldn’t it? After all the advancements for our unit that you personally have made…”

Naomi’s jaw worked. Mantis supposed that the next logical question would be whether or not
FOXHOUND was going to pull someone from the medical research team to tell them what exactly was in her files, just in case they were encoded in lab-speak or something like that (which no one on the squad would know if anything were out of place), but likely enough she was thinking they might not if it never occurred to them, but they certainly would if she brought it up.

It was amazing how easy she was to predict; if Mantis didn’t know better, then he would have assumed that her cybernetic implants were defective. As it stood it was just likely that she was less subtle than usual and a little slow on the uptake due to her hangover.

Although, Mantis more than suspected Ocelot was at least twenty steps ahead of him as far as knowing what was going on in Naomi’s head went.

“Fine,” Naomi said, “fine. I’ll give you my password. There can’t be any harm in it, you won’t find anything.”

“Mm,” Ocelot responded, smirking lightly, and it almost sounded like a purr. Mantis rolled his eyes.

Naomi grabbed the hotel’s room service menu off the bedside table, ripped off a mostly blank corner of it, and Ocelot handed her a pen from his pocket (making sure to twirl it around his fingers once before he did so, because of course he did, that irritating bastard). She quickly scribbled something down and handed the paper to Ocelot.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” he purred - it definitely was a purr this time, god - then looked at Mantis for the first time since they had entered Naomi’s hotel room. “Come on, then. We’ve got what we came for.”

“…right,” said Mantis, unsure what Ocelot’s game was.

“Oh, by the way, Dr. Hunter,” Ocelot said just before he shut the door behind him, “before you get any bright ideas, don’t forget who Dr. Clark was.”

“Of course,” Naomi said flatly.

It wasn’t until the two of them were back in the car and Ocelot was pulling out of the parking space that Mantis demanded, “What just happened??”

“I threw her off the trail, as Liquid said,” Ocelot said calmly.

“What was all that about the cyborg ninja and the explosion at the medical research building last year??”

“Oh, that,” Ocelot said, “well, it’s simple, really. Dr. Hunter was the one responsible - well, partly responsible, it’s true that it was EVA and I who engineered it - for the ‘accident’, the death of Dr. Clark, and the escape of the man whom Dr. Clark had been… experimenting on.”

He shared the information so casually that Mantis had no idea how to respond to it. He just glared at Ocelot, silently waiting for him to clarify the situation.

“Her primary motivation was the man we now call the cyborg ninja,” Ocelot continued after a moment, “what, if any, relationship there is between the two of them - I have no idea. As far as EVA or I know, she simply felt that the way Dr. Clark handled his case was barbaric and she wanted her dead out of simple altruism for another human being.”

“Yes,” Mantis said sarcastically, “that certainly sounds like Dr. Hunter.”
“Lacking any other explanation, though…”

Somehow Mantis doubted Ocelot’s claim that he didn’t know the relationship between Naomi and the cyborg ninja, because that implied that he didn’t know the identity of the cyborg ninja, which Mantis absolutely didn’t believe. He made a mental note to ask about it again later, getting Liquid on his side this time. “Why did you and EVA set it up?”

“We had our own reasons,” Ocelot said, “specifically, Dr. Clark. She was with the Patriots and needed to be removed. Simple, really.”

“…I see. At least that does explain why you told Dr. Hunter to keep in mind who Dr. Clark ‘was’.”

“Yes. If she thinks that what we’re really investigating is an incident where she effectively murdered a high-ranking Patriot agent, then she won’t go to the Patriots about our investigation. As far as they’re concerned, our investigation into her will continue to be about exactly what was put on paper for what Dr. Hunter will suppose is the sake of the public: embezzling.”

“She was a high-ranking Patriot agent?”

Ocelot stopped explaining himself. Mantis grumbled, settling back into his seat. On one hand, left to his own devices he would consider every word that ever came out of Ocelot’s mouth to be a lie, because the man lied as easily as he breathed. On the other hand, Ocelot wasn’t the type to be caught in a lie - it was rare that he ever gave out information that couldn’t be somehow verified, or at the very least, that could be disproved (even if doing so would take a hell of a lot of time, effort, and luck). In fact, loathe as Mantis was to admit it, Ocelot didn’t often lie so much as he carefully recontextualized the truth. If he told Mantis such a plain, simple fact as ‘Dr. Clark had been with the Patriots, and had been a high-ranking agent, too’, then that certainly was true.

And- Jesus, if Ocelot was willing to admit that he had engineered the murder of a high-ranking Patriot agent, didn’t that prove that he was working against the Patriots? If the Patriots were going to let him kill one of their own so he could establish his honeypot a year later, then they would have sacrificed a low-ranking agent or two to him instead.

…no. Surely Dr. Clark had outlived her usefulness somehow. Surely she had lost ranking at some point, and even if she had been pretty up there on the pecking order at one point, she certainly wasn’t by the time Ocelot had killed her.

Just, where did EVA work into this? Was she with the Patriots, too? Or had Ocelot simply fooled her? Mantis and EVA had actually gotten along pretty well on those occasions when she’d been around at Mother Base, mostly because they were united in disapproval of Liquid’s relationship with Ocelot. Even now Mantis was inclined to trust her, despite her having gotten cybernetic implants in the late eighties…

“Incidentally,” Ocelot said when he’d apparently felt Mantis had spent enough time mulling this over, “Dr. Hunter is definitely going to skip town tonight. I wouldn’t be surprised if she were already packing.”

“…should we not stop her?”

“Does that not sound like a decision to leave up to Liquid?”

Mantis didn’t bother snarking at that. He was tired of spending time with Ocelot and if Liquid decided to send them back out to corral Naomi, then Mantis was certainly staying at the base.

When they got within three miles of headquarters, the first thing Mantis did - well, the first thing
Mantis _always_ did, to be honest - was trying to locate Liquid. It usually wasn’t hard, just a quick peek through his eyes or, if he had his eyes closed or his vision otherwise obstructed, his memories, but at the moment he was finding him to be… not there. Perhaps he had left headquarters?

“You could try raising him on Codec,” Ocelot said, rolling his eyes, when Mantis mumbled that Liquid didn’t seem to be around.

Mantis wasn’t much of a fan of the Codec, though… the arrangement FOXHOUND had with their own R&D team essentially boiled down to FOXHOUND being mere guinea pigs for technology that would end up being passed around to the rest of the military anyway. Sometimes that meant having an amazing new weapon long before any of their enemies conceivably could, but it almost always actually meant suffering through interminable iterations of dodgy systems while R&D worked out the kinks. As it stood, as far as Codec went it was pretty ironed out, leaving the engineers free to work on a second version where it would be possible to _talk_ without being heard, too, but the damage had already been done. The first generation of Codec had permanently messed up Raven’s ears (restricting him to radio or, hell, cell phone if he needed to talk to support on a mission), and no matter how many times they tried to fix the one Mantis had gotten shoved in his head he still managed to get a migraine every time he used it for longer than thirty seconds.

Anyway, the point was that Ocelot, by suggesting that, was purposefully being annoying, which was what he always did as far as Mantis was concerned. So Mantis ignored him, to the point of refusing to even turn his head when Ocelot said, in mild surprise, “Huh. Will you look at the fence.”

Upon walking back into headquarters, he ran almost immediately into Wolf, who prefaced herself with “Don’t freak out.”

“What? Did something happen?”

“While you two were gone—“

He didn’t let her finish, just glanced in her mind and found that while he and Ocelot had been in town, that accursed cyborg ninja and his damnable sense of dramatic timing had come visiting FOXHOUND headquarters again and had _actually managed_ to get close enough to Liquid to catch him with that sword of his. Liquid, although yelling at the top of his lungs when Wolf last saw him, had been carted off to the med labs by Octopus and a pair of doctors, bleeding profusely. And then Raven had chased the ninja off with his Vulcan cannon, but Mantis wasn’t really concerned about that.

He was already flinging himself to the west wing of the building.

_“Don’t freak out,”_ Liquid said as soon as Mantis burst into the room.

_“Eli—!!“_

_“It’s just a shallow wound,”_ Liquid said quickly, gesturing to the bandages across his bare chest. _“See? This is all. It’ll heal. Everything’s under control, Mantis.”_

_“But— Wolf saw you—“_

_“I can bleed a lot before it actually starts to matter,”_ Liquid waved him off, and the medic who was in the room rolled his eyes and left quickly, evidently not wanting to get involved. “Well, I mean, _yes_, I do feel a _bit_ light-headed now, but it’s fine, really, you’ll just have to be extra gentle with me tonight…”
Mantis gave Liquid an annoyed look at his implication, and Liquid only smiled at him in return. If he was annoyed, that was good. That meant he wasn’t half-panicking over what Liquid really considered a minor wound — sure, Liquid could appreciate the fact that Mantis got so concerned for him whenever he got an injury, but he found that concern suffocating and tiring considering he happened to get injured a lot. He always recovered quickly, and usually without even any scars, so what did it matter?

“How did- why did you even let him get close enough to you to injure you?”

“Because I finally got close enough to actually hear what he was muttering to himself about,” Liquid said triumphantly. “I finally know just why the hell he keeps coming here to attack me.”

“…”

Liquid wasn’t even remotely deterred by Mantis obviously thinking that that wasn’t worth it. “Dr. Hunter,” he explained, “is not the only one trying to kill my brother!! That’s why he keeps coming after me - he fails to realize that Solid Snake isn’t here anymore, and he gets confused when he sees my face and thinks that I am Snake!”

“…and this is important how?”

“Well, don’t you think it might be related? I’ll grant that the ninja might very well have a good reason to kill Snake, considering we don’t know who he was before he was an insane cyborg, but as it stands it means we have two completely separate people who-“

“Dr. Hunter and the ninja are related somehow.”

Liquid blinked. “Come again?”

Mantis sighed. “It came up during Ocelot’s interrogation,” he said, and briefly summed up their trip to the hotel. Liquid blinked again.

“I see,” he said at length. “You don’t suppose they’re both trying to kill him for the same reason?”

“I have no idea. Dr. Hunter’s reason for wanting him dead did not come up. Nor did the cyborg ninja’s identity or relation to any other parties that would want Solid Snake dead.”

“Well, if he owes her his life and freedom, then I don’t find it too unlikely that she would ask him to repay her by killing Snake, since she apparently wants him dead and all - or perhaps he simply decided to do it on his own, as a show of gratitude.”

“I have tried to read his mind before, Eli,” Mantis pointed out, “it isn’t just shielded. It is broken. I do not think he is even capable of being logical enough to try to kill someone for someone else’s sake.”

“Then… perhaps Dr. Hunter wants to kill Snake because of something that happened between him and the cyborg ninja?”

“Why would she participate in vicarious revenge? What is her relationship to him?”

“How am I supposed to know? I only heard him muttering about Snake. A bit busy trying not to let him past my ribcage, really.” He started fiddling with the gauze on his chest, but put his hand down when he caught Mantis’ stern glare. Okay, maybe it was true that his habit of messing with his bandages and/or wounds was a bad one…

“Oh, incidentally,” Mantis said, lifting his chin up as though he’d suddenly remembered, “Dr. Hunter
is likely to leave town tonight. Should she be stopped?"

“Did Ocelot get her password?”

“Yes.”

“Does it work?”

“I do not know yet.”

“Test it quickly, if they aren’t doing that already,” Liquid said, swinging his legs over the side of the examination table he’d been sitting on, “if it works just fine, let her go but keep her under surveillance of some sort - just keep track of her location, follow her paper trail, whatever. I don’t think it’d be necessary to have someone actually tail her, from the sound of it she wouldn’t dare cause any problems with the Patriots. If the password doesn’t work…”

“-bring her back here, get one that does work, and execute her for lying to us.”

“Well, you don’t have to put it so bluntly,” Liquid said, standing up. Ooh, mistake. He swayed on his feet almost immediately, and when he took a step forward instead of sitting back down, Mantis had to catch him - mostly using his psychic powers, of course, as always, but he let Liquid cling to his shoulders and chuckle lightly at his own dizziness. “There are other avenues we can pursue as far as finding out what the deal is with the cyborg ninja,” he continued regardless, “in the meantime, it’d be better to turn her loose and see what happens from there. Alright, I’m going AMA. Take me to the others, Mantis, let’s get this encryption business sorted.”
“Are you sure you should be walking around, boss?” Wolf asked.

“It looked worse than it actually was,” Liquid said dismissively, sitting down. “Now, about that password—“

“Works just fine,” Octopus said at Naomi’s computers. “Guess I was wrong about it probably being her older brother figure’s birthday, though. It’s a date alright, but about eight years after her birthday. Must be an anniversary of some kind.”

“It doesn’t matter what it is,” Liquid said, “just as long as we can view the data on FOXDIE now.”

“Well, we can.” He pushed himself back from the table, and everyone else kind of leaned towards the monitor. “Hell if I know what any of this means, though. Bunch of technobabble. Anyone?”

“Is there not a progress report that she has written?” Raven said, “I am sure that the Patriots would want regular updates on FOXDIE’s completion status, written in plain language.”

“Oh yeah, hang on,” Octopus said, clicking around. At least Naomi was organized enough to put all her status reports in a folder helpfully labelled ‘Status Reports’, which had a subfolder labelled ‘Sent’. Octopus pulled up the one that wasn’t yet in the ‘Sent’ folder. It was… largely blank.

“This looks like a template,” Wolf said.

“She must be sending quarterly reports, then,” Mantis said - okay, guessed — “that would have given her another two weeks to finish writing up this report.”

“Look under ‘Sent’,” Liquid said, “her most recent one would be fairly out of date, but it’s better than nothing.”

Octopus opened up the most recently created file in the ‘Sent’ folder. Liquid was mildly amused to find that it read almost exactly the same way his reports to the Army brass went - mostly talking up the unit, or this case, the progress made on FOXDIE, while hinting that a larger budget might be appreciated. Although Naomi’s subtle pleas for more money were significantly less desperate than Liquid’s… which was odd, considering the medical research team worked off of the same shitty budget the rest of FOXHOUND did. Were the Patriots supplying her with extra money? Wouldn’t that make the embezzling charge legitimate?

“What does it mean if it is going ‘according to schedule’?” Wolf wondered aloud, “what is their schedule? That could mean anything from 10% completed to nearly ready to kill all of us.”

“The schedule might be in here somewhere,” Octopus said, closing the progress report and clicking through folders again. He eventually found a spreadsheet with two week windows of time starting in December 2003 and ending in January 2005, each of which had a very technically involved description of where the FOXDIE virus should be at that point in time.

“They only gave her a year and a month to create this?” Raven said incredulously.

Liquid squinted at the 1 Dec 2003–15 Dec 2003 block. “I think somebody else must have been
working on this prior to her. It looks like her involvement has been almost entirely figuring out how to ‘program’ the virus to recognize certain people’s DNA.”

“Really?” Wolf said, “is that what it says?”

“I think so. I’ll admit I’m not exactly an expert in this field, but I’ve read enough books on it to know most of these terms. Octopus, scroll down.”

Octopus scrolled down until they found September 2004.

“So if she is still on schedule…” Mantis started.

“…then she hasn’t actually encoded our genes into it yet,” Liquid finished, still squinting at the screen. “Looks like by now, she… hm, I don’t recognize these names.”

“The ArmsTech board of directors,” Octopus said, “or at least, that’s what it said in another file. We found a copy of that list Ocelot mentioned, only your name wasn’t underlined.”

“So she only did that on the paper copy Ocelot saw? I suppose that makes sense.” He stood up, wincing slightly at un-bending his torso. “Well, if Dr. Hunter’s abandoning her project, that means we’re in the clear… for now. Maybe.”

“Someone else might have been working on it separately,” Mantis clarified Liquid’s thoughts to everyone else, “or someone else might take over the project with her gone.”

“Gone?” Raven said, crossing his arms.

“Where did she go?” Wolf said, “did Ocelot kill her?”

“Oh, no,” came Ocelot’s voice from the doorway to the conference room. Everyone except Mantis turned around. “She fled her hotel just before I returned to it. From the looks of things, she headed up to Minot — planning to cross the border into Canada eventually, would be my guess.”

“So she’s a non-issue for now,” Liquid said. “Alright. Really we’ll just need to keep an eye on any replacements that might come in with instructions to continue her FOXDIE program — Octopus, do you think you can find any indication of anyone working on it separately, or any kind of collaborator?”

“If it’s in here,” Octopus said, “I could probably find it eventually. I don’t think it’d be in the files where she was actually programming the virus’ genetic modification or whatever it was she was doing.”

“Right. You do that, then. In the meantime…” Liquid laced his fingers in front of him, cracking his knuckles. “We might as well take this a step further, actually.”

“You want me to find out where the actual FOXDIE samples are first?” Octopus said.

“Yes. Once we have a location, we can destroy the samples directly - in all likelihood Dr. Hunter would get the blame for it as far as the Patriots go, considering her flight to Canada. We’ll be in the clear even if there is a replacement imposed on our medical team; it’ll take them some time to get back to the point where Dr. Hunter was.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as I find anything, boss,” Octopus said. “Hey, Raven, want to get me some coffee? I think I’ll pull an all-nighter and see if I can’t get this wrapped up by tomorrow.”
Raven shrugged, and left the room.

“In the meantime,” Liquid said, folding his arms, “Ocelot, keep tabs on Dr. Hunter, just in case we need her again. But don’t go overboard, she doesn’t need to know she’s being tailed and we don’t need to know anything more specific than her general location and who she might have come into contact with - especially Patriots.”

“Certainly, boss,” Ocelot said.

“Wolf, Mantis… business as usual. You two and Raven will be at the top of the assignment list if anything comes in.”

“You’re planning on going and destroying the FOXDIE virus yourself once Octopus finds the location,” Mantis accused.

Liquid shrugged. “As commander, I’m the one who’d have the easiest time of slipping off on an unsanctioned mission without raising any eyebrows. I can just give myself vacation time.”

“Be sure to bring back some souvenirs for us,” Wolf snarked.

That night Mantis shared his meandering conclusions about Ocelot and Dr. Clark with Liquid as Liquid was getting ready for bed.

“You’re so paranoid when it comes to him,” Liquid said, shaking his hair out of his ponytail and sitting on the bed next to Mantis. “And it really does sound like he set up that whole conversation to give you, specifically, a reason to believe him.”

“That is exactly what worries me,” Mantis said, “the more he intentionally does to convince me to trust him, the more certain I am that I have reason to distrust him. No one goes to any real effort to get you to trust them unless they are planning on backstabbing you.”

“It’s not about trust, Mantis,” Liquid said, yawning and lying back, “I know he’s long since given up on you trusting him. He just wants you to accept the fact that he is telling the truth with this.”

“Fact? I really do not think that is a fact, Eli.”

“Paranoid,” Liquid muttered, absent-mindedly picking at the gauze on his chest again.

Mantis leaned over him. “I have reason to be,” he reminded him, placing a hand on his stomach right over his upside-down-V-shaped scar. Liquid rolled his eyes.

“That was ten years ago, Mantis.”

“Nine years ago. He spent a year abusing you.”

Liquid sat up, annoyed, and pushed Mantis off of him. “For the last time, it wasn’t abuse,” he said heatedly, “I’ll grant it might not have been the healthiest way of coping, but he never abused me.”

“To inflict that level of sexual violence on you mere weeks after-”

“I initiated!” Liquid snapped, “every time from the very beginning at Mother Base until you tried to kill him! And even after that, I can still count the number of times when it wasn’t me starting it on one hand.”

“Just because you started it doesn’t mean you wanted it,” Mantis said coldly.
“Like hell I didn’t.”

“He groomed you - he was manipulating you.” He scoffed. “He still is. It’s hardly even different now, it hasn’t quite been three months since the last time you cheated on me with him.”

“That- that wasn’t—“

Mantis hooked a finger into the lead of Liquid’s collar and pulled him close. “I do not blame you,” he said, his voice insidiously gentle, “I do wish that it weren’t so, but - you are impulsive and gullible, and easy to manipulate. It is not your fault Ocelot can take advantage of you so readily.”

“Don’t say that, Mantis,” Liquid said, squirming. “That’s not true.”

“Which part? You being impulsive, or too trusting?”

“I— …Ocelot’s not manipulating me. He’s not.”

Mantis sighed, let go of him. Liquid hated it when Mantis went off about Ocelot like this - his insistent efforts to convince Liquid that Ocelot had abused him always left Liquid feeling uncomfortable in multiple different ways, none of which he could really place.

“…I do not mean to unsettle you, Eli,” Mantis said, taking Liquid’s jaw in his hand this time. “But the truth is not a pretty thing.”

“Cute,” Liquid said dryly, “now, how does that apply to your own insistence that Ocelot’s some kind of monster?”

“Monster? No, Eli, you and I are monsters. Unnatural creatures who only do what we have to in order to survive. Ocelot is entirely too human — so artistically cruel…”

“You’re just afraid that the world’s more a complicated place than you like to think it is,” Liquid said. “You’re all too willing to demonize Ocelot just because he did something— unpleasant— you don’t want to admit that it was the only way and you’d do the same if you were in his boots.”

“I would never,“ Mantis hissed.

Liquid grabbed him around the waist and pulled him close. “You do so many of the same things he did, anyway,” he murmured spitefully, “you know, between the two of you, I really don’t think I can get off anymore without being called a ‘good boy’. Did you coordinate on that or something?”

“Eli—“

Liquid kissed him underneath his ear, then laid down on the bed again, pulling Mantis down with him, stretching out under him luxuriously, seductively - and grimaced, half-curving in on himself, not at all liking the feeling of his skin pulling at the edges of his chokuto wound.

At least suddenly remembering his injury successfully distracted Mantis, who slid off of him, his concern pressing at the edges of Liquid’s consciousness. “Do not strain yourself, Eli.”

“It’s nothing, Mantis, really. Just a twinge.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m perfectly fine.” He took Mantis’ hands, and kissed his knuckles. “Just, remember what I said earlier - be gentle with me tonight. Somehow I don’t think you’d be very committed to sex if you’ve managed to make me start bleeding again.”
“You still expect sex? Sometimes I can hardly believe you, Eli.”

“We always have sex after we argue, Mantis, we’re predictable.” He pulled him towards him again, and kissed the underside of his chin submissively. That really wasn’t how I wanted that conversation to go, he thought, but either way I still love you and I want to show you as much.

Mantis sighed again, although less irritably this time. “No, don’t show me anything. Lie back and let me take care of you.”

“Mmm. Fine.”

The upside to arguing about Ocelot was that Mantis, in what Liquid assumed was an effort to prove he was better for Liquid than Ocelot was, would always be intoxicatingly affectionate afterwards. His touch on Liquid’s cock was teasingly soft, but his stroking had a reassuring steadiness that could only come from the slightly detached, clinical way Mantis tended to approach sex. After so many years Liquid had really come to enjoy it way more than he probably should, although he’d never really mastered the art of staying still while Mantis was touching him like this, no matter how many times Mantis murmured to him to stop squirming so much, to just relax and let it happen.

“A-Ah… god, M-Mantis…”

“Hush, Eli.”

“Mnghh… Mantis, a l-little faster, p-please…?”

By the time that was over and the tension has passed, leaving just comfortable sleepiness and a vague, residual arousal that demanded Liquid’s body be pressed as close to Mantis’ as possible, Liquid had almost entirely dismissed Mantis’ fussing about Ocelot as nothing more than his typical performative hatred of the man. He wasn’t worried. Mantis might not trust Liquid’s judgement, but Liquid did; and anyway Mantis wasn’t about to cause any actual problems, such as killing or trying to kill Ocelot. He’d had plenty of opportunities already. Hell, he’d even had some today, while they’d been alone together on deserted country roads. But he never did a thing.

He felt Mantis’ arm tighten around his shoulder, presumably at that thought. He didn’t much care, though. He was right and Mantis damn well knew it.

“Eli, if I ever get even the faintest inkling that whatever plan he has up his sleeve is going to get you hurt or killed,” Mantis said, very seriously, “then I swear I will make him rue the day he was even born.”

“Why can’t you put this kind of motivation into your day job?” Liquid yawned.

“Morning, Octopus. Any progress?”

“Oh- morning, boss,” Octopus said, “you know, next time acquisition orders come around, you really should try to get us some instant coffee that doesn’t suck. Or better yet, actual coffee beans a grinder to go with them.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Wasn’t what I asked, though.”

Octopus leaned back in the conference room chair, stretching and yawning. “Almost got it, I think,” he said, “I found a whole bunch of mentions of how the process of actually modifying the virus is mostly automated, and done remotely from here — I think Dr. Hunter just pretty much tells the computer which of the virus’ genes need to be modified. Genes…? Do viruses have genes?” He
blinked. “Honestly, I have no idea. But you get the gist. I’m not sure Dr. Hunter has ever even seen the samples of the virus.”

“Any clue as to where exactly it is?” Liquid said.

“Uh… halfway across the country, as far as I can tell. It’s definitely in America, though. I’ll keep looking. But as soon as I find it, I’m going to go take a nice, long nap.”

“Fine by me. Keep me posted.”

In the meantime, Liquid had to go back to his office and fill out more paperwork, this time on the subject of suspending the investigation into Naomi’s so-called embezzling due to her suddenly disappearing in the general direction of Canada. It was significantly less to fill out than starting the investigation, but nonetheless after twenty minutes Liquid laid his head on his desk and wondered who the hell thought it was a good idea to promote him to a commander of a special forces unit. Probably some Patriot somewhere.

Now that he thought about it, did they appoint him because he was too easily distracted and frustrated to put up much of a fight for the FOXHOUND budget? Surely if they wanted to financially strangle FOXHOUND out of existence, they still had to go through the official channels for it, if only for appearances’ sake.

Liquid frowned at the thought of strangling FOXHOUND out of existence. Were the days of the unit - his biological father’s unit, the unit that had killed his real father in cold blood - numbered? Even if they weren’t already, there was no way they’d be allowed to continue to operate as normal once the Patriots got even the faintest inkling - the slightest rumor - of what was brewing here. Somewhat of a disheartening thought…

Liquid wasn’t the only one who had, despite everything, found a new home in FOXHOUND…

He sat up. No. Even if they were stripped of their official status as a special forces unit, even if they were chased off their base and out of the country, became fugitives — they were, at the very least, united in a common purpose. They wouldn’t simply be scattered to the uncaring winds of a world that no longer had a place for people like them. Liquid would make sure of that personally if he had to.

…although separating Mantis and Ocelot might be a good idea.

Wolf poked her head in his office (his door hadn’t been shut). “Octopus found the location of the FOXDIE samples.”

“Did he?”

She nodded. “Mhm. The basement of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. Presumably right next to their 451 samples of smallpox.”

“Atlanta? I see,” Liquid said, “well, I’ve never been to the American Georgia. This should be interesting.”

She leaned against his doorway. “Are you sure,” she said, “that it won’t be even a little suspicious that you are going ‘on vacation’ to Atlanta at the same time as the FOXDIE samples go missing or are compromised?”

“The vacation part shouldn’t be suspicious,” he said, “I’m sure it’s common knowledge that I would certainly get frustrated over having to suspend an embezzling investigation and my idea of stress
relief typically isn’t lazing around the base.”

“Yes, but Georgia…?”

“They don’t know that we know about FOXDIE, remember?” Liquid said, “as long as I come back with some kind of proof that I was taking a vacation, I’m certain they won’t put two and two together. …what is there to do in Atlanta?”

“I have no idea. They probably have a zoo. Perhaps take some pictures there, buy something at the gift shop. Or maybe visit another city as well.”

“Hm… I should ask around. I think what’s his name - Staiger - on the R&D team is from that part of the country.”

“Is he the one that’s always hovering around that tiny Chinese girl?”

“No, I think that’s Stader. Isn’t it?”

“I cannot keep all these people straight…”

“Anyway, I’ll just have to remember to pack properly,” Liquid said lightly, “and make a road trip out of it instead of subjecting myself to the TSA. Might get hairy if anyone notices a sneaking suit in my luggage…”

“Why is Wolf in charge?” Octopus protested, “I’ve been here longer than her!”

“You are supposed to be sifting through Dr. Hunter’s data,” Wolf said. “And I have been here as long as Liquid has, that is enough.”

“And the only other person who’s been here as long as Wolf and I have is Mantis,” Liquid said, “and he’s going with me as backup, since we weren’t able to get our hands on the CDC headquarters’ building plans without anyone noticing. That and it isn’t unusual for us to take time off together.”

“Boss, do you have a backup plan in case the CDC employees with basement access have cybernetic implants?” Raven said.

“Yes,” Liquid said, “improvise.”

“…that is not a plan.”

“They give cybernetic implants to people working on top-secret projects, not cleaning staff,” Mantis said dismissively, “finding out the layout of the building should be no trouble.”

“Getting into it will,” Ocelot said, “although I don’t doubt your ability, boss. Just be careful.”

“I’m always careful,” Liquid said, and Wolf laughed.

So Wolf was left in charge of the base and Liquid threw his and Mantis’ luggage in the back of an appropriated car, and they set off for the South. The drive was to take about two days, so Liquid had decided that the singular night on the road between FOXHOUND headquarters and the hotel he’d booked just outside Atlanta would be better spent just sleeping in the car. Mantis didn’t object. In all likelihood he wasn’t going to be sleeping anyway. He did, however, not offer to drive while Liquid slept.

“Nice to get away from Ocelot for a few days,” Mantis, in the passenger seat, muttered.
“Oh, enough,” Liquid, behind the wheel, replied. “All his information so far has been accurate and he’s even been verified by someone you get along with. What more do you want?”

“I do not want him.”

“Too bad. He isn’t going anywhere.”

“…he has made himself indispensable,” Mantis grumbled, folding his arms.

Liquid rolled his eyes. “What, do you feel-“

“-threatened that he might usurp my status as your right-hand man?” Mantis finished his sentence irritably, “no, Eli. Not something so inane as that, and you know it.”

“Christ, Mantis, can we go two days without you bringing up what happened in ’94? I don’t want to be reminded of what happened in ’94.”

“Hmph.”

“You’re so obsessed with him,” Liquid sighed, “it isn’t healthy.”

“Do not talk to me about what is and is not healthy, Eli.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence in which Liquid just wished they could talk about something else. Mantis didn’t really have anything to offer, though, aside from making the radio ‘spontaneously’ switch itself on.

“—I’d give you anything, but you want pain…!

“A little water please…

“I taste you all over my teeth-

“Never again! Just tonight? Okay—“

Liquid wondered if Mantis had found that song on purpose. It was another hour before they were out of range of that particular station.

“So,” Liquid said awkwardly, “anything you… particularly want to do while trying to fake a vacation?”

Mantis shrugged noncommittally.

Liquid frowned. “You’re not being helpful, Mantis.”

“I have been to Atlanta once. It was not very interesting.”

“You’ve been to Atlanta? You never told me that before.”

“It was back when you were still— back when I was still a psychic spy working corporate espionage. And as I said, it was not very interesting.” He tilted his head slightly. “The city’s obsession with Coca-Cola is… amusing, though.”

“Ah…”

And later in the night, somewhere in south Wisconsin, Liquid knelt between Mantis’ legs,
swallowing his cock and rutting against his ankle, and the radio played garbled snatches of “Let It Be” on a staticky radio station from somewhere far away. It was raining. When they were done, Liquid fell straight asleep with his head cradled in Mantis’ lap, fingers running through his hair.

When he woke up in the morning, his back and knees were killing him.

Chapter End Notes

Jimmy Eats World’s “Just Tonight” actually came out in October 2004, not September. Whoopsie. Also it wouldn’t hit the radio until May 2005, but I figure that’s less important.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Finally the Wintergames are over and I can have the tag to myself again now that people aren’t posting drabbles for cheap points (haha I’m kidding. Mostly. I posted fic for the Wintergames, too...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Who put part of a dollar bill on the corkboard?” Wolf said.

“Huh?” Octopus said, walking by with his thousandth cup of coffee that week. “Oh, that was me.”

“...why?”

“It’s- it’s the Eye of Providence. I thought it would be funny to stick it to the board with a pushpin through its pupil.”

“The… what?”

“The Eye of Providence. You know, the Illuminati?”

Wolf blinked at him.

He blithely took a sip of coffee. “Wolf, I have got some amazing forum threads to show you once I’m done with Dr. Hunter’s files.”

“...hm.”

“It’s not like we had anything on this stupid ‘announcements’ board other than a ‘No blonde jokes’ sign...”

Meanwhile, in Atlanta, Georgia.

“The sunglasses are just unnecessary, Eli.”

Liquid gave him a look from under the gold-colored aviators. “I am a tourist, thank you.”

“You would need more than sunglasses to convince anyone you are an innocent tourist who happens to have been loitering around the CDC headquarters all afternoon, Eli. That is why I am here.”

“Yes, yes, the SEP field, I know…”

“I cannot believe you were initially planning on doing this all on your own.”

“Well, I reconsidered, didn’t I?” He frowned, grumbling to himself. “So I’m more one for action than planning… at least I know my own limitations.”

“Mm.”

Someone behind them whistled loudly, and they both turned around. Liquid blanched.
“Oh my g— M-Mother??”

EVA waved.

Liquid did his best to hide behind Mantis, which was about as effective as hiding behind a lamppost. “What is *she* doing here,” he hissed.

“Clearly there’s been a leak,” Mantis said dryly. “Shall we go say hello to your mother, Eli?”

“I haven’t seen her in nine years, what am I supposed to-??”

It was too late. Mantis was already walking towards her. Cursing under his breath, Liquid followed.

EVA hadn’t changed much in the past nine years: she was a little obviously older, but she was the type of woman who aged well - not that that justified how low-cut her shirt was, at her age - so the only major difference was that she’d cut her hair rather short at some point and was now wearing it combed back instead of loose around her face. She was also wearing sunglasses, although round two-tone ones, which she lowered to peer at Liquid over.

“Ocelot told me what you were up to,” she said before Liquid could say anything.

“I am not surprised,” Mantis said.

“And you came *because*…?” Liquid said warily.

EVA gave him an annoyed look. “He said that your infiltration plan amounted to ‘we’ll just wing it and see what happens’, so I caught the first flight over. I can help you get into the CDC without getting caught, you know.”

“We’re doing perfectly fine on our own,” Liquid protested. Damn that Ocelot, saying he didn’t doubt Liquid’s infiltration abilities and then going around behind his back to bring his *mother* here as backup…

“That would be highly appreciated,” Mantis said at the same time.

EVA smiled brightly. “I’m guessing you two are hanging out here to try and observe the shifts people come and go in?”

“We thought about doing it in the museum instead,” Liquid said grudgingly, “but that wouldn’t give us a good enough view of the comings and goings, plus we’d be too likely to be caught on security cameras - not really a good idea to interfere with them in the middle of the day. We’re allegedly on vacation here, too, but visiting the CDC museum would just be pushing it.”

She raised her eyebrows and shrugged. “I know what I’m doing,” she said, “I used to know someone who worked here.”

“That’s… vague.”

“That’s enough to get you into the basement where the FOXDIE sample is kept.”

“When are we doing this?” Mantis said.

“Tomorrow night,” EVA said, then grabbed both of their arms. Mantis placidly accepted it, while Liquid tensed, his eyes flicking towards the road like he was seriously considering running into traffic. “Now, in the meantime…”
“I don’t think I like where this is going,” Liquid said.

“We have a lot of catching up to do, Eli,” EVA said, marching the two of them away from the CDC headquarters. “Besides - I think I just proved that Mantis’ SEP field doesn’t work on anyone with cybernetic implants—“

“You read *Life, the Universe and Everything* too?” Mantis said.

“Mantis, I was around for the series’ original radio broadcasts. Anyway, you were going to get noticed eventually. Most of the CDC staff are clean, but there are a few Patriot agents, and generally speaking it’s Patriot agents who got cybernetic implants first.”

Liquid snatched his arm out of her grip. “Didn’t you get implants back in the *eighties*?”

“No, I got them back in the sixties. Held up well all these years, haven’t they?”

“…wh-“

“I’m kidding. Geez, you’re so much like your father. Yes, I got the psychic insulation cybernetic implants back in ’88, when they were just starting the program. I thought Ocelot told you I’m a double agent…?”

Liquid opened his mouth, then closed it. He’d completely forgotten about that.

“I would much rather trust your information on the Patriots than Ocelot’s,” Mantis said flatly.

“We’re giving you the same information, Mantis.”

“He’s hiding something.”

“He’s not dumping everything he knows on you at once; there’s a difference. By the way, Eli…”

“What?” Liquid said irritably, pointedly trailing a few paces behind EVA, who was still holding an unprotesting Mantis’ arm.

“Where on earth did you get those sunglasses?”

“…found them in an abandoned desk back at headquarters. Thought they looked good on me. Why?”

She glanced over her shoulder at him, her lips tight. “Nothing,” she said. “Something about them kind of… bothers me, I suppose, but it’s not important.”

“I should hope not, they’re only sunglasses.”

“Nevermind. Now, Eli, Mantis — we have all afternoon, what should we do? You two are pretending to be on vacation, after all.”

“I really don’t think I want to-“

“I insist,” EVA said, “I’m your mother, after all.”

“Eli and I just came from Centennial Olympic Park,” Mantis said, “we could go back there.”

The fact that Mantis got along with EVA better than he did would never fail to irritate Liquid. Mostly because their initial amicability had only come about because they both got their panties in a twist
about Liquid sleeping with Ocelot back in ’94. (Although EVA had seemed resigned to it by ’95. Mantis still thought of it as the end of the world…) But either way — ’94 and ’95, they’d only seen EVA on a handful of occasions, really, regardless of the persistent observations that EVA’s contact with Outer Heaven had dramatically increased after Liquid joined their ranks. Combined with the fact that prior to that Liquid had only seen her a few times when he was thirteen before she unceremoniously disappeared from his life, Liquid found himself… well, not exactly hesitant to think of her as his mother, more like horrified at how willing he was, on some level, to accept her as such.

Somehow the idea of being on what amounted to a family outing with his mother and his boyfriend was even stranger to Liquid than the context of the whole ‘vacation’ thing actually just being an alibi for the destruction of a virus being engineered to wipe out him, his whole unit (except Ocelot), and his surviving family (except, presumably, EVA - if Ocelot wasn’t on the list, she shouldn’t have been either).

“Oh, I have an idea,” EVA said, “Eli, you like Shakespeare, don’t you? There’s this tavern downtown that puts on plays every weekend, we could go tonight. I think it’ll start in a few hours.”

“Do you happen to know which play?” Mantis asked.

“Yes,” EVA admitted, smiling, “I was actually hoping to go see it. Much Ado About Nothing.”

“Hmm…”

Well… it was just until he and Mantis returned to FOXHOUND headquarters, anyway, wasn’t it?

Liquid sighed. “…didn’t have anything planned for this evening anyway, Mother.”

An assignment came in to FOXHOUND. It was really nothing special, just a generic “We need this thing blown up in the interests of national security blah blah blah but we can’t let anyone know the U.S. government is involved in this or else our diplomatic relations might be endangered blah blah blah!” mission that suited Raven’s lack of subtlety just fine, so Wolf gave him the assignment and Raven would be headed off for eastern Uzbekistan at 0600 hours the following morning. In the meantime, Wolf had to fill out the requisite forms in Liquid’s stead, which she was determined to do without bitching as much as he did, except even the word paperwork made her want to roll her eyes. And maybe toss said paperwork out a window.

She opened the door to Liquid’s office and found that cyborg ninja already standing in there.

“…how——”

He pointed his sword at her. “Where is my friend?” he demanded.

Wolf was so shocked he actually said something understandable - usually he was almost entirely incoherent, and the first couple times he’d bothered them he had been yelling in garbled Portuguese, of all languages - that it took her a few precious seconds to remember that she was pretty useless without her rifle, and slam the door shut and take off sprinting down the hallway, raising the other two available members of FOXHOUND on Codec as she ran.

“What are you men even good for??” she hissed as she heard the office door splinter behind her. Liquid was going to throw a fit when he got back.

“Whatever it is, I’m busy,” Octopus said immediately.

“What’s going on?” Ocelot sighed.
“That damn ninja has returned! And I am not sure where he is… he did not follow me very far…”

She had only turned about two corners between Liquid’s office and where she was now, but there was no sign of the cyborg ninja. Wolf didn’t let herself think that she’d managed to lose him - even from the very beginning he’d always displayed an odd sort of familiarity with the layout of the base, with the exception of the time he’d gotten into the then-still-under-construction med labs, to which he never returned. He never went to the other building on campus, either. It actually worked out just fine that he only bothered FOXHOUND and not their medical or R&D team…

“So… he could be anywhere,” Octopus said. “Great. I’m locking the door.”

“That won’t help you,” Ocelot said. “Wolf, do you want me to go wake up Raven?”

“And risk him falling back asleep afterwards and missing his deployment?” Wolf said, “not while I am responsible for him. I am going to go get my rifle.”

“That’s not going to help much, either…”

“Then you find him, Ocelot!”

That was exactly what Ocelot did. After prowling the base for a while he found the cyborg ninja had actually gone outside, to the training grounds, where he was standing perfectly still, face tilted up towards the sky, arms at his sides and chokuto held carelessly loose in one hand. Ocelot was mildly surprised — he didn’t think the cyborg ninja had spent a single second not jittering around like a pinball on speed ever since he was torn out of his artificial coma.

Of course, it didn’t last. The faintest clink of Ocelot’s spurs - still further away than most people would be able to hear from - brought him back to life, spinning to face Ocelot, sword at the ready, mechanically mumbling what sounded like a recitation of Kansai train stations.

Ocelot already had his SAA dawn and pointing unwaveringly at the ninja’s single red ‘eye’.

“Every time you come around here,” Ocelot said, “I’m always surprised you managed to last this long without your life support. Or that you haven’t put yourself out of your misery already. Actually, I’m surprised you didn’t do that long before you were ever refitted as a cyborg.”

“Where is…” the ninja rasped, “where is—“

“You have thirty seconds to get off this campus before I fire.”

“Where is- Naomi?” he said, then repeated, “Naomi,” then said it a third time in a soft hiss - then he started screaming, his body seizing, and Ocelot’s count had only reached seventeen when he was gone. Back over the fence, hopefully not to return for at least a couple weeks. Ideally to get hit by a truck or something. Surely that exoskeleton would crack under enough force.

“Was that the ninja I just saw fleeing the base?” Wolf said over Codec.

“Yes,” Ocelot said, “he started shrieking and ran off. As he does.”

“Well… at least that is dealt with. He has always waited at least a few days before coming to harass us again, so we should be fine for now…”

“This was closer to the last time than he’s ever been before,” Ocelot pointed out, “he’s always waited two weeks at the minimum, but he was just here four days ago.”
“Perhaps injuring Liquid encouraged him? He hadn’t wounded any of us before that.”

“Hmm. Maybe.”

Wolf sighed. “What am I supposed to do about the door? It is completely wrecked, and I would rather Liquid not find out about that…”

“He’s going to find out no matter what you do,” Ocelot said, re-holstering his gun. “The money for a replacement door will come out of our budget anyway – unless you want to hold a fundraiser carwash.”

“…”

“Wolf?”

“That is not a bad idea…”

“Wolf, I wasn’t being serious.”

“No, it could work,” Wolf said, “we could make enough money for it in two hours if I wear a bikini and bend over frequently.”

“We’? I’m not going to participate in this.”

“Well… Octopus could put on one of his female disguises, and also wear a bikini and bend over frequently…”

Ocelot hung up.

“—chased us right out of the province, which honestly at this point I don’t blame them, it was the third village in the week we’d burned down—“

“Don’t take all the credit for it, Eli.”

“Fine, the third village that week that Mantis had burned down. Mostly. I helped.”

“So then what?” EVA said, “did the villagers ever come back?”

“Evidently,” Liquid said, “a few weeks later we were wired the agreed amount. I really hadn’t thought we were going to get paid for that one, but there we were.”

“To be fair,” Mantis said, “we were hired to rid their villages of the soldiers who had taken them over and driven them out. At no point did we guarantee that their property would remain intact.”

“You did get the soldiers out, I suppose,” EVA said.

“Only five of the villages burning to the ground was surprisingly non-destructive, too,” Mantis said.

Liquid shrugged. “The money didn’t last, though, because right before that happened our car had gotten blown to hell and we had to spend most of our payout on a new one.”

“And bribes,” Mantis added.

“Yes, and bribes. God it can be so hard to get even basic necessities when you’re not a citizen and your occupation is listed as ‘mercenary’.”
“Tell me about it,” EVA said. “What about the black market?”

“Er… too many people we’d had issues with.”

“As it turns out, even black market dealers will blacklist people who have shot at them at some point,” Mantis said, “who knew?”

EVA laughed. “And you two managed to get into all this trouble in how many months?”

“Less than six, wasn’t it?” Liquid said.

“That sounds correct,” Mantis said, “I did not really pay attention to the date during that time.”

“Everyone recruited to FOXHOUND after Campbell took over was from Outer Heaven, but he really didn’t send out very many invitations even though so many people left after the Galzburg incident,” EVA said, “he must have heard of your reputation as mercenaries, too.”

“In that case, I’m honestly surprised he was willing to take a chance on us,” said Liquid lightly, “oh, Mother - your ice cream’s dripping.”

As far as EVA was concerned it wasn’t a very subtle way to change the subject, but he was right, it was — and considering they were in the middle of a city, it had definitely been too expensive to waste. (They’d stopped and gotten ice cream cones after *Much Ado About Nothing* - hey, it was September in the South, it was hot enough to justify it — or rather, EVA and Liquid had gotten ice cream, and Mantis hadn’t gotten anything. Again, they were in the middle of a city. There was no way in hell he was taking off his mask for literally anything.)

“I mean,” EVA said, taking a lick of her ice cream, “Campbell never knew about the whole ‘clone’ thing, did he?”

“I don’t think so,” Liquid said. “I never personally discussed it with him, but…”

“He knew he has some kind of relation to Solid Snake, and he did comment on how they look similar,” Mantis said, “but I believe he was mostly under the impression that them both having ‘Snake’ in their codenames was due to comparable skill levels.”

Liquid nodded. “The one time he overheard me talking about it, he told me it was utterly pointless to compare myself to him. It certainly didn’t come across as him realizing that we are related.”

“You shouldn’t be comparing yourself to him,” EVA pointed out.

“Then no one should have ever told me about the modifications they- the Patriots- made to our genes. Please, I already know they designed me to be the inferior twin, Mother.”

“I… well… maybe?”

“They did not fill you in on all the details?” Mantis said.

EVA’s eyebrows drew together. “I was told that… let’s see if I remember this correctly… a lot of the ‘soldier genes’ they identified in Big Boss were Mendelian, so one of you was supposed to express them all as dominant and one all as recessive.”

“Right,” Liquid said, “I’m the recessive one.” He flicked his blond ponytail. “Obviously.”

“Yes… but… I don’t remember if Big Boss himself expressed most of those genes as dominant or recessive. I don’t think they told me. But if he was mostly recessive, then you’d be the ‘genetically
superior’ one, Eli.” She made air-quotes with one hand as she said ‘genetically superior’ to emphasize the fact that she didn’t think of either one of the twins as being better than the other.

Liquid shook his head anyway. “I was told that I was the inferior one. They must have been mostly dominant in Big Boss.” He said the name bitterly.

“What told you that?” EVA demanded.

“Big Boss himself. He would know, wouldn’t he?”

“I… suppose the only one who would really know for sure is- was Dr. Clark. But I think the whole experiment was non-conclusive anyway. Both you and your brother have accomplished great things in your lives so far.”

Liquid snorted. “Like killing Big Boss?”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Mantis said, “your brother is an alcoholic in Alaska while you are running a special forces unit.”

“You two are equal in my eyes,” EVA said firmly, “you’re my sons and I’m very proud of both of you and I love you both unconditionally.”

“…right,” Liquid said, “I can’t take you seriously when you say that on the first occasion we’ve seen each other in nine years.”

“That isn’t my fault.”

“And I never even met you until I was thirteen.”

“I was against that!”

“And for the nine years between when I was thirteen and twenty-two - not even a word.”

“I was told you didn’t want to keep in touch with me. And I thought you were doing just fine on your own!”

“He didn’t,” Mantis said, “and he wasn’t.”

“Mantis, hush,” Liquid said.

EVA shook her head, no longer finding her ice cream cone appealing. “I did the best I could from where I was, Eli. It was completely out of my hands, though - the most I could ever do was send Ocelot after you when you got taken prisoner.”

If the conversation was already uncomfortable, it was now excruciating. Liquid’s expression changed, going both a little angry and a little blank, and he looked away. Mantis narrowed his eyes.

“That ended well,” he said sarcastically.

The corner of EVA’s mouth twitched down. True, it hadn’t been until after Liquid had dumped Ocelot that the truth about what had happened in that prison camp the day he was recovered had come out to her, but— “Better than dying alone in Al-Dibdibah,” she said quietly.

“Right,” Liquid said, in a strangely faint voice, then he went back to eating his ice cream without further comment.
EVA took a deep breath. Okay. This evening was rapidly turning into a disaster - and the saddest part was that, when Liquid was cheerfully recounting stupid shit he’d done either as a soldier at Outer Heaven or an independent mercenary with Mantis, she’d started thinking that Liquid was settling into the fact that she was his mother, and getting more comfortable with her, and he was sharing his stories as a genuine attempt to bond with her and maybe even try to forgive her for being so often absent from his life. And then she had to go and bring up the Galzburg incident, and to try to salvage the discussion after that, and to remind him that she was the one to blame for what Ocelot did to him back in 1994.

Oh, she didn’t fault Ocelot for it, not really. He was right, it had been the only way. He had to break Liquid, and what were his other options? Maybe something that would actually have killed him? The point was that it had bought enough time for Venom to come and get Liquid out of there. It had been necessary. And EVA had known from day one that her plan for Ocelot to find Liquid’s location could only work if they accepted the fact that Ocelot would have to torture Liquid for his own good. Maybe she hadn’t necessarily realized the possibility that Ocelot would judge raping him a more efficient, less physically dangerous way of torturing and breaking him, but if she’d known back when she’d first commissioned Ocelot to find him under the guise of an interrogator then she knew she would have deemed than an acceptable risk. It only seemed so horrible in retrospect, from the privileged perspective of Liquid already being long since safe and sound.

But she didn’t have to like it.

“So, for tomorrow night,” EVA said evenly, watching the traffic go by, generously interspersed with cars with the windows down and the bass turned up thumping their way down the street, “I’m going to need your Codec frequency, Eli.”

Liquid didn’t respond. Off in his own little world, apparently.

Mantis sighed. “141.80.”

“Thank you, Mantis.”

There was a long pause.

“…he’s perfectly alright,” Mantis said, nodding at Liquid. “Just give him a few minutes.”

“Does he… space out like this often?” EVA said.

“Yes and no. He is not nearly as …easily upset as he used to be, but most of the time when he is, he has a genuine flashback instead of just spacing out.”

“I see.”

“He only spaces out if he is too at ease for his mind to convince itself he is in danger. So I consider this a good sign.”

“Consider what a good sign?” Liquid said, turning back to them, blinking innocently.

“Nothing, Eli,” Mantis said, “finish your ice cream before it melts all over your hand.”

“I think it’s a little late for that,” Liquid said, staring down at it.

“I’ll go grab some napkins,” EVA smiled, standing up. She threw her ice cream cone in the garbage on the way.
To make up for the “Just Tonight” anachronism in the last chapter, I actually looked up which play the Shakespeare Tavern was putting on in September 2004, and it was in fact *Much Ado About Nothing*. Incidentally, if you’re ever in Atlanta, the Shakespeare Tavern is one of those places that gets a strong recommendation from me - I used to go with my family all the time back when I still lived there!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

EVA, by some freakish sleight that Liquid didn’t bother questioning, had booked a room in the hotel nearest to the CDC headquarters - as in, it was a few blocks away, but she’d gotten a room with a sufficient view for observing the building with binoculars via the window. They determined that, for the most part, EVA would be running support using Mantis as a conduit since psychic communication was infinitely more secure than Codec. (Mostly because Liquid could reply to Mantis without even opening his mouth, something that was currently impossible over Codec.) EVA had the map of the CDC headquarters’ hallways and such at the ready, and had circled a room in the basement where the FOXDIE samples were - although it was also where there were several other viruses being studied, so it was going to be entirely up to Liquid to figure out which one it was if it wasn’t clearly labelled ‘FOXDIE’.

Evidently no one had warned EVA that Liquid had absolutely zero problem with nudity in front of others, but she took it annoyingly in stride, only turning her back politely as Liquid changed into his sneaking suit. Although she did comment on the gauze pads still taped to his chest.

“They’re just to keep the wound clean while it’s healing,” he said dismissively.

“Yes,” EVA said, “I generally know how bandages work, Eli. I’m wondering what you did to get an injury that… long.”

“He got hit by the wrong end of a chokuto,” Mantis, who was sitting casually on the bed, said.

“…that really doesn’t explain anything, but okay.”

“What, you never heard about that cyborg ninja assaulting FOXHOUND headquarters just to make my life difficult?” Liquid said, carefully lacing the back of it up and pulling it tight. He’d figured out how to do it himself a long time ago, considering it had taken years for him to get comfortable with anyone helping him dress or undress again. “Ocelot said you and he were the reason why he’s even running free at all.”

“Oh,” EVA said, “he’s the man Dr. Clark was experimenting on. Ocelot never told me he stayed around FOXHOUND…”

“Well, he didn’t so much stay around as he comes back every so often because he’s got me mixed up with Snake,” Liquid said, doing some stretches against the wall - it was really the only way to get the suit’s seams properly settled against his body, although to be honest stretching before any op was always a good idea. “Why on earth he’s so hell-bent on killing Snake, though, no one has any idea. Perhaps next time he drops by we should direct him towards Twin Lakes, Alaska.”

“Hm.”

“Ready to go, Eli?” Mantis said, “normal operating hours end in five minutes.”

“Yes,” Liquid said, putting his hands on his hips.

EVA glanced at his thigh-holster. “That’s not lethal weaponry, is it?”

“What? Of course it is. I know there’s going to be armed security, but somehow I doubt the CDC
headquarters is going to be a good place for OSP.”

“No, no…” EVA grabbed her purse. “You’re right about the OSP thing, but that’s not it, Eli. This is a government medical research facility, not a military base. You should be using non-lethal weaponry.”

“…well I didn’t bring any-“

She pulled out a modified Beretta and handed it to him, along with a full clip. “Tranquilizer darts,” she said, “don’t run out of ammo, you won’t be able to find more there.”

“He should not even need to fire it,” Mantis said lazily, “the CDC has very light security for our line of work. You should be more than capable of avoiding all the guards entirely, Eli.”

“Mm.” Liquid replaced the MK23 SOCOM with the M9, keeping his indignation to himself.

“But keep in mind that most of the security guards are ex-police or -military,” EVA said, “or both.”

“Some of them are in military reserves, too,” Mantis said.

“Yes, yes,” Liquid replied, waving them off, “either way, if I get caught I’m going to be in much, much more trouble than a simple shootout with security guards. We all will.”

“Do not get caught.”

“You don’t need to tell me that, Mantis.”

Mantis dropped a respirator in his hands, which he hooked onto a strap at his hip for now. With FOXDIE being airborne, he was definitely going to need it once he got to the room where it was stored, especially considering he wouldn’t have time follow normal isolation protocols… there was a good chance that even if it did get into his system it would prove completely harmless, but there was also a nonzero chance that at this phase it was prone to giving anyone heart attacks even if their DNA had yet to be programmed into it. And either way Naomi was going to put FOXHOUND’s genetic data into the program she was using to control the nanomachines modifying the virus soon, so if she had happened to be ahead of schedule that could be very bad news.

“So how do I destroy the virus?” Liquid said.

“I looked this up,” EVA said, “it’s a process called ‘inactivation’ - it may or may not technically destroy it, but either way it’ll render it non-infectious, and it can’t be reversed.”

“Lovely. What do I do?”

“You’ll need a solvent and a detergent called Triton-X 100. They should be somewhere in the labs.”

“Solvent, Triton X-100, got it. …what kind of solvent?”

“I guess whatever’s there.”

“She will talk you through the rest of the process once you have located FOXDIE,” Mantis said, glancing at the alarm clock on the bedside table. “You should go now. Good luck.”

“Won’t need it. I’ll be back in a bit.”

Liquid got over to the CDC headquarters just fine, although he had a little trouble getting in - every
door was guarded by a security camera, and they didn’t have time to figure out the blind spots plus with people still in the building it would be a bad idea to outright disable the cameras, so he ended up forcing a window (in such a way that no alarms were set off, of course, this wasn’t the first time he’d done this) and making his way in that way. Mantis warned him that there were still quite a few researchers working late, and as far as he could tell some of them had cybernetic implants, so he wouldn’t be able to give Liquid their locations — *I’ll be fine, Liquid replied mentally, if *I do walk in on a researcher, the tranquilizers will take care of them.*

“…do tranquilizers cause retrograde amnesia?” Mantis asked EVA.

She halfshruggedd. “It’s been reported. And that would explain why tranquilizing someone a few seconds after they see your face still apparently counts as not leaving any witnesses…”

The first (and hopefully only) of Liquid’s fifteen rounds of tranquilizer ammo was used on a hapless researcher that Liquid stole several cardkeys from. It kind of went without saying that unauthorized personnel weren’t allowed in the basement. The researcher was propped up in a random room, slumped over a desk with his arms folded like he was taking a nap.

*The elevator has a security camera in it,* Mantis warned him after seeing it in the mind of one of the security guards.

*Incidentally, your open window has been noticed.*

*Did it put anyone on caution?*

*No, the person who found it assumes one of the other researchers left it open on accident. But you may have to find another way out.*

“How are things going?” EVA asked.

Mantis tilted his head. “No problems so far.”

“Ah, good.” She flopped backwards on the bed. “Running support is so *boring.*”

“Mm.”

She gave him a very scrutinizing look for a few moments then said, “Question…”

“Hm?”

“I heard a rumor that you and Eli are, well, lovers. I considered asking Ocelot about it, but figured I’d be better off asking one of you… so how about it?”

“Oh,” Mantis said, “I did not know word had gotten out outside of FOXHOUND. Yes, it’s true.”

She sat up. “Since when?”

“2000.”

“…when Ocelot joined the unit.”

Mantis glanced away deliberately. “I am trying to concentrate,” he said. *Eli, take a left once you exit the staircase.*****

*Got it.*

“Why does Eli wear a collar?” EVA asked.
“That is no one’s business but ours,” Mantis replied.

“It’s a sex thing, isn’t it?”

“…”

She waved a hand flippantly. “I don’t judge, of course. I mean, I have heard about how you dress when you’re not pretending to be on vacation. I’m just wondering…”

“I… am asexual.”

“Yes, I remember, but that doesn’t necessarily preclude you from, ah… doing Eli favors.”

Mantis gave her an extremely unamused glare. “Why is this any concern of yours?”

“It’s just that the kind of sex that ends up with him wearing a leather collar 24/7 might not the kind of sex that I think is particularly healthy after what he’s been through with Ocelot. I’m worried.”

“If you are worried about me abusing him—“

“I’m not - I’m sure you wouldn’t, Mantis,” EVA said firmly, “I’m just worried about you cluelessly doing something damaging because he, I don’t know, has self-destructive kinks…?”

“……”

She laid back down, folding her arms behind her head and frowning, still watching Mantis out of the corner of her eye. “I don’t think BDSM is inherently unhealthy, even for someone with Eli’s background,” she insisted. “Since it’s largely about trust, it might actually be good for him.”

“‘BDSM’ implies an S&M element,” Mantis said stiffly, pointedly shuffling the CDC headquarters maps, “I do not hurt Eli.”

“So it’s just bondage and D/s, then? Oh god, it’s not TPE, is it? Tell me it’s not TPE.”

“I do not want to have this conversation.” He didn’t even know what ‘TPE’ was…

“You two use a safeword, right?”

“I feel like I should probably know this, but what exactly is a safeword…?”

“What do you mean, what exactly is a— it’s what he says when he wants you to stop.”

“If he wants to stop then he tells me as much, and I stop,” he said flatly, “and even if he does not tell me, I am psychic. I can see in his mind if he is not enjoying himself or the situation is getting to be too stressful for him. Satisfied, EVA?”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Yes. Look, I don’t mean to pry. I’d rather not be thinking about my son’s sex life. But…”

“…I know. I would be concerned, too.” Eli, have you found it yet?

*I’ve located some virus samples - I’m still looking through them. Found a bunch of specimens labelled “variola major” and “variola minor”…*

*You didn’t touch them, right?*
Of course not. Although I’m fairly certain there are a dozen failsafes in place anyway, notwithstanding the fact I’m already wearing a respirator and gloves.

Don’t touch the smallpox, Eli.

I didn’t!

“Any developments?” EVA asked.

“It seems he has found the right room,” Mantis replied.

AHF, CHHF, CCHF, HFRS, HPS, HeV, he heard Liquid read to himself, KFD, LUHF, LCM, OHF, Marburg HF, RVF, TBE… and how many different ebola samples do they need, anyway…?

Have you found what we’re looking for yet? I’d rather you not spend too much time in that room, personally.

I’m being careful, and all the viruses are in hermetically sealed containers. LASV, NiV… more HPS… oh, here we go.

FOX DIE?

Naturally. Now what?

“Has he found the FOX DIE yet?” EVA said.

“Yes.”

“Alright, tell him to- actually, ask him if there’s anyone around, I think this’ll be easier if I just talk him through it over Codec.”

After Mantis confirmed that Liquid was completely alone, EVA called his Codec frequency and asked him what kind of materials were in the lab he was in.

“I need to find some Triton X-100 now, yes? And some kind of solvent…”

“Are there any cabinets or something in there?”

“On the other side of the room. Hang on. …alright, there are bottles on one of the shelves.”

“Do you see Triton X-100?”

“Yes. So there’s probably the solvent I need in here somewhere, too…”

“Look for TnBP,” EVA said, rolling her eyes up and to the side trying to remember how it all went.

“TnBP… tri-n-butyl phosphate?”

“That’s it.”

“Right here,” Liquid said, grabbing that and the bottle of Triton X-100.

“So,” EVA said, “I think you need to dilute the TnBP.”

“Hold on,” Liquid said, looking at the bottles, “isn’t virus inactivation typically done to try and make vaccines?”
“Uh… yes, I think so.”

“So in that case the virus is supposed to still be intact. We don’t really want it intact.”

“…point. Alright, you’re going to need to expose the FOXDIE virus.”

*I think those kinds of containers are twist-out,* Mantis told him.

Liquid opened the container, frowning behind his respirator. So far so good. He was yielded four vials of some kind of saline colloid. The whole set-up reminded him very much of what Skull Face had been carting the English strain of the vocal cord parasites in twenty years ago.

That was fun, Mantis thought sarcastically.

*Oh hush, it all worked out in the end.* “Should I transfer all the virus specimens into one container?”

“Yes,” EVA said, “if you can find one.”

He went back to the cabinet. He quickly found and grabbed an Erlenmeyer flask and brought it back over to the counter where he had the FOXDIE samples - which he, not hesitating for longer than half a second on the incredible stupidity of assuming that his sneaking suit and a simple respirator were adequate protection in *this* kind of lab, opened and poured into the flask.

“And now do I add the TnBP and Triton X-100?”

“I think so,” EVA said, “just… be careful.”

He did as instructed, dumping an indiscriminate amount of both Triton X-100 and TnBP in the flask with the FOXDIE specimens. Nothing happened aside from a little foaming, which could very well have been from agitating the fluid by pouring something in. Or maybe the nanomachines reacting poorly to the detergent.

“…oh, right,” EVA said, “I think you need to stir it.”

Liquid swished the flask around. “I don’t think it’s doing anything,” he said, staring at it. It foamed a little more, that was about it.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to be able to see if it is doing something,” EVA replied, “viruses are microscopic. …hmmm… Mantis, you don’t think I’ve forgotten something, do you?”

“How am I supposed to know?” Mantis said, “I cannot just go digging through the researchers’ minds for how to do this, I won’t understand their thoughts on the subject.”

EVA snapped her fingers, sitting up again. “It needs to be cold,” she said, “four degrees Celsius, I think.”

“Erm…”

Liquid looked around the lab. There was plenty of equipment here, and more than likely at least one of these things had been designed to get virus specimens to a low temperature. Just… he didn’t know how to work any of these things. He was a soldier, not a scientist, and he hadn’t even gone to middle school. Technically.

*You did get your GED, though,* Mantis thought, *eventually.*

*That isn’t relevant right now, Mantis, thank you.*
You were the one who was just thinking about it...

And then Liquid had an idea. Mantis facepalmed at it, and EVA, raising an eyebrow at Mantis’ reaction to apparently nothing, asked Liquid, “What are you going to do?”

“There’s got to be a break room around here somewhere, right?” Liquid said. “And break rooms tend to have refrigerators…”

“You’re going to put a potentially incredibly dangerous airborne virus in a breakroom fridge??”

“Well,” Liquid said, “I’m in the process of making it a hell of a lot less incredibly dangerous. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

With that he left the room, taking the Erlenmeyer flask with him. EVA scrubbed her hands down over her face, but didn’t offer any better ideas.

“How long does it need to be chilled for?” Mantis asked.

EVA blinked. “Eli, wait,” she barked, “the virus will need to be in the fridge for at least an hour.”

“An hour?” Liquid said.

Mantis was alarmed. “Can he not just put it in the fridge and leave?”

“No, Mantis,” EVA said, “he has to stay until he’s sure the virus is destroyed.”

“It is only an hour,” Liquid said, “and this place is practically deserted anyway. It should be fine. Okay, Mantis - tell me where the nearest breakroom is.”

“Be careful not to set off an alarms while leaving the lab - there might be a system in place to make sure the isolation protocols are followed upon exiting,” EVA said just before he closed the Codec channel.

Liquid ended up having to let the chemical shower run pointlessly while he left quickly, and Mantis observed a security guard grow suspicious at the empty but operating shower and make a mental note to ask if there might be a bug in the software governing it the following morning. Then he informed Liquid that all the breakrooms had security cameras in them, but one on the second floor had a conveniently placed vending machine that no one ever bothered moving because the staff appreciated the privacy… even if no one ever dared to leave their lunches in the fridge in there.

Perfect, Liquid thought, running up the stairs and being extremely careful not to spill the contents of the flask, especially on himself.

Getting to the breakroom went off without a hitch, and getting into it more or less went the same way - except when he walked in, there was a security guard drinking a cup of water, who was so shocked by a ponytailed blond man with a skin-tight suit and an Erlenmeyer flask in hand suddenly appearing in the reflection in the window that Liquid had put a tranquilizer dart in his neck long before he drew his gun.

That could have ended badly, he thought lightly, putting the flask (and the pilfered cardkeys for good measure) in the fridge and looking around for a clock, taking off his respirator. There was no clock in here… Let me know when an hour’s passed and I can get out of here, will you?

Of course, Mantis replied, drumming his fingers on the table in front of him. Thirteen darts left. That researcher he’d initially tranquilized would be waking up any minute now. Liquid had mostly
forgotten about him by now, but Mantis was still somewhat on edge about it, mostly because the researcher had been one of the handful with cybernetic implants - Mantis couldn’t exactly keep an eye on how close he was to waking up if he couldn’t read his mind. Somehow he doubted that the researcher would just write off randomly waking up in (presumably) somebody else’s office, missing his cardkeys to the basement lab.

But the hour passed largely without incident. Largely. Towards the end of it, just when EVA and Mantis figured it would be acceptable to call Liquid back to the hotel, Mantis caught the security guard who’d been suspicious of the chemical shower earlier talking to the same researcher whom Liquid had stolen the cardkeys off of. They had a short discussion about tonight’s confusing events, and then something must have occurred to the researcher because he suited up and went in the virus lab — and when he got back out, serenely told the guard to hit the alarm. The whole process took about twenty minutes, but the alarm was indeed hit and it started blaring all throughout the building.

“Fuck,” Liquid said out loud.

“Just take the window out,” EVA said over Codec, grabbing her keys and running to the room door, “you’re only on the second floor. I’ll pick you up in ninety seconds.”

But just Liquid’s luck that the window was either jammed or not the kind that could be opened. Breaking it would attract too much attention. He turned around and took off running out of the breakroom, respirator bouncing against his leg and M9 at the ready just in case.

*Thirteen shots left, Eli,* Mantis reminded him, pacing the now-empty hotel room.

*I know, I know.*

*And if you let yourself be seen by any of the security cameras—*

*It’ll be even worse than if I was caught by any of the guards, yes, I know! Which way do I turn?*

*Right. Then left. There are two guards waiting at the end of the hallway.*

Liquid spent two more of his limited tranquilizer darts on the guards, sending them down before they could really process his appearance. He continued running, the swift, careful steps of a well-trained natural-born soldier who felt nothing but excited when alarms screeched, and Mantis did his best to match his composure, following his route on the map and guiding him towards an exit.

*Security camera on your right. Shoot it before you get in its visual range.*

The darts didn’t have much stopping power in and of themselves, so it took him three shots before the camera was disabled. Eight darts left. Another researcher. Seven darts.

*You’re almost there.*

*Good,* Liquid thought, ducking behind a corner as a security guard fired at him, the sound of the gun deafeningly loud in the echoing hallway, especially when combined with the alarm and the sirens outside.

“Eli,” EVA said over Codec, “looks like you’ll have to walk.”

“What?” Liquid said, leaning around the corner and shooting the guard who had shot at him - six left now — “what are you doing?”

“Distracting the cops. Meet you back at the hotel in half an hour.” There was the sound of her
revving her motorcycle just before she signed off.

*Just at the end of this hallway, Eli, Mantis told him. Through the door.*

“Right,” Liquid said out loud.

—wait. *There’s a security camera.*

“I’ll shoot it.”

*And five armed police officers. That leaves you with just one dart for the camera.*

Liquid swore. “That’ll never take it out!”

*I know, I know - I’m trying to find another way——*

EVA came back on Codec. “Change of plans again,” she half-yelled, “be ready to go in thirty seconds, Eli.”

“What?!?”

“I’ll be right outside the door, just don’t get shot!”

Alright. Thirty seconds (twenty-seven now), five cops - tranquillizing all five of them before they opened fire was going to be an impossibility, Liquid was good but he wasn’t Revolver fucking Ocelot. And there was a camera he wasn’t going to be able to take out in less than three shots - probably more considering this was an outdoors camera, by definition sturdier than any in the hallways - and last he checked EVA hadn’t brought weaponry other than this Beretta. Shit. No matter how he cut it, he didn’t have enough darts, and his allotted time was rapidly ticking away.

He should have just taken his SOCOM.

Chapter End Notes

All of the viruses Liquid mentions (except FOXDIE, obviously) are actually being studied at the CDC lab in Atlanta. Seriously, it’s on their website. Although their website doesn’t say how many of them were being researched there in 2004… also, I guess putting VSPB at their headquarters is kind of an assumption on my part, but their phone number *does* have an Atlanta area code, so…

The basement thing is, I’m sure, completely bullshit. And while I did make nods to it, my research on actual isolation protocol for BSL-4 labs ended up pretty much completely wasted because Liquid Snake dgaf. \_\_(ツ)_\_/¯ However the process for inactivating a virus is accurate near as I can figure - I was working off of a .pdf put out by Bio Products Laboratory Ltd.
Liquid had twenty seconds to get past an unavoidable camera, tranquilize five armed police officers out for his blood, and meet up with EVA just outside the CDC headquarters. He only had six tranquilizer darts left for his borrowed M9, he could hear security guards running down a perpendicular hallway towards him, and to top it all off he was starting to get a headache from the fact that Mantis was less than three miles from here, knew exactly what was going on, and was in a borderline panic about Liquid getting out of there safely.

Liquid had an odd habit he’d picked up from Venom of ranking how well he’d done on a mission - not for any tangible reason, simply because he found it satisfying. The way this was going, he definitely wasn’t going to give himself anything higher than a B rank.

The door he ran up on was glass, and the glass shattered as one of the assembled policemen standing mere yards away from it fired - missed Liquid entirely, and he didn’t even slow, just kept sprinting, yanking a labcoat off of a coatrack next to the door. Hopefully this would work. He didn’t have time to stop and consider a backup plan in case it didn’t.

Right before he barrelled through the door he flung the coat up in the air; it billowed as it caught the humid September breeze, and for a brief second it blocked the security camera’s view in a blur of white - he dashed underneath it, shouldering one of the cops hard, jamming the M9 against his stomach and firing at the same time.

There was a lot of gunfire all at once.

But if there was one thing Liquid was better at than grievously injuring himself and brushing it off, it was coming out of bad situations miraculously unscathed. By the time the labcoat hit the ground, all the police officers were out cold on the ground, darts sticking out of various body parts, and EVA was astride her rumbling motorcycle a few yards away, Liquid’s SOCOM smoking in one hand.

Liquid glanced behind him. The security camera above the door was quite obviously blown to hell.

“What are you waiting for?” EVA shouted, “get on!!”

Liquid jumped on the motorcycle right behind her, and in the heat of the moment it didn’t occur to him that grabbing his mother around the waist was kind of weird and awkward. By the time the security guards he’d heard earlier were upon the wrecked, open door, the only direct evidence of Liquid and EVA was the sound of a motorcycle tearing away into the humid Atlanta night and a lingering scent of gasoline.

“What are you waiting for?” EVA shouted, “get on!!”

“Old?” EVA said, “I got this in 2001!”

“That makes it three years old, and-“ he winced as EVA jumped the sidewalk and took off down an unlit alley, “-the way you treat your motorcycles, three years is more like thirty.”

“I don’t want to hear that comment from someone who turned 32 this year. Now, I’m about to turn, Eli, so you’d better squeeze your knees against the bike if you don’t want to lose your leg.”
She executed a sharp ninety-degree turn and they were off down a road, still putting a significant amount of distance between them and the sound of sirens, but now going the opposite direction as they had earlier.

“You know, Mother,” Liquid said, “if I’m 32, then you’re officially old enough to be a grandmother.”

“Oh, shut up. You and David are both sterile anyway.”

“David?”

“Solid Snake.”

“Oh.” Somehow it had never occurred to him that Solid would have a given name, too. Or at least, he’d never wondered about it. They kept driving, the yellow light of streetlamps casting stripes over them and long shadows behind them.

Undeterred by a red light, EVA nimbly dodged all the traffic in the intersection before jumping the sidewalk and cutting through an alley again. Two men having an intimate conversation in the middle of it sprang apart as EVA hurtled through the three-foot space between them. One of them pulled a gun and started firing at their backs.

“I think we interrupted something,” Liquid said, ducking.

“Probably a drug deal, this is Atlanta after all,” EVA replied, “so, good for us. We’re helping keep the streets clean. Hmm… I think I’d make a good vigilante superhero, what do you think, Eli?”

“I think if the police are chasing us, that makes us the bad guys. Are you sure this bike can’t go any faster?” Judging by the continued gunfire, they were going through gang territory and people were shooting at them simply because other people are already shooting at them, which marked them as a target, and in all likelihood there was going to be a fair amount of them shooting at each other in response to the sound of gunshots, too. Such was life in a gang war.

“I don’t want to be too hard on her!”

“You- Aren’t you going to trash it anyway?! They’re going to be looking for it!”

“Oh, please,” EVA scoffed, “this isn’t the only black motorcycle in existence. I shouldn’t even have to change out the plates, they might not have gotten them - I’ve got this special coating on my license plate that distorts it in cameras…”

“Nevermind,” Liquid said. He wasn’t too enthused about the idea of getting shot in the back by some lowlife, nor was he about to ask EVA to hand him her helmet while she was driving - so he groped around her front (trying very hard to make sure it at no point resembled actual groping) until he found his SOCOM, then twisted around, one arm steadying himself at EVA’s waist, the other held out, returning fire. “We can at least make it to the hotel, yes?”

“Just trust me, Eli.”

She turned sharply - whooping excitedly, and Liquid couldn’t help but laugh - and zoomed them beneath a freeway overpass, cutting through traffic and driving halfway up the concrete slope at the edge. They were airborne for several seconds when they ran out of ground, then came down hard on the sidewalk.

“Oh, goddammit! Was that really necessary?!” Liquid yelled.
“Did we lose the gang members?”

“You mean did we successfully incite a riot and distract them? Apparently. The sirens are getting closer, though.”

“So I hear.” EVA executed a hairpin turn, then decelerated so fast Liquid almost broke his nose on the back of her helmet. “Put your gun away, now.”

“What-?”

“I said put it away - don’t do anything suspicious, okay? Take my helmet.”

Liquid blinked, then carefully removed EVA’s helmet from behind and put it on himself. It was significantly easier to use both hands - anchoring himself to the motorcycle seat with just his thighs - now that EVA was scrupulously following traffic laws and calmly merging onto the freeway. And it was probably going to help that, if he was wearing a motorcycle helmet, no one was going to look twice at his sneaking suit.

“Act natural,” she said.

“That’s an oxymoron.”

“True. Okay, where’s your hotel? Probably not a good idea to go back to mine, so I already told Mantis to meet us up there - and to bring my bags, too, looks like I’ll have to sleep on your couch tonight.”

“Hm. Let me think…” He looked around, trying to get his bearings. “Oh, wait - big yellow billboard that just says ‘Jesus’ on it. Get off at the next exit.”

By the time EVA and Liquid arrived, Mantis was already there (EVA had driven her motorcycle much, much faster than the cab Mantis had taken, but the cab hadn’t wove all around the city on the way there); he was pacing the room, somewhat nervous, and the TV was turned on to a news channel.

“—suspect has been described as an adult female. She fled on a black Triumph motorcycle, license plate unknown. Motorists are advised that she is armed and was last seen headed south on Clairmont Road—“

“Well, that was exciting,” Liquid said, flopping down on the bed. “I even ended it with one dart to spare. I think I’d give this one an ‘A’.”

“That was close,” Mantis said, “far too close for comfort, Eli. You could have been killed, or the Patriots could have found out that we were after FOXDIE—“

“Well, I didn’t, and they didn’t,” Liquid said, “and FOXDIE is dealt with.”

“You’re sure they don’t have backups somewhere?” EVA said, sitting down and kicking off her boots. “I don’t think you’ll be able to get away with this more than once.”

Liquid waved a hand. “If there are backups, we weren’t able to find any information about them.”

“I suppose Octopus is likely still looking through Dr. Hunter’s files,” Mantis said.

“True… but sooner or later we’re going to know very definitively, I’m sure. Right now I’m only doing the best I can with the information I’ve got.”
“Arguably better to do that than wait around for better information,” EVA said with a shrug. “So, Eli - are you in the mood for room service?”

“Only if you’re paying, Mother.”

Octopus threw open the door to the women’s barracks. “Oh my god, Wolf,” he said loudly, “wake up. The boss is on TV.”

“Whuh?” Wolf sat up blearily.

“C’mon, it’s great.” He disappeared, and faintly she heard him call, “Hey, Ocelot! Get in here!”

What Octopus had meant by ‘the boss is on TV’ turned out to mean that there was a news flash about a break-in at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Backdrop to all the scrolling text about how all viruses and biological materials were secure and accounted for, there was a minor riot in Kirkwood, and the requisite election bulletins was a grainy security footage still of a helmeted woman on a Triumph Bonneville T100 ramping over the hood of a police car.

Ocelot pinched the bridge of his nose. “Oh, no,” he said, “I’d recognize that jumpsuit anywhere.”

“Is… is that EVA?” Wolf said, rubbing her eyes.

“Yes. I requested she provide the boss with assistance, but I meant intel, not- oh, nevermind. This works out.”

“There hasn’t been anything yet about the boss per se,” Octopus said, “just about his mother. I think she might have been the only one witnessed.”

“As I said, it works out,” Ocelot said, “if the ‘trespasser’ is only identified as a woman, then that will lend credence to the idea that it was Dr. Hunter who sabotaged FOXDIE after abandoning the project.”

“Do you think the boss actually succeeded, Ocelot?” Wolf said.

“It’s not like the news is going to say ‘Also this top-secret biological weapon the government was developing was destroyed during the heist’ or anything…” Octopus mumbled. “Although I bet it’s going to be all over the conspiracy theory boards in the morning. Hell, I could go check right now.”

“…Octopus, how long has it been since you last slept?”

“Four days?”

“We’ll find out the mission details when Liquid and Mantis get back,” Ocelot said, “I’m going back to bed. Octopus, you probably should too.”

“Once the caffeine buzz wears off again.”

“Fine. Good night.”

“He really is getting old,” Wolf yawned. “Although… I myself am tired, too… but we are not all supposed to be asleep at the same time. Wake me up again when you go to bed, Octopus.”

Octopus sighed. “That rule is so much easier to follow when Mantis is around…”
“Enjoy your vacation, boss?” Octopus said, leaning back in his chair.

“Everything went smoothly,” Liquid replied.

“We saw the news.”

“Oh.”

“I suppose not getting caught still counts as ‘going smoothly’,” Wolf said. “How did the actual ‘vacation’ aspect of it go?”

He tossed a small plush wolf at her. “Bought you a souvenir at the zoo.”

“…oh my god, it’s adorable. Thank you.”

“What, nothing for me?” Octopus said.

“I got postcards for you and Raven.”

“And Wolf gets a stuffed animal? This is favoritism.”

“They’re nice postcards,” Liquid protested.

Ocelot glanced up from the papers he was going over. “I assume Mantis would have killed you if you bought something for me in front of him.”

Liquid shrugged. “You can look through the photos we took if you like.” He’d already triple-checked that all the naughty ones had been deleted.

“Mm. By the way, boss, take off those sunglasses.”

“My sunglasses? What’s wrong with them?”

“They don’t suit you.”

The pictures on the digital camera Liquid had brought to Atlanta certainly seemed to show a typical vacation, with various shots of tourist destinations around the city, only some of which had Liquid in them (noticeably better shots than the ones that didn’t, Mantis knew his way around a camera more) and very few of which had a clearly reluctant Mantis in them - but enough to establish that they were both there. EVA was in none of the pictures although they did have photos of the Shakespeare Tavern. The afternoon they had wasted most of staking out the CDC was covered with pictures of Centennial Olympic Park: photos of a picnic lunch, the fountain, the walkway and statues, all taken around noon, and then after that photos of other things around the park taken later in the day. It really looked like they’d spent all afternoon there and had simply forgotten to pull out the camera for most of it.

“I’d call this a well-established alibi,” Ocelot said.

Wolf was leaning over his shoulder, watching him scroll though the camera. “Boss, why do you have 75 pictures of a snake at the zoo?”

“It’s their black mamba,” Liquid said, “I, ah, thought it was cute. Look, it looks like it’s smiling.”

“It is kind of cute, actually…”

Ocelot put down the camera. “Where’s Mantis?”
“He want to his little deserted hangout half an hour ago to take his pills,” Liquid said, jerking his head in an arbitrary direction. “Why?”

“Just wondering. There’s someone I need you to meet - it’s very important.”

“Oh? Who?”

“Our commander-in-chief.”

Liquid blinked. “The president?”

“Yes.”

“…huh. Why is this so important?”

Ocelot shrugged. “To be honest, I would rather he explain it himself. You two are scheduled to meet next week.”

“Ah. Alright. A little more advance notice would have been nice, but alright.”

“This should be interesting,” Octopus said.

“Oh, speaking of interesting,” Liquid said, “Wolf, why on earth does my office door look different now?”

Wolf sighed. “It’s a long story, boss…”

Raven came back the next day, and, being none too interested in his postcard, simply attached it to the announcements board right under the impaled Eye of Providence. Someone else had printed out one of Liquid’s nicer photos of the Zoo Atlanta’s black mamba and also pinned that up, but they never found out who.

Around that time another assignment came in.

“…fascinating,” Liquid said out loud, reviewing it. He stood up and left his office, finding the others slacking off in a breakroom. (Specifically, Octopus was sleeping on the couch, Wolf and Raven were playing cards, Ocelot had commandeered the TV and was watching some Western, and Mantis was nowhere to be seen, as usual.)

“Did any of you actually want confirmation that the CDC incident was pulled off properly?”

Everyone (except Octopus, obviously) looked up at him, and Ocelot paused his movie. “New orders came in?” he said.

Liquid nodded, waving the paper around a bit. “We’ve an assassination order for one Dr. Naomi Hunter.”

“Oh,” Raven said, “at least we already know exactly where she is.”

“That’s the problem, Raven, we’re keeping an eye on her movements because we might need her later. Killing her at this point would just be counter-productive.”

“You can’t exactly refuse an assignment,” Ocelot said. “It might be better to write her off. What we might need her for is nebulous at best right now, and if she ever figures out we were investigating her over FOXDIE and not Dr. Clark’s death, well…”
“…she might judge it safer for her to turn us in to the Patriots,” Liquid said, “possibly in exchange for amnesty for Dr. Clark’s death. Yes. I realize that.”

“What exactly might we need her for?” Wolf asked, raising a hand.

“I don’t find it terribly unlikely that we wouldn’t benefit, at some point, from having a scientist in our pocket,” Liquid pointed out, “and while we have some damn good blackmail on Dr. Hunter, there’s no guarantee that anyone on our R&D team can be readily convinced to our side.”

“So what are we going to do?” Raven said, shuffling his cards.

Liquid half-frowned, briefly. “Wolf, I’m giving you this assignment,” he said. “I know I’ve complained in the past about how dramatically long you like to drag out your wetworks, but it’ll come in handy here. You can stall for time for at least a month before anyone will notice anything, since that’s normal for you…”

“That is fine,” Wolf said, “although I still think you of all people have no right to judge me for being dramatic.”

“Tch. Just, go to where she is and do your stalking bit until I give you further instructions. Either you’re going to have to kill her or capture her - hopefully we’ll find out which while you’re still savoring the hunt.”

“Can do, boss.”

“I don’t like this, Eli.”

“You’re going to have to be more specific than that, Mantis.”

Another night, another argument with Mantis. It had started really innocuously, with Liquid attempting to come on to him, but Mantis very obviously had other things on his mind and Liquid had eventually given up, instead curling up with his back to Mantis and the blanket pointedly yanked up to his chin.

“You’re practically taking orders from Ocelot.”

“I am not. I won’t deny taking his advice or information, but he’s our ‘liaison’ for the Patriots. In other words, he’s the only one who knows what the hell is going on around here.”

Mantis sighed irritably. “I will grant that we do need someone to spy on the Patriots for us,” he said, “and specifically someone who has been in the organization long enough that they are capable of getting useful intel. But why Ocelot? Why not EVA?”

“She’s not around,” Liquid said, although truthfully it was just because he didn’t want to. Tearing around Atlanta on a motorcycle being chased by cops and gang members might have been a great bonding experience, but the idea of having to rely on his mother nonetheless put Liquid off.

He could almost feel Mantis’ annoyed glower at his back.

“How is relying on Ocelot any better?”

“…”

“After everything he did to you…”
“Mantis, I’m only going to say this once, so listen well: Shut the fuck up.”

He heard a sharp intake of breath, and then something - not a hand, a psychokinetic tug - yanked at his shoulder and pushed him against the bed, flat on his back. Liquid writhed furiously, unable to push himself off the mattress but with enough movement that he could turn his head to glare at Mantis and take a swipe at him — which he dodged.

“Don’t talk to me like that, Eli,” Mantis said icily.

“Let go of me,” Liquid spat.

Maybe it was the genuine anger that did it, but Mantis released his hold on Liquid and Liquid sat up, still glaring at him. “Even if I did come to believe that Ocelot was abusing me nine years ago like you so desperately want me to, at this point, what the hell would it change? It was nine years ago and it we would still need him. What would you expect me to do - entirely give up on the Patriots? on my revenge?!”

“…”

Yes, that’s exactly what I thought, Liquid grumbled to himself, turning away.

“I just…”

“Drop it, Mantis.”

Mantis shut up. A moment later Liquid felt his hands at his sides, then around his front, pulling him back to Mantis so that his back was pressed against Mantis’ chest and Mantis’ chin was resting on his shoulder.

“You know how worried I am.”

“I know how possessive you are.”

“Don’t misinterpret me, Eli. Ocelot has repeatedly taken advantage of you and never let you move on from everything that happened between 1991 and 1995. Those events are still eating away at you from the inside.”

“…when have I ever moved on from anything? I don’t forgive and I don’t forget, Mantis. It’s not who I am.”

“You certainly seem to have forgiven Ocelot.”

“I…”

Mantis’ hands slipped down his stomach, one of them lingering only slightly - but still noticeably - over the upside-down-V-shaped scar. Of course. After arguing, sex. Like Mantis wanted to distract him or himself or both. “Any shallow anger you might have felt towards him over the years does not count,” he said softly. “Violent sex does not count. You have never done anything to try and make him pay for what he did to you, and you have actively prevented me from doing it in your stead.”

“Mantis… there’s nothing to forgive him for; he never did anything wrong.”

Mantis’ hands briefly clenched, fingernails scraping Liquid’s skin, and then he relaxed again. “You lying whore,” he murmured.

Liquid wanted to keep being mad at him but Mantis’ words went straight to his dick and he twisted
around in his arms, and crushed his body against his, kissing and nipping at his neck. Violent sex…
Mantis had mentioned violent sex, which admittedly Liquid was a fan of - fighting tooth and claw in
a struggle for dominance before he’d finally been roughed up enough and had enough blood under
his nails that he gave himself over. That was how, with few exceptions, every time with Ocelot had
gone ever since that day when he’d laid on Ocelot’s bed and watched him bleed while he was
getting dressed.

But he never did that with Mantis. Sure, every so often he could convince Mantis to be a bit less-
than-gentle with him, but Liquid never got to do it in turn — Mantis was essentially a glass canon so
if *Mantis* held back then Liquid would genuinely harm him without thinking and if *Liquid* held back
then Mantis would dominate him too thoroughly. So Liquid settled for the bit of leeway that arbitrary
rules had given him, where he could assert that he wasn’t *that* submissive by breaking rules on
purpose and then squirming in pleasure when Mantis administered his punishment.

And it always ended up like this. Mantis ran his hand down over Liquid’s spine, reaching his ass and
kneading it, and Liquid rocked his hips against him, grinding on his stomach and sucking at his
throat, moaning immodestly. So what if Mantis was trying to distract him? He wanted to be
distracted. They never argued about things Liquid actually wanted to *think* about.

“Have you ever considered we might have been making a mistake for the past four years?” Mantis
said, pressing him closer.

“I-I don’t care,” Liquid mumbled against his skin. “I don’t care. I l-love you. That’s all that m-
matters.”

“Hn.”

“Mantis,” Liquid breathed over his ear, “please, fuck me.”

Mantis had stopped holding out on him years ago. He pushed Liquid back on the mattress, settling
between his legs as the bedside table drawer shuffled itself open, a bottle of lube coming to Mantis’
hand — he stretched and prepared, and carefully entered Liquid without much ceremony, but god
was he gentle—-

“O-Oh,” Liquid groaned, shifting his hips up, forcing Mantis’ cock deeper, “oh, I-I love this…”

“Shh. Do not move around so much.”

“Nnmgh… ahh, M-Mantis— that’s g-good… that f-feels good…“

“Hush, Eli.”

“Ah— mmm… mm… oh… hh…“

“Good boy.”

Chapter End Notes

I just want everyone to know that there is indeed a big yellow billboard that only says
JESUS on it visible from a certain freeway out of Atlanta. (If I remember correctly, it’s
I-85 and the billboard is actually more visible on your way in to Atlanta, but if you’re on
the back of a motorcycle and looking around I suppose you’d see it anyway. Also, I’m
pretty sure it is in fact right in front of a hotel.)
The Zoo Atlanta no longer has a black mamba, since it died earlier this year, but the one they did have had been there since 1993. It's true, I asked the Zoo ATL about it on Twitter! Although he didn’t have a name before they named him Kobe in 2015, so I couldn’t include that…
Roughly one week later, a Beechcraft C-12 Huron from the Army’s Aviation Branch was sent to FOXHOUND headquarters to pick Liquid up for his oh-so-important meeting with the President in Washington, D.C. — which prompted a mild amount of bitching from him about the fact that FOXHOUND hadn’t had any kind of aircraft of its own since, what, 1999? and if only they still did then they wouldn’t have to rely on the Aviation Branch or, god forbid, the other branches of the military for transportation most of the time. Ocelot was to go with him, and, after a protracted shouting match that everyone heard even though they’d had the decency to do it behind closed doors in Liquid’s office, Mantis as well. Although during the meeting itself he was supposed to stay at Fort McNair, where they’d been put up for the few days before and after the meeting.

“I’m surprised this is going through all the official channels,” Liquid muttered.

“Well, there’s an official excuse,” Ocelot said, “the question of dissolving FOXHOUND has been on the table since the Galzburg incident - this is just supposed to be the commander-in-chief meeting with you personally so he can weigh in on the issue.”

“I see.” Although he hadn’t known about FOXHOUND being actually targeted for dissolution… just repeated budget cuts… Liquid couldn’t help but feel concerned even though he knew full well FOXHOUND wasn’t long for this world the minute they’d decided to take on the Patriots.

“And what, exactly, is your excuse for being here?” Mantis said coldly.

Ocelot shrugged. “No one gives me a second thought around the President,” he said. “And you?”

“…”

“He’s my ‘bodyguard’,” Liquid said, rolling his eyes and climbing into the Huron. “Come on, let’s not keep them waiting.”

Rather predictably, Liquid fell asleep within 45 minutes - he had a marked tendency to nod off in vehicles if he wasn’t the one driving/piloting - leaving Mantis and Ocelot in an awkward silence. (And the pilot, too, but the pilot was minding his own business and between his headset, radio, and sound of the engines, he couldn’t really hear his passengers’ conversation in the first place.)

“Bodyguard?” Ocelot said dryly, speaking in Russian anyway, “what exactly are you defending him from?”

Mantis glared at him.

Ocelot sighed. “…no, I suppose I really don’t need you to answer that. How about a different question?”

“What do you want?”
“I know you and Liquid met EVA a few times back in 1985 and ’86 - and that she didn’t get cybernetic implants until 1988. Did you read her mind back then?”

“…”

“You did, didn’t you? It’s an unshakeable habit, every time you meet someone, to read their mind. You’ve been that way for a long time.”

“……”

“Am I wrong?”

“No,” Mantis said at length. “I did read her mind, back then.”

“And…? What did you see?”

“I…” He looked away deliberately. “It was a long time ago, and I did not find very much of it to be relevant to Eli and I. I have honestly forgotten.”

Ocelot raised an eyebrow at him. “Have you now.”

“Really, I have,” Mantis said defensively, “everything I found out from her back then, Eli knew on some level as well. He could not help but absorb the information from me.”

“Ah, yes,” Ocelot said, “but that doesn’t preclude you from putting the facts together afterwards. As you got older, saw more of the world… perhaps you reached a few conclusions about things you saw in EVA’s mind that didn’t make sense to you at the time. Conclusions that Liquid might not reach, being more a man of action than thought…”

A long breath hissed out through Mantis’ mask. “How was I supposed to tell him that his mother had been with Cipher since- since almost the very beginning?”

Ocelot chuckled, turning to look out the window. “I would have thought that’d be a given,” he said, “he’s known for a long time that it was Cipher who ordered Les Enfants Terribles.”

“Yes, well - before we met EVA, he had never thought much about his mother; he only assumed that she was a nameless surrogate who had nothing to do with anything. Then…” He trailed off.

“…he ended up liking EVA too much to believe she really was with Cipher?”

“He wanted to believe she wanted him.”

There was a long pause. Liquid mumbled something unintelligible in his sleep.

“I’m sure you noticed, of course,” Ocelot said eventually, “that he didn’t seem too concerned about it when I revealed that she’s with the Patriots.”

“Because you were the one who told him,” Mantis said quietly.

“Oh?”

“Sometimes he resents me when I warn him about people. He thinks I want to isolate him.”

“For his own good?”

“I don’t. I do not want him to be isolated - I want him to be safe. But I cannot trust his judgement off
of the battlefield — he is completely incompetent on an interpersonal level, it can’t be helped. But I do not want him to be *alone*, and I do not want to drive others *away* from him. Only those that could hurt him.”

“And EVA?”

“…I… would rather trust her. Even if she is with the Patriots. I do believe that she is a double agent.”

Ocelot finally looked back at him. “See,” he said, “that’s exactly why Liquid had no problem finding out EVA is with the Patriots - because even *before* I told everyone about her I already made it clear she is on *our* side. It had nothing to do with the fact that I was the one to say it.”

“I would love to believe that,” Mantis said bitterly.

There was another pause, but shorter this time.

“Another question, if I may,” Ocelot said.

“*Now* what?”

“Four years ago, when Liquid invited me to the unit - what exactly did you *do*?”

Mantis bristled at him. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, I know that you seduced him to keep him out of *my* bed,” Ocelot said, “assuming that he would remain faithful to you… which, as it turns out, he didn’t. Doesn’t.”

“…”

“But you know, there’s something else. There’s an extra *hostility* towards me that you never displayed back at Outer Heaven, and I don’t think it can be explained by the fact that I no longer outrank you. And, really, it is odd that you wouldn’t cool down at least a *little* over the course of five years.”

“I do not know what you are referring to,” Mantis said through gritted teeth.

“Hm? How funny. Here I thought for sure you’d realized that, when it comes to Liquid, you and I really haven’t conducted ourselves any differently.”

“Shut up. Shut *up*,” Mantis hissed, “I swear I will throw you out of this plane. Eli is not awake to stop me.”

Ocelot raised his hands, settling back in his seat. “Calm down,” he said. “It was merely an observation.”

“I am not interested in hearing your *observations*, you-“

“How’s your ability to entirely take over people’s wills these days? Are you still capable of that?”

Mantis went completely stiff, and glanced at the still-sleeping Liquid. No. He hadn’t— had he-?? Had Mantis simply not noticed—?

“Liquid didn’t tell me anything,” Ocelot interrupted him. “Just another observation. Or rather, just an unprompted question that your *reaction* answered loud and clear.”

“I-“
“So that’s how it is, then? When he invited me to the unit, you deprived him of his will.” His eyes shifted over to Liquid momentarily, then back to Mantis. “You obviously gave it back, of course, I doubt I’d be here if you didn’t, but that doesn’t change the fact that you took it over.”

“No, I didn’t—“

“Then you threatened to.”

“I… I- I just…” He growled, scrunching in on himself like a threatened pillbug. “I should have done it,” he whispered harshly, “that temporary loss of control would have been better for him than for you to come back and take advantage of him again. He never would have forgiven me but it would have been worth it.”

“…I see.”

“I am not like you, Ocelot.”

“Stripping his will from him, and without his consent, too,” Ocelot said in a low voice, “I don’t know about you, Mantis, but that sounds a lot like rape to me. His mind instead of his body, but still the same principle.”

Mantis twitched. “It’s- it’s different—“

“You don’t honestly believe that?”

“Gkh… at least I did not actually do it! I changed my mind!!”

“You still threatened him with it,” Ocelot said, “you still decided to do it in the first place. Whether or not you carried through is irrelevant. You were willing, and that’s what counts.”

“No- no—!“

“Poor Eli,” Ocelot purred, “for the past decade, caught between two men whom he knows are capable of raping him if it’s for his own good.”

“I hate you, Ocelot,” Mantis choked, clutching himself, shuddering forward until his head was between his knees, “I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you—I hate you, I hate you—I hate you, I hate you—I hate you, I hate you— I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you—I hate you——“

Liquid jolted awake, and rubbed his forehead like he’d suddenly developed a headache. He glanced at Mantis, who was curled in some kind of sitting fetal position, repetitively muttering something in Russian, then turned to give Ocelot a sour look.

“What did you do to him??”

“I didn’t do anything,” Ocelot said smoothly.

Liquid gave him a look that clearly said he didn’t believe him. “What does ‘Я тебя ненавижу’ mean?”

“Your pronunciation is too bad for me to really say, boss.”

Liquid glared at him, then turned to Mantis, putting a hand on his shoulder- Mantis practically jumped away, stumbling and sprawling all over the floor of the plane. The pilot glanced back at them.
“Stay away from me,” Mantis snarled at Liquid.

Liquid blinked. “Mantis,” he started.

Mantis waved him off, sitting up. “It… is nothing, Eli,” he said after several moments. “My apologies. I do not know what came over me.” He stood, and re-took his original seat next to Liquid, opposite side of the Huron as Ocelot.

Liquid was utterly perplexed. He spent almost a full minute looking back and forth between Mantis and Ocelot, who were now both pointedly ignoring each other - Mantis staring fixedly straight ahead with his hands gripping his knees hard, and Ocelot gazing serenely out the window, legs crossed - before realizing that if he ever was going to find out what had just happened between them, it wasn’t going to be right now. So he shrugged, leaned his head on Mantis’ shoulder (Mantis hardly reacted) and went back to sleep.

They were just approaching Washington, D.C. airspace when Mantis finally broke the silence, still not looking at Ocelot.

“If I can ask a question of my own…”

“How were the Patriots founded? What on earth did you have to do with it?”

“Ah,” Ocelot said, glancing at him, “an excellent question, but now’s not the right time to answer it.”

What exactly had went down between Mantis and Ocelot was never explained to Liquid, apart from perhaps Mantis saying, unprompted, “Eli, I’m sorry” in the middle of night after they’d settled in at Fort McNair. Of course, Liquid was mostly asleep at the time and Mantis didn’t respond to his inarticulate request for clarification, so maybe he had only dreamed it.

The next morning Mantis was left at Fort McNair after he gave a very heated warning to Ocelot to behave professionally and not lay a finger on Eli or so help me I will— Liquid recommended he visit some D.C. sites that he might find interesting, like one of the Smithsonian museums or the Library of Congress (“You used to live here, I’m sure you can think of something…”), and he and Ocelot were escorted to the White House by some Secret Service detail or whatever the hell.

And, despite the White House being pretty heavily guarded, Liquid found himself idly thinking about how it actually wouldn’t be that hard to infiltrate it. He made note of its cameras and security features just by force of habit. Ocelot rolled his eyes.

The White House hallways were perhaps not filled with staff and/or guards bustling around, but populated enough that Liquid and Ocelot weren’t able to make any comments to each other without being interrupted by someone. They weren’t really alone until a hallway immediately outside the Oval Office, where they were afforded an extremely brief conversation. (Funny. Liquid would have thought that here of all places they’d see more Secret Security people. Perhaps the President had sent them away?)

“There is something I really should give you prior warning of,” Ocelot said.

“How?”

“You and your twin were not the only products of Les Enfants Terribles.”
“…say that ag-?”

Ocelot opened the door to the Oval Office. The sole person in there was seated at the desk with his back turned, although as soon as Ocelot and Liquid walked in he dramatically swivelled his chair around.

Liquid had to stop himself from saying *Bloody fucking hell* out loud.

“Ah, we meet at last,” the President said, standing up, “my older brother, Liquid Snake…”

Liquid blinked. “Er. Older?”

The President raised an eyebrow. “Yes, of course. You and Solid Snake were created four years before I.”

“Accelerated aging,” Ocelot explained.

Well, at least that explained why the President bore such a strong resemblance to Big Boss, certainly much more that Liquid did or even Solid judging by that photo Liquid had seen in his file— wait, no it most certainly did fucking not!

“Let’s back this up *several* steps,” Liquid said aggravatedly, “just what the hell-“

“I told you a minute ago,” Ocelot said, “Les Enfants Terribles produced *three* sons, not two.”

“You never mentioned the specific number or- and another thing, the bleeding President—??”

The President crossed his arms, huffing. “I would have thought you already knew.”

“I- was never told——“

“He doesn’t watch the news, sir,” Ocelot said dryly.

Liquid was sort of thrown for a loop at Ocelot using ‘sir’, but figured since he was talking to the goddam President of the United goddam States it was only expected. He brushed it off and attempted to justify himself: “I’ve no interest in keeping up with the election, it’s not like I vote anyway and I don’t even consider myself an American.”

“The election…?” the President said, “I’m running as the incumbent.”

Now Liquid really was thrown for a loop. “You’re running as a male sex de-“

“You’re thinking of an incubus, boss,” Ocelot said patiently.

“Oh.”

“Do you honestly not recognize me?” the President said.

Liquid frowned. In his mind the obvious answer was yes, of course he did, the President looked like a somewhat younger version of Big Boss with a neater hairstyle and both eyes, but if he said that then that would mean admitting that no, he hadn’t known what his commander-in-chief looked like up until now. Which was kind of pathetic.

But it wasn’t like it had been *relevant*.

There was a long, awkward pause in which Liquid refused to say anything, and he suddenly noticed
that, no, the President hadn’t been avoiding eye contact, he was just staring less-than-subtly at Liquid’s collar. Liquid self-consciously covered it with one hand. The President blinked, then turned to Ocelot. “I thought you said he was talkative.”

“He normally is, sir,” Ocelot said dryly. He had the kind of expression on his face that said he was thinking he’d made a terrible mistake that it was too late to back out of now. “Well, I suppose in this case a proper introduction is in order. Boss, this is the 43rd President of the United States, George Sears, better known in… certain circles… as Solidus Snake, the third and final product of Les Enfants Terribles.”

Solidus finally looked Liquid in the eyes and extended a hand. Liquid stared at it mistrustfully for half a moment before shaking it.

“Unlike you and your twin,” Ocelot went on, “there was very little modification of Solidus’ DNA, and genetic contribution from from the egg donor was effectively eliminated. In other words, he’s a much more perfect copy of your fa- of Big Boss than either of you.”

“I see,” Liquid said, “and I suppose he already knows me.” At the same time, Solidus looked a tad confused at Ocelot correcting himself over ‘your father’.

“He was adopted, sir,” Ocelot muttered to Solidus, then said to Liquid, “Solidus is generally included in more information than you ever were. For one thing, he was directly raised by the Patriots instead of being sent off to foster parents.”

Liquid rolled his eyes. He had known even at an extremely young age that his so-called foster parents in England had really been more like handlers, and he had never been particularly sad that they’d abandoned him in Africa. Good riddance…

“And then the Patriots had me installed as President,” Solidus said, crossing his arms, “and all year I have had to waste time on my election campaign when I already know that my administration is set to continue through the next term as well.”

“I’m… sorry to hear that?” Liquid said, unable to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

This working relationship was off to a wonderful start.

Ocelot must have been thinking the same thing, judging by the way he pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed deeply. “Just to get directly to the point…” he said, “Solidus and I have been plotting against the Patriots for the last several years. Although I didn’t consult him before bringing you and the rest of FOXHOUND on board with our plans, he has - graciously - decided to coordinate with you on this. In fact, due to his greater experience with their inner workings, and the fact that he’s your commander-in-chief anyway, FOXHOUND is going to be assigned the position of ’the muscle’, as needed.”

Liquid frowned. It was obvious Ocelot was telling Liquid there was no point in protesting, if not in so many words, although Solidus didn’t give any indication that he picked up on that himself. Did he simply not care? Or did Solidus require even less subtlety than Liquid did?

“That seems only natural,” he said, slightly narrowing his eyes, “but, of course, I think I’d personally be more comfortable with this arrangement if I had some kind of guarantee that you are at no point going to throw us under the bus, so to speak?”

Solidus raised an eyebrow. “I hardly think you’re in a position to negotiate, Liquid.”

“Oh?”
“If you refuse to accept these terms, it’d be just as easy for me to turn your entire unit over to the Patriots. Certainly that would remove any suspicion brewing against me.”

“Sir, that’s a little drastic,” Ocelot said.

“Then at the very least I could officially dissolve the unit and have them all denaturalized and deported.”

“I’d like to see you try to deport Raven back to a reservation in Alaska,” Liquid said, glaring at Solidus.

“That’s entirely besides the point,” Solidus said, gesturing grandiously - which unsettlingly reminded Liquid of Ocelot, just how long had these two known each other? - “FOXHOUND itself is unneeded. If you’d rather go this your own way, then I can always use Dead Cell—“

Liquid laughed in his face. “Dead Cell? That worthless bunch of—“

“A terror attack simulation group established specifically by President Sears that already answers directly to him,” Ocelot interrupted, “yes, that Dead Cell.”

Whoops. Liquid hadn’t known that Dead Cell was Solidus’ pet project. Might not be the best idea to insult them right in front of him - but still, them? What the hell could they do to the Patriots, gun down a couple of their agents with rubber bullets? attack an installment with dummy missiles?

Recomposing himself, Liquid waved a hand. “There’s no need to bring them into this,” he said, “whatever direct assaults you might need on any Patriot projects, I can promise you FOXHOUND will be a better choice than any other special forces unit in the whole country, possibly even the whole world.” A habit of talking up FOXHOUND in front of superiors? Who, him? “And, of course, we’re all still relatively new to this whole resistance thing, so it would be much more convenient for us to join up with you as our de jure leader.”

“I assume you wish to remain FOXHOUND’s de facto leader,” Solidus said.

“Well, that’s only natural, too, isn’t it? We can retain our organization as a group even under more… subversive circumstances than usual. All I ask is an agreement that my unit will not be your sacrificial lambs, brother.”

“What makes you so convinced that—“

“I’m not completely naïve about what goes on in the Patriots’ ranks,” Liquid said, smiling, “nor am I ignorant of what you might feel the need to do in order to delay cutting your ties with them until the right time. In fact, you already gave your potential motive yourself.”

“Just agree to his terms, sir,” Ocelot said, “he’s not asking for very much, and FOXHOUND won’t be any use to you dead.”

…I suppose,” Solidus said, then extended a hand. “Very well. In a game of chess, one wouldn’t sacrifice a queen…“

Liquid shook his hand again. Somehow, he couldn’t help but feel he’d just been insulted.
The rest of the meeting with Solidus was, as probably was to be expected, unendurably boring: Solidus talked at length about the Patriots and how they worked (or at least what he knew of them), but none of it was new information - either Liquid had already heard about it from Ocelot, or else he’d deduced it on his own using his prior knowledge of Cipher. In fact, the only new tidbit of information was the existence of the so-called Wisemen’s Committee, although Solidus admitted it was only a rumor. Even if he took it very seriously, Liquid didn’t feel the need to himself until he got some kind of corroborating evidence for it. Hadn’t Cipher just been run by one guy?

On the plus side, Liquid got to become one of surely very few people who could say they had casually sat on the President’s desk. Solidus had attempted to make him get off it, but Liquid had only replied “You can’t tell off your older brother!” in mock indignation and remained exactly where he was, and Ocelot had advised Solidus to drop it, so he did. So, in essence, Liquid felt as though he’d established his dominance here.

Still, he wasn’t in a terribly good mood as he and Ocelot left the Oval Office — “Oh, and Ocelot,” Solidus had said as they were walking out, “as long as you’re in town tonight…” “Of course, sir,” Ocelot had responded, smiling blandly — and as soon as the door shut behind them and they were alone again, Liquid rounded on Ocelot, seizing him by the scarf and shoving him up against a wall.

“Who exactly is he?” he demanded.

Ocelot, who hadn’t made a single noise of protest when Liquid grabbed him, only raised an impassive eyebrow. “I’m not sure what you mean, boss.”

“How long have you been cavorting with him, Ocelot?”

“I first met him in Liberia in 1989 - we were introduced on Patriot business. But I didn’t see him again until 1998, when he was sworn in as one of the New York senators as set-up for his ‘campaign’ in 2000. That campaign was when I started… getting involved with him.”

“So… around the time you joined FOXHOUND, you also wormed your way into Solidus’ entourage.”

Ocelot frowned. “You make it sound so insidious,” he said, “I don’t do everything underhandedly, you know. His goals align with mine, so allying myself with him-“

“Which one of us do you consider your boss?” Liquid said, leaning slightly closer, pressing Ocelot a little harder into the wall.

“Hm?”

“Which of us do you defer to? Suppose we both gave you contradictory orders—“

“I wouldn’t turn down an order from either one of you. I’d find a way to fulfill both requests.”

“And if there isn’t a way?” He narrowed his eyes. “Let’s say Solidus orders you to kill me. I find out about this order and- well, I assume if I ordered you to kill him instead you’d just say you’d assassinate us both. But suppose I simply order you to stand down?”

“If Solidus ordered me to kill you,” Ocelot said very seriously, “then you would be dead long before you ever got the opportunity to order me to stand down. I wouldn’t even get my hands dirty.”
There was a long pause.

“But then, the same would apply to you,” Ocelot continued at length, “and either way, if one of you were to give that order I’d attempt to dissuade him. I won’t _argue_ against an order but if it’s counter-productive then I’m not above subtly convincing my boss to change his mind.”

“…well,” Liquid said, “I’ll just say this now, Ocelot: if Solidus ever orders you to sell out FOXHOUND, you _belay_ that order and report it to me. I’ll take matters into my own hands if it comes to that.”

“Yes, sir,” Ocelot said, then glanced to the side, breaking eye contact.

It was at that moment that Liquid realized how close he’d pushed his and Ocelot’s faces together, and that they were breathing each other’s air and their lips were only centimeters apart. Certainly that wouldn’t _look_ good if anyone should happen to come walking into the hallway right now.

Blushing furiously, Liquid quickly stepped back, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Anyway,” he said, “it’s going to come down to one or the other eventually, Ocelot. ‘No man can serve two masters.’ It says that in the Bible somewhere.”

“You’ve never read the Bible,” Ocelot said (completely unruffled) as they started walking towards the exit.

“Well, no, but… back in Iraq, there was this other prisoner who told me about it…” Liquid sort of trailed off, then said, “an American. Can’t remember his name, it was some perfectly generic English one although he spoke fluent Spanish. Had a wife and kids - managed to hold on to a photo of them and he kept showing it to the rest of us — and he told us Bible stories to pass the time. All that stuff about Jesus, plus things like Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt and Lehi fleeing from Jerusa-“

“What?”

“What?”

“A person called Lehi? That’s not in the Bible.”

Liquid blinked. “It isn’t?”

“Not at all.”

There was a short pause as some White House staff passed them.

“Samson and Delilah?” said Liquid.

“Old Testament,” said Ocelot.

“Captain Moroni?”

“No.”

“…shame, that one was my favorite. Anyway, he died about… what, two or three months after I was captured? but it was a nice distraction while it lasted.”

“Mm.”

Liquid shook his head to himself. What was he doing? It had been ages since he’d even thought about any of his fellow prisoners back then - by the time the first year was out, he was the only one
left alive and he’d practically forgotten about the others before he’d been recovered himself. Even now, he couldn’t quite conjure any of their faces in his mind’s eye, not even those that had been his comrades in the SAS.

Better to change the subject.

“Do you think I can talk ‘President Sears’ into increasing our budget?” Liquid wondered out loud.

It was only early afternoon when Liquid’s meeting with Solidus was over and done with, and Mantis wasn’t around at Fort McNair presently and Ocelot had to go socialize with some old contacts to keep his connections up, so Liquid was left entirely by himself. He was a little relieved, actually - after that rather unsettling exchange with Ocelot, and the fact that he’d already decided he hated his younger brother even though he’d only just found out about his existence, Liquid figured he’d appreciate a little time to himself. So he headed off to a Smithsonian institution picked at random, which happened to be the American Art Museum.

He really couldn’t focus on any of the exhibits, though. Lovely paintings and all, but he was too busy fretting over the whole Ocelot-Solidus connection to concentrate on them. There was no point in pushing the subject, he already knew that, Ocelot would continue to insist that he would never pick one over the other, but…

Liquid tried to tell himself that if it came down to it, Ocelot would pick him. After all, even though their relationship unceremoniously ended when Liquid left Mother Base nine years ago, he was certain - no matter what Mantis said! - that Ocelot had genuinely cared about him back then and he still did now, at least on some level. Wasn’t that right? Even if Liquid was ashamed he’d done it (and kept doing it, he really didn’t have great self-control), that didn’t change the fact that the last time he and Ocelot had slept together had been only about three months ago. If Liquid went to him again tonight, he’d definitely take him up on his offer, too. Surely that proved something?

But speaking of tonight, Liquid found himself inexplicably bothered by Solidus saying “Oh, and Ocelot, as long as you’re in town tonight” as they had been leaving the Oval Office. Perhaps it wasn’t so much what he said as it was the way he’d trailed off significantly, giving Ocelot a look Liquid couldn’t quite interpret, and the empty smile Ocelot had put on as he said “Of course, sir.” But Liquid still couldn’t place how exactly that was any kind of worrisome - maybe this evening they would be dining together or something, but wouldn’t that be no different from what Ocelot was doing at this very moment, visiting useful acquaintances just to make sure his snares around them hadn’t been untangled in his absence?

Or, maybe Ocelot really did like Solidus. Which was, of course, perfectly fine, Liquid had no problem with that, there was no reason for Liquid to have a problem with that — it was just that he was still worried that Ocelot was closer to Solidus than he was to him, and that meant that if things came down to the wire Ocelot would defer to Solidus and that could be very, very bad news for FOXHOUND in general and Liquid Snake specifically.

But really Ocelot should be closer to Liquid than Solidus, shouldn’t he? They’d known each other longer… they used to be lovers… they still occasionally were, even if it was only because Liquid was no good at resisting his mostly unwanted impulses…

Solidus looked more like Big Boss, though.

All the art in the world couldn’t have done anything to dissipate the black cloud hanging over Liquid’s mood now, so when it started to get late he slunk back to Fort McNair, glad that Washington, D.C.’s only professional psychic had been fired from the FBI years ago because if
someone had read his thoughts right now he would certainly have had the Secret Service called down on his head over his foul-tempered fantasizing of tearing the President limb from limb.

But speaking of Washington, D.C.’s former only professional psychic, Mantis was already back at Fort McNair and Liquid perked up when he walked into the room they’d been put up in together. (With two separate beds on opposite sides. Ha.) This was perfect, Liquid could really do with some attention right about now—-

“Unbelievable,” was all Mantis had to say about everything that had happened at the White House and Liquid’s thoughts afterwards, and he went back to his book, barely sparing Liquid a glance.

Liquid frowned. What, was that book somehow more important than him? Looking at it he could see Mantis had only just purchased it - he hadn’t bothered to take the price sticker off yet; it was a thick volume about the Cold War, which Liquid thought was absolutely ridiculous that Mantis should want to read it in the first place considering he’d grown up during the Cold War.

Besides, Mantis wasn’t often one to read nonfiction books, and when he did they were inevitably about bugs… normally, anyway…

“Mantis?”

“Mm?”

“What are you reading?”

Mantis shifted the book in his hands so that Liquid could see the cover, even though he had to know full well that that was not what Liquid meant.

“More interesting than me, eh?” Liquid said bitterly.

“No,” Mantis said, “but I want to finish this as soon as possible.”

“Important?”

“You could say that. At least, hypothetically… I have not found any useful information so far…”

“Ah. Well, you don’t seem to be very far into it anyway.”

“Mm.”

Frustrated now, Liquid whined loudly, “Mantis, pay attention to me.”

All he got was another “Mm.”

He should have kissed Ocelot back in the White House when their lips were so close they were almost kissing anyway. He should have just gone for it. There had been nothing stopping him. Mantis would have been furious but at least then he wouldn’t have been ignoring him in favor of his book and fine, then, if Mantis would rather read his book than interact with Liquid then Liquid just had to wait until Ocelot got back from dinner with Solidus. Ocelot wouldn’t ignore him, Ocelot would give him lots and lots of attention, Ocelot would make him feel it—-

Mantis snapped his book shut, marking his place with a finger, and stood up. “Hands and knees, Eli,” he said in the kind of stern, falsely patient voice that Liquid knew full well meant he was beyond irritated with him.

Liquid swallowed hard. This was kind of what he had been angling for, though… so he didn’t say
anything in his defense, just wordlessly followed Mantis’ orders. And Mantis sat on him. And continued reading his book.

Fuck.

Liquid’s face burned. Being used as a piece of furniture was bad enough, but the *book* was just adding insult to injury. Still, it was acknowledgement. It was attention, after a fashion. And one of Mantis’ hands absent-mindedly pet his hair as he continued reading, which was… good?

But by the time Mantis finally let him go his knees were aching - his back, too, even though Mantis was very light - and he almost felt like crying. He hadn’t protested *out loud* the entire time and he more than suspected Mantis hadn’t been listening to his thoughts, either, but really he did think that that on top of his previous bad mood… well, that was just *mean*.

Mantis, as always, took him to bed. He still followed his self-imposed rule about that. No, he didn’t put down the book even now, but he leaned back against the wall and Liquid draped himself across his lap, throat tight, and Mantis gently played with his hair and tore himself away from the Cold War long enough to call Liquid a good boy for submitting to his punishment for thinking about Ocelot like that, even if it really was just a spiteful way to shift Mantis’ focus over to *him*.

Liquid snorted. No mention of the fact that he’d mutinously tried to buck Mantis off three or four times…?

“*Relax, Eli,*” Mantis said, “I know you are upset, so I don’t want to be too harsh with you.”

“Put that bloody book down,” Liquid said, grabbing him around the waist and nuzzling his stomach, “I want you.”

“Fine, fine…” Mantis dogeared the page he was on, and set the book aside. “There. No more distractions.”

“Good.”

“But I do not like that you worked yourself into such a horrible mood over the idea that Ocelot might like Solidus better than you.”

Liquid rolled his eyes and groaned. “It’s *strategic,*” he protested, “it wouldn’t be in *our* best interests if Ocelot ultimately sides with Solidus.”

“You’re jealous.”

“No, I’m not! There’s nothing to be jealous of.”

“Nothing you *should* be jealous of, yes, but that does not change the fact that you are-“

“Well- I suppose you would know!” Liquid snapped, sitting up, “there’s no emotion you’d know better than *jealousy,* Mantis!!”

Despite his rather cold tone, Mantis evidently wasn’t going to rise to Liquid’s combative attitude tonight. He wasn’t going to let this argument escalate into a fight. “I have never doubted that Ocelot is going to backstab us eventually - I do not care if it is for Solidus or anyone else. If anything, I’m pleased that your suspicion of Solidus *might* just lead you to cast suspicion on Ocelot, where it’s really due. But jealousy is simply unwarranted. *You are no longer in a relationship with Ocelot, Eli.*”

Liquid snarled at him, but didn’t have a good rebuttal. Instead he just flopped onto his side at the end
of the bed, back turned, deliberately not touching Mantis. *Arsehole*, he thought.

But barely a moment passed before he felt Mantis’ hands at his sides, and his chest at his back; Mantis had laid down next to him, calm as could be, tangling their legs together and resting his chin on the top of Liquid’s head.

“We do not need either of them, Eli,” he said, “we do not need anyone. Only each other.”

“Hmph.”

Slowly, carefully, Mantis’ hands slipped down Liquid’s hips. Of course. Liquid let out a long breath and pushed himself back against Mantis a little, finally relaxing.

Of course. After arguing, sex. Clearing the air after all the bad, ugly feelings brought out, reassuring one another of their mutual affection, setting all the nastiness aside to make love. Or, less charitably but more realistically, distracting one another from their glaring relationship problems.

They were predictable.

Back in the Huron again on the way back to FOXHOUND headquarters, Liquid had his phone out, carefully adding Solidus’ contact information. It was taking him forever to type PRAT YOUNGER BROTHER on the tiny numerical keyboard…

“Nice of him to provide me a direct line to get in touch with him,” he muttered.

“Mm. You would have forgotten to ask for it yourself if you hadn’t,” Mantis replied. He was still reading that Cold War book, which Ocelot had raised his eyebrows at when he saw it but made no comment.

“I wouldn’t have *forgotten*,” Liquid said, “it just wouldn’t have occurred to me, there’s a difference. I would have assumed that I was expected to wait for *him* to contact *me*.”

“Or, if you absolutely needed to get in touch with him, to use me as a go-between, I presume,” Ocelot said.

“Mm. Quite.”

“Something the matter, boss?”

“No, it’s nothing.” He clacked his phone shut, sighing. He always got a good night’s sleep after getting fingered within an inch of his life, and after a good night’s sleep he always found things that had seemed like *such* a big deal the day before were much more manageable. In other words, he’d calmed down about the whole Revolver Ocelot-Solidus Snake thing, even if it was still a situation he’d resolved to keep an eye on.

“Eli, when you were talking to the President - and I ask because he monologued for so long that I really do not want to sift through your memory of it…” Mantis said, and he abruptly switched to Kikongo: “did he actually bother to tell you at any point *why* he is determined to take down the Patriots?” (He actually used the word ‘bamuéné’, meaning ‘kings’ or ‘rulers’, to refer to the Patriots instead of calling them by name.)

Liquid cocked his head at him. “Of course he did,” he replied in same, “spent probably half his lecture ranting about it. He’s obsessed with leaving a legacy of some kind.”
Mantis scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Typical,” he said dryly, “really it is a given that your brother would be sterile like you, but even then he still feels the need to participate in the atavistic desire to—”

“No this again,” Liquid interrupted, rolling his own eyes, although even he had to admit there was a trace of amused affection in his voice. Mantis’ hatred of children, reproduction, passing on one’s genes/memes, et al. was really just kind of funny to him.

Mantis huffed. “Still… what need does he have of a legacy? He is President of the United States, a position considered by many to be the most powerful person in the world… even if the bamuéné had him installed with no effort on his end, that still ensures he will make it into the history books.”

“I asked him the same thing, actually,” Liquid said, “and he just said—” he put on his best impression of Solidus’ voice, which admittedly wasn’t very good although at least he sounded kind of American, “‘Martin van Buren. Millard Fillmore. Chester A. Arthur.’”

“Who?” Mantis said, blinking.

“American presidents,” Liquid explained, “ones that no one remembers. It seems he’s afraid of going down that route himself when he’d rather have his name be right up there with George Washington’s.”

“And he aims to accomplish this by being the president who not only reveals that modern democracy is a sham, but also restores democracy to the country,” Mantis said.

“Precisely. To be fair, I’m sure that would have a very profound impact on American history… certainly nobler than doing this as revenge for Galzburg, he claims.”

“Certainly more self-centered,” Mantis said dismissively. “An obsession with one’s legacy is an obsession with one’s future… good for him that he has the luxury of worrying about that. Meanwhile, in the world we live in—”

“No future,” Liquid said, leaning back in his chair with his arms behind his head, “only buried pasts soaked in blood that cries up for vengeance. My little brother’s really spoiled, isn’t he?”

“Evidently.”

“But anyway, why were you wondering? I don’t suppose you actually care about his motivations.”

“No,” Mantis said, “I got a little off-topic just now. I was just wondering if you were going to think it was odd.”

“…? What’s odd?”

“That President Sears is all too eager to tell you why he wants the bamuéné gone, but Ocelot has never mentioned his own motive - not even once.”

Liquid blinked.

That was true. Ocelot had never said anything about it… Liquid had sort of presumed that Ocelot’s motives were similar to everyone else’s, except that, admittedly, it’d be over Big Boss’ death during the Zanzibar Land disturbance, not Venom Snake’s death during the Outer Heaven incident. But, it was logical to assume that the Patriots had been responsible for both, wasn’t it?

Wait, was it? Big Boss had been the one who had sent in Venom’s killer. He had been ordered by the Patriots to do so, ultimately. Liquid knew that Big Boss had broken from FOXHOUND after that.
incident, running off to take over the remnants of the PF that was rightfully Venom’s by that point, but... but that didn’t mean he’d broken from the Patriots, too, at that point, did it…?

“I... no, he hasn’t,” Liquid said, his brow furrowing. “I don’t know what he wants.”

“If you want to know,” Ocelot said suddenly, “you could always just ask.” Both Liquid and Mantis turned to look at him, shocked.

“Since when did you know Kikongo??” Mantis asked, startled back into English.

“I thought it might be useful to know,” Ocelot said, also in English, “and I was right. Not specifically for this moment, of course, but I was still right.” He switched back to Kikongo. “I would have thought that my reasons for wanting the bamuéné gone were obvious: I lost people important to me in the Galzburg incident, too. And…” he glanced slightly to the side, “you might also note that it isn’t a coincidence that I started all this the year after Zanzibar…”

“...I thought so,” Liquid said, frowning. Mantis scoffed.

“It’s the exact same reason your mother is with us, too, boss.”

“Oh,” Liquid said. Come to think of it, he hadn’t stopped and considered why EVA was against the Patriots. Then again, she was the one who’d said that she’d make a good vigilante superhero, so maybe on some level he’d just assumed she was doing it because it was the right thing to do. Although of course taking out the shadowy puppet masters of the world would probably throw it a little bit into chaos, which made it being ‘the right thing’ subjective enough that Liquid didn’t feel ridiculous or hypocritical doing it. He was kind of a dick, after all.

“Any further questions?” Ocelot said.

“Er... no,” Liquid said, feeling a little silly. Mantis trying to turn him against Ocelot over nothing - or over things that were easily resolvable - wasn’t anything new, but he’d almost fallen for this one.

Mantis just glared at Ocelot, then turned away, folding his arms irritably and remaining silent. Liquid could pretty much sense that Mantis was sure Ocelot’s reasoning was only an excuse and that Liquid was being incredibly naïve and gullible for buying it. But trying to drive suspicion over something that was cleared up with a simple question, really?? If they were going to be making harsh judgments of each other anyway, Liquid was going to go ahead and think of Mantis as being lazy.

He heard Mantis’ offended scoff, but ignored it and took a nap until they arrived back at FOXHOUND base.
“So you’re telling me you didn’t know what the President looked like.”

“Ah. No. I didn’t.”

“Incredible, boss,” Raven said, “I knew you did not watch the news, but…”

“Well, one of you could have mentioned it to me at some point,” Liquid said, annoyed, “since you all clearly noticed how similar he looked to—”

“Hey, I thought it was just a coincidence,” Octopus said, “I mean, it’s been all over conspiracy theory forums ever since he was still a Senator from New York. People absolutely noticed he looks like Big Boss, they still talk about how he’s got to be secretly related to him somehow. Hell, people have even guessed that he’s a clone.”

“…and you didn’t tell me about any of this?”

“Uh, no, you said that Les Enfants Terribles was just you and your twin, so I thought that President Sears was just Big Boss’ first cousin once removed or something.”

“I thought he was another body double that they got the age wrong with,” Raven volunteered.

“That’s… helpful,” Liquid said, “Octopus, you’re a part of a top secret special forces group, what the hell are you doing on conspiracy theory forums?”

“I make a point to never mention my job,” Octopus said indignantly, “and I only got started on them because you have no idea how fun it is to read people going nuts trying to figure out something we did, boss. My favorite threads are the ones where they compile evidence that such-and-such an official was totally secretly replaced by a doppelgänger in the months before his mysterious death… and I was actually playing his wife.”

Liquid had no idea how to respond to that.

“You’d be surprised at what a useful source of intel conspiracy theorists can be,” Ocelot said from the other side of the breakroom, where he was casually cleaning his guns, “sure, the vast majority of them are completely out of touch with reality, and even among those that aren’t they’re still wildly off-base most of the time… but they’re the only ones who notice things that get entirely overlooked by the mainstream media and the general public.”

“You prefer to get your news from the crazies?” Raven said derisively.

“I didn’t say that. But certainly if I want to know what the Patriots are trying to keep me out of the loop on, I just need to find the common threads in the ‘truther’ papers.”

“That’s way easier to do online nowadays, you know that, right?” Octopus said. Ocelot didn’t reply.

“…wouldn’t the Patriots just censor any mentions of what they’re up to?” Liquid said.

“Underground publications and the internet are nearly impossible to censor, even for the Patriots,” Ocelot said, “at least for now. Rumor has it they’re working on something… but either way, they
leave the conspiracy theorists alone. They could openly reveal the Patriots’ existence and even provide proof, and all it would do in the public eye is assure them that the Patriots could not exist. Nothing ruins the credibility of a concept like putting it side-by-side with ‘9/11 was an inside job’ and ‘the moon landing was faked’.

“So you’re telling us that 9/11 wasn’t an inside job?” Octopus said.

“Oh, no, it was,” Ocelot replied casually, “the moon landing was real, though. Mostly because they hired Stanley Kubrick to direct it, and, perfectionistic as always, he demanded that they film on-location on the moon.”

“…he is messing with us, right?” Raven said, “I cannot tell.”

A couple hundred miles north of there, Naomi dared to leave her hotel room for the first time in a week - she hadn’t eaten anything besides granola bars for the past three days, so at this point she was willing to risk it.

“Good morning, Dr. Hunter.”

Naomi screamed and dropped her keycard, then quickly picked it back up, scrambling to get back into her hotel room. She fumbled with the lock, though, and by the time she actually got the door open she could feel breath on the back of her neck.

Is was bad enough that they had to send a FOXHOUND assassin after her, but Sniper “sexual harassment on legs” Wolf? Seriously?

“You just wanted to make a grocery run, no?” Wolf said, reaching around Naomi and tugging the keycard out of her hand. “Such a mundane task would be nothing but undignified to die in the middle of…”

Naomi swallowed hard, composing herself. “So you’ll leave me alone,” she said, “because an undignified death won’t do anything to satisfy your sense of drama.”

“Of course,” Wolf said, pushing Naomi back into her hotel room. “Let’s get delivery.”

“What do you mean let’s—“

“I will pay, although I will need to keep the receipt.”

Naomi kept her mouth shut. Although she wasn’t worried about her cash reserves right now, it would certainly be in her best interests to save money - she didn’t know when the next time she’d have any kind of income would be, and she hadn’t been using credit or debit cards so it would be more difficult to track her, instead relying on what relatively little paper money her bank let her pull from her account the day she bolted. Of course, she’d been tracked down anyway, so maybe she shouldn’t even bother with…

Wait, Wolf wouldn’t consider killing someone after having dinner with them to be suitably dignified and tragic, would she? No… maybe if they were dining out at a very nice, incredibly expensive French restaurant and were both wearing black-tie dresses and strings of diamonds, but this was a shitty hotel room in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Wolf was ordering Chinese, and Naomi was wearing worn-out sweats and unwashed hair.

That would be even more undignified than getting shot on the way to Safeway.
Wolf put down the phone. “It is hot,” she sighed, “do you mind if I take off my jacket?”

“It’s not *that* hot,” Naomi said, “we’re in Canada. In October.”

“I mean in this hotel room… your heater is turned up too high.”

“We’re in Canada. In October.” And Naomi had grown up in Rhodesia, it couldn’t helped that she wasn’t a fan of cold temperatures.

Wolf took off her jacket without waiting for Naomi to give her the go-ahead, and Naomi realized—well, not really *realized* since Wolf had walked into the room with her jacket already unzipped almost to her navel, going completely past the normal definition of cleavage, but it hadn’t quite *registered* with her that Wolf wasn’t wearing anything under her jacket until her jacket was already down around her elbows.

“Put that back on,” Naomi said flatly, looking her in the eye.

“What is the matter?” Wolf said.

“You aren’t wearing a shirt, or even a bra—“

“You often do not wear a bra, either.”

Naomi couldn’t help but glance *very briefly* at Wolf’s breasts. She was still pretty young - only 28ish, close to Naomi’s assumed age - so they hadn’t started to sag despite her prancing around with no support and them half-hanging out of her shirt all the time, and she had the nipples and areolae of an adolescent, small and close in color to her skin, so if she’d ever been pregnant it had been a long time ago. In the warmth of the room they were soft-looking and rounded.

“Why is it acceptable for men to go around shirtless and not women?” Wolf said.

“Don’t bring that into this,” Naomi snapped, “this is my hotel room and I am not comfortable with you exposing yourself. Put your jacket back on.”

“But I’m paying for dinner.”

“…oh my god.”

“It is alright if you stare,” Wolf said, “I do not mind.”

“I have no interest in—“

“Really? Because I heard—“

“I don’t care what you’ve heard,” Naomi said. She wanted to turn away from her, but even though she knew the time hadn’t yet come for Wolf to kill her (not to mention the fact that she was ultimately a sniper and not only was she standing about two feet away from her but also didn’t even have her rifle right now) she still didn’t exactly feel *comfortable* turning her back to her. “I’m straight.”

“No you are not.”

“What? Yes I am. How would I not be? I have no sexual or romantic interest in women.”

“…did you not think your mouth tasted a little *odd* when you woke up the day after Liquid started your investigation?” Wolf said plainly… still not putting her jacket back on.
Naomi blinked, then her eyebrows drew together angrily. “How on earth did you know about-“

“The unremarkable office woman you had oral sex with was actually Octopus in disguise, trying to milk you for information while you were drunk.”

There was a long pause.

“Well,” Naomi said at length, “even if he was disguised as a woman, Octopus is still a man, so I’m still-“

“But he has a vagina, and you put your tongue in it.”

“He also has XY chromosomes.”

“A quze is a quze, Dr. Hunter.”

God damn it, Naomi knew from the moment she saw it in Octopus’ medical history that that vaginoplasty was going to come back to haunt her.

She was saved by the Chinese delivery boy knocking on the door. Before Naomi could stop her, Wolf opened it wide and greeted the boy, who went boiled-lobster-red and was unable to tear his eyes off her boobs as she took the food and slammed the door in his face. He’d forgotten to ask for payment…

“So much for paying for dinner,” Naomi said dryly.

“It is just as well,” Wolf said, setting the food down and immediately opening a fortune cookie, “Liquid hates reimbursing personal expenses. Hmm… ‘You will soon achieve your goal.’ Good news, I think.”

“But not for me,” Naomi snapped, opening her own fortune cookie. Of course it was missing the little slip of paper. Of course. Naomi sighed. She never much cared for fortune cookies, anyway.

The meal was eaten in about as awkward a silence as one could expect between an assassin and her target. Surprisingly, Naomi had entirely gotten used to Wolf’s shirtlessness…

“Have you ever met Solid Snake?” Wolf asked suddenly, her forkful of lo mein hovering halfway to her lips.

“What?” Naomi said, blinking.

“Why do you want to kill him?”

“What makes you think I want to kill him?” Naomi said, narrowing her eyes, “I’ve never even met the man.”

Wolf shrugged. “We know about FOXDIE,” she said.

Naomi was silent. That was kind of a given, and exactly the reason why she had run: it was only obvious that they were going to through her project files on that, and while she’d mildly held out hope that it would fly over their heads due a complete lack of bioengineering backgrounds in their unit, that was only a pipe dream. And, she knew Ocelot knew about her kill list with Liquid’s name double underlined, even if at the time she had been pretty sure that he hadn’t known what it was actually for.

“I was under orders to-“
“Not by the same people who ordered you to develop the virus,” Wolf said, “otherwise they would have put Solid Snake’s name on the target list in the first place. You would not have had to underline Liquid’s.”

“…”

“Is it perhaps some third party?”

“…”

“Does it have anything to do with the cyborg ninja?” Wolf pressed.

“Answer me one thing first,” Naomi said.

“Hn?”

“I saw the news about the break-in at the CDC a few weeks ago. Did you lot have anything to do with that?”

“Do you think we did?” Wolf said evenly.

Naomi hesitated before replying. Was this a trap? As far as she knew, Wolf wasn’t much one for interrogations or conversational mind games… “I don’t know what reason you would have to do so,” she said carefully, “your names on the development list notwithstanding… you were investigating me over Dr. Clark’s death. I can only assume that you’re with them.”

“Are you?” Wolf said.

“…I follow their orders.”

“Yet you killed Dr. Clark. I am sure that they would not like that, if they found out.”

Again Naomi was silent. She would have liked to outright accuse Wolf of FOXHOUND being responsible for the break-in at the CDC and the presumed destruction of FOXDIE - it couldn’t be about anything else, that would have just been too big a coincidence - but Naomi didn’t know that for sure. On the security still shown on the news, she’d thought she recognized EVA, but she wasn’t certain. She’d only met EVA in person exactly once, and while as far as she recalled EVA had driven the same kind of motorcycle (or at least the same color, Naomi didn’t know much about bikes) and had the same body type as the woman in the footage… EVA didn’t really have anything to do with FOXHOUND herself, did she…?

“I wasn’t the one who killed her,” Naomi said eventually. “The ninja did that.”

“But you were the one who set him loose, and covered it all up, were you not?”

This had to be a trap. Naomi didn’t answer. Wolf leaned forward, her hair slipping over her bare shoulders.

“Ocelot talked,” she said, “he told us everything.”

“Oh.” A flat response. It was all Naomi could give.

There was a long pause.

“Why don’t you turn him in to the Patriots, then?” Naomi said, “they would never believe it coming from me, but—”
“Why should we?” Wolf said, “the Patriots had you create FOXDIE to kill us.”

So there it was, then. FOXHOUND was in rebellion against the Patriots - or, at least, was brewing a rebellion. But this was just entrapment, wasn’t it? Certainly Wolf seemed sincere, and her position seemed logical… even if they realized that FOXDIE was only intended as a contingency plan in case of, well, this, Naomi somehow found it unlikely that the unit would take that lying down.

After all, if you point a gun at a soldier’s back, they’re going to turn around and shoot you even if you promise not to fire unless it’s necessary to do so.

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

“It may be a convenient arrangement, if you joined us,” Wolf said, “for both of us. FOXDIE is of no concern anymore, and with the Patriots gone you will not have to worry about retribution for Dr. Clark’s death.”

“What motive would you have for inviting me along?”

“A scientist on our side would be a useful thing,” she said, “and you are our best bet because you already know about the Patriots and have a history of making trouble for them.”

“That lab accident had nothing to do with the Patriots.”

“We know that, but do the Patriots?”

Naomi frowned. “Did Liquid order you to try to recruit me to your insurrection? Is that the real reason why you’ve just been harassing me all this time instead of making an attempt on my life?”

“To be fair,” Wolf said, “I had not yet had a good chance to kill you, anyway.”

Because Wolf was Wolf and that meant she had to lie in wait for ungodly amounts of time to find the perfect opportunity to shoot someone, instead of just taking the first opportunity. Because that was just the kind of person that FOXHOUND hired. Sociopaths. Inefficient sociopaths. No wonder Liquid was constantly bitching about their budget disappearing on him.

“So essentially you’re offering me amnesty for FOXDIE and protection from retaliation over Dr. Clark’s death in exchange for joining you,” Naomi said.

“Yes.”

“May I make a request, in addition to those?”

“Certainly. Although I have no idea if we will be able to fulfill it.”

She took a deep breath. “I want—my cooperation in exchange for the life of Solid Snake. Additionally I would like the cyborg ninja recovered and returned to me unharmed.”

Wolf raised her eyebrows. “Do you wish to continue genetic experiments on him?”

“What I wish to do with him is my business and mine alone,” Naomi said, “however, those are my terms.”

“I can talk to Liquid about it... however... if you decide not to accept our terms, then you are only going to rat us out to the Patriots, aren’t you?”

“...”
Wolf stood, and shrugged her jacket back on, leaving it unzipped but covering her nipples at least. “I will get in touch with Liquid. In the meantime, behave yourself. I will return.” She walked out of the hotel room, leaving all the not-quite-finished Chinese with Naomi.

Shit. Okay.

Okay, Naomi had to figure this out. She had an offer on the table from FOXHOUND, and at the same time she also had some nasty dirt on the unit - in all likelihood the Patriots would be willing to give her the same things she had just asked of FOXHOUND (dropping suspicion from her over FOXDIE’s destruction - she knew that was being blamed on her, Wolf was here on an official assignment - amnesty for Dr. Clark’s death, Frankie’s safety, her revenge on Solid Snake) but… well, which group was less likely to turn on her? FOXHOUND was, as stated, the apparent result of someone somewhere creating a federal hiring quota for sociopaths. Most of them were pretty loyal to each other as far as Naomi could tell from the outside looking in, but she had no doubt that she would be kicked to the curb as soon as she stopped being useful. Plus, one of the people on their team already was Revolver Ocelot, the king of backstabbing.

The exact same things could be said of the Patriots.

Naomi flopped onto her bed, sighing, putting one hand to her forehead. She wasn’t a part of the Patriots, per se, just followed the orders they occasionally handed down to her through a cut-out, but she had a good idea of what was going on in their ranks. That was why she hadn’t been suspicious when EVA and Ocelot commissioned her to arrange Dr. Clark’s death in exchange for Frankie’s freedom from that movie-obsessed two-faced bitch. She knew Ocelot and EVA were both Patriot agents, she knew Dr. Clark had been one too, and she’d always been under the impression (perhaps knowingly cultivated by Ocelot, now that she thought about it) that Dr. Clark had needed to be taken care of because she’d done something to displease the Patriots. It had never occured to her that Ocelot or EVA might have been acting in their own interests.

But apparently they were. And while Naomi didn’t know about EVA, if Ocelot had let the cat out of the bag about her to FOXHOUND then he must be on their side - on the anti-Patriot side. Or maybe this was, as she’d thought earlier, a trap. The Patriots wanted to see what she’d do.

Or maybe Naomi wasn’t the one ensnared in a trap, maybe it was FOXHOUND. Maybe FOXHOUND was sincere and Ocelot wasn’t - maybe he was still with the Patriots and had entrapped them and so if Naomi joined with them now, she’d only be joining a doomed effort slated for extermination. And she’d lose her bargaining chip with the Patriots: the fact that FOXHOUND, and Ocelot in particular, was plotting against them. If they were the ones who set it up, then they’d already know.

But… suppose that wasn’t true? Suppose Ocelot wasn’t going to turn them all in and the Patriots had no idea what was being built up to here. FOXHOUND still had the cards significantly stacked against them, a tiny, broke, dysfunctional unit of six, only one of whom had even gone to a real college, versus a world-spanning shadow government with nigh-infinite resources that operated as a well-oiled machine and knew almost everything…

FOXHOUND had come out on top of incredible odds before, though. In fact that was the unit’s claim to fame, and justification for its continued existence after all the scandals: its operatives were nothing if not good at making the impossible possible.

Naomi grit her teeth.

It’d be wiser to approach the dilemma with all things being equal. So it essentially came down to this: Which of the two, the Patriots or FOXHOUND, was more likely to betray her and her interests?
Maybe that was the wrong way to think about it. Maybe it should be an ethical question, a moral judgment about which would be the right thing to do, destroy the Patriots and free the world of their control, or leave them intact and avoid the chaos, uncertainty, war, and collapsing infrastructure that would come with the ensuing power vacuum?

She traced her hand over her stomach. Did it really matter to her? She’d only gotten the diagnosis this past summer, and no one knew about it yet, but Naomi was painfully aware that she only had another few years at most. Ten or eleven, if she was lucky and managed to finish the nanomachine therapy she had been working on in secret. If she didn’t… if she couldn’t get back to her lab or a Patriot-provided one… the cancer would take her by this time next year. So she didn’t have the option of running away from this choice entirely, not if she wanted to live.

Maybe she didn’t. After all, cancer was clearly written into her genetic fate, wasn’t it? Sure, it was likely enough a side-effect of all the radiation she’d endured during her research, but radiation didn’t directly cause cancer. It could effect DNA and cause birth defects, but as far as cancer went all radiation did was change the chemical components of her cells. If her body reacted to said changes by becoming cancerous and metastasizing then that was the fault of her genes.

She wouldn’t live to see the fall of the Patriots either way, and even if she did then she wouldn’t be around for the aftermath. And she’d never passed on her genes - never had a kid, couldn’t now even if she wanted to, the cancer had already spread to her uterus - she wouldn’t be leaving any legacy behind to inherit a world with or without the mostly-benevolent oppression of the Patriots. So it didn’t matter.

…right?

…

Naomi came to a decision.

Chapter End Notes

“Quze” is, at least according to my cursory Google search, a Kurdish (Kurmanji) slang term for vagina… hopefully that was obvious by context…?
Naomi pulled over on the sketchy side of town and fished her cellphone out of her pocket as she stepped out of her rental car and walked over to an old payphone on the side of the road. The only surefire way she had of getting in touch with the Patriots was reaching out to the same cut-out who’d given her all her instructions regarding FOXDIE… their number was saved in Naomi’s phone, but to avoid having her location traced Naomi had cut off cell service the day she’d fled her hotel in the small town a couple miles away from FOXHOUND headquarters. Right now it was just a glorified address book.

She glanced around cautiously - no sign of Wolf, but then, she could be anywhere - then dropped some coins into the payphone’s slot and dialed the number saved to her cellphone and nervously put the receiver to her ear, still looking around.

It probably rang about twenty times before the Patriot cut-out picked up. “Hello?” they said - Naomi couldn’t tell their gender over the phone, because she couldn’t tell if it was a male doing a falsetto or a husky-voiced valley girl.

“This is Dr. Hunter,” Naomi said quietly, “and I have some very interesting information I’d like to offer in exchange for my life.”

“Huh…? You really think you know something we don’t, Dr. Hunter?”

“Reasonably sure, yes.”

“Go on, then, give us a little preview.”

“No,” Naomi said firmly.

“Then goodbye.”

“Wait, wait! …fine, I’ll tell you this much right now: It has to do with the break-in at the CDC a few weeks ago.”

“Hmmmmmm,” the Patriot on the other end of the line hummed to themselves in thought, “that’s not very useful, Dr. Hunter. We already know you’re responsible for it.”

Naomi held her breath. “If you think I’m responsible for that,” she said, “then not only are you mistaken, but the information I’m offering would clearly be valuable to you.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I’d like to negotiate. And I’d like to do it in person.” That might get Wolf off her back…

“Hmmmm…”

“If you won’t accept my offer,” Naomi said, “then I’ll go straight to your enemies.”

“Enemies? Oh, oh… let me ask my superiors, Dr. Hunter. Somehow I think they’ll want to hear what you have to say about this. Plus they might be interested in having you re-start your little virus project…”
“Thank you,” Naomi said.

“It’s no trouble. Stay right where you are, I’ll call this payphone back with when and where to meet up with one of us in fifteen minutes, okay?”

“Okay.”

The Patriot cut-out hung up. Naomi replaced the receiver, heart feeling lighter than it had felt ever since before Liquid walked into her office with a writ of investigation. Maybe things weren’t definite yet… but as long as the Patriots were willing to negotiate she might yet come out of this with her revenge, an extra decade of life, safety from the sniper’s bullet, and Frank by her side again. She could go back to her research and everything would be normal. Better than normal.

Wolf saw the glimmer of hope in Naomi’s eyes through her rifle’s scope.

She let out a breath and squeezed the trigger.

Liquid picked up Wolf’s call on Codec.

“She decided to turn us in after all?” he said.

“Yes,” Wolf said, “she has been taken care of. A rest stop along the Trans-Canada Highway, just outside of Medicine Hat, Alberta. Some passerby has already called an ambulance for her, but it is already too late.”

“She’s dead already?”

“My bullet went straight through her left eye and into her skull. No chance for the mercury to take effect. She did get a call back on the payphone she had been using, but obviously she could not pick up…”

“And you?”

“No one saw me,” Wolf said, “I am headed back now, south on Provincial Highway No. 41… I am approaching Wild Horse, so I will be over the border soon.”

“Right. Let me know when you’re starting to get near base, then.”

“Certainly, boss.” She hung up.

Liquid sighed, dragging his hands down his face. Okay. He knew from the moment that Wolf had reported Naomi waffling about whether to throw in with them or the Patriots, the chances of Naomi actually surviving the rest of the week were slim, but this was a little bit of a setback. For one thing, it was almost a given after all that stuff about FOXDIE that they were going to need some kind of scientist on their side, and Liquid could already tell that he wouldn’t trust any that Solidus sent to work with them.

For another thing, Naomi had been pretty much their only shot at finding out just who the hell the cyborg ninja was and why the two of them both wanted to kill Solid Snake. (Wolf had already told him that Naomi had confirmed their assumption about her being after Solid with FOXDIE - Liquid had belatedly realized about last week that technically Solidus would have been affected by a virus designed to kill Liquid, too.) Perhaps it was mostly only curiosity that demanded that Liquid find out, but hey - it could be relevant. Suppose the cyborg ninja had been some kind of top-secret Patriot project? (Actually, with Dr. Clark being a high-ranking Patriot agent before her death, that seemed
extremely likely.) And Solid… well, maybe that was just something personal between Naomi, the ninja, and the patricidal former FOXHOUND operator. But maybe it wasn’t. It was perfectly within Liquid’s rights to pursue all avenues of inquiry, wasn’t it?

“That is just idle nosiness, Eli,” Mantis said from his office doorway. “So Dr. Hunter is dead?”

“Yes,” Liquid said, rifling through his desk drawers for the completion-of-objective paperwork he had to fill out now. Sometimes he shuddered to imagine how much paperwork the commanders of units who didn’t do nothing but black ops had to fill out…

“Oh, are those completion-of-objective forms I see?” Octopus said, appearing behind Mantis. “So… Dr. Hunter?”

“Dead,” Mantis said.

Octopus closed his eyes and made the sign of the cross, muttering “Haced, oh Dios omnipotente, que el alma de vuestro sierva Naomi que ha pasado de este siglo al otro, purificada con estos sacrificios y libre de pecados, consiga el perdón y el descanso eterno. Amén.” He opened one eye to see Liquid giving him a funny look and Mantis a somewhat confused, but entirely unamused one. “What?” he said, “she gave good head.”

“Anyway,” Liquid said, “did you need something, Octopus?”

“Just wanted to let you know that I’m finally done going through all the files on FOXDIE,” he said. “At this point, I could probably qualify for a PhD in genetics and virology.”

“Anything of note?”

“Well, didn’t find a single reference to anyone else working on the project, except the person who, I guess, initially developed it in 1973,” Octopus said, “but I showed the name to Ocelot and he said that that person had died back in the ‘80s.”

“Really?” Mantis said flatly.

Octopus shrugged. “I did find some references to Dr. Hunter’s work being a ‘revival’ of the whole concept - used to be called a different name, Project Charon — I think Ocelot knows more about it, I only saw mentions of it, not any specific information. From what I can tell the virus was just on ice for thirty years.”

“But the person who developed Project Charon is already dead?” Liquid said.

“According to Ocelot, anyway. Other than that the only names that cropped up were people on the kill list… and a handful of anonymous test subjects from Central America. I actually found a note Dr. Hunter made to herself about how they were all known criminals who got in trouble for pushing drugs on kids, so I guess whatever helped her sleep at night.”

“She must have used them to make sure the ‘inducing a heart attack’ mechanism worked,” Mantis said.

“Or someone must have done it for her,” Liquid said, “the virus was in Atlanta the whole time she was working on it, wasn’t it?”

“Oh,” Octopus said, “I hadn’t even thought of that. Yeah, it was. Project Charon was turned over to the CDC when it was suspended, I saw that much in Dr. Hunter’s files. As far as I could tell it never left their labs.”
“That’s what I thought,” Liquid said, “and that would have been facilitated by Dr. Hunter using nanomachines to modify the virus - which would explain why they didn’t do anything with it until it was 2003 and they had a nanotechnology specialist on board…”

“But nanomachines cannot infect a test subject,” Mantis said.

Liquid nodded. “So there must be someone else involved with the project, at least tangentially. Which doesn’t rule out the possibility of FOXDIE being revived in the near future by someone who knows what they’re doing with it already.”

“Well, I didn’t see anything about it in Dr. Hunter’s files,” Octopus said, “if you want to find them, you’re just going to have to look someplace else.”

“Where do we even begin with that, though?” Mantis said, “I do not recall hearing anything about that while we were at the CDC…”

Liquid frowned, rubbing his chin in thought. “Perhaps we should start with this Project Charon…? Even if the person heading up the project died back in the ’80s, that doesn’t guarantee that everyone involved with it is gone. And if you’re going to revive a project and need a gofer…”

“…might as well use an intern from the first go-round?” Octopus said, “makes sense to me. I’ll go find Ocelot.”

“Thank you, Octopus.” He waved him off. Octopus dutifully scurried off and Mantis pointedly stayed exactly where he was in anticipation of Ocelot coming to Liquid’s office - which Liquid rolled his eyes at.

“Don’t give me that look,” Mantis said acidly.

“Don’t be so paranoid about Ocelot and I being alone together,” Liquid retorted. (Mantis was definitely going to take that out of his ass later…)

Ocelot sauntered into the room, ignoring Mantis’ sour glare at him as usual. “Octopus said you had some questions about Project Charon, boss?”

“Yes. How much do you know?”

“Not a lot, I’m afraid. I wouldn’t say it was above my pay grade per se, but it certainly wasn’t my department.”

“Just tell me what you do know about it.”

Ocelot pulled out his revolver and started twirling it thoughtfully around one finger. “It was, in a way, the predecessor to the vocal cord parasites. They were being worked on at the same time, actually, but Cipher had started both endeavors in order to develop an efficient ethnic cleanser and it was Project Charon that produced results first.”

“What exactly was it?”

“In theory, exactly the same as FOXDIE, just on a wider scale. However, the technology wasn’t quite there yet - the Human Genome Project wasn’t even completed until early 2003 - so all Cipher ended up with was an airborne virus that could more or less reliably simulate a heart attack. After Code Talker got his parasites up and running in 1975, funding to Project Charon was reduced and it ended up being officially suspended in 1980. Just two years later the head developer on the project was murdered.”
“Why?” Liquid said.

Ocelot’s gun stopped spinning. “Internal squabbling,” he said seriously, “that’s always been the one constant in the Patriots’ ranks, no matter how much power they’ve managed to amass, or rather because of it. Although, as I recall, Project Charon’s developer was killed by XOF, so by ’82 this would be Skull Face we’re talking about, not Cipher.”

“Doesn’t that still qualify it as an internal squabble…?” Skull Face had been with Cipher, right?

“Wait a minute,” Mantis spoke up, “you did not mention any of the ‘ethnic cleansing’ aspect of it back when you first told us about FOXDIE.”

“I wasn’t certain that FOXDIE was a continuation of Project Charon,” Ocelot said smoothly, “and, either way, FOXDIE isn’t an ethnic cleanser. It’s an assassination tool.”

“Mantis, that really doesn’t matter,” Liquid said, catching the way Mantis’ jaw moved under his mask as he opened his mouth to argue. “Ocelot, the head of Project Charon - they weren’t the only one working on it, were they?”

“Not exactly,” Ocelot said, “although I believe they were the only one with all the details on the project. But they did need people to help them run their lab.”

“Do you know if any of them are still with the Patriots? There’s a possibility that at least one person was testing the virus for Dr. Hunter in Atlanta, and I thought it likely that a former member of Project Charon would be entrusted with FOXDIE.”

“That’s… logical,” Ocelot said, “but I can’t answer that right now.”

“And why not?” Mantis snapped.

Ocelot glanced at him dismissively. “As I said: not my department. Much of what I know about Project Charon I only found out after the fact, while I was trying to find out if Code Talker’s vocal cord parasites really were the only ones around. I’d have to go looking back into it to see if anyone who was involved with Project Charon is even still around, let alone at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.”

“But can you find anything if you do go looking?” Liquid said insistently.

“If nothing else, I can rule out possibilities,” Ocelot said, reholstering his SAA. “I’m afraid I’ll need to be taking a few weeks of vacation time, boss.”

Mantis snorted. Liquid pulled open a desk drawer and pulled out the requisite paperwork. At least, and thank God, the form he had to fill out when someone was taking time off only took about thirty seconds to be over and done with.

“There,” Liquid said, signing it. “I gave you a whole month. Come back with something good.”

“Of course, boss.”

“Project Charon?” EVA said, “didn’t XOF kill everyone on that?”

“I’m not sure,” Ocelot sighed, leaning his head back. “A lot of that happened while I was still working on frying my brain with self-hypnosis.”

“You know, I’m still in awe that you ever thought that was a good idea,” EVA said, “and the fact
that no one decided to tell me about it until the whole thing had already blown over. You let me think Big Boss was still at Dhekelia until the next February!"

“That didn’t want to complicate things,” Ocelot said dismissively. “Anyway, I do find Liquid’s conclusions about any leftovers from Project Charon being Dr. Hunter’s anonymous assistant at the CDC to be sound… but I think it’d be more efficient to just look into the VSPB pathologists directly.”

“You’d still be cross-referencing them with anyone who’s worked on any previous medical projects for the Patriots anyway, though, wouldn’t you?”

“Right. So I still need to know about Project Charon.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “And any other ethnic cleansing project, I suppose. You wouldn’t happen to know anything…?”

“Hey, it wasn’t my department, either,” EVA said. “You’re going to have to get ahold of someone else - and come up with a good excuse.”

“Hmm. That might be fairly easy now that Dr. Hunter’s dead; it could be as simple as inquiring into whether or not someone is going to be restarting the project now. I can frame it as having been personally keeping an eye on her progress, and she’s not alive to refute me.”

“That should work,” EVA said. “But you don’t think anyone’s getting suspicious already…?”

“I can’t say. I know her claim that she had information about the break-in at the CDC caused a bit of a stir, but I’ve heard it’s presently ‘inconclusive’ as to whether or not she was just trying to cover her tracks.”

“…although,” EVA muttered, “since that picture of me was all over the news… I’d be surprised if Sigint didn’t recognize me.”

“He probably did. But somehow he hasn’t turned suspicion towards you yet.”

“Yes, I think I’d know if he had. But… well, it’s odd, isn’t it? That he’s just letting everyone run with the assumption that it had been Dr. Hunter.”

Ocelot frowned. “Perhaps the Patriots really have gotten that far out of his control.”

There was a long pause as they just watched the traffic go by.

“It’s nice to have confirmation that it really was Solid Snake that Dr. Hunter was targeting with FOXDIE,” Ocelot said at length.

“Mm.”

“However, I doubt she was the only one who realized that FOXDIE could be used to target more or less genetically identical individuals…”

“I know,” EVA said, “it’s been bothering me, too.”

“What would the purpose of designing something to take out John even be…? He’s still trapped in his coma. He should be a complete non-issue as far as they’re concerned.”

“I know, ADAM, I know.” Now she frowned. “Are you ever planning on telling FOXHOUND about that?”

“Won’t be able to keep it secret forever,” Ocelot said, “but… it’s hardly relevant right now, is it?”
“I’m not sure I’d call your and my primary reason for doing this ‘irrelevant’.”

“I’m still uncertain about how Liquid will react when he finds out. There’s a decent chance he won’t do anything drastic, but I want him to be too deep into this to go off the rails by the time I have to reveal it.”

“…”

“He still hates him, of course,” Ocelot went on, “finding a new father in V didn’t change that. But for the past nine years it’s been V’s death that has really driven his hatred for John, not anything else that happened. And I’ve got him convinced that it’s the Patriots who are at fault for that, not John per se, so given a choice between revenge on John and revenge on the Patriots he should—“

“You have Eli convinced of that?” EVA said, “or yourself?”

Ocelot didn’t reply.

“Eli, will you stop fussing over the mirror?”

Liquid didn’t turn around, just glanced at Mantis’ reflection behind his own. “I’m too young to have this many white hairs.”

“They are not even noticeable.”

“Yes they are,” Liquid whined, “just look at them.”

“I literally do not see any. Your hair is fine, Eli, stop fussing over the mirror and come to bed. It is three in the morning.”

“My hair’s going white and I’ve started getting heartburn recently - you don’t think this is just inferior genes, do you? Or maybe they programmed accelerated aging into me like they did with Solidus?”

“I think it is just stress.”

Liquid snorted. “Wasn’t that the excuse you gave when your hair started falling out and you just shaved it all off? Because that was malnutrition, plain and simple.”

“Don’t make this about my eating habits, Eli.”

“Then don’t be so blithe about my premature aging.”

Mantis sighed irritably. “White hairs and heartburn are not necessarily signs of premature aging. They could just as easily be symptoms of stress. Now come to bed, it is late and you are being ridiculous.”

Liquid finally tore himself away from the bathroom mirror, although he was still grumbling petulantly. “I just think, if Solidus was designed to look twice his age—“

“Would that not have been the case even when he was younger? You are leaping to conclusions. If you were supposed to age at an accelerated rate then we would be seeing something sooner and more definite than a few white hairs at age 32.”

He opened his mouth to protest but Mantis grabbed his wrist and started leading him out of the bathroom, down the hallway to their shared quarters. He shook his hand out of Mantis’ grasp,
annoyed and a bit self-conscious.

Maybe he was right. It could be just stress, couldn’t it? Certainly there had been a lot going on lately...

“Of course I am right,” Mantis said, “when am I ever not?”

“You don’t want me to answer that, Mantis.”

“Mm. No, I don’t.”

Still, Liquid couldn’t help but fret over this even with how likely it was that the added stress would just make it worse. He couldn’t help it. Maybe he came across as vain to other people, but truthfully it was just that his appearance was the one thing he’d been consistently praised on his whole life - the one aspect of him that had never been dismissed as worthless, defective, or inferior - so he made sure to take care of it. So… white hairs? In his early thirties?

“They really are not noticeable, Eli,” Mantis assured him, “there is no reason to worry about this.”

“…”

“If nothing else, you have better, more important things to concern yourself with.”

“…right. That’s true.”

“Good. To bed with you. Maybe if you are lucky can get three hours’ rest.”

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Mantis blinked, broke eye contact with Liquid. “I only needed to-“

“Your Cold War conspiracy theory compilations again?” Liquid said, and grabbed him around the waist, picking him up and throwing him over his shoulder despite his squawk of protest. “Not tonight, Mantis. You’re coming with me.” He gave him an affectionate pat on the butt.

“Put me down! You need to sleep-!”

“And you need to realize that none of your books are going to give you any information about the Patriots, they’ve all been through the censors’ mangling. Why are you so bloody concerned about their past, anyway? We don’t need to know how they came about in order to take them down.”

Mantis fell into a sullen silence and let Liquid carry him the rest of the way to their quarters. He probably would have put up more a fight if it hadn’t been three in the morning and there was actually anyone else in the hallway.

Liquid deposited Mantis on the bed and clambered on top of him, but Mantis disinterestedly pushed him away and Liquid, undeterred, settled instead between his legs and grabbed the zipper of Mantis’ pants. He was determined to get the dick tonight and take his mind off things.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Mantis muttered, then gave Liquid’s hair a good yank. “You are supposed to wait for me to tell you to do this sort of thing.”

“Please?” Liquid said, looking up at him and giving him his best smile.

Mantis sighed deeply. “…fine, go ahead… if you are that desperate.”
“Mmm.” He undid Mantis’ fly, pressing a kiss to his stomach at the same time. Carefully he drew Mantis’ limp cock out, brushing it with his fingertips, then mouthed it, eyes still directed up towards Mantis’ face. Mantis watched him for a few moments, then turned his head away, his breath catching as Liquid drew his tongue in a long wet line down his dick, making it twitch.

The taste of Mantis’ skin was salty, mostly, and some other flavor that Liquid had never put a word to although he knew it was arousal-related somehow, and he also tasted a little of the way his soap smelled - like oatmeal. Liquid was always grateful Mantis kept himself fastidiously clean, even if it was only for his sake; he’d taken enough dirty, unwashed cocks in his mouth to last him several lifetimes over ten years ago.

“Don’t think about that,” Mantis said softly, lazily tugging on his hair again.

Yes, Mantis, Liquid thought, closing his eyes and focusing on sucking on the side of Mantis’ dick, down near the base, and squeezing his thighs with his fingers digging into them. The way Mantis’ cock had stiffened under his hands and mouth was turning him on so bad.

“Good boy.”

That wasn’t helping.

“Nothing to worry about, Eli,” Mantis said, pulling Liquid’s ponytail holder off and brushing his hand back through his hair, letting it fall down around his face, “I will take good care of you as soon as you finish what you started…”

Liquid pulled away from him, nodded, then tucked his hair behind his ears and took Mantis’ erection into his mouth, moaning appreciatively, making only the slightest choking noise when he pushed it past his (ostensible) gag reflex.

I love you, he thought dreamily, swallowing.

“I know,” Mantis gasped, “Eli, I know.”

Chapter End Notes

The vocal cord parasites being related to FOXDIE is implied in canon, by the way.

re: Project Charon — I know there’s a Charon Corps in Metal Gear Survive but to any new readers, there’s no relation. I didn’t name Project Charon after that; this entire subplot was (in the original upload) resolved months before the game even dropped. :^( 
Chapter 12

“I see. Thank you.” Ocelot hung up.

He scrutinized the card he’d written on during the phone conversation for a moment - he’d been given a name, three telephone numbers (a home phone, work phone, and cell phone), and a home address - then put it down and called Liquid on Codec.

“Turns out you were right on the money, boss,” he said, “one of the VSPB pathologists used to fetch coffee for Project Charon. He’s slated to restart development of FOXDIE pending the arrival of Dr. Hunter’s computers from FOXHOUND headquarters.”

“That’s what I thought,” Liquid sighed, “we got the order to turn them over this morning. I stalled for time and had Mantis ‘accidentally’ reformat the harddrive or fry the motherboard or whatever it is he did. Blamed it on the dearly departed doctor, of course.”

Ocelot twitched his moustache. He hadn’t gotten the opportunity to go over any of Naomi’s files himself, so while he would have picked up on more important things than Octopus had, it seemed he would be forced to take Octopus’ word for the significance or insignificance of the data he sorted through. “She might have backups somewhere - but if they request the backup data then they’ll have to tell you where to find it. Although I’d recommend only telling them it was accidentally wiped and just keeping the data for yourself - you never know what might come in handy later.”

“Hmm. Right. What about the VSPB pathologist?”

“He’ll have to reverse-engineer the Project Charon virus before he’s able to do anything, even without Dr. Hunter’s data,” Ocelot said, “but he should have access to all of the data from Project Charon, so it should only take a year at the most before he’s ready to start programming in the kill list. Dr. Hunter was only given a year to do that, so…”

“…so all we’ve really done is delay FOXDIE by about two years, and ensure that the entire development takes place in Atlanta instead of part of it being here where we can keep an eye on it.”

“Yes.”

“Damn it. Is there anyone slated to take over the project assuming something happens to him?”

“Not presently, no,” Ocelot said, “not only does it require a rather specific skill set to work on almost entirely by oneself, but the pool of people that the Patriots are willing to give clearance to for this project is extremely limited.”

“So if this one’s taken out…”

“FOXDIE will, in all likelihood, go back on ice, yes. However, once it gets out to the Patriots what we’re doing, I imagine they’ll find someone to continue the project.”

“So as long as the data still exists, FOXDIE will always be hanging over our head,” Liquid said. Ocelot heard him drumming his fingers on his desk. “And it’s not just Dr. Hunter’s data, either, it’s the data from Project Charon…”

“Right. Get rid of that and FOXDIE will go the same way as the vocal cord parasites did.”

“And what should we do with the VSPB pathologist in the meantime…?”
Ocelot shook his head. “With Dr. Hunter already dead, killing him now may lend credence to the idea that she really didn’t have anything to do with the CDC break-in. Better to just go after the Project Charon data and render him incapable of producing any results on his own.”

“Then we’ll need to find that. It should be on a computer somewhere, shouldn’t it? Since it was ‘70s project…”

“Computer, yes, and since it was the ‘70s it’s likely on microfilm as well as a backup,” Ocelot said, “I can promise you that there’s going to be at least a copy of the Project Charon data in the CDC’s internal network, but at this juncture I don’t know where else the data might be stored. It may have been disseminating for thirty years, for all we know.”

“Well, see if you can find that out. In the meantime I’ll… well, infiltrating the CDC again would be pushing our luck, so I suppose that in order to remove the Project Charon data from their network we’re going to need a hacker. I’ll try to find someone in our R&D team.”

“I don’t think there’ll be a way to hide your anti-Patriot intentions from them,” Ocelot said dryly, “so if you must, send their personnel files to EVA and have her vet everyone first - we can’t guarantee anyone will join us, but at least then we can weed out any Patriot plants. Actually, you should do that anyway. As far as acquiring a hacker goes, though, just in case of leaks I would recommend calling Solidus.”

Liquid groaned. Ocelot resisted his urge to roll his eyes on Codec.

“He should be able to get you in touch with someone who can help, without all the fuss.”

“Fine.” He signed off without another word.

Ocelot looked at the card with the VSPB pathologist’s contact information again. Judging by his address, he was likely married and might already have kids - at least, he lived in the part of town where one could rent apartments with multiple bedrooms, so understandably it was where families lived. He ought to go check against his conclusions…

It might not point him in the direction of where the Project Charon data was stored, and it would be a bad idea to directly ask about it as that may raise a red flag, and it was too soon for that, too soon — but if nothing else it would be fun to terrorize a poor CDC researcher who was probably already in over his head, anyway, what with directly causing the deaths of some nameless Central American expats and suddenly being handed a virus development order after the previous researcher on it had been assassinated.

Harmless bit of relaxation, really.

Solidus wasn’t picking up his phone.

Frustrated after four times getting an automated “This user has not yet set up his or her voicemail inbox!” message, Liquid gave up on that (maybe he was busy? He was pretty sure Presidents did something besides play golf occasionally) and just texted him instead. Once again the numeric keypad slowed him down to the point of him just sending Solidus the words “CALL ME” and nothing else.

And then he waited.

He ended up falling asleep at his desk by the time his cell phone rang. He jolted awake, fumbled for his phone, and flipped it open.
“Hello…?”

“What do you want, Liquid?”

“Oh…” Liquid stifled a yawn. “Have you ever heard of Project Charon?”

“No.”

“Well, to make a long story short I need someone to hack the CDC computers and delete some data. It’s very important. As in, *life or death for this entire unit* important.”

“And…?”

“And Ocelot said,” Liquid grit his teeth, “that you would be able to put me in touch with someone who could do that for me…”

“Hmmm… you’ll owe me.”

“You’re my commander, anyway…”

“Let’s see…” There was a creaking sound, like Solidus was pensively leaning back in his chair. “Well, when you say ‘hacker’, there is this one girl who comes to mind…”

“Yes?”

“But she’s currently under close Patriot surveillance - they intend to recruit her - so using her would just be asking for trouble.”

Liquid had to stop himself from saying *Why bring her up, then?!* out loud. “Anyone else you can think of?”

“Hrm… I believe one of the men on one of my pet projects can be described as a hacker. He might appreciate a free vacation to Atlanta.”

Liquid perked up. “Oh?”

“Yes… yes, his name is Dr. Emmerich—“

“Eh? *Emmerich?*”

“Hm? Do you know him…?”

“Er… no. Common name, isn’t it?” He knew that the Dr. Emmerich from twenty years ago had come to America after getting kicked off of Mother Base (although he’d never found out about most of the details behind *that* part of the story), but… that’d just be too much of a coincidence.

“Indeed. Anyway, he’s a relative of some sort of the girl I just mentioned, and - although I haven’t met him personally - I hear he’s extremely naïve, so you may be able to convince him to do whatever it is you want him to do without any mention of the Patriots.”

“I see. I’ll be needing him, then - but not immediately, I’ll call you back when I require Emmerich but there’s no point in destroying the data until the backups have been located and dealt with already. Are you *certain* you don’t know anything about Project Charon?”

“I’ve never heard of it.”
“Helpful. Also, about that helicopter I’ve been—“

Solidus hung up on him.

Git.

He put down his phone, thinking this over. Realistically, how many copies of the data were there going to be? He sincerely doubted that it would have been put on the internet anywhere, which was good - he’d heard that once something was on the internet then it would be preserved pretty much forever no matter how badly you wanted to delete it, since it would effectively (or was it potentially?) have a backup copy on every computer on Earth. But, even though that was the most secure thing to do if what you were trying to preserve was the existence of some particular data, putting something on the internet meant that anyone with the right URL could see it, so top-secret stuff like Project Charon wouldn’t be on there. That meant that there were a limited number of copies of its data.

So… the copy at the CDC would have to be taken care of last since that would be the data that someone was currently working off of - if something happened to it, they’d just retrieve the data from one of the other copies. That could be useful if things weren’t going so well and they really couldn’t find where else Project Charon’s files were being stored, couldn’t it? Liquid could just have the hacker, Emmerich, delete the data off the CDC network and then when they copied it over again, have him track where it came from. That meant that there were a limited number of copies of its data.

Of course the Project Charon data on the CDC computers wouldn’t be the original; Octopus had said that Project Charon hadn’t been turned over to the CDC until it was suspended, so clearly when it was actually being worked on in the ‘70s that would have been using a different computer.

Logically, then, there were at least two versions of it that had to be taken out. Plus Ocelot had said it was likely backed up on microfilm as well. At least microfilm didn’t need any technological knowledge to destroy without making a scene, but what were the odds of it being stored with one of the computers that had the files they needed? Maybe that was likely, if Liquid was thinking about the computer that the original researcher had used here…

He leaned his head on the desk. Two separate locations, potentially three or more, and while one of them had to be done after the other it would still be prudent to have them as close in time as possible so the operation wasn’t interrupted by someone noticing something. And that was assuming that there wasn’t another computer somewhere that had this backed up. Or that it hadn’t been folded into some kind of network, because wouldn’t that be the same problem as the internet, except on a smaller scale? They needed a hacker just for the CDC one, and Liquid hadn’t yet come up with a way to explain himself if the Emmerich guy decided he needed an explanation to do his job… hopefully Liquid could just get away with flatly ordering him to do it, and he would…

Honestly, he felt like pulling out his hair. Liquid growled in frustration to himself. He could hardly come up with a plan with so little information, and he had to figure out how to do all this without arousing the suspicion of the Patriots. Sooner or later they were going to notice all the random stretches of vacation time, wouldn’t they? Plus Liquid had already sort of decided that someone would need to accompany Emmerich to Atlanta, and he had already decided that that someone would be him.

He couldn’t help it. This was a life and death situation for the entire unit, and as team leader he was responsible for them. Ever since taking command, Liquid had frequently asked himself what Venom would do in such-and-such a situation - and he was certain that here, Venom would have personally overseen the destruction of the last remnants of Project Charon.
His phone buzzed. He sat up. “Hm?”

A text, from Ocelot - Liquid hadn’t been entirely aware that he could text, nor why he felt the need to do that instead of just calling him on the Codec again. He opened it.

“despite buying 2 years destruction of p c data can t be delayed patriots working on worldwide network original digital copy of data has been located + is in location planned to absorb into network beginning of 2005”

Shit, that gave them a little over two months. “where” Liquid texted back.

“lima will be sending pertinent information this evening”

*Peru*? Liquid thought, blinking. *Interesting*… mentally he prioritized Octopus, a native Hispanophone, over the others as far as who was going to get assigned to this off-the-records mission went.

He snapped his phone shut and slipped it into his pocket, standing up, and wandered over to the… well, ‘mess hall’ was a tad generous, really it was just another breakroom (FOXHOUND headquarters had a lot of breakrooms and a lot of storage rooms, just the natural result of the unit dropping so dramatically in size since the so-called glory days when Big Boss has run it) except this one had a decent-sized kitchen attached, not that the full thing was ever really used. It was already mid-afternoon, and Liquid had accidentally napped through lunch, although stepping into the mess hall he found that Wolf and Raven were still eating.

“Any progress on the Project Charon… thing?” Wolf said.

“Yes,” Liquid replied, walking past them to the kitchen, “evidently someone is going to take a nice ‘vacation’ to Peru soon.” Four minutes later he walked back out with a bowl of microwave ramen, sat down, and interrupted Wolf and Raven’s conversation: “Also, if we don’t get this sorted by New Year’s, we’re going to have FOXDIE hanging over our heads for the rest of our lives.”

“Oh?” Raven said.

Liquid gave them a quick summary of his conversation with Ocelot. He’d given up a long time ago on anything resembling security clearance as far as the other members of the unit went, mostly because Mantis had access to every bit of Liquid’s mind and, as much as Liquid thought of him as a very intelligent man, he could be a bit… conversationally absent-minded and didn’t always have the best grasp of what was or was not acceptable to share with others. Liquid was just glad that it was really only classified mission details that he let slip, and only to other members of FOXHOUND. Largely because he received complaints of being “standoffish” “uncommunicative” and “anti-social” to the medical and R&D teams, and rarely if ever talked to any of the residents of the nearby town.

“What time zone is Ocelot in right now, anyway?” Wolf said.

“I think he’s in Atlanta right now,” Liquid said, “so he’s an hour ahead of us.”

“So it does not make much difference if he meant his evening or our evening…”

He left Wolf and Raven to their conversation as he scarfed down his ramen, too preoccupied with Project Charon to participate. Afterwards he went wandering again - yes, he knew he needed to call EVA to see how he was supposed to get the personnel files to her, and then he needed to pull said files and do that, but he just didn’t want to right now - and he ended up at the shooting range.

It was, as kind of expected, completely empty and the lights weren’t even on. He only bothered
turning on one light - Liquid looked around the shadowed, acoustically neutral space of the shooting
range, and sighed to himself.

After five years of hardly thinking about Ocelot, it had been here that - a mere week after Ocelot had
joined the unit - Liquid realized that no, he hadn’t really gotten over him. It was in this room, in the
same dim light, that he had had a good tussle with Ocelot again and then when he was dizzy and
bleeding and too excited to say no like he should have, Ocelot had pinned him against the wall and
fucked him until he had no idea whose name he was moaning and couldn’t remember his own
anymore.

Of course that was about two weeks after Mantis had seduced him and kept him as a lover. Liquid
chuckled dryly to himself, walking over to the lit target and unholstering his pistol. Mantis had been
pissed as hell when Liquid came staggering back to bed after that, and that night had been the night
he’d put Liquid’s collar on for the first time. It never stayed off for long after that - just when Liquid
was bathing, or on the rarer occasion that the collar itself needed cleaned. And it hadn’t been until the
following morning that Mantis had actually yelled at him for cuckolding him.

Liquid lined up his shot and fired. He wasn’t renown for his marksmanship like Ocelot or Wolf
were, but he was good enough to consistently get bullseyes. It used to be that his aim would drift
when he was thinking about something else while shooting, but that wasn’t the case anymore.
Practice had taken care of that.

He didn’t often stop and think about when Ocelot had joined the unit. From an administrative
standpoint, it wasn’t particularly remarkable, since Raven had joined around the same time, arriving
at headquarters just a few days after Ocelot did. He’d extended invitations to both of them the same
day (Raven had responded first, despite reporting later), although when Mantis had found out about
it… well, it hadn’t been pretty. Mantis overreacted and Liquid overreacted to his overreaction and
there had been a lot of shouting, Mantis had bitterly accused Liquid of being some kind of whore,
and in the end the only thing that had stopped them was Mantis threatening to take over Liquid’s will
to essentially tell Ocelot to fuck off and Liquid panicking a little about that… he was embarrassed
about it even now, on the rare occasion that he even remembered that, but back in Iraq…

Back in Iraq the only reason why he felt the rape was even bad - the only reason why it affected him
- had nothing to do with the fact that it hurt, although it did hurt badly. Nor did he much care about
the humiliation factor; sure, his pride might have been pretty much the only thing he’d ever had, at
least at that point, but the only people who saw that being done to him were people who looked
down on him anyway. He could spare a little dignity. No, the real trauma inflicted was the fact that
he felt so powerless and out of control. If it hadn’t been for that then it would have just rolled off his
back like all the torture and beatings and isolation had. But he hadn’t been allowed control of even
his own body and——

He was missing his shots.

Why the hell was he even thinking about this?

Anyway, he’d never really thought it mattered much that Mantis had threatened to strip his will from
him because he’d only threatened, hadn’t actually done it, and even if he never directly addressed it
again it had still been pretty clear to Liquid the couple days after that that Mantis felt at least a little
bad about it. So Liquid forgave him, as weird as it was to think of himself as forgiving someone. But
he was sure Mantis hadn’t realized when he said it that Liquid would have that kind of reaction. And
after that he’d always been careful about what he did or say, so that Liquid wouldn’t have to suffer
the mortification of breaking down in front of him like that any more often than he couldn’t help either way.
He reloaded his gun, dimly wondering where Mantis was. It wasn’t often that he was able to introspect about these subjects without him, at some point, butting in and distracting him. It seemed - just because he wasn’t getting any mental response from the man even though he just thought that - that Mantis actually wasn’t around right now. Perhaps he’d gone into town. Or the medical labs, which would have cut him off from the rest of his range. Or he might just have been asleep.

Liquid chased all those thoughts away his own damn self and went back to his target practice. He five magazines deep into the target when he was suddenly blindsided by some incoherent psychic message from Mantis that could only be transcribed as !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

What’s going on?! Liquid thought, alarmed at the intense shock of the ‘statement’.

i just woke up and why is the cyborg ninja IN OUR ROOM?!!?

“Well, get rid of him!” Liquid said out loud, lowering his pistol to his side and taking off out of the shooting range and towards his quarters at a sprint. “You’re the world’s most powerful practitioner of psychokinesis, remember?”

i just woke up!!!

“That’s no excuse!”

and he just ran off before I could do anything.

Oh, great. Fantastic. Liquid raised Wolf and Octopus on Codec.

“He just ran by the med labs,” Octopus said before Liquid could say anything, “got one of the interns, Hamel. Looked bad, but she’s already being treated.”

“Raven has gone to get his cannon,” Wolf reported.

“Good, hopefully that should-“ He rounded a corner and almost ran smack into the cyborg ninja, who turned visible again just as he did. “Aaagh!!” Why the hell did he have the ability to turn invisible, anyway?!

“Boss? What happened?!”

Liquid signed off, jumping to the side as he narrowly avoided getting bisected by the ninja’s chokuto. He’d never entirely noticed until he’d been hit by it a few weeks before - always assumed the sound was coming from the ninja himself - but the sword made a faint humming noise as he swung it around. Vibrating, perhaps? At least, that would probably explain why it could cut through the walls like a hot knife through butter.

Shit, wasn’t that a load-bearing wall?

With a horrible rumbling sound, part of the ceiling collapsed, burying Liquid under a pile of lath, plaster, spray insulation, and bits of concrete. He just barely rolled out of the way of a long piece of steel rebar that would have otherwise impaled him.

And between that and the fact that on the other side of the now-missing wall had been Raven and his Vulcan cannon, the ninja didn’t have time to do make any more attempts on Liquid’s life, because a split second later the whole hallway was filled with the roaring of gunfire, the ninja was fleeing, and the wall opposite the one that had just collapsed had a huge round chunk torn out of it. Fortunately that one wasn’t a load-bearing wall and what remained of this section of ceiling stayed exactly where it was.
Despite the fact that the ninja always deflected - whether with his sword or his armor - FOXHOUND’s bullets, even he didn’t like having 6,000 20mm rounds a minute fired at him, so within moments he was gone, Raven pursuing. Liquid’s ears were ringing from a combination of the noise and the ceiling falling on his head.

Wolf came jogging up as Liquid was brushing himself off, pistol already re-holstered. “Are you okay, boss?”

“I’m fine,” Liquid said irritably, looking around at the two destroyed walls and partly caved-in ceiling. Now would not be a good time to call in some contractors to fix things, so they’d just have to handle it themselves… probably cheaper that way, too… plus it really only had to be a temporary fix, their time remaining on this base was limited. “Any casualties besides the intern?”

“No, I do not think so.”

“Where’s Mantis?”

“Over here,” Mantis said from the corner. Liquid strode up to him and grabbed him by the shoulders, getting dust on his outfit.

“Are you hurt?” he said very seriously, examining him intently, “the cyborg ninja, did he—“

“I am fine, Eli.”

“What was he doing when you woke up?”

“Nothing. Just staring at me.” Wolf gave them a quizzical look. Mantis shook his head. “I want to say he was interested in my gas mask, nothing more.”

“Perhaps he was thrown off by the fact that he could not see your face,” Wolf said.

“Did he say anything?” Liquid said.

“He muttered something about poison gas, and something about a fan. I do not know.”

Octopus came sauntering up, and Liquid let go of Mantis. “So,” Octopus said, “that was exciting.”

“Helpful as always, Octopus,” Wolf said.

“Hey, if it’s the Vulcan cannon that consistently gets rid of him, why shouldn’t I just step out of the way and wait for Raven to handle in?” He glanced at Liquid. “He didn’t get you again, did he?”

“No,” Liquid said, “just dropped half the hallway on me, I’m perfectly fine.”

“Right… actually, you’d better come to the med labs anyway, you kind of have a duty to check up on Hamel, don’t you?”

“I suppose that’s true,” Liquid said, although really it would only be for appearances’ sake, and maybe the new medical chief of staff ever since Naomi had run off - Liquid couldn’t recall her name right now - would pester him about something or other.

As it turned out Hamel was expected to pull through, anyway; the wound was deep and it had been a bit touch-and-go for a little while there and she probably wouldn’t have made it if she hadn’t been attacked (well, slashed in passing as the ninja ran down the hallway) right outside of the med labs, but, well, she was fine now. A bit too high on painkillers to really speak or do anything besides stare blankly at the ceiling, but when the medical chief apologized and said Hamel was going to need
some time off after this, Liquid waved her off and said that she was free to give the poor half-disemboweled intern as much time off as she needed - just make sure that the *medical chief* was the one who filled out the ‘time off’ form and all Liquid had to do was sign it.

“And whose phone is that?” he said, annoyed.

“That would be yours, sir,” the medical chief said.

Whoops. That was probably Ocelot.
“Alright, what’s going on?” Liquid said sharply, striding down the hallway away from the med labs.

“What are you so worked up about?” Ocelot said from the other end of the line.

“Wh- worked up? I’m not worked up.”

“I can tell by the sound of your voice, boss. What just happened over there?”

“The cyborg ninja came back,” Liquid said with a frustrated sigh, “snuck into my quarters, then gutted one of the medical interns. She’s fine, though.”

“…is he gone now?”

“Yes. Probably. Raven was chasing him off a few minutes ago so I doubt he’s still around. Now, you said you had information about Project Charon…”

“Yes,” Ocelot said, “I’ve found out where all the copies of the data are - I’ll admit we got a bit lucky, none of them are on computers that have already been folded into the Patriots’ general network, except for the one at the CDC, which is a sub-network anyway.”

“Is it being a sub-network good?”

“Yes, boss, it means that the data is technically separate and didn’t disseminate over the rest of the network. Anyway, as I said earlier the original digital copy of the data is in Lima, where the majority of Project Charon was carried out — on a computer in the National Library of Peru. I believe the microfilm is also there.”

“Any other copies?” Infiltrating a library, deleting some data off a computer there, and trashing some microfilm should be about the easiest thing in the world - Octopus could do this, he could replace one of the librarians with himself and simply walk right in.

“One in Hong Kong - a lot of South American systems have been neglected by the Patriots, but in this case we were saved by conflicts with the Chinese government — I went ahead and asked EVA to take care of that, she knows the city rather well.”

“Ah. I see. Is that all?”

“That’s all, boss.”

“Alright. I’ll have Octopus take care of the Biblioteca Nacional del Perú, and once I get confirmation of that and the copy in Hong Kong being destroyed I’ll see to the one at the CDC myself. I’ve already got Solidus started on the arrangements for a hacker… oh, and when can I expect you back?”

“Mmm… I was thinking about using up the rest of my vacation time, boss. I assure you it’s very important.”

“Oh. That’s fine. As long as it’s important.”
“I’ll call you back if anything else comes up,” Ocelot said, then hung up. Liquid put his phone back in his pocket yet again and went and found the breakroom where Octopus was hanging out, where he stood in the doorway and put one hand on his hip.

“So, Octopus,” he said brightly, “how do you like the idea of an extended vacation to Peru?”

Since Ocelot couldn’t/didn’t give any more specific information than “a computer at the BNP” and “the microfilm is probably there somewhere too”, Octopus requested two months to complete the assignment - one month to pick a victim and study them before eventually quietly murdering them, draining their blood, and stealing their entire identity, and then another month to unobtrusively work at the library and figure out where his targets were. He said he probably wouldn’t need the full second month but it was still with a bit of trepidation that Liquid signed off on the ‘vacation’, since two months only gave them about a week to spare before New Year’s.

At least it wasn’t weird to give Octopus such a long vacation. When he did take time off, which admittedly wasn’t often, he typically took a lot of time off, mostly because a two-month assignment was hardly out of the ordinary for him. Finding out every last detail of a person’s life was incredibly time-consuming.

Anyway, Octopus was off to Peru and Liquid was still holding off on pulling the medical and R&D personnel files to send to EVA, using the fact that she was “busy in Hong Kong, best not to interrupt or distract her” as an excuse. Mantis snidely commented that it was just that, an excuse, and Liquid, not particularly in the mood to get in an argument about his relationship with his mother, had stalked off to the garage and headed into town to buy some plywood. He’d patch up the holes in the walls and ceiling himself, goddammit.

“Do you know anything about repairing buildings?” Wolf asked him as he picked up pieces of rubble and dumped them in a wheelbarrow that he’d brought indoors and subsequently tracked dirt all over the floor. Sometimes he wished they could afford a cleaning crew…

“I know a little about building primitive shelters,” Liquid said, “that’s close enough, isn’t it?”

“Not when federal building codes are involved…”

“Well, this is just a temporary fix. All I need to do is screw the plywood over the holes and sweep up. Now, are you going to help or not?”

Wolf just laughed at him. It would have taken Liquid all day to complete the job - which he didn’t complain about - except Raven, possibly irritated by the way Liquid had appropriated a radio to blast ‘80s music down the hall while he worked, showed up after twenty minutes and helped him with most of it. Liquid ended up sweeping up all the dust, dirt, and small debris by himself, though.

“Another job well done,” he said cheerfully to himself, leaning on the broom. In actuality, it looked like shit. That was about all that could be expected from a couple panels of plywood screwed to both sides of the ruined walls, and carefully inserted into the ceiling where they more rested over the hole instead of covering it. But at least the holes were gone. And the floor was clean.

Maybe he should paint over the walls? Was there even a point?

“Trying to burn off excess energy, or genuinely that upset about me commentating on your relationship with EVA?” came Mantis’ exceptionally dry voice from behind him.

“I’m restless,” Liquid claimed, turning around.
“Lying by omission is still lying, Eli.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

Mantis shrugged. “As you wish, then. You worked right through lunch, aren’t you hungry?”

“Oh…” He was, actually. “When was the last time you ate?”

“The other day,” Mantis said, sounding mildly affronted that Liquid would even ask.

“I mean real food, Mantis, not multivitamins.”

“Multivitamins are good enough, are they not?”

“No.”

“…”

“…right. I’m going to go make some rice and whatever the hell else we have, and then we’re both going to your deserted little hangout outside of base and you’re going to-“

“Fine, fine,” Mantis said, waving him off. “If you insist.”

They were a week into November when Ocelot finally came back, which meant the abrupt end of Mantis’ relatively pleasant and compliant attitude. In other words, things were pretty back to normal around here.

Liquid got a call from an unknown number. After staring at his phone suspiciously for a few moments, he picked up.

“Hello?” he said cautiously.

“早晨 Eli! 近排點呀?”

“…”

Well, he didn’t understand Cantonese, but he certainly recognized the voice…

“Ah— sorry about that, people were watching,” EVA said, “I’m alone now. But how have things been going lately? Ocelot only keeps me updated on the broad details.”

“How have things been going on your end?”

She sighed. “You mean about the Project Charon data…? It’s gone now, I torched the server it was on.”

“Good. I’m hanging up now.”

“Wait! I just wanted to see how you were doing.”

“I’m fine, Mother.”

“Anything happen lately?”

“Not in particular.”

“…”
“…”

“…Ocelot told me you had some personnel files to send me for vetting?”

“Oh, right. Yes, I do. How should I-?”

It took them about ten minutes to figure out how to swing that once Liquid revealed he was a little bit on the technologically illiterate side. They considered just mailing the files to EVA, but the risk of said mail being searched was too great - and obviously this was a gigantic breach in confidentiality, not even Ocelot could talk his way out of that one probably - so in the end they just agreed that EVA would come to FOXHOUND headquarters and sort this out personally. “Agreed” meaning EVA suggested it and Liquid had no choice but to consent to that, and as soon as the phone call was over he screamed and pulled at his hair in frustration.

“Now what is your problem?” Ocelot, who had evidently been passing by, poked his head in the door and said.

“Why can’t you vet the medical and R&D team?!” Liquid said, “you should be perfectly capable of it!!”

“I could root out any plants, but EVA is much better than I at figuring out who would be receptive to our cause. Truthfully I’m too suspicious.”

Word got out quickly to the rest of FOXHOUND. Mantis was pleased - which was why word got out so quickly - as was Wolf, Raven was entirely indifferent, and once Wolf was done mentioning it to Octopus over Codec she reported back that he was disappointed he wouldn’t get to meet her yet.

“Yet?” Liquid said, “what does he mean, yet?”

“How is his assignment going?” Raven asked Wolf.

Wolf shrugged. “Evidently the man he is stalking likes anticuchos and picarones, whatever those are, which is good because apparently they are delicious.”

“…glad he’s enjoying himself,” Liquid said flatly.

Liquid spent the rest of the day holed up by himself, working on the eternal backlog of budgeting paperwork, and when Mantis dropped by to try and cheer him up at least a little Liquid just lashed out at him, shouting about how it really didn’t matter that EVA was his mother because she was technically only a surrogate and not even around much even when he was already an adult, so he didn’t know why everyone had to take this attitude about this, and it was completely ridiculous that Mantis in particular should like EVA so much when the only thing they really had in common was the fact that they’d both liked to butt into Liquid’s personal business back in ’94 and ’95 and considering EVA had cybernetic implants Mantis shouldn’t have even—

Mantis simply walked out before Liquid was done ranting, much to Liquid’s frustration. He couldn’t concentrate on the paperwork after that but on the plus side, at the end of the evening Mantis forced him to put on lacy, silky thigh-high stockings and panties, then handcuffed him, bent him over the side of the bed, and pulled the panties to the side and fucked him entirely into submission. In the morning Liquid felt a lot better about his mother’s impending visit.

“You wouldn’t have been acting like that if it had been your father who was coming here,” Mantis mumbled from where he wasn’t bothering to get up for the day yet.

“If Father were still alive, I wouldn’t even be here,” Liquid said, pulling his hair back into his
customary ponytail, “I’d still be at Outer Heaven.” And honestly, if Venom hadn’t in some way died to Big Boss, and if Big Boss hadn’t come to take over Outer Heaven after Venom’s death - Liquid would still be there, too.

The following week EVA arrived and casually revealed that she’d be staying for two weeks - one week to handle the medical staff, and one to handle R&D. Despite Liquid’s protests she took up residence in the women’s barracks instead of that hotel in town - there wasn’t much Liquid could do about it without looking like a complete git since Wolf was completely fine with having a roommate for the next two weeks, and even helped EVA drag one of the beds that used to be in there out of storage — she also took over Liquid’s office, but in that case Liquid just let her have it. That was where the personnel files that she needed to dissect were, after all.

Liquid went so far as to call Octopus and ask if it were possible at all for him to get rid of the Project Charon data in the next few days so that he could go ahead and call Solidus and have him send Emmerich to Atlanta so he could be on his way there himself as soon as possible.

“Uh, no, boss,” Octopus said, “I’m still working on my librarian mask, it’ll be about another week before I’m ready to kill the guy. Why, is your mother already there?”

“…yes…”

“Hahahaha! Okay, tell her I said ‘hi’.” He signed off.

Helpful.

Unfortunately his plan to avoid EVA at all costs was rather difficult to pull off, mostly because FOXHOUND headquarters wasn’t very large and he didn’t have the cooperation of the other members of FOXHOUND. If EVA came wandering by and asked where Liquid was, literally anyone she was talking to wouldn’t even hesitate before pointing her in his direction. And EVA always seemed to have her breakfast, lunch, and dinner at the same time Liquid did — Liquid initially planned to just start eating in his quarters instead of the mess hall, at least until EVA was gone, but Mantis had flatly forbid it.

Liquid finally lost his temper with her when she found him in the otherwise-empty shooting range while she was taking a “quick break” from going over personnel files all day.

“What do you want from me?!”

EVA was mildly taken aback. “What do you mean, Eli?”

“You keep following me around and— look, I don’t want to talk to you!”

“Why not?”

“I just—I don’t, is that bloody alright with you?”

“Eli… I’m worried about you,” she said, gently but firmly, “you’ve been skittish around me the whole time I’ve been here. I thought we were doing fine after Atlanta.”

“That was different.”

“How?”

“It just was. But this is my base, my unit- I’m in charge here—“
EVA raised her eyebrows. “What, are you worried your unit likes me more than they like you?”

“What?” Liquid said, “no! Of course not. I just… everyone’s just got these- ridiculous expectations of how I’m supposed to act around you. You’re not even my real mother.”

There was a short pause. EVA frowned. Liquid… sort of wished he hadn’t said that, but not nearly enough to apologize or try to take it back.

“I know I was ‘only’ a surrogate,” EVA said, “I know that as far as DNA goes, you have no relation to me - and you have barely any genetic relation to the egg donor to begin with. But I gave birth to you, Eli. I gave you life. You and your brother developed in my womb. Your first blood was my own.”

Liquid’s hands clenched and unclenched. “That doesn’t matter. Blood relations haven’t brought me anything but pain and annoyance anyway.”

“Let’s try this, then,” EVA said, folding her arms, “Eli, you thought of Venom as your real father, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t just think of him as my real father,” Liquid snapped, “he is my real father.” And then corrected himself: “was my real father,” even though it had already been nine years and getting close to ten now.

“And he didn’t have any genetic relation to you whatsoever,” EVA said, “and you had never met him at all before you were twelve.”

“…”

“And when you were twelve - you were only with him a few months, and hated him and wanted to kill him the whole time. And after you ran away, you didn’t hear anything of him until you were 22.”

“What’s your point?” Liquid growled, even though he already knew full well what EVA was getting at.

“I’m just saying… the circumstances of your and his relationship really weren’t all that different from the circumstances of yours and mine now.” She gestured with one hand. “I’m not saying you have to immediately accept me as your mother if you don’t want to, but I just don’t want you to hold my absence or lack of genetic relation against me. I’m doing my best.”

Liquid struggled to find words to explain himself for a moment, then said, “after Father rescued me from that prison camp… he didn’t start off by treating me like a son, if that had even crossed his mind then he had the decency to wait until I brought it up. It wasn’t until I started calling him ‘Father’ that he started referring to me as his son.”

“So you don’t like me treating you like a son?” EVA said, “you’re not comfortable with it?”

“I… no, I’m not.”

“Then, you would prefer it if I treated you like just another comrade?”

“I…” He tried to imagine it, EVA treating him in the amicable but somewhat cool and detached way that she treated the other members of FOXHOUND, or Outer Heaven back in the day - a way that might cause one to refer to her in passing as ‘a friend’ but if one actually thought about it, really, they were more just colleagues, acquaintances, practically strangers — and it wasn’t that he couldn’t imagine it. He could. But that made him uncomfortable too…
Because, honestly, she was his mother, wasn’t she? So he didn’t want her treating him like he might as well have never met her outside of work. And looking back on it…

…well, hadn’t Venom treated him at least a little bit like a son even before Liquid had accidentally called him Father and it just sort of stuck? He hadn’t called him his son or his family but he had obviously cared about him. Was that what he wanted from EVA?

Liquid realized he didn’t know what he wanted, and clenched his fists in frustration, gritting his teeth.

“Eli, it’s okay to want a mother.”

“…hn?”

EVA shrugged. “It is,” she said, “it doesn’t really matter that you’re in your thirties already. Growing up without real parental figures is tough - it leaves you wanting for the rest of your life.”

Come to think of it, Liquid had never asked about how EVA grew up.

“So if you want to think of me as your mother, there’s no shame in that. If you don’t, I don’t mind, as long as you’re satisfied with your decision even if you end up changing your mind later. And if you aren’t sure… well, I just want you to know that I do consider you my son and I love you unconditionally. You’ll always have that. You don’t have to do anything with it if you’re not comfortable with it, but it’s still there.”

Liquid just stared at her for a few moments, then turned away deliberately. “Don’t you have personnel files to be going over?”

“…Eli…”

“That’s more important right now. And I don’t want to discuss this- I mean, I’d rather figure this out myself.”

“…alright. I’ll see you later, then.”

“Yes. See you later… Mother…”

The last word just kind of awkwardly slipped out without him entirely meaning to say it, probably just because he was more or less used to calling her that, but thankfully EVA didn’t really react to it other than throwing a small smile over her shoulder as she walked out of the shooting range. Liquid sighed deeply. If nothing else - if absolutely nothing else - the middle of the lead-up to a full-on revolution right under the Patriots’ noses was not the best time and place to sort out his mommy issues.

He wondered if Solid ever felt like this.

“I know what your problem with EVA is,” Mantis said, “I just do not understand it at all.”

Liquid made a muffled groan from where he was lying face-down on the bed.

Mantis tugged a loose shirt over his frame - he wasn’t necessarily planning on sleeping tonight, but it was arguably more comfortable to lounge around for ten hours in and it prevented Liquid (who liked to sleep naked) from complaining about his skin to sticking to Mantis’ leather. “I find her to be a perfectly pleasant lady - very easy to get along with, even for me.”
Liquid propped himself up on his elbows, scowling. “People aren’t supposed to get along with their mother-in-laws,” he complained.

Mantis gave him an unimpressed look. “Mother-in-law? We aren’t married, Eli.”

“We might as well be.”

“But we are not.”

“Well, you get what I’m trying to say!” He flopped back on the mattress, grumbling again. You’d despise her if she hadn’t come out and said she didn’t approve of me sleeping with Ocelot back in 1994, he thought sourly.

“That proved she has a good head on her shoulders, even if I cannot read her mind.”

You were just hoping she’d be able to convince me to break it off with him. It’s ridiculous that this persisted. I did break it off with Ocelot eventually.

“Eli, you hardly realized that breaking it off with Ocelot would be a side effect of leaving Outer Heaven until about fifteen minutes before you got on the boat.”

…that still counts.

“It was better than nothing,” Mantis said dryly, “at least until he showed up again and it took you all of one week to-”

“Can we stop bringing that up?!” Liquid burst out, pushing himself up again. “That was over four years ago! I apologized!!”

“I would be more inclined to forget about it if it never happened again…”

Liquid flushed angrily. “I’ve been behaving myself,” he protested, “last time I slept with him was all the way back in the end of June.”

“The beginning of July,” Mantis corrected, “but the thought has crossed your mind since then.”

“But I didn’t act on those thoughts!”

“Again, better than nothing,” Mantis said, “however…”

Liquid let out a long whine, pressing his face against the bedspread. He really didn’t like talking about his chronic and repeated infidelity. Of course Mantis couldn’t help but wonder if part of the reason why it was chronic and repeated was because he too often let Liquid get away with not talking about it with him…

He hooked his finger into the lead of Liquid’s collar and tugged him back onto his elbows. Liquid glared at him petulantly.

“I love you, not him,” he whined.

“So I’ve heard.”

“It’s just- I— well, I— you- nn…” He sighed. “You’re not open to the idea of having another threesome, are you, Mantis…?”

“Absolutely not.”
“I thought as much…”

Chapter End Notes

EVA’s line in Cantonese is just “Good morning Eli! What’s been going on recently?”
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

never forgetti how hyped this chapter was in the comments section of previous chapters in the original fic
and how horrified everyone was in the comments of this chapter :^)

Please, comment, and recapture those beautiful moments.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Any progress, Mother?” Liquid said, leaning against the doorjamb to his office.

“Stader’s wife works part-time at a Patriot-owned corporation in Belfield; Cotreau had some dealings with them when he was in college, but isn’t on their payroll anymore; Mahjub may or may not be with them, certainly the Patriots got ahold of some patents of his but at this point I don’t know if he gave them to them or if they were stolen,” EVA said, shuffling through the R&D team’s files.

“So no one here for the express purpose of keeping an eye on us so far?”

“No… I’m sure Ocelot was given an assignment along those lines at some point, though. And when it comes to Ocelot, or, at least, agents of Ocelot’s standing, they don’t typically assign redundancies.”

“I see. Well, anyone who might be persuaded to join our cause?”

“Maybe Dr. Mahjub, as I said,” EVA said, “I know Blažej Čižek’s - sorry, ‘Blaise Sisken’, I never understood changing your name upon immigration to America of all places — anyway, I happen to know his younger brother Záviš, so we have an ‘in’ there. And that little Chinese girl, Mei Ling, she looks promising… but she’s so young, I’m afraid the Patriots are going to be thinking the same thing, too…”

“Mei Ling…?” Liquid said. He couldn’t recall her last name and she wasn’t the only Chinese-American woman on the R&D team, but the other one was pushing fifty and had just had her first grandchild. Could hardly be described as a ‘little girl’, unless you were talking about her height. “Is it Stader who’s always hanging out with her, or Staiger?”

“Stader,” EVA said, frowning. “She’s the one who invented the Codec, isn’t she?”

“Is she?” Liquid already knew she was only eighteen or nineteen and still technically enrolled at MIT, in some kind of long distance learning program. (He mostly remembered that because he was the one who’d had to deal with the stuffy MIT types for a while after the head of the R&D team begged Liquid to let him hire her.) That would explain how she ended up here…

“The Soliton Radar, too. Although with that one, that was more just a modification of currently existing technology. Still, that’s pretty impressive…”

“So the Patriots might be after her for a purely technological advantage.”

“Exactly. But I don’t think it’d be a good idea to bring any of this up to her until something definite happens. She might talk - I mean, she is a teenage girl. It happens.”
“Hm.”

EVA sighed, leaning back in the chair, then did that full-body spasm people do when the chair they’re in tips too far back and the instinctual fear of falling kicks in. Liquid felt a little bit of petty delight at that because it was his chair and only he knew the exact point when that chair leaned back too far past the center of gravity.

“Anyway,” she said, sitting up straight, “I can start on the medical team tomorrow. How’s Octopus’ BNP infiltration going?”

“Smoothly. The librarian he was stalking is dead now, so he’s free to search for the particular computer and the microfilm.”

“Hmm… how does he do that, anyway? The blood thing, I mean. How does that work?”

“I’ve never asked,” Liquid said flatly, “last time I got curious about how he does his job I ended up getting flashed.”

“You what?”

“Nevermind. Long story.” Although, frankly, it really wasn’t.

EVA stood up, stretching. “I’ll just find out from someone else,” she said. “In the meantime… what time is it…?”

“The clock’s on my desk…”

“Oh, so it is. Mm. It’s a bit early for dinner, isn’t it?”

Liquid forced a nonchalant shrug.

“You don’t have anything else to be doing this afternoon, do you?”

“Ah… no, not really.”

She smiled at him. “Want to watch a movie?”

“Hrm. Which one?”

“Have you ever seen Mad Max? I think you’d like it.”

He hadn’t, actually.

______________________________________________________________________________________________

Biblioteca Nacional del Perú, Lima, Peru.

“Good morning Mr. López!”

“Good morning, Miss Quispe,” Octopus said, waving and smiling brightly at the energetic young assistant librarian.

“How is Melany this morning?”

Melany being the real Joaquin López’s wife. “Oh, she’s just fine,” Octopus said, “she’s going out to lunch with Cusi later.” Pidru “Pedro” Cusi was the man Melany was cheating on Joaquin with. Big part of the reason why Octopus didn’t feel bad about how she would feel once she found out about
Joaquin’s death.

“Are you going to be working on the computers again today?”

“Haha, yes,” Octopus said, walking by her, “that new firewall isn’t going to install itself.”

“I’ll hold down the fort here, Mr. López!”

God bless her, she was so cute. Now here was a girl that Octopus did feel sorta bad about how devastated she was going to be when she found out that her boss was dead. Oh well. Octopus had a mission to carry out, and she was young. She’d get over it. She and Melany could comfort each other, even - they were pretty close.

The librarian he selected for this was, while not technically the BNP’s tech support guy, the most technologically literate on the staff otherwise and had a degree in some computer field. Octopus himself didn’t know shit about programming, but he knew enough to bluff detailed knowledge about it - this was true of almost any subject - so nobody batted an eye when Octopus said he was going to be spending the next few days installing a newer, better firewall on all the library’s computers.

That was a lie, of course. There was no firewall. But no one realized that if there had been then it would been possible for “Mr. López” to install it to every computer on the library’s internal network at once — what Octopus was doing was going through and “installing a firewall” on every computer one by one until he found anything related to Project Charon.

It took him a decent amount of time to finish sorting through every file on each computer, but Octopus wasn’t the type to get easily frustrated. With every computer he failed to find it on, he remembered that he still had another however many were left to look through, and he’d get to it eventually.

By the time noon rolled around, Octopus had so far had another day of turning up precisely jack and shit. So he stepped out into the warm streets and grabbed some ceviche and choclo (and a bottle of Inca Kola) from a vendor. Unlike some other places, Lima didn’t shut down for afternoon siesta, although when he returned from lunch Miss Quispe was always nowhere to be found for the next two hours, and the library was generally slow.

Miss Quispe was already back by the time Octopus finally stumbled across something on one computer, semi-abandoned and tucked way in the back of the building: a whole lot of English-language files which were headed, clear as day, PROJECT CHARON.

“Well, that was easy,” Octopus said, leaning back in his chair, then glancing over his shoulder and calling Liquid on Codec.

“Oh— yes? What do you want?” He didn’t pick up immediately and Liquid sounded annoyed and slightly out-of-breath, and in the tiny, grainy screen he was shirtless (although that was pretty normal) and his hair was messed up (which was not normal).

“Not the most opportune time, huh, boss?” Octopus said, in his natural voice instead of Joaquin’s. (Although he continued in Spanish, Liquid spoke it anyway even if it was European and his accent was sort of… Malaysian.)

“Er. No. So this had better be important.”

“I mean, for God’s sake, boss, it’s the middle of the afternoon. Don’t you two have anything better to be doing?”
“For your information, Octopus, no, we don’t - there’s nothing going on here except that my office is currently otherwise occupied so it’s not like I can— oh, would you just get to the point!”

“I found the Project Charon files here,” Octopus said, glancing over his shoulder again, “so I’m just calling to confirm whether I’m supposed to just delete them, or make a backup for our own purposes first and then delete them?”

“Hm. Well…”

“You haven’t thought about this, have you…”?”

“I— nothing in them is going to be very relevant anymore, is it?” Liquid said, annoyed again, “it’s not as though we’re going to need any of the data to develop our own ethnic cleanser, and any information it might be able to give us on the Patriots is going to be horribly outdated since it’s thirty years old by now.”

“So, just delete it?”

“Yes. Have you found the microfilm yet?”

“Nah, but I can start looking for it once I’m done with this computer.”

“Right. Double-check that it was only on that one computer, too.”

“No problem, boss,” Octopus said, “I’ll handle that. You can go back to to your afternoon fuck-fest now.”

Liquid made a short, irritable growl, and hung up without another word. Now that Octopus thought about it, wasn’t this first time anyone had managed to Codec-call him in the middle of sex? Because it certainly hadn’t happened to him before and if it had happened to any of the others he was pretty sure he would have heard about it. He supposed it mostly had to do with official missions having official support capacities that, if Liquid was the one running support (which he frequently was, being commander and all), Liquid didn’t dare goof off during. Or maybe Mantis didn’t dare. Either one.

“Strange times we live in,” he muttered in Joaquin’s voice, setting about wiping this particular harddrive.

“So, Noche Beuna is coming up,” Miss Quispe said, mid-morning the next day after Octopus had finished ‘installing the new firewalls’. “Do you and Melany have anything planned?”

“You mean after the Rooster Mass?” Octopus said half-jokingly, “what, didn’t Melany tell you you were invited to dinner at our house?”

“Oh, I am? I’d love to, Mr. López!”

“Mhm. Cusi will be there too. I can introduce you if Melany hasn’t already.”

“Sounds like fun!”

“By the way, Miss Quispe…”

“Hm?”

“I need something from the microfilm storage. I forget what it’s labelled, but it’ll be in English—“
“Ay… I don’t speak English, Mr. López…”

“Sorry, I must have forgotten.” Actually, Octopus wasn’t even sure Joaquin had even known in the first place, although he himself did speak English, but still the conversation was going in exactly the right direction he wanted it to. Like reading off a script… “Hmm… you know, Miss Quispe, I think I might be getting old.”

“Oh, no, Mr. López!”

“No, no, I can’t seem to remember how to get to the microfilm storage room! Remind me again what part of the building it is?”

Miss Quispe gave him directions, apologizing for being unable to go grab the films he needed due to the fact that she wouldn’t be able to identify them (there were, evidently, more than a couple film sets that weren’t in Spanish or Quechua). It never even occurred to her to question why Octopus needed a particular set of English-language microfilms.

Fortunately for Octopus, all the microfilm was in the same room, and it wasn’t a very large room, either - hypothetically he’d be able to go through the entire thing in a single day, well, assuming that Project Charon was clearly labelled ‘Project Charon’. The likelihood of that was… low, though, so although he would spend today checking the labels just in case, he was probably just going to end up feeding microfilm samples one by one through the old-fashioned reader in the corner.

Octopus laced his fingers out in front of him, cracking his knuckles.

“Alright, Joaquin,” he said, “let’s finish this once and for all.”

The desiccated, bloodless corpse hidden in the BNP’s basement didn’t respond to him at all.

In the end EVA turned up two people on the medical team with vague connections to the Patriots (Brennan had run messages for them in high school under the guise of a pizza delivery boy, Patel had a sister who was married to a Patriot agent) and no one who would probably believe their conspiracy theories, and then she quietly left in the middle of the night and didn’t pick up her phone when Liquid called her.

“She does that,” Ocelot said with a shrug.

“She could have at least said goodbye,” Liquid grumbled, closing his cellphone.

At least he had his office back now, but his chair still smelled like EVA - mostly like motorcycle gasoline, but with a faint hint of something… else, something more feminine, maybe fruity (apples? apple blossoms?), that Liquid supposed was perfume.

As much as he would rather not add to his reputation as high-strung, the smell of her on his things got under his skin enough that he hauled his chair outside and let it air out until the scent of her was gone. Which was accelerated by the fact that it was snowing that day and within half an hour he’d managed to lose the chair to a snowdrift.

“I’m sure I deserve this somehow,” he sighed.

“Well,” Wolf said, “at least now you have an excuse for not working on your paperwork backlog until spring arrives.”

“True.”
Of course, there wasn’t anything else to do — it had just been a rather slow season so far, and everything was going smoothly on Octopus’ end (or, at least, he hadn’t raised anyone’s suspicions and was still searching for the microfilm at his leisure). Mantis got tired of Liquid’s “I’m bored, can we fuck?” every twenty minutes, and when Ocelot wasn’t holed up on the roof, immune to the biting cold and somehow getting cell reception in the heavy snowfall, he was going through his extensive catalogue of spaghetti Westerns with Wolf and Raven, who seemed to find them entertaining enough. Liquid wasn’t much into Westerns, though. And of course Mantis wouldn’t be caught dead engaging in any could-be-vaguely-construed-as-friendly activity with Ocelot. In fact Mantis had gone back to that stupid Cold War thing.

Liquid was, despite the relative good cheer he’d found himself in lately, bored as hell. And he was in one of those moods, too, where he had energy to burn and desperately craved stimulation.

Mantis caught him out when he was on his way to go proposition Ocelot. He didn’t have an excuse to defend himself with.

“I— I just—“ Liquid stammered as Mantis dragged him off to their shared quarters by his collar, almost visibly fuming, “er, I wasn’t— I didn’t- Mantis, I’m sorry——“

“Just because you were bored,” Mantis said, every word an increasingly sharp tug on the collar, enough that Liquid was sure his neck was going to bruise by this point, “does not excuse-“

“I-I wasn’t thinking,” Liquid said, “really, I wasn’t—“

“You always say that.”

“Look, Mantis, it’s just- honestly, I don’t— I’m really not doing this on purpose, I swear!”

Mantis shoved him into their quarters and closed the door behind him, glaring. “Not doing it on purpose?” he said icily, “the way you were specifically seeking out Ocelot with the express intent of having sex with him certainly seemed purposeful to me.”

“That was stupid of me,” Liquid said, “I know that was stupid of me, I just-“

“Can’t control yourself?”

“W-Well, I can’t! I know I shouldn’t even be thinking about it but I just can’t get it out of my head!”

“That does not mean you should sleep with him!”

“I- I— you caught me, didn’t you?” he said, spreading his arms. “Crisis averted. You intercepted and here am I, untouched by Ocelot.”

“The fact that you had the intention to do so is as bad as the act itself, Eli.”

“I’m sorry, alright? I am. Really, Mantis, I am. I know it upsets you, I know I shouldn’t do it, I know I… I… I’m sorry… it’s just so hard to- to think it through…”

He trailed off, shrinking in on himself a bit. Mantis was still glaring at him. Never had he ever been able to talk his way out of getting what was coming to him for cheating on - or attempting to cheat on - Mantis, and the longer this went on the more he had started to feel a little prickle of something like fear whenever Mantis was this angry at him.

“I-I’m sorry, Mantis,” he said in a small voice, kneeling in front of him and doing his best to look submissive, “please punish me however you see fit.”
Sometimes Liquid wondered if anyone else would be moved to mercy or at least pity at his pathetic supplications, but Mantis glowered down at him with no warmth in his eyes. The only thing that really kept Liquid from engaging a fight or flight reflex was the implacable trust he had that, despite everything, Mantis wouldn’t hurt him or cross any lines that shouldn’t be crossed and when he felt Liquid had learned his lesson for the millionth time he would calm down and be nice to him again.

No one ever said Liquid had to like it in the meantime.

Mantis wordlessly yanked him to his feet by the collar, and pushed him back onto the bed, where Liquid went as still as possible, breathing slowly and shallowly and watching Mantis carefully. “Well, go on, Eli,” Mantis snarled, “take your clothes off.”

Liquid hurriedly did as said, his mind racing. A sexual punishment? He was never sure how to feel about one of those, as much as it almost seemed like leniency - like Liquid should really enjoy it - it was always those that brought him closest to the edge of panic and left him jittery and anxious afterwards. The only thing that tempered it was the fact that he was certain Mantis would stop if he caved in and asked him to. He’d never tried it, though, not while he was being genuinely punished. He understood his transgression and besides, trying to get out of his punishment never ended any other way than further reproach from Mantis later.

“I’m sorry,” Liquid whispered as Mantis psychokinetically forced him back flat against the bedspread, leaving him with barely enough mobility to breathe and speak. “I-I’m sorry, I am, M-Mantis, I’m sorry… I’m really, very s-sorry…”

“Shut up.”

He loomed over Liquid, straddling him, hands resting on his chest - not clawing his flesh or pressing hard into his ribs, just resting, but Liquid felt the unfulfilled need to squirm under him anyway.

“Why do you do this to me?” Mantis asked him. “If you have no regard for the dangers to you that Ocelot poses, then why do you not at least consider how I might feel about this?”

“I… ah…”

“You said we might as well be married,” Mantis scoffed, “is this what husbands do? Go off behind my back and try to sleep with the person who raped and abused you?”

Liquid bit back his immediate reflex to protest, and defend Ocelot. There was no point in arguing right now. Even if Mantis’ snarlings about Ocelot were never going to be something he took seriously, Liquid already knew that trying to explain that he hadn’t been abused and, situationally, the rape had been the best he could hope for would just stoke Mantis’ fury.

“What attracts you to him over me, Eli? Tell me. What does he have that I don’t?”

“I… nothing,” Liquid said, “he just… I… I’m a st-stupid slut who c-can’t keep his l-legs closed,” his throat felt tight, “that’s a-all, Mantis.”

“Hmm.”

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“Hmm.”

“Please, I’m sorry,” he choked out, “I love y-you, Ocelot doesn’t m-mean anything to me, he’s just a- h-he’s just a c-convenient dick to hop on when I’m b-bored, he n-never says ‘no’ to me, M- Mantis, that’s th-the only thing I—“

“Am I not enough to keep you sated, Eli?”
“I… nn… y-yes, Mantis, you a-are… you’re enough…”

“Then why must you go after more than you need?” He trailed his hands down Liquid’s skin, too gentle not to make Liquid’s stomach turn. “You really are greedy sometimes.”

“I-I don’t mean to be…”

There was a long silence, then Mantis raised one of his hands and snapped his fingers. Liquid’s hips were forced up, legs spread, knees folded underneath him with his ankles crossed - Mantis was still sitting on his stomach - the bedside table drawer snapped open, its contents rattling.

Liquid swallowed hard.

“If you are so bored today, then I suppose it really is my marital duty to entertain you, is it not?” Mantis said, a falsely pleasant irony in his cold voice.

“Y…Yes…? Mantis…”

Mantis gestured, sweeping his wrist upward, and a vibrator floated up out of the drawer, spinning airily. Liquid had to glance away. He wasn’t sure about where this was going - especially when he heard the familiar pop of the cap on the bottle of lube.

He shut his eyes tight when he felt the vibrator press against his asshole. He yelped a little when it turned on.

It didn’t take much to turn Liquid into a mewling wreck; Mantis knew that, and furthermore he knew how mortified Liquid was at his own sort of vulnerability, so if he was being nice then he usually let Liquid ease into his abandon. He wasn’t being nice right now, of course. Within minutes Liquid was panting and whimpering, his muscles straining against the need to shiver uncontrollably and Mantis’ psychic bondage.

“Oh, god— M-Mantis, please—“

He let out a little groan, eyelids fluttering as the vibrator slipped in and shifted a few times - thrusting against his prostate — he barely caught the way Mantis’ eyes narrowed dangerously before he shoved the vibrator in there entirely, past his anus and well up into his colon, presumably never to be seen again. It was still on.

Liquid choked.

“O-Oh, my god,” he cried, staring at Mantis, his eyes wide in horror, “i-i-it’s not s-supposed to go up that f-far, Mantis, oh g-god, take it o-out—“

“Hm?”

“T-Take it out, take it out!” he repeated frantically, ineffectually struggling against Mantis’ psychokinesis. He could feel it still vibrating somewhere in his belly and his brain was kind of short-circuiting, screaming about how it was not supposed to be there. “Please, Mantis, take it o-out, I d-don’t want— please, it h-hurts!”

“You are fine, Eli,” Mantis said, casually inspecting his nails as if he weren’t currently perched on top of a hysterical Liquid. “It will be easy for me to retrieve it.”

“I d-don’t like this!!”
“You’re not supposed to.”

Liquid whined, grimacing in discomfort, clenching his entire body. “I’m sorry,” he said again, voice shaking, “I-I’m sorry, Mantis, I l-love you, p-please, take it out.”

“I will. But not now.”

“Then wh-when?!”

Mantis chuckled darkly, patting Liquid’s cheek.

“When the batteries run down a little bit.”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve never seen *Mad Max* but Corpsefluid said Liquid would probably like it. She also sort of helped me with the vibrator scene(s). Also I don’t know a damn thing about the National Library of Peru. I mean, it’s a library, so I’m sure they had a computer network by 2004, but do they have a basement? Do they even store microfilm there? I have no idea. I hope I have no Limeño readers for whom I just ruined their suspension of disbelief.
Chapter 15

It was taking a long goddamn time for the batteries to run down a little bit.

After a certain point, it wasn’t even about how uncomfortable it was to feel the still-buzzing vibrator somewhere in his belly instead of his ass - it started to get more and more about the shooting pain running through his thighs at being kept in this hips-up position for such a long time. Liquid breathed a shaky sigh of relief when Mantis let him back down, taking the weight off his legs… but he should have known that Mantis wasn’t feeling particularly *merciful* today.

Instead Mantis turned around and, before Liquid could raise his voice in protest, ran his fingers over Liquid’s fitfully hard cock. Liquid’s whole body jerked against his psychic immobility. He already knew exactly where this was going and the only thing he could choke out was, “Wh-why…?”

“You know perfectly well *why*, Eli,” Mantis said coolly.

And cut to several hours and three or four reluctant orgasms later: Liquid was on the point of tears, whimpering piteously, in legitimate physical pain from the still-on vibrator stuck somewhere deep inside him combined with his hypersensitivity from the orgasms. He still couldn’t move. He’d tried begging Mantis to ease up on him back when it had really started to hurt but Mantis didn’t - maybe because Liquid had never outright asked him to stop - and by now his voice was basically gone; he was really too overwhelmed to articulate anything other than the occasional breathless “P-Please, Mantis, take i-it out, please, I’ll do a-anything, just t-take it out…”

“Alright,” Mantis eventually said after Liquid couldn’t even mumble anymore, “I think the lesson has finally sunk in.”

He released his psychic hold on Liquid, although all Liquid could do was sag against the mattress, trembling, and instinctively curl his arms around his stomach.

“Just a moment, Eli,” Mantis said, his voice gentle now, sliding off of Liquid and brushing his hand over his abs, “let me get a good hold on it and then I will turn it off.”

Liquid nodded exhaustedly, whining. A few seconds later, the vibrations abruptly stopped, leaving just a sharp, pulsating ache in its place that quickly faded to a dull, faraway tingling. “M-Mantis…”

“Oh, hush, you are fine - just a little overstimulated.”

“I-It hurts…”

“Shh. Spread your legs a bit, and relax. Just relax.”

Liquid turned his head to the side and shut his eyes again, following Mantis’ instructions as he felt something foreign stir inside his body - a really unsettling feeling on top of the numbness - then the vibrator, flat end first, pushed against and then out of his asshole. Liquid grit his teeth.

“There,” Mantis said, rubbing his stomach affectionately as he psychically deposited the vibrator in a plastic bag for later cleaning.

“M-M-Mantis…”

“That wasn’t so bad, was it, Eli?”
“I’m s-sorry…”

“Hush, hush. Your punishment is over, Eli, you don’t have to apologize anymore.”

Slowly Liquid rolled onto his side away from Mantis, groaning. That was awful. He felt nauseated, and like his skin was on fire, and his ass and his head were throbbing.

Mantis put a hand to his shoulder. He flinched.

“P-Please don’t touch me r-right now,” he stammered, blinking, a few tears leaking involuntarily out of the corners of his eyes.

“Mm.”

He didn’t feel or hear anything that indicated that Mantis had gotten up off the bed, but he also didn’t feel Mantis attempt to touch him again.

“Did I go too far?” Mantis said suddenly, in an unusually hesitant voice.

“Mngh… n-no, Mantis, I-I’m alright…”

“Are you sure? You do not seem alright.”

“Y-Yes… I deserved th-that…”

Mantis tentatively touched Liquid’s shoulder again, and this time Liquid didn’t pull away - so Mantis laid down right behind him, slipping his arms around his waist, rubbing his stomach again softly.

“I only do this sort of thing because I care for you,” he murmured, nuzzling the back of his neck. “I do not want to see you get hurt again and I do not want to lose you… you belong to me… you are very important to me, I want to keep you.”

“I kn-know, Mantis. I-I’m yours.”

“Your body should feel better after a nap.”

“Mnn.”

He pulled a blanket up over the two of them. “You submitted to your punishment so well,” he said softly, “good boy, Eli.”

“I… I-I knew I… I shouldn’t h-have… O-Ocelot…”

“Shh. Enough. Get some rest, I will still be here when you wake up.” He found one of Liquid’s hands with his own and gave it a weak squeeze. “Alright?”

“Mmhmm…”

“Good boy.”

“Yo intento pero nunca salgo del abismo,” Octopus sang to himself, gathering up the Project Charon microfilms from where he had them stacked by the reader.

“Y todo queda en nada,” he went on, scattering them all over the floor, and throwing a few random sets in there for good measure. It wouldn’t do if anyone noticed that it was the Project Charon data in
particular that was coincidentally destroyed, after all.

“Mis— gritos hacen— eco al fondo— de— la nada——” he sang breathlessly, dragging López’s body up the basement stairs with his arms hooked under his armpits.

“Mientras mi cuerpo se resiste a caer!” He laid the corpse down on top of all the microfilm, and picked up a canister of gasoline and started splashing it all over the room. He made sure to get a good amount on López; it wouldn’t do, after all, if anyone figured out that he’d actually died almost a month prior to this. But it was hard to place time of death when the body was practically cremated…

“Yo no te olvido…” Octopus pulled out López’s phone, and started dialing.

“…mujer.”

“Hello?” said the woman on the other end of the line.

“Melany!” Octopus said brightly.

“Joaquin? What are you doing calling me so late in the afternoon? Where are you? You should have been home three hours ago!”

“Oh, just taking care of some things at the library, you know,” Octopus said, shouldering the phone and taking out a book of matches. “It’s very important.”

“Hmph! It had better be! Don’t forget we have to get up early for Rooster Mass tomorrow!!”

“I know, I know, Melany,” Octopus said, “it won’t take long. I’m almost finished, and then I can go home. That’ll be nice.”

“Of course, Joaquin,” Melany said, her exasperation obvious even over the phone, “you hurry up. I’m hanging up now.”

“Oh, by the way…” He struck a match.

“Hmm?”

“I know you’re cheating on me with Cusi, you lying bitch.”

“E-Eh—?!?”

Octopus terminated the call, chortling to himself as he tossed the lit match onto the real Joaquin López and all the microfilm he was atop of. It caught quickly, the microfilm curling into ember and ash. Octopus only stuck around at the BNP long enough to make sure of that.

Disguise shed, Octopus walked down Abancay Avenue, away from the library, whistling the rest of the song as the fire department sped by. He didn’t feel bad at all. A minor fire in the building was no matter - only that particular room would be wrecked, only a few reams of microfilm lost - and besides, even if the fire did get out of control, they were working on a new building for the library over in the San Borja District anyway.

Admittedly the bit about calling up López’s wife and revealing that he knew about her infidelity was mostly just petty of him, but hey - it’d give a good motive for the guy’s supposed self-immolation.

“Hey, boss?” Octopus said over Codec, “everything’s taken care of on my end. I’m going to get a cab to Callao and then I’m going to catch the first flight out of Jorge Chávez back to America.”
“Excellent,” Liquid replied smoothly. “I’ll get the final copy at the CDC gotten rid of immediately, then. I probably won’t be there when you get back.”

“Haha. Well, then, I guess if you aren’t - Merry Christmas, boss.”

“Mm. Happy Christmas, Octopus.”

“By the way, I’ve decided that next time I have to play an overweight guy. I want hazard pay. Do you have any idea how hard it is on your back to carry around an extra fifty pounds on your stomach for almost a month straight?”

“I said Happy Christmas, Octopus, let me hang up now.”

“Medical leave?” said the chief of medical staff in surprise.

Liquid shrugged. “It’s been slow around here lately, we’ve only had two assignments come in since the summer. I get… restless.”

“But you just went on vacation.”

“And it didn’t help much.” He threw an arm around the medical chief’s shoulders and whispered conspiratorially to her: “truthfully it was a mistake to do that with Mantis. Maybe it’s just because I’m starting to go a touch stir crazy, but we’ve hit a bit a rough patch in our relationship and I need some time away from him. Alone.”

“Ah…” the medical chief said, “I see…”

“So I was just going to give myself a few days off to go camping—“

“Camping? It’s fifteen below out there!”

Liquid gave her an unimpressed look. “And?”

“Um…” She blinked. “So you need me to sign off on your self-imposed vacation because it’s for medical reasons, sir…?”

“Mhm. Mental health reasons.” He paused briefly, then added, “by the way, is Hamel enjoying being able to spend Christmas with her family?”

“Oh. Uh. Yes, sir.”

She must have gotten his little hint about his generosity in allowing her to give Hamel as much time off as she liked, because she signed off Liquid’s forms without further questioning. Liquid thanked her cheerfully, and wandered back over to their side of the base, mindlessly whistling “Stop The Cavalry”.

“What a wonderful excuse you gave to the medical chief,” Mantis said sarcastically, leaning with his arms folded in the doorway of Liquid’s quarters while Liquid threw a few things into a canvas bag.

Liquid gave him a smug look over his shoulder. “You know,” he drawled, “I think spending a week or so away from you might very well be good for my mental health. Nice to get a break once a while, isn’t it?”

“Oh, ha ha. When will you return?”
“Can’t entirely say for sure,” Liquid said, closing the bag and standing up, “I’m driving, which, as you’ll recall, takes about two days, but in this weather, well… I’ll try not to push my luck. Three days both ways. The job itself shouldn’t take more than three days as well.”

“So you will not be back until the second or so?”

“The fourth at the latest. Shame I’ll be missing New Year’s and Christmas with you—” he put an arm around Mantis’ waist and pulled him towards himself, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “We’ll just have to make up for it next year.”

“Assuming we are even still alive next year.”

“Don’t be so negative - I’m doing this so we can be alive next year.” He pulled back, smiling at him. “Anyway, I’ve got to go now if I want to make any decent headway by the time it gets too dark. Give the others my regards, tell them about when I’ll be back - Wolf’s in charge again while I’m gone—“

“Stay out of trouble,” Mantis said, nuzzling him.

“Of course. I’ll see you in January, Mantis. I love you.”

A few days after that, almost 3,000 miles away on a top-secret civilian base just north of Unalaska Island, a completely different man was also packing for a little trip to Atlanta.

“This is, uh, a little random,” Hal said, laughing kind of nervously, “sorry I couldn’t give you guys more advance warning, I didn’t get much myself…”

“It’s no problem,” laughed Dr. Demolles, “I mean, it is kind of weird, but it’s some sort of assignment, isn’t it?”

“Yeah… I don’t know who it’s from, though… someone pretty high up in the pecking order, I think…” He took a deep breath, clutching a shirt to himself with wide eyes. “I’m supposed to be meeting up with a secret agent at the airport. This is… this is kind of exciting, actually!”

“Do you know what they want you to do?”

“No… I mean, not specifically. I know it’s got something to do with, erm, well…”

“Hacking?”

“Well, yeah, but…”

Dr. Demolles waved her hand good-naturedly. “C’mon, it’s not bad if you’re using it in the interests of national security!”

“Y-Yeah, but— I mean, shouldn’t they have their own information specialists instead of having to pull me off this project?”

“It’s only for a little over a week,” Dr. Demolles said, “maybe they didn’t want to bother. Or maybe all their guys are busy, I dunno. Either way, it’s a free vacation for you, right?”

“Plus it’s in Georgia,” said Dr. Jorgenson, standing in the doorway to Hal’s room. “I mean, it’s still winter there, but it’s going to be a hell of a lot warmer than it is here. No snow, even! You could practically go around wearing shorts and t-shirts!”

“I guess it will be kind of nice,” Hal said, almost sheepishly.
“Anyway, the boat that’s supposed to take you to King Cove is here. You ready?”

“Yep.”

“Need any help with your bags?”

“No, it’s just the one…”

“Bring us back some postcards!” said Dr. Demolles.

So Hal went off to King Cove, and from there a short flight to Anchorage where he boarded a plane to Atlanta; the flight to Georgia was long and boring, and Hal spent most of it playing his import copy of *Pokémon Emerald* on his new DS that he’d specifically mail-ordered to a P.O. box in Nikolski the day it came out. At the domestic arrivals terminal at the Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, Hal suddenly realized that he had no idea who was supposed to be picking him up. He hadn’t been given a description of the man other than him being a secret agent - heck, now that Hal thought about it, he wasn’t entirely sure that it was a man.

“You’re not Dr. Emmerich, are you?” said someone with an affected, theatrical British accent behind him. Hal jumped and whirled around.

The man seemed almost as surprised to see Hal’s face as Hal did to see, well, him. There was a brief pause where they just scrutinized each other — he wasn’t a bad-looking guy, although, uh, definitely a guy, with long, slightly wavy blond hair pulled back into a ponytail and a dark, vaguely mixed-race complexion, and… wait… was that a leather collar? Hal found himself staring at the leather collar. Why was he wearing a collar? Like the kind dogs wore?

“Are you Dr. Emmerich?” the man said, slower this time.

“Huh?” Hal said, snapping up to look at the man’s pretty gray-blue eyes. “Uh, yeah. Sorry. You are…?”

The man snorted, then extended a hand. “Liquid Snake,” he drawled, “sent to pick you up. Shall we head off to baggage claim?” he added as Hal shook his hand, hiding a grimace at how firm Liquid’s grip was.

“Did your father also have a doctorate?” Liquid said as they walked towards the baggage claim. “Born on the day Little Boy was dropped on Hiroshima? Spent some time in Afghanistan, perhaps?”

“Um… yes,” Hal said, taken aback and more than a little unsettled, “how did you know?”

“I might have been acquainted with him.”

“Oh. Well, er, he’s been dead for seven and a half years now.”

“I see. No great loss. Which bag is yours?”

Hal had… absolutely no idea how to react to Liquid casually saying “No great loss” in response to Hal’s father’s death. None whatsoever. He didn’t often discuss his father, but on the rare occasion that he did mention he’d already died - without going into the circumstances of it, of course - well, he was much more used to a somewhat insincere “I’m sorry to hear that,” or, if anyone did the mental calculations and realized Hal was only seventeen in 1997, “That must have been hard, I’m glad you seem to be doing well now.”

Some extremely uncharitable part of Hal’s mind came to the conclusion that, since Liquid had said
“No great loss,” he must have really had known Hal’s father.

“Dr. Emmerich? Hello?”

“H-Huh? O-Oh, this is my bag,” Hal said, grabbing it, and overcorrecting when pulling it off the conveyer belt, nearly knocking himself over. Liquid tsped and picked up his bag for him, lifting it like it was nothing.

“Let’s go, then,” Liquid said, “I’m parked in the West Economy Lot. We’ve been put up in the same hotel room - separate beds, of course,” he added, catching Hal’s flustered expression.

The first thing Hal did when they got to the hotel room (following a rather long, somewhat awkward car ride where Liquid had just turned on the radio and flicked through channels until he found the local classic rock station once he realized Hal wasn’t terribly forthcoming with conversation) was take a nice, long shower. It was good to have consistently running hot water again, something that was frequently lacking on Shadow Moses, especially during the winter. When he got out of the shower, Liquid was sitting on his bed, facing the window, with two fingers held to the point where his jaw met his neck.

“—you know how he feels about Codec,” he was saying in a careless voice, “and talking with him on the phone is impossible, you can’t hear what he’s saying at all. I think the gas mask interferes with… no, of course I’m perfectly fine being without communication with him for a week, you don’t have to—“

He glanced behind as Hal sat his own bed, then turned back to the window, still having his conversation.

“I just want to- …mmhm, yes, Wolf. Look, we had a bit of a tiff a few days before I left, I just want to know if he’s gotten over it yet. …well, yes, I am a bit worried, you know how he is. —yes, yes, yes- hm. I’m a little concerned that he still felt sort of bad about that and he’s been stewing in the fact that I used getting away from him for a bit as an excuse to… uh-huh.”

Hal felt really quite certain that this wasn’t a conversation he was necessarily supposed to be overhearing, but he couldn’t turn on the TV or radio without being rude, and even playing his DS and turning up the volume a bit wasn’t going to cut it since he had neglected to bring headphones. He stared awkwardly at the wall, trying really hard to tune Liquid out on his own.

“Just- if he’s being more reclusive than usual tell him that I told you that I’m really not upset about it. It was kind of a dick move but I know I had it coming. …no, Wolf, you wouldn’t be saying that if you knew what I’d been thinking when he got mad at me. —no, of course I’m not going to tell you!”

There was a long pause.

“Alright, then,” Liquid said finally, “duly noted. Oh, and I’ve got that hacker with me now, we should hopefully be able to sort this out tomorrow. …no, I don’t know how long precisely it’s going to take, I- no, thank you, it’s better if I explain it to him tomorrow. When we’re actually doing it. … yes, I imagine it would work like that. That’s logical, isn’t it? …right. Yes, see you then.”

He lowered his hand, then turned around on the bed, looking at Hal again. Hal almost instinctively shrunk in on himself.

“Just checking in with my unit,” Liquid said lightly, “now, Emmerich-“ Was dropping the ‘Dr.’ from his name really necessary? “—if you have any questions, now would be a decent time to ask. Although, anything specifically related to the mission we’re carrying out together shall be left for
tomorrow. So?”

“Uh… can we get room service or delivery? I’m kind of hungry.”

Liquid claimed he’d eaten earlier, so Hal just got something for himself, a single order of curry with rice from a nearby Indian delivery place. Which turned out to be a mistake, since it was pretty spicy and Hal had gotten used to fairly bland food at Shadow Moses, but he was hungry and a little spurred on by the entirely unimpressed look Liquid gave him when he coughed over the first bite, so he kept eating anyway.

“How did you know my father?” Hal asked between bites, the question coming out of his mouth without any forethought and almost without his consent.

Liquid, however, seemed like he entirely expected that question, even though it was pretty irrelevant to what they were here for. “I met him twenty years ago. Never liked him much.”

“…where, and how, and…?”

Liquid shrugged. “As I mentioned, Afghanistan.”

Hal tried to do the math in his head, although he wasn’t entirely sure how old Liquid was other in his early thirties, maybe? “And twenty years ago, you were how old…?”

“Twelve.”

“Why were you in Afghanistan when you were twelve?” He definitely wasn’t from there, not with that accent. (Although, maybe Hal shouldn’t comment on that… he’d been born in Afghanistan himself, even if it had been a Soviet-held hospital. But his parents had been American citizens!)

“Well, technically, I was in Africa,” Liquid said with apparent sincerity.

Hal waited for him to elaborate, but he didn’t, and Hal had no idea what sort of question to ask to get him to explain himself, so he stayed silent. After a while Liquid, evidently satisfied that Hal had no further questions to ask about anything, stood.

“I’m going to go take a shower. Don’t bother me.”

“Er… right…”

With Liquid gone, Hal finished his curry and went back to self-consciously playing Pokémon. …he should have asked about the collar.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I know nothing about hacking. Or computers in general, really… Despite this I was the best student in my high school’s AP programming class *sob*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Liquid threw open the hotel curtains with appropriate flair and gestured to the CDC building visible over the trees. “That,” he said, “is our target.”

Emmerich pushed his glasses up his nose, blinking. “The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention?”

“Yes. There’s a set of files on its internal network that needs deleted — and it is of the utmost importance - and secrecy.”

“Um,” Emmerich said, raising his hand, “if this is a government-sanctioned mission and all, how come you can’t just ask the CDC staff to delete it?”

Liquid gave him an annoyed look. “I can’t go into detail about all the circumstances behind this,” he said, waving a hand, “as I said, it’s very secret.”

“Oh… okay.”

God, Solidus was right. He really was naïve.

“So,” Liquid said, “I’ll admit I’m not exactly an expert on computers - how do you do this?”

“Well,” Emmerich said, pulling out his laptop, “first I’ll need access to the network somehow. I guess I’m supposed to do all this from this hotel room, right?”

“Naturally.”

“Okay. Er… I can’t get the CDC’s wifi at all from here, which I suppose isn’t really surprising. So what- I guess what you’ll need to do is, um…” He rummaged through his laptop bag for a minute, then pulled out some sort of blocky rectangular metal… thing. “You’ll need to plug this into one of the computers in there. Or get one of the employees to do it for you, I don’t know. I guess I can’t tell you how to do your job…”

“What is it?” Liquid said as Emmerich handed it to him.

“It’s a kind of wireless router,” Emmerich explained, “with it I can hook my laptop up to—“

Liquid stopped listening, since he really didn’t care about all the technical details and just needed to know what he was supposed to do with this gizmo, which he turned over in his hands, inspecting it closely.

“-and after that it’ll be really simple to find the files that need deleted and—“
“What part of it do I plug into a computer?” Liquid interrupted.

“Th… the little USB cable, there,” he said, pointing at the cord sticking off of the router.

“…right.”

“Um… are you sure you can-?”

“You just said you can’t tell me how to do my job, didn’t you?” Liquid said irritably, handing him back the router. “You stay put. I need to go get changed.”

“Uh, yes sir.”

While normally Liquid just changed out in the open, having no problem with nudity in front of others, poor Emmerich was so awkward and nervous that Liquid figured his head would explode if he did that, so he extended the courtesy of changing into his sneaking suit in the bathroom… mostly because he figured he needed Emmerich to be able to concentrate on his hacking.

Of course, the bathroom, while nice, was a little cramped for stretching, so Liquid returned to the hotel room to do that. He didn’t miss the way Emmerich’s eyes snapped to him as soon as he stepped out, trawling up his body and taking in the sneaking suit, and lingering on his collar before finally looking at his face.

“What?” Liquid said, as innocently as possible.

“Uh… nothing,” Emmerich said, flustered, turning back to his laptop.

He also didn’t miss the way Emmerich’s gaze kept returning to him as he stretched. Hm. Interested, was he? Some part of Liquid earnestly wondered what Mantis’ reaction would be if he cheated on him with someone who wasn’t Ocelot, but after the vibrator incident… well, Liquid pushed the thought away. Besides, Emmerich seemed like the closeted type.

“You’re really going to sneak into the CDC dressed like that?” Emmerich said.

“The sneaking suit is standard in my line of work,” Liquid said indignantly.

“…in broad daylight?”

“I’ve already infiltrated the CDC at night. I think this will be a nice challenge after that, don’t you?” Emmerich stared blankly at him, clearly thinking that he was better off not asking for details.

“Anyway,” Liquid said, “we’re going to need some way to keep in touch while I’m in there, just in case…”

“Oh, right,” Emmerich said, “er— last night, that was Codec you were talking on, wasn’t it?”

“Mhm.”

“I have one, too. It’s- it’s a lot better at getting reception when the weather’s bad, so my team uses it all the time in case one of us is on the other side of the… uh… anyway, my frequency is 141.12.”

So with that taken care of, Liquid grabbed the wireless router and set off for the CDC. Emmerich had glanced at the silenced MK23 SOCOM in his thigh-holster, but didn’t comment on it being lethal weaponry (Liquid couldn’t even be sure Emmerich knew enough about guns to identify it as lethal weaponry - then again, a secret agent using tranquilizer darts was a little less intuitive, wasn’t
Naturally Liquid’s first challenge was getting out of the hotel and over to the CDC without being seen by anyone or caught on security cameras, but all he had to do was take the exact same route he had the first time he infiltrated this place. He was leaving from the same room, even. And hotels tended to have more people wandering around the hallways in the evening than they did in the morning, at least before check-out time was imminent.

Once again he got in by carefully forcing a window round the back of the building. He slipped through the hallways, just out of range of any of the security cameras, focusing on the sound of staff and researchers walking in adjacent rooms and hallways. Quite a few more people around in the daytime as opposed to nighttime.

Right…, he thought, need to find a computer. Preferably one that isn’t being used. To that end he went up the stairs instead of down, away from the labs, doing his best to stick to the parts of the building he already knew until he ran out of that.

He found a room with a bunch of computers in it, and no people, at least currently - the lights weren’t even on. After checking for a camera, then generously estimating the visual range of the camera he did find, he walked up a computer in the back corner of the room and called Emmerich’s Codec frequency.

“Do I have to turn the computer on before I plug the router in?” he asked.

“Uh… yes?” Emmerich said, like he was a little surprised Liquid didn’t know that… which irritated Liquid…

“Is there a way to turn on the computer without making it look like it’s on, though?”

“Well, yeah, you can just turn off the monitor.”

“…turn off the monitor?”

“Yes? There should be a power button on the monitor, just hit that after you’ve turned on the computer.”

“Wait,” Liquid said, staring at the computer, “if the button on the monitor turns the monitor on and off, then how do I turn on the computer?” He was used to them both turning on when the button was pressed - wasn’t that how it worked?

“…you press the power button on the computer…?”

“…”

“You’re kind of technologically illiterate, aren’t you?”

“With my job it’s more important to know my way around a gun than a computer,” Liquid snapped, “now, the computer is the rectangular thing, isn’t it?”

“Er… yes, assuming you aren’t looking at the keyboard…”

“I know what a keyboard is,” Liquid grumbled, turning on the computer, then quickly turning off the monitor. “I… don’t need to… log in or anything, do I, Emmerich…?”

“Oh, no,” Emmerich said, “just plug the router in and I’ll take it from there.”

“How long until you’re able to delete the data?”
“First I need to actually get into the network and past their security systems,” Emmerich said, “and then I’ll need to do a data trawl of all their computers until whatever it is you’re looking for comes up. But just the first part is going to take a while, so… you don’t need to stay there until I’m done, do you?”

“The router is going to need to be retrieved later, won’t it?”

“Uh… yes, but… maybe you should come back and get it later. I’m saying it might be a few hours before I can even start searching for your data.”

“Fine,” Liquid said, carefully tucking the router behind the computer where it was much less visible, “I’ll come back to the hotel.” And in the meantime, make sure no one wandered in here and messed with the computer, since that might not be good. He briefly considered writing an ‘OUT OF ORDER’ sign and taping it to the monitor, but decided against that and simply stole the mouse, figuring anyone who came in here would simply use a different computer upon noticing that.

“That’s actually pretty clever,” Emmerich said, glancing at the mouse Liquid threw on the bed next to him when he got back to the hotel.

“We aren’t all a bunch of meatheads in the Army, you know,” Liquid said, flopping down on his own bed. “Besides, you don’t get to where I am now by being stupid. Even a minor lapse in judgement can cost you your life - or worse.”

“Worse, huh…” Emmerich said, his rapidly typing fingers stilling for a second.

Liquid glanced at him. “What,” he said, “you don’t believe it’s possible to have a fate worse than death?”

“…”

Whatever. Even with as admittedly little Liquid knew about Emmerich’s family history, he wasn’t surprised that the man might have a few issues here and there.

“Anyway,” Liquid yawned, “you can go ahead and keep the mouse a souvenir, I’m not taking it back.”

Emmerich didn’t reply. Too wrapped up in his hacking, apparently. Liquid tried to recall if he’d remembered to bring a book or something. He couldn’t, and, upon checking his bag, found he hadn’t. He sighed. There was a very good reason why he considered the downtime - the waiting around for something to happen - to be the most stressful part of any mission.

Liquid went completely unnoticed as he casually picked up Emmerich’s little handheld game system and turned it on. He was marginally surprised to find the game in it wasn’t in English.

“You speak Japanese, Emmerich?”

“Oh,” Emmerich said, not looking up from his laptop, “not really. I mean, I can read a little bit of it. If you’re talking about the game I was playing yesterday, it’s actually kind of aimed towards kids, so it really doesn’t have very complicated vocabulary in it, plus it’s pretty repetitive, too…” He trailed off. Still didn’t seem to notice Liquid was holding said game.

“Hm.”

Well, Liquid’s knowledge of Japanese was probably about on-par with Emmerich’s, then. That, combined with the sense of “Well, what is anyone going to do to stop me?” that defined most of
Liquid’s life, led him to actually start playing the game… once he figured out the controls and mechanics, anyway… wasn’t too hard, though. Simple game, really. Turn-based.

“Actually, I’m part Japanese,” Liquid said inattentively as he randomly selected the じしん option. The ラグラージ did a little animation and then the health bar of the opposing ハブネーク (which had a cute sprite, in Liquid’s opinion) dropped dramatically.

“Huh,” was all Emmerich had to say. Probably wasn’t listening at all.

It was just past noon when Emmerich finally looked up from his laptop and said, “Okay, I’m in. Now I need to— hey!! My DS!”

“What?” Liquid said, looking up.

“What are you doing with my DS?!”

“Nothing,” Liquid said, closing it, “what do you want?”

Emmerich gave him an affronted yet perplexed look, then shook his head and said, “what data is it that you need me to find?”

“Anything pertaining to something called Project Charon — C-H-A-R-O-N.”

“—R-O-N, okay. It might take a little while but this program will return any files that have the words ‘Project Charon’ anywhere in their internal text. Now, give me back my DS.”

“But I was rather enjoying myself with it.”

“You’re going to ruin my run!”

“Say, when one of your little monster units dies - that’s not permanent, is it?”

“G-Give it back! I spent a lot of money getting that to the States!”

Honestly, if Emmerich had managed to gather the courage to try to physically snatch the DS back from Liquid, Liquid would have let him have it. But he didn’t. So Liquid opened it back up and continued playing Emmerich’s game. Emmerich glared at him for a minute, then sighed deeply, checked his laptop again, and mutinously turned on the TV, switching through the channels until he found some old sci-fi series playing.

By the time the episode of whatever he’d just put on was over, Emmerich was back at his laptop, typing again as he systematically destroyed every file that so much as mentioned Project Charon. Liquid could almost physically feel a weight lifting off his shoulders with every deletion.

“Alright,” Emmerich said as Liquid stood, returning the DS to the bedside table, “go get my router back, and then we’ll be completely done here.”

“Of course.”

Getting back into the CDC, and the computer lab, went as smoothly as it had that morning; if anything it was even easier - the hallway traffic had certainly declined, and Liquid supposed it was because most of the staff were still taking nice leisurely lunch breaks. The light in the computer lab was still off, too.

Liquid had just unplugged the router when he heard footsteps approaching the door to the lab.
Seconds later, the door opened, and the light switched on. A researcher walked into the room, glanced disinterestedly around, and his eyes settled on…

“Huh,” he said, “a cardboard box?”

Liquid had been a fucking idiot to laugh at Venom for it the first time he’d seen this technique.

“Guess someone else’ll grab it later…” The researcher sat down on one of the computers near the doorway and turned it on.

Liquid sighed silently. Something told him that whatever the researcher was doing in here, it wasn’t going to be over in five minutes or less. And he was sitting right in front of the door! …not that Liquid would have been able to sneak by him if he had been sitting anywhere else - at least, he might have been able to slip by just out of eyesight if he had been sitting at certain other tables, but there was also the camera he had to avoid.

He shifted from a crouch, which would be hell on his knees and back after a while, to a marginally more comfortable sitting position that would only be hell on his back. He called Emmerich on Codec.

“Is something going on over there?” Emmerich said.

“…”

“Oh. Can’t talk, huh?”

Liquid shook his head.

“Someone’s blocking your way out?”

Nod.

There was a very brief pause. “Are you… hiding in a cardboard box?”

Liquid did his best to convey What, do you have a bloody problem with that? with just his face in a way that would still be interpretable on the tiny, grainy Codec screen.

“…think it’s gonna be a while?”

He nodded, rolling his eyes. Could be hours, he mouthed.

“Huh… well, I already saw that my router’s been disconnected, so I guess you got it already… so, now all you have to do is wait until the person blocking your path out is gone,” said Emmerich.

Liquid frowned.

“…um… are you gonna be alright with nothing to do but wait for a couple hours? You… seem like the type that gets bored pretty easily.”

“…”

“Do you want me to… I dunno, talk about something until you can leave?”

Liquid nodded, although was sure to put on an uncaring, dismissive expression.

“Okay. Hmm. Well…” Emmerich adjusted his glasses, evidently thinking hard about what to lecture
Liquid about. “Okay. So, there’s this animé called Neon Genesis Evangelion, have you ever seen it?”

Liquid shook his head. What exactly was an ‘animé’, again? Wasn’t that what Japanese animation was called?

Emmerich’s face lit up. “It’s my favorite,” he said, “alright, so, first off you kind of have to understand that characters before you can really make sense of the plot - but first some backstory. Basically, there was this thing called the First Impact—“

Oh, god. Liquid should have said no while he still had the chance. Or he should just hang up without explanation right now.

Then again, his alternative was literally watching a researcher sit almost motionless at a computer for the duration. Listening to Emmerich explain a cartoon to him was, strictly speaking, more entertaining than watching paint dry.

Downtime really was the most stressful part of a mission.

Liquid gave that one an S rank just because he somehow managed to survive Emmerich talking about Neon Genesis Evangelion for nearly five hours until the researcher in the computer lab hit the end of his shift and left. Liquid’s back had popped as he stood up, grimacing, grateful to get out of the CDC at last. There were no further incidents on the way out. Would have been S rank anyway.

Back at the hotel, Emmerich had already ordered pasta for two from some pizza delivery place that was there by the time he got back. Liquid wasn’t actually a huge fan of Italian, but he hadn’t had lunch, or, come to think of it, breakfast, so he ended up scarfing it down so fast he barely tasted it anyway.

“So I guess that’s the end of the mission, huh?” Emmerich said, “whatever Project Charon is, it’s gone now.”

“Yes. Your help is very appreciated, Emmerich.”

“Um, it’s no problem! I’m always glad to help. A-At least, when I’m ordered to, anyway.” He paused. “But why me?”

“I told you, that’s classified.”

“Okay, okay…”

The conversation sort of died while Emmerich pushed his pasta around moodily in the foil take-out tray with a plastic fork. Liquid was already done, lounging on his bed, absent-mindedly running his fingers underneath his collar.

“So,” Emmerich said at length, “are you leaving tonight, or tomorrow, or…?”

“Tomorrow morning,” Liquid yawned, “I’ve a lot of driving to do in order to get back to headquarters, but quite frankly I’m not fond of travelling at night.”

“Why not?”

Because the doomed SAS mission to track down and destroy those Scud missiles had started at 1900 hours, and they’d been shot down at 0430.
“No reason in particular,” Liquid said, “just a bit mind-numbing with less traffic around, I suppose. Hard to concentrate on driving.”

“Oh, I see.”

“You still have a few days left on your ‘vacation’, don’t you?”

“Yep. I, uh… I thought I might go to the World of Coke, it seems interesting and I’ve never been.”

“There’s a really cute snake at the zoo,” Liquid recommended.

“Really? I guess I should go there, too, then. I have a couple days and I haven’t really planned anything out…” He blinked. “Actually, i-it’s kind of funny to hear a guy like you describe something as ‘cute’.”

Liquid raised an eyebrow. “Like me?”

“Y’know… big and tough. Manly. Could probably snap me in half like a twig.”

Liquid shrugged modestly.

Emmerich adjusted his glasses again. “I would’ve thought that you’d be the sort that says, ‘I’m a grown man, of course I wouldn’t call something “cute”!’ , y’know?”

“I’m a grown man,” Liquid said, “I can call things cute if I want to. And that black mamba is very cute, it looks like it’s smiling.”

“I see…”

Liquid found himself rather glad he was, in all likelihood, never going to see Emmerich or his strange notions of masculinity again.

“Anyway,” he said, “I get up fairly early, so I’ll probably be gone by the time you wake up tomorrow. You’re welcome to the room for the rest of your stay in this city, but I’d recommend avoiding the front desk at all costs when you leave. Trust me, you do not want to get stuck with this bill.”

“Your unit is supposed to be handling that, I suppose?” Emmerich said.

“Mmm… if you want to get technical about it, this room has been checked out to a certain woman since September. We’re only borrowing it.”

“…ah.”

“Oh, and don’t forget,” Liquid added, giving Emmerich a sharp look, “everything that happened here is top-secret. Not a word is to get out about this, not even to your closest friends, if you have any. Project Charon is probably the most classified thing you’ve ever set eyes on in your life.”

“I… kind of doubt that,” Emmerich said with a sheepish little laugh, “but I won’t tell anyone.”

“Don’t tell anyone about me, either.”

“I won’t. Really.”

“Good,” Liquid said, looking at the ceiling, “you’re not a bad fellow, really. I’d hate for the next assassination assignment to come in with your name on it.”
Liquid Snake: smart enough to figure out how to play a game he's never seen before in a language he doesn't know, still can't figure out the difference between a computer and a monitor.
“I have the champagne,” Raven said, throwing open the door to the breakroom and holding the bottles in the air.

“Ugh, finally,” Octopus said, “countdown starts in five minutes. We were starting to think you’d died in all that snow out there.”

“Do not underestimate my ability to drive in blizzard conditions,” Raven said, setting the champagne down. Wolf quickly grabbed a bottle and opened it. “This is nothing compared to Alaska.”

“All that matters is that we have the champagne, and now we can make a toast and do all that,” Wolf said, pouring it into the glasses - well, three out of the four glasses, anyway.

“Who’s getting left out here?” Octopus said, claiming one of the filled glasses.

Wolf jerked her head over to the couch, where Ocelot was snoozing, sitting up. “He is old,” she said, “I thought we should let him sleep.”

“We can keep our voices down,” Raven said, taking one of the other glasses.

“Mantis?” Wolf said, looking over at the corner where the man was brooding, “do you want to join us?”

“I can hardly drink champagne with this mask on,” he said.

“No, but it would be good to socialize a little. It is New Year’s, after all.”

“Yeah, 2004 is finally just about over,” Octopus said, “2005 is where it’s at, I’m sure.”

“The boss will be home by tomorrow, so stop worrying about him and come have fun,” Wolf said. Mantis shrugged and walked over, resettling at their card table.

“Has anyone considered yet what to say for a toast?” Raven said.

“I’ve got something,” Octopus said, raising his glass slightly, “to FOXHOUND. And us not getting a termination order by the Patriots in the near future.”

Wolf nodded, raising her own glass. “To the destruction of the Patriots,” she said, “before they destroy us.”

“To freedom from their control,” Raven rumbled.

“Yeah,” Octopus said, “to freedom from the world’s oppressors.”

“To freedom to be who we choose,” Mantis muttered.

Wolf clinked her glass to Octopus’. “To freedom.”

At a half-snowed-in truckstop somewhere in Illinois, Liquid was curled up in the back seat, staring blankly at the dimly-lit dashboard and the clock that slowly ticked towards midnight. He had a radio station on but the volume was down low, only faint static in this weather, barely audible over the soft *tcn tcn tcn* of the snow flecking against the car’s windows.
Would be nice if he could be back at headquarters already. He was sure he was missing champagne - and seeing if Wolf would kiss Octopus or Raven at the stroke of midnight, or fake them out and kiss Ocelot instead like she had last year.

“Should… auld… acquaintance be… forgot… and never brought to mind…? Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and days of auld lang syne?” he sang quietly to himself. Even he had to admit he was a little bit on the tone-deaf side, although maybe it was just because he’d never really learned anything about music.

“For auld lang syne, my jo, for auld lang syne…” Spending New Year’s by himself at an Illinois truckstop was just a bit more depressing than spending Christmas like this - New Year’s he was actually used to celebrating. Liquid wasn’t religious, and didn’t exactly keep religious company, so Christmas was often overlooked. “We’ll tak’ a cup o’ kindness yet—“

What if they were all dead this time next year?

“For the sake of auld lang syne.”

12:00. 2005.

He’d do anything to make sure that wouldn’t happen.

The first two weeks of 2005 went exactly the same way the whole second half of 2004 went: slowly and listlessly. No assignments came in, no major breakthroughs from either R&D or medical (although that intern who’d been gutted by the cyborg ninja returned, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, but she jumped about a foot in the air every time someone walked up behind her in the hallway). Even the cyborg ninja must have been lazing around somewhere, because he didn’t show up at all.

Wolf spent so much time in the shooting range that Liquid had to order new targets; Octopus got banned from one of his conspiracy theory forums for ‘trolling’, which no one else in FOXHOUND knew what that meant; Ocelot spent a lot of time on the phone with Solidus, which Mantis kept trying to eavesdrop on but always got chased away; Raven had started making increasingly intricate snow sculptures for lack of anything better to do; Liquid managed to behave himself and stay out of trouble with Mantis but he was bored and horny and with FOXDIE and Project Charon gone he felt oddly directionless and really, he just wished he’d gotten the name of that game he’d borrowed from Emmerich back in Atlanta. Surely that could serve to kill time, if he could order a copy for himself.

But eventually an assignment came in.

And while it wasn’t too out of the ordinary for an assignment to come in requesting a specific person be assigned - for example, a good majority of “we just need this information, that’s all” orders came with a ‘suggestion’ that Mantis be sent to get things done as quickly as possible - and it wasn’t unprecedented that two agents be requested for a mission - the most common arrangement being Ocelot getting an ‘in’ somehow to facilitate the other operative completing the objective — it was extremely unusual for the entire unit to be called on assignment. In fact, now that Liquid thought about it, he didn’t think that kind of thing had happened a single time before in FOXHOUND’s entire 34-year history.

At the same time his office printer spat out the assignment paper (as it was automatically set up to do ever since things had been switched over to some kind of online, wireless, long-distance system that Liquid still didn’t quite get), Ocelot walked into his office.

“Is that the Shadow Moses assignment?” he said.
“Erm… yes,” Liquid said, staring at it. “Ocelot, what the hell is this? The entire unit? For six weeks?”

“Yes,” Ocelot sighed, “ostensibly it’s just to supervise the testing of a top-secret new weapon, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Liquid said, not even a little surprised at Ocelot having the mission details before Liquid had even read them himself, “it says something about how we ought to be able to ensure everything stays hush-hush. But that’s not…”

“No, it’s not something that makes sense. Even if they wanted FOXHOUND specifically there’s no reason to call in the whole unit. Well… if our only objective was that which the Army gave us, anyway.”

“So give me the rest of the mission details, Ocelot,” Liquid said, throwing the assignment paper on his desk. “Since you clearly have them and all…”

“Boss, our real assignment here is from Solidus — that top-secret new weapon they’re working on out at Shadow Moses is a Metal Gear.”

“Metal Ge… oh! Like Sahelanthropus?” Despite the fact that he now regretted attacking his father with the walking tank on three separate occasions, he still had to admit that those had been some good times and he had fond memories of dear old Sally.

“Perhaps not quite so grand,” Ocelot said, “as you’ll recall, Sahelanthropus didn’t exactly work without Mantis…”

“Hm. Right.” Liquid frowned. “What does Solidus want us to do with Metal Gear, then?”

“Take it over,” Ocelot said.

“Take it over?”

“This is the part where we throw ourselves into open rebellion against the Patriots, boss. This is the start of our revolution.”

Liquid kicked open the breakroom door. “Alright, who’s ready to— where’s Raven?”

“Outside,” Wolf said, looking up from her cards.

“What’s going on?” Octopus said, shaking a card out of his sleeve while Wolf wasn’t looking.

“Eli, just because you are excited does not mean you should go around kicking doors in,” said Mantis from the couch.

“…nevermind. Who’s ready to go to Alaska?!”

“Huh?” Wolf said, confused.

“A new assignment,” Mantis yawned. “Very important.”

“You’re bleedin’ right it’s important, Mantis, this assignment is the end of FOXHOUND as we know it and the beginning of our lives as free men. …and woman.”

Wolf waved him off. “…so,” Octopus said, “what exactly is going on?”
Liquid started briefing them, but had to start over halfway through since Ocelot showed up with Raven in tow - evidently he’d already known he was outside and had gone to go get him while Liquid beelined for the breakroom where the others were. “And so,” Liquid concluded, “we leave tomorrow at 2100. So get packed. Don’t forget that, dead or alive, we’re not coming back from this.”

“You know, I will be sad to see this place go,” Wolf said, putting down her cards and standing up, “although… perhaps not the section of hallway that still has plywood instead of actual wall or ceiling…”

That evening Mantis sat placidly on the bad while Liquid circled around the room, throwing their things either into one of two suitcases or onto the floor, depending on whether or not he decided it was worth keeping (most of it ended up on the floor). He had a tape player on and while he’d initially wanted to crank it up as loud as it would go, Mantis had kept him restrained to a more reasonable volume that wouldn’t be heard too much unless one was standing right outside their quarters.

“—my own desire, my own remorse…

“Help me to decide, help me to make the most of freedom and pleasure!”

“Did you have any plans to reread any of these?” Liquid said, picking up one of Mantis’ Cold War books.

“No,” Mantis said, “none of them gave me the information I was after.”

“Oh, you never explained to me what exactly it was you were looking for.”

Mantis sighed. “It was only a vague suspicion based off of a memory I was unsure of anyway. Perhaps it really was nothing.”

“?”

“Everybody wants to rule the world!”

“Well, if you’re sure…” he said, tossing the book onto the floor. “I’ll assume you want to keep this old book on the order Mantodea…”

“There’s a room where the light won’t find you—

“Holding hands while the walls come tumbling down…”

“When they do, I’ll be right behind you…!”

“I just realized how little we have in the way of personal possessions,” Liquid said, walking to the other side of the room, chin in hand. “I suppose we’ve just… never had the luxury of ascribing much sentimental value to particular things.” He absent-mindedly brushed his fingers over the wall, then stopped, pressing his palm against it. “Or places.”

“I have never particularly liked this building,” Mantis said with airy disdain, “it is ugly and cramped, and while the isolation is a plus I am not a fan of the climate or surrounding landscape.”

Liquid laughed. “I won’t be sorry to leave this boring state, either.”

“So glad we’ve almost made it, so sad they had to fade it…”
“You already put your copy of *Lord of the Flies* in one of the suitcases, no?” Mantis said.

“I’m not sure,” Liquid said, turning around and opening the drawer of the bedside table. “Could you check for me?”

Mantis got up off the bed and crouched by the suitcases, rummaging through them for a moment before looking around and finding the book - really the only object Liquid had any attachment to, besides his collar, that didn’t strictly serve any kind of practical purpose - and fetching it.

“*Everybody wants to rule the world!*”

“You don’t suppose someone’s going to search our bags, do you?” Liquid said, “I’d rather avoid embarrassment.”

“I am not sure… certainly someone is going to have to go through our quarters after we are gone, and see what we left behind…”

“Well… I won’t be there for that, so I won’t really mind.” He worried his lip for a second, then said, “I’ll just keep it low-key. Er… we can get rope anywhere, I suppose, but I’ll take the handcuffs—“ he started pulling things out of the drawer, “and I really like this toy…”

“You’re incorrigible,” Mantis said dryly.

“I can’t stand this indecision…!

“Married with a lack of vision…”

“And lube, of course,” Liquid said, but he tossed that on the bed instead of into a suitcase and abruptly turned around, scooping up Mantis and nuzzling him. “But I’d rather use that tonight, before we pack it up.”

“Eli,” Mantis said, exasperated, “I thought you wanted to get all this sorted tonight so you could attend to other preparations tomorrow.”

“I changed my mind.” He dumped Mantis on the bed, crawling over him and kissing his neck. “I want to do this now.”

“*Everybody wants to rule the world!*”

“I want you.”

“As I said, incorrigible,” Mantis sighed, but he ran a hand back through Liquid’s hair anyway. He was in one of his moods, it couldn’t be helped.

“Mmmm.”

“What are you waiting for, then? Go on, Eli, strip.”

“Say that you’ll never, never, never need it—“

“Good boy.”

“*God,* I love it when you call me that, Mantis.”

“Mm, I know.” He curled his fingers under Liquid’s jaw, tilting his face up. “So— suggestions for right now? Any misbehavior to confess, or do I have to go looking myself?”
“Ahh,” Liquid said, moving his hands to Mantis’ thighs and squeezing them, “you know, I just might have snuck off and touched myself without your permission earlier this weekend.”

“Hmmm, did you? I never noticed.”

“Oh- yes, I did—“

“One headline, why believe it?

“Everybody wants to rule the world!”

“And?” Mantis said, “what were you thinking about? What fantasy did you find so overwhelmingly attractive that you simply had to break the rules I set for you, Eli?”

“I, ah,” Liquid was already a little flushed, and was rubbing his legs together a bit, which after all this time Mantis had really started to find this objectively abhorrent behavior kind of adorable and endearing, “I th-thought about you, Mantis.”

“Oh?”

“All for freedom and for pleasure-“

“Y-Yes, I imagined that you came i-into my office, and bent me over m-my desk, and fucked me right th-there with the door unlocked.”

“And you liked that?”

“Mmmh. I-I liked that very much, Mantis.”

“Nothing ever lasts forever—“

“Well, I’m glad you enjoyed yourself,” Mantis said, pulling Liquid closer, then pushing him onto his side next to him and sitting up. “But you know the rules. No masturbation.”

“Yes, Mantis,” Liquid breathed, looking up at him with a naughty little smile.

“And I suppose if it’s the idea of me fucking you that drives you to break the rules, then it is only fair that I punish you by doing exactly that.”

“Y-Yes, Mantis!”

“Hmm… what a way to say goodbye to this bed, Eli…”

“Y— y-yes, Mantis… ah, yes…!”

“Everybody wants to rule the world!”

By 2100 Monday morning everything was ready to go, and no one was any the wiser that FOXHOUND wasn’t planning on coming back. A single suitcase each of personal belongings was about expected for a six-week assignment, mostly because it was assumed that ‘personal belongings’ meant changes of clothing and toiletries - no one had taken a peek in the barracks to find that wasn’t the case. The Aviation Branch pilot of the Beechcraft C-12 Huron sent to shuttle them to Alaska did ask about the fact that they were all bringing their customary weapons (or, in Octopus’ case, his disguise kit), but Liquid already had a good excuse ready.
“What if an emergency assignment comes in while we’re in the middle of this?” he said, “there won’t be time to come back here to get what’s needed, and any one of us could be the person ideal for it. I’m not saying that is definitely going to happen, of course, but it does pay to be prepared!”

The pilot not only accepted that explanation, she also made an admiring remark about what a competent leader Liquid was. Liquid was just glad that FOXHOUND’s SOP being OSP wasn’t common knowledge.

“What exactly is the itinerary, boss?” Wolf asked as Raven was loading his cannon into the plane.

“This flight will take us to King Cove,” Liquid said, “it’s a small town on the Alaska Peninsula and it’s where all the Shadow Moses base’s supply shipments come from via boat. Food and such…”

“So I take it we will be taking a boat from King Cove to Shadow Moses.”

“Yes, as long as there aren’t any delays or complications, we’ll be landing about an hour before the next supply shipment!” the pilot said.

“So we will be coming in with their supplies…”

“That reminds me,” Octopus said, “hey, Raven, you’re from Alaska, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Raven said.

“How far away from Shadow Moses is your hometown?”

“Metlakatla is on Taak’w Aan. Shadow Moses is part of the Fox Islands.”

“I have no idea how far apart those are,” Octopus said.

“The Fox Islands are part of the Aleutian Islands,” Mantis supplied, “Taak’w Aan is called Annette Island in English, and it is part of the Gravina Islands in the Alexander Archipelago.”

“…yes, thank you for reading Raven’s mind and telling me geographical details about a state I know nothing about the geography of.”

Raven sighed. “The Aleutian Islands are in the southwest, the Alexander Archipelago is in the southeast.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t look now, boss,” Ocelot said, “but I think a certain someone is interested in where we might be headed.”

Liquid looked over his shoulder just in time to see the cyborg ninja disappear behind the corner of the building. He sprinted over, but was unable to catch him - he was entirely gone, his only remnant being footsteps leading towards the fence, quickly being filled in by the falling snow.

How odd. Did he often show up just to lurk, and not attack anyone? Had they simply never noticed before?

Deciding it didn’t much matter if he warned the medical and R&D teams or not, since he’d never see them again (or at least most of them; Mahjub, Sisken, and/or the Chinese girl might come up again), Liquid returned to the Huron just in time for the pilot to insist on everyone boarding because staying out in this weather any longer might cause complications on her end, nevermind the plane.
Although Liquid was in high spirits when they took off, less than an hour into the flight he was leaning his head drowsily on Mantis’ shoulder and found himself unable to keep his eyes open any longer. He summarily nodded off.

“…he is asleep,” Mantis said, rolling his eyes.

Octopus checked his watch. “54 minutes.”

“I said fifty,” Wolf said.

“Fifty minutes have already passed,” Raven said, “you lost. I said an hour, so I was closest.”

“54 is closer to fifty than sixty,” Wolf argued, then held out a hand expectantly, “everyone pay up.”

“The time you allotted was already up,” Raven said, “I am not giving you thirty dollars.”

“You lost the bet, Raven, you have to pay me, that was the agreement.”

Octopus was pulling thirty dollars out of his own wallet. “I lost either way,” he said, since he had bet on half an hour, “but who am I supposed to give this to?”

“I would go with Wolf,” Ocelot said - he’d predicted ‘about’ 45 minutes but hadn’t actually wagered any money like Wolf, Raven, and Octopus had. “54 is closer to fifty than sixty.”

“She had already lost,” Raven said again.

“Raven, the way you view it, as long as the boss had stayed awake longer than fifty minutes you would have automatically won.”

“No, if he had stayed awake longer than an hour then I would have lost as well.”

“This is still my win,” Wolf said, “pay up. Sixty dollars will buy me a decent amount of diazepam.”

“No it won’t,” Octopus said, “that stuff’s expensive.”

“Sixty dollars and an implicit threat.”

“…that’ll do it.”

“I am not going to fund your drug habit,” Raven said.

Ocelot snorted. “That’s why I didn’t wager anything.”

“If none of you can decide who won the bet,” Mantis said, “then all of your money should go to me.”

“What, are you ‘the house’ here?” Octopus said.

“Yes, I am the one Eli fell asleep on, am I not? Besides,” he added casually, “I do need some sort of incentive not to tell him that you all bet on how long it would take him to fall asleep on the plane. You know he would not be pleased about that.”

After some deliberation, it was begrudgingly decided that Wolf and Raven were both wrong because 54 was neither fifty nor sixty, and Mantis made $90.

Fortunately the pilot had been trained to mind her own business.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Per ‘Army brass doesn’t actually give a shit about FOXHOUND’ tradition, the briefing material provided to Liquid had been… vague, and he’d had to spend a bunch of time before they left just looking things up on his own. By the time they landed in King Cove on Tuesday morning Liquid had already told the rest of the team what he did know: Shadow Moses island contained a civilian base built in 2002 for the disposal of nuclear weapons, but in actuality the corporation contracted to “safely deactivate, dismantle, and dispose of decommissioned nuclear warheads” was a front for this big company called ArmsTech that had gotten funding from DARPA to build a Metal Gear of some sort… Raven was familiar with the concept, since (and Liquid hadn’t heard about this until now, despite Mantis knowing) there had been a Metal Gear at the Galzburg FOB and that was what Operation Intrude N313 had been about in the first place, but it had to be explained to Wolf and Octopus. Liquid also mentioned that the Shadow Moses base had its own foundry and power plant to cut down on how often they needed supply shipments - once every month, instead of every few days or so like would be required if they had to bring the metal used to build the Metal Gear in from mainland Alaska. Plus it helped with secrecy.

On the boat on the way to the island, Liquid tried multiple times to contact the head honcho on the base - that is, the team leader on the Metal Gear project - but either his cell phone wasn’t getting any reception out here on the Bering Sea or else the reception on Shadow Moses was fantastically bad and it was the team leader’s cell phone that wasn’t getting anything. Liquid didn’t know how to tell.

“Does anyone have any idea why we are going for six weeks?” Wolf said, “I thought the Army sent us here to supervise Metal Gear’s final test. Does that take six weeks?”

“No,” Liquid said, “the test itself takes place six weeks from now, on February 28th. What we need to be so early for is utterly beyond me… perhaps Solidus bought us some extra time to prepare for the uprising…?”

“Do we really need six weeks to prepare to hijack a walking tank?”

“We might need six weeks to bring in any reinforcements or extra materials,” Ocelot said, “you never know.”

“He has something up his sleeve already,” Mantis said in a low voice.

“Mantis, hush,” Liquid replied almost automatically.

They were greeted at the docks by a plumpish woman with a thick coat and a red-cheeked smiling face. She shook Liquid’s hand and introduced herself as Dr. Demolles, and while Liquid had initially thought she was the team leader she waved her other hand and said, “Oh, no, our team leader is busy working out some bugs in REX’s attitude control right now. He delegated showing you around to me. So, shall we?”

The first ‘stop’ on their ‘tour’ was actually the docks, where Dr. Demolles gestured to the men who were unloading the crates of food and supplies from the boat FOXHOUND had come in on and explained, “we’re actually separated into two departments here, Department A and Department B - creative naming, I know. I’m part of Department A - it’s smaller, and we’re the ones who work on design, troubleshooting, and the programming for REX’s autonomous functions. Basically, we
handle the software. Department B handles the hardware: they’re the ones who actually put REX together. We have this joke that the ‘B’ stands for ‘bitch’,” she added conspiratorially, “since they have to do anything we tell them to.”

“…interesting,” Octopus said, “can we go inside now? It’s thirty degrees below zero.”

Despite being a civilian base, Shadow Moses very much had the air of a military one. Dr. Demolles even showed them what the engineers ironically referred to as ‘the barracks’, where they all slept: they were only barracks in the same sense that the so-called barracks in the R&D building back at FOXHOUND headquarters had been. Although slightly smaller. The point was that every member of both Department A and Department B had their own quarters, even though the kitchen and bathrooms were communal. There were also a number of leftover rooms, too, so each member of FOXHOUND was able to claim one and dump their bags in there. (Dr. Demolles blinked when Mantis claimed the same room Liquid did, but after another glance at Liquid’s collar seemed to resign herself to it.) Also, upon further inspection after Liquid got separated from the rest of the group due to getting distracted by something irrelevant, it turned out that Shadow Moses did actually have traditional barracks available, though unused.

Dr. Demolles showed them Metal Gear REX and excitedly explained the specs and purpose to them, although presently they couldn’t get very close to it or touch it, merely stand on a nearby walkway and look at it. Mantis snorted derisively every time Dr. Demolles described Metal Gear as being “a mobile TMD” or otherwise implied it was for defensive purposes; Liquid found REX to be rather unexciting after Sahelanthropus and the fact that it wasn’t fully put together yet and still had exposed unarmored sections didn’t help, but Raven found it very impressive, saying it was over twice the size of TX-55, the Metal Gear at Outer Heaven in 1995.

They didn’t have to meet anyone in Department B, which was just as well because literally no one in FOXHOUND had been remotely interested in Dr. Demolles’ tour after the first five minutes (even Ocelot, who was clearly trying to be polite, seemed tired of it) and Liquid made a mental note to just get some maps of the base since it wasn’t like she had shown them the whole thing anyway… but the last place Dr. Demolles took them was the second floor basement lab, where the rest of Department A was.

“Well, it looks like our team leader is out right now—” she started.

“He went to go get some coffee,” said one of the engineers, “he’ll be back in a minute.”

“Oh, okay. Well, I’ll introduce you to everyone else. This is Dr. Wengret,” she gestured to the man who had just spoke, then started waving her hand towards the other scientists in turn, “Dr. An, Dr. Poholsky, Dr. Jorgenson, and then our team members who don’t have a doctorate — Lo, Marnon, Gomez-Ibanez, Rosenberg - actually, she should be getting her PhD in May - and Bashir.”

Liquid hoped he wasn’t expected to remember all these names.

“So who is the team leader?” Wolf said.

Appropriately right at that moment the door to the lab opened, and someone (the team leader, presumably) said, “Oh, is that special forces group here already…?”

Liquid realized he’d heard that voice before just in time for there to be the sound of a cup of coffee bouncing off the floor. He looked over his shoulder, then turned around, his eyebrows shooting straight up into his hairline.

“You!!” he said at the same time Emmerich did.
“You two… know each other?” Octopus said as one of the engineers (Marnon?) grabbed some paper towels and started cleaning up Emmerich’s coffee spill while Emmerich just stood there and stared at Liquid in shock.

“Erm, yes,” Liquid said, blinking, “Emmerich here is the one who helped us out with that CDC thing.”

“I…” Emmerich said faintly, then tried to recover. “I, uh, didn’t know it was your group that was supposed to be coming to supervise the-”

“What CDC thing?” one of the scientists (Dr. Poholsky??) said, glancing at Emmerich, then Liquid, “this is seriously the special agent you were supposed to meet up with when you got that weird hacking assignment?”

“The way you described him,” Dr. Demolles said, “I would have never guessed it was the same guy.”

Liquid narrowed his eyes at Emmerich. “I thought I told you that everything that happened in Atlanta was top secret, Emmerich.”

“No, I-I didn’t-“ Emmerich started, but one of the other scientists (what was this one’s name again…) swooped in to save him.

“We already knew he was supposed to be meeting up with a secret agent and hacking something for them as part of some super important top-secret national security thing,” he said, “because that’s how it was explained to us when we got the call that he was supposed to go on ‘vacation’ to Atlanta. We didn’t know it had anything to do with the CDC until you mentioned it just now.”

“Yeah, and he didn’t tell us anything really important about you,” said one of the others, “he didn’t even mention your name! Just that you were British, and got bored very easily, and looked like a supermod.”

“That’s enough, Bashir!” Emmerich blurted out, then took his now-empty cup which Marnon(?) handed to him.

“Yes, all of that is completely irrelevant now,” Mantis said in an extremely dry, unamused voice. Liquid internally groaned. There weren’t going to be any problems over Emmerich, were there?

“Actually, it’s probably a good thing that you and Dr. Emmerich already know each other, boss,” Ocelot said evenly, “as the team leaders of your respective groups, you and he are in equivalent positions.”

Damn.

“Although, if anything, since this is his base you would be deferring to him in situations where it calls for that.”

Shit.

“I suppose that’s only to be expected,” Liquid said, putting on a smile despite the fact that he was internally screaming, and extending a hand for Emmerich to shake. Again.

At least he still winced when Liquid crushed his hand in his.
“There is no need to get worked up over Emmerich,” Mantis said over lunch. Or rather, over most of the rest of FOXHOUND eating lunch while he sat across from Liquid with his arms imperiously folded.

“I’m not,” Liquid said, pushing his food (seriously, what the hell was this? Whatever it was, it was bland, mushy, unidentifiable and unappetizing) around on his plate with his fork. “It’s only that I was thinking I wouldn’t see him again.”

“Did something happen when you two were in Atlanta together?” Raven asked. He didn’t seem to mind the food. Perhaps it was an Alaskan thing.

“If it did,” Octopus said, “don’t you think we would have heard about it from Mantis by now?”

Mantis rolled his eyes. Liquid frowned.

“Things were a little bit awkward,” he said, “mostly because I think I intimidated him. But other than that everything stayed perfectly professional.”

“It was not just intimidation,” Mantis said disdainfully, “Emmerich finds you attractive.”

“Oh.”

“I’m not surprised,” Octopus said, “I mean, if he described you as looking like a supermodel and all…”

“It does not matter, does it?” Raven said, raising a heavy eyebrow.

“No,” Liquid said quickly, “of course it doesn’t. To be honest, I’m used to random people thinking of me that way. It doesn’t bother me.” Anymore, at least.

“It’s hardly the most interesting thing in his mind,” Mantis said, cocking his head. “Let’s see… well, he is definitely Dr. Huey Emmerich’s son. Born at a Soviet-held hospital in Afghanistan, then when he was… hmm… a few months before he turned four, his mother had him sent to America to live with his paternal grandparents… a German Jewish couple living in Chicago, grandfather worked on the Manhattan Project… why the sudden decision to send him off…?”

“Wasn’t his father hanging out with XOF at the time?” Liquid said, “if I were her, I don’t think I’d want a toddler around, either.”

“You have a point. Although… well, it is strange… he has very vague memories of Sahelanthropus.”

“Seeing it?”

“Piloting it.”

There was a pause.

“Did you not just say he left Afghanistan when he was three?” Raven said.

“Honestly, I have no idea what Sahelanthropus is,” Octopus said, “or what the hell you two are talking about in general. Carry on.”

“The sad part is,” Liquid said, leaning back in his chair, “using a literal toddler as a test-pilot for a barely-functional Metal Gear is exactly the sort of thing I can see the late Dr. Emmerich doing. But that does explain why his mother sent him to America. What happened to her, by the way? What sort
of woman would have a child with *Dr. Emmerich??*

“That is entirely beyond me,” Mantis said, “Emmerich never saw her again, so I do not think I can really put much stock in his own conclusions about her. Anyway… when he was eight, his father came and got him, and then they moved to the Boston suburbs… father remarried…” He stopped suddenly. “Oh, disgusting.”

“What?”

“Nevermind. I have decided I am done fetching his life story from his mind, it really does not even matter, anyway. He went to MIT and Princeton and he is the REX project’s team leader despite being the youngest person on the project, and that is the only relevant information here.”

“Mantis…”

“Ask him yourself if you are curious about him,” Mantis snapped, “I said I am through.”

“…so,” Octopus said, possibly to cut the sudden tension in the room, “where are Wolf and Ocelot, anyway?”

“Ocelot is on the phone,” Raven said, “Wolf is—“

“They have *wolfdogs* here,” Wolf half-shouted, suddenly throwing open the cafeteria door.

“Dogs?” Liquid said.

“Wolfdogs,” Wolf corrected, “not merely dogs. There must have been huskies here that interbred with native wolves.”

“Uh,” Octopus said, “well, congrats?”

“And,” Wolf went on excitedly, “there is a litter of two-week-old puppies!”

“Puppies are ready to be separated from their mother at eight weeks,” Raven said, “perhaps you can take one with you when we are done here.”

Wolf gasped. “Liquid,” she said, “may I?”

“Erm… I don’t know if that will really be… feasible…”

She stared at him for a second, then pursed her lips, then sighed deeply. “I suppose you are right,” she said, “we are likely to be on the run for a while, and I am not sure that that would be a proper life for a wolfdog.”

“I’m not expressly forbidding it,” Liquid said, “just… well, if it really wouldn’t be best for the dog then you really should just leave it here.”

“Wolfdog,” Wolf corrected again, “and yes, I think I will just let them be here. But at least I will enjoy myself for the duration of this assignment.”

Back in 1995, after the fortress that would become the Galzburg FOB was taken over but before anything bad had happened, the floorplans of the fortress had been sent back to Mother Base per normal regulations for the intel unit to file away against the base development unit needing them in the near or far future. Mantis had intercepted a copy and had shown it to Liquid and Wolf, who had spent the day boggling over the architecture of it - it wasn’t very efficiently laid out at all, with too
many small closets to be useful and a large open water drainage ditch for no reason, but worse were the notes about how there were two half-broken elevators which refused to operate if they had any extra weight going either up or down, depending on the elevator, and Liquid had burst into horrified laughter when he saw the attached photo of the offensively hideous bright blue tile on the roof of the second building.

Ocelot had ended up catching them, which could have been bad because while the intel unit wasn’t really keeping everyone else on a strict need-to-know basis they still weren’t supposed to casually pass this sort of information around to the foot soldiers, but… Ocelot had just shrugged and let them get away with it, citing the fact that Liquid was Venom’s son and Wolf was very close to Quiet. He did threaten Mantis with a talking-to, but after a few weeks passed Mantis had still never brought it up (and Liquid always heard about it whenever Mantis got lectured by Ocelot on anything, or hell, Ocelot had any kind of interaction with him that wasn’t giving him a sound bite of an order, being in charge of the intel unit and all) so evidently Ocelot had just “forgotten” about the whole incident.

Exploring the Shadow Moses base by himself, Liquid was reminded of that time. Especially strongly when he found that it was the cold storage that was far underground while the foundry was ground-level… just to make insulation and energy expenditure as steep as possible…? If this had been a purely federal thing, Liquid wouldn’t have been surprised, but surely ArmsTech was still answerable to its own accounting department.

“No wonder Father took the architect prisoner back then,” Liquid muttered, staring at the trap door that had opened but when he stepped on a certain floor tile in the armory. (Why did they have an armory? Sure, it was convenient for FOXHOUND, but what on earth was the government planning on doing with this base once Metal Gear was completed and the scientists were gone?) “I’ve half a mind to do it myself, if I could get my hands on them…”

On the plus side, he’d found the places where good cell reception existed - mostly outdoor areas, and it was actually pretty decent both at the docks and over in the living quarters, and the control room overlooking the hangar where Metal Gear was being built actually had really good reception but it also had the head of Department B, who asked Liquid if he had Dr. Emmerich’s permission to be here.

Which he didn’t, but Liquid lied about that because for God’s sake what was Emmerich going to do about it?!

Also on his hunt for good cell reception Liquid came across what one of the Department B grunts referred to as the “medical room”, and his initial reaction was a positive one - “Medical facilities on this island? Good, we might actually need those at some point…” — entering the room he found that its title was entirely euphemistic and, even though there were some shelves and cabinets in there with legitimate medical supplies, the centerpiece of the room was a large, square… well… torture rack. Liquid didn’t know how it actually worked, yet, but he still felt his assumption of it being related to torture somehow was a sound one, judging by all the machinery it was hooked up to.

“Ocelot, what the hell.”

“What, boss?”

Back in the cafeteria now, where Ocelot was having an early dinner, Liquid gestured vaguely. “Why is-” he started, “has that thing in the medical room always been there?”

“You found the medical room?” Ocelot said, “does it actually have medical supplies?”

“Yes, but, it also has some kind of device—“
“How is the cell reception in there?”

“Just fine, but Ocelot, why on earth does this facility even need a-“

“I don’t know anything about the torture device,” Ocelot said, turning back to his dinner. “I mean, I heard about it, and I know it’s a model I’m already familiar with, but its given reason for being installed in the first place is something I was not told.”

“How does it work, anyway?” Liquid asked almost despite himself.

“Electrocution,” Ocelot simply said. By now he had figured out that Liquid never stayed in the room if he ever tried to launch into an explanation of the finer points of torture. That didn’t always mean he kept his mouth shut, of course, but it did mean that he usually waited until there was some official, administrative, and/or tactical reason for Liquid to be a captive audience.

Sometimes Liquid wondered if Mantis didn’t have a point about Ocelot.

Finally, he heard Mantis’ voice in his head.

“Do you know where Mantis is?” Liquid flatly asked Ocelot.

“No idea.”

What? I haven’t done anything wrong. You, on the other hand…

Liquid slunk out of the cafeteria before Mantis could get in a snit about him spending any time alone with Ocelot, even if he was just asking about the torture device. A while back he had tried to protest ‘Don’t spend too much time with Ocelot, with no one else in the room’ as a rule because not fooling around with Ocelot was already a rule anyway, but Mantis was absolutely convinced that given the opportunity Ocelot would jump Liquid - or, at least, seduce him or something. Every time Liquid had cheated on Mantis it had been his own horrible idea, though, so he didn’t know (okay, he didn’t like to think about) what Mantis was so afraid of here… the point was that he’d ceded the rule and was still technically opening himself up for potential punishment (the un-fun kind) by socializing with Ocelot without any other company present.

Had he ever been in a healthy relationship in his life? Like, ever?

I have no idea what you are referring to, Eli.

“Nevermind,” he grumbled under his breath, stalking through the hallways.

He did end up finding Mantis, though, in a nice section of the first floor basement of the nuclear warhead storage building. Specifically he found him in a fancy office, with wood-panel walls and plush chairs, bookshelves, a mahogany desk and a hologram map of the communications towers… and fine ceramic busts that Mantis was systematically covering in electrical tape.

“What’s going on here?” Liquid said, brow furrowed, picking up one of the busts Mantis had already ‘modified’.

“I like them better like this,” Mantis said.

Liquid blinked at him, then glanced at the one Mantis hadn’t gotten to yet. Who had sculpted these, anyway? Surely it wasn’t someone who had known Mantis from somewhere… their faces did look a little… familiar, although they were lacking any obvious deformities… surely it wasn’t—
The bust Liquid was staring at abruptly exploded into glittering white shards. One bit cut Liquid on the cheek, some of the rest of it stuck to his coat in a gritty powder.

“That’s just unnecessary,” Liquid said, wiping the cut with his fingers. A little bit of blood came away on his glove, not nearly enough for even Mantis to worry about.

“I would destroy all of them if it was not a pain to clean up afterwards.”

“Why not just avoid this room?”

“Other than these,” Mantis said, pulling off another strip of electrical tape, “I rather like this room. I think I’ll claim it.”

Liquid looked around again. “What is this room, anyway?”

“The commander’s office.”

“…okay, Mantis, by rights then it should be-“

“I got here first.”

“But I’m commander.”

“Do not pull rank on me over an office, Eli,” Mantis said, annoyed, “I said I like this room, and it is not as though I would ban other people from coming in here, except perhaps Ocelot. It is in a convenient place, after all.”

“What do you mean a convenient place? I find this quite out of the way.”

Mantis gestured to a bookshelf against the wall behind the desk. “There is a secret passage,” he said, “why I do not think anyone knows, certainly I have found no explanation in any of the engineers’ minds. I do know that it is locked by a puzzle that none of them have solved… or, at least for some of them, bothered attempting to solve.”

“Oh. Huh.”

“Of course I need not bother with such things.” He waved his hand, and the shelf swung forward. Liquid peered behind it. Just a dimly-lit hallway, and a breath of cold air… “That is a shortcut through some caves to the communications towers. Could be useful.”

“Are those Wolf’s dogs I hear?”

“I think so, yes. The cave must also let out in the yard where the dogs are kept.”

“Interesting. And completely inexplicable.”

“Indeed.”

So, entirely forgetting about Mantis stealing the commander’s room from him, Liquid walked into the secret passageway.

Chapter End Notes
Yes, I know it’s supposed to be leather straps the busts are covered in, it just looks more like electrical tape to me and honestly I find that funnier.
Also I'm 100% sure that the secret passage in the commander’s room really was some Resident Evil bullshit that Mantis just bypassed by forcing the mechanism with his psychokinesis. It makes sense!
Liquid made a mental note as he bolted out of the caves and vaulted over the dog yard’s fence that *Shadow Moses’ wolfdogs were very hostile towards men*. He would have thought they’d be *fine*, since they apparently got on so well with Wolf, but *no*.

…oh, great. How was he supposed to get back inside from here without going through the yard? He might have been spending the last couple days just exploring the place, but so far he’d only been through the interior of the base, not the surrounding island.

Then again, if those ravens just visible over the tops of a nearby copse were any indication, perhaps there just might have been someone already out here he could ask for directions.

“Morning, Raven,” Liquid said, walking up to him.

“How was he supposed to get back inside from here without going through the yard? He might have been spending the last couple days just exploring the place, but so far he’d only been through the interior of the base, not the surrounding island.

Then again, if those ravens just visible over the tops of a nearby copse were any indication, perhaps there just might have been someone already out here he could ask for directions.

“Morning, Raven,” Liquid said, walking up to him.

“Mm.”

“I see you’ve found your pets here.”

“Yes,” Raven said, “but they are not mere pets. They are noble creatures, highly esteemed in nature for returning to the earth that which has overstayed its purpose.”

“Hm.”

“…boss, are you cold?”

“Huh?” Liquid hadn’t even realized he was hugging himself. Hm, usually temperature didn’t bother him too much, but then again it *was* thirty below and he preferred the heat… “I’ll get used to it.”

Raven laughed once. “Alaska is not the best place for Snakes, boss.”

“Ha ha. Do you know how to get back inside *without* going through the yard and getting eaten by dogs?”

Raven pointed towards the communication towers. “Just climb over the fence into the snowfield. Otherwise you will have to head back towards the docks.”

“Thank you.”

Heading back inside from the snowfield, Liquid dropped by REX’s hangar again just to take another quick look before getting chased away by the Department B guys. Unlike the last couple times he’d tried this, they were a lot quicker on the uptake now, their head almost immediately showing up to complain to Liquid about how he didn’t need to be here right now and everything was going smoothly but it was a very delicate operation so, implicitly, Liquid would just get in the way if he kept hanging out in their workspace - it was so annoying that Liquid *let* himself get chased off by the guy, and then outside the hangar he found the reason why they’d apparently already been on alert for unwanted spectators: Emmerich.

“I thought Department A had no business watching Metal Gear’s construction,” Liquid said, somewhat dryly.
Emmerich sheepishly adjusted his glasses. “We don’t,” he said, “I mean, we’re not allowed to - that’s what the president said, the ArmsTech president I mean. He said it undermined interdepartmental trust.”

“Hm.” Again, Emmerich was unbelievably naïve, so Liquid figured the real reason would be so that he wouldn’t see what precisely Department B was arming REX with and become disillusioned about Metal Gear being for defensive purposes only.

Come to think of it, wasn’t this the first time they’d had a private conversation since Liquid had come to a similar conclusion about Emmerich’s naïveté in Atlanta? (Or, wait, he’d come to a conclusion about his naïveté before that final night where he’d come to some even more interesting conclusions about Emmerich’s perceptions of masculinity.)

“So, uh,” Emmerich said, “I never asked about the collar…”

Liquid stared at him for a moment. Emmerich went beet red, like either he now regretting saying that or that wasn’t even what he intended to say in the first place. And Liquid was unreasonably tempted to fuck around with him a bit.

“You should have, I don’t mind talking about it,” Liquid said lightly, “truthfully I only wear it because - well, you use the internet a lot, don’t you? I’ve heard there’s a lot of fringe porn on the internet.”

“Uhm, w-wh-what?”

“I ask because I’m wondering if you’re familiar with the concept of a relationship where-“

“H-Hang on, I’m not sure I want to…”

Liquid cut off Emmerich’s escape route by subtly steering him against the wall and bracing his arms on either side of him, mostly because he was very, very bad at resisting temptation. “What’s the matter, Emmerich?” he said with a lecherous grin, “what are you so embarrassed for? It’s not like I’m inviting you to join us, Mantis would never tolerate a third person, not again, anyway…”

“Wh… Mantis…? What do you mean, again?”

Liquid ignored the second question. “Of course Mantis,” he said, “didn’t Dr. Demolles mention to you that he and I claimed the same quarters for the duration of this assignment?”

“Uh… um…”

“He’s the one who put this collar on me,” he purred, “he’s the one who’s going to fuck me silly until we break the bed here. And you’re the one who’s going to have to pay for a new one, project team leader.”

Emmerich legitimately looked like he might faint. Liquid had to stop himself from bursting into laughter.

“What,” he said, “you think that might be a little unfair? Would you like to at least be able to watch? Or perhaps just have me describe it to you in graphic detail?”

“No, I don’t-“ Emmerich started, “what do you want from me??”

Liquid did laugh now, and stepped back from him. “I’m only messing with you.”
“That wasn’t funny.”

“I beg to differ - you ought to see yourself right now, your face is all red.”

“That wasn’t funny, Liquid!”

Liquid raised his eyebrows at Emmerich’s attempt at a harsh tone. And Ocelot had said Emmerich outranked Liquid here… feh.

“Look, we can change the subject if you like,” Liquid said, “actually, I’ve been wondering how you managed to land this job.”

“…what?”

“Well, you’re the youngest on your team, aren’t you? Even that Rosenberg woman is older than you?”

“Oh,” Emmerich said, blinking, lowering his hackles, “yeah. The next-youngest person on the whole base besides me is Erwin Brewster in Department B, and he’s 27. In Department A, Leah Rosenberg is… 28, I think? My 25th birthday is next week…”

“So, how did you manage that, then?” Liquid waved a hand vaguely. “24’s a bit young to be at any position like this, isn’t it? Let alone team leader. It wasn’t just because of your father, was it?”

“No, of course not,” Emmerich said quickly, “I mean, mostly. I- I’m good at what I do. Finished school early and all. Even if I was hired and given this position because of my father, there’s no way I would have been able to keep it except on my own merits.”

“Hm.”

“It’s just… well,” Emmerich started walking off down the hallway, not indicating that Liquid should follow, but didn’t protest when he did and in fact continued talking, “REX wasn’t ours, originally. I guess you could say it’s a continuation of an earlier project, but not really - we were just given some partial blueprints and vague specifications, and a couple photos of a Metal Gear built back in 1995 —“

“TX-55?”

“Yeah, how did you know?”

Liquid shrugged.

“Anyway,” Emmerich said, “later in early 2000 we got some more scraps of information based off of the Metal Gear that got destroyed during the Zanzibar Land disturbance - I think it was called Metal Gear D. But the point is that the information was totally incomplete — ArmsTech has been working on REX since 1996, but it wasn’t until I got kicked out of the FBI’s ERF over a… minor hacking incident and then got hired here that we made any headway.”

“What happened?”

“Well, y’see, my father…” Emmerich sighed. “I guess if you knew him then you’d already know that my father worked on Metal Gear. He was never really able to let go of the concept, even after he came back to America. I remember as a kid, finding these blueprints he’d drawn up for something he called ‘Metal Gear ZEKE’, and y’know, I never found out if it was just a concept or something that actually existed once. But since I thought it was pretty fascinating either way, so I studied those
blueprints a lot…”

“…and later, when you were expected to help reconstruct Metal Gear D or TX-55, you remembered ZEKE and it was easy to do so?” Liquid guessed.

“Yes,” Emmerich said. “Of course it wasn’t just copying my father’s plans. Keep in mind the last time I saw any of those I was eleven years old - he eventually destroyed them entirely, I think. Plus ZEKE was antiquated anyway, there’s a lot of newer technology going into REX that wasn’t influenced by previous Metal Gears at all.”

“But nonetheless, they made you team leader because you were the one finally able to put a definite plan on the table.”

“Yup. I was the only one who really understood how Metal Gear came together.”

“I suppose that’s something to be proud of,” Liquid said. “I myself am the youngest person to ever run FOXHOUND, but to be honest I’m not entirely sure why they made me commander. Sometimes I think it was a mistake.” Else his theory about him being considered too easily distracted to negotiate a bigger budget really did have merit to it…

“I don’t think the government makes mistakes like that,” Emmerich said with wide-eyed innocence.

Liquid snorted. “Go ahead and believe that if you like,” he said, “while we’re on the subject, I was also the youngest person in history to join the SAS. But I think that mostly happened because I harassed the recruiter so much.” Or maybe Cipher or the Patriots or whatever the hell they were calling themselves by that point had facilitated it somehow? That had never occurred to Liquid before. Hadn’t he been abandoned…?

“Really? How old were you?”

“I had just turned eighteen. Actually, there was another man back in… 1959, I think? who also joined the SAS at age eighteen, but I was told I beat him out by a few months.”

“Neat.”

They turned the corner, only to run into an extremely unamused Mantis.

“Hello,” Liquid said brightly.

“Er, hi,” Emmerich said, taking a step back.

Mantis ignored Emmerich entirely, instead fixing his beyond-annoyed gaze at Liquid. “You are in big trouble, Eli.”

“I have done nothing wrong,” Liquid said in mock indignation, but nonetheless he waved ‘later’ to Emmerich and followed Mantis off, head held high.

“I knew Emmerich was going to become an issue,” he said when Mantis had led him back to their temporary quarters.

Mantis glared at him. “I was not planning on making him an issue, and then you decided to flirt with him.”

“I wasn’t flirting with him, I was just yanking his chain a little. It was hilarious.”

“You were flirting, Eli.” He sat down on the bed and sighed, rubbing his temples. “What am I
supposed to do with this…? I am trying to think of what I did last time you insincerely flirted with someone just to get a rise out of me, but I honestly cannot recall any other such occasion.”

“Well, my options have been a bit limited, generally speaking…”

“Nevermind. Misbehavior is misbehavior, Eli, I will treat this as I do anything else.”

Liquid gave him his most seductive smile. “You’ll show me how wrong am I to dare entertain the possibility of sex with someone other than you, perhaps? Demonstrate that you’re the best in the world for me? Make me beg for your dick until I can’t even remember that other men have them?”

“That isn’t funny, Eli. Come here.”

As it turned out Mantis had put his camera in with the rest of his luggage while Liquid wasn’t looking. But Liquid went along with the punishment photos so well, no matter how humiliating a position Mantis ordered him to contort into, that once they were finished with that and Mantis had deleted all the evidence of it, Liquid was generously rewarded.

Maybe he should flirt with people more often.

“Don’t even think about it,” Mantis muttered, giving Liquid’s hair a slight tug.

Tacitly ignoring Liquid and Mantis having sex in the middle of the day like they usually did when there was nothing else going on, the rest of FOXHOUND quickly found their own ways to pass time and acclimatize to Shadow Moses while they waited for the time to prepare for the uprising to approach. Even Ocelot was indulging in the downtime, to everyone else’s surprise - they would have expected him to be drawing up plans or something. But Ocelot had elected to wait until the situation developed more, and REX got nearer to completion, and Liquid started to come up with specifics about how they would hijack Metal Gear and what would happen next.

“We have our goal,” he said, “and it’s still more than three weeks until the next supply shipment comes in and the boss inevitably tries to convince Solidus we need an attack helicopter in order to pull this off.”

“I wonder if I should ask him to request a tank as well,” Raven said.

Octopus caused a minor scandal by seducing the only woman in Department B only for her to unceremoniously discover his vagina, which Octopus thought was hysterical although the woman in question threatened to sue, which ended up forcing Liquid to intervene on Octopus’ behalf. Which actually just made things worse because Liquid snidely suggested to the woman that it was a good idea to double-check that your prospective partner had your preferred set of genitals before bedding them, and apparently that wasn’t reasonable or something because one should be safe in the assumption that Decoy Octopus, in particular, had a penis? Personally Wolf had never cared about that sort of thing, she was fine with whatever.

Besides, it was pretty rare that she found herself attracted to anyone she hadn’t spent any time obsessing over in preparation for killing them. Which, granted, could be men or women, but that didn’t help her when she had to spend the better part of two years trying to live down the time she’d fallen for a wizened, reclusive, somewhat smelly 98-year-old man. But he was an enemy of the state! And by God she had gotten that liver-spotted dick and enjoyed it too. She also enjoyed watching him die of mercury poisoning.

Of course Wolf kept up-to-date on the drama, since there wasn’t much else to do, but evidently the situation ended up resolving itself with Octopus letting the Department B woman pick whichever
prosthetic penis she thought would feel best from Octopus’ disguise kit, and that was the end of that. Deprived of entertainment - since Raven was too busy enjoying being back in Alaska to play cards or anything like that, and Ocelot was catching up on his sleep, which God knew he needed it - Wolf ended up spending more time with the wolfdogs than she had initially planned (she had been trying not to get too attached). And that was how she properly met Dr. Emmerich.

“O-Oh,” Emmerich said, somehow supporting the bag of dog food in his skinny arms, “um, hello!”

“Hello,” Wolf said politely. “Are you the one who feeds the wolfdogs?”

“Yes, usually.”

“I thought these wolfdogs did not like men.”

“Er… well, generally, no, but they like me.”

“And do you like them?”

“Uh-huh.” Emmerich put down the bag of food, and Wolf helped him collect the bowls. “I love dogs, actually. I always wished I could have one growing up, but, well, it didn’t pan out. And then later I just never had the space for it, so coming out here has been the first time I’ve really been able to… y’know…”

“I… also like them,” Wolf said, petting one of them, “when I was little, my family- or perhaps a neighbor, I do not remember— we had a Kangal.”

“Those really big Turkish dogs?”

“Mm. I suppose they are from Turkey originally, but there is a Kurdish breed. Or sub-breed, I suppose. That would have been what we had.”

“What was its name?”

“I do not remember. I was very young, and it took a mortar shot for my… I think she was my cousin, but maybe she was just a neighbor…”

“Oh,” Emmerich said in a (likely unintentionally) flat voice.

Wolf shrugged. “When I was fourteen, I was picked up by a mercenary group, and they had plenty of dogs. Wolfdogs, in fact, a lot of them. The first ‘dog’ they had turned out to be a wolf, but he fathered a lot of puppies with domesticated bitches, so…”

“Oh. So, what was his name?”

“DD. I was never sure what it was short for.”

“What’s your name?”

Wolf blinked. “Sniper Wolf,” she said.

“No,” Emmerich said, “I mean your real name, if that’s… well, if that’s okay to share. My first name’s Hal. I don’t like it much, but you can use it if you want to.”

Wolf glanced down, unsure how to respond for a moment. “I do not have any other name,” she said eventually, “I am sure that my parents must have named me something, but I honestly do not remember it. Before I was Sniper Wolf everyone just called me ‘keçik’, ‘girl’. As in, ‘you there,
There was a sort of awkward pause. Emmerich kind of started, like he’d been surprised by something, then quickly started scooping dog food into the bowls.

“Can I ask you something?” he said, “not something personal, I mean. About one of your comrades.”

“Which one?”

“The gas mask one… Mantis, I mean. I think that’s what he’s called…?”

“Yes, that would be Mantis.”

“Is he… I don’t know, anti-social? I passed him in the hallway earlier and he hissed at me.”

Wolf raised her eyebrows, and very briefly wondered if she should keep her mouth shut. “Do you know if you have done anything to cross him?”

“I don’t think I have… I haven’t actually talked to him, really, outside of just saying ‘hi’ once or twice…”

“…you know he is psychic, no?”

“Huh?” Emmerich looked up. “He is??”

“Yes?”

“I… I guess that explains the ‘Psycho’ part of his codename—but, uh…”

Wolf sighed. “I am not sure if it is a good idea to tell you this, but… my room is right next to his and Liquid’s, and the walls are not really very thick…”

“Oh, yeah,” Emmerich said, “you can hear just about anything going on in the quarters next to you.”

“Right. The other night I heard them having a little argument about you.”

Emmerich frowned, like he might already know where this was going, and by now Wolf was pretty sure that the redness of his cheeks wasn’t just because of the cold and wind. And it was… sort of cute, in a somewhat pathetic way…

“Was it about the fact that Liquid came onto me?” he said.

“Oh, no, Liquid claimed that was only a joke and Mantis seemed to accept that explanation.”

“Didn’t feel like a joke at the time…”

“The first thing to remember about that man is that he has zero impulse control,” Wolf said wisely. “Anyway, what I heard them arguing about was that Mantis overheard you furiously masturbating to the thought of spitroasting Liquid with him.”

There was a long silence.

Wolf had to cover her mouth to stifle her laughter as Emmerich went completely scarlet.
“I— what??”

“He did not *physically* hear you,” Wolf clarified, “I do not think that was even possible, your department’s quarters are rather far away from all of ours. But he *psychically* overheard you fantasizing. Evidently.”

“I… I…!” Emmerich hurriedly closed the bag of dog food and picked it up again, spilling a few kibbles on the snow as he did, still wide-eyed and bright red. “That isn’t— that wasn’t— does that guy have any concept of privacy-?”

“No,” Wolf said.

“W-Well, it’s Liquid’s fault anyway for putting that image in my head in the first place! I never asked for that!!”

“But apparently you jacked off to it…”

Emmerich’s mouth opened and closed like a dying fish for a few moments, then he turned on his heel and scurried away, making it a couple yards before he stumbled and fell flat on his face. Wolf *would* have gotten up to help him, but decided against it, especially since he jumped up so fast he might as well have fallen into an open fire and continued fleeing without so much as glancing over his shoulder at Wolf.

Wolf called Liquid on Codec.

“You are right,” she said, “Emmerich is *hilarious* when he is embarrassed.”

“Thank you,” Liquid said, “I was beginning to think nobody understood what I was getting at.”

“Stop using Emmerich as your chewtoy,” Ocelot said to both Liquid and Wolf, pinching the bridge of his nose. “He’s team leader on the REX project. We *need* him.”

“I haven’t done anything,” Liquid said, splaying a hand on his chest, falsely offended.

“He deserves it for staring at my breasts,” Wolf said. “He was not even *trying* to be subtle.”

“Try zipping up your jacket once in a while, Wolf,” Ocelot said dryly, “but nevermind. Boss, we need to talk about our plan once the final test rolls around.”

Wolf raised her hand. “Am I just here for Mantis’ peace of mind?”

“Yes, because this is too important to interrupt with him throwing a tantrum over something.”

“I *did* try to talk with him about that,” Liquid said, somewhat defensively. “What is it you need to say about the plan, Ocelot?”

“Well, for one thing it’s not Metal Gear REX we need per se - it’s the plans for it, and all of their virtual test data. Physical results, especially, if we can get that far.”

“…Solidus is the President,” Wolf said, “if he needs the data so bad, why not simply ask for it? Surely that is under his jurisdiction?”

“It needs to be done completely behind the Patriots’ back,” Liquid said, “Solidus can’t reveal he’s against them yet for whatever reason.”
“Right,” Ocelot said, “FOXHOUND has greater freedom to cut ties with the Patriots than Solidus does. But even then, it might still be possible to get the data and get out without this turning into open rebellion. If it weren’t for one thing…”

Liquid bared his teeth in a grin and took a wild guess.

“Solid Snake?”

Chapter End Notes

The man Liquid references who joined the SAS at age eighteen is real! His name is Lofty Wiseman (seriously) and he’s an author nowadays - I used to own one of his books, the revised edition of The SAS Survival Handbook. Good stuff!
“Solid Snake?” Wolf said.

“Of course,” Liquid said, “the last two times Metal Gears needed taken down, it was he who was sent in to deal with it - despite being retired already, the second time. If we highjack a Metal Gear now, it’s only to be expected that it’s going to be Snake who is sent in to take us out.”

Ocelot raised his eyebrows. “I’m surprised you’ve thought that far ahead, boss.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Anyway, it’s really an obvious conclusion. Nevermind the fact that we could use the Metal Gear, I want to meet Snake. Of course,” Liquid continued, “he has a bit of a track record of completely blowing through even well-staffed bases, so I’ve already arranged for the Genome Army to join us the next boat in. I convinced the brass this is a good place for a training exercise.”

Both Wolf and Ocelot stared at him for a moment.

“Training exercise?” Wolf said at length.

“Of course. Patrolling, guarding, all that. Plus it would be good for their morale, I’m sure they’re all very unhappy cooped up trying to fix themselves in a top-secret military hospital in Guam.”

“Boss…” Ocelot said, “the Genome Soldiers are…”

“…complete failures of gene therapy, yes, I know. Every one of them is like the tail end of Flowers for Algernon, I’m well aware — they’re barely worthy to be called cannon fodder, but fortunately that’s all we need them for.” Then he added in a mutter: “I shouldn’t be so harsh on them, it was my biological father’s genes they spliced into them, so in a way they and I are blood relatives…”

Ocelot sighed. “I’m not trying to overstep my rank here, boss, but I would have liked to hear about this before now.”

“Tsk. I’m only doing the best I can with what I have - I was only able to convince my dear little brother to agree to send a Hind D and two M1A1 Abrams with the soldiers. He denied any requests for further armaments… although why he’s willing to send two M1s I have no idea, Raven’s the only one here who actually knows how to drive a tank…”

“Even if the Genome Army was everything they were intended to be,” Wolf said, “does Solid Snake’s track record not make this whole endeavor somewhat… suicidal?”

“Not if we don’t make this our hill to die on, Wolf. With a definite goal in sight, we… hang on. Ocelot?”

“Hm?” Ocelot had a perfectly mild expression…

“How long has Solidus been planning this?”

“Years, boss.”

“Even before we removed FOXDIE from the equation?”
“…yes, sir.”

Liquid narrowed his eyes. “And before we found out about the Patriots? Before he had a reason for giving us explicit instructions?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where are you going with this, boss?” Wolf said.

“Oh, I’m just wondering,” Liquid said, starting to pace, “how Solidus was going to get all of this rolling without us being any the wiser. The assignment to Shadow Moses isn’t anything too suspicious, all things considered, but if he wanted stolen data on Metal Gear, well…” He stopped in front of Ocelot. “This was originally your assignment and your assignment only, wasn’t it, Ocelot?”

“Yes, sir,” Ocelot said again.

“Right down to inciting a rebellion?”

“You have to admit, boss,” Ocelot said, “that you are startlingly easy to manipulate—“

Liquid seized Ocelot by the throat. Wolf gasped. “Boss!”

“You were just going to go with it?!” Liquid hissed, throttling him, “you were just going to stand idly by while Snake and FOXDIE got the rest of us killed! You were the going to be complicit in the death of the entire unit—“

“Boss, stop that!”

“You were going to murder us all!!”

“Liquid!” Wolf bodily grabbed Liquid’s arm and dragged him, still snarling, off of Ocelot. Ocelot coughed, eyes streaming, rubbing his throat with one hand. “If he intended for us to die here, why would he tell us about this now?” Wolf demanded.

“She has a point, you know,” Ocelot said hoarsely, “at this juncture, you and the rest of the unit are intended to survive this. I don’t want you dead.”

“But you were going to—“ Liquid started, jerking his arm violently out of Wolf’s grasp.

“As I told you back in D.C., I won’t contradict an order. I am not, however, above making it so that the order must be changed.” He sighed, coughed again. “That’s why I brought you all on board with the anti-Patriots endeavor. Having FOXHOUND in the loop forced Solidus to change the plan for me.”

“Change it to something where we might live?” Wolf said.

“Precisely. Boss, didn’t you ever find it odd that I would bring it up so suddenly?”

Liquid didn’t reply, just glared murderously at him, unsure how to feel.

“It was because this was coming up so quickly,” Ocelot said, “and I had to give you enough time to take care of FOXDIE before REX started to reach completion. I told you what I told you precisely when I told you because I did not want FOXHOUND to be sacrificed on the altar of Shadow Moses.”

“…and you didn’t even warn Solidus that you were planning on bringing us into the fold,” Liquid
said grudgingly.

“No. Because he didn’t want you. And here I was about to tell you another thing that I haven’t cleared with Solidus first…”

“Go on,” Wolf said before Liquid could bitterly comment on Ocelot saying If Solidus ordered me to kill you, then you would be dead long before you ever got the opportunity to order me to stand down back at the White House. He supposed that the I wouldn’t even get my hands dirty part of it referred to Solid or FOXDIE.

“We already know Solid Snake will be coming as soon as the uprising starts,” Ocelot said calmly, still rubbing his neck with his hand although somewhat absently, “therefore I propose a secondary goal: recruitment. We lure Snake into a trap, flee the base with him in tow, and convince him to join our crusade against the Patriots.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely not,” Liquid said flatly, “as soon as I get my hands on Solid Snake, I’m going to destroy him for killing Father.”

“He would be a very valuable addition to the team, boss.”

“No. I’m going to kill him.”

“Boss, I do not mean to be rude,” Wolf said uncertainly, “but you told us you were the inferior clone. Are you sure you will be able to match him, let alone defeat him?”

“I’ll use the bloody Metal Gear if I have to,” Liquid snapped.

“He has already taken down two Metal Gears on foot…”

“And?! This one is bigger and better than the ones that came before it! It can make up the difference if I need it to!!”

“Boss, Snake also killed the man who took down Sahelanthropus on foot,” Ocelot pointed out.

“Yes, but- well— that’s exactly the point! That’s why I must take revenge on him, that man was my father!!”

“It was the Patriots who made him do it,” Ocelot said, his voice suddenly stern, “Solid Snake was nothing but a tool to them. Take your revenge on him if you wish, but if you do so then you may very well lose your chance to take your revenge on the system that orchestrated your father’s death. It would be like destroying the gun that took his life while letting the hand that pulled the trigger go free.”

Liquid was silent for a long time, his hands clenching and unclenching, then suddenly spat on the ground and turned on his heel, his coat flaring out behind him. “Fine,” he growled, sweeping out of the room, “we can kidnap Snake. It won’t change the plan much, we’ll need to put on enough of a show to get him out here anyway. But don’t expect me to like it.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Ocelot said as Liquid slammed the door behind him.

“…you should have told him this from the start,” Wolf said.

Ocelot cleared his throat. “I should have told him a lot of things from the start.”

The Next-Generation Special Forces numbered only 150, although due to medical problems several
of them were already being replaced by other, somewhat random soldiers - of those originally in the squadron, as Liquid recalled from the one and only time he’d ever met any of them (it was requisite, the Genome Army was supposedly FOXHOUND’s reserve pool), there were a lot of familiar faces. A lot of bought-out Outer Heaven contracts following the Zanzibar Land incident… some of them were from after Liquid’s time, but for the most part he recognized them as being from D- and E-rank units.

Which, actually, explained a lot.

Liquid spent a couple days drawing up routes and schedules for patrols around the base for the Genome Soldiers to rotate through, keeping everything as simple and easy-to-remember as possible because, well… Liquid was honestly a little suspicious that at least some of the failure of the gene therapy had been intentional, and the backfired attempt to give all of them a 180 IQ was really just so the U.S. government could end up with child soldiers without the ethical backlash of using actual children. Sure, the Genome Soldiers were all grown men - but for the most part they were as simple-minded as toddlers, fearless and good at following directions but with the collective intelligence of a sack of bricks.

Okay. Liquid was being overly-harsh again. These were his brothers, after a fashion.

None of the engineers seemed particularly alarmed at the news that a small army was going to be arriving at Shadow Moses (although Emmerich did seem particularly alarmed that Liquid was attempting to talk to him, necessitating Liquid pass him over and give the news to Dr. An instead). They seemed to find it reasonable that FOXHOUND use their base as a training grounds for their reserve troops for two weeks while they were on assignment here anyway…

“Mantis, how good are you at brainwashing people?” Liquid asked. (Mantis was already here, in the commander’s room, because they were still passive-aggressively butting heads over whose office this was.)

“Decent, I suppose,” Mantis said, “it would be like a milder, more passive version of taking over someone’s will.” He seemed slightly uncomfortable about that particular subject, but Liquid didn’t press.

“Can you do it on a large scale?” he asked instead.

“With how dumb the Genome Soldiers are…? I could leave the island and they would still bend to my will for several hours.”

“Good, we might need that. I’m sure that of all people, the Genome Army would be receptive to forging a home for soldiers in a world where we’re only dead weight - a new Outer Heaven - even without hearing about the Patriots, but… well, having ideals and acting on them are two different things.”

“If you can sway them all to your ideals, Eli, then it will be easier for me to bend their wills,” Mantis said, “all I would have to do is ‘suggest’ they take up arms for what they believe in, instead of idly complaining about it while they slowly die in Guam.”

“And anyway there might be a few who don’t agree with the concept of Outer Heaven,” Liquid said, “you’d need to take care of those as well, so they don’t disrupt anything.”

Mantis tilted his head. “Peer pressure could take care of that in and of itself. But I suppose I will need to address ideological consistency… if any of the soldiers interpret your ideas differently, there may be friction.”
“As long as you can remove that…”

“Of course I can. We’ll have no problem subverting the Next-Generation Special Forces to rebellion.”

Liquid grinned at him. “Not just rebellion, Mantis,” he said, “revolution. The first step to dismantling the Patriots and bringing chaos and honor back to this world gone soft.”

“Eli, I really do not care about chaos and honor,” Mantis said, “I would honestly prefer a quiet life.”

“And yet you go along with this anyway.”

“I know how much you need war, because you are hardwired to come alive only on the battlefield and waste away in times of peace. I am just saying - me, personally, I would like a quiet, calm life, mostly alone. Perhaps a cabin the woods somewhere.”

“You can have a quiet life running support for me in the anarchy that follows the downfall of the Patriots. Would that work?”

“Mm. That seems best, doesn’t it? A good compromise.” His lower eyelids kind of scrunched up a little, and Liquid suspected that Mantis was actually smiling at him underneath his mask, which gave him the warm fuzzies. “Besides, I always welcome the opportunity to kill.”

“Oh, but you don’t enjoy it the way I do,” Liquid teased, standing up, “you only like it conceptually, just because you’re a misanthrope — you’ve no appreciation for blood running over your fingers, the feel of a gun recoiling, or the way the light fades from someone’s eyes…”

“Compared to you I’m a saint, boss.”

Liquid laughed, for once not minding Mantis dropping his given name, and leaned over the desk and pulled Mantis towards him, kissing his jaw.

“‘Love the sinner’, eh, Mantis?”

“Don’t try to ascribe that silly word to me…”

The days slowly ticked down towards the arrival of the Genome Army, and Liquid decided to try to mend the bridges he’d accidentally burned when he’d sexually harassed(?) Emmerich as a joke. So he cornered him in the lab, in front of the rest of Department A where he couldn’t escape, and put on as friendly and innocent a smile as he possibly could.

Of course, Emmerich was still plainly nervous around him, but relaxed when Liquid managed to steer the conversation towards the little technological… things he seemed to be currently working on.

“Stealth camouflage,” Emmerich said, a trace of pride in his voice as Liquid turned one of the units over and over in his hands, carefully examining it, “I’ve been- I mean, my team and I have been working on it. It bends the light around the user in such a way that they’re rendered nearly invisible.”

“Really?” Liquid said, “such a thing is possible?”

“Yep.” Emmerich picked up one of the other five units, then flicked a switch on it and was rendered invisible, just like he said. Liquid very nearly gasped out loud. Emmerich switched it back off and continued: “Actually, it’s not my design originally - from what I hear it was originally developed by someone in your unit, but nearly all of it was destroyed in a lab accident two years ago. I’ve managed to reverse-engineer it from what survived this far, so far.”
Originally developed in FOXHOUND, and destroyed in a lab accident...? Liquid thought, oh, of course, it's the same technology that makes the cyborg ninja invisible... well, that explains that!

“The original plan was to incorporate it into REX’s armor,” Emmerich continued, completely oblivious to the shady circumstances in which the original stealth camouflage-enabled armor had been created, “but there’s still a few bugs that need to be worked out - the fact that anything using it is still visible with infrared technology is a pretty big one. We made these small personnel units to try and iron out the kinks, but... well, I’ve been doing impact testing recently, too, and it turns out that the optic technology is so unstable that just jostling it too much makes it short out. In other words, there’s no way this is going to make it into REX’s armor. This iteration of REX, anyway...”

“Aren’t you too close to completion to incorporate it even if it worked properly, anyway?” Liquid said.

“Well, yeah... and a lot of REX’s capabilities are long-range anyway, so I guess it wouldn’t really matter too much if he were invisible...”

“It’d serve just as well suited for single-person use, Emmerich,” Liquid said, “it’d be bloody useful on a sneaking mission - for amateurs still learning the ropes, granted, and I suppose if it were used too much it’d just become a crutch — but still, consider me impressed even if I’d never use it myself. Do you mind if I borrow this one?”

“Huh?”

“Of course you don’t,” Liquid purred, slipping it into his coat pocket. “Much obliged, Emmerich.”

“Er— you’re... welcome?”

After Liquid had left the room, Hal turned to the rest of the engineers and said, “I’m never going to see that again, am I?”

“Nope,” Gomez-Ibanez said.

“Should I have... stopped him?”

“I don’t think you could have,” Dr. Wengret said sagely.

“Huh... well, at least there’s still another five left...”

“But there’s six members of his unit,” Gomez-Ibanez said, “what if he comes back and takes the remaining five for the rest of them?”

“He just said he’d never use it himself,” Dr. Wengret said, “Dr. Emmerich will be left with at least one even if the commander does come back for more.”

“Yeah...” Hal mumbled, “great...”

Meanwhile Liquid had dropped off the ‘borrowed’ stealth camouflage off with Mantis, who was deeply offended by the acknowledgement of his inability to turn invisible on his own anymore - and even more offended at Liquid’s tongue-in-cheek mental comparison of him to a man with erectile dysfunction who couldn’t believe his physician was trying to prescribe him Viagra - but he ended up accepting the gift anyway. And using it. In fact that first thing he did after Liquid gave it to him was terrorize some hapless Department B personnel by appearing and disappearing before their eyes while they tried to chase him out of Metal Gear’s hangar.
At least someone around here was having fun.

There was also a minor incident where Mantis fucked up one of the cargo elevators in communications tower B (which was Liquid’s fault, he knew full well Mantis was going to get flustered at the idea of receiving a blowjob in a public elevator and that was exactly why Liquid had tried to initiate it), but it was quickly fixed. Mostly. The weight limit had to be reduced to 650 pounds, which rendered it completely useless as a cargo elevator, but at least it could still shuttle people around. The communications towers were so tall that even FOXHOUND, infinitely more athletic than any of the scientists, didn’t want to take the stairs.

“Why have you been so destructive lately?” Wolf asked Mantis.

“…I am not a fan of this weather.”

The weather was, actually, getting worse despite time marching on away from the dead of winter. Being so far north the nights still dragged on endlessly, although it was none of the engineers’ first winter in Alaska and of course Raven was from here, and Ocelot never complained about this sort of thing, so the remaining members of FOXHOUND were left without sympathy in missing the sun. In the meantime a glacier was encroaching on the sea-space around Shadow Moses, and boat access to one side of the island was expected to be blocked off within a few weeks — on the plus side, if it turned out to be the east side of the island, then getting to the mainland via car or snowmobile was going to become suddenly feasible.

Mid-February arrived and with it, a boatload of Genome Soldiers.

They were installed in the empty barracks, their weapons stored in the armory (“Why do they have live ammunition?!” Emmerich asked. “Why does this base have an armory?” Liquid retorted.), and their leader (although Liquid wasn’t sure if he was commander in any kind of official capacity) tried to get in good with Liquid as respectfully as possible.

“You look familiar, soldier,” Liquid commented.

“Yes, sir,” the Genome Soldier said, dropping his salute but still standing ramrod-straight, “we knew each other back at Outer Heaven.”

“…” Liquid didn’t want to incredulously say We did??, but honestly, he had no idea who this guy was…

“B rank, unit three, sir. Coarse Albatross…?”

“…sorry, doesn’t ring a bell.”

The soldier cleared his throat. “Probably better if it doesn’t,” he said awkwardly, “and anyway, we all just use our real names, so you can call me First Lieutenant Edward Gomolka, sir.”

He didn’t really look like an Edward, in Liquid’s opinion, but almost immediately after that conversation the name of the Genome Soldiers’ de facto, possibly self-appointed (officially, the Next-Generation Special Forces should be headed by a Captain) leader slipped his mind entirely.

And then that goddamn cyborg ninja showed up again.

Near as anyone in FOXHOUND could figure, he’d followed them to King Cove and then snuck on board the ship that brought the Genome Soldiers, and laid in wait hidden in the dark corners of the base for a few days before striking. Of course, everyone in FOXHOUND tacitly agreed to not share the fact that it was sort of their fault he was here, even if they couldn’t really conceal that they
already knew of him — he’d announced his presence at Shadow Moses by ambushing a pair of Department B guys walking through the hallways on their way back from a break, and both of them wound up being the not-so-lucky recipients of some free above-knee amputations.

One of them bled out in the hallway. The other one was rushed back to King Cove in Liquid’s Hind D, which meant he was the one who had to pilot it because he was the best (and only, really) pilot here. (And he didn’t trust anyone else with his new toy.)

As was probably to be expected, the engineers fell into an utter panic about the cyborg ninja, and most of them threatened to leave - Dr. Poholsky, Lo, and a handful of Department B personnel disappeared the next night, along with one of the Jeeps - but Liquid quickly restored order as soon as he got back from King Cove.

“We won’t let that metallic freak attack any more of you,” he assured them, “there’s nothing to worry about. FOXHOUND is the deadliest unit in the world, and even if you’re concerned about the fact that there’s only six of us, we have the Next-Generation Special Forces here as well.”

“I think the biggest help the Genome Army will be is the statistical likelihood of the cyborg ninja going after one of them next,” Wolf said under her breath. Raven snorted.

And, as it turned out, he did.

Chapter End Notes

The scene where Liquid steals/borrows the stealth camo from Otacon is another thing recycled from #MGS Offscreen. Might upload the original in Miscellany, if anyone's interested.
A few days after the pair of Department B men were attacked, and one killed, the cyborg ninja jumped out of the shadows again, tearing through a small group of Genome Soldiers while screaming about Snake and how he wanted to feel alive again. End result: four dead soldiers, one so severely injured that once again Liquid had to airlift someone to the hospital in King Cove from where the soldier would probably just be sent back to Guam, and half a dozen minor/moderate injuries that were treated on the base.

Upon getting back Liquid found that three of the four dead soldiers (and two of the moderately injured ones) were among those who weren’t actually technically a part of the Next-Generation Special Forces and had only been assigned here to keep the ‘proper’ number of soldiers for ‘the exercise’. The one dead Genome Soldier was being mourned vigorously by the rest of the Genome Army, who ignored the other three KIA with a kind of childish sociopathy even though all three of those guys were married and two of them had young kids.

Personally Liquid was much more concerned about the first lieutenant who went ahead and sent for more replacement soldiers. So another five were set to be shipped in over the glacier as soon as possible from some military academy.

“Is this really alright?” Liquid wondered out loud. “We don’t know what kind of people they’ll be sending in as replacements.”

“At this point it’d be more suspicious if we refused them,” Ocelot said, “did the lieutenant mention the cyborg ninja?”

“No, he just said that some of the soldiers had gone missing — I told the Genome Army the other day that the cyborg ninja was top-secret, and word of him wasn’t to get off this base…”

They had to get rid of the cyborg ninja before the replacement troops arrived.

Liquid had a plan. It was, granted, somewhat of a shitty one, but it was a plan nonetheless, and even only had to involve three members of FOXHOUND: Liquid would be bait, to take advantage of the cyborg ninja’s perpetual confusion of him with Solid, and draw him out of hiding; Raven would be waiting in the snowfield with his Vulcan cannon to kite him into the foundry; Wolf would be lying in wait on a walkway in there, and as soon as the cyborg ninja was within her sights and too busy deflecting Raven’s bullets to deflect hers, she would fire. At such a close range, even if the bullet itself had little affect on the cyborg ninja (which it probably would), the force behind it would still be enough to knock him backwards into the vat of molten steel. Surely even he couldn’t survive that.

Octopus quickly volunteered to stay the fuck out of the way. Mantis wanted to participate to begin with, mostly because he was somewhat concerned about Liquid using himself as bait and wanted to ensure the plan went smoothly so he wouldn’t get too injured, but after a short argument with Liquid it was determined that since the cyborg ninja’s mind was too broken for Mantis to really do anything with, he should stay on the other side of the base while all this was happening for his own safety. Ocelot was in charge of making sure the engineers and the Genome Soldiers were kept away from the action.

Liquid walked through the largely empty nuclear warhead storage building, his footsteps echoing
conspicuously. He didn’t know if the cyborg ninja was anywhere nearby - he’d already been wandering around, looking as attackable as possible, for the past 45 minutes - and he also didn’t know if the ninja would even attack upon seeing him or just continue lurking in hiding like he’d done ever since arriving here. After all, despite the two attacks already the ninja still hadn’t come after Liquid yet. Maybe he didn’t realize he was here at all, or maybe he was waiting until Liquid was alone, since ever since coming to Shadow Moses Liquid realized he hadn’t actually spent very much time by himself. He was usually with others, whether they were other FOXHOUND members, any of the engineers, or the Genome Army.

There was a slight scrape of metal against concrete. Liquid glanced over his shoulder just in time to jump out of the way of a chokuto slicing through the air where he had just been standing.

“Snake,” the cyborg ninja’s tinny voice box ground out as his stealth camouflage deactivated, “you and I… must fight to the death—”

“You’ll have to catch up with me first,” Liquid said in an American accent, taking a few quick steps backwards and then turning around and sprinting towards the exit. Snowfield, snowfield, had to get to the snowfield—-

“Snake! Why do you flee!” Despite the ninja’s protest his metal footsteps still clicked against the floor as he pursued Liquid.

Liquid threw himself against the door, his heart briefly seizing as it didn’t open immediately, stuck in a snowdrift blown up against its exterior - he forced his way through just as the ninja attacked again, cutting a wide slit in the bottom of his coat as he leapt over the threshold. He’d have to repair that later. Right now he just kept running, slowed down by the snow and the ninja was catching up again, he was just jumping instead of running, hopping from place to place without having to extricate his foot from the snow with each step.

Just as the cyborg ninja threw himself at him, Liquid ducked, leaving him to crash harmlessly over his head and into the snow. The ninja flailed around the ground, shrieking, his exoskeleton sparking, as Liquid clambered back up and dashed for the snowfield fence. Thank God Liquid had always been fast on his feet and extremely agile. Despite the snow and how high the fence was, Liquid only had to jump in order to get a good grip on the top of it and start pulling himself up and over. He glanced at the cyborg ninja again as he cleared the top, making sure he had gotten up and was continuing to chase Liquid.

“We must do battle, Snake!” the cyborg ninja screeched, jumping over the fence entirely in one leap, landing directly in front of Liquid. He slowly raised his sword towards him. “I have returned from the depths of Hell to do battle with you.”

“Who are you?” Liquid said, backing up against the fence, glancing around. Where was Raven? He had about three seconds to get his giant rear in gear and open fire before the ninja turned Liquid into mincemeat.

“I… I’m like you, Snake…” the ninja said, his mechanical voice suddenly uncertain, then his body sort of jerked and he gasped out, “I’m your number one fan, Snake—”

There was the roar of a Vulcan cannon from the direction of the communications towers, and Liquid dropped down into the snow as the immediate area filled with the *kng kng kng* sound of bullets ricocheting off of the ninja’s exoskeleton, some of them smashing divots into the fence behind where Liquid had just been standing. A second later the ninja was gone, screaming over the snow with Raven at his back and the invitingly open door of the foundry ahead of him.
Wolf had been settled in on her stomach on one of the walkways for just under an hour now; to her it was utter child’s play to stay still and attentive through her scope for that long. The mild buzz from her last dose of diazepam helped. On the downside, it was extremely hot in the foundry, so Wolf ended up becoming an echo of Quiet after all, stripping down to just her boots and panties and laying her winter-thick clothes down on the walkway so the metal of it wouldn’t burn her skin.

She’d have to cover up a little real fast before Raven and Liquid came in once she’d taken care of the cyborg ninja. Either that or one of these days she really would have to invest in a bra.

She heard the sound of Raven’s Vulcan cannon thundering away outside almost a full minute before the cyborg ninja burst into the room, a few stray bullets glancing off of the foundry equipment behind him. After that point it was only a second and a half until he was in the view of Wolf’s scope, swinging his sword so fast it left afterimages, still deflecting Raven’s bullets — Wolf fired.

"Crack."

Just as Liquid had calculated, at this range there was much inertia slamming behind the bullet that even though the cyborg ninja reacted in time to bring his arm up and protect his head, the force of the shot still pushed him sideways, right onto the very edge of the vat of molten steel, where he lost his balance and fell in. There was a loud hissing crackle, and a cloud of steam and smoke, and he was gone, sword and all, the only remnant of him being the acrid smell of burning plastic.

“He’s done,” Wolf said to Liquid over Codec, sitting up and shrugging on her jacket, not bothering to zip it up. A moment later, Liquid must have signalled as much to Raven, because the noise of the Vulcan cannon died down and Shadow Moses seemed very, very quiet all of a sudden.

A few minutes later Liquid and Raven met her in the foundry. Raven glanced at her bare legs, then looked away respectfully, while Liquid didn’t seem to notice her lack of pants at all, instead walking over to the steel vat and squinting at it.

“And he didn’t try to come up from it at all?” he asked Wolf.

“No,” Wolf said, “I was watching. I think he really has been completely melted.”

“…glad that’s done with, then.”

“And we never found out who he was, or his relation to Solid Snake or Dr. Hunter…” Raven said.

“I suppose it didn’t really matter.”

There was a short pause.

“Boss,” Wolf said, mildly alarmed, “there is a spot of blood spreading on your sleeve.”

“Eh?” Liquid looked down, then took off his coat, draping it over his unbloodied arm, and inspected his injury. “Oh, it’s just a scrape, Wolf. Must have gotten clipped by a stray bullet.”

“It… is bleeding pretty badly,” Raven pointed out.

“I’ll be fine. It could have been worse, really.”

“Just makes sure you get it bandaged,” Wolf said. “Wouldn’t it be awful if infection set in?”

After that, some of the Department B foundry workers reported to some patrolling Genome Soldiers that they’d found some strange, twisted little clumps of hardened steel littering the area all the way to
the cargo elevator, but by the time that information actually made it to Liquid it sounded more like Department B was complaining of some kind of minor malfunction with the foundry equipment, and he was just confused about why they were even telling him.

Besides, he had more important things to worry about. The five replacement soldiers would be coming in soon, along with some VIP guests that were here for the final testing of Metal Gear REX. Liquid went over the names on the notice for it — Donald Anderson from DARPA and Kenneth Baker from ArmsTech, two names which meant absolutely nothing to him, and as for the rookies under the impression that they were just building numbers for a training exercise following some mysterious disappearances: Steve Holland, Johnny Sasaki, Rueben Schaar, Baltasár Cordero Caraballo, and Meryl Silverburgh.

“Silverburgh?” Liquid said out loud, “why does that name sound familiar?”

“It was Campbell’s brother’s name, remember?” Octopus said, “we all thought it was kind of weird that he took his wife’s last name.”

“Huh. Right.” Liquid took a closer look at Meryl’s papers. “Do you remember what his first name was?”

“Matt? Might have been short for Matthew, I guess.”

“…”

“Wow,” Octopus said, coming around to look over Liquid’s shoulder, “are we seriously getting the old colonel’s niece here for a replacement?”

“Unbelievable…”

The microwave beeped and Liquid got up to fetch his (late) lunch, leaving the papers on the table. He got back to Ocelot perusing them and no Octopus in sight.

“Boss,” he said, “Donald Anderson is with the Patriots.”

“He is?” Liquid said, blinking and putting down his sad little TV dinner tray meal. “It was really just a matter of time until one would come, though, wasn’t it? Even assuming that none of the engineers are with them directly.”

“Any of the engineers with the Patriots are going to be completely over their heads when it comes to dealing with us. Anderson, on the other hand… well, let’s just say he and I are of equivalent rank. Or rather, you could say he outranks me.”

“Seriously…?”

“So we’ll have to take care of him at the earliest possible convenience.”

“Or pump him for as much information as we possibly could,” Liquid said, “if he’s even higher up than you… well, I’ll grant I don’t know how high up you are exactly, you never really mentioned it. How many people do outrank you, Ocelot?”

“Let’s just say not very many and leave it at that. And when it comes to Anderson, it’s better not to leave anything to chance.”

“I’ll think about it,” Liquid said. Ocelot twitched his moustache but didn’t object. Mantis came over and sat down on Liquid’s other side, dropping a bandage on the table in front of him.
“How is your arm, Eli?” he said, deliberately ignoring Ocelot.

“It’s fine, Mantis.”

“You have not changed your bandage since last night, you know it’s supposed to be changed every so often…”

“Really, Mantis, it’s fine.” He threw an exasperated look at Ocelot, who seemed almost amused.

“Take off your coat, Eli, I don’t want to take any chances with this,” Mantis said. “The final test is rapidly approaching and we cannot afford distractions.”

“Fine, fine…” Liquid slipped out of his coat and surrendered his arm to Mantis, who carefully removed the old bandage (there was a little bit of blood still, but mostly it was just the normal serous drainage) and applied the new one. Liquid ignored him entirely and ate his lunch with his other hand. Ocelot was still going over Liquid’s papers.

“Are you sure you are alright?” Mantis said quietly, “you did not sleep last night. You haven’t slept but three hours in the past two days.”

“I don’t feel tired, Mantis,” Liquid said honestly, “besides, I wouldn’t have been able to sleep anyway, remember? My chest was hurting all night.”

Ocelot glanced up from the papers. “Sub-ternal chest pain, boss?”

“Hm? Well, yes, but I’ve just been thinking it was heartburn.” He frowned down at his lunch, which had been cold in the middle to begin with and by now had cooled past the point of being worth eating. “Maybe it’s the food here…”

“You were having heartburn before we came up here, Eli,” Mantis said, picking up Liquid’s coat and inspecting the torn hem of it, which Liquid hadn’t gotten around to sewing back up yet. “By the way, you really should wear a shirt under your coat, it is February and we are in Alaska.”

“Mantis, will you stop fussing over me?”

“Is it actually a burning sensation, boss?” Ocelot said, “it doesn’t exactly qualify as heartburn if it isn’t.”

“Hmm…” Liquid absentmindedly rubbed the side of his hand between his pecs. “Now that I think about it, it isn’t really…”

“That’s probably not a good sign. If we had any actual medical personnel here I’d recommend mentioning it to them, but…” he shrugged. “Perhaps you’re just getting old.”

Liquid suddenly felt very self-conscious about his white hairs again, and stood up. He stalked out of the cafeteria without another word, dumping his TV dinner in the trashcan as he went.

“Wait, Eli,” Mantis called, standing up, Liquid’s coat still in hand, “your… he isn’t listening to me…”

“You two fight recently?” Ocelot said, tapping the papers about the VIP guests and the replacement soldiers into a neat little stack.

Mantis glared at him. “Everything is fine between us, Ocelot.”

“I’m not saying it isn’t. In fact, arguing is a normal part of any relationship. Healthy, even. It’s good
to be in a place where you feel comfortable enough with each other to disagree and express yourself."

“We haven’t been arguing.”

Ocelot raised an eyebrow at him.

Mantis suddenly remembered how thin the walls between the living quarters were. And while he and Liquid were at the end of the row and it was Wolf who was right next to them, that certainly didn’t preclude Ocelot from hearing about everything from her.

“We’ve… had discussions,” he said evasively.

“Anything to do with the fact that you think you’re too good to apologize?”

“I— I haven’t done anything to apologize for.”

“If you insist,” Ocelot said, then took out his revolver and started methodically disassembling it to clean it, disregarding Mantis now. Mantis, fuming, turned on his heel and slunk out of the room in the same direction Liquid had left in, Liquid’s coat bundled up in his arms.

Where the hell did Ocelot get off trying to advise Mantis about his relationship with Liquid? All their problems could, in one way or another, be traced back to him and what he did.

The final test for Metal Gear REX - culminating in the launching of the dummy missile from its railgun - was scheduled for February 28th, a Monday. According to the weather forecasts a terrible blizzard was supposed to whip through the Fox Islands the night of the 27th, although it was expected to die down by the next morning.

It was on the 25th that a Department B man and a pair of Genome Soldiers drove a van over the glacier to King Cove to pick up the VIP guests and the replacement soldiers who had flown in from Anchorage that morning. By now Liquid’s ideas about a free world where warriors were valued had disseminated among the Genome Army, even if none of them had any idea that the crux of those ideas was the downfall of a system that took advantage of soldiers and discarded them carelessly, and for the more hesitant, cynical, or peace-loving among them Mantis had spent the past two-ish weeks grooming them for his subtle mind control anyway. (Which was quite a sight to see, Mantis hanging out with the Genome Soldiers and pretending to be social.)

Mantis had also been grooming a hapless man in Department B who knew quite a lot about the communications system here on Shadow Moses, so that when the metaphorical spark finally turned into a flame he would be able to use him to cut Shadow Moses off from the outside world completely with a snap of his bony fingers.

When the van came back, Liquid had no choice but to meet briefly with the VIP guests. He put on the same confident smile he always put on in front of Army brass and shook their hands firmly, then handed them off to Emmerich using the excuse of getting the replacement soldiers settled. (Which, actually, he did legitimately need to see to - it hadn’t really occured to him earlier, but the Silverburgh woman was, in fact, a woman and as such really couldn’t be in the same barracks as the rest of the Genome Army, but at the same time he needed to make sure giving her a separate space for sleeping and showering wasn’t going to come across as special treatment in any way. Both because the Genome Soldiers might get jealous and resentful, and because Silverburgh might feel condescended to.) (He ended up just sticking her in Wolf’s room. Wolf made her sleep on the floor and strongly implied she was going to backhand her for giving that little wolf plushie Liquid got her from the Zoo
“Ocelot,” Anderson said rather flatly as Emmerich was busy explaining something to Baker.

“It’s been quite a while, hasn’t it?” Ocelot said with a joyless smile.

After that two-sentence exchange Ocelot developed a noted tendency of suddenly disappearing from the section of base Anderson happened to be in. He could move very silently for a man wearing spurs.

On the 26th Wolf heard from Emmerich (Emmerich really liked talking to Wolf, even if she was pretty disinterested in the conversation and really only hanging out with him for information leaks) that REX was technically ready to go and they were only not doing anything presently just to stick to the schedule. So Liquid decided, almost impulsively, that today was the day. Wolf had her misgivings.

“Are you sure this is the best way to go about this?” Wolf said, “using the Genome Soldiers…”

“They’re really only cannon fodder, Wolf,” Liquid said. “We don’t need them to do anything important, just to patrol and slow down Snake.”

“I am not sure they will not become an active hinderance to us, though,” Wolf said, “they really are quite dumb. Here, follow me. Watch this.”

She went out to the heliport, where a couple Genome Soldiers were practicing their patrol routes, and walked behind one of the storage crates sitting in the snow. She knocked on the side of it opposite the nearest soldier.

“Huh?” said the soldier, who apparently hadn’t noticed Wolf walking behind the crate, “what was that noise?”

As he’d been trained to do, the soldier walked over to the crate and circled around to the back of it, gun at the ready, but by the time he got there Wolf had already walked around to the other side of it, behind his back. The soldier looked down.

“Whose footprints are these?”

He followed them. Wolf kept walking, returning to the back of the crate and knocking on it again.

“Huh? What was that noise?”

Liquid watched, fascinated, as Wolf repeated the process four more times before he finally said, “Alright, alright, I get your point, Wolf.”

“Is it too late for a change in plans?” Wolf said, walking back over to Liquid. The Genome Soldier circled around the crate a few more times before giving up and returning to his patrol route, a deeply confused man. “Perhaps we can just lock them in the barracks.”

“I’m sure they’re going to tell Snake that they’re supposed to be here, since they are officially stationed here right now. He’d get suspicious if they’re not around.”

“If you say so…but perhaps you should not have brought them here in the first place…”

“Hindsight is 20/20, Wolf…”

But as Mantis had said earlier, their simple-mindedness made them extremely easy to brainwash. So
around 3:00 in the afternoon, when Baker and Anderson were having a very important meeting with the remaining members of Department A, eerie music began to play as if over a PA system, which the base didn’t have. They all looked around in mild confusion.

“What the…?” Anderson started.

He didn’t get to finish his sentence. Two dozen Genome Soldiers, guns drawn, burst into the room. “Hands up!” one of them yelled. Baker, Anderson, and the engineers had no choice but to obey. A few of the soldiers stepped forward to pat them down for weapons, pulling a Kahr PM9 from a shoulder holster under Dr. Demolles’ jacket and an old but well-maintained Colt Mustang Plus II from Anderson’s hip holster and a SIG Sauer P238 concealed at his ankle.

“My, my,” Liquid said, walking into the room, smirk plastered on his face and hands shoved deep in his pockets as the Genome Soldiers parted before him like the Red Sea before Moses. “I certainly hope the two of you were up-to-date on your conceal carry licenses. Or are those not required in Alaska?”

“Um, wh-what’s going on?” Emmerich said nervously.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Liquid put on foot on the table, resting his arms on his knee and leaning forward to sneer triumphantly at his hostages. “I’m claiming my birthright.”

Chapter End Notes

The SIG Sauer P238 was introduced in 2009, so having it here is a little anachronistic but then again Anderson (or Sigint, rather) is a Weapons Expert Guy™ so I don’t think it’d be too much of a stretch to claim he was using a prototype or something. Although, I’ll admit I don’t know very much about guns, so I’m not sure if a Sauer is the type of gun a weapons expert would make a habit of carrying…
Meanwhile, halfway across the base, Meryl Silverburgh was running for her life.

She didn’t get very far. Even discounting FOXHOUND, it was still 149 versus one and while she managed to evade the other Genome Soldiers for a while, a small group of them finally cornered her in the commander’s room. She fumbled with her FAMAS, and one of them - she didn’t know which one under the standard-issue balaclava - snatched it away.

“Careful, now,” he said in a kindly voice, like a teacher trying to correct a frustrated student, “the commander won’t be happy with us if we get blood all over his office.”

Meryl surrendered, or at least pretended to while they escorted her to the holding cells in the first floor basement of the tank hangar building. As soon as the elevator door opened, she headbutted the man holding her arm and fled.

Again, didn’t get very far. There weren’t many places to hide in the tank hangar’s basement, and she ended up getting a gun pointed at her by the guard already standing by the holding cells. The rest of the soldiers caught up a second later, and after stripping her of the rest of her equipment (including the bulky temporary Codec she was marginally glad to get out of her ear, at least) and some of her clothes (it was a good thing that Meryl was practically immune to the cold, they had left her in just her tank top even if they’d let her keep her pants, boots, and gloves) she was herded into the empty holding cell and the door clanged definitively shut behind her.

There was a long silence, apart from the alone-again guard in front of the cells whistling as he paced back and forth. After about ten minutes, he wandered off in the direction of the bathroom.

“Young lady,” Meryl heard come from the cell next to her.

“Yes?” Meryl said uncertainly.

“Do you know what’s going on around here?” Sounded like the ArmsTech guy, Baker.

“No, not really,” Meryl said, “all of the other soldiers just went crazy all of a sudden. I mean, I knew they were all pretty resentful of something, but I never thought they’d try to take over the base. This was just supposed to be a training exercise… I only just joined up as a new recruit, I didn’t want to take part in any rebellion, so they threw me in here…”

“It’s that FOXHOUND commander, Liquid Snake,” Baker said, “he’s poisoned their minds. I’m sure he intends to threaten the U.S. - no, the entire world - with REX.”

“Oh…” Meryl frowned. “Yeah, with all the discarded nuclear warheads around here, he’s got a nuke stockpile to rival the government’s, doesn’t he? Oh man…” She didn’t want to say We’re doomed... out loud, but she was certainly feeling it nonetheless.

“Well, in order to activate it he’s going to need the codes,” Baker said, “or the cardkeys. I’m sure he’s going to come after me, I know one of the codes, but you…”

“Huh?”
“Hurry, while the guard’s still in the bathroom. Come to the window.”

Meryl walked up to the window in the door and peered through. She could see Baker holding his arm out between the bars of his own door’s window, waving a little cardkey.

“Take it,” he said insistently, “hide it, and keep it safe. We can’t let FOXHOUND get it.”

“Yes, sir,” Meryl said, reaching through her own bars. It was a good thing she was flexible, she practically had to dislocate her shoulder to reach Baker and even then he had to give the card a little toss in order to get it to Meryl’s hand and Meryl nearly cried out when it almost slipped through her fingers.

“Don’t tell anyone about it unless you’re sure they came here to take care of the situation,” Baker said.

“I won’t,” Meryl said, “not unless I know they’re one of the good guys.”

“Good. I’m not sure how much longer I’m going to be around, young lady — they’ve already got the DARPA chief in the medical room, and I’m sure I saw a torture device in there. I know I’m going to be next.”

The guard returned. Meryl and Baker shut up.

Department A and Department B were gathered in a building at the supply port. They waited in nervous, whispered conversation while Ocelot and Liquid argued in a nearby room with Mantis silently watching them from a corner.

“Demands?” Liquid said, “it doesn’t matter what our demands are, they’re not going to fill them.”

“The demands make it look realistic,” Ocelot said. “They’re going to suspect we’re up to something if we don’t present them with a list of demands.”

“Can’t our demand just be that they hand over Solid Snake?”

“No.”

“…okay. What sort of demands are they going to take seriously?” Liquid said grudgingly.


“…”

“Just throw a number out there, boss. Whatever you want.”

“One billion dollars,” Liquid blurted out.

“…” Ocelot pinched the bridge of his nose. “Just what kind of budget has FOXHOUND been working with the past five years, anyway…?”

“What??”

“Nevermind. Just money won’t suffice, there’ll be a nonzero chance that the government will just decide to give us the billion dollars and leave us here to try to fight the world alone on this island.”

“To be honest,” Liquid said, “I wouldn’t really mind that result.”
“I know,” Ocelot sighed. “But we need something to guarantee they’d rather try to take us out than acquiesce to our demands.”

Liquid paced for a moment, then said stopped, glanced at the closed door, and said, “Big Boss’ remains.”

“What?” Ocelot said, genuinely taken aback.

“The Genome Soldiers - we can use them as an excuse. With Big Boss’ genetic samples, they might be able to correct the errors in their gene therapy. Or, well, they would if we had any equipment for it - I suppose we can ask for that as well - or if we actually thought we might get any of these things, or if they weren’t as dumb as-“

“Demanding Big Boss’ remains will certainly get them to send Snake,” Ocelot interrupted, “if there’s one thing they can’t afford to hand over, it’s that.”

“And why is that?” Mantis finally spoke up.

“His DNA is… tactically significant.”

“That works for me,” Liquid said, and swept out of the room.

“Tactically significant?” Mantis said dryly, giving Ocelot a sharp look.

Ocelot nodded. “Tactically significant.”

“Must you be as unhelpful as possible?”

Liquid was addressing the engineers. “There’s no need for anyone to die senselessly,” he said, his voice loud and full of teeth, “in fact, I’d rather prefer if you didn’t. There’s no challenge or honor in gunning down defenseless scientists like yourself, so there’s no reason to worry about your safety.”

“Does this mean you’re going to let us go?” said someone from Department A in a small voice.

“Of course we will,” Liquid said brightly, “as soon as you’re all ready I’m going to put you all on a boat to Anchorage along with a list of our demands to the U.S. government. You should arrive tomorrow morning, and from then on the government will have 48 hours to respond or we’ll use REX to launch a nuke. The serial number of the nuke we’ll launch first will be included with our demands so they know we’re serious.”

“What about Mr. Baker?” said one of the Department B people.

“He’s staying with us - him and the DARPA chief. We do still need a few hostages. Oh, and speaking of…” his eyes roved over the crowd of engineers for a moment or two before settling on Emmerich, who went completely pale. “We’ll also need someone on hand just in case REX malfunctions. Emmerich, I’m afraid you’ll be staying with us. Don’t worry, we’ll take good care of you…”

Emmerich swallowed audibly.

“The rest of you,” Liquid continued, “grab your things and get ready to go. You’ll just be unnecessary dead weight if you stay here.” He signalled, and the Genome Soldiers lining the sides of the room stepped up to escort the scientists back to their quarters. “Don’t try anything,” Liquid called after them, “or you just might make me change my mind about extending mercy like this.”
Emmerich was left standing alone in the room with Liquid, who had Ocelot and Mantis standing behind him.

“You’re really… you’re really not going to sink their boat on the way to Anchorage or something, are you?” he said hesitantly.

“No,” Liquid said, “as of this afternoon the island is in a complete communications blackout. We need some way to relay our demands without compromising that.”

“A-And you won’t kill me as soon as you don’t need me anymore, will you?”

“As I said, there’s no challenge or honor in murdering a defenseless scientist,” Liquid said, “it’s just not fun. Don’t do anything to necessitate it, and I’ll let you live. I might even let you go once we’re done with you, if you cooperate well enough.”

“Yessir.”

“If you plan anything,” Mantis piped up, “I will know before you act.”

“Y-Yessir. Um… will I still be able to feed the dogs?”

Liquid and Mantis looked at each other. “As long as Wolf is there,” Liquid said, turning back to Emmerich. “Expect to be under constant supervision, Emmerich.”

Emmerich nodded mutely.

A Genome Soldier walked into the room and saluted Liquid. “Sir,” he said, “one of the new recruits refused to take part in the revolution and has been confined to one of the holding cells.”

“What?” Liquid said, raising his eyebrows, then glanced at Mantis again.

“…I will go see to this,” Mantis said.

“I’ll go with. Ocelot, you’re in charge of Emmerich. Do as you like with him for now but remember we need him coherent and intact.”

“Of course, boss,” Ocelot said. Liquid and Mantis followed the Genome Soldier back to the tank hangar building.

Liquid was mildly surprised when he looked into the holding cell with the insubordinate (or rather, refusing to be insubordinate) soldier in it. “Silverburgh?”

She jumped. “Liquid?” she said nervously, “what do you want?? Why are you doing this??”

Liquid didn’t answer her, just stepped back from the cell and turned to Mantis. “Explain yourself,” he said flatly.

“Hm…”

“She doesn’t have cybernetic implants, does she?”

“No,” Mantis said, “nor is she unusually strong-willed, at least compared to the average person. Still, I accounted for the replacement soldiers with stronger wills than the Genome Soldiers in the mass passive brainwashing.”

“Is it possible she’s like Ocelot?” Liquid said, “just naturally resistant to your powers?”
“No, no. I can still control her will any time I want. Watch.”

Liquid wasn’t actually watching, per se, but he did hear Meryl say “H-Huh? What the hell?!” right before a loud thunk and a “Wh-why did I just do that?!”; then another two thunks and “Why do I have an uncontrollable urge to walk into the wall?! Hey!! What’s going on-?!”

“I will stop now,” Mantis said, “but you get the point.”

“So… why didn’t the brainwashing work?”

Mantis stared at the floor for a moment, then looked up at him, blinking. “She’s a teenage girl,” he said, “all the other soldiers are grown men. Of course. Men’s and women’s brains work differently to begin with, and an 18-year-old’s brain isn’t going to be same as someone in their twenties or thirties or forties already — why didn’t that occur to me before? It was never going to work on her.”

“Oh, I see,” Liquid said, “that does explain why it was just her. Hang on a moment.” He walked back up to her cell and spoke to her. “Colonel Roy Campbell is your uncle, isn’t he?”

“Yes!” Meryl said. She was sitting on the bunk, rubbing her head where it had presumably smacked into the wall. “And when he hears about this, you’d better believe you’re going to pay for this!!”

“Duly noted. Be glad your relation to Campbell makes you a potentially useful hostage, Silverburgh, otherwise I’d rather just shoot you.”

“Wh—?”

“Well, you are a soldier, aren’t you? So I wouldn’t have any qualms about slitting your throat, unlike the other hostages. So you’d best behave yourself.”

“…”

“Hey, boss,” Octopus said, poking his head in the room, “those hostages you’re playing catch-and-release with are ready to go. Do you have the list of demands and stuff drawn up?”

“Ah, already?” Liquid said, “goddammit. I’ll go grab some paper and a pen, er- Mantis, go get me a serial number…”

“Wouldn’t a typed list be more professional-looking?” Octopus said as Liquid brushed past him.

“If you ask me, this would work best if I wrote it in blood,” Liquid said over his shoulder.

“Boss, I’d like to talk to Anderson alone,” Ocelot said.

Liquid narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

“Just for part of the interrogation.”

“I would rather-“

“He might not talk with you in the room.”

Liquid seemed unimpressed with Ocelot’s excuse. “Then I can watch and listen from outside the room. But anything he has to say to you can be said to me - even if I weren’t there I would still expect you to relay everything he said to me anyway.”
“Of course, boss. However…”

“What are you up to?”

“Nothing,” Ocelot claimed. “Nevermind. You can watch from outside the room, but it’s best I be the only person he can actually see. And anyway there’s no need for anyone else to be there, as a Patriot agent he’s going to have cybernetic implants as it is so Mantis will be useless and we’re the only two in the unit who are any good at interrogations.”

“I’ll be keeping a close eye on you, Ocelot,” Liquid said, regarding him suspiciously, “and if you happen to say anything I can’t hear very well in the next room, and you don’t tell me exactly what was said—“

“I understand, boss. Anyway, I’d better start the interrogation soon. If I can break him then Anderson should be able to give us some very interesting information.”

“Mm.”

Of course Ocelot had already checked the acoustic transfer between the medical room and the room behind the two-way mirror. It was good enough that any conversation held at a normal volume would be decently audible but whispering and lowered voices would be largely incomprehensible. It was only natural that Ocelot would bait Liquid into insisting he watch from the other room instead of being in the room with Ocelot, since he was now under the impression that his only options were ‘other room’ or ‘absent entirely’.

Besides, as much as he had no moral or ethical objections to torture he wasn’t overly-fond of being in the same room while it was going on, particularly if Ocelot was the one doing it. He would have wanted to be in the other room anyway, Ocelot just needed to give him an excuse to do it as a “compromise” so he wouldn’t have to admit he was uncomfortable. That guaranteed he would choose being in the other room.

Anderson probably didn’t appreciate the nuance of any of this.

“And here I thought this sort of device lacked the personal touch you enjoy,” he said as Ocelot entered the room. He was already hooked into the electrocution device.

“Ah, well,” Ocelot said, “I am getting old, and I’d rather conserve my truth serum. As such, precision is important, and this is a very precise machine.”

“Hm. What is all this about, Ocelot?”

“Do you really have reason to believe it’s about anything other than what Liquid already told you?” He took a step forward, and lowered his voice enough that Liquid would only be able to hear him if he strained his ears. “I suppose you do have reason to believe I have a different motive here.”

Anderson also kept his voice low, although unintentionally - it was just the natural impulse of any person to match the volume of the person they were speaking to. “Don’t you always?”

Ocelot stepped back again, walking over to the console of the machine and setting it to a painful but safe amount of electricity. “You haven’t even asked about our demands yet.”

“It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Well, I’d be interested in hearing your opinion on the likelihood of the government acceding to us. After all, we really would hate to launch a nuke.”
“This is insane, Ocelot.”

Ocelot gave him an unpleasant smile. “One billion dollars, various mint-condition vehicles and armaments, equipment to continue the Next-Generation Special Forces’ gene therapy, and the remains of Big Boss.”

Anderson’s eyes widened. “The remains of Big Boss? Ocelot, you know that’s—”

He was cut off with a scream as Ocelot hit the button. It only lasted a few seconds, but once that was done and Anderson had caught his breath enough to open his mouth to talk, Ocelot pressed it again and electrocuted him until he had screamed so much that his throat gave out.

Good. Ocelot relented. From now on Anderson’s voice was going to be so hoarse and quiet that Liquid wasn’t going to be able to hear anything he was saying and was just going to have to take Ocelot’s word on anything.

“It doesn’t matter if you have a nuke or not,” Anderson whispered painfully, “it doesn’t matter how many nukes you have. We’re not going to hand Big Boss over to you.”

“You know,” Ocelot whispered in turn, walking over to him and leaning too close for Anderson to be comfortable, “I wouldn’t mind just getting a location.”

“Absolutely not. We’re not going to wake him up for you.”

“Really?” Ocelot said in a normal volume, stepping back over to the console again and electrocuting Anderson again for a moment. “And why not?”

Anderson coughed. “Forty years ago I would have agreed in a heartbeat, Ocelot. Hell, thirty years ago. But he changed too much. Bring him back and he’ll only plunge the world into war—” He cut himself off on his own, eyeing Ocelot’s finger hovering over the shock button. “Not what you want to hear, huh?”

“You’re not going to tell me anything I want to hear,” Ocelot said. “Figured I’d try anyway. Now, about those detonation codes…?”

“No,” Anderson said, “no way.”

“Come now, Sigint, you know how good I am at this. It may take some time, but I can and will break you eventually.”

“…”

“You might as well tell me now.”

“I’d rather hold out as long as I can, thank you.”

“Tough man,” Ocelot said, fiddling with the controls again, verging on lethality now. “Zero made a good decision, leaving you in charge of the Patriots,” he whispered.

Despite everything, Anderson laughed humorlessly once. “I wouldn’t really call them in my control. The AIs…”

“Different ideas of how to run the world, hmm?”

“I was the one who made the decision to fund Metal Gear,” Anderson coughed, “despite JD concluding it was an unnecessary and subversive project. But that’s been my focus these past few
years. That’s why I didn’t identify EVA in the system when she was on the news after that CDC incident.” He sagged in his restraints, sighing hoarsely. “I didn’t want to draw attention to myself… and besides, I never agreed with any of the ethnic cleansing or biological weapon stuff. If I’d known about FOXDIE before then, I would have done all I could to override the order for it.”

“And could you even do that?” Ocelot asked him softly, “I’m afraid I don’t know much about how far the AIs will bend to a mortal’s will. You removed EVA and I from its guest list half a decade ago.”

“I… I don’t know.”

Zap.

“R-Really! I don’t know! I’ve never tried… I’ve been afraid to try, in case I found out I couldn’t…”

Ocelot turned his back to him, in full view of the room next door now. “Tell me your detonation code,” he said in the same volume as before, although Liquid would be able to read his lips at this distance.

“No. No.”

He turned back to Anderson. “John is being held, isn’t he? He was ready to wake up years ago. All you need to do is release him.”

Anderson shook his head.

“Well, it doesn’t matter if you don’t,” Ocelot hissed, “if we take down the network keeping him held in his coma, he’ll wake up. Simple as that.”

“The whole system… Ocelot, there’s no way—“

“For John I could. You know that. And I’m going to use his sons to do it, too.”

“You were never going to be handed Big Boss on a silver platter just because you convinced Liquid to highjack a Metal Gear and take over Shadow Moses. You know that.”

“Yes, I do. Now, tell me the detonation code.”

Anderson grit his teeth, and finally his eyes flicked up to the mirror behind Ocelot. “That’s a two-way mirror. Liquid’s back there, isn’t he?”

“He is,” Ocelot confirmed.

“How much does he know?”

“Enough.”

There was a pause, then Anderson took a deep breath. “Ocelot’s with the Patriots,” he shouted at the window, “he’s going to sell you all ou-“

Ocelot hit the electrocution button again. Anderson’s body convulsed.

As soon as the current stopped he gathered his strength and yelled again. “He’s been with the Patriots since-“

“He already knows, Sigint,” Ocelot said patiently. “He and his whole unit want the world rid of the
Patriots as bad as I do.”

Anderson gave him a wide-eyed look, then tried one more time.

“Big Boss will never—!”

Ocelot’s elbow bumped the amperage up to certainly lethal levels a split second before he hit the button to electrocute Anderson again.

Chapter End Notes

Maybe the 'releasing the rest of the scientists' seems like Liquid apologism, but we do know there were definitely other people (I mean, it was kind of given from the start, even if I don't think it was explicitly confirmed until 4) and we also never hear about what happens to them... if you ask me, if they were also being held hostage elsewhere on the base (like in the English novelization) or were outright killed at the beginning (like in a lot of fanfiction), Snake would have been told about it. So yeah, I do think Liquid just kicked them all off the island. I also, however, think that his given reasoning here of "It just wouldn't be fun to kill them and I don't want to deal with the extra hostages taking up space" is completely unironic, and he really doesn't care about them further than that.
Liquid stared at Anderson’s body, sagging from bones broken by uncontrollable muscle contractions and skin blistered and charred, with his arms crossed and his brow furrowed. He turned to Ocelot and glared at him.

A full ten seconds passed before Ocelot opened his mouth to defend himself.

“You fool!” Liquid snapped before Ocelot could get a word out. “You’ve killed him!!”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Ocelot said.

“What was he about to say?” Mantis, who had joined Liquid in the room next to the medical room halfway through the interrogation, “something about Big Boss…”

“And didn’t sound like it had much to do with his remains. Ocelot, what the hell is going on here?”

“I’m not sure,” Ocelot said, “I only interrupted him because I assumed the rest of the sentence did have to do with his remains. After all, Big Boss’ death was confirmed, wasn’t it?”

Liquid and Mantis exchanged a look.

“There wasn’t another body double, was there?” Liquid said, eyes narrowed.

“No, boss. I assure you I would know if there were.” He turned back to Anderson’s body. “It was an accident.”

“Mantis, we saw what happened. I don’t think it’s really all that feasible to change the voltage on this thing with one’s elbow on purpose.”

“This is Ocelot we are talking about,” Mantis said, gesturing to him furiously.

“Actually, boss, it was the amperage, not voltage,” Ocelot calmly said at the same time.

“Not a word from you right now, Ocelot,” Liquid snapped.

“Yes, sir.”

Liquid frowned at him for a moment, then sighed irritably and said, “I didn’t catch most of the interrogation, what did he say?”

“He didn’t give me the detonation code, so if worse comes to worst we aren’t going to have access to REX’s nuclear launching capabilities,” Ocelot said. “I did get out of him why he didn’t turn EVA in to the Patriots when he saw her on the news following your infiltration of the CDC.”

“Wait, that was a risk?” Liquid said.

“Yes. There aren’t many people out there who would have been able to identify EVA, but Anderson - or Sigint, as he was known - was one of them, and really the only one with the Patriots. However,
he kept his mouth shut.”

“Why?”

“Internal squabbling, what else?” Ocelot said, “he didn’t like the fact that the Patriots were developing a biological weapon. The destruction of FOXDIE was, in his eyes, no great loss.”

“I see…”

“Is that really all you talked about?” Mantis said suspiciously.

“Yes, of course it is. And if it makes you feel any better, boss, we shouldn’t have suffered a Patriot agent like him to live long in the first place.”

“It’s still troublesome that you killed him in the middle of an interrogation,” Liquid retorted, “you, of all people. I thought you were better than that.”

“I’m… sorry, sir.”

“Plus we may need an Anderson around for negotiations - or, perhaps, if the Patriots find out our most important hostage is dead already they’re going to launch a full-on assault on us instead of sending in Snake on an infiltration mission. Nevermind the fact that that ruins our plan with Snake, we don’t have the capability to repel a full assault.”

“They think we can use the nukes here,” Mantis pointed out. “They should err on the side of caution.”

“They might assume Anderson failed to give us his detonation code before being killed.” He gave Anderson’s corpse a look of great distaste, then Ocelot. “Correctly assume, that is.”

“I don’t know what to say, boss,” Ocelot said. “It really was an accident.”

“Forget it.” Liquid stalked out of the room, grumbling. “Just take care of the body, Ocelot. Tell Octopus to get the blood he needs before you do, though - as I said, we might need an Anderson around for negotiations, or for Snake to encounter. We don’t want him getting suspicious before we spring our trap…”

“Of course, sir.”

“Eli, you saw that,” Mantis said as he followed Liquid into the elevator. “Anderson tried to out Ocelot as a Patriot agent. He said he was going to sell us out.”

“And you heard Ocelot tell him that we already know he’s ostensibly with the Patriots,” Liquid said dismissively, “Anderson didn’t know that already. It was useless information.”

“He is not ‘ostensibly’ with the Patriots,” Mantis snapped, stepping in front of Liquid and leaning close. Liquid didn’t move back at all. “He is with the Patriots, Eli, and he is going to sell us out. Just you wait.”

“He wants the Patriots gone as his own revenge for the Zanzibar Land disturbance,” Liquid said. “I don’t much care for his motive but he’s on our side.”

Mantis lost his temper, snarling and pushing a mildly alarmed Liquid back against the back wall of the elevator as roughly as he had the physical strength for. “You naïve—“

The elevator dinged and its doors slid open. Both of them froze. “Is now really the time for this?”
Octopus said, blinking.

Liquid ducked under Mantis’ arm and away from him. “No,” he said brusquely, throwing a glare over his shoulder at Mantis as he strode off. “No, it isn’t.”

“…that was not what it looked like just now,” Mantis said stiffly.

“Sure,” Octopus said, “and the boss hasn’t been having a manic episode since November. Are you planning on staying in the elevator all day?”

“That was foolish of you,” Wolf said, picking Hal up by the scruff of his jacket after she shooed away the Genome Soldiers with her rifle.

“They were—“ Hal started, wiping blood off his face with his hands, “they were going to shoot the dogs—“

“I stopped them, don’t worry about it,” Wolf said, setting him on his feet. “If any of those incompetent soldiers *did* shoot any of the wolfdogs, I would shoot *them* myself.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured, but you weren’t here right then so I—“

“They might have shot you if I did not get here in time,” she said sharply, then sighed, staring at his bloody nose. “Do you remember which of them it was that hit you with the butt of his rifle? I can report him to Liquid, he won’t be happy with them roughing up any of the hostages.”

Hal winced at the word ‘hostage’, but shook his head. “I couldn’t tell you, they’re all wearing balaclavas…”

“Well, it is cold out,” Wolf said, “I mean, *I* do not think it’s so bad because *I* did some training in Nepal a few years ago, but they just came here from Guam. It is little wonder that they would wear their heavy winter uniforms constantly.” She pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and handed it to Hal. “Here, clean yourself up.”

“H-Huh?”

“You have blood all over your face, clean yourself up. And go ahead and keep the handkerchief, I do not want it back all stained.”

“Oh, uh… but…”

Wolf walked off. At least she trusted him enough to leave him alone with the dogs for a few minutes? Then again, the dogs would probably bark if he tried to escape or anything… Hal looked down at himself. Jeans, tennis shoes, and a thin button-up jacket weren’t exactly a great ensemble for escaping in, even without the blizzard brewing over the horizon. Sure, he’d gotten used enough to sub-zero temperatures that he was fine for *now*, but…

Well… he should be fine anyway, shouldn’t he? Liquid had promised his safety and eventual freedom if he cooperated, and while he wasn’t sure he could trust Liquid he *did* think as he looked down at the handkerchief in his numb hands that Wolf would make sure Liquid kept his promises. She was pretty nice. Hal didn’t dare entertain the possibility that she actually *liked* him but he thought she was a good person.

He put her handkerchief in his pocket without using it, wiping his nose on the sleeve of his jacket instead. Once he got back his quarters somehow he would change into his thick, wool-lined hoodie
anyway.

Just in case.

Twin Lakes, Lake Clark National Park, Alaska.
Three hours since released hostages arrived in Anchorage.

Solid Snake woke up the sound of all fifty of his dogs barking their heads off.

It was early afternoon but it wasn’t the right time of year for hunters, so in an instant he was off the couch, gun in hand, and cautiously approaching his front door. Paranoid? Maybe. But maybe also it was better to keep his razor-sharp instincts honed even in his self-imposed exile from the rest of the world. If nothing else it let him cling to a modicum of safety no matter how hard his PTSD tried to rip that away from him.

But it seemed his paranoia was justified. After all, dogs barking at a passing animal usually aren’t interrupted with the distinctive squeal of being kicked in the side.

A moment later the door was busted open, along with the shutters on each window, and a full dozen armed-to-the-teeth special forces soldiers poured into Solid’s house. It wasn’t a large house so with operators closing in on every side Solid didn’t have anywhere to hide, but between about twenty dogs lunging at the soldiers, growling, teeth snapping, and Solid firing his gun at one of them – succeeding only in bowling him over, he was wearing a bulletproof vest - he managed to buy himself just under thirty seconds.

But once those thirty seconds were up he was on the floor, disarmed, boot pressed against his head, eleven guns trained on every part of his body. His dogs surrounded the group of soldiers, growling and barking but not attempting to advance, clearly sensing that Solid would be in danger if they did.

The soldier Solid had shot stood up, brushed himself off, and approached him. “We aren’t here to fight,” he said, “we only need you to come with us.”

“Go to hell,” Solid spat against the dirty, scuffed wood of his floor.

“It’s a top-secret mission and you’re the only one who can handle it,” the soldier continued as though he hadn’t spoke, “the whole world is in danger from these terrorists.”

“I’m retired.”

“If we had any other choice, we’d take that. Come with us.”

If Solid had any other choice, he’d take that.

Ohio-class nuclear submarine USS Discovery, Gulf of Alaska. 600 miles and twenty hours from Shadow Moses.
Four hours since released hostages arrived in Anchorage.

“It’s been a long time, Snake.”

Solid scowled at his former commander. “I should’ve known you were behind this, Colonel.”

“That’s no way to greet an old war buddy, Snake,” Colonel Campbell said with a dry chuckle.

“What do you want from me?”
“I just invited you here so we could talk.”

“Invited!?!” Solid growled. “That’s what call sending armed soldiers after me?” They’d bruised him, broken his doors and windows, and worst of all, kicked one of his dogs.

“Sorry if they were a little rough with you,” Colonel Campbell said. Solid did not feel any better. “But we’ve got a serious situation here. Only you can get us out of it.”

“I’m retired from FOXHOUND. You’re not my commander anymore, and I don’t have to take orders from you or anyone else.”

“You will take these orders,” Colonel Campbell said, “I know it.”

“Excuse me,” said a rather short, moustached man with a thick accent, sidling up to Snake with a syringe in hand and taking his arm.

“Who’s this?” Solid said as the man injected him with something.

“Dr. Vihaan Patel,” Colonel Campbell said, “he’s part of FOXHOUND’s medical staff. I wanted to get the recently-installed chief, Dr. MacCulloch, but this was extremely short-notice and she was very busy. However, Dr. Patel should prove a competent replacement.”

“I’ve been contracted to FOXHOUND for seven years now,” Dr. Patel said helpfully.

Solid grunted. “Contracted? You’re not military, then?”

“No, I’m civilian. I technically work for ATGC, like most of FOXHOUND’s medical team.” He prepared another syringe.

“What’s the shot for?” Solid asked.

Dr. Patel opened his mouth to explain, but Colonel Campbell cut across him: “We can get to that later, Snake. Listen up. It all went down five hours ago…”

…

“Liquid Snake,” Colonel Campbell said, “the man with the same codename as you.”

“Tell me what you know,” Solid said.

“He fought in the Gulf War as a teenager, the youngest person in the SAS,” Colonel Campbell said, pacing back and forth slowly. “His job was to track down and destroy mobile Scud missile launching platforms. You were there too, I believe. Didn’t you infiltrate western Iraq with a platoon of Green Berets?”

“I was just a kid myself back then,” Solid muttered.

“The details are classified, but it seems that originally he penetrated the Middle Easter as a sleeper for the SIS.”

“He was a spy for the British Secret Intelligence Service?”

“But he never once showed his face in Century House,” Colonel Campbell said flatly. “He was taken prisoner in Iraq, and after that there was no trace of him for several years, at least until he cropped up as a member of a certain merc agency…“
“Don’t tell me… Outer Heaven again?”

“Exactly. Rumor has it that it was Big Boss himself who rescued him, but then again there are a lot of rumors about him concerning his time with Outer Heaven. I don’t believe most of them.”

“Hrm.”

“He ended up leaving the agency immediately following the Outer Heaven incident, when you retired, and within six months he was a new member of FOXHOUND.”

“I thought by the time I left they were no longer using codenames.”

“I don’t know his real name. That information is so highly classified I can’t even look at it,” Colonel Campbell said, then picked up a little square of stiff paper and handed it to Solid. “Here’s a photo of him.”

He was an attractive blond with long hair pulled back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck and few small, faded scars on his face, the most noticeable of which neatly split his left eyebrow. He was wearing a commander’s uniform that Solid was much more used to seeing Colonel Campbell - or Big Boss - in, although somehow it seemed out of place on him… maybe it was the way he was holding himself, not quite looking at the camera and like his whole body was comprised of nothing but coiled tension waiting to strike. He looked like he should be wearing plain fatigues, or maybe nothing at all, if the strange raw, primal, almost feral energy even his photograph exuded was anything to go by. Or, at least, if the leather collar at his neck was anything to go by. Kinky.

But that wasn’t the most striking thing about him.

“Pretty shocking, huh?” Colonel Campbell said, “his skin tone is a bit different, but otherwise you two are exact duplicates.”

What, did Colonel Campbell think that Liquid bleached his hair? It looked natural to Solid, although admittedly Liquid’s eyebrows were fairly dark. But Colonel Campbell was right, they did share a face, and body type too. “I have a twin?” Solid said incredulously.

“I don’t know the details, but it seems so. That’s why we really need you. You’re the only one who can beat him.”

“I agree,” Dr. Patel said, “you have something Liquid doesn’t. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Why don’t I find that thought more comforting?” Solid wondered out loud.

…

“By the way,” Solid asked Dr. Patel, “what were those injections for?”

“The first one was anti-freezing peptide so that your blood and other bodily fluids don’t freeze in these sub-arctic temperatures,” he said cheerfully, “the second was a cocktail of nanomachines.”

“Nanomachines?”

“Yes, designed by a former member of the medical team. Although, she’s dead now… but that’s beside the point. These nanomachines will replenish the sugar, adrenaline, and miscellaneous nutrition in your bloodstream. Additionally, I added in some nootropics to improve your mental functioning.”
“Huh… anything else?”

“Benzedrine to keep you alert and responsive for twelve hours,” Dr. Patel said. “However, the nanomachines will keep that on a delayed release so that it does not kick in until you’ve been launched. Same thing with the nanomachines keeping your Codec batteries charged - they’ll only last for about twelve hours as well, so they’ll be inert until the terrorists’ countdown reaches 24 hours.”

“So, when we get there…”

Solid gave his hair a quick, inelegant trim - he’d let it grow quite long over the past couple years in Alaska, but now he was leery that he’d get mixed up with the terrorist leader. Which, in another mission, would be more useful than anything else, but since he didn’t know anything about Liquid’s personality and mannerisms that was more likely to put him right in the middle of a situation he’d have a hard time getting himself out of. He pulled back what remained of his hair in his customary bandana and picked up the sneaking suit they’d provided him.

It was kind of weird. Last time they’d pulled him out of retirement he’d had to wear standard fatigues, but maybe wearing a sneaking suit was kind of like riding a bicycle - your body never forgot. It fit easily, like a second skin — which was the weird part. These suits had be custom-tailored, and while he would have guessed that they’d just used his measurements from back when he’d been with FOXHOUND, he really didn’t think they’d had the time to do that. Plus that would mean that he’d lost some muscle in his thighs, which didn’t seem all that likely to him.

Also, judging by how snugly it fit down there, this sneaking suit had been made for someone with a flatter butt than Solid had. At least the fabric it was made out of precluded tension-ripping, no matter how acrobatic a move Solid might have to make.

“Twenty-four hours left,” Liquid said, glancing at the clock as he walked by. “Snake should be arriving any minute now.”

“Going to go warn the Genome Soldiers?” Wolf said.

“The most likely infiltration point is going to be the docks - they’re not going to dare approach by air or ‘land’, so that leaves sea. A submarine, most likely. A boat would be too obvious. They’d launch an SDV from there.”

“I’ll trust your judgement on that… by the way, Octopus says—“

“—he wants some sort of compensation for playing an overweight person again, yes, I’m well aware. He can suck it up, he won’t be in that disguise for long. Either this ends in the next few hours or our deadline comes and the government realizes that we’re only bluffing and bombs us to hell.”

“This is a hardened base,” Wolf said, “perhaps we could survive a siege.”

“I doubt it. They’re the ones who built this place, so they’re the ones who are going to know exactly what they’d need to blow it up.”

He stepped into the elevator and rode it down, leaving Wolf on the floor above. Warning the Genome Army to be vigilant wasn’t going to accomplish much - Wolf’s demonstration earlier had thoroughly destroyed any hope in them being anything other than a minor obstacle for Solid that might buy FOXHOUND precious seconds if they needed it - but Liquid wasn’t a patient man and was half-hoping that scoping out the docks himself just might result in him being able to ambush
Solid early.

The Genome Soldiers saluted as he walked by, mostly ignoring them. He went up to the edge of the water and stared down into it, his breath fogging in front of his face. It was dark. That was a given, of course, it was the middle of the night and there was a blizzard raging outside anyway, and even then the water was probably sort of murky to begin with, but… he couldn’t see anything, not even bubbles rising to the surface that might indicate someone swimming underwater.

His phone rang.

“It’s me,” he said, “what’s going on over there?”

“The radar just picked up some aircraft coming in from the north,” Raven said. “Likely from Galena Air Force Station, probably F-16 Fighting Falcons.”

“I see. I’ll take care of them, then.”

“…are you sure? Our only aircraft is a Hind D.”

“Don’t underestimate me. And be warned that by the time I get back, Snake will probably already be on the island.”

“…of course, boss.”

He walked back to the elevator, unable to keep a spring out of his step, and pressed the button to head up to the helipad with a little more force than necessary. “Stay alert,” he called to the Genome Soldiers as the elevator ascended, “he’ll be through here, I know it. …I’m going to go swat down a couple of bothersome flies.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally starting to get into on-screen events in MGS1!! Enjoy!!!
“By the way, how’s the diversionary operation going?”

“Two F-16s just took off from Galena and are headed your way. The terrorists’ radar should have picked them up by now.”

Cautiously Solid edged to the corner of the storage crate he was hiding behind and peered out towards the helipad. There was a helicopter parked there, standing by it a small group of soldiers like the ones by the dock, along with Liquid Snake, whom Solid almost didn’t recognize out of the commander’s uniform - instead he was wearing a rather unremarkable long brown coat that seemed even at this distance, in a way Solid couldn’t quite place, to be somewhat worn. Liquid was climbing into the helicopter and saying something to the Genome Soldiers that Solid couldn’t hear at this distance.

“A Hind D?” Solid said, keeping his voice low anyway, “Colonel, what’s a Russian gunship doing here?”

“I have no idea… it’s recorded on the list of equipment brought in with the Genome Army at the start of the exercise, but usually you’d expect the military to lend them a Black Hawk or an Apache. But anyway, it looks like our little diversion got their attention. Now’s your best chance to slip in unnoticed.”

Solid watched as the helicopter took to the air, snow billowing around it, and wondered if whatever government official had signed off on a Hind D had really gotten it via any branch of the United States Armed Forces… and if they’d known what it was going to be used for. Colonel Campbell said something about how Solid had to hurry up as the Genome Soldiers either saluted or shielded their eyes from the whipping wind as the Hind D disappeared into the whirling snowstorm above them.

“Wow,” came a new voice over Codec, a young-sounding woman with a Chinese accent, “he must be crazy to fly a Hind in this kind of weather.”

“Who’s that?” Solid said.

“Oh, sorry, I haven’t introduced you two yet,” Colonel Campbell said, “this is Mei Ling…”

“…please tell me you’re joking,” Ocelot said.

“No,” Raven said.

“…” Ocelot rubbed his forehead. “It’s like his brain has a switch that’s permanently set to Make the worst, most reckless decision possible.”

“Explains a lot about his relationship with you,” Mantis said snidely.

“Mantis, you don’t need to be here,” Ocelot said, “Baker has cybernetic implants… as you just unceremoniously found out.”

Mantis grumbled, but stalked off, turning on his stealth camouflage as he walked through the door.
Raven watched him go with a frown.

“Have the two of you ever gotten along, General Ivan?” Raven said.

“We were quite close at the KGB, actually,” Ocelot said dryly, “and if you’re going to call me that then I insist you pronounce it properly. It’s ‘ih-vaehn’, not ‘eye-van’. You should know that already. Anyway, I’d better get back to my interrogation.”

“Is there any information that Baker can give us that the engineer cannot?”

“None that would be useful now that the DARPA chief is dead. Still, I intend to leave him where Snake can find him, so I’d best give him a good story to tell…”

Belly-crawling through the vent on the second floor of the disposal facility, Solid’s Codec rang. Frequency 140.38 - not someone who’d called him already today. Interesting. He picked up.

“Snake,” said a voice he hadn’t heard in years. “It’s… been a while.”

“Master?” Solid said in surprise, hoping his voice wouldn’t echo too much through the duct, “what are you doing here?”

“I moved out here after my daughter went off to college for some peace and quiet. You remember Catherine?”

“Oh, yep. She’d be about nineteen now, wouldn’t she?”

“Yeah. Got into a good school in North Carolina, so I figured there wasn’t much reason for me to stay in Los Angeles. Plus, out here I can help train local scouts once in a while.”

“Passing on the skills to a new generation, huh?”

“Campbell called a few hours ago and told me about the situation here,” Miller said, “I figured you’d be in the base by now, so I thought I might make myself useful.”

“There’s no one I’d rather have in a foxhole than you.”

Miller chuckled at the comment. “You’ve lived in Alaska longer than I have,” he said, “but I imagine I’ve learned more about the flora and fauna here than you ever bothered to. General survival techniques, too. Call me if you have any questions.” He paused thoughtfully, and didn’t hang up.

“Master?” Solid prompted.

“Huh? …oh, nothing, Snake. Give Liquid a good kick in the ass for me, will you?”

“Uh… sure…”

“Aircraft approaching,” Raven said, scrutinizing the radar display in the command room. “Just one.”

“An F-16 or a Hind?” Wolf said, frowning.

“Difficult to say…”

“It’s Eli,” Mantis said without glancing at the screen, “I can sense him.”
“So he really shot down two fighter jets with a helicopter…” Wolf said, “honestly, I am impressed.”

“He should be back soon,” Raven said, “which one of us will get the pleasure of telling him that three of the Genome Soldiers are already dead?”

“I will handle it,” said Mantis, “there is just one thing…”

“…how they died?” Wolf said, “the fact that it was cutting wounds instead of broken necks or bullets…”

“Perhaps Snake was using a knife,” Raven said.

“Too big for a knife,” Wolf said. “It was… more like a chokuto.”

Solid carefully moved the grating on the vent into the second holding cell, after passing over the one with a pretty redhead doing some exercises, and dropped into the cell. The man sitting on the bed - sort of stocky, wearing a tie, probably in his mid-sixties but sometimes that could be hard to estimate when it came to black people - jumped up.

“Who… who- who’s that?”

“I’m here to save you,” Solid said, raising his hands non-threateningly, “you’re the DARPA chief, Donald Anderson, right?”

“You’re here to save me, huh?” the DARPA chief said, “what’s your outfit?”

“I’m the pawn they sent here to save your worthless butt.”

“Really?” He looked Solid up and down for half a moment, then frowned and said, “it's true… you don’t look like one of them.”

He must not have talked directly to Liquid, then, Solid thought.

“In that case, hurry up and get me out of here.”

“Slow down,” Solid said. “Don’t worry. First I want some information… about the terrorists.”

“The terrorists?”

“Do they really have the ability to launch a nuke?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The terrorists are threatening the White House,” Solid explained, “they say if they don’t accede to their demands they’ll launch a nuclear weapon.”

The DARPA chief sat down on his bed again, heavily. “Sweet Jesus…” he mumbled.

“Is it possible?!” Solid demanded.

“…it’s possible,” the DARPA chief said somberly, “they… could launch a nuke.”

“How do they plan to launch? I thought this place was just for keeping the dismantled warheads. They shouldn’t have access to a missile…”

“What I’m about to tell you is classified information. Okay?” The DARPA chief gave him a sharp
look. “We were conducting exercises of a new type of experimental weapon. A weapon that will change the world.”

“What?”

“A weapon with the ability to launch a nuclear attack from any place on the face of the earth. A nuclear equipped walking battle tank.”

“Metal Gear!?” Solid said, taking a step back. “It can’t be!”

The DARPA chief looked at him again in surprise. “You knew?! Metal Gear is one of the most secret black projects! How did you know that?”

“We’ve… had a couple run-ins in the past,” Solid said, composing himself. “So that’s the reason you were here at this disposal site?”

“Why else would I come to a god-forsaken place like this?” the DARPA chief groaned, covering his face with his hands.

“I’d heard the Metal Gear project was scrapped.”

“On the contrary,” the DARPA chief said, looking up again. “It’s grown into a huge joint project between ArmsTech and ourselves. We were going to use this exercise as raw data and then proceed to mass production. If it hadn’t been for the revolution…”

“Revolution…?”

“REX has fallen into the hands of the terrorists,” the DARPA chief said as if Solid hadn’t said anything.

“REX?”

“Metal Gear REX, the codename for the new Metal Gear prototype. They’re probably already finished aiming the warhead they plan to use with REX. These guys are pros. They’re all experienced in handling and equipping weapons.”

Solid heard about two careful footsteps just outside the door and just barely ducked into its blind spot before the guard’s face appeared at the window, banging on the door as he did.

“Hey!” he said, “shut up in there, will ya!”

The DARPA chief just shrugged at him. The guard gave him a suspicious look, but walked off again. Solid breathed a sigh of relief.

“But I thought all nuclear warheads were equipped with safety measures,” he said, “some kind of detonation code you need to input.”

“Oh, you mean PAL,” the DARPA chief said. “Yes, of course, there is a PAL. It’s set up so that you need to input two different passwords in order to launch the device.”

“There are two passwords?”

“Yes. Baker knows one, and I know one.”

“Baker? The president of ArmsTech?” Solid would have thought that sort of thing would be left to government types…
“That’s right,” the DARPA chief said. “Each of us has to input our password or there can be no launch. But…” he sighed, cringing. “They found out my password.”

“You talked?” Solid said, his eyebrows drawing together.

“Psycho Mantis can read people’s minds,” the DARPA chief said, gesturing towards his head. “You can’t resist.”

“Psycho Mantis?”

“One of the members of FOXHOUND. He has psychic powers.”

Right. Solid remembered hearing about him during the briefing. Granted, the only thing really mentioned was that he was a psychic, but still. He frowned. “…this is bad…”

“It’s just a matter of time before they get Baker’s, too,” the DARPA chief declared gravely.

“If they find out Baker’s password…”

“Yes. They’ll be able to launch a nuke anytime. But— there is a way to stop the launch.”

“What?” Solid said, blinking.

“The cardkeys.”

Solid stared at him. Cardkeys? He’d sworn to himself back in 1999 that if he ever saw another cardkey as long as he lived, he’d shoot himself on the spot. Then again, he’d sworn a lot of things back in 1999.

“They were designed by ArmsTech, the systems developers, as an emergency override,” the DARPA chief went on, “even without the passwords, you can just insert the cardkeys and engage the safety lock.”

“And if I do that?”

“Yes. You can stop the launch.”

There was a quiet sound from the cell next to them. Solid glanced at the wall, but elected to ignore it for now. “So where are the keys?”

“Baker should have them,” the DARPA chief said. “Listen. You need three card keys. There are three different slots to put them in. You need to insert a card into each one of them.”

“Okay,” Solid said, “three cardkeys. Do you know where they might be keeping Baker?”

“Somewhere in the second floor basement,” the DARPA chief replied without stopping to give it much thought. Someone must have told him.

“Second floor basement?”

“I heard the guard say they moved him to an area that has a lot of electronic jamming.”

“…any other clues?”

“Yes... they cemented over the entrances but but didn’t have enough time to paint over them. Why don’t you look for the areas where the walls are a different color?” He got up and fished something
out of his pocket, then handed it to Solid, who looked at it quizzically. “Here, take this,” he said, “it’s my ID card. It'll open any level one security door. It's called a PAN card. It works together with your body's own electrical field.”

“Personal Area Network, huh?” Solid said, vaguely wondering why such a VIP only had level one security access. Or maybe he was just usually accompanied by people with higher security cards anyway…

“It transmits data using the salts in your body as the transmission medium. As you approach the door's security devices they'll read the data stored in the card.”

“And the doors will open automatically, gotcha. Okay. I'm going to get you out of here.”

“Wait a minute, the DARPA chief said.

“What is it?” Solid said. Although, he hadn’t really considered just how he was going to get the DARPA chief out of here yet, anyway.

“You haven’t heard of another way to disarm the PAL, have you?” the DARPA chief said, almost carelessly, “from your bosses or anyone.”

“No,” Solid said.

“Are you sure you haven’t heard anything?”

“I just said no.”

“So, does the White House plan to give in to the terrorists’ demands?” the DARPA chief said. Solid frowned again. He would have called the DARPA chief oddly insistent on this if it weren’t for his almost too casual tone of voice.

“That’s their problem,” Solid said, “it has nothing to do with my orders.”

“Do you know what they plan to do if you don’t make it back?”

“No idea. Not making it back really isn’t an option for me.”

“You really don’t know? Are you sure?”

“I wasn’t told.”

“I guess I can’t help but be worried…” the DARPA chief sighed. “Well, you’d better go. Now that I think about it, you should leave me here.”

“But—

“I’d only slow you down, and the nuke’s more important,” the DARPA chief said, “besides, we’re on an island. How am I supposed to escape even with your help? I’d never make it over that glacier.”

“Glacier?”

“Just leave me here. The terrorists won’t bother me, they've already gotten what they want. Just don’t forget to come back and get me once everything’s over.”

“…right,” Solid said, “hang on.” He took a knee and called Colonel Campbell on Codec. “The chief’s safe and sound,” he said.
“Good,” Colonel Campbell said, “but he’s probably right. It would be better to just leave him in the cell until a more convenient opportunity to arrange his escape.”

“He’s not injured, is he?” said Dr. Patel, “most likely he’s been interrogated by Ocelot. That usually isn’t pretty, from what I’ve heard.”

“He looks fine,” Solid said.

“Then go find Baker,” Colonel Campbell said, “get those cardkeys from him. And while you’re at it…”

“Meryl?”

“Just make sure she’s safe. Thanks.”

Solid hung up and stood. “Alright,” he said to the DARPA chief, “you stay put. I’ll shut down that nuke.”

“Good luck,” the DARPA chief said, sitting back down on the bed.

Solid was about to jump up and grab the edge of the still-open vent in order to climb back into the ducts when he heard a commotion coming from the cell next door.

“What the hell?” the DARPA chief said, his voice sounding a little… off for just a second there.

“Hang on,” Solid said, “let me check-”

The door to the DARPA chief’s cell opened seemingly on its own. The DARPA chief glanced at Solid, but Solid motioned for him to stay put (which he did) and crept towards the door.

The guard from earlier was totally unconscious on the floor, face-down ass-up, and stripped completely naked. Solid blanched. Not what he wanted to see at this time of night, at least without a few drinks and some cheesy pickup lines first.

“Don’t move!” said a woman behind him. “Who are you?”

Solid turned around, arms up, to see that the woman was wearing a Genome Army uniform and was pointing a FAMAS at his nose. “Liquid?!” she said, taken aback, then squinted at him, “no… you’re not…”

Solid moved to step back, but it startled the woman and she twitchily curled her finger around the trigger, not pulling it yet but definitely thinking about it. The gun trembled in her grasp.

“Is this the first time you’ve ever pointed a gun at a person?” Solid asked. “Your hands are shaking.”

The woman gasped, glancing to the side skittishly. Solid grabbed the barrel of the gun and pushed it against his chest.

“Can you shoot me, rookie?” Solid said, looking her in the eye. He could hear the DARPA chief mumbling to himself in his cell, but figured it wasn’t important.

“Careful,” the woman squeaked out, “I’m no rookie!!”

“Liar,” Solid said, “that nervous glance… that scared look in your eye. They’re rookie’s eyes if I ever saw them. You’ve never shot a person, am I right?”
“You talk too much,” the woman hissed.

“You haven’t even taken the safety off, rookie.”

“I told you I’m no rookie!!”

“You’re not one of them, are you?” Solid said.

“Open that door!” the woman said, jerking her head towards it. “You’ve got a card, don’t you?!”

“Why?”

“So we can get the hell out of here! I’m not going to just wait around in that cell until this place gets bombed!!”

The door opened, although entirely without Solid’s input. Several Genome Soldiers rushed in.

“Looks like we’ll be a little delayed,” Solid quipped, whipping out his SOCOM. He glanced at the woman, who hadn’t even pointed her FAMAS at them. She seemed petrified. “What are you doing?!” Solid yelled, “don’t think! Shoot!!”

…

“Thanks for the help!” the woman yelled, jumping over the Genome Soldiers’ bodies and running for the door.

Damn. She had a cute butt.

“Wait!” Solid said, shaking himself, “who are you?!”

If she answered he didn’t hear her. Everything when white all of a sudden, along with a weird pulsing sensation like his heart had suddenly started beating in every part of his body. He fell forward.

“You fool!” a ponytailed blond man in an old coat snarled at a moustached man with a red scarf. “You’ve killed him!!”

“I’m sorry, sir,” the moustached man said. He sounded closer to the DARPA chief’s age than the first man’s.

“What was he about to say?” said a third man, a bald one wearing a gas mask and a coat similar to the ponytailed man’s except with gratuitous belts strapped where belts didn’t belong. He stared intensely a limp African-American man restrained in some sort of metal frame. “Something about Big Boss…”

The ponytailed man jerked his head towards the gas mask-wearing man. Solid still couldn’t see his face. “And it didn’t sound like it had much to do with his remains…”

The word returned with a crushing sensation in Solid’s head. He gasped, straightening himself. Big Boss? What the hell??

The woman had reached the elevator. She spun on her heel, sort of flailing, and it looked for a second like she really should have lost her balance and fallen over but somehow she stayed on her feet, and then she raised the FAMAS and fired at Solid. He jumped out of the way.

“Damn!”
The gunfire stopped. Solid peeked out behind the wall just in time to see her pump her arm triumphantly just as the elevator doors closed. Suddenly Solid’s head pounded again, and he squeezed his eyes shut for half a second, and when he opened them again the gas mask-wearing man from his vision just now was floating in front of the elevator. He didn’t seem to acknowledge Solid, though.

“Good girl,” he mumbled instead. “Just like that…”

And he was gone just as suddenly as he’d appeared. Solid still had a bit of a lingering headache behind his eyeballs and was deeply confused. He glanced back into the DARPA chief’s cell. He was still sitting there placidly.

“What the hell?” Solid asked him.

“I’m not sure,” the DARPA chief said, “I haven’t talked to that girl.”

“And that… vision just now?”

“What are you talking about?” the DARPA chief said, “are you hallucinating? That can’t be good… are you sure you’re up for this mission?”

Solid blinked. He might have a point. Solid was no stranger to hallucinations because that had been one of the symptoms of his PTSD for a while, but he’d never seen anything in them that he hadn’t seen in real life beforehand. He called the Discovery on Codec again. “Dr. Patel,” he said, “I’ve just had some kind of hallucination. Is it from the nanomachines?”

“Hallucinations aren’t a reported side effect of these nanomachines,” Dr. Patel said. “Perhaps it was psychometric interference from Psycho Mantis. He is a psychic, you know.”

“Psychometric interference?”

“Think of it as a mental feedback loop.”

That didn’t really mean anything to Solid, either, but if it was something that originated from FOXHOUND’s psychic then that meant that there wasn’t anything medically or psychologically wrong with him… not that it precluded it happening again… still… “So that was Mantis…?” Solid mumbled before hanging up. At least he knew what the guy looked like now. Two down, four to go. (Come to think of it, one of the guys in that mental feedback loop a moment ago had looked like Liquid.)

“I’ll stay put,” the DARPA chief assured Solid when he stood up. “You go deal with the nuke. Oh, but close my door first. Don’t want the terrorists getting suspicious.”

“So Snake’s off on a wild goose chase to find three cardkeys when we only confirmed the existence of one,” Liquid said, pacing around the command room, “and Ocelot’s already set to ambush him in the second floor basement where he’s holding Baker. If everything goes perfectly then we’ll have him bound and gagged within the next half hour.”

“But more than likely it won’t,” Wolf said.

“Yes. Still, it’s a good idea to get a good gauge on his fighting abilities so we know how to best capture him once he inevitably gets past Ocelot.” He paused, and after a second realized he was sort of subconsciously waiting for Mantis to say something like, It’d be best for us if Snake killed Ocelot entirely. “Say,” Liquid said, “where is Mantis, anyway?”
"I'm right out here, Eli, he heard in his head right before there was a plastic-sounding thump against the wall next to the door of the command room, followed by a muffled Russian curse word. Wolf walked over and opened the door, and glanced down.

“Mantis?” she said, “did you just walk into the wall?”

“…head hurts…”

Liquid stepped over and helped Mantis up. “What’s the matter?” he demanded. “What happened??”

“ Took a quick look in Snake’s mind…” he muttered, shaking his head, “mental feedback loop… headache… I was fine a minute ago, honestly. Then everything went sort of… fuzzy… when I reached out to your mind, Eli.”

“Hm. That’s… probably not good, Mantis. Here, sit down.” He deposited Mantis in a chair and then put his hands on his hips, frowning deeply. “An unusual reaction to Snake’s mind…? Just passively reading it, too?”

“Maybe your mind and his and too similar, and Mantis’ brain got confused,” Wolf said, “you are twins.”

“I am… not sure that is how it works, but…” Mantis said, rubbing his temples.

“Can you not read Snake’s mind at all?” Liquid said.

There was a brief pause, then Mantis said, “no, I can do it perfectly fine now. He is on his way to the armory.”

“So it was just the first time you did it…” Liquid relaxed. If it was just the first time, then it wouldn’t happen again… or wait… “Dammit. Something like that will probably happen again if you try to do anything more invasive than just reading his mind - and it’ll probably be worse, too.”

“Well…”

“Just… avoid it, Mantis. Things are going smoothly anyway. Don’t strain yourself.”

“…yes, Eli.”

Chapter End Notes

Here I am copying entire conversations from the game and I’m just like holy shit... Solid repeats stuff in the form of a question a lot...

Also, there was a minor amount of confusion over this in the original upload, but the Master Miller is in fact the real Master Miller. Liquid's plans didn't include killing him this AU. (Not a spoiler btw, y'all readers were intended to know that just by the way it never came up in the lead-up to this.)
Chapter 25

“A hallucination?” Miller said, “that’s strange. Last I checked inducing hallucinations wasn’t one of his powers.”

“You know Mantis’ powers already?” Solid said, keeping an eye on a nearby guard just out of earshot of him.

“Hm? Well, yes. He’s telepathic and psychokinetic - and when he was younger he could turn invisible, pass through walls, teleport, generate flame from nowhere, and assume people’s wills. I don’t know how much of that he can still do. But causing hallucinations specifically… even if he were technically capable of it, I don’t know if he knows how to do it…”

“Did he join the unit before you retired, Master?” Solid said, confused.

“No… I retired right after you did, Snake. Too much had happened. Mantis, Liquid, and Wolf all joined up at the same time, about four or five months later. I… never met them personally at that point.”

“Then how do you know so much about Mantis’ powers?”

“It’s a long story,” Miller said, then smoothly changed the subject. “From the way you describe it it sounds like what happened wasn’t intentional. Why would he show you what you saw?”

“I don’t know… I’m not even sure what I saw…”

“Maybe it’s… no, it couldn’t be— I can’t believe it, after all this time…?”

“Master, what are you talking about?”

He probably blinked under his sunglasses. “No, it’s nothing,” Miller said, “I’ll tell you later. You get to the ArmsTech president right now, Snake.”

Solid nodded and hung up, pulling out the C4 he’d appropriated. That guard he was keeping an eye on earlier was now far enough away that, while he’d certainly come running at the sound of Solid blowing a man-sized hole in the wall, Solid would have enough time to slip out of sight before he got there.

He ended up finding Baker tied to a concrete beam in the middle of a room, with wires criss-crossing around him. Solid approached, explaining that he was here to rescue him, but Baker shouted him off and Solid finally noticed that the wires were attached to…

“C4!” Solid exclaimed.

From the corner of the room there was the click of a hammer cocking a split second before the crack of gunfire. Solid jumped back. The bullet ricocheted off the floor at his feet.

“Right,” said a moustached man - hey, he looked familiar - stepping into the light. “Touch that wire and the C4 will blow up along with the old man!” Old man…? This guy seemed a little old himself to be calling anyone that… the man narrowed his eyes at Solid. “So you’re the one the boss kept talking about.”

“And you?” Solid said, taking another step back.
“Special Operations FOXHOUND,” the man said, spinning his revolver around on his finger, “Revolver Ocelot.”

Oh, the gunslinger and ‘interrogation specialist’. Solid finally realized that this was the third man from Mantis’ hallucination — had the unconscious or dead man in the metal frame been someone Ocelot had been interrogating?

“I’ve been waiting for you, Solid Snake,” Ocelot said, “now… we’ll see if the man will live up to the legend!” He raised his gun - Solid’s hand flashed to his own - but instead of firing immediately, Ocelot paused thoughtfully, then slowly (almost sensually) rubbed his gloved fingers over the barrel. “This,” he said in a reverent voice, “is the greatest handgun ever made. The Colt Single Action Army.”

He started loading it methodically. Solid wasn’t sure what to do. Had he only had one shot in his gun just now? Had he stepped out to confront Solid completely out of ammo? He must be either insane, or really, really confident, with the skills to back him up. Both seemed likely.

“Six bullets,” Ocelot said, sliding his gun back into his holster and giving Solid a look from under his eyelashes, “more than enough to kill anything that moves. Now I’ll show you why they call me… ’Revolver’.”

He dropped into a semi-crouch, hand hovering over his gun. Solid mirrored his move. Ocelot smiled at him.

“Draw!”

“Draw!”

“Well,” Wolf said, where they were monitoring the battle in the command room, “it is nice for him to finally be as dramatic and showy as he likes.”

“He is awful,” Mantis said.

Wolf shrugged. She was so used to Mantis’ hatred of Ocelot that she hardly cared anymore. “Can you tell Liquid Ocelot has ambushed Snake? I cannot raise him on Codec, I think he is going through an area with too much harmonic interference. Is he still on his way to check up on the engineer?”

“Yes,” Mantis said, “hold on. …wait, what did Ocelot just say?”

“‘There’s nothing like the feeling of slamming a long silver bullet into a well-greased chamber’?”

“…he is the worst, I hate him…”

Ocelot ducked behind one of the concrete pillars, grinning. “Just what I’d expect from the man with the same code as the boss,” he said gleefully. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had such a good fight… but I’m just getting warmed up.” He leapt out from behind the pillar, SAA pointed directly at Solid—

And suddenly he instead of a hand with a revolver he had a wrist with a spray of blood.

“What!” he cried out, “my hand!!!”

Solid jumped back from the center room as quick as he could as he could as the same rapidly-moving blur that had just truncated Ocelot’s forearm sliced through the wires surrounding Baker. A series of small
explosions rocked the room, a hoarsely screaming Baker falling to the floor as Ocelot was thrown against the wall, hitting the back of his head hard. He squinted up at the vague distortion in the air in front of him.

“Stealth camouflage—“ he hissed, “can’t you even die right?!”

He jumped up, grabbing his severed hand (still clutching the SAA) in his left hand and running out of the room. “You were lucky!” he called to Solid over his shoulder, “we’ll meet again!”

At the same time, the thing using the stealth camouflage deactivated it, suddenly flickering into being as what Solid could only describe as a cyborg ninja. He even had a faintly humming chokuto.

“Who are you?!” Solid demanded.

“I’m like you,” the ninja said in a mechanical-sounding voice, “I have no name.”

Baker was groaning in pain on the floor, but managed to lift his head enough to look at the cyborg ninja. His eyes widened. What little blood he had left in his face drained from it. “That… that exoskeleton!”

Solid ignored him. For now the ninja wasn’t moving, just staring at Solid, so Solid decided it would be best to stay still and unwaveringly return his gaze.

Suddenly the ninja started screeching as if in pain, and convulsing. He fled the room, leaping from place to place as he did. After a second, Solid blinked and reholstering his gun.

“Who the hell…” he said to no one in particular.

He shook himself, then walked over to Baker and helped him up, leading him over to sit down and support himself against the wall. He was in bad shape. “Can you talk?” Solid asked him.

“Who are you?” Baker coughed.

“I’m not one of them,” Solid said, and decided to get straight to the point. “The DARPA chief told me he gave them his detonation code. What about yours?”

“Oh, I get it,” Baker said, “Jim sent you… you… you’re from the Pentagon.”

“Answer my question! What about your code?! There’s no time!”

“I…” Baker looked down. “…talked.”

“What!” Solid growled. “Now the terrorists have both codes and can launch anytime!”

“It’s not like I didn’t fight,” Baker protested, “I managed to resist Psycho Mantis’ mind probe.”

Now Solid was thrown for a bit of a loop. “He couldn’t read you?” he said, “how’d you do it?”

“Surgical implants in my brain,” Baker said.

“Surgical implants?”

“Kind of like a psychic insulation. Everybody who knows these top-secret codes has it.”

“Even the DARPA chief?” Solid said, raising an eyebrow.
Baker’s scoff turned into a wheeze. “Of course.”

“But the DARPA chief said Mantis got his code by reading his mind…”

“Are you sure you heard him right?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Maybe the DARPA chief had lied… because he was ashamed of giving it up for other reasons? “In that case, how did they get your code?”

“I never had any training on how to resist torture…”

Baker started coughing. He pressed one arm against his side - just under the edge of his coat Solid could see blood beginning to spread across his vest. Baker shook his head when Solid stepped forward slightly.

“It looks like he had some fun with you, alright,” Solid said.

“He’s not human,” Baker said through gritted teeth, “I tell you, he loved every second of it.”

“What happened to your arm?” Solid said, glancing at the one still hanging limply by his side.

“He broke it.”

“Looks like you’re more than even now. His was sliced off.”

“Ha,” Baker coughed, “you’re a funny man. …so… the DARPA chief… is he okay?”

“Yeah,” Solid said, “but I don’t have a way to get him off the island yet. He’s laying low in his cell until things blow over, the terrorists should leave him alone.”

Baker sighed. “Good…” he said, “I guess it’ll be a little harder to find me a place to hide around here, but the terrorists shouldn’t need anything else from me, either.”

“I know,” Solid said, “they have both codes now.”

“Those boys are totally insane,” Baker said, shaking his head. “They won’t hesitate to launch.”

“I agree. But what do they really want?”

“Who knows…” Baker coughed again. “Maybe they’re like us in the arms industry… always looking forward to the next good war.”

“Well, I’m not going to let these maniacs start a war toady. Do you still have the cardkeys?”

“Cardkeys?” Baker said.

“To override the detonation code!” Solid said, “I heard you had them…”

“No, not anymore,” Baker said.

“What?” Solid said, “who does, then? Not the terrorists…!”?

“No,” Baker said, shaking his head again, “that woman.”

“Woman!” Solid said. Didn’t FOXHOUND have a female member? “Who!”

“A soldier that was thrown into prison along with me…”
“A female soldier?” Oh, “It must be…”

“She said she had just joined up as a new recruit,” Baker explained, “she said they threw her in prison because she refused to take part in the rebellion.”

“A new recruit? Could that be the Colonel’s niece…?”

“I gave her the key,” Baker said, “looks like she managed to break out of here, though. I hope she’s okay.”

“I’m sure she is,” Solid assured him. “She’s green… but as tough as they come. But how did you know she escaped?”

“I was in contact with her by Codec. Until I was tied up here, I mean.”

“Codec?”

“Yes. She stole it from the guard.” Baker coughed again for a few moments. The blood was spreading further now. “If she still has it,” he said, catching his breath, “you should be able to contact her.”

“I’m sure she still has it. What frequency was she at?”

“Oh yeah,” Baker said, “let me tell you. It’s…” he paused, his eyes rolling up in his head as he tried to remember. “Hmmm…”

“Huh?”

“…oh… sorry, I forgot,” Baker said sheepishly.

Solid stood up, snapping his fingers angrily. “Damn!”

“Oh, that’s right!” Baker said, “just look it up on GameFAQs. Try to contact her.”

“I’ll contact her right away,” Solid sighed, “but tell me… if this doesn’t work, is there some way to prevent the missile launch?”

“Hmm. You need to find Hal Emmerich, one of my employees.”

“Who’s that?”

“The team leader of the Metal Gear REX project. A genius at engineering, but a little bit of an oddball. If there is anyone who can figure out how to stop Metal Gear from launching, it’s him.”

“What if he can’t come up with anything?”

“You’ll have to destroy it,” Baker said firmly, “Emmerich knows how to destroy Metal Gear.”

Ocelot stalked into the command room. Liquid gave him an extremely unimpressed look.

“That went well.”

Ocelot grunted. “The medical room is completely out of painkillers now.”

“What? Completely out?”
“It takes a lot for them to effect my system… also, I packed my hand in ice and put it in a cooler. There’s still a chance I can get it reattached - if not, I’ll just get a prosthetic like your father’s.”

“Hm. And that cyborg ninja?”

“Must have crawled out of the steel vat after a while. It’s amazing he could survive that, but… well, we aren’t the only ones after Snake tonight.”

“We’ll just have to catch him before he gets dismembered by the ninja,” Liquid brushed him off. “By the way, if you took all the painkillers in the medical room… you’re not high, are you?”

“…”

“…well, you’re missing an arm anyway… stay out of everyone else’s way.”

“Yes, sir.”

Baker shakily handed Solid an old-fashioned floppy disk. “What’s that?” Solid said, taking it.

“An optical disk,” Baker said, “it’s all here. The main harddrive was destroyed by gunfire. This is the only remaining copy of the data.”

“What kind of data?”

“All the data collected from this exercise. Don’t play dumb. I know you were sent to get this. I hid it from that sadistic maniac while he was torturing me. They don’t know that this disk exists. Make sure that you report this to Jim... to your boss. I’ll give you my card too.” He handed that to Solid as well. “It’ll open up all level two security doors.”

“Can you walk?” Solid said.

“No… you go on without me. Just leave me here.”

“I don’t think that’s very safe… here, I’ll move you someplace a bit more hidden.” He crouched down. Baker groaned in pain as Solid levered his shoulder under his arm, helping him stand up. “Also, I have one more question,” Solid said, “who or what was that ninja thing? It looked like you knew something.”

“That ninja?” Baker said, wincing in pain as Solid started walking him towards the exit. “That was FOXHOUND’s dark little secret.”

“Dark little secret?”

“An experimental… genome… soldier…”

He coughed. A bit of blood spattered to the floor at their feet.

“You know him?” Solid said, trying to think how feasible it was to get Baker to the medical room, where there’d be first aid supplies. It didn’t seem likely.

“The person who’d know the most about him is dead now,” Baker wheezed, “I’m not even sure her successor, Dr. MacCulloch, would know anything. The project was aborted in 2003.”

“Hrm…”
“You’ve got to stop them,” Baker said, grimacing, “if it goes public, my company and I are… finished…”

“What?” Solid said, “doesn’t Metal Gear use currently existing technology?”

“Metal Gear itself does, but… oh, god, oh, no…”

Solid looked down just in time to see what Baker was groaning over - the blood dripping from under his coat was increasing in flow. Shit. Maybe moving him too much had exacerbated it. Solid put him down against the wall again and took off his coat.

Shit.

“God, this can’t be happening…” Baker panted. “I don’t want to die…”

A loop of intestine was sticking out of a long gash in his side. He was bleeding out fast. Solid shoved the organ back in Baker’s body and applied pressure to the wound, but he already knew it wasn’t going to do much. He didn’t have much time and there was just too much blood.

“Stop them,” Baker said, his eyelids drooping, “stop the terrorists…”

“I will,” Solid said, “just hang in there.”

But moments later Baker slipped into unconsciousness. Within two minutes he was dead.

Solid wiped the blood off his hands on Baker’s coat, then called the Discovery.

“Baker’s dead,” he reported, “that ninja thing got him. Does anyone know what the hell that was?”

“I have no idea,” Colonel Campbell said.

“A member of FOXHOUND…” Solid said.

“No,” Dr. Patel said, “we don’t have anyone like that in our unit.”

“I guess you’d know…”

“Snake,” Colonel Campbell said, “the terrorists are ready to launch and we’re running out of time. I want you and Meryl to work together!”

“Can I trust her?”

“Yes. She’s a smart girl. Get in contact with her.”

Mei Ling cut in. “Snake, there is a lot of electrical interference coming from there. It should be okay if you do burst transmission like us, but normal transmission is probably impossible. Try moving away from that area.”

Solid hung up and called Miller first.

“Do you know anything about that cyborg ninja, Master?” he asked.

Miller sighed. “Snake,” he said, “just because half my limbs are prosthetic doesn’t mean I know anything about cybernetics.”

“Er… sorry. I didn’t mean to imply…”
“I was just teasing, Snake. But seriously, Campbell stayed with the unit much longer than I did - if he didn’t know anything about that ninja, why would I?”

“I guess you have a point…”

“Stay focused on your mission. I don’t think the ninja has anything to do with it, so just stay out of his way. He seems dangerous.”

“Of course, Master.”
“What’s your name?” Meryl demanded over Codec.

“My name’s not important,” Solid replied.

“Aha! Could you be Snake? Are you Solid Snake?”

“That’s what some people called me…”

“The legendary Solid Snake…! You?!” Meryl laughed, and took off her balaclava. “Sorry about before,” she said, “I heard a lot of talking in the next cell about how to stop the launch and wanted to get out of there to go help… but I wasn’t sure if you were one of the good guys.”

“But I knew you were,” Solid said.

“How?”

“It’s your eyes.”

“My eyes?”

“They’re not soldier’s eyes.”

Meryl rolled her not-soldier’s eyes. “They’re rookie’s eyes, right?”

“No,” Solid said, “they’re beautiful, compassionate eyes.”

Meryl laughed. She guessed her uncle hadn’t told him she was only 18, but maybe he did and Solid just didn’t care. Legal was legal, after all. And Meryl definitely thought of herself as an *adult*. “Just what I’d expect from the legendary Solid Snake,” she said, smirking, "you trying to sweep me off my feet?"

“Don’t worry,” Solid said, suddenly evasive, “you’ll land back on them once you meet me. The reality is no match for the legend, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Why did you look so surprised when you saw my face?” Subtle subject change.

“Because you look just like him!” Meryl said anyway.

“…you mean the terrorist leader, Liquid Snake?”

“Yeah, you know him? You’re not brothers, are you?”

“I have no family,” Solid grumbled.

“So, what’s the deal then?”

“Who knows. Why don’t you ask him? But first I want some information. You were involved in this exercise from the beginning. What exactly happened here?”
“I’m sorry,” Meryl said, frowning, “I was captured along with President Baker right after the terrorist attack.”

“That’s okay,” Solid said. “But what is this place? I don’t think it’s just a nuclear weapons disposal facility…”

“Boy oh boy… it’s just like them! Nobody told you anything, did they?” Meryl took a deep breath. “Okay… you see, this place isn’t really for disposing of nuclear weapons…”

“Any predictions for what he will be like?” Raven said into the phone. He had Liquid on speakerphone, and he was in the command room so Ocelot was there too.

“Well, he is my twin,” Liquid said, “and not only that but we were granted the same codename, Snake. You can probably expect a lot of similarities in his combat style.”

“That was my assessment until we got interrupted,” Ocelot said in the background.

“We’ll keep an eye on things here,” Liquid said. “Don’t kill him, Raven. But give him a good run for his money.”

“Naturally, boss.”

A call from another new Codec frequency. Solid picked up.

“Snake, be careful!” said a voice he didn’t recognize at all, “there are Claymore mines around here. Use a mine detector!”

“Who are you?” Solid said cautiously.

“Just call me ‘Deepthroat’.”

“Deepthroat?” Solid blinked. “The informant from the Watergate scandal?” (Admittedly that wasn’t his first thought, but he wasn’t sure he wanted whoever this was to think of him as a pervert.)

“Nevermind about that,” Deepthroat said brusquely.

“You’re not using burst transmission. Are you nearby?”

“Listen. There’s a tank in front of your position waiting to ambush you.”

“Who are you anyway?”

“One of your fans.”

Solid opened his mouth to reply but Deepthroat signed off. Solid bit the inside of his cheek. One of your fans… your number one fan… no, it couldn’t be. Whoever Deepthroat was, they were just messing with him. Found some top-secret radio logs from the Zanzibar Land disturbance and were just trying to trigger him, ruin his concentration. Must be with FOXHOUND - Liquid would have access to those logs, probably.

But using the mine detector proved that the intel about the Claymore mines had been accurate. And, moreover, so was the bit about the tank ambush.

“This is Raven’s territory.”
A very large tattooed man emerged from the M1’s hatch and pulled the turret-mounted machine gun around in front of him, aiming at Solid.

“Snakes don’t belong in Alaska,” he rumbled, “I will not let you pass. Send him a message!” he shouted down to whoever was in the tank with him.

The tank’s turret fired. Solid leapt out of the way, avoiding the shell but failing to land properly on the snow, instead crashing down on his back. Dammit.

The giant man laughed. “That’s right, you belong on the ground. You should crawl on the ground like the Snake you are.” He disappeared back into the tank. “Come. Let’s fight!”

Solid moved on, keycard looted from the ejected Genome Soldier in hand. Raven silently watched him go, then dialed Liquid, fully prepared to ignore any imminent complaining about his snake puns.

“Well, boss,” Raven said before Liquid could get a word in edgewise, “I hope you are happy. He got the card.”

“…we’ll play with him a little longer…” Liquid said. Hmm. That was his assessment, then?

“You would be wise not to underestimate him.”

“What did you think of him?”

“He is just as you said,” Raven said gravely, “in battle he is as if possessed by a demon. Much like you. I would expect no less.”

“You see?” Ocelot said suddenly. Unlike before he was no longer in the background, and now seemed to be standing right next to Liquid and therefore the phone. “I told you so.”

“So, General Ivan,” Raven said, “I hear he took your hand as well as your dignity.”

“Watch your tongue, Shaman!” Ocelot snapped, finally losing his temper with Raven.

“In the language of the Sioux people, ‘sioux’ means ‘snake’. It is known as an animal to be feared.”

“Well, Snake is mine now,” Ocelot snarled, still ticked off, “when I meet him next, I’ll take special care of him…”

“Ocelot,” Liquid said sharply.

“How far will he get?” Raven said. “Who will apprehend him? I am more than willing to meet him again in battle. The raven on my head’s appetite has been whetted…”

“Right now he’s going after Emmerich,” Liquid said, “but it doesn’t matter if he gets to him. Besides, I’ve filled the whole hallway in front of his lab with Genome Soldiers, he’ll be hard-pressed to find a way in without going straight through them.”

“And after that?”

“Mantis was going to intercept him on his way out of the warhead storage building.”

“Boss,” Ocelot said, “about that…”
“What is it?” Liquid said, closing his phone.

“I don’t think Mantis should face Snake,” Ocelot said, “it’s dangerous.”

“This is Mantis we’re talking about, Ocelot,” Liquid said, glancing at him. Mantis was still in the chair in the corner of the room, but had nodded off a little while ago after telling Liquid to wake him when Solid was approaching his intended ambush position, the commander’s office.

“And? You haven’t forgotten that hallucination incident.”

“That was a one-time thing. I’ll grant it could happen again, and worse, if he tries to do anything less passive than just reading Snake’s mind, but he shouldn’t have to do that. All he needs to do is read Snake’s intentions—“

“We’ve already observed what Snake is just like you when it comes to combat,” Ocelot said patiently, “and I know Mantis has already observed that you’re difficult to read in the heat of combat - and that’s with a preexisting psychic link. It’s possible that he won’t be able to read Snake’s mind at all.”

Liquid glanced at Mantis again. “He should still be fine. We really only need him to harass Snake a bit so that he doesn’t start thinking we’re being a little too quiet, that isn’t exactly full-blown combat.”

“Hmm. Mantis,” Ocelot called, picking up a pen, “wake up.”

Mantis cracked his eyes open with a “Mm?” just in time for Ocelot to fling the pen at him. Mantis flinched, and the pen disappeared in mid-air, but right after that Mantis said “Ow” and massaged his shoulder where the pen would have hit if he hadn’t vanished it.

“See?” Ocelot said, turning back to Liquid, “he can still make projectiles disappear but he can’t entirely dissipate the force behind them. And this was just a pen, Snake’s going to be shooting bullets at him.”

“So… he could get injured, and that’s being optimistic…”

“What is this about?” Mantis yawned, lowering his hand from his shoulder. “Eli?”

“Mantis, Ocelot has a point,” Liquid said, “you shouldn’t face Snake.”

“…hn?”

“Let me rephrase that: Mantis, I’m ordering you not to face Snake. There’s too much risk you won’t be able to retreat in time if you do, and we need your talents elsewhere.”

“…”

“You can stay here and keep us updated on everyone’s positions. But no combat.”

“…yes, boss,” Mantis said sourly, rubbing the back of his neck.

“So where is Snake now?” Ocelot said.

Mantis glared at him.
Solid hadn’t seen this much carnage since the Zanzibar Land disturbance, and even then, there was something about the way that these soldiers were cut down with a blade instead of just shot that made the scene extra gruesome. He stepped over a guard who had just collapsed and the steadily expanding pool of blood emanating from him, and rounded the hallway’s corner just in time to see another guard lifted into the air by something invisible and practically gutted before Solid’s eyes. The guard fell to the floor. There was a swish then the electronic lock on the lab door exploded into sparks, the door shuddering open.

Not a good sign…

Inside the room, Hal was backing up into a corner, goggling in horror at the person-shaped distortion in the air that was brandishing a sword at him. He was so terrified that he felt the end result of the fact that the Genome Soldiers had refused to let him out of his lab since noon yesterday soaking the crotch of his jeans.

“S-Stealth camouflage?” he gasped, trying to flatten himself against the wall and also ignore the fact that he’d just wet himself, “who are you?”

His assailant turned off the stealth camouflage, revealing himself to be some kind of robot, or at least a person with an orange-red-and-blue-gray armored exoskeleton so cutting-edge Hal would have called it conceptual. A single round, red eye in the middle of his faceplate glared menacingly at Hal.

“Where is my friend?” he rasped.

“What…” Hal gulped, “what are you talking about?”

Oh fuck there was a guy approaching behind the cyborg… ninja… person. He wasn’t with him, was he?

“What next?” Hal whimpered.

The ninja slowly turned around to face the man behind him. Hal could see every fiber of his artificial muscles tighten.

“Snake!” the ninja said.

“You’re that ninja,” the Snake guy said eloquently.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Snake,” the ninja said.

“Who are you?”

“Neither enemy nor friend…” he bared the back of his sword towards Snake. “I am back from a world where such words are meaningless. I’ve removed all obstacles,” he declared, “now you and I will battle to the death.”

“What do you want?”

“I’ve waited a long time for this day. Now I want to enjoy the moment.”

“What…” Hal started. Snake stepped closer to the ninja, and Hal blinked and his vision suddenly got a lot clearer - oh, he hadn’t even noticed it was blurry. He must have been on the verge of tears. “What’s with these guys…?”

“He’s on his way to Emmerich’s lab. …oh, but wait… something is happening…”

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The Snake man was so ruggedly handsome that Hal thought he looked like the love interest in an action shoujo manga. This was so unreal. It was just…

There was no way it was real.

“It’s like one of my Japanese animés…”

“I’ve come from another world to do battle with you,” the ninja declared.

“What is it?” Snake said, his pistol trained on the ninja’s head. “Revenge?”

“It is nothing so trivial as revenge,” the ninja said with a tinny scoff. “A fight to the death with you. Only in that can my soul find respite. I will kill you or you will kill me… it makes no difference.”

Hal slowly stood up, wincing as his twisted ankle throbbed when he put weight on it. He started edging towards a nearby locker, keeping a close eye on Snake and the ninja. He saw Snake’s eyes flick towards him. The ninja’s head moved. Hal couldn’t stop himself from shrieking and diving into the locker, slamming the door behind him.

“Hah! Fine!” the ninja said, “he can watch from inside there.”

“I need that man,” Snake said, “keep your hands off him.”

“Now, Snake. Make me feel alive again.”

What followed next was a cacophony of flesh against metal and the ninja saying things like “That’s good, Snake!” and “Hurt me more!!” in what Hal could only describe as a rather sexual tone of voice. Which just added to the unreality of the situation. Hal really did not want to know what was going on out there.

Out there, the battle paused. The ninja knelt on the floor, vibrating slightly, and Solid imagined he would have been catching his breath if he had any.

“I felt that, Snake,” the ninja wheezed out, “do you remember me now…?”

Solid swallowed hard. All that Hurt me more stuff… there was only one person Solid had ever known who took such fetishistic delight in combat.

“It can’t be,” he choked out, “you were killed in Zanzibar…”

Maybe it was the word Zanzibar that set him off this time, but the ninja suddenly started seizing and wailing again, and only responded to Solid’s alarmed questions with a drawn-out, pitiful “The mediciiiiiiine!”

He fell to his knees and started banging his head against the floor. “What’s happening?” Solid said, unsure if he should attempt to help him up or get to the other side of the room as fast as possible.

“…I… I… I’m losing myself…”

“…is it over…?” came from inside the locker.

The ninja screamed again and ran out of the room. Solid immediately called base.

“Gray Fox…” he said, “Colonel, that ninja is Gray Fox. No doubt about it.”

“Ridiculous!” Colonel Campbell said, “you of all people should know he died in Zanzibar.”
“Maybe he didn’t,” Dr. Patel said.

“What?” Colonel Campbell said.

“Well, it’s only a rumor,” Dr. Patel said, somewhat hesitantly, “supposedly a nearly-dead soldier was used as a guinea pig to streamline the gene therapy process before applying it to the Next-Generation Special Forces.”

“I… never heard that,” Colonel Campbell said.

“It is only a rumor, as I said,” Dr. Patel insisted. “But if it were true, it would have happened after you retired. It was Dr. Clark, the medical chief before Dr. Hunter, who would have been in charge of it.”

“Dr. Hunter?” Solid said, confused.

“Dr. MacCulloch’s predecessor,” Dr. Patel said. “But it is true that Dr. Clark started the gene therapy project. I just never thought she had used an actually alive person for it.”

“And they used Gray Fox…” Solid said, “they recovered him after the fall of Zanzibar Land?”

“But he was already dead,” Colonel Campbell said.

“Perhaps he was only brain dead,” Dr. Patel said. “But even if he were, if he is running around Shadow Moses now… they must have revived him. I’m sorry, I don’t know anything, this would all be highly confidential information. Colonel, should I call Dr. MacCulloch and ask her to pull the files for us?”

“Don’t bother,” Solid said, “if I really need to know, I might be able to get the information out of Gray Fox himself.”

“I’m not certain it’s relevant anyway, Snake,” Colonel Campbell said.

“True… and that’s probably good. From what I could tell, he didn’t know who he was.”

“Are you saying he’s just a mindless robot?”

“I’m not sure, but he seems intent on fighting me to the death. We’ll meet again, I know it.”

“And… you’ll kill him?” Mei Ling piped up.

“Hmmm… I’d rather not,” Solid said honestly, “but maybe that’s what he wants.”

“How horrible…”

Solid signed off and stood in front of the locker where Emmerich was still hiding. “How long are you going to stay in there?”

“Huh?” Emmerich said, still not opening the door. “…are you one of them?”

“No, I’m not. I always work alone.”

“Alone?” He paused. “Are you an otaku too?”

A what…? “C’mon, get out,” Solid said, annoyed, “we can’t stay here forever.”
Emmerich slid open the door partway, and gave Solid a long, careful look, taking in his sneaking suit in particular. He kept his hand on the door like he was ready to close it again at any moment, like that would really stop Solid from getting at him if he wanted to.

“But your uniform…”

“What about it?”

“Their leader—I’ve, I’ve seen him in that exact same getup before.”

“Here?”

“No, a couple months ago. I guess none of them are dressing anything like you now.”

“I’m not with them,” Solid repeated, “look, you’re the head Metal Gear designer, Hal Emmerich, right?”

“You know me?” Emmerich said anxiously.

“I heard about you from Meryl.”

“Oh.” Emmerich visibly relaxed, and climbed out of the locker. Solid took a step back. He was sure it wasn’t his fault, but Emmerich smelled like piss. “So you’re here to rescue me?”

“Sorry, but no. There’s something I’ve got to do first.”

Chapter End Notes

Long live Vulcan Raven and his snake puns (lol)
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

(aireyv sent me a new miscellany ficlet to post today but i figured i’d upload that at my usual time and this morning, also update feetground because aireyv is home sick from work today (again) and i wanna help cheer them up.. so double updates three days in a row!! happy friday!! -pp)

By the time Emmerich - or Otacon (“It stands for ‘otaku convention’! An otaku is a guy like me who likes Japanimation.”) - was done explaining REX and the new type of nuclear weapons until now only tested in VR to him, Solid was having some serious doubts about this mission. Mostly about the parts Colonel Campbell hadn’t told him going into this, which would be all of that… could he really believe that Colonel Campbell hadn’t known it himself, either?

Otacon gave him directions to REX’s maintenance base, and Solid had to stop him from trying to go with him, citing his injured ankle although even without that a skinny nerd like him would still likely prove to be more of a liability than an asset, at least when Codec existed. Left on his own, Otacon should have been fine, anyway, since he had some stealth camouflage of his own, but just in case Solid called Meryl to tell her to babysit him.

“Meryl, the engineer’s okay.”

“That’s a relief.”

“I want you to look after him,” Solid said, in as authoritative a voice as he could muster. “Where are you now?”

“Very close.”

Some other voices cut in on Meryl’s side of the Codec link, and she glanced over her shoulder in alarm. “There she is!” “Over there!”

“Oh no!” Meryl exclaimed, “Damn… they’ve spotted me!” She quickly put her balaclava back on.

“Meryl!” Solid called out. “What happened?!” But it was too late, she’d already disconnected.

“Something’s wrong…”

“Meryl?” Otacon said uncertainly.

“What did she look like?” Solid asked him.

“She… she was wearing the same green uniform as the terrorists.”

“A disguise?” Same one as earlier, apparently… she must not have changed. Which meant some of the blood from those soldiers they’d had to gun down then was probably still on it - Solid hoped the smell of it wasn’t bothering her too much, sometimes rookies had a hard time handling that.

“She had such a cute way of walking,” Otacon said thoughtfully, “she kind of wiggles her behind.”
Solid snorted. “You were really looking.”

Otacon flushed. “Well,” he said, with a ‘You would have looked too’ air, “she’s got a very cute behind.”

“Way of walking, huh?…”

Solid decided to go find Meryl himself, and Otacon gave him a level four security card. He assured Solid he’d stay out of the way and answer his Codec whenever called, then turned on his stealth camouflage and ran out of the room, his sprained ankle apparently forgotten. (Or maybe when he said he’d twisted he really meant just that - he’d twisted it, and it had stopped hurting a while ago.)

Solid presumed Otacon was going to make a quick stop by wherever the residential area was to grab a fresh pair of jeans.

“Don’t move,” Wolf said, pointing her rifle at a slight distortion in the air. “Who is there?”

“D-Don’t shoot! I’m sorry!!” Emmerich deactivated his stealth camo.

Wolf raised her eyebrows. “What are you doing here?” She was only here to grab a new bottle of diazepam, her old one was down to the last pill and she was going to need it.

“I was just… uh…” He flushed as Wolf glanced down at his pants and her lip curled. “I needed to… go to my quarters…”

She lowered her rifle. “That’s fair,” she said. “Who let you out of your lab?”

“That cyborg ninja…”

“He let you out?”

“No! He just— killed all the guards in the hallway in front of it, so…” Emmerich looked a little queasy just thinking about it and Wolf frowned. He probably wasn’t used to blood and gore, after all.

She decided to change the subject. “My apologies for pointing my gun at you,” she said, “I only thought, because of the stealth camouflage and because you were near my quarters too, you might have been the person who was stealing my panties.” She blinked, then raised her rifle again. “Wait - it was not you, was it?!”

“Huh?!” Emmerich stumbled backwards. “Your p-panties?! No way!”

“You do seem like the kind of social maladjust that would do that…”

“N-No, no, I swear! I’d never— it must have been one of the Genome Soldiers!”

“Hmm…” she lowered her gun again. “Come to think of it, it did start when the Genome Army got here.” Still, she stepped towards Emmerich, who just stood petrified, and checked the pockets of his hoodie. (No way was she going to touch his jeans.) She did find a folded-up square of fabric in one of them, but it turned out to be the handkerchief that she gave him the other day, not a pair of her underwear. She handed it back to him.

“Go back to your quarters,” she said sternly, “and stay there. It is dangerous for you to be running around.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am,” Emmerich said, scurrying off. She followed him far enough to see him run into his
room and close the door behind him, then called Liquid on Codec.

“Is it alright if Emmerich is running around loose?” she said.

“It shouldn’t matter,” Liquid said, “I’m sure he’s already in contact with Snake, so any damage he can do won’t be curbed by him being imprisoned. He’s smart enough to stay out of our way, anyway.”

“Alright… I will leave him alone, then. I had better get to the communications tower.”

“That’s strange,” Meryl said as she and Solid exited the ladies’ bathroom following a long heart-to-heart about her father and a short argument about her Desert Eagle. “There’s no guard.”

“Something’s funny…” Solid said.

“I’ll keep a look out,” Meryl assured him. “Make sure you’re ready, okay?”

They started walking towards the commander’s room. Still no guard… in the hallway leading up to it, Meryl explained, “like I said, since the overland route north is blocked by glaciers right now, we’ve got to go through this room. I’ve heard there’s a secret passage somewhere in here that leads to the communications towers.”

“Secret passage?” Solid said.

“Yeah,” Meryl said, “I don’t know all the details since I haven’t been here very long, but I’ve heard you have to solve a puzzle in order to open it. I’ve also heard that no one’s solved it yet…”

“Hrm. This could be difficult.”

“Don’t worry,” Meryl said confidently, “I beat Myst when I was in middle school. And my uncle told me you’re supposed to be really smart, too.”

“Uh… right,” Solid said. “I guess if we get stuck, we can always call Otacon. He’s probably good at this sort of thing. Master Miller, too…”

Solid used the security level five card that Meryl gave him on the door, and it slid open. He stepped in ahead of Meryl, sweeping the room with his gun, but it was totally empty.

“Huh…”

Meryl walked in, first looking at the holographic display of the communications towers, then one of the several busts in the room covered with electrical tape. “I wonder if these have anything to do with the puzzle?” she said.

“Uh, Meryl…”

“You know, back before the takeover I actually heard from one of the Genome Soldiers that one of the engineers who was building Metal Gear said that the person who sculpted these used to be a facial reconstruction artist in the FBI, and that’s where they met their model.”

“Meryl.”

“Also, I heard that the kid they were using as a model didn’t even know they were making sculptures based off of his face! That’s kind of creepy… what do you think, Snake?”
“Meryl, I think we don’t have to bother with the puzzle,” Solid said, gesturing to a bookcase in the corner of the room that was diagonal to the wall, with an obvious draft blowing out from behind it.

“Oh,” Meryl said sheepishly, walking over. “Well, I guess let’s head over then.”

“I’m not so sure about this,” Solid said, eyeing the passageway behind the bookshelf.

“I bet it’s fine,” Meryl said, “look, the terrorists would have to use this route to get between here and the maintenance building too, right? They must have just left the door open so they don’t have to go through the trouble of solving the puzzle every time.”

“I don’t know…” Solid said, so he called the Discovery just in case.

“In China they say, ‘A man grows most tired standing still,’” Mei Ling advised him, “that means you can’t waste time on uncertainty, Snake. You’ve got to go for it!”

Solid figured she was right, so he and Meryl stepped into the passage, which lead into some caves. There were a few dogs wandering around in them, which growled and nipped at Solid’s heels, but they seemed to like Meryl.

“Those are wolfdogs in there,” Miller said when Solid called him on Codec, “just like their name, they’re a cross between huskies and Alaskan wolves. They were bred to be used as sled dogs.”

“They were trying to create an animal that would combine the gentleness of a dog with the endurance and ferocity of a wolf,” Solid said, nodding, “but they didn’t get the stamina and power they were hoping for. On top of that, their personalities wound up closer to wolves. Most of them won’t even let you get close. That’s why they never caught on.”

“…oh, that’s right,” Miller said, “you’re a musher. I almost forgot - of course, I haven’t talked to you since ’99…”

“…yeah… anyway, after they outlawed the use of hybrids in dogsled races in 2002, no one even wanted to breed them anymore. I heard that most of them were put to sleep after that…”

“Yes, but some of the wolfdog pups that were thrown away went wild. I’ve heard that wild wolfdogs hunt in packs just like wolves. Better be careful.”

“Master, hang on,” Solid said before he could hang up.

“Hm?”

“How do you know Liquid? Mantis, too. You sounded like you knew them — and Ocelot, when I called during my fight with him… how would you know about his personality? Didn’t he join FOXHOUND after you retired?”

“…yeah,” Miller said, “look, I said I would tell you later, and I meant it. But now isn’t the time. You’ve got to go north, to where Metal Gear is. And don’t forget Meryl is with you, and she’s just a rookie - you need to keep an eye on her. Don’t let me break your concentration, okay?”

“Okay… but I’ll call back about this later.”

“Right. I guess it might be important after all…”

Miller hung up. Meryl, who seemed to have been waiting for him to finish his conversation, said, “Snake, can I ask you something?”
“What?” Solid said.

“I was just wondering… well, what’s your name? Your real name?”

“Names mean nothing on the battlefield,” Solid said quickly.

She frowned. “How old are you?”

“Old enough to know what death looks like.”

“Any family?”

“No, but I was raised by many people.”

Her frown deepened. Maybe she was starting to pick up on the fact that Solid didn’t want to have a personal conversation about himself? “Is there… anyone you like?”

Solid groaned internally. “I’ve never been interested in anyone else’s life,” he said.

“So you’re all alone,” Meryl said. Ouch. She sounded almost sad, too.

“Other people just complicate my life,” Solid grumbled, “I don’t like to get involved.”

“You’re a sad, lonely man.”

_Ouch._ She didn’t have to come for his whole life like that. “Let’s just keep going…”

They reached the end of the caves and the beginning of a man-made passage - Solid could see a building at the end of it. Meryl was about to blithely walk into it when she suddenly stopped, doubled over and grabbed her head, and hissed. “D-Don’t come here,” she stammered out.

“Meryl, what’s wrong?” Solid demanded.

She grit her teeth, then stood up, blinking like it was twenty times brighter than it really was, and smoothed her hair. “I’m fine now,” she said, sounding pretty confused, “I just… hey, Snake, your radar doesn’t work in this area, does it?”

“No…”

“So the mine detector won’t work…?”

“No.”

“Ugh… well, that’s not good. Something tells me there are- _gkk._” She grabbed her head again, but the pain seemed to last even less time than before. “What the heck?”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I just… I just had some kind of vision.”

“Maybe it’s psychometric interference,” Solid said, “the same thing happened to me earlier.”

“You think? Oh, I wonder if that kind of thing happens whenever Mantis tries to read someone’s mind. He must be trying to figure out where we are right now.”

“Hm. We’d better hurry, then. What’d you see?”
“Where the mines are placed! Hang on, I’ll walk through, you just follow my footsteps.”

“Be careful,” Solid said dubiously. But if he had reason to take her feeling that there were mines there seriously, then he also had reason to believe she’d just seen where they were, didn’t he?

Meryl got through with no problems, so Solid followed her quickly. They started walking down the canyon. They got about two yards into it when Solid spotted the red point of a laser light slowly trailing down her body.

“Meryl!!” Solid yelled.

“What is it?” she said, looking at Solid instead of down at herself. The red light had reached her leg. Solid was already backing up.

“Meryl, get down!!”

*Bang.*

Meryl screamed as blood spurted from both the entrance and exit wounds on her right mid-thigh. She fell forward.

“Meryl!!” Solid shouted, ducking behind the concrete wall. Wouldn’t be able to help her if he got shot himself, but…

Meryl tried to crawl forward, but there was another retort of the same rifle, and this time it was her left leg that was shot. She screamed in pain and fear again, unable to support her weight now. She reached towards her gun, which she’d dropped when she’d fallen, but the sniper shot her in the arm. Meryl rolled onto her back, whimpering. Solid started edging towards her, for the moment forgetting about the sniper, but the sniper reminded him of their presence with a bullet glancing off the wall a few inches ahead of his face. He drew back.

“Snake…” Meryl groaned, “leave me and run…”

“Meryl…”

“I guess… I am a rookie after all…”

“Don’t worry, Meryl,” Solid said, “it’s me they want.” He’d been standing slightly behind Meryl, so he supposed that the sniper hadn’t gone for him in the first place just now because they weren’t confident in their ability to take him down in one shot at their current angle… and maybe they thought he was good enough to *get away* if they failed to kill him immediately, although Solid wasn’t so sure about that himself.

“Even I know that,” Meryl protested weakly, “it’s the oldest trick in the book. The sniper’s using me as bait to lure you out.”

“Damn!!” She didn’t deserve this!

“Shoot me, Snake!!”

“No!”

“My gun… I can’t reach it by myself.”

“Don’t move!” Solid hissed at her.
“I promised… I wouldn’t slow you down! I… I… I can still help… I want to help you!”

“Quiet down!” Solid said, “save your strength!”

“I was a fool, I wanted to be a soldier,” Meryl said in a wavering voice. Solid could see tears in her eyes from where he was standing. “But war is ugly… there’s nothing glamorous about it.” She turned her head to look at Solid, her face tight with pain. “Snake, please! Save yourself. Go on living and don’t give up on people! Don’t forget me… now get out of here!”

What choice did Solid have? He started backing up, making sure to stay out of line-of-sight of where the sniper seemed to be stationed, judging by the shooting at Meryl. As he retreated, his Codec rang.

“Meryl!” Colonel Campbell cried, “damn!! Snake, it’s a trap! Sniper’s trick to lure you out. The sniper’s waiting for you to go and help Meryl so they can pick you off… don’t do it!”

“It must be Sniper Wolf,” Dr. Patel said, “FOXHOUND’s best shooter.”

“Snipers usually work in pairs, but this one’s alone, huh?” Solid said.

“I suppose so.”

“I’ve heard about her,” Mei Ling said, “they say she can wait for weeks at a time, just watching for her target.”

“Weeks? Meryl can’t hold out that long,” Solid said.

“Can you see Wolf from where you are?” Dr. Patel said.

“There’s nowhere to hide between here and tower,” Solid said, “she must be on the second floor of the tower.”

“If Wolf is in the communications tower, she can see you perfectly!” Colonel Campbell said sharply, “it’s the classic sniper’s position!! At that distance you won’t be able to hit her with a standard weapon, either! You’ll need a sniper rifle.”

“Colonel! Take it easy.”

Colonel Campbell frowned, but didn’t say anything.

“I’m going to save Meryl no matter what it takes,” Solid assured him.


“As long as she stays still, she shouldn’t be in too much risk of bleeding out,” Dr. Patel said, “don’t rush and make any stupid mistakes, Snake.”

“Good luck!” Mei Ling said.

Solid signed off and called Otacon. He managed to get the location of a PSG-1 out of him, but he was oddly reluctant and seemed weirdly attached to the subject of a sniper. On his way to the second floor basement of the tank hangar, Solid called Miller back.

“Tell me what the hell is going on around here, Master,” he said gruffly, “Meryl’s just been shot and I need to know.”

“It doesn’t really have anything to do with Meryl…”
“Master, please!”

“Right,” Miller sighed, “right, I’m sorry. To be honest, I should have told you this years ago. Okay. Snake, I know that Big Boss eventually told you that he was your father… but did he ever tell you that you weren’t his only son?”
“What?” Solid said, stopping in his tracks for a brief moment before getting moving again. “What did you say, Master?”

“You aren’t Big Boss’ only son,” Miller said, “you have a twin brother.”

“Don’t tell me it’s…”

“…Liquid, yes. That’s why he looks exactly like a palette-swapped version of you, Snake.”

“Damn. Master, how long have you known about this?”

“I’ve… I’ve known about the two of you since not long after you were born.”

“What?!”

Even on the Codec screen, Solid could see Miller wince. “It’s true,” he said, “and when you joined FOXHOUND and I found out you weren’t aware… I was going to tell you. Big Boss stopped me. Said he didn’t consider you a son anyway, so there was no point in you knowing about it. It goes without saying that that was his attitude towards Liquid, too.”

Solid wasn’t entirely sure how to process this. “But…” he thought back to the briefing he’d gotten on the USS Discovery. “I thought it was Big Boss who rescued Liquid from Iraq.”

“Well, it was and wasn’t. It’s a long story, Snake.”

“And how do you know Liquid, anyway?”

“That’s… part of the long story. As is how I know Mantis… and Ocelot.”

“Master…”

“It’s better if I don’t tell you all at once,” Miller said quickly, “we can continue this conversation later. For now you need to focus on taking out that sniper.”

“I…”

“Don’t worry about Liquid being your brother - you have to take him out, so so be it. Remember, family ultimately doesn’t have much to do with blood. It’s about who loves you, not who shares your genes.”

“…”

Solid hung up, picking up the PSG-1 and looking around for some ammo. He knew Miller had a good point about family, probably one that was born from, as far as he knew, the divorce that had ended with him taking full custody of his daughter Catherine, at least until she went off to college. He was probably trying to say that Big Boss wasn’t any more Solid’s father than his ex-wife was Catherine’s mother, and by extension Solid shouldn’t really think of Liquid as being his brother. Honestly, Solid wasn’t planning on worrying about that anyway.
But mostly because after committing patricide - twice - fratricide really didn’t seem so objectionable.

“You’re in position, Wolf?” Liquid said over Codec.

“Yesssss,” Wolf said, drawing the word out in anticipation, “I am ready. Is Silverburgh…?”

“We’ve bandaged her and put her up in your quarters,” Liquid said, “don’t want her too close to where we’ll be holding Snake for a bit… video feed from the medical room’s already set up, but last I checked she was still unconscious. Still, we’ve got guards. Well, a guard, anyway.”

“Snake should be there any minute now,” Mantis said from where he was still pouting the corner.

“Do you know where Emmerich is?” Wolf asked suddenly.

“Hm? Emmerich?” Liquid said.

“I told him to stay in his quarters, but I doubt he listened to me.”

“He wasn’t there when Silverburgh was getting dropped off. Mantis?”

“I… am not sure,” Mantis said, “he is certainly still on the island somewhere, but it is not a part I recognize. I’m afraid I do not know my way around this place very well.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Liquid said. “Just remember, Wolf - you are not to kill Snake.”

“Fine,” Wolf said in almost exaggerated disappointment.

Liquid hung up for now, sighing. Now that he thought about it, he couldn’t recall another time when Wolf was hunting someone she was expressly forbidden to murder. And it didn’t help matters that the more she thought about Solid, the more she decided she really liked him. She had actually said, to Liquid’s face, that she thought Solid was pretty sexy because he looked exactly like Liquid but better because while Liquid was of course very attractive she happened to prefer dark hair, pale skin, and unkempt stubble (all of which was news to Liquid), and also she was fairly certain that Solid wasn’t gay.

Liquid didn’t bother pointing out to her that he wasn’t gay, but bi. He’d already told her that a dozen times, and she always forgot.

“Eli, you have never expressed any actual, visible interest in women,” Mantis said in an extremely bored tone of voice.

“That’s because I never express any actual, visible interest in anyone besides you. …and Ocelot, at one time.”

“At one time,” Mantis scoffed.

Wolf called back on Codec. “He’s here,” she breathed, “he’s here, he’s here, he’s here…”

“Hurry up and shoot him already, then,” Liquid said.

There were two successive gunshots, and Wolf made a small grunt. “He is good,” she said, “Snake… you will not be getting away from me that easily…” Another gunshot. Wolf cried out.

“Everything going alright over there?” Liquid said, alarmed.
“He clipped me!” Wolf said, “he tore my coat.”

“I can fix it later, Wolf…”

“How dare he-! I will shoot him. I will. Oh, I want him—"

Liquid hung up, mouth drawn into a thin line. There had been excitement, in every meaning of the word, extremely evident in her voice. As much as he and Wolf were pretty much best friends and had been for more than a decade, sometimes she really was just too weird for him.

Meanwhile on the second floor of the communications tower, Wolf was having a hard time getting a bead on Solid. Of course, he was probably having an even harder time getting a bead on her - he was lying on his stomach with a PSG-1, but also angling his body so that it was hidden behind the corner of the wall. On the plus side that meant he had to bend his arms pretty unnaturally to aim at Wolf, so his shots largely missed and whenever they narrowly scraped by her, all she had to do was move a few feet over.

But she just couldn’t line up a good shot. A couple times his head had been exposed, but she couldn’t take those - as badly as she wanted to just kill him right now, she knew she couldn’t. Solid Snake himself wasn’t her prey per se — the Patriots were. Solid was going to help her - help FOXHOUND - hunt them down.

As such she was restrained to non-lethal flesh wounds (hence why she’d swapped out her mercury bullets for normal ones... if she’d had a tranquilizer rifle, she would have used that. Perhaps she should look into it sometime), and those were very difficult to do when concrete walls prevented any body shots.

A laser sight shone directly into her scope, and she recoiled instinctively to protect her retina - and a good thing too, a second later Solid’s gun went off and the glass of her scope shattered, and Wolf cried out as she felt a hot pain under her hair. “God-damned fucking donkey shit son a of whore,” she hissed in Kurmanji, clapping her hand to the side of her head, which was bleeding profusely, “he shot off half my fucking ear!”

Abandoning the battle, figuring Solid would assume he won and make his approach, she jogged off down the stairs (leaving spatterings of blood on the ground behind her) and back inside, quickly finding a tucked-away closet with a towel, which she used to wipe all the blood off her, and a small first-aid kit. She tossed her hair out of the way and, ignoring the feeling of her ear canal slowly filling with blood as she tilted her head to keep her hair out of the way, hastily taped a gauze pad over her ear. An inelegant solution, but it would work for now. She could disinfect it and all later. At least she wouldn’t need painkillers, the diazepam made her not care.

Taking her rifle back in hand, she headed back outside and saw that, just as planned just in case, a group of more-intimidating-looking-than-they-actually-were Genome Soldiers had ambushed Solid as soon as he walked up to where Wolf had been stationed. She sneered at the way Solid was holding his hands up and waiting for something to happen, and walked over.

“It’s hard to miss when you’re this close,” she said, keeping her rifle levelled at Solid’s chest. “Toss your weapon over here... slowly.”

Solid, keeping his eyes fixed on Wolf, pulled out his SOCOM, dropped it to the ground, and kicked it in Wolf’s direction. One of the Genome Soldiers picked it up. Wolf didn’t doubt that Solid had more weapons on him, but she also didn’t doubt he was at least bright enough to not try anything right now - that, and she didn’t doubt that it was technically Liquid’s sneaking suit they’d given him to wear, so in a few minutes Liquid would be able to turn out all of his hidden pockets anyway, so to
“You are a fool to come down here,” Wolf growled, still a little pissed about her ear, “stupid man!”

“A lady sniper, huh?” Solid said, raising an eyebrow.

Wolf scoffed. “Didn't you know that two-thirds of the world's greatest assassins are women? Do you want to die now? Or after your female friend? Which will it be?”

“I'll die after I kill you.”

She laughed. Cute. “Is that right? Well... at least you’ve got spirit.” She lowered her gun and ran her hand back through her hair, un-sticking a few strands that were caught in the medical tape - although to Solid it would look like a purely showy gesture. “I am Sniper Wolf,” she introduced herself, “and I always kill what I aim at.”

She walked up to him. He didn’t move, even when she reached out and took his face in her hand.

“You’re my... special prey. I need you for something,” she said. “Got it?”

Solid stared at her blankly. Wolf abruptly raked her nails down his cheek, leaving three long red lines. Solid’s only reaction was a little displeased noise, and nothing else. Wolf scowled.

“I’ve left my mark on you,” she said, “I won’t forget it. Even if you try to escape, I will find you. And as long as I must hunt you, you’ll be all I think about.”

She signalled subtly, and the guard behind Solid hit him hard in the back of his with the butt of his FAMAS. Solid groaned and fell to the ground. Wolf could see the consciousness fading from his eyes as two of the Genome Soldiers took him by an arm each and started dragging him back towards the underground passage and the nuclear warhead storage building.

“He is on his way,” Wolf said over Codec. “Is everything prepared? Has Emmerich been located?”

Liquid’s reply was rather indistinct. Wolf frowned. Oh, of course, it was her right ear, the one that had just been shot and was now filled with blood, that had the Codec installed in it. She’d have to take care of that before she could really get in touch with the rest of her team... she disconnected, and started following the Genome Soldiers. They were headed for the medical room anyway.

“I want no more accidents like the DARPA chief,” Liquid said to Ocelot dryly as Mantis was helping Wolf clean and bandage her ear properly in the corner of the room. Solid was already hooked up to the torture device, more or less horizontal and still unconscious.

“Yes,” Wolf snapped, turning her head towards Liquid and Ocelot and eliciting an annoyed noise from Mantis, “if he will not join us and we must kill him, I want to do it.”

Liquid shook his head - he supposed Wolf had a right to be irritated about having everything above her crus of helix ripped off by glass shards and a 7.62x51mm NATO round. He walked over to Solid and scrutinized him. “Can you hear me, Solid Snake?”

“He’s tougher than I thought,” Wolf grumbled, letting Mantis go back to fixing up her ear.

“Do you know who I am?” Liquid said to Solid, even though he wasn’t getting any kind of response from him currently, “I always knew that one day I would meet you. I always wondered what you were like, what you were doing out there all alone in the world...” He stepped back, more talking to
himself than Solid now. “And now, after the sacrifice of our ‘brothers’… after thirty long years, finally the two of us meet. The brother of light…” he tilted his head, running his eyes up and down Solid’s body. He’d been sent in in *his* sneaking suit alright, but that just meant that Liquid happened to know that all his inventory space was in the top part of it, which was easily removed. “…and the brother of dark.”

Wolf walked over. Her ear must have been taken care of now, because she had her hair brushed back over it and if Liquid hadn’t already known he would have never guessed she was injured. “Is the video feed to my quarters working properly?”

“Yes,” Liquid said, “is your Codec?”

“It should be. Try calling me.”

Liquid touched the side of his neck and a second passed, then Wolf nodded. “I hear it ringing,” she said.

“Good,” Liquid said, “they’re bloody useful, I’d rather as much of the team as possible keep theirs.”

“What about Snake’s?” Wolf said, staring at him. He still hadn’t stirred. “His needs to be disabled, no?”

“He should be using a temporary model like Genome Soldiers’,” Liquid said, “the kind with nanomachine batteries that don’t last very long.”

“And the kind that can be short-circuited easily,” Ocelot said, “high voltage, low amperage. It’ll knock out his Codec, at least until we get it repaired or replaced if we need to, but there’s very little risk of him dying.”

“*Keep* it on very little risk of him dying,” Liquid reminded him.

Ocelot twitched his moustache in annoyance, but nodded anyway. Then he glanced at Solid. “Boss,” he said, “it looks like our friend is awake.”

With his one functional hand Ocelot did something at the machine’s control panel to lower Solid into a more vertical position. Liquid stood in front of him, unable to keep the gleeful smirk off his face, which the still woozy Solid didn’t appreciate.

“There *definitely* is a resemblance,” Liquid said thoughtfully, looking Solid up and down again. He stepped forward, deliberately invading Solid’s personal space, even going so far as to brush a strand of hair off of his forehead. Solid’s lips twitched. “Don’t you think, little brother? or should I say big brother? I’m not sure…” Liquid stepped back again. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter.”

“Eli,” Mantis said abruptly, “there’s an incident brewing in the residential area.”

Liquid glanced at him. “Hm? Is it important?”

“Better not to say in front of Snake.”

“We’ll talk outside.” Mantis nodded and stepped out of the room. Liquid turned around again. “Ocelot, you’re in charge here.”

“What about you?” Ocelot said to Wolf, “wanna stay for the show?”

“I’m not interested,” Wolf said, “it’s time to feed the family.” She pulled out her diazepam and took a
The corner of Ocelot’s mouth twitched. “So, you prefer your wolves to my show, huh?”

“Ocelot, don’t screw up like you did with the chief,” Liquid said warningly.

“Yes, I know,” Ocelot said, “that was an accident. And about that ninja…”

“He’s killed twelve men today,” Liquid grumbled, “whoever he is, he’s some kind of lunatic.”

“Bastard took my hand…”

“Well, we won’t have to deal with him for much longer anyway. Make this little torture show of yours as short as possible, Ocelot.”

“Torture?” Ocelot said indignantly, “this is gentle persuasion.”

“As you wish,” Liquid said dismissively. He looked at Solid again. “See you later, brother…”

He left the room, his coat sweeping dramatically behind him as he did. Dimly Solid noted that the reason why it had looked so worn earlier was because it had obviously, at some point, sustained a long cut in the tail and had been sewn back together, quite skilfully but with the wrong color thread.

“Your woman is still in this world,” Wolf said, walking up in front of Solid and casually feeling up his chest.

“Meryl…” Solid said hoarsely.

“Catch you later, handsome.” Wolf followed Liquid out. Ocelot let out a low whistle.

“Once she picks a target, she doesn't think about anything else,” he said to Solid. “Sometimes she even falls in love with them before she kills them.” He shook his head, a gesture Solid found strangely… fatherly? Perhaps that was too close a relation. Uncle-ly, maybe. “Finally, just the two of us,” he went on, “how are you feeling?”

“Not bad,” Solid replied, “I caught a nice nap on this revolving bed of yours. Too bad I was sleeping alone.”

(“He would never say that if he knew what kind of track record Ocelot has,” Mantis muttered out in the hallway.

“Mantis, focus,” Liquid said, “what’s going on in the residential area? I’m guessing it has something to do with Silverburgh.”

“She has not escaped, has she?” Wolf said.)

“Glad to hear that,” Ocelot said. “This is some bed alright. I’m about to show you some of its nicer features…”

“Where are my things?” Solid said.

“Oh, don’t worry. They’re all here.” He started adjusting settings on the console to the machine. “Washington was taking quite a chance sending you here. Quite the mistake, as it turns out, actually.”

“What are you talking about? And what Wolf said…”
“You’ll see soon enough. Now…” His hand moved over to what Solid presumed was the ‘begin torture sequence’ switch.

“I don’t have any information,” Solid said flatly.

“That’s alright,” Ocelot said right before he hit the switch.

Outside in the hallway. Liquid poorly hid a wince at the screaming emanating from the medical room. His only real consolation here was the fact that the missing hand was probably killing Ocelot’s mood. Then again, he was in all likelihood still high from all the painkillers, and Liquid couldn’t say for sure how that affected Mr. I’ve-had-drug-resistance-training in there.

Mantis shook his head. “Anyway, the guard assigned to Silverburgh, the one called Holwell - yes, Eli, I know that name means nothing to you - he—“ He cut himself off with an annoyed huff as Octopus strolled up to them, peeling off his DARPA chief mask as he did.

“Figured there wasn’t much point in staying around in the cell now that Snake’s been captured,” he said, “what’s going on right now?”

Solid’s screaming started up again as if in answer.

“Oh, I see,” Octopus said, putting his hands in his pockets. “You know… did it occur to any of you that torturing someone might not be the best way to convince them to join your cause?”

There was a long pause. Liquid, Wolf, and Mantis all exchanged glances. Solid’s screaming died off, being replaced with muffled conversation.

“…I kind of figured,” Octopus said, “let me guess: That’s how they did it at Outer Heaven.”

“Well, it was effective,” Liquid sniffed.

“May I speak now?” Mantis said.

“Sorry. Go ahead.”

“For one thing, Silverburgh is about to wake up. For another thing, that guard assigned to keep watch - he’s noticed that she is, in fact, currently injured and vulnerable, and therefore unable to fight back, and he is planning to… take advantage of her.”

“…pardon?”

“Oh, disgusting,” Wolf said, “surely you’re not serious, Mantis.”

“I would never lie about this,” Mantis said, in an even more disdainful tone than he used on even Ocelot anymore. “He thinks he would be able to get away with it.”

Liquid pulled out his SOCOM, checked that he still had a bullet in the chamber, and put it back in his holster. “Well,” he said brightly, “torture’s fine, but I’m not about to let that happen right under my nose.”

“Uh… you feeling okay, boss?” Octopus said.

“Of course I am. Besides, one of us needed to head over to Silverburgh anyway, she simply must see what’s about to happen to Snake and it wouldn’t do if she gets it into her head that she’s free to look away from the video feed.”
“I’ll handle that, boss,” Wolf said, giving him the same mildly confused, somewhat concerned look Octopus was giving him, “you can discipline the soldier.”

“Certainly. Come along then, Wolf.” The two of them headed off in the direction of the sleeping quarters.

“…think you should go with?” Octopus said to Mantis.

“Most likely,” Mantis said, “but… I also want to keep an eye on Ocelot, we have come too far for him to ruin our plans somehow…”

“If you insist. Me, I’m going to go take off the rest of this costume. Seriously, half this nation needs to go on a diet…”

Chapter End Notes

"sewn back together, quite skilfully but with the wrong color thread" describes how I fix all my clothes because all my clothes are hand-me-downs/from thrift stores so they all get holes in them and I fix them
“Holwell, was it?”

The Genome Soldier Liquid addressed jumped and turned around, and saluted. “Yes sir!”

“I’ve just had a rather interesting conversation with my dear friend Mantis - you know, the psychic in our unit,” Liquid said in a very light tone as Wolf brushed past him and the soldier to enter her room, where Meryl was.

“Uh… sir?”

“Do you know what he said about you, Holwell?”

“No sir.”

Liquid’s strained smile widened. “He said you were planning to rape the female prisoner here. Is that true, Holwell?”

The soldier stared at Liquid blankly for a moment, then looked evasively to the side. “Well, she’s just a hostage, sir,” he said, “and it’s not like Geneva convention applies to us, anyway, I mean, Ocelot’s been torturing people with that electric shock machine for like half the time since the revolution started.”

“So it is true.”

“What’s she gonna do about it?”

“Nothing,” Liquid said, “she can’t. She’s injured fairly badly and I’m certain at this point she’s still rather out of it, too.”

“Exactly, sir. Say,” the soldier said, looking at him again, “ya know, if you want, you can join in—“

Liquid shot him in the face.

Wolf poked her head out the door, looking at the dead Genome Soldier on the ground, then back up at Liquid.

“I do not think that’s good for morale,” she said.

“I think getting rid of a professed rapist would be extremely good for morale,” Liquid said. His maniacally cheerful demeanor had dropped, and he was scowling as he changed out his SOCOM’s magazine and pulled back the slide before returning it to his holster. “Unbelievable. I knew the Genome Army wasn’t exactly the cream of the crop, but to think people like this were in it…”

“There are always a few bad people in every group, boss,” Wolf said, “just one out of 150 is actually pretty good.”

“Well, it’s zero now. How’s Silverburgh?”

“Semi-conscious.”
“Wake her up. It’s very important that she sees this.”

“I know, I know, boss…”

The current abruptly stopped, letting Solid’s body un-tense slightly, head lolling as he sagged against the frame. Ocelot watched him appraisingly from under his eyelashes, fiddling with the controls with his one hand.

“You’re a strong man,” Ocelot said, “you’re the boss’ brother alright.”

Solid didn’t reply. His mouth tasted like charcoal.

Ocelot left the control console and stepped closer, but thankfully not as close as Liquid had earlier - not enough to encroach on Solid’s personal space and make him legitimately wary of an unwanted touch. It’d be extra unwanted from Ocelot considering how many rounds of high-voltage electricity he’d just been through.

“Your brother…” Ocelot murmured. “He’s an amazing man. Who else could shoot down two F-16s with a Hind helicopter? The ‘Les Enfants Terribles’ project was not a… total failure. It was actually quite successful, I’d say. Just not in the way they intended.”

What the hell was he talking about?

Ocelot stepped away again, returning to the control console. “He,” he said, “will make my dream into a reality.”

“And what…” Solid cleared his throat. It hurt. Maybe talking wasn’t such a hot idea right now, but he didn’t want to let Ocelot think he was getting to him. “What would that be?”

“You’ll be finding out soon enough,” Ocelot said, starting up the current again.

Meryl was roused back to full consciousness by Wolf roughly shaking her shoulder. She squinted up at her, for a moment forgetting everything that had happened over the past few days and only vaguely thinking that she had overslept and Wolf was just considerately waking her roommate in time for the Genome Army’s morning roll-call. Only she couldn’t quite figure out why she was in bed instead of in a sleeping bag and pad on the floor, surely she hadn’t… done anything with Wolf? Meryl generally considered herself straight even if for some reason she recalled sarcastically telling someone recently that she’d had psychotherapy to destroy her interest in men, so maybe it had just gotten really cold last night.

“What was…” she mumbled drowsily, her mouth strangely dry, “what was that noise just now…? Sounded like a gunshot…”

“That would be Liquid defending your virtue,” Wolf said.

Meryl blinked, extremely confused, and then went pale(r) as she suddenly remembered everything, the revolt, her imprisonment, the ArmsTech president, escaping, meeting up with Solid, getting shot — the wounds in her legs and arm started throbbing hot and painful as though triggered only by her thinking about it. She felt very woozy. She belatedly realized her uninjured arm was zip-tied to Wolf’s bed-frame.

“W-What? What the hell’s going on?!”
“Snake tried to rescue you,” Wolf said, “but he failed.”

“H-Huh!?”

“Look.” When Meryl didn’t react fast enough, Wolf grabbed her hair and dragged her up, forcing her to look at a TV someone had wheeled into the room at some point. It took Meryl a second to figure out what she was seeing - the rumored torture chamber, the so-called medical room, and the centerpiece was a large metal device with Solid Snake strapped to it.

Meryl opened her mouth to cry out in shock and horror, but no noise came when electricity arced on-screen, and Solid started jerking and convulsing. She could see his mouth open like he was screaming but there didn’t seem to be any audio.

“Why?!?” Meryl screamed as Solid stilled, then started twisting in his restraints a little. “Why are you doing this?!” She wanted to look away but Wolf’s fist in her hair kept her face pointed towards the screen, and somehow she couldn’t bring herself to close her eyes.

“This is a terrorist operation, not an actual armed conflict,” Wolf said, “the rules of war do not apply. There is no Geneva convention. We are free to do whatever we like with the two of you.”

“But— please, you can’t do this to him! He doesn’t know anything, I swear!!”

“This is as much about you as it is him.”

Meryl cried out again as Solid started getting electrocuted once more, and she felt tears start to drop down her cheeks and to the blanket below. Weakly she tried to push Wolf away with her injured arm but it hurt to move and Wolf just ignored her.

“In fact,” Wolf said, “I would say this is more about you.”

“Please, no,” Meryl sobbed, “this is worse than torture, please let him go!”

“Mmm… I’m afraid we do not have that option at this point.”

“I-I’ll do anything!”

Solid abruptly slumped. He didn’t seem to be moving now. Meryl’s breath caught in her throat.

“He’s not… he’s not—“

“It seems so,” Wolf said.

“S-Snake’s not… he’s not dead!”

“Look at him,” Wolf said, pushing Meryl’s head towards the TV screen until the shoulder of her zip-tied arm spasmed in pain. “Absolutely still. That last shock must have been too much for him.”

“No way! No way, not Snake-!”

“Even Solid Snake is only human, and humans can only survive so much electricity coursing through their fragile bodies.”

“He’s fine! L-Look, he’s breathing!! See?!”

Wolf let go of Meryl and walked up to the TV, and scrutinized the screen for a moment before turning back to Meryl. “Post-mortem spasms,” she announced, “electricity will do that sometimes.”
“No!! No!!! That’s not true!!!” Desperately Meryl tried to raise Solid on Codec, but… he wasn’t picking up.

No way. No way.

“Noooooooooo! Snake!! Snake!!”

Her sobs returned full force. Wolf watched her for about half a minute, then turned off the TV and walked out, shutting off the lights and closing the door behind her.

“You,” she said to a passing Genome Soldier.

“Uh, I’m still on my patrol route,” the soldier said, “I was just on my way back from the bathro— is that Holwell??”

Wolf glanced at the body of the soldier Liquid had shot earlier, which was still lying on the floor. Whoops. “Yes,” she said honestly, “I will tell someone else to come put him with the other bodies. In the meantime, I need someone to guard the woman in this room here.”

“…woman, huh?” the soldier said suspiciously, looking up from the corpse. In the brief lull in conversation, Meryl’s crying could be heard even out in the hallway. “She’s not going to knock me out and strip me naked again, is she?”

“…what?”

“Um… nevermind,” the soldier said, then sneezed. “Ugh… yeah, I’ll guard her, no problem.”

“Mm.”

Even before Solid cracked open his eyes he took a moment to appreciate how much the aftermath of being electrocuted within an inch of your life felt strangely like the overstimulated exhaustion that followed jacking off one too many times in the same hour. He was numb to his core and yet his skin was excruciatingly hypersensitive, and every breath was ragged and felt like it didn’t quite fill his lungs all the way, but on the plus side it was his hands and feet that ached and felt horribly raw instead of his dick.

He opened his eyes to a maggot squirming its way out from under the DARPA chief’s dull, flat eyeball.

“Gah!”

He sat up quickly, ignoring his body’s protest, and took a second look. Yep, that was definitely the DARPA chief. And he’d definitely been dead for… at least a couple days, it was hard to tell considering his blood seemed to have been drained. But he was starting to decompose - Solid’s senses were still a little fried, but nonetheless he could still pick up the overpowering, sickly sweet, wet stench of something dead.

Except… last Solid had checked, the DARPA chief was still alive…

Very confused, Solid attempted to call Colonel Campbell, but his Codec on the fritz. Huh… it must have gotten shorted out. None of his frequencies were working, not even the non-burst transmission ones. He didn’t have any way to contact anyone. Hell, there wasn’t even a guard in here.

Solid was completely alone.
He tried to piece together what had just happened, and what FOXHOUND wanted from him. What mostly bothered him was Wolf saying something like “If he will not join us…” Of course, he’d only been semi-conscious at best when he’d overheard that, so he supposed he really couldn’t be positive that she had even said that in the first place. And, his mind now returned to that hallucination Mantis had accidentally given him - why had they been talking about Big Boss? He remembered that Big Boss’ body had been part of their demands for the sake of the Genome Army… but that little snippet of conversation didn’t exactly seem like they were talking about anything to do with the Genome Army…

And Solid had never got to hear the rest of the ‘long story’ Miller had promised him. What did he know about the current members of FOXHOUND? Was it anything that would help him escape right now? Not that it really mattered if Solid had no way to get in touch with him…

Solid hauled himself up off the floor and sat down on the bed, hissing as he did. His whole body really was very tender, and keeping his balance for even the few short steps over to the bed had been difficult as his muscles kept twitching and spasming randomly. He held a hand up in front of his face. The skin of his wrist was blistered and white, and while it didn’t look too bad Solid recalled from a million first aid lessons back in his Army days that the real damage behind electrical burns was usually subdermal.

Wasn’t much he could do about that right now, though. Just resign himself to the fact that he was going to be hurting for a long time.

The door to the room his isolation cell was stationed in slid open. Solid glanced up. No one. Huh.

“Hey!”

Huh?

“I’m here!”

Solid sat up, looking around. There still wasn’t anyone there - was he hallucinating again? “Where?” he said cautiously.

“Here.” Otacon deactivated his stealth camouflage, and… that explained why the voice had sounded so much like him… “It’s me,” he said, standing right in front of the door to Solid’s cell, and gestured for him to come closer.

“Otacon!” Said said, unable to keep the warmth - and surprise - out of his voice, standing up and walking over to him. It was easier this time, his muscles had started to stop jerking around so much.

“Wow,” Otacon said, “they even captured you.”

Solid reached through the bars of the door’s window and grabbed Otacon - who didn’t react for a second before going completely stiff - by the hoodie, lifting him up so his heels left the floor and shaking him back and forth. “Hurry,” he hissed, “get me out of here!”

“Let me go!” Otacon whined, eyes wide, hands scrabbling at Solid’s, “that hurts!”

“Hurry up!”

“Is that how you ask a guy a favor? Let me go.” Solid dropped him, and Otacon huffed, straightening his hoodie. “Jeez, it’s like an animal’s cage.” He paused, sniffed curiously, and then leaned forward, trying to get a good look at the interior of the cell. “What a smell…!”
Solid stepped aside, giving Otacon a better view, and gestured to the corpse in the corner. “Because of him…”

Otacon let out a short shriek (“Eeyah!”) and stepped back. “The- the DARPA chief?! How? I thought you said he was still alive!”

“He is,” Solid said, “or at least, he was last I saw him.”

“No way he would be this decomposed by now, anyway… what the heck, Snake? He didn’t have a twin or anything, did he?”

Solid snorted. “Nevermind that. If you don’t hurry up and get me out of here, I’ll be laying next to him.”

“Those bastards!” Otacon said, although he sounded more offended than aggressive. “This lock won’t open with a security card; you need a key like the soldiers carry,” he told Solid.

“So what are you doing here, then?” Solid retorted. Then he blinked. “Actually, what are you doing here?”

“I overheard some of the soldiers talking,” Otacon said, “about how you’d been captured. About how you’d been…”

“…”

“…nevermind. Anyway, I figured you’d probably be here, so I came right away, just to make sure.”

“Make sure? That I’d been captured?”

“Uh… yeah.” Otacon glanced to the side. “But I thought, just in case, I’d bring something that might be able to help…” He pulled a ration out of his hoodie, and handed it to Solid through the bars. “Here. I… I thought you might be hungry. If you need more food, I can bring some more later.”

Solid stared blankly at the ration in his hands. Well… maybe he would have been feeling sort of hungry by now if he hadn’t just been electrocuted, and it wasn’t like he had any food of his own at the moment, since he’d been stripped. But mostly it was just the thought that counted, right?

Otacon seemed to pick up on Solid’s dubiousness, and pulled some other stuff out of his hoodie, handing it to Solid through the bars again. “Also, I got this level six card, it’ll get you out of that torture room. And…”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a handkerchief,” Otacon said, almost sheepishly. “I got it from Sniper Wolf.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know why, but she’s nice to me.”

“Sounds like Stockholm syndrome to me.” Right after he said that he remembered that captors sympathizing with their hostages was actually called Lima syndrome, and Stockholm syndrome was when hostages sympathized with their captors. But he didn’t correct himself — the weird fondness in Otacon’s voice when he talked about Sniper Wolf convinced him that he was right anyway.

“I was taking care of the dogs here,” Otacon was saying, “After the terrorists took over, they were planning to shoot all the dogs. But Sniper Wolf stopped them… she even let me feed them when I
asked. She likes dogs. She must be a good person.”

Solid decided not to point out that Hitler liked dogs.

“Please don’t hurt her.”

“Wake up, you idiot!” Solid said, irritated, “she’s the one who shot Meryl!”

Otacon took a step back, not looking Solid in the face. “Well,” he said waveringly, “that’s all I can do…”

“They’re planning to launch a nuke! I’ve got to stop them!”

“Then you’ll have to get past the communications tower.”

“First you’ve got to get me out of here!”

“C’mon…” Otacon adjusted his glasses nervously, “I’m trying my best…”

“There’s got to be a soldier around here somewhere with a key,” Solid said, “you’ll have to find him, and take him out!”

Otacon blanched. “Give me a break!” he cried, “I’m no soldier! I can’t take anybody out!”

“You have to!!”

“I’ll be killed!”

They both froze at the sound of someone walking none-too-carefully down the adjacent hallway.

“Someone’s coming,” Otacon said in a terrified whisper, backing away from Solid. He turned his stealth camouflage back on. “See ya later…”

“Wait!” Solid called after him. The door slid open, then closed.

He was gone.

Solid stared at the door for a moment, hoping somewhat grudgingly that Otacon would be able to just slip by whoever was out in the hallway, then turned his attention to the ration, the keycard, and the handkerchief.

Wolfs, huh? he thought, raising it to his nose and inhaling. Yup, smelled like her alright. Like gunpowder, mostly, with hints of dog.

As Otacon fled into the hallway, he found that the footsteps he and Solid had heard had belonged to Wolf. He felt oddly relieved. Good, he could probably get away clean, then—

Wolf must have heard him breathing or something because she whirled around, rifle at the ready, and smacked Otacon across the jaw with its barrel. His stealth camouflage deactivated at the blow. They both stared at each for half a moment.

“Mantis said you were in there,” Wolf said with a sneer, adjusting her rifle so that she was now aiming it at Otacon’s forehead. Otacon wanted to believe that hitting him in the face with her gun had been an accident, although it made him fremdschämen a little to think he was probably right about that…
“U-Um,” Otacon said, eyes fixed on the bore of the gun, “if he knew where I was, how come no one came to apprehend me sooner?”

“…” Wolf frowned. “He finds out where people are by looking through their eyes… it isn’t very helpful if the person he is locating is in an area he is unfamiliar with…”

“Ah.”

She shook her head. “Nevermind. You must come with me now.”

“Am I… getting taken prisoner again?”

“Yes.”

She lowered her gun and started walking off, not even glancing over her shoulder like she just expected him to follow her. Except Otacon wasn’t stupid, so he… followed her obediently.

Hey, if he didn’t, he’d just get shot. He knew that.

“At least I’ll get to see Meryl again,” Otacon said, largely to himself, with a kind of weak optimism.

“Oh, no,” Wolf said, “absolutely not. You and she cannot see each other anymore.”

“Huh? Why?”

“None of your concern.”

By that point they were already standing in front of the cells that had once held Meryl and the DARPA chief. Both were empty. Wolf patted him down, presumably for cardkeys, and confiscated his stealth camouflage but left his other belongings alone, then herded him into one of the cells and locked the door behind him.

Great. Right across the hall from Solid, and no guard, either, but Otacon was still stuck here with no options other than waiting around for what he didn’t even know.

“Stay put this time,” she said, “we will decide what to do with you later.”

The door to the room Solid’s cell was in opened and closed again, and when Solid glanced up there was no one there. He got up off the bed, rubbing his arm.

There was a brief spark at the lock of the door to his cell, and then it slid open. Someone was standing there, but Solid couldn’t exactly tell who, since right now it was less a person and more a person-shaped distortion in the air. Stealth camouflage again.

“Otacon?” Solid said, somewhat uncertainly, walking towards him quickly. “So you’re here to get me out…”

The stealth camouflage deactivated. Gray Fox stood in front of Solid for about half a second before jumping up and disappearing somewhere past the ceiling tile that had just ‘spontaneously’ been sliced neatly in half.
(Gray Fox busting you out of prison is something that happens if you go through too many rounds of torture without using any other method of tricking Johnny into opening your cell for you.)
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Remember when I thought getting to 30 chapters was impressive?

“We could always just shoot him,” Liquid said.

Wolf put her hands on her hips. “You told him you would let him live if he cooperated. He has been cooperating.”

“Well, yes, but… no one’s supposed to know Snake’s still alive, so we don’t really have the option of letting him around free…”

“That’s why I put him in the prison.”

“That’s only a temporary solution, Wolf.”

“We could take him with us,” Mantis yawned, “after all, we never did find someone on our R&D team to join our cause. He could be extremely useful.”

Liquid and Wolf both blinked at each other, then turned to Mantis at the same time.

“Was that an actually helpful suggestion just now, Mantis?” Liquid said incredulously.

“Oh, enough, Eli. Just because I find nearly everything you have planned to be completely ridiculous does not mean I cannot contribute.”

“I second the motion,” Wolf said, throwing one arm up, “I think we should take Emmerich with us, and make him use his talents to our advantage.”

“A travel-along hostage, huh… well, I’ll think about it. Mantis, how is the, erm, ‘evacuation’ going?”

“All the Genome Soldiers in the basement of the tank hangar are gone by now,” Mantis said, “the ones stationed in the hangar itself, the heliport, and the dock are filtering out.”

“And they’re all under the impression that they and everyone else have just spontaneously decided to desert?”

“Yes, none of them are any the wiser. Word has naturally gotten around of Snake’s ‘death’, so I am simply letting their fear of being bombed out of existence override their ‘loyalty’ to you.”

“Nice of you to evacuate the Genome Army, boss,” Wolf said.

Liquid shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t think any of them are going to last very long in the wild anyhow. But I don’t want to risk any of them getting in our way as we leave, so… anyway, I’m going to go talk to Snake.”

Five minutes later Liquid came running back into the command room, snow-caked boots sliding the last few feet back to Wolf and Mantis. He was livid.
“Where the fuck is Snake?!”

“Hey, boss,” Octopus said over Codec, “Snake just passed by me, he’s headed to the communications towers now. Didn’t even glance my way…” Of course, why should he when Octopus was rather lazily disguised as a Genome Soldier…

“Good,” Liquid said stiffly. Octopus could tell he wasn’t really paying attention to the call - he was seated in Metal Gear, working on getting it activated and functional before Solid showed up at the maintenance base. As far as Octopus knew the only instructions Liquid had on how to run the thing had been entirely verbal and given three weeks ago, but somehow he didn’t doubt Liquid would figure it out.

“Want me to call Raven and have him intercept and buy you a little time? Last I checked he was hanging out in warehouse, Snake’s gonna have to pass through there.”

“No, there’s no point. I’ll call and have him fall back to wherever the hell Ocelot got himself off to —”

“He’s over in the residential area, he needed to go lie down for a while. Painkillers wearing off, I think.”

“—the point is that I want Snake here as soon as possible and I don’t give a damn if he thinks he’s walking into a trap or not. I want to take him down—!

I know, Mantis, I know!!”

Probably reminding him that killing Solid was the literal opposite of their goal. “Okay, boss,” Octopus said, somewhat skeptically, “by the way, why are there dogs wandering around everywhere?”

“…that would be Wolf. She opened up their yard so they could run free from this place, but some of them just came inside instead.”

“I see…”

Solid was in fact starting to suspect he was walking into a trap. Or maybe he was just extra on-edge because of his broken Codec. He hadn’t happened to run into Otacon again, nor Gray Fox, and for whatever reason the population of the base seemed to have dramatically lessened, leaving most of it in an eerie, empty silence. Where had all the Genome Soldiers gone…? On the rare occasion now that he did pass one, they were inevitably walking anxiously towards the nearest exit. Solid could pretty much prance around the base openly without anyone seeing him.

He had a sinking feeling that, since his Codec was no longer responding, he was assumed dead now. Solid vaguely recalled overhearing while on the USS *Discovery* that the Secretary of Defense fully intended to destroy Shadow Moses entirely if necessary, as a last resort. And Solid’s alleged death just might push him to take that option - and then, Solid really *would* be dead.

This wasn’t just paranoia setting in, was it…?

The door to Wolf’s room opened. Meryl looked up blearily.

“Um, hey,” said the guard, kind of awkwardly, “so, weird question, but… you wanna get out of here?”

“H-Huh?” Meryl said, sitting up (or rather, shifting herself so that she could look at him better
without putting too much strain on her still zip-tied wrist) and rubbing her eyes with her free hand. By now the gunshot wounds had faded to a dull, feverish ache.

“Listen… that intruder who was supposed to take out FOXHOUND - he’s dead now.”

“Yeah,” Meryl said miserably, “I know. I saw.”

“And that’s not really good news for us.”

“Wh…?”

The guard gesticulated vaguely. “With him gone, what’s stopping the government from just blowing us all up? Nothing, that’s what. And I don’t know about you, but I really don’t have much faith in this Metal Gear thing, so I’m, uh… well, I’m leaving.”

“What?” Meryl said, genuinely taken aback even though this guy was a terrorist, “you’re deserting?”

The guard nodded. “To be honest, I was only with them because I was scared of what would happen if I wasn’t. And y’know, I’m not the only one leaving. The Genome Soldiers have all been wandering off for the past hour or so. So if we want to be able to grab a Jeep to get over the glacier back to mainland Alaska, we’d better go now.”

“What do you mean ‘we’?” Meryl said, perplexed.

“Uh… well, do you want to come with me or not?”

She blinked. “…yes!” she burst out, almost without thinking, “yes, I want to get away from this godforsaken place!” Away from the cold and snow and everything that had happened - away from where Solid Snake died…

“Okay,” the guard said, stepping over and pulling out a pocketknife, and cutting the zip-tie. Meryl sat up, shaking feeling back into her hand. “Can you walk?”

“I’m not sure…”

“It’s not very far to the garage, I can carry you if I have to… I guess. But hang on, we’d better grab you something heavier to wear…” He looked around, then yanked open the plain chest of drawers that Wolf had dumped her stuff in. “Hey, these panties look like the ones Sayers was showing off the other day.”

“Huh??”

“Nevermind.” He opened another drawer and pulled out one of Wolf’s coats, and handed it Meryl. She stood up unsteadily, her legs burning but not giving out under her, and put it on.

“Thanks…” she said, “by the way, what’s your name?”

“Oh,” the guard said, rubbing the back of his neck sort of sheepishly, “my name’s Johnny. We’d better go.”

When Solid arrived at the underground maintenance base, he wasn’t surprised to find what he did: Metal Gear REX, already active. The only thing he didn’t expect was that currently the cockpit was wide open and technically empty; Liquid was perched sitting on the edge of it, legs crossed and hands folded on his knee, grinning humourlessly down at Solid like a very handsome but more than slightly unhinged take on a gargoyle. He’d shed his coat at some point, and his chest was instead
completely bare despite this being Alaska in February - the leather collar was a lot more noticeable like this, but Solid’s eyes were drawn more towards the large, upside-down-V-shaped scar on Liquid’s stomach.

“Liquid!”

He tutted softly at Solid’s SOCOM aimed at him. “You’d point a weapon at your own brother?” he said.

“So you’re really my twin brother, huh?” Solid said, relaxing his stance slightly. Liquid didn’t exactly look poised to strike at this exact second, and although Solid knew full well how quickly that could and would change, something told him it would take more than one shot to take Liquid out anyway.

“I wasn’t sure if you ever knew or not - but, it does seem that someone told you. Big Boss?”

“Master Miller,” Solid said, “a few hours ago.”

“Hmm.” Liquid frowned. “I didn’t know he was involved in this… no matter. He always did play favorites. Just like Big Boss did, and it seems you were the golden child in both their eyes.”

“I wouldn’t call it that,” Solid said, eyeing him suspiciously.

“Again: no matter. You know, Snake, I would dearly love to kill you, but you’ve yet to serve your purpose. Your real purpose, not the wild goose chase the government sent you here on. Truthfully, it’s all been a bluff since the DARPA chief died a few days ago without giving up his detonation code - a feint, Snake.”

Solid’s brow furrowed. “A feint?” he said, “you mean Metal Gear isn’t actually launch-capable?”

“Technically it is,” Liquid scoffed, “we can still use it to deliver a payload anywhere in the world, it just wouldn’t be nuclear. Conventional explosives only - which we’re shorthanded on anyway — perhaps we could jury-rig a biological weapon or ‘dirty bomb’, but the threat Washington called you out of retirement for has been nothing but a fairytale for the past several days. But I have no interest in that.”

“Then what do you want?” Solid said.

Liquid stared down at him for a moment, and then his tight-lipped, mirthless smile returned. “Tell me, Snake, do you remember Outer Heaven?”

“…”

“Of course you do,” Liquid purred. “I wasn’t there when you blew up the base near Galzburg, but I was a part of that group inelegantly referred to nowadays as a ‘mercenary company’. It was more than that, Snake, much more.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It was home,” Liquid said as though Solid hadn’t spoken. “We lived and died in a war without end, for no greater cause than simply because that is the only way we could have existed. But things have changed. This world is diseased, Snake, it’s rotting — it’s gone soft. The eternal war ended. People like us - soldiers, warriors - we’re useless and disposable now, and discarded without a second thought. Where’s our place in the world, Snake?”
“I’d rather have no place in a world at peace than a place in a world at war,” Solid said.

“Liar,” Liquid said, his eyes flashing. “I saw your face as you fought with my comrades and killed Genome Soldiers — it was filled with the joy of battle.”

Solid couldn’t answer for that.

Liquid went on. “The world needs a little shaking up, Snake. A little chaos and honor. We need good, honest wars again instead of just waiting around for the next brushfire started by the liars and hypocrites that control society. Conflict will breed conflict, new hatreds will arise…”

“But as long as there are people,” Solid said, “there will always be war.”

“But the problem… is balance,” Liquid replied, gesticulating, “Father knew what type of a balance was best. He never got us into unnecessary skirmishes.”

“So what, you want to be just like Big Boss?”

Liquid didn’t reply for a second, then his expression abruptly changed to an ugly scowl and he jumped up, still balanced on the edge of REX’s cockpit, one hand clawing the metal of its armor to stay upright. “Not him,” he spat, “not that shifty, honorless coward.”

“How-?”

“That man will never be the real Big Boss in my eyes — I’m referring to my father - my real father - Big Boss’ phantom.”

“Hold on, what are you-?”

“The man you killed at Outer Heaven.”

Now Solid was really confused. “Outer Heaven?” he said, “Big Boss survived the Outer Heaven uprising, he… was killed in Zanzibar Land.”

“No! Not him!! His phantom, Snake, do keep up.”

“You aren’t trying to say there was more than one Big Boss?!”

Liquid rolled his eyes. “Of course there was,” he said, “in fact, you could even say there were five of them: the original, his memetic clone, and his three genetic clones.”

“Three…?” Solid said, “wait, clones?”

“Yes,” Liquid drawled like he was explaining a simple concept to a stupid child, “you and I, along with our other brother, Solidus, whom I presume you’ll be meeting within the next few weeks… we were all cloned in a project called Les Enfants Terribles, ‘the terrible children’. The goal was to artificially create the most powerful soldier possible. The person that they chose as the model was the man known then as the greatest living soldier in the world…” (There was a trace of sarcasm as he said the last line.)

“…Big Boss,” Solid said.

“It was all a very long and complicated process,” Liquid said, “I’ll explain it to you later. You and I were used as guinea pigs during the project - but you’re fine, you got all the dominant genes. I got all the flawed, recessive genes. Everything was done so that you would be the greatest of his children. The only reason I exist is so they could create you.”
“I was the favorite, huh.”

Liquid’s scowl returned. “That’s right! I’m just the leftovers of what they used to make you. Can you understand what it’s like to know that you’re garbage since the day you were born!?” Then he relaxed, his face smoothing over. “But that doesn’t matter,” he said, rather serenely, “Father was able to look past all that.”

“…”

He closed his eyes. “And then you killed him,” he said, voice still calm but now it was tinged with rage. “And that’s why I ought to kill you… but consider yourself lucky. I’d rather hold those who engineered his death guilty, even if it means letting you, who carried out the order, go unpunished… at least for now.”

“What are you talking about?”

Liquid clicked his tongue. “Oh, Snake,” he said, gazing down at him in pity, “you poor, stupid fool. But rejoice, brother! You’ve been selected to help usher in a new age of freedom, belonging, and power. The ‘sons’ are being gathered, you see. To bring down the Patriots…”

“The… Patriots?”

“I’ll explain later,” Liquid said again, “right now, Snake, you’re being evaluated.”

“I am?”

“Yes.” Liquid smoothly slid into REX’s pilot seat, and flashed a smile at Solid. “Nothing to worry about - just a simple test of your mettle, to see if you’re really worthy of joining our revolution.”

Why the hell Solid would want to join them after all this aside, Liquid’s eyes said plainly that this was anything but a test. Liquid was just dying to “accidentally” kill Solid.

“Draw your weapon and face me, Snake!!”

Alone in the command room, Mantis sighed behind his mask and watched as Liquid closed REX’s cockpit up and Solid started firing at it with Stinger missiles. As hilarious as Emmerich’s weird insistence on including an obvious design flaw was, Mantis wasn’t too worried that Solid would figure out on his own that he needed to take out the radome and force Liquid to open the cockpit again so he could shoot at REX’s unarmored interior. Plus he’d already decided to intervene if the battle was going too badly in Solid’s favor, even though he knew Liquid would be annoyed to no end and probably would give him the silent treatment for a month. (Besides, Liquid was durable as hell - even if the cockpit had to be opened, it would take quite a lot for Mantis to start seriously worrying.)

Solid’s death was a more pressing concern, but unfortunately for everyone else, Mantis was of the opinion that Solid wasn’t needed, so they’d been stupid to trust him with supervising the fight Liquid had insisted on having, and even pulled rank on everyone to do it — Mantis wouldn’t lift a finger (metaphorically, although gesturing did help him concentrate) to help Solid out even if he were on the brink of death.

He watched REX stomp around the room, occasionally bathed in the light of explosions courtesy of Solid, and idly regretted the fact that the rest of FOXHOUND plus Solid and Emmerich were still too many people around for him to take his mask off and eat some popcorn.
“Nice try, Snake!” Liquid crowed, moving in to crush Solid under REX’s foot. Then, out of nowhere, the last thing Solid would have expected — Gray Fox. He held up REX’s foot with his arms, his exoskeleton straining audibly, giving Solid enough time to stumble back.

“Hurry!” Gray Fox said, “get away!”

“Gray Fox!!” Solid shouted.

“A name from long ago,” Gray Fox rasped, “it sounds better than 
*Deepthroat*.”

“So it *is* you?!”

“You look terrible, Snake. You haven’t aged well.”

“I’ll send you back to Hell!!” Liquid screamed at Gray Fox before Solid could say anything his defense.

Gray Fox leapt away from the Metal Gear, firing a few shots at the shield-like radome before joining Solid behind the crate where he was taking cover. Between the sudden shift in balance and the assault on the radome (which, now that Solid thought about it, might have impeded his view of the hangar, since the cockpit didn’t have a window he had to be relying on something else to see what was going on), Liquid seemed to have lost track of them. REX continued stomping around the room but its guns were still and it actually turned *away* from Solid and Gray Fox’s crate. Solid turned back to Gray Fox.

“Fox, why?!” he said, “what do you want from me?”

“I’m a prisoner of Death,” Gray Fox said, his faceplate sliding back to reveal his natural face - it was just as Solid remembered it, except perhaps a bit paler, with redder eyes and more scars, but it seemed he hadn’t aged a day. “Only you can free me…”

“…Fox…”

“Snake… before I die, there’s a message I need you to pass on…”

“A message?”

“My sister, Naomi…”

Solid nodded. He wasn’t sure it was a good idea to tell Gray Fox that he didn’t know her - he’d just have to find her, once he got out of here. Somehow.

“I’m the one who killed her parents,” Gray Fox choked out. “I was young then, and couldn’t bring myself to kill her too. I felt so bad that I decided to take her with me. I raised her like she was my own blood to soothe my guilty conscience. Even now she thinks of me as her brother…”

“…”

“From the outside, we might have seemed like a happy brother and sister. But every time I looked at her, I saw her parents’ eyes staring back at me... tell her for me. Tell her that I was the one who did it.”

Again Solid nodded. Hell of a thing to tell this Naomi woman whenever he found her, but…

“There you are!” Liquid suddenly called out, opening fire at their crate.
“We’re just about out of time,” Gray Fox said, dropping into a pre-run stance, “here’s a final present from Deepthroat. I’ll stop it from moving!”

“Fox!” Solid yelled in horror as Gray Fox sprinted out towards REX.

Liquid fired at Gray Fox, but he jumped over the bullets - but damn but Liquid was fast, and before even a full second had passed he was sweeping REX’s lazer towards Gray Fox. His arm was severed neatly in a spray of blood, some of it spattering against Solid’s face and he had to look away to wipe the blood out of his eyes. When he looked back up, Gray Fox was perched on a high vantage point on the hangar wall, readying his gun, acting as though he didn’t even notice his missing arm - although granted it looked like his cyborg body had automatically sealed off his major blood vessels, he wasn’t bleeding nearly as much now — and as Solid watched, Liquid pinned Gray Fox to the wall with the nose of REX’s cockpit. It made a sound of metal clanging against metal and Solid thought he might have heard something start to give.

Liquid laughed. “In the Middle East,” he said brightly, taunting Gray Fox, “we don’t hunt foxes, we hunt jackals. Instead of foxhounds, we use royal harriers!”

“Fox!!” Solid yelled up at them.

“How strong is that exoskeleton of yours?” Liquid wondered mockingly aloud, pushing REX forward a little bit more. Gray Fox creaked. “Snake, are you just going to sit by and watch him die?”

Gray Fox’s remaining arm jerked up, trembling a bit, but once he had it fully raised he held it steady and fired off several shots at REX’s radome. It was destroyed in a hail of sparks and bits of shrapnel. “A cornered fox is more dangerous than a jackal!” Gray Fox cried.

“He destroyed the radome…” Solid said out loud, watching as REX’s cockpit opened with a shudder. Liquid was still manning the controls, but scowling. His eyes were wild.

“Impressive,” Liquid said, cocking his head arrogantly, “you are indeed worthy of the codename ‘Fox’! But now you’re finished!”

Gray Fox groaned, his exoskeleton almost buckling under the pressure of Metal Gear pinning him to the wall. “Now!” he called weakly down to Solid, “fire the Stinger!”

“Fox!” Solid shouted again.

“Can you really shoot?” Liquid said derisively, “you’ll kill him too!”

Solid lined up the shot.

“Now, in front of you…” Gray Fox said, his head lolling on his shoulder, “I can finally die…. After Zanzibar, I was taken from the battle neither truly alive nor truly dead... an undying shadow in the world of lights. But soon... soon.”

If he fired now, from this angle, from this distance, Liquid wouldn’t stand a chance. But Liquid was right - neither would Gray Fox.

Gray Fox wheezed. “It will finally... end.”

Solid had already killed Gray Fox once.

He tried to pull the trigger.
…nothing happened.

“I…” he said quietly, “I can’t do it…!”
Liquid moved REX back, allowing Gray Fox to fall unceremoniously from the wall. He hit the ground hard, and made a brief attempt to push himself up with his one arm but then REX’s foot was on his back.

“Die,” Liquid hissed, pressing down.

Gray Fox’s exoskeleton started to warp and spark under all the pressure. He looked at Solid, not with fear or desperation in his eyes, or even resignation - just… relief. “Snake,” he said, “we’re not tools of the government or anyone else. Fighting was the only thing… the only thing I was good at, but… at least I always fought for what I believed in…” Solid could actually see him start to flatten. A bit of blood trickled out of Gray Fox’s mouth. “Snake…”

Solid could only watch helplessly.

“…farewell.”

REX’s foot hit the floor, its claws digging into the concrete. And then it scraped, leaving a wide smear of blood that had once been Gray Fox where it passed.

Solid screamed.

“FOOOOOOX!!”

“Foolish man,” Liquid scoffed, tossing his head so that his ponytail flicked across the pilot seat’s headrest, “he prayed for death… and it found him. And what a ridiculous thing to choose as his final words… you are, and always have been, a tool of the government, Snake. A tool of the Patriots.”

“What the hell are you going on about?!”

“I’ll crush you into dust!!”

Reasonable.

At least Solid had a definite target for his Stingers now - Liquid’s stupid, smug face in REX’s now-open cockpit. The man must be an absolute lunatic to continue coming after Solid with Metal Gear’s delicate innards exposed and his squishy human self seated right where Solid needed to be shooting anyway.

Unfortunately, as Solid soon found, Liquid was, well, indestructible. He was either insanely lucky, insanely good at somehow managing to use the back of his chair to shield himself from the explosions, or insanely adept at not acting like he’d been injured at all. Perhaps, Solid thought, his codename was ‘Liquid’ because shooting him accomplished no more than blindfiring into the ocean would. Bullets just sunk harmlessly into the depths, and the sea felt no pain.

When Metal Gear REX exploded and Solid was thrown against the wall, hitting the back of his head hard enough that he started to lose consciousness, the last thing Solid saw was a bloodied-up Liquid approaching, his expression hard.
“You have done enough damage.”

“Don’t you dare point that at me, Wolf.”

Wolf didn’t lower her rifle - it was still aimed squarely at Liquid’s head, where Liquid was crouching in front of Solid, who was still unconscious.

“We need him,” Wolf said.

“I’m only going to-“

“If I let you persist then it will end with one of you dying. We need Snake, and we need you as well.”

“But—“

“And I would not want you to die either way. You are at a supposed genetic disadvantage in the first place - and you’re injured! You shouldn’t do this and if you insist on it then I am going to kneecap you,” she said very seriously, “twice if that is what it takes to make you stand down.”

Liquid glared at her for a moment, then stood up. He looked down at Solid, lips drawing back from his teeth a little.

“I hate him,” he said. “He killed Father.”

“The Patriots killed Saladin. Snake was just their tool.”

“…I know, I know. This… isn’t fair, Wolf.”

“Liquid…”

Evidently satisfied that Liquid wouldn’t try to continue his fight with Solid, Wolf lowered her rifle. A few moments later, Mantis came strolling up, eyeing the still-smoldering remains of REX warily.

“Not injured too badly, are you, Eli?” he said, turning to Liquid.

Liquid looked down at himself. Okay, blood, yes, and it was in fact entirely his own, but all his limbs still worked and he didn’t feel like he was going to pass out in the next thirty seconds. Would have to do a more thorough examination later for embedded shrapnel or burn blisters or whatever, but…

“I’m fine.”

“Good. The assault on the base could begin any minute now.”

“Right,” Liquid said, staring at Solid again. “Yes. Of course. Let’s grab our things and go.”

“Were you jealous? I knew what I was doing.

“If I could pass your will onto a child I carried… my genes, your meme. The father would be… irrelevant.

“If I did that, the child would be ours.”

Otacon stared up at the dirty ceiling and reminded himself to fix the faint clicking that his old Walkman made whenever he played this tape. It occurred to him that it might be able a problem with the tape itself, but he liked to think it was the Walkman - since the Walkman was replaceable, if a bit
hard to find since the success of the iPod.

That was probably why he kept forgetting to see if he could fix it, actually.

He kept listening.

“Joy… I know you can hear me… you remember my voice, don’t you?

“Please… take care of our son.”

Back when this tape had anonymously arrived at his P.O. box along with a letter detailing his father’s crimes right after the funeral, right after Otacon ran away from home for the last time, he’d listened to it almost constantly until he’d started fearing he’d wear it out. Right now, he hadn’t listened to since he’d been fired from the ERF.

“Hal…”

He closed his eyes.

“Don’t ever be afraid. Whatever happens out there, she’ll be watching over you.”

The letter, which he’d long ago lost in some cross-country move or another, made no mention of Joy or who she was. Otacon had searched for information - in fact, that was what had gotten him fired from the ERF, trying to see if any of the FBI’s database might give him the slightest clue who his ‘other mother’ was — but he’d never turned anything up.

“The system - the framework for your world - will protect you. You don’t need me…

“You just need to be strong enough for the both of us.”

Nor had he been able to find any information about who Zero was. He barely had any idea who his mother was - he hadn’t even known her actual name until he’d gotten ahold of his birth certificate. His father had always just referred to her as Hal’s mother, occasionally appended with ‘late’, and very rarely by the name ‘Strangelove’. (Similarly, it wasn’t until he’d found his birth certificate that he found out that his father’s legal first name was not, in actuality, Huey.)

“Talked… too much…”

Otacon hated this part of the tape.

“I’m glad it’s you… here at the end…

“…I think I hear your pulse…”

Otacon opened his eyes and held the Walkman up in front of his face, still listening to the final bits of ragged breathing and slowly tapering-off heartbeat that marked the end of its playback. Through the window on the Walkman he could see the label on the tape - A.I. Pod’s Final Recording (Copy), in handwriting he’d never seen before or again.

Sometimes he wondered what kind of person would send a homeless seventeen-year-old a recording of his mom’s death.

The door to his cell opened.

“Be glad, Doctor,” said Raven, “it has been decided that you are to come with us.”
Otacon pulled his earbuds out of his ears and gave Raven a weak, scared smile.

*I mustn’t run away*

“Fun,” he said.

Alright,” Ocelot said, rubbing the back of his neck with his remaining hand, “Raven, the addresses on that paper I gave you are safe houses from here to Québec. Pick one and call it good, don’t move unless you need to.”

“Changing location will attract too much attention,” Raven said, “I understand.”

“Boss, you’ll be taking Snake back to his cabin in Twin Lakes - keep him under house arrest there, I’ll be bringing Solidus to join you when convenient.”

“Is that really necessary…?” Liquid whined.

“Yes, it’s absolutely vital that the three of you learn to work together and that process should be accelerated if the three of you live together for a time. Snake’s house is as good as any, with him allegedly dead no one’s going to bother taking a look.”

“And in the meantime I’m the one in charge of convincing him to our side,” Liquid said, rolling his eyes and sneering, “wonderful.”

“Am I-“ Mantis started.

“Yes,” Ocelot said, “you’re going with the boss, Mantis. I have no interest in dying.”

Mantis actually chuckled dryly at that comment. “So I guess Wolf and I are going with Raven?” Octopus said.

“That’s right,” Ocelot said, glancing at Otacon, who was standing quietly behind Wolf, staring at his feet. “As is Emmerich.”

“And what about you?” Wolf said.

“I need to meet up with Solidus’ people as soon as I can - so I’m going with the four of you, but I’ll need dropped off in Anchorage.”

Octopus looked around. “Aren’t we missing something?” he said, “something like a cooler with a severed hand in it…?”

Ocelot’s moustache twitched. “It’s been severed long enough that I wouldn’t be able to regain 100% functionality even if it were successfully reattached,” he said almost with a sigh, “I’m just going to wait for the stump to heal and get a prosthetic. That’s actually exactly why I need to meet up with Solidus as soon as possible…”

“Well, have fun with that,” Liquid said, and then nudged Solid, who was still unconscious on the ground, although at this point also bound and gagged, with his foot. “So this is where we scatter, then.”

“It’s only temporary,” Wolf assured him.

“Our cell phones are still secure, are they not?” Raven said.
“Yes,” Ocelot replied. “You’re still free to keep in touch that way… as long as both parties can get reception.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Liquid said, “alright, let’s go. We’ve wasted enough time as it is.”

Raven and the rest of his group, sans Ocelot, headed for the garage, where there was a van that had gotten passed over by the fleeing Genome Soldiers - largely because Octopus had casually pilfered the keys days ago. Liquid told Mantis to wait there, and left to get the Hind D ready for flight. Mostly he just needed to get as much extra fuel as it could stand on board, since he anticipated still maybe needing to use it even if after they’d landed in Twin Lakes.

That left Mantis and Ocelot alone, except for Solid.

Solid supposed that Mantis, being psychic, would realize that he wasn’t fully unconscious, and was in fact mostly just pretending at this point. Or maybe he just wasn’t paying attention.

“Before I catch up with the others, Mantis,” Ocelot said in Russian - did even Mantis know that Solid knew Russian? - “I have a favor to ask. And you know how I hate to ask favors of you…”

“And you know I hate to give them to you,” Mantis replied, also in Russian, not even sparing Solid a glance. Maybe he really wasn’t paying attention.

“Well, it’s not about me really,” Ocelot said, “just thought you ought to know that I didn’t decide to send you off with the boss because it’d make you happy.”

“Of course.”

“I need you to watch after him.” Ocelot gestured towards Solid. “Liquid, too.”

“Is there a reason why you waited for Eli to leave before telling me this?” Mantis said, eyes narrowed dangerously, “or, perhaps, a reason why you started this conversation in Russian just in case Eli came back before we were finished?”

“I don’t want to offend him.”

Mantis scoffed loudly.

“Mantis, you should know how important it is-“

“Yes, yes,” Mantis said, waving a hand irritably, “I’ll be the mediator. But make no mistake, Ocelot, I’m doing this for his sake, not yours.”

“Wouldn’t expect it any other way,” Ocelot said, then left in the same direction Raven, Wolf, Octopus (which, this was Solid’s first time seeing him here, but now that he thought about it they’d been in FOXHOUND at the same time even if he hadn’t recognized his name up until this point), and Otacon had.

Mantis watched Ocelot go, eyes hard and body language tense, then suddenly turned and crouched down next to Solid.

“I know you’re awake,” he hissed, still in Russian, “I know you understand me.”

Solid decided to not react. He could faintly hear Liquid’s footsteps approaching.

“I have no reason to like your presence, but for now I will follow the plan,” Mantis said, “I will ensure that Eli, that is, your brother, does not kill you. However, I will only guarantee your safety as
long as you do not attempt anything. Eli’s safety is always my priority. …I hope I have made myself clear.”

Crystal, Solid thought.

“What are you doing down there?” Liquid said.

“Nothing,” Mantis said, standing up and returning to English. “It really is amazing how similar he looks to you.”

“Well, we are twins.” He stooped down and grabbed Solid bodily - Solid concentrated on staying convincingly limp - then hefted him over his shoulders with a small grunt. “Come on,” Liquid said to Mantis, “the Hind’s ready and I have the coordinates. Let’s go.”

Raven drove. Ocelot rode shotgun, although he’d be getting off in Anchorage, and was currently asleep. Otacon managed to get a window seat, and Octopus took the other one, and they had Wolf sandwiched between them. The back was filled with what personal belongings FOXHOUND had brought with them - plus they’d let Otacon grab some of his clothes and things, during which he’d found that his DS was missing and got almost irrationally upset, like that was the worst thing that had happened all day, and Wolf had to flatly tell him to stop crying or she would break his nose — most of the space was taken up by Wolf’s rifle in its carrying case and Raven’s fuck-off-huge Vulcan cannon.

On their way out of the base, headed towards the glacier that would take them over the strait and back to the mainland, several dogs chased after the van, barking. Wolf encouraged Raven to keep pace with them and draw them away from Shadow Moses before the inevitable bombing began, but he didn’t adjust his driving at all. After a few minutes, most of the dogs had fallen away, except for a single puppy that was still determinedly yapping after the tires.

“Oh, stop!” Wolf said, practically throwing herself over the back of the driver’s seat, “stop the car!”

This time Raven obliged, and Wolf clambered over Otacon (who went bright red) and jumped out of the car, returning a second later with the puppy in her arms.

“Seriously?” Octopus said.

“Do you intend to keep it?” Raven said in a flat voice.

“Yes,” Wolf said fiercely, “she has followed us all this way, it is only right that I claim her.”

“If you insist,” Raven said, starting the van up again. “But make sure it does not make a mess in the vehicle.”

“I will let you know when we need to pull over for her.”

Another few minutes passed in mostly silence, except for the happy panting of the puppy in Wolf’s arms. Ocelot snored exactly once.

“So,” Octopus said at length, “planning on naming it?”

“Yes,” Wolf said, “her name is Bêdeng.”

“Gonna go out on a limb here and say that’s something in Kurdish…”

“Quiet,” Raven guessed. His voice was strangely solemn.
Wolf nodded. She, too, had a very serious attitude all of a sudden.

Otacon didn’t know what to make of it.

Octopus glanced across Wolf at him. “What’s the matter, doc?” he said, “I’ll have you know we’re a perfectly friendly bunch once you get to know us.”

“You… staged a hostile takeover of my base,” Otacon said, “and now I’m your hostage.”

“Well, yes, but - you just need to get to know us. We’re not a bad group, really… just passionate about our beliefs.”

“Beliefs.” He hadn’t intended for that to come out as flat as it did, but for God’s sake.

“Has no one told him why we staged this rebellion?” Raven said, glancing in the rear-view mirror.

“I don’t think so,” Wolf said. Bêdeng barked.

“I’ll explain,” Octopus said brightly.

...

Otacon really didn’t know what to make of this.

He adjusted his glasses. “Umm… no offense,” he said, “but that sounds like something off of the conspiranet.com forums.”

“You use ConspiraNet?”

“…uh-“

“I do, too!” Octopus said. “I mean, I’m on a lot of conspiracy theory boards and forums, but ConspiraNet’s one of my favorites.”

“Oh… I don’t really use it anymore, I didn’t find the community there to be very… welcoming.”

“Really? I think it’s a lot of fun. For instance, there was this one guy in the Extraterrestrial Encounters subforum who had a Rei Ayanami icon - he always got so mad whenever I poked holes in his logic, it was hilarious.”

“…hang on. pulpo_esceptico? Is that you??”


“So you’re the one who kept derailing my UFO threads!!”

“Otaku1980??”

“Can I change seats?” Wolf said.

“Mantis, can you get the radio?” Liquid said as they were just encroaching on Togiak National Wildlife Refuge’s airspace.

“Certainly.”

“—of Defense, Jim Houseman. The terrorists inadvertently detonated their own nuclear
warhead, wiping them all out and rendering Shadow Moses island inhospitable. Residents of King Cove, Belkofski, and other areas of the Alaskan Peninsula as far north as Nelson Lagoon are advised to evacuate and seek medical attention if necessary. The symptoms to look out for of radiation poisoning are—

“So that’s that, huh,” Solid said, “they nuked the place.”

“Only real way to make sure, I suppose,” Liquid said. “You know they must have planned this.”

“Hrm.”

—estimates of terrorist casualties currently unknown. Civilian casualties consist of: Dr. Hal Emmerich, engineer, age 25; Donald Anderson, head of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, age 64; Kenneth Baker, CEO of—

Solid remembered, vividly, listening to the radio report on the Outer Heaven incident immediately after it happened. They’d called the NATO bombings an ‘earthquake’.

“The Army has reported only one casualty, a special forces member whose name is being withheld at this time pending notification to his family.”

Liquid snorted. “I think your family already knows, brother.”

“Save it,” Solid grumbled, “you’re no brother of mine.”

“You’ll come around.”

Solid tried to ignore him and light a cigarette - Mantis had untied him when they’d gotten out over the sea, after ripping off the duct tape over his mouth so fast and hard Solid was pretty sure he lost half his stubble - but as soon as he had the pack out it flew to Mantis’ hand.

“No smoking,” he said flatly.

“You wear a gas mask anyway,” Solid said, annoyed.

“Don’t and don’t like it,” Liquid called over his shoulder.

“Can’t you just focus on flying the damn helicopter?”

This relationship was off to a great start.

Chapter End Notes

No, ConspiraNet is not a real website. But conspiranet.com totally exists. It is, however, completely blank. Octopus’ username is literally skeptical_octopus, except in Spanish.
Over the wide open space dotted with lakes and rivers between Wood-Tikchik State Park and Lake Clark National Park and Reserve, it finally occurred to Solid to ask, “Do either of you know someone named Naomi?”

Neither of them said anything for a moment, then Liquid said, “what’s this about?”

“Fox’s sister. I need to find her.”

“And Fox’s full name was… Frank Jaeger?” Mantis said. Solid shot him a glance. He wasn’t sure he was comfortable with someone reading his mind like that. “So you would be looking for a Naomi Jaeger, unless she got married.”

“Right… any clues?” Kind of a longshot, really…

“No, I don’t think…” started Liquid, then he trailed off. “Hang on.”

“?”

“Oh,” Mantis said, “that’s right. Eli, you don’t think—”

“What are you two talking about?” Solid said.

“‘Jaeger’ is ‘Hunter’ in German,” Liquid said, as though that explained everything.

“Uh… yeah,” Solid said, “I know. I speak German.”

“I don’t,” Liquid admitted, “but that’s the correct translation, isn’t it?”

“Yup. But Fox wasn’t German, I don’t think… well, he never really told me about his life or family, but I think he was from… somewhere in Africa?”

Mantis shook his head. “That’s not it,” he said.

“FOXHOUND’s previous medical chief,” said Liquid, “was named Naomi Hunter. And Octopus said her only family was some sort of unrelated older brother figure, my god, it all fits.”

Solid blinked. “Wait, really? You think your old medical chief was Fox’s sister?”

“Yes! It explains why she wanted to kill you, too!” Liquid tilted his head back and laughed. “It all adds up!! And why she killed Dr. Clark and released the ninja - because he was her beloved older brother! But you, of course, you’re the one responsible for putting him in that state in the first place, it’s only natural she’d want revenge!”

“Do you have her contact information still?” Solid said, unsure of how to react to most of what Liquid said.

“You really think we’d allow you to contact someone?” Mantis said, “that is a privilege you have to earn, Snake.”
Solid glared at him shortly. “I could do it anonymously. She just needs to hear what Fox told me.”

“What a pleasant thing to hear out of the blue,” Mantis said snidely, “that the older brother who rescued and raised her was the one who made her an orphan in the first place.”

“And anyway it doesn’t matter,” Liquid said, “Dr. Hunter is dead.”

It took Solid half a moment to process what Liquid said. “What? …are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure, I’m the one who signed off on her assassination order.”

“You…” He slumped in his seat, sighing. “Of course. Killing Fox wasn’t enough for you, huh?”

“Come now, Snake,” Liquid said, “Wolf killed Dr. Hunter months ago, on an official assignment, no less. And what happened yesterday - no need to get worked up about it.”

“That was my best friend you crushed under your goddamn Metal Gear.”

“You already killed him once, brother.”

Solid didn’t - couldn’t - respond. He knew Liquid was just carelessly needling him, but he did strike a nerve here — what right did Solid have to be devastated about seeing Gray Fox die in front of him again, when the first time he’d died had been because Solid Snake himself had punched him to death in a minefield?

“Snake,” Mantis said suddenly, “do you wish to seek an end to the system that forced you to face your best friend on the battlefield in the first place?”

“…the Patriots, right?”

“Yes.”

Solid considered it for a moment. Like hell he could trust FOXHOUND, or anything that came out of any of these lunatics’ mouths, but as of right now he was still trapped in a helicopter with two of them (one of them being a psychic who was probably reading his thoughts currently) and he didn’t have anything else to do. So.

“Tell me what you know,” he said.

Ocelot was dutifully dropped off in Anchorage, with Wolf (and Bêdeng) taking over his seat before Raven had even shifted back out of park. His next order of business, however, was not in Anchorage, nor did it have anything to do with Solidus. Not that he’d been lying about needing to meet up with ‘Solidus’ people’ as soon as he could - or even that this would take place in Anchorage - Ocelot just had some time to kill here.

Enough time to rent an unremarkable car from an agency that didn’t ask questions, paying cash and using a false identity, and head north until the roads gave way to trees… and visit an old friend.

He knocked on the door and waited patiently. Eventually he heard, under the sound of dogs barking, footsteps on the other side of it. He kept waiting. The door opened, and Ocelot had just barely enough time to neatly sidestep before the gun went off.

Ocelot glanced down at the steaming hole in the snow by his foot. “Huh,” he said, stringing his voice out into a purposeful drawl, “that would have hit my left leg if I hadn’t moved.” He held up the stump of his right hand. “Trying to make us match, Miller?”
Miller - old, worn, carefully maintained prosthetics, long hair stubbornly dyed blond, same style of sunglasses as he'd worn in the seventies and eighties - glared sourly at him. “Where the hell did you come from? I was told you’d gotten yourself killed.”

“And you didn’t believe that for a second. May I come in? We need to talk.”

“If you don’t get the fuck out of here in the next five seconds I’m going to shoot you, and it isn’t going to be in your leg.”

“It’s very important.” He leaned forward slightly. “About the Patriots.”

Miller went completely rigid.

“May I come in?” Ocelot said again.

“…yeah. Yeah, come in. It’s cold outside.”

Miller ushered Ocelot into the house, closing the door behind him. It took Ocelot a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the relative darkness after all the sunlight glaring off the snow - of course, even then it was still unusually dim inside Miller’s house, dimmer than he’d ever kept his office back at Mother Base, especially considering Miller was still wearing his sunglasses… he really must be blind, or mostly blind. That would explain the lack of any vehicles outside.

Other than that the house was unremarkable. Yes, it smelled like dogs and as Ocelot followed Miller into the living room he saw a couple watching them curiously, wagging their tails but not barking anymore. Pretty, well-fed, obviously lovingly cared for. Miller had a few pictures on his walls (making Ocelot reconsider his assessment of how blind Miller really was, keeping photos was a very visual response to nostalgia): they were mostly of Catherine, largely without Miller in the picture at all, and none with Catherine’s mother, Nadine, and there was also a fairly prominent photo of Miller with his arm slung around Solid’s shoulder back when he’d just been a kid with FOXHOUND. They were both smiling.

Ocelot didn’t miss the fact that the singular photo from before 1985 was a faded black-and-white photograph of a smiling Japanese woman in her early- to mid-twenties manning a cigarette shop with English signs.

“Smoke?” Miller said, offering Ocelot a blunt.

“No thank you,” Ocelot said.

“Suit yourself.” Miller lit up, took a drag, exhaled sweet smoke. “More for me.”

“And here I thought the fact that you’d settled down was attributed to you going to therapy.”

“I did go to therapy - after the divorce, anyway.” He took another drag. “You have a lot of explaining to do, Ocelot.”

“That I do.”

“First off - Shadow Moses. What the hell happened? Is Snake really——“

“I have a question for you first,” Ocelot said, raising an eyebrow. “And depending on how you answer…“

“Shoot,” Miller said, then immediately cringing at his unintentional pun. They both knew that the
wrong answer here was going to end with Ocelot killing him just as he predicted he would- or else the other way around- back in 1984.

“The Patriots, Kaz. For or against?”

“…”

Ocelot stepped into his personal space, smoothly taking his hand and removing the blunt from it. “It’s a simple question,” he said, “for or against? If it came to war and neutrality was no longer an option, which would you chose? Where would you stand, Kaz, if you had to stand for something?”

“…I…”

“Twenty years ago you would have given anything to hunt them down, but after Skull Face died, well - you grew so aimless that it must have been child’s play for them to draw you back in and stick you in FOXHOUND. You’ve played both sides of the field.”

“…as have you.”

“Yes,” Ocelot said. He dropped the blunt to the floor and snuffed it out with a clink of spurs, at the same time grabbing the collar of Miller’s shirt - a tank top in February, really? - and pulling him so close that he could see him blinking and squinting suspiciously behind his sunglasses. “Yes, I have, Kaz.”

“So what side are you on today? Which way do you want me to answer?”

“I’m not about to tell you that. That’s cheating, Kaz.”

Again Miller was silent. His jaw was set, his breathing a touch too deliberate through his nose, ruffling Ocelot’s moustache with every exhale.

“I don’t know,” he said at length, “I haven’t thought about any of that stuff in years.”

“Liar.”

“No, seriously, my therapist said I— mm-! mnn…”

Ocelot would be lying if he said he didn’t find it just a little pitiful, the way Miller stiffened when he kissed him but melted against him a second later, grabbing the lapels of his coat to crush him closer to him. But god, the man probably hadn’t been touched in over a decade now, maybe two, and even if he was in his late fifties by now Ocelot had always been good at giving Miller just the right look, just the right tone of voice to stir up that hate-fueled lust he’d felt for him since the moment they’d met.

Whether or not Miller closed his eyes was his business. Ocelot gazed past his head, deliberating on the framed photograph of Miller and Solid while Miller bit down on his lower lip.

Abruptly Miller pulled back. Ocelot tasted blood, just a bit. Miller licked his lips frenetically, a vague Why the hell did I think that was a good idea expression on his face.

He tried to salvage the moment. “You still taste like you suck a lot of dick, you old-”

“Snake’s alive.”

Miller stared at him. Cleared his throat.
“What?” he said.

“Snake’s still alive,” Ocelot said, “I faked his death in the torture chamber, and Liquid flew off with him bound and gagged in his gunship.” He stepped away from Miller, instead walking over to the wall and taking down the photo of Miller’s days as a FOXHOUND drill sergeant. “I’m gathering the sons, you see,” he said.

“Why…”

Ocelot looked up from the photo, the corners of his mouth twitching in a listless attempt at a smile that probably came across more as him baring his teeth.

“The Patriots are finally coming to an end, Kaz. I’m fixing my mistakes.”

It had taken Liquid and Mantis most of the rest of the helicopter flight to explain who the Patriots were to Solid, partially because Liquid had a tendency to go off on tangents and had by now told Solid in excruciating detail the process by which the two of them had been cloned and how the Genome Soldiers, Gulf War veterans, and ‘Gulf War babies’ were all technically their siblings in a way. Solid made a mental note that Liquid considered abortion murder, although he wasn’t sure if it would ever come up again or if he would even remember it, to be honest. Also, Liquid had ended up being unable to explain how Solidus was born or how exactly his accelerated aging worked (although he did inform Solid of the accelerated aging, he just didn’t say much else about the third-and-final clone)… all he was really able to say for sure was that their surrogate mother hadn’t been the same as Solidus’, he would have heard about it if she was.

“You know Mother, of course,” Liquid said carelessly.

“Uh, no,” Solid said.

“Really…? Surely you’ve met her at least once. Blonde hair, blue eyes, good with a gun, spends a lot of time in the Czech Republic and dresses like a coked-up teenager…”

“…no.”

“He has never met EVA,” Mantis informed Liquid.

Liquid didn’t reply out loud, although his face did light up in petty vindication.

There had also been a general exchanging of backstories, although all three of them elected to provide as few details as possible (even though Solid knew full well if Mantis felt like it he’d just read his memories anyway… mostly because Mantis had pointed that out…). Solid didn’t really get any more information than he had already, apart from Liquid making a passing reference to first meeting his adoptive father, Venom Snake, when he retrieved him out of a war zone and attempted to rehabilitate him - it wasn’t for another fifteen minutes that Liquid casually said they’d attempted to rehabilitate him from being a child soldier - he also mentioned running away from Venom after a few months anyway and coming to America.

As for Mantis, all he really had to say was that he was from somewhere in what used to be Czechoslovakia, not Russia like his official files said, and he’d met Liquid when he was ten (probably) and the latter was twelve.

“And you’ve just… what, been together since then?” Solid said skeptically.

“Well,” Liquid said, “there was a time when we weren’t, but it was only a few years…”
“Oh, right. I was told during the briefing that you went missing in the Middle East for a couple
years.”

“…right.”

Solid noticed that Liquid had clammed up but he didn’t say anything and wasn’t sure what to make
of it anyway.

He also tried asking Mantis about the weird tension between him and Ocelot - switching over to
Russian, which Liquid made a loud, annoyed scoff at but for some reason didn’t comment other than
that.

“It’s simple,” Mantis said, “I hate him.”

“Yeah, it kind of came across that way.”

“No. I mean I hate him personally, not just as part of my general hatred of humanity.”

“…what’d he do to you?”

“To me? Nothing, or at least nothing that matters. To Eli…”

“Alright, I heard my name,” Liquid said, “this is now an English-conversation-only flight. What are
you two talking about?”

“Ocelot,” Mantis said.

“Gathered that, Mantis, I heard his name half a dozen times already - what are you telling Snake?”

“Not nearly enough,” Solid said, “did something happen between the three of you?”

“It’s nothing,” Liquid said dismissively, “I used to be Ocelot’s lover and now I’m Mantis’, that’s all.”

It took Solid a second to process that, then decided that since Ocelot was, what, thirty years older
than them? it was better not to think too hard about it. He presumed that Mantis’ hatred of Ocelot
was just jealousy and if Mantis was reading his mind at the moment he didn’t correct him on that so
hey, maybe that was right.

Also, Liquid and Mantis being shacked up did definitely explain the BDSM collar, if the gratuitous
belts on Mantis’ coat were anything to go by.

Mantis made a disgusted scoff.

By the time they were close enough to Solid’s cabin that Liquid had started attempting to visually
locate it, Solid had somehow offended Mantis and Mantis was trying to prove to him that he really
could read minds.

“You primarily clicked on this fic either out of a sense of morbid curiosity or because of the author’s
reputation, particularly following the doxxing incident that wiped out the original version of this,”
Mantis said, waving his arms around, “but by this point, over 119.7 thousand words into it, you are
genuinely invested in it and want to see how it ends. You also think it’s mildly clever that aireyv
chose to adapt the fourth wall-breaking in this way. And now I’ll read your future: you are going to
be very shocked by upcoming plot twists that will seem blindingly obvious in retrospect.”

“Plot twists?” Solid said skeptically.
Mantis was silent for a moment. Then he glanced over his shoulder at Liquid. “The plot twist is always Ocelot lying to or backstabbing someone,” he said, switching over to Kikongo, “what sort of story would this be if the plot twist were him playing everything completely straight for once in his life?”

“Mantis, that’s enough,” Liquid said, then went back to English again. “Snake, I believe I’ve located your house.”

Solid got up, looked through the chopper’s front window, and frowned. “Yeah,” he said, somewhat grudgingly, “that looks like the clearing alright.”

So they landed. Solid vaguely hoped he’d be able to either get rid of Liquid and Mantis or else take the run out himself once they were asleep, but Mantis intercepted his thought and said that he didn’t.

“Don’t? You don’t what?”

“Sleep.”

Solid just decided to hope that when Solidus came, as Liquid had said he would sooner or later, the addition of a fourth person would shake things up enough that he could escape. In the meantime he figured he’d just tolerate their presence - he was outnumbered, had no way to contact anyone (he’d never bothered getting a phone for his cabin), his presumed death would cause problems with the national authorities anyway and there was no way he wanted to risk involving the local authorities… Liquid would tear them to bits and Solid didn’t even know what Mantis was capable of… and if he was being honest with himself, he was still too shell-shocked from the whole Gray Fox thing to put up much of a fight here. He only hoped Meryl had gotten out of it okay and hadn’t been included in the terrorist death count like the rest of the Genome Soldiers had.

Besides, if he was being really, really honest with himself, he had to admit that their whole thing about the Patriots was… intriguing, if true. So maybe there was just a part of him that was tolerating his captivity just to see where they were going with this.

Despite Solid being under house arrest, Liquid had enough tact to act like he and Mantis were unwanted guests rather than serious threats to Solid’s life if he didn’t cooperate. He allowed Solid to set the house rules - “The huskies will stop barking and growling at you eventually, in the meantime if you lay a finger on any one of them I’m going to shoot you, consequences be damned… but petting is okay, I guess…” “I smoke in the house and if you don’t like then you can go outside!” “It takes forever for the water to heat up this time of year, so if you want a hot shower then you’re only allowed to actually be in it for five minutes.” - and demanded that he show them around, although there wasn’t much to see.

Mostly it just cold and cluttered and hadn’t been properly cleaned in years, the doors and windows needed to be fixed bady, and stank like whiskey, cigarettes, and his fifty huskies, all of which had names. Solid insisted on telling them what all their names were (and he named nearly all of them after people he’d known at some point, or names he’d heard on the radio or read in the paper, and there were multiple dogs named after brands of cheap liquor) even though Liquid told him up-front that he would never remember any of this because nearly all of the dogs looked identical to him anyway.

“And this is Diane,” Solid said, patting the head of a fat tan-coated husky. “She’s pregnant, should be giving birth three weeks from now.”

“Weren’t you supposed to be in the middle of the Iditarod three weeks from now?” Liquid said. (Solid had mentioned that on the flight over, when Mantis had referenced his alcoholism and Liquid
asked why he wasn’t getting the shakes or anything - the reason being that Solid had gone cold turkey as his New Year’s resolution so he could participate in the Iditarod sober.) (Solid sure as hell craved getting blackout drunk now, just to drown the memories of killing Gray Fox again, but when he’d quit in January he’d gotten rid of all his alcohol, even the disinfectant kind, so he wouldn’t give in to temptation. And with Liquid and Mantis here it wasn’t like he could make a quick run to town and add another couple hundred dollars to the liquor store debt that he still hadn’t paid off…)

“There was a guy in town she was going to stay with, just in case… the rest of my dogs would have been fine on their own for a few weeks, though.”

“I should hope so,” Liquid said, “they’re half-feral anyway.”

Solid had a car but it hadn’t been used in about five years, since not long after moving here he’d been arrested for drunk driving and, since he couldn’t afford the fine, the judge had given him the choice between attending an alcoholics recovery program or forfeiting his license and being blacklisted from getting a new one. Solid had taken up dogsledding. The car remained exactly where it was since then, slowly rusting, tires deflated, gasoline still stocked up but pretty well frozen this time of year. Liquid filed that information away for later.

Also, as it turned out the sleeping situation was already conveniently, unintentionally handled. Not only did Solid have a couch, but he also had a spare room - several spare rooms, actually - and one of them had an unused queen-sized bed. The mattress had obviously and noticeably been purchased used, and the boxspring seemed ready to fall apart, but the bed-frame was in excellent condition and Liquid was able to find sheets after half an hour of snooping through Solid’s things. He wondered why Solid even had the extra bed when he clearly lived by himself, and moreover why he slept on a twin bed with a rickety frame instead of the other bed, but Solid had refused to comment. Mantis answered for him: “Waking up in the middle of the day with hangover is depressing and lonely enough without doing it in a bed meant for two people.”

So Liquid and Mantis took over the ‘storage’ room next to Solid’s bedroom, and Solid was glad to temporarily get them out of his hair.

It didn’t last. A few hours later Liquid was criticizing the sorry state of the house - Solid caught Mantis rolling his eyes behind his back - and got on the subject of food. “I assume you hunt for your food out here - how do you cook it? I didn’t see a smokehouse or anything.”

“I mostly just boil everything,” Solid said honestly, “that way if I overcook it, I just end up with broth or stock that I can use for soup.”

“That’s…”

“—disgusting,” Mantis finished his sentence for him.

“I was actually going to say that doesn’t sound that bad.”

“That is because the English do terrible things to their meat, Eli.”

Liquid’s face changed to a hilarious pouty one so fast that Solid couldn’t help but snort, which caused Liquid’s expression to return to his previous slightly disdainful one in an instant, although he was clearly a little bit embarrassed. “You can’t survive off of just meat, though, you’ll get scurvy.”

Solid shrugged. “I can forage for berries part of the year,” he said, “and I stock up on canned fruit every few months in case I crave something sweet.”

“…when was the last time you ate a vegetable?”
“Are beans and potatoes vegetables?”

“…”

Solid narrowed his eyes slightly. “Picky eater, huh?” he said.

“No,” Mantis volunteered, “he will eat anything he can get his hands on, he just likes complaining.”

“Mantis!” Liquid cried, his face going red.

Solid shrugged. “Hope you like rice,” he said, “aside from venison, it’s about all I have.”

Chapter End Notes

Venison here = caribou meat. Also I’m pretty sure you’re not supposed to boil venison but it’s already canon that Solid doesn’t know how to cook
Meanwhile in the Yukon Territory, a very dull car ride - occasionally interrupted by Raven pulling over so Bêdeng could go do her business outside for a few minutes - had been somewhat livened up by talking about the past. Mostly the discussion was monopolized by Wolf, who turned around in her seat to describe what Kurdistan was like to Otacon.

“Hunted like dogs day after day, driven from our ragged shelters... that was my life. Each morning, I'd wake up and find a few more of my family or friends dead beside me. I’d stare at the morning sun and pray to make it through the day. The governments of the world turned a blind eye to our misery. But then... he appeared. My hero, Saladin - Liquid’s father - he took me away from all that.”

Otacon wasn’t really sure how to respond. Raven and Octopus didn’t at all, they seemed pretty used to Wolf talking about this sort of depressing thing, in fact.

The thought occurred to Otacon that, her being Kurdish and all, Wolf was probably Muslim... or used to be, anyway, she certainly didn’t seem to be *practicing* anymore if her absolute cleavage was anything to go by... Otacon thought his grandmother wouldn’t approve. If she were still alive. Which she wasn’t.

Wolf described a mercenary group headquartered at an offshore platform near Seychelles for a while (mostly talking about a sniper named Quiet, which started to explain the exchange re: Bêdeng’s name earlier), with Raven occasionally interjecting - he’d joined up with the same group two or three years after Wolf was picked up.

“You know, Raven,” Octopus said suddenly, “I’ve never asked why you joined Outer Heaven.”

“Why...?” Raven said. “Do I need a particular reason?”

“I guess not. But it’d be interesting to know, I mean, the boss and Wolf were both war zone kids that they took in, and I guess so was Mantis in a way, and Ocelot helped *run* the place, didn’t he? But you...”

“That is a good point,” Wolf said, “how *did* you end up there? Just for the glory of it, or were you supporting your family?”

“No,” Raven said, “I joined because I already knew Ocelot, and I had recently left Vympel and needed a job. My only living family at that time was my mother, and she did not need my financial support.”

“What happened to your father?” Octopus said, somewhat insensitively in Otacon’s opinion.

“He did not like living so far south, so he moved back to his village in the North Slope Borough when I was very young. I stayed in Metlakatla with my mother,” Raven said. “I do not think he and she ever divorced, in fact, they stayed on good terms and I did spend many summers with him. However he died in a whaling accident when I was fifteen. My mother passed on due to a heart condition two years before I joined FOXHOUND.”

“What did your mother think of you joining a mercenary group, though?” Otacon ventured to ask.
Raven chuckled. “She said I was just like my grandfather,” he said, “her father. He was part of the Alaska Territorial Guard, the Eskimo Scouts, in World War II. He perished during the Aleutian Islands Campaign.”

“I wonder what my grandfather was like,” Wolf said thoughtfully, “or my parents. I do not remember them. I can hardly remember which people from my childhood were blood relatives of mine, or neighbors I had become close to.” She turned in her seat again. “What about you, Dr. Emmerich?” she said, “do you have any family who would be sad that you are allegedly dead? I heard that your father used to work for Outer Heaven back in ’84, and I think during the seventies too.”

Otacon winced at both of the last two sentences. “Uh, he did, but no,” he said, “I mean, I’m sure my stepmother’s still around and I had a sister- well, a stepsister, too, but I haven’t gotten in touch with either one of them in a while.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Octopus said, “your dad’s dead, isn’t he?”

“What about you?” Otacon said, trying to deflect this entire line of conversation, “your family, I mean.”

“Aha,” Octopus said, “both my parents are still alive and they live with my older brother near Campeche. And I’ve also got a little sister who lives in Puerto Vallarta with her family - she married a nice Catholic boy and they have three kids now and another one on the way last I heard.”

“Really?” Wolf said, raising her eyebrows. “You never told us about that before.”

“No one ever asked.” He kicked back in his seat a bit. “I’m pretty sure our names and faces aren’t going to make it on the news, but I wonder if the Army will tell them I’m supposed to be dead? They definitely won’t be happy about that… my mama was my biggest fan back when I still worked in Hollywood.”

“I thought you were an SFX artist, not an actor,” Raven said.

“I did some acting. But mostly she’d just look for my name in the credits and then make me pay for an international call so she could criticize the lead actress’ makeup.” He sighed. “You know, if we ever get the opportunity, I’d like to call home and tell my family I’m safe. Don’t want them to worry.” He cracked a grin. “Maybe I’ll even tell I’m working on saving the world. My nieces and nephew already think their Tío Pulpó is a superhero anyway - they’re just kids, all they think an American special forces group would do is fight bad guys, like the Coast Guard versus the Narcos. They don’t know how many innocent people I’ve killed. And what’s my sister gonna do, tell them? She’d rather tell herself they’re right.”

Otacon sort of wished he didn’t ask.

The safe house they decided to put themselves up in to start with was the third address on Ocelot’s list, one outside of Tulsequah, British Columbia. Otacon was initially concerned about the fact that the house only had two beds and one couch, but as it turned out that for the FOXHOUND members it went without saying that they would sleep in shifts so that at least one of them was always awake. As such, they only needed two beds. They let Otacon have the couch all to himself. (Wolf insisted they offer one of the beds to Otacon, but Otacon declined anyway, since he was kind of uncomfortable with the idea of sleeping in a bed that had just been occupied by someone else.)

“So this is it, huh,” he said.

“It isn’t a bad house,” Wolf said, looking around. Bèdeng barked and started tugging on the cuff of
Otacon’s jeans. Wolf looked down. “I think she likes you.”

“I… I guess that’s good…”

Octopus quickly found that the cable bill was evidently something whoever maintained this house kept up on. (They’d neglected to ask if this was provided via Solidus, Ocelot’s own initiative, or if it was a Patriot holding that they could squat in without being checked up on. Ocelot had never volunteered the information himself.) He turned on the TV, switched over the news, and found that every station was all over the nuclear detonation on Shadow Moses Island.

“Oh my gosh,” Otacon said quietly, staring at the screen.

“I am not surprised,” Raven said, “they would have wanted to eliminate all traces of what they were building there.”

“Kind of drastic, though,” Octopus said, crossing his arms, “I mean, look how many towns they’re evacuating.”

“…three?” Wolf said. She hadn’t been watching the TV very attentively, instead sitting on the other side of the room and changing the bandage on her ear.

“It could be worse,” Raven said, “it could be much worse.”

“This is… kind of surreal,” Otacon said, “being listed as a casualty, I mean.” He grimaced slightly. “They’re using the photo ArmsTech took for my ID card, too… that was a terrible picture…”

“Better get used to it,” Octopus said, “if I know the media - and I do - they’re going to turn this into a big crusade against the President and they’re going to turn you into a martyr for it. After all, you were the youngest civilian there, brilliant, bright future, nonthreatening appearance, white - and the other two civvies were a scumbag CEO and a political figure.”

“…”

“He may have planned it this way,” Raven said.

“Who?” Otacon said, blinking.

“The President.”

“Oh. Right.” Yeah, they’d mentioned the President being with the Patriots but not really because he was their CO in this whole secret war revolution thing except he couldn’t cut ties with the Patriots just yet. Maybe he’d use a media campaign against him to resign and do exactly that. “I guess so.”

“I think,” Wolf said, pulling off another strip of medical tape, “that it is more likely that Ocelot planned it this way. Perhaps he had something to do with the boss deciding to release all but four of our hostages…”?

Raven and Octopus agreed. Otacon didn’t say anything. He mostly knew Ocelot as the guy who’d asked him some weird questions about his father - in retrospect, he must have just been trying to see if he already knew anything about the Patriots, which his father might have known - and later tortured Solid, so he wasn’t sure that him planning anything was a good sign.

Liquid, who really had run himself to exhaustion with the whole Shadow Moses incident, was eventually persuaded by Mantis to just go to bed - and while he’d protested that he wasn’t tired even
as he was lying down, he was asleep within literal seconds of his head hitting the pillow. Mantis pulled a blanket up over him and set about organizing the room they were in, just a little, for his own sake.

When Liquid woke up the next morning at his usual time, long before sunrise, both he and Mantis could already tell it was going to be yet another one of those days when Liquid had more energy and motivation than he knew what to do with. Mantis reminded him that picking a fight with Solid (who was still asleep at this point) was not a productive use of his time, especially considering his minor burns and moderate lacerations from REX blowing up with him inside it were still healing. Liquid acquiesced, and produced Otacon’s DS from his suitcase, deciding to stave off boredom by playing Pokémon Emerald.

“You shouldn’t have stolen it from him,” Mantis scolded. “Wolf and the others are going to have a hard enough time keeping him in an emotionally stable state as it is without you making things any more stressful for him.”

“What? I’m only borrowing it,” Liquid said defensively, “I’ll give it back next time I see him. Besides, it’s just a game system, it doesn’t matter that much.”

“It is a comfort item for him!”

Liquid just shrugged; not much he could do about it now anyway. Mantis implied he’d punish Liquid for being so rude later, and then explicitly said as much when Liquid started a new game and saved over Otacon’s old one. Much to Liquid’s disappointment, though, he wouldn’t just do it now because with their current relatively cramped living conditions he’d rather wait until Solid was asleep.

As far as Solid went, later in the day he discovered he’d run out of cigarettes and decided to make it into a big deal.

“If I can’t leave the house,” he said firmly, shaking his empty cigarette box at them a little, “then one of you needs to go into town and get me a couple more packs. And you should pay, too.”

“Fine,” Liquid sniffed. “Except how do you expect either of us to get there? Isn’t the nearest town miles away? Do you expect us to ride a dogsled like you do? I can’t image flying the Hind there will go over very well and besides, we need to conserve the leftover fuel.”

“I’m pretty sure the car still works.”

“The petrol is frozen.”

“I can un-solidify it,” Mantis said.

Solid blinked. “How?”

Liquid just waved him off, then blinked, like he’d suddenly realized something. “Mantis, a word,” he said, grabbing his arm and pulling him into a different room.

“I do not want you and Snake alone together,” Mantis said before Liquid could say anything, “you should go.”

“No. I don’t want you and Snake alone together. I’ll stay here, you go.”

“Eli, I’m not confident that the two of you would not get into a fight while I am gone.”
“We’ll be fine.”

“But-“

Liquid put a finger to his lips and thought, _I don’t trust Snake not to assault you in an attempt to escape - and we went over this at Shadow Moses, Mantis, he could overpower you._

“Tch.” _How ridiculous. You have that little faith in me, Eli?_

_It’s not about how much faith I have in you, it’s about how concerned I am for your safety. Even if you anticipated the attack and took steps to protect yourself, what’s the likelihood that that would involve fleeing? And if I’m not here, and Snake is left alone, he’ll surely run…_

_I will just make sure he doesn’t._ Mantis spoke out loud again. “I still do not want the two of you alone together. You should go.”

“Mantis, it _really_ isn’t-“

Solid stepped into the doorway. “You didn’t answer how you were planning on un-freezing the gasoline,” he said flatly.

“I can heat things with my psychic powers,” Mantis said.

“…heat. Gasoline. _Psychic powers._”

“If it’s a _low_ heat, that should be alright,” Liquid said, “just enough to get it melted and usable again. I wouldn’t exactly call that a combustion risk.”

“No, but I’d say that shows a dangerous lack of common sense,” Solid said. “I don’t think I trust you two with gas. At least, not near my dogs.”

Liquid scowled at him. Then, again, he blinked like he’d suddenly realized something and turned to Mantis. “_You_ don’t need petrol to work a car,” he said, “you don’t even need an engine.”

“Eli…”

“So you _have_ to be the one making supply runs, it’s very simple, really.” He started pushing Mantis out towards the door. “Don’t worry about Snake and I, I assure you we’ll get along _just fine_ with you gone for an hour or two. Snake, where’s the nearest town?”

“Port Alsworth, south and a bit west of here,” Solid said, “it’ll take you a couple hours just to get there. But the liquor store sells the brand of cigarettes I like and there’s also a general store if you feel the need to pick anything else up.”

Mantis looked like he might protest for a moment, then sighed, put on his coat (which Solid hadn’t seen him without the entire first day, and when he got dressed this morning he’d put on a sensible if too-loose turtleneck sweater, _under_ which he wore his usual self-bondage), and headed out the door. “Behave yourself,” he said to Liquid pointedly. Liquid rejoined with a grin that Solid could only describe as ‘seductive’.

To Solid’s surprise, Liquid decided that he’d rather not cross Mantis and didn’t actually try to fight with Solid… which was fine by him. The only problem was that Liquid kept coming to bother him, not by talking or even interacting with him really, but just walking by to see if he was still there. Other than that he continued playing his game for a while, but _Pokémon Emerald_ was no match for his need to burn energy so about mid-afternoon he decided to clean Solid’s entire cabin top to
It was past dark when Mantis came back. A very tired-looking Solid greeted him at the door. ‘80s music was loudly playing in the cabin.

“Did you get my cigarettes?”

Mantis silently handed them over.

Solid sighed, immediately taking one out and lighting up. He took a drag, exhaled smoke for a long while, then said, “is he always like this?”

“Like what?” Mantis said.

Solid opened the door the rest of the way. From here it was visible that Solid’s miscellaneous junk had been moved around, the floor swept, and Liquid was in the background with his sleeves rolled up, dusting the wall with a rag.

“No,” Mantis said, stepping in, “normally he is a complete slob. He is just bored.”

“I… I see…”

“Don’t insult me, Mantis,” Liquid said indignantly, turning around, “I know you’ll at least appreciate having this dump cleaned and organized.”

Mantis looked around, then looked Liquid up and down, and said, “you really did not have to put on an apron in order to do this.”

Anchorage, Alaska.

“—and, of course, all the design data for Metal Gear REX,” Ocelot said, handing the floppy disk over to Colonel Jackson. “To be honest, I don’t think Snake ever noticed I took it out of his things.”

“Your work is always appreciated, Ocelot,” Colonel Jackson said, carefully putting the disk into an interior pocket of his coat, “now, about FOXHOUND…”

“Alive, but scattered,” Ocelot said, “where precisely they all are is my business.”

Colonel Jackson narrowed his eyes slightly. “So untrusting of us,” he said.

Ocelot shrugged. “In my line of work, it pays to be untrusting. Even my closest allies I keep on a need-to-know basis.”

“Closest allies,” Colonel Jackson scoffed under his breath, then said in a normal volume: “well, is there anything you’ve decided President Se- I mean, Solidus needs to know right now?”

“Not that I can’t tell him myself when you bring me back to D.C.”

“Just admit that you think Dead Cell is a Patriot plant…”

“Of course I don’t think that,” Ocelot said smoothly, “after all, none of you are stupid enough to dare involve yourself with the Patriots right under Solidus’ nose. Apropos of nothing, how’s your wife?”

Colonel Jackson swallowed audibly. “She’s fine,” he said. He glanced down at Ocelot’s right arm - he’d kept it in his pocket almost this whole time, but Colonel Jackson had already seen the way it
ended at the wrist. “About your arm…”

“It’s all handled already, I can take care of it once I leave D.C.,” Ocelot said.

“Really…?”

“If you must know, I’m meeting up with someone in eastern Europe who can introduce me to a bionics specialist.”

“Eastern Europe, huh,” Colonel Jackson said, “that’s… vague.”

“That’s none of your concern,” Ocelot replied. “Take me to Solidus.”

From Anchorage it was a tense, silent flight in a Learjet C21-A to Naval Station Everett in northeast Washington, where the Learjet was refueled and then they were off to Washington, D.C. Ocelot texted Mantis just to ask if Solid and Liquid had killed each other yet, and judging by the deliberate lack of a response he could assume that they hadn’t. Texting Raven, he was informed that they were settled into one of the safe houses (Raven didn’t say which one; Ocelot didn’t ask) and were having no problems with Otacon although the poor man was scared out of his mind and had gotten very attached to Bêdeng, presumably as a form of coping.

When they landed in D.C., it was very late at night, or rather very early in the morning, but Ocelot had slept on the flight here so once he was off the Learjet he went straight to the White House. On his way in, walking along the sidewalk in front of the south fence, a popular place for tourists to take pictures with the White House in the background, Ocelot noted the abandoned signs littering the ground that hadn’t been picked up yet. Looked like people had been protesting whatever perceived mismanagement lead to the detonation of a nuclear weapon on American soil by terrorists, but had been dispersed some time ago. It must have been raining earlier, because the ground was damp and the protest signs soaked, ink and paint running and smudging into illegibility.

“The media moves fast, doesn’t it?” Ocelot said, stepping into the Presidential Bedroom. Solidus was still awake, although sitting up in bed, reading, with a single lamp on.

“Yes,” Solidus said, barely glancing up at Ocelot and turning a page. “But it’s just as you said… Emmerich makes for a convenient martyr. Sooner or later Congress will move against Houseman - once it’s been assured that he’ll take the legal responsibility for this, I’ll step down and… disappear.”

“Not letting Houseman know that you were aware of the situation was a wise move, sir.”

“Indeed. Although START III ended up being more of a hassle than I anticipated - shame I couldn’t take advantage of the fact that I already knew my trip to Helsinki was going to be interrupted. How’s your arm? I heard…”

“It’s fine, sir.”

Solidus nodded, then marked his place in the book, put it down, and gestured for Ocelot to join him on the bed. Ocelot did, hiding a sigh as he did.

It had always been obvious, Ocelot reflected as Solidus methodically took off his clothes, that in Solidus’ mind all this ever was was just taking for himself what rightfully belonged to Big Boss.
“Tío Pulpo” just means “Uncle Octopus”. Yes, he referring to himself by his codename even when talking about his personal family life. No I won’t ever give anyone in FOXHOUND an actual name even if I am willing to make up backstories for them.

The mention of the Learjet being refueled in NS Everett is because the Learjet (yes, an actual Navy aircraft) has a range of 3,290 miles and the as-the-crow-flies distance between Anchorage and D.C. is roughly over 4,000 miles. However, between Anchorage and NS Everett it’s about 2,000, and NS Everett to D.C. is under 3,000. Incidentally, the Huron mentioned in earlier chapters I did look up to ensure that shuttling from The Vague Place In North Dakota Where FOXHOUND Headquarters Is and both D.C. and King Cove in one flight was feasible. (Don’t ask me why I placed FOXHOUND hq in North Dakota…)}
Chapter 34

An unanticipated problem about Solid’s cabin was that everything that happened in the ‘storage’ room Liquid and Mantis were put up in was perfectly audible in Solid’s bedroom. Perhaps that wouldn’t have necessarily been a problem, but Solid was a pretty unfortunately light sleeper when he didn’t have alcohol in his system.

That was how he learned that Liquid could probably medically qualify as a nymphomaniac.

Every. goddamn. night, and sometimes during the day, he was going at it with Mantis somehow; half the time it sounded like Mantis turned him down and that always lead to an argument, and as Solid had found from other situations where they’d started bickering about something - thankfully they had the sense to keep their fighting either in a low whisper or completely silent, apparently communicating mentally, or in a language Solid didn’t speak so Solid didn’t have to know what was causing so much contention in their relationship — they always fucked after they argued.

They didn’t so much keep their voices down when they fucked. Or, at least, Liquid didn’t. The first night - or rather, their second night here - Solid had been woken up around eleven o’clock to the sound of Liquid moaning. He heard Mantis sternly tell him to be as silent as he could be Snake can hear us he is awake right now, oh my god Eli shut up — and Liquid’s response had been bouncing around Solid’s head for close to two weeks now.

“I don’t care. Let him hear. What’s he going to do about it?”

Granted in real life Liquid had stammered quite a bit more than he did in Solid’s memory of it, and immediately after he said that from the sound of it Mantis had smothered him with a pillow until he started kicking the bed, but still. The scornful What’s he going to do about it? came to Solid’s mind whenever he curled up on his bed with his back to the wall dividing his room and theirs, and tried not to listen to way Liquid whimpered and gasped and was probably just melting against the bed as Mantis did whatever he liked with him, and tried to ignore the way the noises carried through the wall sent a familiar but currently unwanted jolt to his groin.

He’s your brother, he told himself, aghast. And when that didn’t do anything to calm down his dick he reminded himself that he was technically their hostage and oh god, Mantis was psychic, what was the likelihood he didn’t realize they were having this effect on Solid? He hadn’t said anything one way or the other, and also hadn’t ever stood his ground when it came to telling Liquid no.

Solid just let himself get blue balls at night, too perturbed to do anything else, and then in the day he’d take care of it — maybe it was because he’d lived alone for so long but quite frankly he just had a habit of masturbation and while he tried to find privacy for it, mostly by hiding in the bathroom, there had still been several occasions when Liquid (never Mantis) walked in on him. And while he didn’t apologize for barging in on him he did always get extremely - unusually? - flustered and leave, slamming the door behind him. But he never gave any indication that he might have wondered if Solid’s jacking off was in any way related to his nightly escapades after arguing with his boyfriend.

But Jesus Christ though, why did they argue so much??

In the meantime, Liquid was still trying to convince Solid to join their crusade. Solid wouldn’t exactly say he was coming around on it, but he also couldn’t exactly say he didn’t believe them - mostly because of how much information had been withheld from him at Shadow Moses, that was pretty suspicious - and when Liquid told stories about his father, Solid could see (even if Liquid was clearly biased) exactly why Liquid was so hung up on destroying the system he thought of as being
responsible for Venom’s death. (Solid was just glad that the question that had haunted him for a
decade now - how had Big Boss survived the Outer Heaven uprising? Solid had killed him
personally - was finally answered.)

Solid also found himself getting along fairly well with Mantis — although by Mantis’ own
admission, he was only hanging out with Solid because he found it interesting, the way Solid’s mind
felt so much like Liquid’s at first glance but Solid had different trauma - “more similar to my own”
except he hadn’t clarified on that comment yet - and seemed more emotionally stable.

“I am not emotionally unstable!” Liquid poked his head in from the other room and shouted.

“You are and you know it, Eli,” Mantis sighed.

At least, for all his numerous, numerous faults, Liquid was getting along well with Solid’s dogs.
There wasn’t much Solid would have been able to do if he hadn’t, apart from hoping the dogs ripped
him to shreds, but it was still… nice?

Honestly, a lot of the time Solid was sort of feeling like this wasn’t really a hostage situation and was
really just a case of his brother and his boyfriend overstaying their welcome but sort of
compensating Solid for it by keeping his house cleaner than it’d been since he moved in.

Solid was pretty sure he’d lost touch with reality at some point.

After two weeks had passed there was a period of about four days in which Liquid acted like a
normal person instead of a highly caffeinated teenager, and then one morning he just decided to not
get out of bed and slept all day instead. From that point on he was listless, refused to eat, and had lost
all interest in everything, even the game he’d stolen from Otacon. Solid recognized the depression
right off the bat - he’d been through his own phases of it. Mantis just muttered that this happened
sometimes and made a disinterested remark about how Solid wasn’t planning on worrying about it
anyway…

Mantis had said that he’d try to draw Liquid back out of his funk (citing that his “bad moods” were
never this severe at FOXHOUND because he had a job and therefore some form of stimulation -
even if paperwork couldn’t, strictly speaking, hold his interest for longer than thirty seconds no
matter what kind of mood he was in, having something to do kept him grounded). Solid didn’t really
question what he planned to do although at night sometimes he heard the slight, repetitive squeaking
of the queen-sized mattress that Solid figured meant Mantis had turned to physical stimulation to try
and cheer Liquid up but at least now Liquid kept his fucking mouth shut. Aside from some indistinct
mumblings that could have come from either one of them, all Solid heard was the mattress.

With Liquid depressed and Mantis preoccupied by that, Solid figured that if he was ever going to get
the chance to escape from them, it would be now. But Mantis caught him when he was shoveling
snow off of his dogsled.

Neither one of them said anything. Solid just gave up and went back inside.

He wasn’t even sure what day it was anymore. Normally he relied on the radio to keep that sort of
thing straight, but as it stood Liquid had relocated it to his room and was keeping it set to a staticky
classic rock station from Anchorage, the volume low.

One day all the dogs started barking and then someone knocked on the cabin door.

Mantis opened it. All he said, instead of a greeting, was a flat “Oh.”

“…god, is that really you? When the hell’d you get so tall?” said a familiar voice that got Solid up off
the couch and sprinting down the hall, almost tripping over himself as he came to a stop in front of the door.

“Master Miller!”

Miller gave him an uncertain smile. “So you really are alive.”

“What are you doing here??”

“It… took me a while to decide to come, actually. I…”

Solid looked between Miller and Mantis, then said in a low voice to Miller: “We don’t have the element of surprise, but with you here, Master, we can take both of them easily. I can get out of here.”

“Actually, Snake, I… well, we have a lot to talk about. Can I come in?”

“Uh… sure,” Solid said, disappointed but mostly confused.

Miller stepped over the threshold, and at the same time Mantis took several steps back, pressing himself up against the wall and staring at Miller suspiciously. Solid raised his eyebrows at him. Miller sighed.

“No,” he said, “you shouldn’t be able to read my mind anymore.”

“Implants?” Mantis hissed.

“Yes.”

Mantis made an audible snarl, then his eyes flicked to Solid. “It is always the Patriots who have implants.”

“Relax,” Miller said, taking off his jacket and throwing it onto a nearby dog, “I left the Patriots. I’d be the first to admit it was a mistake to ever go back to them… but that’s why I’m here.”

“So the Patriots are real, then?” Solid said.

“Uh-huh. Where’s Liquid? I was told he’d be here.”

Mantis narrowed his eyes at him, but disappeared further into the cabin, presumably to go get him. Miller made a low whistle after he left.

“He used to be so tiny,” he said to Solid, “never would have thought of him being so hostile, either. …Snake, could you get me a hot drink? It’s kind of a long way from my place to yours, and I had to hike the last bit. Better make three, actually.”

Solid got Miller’s drift. He made a cup of coffee for himself and two cups of tea (purchased by Mantis) for Miller and Liquid - all the shitty instant stuff, of course - and returned to his living room, where Miller was already sitting on the couch surrounded by huskies, just in time for Mantis to drag Liquid away from his depression nap and into the living room, where he went shock still as soon as he laid eyes on Miller.

“What the fuck are you doing here?!” he blurted out.

“What the fuck happened to your accent?” Miller retorted, then took a cool, collected sip of his tea. “Did you watch *My Fair Lady* at some point and say to yourself, ‘Hey, I should do that too’?!”
“Mantis, what is he doing here?”

“That is beyond me. He got cybernetic implants.”

“My god, really?” He rounded on Miller, his voice suddenly accusatory. “You joined the Patriots! After all that shit about revenge on Cipher, you went and—”

“He never wanted revenge,” Mantis said, “I would have known.”

Miller cleared his throat. “The way I acted back then was largely just projecting my own feelings of responsibility for what happened in Costa Rica on others. I didn’t want to admit to myself that MSF most likely never would have sunk if I hadn’t been involved with Cipher, so instead I assigned blame and acted on that instead.”

“…that sounds like therapy talk.”

“It is.”

“What’s going on?” Solid spoke up, sitting on the coffee table. “What are you three talking about?”

Liquid scoffed loudly, then snatched up the other cup of tea and sat down on a nearby box. “Ancient history,” he said coldly, “as to what’s going on, I have no idea. Miller, what the hell are you doing here?”

“Ocelot came to visit me right after the… incident at Shadow Moses,” Miller said. “Told me about how Snake hadn’t really been killed like we’d all thought when his Codec went dead. Also told me what you all were up to, Liquid.”

Liquid grit his teeth. “And why did he do that?”

“Figured I’d make a good ally, I guess. He wanted me to join him. Join… you.”

“But—” Mantis started. Miller held up a hand. Solid found it a little weird that Mantis actually shut up, even if it was with an offended huff.

“If I were still with Cipher - that is, the Patriots - he would have murdered me then and there.”

“So you’re joining us out of fear, then,” Liquid said in a low, dangerous voice.

This time it was Miller who scoffed. “Ocelot and I have known that one of us would kill the other for decades,” he said, “I’m not afraid of him. I’m not afraid of death.”

“Why are you here, then?” Solid said.

“Because like it or not Ocelot brought me back into this world. He’s right - I have to stand for something, so I chose my side. That’s why I came here.” He turned his head slightly towards Solid. “Snake, have you decided anything?”

“…not really. I wasn’t sure if the Patriots were even real or not. Plus I don’t think I’m finding kidnapping people to be a good way to convince someone to join your cause.”

“What, was I just supposed to sit you down politely and ask you to join?” Liquid said sarcastically, “everyone knows the best way to recruit someone is to just snatch them up and tell them they’ve arrived at their new home—”

Miller laughed. Liquid stopped talking, evidently surprised.
“I’d heard you made up with V, Eli,” Miller said, “Snake, looks like you got Fultoned - just without the balloon.”

“I don’t get it,” Solid said at the same time Liquid said, “Don’t you dare call me that!”

“Miller,” Mantis said abruptly, “I want you to tell us, explicitly, which side you chose. You haven’t said, only implied.”

Miller paused, then looked at Mantis and opened his mouth to speak-

“And take off the sunglasses, I want to see the expression in your eyes as you say so.”

Miller grumbled, taking them off. “What,” he said, “you think you can spot a lie even without reading someone’s mind?”

Solid wasn’t sure if it was polite to look at Miller’s eyes or not as Miller turned back to Mantis. Solid already knew that Miller was legally blind and had been for years (although this had been information given to him privately, on the condition that he tell no one else in FOXHOUND, even especially Big Boss) but he’d never seen him without his sunglasses before, and was sort of surprised at how cloudy they were.

“My grievance with Cipher was - is - legitimate,” Miller said firmly, unblinking, “the Patriots have no right to run the world into the ground like this. I’d rather have them gone. I’m taking Ocelot up on his offer, and joining you.” He then put his sunglasses back on, muttering about how it was too bright in here, and turned to Solid. “I’d recommend you do the same, Snake.”

“…”

Mantis glanced at Liquid. “What do you think, Eli?” he said, his voice somewhat uncertain, “should we accept him, or kill him?”

“What?” Solid said, “kill-??”

Liquid took a sip of his tea, glowering. “Miller,” he said, “just why did you go back to Cipher? And what do you mean, you went back to Cipher, and you were involved with them?”

“Back in the seventies,” Miller said, “it’s better to describe it as a parasitic relationship. I used them to make the Militaires Sans Frontières a force to be reckoned with. But in the end, well… things happened. I’d cut ties by the time XOF came after us, you understand.”

“And going back to them?”

“A couple years after we found out the truth about V and Big Boss. I’d left Diamond Dogs, couldn’t keep in one job for more than six months at a time… I wasn’t directly with the Patriots, not at first, anyway. All that happened was I got recruited to FOXHOUND as the drill instructor. What could I say? It was a good job, fit my skills well enough, and I was a single dad with a young kid and needed the money.” He looked down. “Then they asked me to keep an eye on Big Boss for them. It was… easier to just go along with it. It wasn’t like I trusted him anymore anyway.”

“I assume that is when they gave you the implants,” Mantis said.

“Yeah. Said it was standard for all their agents, but I never considered myself an agent of theirs. I was only… keeping watch. And when I left FOXHOUND after the Outer Heaven uprising, they just let me go.”
“They don’t normally let people just leave, do they?” Liquid said, raising a skeptical eyebrow. Miller shook his head. “Just goes to show how unimportant I was to them.”

“Or it just goes to show that you are still with them,” Mantis said.

“What makes you say that?”

“Because you came saying Ocelot recruited you,” Liquid said. “Mantis is… uncertain of where Ocelot’s loyalties lie.”

Miller snorted. “This is Ocelot we’re talking about,” he said, “he’s more predictable than he’d like to think; his loyalties have always laid with Big Boss. If Big Boss wasn’t around, then his phantom. Neither of those - then his son. Kind of goes without saying that he’s loyal to you now, Eli.”

“I said don’t call me-“ Liquid cut himself off, growling and tossing his head arrogantly. “Well, what about Solidus?”

“Who?”

“Big Boss’ third clone,” Solid said.

“The President,” Mantis said.

“Wait, what?”

“Seriously…? I only ever knew about you twins, he must have been born after ’74,” Miller said. “Well, whose side is he on?”

“Solidus?” Liquid said, “he’s also against the Patriots. He’s… sort of our ringleader, I suppose, at the very least FOXHOUND is taking orders from him. More or less. For now.”

Miller shook his head. “Okay,” he said, “so it doesn’t matter which one of you Ocelot is loyal to, because you’re both standing against the Patriots.”

“I wouldn’t say it doesn’t matter, but…”

“Look, the point is that we know what Ocelot wants. Why so suspicious of him, Mantis?”

“Don’t answer that,” Liquid said sharply before Mantis could say anything.

Solid and Miller exchanged a glance at that, but Solid just shrugged. Miller frowned.

“I’ve made my choice,” he said, settling back into the couch, “Snake, have you?”

“I…” Solid wasn’t sure what to say for a moment. “I guess if… you’re on board, Master…”

“So you’ll join us?” Liquid said, perking up. “Excellent, I knew you’d come around eventually. Make it worth my while to not have killed you back at Shadow Moses.”

“Liquid…”

“Anyway,” Miller said, “Snake, it’s late, the weather’s bad, neither one of us has a car, and my neighbor’s taking care of my dogs. Do you mind if I stay for a few days until we start to get the details of this whole ‘revolution’ thing ironed out?”
“It’s no problem, Master,” Solid said, jumping up, “you’re welcome to the cou— actually, I’ll take the couch, you’re welcome to my bed. I’ll go change the sheets.”

“Thanks.”

Solid left, leaving Miller, Liquid, and Mantis in an awkward silence. Miller eventually broke it.

“Eli, is that a collar?”

“The news again?” Wolf said, sitting down next to Otacon, who had Bêdeng sleeping in his lap.

“Yeah,” Otacon mumbled, “I just can’t seem to look away.”

“It’s so late, though… you should be asleep.”

Otacon shook his head.

Wolf frowned slightly, but it wasn’t an unkind expression, or at least Otacon thought it wasn’t. “You can’t?”

“…no…”

He tried, and sometimes succeeded, but ever since Shadow Moses it seemed like every time he closed his eyes he was assaulted by visions of the incident. Most common was just the memory of walking down the hallway outside his lab by himself, invisible, pretending he didn’t exist, surrounded by blood and viscera and hacked-up Genome Soldiers left behind by the cyborg ninja. Sometimes he dreamed about the ninja himself - his brain replaying what had happened when the ninja threatened him and sometimes it continued the scene as if Solid hadn’t shown up and he’d wake up and clutch at his chest and stomach and be somehow surprised that his body was intact when he could swear he still felt the blinding pain of the ninja’s sword cutting into him.

Sometimes he dreamed that the FOXHOUND members “watching over” him decided that they didn’t need him anymore, and they killed him. Sometimes his brain supplied ways they might torture him before they killed him even though Otacon knew that it was Ocelot who was the sadist of the unit, not any of them.

And sometimes he dreamed What if they’d really been able to launch that nuke, and did? and he got lost in a nuclear winter hellscape version of Princeton or Cambridge or Boston or even Chicago. But then, that kind of dream hadn’t started with Shadow Moses. He didn’t remember when that kind of dream had started. They just usually involved his father standing culpable against the ash instead of Liquid.

“Huh, an interview?” Wolf said, snapping Otacon out of his reverie.

“What?”

His eyes widened as he looked at the screen. A girl in her early teens, with slightly curly brown hair and glasses, was furiously gesturing to the camera on the dreary street of a city - advertisements in the background implied it was somewhere in Maryland. A bit of text at the bottom of the screen identified her as “Computer prodigy Emma Robinson, 14, stepsister of Shadow Moses victim Dr. Hal Emmerich”.

“Get out of my face!” she was screaming at the reporter, “I don’t want to talk about my stupid dead brother! No comment! No comment!!”
Otacon scrambled for the remote, switching the channel to a blank one just as Emma was starting to screech about how she hadn’t seen or talked to her brother since she was six. He and Wolf just sat on the couch for a moment, the only sound being the static of the TV. Bêdeng made a little yip in her sleep, legs twitching.

“We all handle grief in our own ways,” Wolf said awkwardly.

“No…” Otacon said, “I mean, yes, we do, but she has a point. I haven’t seen or talked to her since she was six.”

“What happened when she was six?”

“…I left home.”

Another pause.

“You don’t want to talk about it?” Wolf said. Otacon shook his head again.

She left it at that.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Much to Liquid’s irritation, Miller told Solid the rest of the long story he’d promised him back at Shadow Moses, although when he got past the part where young Liquid (consistently described as a brat) had hijacked Metal Gear Sahelanthropus for the second time Liquid shut up and listened too as Miller described what happened to Otacon’s father.

“He really wasn’t colluding with me, you know,” Liquid said, “it might have been incredibly stupid of him to tell us how to fix Sally, but as far as I remember he never gave any indication that he thought we were doing anything other than practicing the mechanical skills we were supposed to be learning anyway.”

Miller sighed. “I’ll admit that some of the charges against him were a bit… trumped-up.”

Liquid also had to answer to Miller about Mantis’ personality, since he guessed - correctly, as Solid found - that when Mantis ‘developed a personality of his own’ it had been based off of Liquid’s. But as it turned out the fact that Mantis was so cold and hostile and (assuming Solid was reading him right, which he might not be) really possessive and overprotective of Liquid didn’t actually have anything to do with Liquid himself, even though the symbiotic psychic bond they’d developed back in ‘84 was still in place (which Miller had been shocked to hear, but said it explained a thing or two even if Solid had no idea which things he was referring to).

“A serial killer, seriously?” Miller said in surprise, “I mean, with how long you two were together it’s weird enough that someone else was even able to replace your influence over him, but it wasn’t even someone he’d met before?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Liquid said, clearly uncomfortable.

“And he kept the personality too, and never went back to normal…”

“This is normal now,” Liquid snapped, “there’s no point in pining for the ‘old him’ and just because someone else took over his bloody will doesn’t mean he doesn’t care for me, and it wasn’t like it was even voluntary in the first place.”

“Alright, alright, we get it,” Miller said with a placating hand gesture, “didn’t mean to imply anything about your relationship, Eli.”

“Like hell you didn’t.”

Speaking of Mantis, it was he who finally told Solid that Meryl had made it safely off of the island long before the bomb dropped - one of the Genome Soldiers hadn’t been comfortable with the idea of abandoning the sole remaining prisoner while everyone else fled, so he’d taken her with him a while before Solid made it to REX’s hangar. Miller tacked on a comment to the end of Mantis’ about how Colonel Campbell had gotten in touch with him one last time after everything got blown up, and said that Meryl, at least, had contacted him and was safe in King Cove, and at the time of the call Colonel Campbell and the USS Discovery were on their way to pick her up so she should have been out of there before the fallout hit.

Solid was unspeakably relieved to hear that. Knowing Meryl was safe after all was a huge weight off his shoulders - she was just a kid, for God’s sake. Even if she hadn’t said as much out loud, she’d
trusted Solid to get her though the incident alive, and he hadn’t wanted to let her down. Plus she’d be one hell of a soldier once she got the wet behind her ears dried off; if she’d died there it would have been nothing but a waste. (Plus she had a cute butt, that too would have been a waste.)

“Are you still in touch with Campbell?” Liquid asked Miller suspiciously.

Miller shook his head. “I don’t have a Codec,” he said, “I stayed online at Shadow Moses via a radio uplink at my house. Besides, that frequency Campbell was on - 140.85 - that’s the official FOXHOUND command support frequency. If I tried to call him back at this point I don’t think anyone would pick up.”

“Wait,” Solid said, “I thought the official command support frequency was 120.13. At least, I’m pretty sure that’s what you drilled into us back then…”

“We’ve never used 120.13,” Liquid said, frowning.

“The frequency was changed immediately after the Outer Heaven incident,” Miller explained, “that was the channel V took over, so we couldn’t use it anymore.”

“I’m guessing you also dropped Big Boss’ personal frequency…” Solid sighed. “I did always think it was kind of weird that Big Boss suddenly started using the official command support channel when before that he always just used his personal.”

“That must have been when you stopped talking to that Big Boss and started talking to the real one,” Liquid said, nodding.

During a different discussion Liquid made a passing reference to the fact that he and Ocelot used to be lovers, and Miller suddenly got very, very worried, quietly demanding if Ocelot had ever done anything to or with Liquid when he was twelve. (He seemed to have entirely forgotten Solid was still in the room at this point, and also said, “I always knew he was planning something but I tried to make sure I kept an eye on him - and he knew it, too — did I miss something, Eli?”) Liquid got extremely defensive about it, vehemently denying that Ocelot had touched him or tried to touch him when he was a kid.

In fact he was so vehement and defensive about it that when he eventually stormed off after Miller insisted that it was okay to tell him, especially after all this time, he was just concerned… Miller and Solid exchanged glances, and Miller gave his verdict on the matter.

“I’m going to rip Ocelot’s head off next time I see him.”

Mantis brought the conversation up again later, while Liquid was holed up in the ‘storage’ room again, having raised the volume on the radio slightly but other than that just taking another depression nap as far as Solid knew.

“While I am always in support of ripping Ocelot’s head off,” Mantis said evenly, “for Eli’s sake I feel the need to point out that nothing happened between him and Ocelot back in ’84, at least to my knowledge.”

“I guess you’d know,” Solid said.

“I’m not sure about that,” Miller said, “maybe Liquid repressed the memory, or Ocelot drugged him - or maybe he subconsciously recognizes only in retrospect that Ocelot was grooming him or making some kind of advances toward him, but… well, that whole conversation just put him way too on edge.”
“...he would be angry at me if I said what really did happen,” Mantis said, “but he was, at least, already an adult by that point.”

Cue all the blood draining from Miller’s face. Solid, for his part, wasn’t sure he understood what Mantis was getting at.

That night Liquid and Mantis had a shouting match about *Why the fuck did you tell them that, Mantis, did you honestly think I wanted them to know?!* that was audible through the whole house and had set at least forty of Solid’s dogs to barking and howling. Funnily enough, they managed to have the whole argument without once actually saying what had happened between Liquid and Ocelot, and the next morning Miller bluntly asked Solid if he’d given up his bed because he didn’t want to hear those two having sex through the wall anymore.

“Well, yeah,” Solid said. “Better you than me.”

“...that’s fair.”

Other than that Miller kept encouraging Solid to try to find common ground with his brother, or at least with Mantis if that was easier, and Solid tried to comply mostly since he wasn’t technically being held hostage anymore (wasn’t he?) so it was no longer... weird. Except Liquid, unlike the first two weeks in which he had basically never shut up, would always tell him he didn’t feel like talking and Solid, in all honesty, really just could not wrap his head around Mantis’ worldview. He honestly did not see how the “selfish and atavistic desire to pass on one’s seed” was why war existed. What kind of leap in logic was that?

“Well, isn’t it kind of hypocritical of you to hate sex so much when you and Liquid are always...?” Solid trailed off and made a lewd hand gesture.

Mantis snorted. “That is different,” he said, “we are both men and even if we weren’t, Liquid is still sterile. There is absolutely no reproductive function served.”

“...right. Didn’t you just get through saying that even if people aren’t boning to having children, they’re still catering to an instinctual desire to, even if it’s ‘misplaced’?”

“...no, this is different.”

“I don’t see how…”

“We don’t even have proper penetrative sex most of the time,” Mantis said, annoyed enough to start giving Solid way more info than he’d asked for... although he wasn’t about to stop him... “It really is only a means for him to get off because he is so demanding about it, I am sure that you would be the same way if you actually ever had a lover instead of just running away from every person you have ever felt remotely close to.”

Ow. “Okay,” Solid said, “so what’s up with the collar?”

Mantis stood up abruptly. “Why am I even discussing this with you?”

“I’m just wondering... if you won’t tell me, I can always ask Liquid.”

“It isn’t any of your business, but go ahead if you dare,” Mantis scoffed, “the last person to ask him that was Emmerich, and he would have *quite* the interesting story to tell you about that if only we could actually contact any of the others.”

“Not my fault there’s no reception out here,” Solid grumbled, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it.
One day Liquid was woken up from his mid-afternoon nap by Miller calling for Solid: “Snake, I think Diane’s about to give birth.”

“What?!”

_Seriously_, Liquid wondered tiredly, sitting up and rubbing his eyes, _how do either of them keep the names of all those dogs straight…?_

Yawning, he stood, threw his blanket over his shoulders, and wandered out into the hallway, quickly finding Solid crouching in front of an open closet with Miller standing next to him. Mantis hung in the background, watching them closely.

“You woke me up with your shouting,” Liquid whined.

Solid shushed him immediately, and quite rudely in Liquid’s opinion. “Diane needs it to be quiet right now.”

Liquid stepped forward a little, looking over Miller’s shoulder. The fat tan husky was lying in a nest of blankets and towels at the bottom of the closet, twisted around and licking at her backside. Every so often a visible ‘wave’ of muscle would ripple across her stomach, under her fur - Liquid supposed this would be the contractions.

“Ever watched a dog give birth before?” Miller asked Liquid in a respectfully low voice.

“Er, yes, but it- it’s been a while.” Like ten years a while. And it hadn’t been a dog per se, at least not like this one; it had been an African painted dog and Liquid had only been there because he’d happened to get stuck cleaning the animal conservation platform that day (as discipline, actually, following an altercation with someone in the base development unit that got physical. Or was it that time with someone from the support unit? Either way he kicked the shit out of them).

Liquid watched, keeping his mouth shut as the dog strained, whimpering, and slowly but surely pushed a puppy out of her, nose-first, with a yelp. It was in a thin, red, wet sac, which she nosed and bit at a little but couldn’t seem to figure out how to break it, so Solid intervened, breaking it for her.

“First time mom,” he said with a soft laugh. Liquid still marvelled at how affectionate Solid could sound around his dogs.

The puppy was tiny and pinkish although it had the beginnings of a dark coat, and soon it was tucked up against its mother’s body, sucking on a teat and being licked over and over. And then the straining began again and Liquid stepped back, standing next to Mantis.

“It’s incredible,” he said.

“Hn.”

“What?” He turned his head towards him. “Surely it’s alright if _animals_ perpetuate. Animals don’t do any wrong.”

“I know, I know…”

The two of them decided to leave Solid to his careful watch over the birth, since it was kind of obvious that this was going to take a while. Not long later, Miller joined them in the living room, flopping down on the couch between them and stretching his limbs obnoxiously.

“So,” he said, “about Ocelot.”
“What about him?” Liquid said stiffly.

Miller raised his hands. “We’re not going back to the molestation thing,” he said, “I’ll take Mantis’ word for it. I just thought you should know that Ocelot definitely only went for you because of your father… biological father, I mean.”

Liquid’s lips twitched in irritation, but decided not to dignify that with a response.

“That is obvious,” Mantis said anyway.

“He did not,” Liquid snapped, “he views me as my own person and he cared about me back then.”

“Is that what he told you?” Miller said, one suspicious eyebrow visible over his sunglasses.

“What about you?” Miller said, his one eyebrow raised. “Is there a reason why I shouldn’t believe him??”

“Ocelot is a liar,” Mantis said, “you know that.”

“Mantis, that’s enough!” He glowered at Miller, too. “And why the hell are you making this claim - what does it even have to do with you!”

“He slept with me, too,” Miller said plainly.

There was a very brief pause. Liquid blinked.

“I already knew that,” Mantis said.

Liquid shot him a glare. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“You didn’t care at the time.”

Miller sighed. “Okay,” he said, “anyway, Mantis - I assume that’s something you saw in my mind when you were a kid?”

“Yes, but I did not really remember until you brought it up just now… I didn’t care at the time, either.” He paused, then added, “In fact, I still don’t.”

“That’s understandable. And, actually, I probably owe you an apology for the fact that you had to see that when you were… hm… however old you were back then,” Miller said, waving a hand. “But nevermind. Do you get where I’m going with this? Anything else you also saw…?”

There was another pause, much longer this time, and then realization dawned in Mantis’ eyes, swiftly followed by disgust. “You slept with Big Boss,” he said.

“I don’t see what this has to do with-“ Liquid started.

“Eli, do you remember what I said a few days ago about Ocelot’s loyalty?” Miller cut him off, “about how it lies with Big Boss, and when Big Boss wasn’t available he deferred to V, and when they were both dead he passed himself on to you and Solidus - Big Boss’ sons?”

“…I don’t like where this is going,” Liquid said.

“He’ll go for any scrap of Big Boss he can get — even, yes, sexually. He never had much of a chance with V since, as it turned out, we managed to find the one straight guy on Mother Base for that, but…” He scratched behind his ear, almost embarrassedly. “Actually, our first time was before V - and Big Boss, I guess - got out of his coma. But still, in his pursuit of Big Boss’ leftovers he
ended up with me, Big Boss’ former lover.”

“That sounds like a personal problem.”

“I sincerely doubt it was any different with you - except at least with me, he had the decency to tell me up front who he was really thinking about. Probably because I was doing the same thing - thinking about Big Boss, I mean. At least at first.” He sighed, hanging his head. “I have terrible taste…”

“I won’t refute that,” Mantis said, sounding thoroughly repulsed by the entire conversation.

“This is ridiculous!” Liquid protested, “I’ll have you know I’m the one who started the whole relationship, not him.”

“Eli, you were-“

“I wasn’t manipulated, we’ve been over this!! Stop saying that!”

“I take it you’ve had this conversation before…” Miller said.

Fortunately they were saved before the discussion could devolve into complete chaos: Solid appeared in the doorway of the room, smiling for once.

“Six puppies,” he said, “well, six puppies and a stillbirth, but that’s fairly normal. Fast delivery, though - Diane could barely keep up.”

“Are the surviving puppies healthy?” Miller asked.

“Yup. You can come see after they rest for a few hours.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“I assume you’re going to name them,” Liquid said, glad for the change of subject.

“Of course I am. But I’ll wait a few days before I check to see what their sexes are.”

And a few hours later, when Liquid got the opportunity to peek into the whelping closet, the only comment that came out of his mouth, as intelligent as he was (or was at least supposed to be) was…

“Ohmygod look at them they’re so small.”

“Three girls and three boys, huh…” Solid said, standing leaning against the wall opposite Diane’s closet. “Well, I already had three girl names picked out, but…”

“At least that works out,” Liquid said. He was sitting in front of the closet - he had, in fact, grown completely enamored with Diane’s puppies and had taken to watching them nurse or crawl around for hours instead of just sleeping and/or wallowing in existential despair. “You said you liked to name your dogs after people you know - anyone from Shadow Moses?”

“No way I’m going to name any of them after someone from your unit.”

“I wasn’t saying that! I was just wondering. What about Silverburgh?”

“Yeah, I was thinking Meryl was a good name.”
Liquid indicated a tan-coated puppy that very much resembled its mother. “Is this one of the female ones? Because I think this one looks like a ‘Meryl’.”

“Uh… yeah, she is, so we’ll go with that.” He crouched down next to Liquid. “This gray one can be Natasha… and this black one right here is Mei Ling. But maybe I’ll shorten it a bit…”

“Just call her ‘Mei’?”

“Right. So that leaves the three boys… figured I’d name one after Otacon.”

“Funny name for a dog.”

“Actually, I was going to go with Hal.” He softly touched a puppy that was light gray his whole body over. “Think this one looks like a ‘Hal’?”

“I think so.”

“But what to do with the other two…”

“Trying to decide on names?” Miller said, walking up behind them.

“Oh,” Solid said, looking up at him, “actually, that gives me an idea.” He turned back to the remaining two puppies, two almost identical dark brown ones. Of course Liquid had made note that one of them had a white spot over his eye where the other one didn’t. “I’ve already named one dog after you, Master, but that doesn’t mean I can’t do it again.”

“Eh… McDonell’s more than enough for me, Snake, he’s a good dog.”

“They’re all good dogs, Master.” He gestured to the two as-of-yet-unnamed dogs. “I can call one ‘Master’, and one ‘Miller’.”

“That’s dumb,” Liquid complained.

“If you want to name two of them after me,” Miller said, “you can use Benedict and Kazuhira - or Kaz for short.”


“…I’m more confused about the ‘McDonell’ bit,” Liquid said.

“I’ve… used a couple different given names over the course of my life,” Miller said, “for what it’s worth, ‘Kazuhira’ was the one my mother gave me.”

“I… I didn’t know that,” Solid said. “Master…”

“So this one can be Kaz,” Liquid said, turning back to the puppies and brushing the one with the white spot with the tip of his finger - Diane watched him warily, but didn’t growl or snap - “and this one can be Benedict.” He touched the one without the white spot.

“…yeah,” Solid said at length, “that works.”

“They’re cute puppies,” Miller said, looking down at them. “Still healthy?”

“Yes!” Liquid reported.

Barking started. Solid glanced up.
“Are we expecting someone?” Mantis said, suddenly appearing at the end of the hallway, nervousness tinging his voice.

“What’s wrong?” Liquid asked, looking up at him.

“A car just pulled up, and I cannot read the minds of whoever is in it…”

“Oh god. Patriots?”

Miller stepped over to the nearest window and pulled the curtains a little out of the way. “That,” he said, “is Ocelot’s car.”

“…so yes,” Mantis said.

“Hang on, someone else is getting out of it.”

Liquid joined him at the window, and immediately put a hand to his forehead and groaned. “It’s Solidus.”

“That’s Solidus?” Miller said.

“This does explain that breaking news I heard earlier about the President stepping down over all the protests…”

“Wait,” Solid said, “what does that have to do with Solidus?”

Liquid turned back to him, lips tight. “Do you know what the President- well, ex-President, I suppose his Veep is in charge now — but do you know what he looks like, Snake?”

“No. I don’t really pay attention to politics, plus my only real news source is the radio anyway… oh, by the way, when you are going to give it back?”

“Never, probably. Anyway, before you meet him it’s probably a good idea to mention—“

There was a knock on the door.

“I’ll get it,” Miller said, and walked off.

“…anyway,” Liquid said, “Solidus was, up until yesterday, the President of the United States.”

Solid stared at him. “So that’s what Mantis meant the other… you’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Nope. And he’s our younger brother, too.”

“But we already mentioned the accelerated aging to you,” Mantis said, looking in the direction of the front door, “come to think of it, this will be my first time meeting him. I can already tell I will not like him.”

“That was a given, Mantis…”

“Miller?” came Ocelot’s voice from the front of the cabin, “what are you doing here?”

“I was just leaving,” came Miller’s slightly strained reply.
Once again Corpsefluid helped me out, this time with the puppy-birthing scene (although I did supplement with WikiHow). While I did grow up with dogs, the only animals in my household who ever reproduced were egg-layers, so… I guess that whole scene is pretty irrelevant in the grand scheme of the fic, but I wrote it the day after my childhood dog, Hero, was put to sleep. She was an old dog by that point - and no doubt about it, a very good girl - and we had her just about her whole life… she was spayed, of course, so she never had puppies herself. Instead she adopted my youngest sister as her puppy when we brought her home from the hospital… what a good dog, I miss her so much. I’m just glad that she had a happy life with us for about fourteen years - which is pretty good for a dog! (She was a german shepherd/collie mix.)
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

This is one of those chapters where I remember that part of the original premise behind Make It Home was me looking at that dumb "rape this chick or SHE DIES" plotline from *Dominic Deegan: Oracle For Hire* and saying, "Okay, this, but more believable and with actual repercussions."

Oh yeah, by the way, that was part of the original premise behind Make It Home.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

While Liquid awkwardly introduced Solid (and Mantis) to Solidus and vice versa, Miller and Ocelot (who still hadn’t gotten that prosthetic) talked outside.

“What are you doing here?” Ocelot said, leaning against his car and folding his arms, raising his eyebrows at Miller. “I’m not surprised you’d decide to come see Solid after our little visit - in fact I anticipated it - but how come you’re still here after three weeks?”

“I haven’t been here for the whole three weeks,” Miller said, “I’ve been here for about eight days now.”

“Overstaying your welcome a bit, aren’t you?”

“Snake doesn’t mind. Besides, I didn’t have a way to get back to my house. Was waiting for the weather to clear a bit.”

“I can offer you a ride if you like.”

Miller narrowed his eyes at him, a completely useless gesture behind his sunglasses but Ocelot more than picked up on the hostility being radiated here.

“What?” he drawled.

“What the hell did you do with Liquid?”

“…how much do you know?” It was too flat a question not to raise Miller’s hackles.

“Well for one thing I’d say it’s pretty strange to hook up with someone almost three decades younger than you and you first met when he was twelve.”

Ocelot sighed. “For the last time,” he said, “I’m not a hebephile.”

“And for another thing, Mantis implied—“

“Mantis would imply a lot of things about me. He and I have never gotten along.”

“I thought as much,” Miller said, “but when I asked Liquid about it his reaction was pretty telling.”

“What were you asking about specifically?”
“Whether or not you tried anything back in ’84. He got all defensive and left, and afterwards Mantis came to say that ‘at least he’d been an adult by the time Ocelot did something to him’.”

There was a long pause, and then Ocelot leaned slightly forward, snow crunching under his boots, gaze intensely fixed on Miller. “Not sure if this information ever reached you or not,” he said, “but back in the early nineties Liquid spent nearly four years in a POW camp in the Middle East.”

Miller’s back stiffened. “You aren’t saying…”

“Mm. You know what sort of things happen there.”

It was, granted, extremely cold out at the moment, but nonetheless the certain iciness that crept up Millers spine was definitely not from the temperature. “So he was r…?”

“Yes.”

“…what does that have to do with you?”

Ocelot settled back against his car again. “I was the one who eventually located him,” he said, “EVA sent me, actually. But the only way we could figure out to find him as quickly and efficiently as possible was to send ‘Shalashaska’ around as an interrogator-for-hire. Our bet that Liquid’s captors were going to be looking for someone to break him paid off, but… well, I have quite the reputation, I’m afraid, and it always precedes me.”

“Just what the hell did you do to him…??”

Ocelot shrugged. “I had to break him, you understand,” he said, “otherwise he would have been killed. I needed to buy time for me to get back to V on where Liquid was, and for him to get there.”

“What did you do?!”

“The most efficient thing possible.” He tilted his head back, looking up at the gray sky. “Played to his existing trauma. Didn’t take too long to shut him down, and relatively little physical injury.”

For a long time, there was only the sound of muffled conversation in Solid’s cabin and the slow tick of the engine of Ocelot’s car cooling. Other than that - complete silence.

“You disgust me,” Miller spat.

“I always have. For what it’s worth, I’m not proud of myself. But I had to do it.”

“If that’s what helps you sleep at night, you sick fuck.”

Meanwhile inside, Solid was once again giving a tour of his cabin - much more carelessly this time - although he hadn’t gotten to the house rules or the naming of all his dogs yet. “It isn’t,” he said, gesturing to the living room, “exactly presidential.”

“That doesn’t pose a problem,” Solidus said, “I’ve lived in worse conditions.” And when both Solid and Liquid made skeptical expressions at him, he clarified: “I participated in the First Liberian Civil War as a teenager. Ever since then I’ve thought having electricity and running water makes a place luxurious in comparison.”

“Right…” Solid said, “when did you say were born again? ’76?” He did the math on his fingers quickly. “Wouldn’t that make you thirteen at the beginning of the war?”

“He did say he was a teenager,” Liquid said.
“…hang on. And you were Senator in 1998, right?”

“That’s two years after the war ended, it makes sense that he’d be back in America by that point—“

“No, I mean - you would have been 22 when you were sworn in. The Constitution says that senators have to be thirty. And the President has to be at least 35, and you’re only 29 now if your birthday has even passed yet and this was your second term.”

There was a kind of an awkward pause.

“Well,” Mantis interjected, “he looks to be at in his late fifties at least, and I am sure he has fake records.”

“…yes,” Solidus said, somewhat uncomfortably, after a moment, “yes, that’s right. I’ve always appeared to be about twice my actual age, and most of my past has been completely falsified by the Patriots - the successful business I owned before running for Senator was handed to me, and the murdered wife I used as an emotional prop for pushing gun control policies was an utter fiction. My military history was completely sanitized — even my platforms weren’t my own, being from New York I was forced to run as a Democrat when I personally see the Libertarian party as being closest to my own worldview…”

Solid grumbled. “I guess it’s just as well that I don’t bother to vote…”

Miller and Ocelot stepped inside for a moment, Miller to say goodbye, I’ll see you later, and Ocelot to have a quick word in Russian with Mantis (“Solidus is extremely interested in seeing whether Solid or Liquid would win in a fight, so don’t let him instigate anything, he can be very persuasive when he wants to be.”). Solid was disappointed that Miller was leaving but on the other hand, that answered the question of where Solidus was going to sleep.

“The couch,” Solid said firmly.

“But brother aren’t you the one sleeping on th-“

“I sleep in my bedroom,” Solid cut across Liquid, “and Liquid and Mantis have already claimed the spare mattress.”

“This is fine,” Solidus said.

Truthfully it was just that Solid found himself remarkably uncomfortable with the idea of someone else occupying his bed… it was mostly strange because he’d never felt weird about letting Master Miller do it this whole past week.

Miller and Ocelot left, to both Liquid and Mantis’ relief. Mantis was glad Ocelot was gone for obvious reasons (not that Solid knew, still, what precisely pissed Mantis off so much about him except that it had something to do with Liquid sleeping with him) and Liquid complained about how Miller “kept singing The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain around me, which wouldn’t even be so bad if he didn’t wear the joke completely thin and wasn’t bloody tone deaf.”

Solid’s introducing Solidus to his dogs was capped off by Liquid proclaiming that Solidus wasn’t allowed to see Diane or her puppies because he’d stress them out, being a new person and all. Solid didn’t think he necessarily would, considering none of his dogs, Diane included, had ever been too bothered about Liquid (in all likelihood he smelled too similar to Solid for them to really register him as a stranger), but he didn’t intervene on Solidus’ behalf and let the ban stand.
After Ocelot had dropped Miller off back at his house with a warning that they might have to mobilize soon, depending on what the Patriots decided to do with the brand-new Johnson administration, he drove for a while, then, in the middle of nowhere, pulled over and called EVA.

“Have you ever,” he said with no preamble, “had a nightmare where you’re in the same room as everyone you’ve ever had sex with?”

EVA paused before answering. “It’d have to be a pretty big room for me, ADAM.”

“…right. I really wasn’t expecting Miller to be there - he must have taken longer waffling about whether or not to go see Snake than I thought he would.” He sighed. “I’m too old for this…”

“Aren’t you the same person who said you were only making up for lost time since you had to stay celibate during your twenties and half your thirties?”

“That was a joke, EVA. And I said that decades ago, why do you even still remember that?”

“Because I thought it was funny. I also thought it was funny that it was Miller you broke your dry spell with when he had to be the most likely candidate for stealing your sperm for Zero.”

“Not at that point,” Ocelot said with a scoff. “That was a completely ridiculous plan anyway… The Boss’ grandchild would be so diluted by traits from other parents that you could hardly call it a real genetic legacy. I’m just glad he gave up on that idea entirely and never tried to clone me.”

“Yeah… I know he set you and I up on dates, what, half a dozen times? but how many other women did he send after you until he finally accepted that you’re gay?”

“I wasn’t keeping track. Nevermind, EVA.”

“While we’re on the subject…” He heard a vague click of a gun being reassembled. She’d probably been cleaning one. “I don’t fault your logic on putting all three of Les Enfants Terribles in the same house in an effort to force them to get along, ADAM, and to be honest I think it’s a good idea as long as we can rely on Mantis to keep the peace…”

“He will,” Ocelot said, “I might not like the man very much but he’s trustworthy… at least when it comes to Liquid.”

“I’m not worried. I just think you’ve got to be insane for doing this - you know Eli and Solidus are going to eventually realize you slept with both of them, right? There’s no way that isn’t going to end in a bunch of drama. And I’ll bet David is going to be… pretty weirded out, it might affect how much he’s willing to trust you.”

“I know, EVA.”

“So why…?”

“It was going to come out eventually.”

“That’s a pretty shallow excuse, ADAM.”

Ocelot sighed again, rubbing his face tiredly. “I’m all about shallow excuses in controlled environments, EVA.”

“I remember this one time,” Octopus said over cards, “when I was assigned to take out this one mafioso type dude. It took me a little while to find a good angle to get at him from - but as it turned
out, he had this fiancée, a sweet little Catholic girl…”

“Did she know about his activities?” Raven asked, playing his card.

“Oh, no. Kept her completely in the dark — that’s why it was so perfect for me, since he’d decided he had to tell her about his ‘family business’ before they got married.”

“I remember that,” Wolf said, “the boss was genuinely surprised at the quality of the intel you kept sending back.”

“Yeah, I was surprised too,” Octopus said, “and if I do say so myself, I put on an Oscar-worthy performance, crying and talking about sin but how I loved him so much I forgave him and just wanted him to clean up his act, et cetera et cetera… Dr. Emmerich, it’s your turn.”

“Oh,” Otacon said, startled, “uh, right.” He hunted through his hand for half a moment before playing his card. “Okay. Go on.”

“Yeah, anyway… while I was stalking her, I found out that she and her future hubby had never had sex — never even seen her naked — she was a total virgin. As I said, good Catholic girl. And as it happened my assignment was going right up through their wedding, so…”

“Oh, no,” Wolf said, laughing, “what did you do?”

“I am almost afraid to hear this,” Raven said.

“Aha. I thought it’d be, ya know, funny to fuck with him a little, so when I was making my disguise for his fiancée I decided to throw in a dick. Just to see how he’d react.”

“So what’d he do?” Wolf said, leaning forward a little while Raven and Otacon both grimaced.

“He cried, it was hilarious. I should have gotten an Emmy just for keeping a straight a face. And then, guess what.”

“What?”

“Once he was done crying he sat me down, explained that he still loved me even though he was totally straight, and then he offered me a blowjob.”

Wolf laughed loudly enough that Bêdeng started yapping and running around in excitement. Raven rolled his eyes, a mildly disgusted look on his face, and Otacon stared blankly at the cards in his hand. Dimly he thought not about Octopus’ story but more about the fact that he never would have taken a group like FOXHOUND to be into Magic: The Gathering, even if they did ‘house rules’, gambled over it, and Octopus and Wolf both cheated like motherfuckers.

“You know,” Octopus said, thoughtfully shuffling his deck, “I don’t often think about it, but I did get legally married to that guy before I killed him. I mean, I signed the licenses, stood for the ceremony, everything. Not the only time that’s happened, too.”

“I do not think it counts, legally, if you are doing it under an assumed identity,” Raven said.

“Oh, I don’t care about the legality of it, within a month of the marriage both parties are discovered dead anyway. I’m just wondering if in this case, I’d be considered a widow or a widower…”

“You are male, so I would say widower,” Raven said.

“But he married the man as a woman,” Wolf argued, “that would make him a widow.”
Otacon quietly interrupted them. “Didn’t you have to kill the fiancée in order to take her place?”

Octopus blinked. “Well, yeah,” he said, “it’d kind of screw me over if she happened to show up while I was pretending to be her. Besides, I needed her blood - I always take the blood of the person I’m imitating, my bone marrow adapts to the blood type and then I can’t be distinguished even with a blood test.”

“But she… she didn’t do anything wrong. You said she didn’t even know about her fiancé being in the mafia.”

“Innocent people die sometimes, doc, it happens.”

“…”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Wolf said, “this is an official assignment we are talking about. Octopus was ordered by the government to kill the man, and his fiancée was considered acceptable collateral.”

“Just because the government sanctioned it doesn’t mean it’s okay,” Otacon burst out, “just look at Metal Gear.”

No one said anything for a little while.

“…forget it,” Otacon said at length, standing up and putting down his cards. “I… forget it.”

“Emmerich,” Wolf called after him reproachfully as he walked off. He didn’t even turn around.

“…everyone’s a critic,” Octopus muttered, playing his card.

Solidus, it seemed, had brought his own entertainment in the form of a small collection of books carefully tucked into his suitcase. Solid had initially thought that Mantis would get along with him since he’d done the same thing, but it seemed he had really been serious when he said he automatically disliked anyone whom he could not read their mind. Now that they were on the subject, Solid had to wonder if the fact that he seemed to have tolerated Miller’s presence relatively well was just because he’d known him as a kid…

While Solidus and Mantis were deliberately ignoring each other, Liquid also seemed to be ignoring Solidus, but then again that could have just been because he was still in the grips of his depression. Solid once found him taking a nap on the floor in the middle of the hallway with Diane’s puppies all snuggled up to him, and he didn’t know if Liquid falling asleep or the puppies deciding his body heat was as good as Diane’s came first. He did, however, step over him and steal into the ‘storage’ room to take back his radio. He switched it over to a news station just in time to catch the tail end of a bulletin about how the Secret Service had reported former President George Sears missing, although at this time foul play was not suspected, and Solid turned the radio off when they started summarizing the Shadow Moses incident.

He ran into Mantis outside when he was just taking out his Ruger 10/22, tailed by a couple of his dogs.

“Aren’t you cold?” he mumbled around his cigarette.

Mantis shook his head. “Going hunting?”

“Yeah… figured we could use more meat with three extra mouths to feed, even if you don’t eat
much. And I’m sure the dogs will appreciate some fresh scraps, Diane especially. So I figured I’d go get a couple rock ptarmigans.” He nodded at the white-all-over dog next to him, one with mismatched eyes and a furiously wagging tail. “Frank here is my best hunting dog, so it shouldn’t take too long. Want to come with?”

“…I suppose. I don’t have anything better to do.”

“I guess you aren’t still worried I’d decide to run off if I don’t have supervision… there’s a good place to get the ptarmigans within walking distance, but if you want to tag along I don’t mind hitching up the sled.”

“That would be appreciated.”

Solid whistled. About a dozen dogs came running over, not counting the ones already by his side - he picked seven of them to hook up to the sled, and, after watching Solid do it with the lead dog, Mantis helped him put harnesses and booties on the other dogs. They were ready to go in under twenty minutes. Frank was going to just run alongside until they got there. After Solid and Mantis got on the sled they were joined by a steel-eyed three-legged dog who immediately stuck her face under Mantis’ arm, expecting pats.

“Which one is this?” Mantis said, leaning away from her slightly.

“Girl,” Solid said.

“…right. The one that doesn’t have a name.”

“She does have a name,” Solid said, “it’s ‘Girl’. It’s all she responds to, so that makes it her name.”

“I see…”

“Hike!”

The dogsled started moving with a lurch away from the cabin. As they cleared the edge of the yard, Solid decided to explain why Girl’s name was Girl even though Mantis could have just casually pulled it from his mind if he wanted to.

“She was my first dog,” he said, “not my oldest - that would be Roy - but my first. She was just barely an adult when I found her caught in one of my traps. That’s why she’s only got three legs.”

“The trap took it off?” Mantis said, looking at her. It was obvious that this had all happened years ago, her fur had grown so well over the stump of her hind leg that at first glance, one might not even notice she didn’t have it until she started walking.

“Sort of. When I got her out of the trap she still had it, although even then it was obvious that she was going to have a bum leg for the rest of her life. I… sort of decided to nurse her back to health - I felt pretty bad about her getting caught — I don’t know anymore if I screwed up or if the wound was just beyond my abilities, but she got infected and I had to cut off her leg to save her life.”

“She seems to have forgiven you for it.”

“I’m sure it helped that I fed her. And she and I had… something in common, I think. Something that made me think it would have been a waste to just put her down when I found her in my trap. And then I decided to keep her…”

Mantis didn’t say anything for a few seconds, then said, somewhat skeptically, “because she
comforted you after you had a nightmare?”

Solid coughed out a single laugh. “They’ve been using dogs to help vets with PTSD since World War II. Anyway, it wasn’t until my second dog, Gustava, wandered into my life that it occurred to me that I should have given Girl a name.”

“And by that point she already responded to Girl.”

“Yup… at first I just tried to rename her ‘Holly’, but she wouldn’t take it. She was set on Girl. Ended up using the name ‘Holly’ for a different dog later, anyway…”

Girl barked, thumping her tail against the sled. Frank barked back, then ran up to the front of the line to trot along next to the lead dog.

“Your only family, hmm?” Mantis said after a while.

Solid shrugged. “The only things on Earth that care about me without me ever having to doubt their intentions,” he said, “dogs are simple. But they’re honest.”

Chapter End Notes

Solidus is a libertarian at heart because the Libertarian party has a collective George Washington fetish so that’s right up his alley (Source: I’m a libertarian too) (Solid is the truest libertarian because he spergs about the Constitution but doesn’t vote)
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Finally Miscellany is vital to understanding the plot of this fic Л.href / If you haven’t read the "Рокси Харт и Вэлма Келли" ficlets, you kind of need to. (Or you could just use context clues...)

After about ten minutes Mantis had decided that he really was cold after all, and Solid offered him his coat, which was much heavier than Mantis’ - without so much as a second thought, which gave Mantis pause but he accepted it anyway.

“There is another one over there.”

“Damn, you’re even better at this than Frank is.”

Mantis shrugged. “I used to help Eli with hunting.”

“Guess you had to find some way to feed yourselves in Africa, huh…”

Of course, back then, even if Mantis was the one supplying information as to the game’s location with absurd accuracy, he had still made Liquid go get it himself. In this case, it was the dog Frank who ran forth and came back moments later with a newly-dead rock ptarmigan in his mouth.

“Can I ask you something?” Solid said as they were walking further into the hills, dutifully followed by Frank.

“About Ocelot?” Mantis said with distaste, pulling Solid’s coat tighter around himself. Solid was roughly the same height as Liquid (Liquid was about a centimeter taller, which amused him to no end — but that made both of them still shorter than Mantis) but both of them, while lean, were undeniably more built than Mantis, leaving the coat to completely swamp him.

“Uh-huh. Don’t take this as a suggestion in case you haven’t thought of it already, but - why the hell haven’t you killed him if you hate him so much? Somehow I doubt that your morals are getting in the way.”

“It’s generally frowned upon to kill a teammate.”

“There’s no way FOXHOUND isn’t officially dissolved now, he’s not technically your teammate anymore. And you’re telling me you really cared about keeping your job?”

“…”

Neither of them said anything for a while. Eventually, Mantis said, “Eli would never forgive me if I killed Ocelot.”

“Yes he would.”

“…what makes you say that?”
“I have eyes. I can see how he looks at you. He’s completely head over heels for you - even if he swears he’ll never forgive you he won’t be able to stay away from you for long and he’ll eventually get over it.”

Again Mantis paused. “You,” he said at length, “are just trying to convince me to kill Ocelot right now.”

“Hey, don’t turn this back on me. I’m just asking you a question — it’s been bothering me...”

Mantis turned his head away, silent. After a while Frank barked and pointed Solid toward a ptarmigan to shoot. Mantis finally spoke again after Frank had run off to go retrieve it.

“I can’t,” he said.

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

“I... I owe Ocelot more than you can ever imagine, Snake. My debt to him is one that can never be repaid.”

Solid blinked at him. “What,” he said, “he saved your life or something?”

“Yes, and more. If it were not for him I’d...” Mantis looked down at the snow beneath his boots. He couldn’t feel his feet - all his senses felt dulled in this cold. “He preserved my life, my freedom, everything, back at the KGB. He taught me to read and write, put me back in touch with Eli, sheltered me from those who would prey upon me, took care of me. Our colleagues thought we seemed like father and son, and looking back on it I can understand where they got that impression. He showed... such kindness.”

“...why? That doesn’t seem like him.”

Mantis shook his head. “He had his reasons,” he said, “I was a loose end from ’84, he was only keeping me compliant and under surveillance. Although he said at the time that he didn’t want to hold debt from me, because I was only sixteen or seventeen - a child - I am sure that he anticipated that I would feel I owed him.”

“Well, if he had ulterior motives, I don’t really think that...”

“There is one thing I never found out his ulterior motive for, though.”

“?”

Mantis looked back up at Solid. “Why did he send for me back in ’94?”

“Huh?”

“After Eli was recovered from Iraq — Ocelot contacted me and invited me to come to Mother Base to be with him. It was done without Eli’s knowledge and, later, despite his protests. And as far as Ocelot is concerned, that is the point when I went from an uneasy dislike of him to outright hatred. I cannot, for the life of me, fathom how he possibly benefited from that.”

“And that’s another thing you feel indebted to him for?” Solid said.

“Yes,” Mantis said, firmly, “in the KGB he preserved my life. At Mother Base, he brought me back to life. I don’t understand why.”

“You really love Liquid, don’t you?”
Mantis flinched at the question and broke eye contact again. After a little while Solid muttered, “I see,” and turned away. A little while longer and he said they had enough ptarmigans to last them a couple weeks and suggested they head back. Mantis numbly agreed.

When they got back to the cabin and Mantis headed inside, he was still wearing Solid’s coat, which Liquid, upon seeing, completely flipped his shit at, tearing it off of Mantis so hard that he would have torn some of its seams if Mantis had put up any resistance. He tossed it on the floor and picked up Mantis, throwing him over his shoulder - Mantis still didn’t resist, and for courtesy’s sake used his psychokinesis to put Solid’s coat on the oft-disused coathook by the door — and stalked back to their room. They passed Solidus on the way, who looked at them with confusion but Liquid ignored Mantis’ audible growl and feeble kicking.

“I told you,” Liquid hissed after he unceremoniously dumped Mantis on the bed - the boxspring creaked warningly - and slammed the door closed, “I do not want you alone with Snake.”

“And I thought we agreed that we no longer needed to worry about Snake trying to attack me in a bid to escape,” Mantis said, voice deliberately calm but hands irritably straightening his sweater. “He is on our side now, Eli, Miller suddenly showing up here cemented that.”

“You never know if he might change his mind!”

Mantis stared at him. “My god, Eli,” he said, surprised, “you’re jealous.”

“I— what?”

“You are. You’re jealous! You’re afraid I might come to like Snake more than I like you.”

“No I’m not!! I’m concerned about your safety. Snake’s a threat to you, I don’t want you alone with him!”

Mantis scoffed. “I suppose if nothing else,” he said snidely, “now you can understand how I feel about you being alone with Ocelot.”

Liquid was gobsmacked. It took him a second to scramble for a response. “This is- this is different! That’s just you being paranoid——“

“Paranoid! After what Ocelot did to you-!”

“Don’t change the subject! I don’t want you alone with Snake.”

“Jealous,” Mantis muttered.

“I’m not!!”

“You’re a terrible liar, Eli.”

Liquid went bright red. “Well- so what if I am?! Why shouldn’t I be?!”

“Eli——“

“We’re twins - we’re practically identical! Only Snake’s the superior one, he’s like a better version of me, why the hell shouldn’t I be concerned you might like him better??”

“Eli, I am not interested in Snake.”

“Then why do you spend so much time with him?!” Liquid demanded, stamping his foot.
“…let me rephrase that. I’m not interested in Snake in that way—”

Liquid made a choked, indignant cry. Mantis continued quickly before he really got attached to the wrong idea.

“—and Snake is not interested in me whatsoever, Eli, there is nothing to be worried about.”

“Like hell he isn’t. You saw how he was with Silverburgh, he’s into redheads!”

“How would Snake know that I’m a redhead?? I’m bald.”

Liquid’s jaw worked for a moment, then his eyes flicked down. Certainly he could think of one way Solid might come to know Mantis’ natural hair color…

Mantis’ lip curled behind his mask. “Don’t be disgusting. I would never.”

“You do it with me all the time.”

“Because you want to, I don’t much care for it myself.”

Liquid closed the space between him and Mantis with a single leap, Mantis only barely recoiling enough in time to avoid being crushed by Liquid’s landing but not nearly enough to avoid being pinned to the mattress underneath his weight. Liquid was snarling in his face, fogging up the lenses of his gas mask, hands too tight at Mantis’ forearms.

“What if Snake wanted it?”

“Eli, I wouldn’t—“

“That’s bloody right you wouldn’t! I’m yours, not him!!”

“I never said otherwise—“

Liquid pushed himself against Mantis, rubbing his crotch against his, and pressed his mouth to Mantis’ neck, biting him savagely, not quite enough to bleed but certainly enough to leave a mark. Mantis’ eyes widened.

“Eli,” he said, “stop it.”

Only a growl in response.

“I said stop it!” He tried to push back against him, kicked his legs, too, but it didn’t accomplish anything. “You have ten seconds before I throw you against the wall, Eli, now get off of me.”

No.


Liquid sat up, still glaring but not grinding against him anymore, and Mantis had just barely took a breath when Liquid’s hands shot out and he shrunk against the mattress almost instinctively - right now Liquid’s state of mind was unsettlingly similar to how it was in the heat of combat, difficult to read and prone to catching Mantis off guard.

Liquid’s fingers tore at the latches on Mantis’ gas mask. Mantis grabbed his wrists.

“Stop,” he said firmly. “I don’t want this.”
“It’s fine,” Liquid snarled, “the only other people in three miles besides me are Solidus - and you can’t even hear his thoughts anyway - and your best fucking friend, Snake— and you’ve had your mask off here before-“

“That does not mean I want you to take it off! I don’t want- not in front of you—“

“Would it be alright if it were in front of Snake?”

“Eli-!”

Mantis didn’t fight back as much as he could have as Liquid roughly pulled off his mask. Immediately he could hear Solid’s thoughts from outside the cabin, where he was cleaning the ptarmigians in peace, letting the crowd of dogs squabble good-naturedly over the cast-off entrails, blissfully unaware that he was being fought over — he could hear the odd hum of each dog’s mind, not loud or overpowering or anything he really understood, mere background radiation, only a little more noticeable than the hum of the forest and mountains themselves — he could hear the vague static of Solidus’ cybernetic implants — and his head filled with Liquid’s thoughts, inarticulate, irrational, insecure, a chaotic swirl of doubt and jealousy.

The most he really offered was a little displeased noise as Liquid took his mouth, his tongue invasive and their teeth knocking unpleasantly together.

After arguing, sex.

Predictable.

Mantis pushed Liquid back, using his psychokinesis to supplement his meagre strength when Liquid refused to follow the move. “You want this?” he said, keeping his voice low. “You want me?”

“I need you,” Liquid breathed, eyes flashing.

“Then first you had better apologize for being so rough with me. You know I do not like that.”

“…”

Mantis sat up, forcing Liquid to kneel on the floor, ignoring him struggling and straining against his psychic powers. He crossed his arms, glaring down at him - he felt much less intimidating, much less confident without his mask on, but his anger and annoyance now was genuine, not playful affectation. “And I also expect an apology for being accused of cheating on you with Snake. I am not you, Eli, I am loyal.”

Liquid hid a wince at being reminded of his infidelity - Mantis almost wouldn’t have noticed if he hadn’t heard a vague flash of resentment about Mantis holding his past mistakes over his head, and guilt, too, for the mistakes. Liquid looked away deliberately. “I don’t like you spending so much time with him.”

“Spending a lot of time with someone does not mean one holds romantic or sexual interest in them, Eli. Tell me — I will acknowledge that I am the possessive type, yes, but have I ever gotten jealous of you spending time with, say, Wolf? You and she are very close, after all.”

“…”

“Well, Eli?”

“No… but-“
“No ‘but’s,’” Mantis said, hooking his foot under Liquid’s chin and forcing him to look up at him. “You are being ridiculous.”

“But you can see my intentions in my mind— I-

“-will simply have to take my word for it. Trust me, Eli. I have no interest in Snake, Snake has no interest in me — nor does he have any intention of attacking me. Your… worry is entirely unfounded in reality.”

Liquid stared at Mantis for a moment, then closed his eyes, frustrated. “Just trust me, Eli.”

He silently acquiesced.

Mantis let out a sigh of relief, lowering his foot and releasing his hold on Liquid. “Good boy,” he cooed down at him, deciding there was no point in pushing the ‘apology’ thing. He picked up his mask; even though he could tolerate not wearing it in Solid’s cabin, he still didn’t like being without it and if he was sure if he left it off for too long he would end up with a headache.

“Wait,” Liquid said, standing on his knees, putting his hands on Mantis’ legs and looking up at him pleadingly. Despite his ceding, and Mantis’ assurances, his jealousy hadn’t abated by much and it was more that he’d changed strategies… now wanting Mantis to thoroughly establish that it was he who belonged to him and no one else.

Again: predictable.

So Mantis let Liquid kiss him again before he put his mask back on, this time keeping a finger curled into the lead of his collar and tugging gently to remind him to be soft and sweet about it instead of aggressive. Then with his mask back on he didn’t have to listen to Liquid’s churning emotions and was free to just give him what he wanted without having to take his own weird sort-of-friendship with Solid into consideration.

And he did eventually get those apologies, anyway.

Meanwhile, in the living room.

“Where’d Mantis get off to?” Solid said, wiping blood and bits of feather off his hands with a rag.

Solidus barely glanced up from his book. “Liquid walked by carrying him over his shoulder earlier.” “…oh.”

In the brief silence that followed, Solid became aware of the stifled moaning coming from the direction of the ‘storage’ room.

“I wonder what they argued about this time…”

“I heard a bit of shouting,” Solidus said, “Liquid sounded upset that Mantis is spending so much time with you.”

“Considering our current living arrangements, I’d be more surprised if he wasn’t spending time with me…”

Solidus turned a page in his book. “Like how you all are deliberately ignoring me?”
“…"

“Nevermind, I’m entirely used to it. Anyway, I wouldn’t be too bothered about Liquid’s jealousy if I were you. I may not have talked with him much, but personally I would describe him as a basket case.”

Solid let out a little “huh” of a flat laugh. “You have no idea.”

There was a loud creak from the ‘storage’ room, followed by a crash and high-pitched yelp that sounded like it came from Mantis.

“What was that?” Solid called. When he didn’t get an answer he walked over to their door and, again when he didn’t get an answer after knocking, nudged it open. (It wasn’t locked, but then again Solid wasn’t sure the lock on this door even worked.)

Neither Liquid nor Mantis were anywhere to be seen at the moment, but what was visible was the fact that the boxspring on their bed had finally given up the ghost, catastrophically splintering and sending the mattress half off the bed and partially onto the floor. Even from here Solid could see that a stray spring had put a sizeable hole in the bottom of the mattress.

“Great,” he said.

Liquid, still somewhat flushed and hair half-pulled out of its ponytail, poked his head up from the side of the ruined bed not visible from the door.

“Go away,” he said flusteredly.

“I have no idea where we’d be able to get a new mattress, Liquid.”

“I can fix it myself later, just go away!”

“Ow…” came Mantis’ faint voice, also from behind the bed, “Eli, I think I broke something…”

“Yeah,” Solid said, “the bed.”

“…I suppose it was inevitable…”

Liquid went (even more) scarlet. “Snake! Close the bloody door!!”

Solid did, and wandered back over to Solidus. “Nevermind,” he said.

“…were you doing that on purpose?” Solidus said, raising an eyebrow.

“Doing what on purpose?”

“…nevermind.”
SHINJI
An unknown ceiling ……

SHINJI
Katsuragi Misato-san ...... She isn't a bad person.

MISATO
-flashback-
Taking a bath is a life washing.

SHINJI
In the bath, more unpleasant things come to my mind than others.

SHINJI
This is an unknown ceiling, too. It's natural ... because I don't know any places in this city.
MISATO
*(flashback)*
This is your home.

SHINJI HAL
Why am I here?

"You are the only one そうよあなただけ！" あふれてる涙救うのは。
"You must fly away いつも想ってる！" 奇跡起こす力を信じて～
"You are the only one きっとあなただけ！』

“Emmerich?”

"閉ざされた扉ひらくのは。
"You must fly away 夢をすてないで!
"奇跡起こす力を信じて…』

“Dr. Emmerich?”

“H-Huh?” Otacon jolted up off the couch, his Walkman clattering to the floor, yanking his earbuds out on the way. “Oh… Wolf…”

“We’ve decided,” she said, “that car that kept coming round our street…”

“Might be one of the Patriots…?”

“Right. Gather your things, we will leave in half an hour.”

Otacon nodded. Wasn’t like he had much to gather, though, and apart from things like his toothbrush and razor (that he didn’t use as often as he should, he reflected, scratching the scruff on his chin) most of his stuff hadn’t left his bag at all. Even his clothes just got put back in there after they got out of the dryer, although it meant Otacon was constantly wearing wrinkled clothing now. “Where to?” he asked.

“Manitoba this time,” Wolf said, “Raven has been looking at maps, and says it should be a little over three days, maybe four, and we must head downriver to Juneau first so that we can get on the ferry to Haines, and then the ferry to Skagway, and then from there we can get on Alaska Route 98 which will take us to Klondike Highway and eventually the Alaska Highway, then Yellowhead Highway…”

“…and then at some point we end up in Manitoba…?”

She nodded. “It did take us a while to find Notre Dame de Lourdes on the map, though…”

There was a little but loud part of Otacon’s mind that said he should use the directions Wolf had sort of given him to escape at a rest stop or something - he’d taken a road trip through Canada once, back in college, and he’d gone down both Alaska and Yellowhead Highways. So while he wasn’t overly-
familiar with the route, he’d still have half a clue where he was and might be able to make it somewhere he could get help.

…no, that was being ridiculous. For one thing it was next to impossible that he’d manage to lose FOXHOUND, and he wasn’t afraid to admit he was scared of what FOXHOUND might do to him if he attempted to escape. And for another thing every knew he was supposed to be dead — it was all over the news. At this point, he might risk getting killed by the government - or the Patriots, which he still couldn’t be sure if they were real or not - for daring to show his face after his so-called murder had forced President Sears to resign in disgrace and subsequently give the Secret Service the slip. He’d already caused enough trouble for them.

Besides, whether or not the Patriots were real, he still had a duty to see this through to the end, didn’t he? He’d unknowingly signed on for exactly this when he joined the Metal Gear REX project. He couldn’t run away now.

Otacon went along unprotestingly when they got in the car thirty minutes later, leaving Tulsequah behind. His only solace was Bêdeng, who was getting bigger and more energetic all the time, although she was still covered in the absurdly soft fluff of puppyhood, and Wolf, who was still nice to him for he reasons he didn’t understand. Octopus had already told him, after he caught Otacon gazing absentely at her last week, that there was no way she was interested in him.

Late in the afternoon the next day, the forest gave way to flat, open plain. It seemed like a long time since Otacon had last seen the horizon stretch forth so distantly like this, and for some reason he thought of his grandmother.

Prague.

“EVA’s mentioned you before,” Ocelot said, extending his left hand - Dr. Ilya “Elliot” Madnar, a slender man with wide hips, short black hair, downturned eyes, and a decent attempt at sideburns and a moustache, briefly fumbled, instinctually extending his right hand before quickly switching so he could shake hands with Ocelot. “Although, your name did sound familiar regardless.”

Dr. Madnar let out an awkward little laugh. “You’re probably thinking of my father,” he said, “Matka Pluku said you used to be with Outer Heaven.”

“That’s right - Drago Petrovitch, the man behind both TX-55 and Metal Gear D. Died in Zanzibar Land, didn’t he?”

“Yes, that’s him,” Dr. Madnar said, clearly uncomfortable.

“That’s right - Drago Petrovitch, the man behind both TX-55 and Metal Gear D. Died in Zanzibar Land, didn’t he?”

Dr. Madnar let out an awkward little laugh. “You’re probably thinking of my father,” he said, “Matka Pluku said you used to be with Outer Heaven.”

“That’s right - Drago Petrovitch, the man behind both TX-55 and Metal Gear D. Died in Zanzibar Land, didn’t he?”

“Yes, that’s him,” Dr. Madnar said, clearly uncomfortable.

“No former Bolshoi Ballet star…?”

“I, er… well…”

“ADAM, now you’re just being an ass,” EVA cut across, then addressed Dr. Madnar: “So how
about his arm? Think you can get something prepared?"

“Let me see,” Dr. Madnar said, his shoulders visibly untensing in relief. He took Ocelot’s right arm and briefly inspected it - “Looks like it’s healed up pretty well!” - then stepped over to his counter, self-consciously explaining that he didn’t really get much into bionics research until about ten years ago, less even, but he enjoyed his work and everyone said he was good at it and he really did feel like he was going it for a good cause, or at least EVA made him feel that way.

“Do you want your prosthetic to look realistic?” Dr. Madnar asked Ocelot.

“I’d prefer it, yes.”

“Okay… that might take a while. But here, I can hook up a temporary one.” He held up a metallic right hand, displaying it carefully. “I mean, it’s a bit on the obvious side and it might not be quite the right size compared to your natural hand, but it’ll work in the interim.”

“Hmm…”

“He’ll take it,” EVA said. “How soon can a proper replacement hand be ready?”

“Let’s say… Saturday?”

Ocelot shrugged. “Works for me,” he said, “although I suppose with that so soon, I may as well stay in the country for the rest of the week.”

“That’s not a problem,” EVA said. They couldn’t leave Dr. Madnar’s place for another 45 minutes or so, since Dr. Madnar had to take very precise measurements of Ocelot’s right wrist and what was left of his arm and also his left arm up to his elbow and his remaining hand in its entirety so it could be copied over to the right, and then Dr. Madnar had to take a casting of the stump of his wrist so he could ensure that the prosthetic could attach properly… and after all that, at least, attaching the temporary prosthetic didn’t take too long and Ocelot didn’t even blink when Dr. Madnar forced his nerves to connect, a typically painful process. EVA thanked Dr. Madnar profusely when he was done and then they left the poor man alone to his work.

“He usually isn’t so…” EVA waved a hand, “anxious.”

“I must intimidate him,” Ocelot said dryly, flexing his prosthetic, then fishing his glove out of his pocket and tugging it over it. An ill fit, although he’d almost definitely have to get a new pair of gloves tailored after he got his permanent new hand anyway…

“Or you just have a habit of immediately latching onto sore subjects and watching people squirm.”

“I won’t deny that. Still, I could have done worse.”

EVA sighed. “I know, I know… wasn’t he technically V’s prisoner back at Outer Heaven?”

“Technically yes,” Ocelot said, “although we preferred to use the word ‘recruit’. And I will say that the senior Dr. Madnar being under the impression that his son - well, daughter, back then - would come to harm if he didn’t help finish developing Metal Gear was simply the result of miscommunication. The younger Madnar’s life was never in danger. For that matter, he was treated extremely well.”

“Funny how the senior Dr. Madnar ended up joining Big Boss anyway. Although I don’t think Ilya
had anything to do with that, he stayed in Russia and minded his own business.”

Ocelot raised an eyebrow. “Solid Snake was the one who killed Drago Madnar,” he said, “so is it possible that—”

“—Ilya might want revenge on David?” EVA said, “no, I don’t think so. As far as I’ve ever heard - and keep in mind I didn’t meet him until after Zanzibar Land - Ilya holds David in high esteem for ‘rescuing’ him back in ’95. In fact, he admitted to me that he had quite the infatuation with him for years and years, up until he started his transition.”

“Still, I don’t often find people who would take the deliberate killing of their father lying down.”

EVA shrugged. “He didn’t agree with his father defecting to Zanzibar Land,” she said, “and firmly believes that David was only acting in self-defense. A bitter pill to swallow, I guess, but he doesn’t hold any resentment for it and I’m not sure he ever did.”

“…hmm…”

“Look, ADAM - he’s trustworthy, alright? I’ve been friends with him for almost half a decade now.”

“If you say so,” Ocelot said. “I can’t argue with the idea of a bionics specialist in our pocket being prudent, either.”

“Hopefully no one else will be losing any limbs any time soon,” EVA said, somewhere between exasperated and genuinely sympathetic towards Ocelot.

“Mm. Hopefully.”

“Still can’t sleep, Eli?” Mantis sighed, sitting up.

“Nn.” Liquid had been tossing and turning all night so far - and it was about four or five in the morning, by Mantis’ estimate. If their lives had still been normal then Liquid would have been getting up soon anyway, although his bout of depression (which he’d more or less pulled himself out of following his blowing up at Mantis over Solid) had completely wrecked his sleep schedule.

Mantis probed Liquid’s mind to see if it was that there was something wrong, or at least something he could help with, that was keeping him from sleep, but Liquid had a tendency of being able to feel when Mantis was doing that and he sat up as well, rubbing his hand just under his clavicles.

“My chest hurts,” he complained.

“Again?”

“I don’t know what it is, but—“

“It’s alright, Eli, I do not find it annoying. Just… concerning.”

Liquid shrugged, dropping his hand. “It’s fine, really. Actually, it’s not so bad tonight.”

“Hm. If you like, I could go to Port Alsworth tomorrow and get some painkillers for you. Although I believe that over-the-counter would probably be the best I can do…”

“Oh, no - it’s so far, I don’t want to inconvenience you—“

“Hush, it’s no trouble. I only wish I could do more.” He dug his fingers into Liquid’s hair, scratching
his scalp lightly, and Liquid tilted his head down into his touch. “Besides, someone around here needs to go pick up some more soap and toothpaste and such. We’re starting to run low since Solidus came.”

“I see…” Fortunately for Mantis, Liquid was rather easy in some aspects, one of them being that he hated people, even Mantis, doing things for him unasked (that is, out of kindness) unless it were a ‘Well, I was going there anyway’ situation, at which point he’d be annoyed at a refusal.

“Anything I can do tonight?”

Of course, that didn’t stop Mantis from offering to do things for him anyway.

“Erm… well…” He considered it for a few moments, then said, half seriously and half just trying to deflect Mantis, “you know, I recall reading somewhere that orgasms release endorphins, which are natural painkillers.”

Mantis snorted, but played along sort of. “You’re incorrigible.”

“And you haven’t been keeping up your end of the game lately…”

“What, breaking the bed was not enough for you?”

“I fixed it, didn’t I?” (No. Well, yes, he’d repaired the hole in the mattress although the damage was still obvious when one laid down on it, and the boxspring had been unsalvageable - the mattress now sat directly on the bedframe.)

“Hmmm…”

After Liquid had blown up at him over Solid Mantis had given him not quite a new rule, but a stern warning about aggressively coming onto him, so it was with a certain amount of caution that Liquid pushed Mantis back onto his back and straddled him. “Come on, Mantis. You asked if there was anything you could do…”

Mantis reached up, pulling himself up a little to meet Liquid, although mostly Liquid just leaned down. He nuzzled his face, then whispered in his ear: “You know, Eli, I recall reading somewhere that the lead-up to the orgasm releases endorphins on its own… no orgasm necessary.”

“Gh… you really like to deny me satisfaction, don’t you…?”

“You are adorable when you beg.”

Liquid was tempted to hit Mantis with his pillow for saying that but was prevented by Mantis suddenly using his psychokinesis to reverse their positions, sitting in his lap now with Liquid pushed back against the bedspread — although, Mantis thought, perhaps if Liquid behaved himself for the next half-hour or so he’d give him permission to ride him. And he let Liquid hear that thought, too; Liquid’s face lit up. He liked riding Mantis, even if Mantis always tormented him before allowing him to and even if he was still a little distracted by the ache beneath his sternum.

Minutes later, in the adjoining room, Solid was grappling with the perennial problem of trying really, really hard to ignore how thin the walls were in his cabin even when every muffled whine and whimper went straight to his dick.

“Oh— oh, god, M-Mantis—“

“Shh, keep your voice down. Snake is awake, he can hear us.”
Solid couldn’t quite make out Liquid’s response, but his brain supplied it anyway:

_What’s he going to do about it?_

Solid turned his back to the wall, curling up under his blanket. Maybe it’d be a good idea to just get up and take a little night-walk, like he’d done sometimes before — but no, he’d have to pass Solidus at some point and Solid didn’t know if he was asleep or not and like hell he was going to risk being seen by him with a noticeable tent in the front of his pants. Solidus had come across as a major space case to Solid so far but he was pretty sure he wasn’t _stupid_, he’d know there was only one thing in the cabin right now that could put Solid in this state without him really wanting it and it started with “L” and ended with “iquid Snake can’t keep his pretty mouth shut when having sex with his boyfriend”.

One of the dogs lying on Solid’s floor lazily raised her head when Liquid let out a loud moan that was quickly stifled - by something being put in his mouth from the sound of it. Solid couldn’t help but wonder what that _something_ was (fingers? his own? Mantis’? Mantis’ tongue? Mantis’ _cock_? had it just been to shut him up or was he sucking on whatever it was even now, and pressing his tongue against it, maybe wetting his full, pink lips until they were shiny with saliva) and even though he chased the thought away as fast as he could his stupid dick still twitched insistently.

_He’s your brother_, he told himself like a mantra, still lying on his side with his eyes closed deliberately like he was sleeping, but he was clenching his fists until his nails dug little half-circles of pain into his palms, _he’s your brother. He’s your brother, Snake, that’s incest, that’s not right, that’s sick—_ and Liquid’s voice in his head kept repeating: _What’s he going to do about it? What are you going to do about this, brother?_

Solid wondered if Mantis was reading his mind right now. Probably not. Clearly he’d taken a glance just to confirm that he was awake, but in all likelihood he was ignoring Solid in favor of Liquid. Reasonable. They were _busy_ right now, after all.

For the first time it occurred to Solid to wonder if they were doing this on _purpose_.

“M-Mantis, Mantis, please—!”

“Eli, be _quiet._”

…there was no way Mantis was. Solid thought about it and he just couldn’t see it. Mantis simply wasn’t that kind of exhibitionist (Solid would hesitate to call him an exhibitionist at all, even though he’d already seen his weird self-bondage a few times when he shed his sweater; he really did get the impression that Mantis did that for aesthetic reasons, or because he found it comfortable, or whatever, instead of anything remotely sexual) and Solid was pretty sure that Mantis ordering Liquid to shut up was done in complete sincerity and if he could have gotten ahold of a good gag in Port Alsworth then he certainly would have.

The image briefly flashed to Solid’s mind of Liquid, shirtless as usual, nipples so hard they could cut glass, tied or handcuffed or something to a frame Solid’s brain didn’t supply the details of, arms spread and shoulders wrenched back, chest heaving, head hanging - maybe his collar had a weight or a ball attached to it just to make noise every time he moved or to make it harder to breathe — a ball gag stretched his plush lips and forced his jaw down, thick saliva streaking his chin, and for once his incessant prattle was halted and he couldn’t ask _What’s he going to do about it._

_Fuck. Maybe Mantis wasn’t doing this on purpose, but maybe Liquid _was._*
“—let me finish, let me finish, Mantis, l-let me cum, tell m-me I can c-cum, p-pl-please—“

Desperate pleading that quickly devolved into incoherent mumbling barely audible through the wall. Solid wasn’t sure he could reconcile that with the fact that this was the same guy who’d hijacked Metal Gear REX, took over a top-secret base, and gave Gray Fox the death he’d been seeking. It probably didn’t matter if he did or not.

Despite their alliance against the Patriots, Solid had no qualms in admitting he felt no love for his brother - if anything, he hated his guts. But god damn wouldn’t he have loved to be the one making those noises spill from Liquid’s hot wet mouth right now instead of Mantis, maybe holding him down even as he squirmed and bucked and giving his tight ass the hardest, roughest, most overwhelming and excruciating pounding of his oversexed life as payback for Shadow Moses—

No. No. Bad thought.

Solid was so hard it hurt.

And what was he going to do about it?

Without even opening his eyes, body still tense, Solid Snake guiltily slid one hand down his pants and stroked himself, listening to his twin brother bounce up and down on someone else’s cock and imagining that it was his own.

Chapter End Notes

I refuse to believe that the Dr. Madnar in MGS4 is the same one as in MG2 because Solid fucking killed him. I don’t give a damn about that so-called rare Codec call, the one video of it is freakin’ audio-only! Open your eyes, people, it isn't rare, it's dummied! It's data-mined! That makes it non-canon!!

Also no I won't explain the NGE script thing, use your imaginations #avantgarde
Chapter 39

The next day Mantis didn’t talk to Solid anymore.

Despite it only being a few hours between when he woke up and when he dusted the snow off the still-entirely-nonfunctional-without-his-psycho-powers car, Liquid absolutely noticed that Mantis wasn’t talking to him anymore. And while Mantis would have thought that Liquid would find that a relief, considering he was still jealous and suspicious of Solid even if he wasn’t openly saying as much anymore, what it in reality did was just raise Liquid’s hackles.

“What happened?” he demanded, cornering Mantis outside. “Why did you suddenly stop—“

“Why are you so suspicious about this, Eli…?”

“Because you’re **you**. You don’t just suddenly **stop** talking to someone you **like**, not without good reason. Tell me the reason, Mantis!”

Mantis sighed. “Eli…”

“What’s the matter, Mantis?” Liquid sneered at him. “Perhaps you feel **guilty** about something?”

Mantis glared at him coldly enough that Liquid frowned, fidgeted a little, and backed down from his unspoken accusation that Mantis had cheated on him. Although the question did set off a little twinge somewhere in Mantis’ stomach — he hadn’t really stopped to consider it until now, mostly because he wasn’t sure ‘guilty’ was the word he’d use (he was, by and large, pretty much incapable of feeling it ever since the serial killer personality absorption thing), but it was true that he did feel sort of… **bad** about the fact that he’d told Solid about his history with Ocelot in the KGB while Liquid only got the barest hints about it. Usually from other, non-Mantis people. Liquid didn’t have a clue that Mantis felt so indebted to Ocelot and Mantis had never mentioned it to **anyone** up until Solid last week.

Huh. Maybe the fact that Mantis felt so insistent about making the trip to Port Alsworth just for some ibuprofen for Liquid was some sort of subconscious attempt at making things up to him. Or maybe it was just his usual ‘would do anything for Eli’ attitude?

“Erm…” Liquid shifted his weight uncomfortably in the snow again, then tried again about why Mantis might have stopped talking to Solid: “He was planning something, wasn’t he?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, something! Maybe he thought he would throw away all our plans and try to kill you, or—“

“Eli, if he thought that, I would certainly take more drastic action than simply refusing to talk to him.”

“…so… what did he think, then?”

Mantis sighed. “It was- simply a late-night fantasy that I found particularly abhorrent. But I don’t think it indicated any kind of threat, it was just a fantasy. I won’t say more.”
Liquid wondered if maybe he could get Solid to tell him himself but he sort of doubted it, and anyway he ended up going back inside to fetch a thicker coat for Mantis, which Mantis knew would take him a while because his only options were Solid’s coats but he’d be wanting to find one that didn’t have the smell of him on it because it drove Liquid absolutely nuts if and when Mantis started smelling like Solid.

Mantis had just about gotten the car ready to go when Solidus walked outside, quickly followed by a fuming Liquid.

“You’re headed into town, aren’t you?” Solidus said to Mantis, “I’d like to accompany you.”

Mantis blinked. “Why…”?

“There’s no cell reception out here and I want to get in touch with Ocelot. I was hoping I might have better luck a little closer to civilization.”

“Oh. Is it important?”

“He already told me it isn’t!” Liquid interjected, then strode over to Mantis and grabbed his arm. I don’t want you alone with him, he thought.

Oh, for God’s sake, Mantis replied, staring at him, this again?

I’m serious! And it’s even more pressing this time, you can’t read Solidus’ mind at all and I could definitely throw him farther than I trust him.

The same could be said of a lot of people. Tell me, what could Solidus possibly stand to gain by doing harm to me?

Liquid blinked. He couldn’t think of anything. He stepped back from Mantis, scowling, but swiftly shifted his glare over to Solidus, who took the whole silent exchange in stride and only seemed to be waiting for Mantis to give his answer about whether or not he could come to Port Alsworth.

Mantis, actually, could think of something Solidus could stand to gain by harming Mantis, or rather, he could think of something Ocelot could stand to gain by harming Mantis - getting rid of the one person on this so-called ‘team’ that actively undermined his rapport with everyone else — and of course Solidus was right in Ocelot’s pocket, wasn’t he? Even if Mantis didn’t know the exact nature of their relationship, although he had his rather uncharitable suspicious…

Still, he was, at this point, more concerned about Ocelot’s warning that Solidus might try to instigate a fight between Solid and Liquid, and between those two nothing would happen except that they escalate it until one or both of them died, or were at least maimed. So he’d rather not have Solidus around them without himself there to disrupt the situation if necessary.

Which wasn’t to say it didn’t occur to Mantis that Ocelot had given him that warning precisely to set up this situation, with Solidus being alone with Mantis and Mantis being vulnerable to a surprise attack with Solidus’ cybernetic implants in the equation here, but… quite frankly, Mantis didn’t know which way this could go and he would much rather take risks with his life than Liquid’s.

“Solidus can come with me to Port Alsworth,” Mantis said at length. Liquid let out an exaggerated groan but stalked back into the house without further comment. Mantis heard him thinking about how he’d flay Solidus alive if Mantis came back with even the vaguest report of threatening behavior, and how Solidus would have a much, much worse fate in store if Mantis didn’t come back at all. Mantis rolled his eyes.
Solid also noticed that Mantis wasn’t talking to him, but mostly because his “Morning” had been met only with a glare followed by deliberate silence. Of course he knew full well why. As relatively sure as Solid was that Mantis hadn’t been paying any attention to his thoughts last night, today he would have found out with even the most cursory glance at his mind that Solid had absolutely jacked off to the sound of him having sex. After all, Solid couldn’t deny that he felt intensely ashamed for having masturbated to his own twin brother. Especially to the part where it was Liquid’s frustrated, breathless just-before-orgasm whine of “Please, it hurts, it hurts” that had sent him over the edge.

Yeah.

But apart from giving him the cold shoulder Mantis didn’t make a big deal about it. Nor did he seem to have told Liquid about it, judging by Liquid’s behavior after Mantis and Solidus had left for Port Alsworth — he sulked a little, evidently upset at Solidus and Mantis alone in a car together for hours and hours, and then he played Pokémon Emerald, ate a tin of canned pineapple, casually talked to Solid about Diane’s puppies, of which he was getting particularly attached to Benedict although Mei was a close second and the other four were extremely close thirds… nothing that indicated he knew Solid had fapped to him.

Unless, of course, he’d already guessed what kind of effect he had on Solid, had intentionally cultivated it, and his general aura of smugness was at this particular time caused by the knowledge that Solid had finally given in to all that temptation he’d been heaping on him.

It mainly came down to Solid not knowing if Liquid had done any of this on purpose or not because he wasn’t sure how he’d act if he did or didn’t. He really didn’t know him all that well - even his assessment of him at Shadow Moses had ended up being off, because ever since that had ended Liquid had spent most of his time being significantly less… manic. Not exactly like a different person or anything, but either there were external forces at play here that hadn’t been at Shadow Moses, or vice-versa.

It also didn’t help that Solid wasn’t particularly good at reading people. Never had been.

Hoping that it would lead to something obvious one way or the other, and taking advantage of the fact that they were alone in the cabin right now (although it was late, Mantis and Solidus should be back soon), Solid decided that now was a good a time as any to finally ask Liquid just what the hell was up with the dog collar. And he decided to do it by abruptly steering Liquid into a wall, grabbing said collar, and making pointed eye contact with him.

“What,” he said, “is this even for?”

Liquid seemed mildly perturbed about Solid’s approach here but mostly just disdainful of the fact that Solid hadn’t figured it out himself. “Isn’t it obvious?” he drawled, subtly leaning away from him and closer to the wall.

“That it’s some kind of sex thing…? Yeah, I guess so.”

“Then what are you asking about?”

“I mean what is it for specifically?” He leaned a little closer, his brow furrowing. “What, does Mantis attach a leash to you or something?”

“H-Huh?”

Was that a yes, then? “Because if it were me,” Solid said, “I’d probably put a bell on it.”

“A…” Liquid blinked. “A bell?”
“Yeah. You’re a stealth operative too, right? So it’d probably be pretty humiliating to not be able to move without making noise.”

Liquid opened his mouth, then closed it, then went bright red and said, “You’ve considered this, brother?”

Solid paused. Liquid seemed more genuinely embarrassed than anything else, but at the same time he was continuing the conversation and had made no attempt to move his body away from Solid’s nor take Solid’s hand off his collar. “Not really,” he said, “I mean, that’s just what I’d think.”

“Oh… so it just sort of… occurred to you.”

“Right. Why, what did you think?”

“Er… nothing, nothing at all.”

Liquid was avoiding eye contact now. Solid had no idea what the hell this meant, except that Liquid wasn’t completely oblivious to whatever Solid was getting at, even if Solid wasn’t quite sure of what that was himself.

“So,” Solid continued, refusing to relent on the minuscule amount of space he’d allowed between him and Liquid, “what is it, then? Or is it not involved in the sex at all and you just wear it because you can? Does the collar mean anything?”

“I— I don’t have to explain it to you if I don’t want to.”

“You don’t want to?”

“No,” Liquid said, and it sounded like he had tried to say it firmly but there was a slight tremor in his voice. Odd. Solid became aware of a soft scratching sound and glanced down — one of Liquid’s hands was frenetically picking at a spot of peeling wallpaper.

Nervous? Solid wondered, looking back up at Liquid, whose eyes had gone a little wide, evidently at the way Solid’s gaze had flicked down. No… not nervous, Solid decided. People got nervous when they felt uncomfortable or threatened. He didn’t think Liquid could be either one of those because over the past few weeks Liquid had been pretty damn consistent in dealing with uncomfortable situations by leaving as rudely as possible, and he didn’t buy that he felt threatened either because he didn’t buy that Liquid wouldn’t get violent if he did. So he must just be restless.

Now, why the hell would he be so restless?

Or wait, maybe he did feel threatened, but not by Solid.

“Mantis is a jealous kind of guy, isn’t he?” Solid said abruptly.

“What makes you say that?”

“I’ve met him.” He tugged on the collar a little - not enough to choke, just enough for Liquid to notice, and he definitely did, his lips twitched — “so maybe that’s what this is for, right? It’s a symbol that he ‘owns’ you?”

“Ah— don’t put it that way, it… it sounds weird.”

Solid raised an eyebrow. Liquid’s blush deepened.

“I don’t get the point of it,” Solid said. “I mean, most relationships don’t need something like that,
right? A visual display that the person isn’t exactly available…”

“That’s what a wedding ring is, if you think about it,” Liquid said evasively, looking anywhere except at Solid… but, still, he made no attempt to escape. Even when Solid experimentally leaned closer, one knee shifting between Liquid’s legs, although he deliberately didn’t touch him.

“I just think it’s kind of weird. It’s a collar, for fuck’s sake.”

“Well… er… I… um…”

“Or maybe you just don’t play by the same rules as the rest of us?”

“I… don’t know what you mean, brother—”

“Maybe you need something to tell everyone that Mantis ‘owns’ you because other than that, you’re free to sleep with whoever you like?”

Solid was just throwing that out there without seriously thinking there was even a chance that that was the case, but when Liquid’s eyes snapped up to his he didn’t look nearly as offended as Solid thought he would. In fact, he mostly looked… kind of… flustered? “No I’m not,” he said, a hint of a whine in his voice. “I’m not allowed—“

“Oh… really? Never?”

“No, er, I mean- well, there was this one time, but—“

“One time?” Solid repeated, his eyebrows drawing together again. “What do you mean, one time?”

Liquid started. Solid guessed he hadn’t meant to say that. “Well, I just-… a couple years ago Mantis and I had a… a ménage à trois. But that wasn’t cheating!”

“You had a threesome?” Solid said, genuinely shocked, “with who?” Wolf, maybe? Solid would have gone for it if he could have. Hell, body like that, the fact that she had been trying to kill him wouldn’t be much of a deterrent. “Wait, hang on a minute… didn’t you say you and Ocelot used to be lovers?”

“Guh… yes?”

“Don’t tell me it was with him…”

“…”

Wow okay holy shit. Solid didn’t particularly like the mental image he was getting of Liquid being fucked by Ocelot, mostly because it involved Ocelot, but he pushed the thought away before his brain could start supplying positions they might have used during the threesome (somehow Solid just knew Liquid had bottomed for both of them) and his penis got involved in this discussion anyway.

“That was years ago,” Liquid said, looking away again.

“And you only did it once?”

“Well… Mantis isn’t really into NTR…”

“He hates Ocelot, if the whole thing wasn’t really a success maybe it had more to do with him. Hey, if you liked it, maybe you should try to convince Mantis to let you give it another shot… with someone else this time.”
There was a brief pause as both Solid and Liquid realized what Solid had implied in that last sentence. That really wasn’t what Solid had been going for (although, to be honest, if they offered he wouldn’t refuse), he’d just kind of absent-mindedly given Liquid a bit of what he felt was good advice without stopping to consider that he totally sounded like he was suggesting he team up with Mantis to DP the hell out of Liquid. But… he was curious about what Liquid’s reaction would be, so he let the implication stand.

Liquid just stared at him for a moment or two and then blurted out, “Have you ever heard of the Selfish Gene Theory?”

“The what?” What on earth did that have to do with…?

“Altruism among blood relatives is a response to natural selection,” Liquid said, his eyes flicking anxiously from side to side, his restless hand at the wall tearing little divots into the drywall now. “In order to increase the chance that their genes will be passed on to a new generation, family members in Nature help each other to survive, but they don’t mate with each other…”

Solid didn’t miss the way Liquid had started stammering all of a sudden. Especially over the word ‘mate’.

And, of course, after all the times he’d heard Mantis screwing Liquid’s brains out, he was well-acquainted with the fact that Liquid had a definite, noticeable tendency to stammer when he was turned on.

No fucking way… right? What the hell…?

But before Solid could say or do anything more to Liquid he was interrupted by Mantis suddenly appearing at the end of the hall, arms crossed, still wearing one of Solid’s old coats.

“Eli,” he said in an even voice, “you know how I dislike seeing you in these kinds of situations. Come wait for me in our room.”

Liquid looked like he could have just about cried in relief, which confused Solid - maybe he’d been misinterpreting everything so far? It was possible - and he ducked away from him, walking briskly down the hall without another word, back stiff.

Almost a full minute passed in silence, with Mantis narrowing his eyes at Solid, his furious revulsion obvious even from this distance - and Solid thought maybe ‘revulsion’ would be far too light a word.

“He is your brother,” Mantis hissed.

“He,” Solid replied flatly, “is loud.”

After his two-sentence exchange with Solid, Mantis slunk back to the ‘storage’ room and, right before he opened the door, gently prodded Liquid’s mind with his own, informing it that it was only he who was about to come into the room.

Still, when he entered Liquid was nowhere to be seen because he’d elected to sit on the floor, knees drawn up to his chest, on the side of the bed not visible from the doorway. Mantis softly closed the door behind him and circled around the bed to sit next to Liquid.

For a little while neither one of them said anything.

Finally, Liquid said, “aren’t you going to punish me?”
Mantis shook his head. “Why should I punish you, Eli?”

“I… Snake…”

“You did not exactly initiate that, Eli.”

“No, but I should have told him to fuck off, at the very least… but I— I—…”

“…froze up?” Mantis said.

Liquid nodded, eyes cast towards the floor.

Mantis reached out, touched Liquid’s shoulder; to his credit, he didn’t flinch or recoil from the touch like he usually did when he was this distressed, so Mantis started rubbing his back in small, slow circles, as affectionately as he could.

“What the hell was that, anyway?” Liquid said, looking up.

“It’s called Genetic Sexual Attraction,” Mantis said frankly, “it is not unheard of in close relatives who meet for the first time as adults. Although it is not particularly common - I understand, Eli, that you have no interest of that sort in either of your brothers — nor does it always crop up in individuals prone to it; Snake feels nothing whatsoever for Solidus.”

“So it’s just me, then. Wonderful,” Liquid muttered.

“And— let’s see— Snake did not intend to come onto you per se, he was merely trying to gauge your reaction to inappropriate questions and conversation because he couldn’t figure out if you were… being loud at night… on purpose, in an effort to bother or tease him. Only, you managed to give off a lot of mixed signals…”

“…sorry.”

“Shh. It’s alright, Eli, that was not your fault.” He sighed. “It’s mine, really. I was supposed to be helping you recover from your PTSD, but it never occured to me that sexual aggression would put you in a bad place mentally.”

Liquid gave him a weak attempt at a reassuring smile. “Well, usually when people flirt with me they assume I’d take the dominant role if they got very far. So this hasn’t come up before.”

“I really do not understand how… has Wolf never flirted with you? She is the very definition of sexually aggressive and she knows you prefer to be submissive, is it something that only puts you on edge if it comes from men?”

“Wolf’s never hit on me, not really,” Liquid said, “she thinks I’m gay, remember?”

“…right… that usually does not stop her, though…”

“I’m her friend. She respects my sexuality, even if she’s not actually correct about what it is.” His smile seemed almost a little more genuine now - really it was fortunate that the reason why Liquid was never too bothered about Wolf constantly forgetting that he was bisexual was because he honestly found it pretty funny.

But even that wasn’t quite enough to lift him out of his jittery mood, so after a few minutes longer of Mantis just rubbing his back and, after a short stretch of silence, murmuring to him about how he was proud of him for holding it together as well as he did, Liquid asked to left alone for a while. Mantis
unprotestingly obliged, closing the bedroom door behind him with the same care with which he had opened it.

He did keep an eye on Liquid’s emotions even as he prepared him as nice a (late) dinner as he could with the available ingredients, but he wasn’t concerned at all when Liquid’s self-conscious anxiety turned suddenly to anger. That, in fact, Mantis considered predictable and if anything, a good sign.

Liquid left the ‘storage’ room and stalked through the cabin, scowling, and quickly found Solid. Solid looked like he wanted to say something - maybe an apology but honestly it could have been anything - but before he could Liquid wordlessly stepped up in front of him and decked him across the jaw.

“What the hell, Liquid,” Solid said, rubbing his chin. Liquid had split his lip, it was already bleeding and it would be swelling soon.

“That was for earlier,” Liquid snarled. “I’m not fucking interested, you sick freak.”

“Wh- I wasn’t—“

Solidus chose that moment to stick his head around the corner. “Oh, by the way,” he said, “I did manage to get in touch with Ocelot, and…” He trailed off, staring at Liquid, who still had his fists clenched, and Solid’s bloody mouth. “Ah… I see…”

“And what do you want?” Liquid barked at him.

“Nothing. Carry on.”

Chapter End Notes

Liquid stop telling people you had a threesome, it gives the wrong impression

Believe it or not, this chapter is setting up for something important later. (Also believe it or not, the same could be said of just about every single scene in this entire fic. I told y’all, this mother is long as hell and it is the edited-down version!)
“So, like…” Mei Ling’s roommate Neela said, “is it really true? About Shadow Moses Island, I mean.”

“What?” Mei Ling said, sitting up on her bed and putting down her book. “What about it?”

“That you were there!”

“Um… I have a gag order, actually.”

Neela pouted. “Oh, come on,” she said, “Soraya told me they can’t prosecute you for violating a gag order if you divulge information anonymously.”

“But if they know it was someone at MIT who got the information then they’ll know it was me who gave it.”

“It’s not like I’m planning on telling anyone!”

Mei Ling considered it for a minute. She’d started attending MIT properly again (instead of her previous work-study arrangement) after FOXHOUND was officially dissolved at the beginning of March - by the next Monday, exactly a week after Shadow Moses had been turned into a radioactive wasteland, she had moved in with Neela (an electrical engineering and computer science major) and another girl, Soraya (a political science major getting a minor in international development), who was out right now. Since it was already May, she felt she knew Neela and Soraya fairly well, so she was reasonably confident that if she talked, it wouldn’t leave this room, at least not in a way that could be connected to her.

“Okay,” she said, “what do you want to know?”

“Um, everything?” Neela said. “Let’s start with those terrorists - like, who the heck were they?”

“A top-secret special forces group in the Army,” Mei Ling said, “I used to be on their R&D team. We used them as our test subjects for a lot of new technology!”

“What were they like??”

“Hmmm… I didn’t know them very well,” Mei Ling admitted, “it was pretty rare that I was even in the same room as any of them, I met their squad commander officially once when I first started, but that was less than three minutes, I think. As for the rest… well, sometimes I’d be in the same room when one of them was getting an updated version of the Codec implanted, but I usually wasn’t.”

“Aw… so you don’t know anything?”

“I heard a lot of rumors and gossip… I don’t know how much of it was true…”

“Do you know why they staged a rebellion?” Neela asked eagerly, leaning forward in her desk chair.

“Uh-uh.”

“Mnnn… well, what about the guy who was sent in after them? Y’know, the one that got killed?”
“Oh… Snake…” Mei Ling blinked. She hadn’t known him very well either, but she somehow felt sadder about his death than she did FOXHOUND’s. She found it pretty tragic either way, actually, but FOXHOUND had started that mess - Solid had been dragged into it and killed for it when all he wanted to do was go home to his dogs. “He called me cute.”

“Really! Wait. How old was he?”

“In his thirties?” Mei Ling put on a coy smile. “You know, I kind of like older men.”

“Huh!! Anyway, what exactly happened over there?”

“I don’t know for sure. He got captured, and…” she lowered her voice, and couldn’t help but looking around before she continued even though it was pretty unlikely that someone was going around spying on Cambridge students’ apartments, “he was being tortured, and suddenly his Codec channel went completely dead.”

“So that was when he died…?”

“Well, I didn’t think so, at the time anyway. They were torturing him with an electric shock device, I tried to tell everyone that it was possible for the Codec to short out with a high voltage shock — but if it was a high voltage, low amperage charge, then Snake might have still been alive even if his Codec was broken.”

“But they, like, ignored you?” Neela said, leaning forward still further, eyes wide.

“Yeah… I think it’s just protocol to assume the worst if communication is cut off,” Mei Ling said, “next thing I know, Mr. Houseman is ordering a nuclear strike on-“ She clamped her hands over her mouth. Neela’s eyebrows shot way up.

“The Secretary of Defense ordered a nuclear strike?!” she exclaimed.

“Shh!!”

“But the news said it was the terrorists who detonated the bomb!”

Mei Ling shook her head frantically. “That was just a story,” she said, “to try to make things look not as bad as they really were. But honestly, even if I hadn’t heard the order myself I still wouldn’t have believed that - there was no way that FOXHOUND would accidentally blow themselves up. They were too good for that!”

“Oh my god,” Neela said, “I can’t believe we’re just, like, being lied to like that! Our own government nuked Alaska!!”

“Neela, shh! I don’t want to get in trouble!”

“Sorry, sorry,” Neela said, dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “Well, I guess if Snake was still alive after all, he was killed in the bombing.”

“Yeah…” Mei Ling said, staring at her lap. “I wondered about that for a while, but then we got to King Cove to pick up Meryl… she was one of the hostages, and was trying to help Snake. But she got captured, too.”

“And she, like, was able to tell you what happened?”

Mei Ling nodded. “She saw Snake die. So he was definitely dead before Shadow Moses got nuked.”
“Like, wow… I don’t know if that would have been a better way to go or not, but either way that’s pretty horrible…”

There was a long pause. Mei Ling picked up her book, but couldn’t really focus on the words. Neela had already turned around at her desk and had gone back to writing her essay when Mei Ling murmured, “there was something odd, though.”

Neela swung her chair around again. “Huh?”

“Snake had GPS-transmitting nanomachines, and I was the one keeping track of them… they didn’t stop transmitting when his Codec went offline. I could still see where he was. And… he kept moving.”

“Really? But, I bet the terrorists were just moving his body around.”

“That’s what I thought… like Achilles dragging Hector’s body before the gates of Troy,” Mei Ling said, “the Colonel agreed with me. And anyway the nanomachines eventually ran out of batteries and I lost track of them completely, but…” She stared down at her book, her eyebrows scrunching together. “Neela… I could swear that just before the batteries died, I saw Snake’s location move again… totally off the island.”

Notre Dame de Lourdes, Manitoba, Canada.

This safe house actually had internet access and a computer, although - to their credit, honestly - FOXHOUND wasn’t allowing Otacon to use it. Not that he really would have been able to anyway… Octopus spent too much time on the computer for him to get in edgewise… he said he was keeping up with the news, although Otacon wasn’t sure that jumping between conspiracy theory forums and imageboards really qualified.

And then Octopus called them all over to the computer, saying everyone and their mother on the conspiracy forums were talking about a certain thread recently posted to 4chan’s ‘Random’ board for lack of a better place to put it, and “Believe me, you had better see this.”

The title of the thread: **THE TRUTH ABOUT SHADOW MOSES.** The starter post:

It wasn’t terrorists who detonated a nuclear weapon on Shadow Moses island back in February, it was the United States Department of Defense. The terrorists were actually an Army special forces group gone rogue. At least one of them is probably still alive. The operator sent in to take care of the situation who was reported dead may still be alive.

His codename was Solid Snake. If you were involved with the incident at all then you know my information is good, since that was top-secret and was never reported in the news. Again: he may still be alive.

I’m friends with someone who was on his support staff, but I can’t reveal their identity or give any information about them because everyone was given a gag order, and if they violate that then their life might be in danger. But word needs to get out.

My friend is willing to talk as long as it stays anonymous. Ask us anything. Pic unrelated.

“Is this serious?” Raven said, frowning at the screen.
“I think so,” Octopus said. “Check this out.”

He scrolled down to another post the OP made to verify their identity. He opened the attached photo - it was a letter, a copy of a gag order in fact, with a DoD letterhead. The name of the person who received the gag order had been covered by some coins placed carefully on the paper, and there was a sticky note attached to it that said, in block letters clearly written with the non-dominant hand, “WHAT'S UP, /b/!!

“MAY 16 17, 2005

“3:35 AM”

“That,” Octopus said, “is definitely official. It was posted 2:38 AM our time, so not only does that mean the poster here is in the Eastern Time Zone, but that also means she’s somewhere with good computers and fast internet in order to get it posted that quick.”

“I didn’t doubt that that was official,” Wolf said, “Solid Snake’s name was never on the news. The poster really must know someone who was involved.”

“Or maybe she was there herself,” Otacon suggested. “…wait. She?”

“I guess I’m not 100% certain,” said Octopus, “but the poster definitely types like a woman - and a fairly young one, too, I’d say she’s either in college or only just out of it. No kids. Definitely extremely smart.” He turned back to the computer. “And I think her story about it being a friend who was involved and not her personally is true, I’ve read most of the thread now and so far she hasn’t slipped up even once on that point.”

“Anything she has slipped up on?” Raven said.

“Nothing yet. All her posts are accurate if a little vague sometimes, and she’s been really careful not to include any identifying information.”

“It may be a good idea for us to find out who this person is, though,” Wolf said.

“Yeah, you’re not wrong… although I kind of doubt she’s with the Patriots, somehow I don’t think that the Patriots want the truth getting out.”

“OP could be in danger,” Otacon said nervously, “her friend, too. What if the Patriots find them? They could trace her IP address—“

“Someone already tried that,” Octopus said, “she’s running Tor.”

“Tor was initially created by the Naval Research Laboratories and it’s largely funded by DARPA,” Otacon blurted out, “if the Patriots are looking for her, then… they might… um…”

Otacon initially thought that Wolf, Octopus, and Raven were staring at him because he’d finally said something that sounded like he’d conceded the existence of the Patriots - which, well, he sort of had at this point, he guessed - but then Wolf glanced at the other two then explained to Otacon, “the DARPA chief was with the Patriots.”

“O-Oh… so, the Patriots might definitely have a way around Tor.”

“This could be bad,” Octopus said. “Still, aren’t IP addresses not completely reliable?”

“IP addresses identify the computer,” Otacon said, pushing up his glasses, “as far as finding a
specific location goes, they’re a lot more useful when the computer in question is a desktop one. If OP is using a laptop, then she could be anywhere.”

“Does she know how much danger she is in, though?” Wolf said.

“Perhaps we should try to find her before the Patriots do,” Raven said.

Wolf nodded. “Her friend, too. Any clues, Octopus?”

“Well…” Octopus frowned at the photo of the DoD gag order. “As I said, college-age woman, Eastern Time Zone. Judging by how fast she’s able to answer questions, I’d say she lives with her friend - roommates, is my guess. The way she talks about them, I don’t think they’re family or in a relationship, so her friend is probably another young woman, but I can’t be sure. Oh, and she uses American spelling.”

“That doesn’t narrow it down by much…”

“I told you, she’s careful.”

“Hey, open that timestamp image up in Photoshop,” Otacon said, “we might be able to find something if we lighten the picture.”

Octopus threw him a look over his shoulder, but did as instructed — after all, the image was pretty murky, it was very obvious that it really had been taken at three in the morning. After lightening the image, Otacon leaned forward over Octopus’ shoulder to squint at the coins OP had used to cover her friend’s name.

“That’s what I thought,” he said.

“What?” Raven said.

“Those coins - they’re not quarters, they’re just a little bit too small, but not small enough to be nickels. They’re arcade tokens.”

“OP must have just grabbed the first thing available,” Octopus said, “okay. So either she or her friend likes arcade games. That might come in handy.”

“Octopus, can you zoom in a bit?” Otacon said, “arcade tokens usually have the name of the arcade on them, that might be able to help narrow down her location.”

“Sure thing.”

He zoomed in. Everyone stared at the screen for a minute, then Raven said, “it is simply too low-quality. I cannot make out what the words say.”

“Me neither…” said Octopus.

“It was a good idea, though,” Wolf said to Otacon. Otacon shook his head.

“Nevermind the words,” he said, “I recognize that logo.”

“Really?”

“Octopus, can you google ‘Festiscore Game Center’? I’m not sure if it isn’t a franchise, or…”

Just one relevant result, a family-owned arcade in Brookline, Massachusetts. Otacon slapped a hand
to his forehead.

“Damn,” he said.

“What is it?” Wolf said.

“Massachusetts is in the right time zone, and… you said OP was really smart and might still be in college, right, Octopus?”

“Yeah,” Octopus said.

“This is kind of a shot in the dark, but - what if she’s a student at MIT? Festiscore is a pretty popular place to hang out, or at least it was back when I was going there. Plus it’d be finals season right about now, so it makes sense that OP would be up posting on 4chan at three in the morning.”

Again, the FOXHOUND members all looked at him weird, but this time Otacon got the feeling that he’d just accidentally said something that cracked the identity of the anonymous Shadow Moses leaker wide open.

“What?” he said, somewhat nervously.

“There was a girl on our R&D team who was a student at MIT,” Octopus said flatly. “A currently enrolled student, that is.”

“And,” Wolf said, “it does make sense that she would be on Snake’s support team, does it not? After all, she was the one who invented the Codec and developed the Soliton radar - technologies Snake would have never used before. Who better to instruct him?”

Otacon gaped at them. “You really don’t think OP’s friend could be her, do you?”

“It is troublingly possible,” Raven said, with a slow, sad shake of his head. “What a shame, I believe she was only nineteen years old.”

“Twenty now, her birthday’s in April,” Octopus said.

“…why do you know that…?”

“This isn’t—!” Otacon started, then paused, trying to collect his thoughts. “We’ve got to do something,” he said. “It only took us a few minutes to figure out who OP’s friend might be - who’s to say the Patriots don’t already know? They’ll hunt her down! Both of them!!”

“Raven, how long would it take us to go to Massachusetts from here?” Wolf said.

Raven considered it for a moment. “About two days,” he said. “We could traverse Ontario, or cross the border into America as soon as possible and go through Chicago on the way there.”

Wolf frowned slightly. “If we cross the border close to here, then we will be headed back to North Dakota, no? And we would cross the border somewhere in New England if we cut across Ontario…”

“Border check’ll probably be easier in North Dakota,” Octopus said.

Otacon glanced at the window. “Getting another car might be a good idea,” he said, “that van looks a little… military, don’t you think?”

“I agree, but where are we supposed to get another car?” Wolf said, her eyebrows drawing together.
Raven walked off with no explanation, but after half a minute he came back with Ocelot’s list of safe houses, which he turned over and pointed at the back of. It was another address, this one in Brossard, Montréal, with a note underneath it about how that was a car dealership owned by someone who owed Ocelot a very, very big favor, and a note under *that* about how the dealership in question specialized mostly in RVs, “so choose wisely.”

“On the road again, then,” Octopus sighed, pushing his chair away from the computer desk. “Permanently.”

“A nomadic lifestyle isn’t so bad,” Wolf said, “although I have never used an RV before…”

“So… we’re doing this, then?” Otacon said, raising his eyebrows.

“It would seem so,” Raven said.

“This is a good recruitment opportunity, isn’t it?” Octopus said, “the more the merrier when you’re fighting a world-spanning shadow government of nigh-infinite resources, after all.”

“I want to know what else Mei Ling might know,” Wolf said.

“And… and she and her roommate are just innocent bystanders,” Otacon said, clenching his fists, “they won’t supposed to get dragged into this, and now they’re probably being hunted by the Patriots… we have to do something, don’t we?”

“I guess so,” Octopus said, somewhat skeptically.

“I would prefer for the blood of innocents to not be shed,” Raven said, “I agree with Dr. Emmerich. We must do something.”

“Right,” Wolf said, hitting her palm with her fist. Bêdeng barked. “So… does anyone have an actual plan, or…?”

There was a short, kind of awkward silence, then Otacon piped up.

“Get the RV, get to MIT, make sure our conclusions are accurate, and convince Mei Ling and her friend to come with us if they are?”

“Works for me,” Octopus said.

“Oh, this is wonderful,” Ocelot grumbled, closing his phone with great annoyance and putting it back in his pocket. “Simply wonderful.”

“What happened?” Chinaman said.

“Nothing of your concern.”

“You always say that,” Vamp muttered.

“If you must know then the gist of the situation is that half of FOXHOUND has decided to go off half-cocked in order to protect someone vulnerable for retaliation by the Patriots.”

“Retaliation…?” Chinaman said, looking between Vamp and Ocelot. “For what? Killing an agent?”

“The Patriots don’t care if one of their agents is killed,” Old Boy scoffed from the corner. “They would be more concerned with something like leaking information.”
Ocelot shrugged. “I don’t have all the details.”

“Why do I not believe that?” Vamp said, his lip curling slightly. “Nevermind. I want to know how Solidus has been doing…”

“Not again,” Chinaman sighed.

“It’s a valid question.”

“He’s fine, Vamp,” Ocelot said dryly. “The fact that the situation between the twins has been devolving into chaos lately does not threaten him in any way.”

“Where are they, anyway?” Old Boy said, scratching his chin. “You never tell us anything specific about them.”

“Surely you of all people know what a ‘need-to-know basis’ is, Old Boy,” Ocelot said, “considering you keep your status as a former colonel in the Wehrmacht on one.”

“…that’s a low blow.”

Chinaman raised a hand. “Who’s a bigger war criminal,” he said, “Ocelot or Old Boy?”

“At least neither of their codenames are racial slurs,” Vamp said. “You’re not even Chinese…”

“Ha! I may be from Hanoi, but I’m more Chinese than the Chinese!”

“You grew up in Chinatown… you have never been to the actual China…”

“If anyone needs me,” Ocelot said, pulling out his phone again and checking the time, “I’ll be going now.”

Chapter End Notes

A conspiracy theory thread would be more at home on /x/, but /x/ wasn’t added until 2007, so /b/ it is.
Ocelot’s description of the situation between the twins devolving into chaos was not, strictly speaking, accurate, because “chaos” would imply that they were still interacting with each other somehow. Instead Solid had started pretending Liquid didn’t exist and Liquid was (unintentionally) accommodating him by pointedly sweeping out of the room whenever Solid entered it. Mantis generally sided with Liquid but in this case he only acted like he didn’t see anything wrong here - he took a cool, disdainful attitude towards Solid, in stark contrast with their earlier friendship, but he didn’t actively antagonize him, nor did he try to mend the burned bridges between Liquid and Solid. He was more than content to just let them not speak to each other. However if they started fighting he would try to stop them, if only for Liquid’s bodily safety.

Solid retreated into spending time with his dogs, slipping back into more or less the same pattern of day he’d lived out when he’d lived alone, except without the drinking, and he also repaired the lock on his bedroom door so that he could hide in there to whack off without being bothered. As such he didn’t get the opportunity for things to get tense with Liquid, anyway, except for the fact that Liquid still took every chance to play with Diane’s puppies - who by now were mostly weaned - and it had gotten to the point where they’d follow him out of the room when he stalked off upon Solid arriving.

“What exactly… happened?” Solidus asked Mantis.

“Nothing,” Mantis said.

“Really now.”

“As far as you are concerned, I mean.”

Solidus had, at this point, finished all the books he had brought with him (which had only been a couple, in order to save space in his suitcase) and had no interest in Mantis’ books (“Carrie? Isn’t that a little… stereotypical?”), so he was left to either listen to the radio or finally confront the fact that Solid, Liquid, and Mantis had all been pretty much ignoring him this whole time. His first attempt to make friends, as it were, was with Liquid, since he was him he knew best out of the three of them. Which wasn’t saying much.

Liquid was pretty bored too, having already caught nearly every creature in Pokémon Emerald, so he went along with Solidus’ attempt at amicable conversation. Only really half-paying attention, of course, focusing more on hunting down that damned constantly-fleeing ラティアス, but then Solidus made an extremely casual remark that made him whip his head back towards him.

“What the hell do you mean,” Liquid said, eyes impossibly wide, “you’re Ocelot’s lover??”

“What?” Solidus said, blinking. “Is that unclear somehow?”

“But— when? how? how long, I mean, when did this get started?”

“Hmm…” Solidus paused to consider it. “I think the first time we slept together was… yes, back in 2000, I remember now. Right when I was going through the motions of a campaign for the Presidential election.”

Liquid opened his mouth, then closed it. Ocelot had said it was around then that he’d started getting
involved with Solidus but— how was Liquid supposed to have known that Ocelot had meant it in that way?! 

Wait. Didn’t this mean that— oh god they had probably, definitely fucked that time Liquid had been summoned to Washington, D.C. They had absolutely fucked. Maybe even at the same time as Liquid being used as a bench for thinking he should have kissed Ocelot at the White House.

“But,” Solidus went on thoughtfully, completely oblivious to Liquid’s indignant horror, “back when we were first introduced, in Liberia, we did have sort of a… moment, which looking back on it I’m sure is why I was so quick to bed him five years ago.”

“A… a— what do you mean, a moment?” Liquid said, “didn’t you two meet each other at the start of the civil war? Weren’t you thirteen?”

“Well, I looked and acted much older.” Liquid wasn’t sure about the ‘and acted’ part even now.

“And nothing really happened, I ended up trying to kiss him, that’s all.”

“…uh. Right. What’d he do?”

“Let me.” No wonder Miller was convinced Ocelot’s a kid-diddler, Liquid thought in immense discomfort, racking his memories for anything back in ’84 that seemed in retrospect like Ocelot would have done the same thing for him when he was twelve as he’d done for Solidus when he was thirteen. Aside from a few violations of personal space during that dumb interrogation, he couldn’t think of anything. So maybe for Solidus it really just had been because he looked like an adult.

“But afterwards he explained to me that I had more important things to focus on and he would rather wait until I was older and more certain of my feelings,” Solidus continued. “So, years later…”

“And… how does that work out for you…?” Liquid asked, somewhat faintly, “he spent most of his time the past five years at FOXHOUND headquarters, and you were in Washington, D.C.”

“I’ll admit our trysts were infrequent, but…”

Mantis stepped into the room, and Liquid dragged his hands down his face at the almost malicious glee in his eyes. “What is this I hear about Ocelot sleeping with Solidus?”

Solidus seemed mildly confused. “We’re lovers,” he said, “it’s to be expected, isn’t it?”

Mantis cocked his head at Liquid. “Now will you admit that Ocelot only had sex with you because of Big Boss?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Liquid snapped.

“This is called ‘basic pattern recognition’, Eli.”

“No, he didn’t- he wasn’t—“ Liquid turned to Solidus, flustered. “You tell him,” he said, “Ocelot didn’t sleep with either of us just because of our biological father.”

Solidus just looked extremely perturbed. “You slept with Ocelot?”

“Yes, he did,” Mantis said with a slight, audible sneer.
Solidus frowned for a moment, his brow furrowed.

Liquid was getting increasingly agitated. “He just has a type, that’s all,” he said.

“Hm?” Solidus looked back up at them. “Oh, no, I know he’s only sleeping with me because of Big Boss.”

Now Mantis was the confused one. “And you are fine with that??”

“Why shouldn’t I be? Do you have any idea how satisfying it is to know that I’m having something intended for Big Boss, that he never bothered to take? or, perhaps, how exciting it is to know that Ocelot’s thinking of me the same way he thought of Big Boss, only this time it’s real and tangible… except, he never told me he slept with you, Liquid.” His frown deepened. “Actually, he let me believe he was a virgin.”

“…why the hell would you believe that in the first place…” Liquid muttered. Clearly it was a more pressing issue than Solidus’ weirdly incestuous way of thinking about his own relationship with Ocelot compared to Big Boss.

“He said it was Big Boss he wanted to give his virginity to,” Solidus said defensively, “so I assumed that meant—“

“Ocelot was not a virgin by the time he even met Big Boss,” Mantis interrupted, “do not ask me how I know this.”

Liquid made a mental note to ask him later. Mantis threw an irritated look at him.

“…regardless,” Solidus said after a moment, “Liquid, I would like to know when you and he were—“

“Ten years ago,” Liquid said quickly, “not concurrent to you.”

Mantis threw him an even more irritated look, but didn’t correct him.

“Well. That’s a relief, I suppose. I don’t think I’d be happy if he cheated on me, personally I’ve always kept my bed reserved him and him alone.”

Liquid wasn’t sure if he wanted to laugh or not.

Solid stuck his head in the door. “What’s all the chatter about?” Liquid and Mantis both ignored him.

“Liquid just found out that Ocelot is my lover,” Solidus replied for them, “and I just found out that Liquid was Ocelot’s lover ten years ago, did you know that?”

“Uh… yeah… hang on.” His nose wrinkled. “Am I seriously the only person here who hasn’t had sex with Ocelot?”

Mantis spoke up indignantly. “Where did you get that—“

“You had a threesome with him, that counts.”

“What,” Solidus said at the same time as Mantis blushed so hard his ears and neck went pink and he cried out, “How did you-?? Eli!”

“I didn’t mean to tell him,” Liquid protested, “it just slipped out!”

Solid sighed. “I wish Master were still here…”
“Well,” Mantis said nastily, “that would only add an additional person to the ‘has had sex with Ocelot’ pool.”

“Ggk. You’re telling me Master Miller also—“

Liquid stood up, spreading his arms angrily. “Who the hell hasn’t Ocelot shagged at this point?! I mean, for God’s sake! Does it really matter?!”

“Solidus, you’re in touch with Ocelot still, right?” Solid said.


“Call him and tell him I’m off-limits.”

So the RV was pretty nice.

What wasn’t so fun was the fact that once they got to Illinois, Otacon had to be completely hidden away in the back of the RV no matter what. Various reporters had, in attempt to further humanize their “The Sears administration fucked up big time!” poster child, traced Otacon’s background (well, the publicly available parts of it) all the way back to when he’d lived with his grandparents as a kid; they hadn’t been able to go any further, presumably because his grandparents were dead and as a natural-born American citizen he wouldn’t have had immigration records from when he’d came here from Afghanistan, so the media had him pegged as a Chicago native.

It was only natural that the whole city of Chicago would know his face by now. Moreover, any random person off the street here would know he was supposed to be dead. Hell, someone had paid for a billboard on I-90 that had Otacon’s face on it, demanding answers from the government on how the Shadow Moses terrorists had even been capable of detonating a nuclear warhead when the ones there were supposed to have been disassembled.

“It could be worse,” Octopus said sagely, “just you wait until someone makes an award-winning blockbuster ‘based on a true story’ dramatization of the uprising where you’re the main character and also played by Jeff Goldblum.”

Otacon was almost afraid to ask why Jeff Goldblum.

“So you really think that would happen?” Raven said, glancing the rear-view mirror.

“Oh, definitely,” Octopus said. “I’m sure by this point, somebody’s already written a screenplay and major movie studios are all fighting over it.”

“I wonder if they will give you a love interest?” Wolf said to Otacon. Otacon wasn’t sure if she was messing with him or not. “I suppose if all the ‘official’ public record says is that a secret agent was sent in, there is nothing stopping the director from assuming that Solid Snake was actually a sexy woman in a skin-tight catsuit.”

“That… isn’t too far off from real life,” Otacon said awkwardly.

“You have a point.”

“I wonder if it would reference the support team leak,” Raven said, “it has become quite the popular theory, has it not?”

“Yeah, it has,” Octopus said, “and even now Mei Ling’s roommate hasn’t talked about a single thing
that didn’t actually happen. It’s starting to attract attention outside of 4chan and conspiracy theory boards now, too. Been picked up by Infowars, so the mainstream media might weigh in on it soon.”

“The Patriots will probably censor the whole thing, though,” Otacon said.

Rush hour hit and traffic slowed down considerably. Bêdeng started getting restless, and so did Otacon — what if they didn’t make it in time?

“If we figured out who the leaker was,” he said nervously, pacing back and forth in the cramped space of the RV, “then the Patriots can, too. Maybe even faster than us.”

“Keep in mind it was the arcade tokens that gave her away,” Octopus said, “everything else she was too careful about. We might not even be right about the leaker being Mei Ling.”

“It does fit too well for it not to be, though,” Wolf said.

“Either way, I know the Patriots aren’t going to be dumb enough to not enhance her photo for any clues,” Otacon went on. “Which means they’re going to see the Festiscore tokens, and of course they’d already know for sure who all was on Snake’s support team—”

“How are they supposed to know those tokens are from that particular arcade, though?” Wolf said, “the name of the establishment was completely illegible, and I found it to be a rather generic logo, personally. It may take them quite a while to figure out which arcade it is, I am sure there are hundreds of thousands of them in the Eastern Time Zone.”

“Yeah,” Octopus said, nodding casually, “we might have figured it out quickly, but that’s only because we had you, Emmerich, who just so happens to be an MIT grad. What are the odds that the Patriots looking into this are going to also have one of you nerds?”

Otacon opened his mouth, then closed it. Octopus was right, it really wasn’t all that likely. Even if the Patriots figured out that the arcade tokens visible in the enhanced timestamp photo were their best and only lead as to the identity of the person posting greentexts of the entire Shadow Moses incident from the perspective of a someone running unspecified support… without someone who was already familiar with Festiscore Game Center, they’d be stuck comparing logos for God knew how long. Too illegible to just have a computer program do it, Otacon was sure. Taking what kind of resources he’d been told the Patriots had into account, he figured that, barring some unfortunate coincidence, he and his half of FOXHOUND might be able to eke their way into Cambridge and their rescue mission before the Patriots got there.

After that disastrous conversation with Solidus, Liquid had stolen Solid’s radio again and holed up in the ‘storage’ room and refused to come out for the rest of the afternoon. Mantis respected Liquid’s desire for space for a while but eventually forced his way in - okay, not forced, the door was ajar, but…

He found Liquid lying on his back on the floor, one arm draped dramatically over his eyes, with Benedict sitting a few feet away from him, wagging his tail. Benedict jumped up when Mantis walked in, obviously wanting to play. Judging by the scraps of fabric and stuffing scattered all over the room, that was what he’d been doing with Liquid for the past several hours - “playing”, or rather, assisting him in taking out his frustrations on some poor, defenseless stuffed dog toys and thereby taking the blame for the fact that they were absolutely shredded. The radio was on but it seemed Liquid had been unable to re-find the classic rock station from Anchorage so he was listening to some other channel instead.
“—taste of your lips, I’m on a ride…

“You’re toxic, I’m slipping under!

“With a taste of poison paradise—“

Probably not his first choice, either.

“As I said several months ago,” Mantis said dryly, “this is an extremely stupid thing to get upset over.”

“He never told me,” Liquid groaned.

“Why should he? It wasn’t relevant to you.”

“Yes it was. Is. I slept with him, multiple times, and he was supposed to be in a relationship with Solidus? He could have mentioned it.”

“…”

How ridiculous. How completely, utterly ridiculous that Liquid would feel jealous, betrayed, cheated on by someone he’d had sex with outside his own relationship. Mantis honestly wanted to be mad at him for this, but he just couldn’t bring himself to - it was simply too absurd.

Mantis found the Anchorage classic rock station.

“‘It won’t be long, yes… ’til you’re alone-

“When your lover… oh, he hasn’t been home!

“‘Cuz he’s lovin’, oh he’s touchin’, he’s squeezin’ another!”

Liquid moved his arm slightly, glared at Mantis.

“‘He’s tearin’ you apart! Every, every day, oh—

“‘He’s tearin’ you apart… oh girl, what can you say?

“‘Cuz he’s lovin’, touchin’ another!”

“Very funny, Mantis.”

“I try.”

“Now it’s your turn, girl, to cry!”

Liquid sat up and made a lunge for the radio, grabbing it before Mantis could react and flinging it across the room. For the sake of the fact that it was Solid’s property, not Liquid’s, Mantis psychically caught it before it could smash against the wall, turned it off, and set it harmlessly back down.

“Don’t mock me,” Liquid snarled. “I’m already upset, shouldn’t that be enough for you?”

“This is not something you should be getting upset over,” Mantis said sternly. “So what if Ocelot was cheating on Solidus? You were cheating on me.”

Liquid gave him a petulant glower, but Mantis’ strict manner was enough to get him to think it over for half a second and come to the conclusion that Mantis had a point. Still, he didn’t want to
apologize, so instead he simply laid on the floor again, this time on his stomach, burying his face in his arms. Benedict yapped, tugging at his ponytail with his teeth, but Liquid didn’t react. Pouting.

Very mature.

Mantis sighed. “Eli…”

“Forget it,” Liquid mumbled. “Just forget it.”

“As long as you do.”

A few moments passed. Mantis, with nothing better to do, sat on the bed, looking down at Liquid, who still hadn’t moved. Eventually, though, Liquid raised his head a little and asked, “How the hell do you know that Ocelot wasn’t a virgin when he met Big Boss?”

“Does it really matter?” Mantis would honestly rather not talk about it, so…

“Of course it does. If nothing else I’d like to know why Solidus honestly thought he was the one to deflower Ocelot, was it not obvious that he’d done it before?”

Mantis rolled his eyes. Maybe if Liquid randomly changed the subject again a few more times he’d eventually get off this topic entirely without Mantis having to contribute anything at all.

“Because it was obvious. It was extremely bleeding obvious. I don’t know how Solidus could think that a virgin could possibly be so— hang on. Is it just me, or when Solidus was talking about it, didn’t he sound a little like he was…? No…” Liquid sat up, eyes wide and a vaguely offended look on his face.

“I really, really do not care, Eli,” Mantis said before Liquid could share the conclusion he’d come to out loud.

He did anyway. “Ocelot fucking let Solidus top him!! My god, he never let me do that, this is- this is unfair!”

Mantis took a deep breath and held it for a good five seconds before exhaling. “Does it really matter?” he said, annoyed.

Liquid opened his mouth to give some harebrained explanation as to how it totally did, but caught the irritated look in Mantis’ eyes and figured it didn’t really.

Good. That was the end of that, then.

“But seriously…” Liquid said, standing up and joining Mantis on the bed. “How did you know about Ocelot…? He didn’t tell you or something, did he? He never mentioned anything of the sort to me, I wasn’t interested in his past sex life. Never asked.”

Mantis shook his head. “I would honestly rather die than have that sort of conversation with Ocelot.”

“Then how…”?

“…do you remember the Man on Fire?”

Liquid frowned in thought for half a moment, then said, “vaguely.”

“You recall he was someone I had linked to mentally…”
“Right, right. His will was yours - so, I suppose, were his memories in some fashion?”

“Very astute,” Mantis said, patting Liquid on the top of the head. Liquid scrunched into himself a little, mildly embarrassed but pleased by the praise. “As it happened, he knew Ocelot when he was a young man - I am unsure of his exact age, his early twenties at the most, and more likely a teenager.”

“Huh. You’re usually so pedantic about that sort of thing.”

“I can no longer dredge up any details from the Man on Fire’s memories - something which I am deeply grateful for,” Mantis said with a sneer. “I only had the barest understanding of most of it back then, but if you’re looking for something to blame my asexuality on I am sure it would lie in his memories.”

“So…”

“So back when the Man on Fire was still fully alive, he was a colonel, I think, in the GRU. Ocelot served under him.”

Liquid thought for a second that he was sure Ocelot had been in the KGB, not the GRU, but immediately realized that it was completely plausible Ocelot was in both. Mantis just wondered why Liquid didn’t already know this, considering he should have gone over that sort of thing when he recruited Ocelot to FOXHOUND. (Then again, ignoring as much of the paperwork as possible would be completely in-character for him.)

“I mean that as a double entendre,” Mantis added.

“…oh.”

There was a long pause.

“I think,” Liquid said eventually, “this might be why Ocelot doesn’t seem to care much about age gaps.”

Chapter End Notes

I legitimately have no idea if Alex Jones had launched the Infowars website by May 2005. But this is totally the sort of thing he’d be all over.
Octopus and Wolf were the two best people in FOXHOUND for stalking someone. (Although Ocelot could produce the same results just as efficiently, he just had other ways of gathering information... but anyway, he wasn’t here right now, so that didn’t matter.) It was decided that Wolf would be a little too noticeable — sure, she didn’t exactly stick out like a sore thumb, especially if she dressed casually, but her long green-blonde hair was distinctive enough that Mei Ling’s roommate might wonder why she kept seeing her everywhere.

Plus, if she happened to be around when Mei Ling was, Mei Ling would probably recognize her.

So Octopus had taken the unofficial assignment, and had pulled out his disguise kit for it. By the time he was done he was not only unrecognizable but also the exact opposite of suspicious. He’d changed himself into a skinny young woman, kind of tall for a girl, of plain features and body, the only thing that could really be used as identifying descriptors being curly hair and bags under his/her eyes. He’d also bought a sweatshirt from a nearby Goodwill bearing the logo of a prestigious private high school in Concord, completing the impression of him being just another MIT freshman burned out from finals. In other words, someone that wouldn’t be looked at twice no matter how often he happened to be in the background of a scene.

An RV in the middle of a city would have turned too many heads, so that had been stashed well outside of city limits and the dingy old sedan they’d towed behind the RV ever since Québec finally became relevant - and Raven had even said it wasn’t too cramped for him, at least compared to a tank. So he’d driven Otacon and his previously-confiscated-but-finally-returned laptop close enough to MIT’s campus for him to get on the school’s wifi network, whereupon he hacked into their student records and found Mei Ling’s address, and the names of the other two young ladies who lived with her, Kovalam Udayasooriyant Neela and Soraya Sourori. It had been Soraya that Octopus had found first - as it turned, it was the one who had left the Festiscore tokens lying around, and Octopus had come across her while staking out the arcade itself.

Wolf had considered taking Otacon’s laptop away again after he was done hacking the MIT servers (and getting out without a trace despite his mumbling about how he wasn’t sure he would be able to get away with this, this was the Massachusetts Institute of Technology he was taking on here), but in the end she decided to let him keep it. After all, the chances of him using it to contact someone to come “rescue” him were minuscule; he was so focused on getting to Mei Ling and her roommates before the Patriots did that even he had to admit he’d sort of accidentally joined FOXHOUND’s insurrection against the Patriots.

“I just want to do the right thing,” he said, almost sheepishly. “I’ve got to make up for all the stupid things I’ve done in the past somehow.”

Wolf said she was pleased he was apparently growing a spine but five minutes later she ended up yelling at him for losing the handkerchief she’d given him. Him telling her that he’d given it to Solid was only met with an “Oh, wow.”

But anyway, before they could do anything about Mei Ling first they had to confirm that she really was leaking information to 4chan. Otacon was keeping track of the thread - now on its third iteration...
- and said that OP was still fielding questions every night, so Octopus’ task was simple: try to catch Mei Ling in the act of telling whichever roommate it was posting on /b/ what to write.

So he bugged their apartment. Just walked right into the building, no one stopped him - picked the lock, left an audio recorder hidden on the underside the desk that Soraya had left her arcade tokens on, and re-locked the door behind him, taking great care to disturb nothing. Then he casually walked right back out of the building, even waving at another occupant on his way out.

“You know it’s detectable, right?” Otacon said when Octopus got back to the RV. “If they do any of kind of signal scanning, they’re going to know immediately, and if we don’t off the feedback right then, they might be able to trace it back to us.”

“Yeah, that’s a known flaw,” Octopus said, “but most people don’t go looking for bugs unless they already suspect they’re there.”

That day had been the last day of the final exam period, so it ended up being a crapshoot as far as surveillance was concerned. They already knew that Soraya worked nights at a local convenience store, so the fact that she wasn’t there was pretty expected; Neela had gone to a ‘finals are finally finished’ party, leaving Mei Ling alone in the apartment. Seemed like Mei Ling just wanted to relax now that testing was over, but as the evening went on she seemed to get increasingly antsy - at least, from the sound of it. Mei Ling didn’t talk to herself, nor was there a pet in the apartment that she could talk to, and the bug was audio-only, but it did sound like she was getting restless. Meandering footsteps as she paced around, the TV switching channels almost randomly then getting turned off only to be turned back on five minutes later, sighing...

Neela finally rocked up to the apartment, drunk and high off her ass despite being under 21, around three in the morning, the usual time when the /b/ thread would start getting updated. So they decided to not do it tonight — what exactly “it” was, they didn’t say, but it was a short list of what they could mean.

Besides, after Neela had - judging by a squeak of mattress springs - passed out on a (her?) bed, Mei Ling evidently figured she’d take matters into her own hands. Or, at least, the faint sound of typing was heard.

Not long after, a new post was added to the Shadow Moses leak thread.

Hey all!!!!! This is OP’s friend, the one who was on Snake’s support team! OP can’t make it online tonight, so I’m going to be answering questions directly, alright?

I’m kind of a newfag, so bear with me. Okay, onto questions!!!

>>481320
The nanomachines were *designed* to continue operating after the person’s death, *especially* the GPS-transmitting ones. Since we use things like nanomachines and Codecs nowadays, it’s more important than ever to make sure the body doesn’t fall into the enemy hands, so if there hadn’t been a nuclear strike then someone would have been sent in asap to retrieve Snake’s body. No idea who, tho…

>>481329
Yeah, generally when you have a high voltage charge it’s really high amperage anyway, but this was a super high-tech electrocution torture device that he was using! I don’t know the specifics but I wouldn’t be surprised AT ALL if he could adjust the voltage and amperage settings independently.
All I know is that his signal went off the island! It was moving too fast for him to be walking, so he must have been in a vehicle. I don’t know if he was still alive, tho, it’s my friend who really thinks that, not me. For all I know FOXHOUND just decided to take his body with them… but I don’t know why. It couldn’t have been because of the nanomachines or Codec, they already had all that kind of stuff. Snake was literally using the exact same technology they were. Even his sneaking suit *actually* belonged to Liquid.

I’m not saying I’d be surprised if Snake turned up alive, tho!

There was a glacier.

It wasn’t just people affiliated with FOXHOUND who were on Snake’s support team, in fact only two of us were still with the unit at the time, two of us were former members of the unit, and one of us was from NEST. I’m not going to say which one I was!

I don’t see how that’s relevant?? Don’t be gross!!

Cont.

“Well…” Otacon said, listening to Mei Ling type. “I guess it really is her.”

“Isn’t this what is generally called ‘circumstantial evidence’?” Wolf said. She called Octopus on Codec. “Can you see what is on her screen?” she asked.

“Nope,” Octopus said, putting down his binoculars. “She closed the blinds already. Can’t make out much through the cracks.”

The typing abruptly stopped, right after there was a ping from, from the sound of it, Mei Ling’s computer. She gasped audibly, then there was some rapid clicking - then the tap of a laptop closing and footsteps again, this time accompanied by the sound of things being shifted around. A couple minutes later, Mei Ling said, “there you are!” and there was the distinctive sound of a microphone being manhandled.

More footsteps, the kt-kt-fwoosh sound of a stove lighting, and then the audio feedback cut off with a squeal.

“She destroyed the bug,” Otacon said grimly, “didn’t see anything that indicated she traced the signal, though.”

About a minute later, a new post in her thread.

I found a listening device in my apartment just now. Guys, I’m scared.

Otacon couldn’t resist posting in the thread himself now.

How did you even find it, OP? How did you know it was there?

Mei Ling was quick to respond.

>>481383 (You)
I still have software on my computer for monitoring Codec calls, since I never actually had a Codec myself. I’ve been keeping it open lately because I’m not sure I’m not being watched by the government… it just intercepted a call. I didn’t open it in time to see what was being said, so I tried to scan again in case they were still talking, and there was a different signal originating in my apartment!

I freaked out and destroyed it instead of tracing it. I’m so stupid. That was a short-range device, I’ll bet the people who bugged me are still nearby. Do you think it was government people? Do you think they figured out who I am?? What should I do???

Otacon advised her to stay in her apartment and keep her head down, then told FOXHOUND that yeah, it was definitely her who was the Shadow Moses leaker. Couldn’t be anyone else at this point.

“So now what?” Otacon asked.

“We could move in immediately,” Raven said, “before the Patriots get a chance to.”

“I don’t think that would go over well,” Wolf said thoughtfully, “it would seem more like a kidnapping. She will not like us.”

“Should we just… be her bodyguards?” Otacon said, “except, like, secretly? Just keep an eye on her and only do something when the Patriots come for her?”

“Sounds good to me,” Wolf said, then relayed the information to Octopus.

“We should keep an eye on her roommates as well,” Octopus said, “I don’t know about Soraya, but Neela definitely knows too much at this point.”

“We must be careful,” Raven said, “a Patriot could approach Mei Ling under the guise of anyone. They may also simply send an assassin after her.”

“If they send a sniper, leave it to me,” Wolf said, “I will watch from the rooftops. Octopus can keep an eye on her from the ground.”

“What do we do?” Otacon said.

“You can keep monitoring her internet thread,” Wolf said, “and Raven will ensure we make a quick getaway if and when we need to move.”

“Yes ma’am,” they both said at the same time.

Meanwhile, finals had ended the previous week for Western Carolina University. Dorms were emptying as students returned home for the summer, although one in particular, a lean nursing student with pretty eyes, had resigned herself to just staying here until the next semester.

After all, it wasn’t like Catherine would have been able to afford a plane ticket to Alaska on her own, and her father hadn’t picked up his phone since April. The only way she knew he hadn’t died and been eaten by his dogs was the occasional semi-incoherent Facebook post. Miller didn’t know how to use the private messaging function, and Catherine didn’t want to publicly ask him to pay for her plane ticket, so…

At least one of her roommates, Veronica, was still here between semesters. She couldn’t afford to visit her parents, either. And one of their other roommates, Trinity, was local so Catherine and Veronica still saw her around even if she was crashing in her old bedroom at home instead of the
One afternoon Catherine got back from her shift at the local grocery store, dropped her purse on the floor right in the door, and was met by Veronica holding a piece of paper.

“Some lady dropped by,” she said, “asked for you.”

“What’d you tell her?” Catherine said.

“Told her you were at work, didn’t tell her where. I had no idea who she was, so…”

“And…?”

“She left a note,” Veronica said, holding it importantly in front of her, then reading, with horrible pronunciation: “‘Catou— Je dois te voir, au plus tôt. Il s’agit de ton père…’”

“Give me that,” Catherine said, snatching the note away from Veronica. “I can barely understand what you’re saying. She skimmed the note - it was short, and there were only two lines Veronica hadn’t already read.

Il est disparu. J’ai besoin de savoir si tu l’as vu.

—Manmi

“What’s it say?” Veronica said.

“Gimme a sec,” Catherine said, rereading it, “my French is a little rusty.” Or, at least, she’d rather believe she was misinterpreting the note since she hadn’t read or spoken much French since she was a kid. But no. It was clear.

Catou—

I need to see you, as soon as possible. It’s about your father… he went missing. I need to know if you’ve seen him.

—Mom

“ちくしょう!” Catherine blurted out.

“What?” Veronica said, mildly startled - she’d never heard Catherine speak Japanese before, let alone with that level of venom.

“Family problems,” Catherine said, flipping the note over. That little scribble she’d seen on the back of it while Veronica was holding it turned out to be, as she suspected, a cell phone number. Catherine sighed. She hadn’t talked to her mother since the divorce, when she was eight, and Nadine and Miller had separated when she was four or five. In fact, Catherine had thought Nadine went back to Seychelles - what was she doing in America? How had she even known what school Catherine was going to, let alone her dorm number? And how would she know that Miller was missing??

The only way to answer any of that was to call her and schedule a meeting.

“Any updates?” Otacon said over Codec.

“Everything seems fine from up here,” Wolf said. She was watching Mei Ling.
“No suspicious activity so far,” Octopus said. He was watching Neela. “Should I go check up on Soraya?”

“It’s Neela who was actually posting, wasn’t it?” Otacon said, “so the Patriots have no reason to go after Soraya.”

“Yeah, but that’s only if they know it was Neela who made the threads. They might not — how would they have found out? If they’re going to take out Mei Ling’s roommate then they might go after the wrong one, or go after both of them.”

“Good point,” Otacon said.

“If everything is secure around Neela,” Wolf said, “go find Soraya. And hope that two of the roommates will meet up soon that one of us can keep them both under watch while the other guards the third…”

“Roger that,” Octopus said, and both he and Wolf signed off. Otacon sighed, mouth grimly set. It had only been a day so far, so they hadn’t quite reached the point where Otacon could justify wondering when the Patriots were going to show up, but regardless he had a little niggling feeling about this… what if the Patriots didn’t show up? Not what if they determined there was no point in retaliating for the leaks. But, what if there was nothing?

What if the Patriots didn’t exist after all and Otacon had just completely misplaced all his desires to fix the mistakes of a system he himself had played into?

Twenty minutes later Octopus checked in on Codec. “Found Soraya,” he said, “she’s at the Foodland getting some rice.”

“Anyone suspicious nearby?” Otacon asked.

“I mean, it’s a grocery store in the middle of a city, so… hey, I’m going to have to get something here so I don’t look out of place, what is everyone in the mood for tonight?”

“Um… I’m fine with anything, I guess. Hey, Raven,” Otacon said, glancing over his shoulder, “Octopus is at Foodland, any suggestions for dinner?”

“Anything but chicken,” he said.

Otacon relayed that to Octopus and Octopus said he’d just ask Wolf since neither of those answers were very helpful, and signed off.

Maybe FOXHOUND was used to this kind of levity, but it put Otacon more on-edge. He didn’t find it very likely that Octopus, Raven, and especially Wolf were lying to him about the existence of the Patriots, but maybe they’d been tricked, or just saw things that weren’t really there?

Soraya meandered through the store for a while, checking out sales and comparing everything on the shelves to the wad of coupons she’d pulled out of her purse, but a broke college student was a broke college student and by the time she was done with checkout she only had three plastic sacs of food and a disappointed expression. (She’d been eyeing those raspberries pretty hard.) Octopus had gotten in line one person behind her, so when he was finished checking out - some spaghetti, a jar of sauce, bread, and fuck it, Kool-Aid - and went back out of the store it took him a moment to re-locate Soraya.

She was standing at nearby bus stop, checking her watch. Octopus smiled to himself. Stalking- that is, keeping an eye on someone was always much easier when they didn’t have any transportation of
their own.

He started walking over, knowing that Soraya wouldn’t give him a second glance as long as he didn’t follow her right into her apartment building, but he was beaten out to the bus stop by a beer-bellied cop walking up to her. He flashed his badge.

“What is it, officer?” Soraya said.

“Are you Soraya Sourori?” he said. “You have roommates named Mei Ling and Kovalam?”

“Kovalam’s her last name, actually,” Soraya said. “Did something happen?” Even from this distance Octopus could tell she was nervous - but she was worried that there had been a fire or break-in or something, and had no suspicion, like Octopus did at this point, that the cop might be a Patriot agent.

Shit. There wasn’t much Octopus could do on his own, he was unarmed and abysmal at combat anyway. He called Raven and told him to get over to the Foodland ASAP, choosing his words carefully so that any passerby would just think he (well, she) was calling a ride so she wouldn’t have to catch the bus, but Raven would know that the situation looked like it was about to head south.

“You could say that- but don’t worry,” the cop said quickly, “your roommates are just fine, miss. See, we just need to take the three of you in for questioning.”

Soraya blinked. “Questioning?” she said. “About what? Um… not about the party Neela went to the other day, right? Because you can only be prosecuted if you’re caught in possession of controlled substances, not just because anyone saw you high—“

“No, you’re right,” the cop said, “that’s true, but this isn’t about that. There was some illegal activity online that was traced back to your apartment, that’s all.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Soraya said.

“How about you come down to the station so we can take your statement?”

“Am I being detained?” Soraya said, nervous again, “I want a lawyer.”

“Miss, please calm down…”

Octopus knew what was going to happen before it actually happened, and all he could do was grimace as the scene unfolded before him. Soraya reached into her purse. An ordinary cop, a normal human being, would have understood that she was only trying to get her phone so she could call a lawyer or family member. But this one - this one, Octopus knew, would later claim that he had thought that Soraya, in her agitation, had been reaching for a weapon.

Fucker had probably been ordered to take her out from the beginning.

By the time Octopus uncovered his hands from his ears Soraya was dead on the pavement. From where he was standing he could see that three shots had ripped through her chest and stomach, killing her more or less instantly, and one had punched through the shopping bags still looped around her arm, scattering rice all over the sidewalk. There was an uproar almost immediately; a crowd gathered, some screaming and crying, other police officers arrived and the Patriot cop had his weapon taken in for evidence and he himself was bundled off away, per protocol, and an EMT showed up just to throw a sheet over Soraya Sourori, a bright young MIT student who hadn’t done anything wrong and in all likelihood didn’t even know about the 4chan thread that had lead directly to her sudden, needless death.
When Raven finally came in the sedan, there was no need for him to ask what had just transpired. All Octopus had to say was, “It happens.”

That night, there was a new post on /b/. 

This will be the last post I make in this thread. 

Someone close to me was killed today. She didn’t know about this thread, but I don’t think it’s just a coincidence. I’m scared out of my mind. I never thought this would go this far. I knew I had to be careful, but I never thought that someone would get killed over this.

I guess it just goes to show that everything we’ve been saying is true. Someone wants really badly for this to get covered up. So I want you all to remember. ***This is information that an innocent person was murdered for.***

The Shadow Moses terrorists were an elite American special forces group called FOXHOUND founded by a known war criminal, Big Boss. They were codenamed Liquid Snake, Revolver Ocelot, Sniper Wolf, Psycho Mantis, Vulcan Raven, and Decoy Octopus.

At least one of them is most likely still alive.

The secret agent sent in to prevent a nuclear launch was codenamed Solid Snake. He was a good man. He’s either still alive or else the remains of FOXHOUND have his body.

FOXHOUND never detonated a nuke. The explosion at Shadow Moses was an attack directed by Jim Houseman, the former Secretary of Defense.

The U.S. government is responsible for the deaths of Anderson, Baker, Dr. Emmerich and anyone else who didn’t make it out in time, and the irradiation of the Alaska Peninsula! And they’re responsible for the death of another innocent person today!!

Spread the word!! Don’t let them all die in vain!!! Don’t believe the government’s lies!!!!!!

My friend and I are going to run for our lives. Wish us luck. Thanks for reading!
Chapter End Notes

Catherine’s bit in Japanese is literally just her swearing. She probably only knows how to say rude things in Japanese. Thanks Kaz
“Mei Ling, I’m scared,” Neela whimpered.

Mei Ling nodded, her face pale. “I am too,” she said, “but it’s like you said - we’re doing the right thing. ‘Better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness.’”

“But we’ll be killed! Hunted down like animals!! Even if they don’t kill us we’re still, like, totally going to prison for the rest of our lives — we’re too pretty for jail, Mei Ling!”

“‘Laws control the lesser man. Right conduct controls the greater one.’” She pulled a Sphinx AT380-M pistol from under her mattress, and Neela’s eyes went very wide.

“Where did you get that?!”

“I’ve had it for a while,” Mei Ling said.

“But- but you don’t have, like, an FID, do you??”

“Do I need one?” Mei Ling said, loading it, then grabbed the clip-on holster that was also under the mattress, attached the gun to herself, and tugged her t-shirt down over it. “Besides, if we head up to Vermont it won’t matter.”

“This is… this is insane! Mei Ling, we totally can’t do this. We… we’re already registered for the fall semester! This is all a mistake, maybe we could just, like, explain…”

Mei Ling shoved her laptop into her bag, along with her phone and all the money and credit cards she had, a singular change of underwear, and her toothbrush. “They killed Soraya,” she said in a hard voice, concealing how terrified she was too, “they know it’s us and we know they’re not going to show any mercy. We’ve got to make a break for it before they decide to come through our windows.”

“I can’t. I can’t, Mei Ling, I’m scared.” Neela started crying. “I’m scared!”

Mei Ling walked over to her and put her hands on her shoulders, looking deep into her eyes. “Neela,” she said, ‘Mark Twain once said, ‘Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear - not absence of fear.’ It’s okay to be afraid. We stumbled in over our heads. But now we’ve got something very important to do and we’ve got to get out of here and do it even though we are afraid.”

“Wh-what are we doing?”

“Blowing this whole conspiracy wide open,” Mei Ling said firmly, “now c’mon. We’re running out of time.”

The dashboard clock ticked over to 2:00 AM.

“Let’s go,” Otacon said. Raven nodded.

Back near Japantown, disguise now shed but wearing a jacket with the hood up despite the warm night, Octopus lingered by Mei Ling’s apartment building, keeping an eye on a nearby unmarked black sedan. It had parked on the street opposite of the apartment building a few hours ago and had
stayed there, its occupant never leaving - as indicated by the occasional glow of the end of a cigarette. Octopus didn’t believe it was just one person there, either.

“They are leaving,” Wolf said over Codec, “back fire escape. Watch the alleys, Octopus.”

“You keep an eye on that car,” Octopus replied, leaning around the corner a little to watch Mei Ling and Neela start walking briskly - not quite a run - down the narrow space between their building and the adjoining one. It was hard to tell if it was Octopus’ silhouette or the too-plain car across the street that prompted it, but either way Mei Ling threw her arm out across Neela, hissed something, and they turned around.

“They’re not just going back into the apartment, right?” Octopus said.

“No. They must be trying to get a few blocks over just by going through alleyways.”

“That’s what I thought. I’ll move to intercept - Raven’s on his way, right?”

“He should be here in the next ten minutes.”

Octopus circled around, intercepting them just a building over by stepping out in front of them without warning. They stopped shock still, Neela cowering behind Mei Ling’s back despite being a few inches taller than her, Mei Ling with an absurdly determined expression for a twenty-year-old engineering student with a bouncy ponytail and a *Space Jam* t-shirt.

“Hey,” Octopus said lamely.

Mei Ling pulled a gun.

Alright. Octopus didn’t realize she was 5’2” of pure whoop-ass, good to know.

“I’m on your side,” he said, raising his hands.

“Let us go,” Mei Ling said.

“Come on… don’t you recognize me, Mei Ling?”

“No. I’m going to count to three.”

“Ugh…”

“One.”

“Listen,” Octopus said, “you need to come with me. We’ll meet up with the rest of-“

“Two.”

“You don’t even know how to use that thing!”

Mei Ling didn’t finish counting, she just pointed her gun at Octopus’ leg and fired.

Fuck.

Octopus staggered sideways, the pain in his leg white-hot — and Mei Ling rushed past him, dragging Neela behind her by the hand. Good idea, Octopus thought dimly, already able to feel his shoe filling up with blood - attention would certainly be attracted by the gunshot, including the attention of whatever Patriot agent had been lying in wait for them in that car.
“Octopus, they’re getting away!” Wolf cried over Codec. “I can’t pursue them over the roofs, I will run out of space!”

“Then you’d better get down here,” Octopus snapped, tearing off his hoodie and trying to stop the bloodflow, “I’ve just been shot. I’ll be fine though, go get them!” From the look and feel of things, the bullet had entirely missed his tibia and fibula, and his major blood vessels, instead passing through his flesh and muscle sort of harmlessly. He’d definitely live, even if it hurt like a bitch and he couldn’t walk very far right now.

Wolf, meanwhile, was taking matters into her own hands. Distance-running wasn’t exactly her strong suit and Mei Ling and Neela were currently being spurred down the streets of Cambridge by fear and adrenaline; she’d never be able to catch up with them. Instead she maintained her position for the moment, waiting for— yes, here it was. The unmarked black sedan peeled out of its parking spot, headed in the direction of gunfire. Wolf lined up a quick, inelegant shot at one of its front tires, which blew out upon being pierced by her round and the car swerved, jumped the sidewalk, and crashed into a fire hydrant, which began spraying water everywhere. The windows of nearby buildings were beginning to light up.

Mei Ling and Neela kept running.

“Where are you?” Wolf hissed to Otacon over Codec, jogging down the fire escape of the building she’d been on. “We only have minutes before emergency personnel begin to show up - most likely including Patriots!”

“I know, I know!” Otacon said, “we’re in Japantown already. Are they headed our way?”

“Yes, they are headed in that direction, down Massachusetts Avenue!”

She hit street level at the same time as two men climbed out of the wrecked car, one bleeding from under his hair, and began pursuing Mei Ling and Neela on foot. Wolf dropped to a half-crouch, steadying her rifle on her knee and putting a bullet in the back of the head of one of the Patriot agents. The other slipped into the shadows between streetlamps, only the faintest gleam of his own handgun visible. But he seemed to have stopped moving, focusing now on whoever had shot his partner.

The likelihood that he hadn’t called for backup already was beyond infinitesimal.

From the other end of Massachusetts Avenue, Raven and Otacon’s car was nearly sideswiped by another sleek but unmarked black sedan going about triple the speed limit. No need to ask who these folks were — Raven accelerated so suddenly, whipped the car around so sharply that Otacon’s glasses nearly flew off his face, and attempted to intercept. He drove side-by-side to the Patriot car for half a moment, and then sparks flew as Raven steered their sedan into the other, scraping the sides of the vehicles together and slowly but surely running the other car off the road.

“Holy shit,” Otacon said to himself, “holy shit. Holy shit. Raven, this car can’t take this, our engine isn’t powerful enough!”

“I know,” Raven rumbled, steadying the driver’s side window against the passenger’s side window of the other sedan. The man in the passenger seat was trying to aim a gun with the erratic motions of both cars. Raven raised one powerful arm and, without taking his eyes off the road, smashed through both cars’ windows and grabbed the Patriot agent by the neck. Then he turned the steering wheel sharply, dragging the agent half out of the car while he screamed.

“Holy shit!” Otacon yelled, pressing himself back against the passenger seat like he was trying to
vanish into it. “You’re going to kill him!!”

“That’s the idea.”

He dropped the agent, who slipped out of the window, still screaming - and got caught under the rear wheels of the car, causing it to completely flip over at the speeds they had just been going. Otacon winced. No way that other guy survived, either. Holy shit, this was intense. But these were the bad guys, right?

“There they are!” Raven exclaimed, slamming the brakes with an unpleasant squeal and the smell of smoke, causing Otacon to faceplant against the dashboard.

“Huh?” Otacon said, fixing his glasses, then caught sight of a terrified asian girl with an even more terrified Indian girl standing behind her and clutching her arm. The asian girl was holding a pistol, which she raised defensively - aim impressively steady - when Otacon threw open the door of their sedan.

“Come on,” he said, gesturing, “get in, get in! Before more come!”

“Wh-“ Mei Ling started, “Dr. Emmerich?!”

“There’s no time to explain right now, just get in!”

“Wolf, what’s your position?” Raven was saying over the phone.

“But—“ Mei Ling was staring at Raven with wide eyes, “isn’t that—?”

“Just trust me,” Otacon insisted. “We just saved your lives.”

“Let’s go!” Neela cried, pushing Mei Ling towards the car. Otacon hurriedly closed his own door and pushed open theirs from the inside, and Mei Ling and Neela both piled into the backseat.

“Let’s get out of here!” Otacon said to Raven, who nodded.

“Wolf is nearby,” he said, as he continued to flagrantly disregard the speed limit, but to be fair this car was toast by now anyway, “we will pick her up. Octopus said he will find his own way back and will get in touch with us on where to meet him as soon as he is in a position to do so.”

“Alright.”

“What’s going on?” Mei Ling demanded, still holding her gun but no longer pointing it at anyone. “Dr. Emmerich—“

“You were right that someone from FOXHOUND survived,” Otacon said, turning around in his seat to talk to her. “In fact, the whole unit survived. And so did Snake! And me!”

“You’re- you’re the civilian engineer,” Neela said, eyes wide, trying ineffectually to wipe tears from her cheeks. “The media martyr! I, like, have a t-shirt with your picture on it!”

“Ehe… yeah,” Otacon said, “I’ve been in hiding with FOXHOUND - or, at least, this half of it. The other half is with Snake somewhere, I don’t know the details.”

“You’re with FOXHOUND now?!” Mei Ling said, “but they staged a terrorist insurrection!”

“And you leaked top-secret government intel,” Raven said.
“Oh,” Neela said, then started sobbing again, “they execute people for committing treason, don’t they?”

“Not if they don’t catch us,” Otacon said. “Okay, let me explain what all this is about…”

He gave a quick summation of the Patriots, which Mei Ling and Neela seemed initially reluctant to believe (Neela more than Mei Ling) but with what they knew about Shadow Moses, they accepted it easily enough. At least, easier than Otacon had. Or faster, anyway. By the time he was done with that, Raven pulled over and Wolf hopped into the back of the car next to Neela and Mei Ling, telling that that she’d shot “the other man as well”. A little bit of a tight fit with three people back there, especially since Neela was a bit on the chubby side and of course Wolf’s rifle tended to take up a fair amount of space, but everyone was too tense to complain.

“Where are we going?” Mei Ling asked as they sped towards city limits.

“We’ve got an RV,” Otacon explained, “we’ll abandon this car and use that to get as far away from MIT as possible.”

“I want to go home,” Neela said quietly.

“I’m afraid that really is not an option anymore,” Wolf said, “at least, not until this is all over.”

Neela sniffled. Mei Ling just looked even more determined.

“Whatever I can help with,” she said firmly, “I’ll do my best! Please, accept me onto your team!”

“What about you, Neela?” Otacon said.

“I want to go home,” Neela said again. “I didn’t want to get involved with this… at least, like, not this much…”

“She can go into hiding somewhere,” Raven said, “Ocelot may be able to help with that. We will get in touch with him.”

“Th-thank you…”

Octopus stayed determinedly hidden in his blood-spattered alleyway even as ambulances and other emergency vehicles rushed by. With his hoodie wrapped tightly around his leg, the bleeding had slowed to an ‘of least concern’ level, but as it stood (ha) any attempt to put weight on it just made him feel like his calf was on fire and he needed to either throw up or pass out or both. It was worse now, really, since the adrenaline in his system had pretty well drained by now. He’d need to wait a little while longer in order to gather the strength to hobble his way away from here without getting caught.

A dented pick-up truck pulled up in front of the alley, driving partially onto the sidewalk as it did. The driver’s door opened. A man in sunglasses gestured, with a fleshy human hand, for Octopus to get over here, while his other hand, a shiny robot one, gripped the steering wheel.

Octopus had to laugh. “Hell Master?” he said, “my god, I haven’t seen you since you retired.”

“Shut up and get in,” Miller said.

“How did you even get here?”

“Carefully.”
Octopus stood up, grimacing at his leg but at the same time chuckling at Miller’s response, and the general absurdity of the situation. “I take it you’re a fan of The Blues Brothers.”

Miller cracked a smile, too. “There’s 106 miles to Chicago, we’ve got a full tank of gas, half a pack of cigarettes,” he quoted, “it’s dark out, and we’re wearing sunglasses.”

“Guess we don’t have much of a choice, huh?”

“No, you can drive,” Miller said, abruptly moving himself over to the passenger’s seat. “It’s a legitimate miracle that I got here in one piece, we shouldn’t push my luck. I’ve never had much of it.”

Octopus sat down in the driver’s seat, but gave Miller an incredulous look. “I just got shot in the leg,” he said, “how the hell am I supposed to drive?”

“A wise old soldier once told me,” Miller said very seriously, “you don’t need legs to drive.”

“Nadine,” Catherine said, a little unkindly, as her mother - tall, broad shoulders and hips, loads and loads of wild curly hair, superbly dressed just like Catherine remembered - swept into the café Catherine had agreed to meet her in.

“Ahh, Catou, ma chère fille—“

“Speak English, Nadine.”

Nadine frowned, perfectly colored lips in an exaggerated pout, perfectly shadowed and lined eyes hard and cold. “Fine,” she said in a - what Catherine had always assumed was deliberately - heavy Seychellois accent, and sat down across from Catherine, glancing at the menu before tossing it back to the table, lip curling. “You know, you aren’t supposed to call your dear Manmi by her first name.”

“I haven’t seen you in like a decade, Nadine.”

“Well, your father never let me-“

“Don’t give me that!” Catherine snapped, “this is the first time you’ve ever tried to contact me since the divorce, and even before the divorce you were barely in my life at all!”

“I was in Seychelles, Catou,” Nadine said, “I went home. I would have liked to take you with me, but your father wouldn’t allow it.”

“Yeah, because he wanted me to be raised by someone who actually loved me instead of someone who was more concerned about alimony than custody.”

Nadine scoffed, folding her perfectly manicured hands on the table in front of her. Catherine was a little surprised that her fingers weren’t covered with expensive rings - actually, now that she looked closer, Nadine was almost completely devoid of jewelry, the only piece being a pair of tiny, simple stud earrings that looked more like stainless steel than silver. And again now that Catherine looked closer, she saw that Nadine’s clothes, while tailored exactly to her body shape and completely stainless, ironed, no obvious repairs… they didn’t have a designer label and seemed to be made out of the same inexpensive cotton/wool blend that Catherine’s own ‘nice clothes’ were made out of.

Of course, just because she wasn’t a stereotypical money- and status-obsessed bitch didn’t mean she wasn’t still a bitch.
“If your father wished to fill your head with lies about me then that’s his business,” Nadine said, “I have more pressing concerns.”

“Concerns that couldn’t just be talked about over the phone?”

“Is it a crime to want to see my own daughter after ten years?”

Catherine wasn’t sure exactly how to respond.

“What do you want, Nadine?” she said, just to say something, “you said in your note that Daddy was missing.”

“He is,” Nadine said, “he vanished from his home. Voluntarily, it seems, since he left his dogs with a neighbor, but no one knows where he went, who he got a ride with, or even when precisely he left.”

Catherine frowned. That was a good point - Miller wasn’t exactly blind, could still see shapes and colors although he was absurdly sensitive to light to the point of pain, but from a legal perspective he was, and had been since before Catherine was born, and before he’d ever met Nadine. As such he’d never had, in Catherine’s whole life, a driver’s license, and the first time in her memory that they had a car was when she got her own license at sixteen. (Of course, they’d lived in Los Angeles, so just due to parking concerns she almost never took the car out and just rode public transport everywhere.) She’d heard after he moved up to Alaska that he relied on neighbors to drive him around or run errands for him when he needed it — fortunately he was well-liked in the community, probably because he was such a good Boy and Girl Scouts instructor.

“What do you have a general idea of when he left?” Catherine said.

“Mid-March.”

Catherine snorted. Great. All this worrying for nothing.

“What is it, Catou?”

“He’s fine,” she said, “I mean, yeah, he hasn’t picked up his phone since April—“

“He hasn’t?”

“—but he still posts on Facebook every so often. Just last week he made a status about his… dogs…” She blinked. “Wait.”

“He’s not around his dogs anymore,” Nadine said.

“I… why would he…? He’s lying about his location!”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Nadine sighed.

“Nadine, what the hell is going on?! Where’s my father?!”

“I don’t know, Catou, that’s why I came here,” Nadine said, “I was hoping you’d seen him.”

“No, I haven’t! I thought he was still in Alaska!!”

Nadine frowned again. Catherine took a deep breath, trying to calm herself — they were in public. She was making enough of a scene as it was and she was 0.4 seconds away from flipping the table, too.
“What are you doing back in America?” she asked, voice as cool as possible, though that wasn’t saying much.

“Business,” Nadine said simply, cocking her head.

“How’d you find me? How’d you know what school I was going to, and how’d you know what my dorm number is?”

“Connections,” Nadine said, cocking her head the other way this time.

Catherine grit her teeth. Damn this woman… “How’d you know that Daddy was missing in the first place?!?”

“I was asked about it,” Nadine said, “they thought I might know something.”

“They’?? The police?”

“Do you remember, back at the end of February, the nuclear explosion at Shadow Moses island?” Nadine said abruptly.

Catherine frowned and looked at her lap, realizing only now that she’d been frenetically shredding a napkin with her fingernails while talking to Nadine. “Yeah, ‘course I do,” she said, “Daddy told me a little about it the day after, when I called him about it. He told me not to tell anyone, but Colonel Roy wanted him to help run support because it was Solid Snake who was infiltrating.”

Nadine raised a threaded eyebrow. “You know Solid Snake, Catou?”

“Kind of. Back during the Zanzibar Land disturbance there was one time when Daddy left the radio to refill his coffee, I think, and Snake called, so I picked up. We talked a little bit, he was pretty friendly.”

“I see…”

“Anyway, Daddy told me he died at Shadow Moses. Got killed by Ocelot.”

Nadine didn’t say anything. Catherine was sort of surprised - she would have expected her to ask who Ocelot was. Although, truthfully, Catherine didn’t know herself. She knew he was her dad’s ex-boyfriend and she also knew he was an incredibly dangerous, sadistic habitual liar who had told Miller once that either he would kill him or the other way around. She also owned the sole copy of the only photo Miller had of that man - he’d given it to her when she was a little girl, telling her that if she ever saw this person (who might have changed his hair since, likely letting it get longer and growing a moustache, and would definitely be older than he was in the photo) to stay away from him.

Maybe Nadine already knew who Ocelot was? But if she wasn’t going to ask, Catherine wasn’t going to tell.

“Actually,” she said, her frown deepening, “now that I think about it, a couple days after Shadow Moses was when he started getting kind of weird.”

“How so?” Nadine said.

“Well… I dunno, just not quite like normal. Usually when I call him he tells me what he’s been doing lately and shares some funny stories about his dogs and the locals. Lately, though, he doesn’t talk about himself anymore - almost like he wants to get me off the phone as fast as he can. And
then, of course, April…”

“…he stopped picking up.”

“But he still posts on Facebook, so he’s definitely alive, right?” Catherine said, “and you said he left voluntarily.”

“That’s the worrying part,” Nadine said.

“What?”

“Nevermind. This has been… illuminating, Catou.” She stood up.

Catherine was really confused. Nadine went to all this trouble to meet up with her, and she wasn’t even going to wait for the server to come ask if she wanted anything to drink besides the Coca-Cola Catherine had pre-ordered for her?

“I’ll be in touch,” Nadine said, walking back out of the café.

“Hey, wait!” Catherine called, half-rising out of her seat, but… her mother was gone. She sat back down with a huff. “Bitch,” she muttered.
So Liquid was still bitter about the ‘Ocelot and Solidus are fucking’ thing. He still hadn’t mentioned to Solidus that Ocelot had cheated on him, of course — mostly because Mantis had threatened dire consequences if word got out that Liquid had cheated on him. So he’d kept his mouth shut.

But god, did he keep thinking about it.

“Eli,” Mantis groaned, covering his face with his hands, “if you wanted me with my mask off then you could at least have the decency to not obsess over Ocelot. I have no choice but to listen to your whining like this.”

“Hypocrite,” Liquid muttered, still not giving Mantis back his mask. “You’re one to talk about obsessing over him.”

“That is very different. And besides, you do not have to hear my thoughts on the subject - yet right now you are forcing your thoughts on me.”

“Hmph.”

Mantis glowered at him through his fingers. “New rule,” he said—

“No,” Liquid replied, “we negotiate on the rules, remember? And I’m perfectly fine with how many there are right now.”

“I don’t like you thinking about Ocelot so much.”

“Too bad.”

“Eli—“

“You’re so controlling,” Liquid complained, “you always try to just tell me what to do—“

“No, I don’t—“

“Yes you do.” He got up off the bed and walked to the other side of the room for no real reason before turning around and glaring at Mantis with his hands on his hip. A completely ridiculous look considering he was naked except for his collar and had his hair loose. “You think you’re entitled to dictate my every action.”

“I don’t, Eli.”

“Yes you do! But you’re not — you’re not entitled to my thoughts and actions, Mantis!” He stomped his foot in frustration. “You only have control over me because I let you, and I draw the line at telling me what I can and can’t think! I won’t let you—“

“You’re being ridiculous,” Mantis said, sitting up and pulling the blanket up almost to his neck, although he himself was still clothed. “I’m not trying to—“

“Yes, you are! You’re being ridiculous!!”

“Eli…”

“It’s none of your business what thoughts pass through my head, if I’m thinking about Ocelot then
that’s my concern and not yours—"

“But you should not - not like this, after what he did to you! Giving him this much consideration, this kind of consideration—"

“You only know what I’m thinking because you’re telepathic! This would never happen in a normal relationship, Mantis!”

“What do you mean, ‘normal’??”

“You aren’t playing fair!”

Mantis dropped the blanket, instead spreading his arms in a confused gesture. “Are you telling me I’m not supposed to use my telepathy on you?” he said incredulously, “Eli, I literally cannot help it, we have a psychic link. Half the time you are directing your thoughts towards me because you want me to hear them. Nevermind how often you try to catch me without my mask.”

“Well- I—“

“My telepathy is the only thing that keeps this relationship going, you whine insincerely so often that it is the only way I have to discern which complaints I should take seriously.”

“Mantis!” Liquid half-shouted, offended, then fell silent, biting his lip, shoulders tense. He was still upset and frustrated but he didn’t want to wake up Solid.

“Do not worry,” Mantis said, “he’s still asleep.”

“Nngh… there you go again, reading my mind without asking…”

Mantis rolled his eyes. For God’s sake, he wasn’t wearing his mask, he couldn’t have not heard Liquid’s thoughts right now if he tried. Still, though, it was obvious that this wasn’t just about right now. “Am I supposed to ask?”

“I— well, yes!”

“What if I’m not within earshot?”

“Er…” He sighed, running his hand back through his hair, brow furrowed. “This is a stupid argument,” he whined, “alright, I know you can’t help the telepathy thing, but god Mantis it wouldn’t kill you to give me a little bit of privacy when I ask for it.”

“I try to,” Mantis protested.

“But you always feel the need to check up on me anyway! You’re controlling, you don’t like me saying or doing things without your input, so you always—“

“That’s not what this is about,” Mantis said, “you worry me. That is all. You get into trouble and I- I want to protect you.”

“I don’t need you to protect me,” Liquid said, glancing away.

“Really? Look me in the eye and say that again, Eli.”

“…”

Mantis scoffed. “That is what I thought,” he said, “after everything you’ve been through…“
Liquid shrugged irritably. “I’m not helpless,” he said, “you’re overprotective.”

“Overprotective!”

“Over the most ridiculous things, too! Not even a word about, say, me taking on two F-16s with a Hind or being trapped in REX’s cockpit while it exploded, but Ocelot can so much as breathe in my direction and suddenly it’s the end of the bleeding world!”

“Eli, he ra—“

“That was years ago!” Liquid snapped, hands curling into fists, “that was to get me out of that fucking prison camp! He had to break me!”

“He didn’t have to do it like that!”

“God!” Liquid threw his head back, covering his face with his hands. “How many bloody times have we had this same conversation, Mantis? I’m sick and tired of it.”

“Perhaps if you listened to me for once…”

“Perhaps if you listened to me for once! And it’s beside my original point, Mantis—” ignoring the fact that it wasn’t his original point, “you don’t worry like this when I’m out there putting myself in actual, physical danger. That’s fine. You don’t mind that. You’re just jealous! possessive! territorial!! You’re just upset I’m thinking for myself!”

“Eli, that is completely ludicrous,” Mantis hissed, “I can trust your judgement during a combat engagement. I know you won’t do anything foolish.”

“And off of the battlefield?”

“You just get yourself hurt without me.”

Liquid growled. “So that’s why you have to do all my thinking for me, eh?”

“I do not!”

“You do! Or at the very least, you would dearly love to!”

“Maybe I would!” Mantis snapped, “you are obviously too stupid to do it yourself!”

Even before it came out of his mouth he knew he shouldn’t have said it. Liquid recoiled as if slapped. Mantis winced.

“Eli,” he started.

“Is- is that really what you think??” Liquid said, so shocked and hurt he entirely forgot he was angry.

“No, it’s not,” Mantis said, “I didn’t mean-“

“It sounded like you meant it.”

“No, no— I… I was upset at you and I was only trying to say something to- to insult you, I—“

“Sure as hell didn’t sound like that, either.” Liquid took a step back, his fists trembling. “It sounded like you just- let your real feelings about me slip.”
“No, Eli, no… it’s not… I didn’t mean…”

“So… so that it’s then?” Liquid honestly looked and sounded like he was on the verge of tears and if Mantis had hair then he would have been ripping it out in handfuls right about now. “You think I’m stupid.”

“I don’t, Eli! I think you are a very intelligent man, you just—“

“Just what, Mantis?!”

Mantis sucked in a quick breath. “I think very highly of you, you know that, haven’t I told you as much?”

“You also told me just now I’m too stupid to even think for myself.”

“That wasn’t what I meant. That was phrased badly—“

“Then what did you mean?!”

Mantis swung his legs over the side of the bed, ready to stand up, but hesitated. “I only meant,” he said, looking at his knees, “what I said beforehand - that your judgement off of the battlefield, that is, in interpersonal situations, is… not so good. Everyone knows you are the type who is easy to manipulate, Ocelot even said as much to your face— I worry, Eli. I worry.”

“…”

Mantis bent forward a little, starting to curl in on himself. It had been years, he was pretty sure, since the last time he’d fucked up this badly with Liquid. “I do not want anyone to take advantage of you, Eli,” he mumbled, resting his face in his hands, “and I do not want anyone to hurt you, and that includes myself. I hurt you, Eli—“

“Mantis…”

“I’m sorry.”

There was a short silence, then the mattress creaked as it depressed under Liquid’s weight next to Mantis — Mantis hadn’t heard him walk over, but then again it was only natural he hadn’t. A moment and a half later, he felt Liquid’s hesitant touch at his back.

“It’s alright,” Liquid said, feeling awkward, “I… I overreacted just now, Mantis.”

“No. No, you did not. I said something horrible, I should be yelled at.”

“You didn’t mean it.”

“I still said it, Eli.”

“Well, yes, but it’s only horrible if you actually meant it, which you didn’t. So it’s fine.” He kissed Mantis’ temple. “I know how bad you are trying to articulate your feelings, Mantis.”

“I don’t think you are stupid,” Mantis said thickly.

“I know, I know.” Liquid wrapped his arms around Mantis, pulling him into his lap and kissing him again, the top of his head this time. “But I really live up to my hair color sometimes, don’t I, eh? Mantis?”
Liquid was trying to make him laugh but honestly Mantis just felt worse. He didn’t like self-deprecating humor coming from Liquid, it was the fact that the man’s self-esteem was legitimately in the gutter already that had made Mantis’ “obviously too stupid to do it yourself” comment strike a nerve so cruelly.

Liquid kept kissing him, down the side of his face, gently pulling his hands down so that he could kiss his cheeks and mouth. Mantis didn’t put forth even token resistance no matter how sure he was that he didn’t deserve Liquid’s affection and, perhaps, that the fact that he had brushed off Mantis’ heated insult so easily was indicative of a larger problem instead of him just being understanding and charitable.

“We shouldn’t,” Mantis murmured as one of Liquid’s hands slipped up under his shirt, and he started to feel the beginnings of an erection pressing against his leg.

“Why not?” Liquid breathed over Mantis’ ear. “We always do this after we argue.”

“That is why we shouldn’t. We… you lose yourself in pleasure, I lose myself in your mind… we don’t stop to think about what’s wrong with us…”

“There’s nothing wrong,” Liquid said, and nipped at Mantis’ earlobe. “We’re fine, Mantis.”

“We fight too much.”

“Every couple does. Come on, Mantis, I love you - you know I love you — let me show you as much.”

“…”

“Mantis?”

“Eli…”

A little twinge of insecurity was wriggling its way back to the front of Liquid’s mind. He frowned, pulling Mantis a little closer and leaning his head against his shoulder.

“I know you don’t love me,” he mumbled, “but you do care for me, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” Mantis said immediately, raising one hand to run it back through Liquid’s hair. How could he sit around feeling sorry for himself when Liquid stood in need of comfort? “I care for you, very deeply. More than I can possibly communicate.”

“So… you like me.”

“You are my favorite thing in the whole world, Eli.”

“…”

Mantis nuzzled him, and pressed a soft kiss against the side of his face, near his eye. “You worry about such silly things, Eli,” he said, “of course I like you. Even if I lash out at you sometimes… I like you.”

“Prove it.”

There was a short silence. Liquid hadn’t meant to say that.

“…how?” Mantis prompted.
“I… er…” Liquid thought about it for a little bit, unsure of what he actually wanted - tell him to do something easy just to reassure himself? tell him to do something impossible so he could reinforce his own miserable conclusion that Mantis only barely tolerated him? — then he blurted out, “let me fuck you.”

“Alright,” Mantis said without hesitation.

Liquid stared at him, blinking. Quite frankly, he’d been certain somehow that asking to top was something scandalous and shocking, but now that he thought about it more he wasn’t entirely sure why he felt being the one doing the penetrating for once instead of the other way around was somehow just… going against the natural order of things and turning everything up on its head.

“I don’t mind,” Mantis said, “I do not find it any more objectionable than how we normally do it.”

“R…Really?”

Mantis nodded. “You can if you would like to.” Then he added, slyly, running his fingers across Liquid’s jaw, “just this once, Eli. And I would like to dictate the pace, so I ask that you lie down and let me ride you.”

“Oh… er, well, yes, I- I—” He went sort of red. “Of course. This is… this is actually kind of exciting—“

“Shh.” Mantis pushed him back against the mattress, straddling him. “No need to make such a big deal about it, Eli…”

Of course all this was easier said than done. Liquid wouldn’t even let Mantis keep his shirt, and Mantis always felt horribly vulnerable naked, so he’d convinced Liquid to give him back his mask so that he could hold onto at least a little bit of self-confidence. Liquid kissed him deeply before strapping it back onto his head for him - the silence was nice, even if all he could really hear beforehand were Liquid’s thoughts, which he was used to, and the easily-ignorable nonsense of Solid’s dreams - and then immediately his hands were trailing down to Mantis’ back, to his butt. Or what passed for a butt on him.

At least, after having been on the receiving end so many times, Mantis didn’t have to worry about Liquid needing instructions on how to prepare Mantis - which he insisted on doing, instead of letting Mantis do it himself, although Mantis wasn’t sure how comfortable he would have been with that anyway. But, he had to keep reminding Liquid to not be so impatient, considering he’d never done this before…

“Oh,” Liquid gasped when Mantis finally carefully sunk himself down on Liquid’s cock, “oh, m-my god—”

“Hush…” Mantis sighed, considerably more breathless than he usually was by this point. No wonder Liquid liked doing it this way so much.

“M-Mantis— y-you’re so hot… and t-tight…!”

“Does it… does it feel good, Eli?” Mantis asked as he experimentally slid himself a couple inches up and then back down Liquid’s dick, sending little shivers through his own body.

Liquid let out a high-pitched moan, nodding, and grabbed Mantis’ hips tight. Mantis placed his hands over Liquid’s.

“Sit still, Eli,” he murmured, and started to rock his hips.
Truthfully it was less ‘Liquid fucking Mantis’ and more ‘Mantis fucking himself on Liquid’s cock’. But that seemed to work for both of them - Liquid hadn’t been sure about how well he’d fare trying to be sexually dominant, at least without hurting Mantis somehow on accident or maybe just embarrassing himself, and Mantis was glad Liquid had relinquished the pace to him, since that meant he could take it as slow and gentle as he wanted. Mantis wasn’t interested in hard and fast. Liquid certainly was and certainly would have given the chance — already he was writhing and panting under Mantis, deliciously frustrated by Mantis’ leisurely pace when his instincts demanded to just rut up into him and fuck his brains out.

Mantis was so thin, and Liquid so… not exactly poorly-endowed, that if and when Mantis leaned back enough then the head of Liquid’s dick created a bulge in Mantis’ stomach. It was a weird enough feeling, the way his skin stretched and his guts seemed to twist, to make Mantis squirm on top of Liquid, finally understanding why Liquid always sort of lost his mind when this happened to him. Moving one hand to press against it let Mantis wrench a few more whimpers out of Liquid.

“Mantis, Mantis, g-god— you feel s-so good, Mantis—“

“Do I…?”

“Mmmmm… you f-feel wonderful around m-my cock, god, I l-love it…! I love y-you!”

Mantis didn’t give Liquid permission to orgasm until after he’d already finished himself and had pulled off of Liquid, practically collapsing onto his chest and letting Liquid bring himself to completion by rubbing himself against Mantis’ thigh. Mantis was too spent and exhausted to care about the sticky cooling semen on his ass and lower back, and between his and Liquid’s stomach. Liquid sleepily kissed the top of his head.

“Did… did you enjoy yourself?” he murmured, nuzzling Mantis.

“I suppose…” Mantis yawned. “It seems that this way around… really wears one out a lot faster…”

“Gained a newfound appreciation for what I put up with, have you?” Liquid chuckled, pulling Mantis close. “I love you…”

“I know, Eli…” He pressed his head up under Liquid’s chin, tiredly appreciating his warmth. Psychically he dragged the blanket up over the two of them. “I… I like you, very much…”

“Mmm.”

“I do…. you are my whole world, Eli. I need you. I want… to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“Mantis…”

“I could never live without you…”

“Let’s get married,” Liquid said abruptly.

“…” Mantis blinked. “What?”

“You heard me. Let’s get married. Right now.”

Mantis sat up, stared down at Liquid in confusion. “What?”

Liquid sat up, too. “What’s stopping us?” he said, excited, grabbing Mantis’ hands and squeezing. “It’s not like we could do it legally anyway, we’re fugitives and all and besides, same-sex marriage
isn’t really recognized as it is, but that just means that our union is *entirely up to us.*”

“So you want to… why??”

“Why not? We’re going to be spending the rest of our lives together anyway, yes?”

“Well, yes, but…”

“So I might as well—“ he kissed Mantis on the cheek, “—claim the privilege of calling you my *husband* instead of my boyfriend. ‘Boyfriend’ just sounds so juvenile and fleeting.”

“This… um… I don’t…”

“What’s the matter?”

Mantis looked around the room for a moment, then said, “this is so… sudden. Not like the way things are supposed to go… no?”

“Well, if you want things the way they’re *supposed* to go,” Liquid said with a grin, “then as soon as this is all over - as soon as we don’t have to worry about the Patriots anymore - I’ll buy us some rings and we’ll have a great big ceremony with everyone we know. And cake. And we can get Ocelot to perform the actual rite just to spite him.”

“I…”

“But tonight,” Liquid said, kissing Mantis’ knuckles, “is our actual wedding. What do you say?”

Mantis didn’t *know* what to say. He just nodded mutely.

But hell, if he’d known how happy - known how absolutely *joyful* being able to call Mantis his husband would make Liquid… he would have done this years ago.
Chapter 45

Somewhere off the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

“Miller,” said Ocelot with insufferable warmth, “I knew you’d pull through.”

“The more I thought about it, Ocelot,” Miller said, “the more sure I am that you were just trying to ensure I died in a car wreck somewhere.”

“Ocelot’s finally here?” Wolf said, throwing open the door to the RV. Bêdeng ran out ahead of her, barking at Ocelot.

“Yes, Wolf,” Ocelot said, “how’s Octopus’ leg?”

“It fucking hurts still,” Octopus yelled from inside the RV.

“Better than before,” Wolf said, “it was just a flesh wound.”

“No major nerve or tissue damage,” Miller added, shrugging, “missed his bones and major blood vessels. Might be some scarring but I imagine Octopus will be able to work around that just fine.”

“And he has no hard feelings towards Mei Ling for shooting him. It was an honest misunderstanding.”

“That’s good,” Ocelot said. “Now, about Cambridge…”

The RV had been kind of cramped with Wolf, Otacon, Raven, Octopus, Mei Ling, Neela, and Miller (although he was just travelling with them until they rendezvoused with Ocelot - no one minded, although Otacon thought it was weird, they way he sort of seemed to try to avoid him), so Mei Ling and Neela met Ocelot outside. Neela had, of course, heard stories about Ocelot’s propensity for torture, so she hid behind Mei Ling as she was evidently wont to do. Mei Ling, however, greeted him cheerfully, and couldn’t resist asking if he really had used a high-voltage low-amperage charge to knock out Solid’s Codec after all.

“Of course I did,” Ocelot said, “if it hadn’t been for that I would have preferred a much more hands-on method.”

“Except you only had one hand at the time,” Miller crowed from where he was sitting on the hood of Ocelot’s car. “Bet that really killed the mood.”

Neela glanced down. “But he, like, has both hands.”

“Finally got that prosthetic, Ocelot?” Wolf said, jumping down from the RV’s doorstep and walking over to Ocelot. “Let me see.”

“Fine,” Ocelot said, tugging off his right glove.

It was a superb piece of work, very realistic, and it moved perfectly - but something about the texture of the skin seemed off, and placed his hand firmly in the uncanny valley, as did the way the complexion was youthfully perfect (if a bit pale for Ocelot’s skintone) and his new nails were blunt and unstained by gunpowder while at the same time the artificial skin sat a little too snugly against the mechanical muscles and tendons, giving it the odd impression of being wizened and aged. So it was a good thing Ocelot had gotten new gloves already. Neela was particularly fascinated with it,
but after about a minute Ocelot took his hand back and replaced his glove.

“Very nice,” Wolf said.

“Who made it?” Neela said, “I’ve never seen tech like that before.”

“His work is obscure, but good,” Ocelot said. “So, I was told that you wish to go into hiding.”

Neela looked at her feet and nodded. “But,” she added, somewhat hesitantly, “if there’s something I can do, like, behind the scenes in order to help take down the Patriots… I want to help. They killed Soraya, she was my best friend, I want to… make sure they come to justice. I just don’t, like, want to be chased around by scary dudes with guns again.”

“Hmm…”

“I’m sure you can think of something for her,” Mei Ling said, “she’s very smart, she’s good with her hands, and she speaks three languages.”

Ocelot raised an eyebrow. “Which ones?”

“English, Tamil, and Hindi,” Neela said. “And I, um… I was, like, studying electrical engineering and computer science, but I was thinking about switching over to medical engineering, or at least minoring in… uh, I mean, like, I wanted to go into robotics.”

“Is that why you were so interested in my hand?” Ocelot said, “do you have an interest in bionics specifically?”

“Yeah, totally!”

“I see… well, in that case, I believe I can think of something for you to do, out of harm’s way,” Ocelot said, “fortunately for you, the man in question speaks English. Tell me, have you ever been to the Czech Republic?”

“No… I’ve never been to anywhere in Europe.”

“Now’s a good time as any to start.”

“…wh…?”

Otacon poked his head out of the RV door. “Is everyone staying for dinner?” he said, “because if I’m going to make macaroni and cheese I’m going to need to know how many boxes to use.”

“Just don’t burn it this time,” came Raven’s voice from somewhere inside the RV.

“It’s mac and cheese,” Otacon protested over his shoulder, “it’s not that hard.”

“Well, Ocelot?” Miller said, “I leave when you do. And so, I suppose, does Neela.”

“We’ll stay for dinner,” Ocelot said with a shrug. “It may be a while before Neela sees Mei Ling again, they need time to say their goodbyes.”

“You make it sound like one of us is going to die,” Mei Ling said.

“I’m not about to rule out that possibility.”
“Thanks for meeting with me, Trinity,” Catherine sighed, “it’s really important.”

“Hey, no problem,” Trinity said, “so what was it that so important ya din’t wanna say over the phone?”

“It’s about my dad - he’s gone missing.”

“What?!”

Catherine raised her hands in a calm-down gesture. “It happened a while back, in mid-March,” she said, “at least, that’s what my mother said. But from the looks of things he left his home in Alaska voluntarily.”

“Oh… so you can’t report him as a missin’ person to the police,” Trinity said thoughtfully. “But ya know he’s still alive, right?”

“Right,” Catherine said, nodding, “he still updates Facebook every so often, and he was always such a paranoid old fart that I can’t imagine anyone else has his password. The funny thing is that he was lying about his location - purposefully implying that he was still in Alaska even though he’s vanished.”

“Which just adds to the theory that he left voluntarily.”

“Yeah. But it’s… well, something just doesn’t feel right, he’s been acting weird ever since the Shadow Moses incident.”

“Have you tried… I dunno, askin’ him what’s goin’ on?”

“He won’t pick up his phone and he doesn’t know how to use the private message system on Facebook,” Cather explained, “and since this whole situation is so… well, this, it might mean trouble for him if I publicly ask online why he left his home. So, I need your help.”

Trinity patted her hands against her legs, face set. “Alright!” she said, “what can I do?”

“Your uncle,” Catherine said, “he’s a detective, right?”

“Uncle Gary?” Trinity said, “yeah. Well, no, I mean, he ain’t a detective, but he’s an investigative journalist. Basically the same thing but with less court appearances. Usually.”

“That works for me,” Catherine said, “do you know where he is now? He might be my best bet for finding out what happened to Daddy.”

“Let me think…” Trinity tapped her finger to her chin. “Last I heard he was tryin’ ta look into this book that keeps gettin’ rejected by publishers. Somethin’ to do with Shadow Moses…”

Catherine raised her eyebrows. “Damn,” she said, “he might want to investigate my father’s disappearance anyway. So where is he?”

“I’ll ask my mom, hang on,” Trinity said, pulling out her phone and starting texting. “Uncle Gary is her brother, so she might be able to tell me where he mighta run off to over this book.”

“Thanks.”

Trinity’s mom texted back fairly quickly. “He went ta Los Angeles,” Trinity read off her phone, “that’s where the lady who wrote the book lives.” She looked up. “Say, ain’t you from there, Cathy?”
“Yeah,” Catherine said, cracking her knuckles. “Alright. Looks like I’ve got a bit of a road trip ahead of me. …oh, but I need to call our boss at the grocery store, first…”

“Dorothea and I will cover for you,” Trinity said, “you just don’t forget to bring ya gun along, y’hear?”

“Of course!”

Los Angeles, California. Two days later.

If Gary McGolden were actually writing this up he’d probably describe Catherine Miller’s approach as something right out of a detective noir novel: A troubled young lady, beautiful (as mixed-race girls tended to be), with long legs and a gorgeous coffee complexion, a bouncy dark blonde frohawk, and baby blue almond-shaped eyes — she walked up to him, too elegantly dressed for these gritty streets, eyes red from tears, and entreated in a silky voice, “Help me, Mr. McGolden, you’re my only hope. Daddy’s gone missing and I’m all alone in the world now!”

Of course that wasn’t what actually happened. In reality, her eyes were only red from driving all night cross-country. And she wasn’t dressed elegantly, she was wearing a loose Paws the Catamount t-shirt, jean shorts, and beat-up old tennis shoes she’d probably gotten at a thrift store; there was an odd geometric lump under her left breast that McGolden suspected was a shoulder-holster for a concealed firearm that he somehow doubted she had a permit for.

Also, her approach couldn’t really be described as “walked up to”. Sure, she had technically done that, but her walking up to him was immediately followed by her grabbing him by the cuff of his jacket and hauling him up out of the bush in front of Nastasha Romanenko’s house that he’d been squatting in. Really strong for such a young lady, although, she just about matched McGolden’s height.

“You’re Gary McGolden, right?” she said. Judging by her accent, she hadn’t grown up here but judging by how bold she was acting in the middle of the street, she had definitely lived here at some point. Tourists don’t manhandle unsuspecting journalists.

“Fan of MEGASURPRISE magazine, huh?” McGolden said.

“You have a niece named Trinity who goes to Western Carolina University?”

“Are you a friend of hers?” McGolden said, dusting himself off. “Because if it’s about the money I owe her mom, I just need a little mo-“

“I’m not involved in your family drama,” she said, “I need you to help me find my father.”

“C’mon lady, I’m not a detective, I’m a-“

“You’re looking into Shadow Moses, right?” Catherine said, hands on her hips.

“Shh!!” McGolden looked around quickly. “Keep your voice down, this is top-secret stuff! You heard that someone got killed over that 4chan thread, right?”

“The what? No, nevermind. My father was involved in the Shadow Moses incident, started acting weird right after it, and vanished from his house, like, two weeks later.”

“Have you tried, I dunno, calling the cops?”
“Everything seems to indicate that he left voluntarily, and doesn’t want to be found, but…”

McGolden looked around again. “You’re right, actually,” he said, “better not to get the cops involved. You never know what sort of person is in their ranks.”

“Huh? I didn’t say… nevermind! Look, I know this isn’t all just a coincidence, Daddy would never just up and leave like that, not without telling me, anyway. So I need you to help me track him down and figure out what’s going on.”

McGolden raised an eyebrow. “So it’s really got something to do with Shadow Moses, yeah?”

“Pretty sure. And in exchange for helping me, I can tell you a bit about the incident - and the special forces unit behind it.”

“FOXHOUND? Seriously??” McGolden said, his eyes bugging out. “Lady, you’ve got yourself a deal!” He stuck his hand out.

Catherine shook it. “My name’s Catherine Miller, by the way,” she said, “my dad’s name is Kazuhira. But he also goes by McDonell and I’m pretty sure he’s gone by Benedict in the past, so I don’t know if he’s changed his name again or not. But he usually keeps the last name Miller. He used to be the drill instructor for FOXHOUND, so he knew the guy who was supposed to infiltrate Shadow Moses pretty well.”

“Right. So, about FOXHOUND…”

“Not until we find my dad, McGolden,” Catherine said firmly, putting her hands on her hips. “Maybe I’ll tell you sooner if it becomes relevant to the search, but as of right now I’m keeping my mouth shut!”

“Alright, alright…” McGolden sighed, “okay, let me call my editor. And then, I think, the best place to start would be your father’s house, the place of his disappearance. Where is it?”

“Alaska.”

“…dang. Okay, I really need to call my editor. Gimme a sec, won’t you?”

“Ocelot,” Colonel Jackson said, “a word.”

“I’m a busy man, Colonel,” Ocelot said, neatly sidestepping him.

“I only need a minute-“ Colonel Jackson blocked his path, “to ask—“

“You’ve wasted enough of my time as it is.”

“You made a copy of the Metal Gear data!” Colonel Jackson accused. “You lied to me! to us!”

“I never said that the copy I gave you was the only copy,” Ocelot said dryly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I was leaving.”

“You son of a bitch!” Colonel Jackson exclaimed, grabbing Ocelot by the scarf — and finding himself pinned against the wall with an SAA pressed up against his nose a second later.

“You know how Solidus frowns on infighting,” Ocelot said coolly.

Colonel Jackson snarled. “You made copies of the Metal Gear data,” he said, “and you’ve been
selling it to anyone who will pay. Within six months everybody's going to have a Metal Gear.”

“Yes, and?”

“What was the point of that?!”

“Fundraising,” Ocelot said. “Solidus has deep pockets, but we can’t live off of his savings forever.”

“You— they’re going to trace that back to me,” Colonel Jackson whispered harshly, “I was the one you passed that data over to after Shadow Moses. No one’s going to believe me that you made more copies to sell. Goddammit, Ocelot, they’re going to think I’m the one selling top-secret design specs to foreigners, and I can’t even defend myself! If I out you, the Patriots’ll have me killed!”

“And you wondered why I maintain my relationship with the Patriots,” Ocelot said with an unpleasant smile, then stepped back from Colonel Jackson, who glared at him. “Although saying you’ll be killed is a bit optimistic - if you ask me, it’s more likely they’ll go after your family. You and your wife have been trying for a baby, haven’t you? How’s that going?”

“…”

Ocelot waved a hand. “It’ll take a few months - years, even - to get the ball rolling any charges drawn up against you — and when they do, in all likelihood the sale of Metal Gear specs will be covered up and you’ll just be convicted of embezzling or something equally random.”

“Like treason, perhaps?” Colonel Jackson said acidly.

“I won’t be involved. Of course, you can use this little… grace period to try and cover things up yourself. Or make a run for it.”

“So I can die now instead of later? Damn you, Ocelot. Damn you to Hell.”

Ocelot snorted. “I’ve had worse curses lobbed at me,” he said.

“You engineered this. You’re just playing with Dead Cell - for what? Trying to root out the Patriot plant?” Colonel Jackson scoffed. “We don’t have a Patriot plant, Ocelot, Dead Cell is just as loyal to Solidus as you are. We stand against the Patriots too.”

“I’ve never said anything of the sort.”

“Well it’s kind of fucking obvious, Ocelot. You did this on purpose, just to get me arrested and throw the entire unit into chaos. Or maybe to see how the Patriots are going to come down on my head! Yeah, that’ll tell you whether or not I’ve been spying for them this whole time!” He pointed an angry finger at Ocelot. “I ought to shoot you.”

“You’d be dead before you could even finish pulling out your gun.”

“…” Ocelot had him there. No one, but no one matched his skill with a gun, and Colonel Jackson knew it.

“You can try to fight the charges legitimately,” Ocelot said with an ironic grin, “after all, you really didn’t sell Metal Gear specs to anyone. You might be able to argue down to simple negligence in your handling of the sole copy of the design and test data. Claim it was backed up without your permission and stolen because you were careless - no one will believe it was despite your best efforts, I’m afraid. Too much at stake.”
“I hate you.”

“Join the club.”
Solid and Solidus were both kind of weirded out about one morning Liquid announcing that he and Mantis got married the previous night, but both of them were at least polite enough to consider them engaged now. Which pissed Liquid off, he insisted that Mantis was his husband now, not his fiancé, but Mantis just seemed unbearably embarrassed about the whole thing and would shut down the entire conversation every time it started to go there.

Solid wasn’t dumb enough to think that either Liquid or Mantis had forgiven him over that whole, er, attempted incest thing that he couldn’t justify to himself even now, but things had settled down around here enough that he did feel as though they’d set it aside. If nothing else, they were willing to talk to him again. Really just pretending it didn’t happen at this point.

Last time Mantis had gone into town he’d come back with a partially disassembled radio uplink he’d scavenged out of someone’s trash, which Liquid put back together after several days of trial and error (and electrocuting himself once. That was fun, he wouldn’t stop bitching about how his chest felt weird for the rest of the day and had randomly gotten dizzy and slumped against a wall or chair or closest available person several times. The next morning he was fine, if grouchy). As a result, they could now communicate with the rest of FOXHOUND without having to try and stake out cell reception in Port Alsworth.

While there wasn’t too much for everyone to get caught up with on their end, Otacon brought them up to speed on everything that had happened since they left Shadow Moses: Bêdeng, Otacon’s status as a media martyr, changing locations, the anonymous internet thread leaking just about everything concerning Shadow Moses, figuring out the source was Mei Ling, rushing to MIT, Mei Ling’s roommate Soraya being killed by a police officer on a presumed Patriot payroll, Mei Ling shooting Octopus in the leg, the epic street battle where they saved Mei Ling and her other roommate Neela from the Patriots, Miller rescuing Octopus, Mei Ling deciding to join them, and Neela leaving with Ocelot for the Czech Republic where she could help but not be in the line of fire. Otacon also mentioned that he was pretty sure Liquid had his DS and copy of Pokémon Emerald and he wanted it back next time he saw him.

“Certainly,” Liquid said into the mic, “but I saved over your game.”

“…you’ve gotta be kidding me…”

Both Solid and Otacon were surprised to hear that the other had not only believed all the stuff about the Patriots but also joined the fight against them; each of them had been sure that the other would hold out and try to get away from FOXHOUND. But it was, at least, nice that they were all on the same side.

Being in touch with the rest of FOXHOUND (plus Otacon and Mei Ling) was great and all, but Solid was disappointed that they couldn’t use the radio to call Miller - in fact, no one even knew where he currently was - and Mantis was beyond bothered that they couldn’t hail Ocelot no matter what they tried. Either he’d changed Codec frequencies (which should have been accessible from their radio, hell, it was Wolf’s frequency they’d initially reached even if they’d ended up switching over to 141.12, which was now routed through Otacon’s laptop instead of his Codec) or else Ocelot wasn’t answering when he heard the beeping, possibly because it was an unknown number.

“Oh well,” Mantis sneered, “we don’t need him anyway.”

“I think it’s pretty clear that we do…” Solidus muttered.
If they had been able to contact Ocelot, then they might have known that EVA was planning to drop by before the huskies started barking at an approaching motorcycle. Maybe.

“I’m not here,” Liquid said, eyes wide, dropping the curtain. “Tell her I’m not here.” He retreated to the ‘storage’ room. Mantis rolled his eyes so hard they were at risk of getting stuck that way. Solid and Solidus were mostly just confused.

Solid had been pretty sure that the door had been locked before a sharp-featured blonde woman on the wrong side of sixty threw it open, beaming.

“Hello, boys!” she said boisterously.

“Liquid’s hiding in his room,” Solid said immediately. Then he reconsidered and asked, “wait, who are-”

“This would be EVA,” Mantis said.

“Your mother, David,” EVA said, pulling him into an embrace before he could stop her.

“…fascinating,” Solidus said.

An extremely confused and slightly freaked out Solid pushed EVA away and took several steps back. “So you’re the surrogate Liquid mentioned?” She didn’t look Japanese, so…

EVA frowned, made a slight huff. “That’s such a cold way of putting it,” she said, “but you can’t grow a human being in a test tube, not even a clone. You need a woman’s body to give it life.” She pointed at herself, smiling again. “That would be where I came in, David. I gave you life - you and Eli.”

“Okay, but… I’ve never even seen you before, so…”

EVA sighed. “That wasn’t my idea,” she said, “if I had been allowed to keep you two, I absolutely would have. But I just… well… it was a complicated situation, I had no choice. I’m glad that you, at least, had a good childhood in foster care.”

“I’m… not sure I would call it ‘good’,” Solid said, somewhat reluctantly, “or ‘bad’, it more unstable than anything else. I don’t think I stayed with one family for more than a year at time since I was… I don’t remember, seven or so?”

“Oh…” the corner of EVA’s mouth twitched. “Right. After what happened with Eli - the emotional abuse allegations, and him getting ‘lost’ in Africa — well, there might have been a little bit of paranoia about something similar happening to you. You got pulled from families at the first hint of trouble, even if it was something innocuous.”

“…I guess that’s good to know after all this time…”

EVA turned to face Solidus. “I’d heard there was a third one,” she said, “I’m afraid I don’t know much about how you were born, though.”

“That’s alright,” Solidus said, “I’ve never much cared.”

“But if you don’t mind, since I’m already your brothers’ mother, I’m going to go ahead and call you my son as well. Welcome to the family… George, I think Ocelot said your given name was?”

“…uh… yes…?”
“And of course,” EVA said, clapping a hand on Mantis’ shoulder, who went somewhat rigid, “Mantis here is practically my son-in-law, anyway, so really we’re just all one family under one roof —”

“If you want to get technical,” Solidus said, confusion still evident on his face, “I’m sure he considers himself your actual son-in-law. Apparently he and Liquid got married a few nights ago.”

“What?” EVA said, blinking, then turned to Mantis. “What?”

“It…” Mantis looked extremely uncomfortable, “…just sort of… happened.”

“They’re only engaged, if you ask me,” Solid said.

“No one asked you,” Solidus said. “Hey, you agree with me.”

“Well… congratulations, Mantis,” EVA said, recovering. “I think that’s wonderful.”

Mantis didn’t say anything. A moment later a grumbling Liquid showed up, or rather, stuck his head around the corner of the hallway that lead into the area by the front door.

“Hello, Mother,” he drawled. “What are you doing here?”

“I take it Mantis threatened to chew you out if you didn’t come say hi…?”

“He threatened something alright. What are you doing here?” he asked again, his voice harder this time.

EVA sighed. “I only came to check up on everyone,” she said, “I wasn’t sure if… have you figured out a way to contact the rest of FOXHOUND yet?”

“Yes,” Solidus said.

“Did they tell you about having to change locations from British Columbia to Manitoba?”

“Yeah,” Solid said, “someone kept driving by the house, seemed like they were checking them out.”

“Patriots, they thought,” Mantis said.

“You were wondering if the Patriots hadn’t been skulking around here?” Liquid said, slinking the rest of the way into the room.

“Exactly,” EVA said, “it’s so isolated here that I would hesitate to say it was an immediate concern, which is why I didn’t come sooner - but I’m afraid it was possible. Ocelot told me he suspected a leak in the resistance somewhere.”

“Perhaps it has something to do with all the irresponsible recruiting lately,” Solidus said, eyeing Solid, Liquid, and Mantis.

“No,” EVA said, “something from before Shadow Moses. But even I don’t know how many people Ocelot has in his pocket on this, all I can say is that I don’t think it’s any of my group and I’m not certain it’s Dead Cell, either.”

“Dead Cell is suspected?”
“So we couldn’t trust Solidus’ judgement after all?” Liquid said in mockingly exaggerated surprise. Solidus shot him a glare.

“The point is that Ocelot is testing the waters,” EVA said, “strategically dropping information so he can, hopefully, catch the leaker in the act eventually. Something tells me some of his bait information is that David’s cabin is still, well, occupied.”

“So you thought someone might come here to check it out,” Solid said.

“Yes. And it’s possible that the Patriots that might have been closing in on the other half of FOXHOUND back in British Columbia were sent there by something Ocelot said. So hopefully that started to narrow it down.”

Mantis snorted. “Or maybe he just-”

“Don’t want to hear it, Mantis,” Liquid said without even looking at him before he could finish his sentence. Mantis made an audible growl but didn’t retort.

There was a short, somewhat awkward pause, then EVA clapped her hands together and said, “by the way, Eli! Congratulations on your engagement! …marriage! Whatever you want to call it!”

“…thank you?” He grabbed Mantis’ arm and pulled him to his side. “It’s marriage, by the way, Mother.”

“I… I see…”

Near Anchorage.

“So Daddy started working for them when I was pretty young,” Catherine said, fiddling with the radio, trying to find a good station for the dozenth time that day, “I don’t really know the circumstances behind it. I do know that Daddy hated the guy who ran the unit, Big Boss - always told me to stay away from him. Never told me the story behind it, just said every time he’d tell me when I was older.”

“Uh-huh,” McGolden said, scribbling in his notebook, then looked up. “Wah! C-Cathy!! Keep your eyes on the road, will you?!?”

Catherine hit the brakes, but there was enough space between them and the moose slowly walking across the road that it wasn’t too sudden of a stop. “Anyway,” she continued as if nothing had happened, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel, “this was after he and Nadine separated, so I didn’t have much of a choice but to live on base with him for a while, until he retired. Which was when I was like… um, nine? Yeah, because it was the year after Nadine finally went through with the divorce… that was right after the thing in South Africa, so Big Boss was gone and Colonel Roy took over the unit, but Daddy got really depressed so we moved to Los Angeles so he could be around Japanese people again. He’s from Japan, you know.”

“What thing in South Africa are you referring to?” McGolden asked.

“Uh… keep in mind I was nine years old,” Catherine said pointedly, easing the car forward again as the moose got out of their lane. “I don’t remember it very well, and Daddy wouldn’t talk much about it afterwards. But it must have been something really serious, since right before Daddy retired Solid Snake left the unit, too.”

“Solid Snake was in the unit while you lived at the base? …did you know him?”
Catherine laughed. “No, not really,” she said, “I mean, I saw him around. How couldn’t I? Snake and Daddy were pretty close — I was really shy when I was a little kid, but Snake did his best to be friends with me. But he was, like, way older than me.” She paused. “My mother asked the same thing,” she added thoughtfully, “I only told her about the time I answered the radio for Daddy during the Zanzibar Land incident.”

“Huh… so, anyone else you knew?” McGolden said, “any of the members of FOXHOUND who staged the rebellion?”

“Nope,” Catherine said, “they all joined after Daddy retired. I’ve heard about Ocelot, though— wait.”

“What?”

“Uh… Decoy Octopus, that’s it. He was in FOXHOUND when Daddy signed on, but back then he was kind of an outlier.”

“Decoy Octopus,” McGolden said thoughtfully, “I read about him in that 4chan thread. Supposedly he’s a master of disguise, and can perfectly imitate any person he wants to… sounds useful for spying.”

“Yeah, I was told that after Liquid Snake took over the members of the unit all got a lot more specialized - Big Boss or Colonel Roy would never hire a psychic - but Decoy Octopus was so good at what he did that Big Boss recruited him anyway. But he was different from everyone else, he wasn’t a soldier… didn’t do combat… so I never really saw him much, he didn’t have any reason to hang out with the drill instructor.”

McGolden tapped his pen against his chin. “How about anyone on the support staff? You know ‘em?”

“Just my dad,” Catherine said, shrugging, “oh, and Colonel Roy. Daddy said that he had to be brought in so that they could convince Snake to do it for them. Although he also mentioned blackmail…”

“Blackmail!??” McGolden said, furiously writing, “who was being blackmailed, Solid Snake or the colonel?”

“Oh, I dunno. …okay, McGolden, this is the road.”

Miller’s house was small and well-maintained, although it was obvious that there had been no one there to cut back the spring growth of April and May. Catherine had only been here twice, last summer and last Christmas, but nonetheless she still found the silence a little unnerving. She associated pulling into the normally-empty-anyway driveway with several dogs barking.

“So this is his house, huh?” McGolden said, stepping out of the car.

“Yes,” Catherine said, “be careful, alright? There might be… evidence, so don’t mess it up.”

“Scout’s honor,” McGolden said, raising his hand. “What exactly are we looking for?”

“Well, ideally, a note he left for me about what’s going on and where he went. I’m pretty sure he knew I was going to come eventually. More likely…” she walked up to the front door, looking at the ground instead of in front of her, and then stopped suddenly, dropping to a squat and staring at a small hole in the dirt. “…something like this.”
“What is it?”

“Hang on.” She pulled out a pocketknife - carrying one around, regardless of legality, was just a habit Miller had impressed on her when she was a kid - and flicked it open, digging in the dirt around the hole. “Bingo.”

“…a lump of metal,” McGolden said, leaning over to look down at it.

“A bullet,” Catherine said, standing up. “And judging by the angle it’s at, I’d say…” She turned around and tried the door - it was unlocked, which both Catherine and McGolden raised their eyebrows at. After exchanging a glance, she opened in the rest of the way, stepped into the house (taking her shoes off at the threshold), and after a quick look around to confirm that it appeared uninhabited, stood just behind the threshold and pointed her hand (one finger out, thumb up) down towards the bullet in the dirt.

“Whoever shot it did it from here,” she said, “or maybe standing a little further back, depending on how tall the person was. I think if it was Daddy he’d be standing about right here.” She frowned. “But he was definitely aiming at the ground, I think. If he’d shot at something from a normal height, and just missed, the bullet wouldn’t be as deep in the dirt as it was.”

“Wow, Cathy,” McGolden said admiringly, “I thought you said you were a second-year nursing student, not a forensic scientist.”

“H-Huh?” Catherine blinked, embarrassed. “Oh, using the angle and depth of penetration in order to guess a bullet’s trajectory and point of origin is just simple logic. To be honest, I learned it while writing Gyakuten Saiban casefic to practice my Japanese.”

“Still pretty cool,” McGolden said. “But why would someone fire at the ground?” he added, scratching his chin ponderously as he stepped forward to enter the house. Catherine held up her other hand for him to stop. “What is it?”

“Just a guess,” she said, deliberately casting her eyes down. McGolden looked and saw that her still-held-out gun-hand was now pointed directly at his leg.

“Oh,” he said. “So whoever fired that bullet must have been going for a non-lethal but crippling wound.”

“It probably was Daddy,” Catherine said, lowering her arms. “He likes doing things non-lethal. Plus, standing here… kinda feels like he answered the door with his gun out, doesn’t it?”

“Does he normally do that?”

“I have no idea. He had no reason to at FOXHOUND and he couldn’t get away with it in California, but here? I mean, he never did it to me, but he always knew when I was coming.”

“But he’s supposed to be a well-liked member of the community,” McGolden said, “you don’t get that way by brandishing a firearm at every Girl Scout trying to sell cookies.”

“Maybe he had reason to believe whoever was at the door was here to… no way… could it be?”

“What?”

“Nevermind. We don’t even know for sure how long that bullet’s been there, for all we know it’s years old,” Catherine said, turning around. “Daddy had his enemies, alright? He was definitely on the paranoid side but I’m pretty sure if it hadn’t been for that he would have died long before he’d
“—so in summary, everything’s going just fine here,” EVA said over Codec.

“Mm.” Ocelot put down the gun he was cleaning, sighing. “You didn’t have to go check up on them.”

“And how were you planning to find out if the Patriots have been coming around David’s cabin?”

“I’ve been in touch with Solidus.”

“…speaking of Solidus,” EVA said.

“EVA,” Ocelot said, “you can’t just adopt people. Especially grown men.”

“Too late.”

He successfully resisted the urge to put his face in his hands. “Do you remember,” he said slowly, “thirty-five or so years ago, just when all this was starting to get rolling and John dragged you out of Hanoi… do you remember the way you tried to mother me? Do you remember that, EVA?”

“Are you still bitter about that?”

“It was weird, EVA. Nevermind the fact that you aren’t even a full decade older than me—“

“Excuse you.”

“—we were romantically pursuing the same man.”

“That’s why I stopped,” EVA said, annoyed, “besides, Miller ended up beating us out to him anyway, didn’t he?”

“…”

“ADAM?”

“Nevermind,” Ocelot said, sighing again, going back to cleaning his gun. “I know you didn’t call to talk about the past and you’re already through telling me that, as of right now, the Patriots haven’t raided Snake’s cabin. Yet you haven’t hung up yet. What do you want?”

“Is there supposed to be a helicopter here?”

“Yes.”

“…interesting. Also - I’m not sure if you’ve heard, but they’ve gotten ahold of an old ham radio setup and got it working again. Eli’s already gotten in touch with the rest of his team, have you gotten any calls from unknown frequencies?”

“…come to think of it…”

“You might want to pick up next time. By the way, remember how I said Eli and Solidus were going to find out about you sleeping with both of them?”

“I take it the other shoe dropped,” Ocelot said disinterestedly.
EVA frowned. “Eli’s furious with you,” she said, “because you never mentioned the whole ‘relationship with Solidus’ thing.”

“He never asked,” Ocelot replied. “Besides, sooner or later something else is going to grab his attention and he isn’t going to care anymore.”

“Or else he really feels like he’s been genuinely wronged and he’s going to be upset about this forever…”

“Could go either way, I’ll admit, hard to tell with that man. But it’s none of his business and it’s certainly none of yours, EVA.”

“I haven’t said anything,” EVA sniffed. “I already know all your excuses — Solidus is an adult, he can sleep with whoever he wants to, it just so happened that it was you he wanted and you just can’t say ‘no’ to that face. All the same things you said about Eli ten years ago.”

“If I knew I was going to get bitched at for it for the next decade I would have kept my hands to myself ten years ago.”

“Good to know. On the plus side, you were right about all three of the sons actually getting along vis-à-vis learning to live with one another. …of course, I imagine a lot of it can be credited to Mantis making sure they don’t kill each other, but still.”

“Right… the marriage thing’s a bit weird though, tell him that from me.”

“I’d rather not get involved…”
Chapter 47

The inside of Miller’s house was a lot like the outside, nice and fastidiously kept but cold and almost sterile for the fact that no one had lived here since mid-March. It had a faint smell of marijuana smoke and the particular oil prescribed to keep prosthetic limbs’ joints working, plus a whiff of dog. There were a few photos on the wall, pictures of Miller and Catherine and Catherine by herself and one of Miller and Solid having a good time at FOXHOUND, and there was also a faded spot on the wall where a picture frame had obviously once hung but it was gone now.

“Do you know what’s supposed to go here?” McGolden said, gesturing to the spot on the wall.

“Umm…” Catherine rubbed her upper lip with the back of her finger, thinking about it for a few moments. “I think there was a picture of my grandmother hanging there last time I came. But he might have just moved it somewhere else…”

“Or took it with him.”

“That could be it, too. I know he’s got some of my baby pictures in his wallet already, but that photo of his mom was, I’m pretty sure, the only one ever taken of her.”

“Whew…” He glanced around again. “So, what are we looking for, exactly?”

“Come on,” Catherine said, “you’re the investigative journalist, you tell me.”

“Uh. Right. Okay, Cathy, let’s see… well, your father left voluntarily, right?”

“Seems that way.”

“Seems, right. But the way he did it was odd, so what we’re trying to find out… is… what could have happened here that might have forced him to decide to leave?”

Catherine nodded. “Let’s look for signs of a struggle,” she said, “that bullet out front is suspicious enough…”

The living room was right off the front hallway, so that was where they started their search. McGolden wasn’t turning anything up - probably to be expected, Catherine was marginally more familiar with the place and understood how it was supposed to look. But she wasn’t finding a whole lot out of place, either. At least until she spotted some odd tears in the upholstery of the couch, on the side, a ways down the arm of it. She pointed it out to McGolden.

“Might be from his dogs,” McGolden said skeptically. “You know how they can scratch up furniture.”

“You’re thinking of cats, McGolden,” Catherine said. “Besides, they’re too close together for claw marks.”

“I see… think it’s relevant?”

“I guess we can’t really tell how old they are…”

“Or what they’re even from…”

Catherine pursed her lips. “Hang on,” she said, then jumped onto the couch, lying on her back and kicking her long, slim legs up over the arm. After a little bit of wiggling, spreading her knees and
arching her back - McGolden wasn’t sure if he was supposed to look away or not - she managed to touch her socked heels to where the scratches in the upholstery were. “Okay, so that’s—…”

“Something on your mind, Cathy?” McGolden said.

Catherine blinked up at him. “Just wondering,” she said. “Something’s been bothering me.”

“What?” McGolden said, leaning towards her a little. “Anything to do with the epiphany you didn’t share with me about that bullet?”

“Yeah, kind of,” Catherine said, then dug her wallet out of her bra, flipped it open, and handed a small, worn photograph from inside it to McGolden. “Do you know this guy?”

McGolden squinted at the picture. It looked like it had been taken candidly, the subject almost in mid-laugh, half turned away from the photographer, but it gave a good view of the man’s features. Sharp cheekbones, long eyelashes, large nose… he had very pale blond hair (pretty much white with how faded the photo was) that didn’t quite reach his shoulders and piercing blue eyes. At some point somebody had added a smear of Wite-Out to his upper lip, presumably to facsimilate a moustache.

“Never seen him before,” McGolden said, looking back up at Catherine, who had put one arm behind her head and was watching him expectantly. “Why? Who’s he?”

“Daddy’s, uh, former business associate. Revolver Ocelot — he was at Shadow Moses.”

“Oh. And?”

“And Daddy always warned me to stay away from him because back in the eighties he and my dad both agreed that one of them would be the one to kill the other.”

“That’s…” McGolden blinked. “Pretty intense. Your dad was a strange guy, huh?”

Catherine snorted. “You have no idea,” she said.

“But what does Ocelot have to do with this? You don’t think he came here, do you? Maybe he was the FOXHOUND member who survived Shadow Moses…?”

“Well…” Catherine kicked her heels against the couch again. “Supposing I’m right about this position - nevermind why someone would be lying on the couch like this, ugh… anyway, what kind of thing would you wear on your shoes in order to leave tears like this?”

“Um— spurs, of course.”

Catherine nodded. “Daddy told me you can always tell when Ocelot’s coming because you’ll hear—“

Clink.

Catherine and McGolden both froze, Catherine now sitting up. For a moment neither of them dared to say anything. Then, just as they were slowly starting to exchange glances, both wondering if they’d only imagined that sound just now, the kitchen door opened.

He was a good bit older than he’d been in the photograph, his hair a lot longer and his moustache definitely a hell of a lot nicer, but it was most certainly Revolver Ocelot.

Catherine and McGolden both screamed — McGolden a lot girlier and higher-pitched, embarrassingly enough. Catherine jumped up off the couch, fumbling for her gun, pulling a .50 caliber revolver out from under her shirt and pointing it at Ocelot. Her hands shook, though. She
might have grown up on a military base with a drill instructor daddy, but she was no soldier.

Ocelot stared down her handgun and whistled. “Smith & Wesson Model 500,” he said admiringly, “very nice. You’ll shatter your wrist with that, girl.”

“Don’t underestimate me,” Catherine said, plainly nervous but not backing down - which was good, somehow in the confusion McGolden had ended up hiding behind her even though as the man here he really should be protecting the young lady.

“Of course I won’t. You’re Miller’s daughter, aren’t you? You have your daddy’s eyes.”

“Where’s my father?!”

“Where did you even come from?” McGolden blurted out. “Were you just silently waiting for us to bring you up in conversation before stepping out of the kitchen??”

“…” Ocelot’s eyes flicked up to Catherine’s face, then to McGolden’s, then back to Catherine. “We knew you were going to come looking for your father, Catherine.” Totally evaded the question…

“Huh…?” Catherine blinked, then grimaced. “…… I totally forgot. McGolden, right before I left North Carolina I told Daddy on Facebook that I was looking forward to spending the summer with him. I meant it as a hint I was searching for him… he never replied…”

“You didn’t think to mention this until now?!” McGolden said indignantly.

“Well, I forgot!”

Ocelot shrugged. “So here you are,” he said, “right on schedule.”

“Schedule? Huh?!”

“I figured you’d go to Los Angeles first — either to try to beg favor from your roommate’s uncle, since he’s the closest thing you’ll get to a detective as far as this ‘case’ is concerned, or to try and meet up with someone else from the Shadow Moses incident, that Natasha Romanenko woman. Conveniently for me, they were already in the same place, which meant you’d take the same amount of time either way to come up here.”

“…am I really that predictable?!”

“Everyone is, to me. Put the gun down, Catherine, I’m only here to talk.”

Catherine glared at him suspiciously, still aiming at his chest. Over the course of the conversation her aim had gotten increasingly steady, but she was still hesitantly maintaining trigger discipline.

Ocelot sighed. “If you want to get into a shootout, I can guarantee you it won’t end well - and I won’t be the dead one here. I’m sure your father impressed my skills on you…?”

“…” Slowly Catherine lowered her gun, but didn’t re-holster it. Then she jerked her head, a get-on-with-it gesture to Ocelot.

“Should we sit down for this…?” McGolden said.

“I’m afraid you’re going to be staying well out of the loop here, McGolden,” Ocelot said dryly, “the only reason I bothered with this was because of Miller’s insistence. I have no obligation to explain what’s actually going on—“
“You’re in touch with Daddy?!” Catherine said, half-raising her gun again. Ocelot raised his hands.

“If one of us really is going to kill the other, that time hasn’t come yet,” Ocelot said. “Your father’s alive and as intact as he ever is. He’s been making those Facebook posts from public libraries in the hopes that you wouldn’t come after him.”

“But- he’s—"

“His past caught up with him, that’s all,” Ocelot said. “You may be right, he may have felt forced to make a choice - but a choice he did make. Unfortunately for you it was a dangerous one. He didn’t want you involved, Catherine, that’s why he hounded me until I agreed to interrupt your search.”

“And what?” Catherine said, a hint of a snarl in her voice, “warn me? I can handle myself, thank you.”

“You have no idea what you’re up against, Catherine.”

“Um,” McGolden said, “what’s going on?”

Ocelot spared him a glance. “You’re in over your head even more than the little girl is,” he said dismissively. “You’ve unknowingly touched on it before, especially with your current project… but you’ve never grasped the full scope of it, and let’s say I’m not optimistic, McGolden.”

“What’s that supposed to…?!?”

“That’s all I have to say,” Ocelot said, spreading his arms, “I won’t say you have nothing to worry about, Catherine, but I will say that your father would want you to go back to WCU and finish your nursing program without worrying about him. Whether he lives or dies is his business. Simply being related to him - a potential bargaining chip - is risk enough.” Again he eyed her revolver. “So I’d hang onto that if I were you.”

“…” Catherine just kept glaring at him, her jaw set.

After a tense moment, Ocelot shrugged again, lowering his hands. “Well,” he said, “at least I can tell Miller I tried.”

“What are we going to do?” McGolden whispered to Catherine.

Catherine growled. “I’m going to find my father.”

“As expected,” Ocelot said. “Miller said you were the stubborn type… apparently I’m the only one around here who realizes that the more you tell the stubborn type not to do something, the more they’re going to do it…”

“So,” Catherine said, “either you give us a clue or you get the fuck out of my dad’s house.”

“I didn’t have a whole lot of time to spare anyway.” Ocelot said, stepping into the living room - McGolden and Catherine both shrank back — “I’m not going to give you any hints, Catherine.”

“Useless geezer,” Catherine said under her breath.

“I heard that. Anyway, I’ll just leave you with this piece of advice: Be very, very careful what leads you pursue. Trying to milk the wrong person for information could not only put you in very real danger, but also your father.”

“…”
“Anyway, I’ll be off.” He turned around and simply walked out of the house, waving a hand. He didn’t seem to care at all that Catherine still had her gun out and could have very well shot him in the back, if she dared.

But she didn’t dare. Instead she just waited for the clink of spurs to recede, and then she blinked, her posture finally relaxing. McGolden hesitantly let his body un-tense too, looking around the room again and scratching the back of his neck.

“How do you think he even got here?” he broke the silence at length. “The only car here is yours.”

“I have no idea,” Catherine said. “It doesn’t matter. Geez, that guy gave me the creeps…”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Anyway… what now?”

Catherine turned around to look at him, eyebrows raised. “You mean you’re not going to quit on me?” she said, surprised.

“No problem, Cathy. Besides,” he added, glancing up, “you’ve only told me a little bit about FOXHOUND so far. I want to hear everything, Shadow Moses especially.”

Catherine nodded, re holstering her gun. “True. Okay, where do we go from here? Ocelot mentioned public libraries…”

“For most of them, as far as I know, you need to have a library card in order to use their computers,” McGolden said, “we could ask around, see if any ‘Kazuhira Miller’s have signed up lately.”

“Good idea, but the problem is even if he was using his real name we don’t know what county he would have gone to. How many counties does Alaska alone have?”

“Nineteen. Not so bad.”

“Yeah, but he probably crossed over into Canada, and…” she frowned. “Actually, the best place to start would be with how he got there. Daddy can’t drive.”

“He can’t?”

“He’s… kind of blind? So if he was in a car then he must have gotten a ride from someone. Or else he, I dunno, biked, but judging by the way Ocelot said ‘public libraries’ plural, he’s gone over county lines at least a couple times. Too far to bike, at his age.”

“Hmmm…” McGolden flipped back through his notebook. “You said he left his dogs with a neighbor. That’s another potential lead.”
“Kind of unlikely he mentioned where he was going… but we’d be stupid not to follow up on it.”

“Alright,” McGolden said, closing his notebook and slipping it back into his pocket. “Well, let’s start looking for that neighbor. That’ll be the easiest thing. Then we can tackle transportation, somebody might have seen something.”

“Yes!” Catherine said, punching one hand. “Let’s go!”

They searched the rest of the house for clues, found nothing except that Miller’s passport was missing, and then left… to an empty driveway. And a note left on the ground, weighted down by a rock, that Catherine snatched up and silently mouthed the words to, as McGolden read over her shoulder.

*Thanks for the car. If you won’t go back to North Carolina, then you can stay in Alaska.*

*R. O.*

“Fuck!”

One (1) new voicemail. Left on Saturday, June eleventh, 3:43 PM.

“Ah… afternoon, Meryl. It’s me again. Your fa-… Uncle Roy.

“Your mother told me you aren’t picking up my calls on purpose. I suppose that’s fair. I know you must be upset, perhaps you feel lied to… your mother told me you haven’t been speaking to her lately, either. I guess it’s true, she does share part of the blame. It takes two to cheat, after all.

“But it’s been months since I told you, Meryl. And it isn’t a crime to want to speak to my own daughter occasionally, even if I did let you believe you were my niece for eighteen years. Your mother and I thought it would be best. So did my brother. He knew. He stayed with your mother for your sake. He didn’t want to disrupt your childhood. Before he died he asked that I tell you the truth when you became an adult.

“I’m… sorry.

“I don’t know if you want me to say I wish I’d never had an affair with your mother. Truthfully, Meryl, I don’t regret it. If it hadn’t been for that, you wouldn’t be here. I…

“…

“So… I hear you’ve joined the USACIDC. That’s… that’s good, Meryl. I think it’s a good place for you. Who knows, you might find yourself climbing the ranks, soon. Maybe run your own special forces unit, just like I did. Only I think you’ll manage it a lot younger than I did, haha.

“…

“…

“…

“Anyway, I miss you. Call me back.”

EVA didn’t stick around for long but she left her Codec frequency when she went. (She also left a bit of advice for Liquid and Mantis after Solid passingly complained about them arguing —
“Communication is key in any relationship, don’t just bottle up your feelings until you’re both yelling at each other. Talk it out before you get to that point.” It flew over both of their heads because they didn’t think, perhaps rightfully, that communication was much of an issue when one party was telepathic.) After EVA was gone Solidus commented that he had no idea how to feel about her and Liquid fervently told him that that was normal.

Things settled back into boring routine. Diane’s puppies grew larger and ever more attached to Liquid. Benedict in particular. Mantis kept the house clean and sometimes deigned to cook for anyone other than Liquid (including himself). Solid chain-smoked, which defeated the purpose of the house being clean. Solidus was content to be ignored and eventually managed to get in contact with Dead Cell, and talked to Vamp even more frequently than he talked to Ocelot. Ocelot actually picked up his Codec now. Solid, Otacon, and Mei Ling sometimes commiserated about how weird it was to be allied and living with a bunch of (former?) terrorists; Liquid talked with the rest of FOXHOUND and seemed relieved to be able to do so. He also re-started Pokémon Emerald, just so he could come pester Solid about translating for him every time something plot-related happened. And he noticed that Mantis’ hair had started growing back in, a fine patchy peach fuzz that was literally only noticeable because it was bright red (a surprise to both Solid and Solidus), but as soon as Liquid commented on it (“You look like a baby bird, Mantis!”) Mantis went and dug up one of Solid’s old razors and shaved himself bald again. Liquid sulked about it for a week.

May slipped into June, which edged its way into July. Solidus wanted to get and set off fireworks on Independence Day but Liquid and Mantis were both entirely uninterested in American holidays and Solid flatly said that his PTSD was triggered by the sound of explosions when he was supposed to be in a safe, controlled environment. (Which just lead to Solidus muttering something about exposure therapy and trying to convince him again, but Solid got snippy. It was his house, after all.) One of the Dead Cell guys, Fatman, described a fireworks display at the National Mall to Solidus in fetishistic detail; the RV group happened to be in Mexico on the fourth so they missed the celebrations completely.

“Why are you in Mexico of all places?” Liquid asked.

“I wanted to let my mother know I’m not, you know, dead,” Octopus said, “give me a break, boss. It’s the first time I’ve seen her in decades and I probably won’t ever see her again.”

“Well, as long as you were careful about it…”

The problem was that the war against the Patriots was one fought with intelligence, not arms, and the problem with wars like that was that the foot soldiers - however one wanted to define that - were usually left around waiting for a very, very long time. It was their own personal Cold War and, to Liquid, his own personal Hell — he could see in Solid’s eyes that it was the same for him too, but he wouldn’t admit to it. Solid didn’t like to think that he, too, only came alive on the battlefield. That was why he insisted on starving his spirit out here in Alaska. Stubbornly peaceful fasting. Asceticism. Denial of self.

But the fun thing about cold wars is that sometimes, they heat up.
“Something’s coming.”

They only got a relatively early warning because it had just so happened that Mantis had been eating at the time, so he didn’t have his mask on. Whatever it was alarmed him enough that he didn’t quite strap his mask back on when he stepped out of the ‘storage’ room; he stepped out to the living(?) room, where Solid was translating a segment of Pokémon Emerald over Liquid’s shoulder and Solidus was trying to train one of Diane’s puppies (Nastasha) to play fetch (and mostly succeeding in getting bitten), simply holding his mask to his face with his hands, straps dangling around his shoulders.

And announced that something was coming.

“What’s wrong?” Liquid said, closing Otacon’s DS.

“The…” Mantis made a rolling gesture with one hand, “hum is off. Something is disturbing the animals in the forest. Something large.”

“So it’d be less than three miles from here…”

Solid and Solidus were both equal parts confused and skeptical, but Liquid wasted no time in getting outside to the Hind, where he managed to get its radar started up after almost a full minute of it refusing to cooperate. The others followed him outside. He looked back at them.

“It’s something large alright,” he said, “looks like an aircraft. Can’t tell what kind on this system.”

“Commercial flights don’t go over this area,” Solid said.

“How far away is it?” Solidus said.

“Roughly three miles, a bit under,” Liquid said, “as I said. It’s sort of… circling our perimeter right now, and,” he looked back down at the radar screen, squinting, “whatever it is, I doubt it’s going full speed.”

“It’s searching,” Solidus said, blinking.

Liquid narrowed his eyes further, still watching the radar. “You’re right, brother. This is a reconnaissance pattern. And I’ll bet it’s searching for us.” He looked up again, jaw set, then jumped out of the helicopter. “Mantis, help me get this bird going again. We’re probably going to need it.” Mantis nodded, buckling his mask properly.

“You’re not planning on fighting whatever it is, do you?” Solid said, raising an eyebrow.

“Of course I am. Don’t worry, I’ll try to keep the Hind intact in case we need to change locations after this.”

“We probably will,” Mantis said, levitating one of the fuel containers.

“…considering how close we are to Galena Air Force Station, what are the odds that it’s an F-16?” Solidus said flatly.
“He’s taken out F-16s in that Hind before, Solidus,” Solid said.

“Oh. Seriously? Why did he even try that?”

Solid shrugged. Understanding what was going on in Liquid’s head was something he suspecting he’d never do.

Solidus was right about it being an F-16, though. About a minute later, one flew over their clearing, high and slow. And, just in case they didn’t think it was meant for them, about thirty seconds after that it buzzed low over the cabin, close enough that the sound of it set the ground to rumbling and Solid’s dogs to barging out of the house, barking madly - this time it was going very, very fast and accompanied by a second F-16.

“Now would be a good time to get away from the cabin!” Liquid yelled, jumping into the Hind and lunging for the controls at the weapons operator’s seat. Benedict barked and leaped in after him, but by the time anyone noticed Liquid had already took to the air, the wind generated by the blades buffeting the clearing.

Damned if he wasn’t right though. F-16 Fighting Falcons could very well be used to drop bombs or fire air-to-surface missiles, just in case everyone not in the Hind D somehow felt safe from its usual guns. The dogs all fled into the forest, and Solid, Solidus, and Mantis followed - Mantis having to be dragged along by Solid, since he was paying rapt attention to the skies instead of looking where he was going. Solid had also grabbed his Ruger 10/22, because that was the longest-range gun he had at home. Definitely a last resort…

Several hundred yards in the air, Liquid was just thinking that fighting two F-16s with a Hind D was child’s play compared to fighting two F-16s with a Hind D in heavy winds, below-freezing temperatures, and near-zero visibility, even if he did have a dog in the cabin now. Benedict was behaving himself, anyway.

Of course, improved visibility affected the pilots of the F-16s as well. As such, Liquid entirely lost the element of surprise outside of any disbelief the pilots might have that someone in a gunship was seriously taking two fighter jets head-on. Mere seconds after Liquid started shooting at them, they broke formation and sped off in opposite directions.

Liquid swore out loud. “As soon as my attention’s focused on one the other’s going to open fire on the cabin!”

Benedict barked.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter all that much,” Liquid said thoughtfully, banking hard to pursue the one that had headed out over the forest in the direction that Mantis, Solid, and Solidus had headed. “We couldn’t have stayed here forever anyway. I should be more worried about them targeting the woods…”

Benedict barked again, then gave a high-pitched howl.

Liquid opened fire again. “Chase two hares and catch neither,” he said. “God, I’m vulnerable up here… any second now the other one’s going to come around my six—“

Right as he said that the other F-16 approached. Liquid responded by dropping altitude so fast that he and Benedict were both in zero gravity for half a second.

Which was not, strictly speaking, a maneuver the Hind D was meant for.
Still, for a brief, glorious moment, he had the F-16 behind him shooting at the F-16 in front of him. And even after the gunfire ceased they were still close enough together for Liquid to let off a barrage of missiles with the reasonable expectation of hitting both of them. But Fighting Falcons were tough birds and it’d take more than a meager handful of hits to take one down — chaff was sent fluttering down over the forest below as they evaded most of Liquid’s firepower. And then they went off in opposite directions again.

“They’re toying with me,” Liquid said through gritted teeth. Benedict growled in agreement.

This time he chased down the one headed in the direction of the cabin. This time he pursued so closely that the F-16’s afterburner was in danger of melting the Hind’s armor. And, although it was suicidal by all accounts, Liquid hit the switch to fire another barrage of missiles. He was already too close for the F-16’s pilot to release chaff in time…

The missiles had barely left their launchers when Liquid repeated the sudden-altitude-death maneuver, banking hard again at the same time so that the Hind was almost sideways in mid-air for a moment as the missile explosions shuddered against the F-16. “There we go,” he muttered as he saw the F-16 begin to smoke, spark, and fly erratically, the pilot’s emergency circling quickly devolving into a downward spiral just above Solid’s cabin. Liquid hardly cared that the F-16 went ahead and released all of its incendiary explosives. Bad news for the cabin, but it wouldn’t have survived anyway — a moment later and the F-16 had nosedived into Solid’s shed. The pilot had attempted a last-ditch ejection but it was the same time as Liquid was returning the Hind to an upright position and his parachute got caught in the upward swoop of air.

So Liquid’s windshield was now covered in blood and miscellaneous bits of gore, that was fun. Reduced visibility to something comparable to Shadow Moses — but one down now, one to go.

Benedict started barking right before the remaining F-16 tore through the airspace immediately in front of Liquid. Liquid grit his teeth again, catching the updraft from the huge, roaring fire Solid’s cabin had been reduced to and rising through the air almost to the Hind’s service ceiling.

“Well,” Solidus said, shielding his eyes against the sun so he could squint at the aerial battle over the clearing, “he got one already. Color me impressed.”

“He is very good at what he does,” Mantis said, not bothering to disguise the affection and admiration in his voice. “Eli will have the other F-16 down in less than two minutes, just you watch.”

Solid, meanwhile, was staring at the fire visible through the trees. “…they’re burning down my house… they’re burning down my fucking house…”

“Did the dogs all get out beforehand?” Mantis asked him.

Solid looked around. “I can’t tell,” he said, “they’ve scattered. I can’t count them if I can’t see them all.”

“At least Benedict is accounted for…”

“I really do not think that that Hind is a safe place for a dog right now,” Solidus said, still watching the dogfight. “Or, for that matter, Liquid himself. If he irreparably damages the Hind, how are we supposed to get out of here? That broken-down car that Mantis is required to use?”

As if on cue, the Hind’s motor started smoking - the whole helicopter shuddered, and altitude started to drop.

“Come on,” Liquid hissed, frantically trying to stabilize it, “fly!! Damn!”
The other F-16 zoomed directly beneath him. It, too, was smoking, one wing severely damaged. If Liquid could just get that wing…

“Question, Benedict,” Liquid said, at this point not caring that he was talking to a small dog, “which do you think will give first: the F-16’s wing, or the Hind’s rotor?”

Benedict yipped.

“Good answer.”

Meanwhile on the ground—

“What the hell is he doing?” Solidus said.

Solid and Mantis both looked up again in time to see Liquid turn the Hind so hard it spiralled, flipping almost completely upside-down, and collided with the F-16 - scraping into its side, sending a shower of metal scrap down across the clearing — the Hind’s still-spinning blades mercilessly chewed into the already-damaged wing of the F-16—-

And then it was over.

The F-16 hurtled off somewhere into the woods, its fate made clear by a loud explosion a moment later. The Hind corrected itself then dropped out of the air, just slowly enough that the descent barely qualified as “controlled”, landing not-so-gracefully next to the burning wreckage of Solid’s cabin, damaging the landing gear in the process.

There was a long pause as the rotors slowly stilled.

Then Liquid opened the door and stuck his head out. His hair was messed up and he had a nosebleed but his grin said he was perfectly alright. Mantis actually cried out in relief.

“You idiot!” he said, running up to him (avoiding stepping on any of the chunks of F-16 pilot scattered around the clearing) and grabbing his arm, “what were you thinking?!”

“It was Benedict’s idea,” Liquid joked. Benedict himself hopped daintily out of the helicopter, trotting up to Solid and panting happily. Diane, who had been waiting next to Solid, nuzzled him anxiously.

“Okay, just watching that,” Solid said, “made me feel like I need to throw up. What the hell?”

“What’s the matter? I’d give that an ‘A’ rank, easily.” Liquid stepped out of the Hind, wiping his face with the arm Mantis wasn’t gripping, then turned around to survey it. “Nothing that can’t be repaired,” he said dismissively.

“If you say so…” Solid’s eyes slid to his cabin behind him. “The same can’t be said about…”

“Excuse me,” Mantis said, and abruptly the flames disappeared. “Perhaps I should have done that a while ago.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Solid said, eyeing the remains of his house. Even without the fire burning, it was still obvious that it had just been through several explosions and a large fighter jet smashing into it.

“What about the other one?” Solidus said, looking in the direction where the other F-16 had gone before crashing - a plume of smoke from the wreckage was visible over the tops of the trees. “Do you think the other pilot was able to bail? Because that could prove troublesome.”
“You and I can go check,” Liquid said, shaking Mantis off of him, “Mantis… you don’t mind getting started on repairs, do you?”

Mantis shook his head. “I will gather what materials I can,” he said.

“I’ll help,” Solid said, “I need to see if there’s anything salvageable from my house, anyway. That was everything I owned in there…”

Liquid’s smile didn’t abate. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, battered copy of Lord of the Flies. “I’ve got the only other thing of mine that matters to me.”

“How?” Solidus said. “You can’t possibly have seen that com-

“Keeping it on me at all times, or as close as I can come to it, is exactly how I’ve been able to keep it all these years.”

“…fair enough.”

Liquid and Solidus left in the direction of the smoke. Mantis started hovering about, investigating the damage done to the Hind D, and then when he started eyeing Solid’s car thoughtfully Solid told him it was okay to pull scrap from the car because it wasn’t like he used it anyway. Then he got to work finding anything still usable in what remained of his house.

He became aware of faint whimpering from around the back of the house, where his bedroom had been, and it raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

Solid picked his way over the remains of his house, following the noise, and his heart sunk when he found the source.

“Oh, Roy…” he said in despair.

The old husky whimpered again, looking up at Solid. For whatever reason - likely his age - Roy had failed to leave the cabin when the F-16s shot over, and when the bombs dropped, well… his fur was charred, patches of skin hairless and badly burned, and his lower half was pinned beneath a ceiling support beam that had fallen. Solid’s chest felt tight just looking at him, but he optimistically knelt down and shouldered the piece of wood, levering it up off of Roy carefully. Setting it aside, he looked again.

Roy kept whimpering.

Even if Solid could have gotten him to the vet in Port Alsworth immediately, this wasn’t survivable.

Jaw clenched but face otherwise blank, Solid leveled his Ruger at Roy’s head.

He hesitated.

“He’s in pain,” Mantis said from behind him. Solid turned his head slightly, glancing over his shoulder. He hadn’t heard Mantis walk up, but then again, it was just as likely he’d floated instead of walked. But Solid hadn’t heard him breathing until he’d already announced his presence…

“I know,” Solid said, “I know what I need to do.”

“Then do it.”

Solid hesitated a moment longer. Roy whimpered one last time, then closed his eyes. He was still breathing raggedly. Left alone he would be dead by the time the day was out anyway, but that could
take *hours* and he was suffering. And he was old. Had a good run. Good dog.

Solid pulled the trigger.

When Liquid and Solidus got back, close to an hour later, it was only natural that the first thing they’d ask was *What was that rifle-shot we heard earlier?* Solid didn’t answer, but Mantis jerked his head over to where Roy’s body had been draped with a singed but still mostly white bedsheet. Liquid frowned. Solidus just said “Oh.” Solid went back to sorting through the remains of his cabin, now accompanied by Frank - who didn’t seem to be turning up any other canine casualties so far.

Solidus volunteered to help Solid scavenge; in the end they were able to find some few canned foods that hadn’t exploded from the heat, still-intact containers that they filled with water, a couple changes of clothes spared vis-à-vis never being taken out of someone’s suitcase (Solid would just have to borrow Liquid’s clothes until they could hit up a Walmart, it seemed), and all of Solid’s weapons (knives, guns) were still perfectly functional if sooty and some of them a tad scuffed. Ammunition was right out, though, the only bullets that hadn’t cooked off were the ones in the Hind, the majority of which were 12.7mm or 23mm rounds for the Hind’s guns. At least Solid still had ammo for the Ruger. And Liquid had been carrying a limited amount of .45 bullets, since both he and Solid used a Mk23 SOCOM.

Liquid, meanwhile, and Mantis, worked on getting the Hind D repaired. Since it was a helicopter and all, the usefulness of the parts cannibalized from the car and the wrecked F-16 here was limited, so most of the repairs were made via a worrying amount of duct tape. Liquid warned everyone else in advance that the poor chopper was probably never going to have another smooth landing in its life. But, he did get it working again.

They didn’t have much time - Solidus and Liquid had found the F-16 pilot barely clinging to life, and although he had no idea who the Patriots were he did mumble that of course the folks back at Galena would be aware of the exact coordinates the two Falcons had been shot down at and would be sending more jets soon… and then he died on his own. F-16s could scramble from cold in 15 minutes if not on alert (which the other ones at Galena probably weren’t, who the hell could have anticipated these two being shot down?) and after that it would take less than twenty minutes for them to get from Galena Air Force Station to Twin Lakes. So the fact that nothing had arrived yet by the time Liquid and Solidus had gotten back to Solid’s cabin indicated that there had been some administrative tangle - perhaps conflicts between the Air Force and the Patriots. The point was that they were *already* out of time and bombers could be coming any minute now.

Solidus and Mantis were already in the helicopter as Liquid was running the final checks to get ready to go - this time from the pilot’s seat in the rear cockpit — Solid was at the edge of the woods, surrounded by huskies, telling himself he wouldn’t cry. He scratched Girl behind the ears.

“Take care of everyone, alright?” he said in a low voice.

Girl gave him her usual steely look, wagging her tail. He took that as a yes.

As he was climbing into the helicopter (the blades were already spinning), Benedict jumped in after him. Diane barked. Benedict turned around and barked back, then ran further into the helicopter and sat down, wagging his tail. Diane barked again, then also sat down. Her other five puppies barked, too, but didn’t leave her side. Diane just wagged her tail.

“…I guess that means she’s letting him go,” Solid said.

“We’re seriously keeping the dog?” Solidus said.
“Evidently.”

“I don’t mind.” Liquid called from the pilot’s seat.

Apparently taking that as his cue, Frank also jumped into the Hind, wagging his tail. Solid shrugged at Solidus’ skeptical expression and gave Frank a pat on the head.

“He’s a good hunting dog.” he said, “he can tear someone’s throat out for us if we need him to.”

“I… suppose…”

“We should go now,” Mantis said.

“Right,” Liquid said, and the Hind began lifting off the air. Solid slid the door shut, but not before Frank howled. Benedict howled, too.

53 different howls sounded back in the forest below, the sound following the Hind up and away from Twin Lakes.

They just barely made it into the Northwest Territories before running out of fuel.

By that point it was late, and they had no choice but to camp in the middle of nowhere; but, at least, it was easy for them to build a fire and dinner was handled nicely by tearing the labels off of some cans and sticking them in the embers until they were heated through. Liquid fed Benedict some ravioli, Frank killed and ate a wild bird of indeterminate species by the time he was done with it, and Mantis declined eating, instead working on piecing together the half-shattered ham radio that Solidus had pulled out of what was left of Solid’s cabin. After all, getting in touch with Ocelot, EVA, or the rest of FOXHOUND was their only hope, and while Solidus, Mantis, and Liquid all still had their cell phones there wasn’t reception out here and they’d have to walk quite a ways in order to find it.

Also, Liquid immediately stole a can of mandarin oranges all for himself, which he wasn’t supposed to do since their supplies were limited enough as it was, but everyone else just let it slide. After all those stunts he pulled fighting the F-16s, it was no wonder that his body was craving something high-energy, like sugar. Besides, he’d earned it.

Mantis eventually got the radio working again, although he had to use his psychic powers to make it run (since they didn’t exactly have electricity), and evidently it was quite strenuous, so as soon as Otacon got through telling them that they should be able to get to their coordinates within the next four days Mantis unceremoniously shut it down and fell asleep on Liquid’s shoulder. Liquid dutifully picked him up and laid him in the Hind, where he’d be a little more sheltered from the cutting wind, and draped his coat over him. (Should be warm. It was the same coat from Shadow Moses.) (Also, Benedict curled up next to Mantis under the coat. He seemed to understand that Liquid would be pleased with him if he did.)

Liquid returned to the fire to set next to Solid and Solidus, and after awhile the awkward-but-pensive silently staring into the flames devolved in general shooting the shit. Specifically about Shadow Moses. Much to Liquid’s vindication, Ocelot kept up his annoying you-don’t-need-to-know basis habit even with Solidus, so he didn’t have a lot of details about the incident. It was mostly Liquid describing it to him, but Solid would occasionally interject to criticize his version of events.

“Otacon has Stockholm syndrome,” he said flatly, “Wolf isn’t a good person. She shot Meryl. She’s a bitch.”

“Snake!” Liquid chided. “Don’t be rude!”
“She shot Meryl!”

“So that we could capture you, come now, Snake, it was for the greater good.”

“Like you care about the greater good.”

“But you do, don’t you, brother?”

Solidus raised a hand. “Did she do anything else to qualify her as a bitch?” he said, “because shooting someone - an enemy soldier, to be specific - during a combat engagement hardly seems like a sound action to judge her personality on.”

Solid was silent. Then he glanced at Liquid. “She wears a collar too,” he said.

“I don’t get what that has to do with anything,” Solidus said at the same time as Liquid irritably crossed his arms and said, “That has nothing to do with me, she’s been doing that on her own for ages as a fashion statement.”

“I’m just saying…”

“…I’m not sure I understand the collar, Liquid,” Solidus said, “perhaps I should have asked earlier.”

“Oh, no,” Liquid said, standing up and brushing off his pants. “This is not a conversation I’ll have with my brothers.” He shot Solid a very nasty look - which Solid cringed at, knowing full well what he was referring to, but it flew over Solidus’ head completely - then he turned around and slunk back to the Hind, yawning. “Besides, I’m a bit worn out after today. I’m going to go sleep now. Good night.”

“Good night,” Solidus said politely. Solid just grunted. Frank chuffed.

“…so,” Solidus said after a long pause, “what happened next, Snake?”

Solid pulled out a slightly crumpled back of cigarettes, shook one out, and lit it with the end of a stick pulled from the campfire. He took a long drag.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Chapter End Notes

Do Hind D’s even have radars?
“Alright,” McGolden said, flipping through his notebook, scratching his scalp. “Here’s the summary of the last, uh… what, week or so?”

“Longer?” Catherine said, rubbing her eyes tiredly. “God, I am so tired of hitchhiking.”

“Me too, but we’ve got a job to do. Okay.” He flipped a page. “So— your dad has five dogs, Lucky, a German shepherd/Labrador retriever/grayhound mutt; Hachiko, an Akita; Princess, a border collie/pit bull mix; Iron Horse, a husky with three legs and one ear; and Macaron, the cowardly pit bull. He left them all with his neighbor back during the second or third week of March, so by this point his neighbor’s kids are getting really attached to the dogs and might not want to give them back if your father ever returns…”

“Get on with it, McGolden.”

“Yeah, yeah. So anyway his neighbor said that when he left, he headed east - and she’s sure about that, because she remembered thinking when he was driving off that it would have been more appropriate if he were riding off into the sunset instead of away from it.”

“Right,” Catherine said. “Because he told her that she might have to take care of his dogs for a long time. He said he ‘didn’t know’ when he’d be back.”

“Of course, she also said that he said things like that a lot, but still…” He flipped a page. “He was walking when he left his neighbor’s house, but you said you recognized the bike we found at Lake Hood Seaplane Base.”

“It was totally his bike,” Catherine said, “I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah, but when’d he go back to his house to get it? The neighbor he left his dogs with said he went east, but his house is west of his neighbor’s.”

“I don’t know. But I bet he went back to his house because he was having second thoughts about whatever he’s doing.”

“Yeah… I guess so.” McGolden flipped to a blank page, jotted that down, then went back to the page he’d just been reading off of. “The float plane operator said he took the sunglasses-wearing man who left his bike behind to Lake Clark National Reserve, but didn’t see him again after that.”

“He can’t still be there, though,” Catherine said, rubbing her upper lip. “There aren’t any public libraries in the middle of a national reserve.”

“Yeah… so, somehow he left anyway, and… got to a library to update Facebook.”

“But which one?”

“Uh…” Flipped the page again. “Haven’t gotten that far. Plus I thought we agreed that that whole line of inquiry was just a total crapshoot?”

Catherine frowned. “It would be like him to register for a library card under a fake name,” she said.
“But I guess… either way, we need to go find what he was doing at Lake Clark, right? That’s a pretty random place to go when you’re… well… I’m still not sure what Ocelot was getting at.”

“Neither am I. Something big, though, that’s for sure.”

“Amen.” She glanced up, shielding her eyes from the sun. “Oh! a car!”

“A car!” McGolden exclaimed, stuffing his notebook back in his pocket and throwing up a thumb.

“C’mon, Cathy, stick your leg out!”

Despite it being July, they were still pretty far north and it got quite chilly at night - not to mention the wind sweeping across the tall grass here where they were camped in the shadow of the out-of-fuel Hind D. Mantis kept complaining of being cold (which everyone else blamed on his still being thin though he’d gained a few pounds at the cabin) but Liquid was pretty sure that he wasn’t cold so much as he wanted Liquid to stay close to him instead of wandering off into the tundra, exploring. Which, granted, he did want to do.

If the original estimate of four days was accurate, then the rest of FOXHOUND (plus Otacon and Mei Ling) should be arriving sometime the next day or the following night. That was fortunate - they were low on water, and already out of food, although the latter problem was easily solved by Frank, plus Solid and Liquid’s know-how when it came to trapping small game animals. (Granted, Solid was much better at this northern wildlife thing, Liquid’s skills had been acquired and honed in central Africa.) They were able to preserve the Ruger 10/22 rounds. They still weren’t sure anyone from Galena wasn’t coming after them still.

When the few hours of night fell they’d extinguish their fire and hide in the helicopter. It was already agreed that they shouldn’t, at any point, all be asleep at once, but after the first night Mantis had taken up the mantle of night watchman and didn’t sleep at all — although he did lie down, excusing himself by saying, again, he was cold and needed Liquid’s body heat. Liquid petulantly muttered that there was nothing wrong with cuddling his husband and letting him sleep on him, even if it was in front of other people.

Jesus, sometimes Mantis wondered why the hell he’d ever done this when he was twenty. What was he thinking? How embarrassing…!

But the point was that Solid and Solidus were both fast asleep, lying on and under dirty clothing on opposite sides of the helicopter cabin while Liquid and Mantis were both by the rear cockpit. Frank was curled up in the middle with Benedict snuggled up under his snout.

Liquid was still awake.

He was lying behind Mantis, arms around his waist, pressed close to him with his chest against his back — being still awake, although not quite fully, he kept nuzzling and occasionally kissing the nape of Mantis’ neck.

Eli, Mantis thought at him, rolling his eyes, you’re supposed to be sleeping now.

“Mm.” I’m not tired, he lied. I’m touch-starved, Mantis, I want you.

You are fine, Eli.

I need you. I need your touch.

You want attention.
“Mhm.” He pressed another kiss to Mantis’ neck, now running his hands softly up Mantis’ body. *I want affection, Mantis,* he thought, *it’s been too long. I’m starving here.*

*You’re fine, Eli,* Mantis thought with a sigh, *and it’s been less than a week.*

*Too long.*

*Your brothers are sleeping only feet away.*

*We won’t wake them,* Liquid thought, tilting his head up to nip at Mantis’ ear. *We won’t even wake the dogs.*

*Eli…* 

*Really. I can be perfectly silent, when I want to be.*

Mantis snorted. In most situations that was absolutely true, but when it came to Liquid and sex, all bets were off.

But… as far as an insatiable rake like Liquid was concerned, close to a week without sex was a long time. And Solid and Solidus were asleep. And Liquid and Mantis were covered by a makeshift blanket (Liquid’s coat; they were using Mantis’ folded up one as a pillow) so what they did wouldn’t be seen anyway.

And Liquid was pressing his body so insistently, so imploringly against Mantis’, sort of rubbing himself against him *just a little* bit - his hands meandering up and down Mantis’ front were almost reverent in their gentleness, and he kept sleepily kissing him — his thoughts were filthy and Mantis could already feel a slight stiffness poking his lower back.

He sighed. *Very well, Eli,* he thought, shifting back against him - Liquid’s breath caught - *I’ll give you permission to grind against me until you get off. But that is all. And you had better not make a single sound, or else.*

*Yes, Mantis,* Liquid thought, the meekness of his internal ‘voice’ a complete contrast to the way his excitement had just triumphantly shot through the roof. The first few rolls of his hips against Mantis’ backside were slow and almost experimental, but he quickly found a rhythm he liked and buried his face in Mantis’ shoulders, humping him for all he was worth, one leg hooked over his and arms tight around him.

Mantis rolled his eyes again. Liquid was just *easy* sometimes.

Despite Mantis’ order to stay quiet, and his insistence that he would, Liquid couldn’t help but make stifled, muted little whimpers as he started approaching his climax. But they were so soft that even the dogs weren’t roused at them, so Mantis just pretended he didn’t hear them. Honestly, in a sense he really didn’t - with nothing better to focus on, at least right now, he was idly listening to Liquid’s thoughts, hot and bright and racing, filled with love and desire and passion and all those cliché, sappy sorts of things for Mantis. Sappy or not, Mantis could… appreciate it. It felt good to read such affection directed towards him, and only him…

*mantis mantis mantis mantis mantis mantis*

*Are you almost done back there? You are so enthusiastic you’re starting to chafe me a little.*

*yes yes yes mantis yes i’m so close it feels good mantis i love you mantis*
“Mmm.”

He climaxed with a little whine that one of Frank’s ears perked up at, although other than that nobody so much as stirred. After Liquid was finished Mantis simply rolled over and rested his chin on the top of his head, draping one arm over his side. Liquid, sleepy and vulnerable, kittenishly out of it as always after an orgasm, leaned his head against Mantis’ collarbones and grumbled at the way the inside of his pants were wet and sticky and rapidly cooling now.

“Shh.” Mantis traced his fingers across his jaw, stroking under his ear. *You brought that on yourself.*

*I… should have unzipped…*

*It won’t bother you anymore if you just go to sleep. You can clean up in the morning.*

“Mnngh…”

*Eli, if you get up now then you really are going to wake your brothers…*

*Fine, fine… good night, Mantis... and thank you… I love you…*

Mantis nuzzled him, shifting a little closer again. *Good boy, Eli. It’s always my pleasure. Good night.*

Otacon had, in an attempt to be as subtle as possible, tried to find out from Wolf what her ideal man was like. (He was only successful because Mei Ling got involved in the conversation, although judging by the knowing smiles she kept throwing Otacon, she knew exactly why he was asking. Whether or not Wolf knew, she didn’t indicate.) At first Wolf had described him rather conceptually - “A highly skilled soldier, capable of uniting troops from around around the world under his leadership… willing to go to any lengths to accomplish his goals, but by the same token he also listens to the advice of others…” - and then it started to get sort of specific - “Good with animals, especially dogs,” which was expected, and “Not very good social skills, but I don’t mind, I think that is cute,” which was… not. Otacon cut her off when she started describing what she found attractive in a man, appearance-wise: “A manly face, sort of broad, high cheekbones - blue eyes - strong arms and shoulders, scars, long hair… preferably with a ponytail—“

“Aren’t you just describing Liquid at this point?” he asked.

“You cut her off before she could say ‘eyepatch’ or ‘beard’,” Raven said from the driver’s seat, not even glancing over his shoulder, “she is describing the boss’ father.”

“…oh.”

“It is not as though I really had a thing for him, per se,” Wolf said, “I just think that if I were looking for a *permanent* mate, then his traits are the sort of thing I should seek out. I would not want Saladin *specifically*, but someone very much *like* him I would happy with, I think.”

“Sort of like how girls tend to look for husbands who are a lot like their fathers,” Mei Ling said, “or how boys tend to look for wives who are a lot like their mothers. Children usually take more after the parent whose gender they match, so if their parents’ relationship was a good one then of course they’re going to try and emulate it by finding someone like their other parent!”

“Exactly,” Wolf said, “except without the parents part.”

“…right…” Otacon said.
“Ask her what she finds attractive in women now, doc,” Octopus said, lazily turning a page of his comic book he bought at a gas station somewhere in Ohio.

Wolf didn’t even wait for him to ask. “Fair skin, dark hair, fantastic breasts, A++ combat and intel rankings, S++ ranking for sniping specifically, has parasites, photosynthesizes—“


Bêdeng started barking. Wolf smiled at him. “I have not even started describing her personality.”

“Photosynthesizes…?” Mei Ling said, blinking.

Bêdeng kept barking. Raven adjusted the sun-visor, then said, “I see campfire smoke in the distance. We must be close.”

“Finally,” Octopus said, still not looking up from his comic book.

Driving closer confirmed their suspicions - the campfire in question was right next to a dented Hind D with a lot of duct tape on it, and Solid, who had been sitting by the fire, jumped up and levelled a Ruger 10/22 at the approaching RV until it got close enough for him to see that it was Raven driving. He lowered his gun, still watching warily, and Liquid stuck his head out of the helicopter. A dark brown husky, still small and fluffy, jumped out, running around and barking, followed by an adult all-white husky who started barking as well. Which meant Bêdeng kept barking, louder now. As soon as Raven stopped the RV and Otacon opened the door, she shot out to go bark at the other dogs directly and engage in the requisite sniffing of butts. Hopefully they’d get all get along…

“That’s adorable,” Wolf said, stepping out, about two seconds before Liquid ran up to her and embraced her so enthusiastically her feet left the ground. In return she left a smear of green lipstick on his cheek. Otacon suddenly remembered Liquid implying months and months ago that he and Mantis had had a threesome with someone and wondered if it had been with Wolf… except, Wolf had told Otacon that Liquid was gay, and everyone knew Mantis was technically asexual whether they wanted to hear about it or not. So their ‘third’ being a woman didn’t seem, strictly speaking, likely…

“Finally,” Solidus said, emerging from behind the helicopter with a jug of water, which he set down next to the campfire. “We can return to civilization. You have no idea how badly we need showers and a laundromat.”

“You have no idea how badly we need to get away from Solidus’ whining,” Mantis snarked from where he was sitting in the doorway of the Hind.

“That’s Solidus?” Mei Ling said, poking her head out of the RV. “That’s President Sears?”

“Well, at this point no one really calls me-“ he actually turned to look at Mei Ling, then abruptly got tongue-tied. “Uh.”

“?”

He blinked, and Mantis started cackling, which caused him to go pink and turn around deliberately. “I’ll gather our things,” he said, and climbed into the helicopter, brushing past Mantis - who stood, anyway.

“I think he thinks you’re cute,” Wolf said to Mei Ling, who went a little red herself.

“All I did was say hi…”
Other introductions were sort of exchanged; this was Solid’s first time meeting Mei Ling in person properly, he’d seen her on the U.S.S. Discovery but at the time he hadn’t known who she was or even particularly noticed her. He and Otacon greeted each other warmly - Liquid raised an eyebrow — Solidus managed to regain his composure in time to exchange pleasantries (and explanations) with Mei Ling, Otacon, Wolf, Raven, and Octopus.

“Sorry about shooting off half your ear,” Solid told Wolf after a gust of wind had blown her hair out of the way to reveal, for a brief moment, only the lower part of a right ear.

“Sorry about shooting your girlfriend,” Wolf replied snidely.

“…uhm, Meryl wasn’t my—“

Also, the dogs got along. And Liquid gave Otacon back his DS and copy of Pokémon Emerald in exchange for borrowing his Gameboy and copy of Pokémon Ruby (which was in English this time).

Solidus asked if they’d been in touch with Ocelot recently and Raven explained that Ocelot had ‘called in another favor’ with a hapless car dealer in Québec, since it was already obvious that not everyone was going to fit in the RV - nor was it generally considered a good idea for them all to travel together, which was agreed upon by all. Safety in numbers was one thing, even with people used to operating solo, but with two groups, even if something happened to one then the others would still persist.

But it was a long way from this isolated spot in the Northwest Territories where Liquid had to make an emergency landing to Brossard, Montérégie. Space was still an issue. That was where the beat-up pickup truck (the same one driven [somehow] by Miller back in Cambridge) being towed behind the RV came in. To save fuel, it wasn’t going to be driven, but it could be ridden in.

After a small amount of debate and a minor tantrum brewing from Mantis, it was decided that the three Snakes would ride in the pickup truck, as would Frank. Mantis and Benedict could stay in the RV. Solid and Solidus both elected to sit in the cabin, but Liquid jumped at the opportunity to ride in the truckbed with Frank. It sounded like fun to him.

On the road again.

Lake Clark National Reserve, upper Twin Lakes.

“Can you think of any reason why someone would come out here specifically?” McGolden asked the float plane operator.

“You mean besides hiking or hunting?” the float plane operator said, confused.

“Yeah. The guy we’re looking for is mostly blind and has two prosthetic limbs - I really don’t think he’d come out here for that sort of thing.”

“Well, maybe he wanted to visit Proenneke’s cabin,” the float plane operator said. “It’s not too far from here, just an easy walk along the beach.” He frowned. “Hang on… two prosthetic limbs… if he’s mostly blind, does he wear sunglasses?”

“Yeah. Gold mirror aviators.”

“Oh, my colleague Hank flew a guy like that up here back in March—“

“We already talked to him about it,” Catherine said, looking out over the lake with her hands on her
“He tell you that the guy never returned for the flight back to Anchorage?”

“Yeah.”

The float plane operator’s frown deepened. “Listen,” he said, “I’m not supposed to tell you this, but…”

McGolden whipped out his notebook, pretty much just on instinct. “Go on,” he said.

“About five years ago - it was right after New Year’s, turn of the millennium if I remember correctly - there was another guy who flew up here and never showed up for the return flight.”

Catherine turned around. “Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, I didn’t get his name, he wouldn’t really talk to me… but from what I hear, a man matching his description shows up in Port Alsworth sometimes. I think he, well…” he glanced around again, “I think he lives somewhere out here, in the National Reserve. I mean, that’s pretty illegal, but no one cares all that much. He’s harmless. Hunts responsibly.”

“So maybe we should head to Port Alsworth,” McGolden said thoughtfully, tapping his notebook with his pen.

“Eh, for that it’d be easier to go back to Anchorage and catch a flight to Iliamna.”

“What’s the dude squatting here look like?” Catherine said. “I’m pretty sure Daddy didn’t come here to live here, since he’s been posting on Facebook and there’s not even cell reception here, but maybe… the other guy…”

The float plane operator screwed up his eyes in thought. “Okay,” he said, “keep in mind the only time I saw him was five years ago. But I think I remember how I… okay, he was about six feet tall, pretty lean, dark hair.”

“That could apply to a lot of people,” McGolden said, then gestured to himself. “Hell, it could apply to me.”

“I’d call you scrawny, not lean,” the float plane operator said, “I mean, this guy was definitely muscular. He just wasn’t huge. More distance runner than bodybuilder, you know?”

“This isn’t very helpful,” Catherine said, “anything else? Anything at all?”

“Uh… well… I don’t know if it was the look in his eyes, or the way he stood, or what, but I’m pretty sure he used to be a soldier. Me, I was in the Air Force during ‘Nam… I know what soldiers are like,” the float plane operator said, “although, I’d say this guy was more Army. Not sure though.”

“That narrows it down a little…”

“Oh, and he had - and I don’t say this lightly - a really nice butt.” The float plane operator made a ‘scoop’ gesture with his hands. “I’m not gay, but god damn. You could have bounced a nickel off that thing.”

Catherine gasped, then grabbed McGolden’s sleeve. “Come on,” she said, “we’ve gotta go to Port Alsworth.”

“Huh?? Did that comment actually make sense to you?”
“Make sense! McGolden, I’m pretty sure he’s talking about Solid Snake!”

Chapter End Notes

Solid’s butt is a plot point now because it’s what Kojima would have wanted.
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

(Original author's note:) Welcome to chapter fifty. This fic is officially way too long. Soon I will demolish the only two fics with higher word counts in the Metal Gear tag. I just started writing chapter seventy yesterday. EAT MY DUST

(Updated author's note:) *points at previous A/N, laughs, resumes work on chapter 91*

Brossard, Montérégie, Québec. Off of Boul Matte.
Car dealership lot owned by beleaguered man whose life Ocelot once saved.

“Ocelot,” Liquid said over Codec, “this is a minivan.”

“Yes,” said Ocelot.

“I’m not certain you’ve heard me correctly. This is a minivan.”

“Yes, it is, boss. I already know what Gilles was planning on giving you.”

“A minivan?? Are we headed to fucking neighborhood football practice, Ocelot???”

“It’s inconspicuous, it’ll fit up to seven people, if you fold down the seats then several adults can sleep in it,” Ocelot said with a sigh, “and it gets good gas mileage.”

Liquid growled and hung up, then turned around with his hands on his hips and glared at the minivan. “I refuse,” he said.

“You can just ride in the RV, boss,” Octopus said. “We’re splitting up anyway. We don’t have to do it along the same lines as we did after you-know-what.”

“So you’re taking the minivan?” the car dealer, Gilles, said tiredly.

“Yes,” Wolf said.

“Allright… that works… at least it’s not something out of my RV inventory this time…”

So FOXHOUND and their associated kidnapping-victims-turned-allies split into two groups again. After Liquid’s fit about the minivan he, of course, chose the RV like Octopus suggested, and that naturally meant that Mantis did too… as did Benedict. Raven and Octopus decided to stay in their current arrangement. Solidus also went with the RV. Solid, Otacon, and Mei Ling (and Frank) chose the minivan, and just in case they needed a member of FOXHOUND there for whatever reason, Wolf went with them, accompanied by Bêdeng.

Gilles was glad to see them leave the lot.

Ocelot’s list of safe houses was passed on to Wolf, although she had to call Ocelot and see which of those were still safe. She ended up crossing off half the list, but was able to add a few more addresses, some of them in the U.S. this time instead of just Canada. Still, Solid, who was driving,
decided to go with one in Alberta, so they headed off in that direction. The RV group, meanwhile, headed south, with no particular destination in mind.

“Six feet tall, lean, dark hair, nice ass?” said the Port Alsworth liquor store owner, “lives out near Twin Lakes?”

“Yeah,” McGolden said.

“Probably smoked, too,” Catherine said.

“Wouldn’t happen to go by ‘Snake’, would he?” the liquor store owner said.

“Yeah!” Catherine said, slamming her hands on the counter. “Snake! That’s him! That’s gotta be him.”

“You know him?” McGolden said.

The liquor store owner snorted. “Know him?” he said, “that paranoid shut-in owes me several thousand dollars. Haven’t seen him in a while, though. Heard he quit drinking so he could compete in the Iditarod.”

“So he’s into dogsledding,” McGolden said, writing that down in his notebook.

“Hell yes he’s into dogsledding. He gets from his cabin to here and back in a dogsled - I guess because huskies always know where to go even if the person in the sled is drunk as a skunk. Which Snake usually was.”

“He wasn’t an alcoholic when I knew him,” Catherine muttered, “he must have really seen some shit during the incident.”

“I couldn’t tell you. We didn’t often talk, and when we did we usually just discussed whiskey and women.”

“Was he single?” McGolden said, “had a girlfriend in town, maybe? Someone we could talk to?”

“Nope. Totally alone, that guy.”

“That’s pretty sad,” Catherine murmured. “But… if Daddy was visiting his cabin…”

“As far as any of us know, Snake hasn’t had a visitor since he moved out here,” the liquor store owner said.

“You’re sure about that?” McGolden said, “maybe Cathy’s dad came here before he went to Snake’s cabin, but didn’t mention where he was going.”

“I dunno… I haven’t seen anyone that looks like he could be your dad, lady…”

“We don’t look a lot alike,” Catherine said, “my parents are different races.”

“That’ll do it. But look, if you’re sure your dad was visiting Snake - I wouldn’t know. Haven’t had any new people show their face in my shop all year… wait,” he said, blinking, “no, hang on. There were some guys I hadn’t seen before, dropped by to buy cigarettes. But…” he rubbed his head. “I really can’t think of what they looked like, or what they said, or even when they came. How odd. Usually I remember that kind of thing.”
“Huh,” McGolden said, writing that down.

The liquor store owner shook his head. “If anyone’s going to be looking for Snake,” he said, “they would have gone to see Dr. Kassaiuli, the veterinarian here. Pretty sure he’s the only person in town who’s ever been to Snake’s cabin.”

Catherine and McGolden got directions to Dr. Kassaiuli’s office, thanked the liquor store owner, and left. Dr. Kassaiuli was, like the liquor store owner, surprised that they were asking about Snake of all people, and, also like the liquor store owner, didn’t recognize Miller’s description.

“If he was friends with Snake,” Dr. Kassaiuli said, “then maybe Snake gave him directions to his cabin directly. He wouldn’t need to come ask me.”

“Has anyone else ever came and asked you for directions to Snake’s cabin?” McGolden said.

“No,” said Dr. Kassaiuli, “but there’ve been some weird things flying in his direction a couple times this year.”

McGolden looked up from his notebook. “Really?”

“What kind of things?” Catherine said.

Dr. Kassaiuli scratched his beard in thought. “Some sort of military helicopter back in… either the end of February of the beginning of March, I don’t quite remember the exact date. And two F-16s were circling this whole area just last week.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Catherine said, her hands clenching.

“Dr. Kassaiuli,” McGolden said, “how come you know where Snake’s cabin is, anyway?”

“Oh,” Dr. Kassaiuli said, “a couple years ago one of his dogs got too sick for him to bring ‘im into town for me to treat ‘im. So I headed out to his cabin. Dog ended up pulling through just fine.”

“I see. Well, if you could tell us how to get there…”

…

They were able to get a ride partway back to Twin Lakes, but for the most part it was a lot of hiking. Since it was July, the weather wasn’t much of an issue, so apart from some kvetching about altitude they located the cabin they were looking for without much trouble. Although, the trouble they did encounter was pretty damn troublesome.

That is, the fact that it wasn’t so much a cabin as it was the remains of a cabin.

“What the hell happened here?!?” Catherine shouted, running up to it. The Air Force had retrieved the remains of both F-16s and pilots, but they couldn’t remove all the scraps of metal left over from the crash, nor every single piece of the pilot that had been shredded alive by the Hind D’s blades. The grass had grown better in certain patches, places where blood and gore had soaked into the soil; McGolden looked down at his feet and repressed a shudder at a piece of human bone that some animal had gnawed at.

An animal like, perhaps, one of the feral huskies that had been watching them closely on their whole hike up here.

“Be careful, Cathy!” McGolden called as Catherine started picking through the charred remnants of
Solid’s cabin. She waved him off, so he walked over, too.

There was no way there were gonna be able to find any clues as to Miller’s whereabouts from this mess. Especially when they weren’t even 100% sure that Miller had even been here in the first place — sure, given what they knew it seemed likely, but they didn’t exactly have definitive proof.

One thing was for certain, though: Something had most certainly happened out here.

“What would Daddy be doing out here, anyway?” Catherine said to herself, covering her mouth and nose and staring down at the partially-decomposed body of a dog. “Maybe he was here to get something…?”

“What are you mumbling about, Cathy?” McGolden said from the remains of the shed.

“Well, it’s just that… I mean, Snake’s dead,” she said, “so even if Daddy came out to see his cabin, he wouldn’t—“

“Snake might not be dead,” McGolden said, “remember that 4chan thread I mentioned?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

“The Shadow Moses leaker said that right before the island got nuked, they saw Snake’s GPS-transmitting nanomachines move away from the island.”

Catherine blinked. “Okay, but,” she said, “we already know that at least one member of FOXHOUND survived that. Who’s to say that Ocelot didn’t just take Snake’s body with him?”

“Why would he do that?” McGolden said, then spread his arms. “Besides, this is to say. All this is from last week, Cathy. Whether or not your father came here, he wasn’t still here last week. And this wasn’t just bombing the place out of existence just in case — look, there was clearly a crash.”

“So that means that someone was here,” Catherine said, “and someone fought back.”

“Right! So what if… what if that speculation that Solid Snake really was alive is true, and he came back to his cabin?” He broke a piece of charred wood off of what once was a support beam. “It’s brilliant, frankly,” he said, “It’s so obvious that no one would ever think to come looking for him here… at least not for several months!”

“I dunno, McGolden,” Catherine said, looking around again, “Dr. Kassaiuli said that it was a pair of F-16s that came here last week. I don’t think even Solid Snake could take out an F-16 on foot.”

“Well, what about that military helicopter he also mentioned? He did say he saw it right around the Shadow Moses incident - that was the very end of February. What if it was a gunship?”

“Shooting down at least one F-16 with a gunship? C’mon.”

“This is Solid Snake we’re talking about. He’s supposed to be really good.”

“He was a Green Beret before he was in FOXHOUND - he’s never been in the Air Force or anything. If I remember correctly, he didn’t know how to pilot a helicopter when I knew him.”

“That was about a decade ago,” McGolden pointed out, “maybe he’s learned.”

“He’s been in retirement all this time… when would he learn how to fly a helicopter?” She shook her head. “Besides, we don’t know that that helicopter was even related to—“
McGolden pointed at the dead grass in front of the shed and cleared his throat.

“…alright,” Catherine said, “yeah, that does kind of look like something big and shaped like a helicopter was parked there for a couple months. But… who flew it? and what happened to it?”

“I dunno what happened to it,” McGolden said, “except that all of the bits of wreckage seem to have come from a jet. But as for who flew it…” He pulled out his notebook and flipped through it, to earlier pages than when he’d gone on the Miller case. “Snake made it off of Shadow Moses. We know that much.”

“Right.”

“And since his cabin was attacked, that means that someone was probably living here. Might be Snake.”

“Or might not be.”

“Hard to say at this point. But from the looks of things there was a helicopter parked here, and right around the time of the Shadow Moses incident a military helicopter was seen flying over Port Alsworth… in this direction.”

“So that would probably be the helicopter that killed all this grass, yeah.”

“So,” McGolden said, looking up from his notebook, “knowing what we know, it’d be logical to assume that that helicopter came from Shadow Moses, right? And it had Snake, alive or dead, in it, right?”

“I guess so,” Catherine said dubiously, “do you think Ocelot flew it?”

“Actually, I think there’s a better option here,” McGolden said, flipping a page in his notebook, his eyes rapidly scanning it, “the insurrection’s leader, Liquid Snake. He was in the British Special Air Service.”

“So he’d know how to fly a helicopter, no doubt… but… he’s supposed to have been killed, too. Daddy warned me that Ocelot might have found a way to get off the island before it was nuked, but he also said it’d be in-character of him to just leave everyone else for dead.”

“Ah, but,” McGolden said, grinning suddenly and tapping a line he’d written, “here’s where that 4chan thread comes in again. According to the leaker, one of the things Liquid Snake did during the Shadow Moses rebellion was… wait for… take out two F-16s with a Mil Mi-24 helicopter.”

“A Mil Mi-24?” Catherine said, shocked, “a Hind D? Two F-16s??” She looked over at where one of the F-16s had obliterated Solid’s shed. “No fucking way. Really?”

“So just based off of circumstantial evidence,” McGolden said, “I’d say Liquid Snake is still alive, and he was probably the one who flew the helicopter - the Hind - to Snake’s cabin. And Snake was in that helicopter…”

“So the remains of FOXHOUND took him hostage?!” Catherine exclaimed, “…but wait - what if that was why Daddy came here? To rescue him?!”

“Maybe…” McGolden said, scratching his scalp. “But what I don’t get is where anything Ocelot said about him comes into this. Him trying to warn you off the case at your father’s request, your father’s past catching up with him, a dangerous choice… saying I’ve already ‘touched on’ whatever’s going on with my ‘current project’, which I guess referred to trying to get ahold of the
manuscript for Ms. Romanenko’s tell-all book…”

“Ocelot’s a liar,” Catherine said firmly. “The only thing I’m willing to believe him on is that Daddy’s still alive.”

“Fair enough. But…”

“…yeah, it bothers me, too…”

Neither of them said anything for a few moments.

“What if Ocelot was telling the truth?” McGolden said, “what if he and your dad are really… on the same side?”

“That’s… well…” Catherine frowned. “I guess we can’t really rule it out, but…”

“And as long as we’re entertaining that possibility, don’t we have to ask… what if Snake’s on their side, too? What if Snake re-joined FOXHOUND?”

Catherine shook her head. “My dad’s done some pretty shady things in the past,” she said, “but I can’t see Solid Snake of all people joining a bunch of terrorists. No way.”

“The kind of guy that always tries to do the right thing, huh?”

“Yeah. At least, he was back when I was a kid… maybe he’s changed…?”

“Maybe he hasn’t,” McGolden said, “I guess it depends on what FOXHOUND’s real goal was. Even the Shadow Moses leaker didn’t know.”

“…maybe they’re fighting something. Something… big. Something dangerous.”

“Like Ocelot said?”

Catherine stared at the ground. Then she shook her head again. “I’d die before I ever trust Ocelot,” she spat, “and I don’t care about what happened to FOXHOUND or whether or not Snake is with them, or even still alive. But there is definitely something huge going on behind the scenes here. Something to do with the Shadow Moses incident. And my father got dragged into it and now I’m sure he’s in danger.”

“So we’ve just got to blow this whole conspiracy open like an egg in a microwave,” McGolden said like it was the simplest thing in the world. “Alright, Cathy, come on. Maybe we can still find some clues yet in what’s left of Snake’s cabin.”

That was too optimistic.

As far as they’d be able to reconstruct events so far, they’d hit a dead end here. Near as they could figure the Hind had still been intact after the F-16s came through, and whoever had been living in Solid’s cabin - Liquid, Solid himself, they didn’t know - had flown off in it to parts unknown. They had no way to track something through the skies. Fugitives don’t file flight plans with the local FAA branch, after all.

They’d searched the surrounding woods and not only came to the conclusion that the feral huskies (of which they’d found about 45, so far) weren’t actually feral, just recently abandoned and probably owned by Solid, but they also found about a half-hour’s walk away from the cabin the crash site for the other F-16. Again, no actual plane or pilot’s body, but it was clear what had happened.
“Two F-16s, taken out with a Hind D,” McGolden said, nodding, “Liquid Snake is definitely still alive.”

“We don’t know that,” Catherine chided, but she didn’t have a better theory. McGolden had finally explained the whole 4chan thread to her and she actually got a little nervous, hearing it… her ‘payment’ for him helping her find Miller was information about Shadow Moses and FOXHOUND, but from the sound of it most of what she could tell him was just confirming what he already knew from the anonymous leaker. The 4chan thread had contained just about everything Miller had told her and a bunch of stuff he hadn’t.

She decided to keep that to herself. To be honest, with the way it looked like this investigation was headed, McGolden was going to find a way to confirm the 4chan posts anyway.

Still, though, Twin Lakes was a dead end and what was worse, it was their only lead. McGolden wore how disheartened he was on his sleeve a lot better than Catherine did, but either way they made it back to Port Alsworth, where they crashed at hotel and the next morning (if sunrise at 4:30 AM could be properly called “morning”, considering the sun didn’t set until after eleven) they caught a flight down to Igiugig where there was a tribal library that Catherine borrowed a computer at. Wasn’t exactly the world’s best internet connection, but she was able to get on Facebook and scoffed when she saw another post from Miller where he talked about Hachiko getting his head stuck in the garbage can. How shrewd of him to have never friended any of his neighbors…

“Still keeping up the charade, huh,” McGolden said, looking at the screen over her shoulder.

“Dammit,” Catherine said, putting her hand to her face. “We’re never going to find him at this rate.”

“Well… he doesn’t want to be found. And we’re seriously behind as far as information goes.”

“I know! but… what are we supposed to do?”

“I’m not sure. Normally when I get stuck on a case like this, I just do something else while I wait for more leads to come in. I mean,” he added quickly, “I still keep an ear out, obviously, but there’s a reason why I usually have at least two projects on the back-burner at all times.”

Catherine turned around. “Is that seriously all we can do right now?” she said, “sit around and wait?”

“Maybe you should go back to North Carolina.”

Catherine scoffed.

“I’m serious. Get started on your next semester, just… keep an ear out. I’ll do the same. Your dad used to be a drill instructor for a special forces unit - I’m sure he can handle himself, or at least stay alive long enough for a little more information about what’s going on to leak.”

Catherine glanced back at the screen, frowning. “I…”

McGolden put his hands on her shoulders. “Look, Cathy,” he said, “I know how important your dad is to. And this isn’t abandoning him, or abandoning the search… this is just using time wisely. Running around with no leads isn’t going to do anything but waste resources and put us in danger, like Ocelot said.”

“So I’m just supposed to go back to WCU like everything’s normal?!”

“Well… yeah! Because sooner or later, more information is going to leak. And that’s when we’ll swoop in and follow our new leads!”
She frowned, glanced away.

“Cathy, I promise - if I hear anything, anything at all that even might be related to your father’s disappearance… I’ll come get you. We’re gonna find him, alright? And we’re gonna find him together. I promise! And I never break my promises, especially to ladies!”

“O…Okay,” Catherine said at length, “I guess you’re right. Yeah. I’ll go back to WCU and I’ll wait for- for more leads. But I’m not giving up on this.”

“Nope. Not giving up.”

“…thanks, McGolden.”

McGolden smiled. “Hey, it’s no trouble. If I’d become an investigative journalist and never used my skills to make anyone’s life better… there wouldn’t have been a point, would there?”
Ocelot met up with the RV group somewhere in Texas; he said he needed to speak to Solidus and Liquid. They met him outside and he placed a map of southern Virginia. A certain spot on the map was circled.

“So,” he said, clapping his hands together, “I’m sure you both recall that the Patriots’ primary modus operandi nowadays is a globe-spanning computer network.”

“Yes,” Solidus said.

“You vaguely mentioned it once,” Liquid said.

“To make a rather long story short, the network is subdivided into four major subnetworks which all operate under a central authority. That really isn’t important right now - what is important is that one of the subnetworks, the one mainly focused on the semi-automatic collection and analysis of SIGINT, is in the process of being retooled.”

Solidus raised an eyebrow. “To do what, exactly?”

“To censor information that analysis returns as unnecessary or harmful to the Patriots’ agenda,” Ocelot said, then tapped the circle on the map. “With the exception of the system authority, the central servers for each subnetwork are in a specific location - different bases around the world run by various governments they’ve co-opted. This one is run by the CIA.”

“…how wonderful that I didn’t know about this,” Solidus said.

Liquid snorted. “What were your approval ratings, again?”

“Boss, focus,” Ocelot said.

“Mmph.”

“As I just said, this one is currently being retooled. The process could take quite some time, but in the interim, the processing power behind this subnetwork has been shifted to another location. As such, security on this location has been reduced.”

“I get where you’re going with this, Ocelot,” Solidus said, “but if there isn’t anything there…”

“Hang on, are they planning on returning the… central… processing server to this base when the network is finished being retooled?” Liquid said, gesticulating vaguely.

“Precisely,” Ocelot said.

“Ah, I see,” Solidus said, “but… while we could take advantage of the reduced security, what would that accomplish? Would that not simply mean that the processing power would stay in its current location?”

“The current location was only ever meant to be temporary, sir, it couldn’t support the network in the long run,” Ocelot said. “I bring this all up because I’ve intercepted certain plans…” he pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and laid it on top of the map. Both Liquid and Solidus leaned over to look
at it.

It wasn’t much, barely qualified as a concept sketch. Whatever it vaguely resembled a horseshoe crab, except not as cute.

“What exactly is this?” Liquid said skeptically, looking up.

“Something purely conceptual for the time being,” Ocelot said, “someone somewhere fielded the idea of re-locating the network hubs to submersible mobile fortresses like this one.”

“I suppose, strictly speaking,” Solidus said, also looking up, “a submersible mobile base would be more secure than a traditional one simply for being harder to narrow down a location for.”

“That’s the idea, sir,” Ocelot said, “but currently, this project is considered impractical and, frankly, too expensive, especially considering how much in terms of resources they have to pour into modifying their subnetwork. The Patriots are, thus far, planning on sticking to the traditional land bases.”

“Unless,” Liquid said, his eyes lighting up, “an attack on the currently vulnerable base forces them to change their mind. Suddenly they have to develop this submarine thing, and move the network hub there…”

 “…whereupon we might be able to hijack it entirely,” Solidus said, “it being technically a vehicle and all.”

“Thus taking out an entire fifth of their network. Or fourth. I’m not sure.”

Ocelot nodded. “Is this the plan, then?”

“Of course it is,” Solidus said firmly before Liquid could make a snarky comment about how Ocelot was leading both of them to exactly this conclusion anyway. He decided to keep his mouth shut. He’d gotten wise to Ocelot’s ‘suggestions’ years ago and honestly didn’t really mind it, but poor stupid Solidus might actually be under the impression that he had all the ideas here.

“I’ll leave you two to iron out the details, then,” Ocelot said, stepping back. “I’m going to go get a drink.”

“Watch out for Mantis in there,” Liquid said absently, moving the submarine sketch out of the way of the map.

In the RV, whatever Mantis was doing it certainly wasn’t minding his own business, and he had been standing right next to the door when Ocelot opened it - fortunately it was a swing-out door instead of swing-in, otherwise he would have been smacked in the face. Nonetheless he hissed at Ocelot as he passed by to grab a water bottle from the mini-fridge.

“No need to be so hostile,” Ocelot said, opening the water bottle.

“I’m surprised you are not still out there, trying to ensure whatever plan they come up with leads to your desired outcome.”

“It’s already leading towards my desired outcome,” Ocelot said, “I’m being up-front up about this.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“You? No,” Ocelot said, taking an unimpressed sip of his water, “but the end goal is taking out part
of the Patriots’ network, as I know you just heard me say. The specific details it’s not my place to care about. Liquid and Solidus can and will sort it out themselves without my influence.”

It was difficult to interpret a sneer considering the only part of Mantis’ face visible through his mask was his eyes, which were obscured by tinted lenses anyway, but nonetheless he managed to get it across to Ocelot. Ocelot didn’t bother suppressing his urge to roll his eyes.

“Besides, if I actually tried to influence the planning process - that’d be like herding cats. I’d rather not.”

Mantis glared at him. “And about the F-16s…”

“You mean the fact that you were eventually located out in Twin Lakes?” Ocelot said, “I’ll admit, EVA was right when she said your location was one of things I was strategically leaking in order to find the Patriot plant in our ranks - since I’m certain there is one.”

“As am I,” Mantis snarled.

Ocelot narrowed his eyes boredly. “At this point I have no way to tell if it was my leak that did it or if the Patriots managed to stumble upon you by themselves. But if I assume that it was because of me, then certain suspicions of mine are-“

“We could have been killed, Ocelot.”

“But you weren’t. The fact that Liquid still had that Hind was something I conveniently left out when I mentioned your location.”

“…”

“You don’t have to believe me,” Ocelot said with a shrug.

“I don’t.”

“That’s fine. Your personal opinion doesn’t matter — you always go along with what Liquid does, and he trusts me.”

“All the worse for him,” Mantis spat.

“As such,” Ocelot continued as though Mantis hadn’t spoke, “I’m stuck with you.” He went back to drinking his water bottle, now ignoring Mantis in favor of starting a casual conversation with Octopus, who had been blatantly eavesdropping this whole time.

Cats could, evidently, herd themselves. It took over an hour and a lot of arguing - including the phrase “I’ve been declared dead and you’re a missing person case, you aren’t technically my commander-in-chief anymore and that means I don’t have to listen to you and your awful, awful strategizing!” - but eventually Liquid and Solidus came up with an acceptable plan of attack on the CIA bunker in Virginia.

For once Dead Cell would make themselves useful.

Since not every terrorist attack was carried out by a small group of people, not every Dead Cell exercise was conducted by only the members of Dead Cell. Roughly 60% of the time, Dead Cell hired random goons (or borrowed them from Navy boot camps) to act as their ‘army’ during a simulation. For legal and safety reasons, both before and immediately after each exercise was
conducted a headcount was taken, in order to make sure that no one had been left behind for whatever reason in the facility they’d just raided. There really wasn’t a way around that, of course, Dead Cell exercises typically took less than a couple hours before they were either successfully repelled or declared a victory (to be followed by massive security overhauls in the target facility) and dealing with the subnetwork’s servers would certainly take longer than that.

But, the initial headcount always happened before the final approach was made. If someone who just so happened to be wearing the same uniform as Dead Cell’s goons slipped into their forces during the approach itself, no one would notice them during the chaos of the “attack” and headcount would remain unchanged at the end of the exercise. Basically, a Dead Cell simulation was the perfect cover for infiltration, at least as far as getting in undetected went.

So Solidus could handle that part easily.

As for infiltration, that fell to Liquid and, at Solidus’ insistence, Solid as well. (Liquid had complained that he was sure that he and Solid would end up butting heads over something and blowing the whole mission, but Solidus was even more stubborn that he was, apparently - or, at least, the type that matched his stubbornness with patience, which Liquid had very little of in general - because after arguing back and forth about it for a full 45 minutes Liquid got so frustrated he threw both the map and the submersible base sketch up in the air and shouted Fine, there was probably going to be a lot of ground to cover while searching for the servers anyway.) Once they were inside, they would locate and destroy - or at least permanently disable - the actual, physical computer servers that the subnetwork was normally housed on.

To that end Liquid decided that Otacon and Mei Ling made the most sense for who should be running support here, since they actually knew things about computers.

While Solidus was contacting Dead Cell to tell them their new assignment, Liquid (almost grudgingly) called the minivan group.

“Meet us in Brunswick county, Virginia,” he sighed. “Just thinking about trying to explain it all over Codec makes my head hurt.”

“Uh…” Otacon said, “do you want to, I dunno, give us an actual town to meet you up in…? A whole county’s kind of…”

“Brunswick county has towns??”

Late evening. A Motel 6 in Wamego, Kansas.

Unlike the RV, the minivan didn’t have a shower (obviously). It also wasn’t a great place to sleep in, so between that and how tiresome truckstop showers got once they’d left the safehouse, every couple days Solid and co. would stop and get two adjacent rooms in a no-tell motel somewhere, paying with cash and making sure the underpaid teenage receptionist understood, no matter how high they were and/or how little English they spoke, that they wanted separate beds. Mei Ling and Wolf would take one room, Solid and Otacon would take the other. Bêdeng and Frank would be snuck into each one, respectively.

Of course, tonight it was a bit different.

Otacon had discreetly approached Solid and Mei Ling and had asked if it would be alright if Mei Ling stayed in Solid’s room for part of the night so he could talk to Wolf, alone, and he insisted it was very important (and private) and Solid and Mei Ling absolutely understood that this was him
attempting to man up and do something about his long-standing crush on Wolf. So they’d agreed, bought a couple six-packs (of Coca-Cola, Mei Ling was still underage and Solid wanted to stay on the wagon) and rented a few b-movies from a floundering Blockbuster to watch on the TV in Solid’s room. Bêdeng came too.

Wolf, meanwhile, had tried to come up with some strategies to deflect Otacon without making it awkward afterwards - since she did like him, just not in that way. She’d considered calling the rest of FOXHOUND for advice but for one thing she knew she’d be made fun of and for another thing the only two people in the unit with an actual stable relationship frequently missed the “stable” part of it. Plus that gotten started with a psychic soulbond, so that was cheating anyway.

I’ll just play him off, Wolf decided as Otacon walked into her room. She smiled somewhat uncomfortably at him.

“Hi,” Otacon said, just as uncomfortable.

There was a kind of pause, and Otacon sat down - somewhat gingerly - on the bed across from Wolf. (He was half-convinced that a roach was going to dart out as soon as he did.) “So,” he said.

“So,” Wolf said.

She wasn’t going to make this easy, was she?

“So I, um,” Otacon said, patting his hands on his lap once for lack of anything better to do with them, “wanted to… speak with you…”

“…about?” Wolf said after another pointless stretch of silence.

“Well, I, uh, that is… well… er…”

Her relatively friendly expression sunk into something that couldn’t quite be described as a scowl, but she was certainly starting to feel irritated and disappointed. “Spit it out, Emmerich. I do not like hemming and hawing.”

Otacon opened his mouth, closed it again, then took a deep breath and forced himself to say before he could stop himself—

“I love you.”

Wolf’s expression didn’t change for half a moment, then she closed her eyes, her face tightening, and took a long breath through her nose. Then she opened her eyes and smiled at him. “I love you too,” she said cheerfully, “we are such good friends, aren’t we? And it is very important for friends to tell one another that they love each other, because it is silly that society refuses to distinguish between romantic love and the love between friends even though they are different and also both very important. Isn’t that right? Bro?”

Otacon cringed. Since when did she call people bro?? “No, I mean…”

“In fact, I think that the love between friends is even more important! Romantic love is fleeting, friendship is…” She glanced to the side, evidently trying to think of something to say, “…like having a family again even when your actual, biological family is dead! Yes. Very important.”

“I… I mean, I’m i-in love with you, Wolf.”

“…”
“R-Romantically. Sexually.”

Wolf glanced off to the side again, her lips drawing together. Otacon could only imagine that she was internally screaming. This was not going well.

“Oh…”

“Emmerich…” she sighed, pushed her hair back out of her eyes. “This was obvious.”

“I… sorry.”

“…no, I will admit that I should have brought this up myself earlier - turn you down before it got… out of hand.”

Otacon winced. “Yeah, I guess it… isn’t really surprising that you wouldn’t feel the same way.”

“I have nothing against you personally,” Wolf said, “I mean, you are kind of a dweeb, and just looking at you gives me a strange urge to shove you in a locker. But you… well…”

“Not your type, huh…?”

“I have never been interested in anyone besides the occasional target,” Wolf said, tossing her hair. “If I ever fell for you, then you should be fearing for your life.”

“I… I see…”

Otacon stared at his lap. This was, to be honest, exactly the expected outcome. Sure, Wolf was nice to him and all but he’d tried really hard to not even entertain the possibility of her liking him back, even in a minor way… quite frankly, he wasn’t sure why or how he’d gotten it into his head that he should confess to her. Tears pricked his eyes. This was so, so stupid. And embarrassing, too — but mostly stupid. He’d made things so awkward for Wolf, that was just rude of him—-

“Would pity sex make you feel better?”

Otacon’s head snapped up. “What?” he said, certain he didn’t hear her right.

Wolf shrugged. “I only see you as a friend, and truthfully I think of you more of as my pet than my friend. Like a little yappy dog that likes to follow me around.”

“Uh… okay?”

“But I realize you have probably been gathering courage to tell me this ever since Shadow Moses. So… I think that’s commendable. Before the revolution started, you were naïve and spineless — and you are still rather naïve, but lately you have been showing more and more backbone.” She smiled again, and it was genuine this time. “I like that, Emmerich.”

Otacon blushed. “Oh. Um, thank you.”

“So that is why I wouldn’t mind having sex with you.”

Okay so he did hear her right. Otacon went commie-colored.

Wolf laughed at him. “Is something wrong?”

“This— I, uh— I wasn’t—… wasn’t… expecting this. At all.”
“So what,” Wolf said, stepping off her bed and coming over to Otacon, pointedly sitting across his lap and placing her arms around his shoulders. “You don’t have condoms?”

“Um, no! I-I mean, this was the last- well, saying it was the last thing I was expecting would imply that I was expecting this somehow—“

“Too sudden for you, Emmerich?”

“Oh…” Well, he certainly didn’t want to imply he wasn’t down for this. “It’s just… well, are you sure about this, Wolf…?”

“I like sex. You like me. Is this a problem?”

“No, no, of course not—“

She rolled her eyes. “Anyway… I am very careful to not sleep with people I suspect have STDs, but somehow I doubt that you-“

“I’m not a virgin,” Otacon blurted out. “I mean, I’m clean, but I’m not.”

Wolf blinked. “…oh. I thought for sure you were.”

“It… it’s been a while, though…”

“I see… regardless, I do not want to risk getting pregnant,” she said with a look of great distaste, “perhaps you would make a fine father, Emmerich, but I would rather not have a child with someone I do not love and besides, the whole thing seems horribly inconvenient and uncomfortable.”

Otacon laughed awkwardly. “I could run down to the 7-11 and buy some, if you want. Condoms, I mean.”

She put a finger to his lips. “I have a better idea,” she said.

And that was how Otacon ended up back to the mattress, hands on Wolf’s thighs, with Wolf herself kneeling over his face, completely naked from the waist-down (except for her boots) with her shirt hanging open, looking down at him with a smirk on her face.

_Hell_ of a view from down here.

“Um, is it just me, or—“

“I’m circumcised,” Wolf said, rolling her eyes again. “But you have no right to judge,” she added, leaning back slightly to reach a hand down Otacon’s pants and run her fingers over the head of his half-hard cock, “I see you are too, Jew-boy.”

“J-Jew-boy?” Otacon sputtered, but he was shut up by Wolf pressing her lips against his. Not the ones on her face, either.

Oh well. Unusual topography and dry spell of eight years aside, Otacon was, or at least used to be, a champ at having his face ridden and he was determined not to disappoint Wolf. But hey - judging by the gasp she made, and the way her hand tightened _almost_ painfully around Otacon’s dick, when Otacon dragged his tongue against her folds, he wasn’t. He quickly figured out Wolf liked it wet as hell and just a little bit rough.

Wolf hissed something in Kurmanji - Otacon couldn’t even begin to guess what, the only word he knew in that language was ‘bêdeng’ - and ground down harder against his mouth. “How,” she
growled breathily, “did you get so good at this, Emmerich?”

You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, Otacon thought, but there was no way he was going to interrupt himself anyway, not now. Not when half his face was sticky with Wolf’s fluids and, despite the fact that he wasn’t really paying attention down there at the moment, his hips were canting up into Wolf’s fist — not that she seemed to be paying much attention to the handjob, either. Hell, probably physically couldn’t. How could she, when Otacon gave her two orgasms in as many minutes and she had to clamp her free hand over her mouth so she wouldn’t be heard in the adjoining room. Thin walls in this motel, after all.

And Otacon was far from done.

Meanwhile, in the adjoining room, Solid and Mei Ling were drinking Coke and watching Catwoman and while they couldn’t necessarily hear what was going on in the other room, they could still tell that conversation had stopped, and yet Otacon hadn’t returned… so it wasn’t hard to figure out what was going on over there.

“Do you think they’ll end up getting married?” Mei Ling said.

“I have no idea,” Solid said.

That brought them around to the topic of relationships. Mei Ling was very interested in finding out about any old flames Solid had - and volunteered the names of some of her own, she’d gone on a couple dates in high school with a guy named Glenn Reynolds and then made out with a Chad Chien at prom. So Solid mumbled something about how before Meryl there had been a CIA agent named Holly White but he’d ditched her pretty much as soon as she turned her back.

“That’s horrible,” Mei Ling chided.

“There was a lot going on in my life at that time, okay? Just agreeing to go to dinner with her was too much commitment in and of itself…”

Solid was nothing but evasive when Mei Ling tried to find out if there was anyone he liked now. Again she tried to push the conversation forward by ‘fessing up herself: “You know, I think one of your brothers is actually kind of cute.”

“Which one? Don’t say Liquid.”

“Solidus.”

“…that’s worse.” Solid gave her a disapproving look from over the brim of his Coke can. “He looks like he’s sixty.”

“I have a thing for older men,” Mei Ling chirped, with a coy smile.

“…that’s nice. I think he’s only nine years older than you.”

“I’m twenty, Snake. That’s good enough for me. Plus, he’s rich…”

Great. Well, if Mei Ling wanted Solidus to be her sugar daddy, Solid figured it didn’t matter to him. He mostly just wondered if he should tell Mei Ling that Solidus was not only currently spoken for, but also evidently had a thing for older men…

Chapter End Notes
Female circumcision is pretty common in Kurdistan. Specifically, type I, the clitoridectomy.
Wolf’s equivalent of an after-sex cigarette was taking enough diazepam to give herself a proper high. Otacon had declined when she offered to share, although to be fair she was only half-sincere and would have stiffed him anyway.

She was lying on the bed next to Otacon, both of them a little sweaty but not as much as they would have been if all the penetration involved hadn’t stopped at Otacon’s fingers in Wolf’s vag, and she was enjoying the nice floaty feeling and he was staring somewhat blankly at the ceiling.

“That was good,” he said at length.

“I thought so too,” Wolf said dreamily, “we should do that again sometime.”

“Uh…”

She rolled over, kissed him on the mouth. She could taste herself. (Fortunately she was into that.) “What I meant was… I think I would enjoy myself, if we had a ‘friends with benefits’ arrangement. I would love to see what else you can do…”

“I…” Otacon gently pushed her away, “I don’t know, Wolf. I guess sex and romance are pretty separate for you, but they’re not for me. I don’t think I could do a ‘friends with benefits’ thing.”

“Why not? You’re in love with me.”

“Y…Yeah, but you don’t love me back. And you never will.”

“No.”

He frowned slightly. “So what I need to do now is move on… get over you. So we can just be normal friends without my feelings getting in the way.”

“Yes…?”

“And I… well, I couldn’t do that if we were sleeping together. I’d just keep nursing the idea that you felt the same way I do or maybe you could feel the same way I do eventually. Believe me, Wolf, it’s… happened before.”

“…” Wolf sighed. “I understand,” she said. “It is a bit of a shame, but if you wouldn’t be comfortable with it, then that is fine by me.”

“…okay. Thanks, Wolf.”

“Mm.”

“I can still do that much - talk to you... even if I can't face you. Even if there's a heaven - even if you're waiting there — I don't deserve to see you again.”

(click)
“I don’t deserve to love you.

“I signed up for Zero’s plan. Even now that he's halfway to dead, his plan lives on - leeching away at the world.”

click

“And it took your strength to make it happen. In using you, I put the world in his palm, once and for all. Zero...

“...

“Zero… or whoever it is that’s taken his name…”

click  
click

“They found me — after the Caribbean. They made me… simulate his will. So that - even after the body was gone - that will would keep the world turning the way they wanted.

“I had no choice. They dredged Lago Cocibolca, pulled up your phantom... forced me to revive and modify you. I thought I could bring you back!

“But in the end… I sold your will to ‘him’. Now this pod is just one big shell - a husk.”

click

“Your phantom is no longer here…”

Brunswick county, Virginia, was part forest, part farmland, part cemetery - slave and “colored” cemeteries, specifically. Allegedly the only traffic light in the entire 500+ square miles of it was in the county seat, Lawrenceville (the only town with more than 300 people, although at a little over a thousand that still wasn’t saying much). The rest of it was so devoid of civilized life that stoplights were unnecessary.

The CIA bunker was a couple miles north of an unincorporated community called Adsit, off an unnamed, gated-off road hidden in the forest surrounding the sensitively-named Indian Creek, which branched off of the Nottoway River. The RV and the minivan were parked at the same site, closer to Adsit. Getting to the base was going to be a bit of a hike but if they needed an emergency extraction the pick-up truck could be there in under two minutes. Dead Cell was already on their way.

An argument broke out over the sneaking suit, which was still in Solid’s possession.

“But it’s mine,” Liquid hissed.

“Tough,” Solid said, already tugging it on - he was changing in the RV, everyone else was outside although no one had stopped Liquid storming in to complain about his stolen suit. Nor did Liquid seem to much care about Solid’s partial nudity, although, to be fair, he’d seen more before. Much more. “I’ve got it now.”

“But it’s mine! It belongs to me!! I want to use it! No way am I going to infiltrate in the stupid, ugly Dead Cell goon uniform—“

“We both have to wear that anyway.”
“But I want to be able to take it off as soon as they’re gone - besides, it’d be more strategic to do so, just in case one of us were somehow spotted, they aren’t going to connect us to the Dead Cell raid as easily if we aren’t wearing their-“

“Oh, come on,” Solid said, “we only have one sneaking suit, one of us is going to have to keep wearing the Dead Cell outfit anyway.”

“Well, that should be you!” Liquid snapped, “the sneaking suit’s mine!”

Solid raised an eyebrow. “Wait, shouldn’t whichever one of us is more likely to be seen wear the sneaking suit?”

Liquid’s eyes went wide, his brow furrowing, and he immediately backtracked. “Well in that case you may borrow it, brother. But it’s still mine.”

“Hm.” Wasn’t it a bad sign that Liquid could be easily duped into doing something just by picking on his inferiority complex? As in, it wasn’t really a good idea to put someone like that in charge of a special forces unit?

“And I want it back when we’re done here, next time we do something like this you’re just going to have to get your own.”

“Like that’s gonna be easy.”

“Oh, please.”

“I’m serious. Isn’t just the fabric for this kind of proprietary?”

“Not now that FOXHOUND is officially dissolved,” Liquid said flippantly, “we could scrounge it up somewhere and I’ve no doubt that Emmerich or Mei Ling would be able to get ahold of the patterns. But you can’t use this one anymore after this mission, quite frankly the way it makes your arse look is just obscene.”

“Uh… duly noted…” Solid had never gotten the hang on lacing it himself, even back when he was in FOXHOUND, so for now he left that undone and just worked on the boots. “I’m still thinking I’ll just keep this, though…”

“Like hell you are.” Liquid leaned forward until he was eye-level with Solid, even though the latter was stooped over. “I’ve had sex in that before, you know.”

“…”

He leaned closer to whisper in his ear. “With Ocelot.”

Solid’s jaw worked for a moment, then he stood up, started tugging the suit back off, and said, “You know what, Liquid? I’ll just wear the Dead Cell uniform and be extra careful.”

Despite Solid hearing from Wolf that Liquid didn’t care about dressing or undressing in front of others, Liquid pointedly waited until Solid was dressed again and had gathered his things to leave the RV (in just boxers and a tank top - perfectly fine in this hot, humid weather) before slamming the door behind him and getting changed into the sneaking suit.

“So Liquid argued you down, huh?” Otacon said.

“Yup.”
“Oh well. It doesn’t matter *that* much, does it?”

Solid really would have preferred to wear the suit, but nonetheless he shrugged. It wasn’t worth butting heads with Liquid over it and besides, if he went back into the RV now, as Liquid was changing… who knew what would happen? (Liquid freaking out and Mantis coming to rip Solid’s dick off was a likely outcome.)

“Hey, Snake,” Mei Ling said, gesturing for him to come over, “I finished fixing your Codec and now I need to put it back in your ear.”

“Okay.”

“Also, I made a few modifications because we don’t have any nanomachines to inject in you to keep its batteries charged, so… let me know if you start to get a burning sensation, or there’s any weird discharge…”

“Especially bloody discharge,” Raven said. “Trust me on this.”

“Um,” Solid said, “right.”

“Is it going to be time to move out soon?” Wolf said, leaning over the hood of the pickup truck with her chin in her hands.

“It’s not like we’re going to be doing anything,” said Octopus, who was leaning back against the opposite side of the pickup.

“No, Raven and I are going to deploy to the perimeter as backup if needed. My rifle is already in the truck.”

“Oh yeah… well, *I’m* not going to be doing anything, that’s for sure.”

“The less people involved, the better,” Mantis, who was sitting on top of the cab, said, “we do not want everyone getting in each others’ way.” He eyed Solid pointedly as he said that.

“It’s not like my expertise is relevant here. And we’re more than three miles away from the base, huh…”

Solidus got off the phone. “Dead Cell is ready to begin and will launch their attack in 45 minutes,” he said, “where’s Liquid? He and Snake need to leave soon if they want to make it to the infiltration point in time.”

“I’m right here, don’t get your knickers in a twist,” Liquid said irritably, stepping out of the RV, giving a last few tugs to the laces in back. “Give us the bloody uniforms and we’ll get going.”

“Just a moment,” Mei Ling said - she was still messing with Solid’s ear, which Solid patiently endured aside from the occasional uncomfortable wince. “…there we go. Snake, does it work? Try calling Otacon’s frequency.”

Solid grunted and touched the side of his neck. Otacon’s laptop beeped; Otacon checked it and made a thumbs-up.

“Finally,” Solidus muttered, then turned around and rummaged through a bag that they’d had to stop at a gas station just outside Morgantown to retrieve from an oblivious clerk who’d been asked to hang onto it by a “super old guy with a hella thick German accent”. He pulled out two sets of olive drab uniforms with balaclavas and tossed them at Liquid and Solid. “They *should* be about your
“It’s better if they’re slightly off, anyway,” Octopus said knowledgeably, “the Dead Cell goons are all temps, so they’d have to be pretty lucky to get properly-fitting uniforms.” He glanced at Liquid’s feet as he and Solid started putting on the uniforms. “Your boots aren’t quite the right style, boss, but I don’t think anyone’s going to notice.”

“Good.” Liquid said, then tugged on the balaclava, his displeasure at having to wear it obvious in his eyes. “Snake, let’s go.”

Solid and Liquid slipped into the Dead Cell mini-army just after headcount, right as Colonel Jackson was handing out weapons (of which they’d brought “an excess” of two carbines “just in case”). No one noticed them. They stuck together for the moment, keeping track of one another by their combat boots - since, as Octopus pointed out, Liquid’s boots were a slightly different style, and Solid’s desperately needed polishing.

“Rubber bullets?” Solid muttered, surreptitiously examining the M4 (not that he needed to be discreet about it, several other goons were also checking out their new toys).

“Dead Cell doesn’t use live ammo,” Liquid said, rolling his eyes, “it’s a simulation, remember? They can’t run the risk of actually killing someone at the facility they’re testing.”

“But the whole point of the exercise is to see how well the facility in question can repel a terrorist assault, right? They’re not warned beforehand?”

“Of course not, that would defeat the purpose. It has to be a surprise, and the evaluees have to think it’s real. So yes, brother, the counterattack is done with live fire.”

“I see.” Solid frowned behind the balaclava. “That seems…”

“…stupid?” Liquid lowered his voice a little. “Well, it was Solidus’ idea.”

“…that kind of explains a lot…”

Liquid shrugged. “Everyone knows that field exercises have a few casualties every year - what people don’t know is that probably about 80-90% of them are from Dead Cell temps being shot during a terrorism simulation.”

“How come you know so much about Dead Cell, anyway?”

“Solidus sicced them on us the year after I took command of FOXHOUND - one of their first assignments. Or, at least, looking back on it I’m fairly certain that Solidus specifically ordered it, just to see what kind of man I am. However,” he added proudly, “they entirely failed to even get past our fence. Our evaluation was listed as a resounding success and they never bothered us again.”

“…ah… I see…”

The last straggling goons were hunted down and handed M4s, and Liquid and Solid shut up and quickly separated in the crowd. Thirty pretend soldiers (plus two real ones) were lead in loose formation by Old Boy. Vamp, Chinaman, and Fatman had gone on ahead; Colonel Jackson stayed behind. Dead Cell was finally on the move.

The CIA bunker was entirely unremarkable in appearance and, judging by its small size, mostly underground. Naturally there was a barbed-wire electric fence around it, and naturally its gate was
locked — the mini-army was instructed to hide in the bushes and wait for the signal to rush in and storm the compound, firing at anything that moved. (Evidently this kind of bum-rush strategy, which Old Boy unironically referred to as Blitzkrieg, was their go-to for lightly-guarded compounds like the CIA bunker currently.) Whether the nature of the signal was explained before Solid and Liquid got there, or if it was just supposed to be a “You’ll know it when you see it” sort of thing, Solid had no way of knowing.

And then the fence gate was completely blown off its hinges by a rather small but extremely flashy and loud explosion.

Evidently that was the signal.

The CIA guards rushed out just as Dead Cell’s temps rushed in, shooting from the hip. Solid didn’t really bother with the gun - only firing once when a guard got too close to him, earning him an extremely bewildered look when the guard put his hand to his stomach in pain and then drew it away completely bloodlessly — he spotted Liquid’s boots on one of the goons who had rushed to the door to force it and storm the base itself. Solid quickly followed, calling Liquid on Codec.

“Which way are you going?”

“Left. You go right. We need to find a staircase, I think.”

“Right. Okay, I’ll call you if I find it first.”

“Likewise.” Liquid hung up. Solid could certainly get used to short, matter-of-fact statements from him.

Jogging off down a hallway to the right (there were a few goons ahead of him, and one of them got into a scuffle with a guard who seemed hesitant to shoot them - word had probably already gotten out that this was only a drill), Solid called ‘base’.

“What’s up?” Otacon said, “you two make it into the bunker okay?”

“Yep,” Solid said, “Liquid’s ahead of me. We’re going to try to make it underground before finding a place to hide while Dead Cell clears out.” (It was fortunate that the loudly blaring alarms in the base prevented nearby soldiers from catching what Solid was saying.) “By the way, I have a question for Solidus.”

“What is it?” Solidus said, cutting in.

“That explosion…”

“Explosion? That must have been Fatman’s work.”

“No, I’m actually wondering how that’s allowed… what kind of unit uses fake bullets, but real explosives?”

“Dead Cell simulations are allowed a moderate amount of property damage,” Solidus said, “in other words, Fatman can blow things up as he likes as long as he is confident he can prove during a court martial that he was reasonably certain that no one would have been injured by the explosion when he set it up. Dead Cell’s budget includes rebuilding damaged facilities…”

“Forget it,” Solid said, then hung up. The more he learned about Dead Cell the more he remembered that Solidus was, in fact, too young to be the fucking President.
Solid found the staircase first, slipping past all the guards and fighting, and after being called, Liquid appeared almost out of nowhere to follow him down. (Again, the aboveground portion of the base wasn’t very large, so since Liquid had started his search first by the time Solid found the stairs Liquid had already started doubling back around.) Right as they hit the bottom of the stairs, the alarm abruptly turned off — the exercise must have been over. The two of them ducked into a supply closet to wait for Dead Cell to leave and base operations to return to normal.

“Now the real fun begins,” Liquid said, yanking off the balaclava and fixing his ponytail. “God, I hate those things. How do people stand wearing them?”

“A uniform’s a uniform,” Solid said, tugging off his own as Liquid started to take off the rest of the Dead Cell fatigues. “Think we’ll be able to find live ammo for our M4s? They’re kind of useless without it.”

“I doubt it. This is a CIA bunker, not a full-on military installation — we’re going to be looking at handguns here.” This was being done OSP in order to preserve their own ammunition, and for the usual “empty cartridges from the outside could serve to identify the intruder” reason. “Still, we should be able to find those…”

“I’ll hang onto the M4 anyway,” Solid said, eyeing Liquid as he shoved his onto a random shelf, to just leave it there for the rest of the infiltration and in all likelihood never come back to get it. To be fair, a Dead Cell weapon being found in a facility immediately after a Dead Cell raid wouldn’t raise any suspicions, and it wasn’t like it had fingerprints on it. “Even if it’s empty or only has rubber bullets, it could still come in handy. Maybe hold someone up by bluffing with it.”

“Tch. Well, if you want to carry around all that dead weight that’s got nothing to do with me…”

They stayed in awkward silence in the closet as the caution wound down — Solid wasn’t sure who was more uncomfortable, Liquid or himself. Certainly Solid was not thrilled with being in such close physical proximity to his brother, considering all the various things that had happened between them already, but judging by Liquid’s expression and the way he kept shifting his weight— then again, after a few minutes he called Otacon on Codec and told him to tell Mantis to have some ibuprofen ready when they came back, so maybe he was just having chest pain issues again.

Caution wound down and normal patrol patterns resumed, if anything even lighter now that some guards had to take off to get their minor injuries treated and other miscellaneous staff were too busy cleaning up to be on the lookout for remaining intruders. Solid and Liquid exited the supply closet and headed in opposite directions without another word or even a nod. The bunker’s basement seemed to be huge, so they weren’t going to cross paths again until one of them managed to find something that looked like computer servers. (Mei Ling had given them a description.)

Of course, Solid was thinking that Liquid was going to have better luck, judging by the rooms he glanced in as he stole by, keeping an eye out for security cameras and the like. He wasn’t sure what exactly sort of thing would be in the part of the building where they kept their super-important Patriot computers, but Solid guessed that the answer to that wasn’t “conference rooms, empty offices, and employee lounges”. Hell, he even found the cafeteria.

Things took a turn for the ominous when he came across a hallway of interrogation rooms — they looked like any standard kind that one might find at a police station, camera, single table, chairs, soundproof walls, overlooked by a two-way mirror - except the floors were concrete and Solid suspected there was a drain under the table. The last room in the row appeared to be currently occupied (although presently anyone observing would have been doing so through the camera, the whole hallway was empty), so Solid made quick time away from there.
He’d just turned the corner the next hallway over when a door slammed in the interrogation hallway, immediately followed by footsteps - a woman, and an irritated one at that, judging by how fast and light they were combined with the distinctive click of fashionable heels. Headed his way.

Aaaand the empty office he was standing next to was locked, so he couldn’t hide in there as the woman passed his hallway. The next best thing was to whip out his trusty cardboard box and pass himself off as an unopened delivery for whoever occupied the office normally.

Which was hopefully not the woman. Solid heard her turn into the hallway and walk right up to him—and stop suddenly, standing right in front of his box, and—

“Huh,” she said, “you know, Snake, I heard you were dead.”

Chapter End Notes

Before you ask, yes, I have been to Brunswick county, Virginia. When I was sixteen I took a month-long babysitting job for my aunt and uncle who lived in Lawrenceville (they’ve since moved). My description of it is accurate. The thing about the stoplight is true, at least according to my uncle. Brunswick county was peak Americana™ but honestly, I had fun. Small towns and wide open country have their perks.
Caught out, Solid slowly raised his cardboard box to stare up at the woman who was glowering down at him with her hands on her hips: Holly White, freelance journalist-turned-CIA agent (or was it the other way around?), former KTV director, Emmy recipient, onetime model for Depeche Vogue magazine, and Solid’s figuratively and literally closest support during the Zanzibar Land disturbance. She didn’t look very different - not surprising considering it hadn’t even been a full six years since then - although she had grown out her hair, wore more subdued makeup, and her extremely serious, somewhat pissed expression was not exactly what Solid remembered seeing on her face back then.

“It’s a long story,” he said lamely. If she hadn’t called an alert yet, that was definitely a good sign and he might yet be able to talk his way out of this…

“Seriously? You reject me in the most embarrassing way possible, I don’t see or hear from you for half a decade and then get told that you died at Shadow Moses, and all you have to say to me is ‘It’s a long story’??”

“What are you doing here, Holly?”

“Me?? I work for the Company, Snake - what are you doing here? Oh my god, you got nuked.”

“Uh…”

“Snake,” Otacon said over Codec, “what’s going on over there???”

“Nothing,” Solid said quickly, and hung up, and didn’t pick up when Otacon immediately called back.

“You came here to do nothing?” Holly said, eyes suspiciously narrowed.

“Who was that you were interrogating just now? or were you the one being interrogated?”

“Excuse me, I’m asking the questions here! Why did you come here? How are you still alive??”

“Can we not talk in the hallway…?”

Holly glared at him, but reached over his box and yanked open the office door, then gestured for him to step inside. Solid stood, and did so. Again, she still hadn’t called an alert, so… plus, as long as he didn’t mention Liquid, they weren’t totally screwed even if she did rat him out…

“Explain yourself,” Holly said flatly, closing the door behind them and standing with her back against it, arms crossed. She didn’t look quite murderous, but she hadn’t been happy with Solid to begin with and seemed to get angrier with every passing second.

“I can’t,” Solid said.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“I know. But it’s important.”
“On a mission, huh?” Holly said, glaring. “Snake, I know you. Maybe not as well as some people do, but I know you. You’d never do, like, this unless you were being ordered by someone.”

“I’m not talking, Holly.”

“What, you can’t trust me?”

“As you just said — you work for the Company.”

There was a brief, tense silence. Solid hoped Holly would break eye contact first, but she didn’t, and he didn’t dare take his eyes off her.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” she said again, glaring, “how the hell did you— the person holding your leash now, I mean, how the heck did they even find this place? It isn’t on maps and no one lives all the way out here, this is too boonies for even the boonies.”

“Holly, I told you - I’m not talking.”

“…”

“…”

This conversation wasn’t going anywhere and there was no way Solid was making it out of this office if it didn’t. So he decided to be blunt about it.

“Why haven’t you called an alert on me yet?”

Holly snorted. “Maybe I have and you just haven’t realized it.”

“Cut the bullshit, Holly. I would know if you did, even if it was a silent alarm, and you know it.”

“…”

“What do you want from me? I’m an intruder, you know I didn’t come here just to catch up with you.”

“There’s nothing to catch up on,” Holly snapped, “what I’ve done these past five years is none of your business.”

“Oh kay,” Solid said, spreading his arms, “so what are we talking about? Why are we just talking?”

This time Holly did break eye contact, sharply jerking her head away. “You suddenly showing up, she said slowly, “kind of, like… confirms something I’ve been suspicious about for a while. You know a bunch of details about Shadow Moses were leaked, right? The leaker said you might still be alive, and that it was Houseman who ordered a nuclear strike on Shadow Moses, not the terrorists accidentally blowing themselves to kingdom come.”

“…it was definitely Houseman,” Solid said, “I was off the island by the time it blew up. There wasn’t anyone alive left there by that point.”

“That’s what I thought…” She looked at him again, frowning. “But why are you here? What are you after?”

“Come on, I’m not going to tell you that…”

“Something’s funny, Snake,” Holly said, “something’s not right. You’ve gotta know something
about it.”

Solid shrugged.

His Codec was ringing again. There was no way Holly could have heard it, but it must have been written on Solid’s face because she gestured and said, “Go ahead, pick it up.” Probably just hoping to get a hint from something that Solid said… but still…

He picked up. “What is it?”

“Finally you answer, Emmerich’s called me four times now to ask if I know what’s going on with you.” It was Liquid. “What is going on? Manage to get yourself into trouble, brother?” And he sounded as irritatingly disdainful as usual.

“Everything’s fine. Got held up a bit, that’s all. Nothing to worry about,” Solid said, his eyes flicking to Holly, who only watched him impassively. “Why did you call?”

“I think I found… something, and I’m not sure what to make of it.”

“What?”

“You’d better get over here.”

In the opposite direction as Solid had headed, Liquid had found labs - not medical labs, looked more like R&D labs. His curiosity got the better of him and he wasted some time poking around at what was being developed or analyzed or whatever was going on here, but he wasn’t really able to make heads or tails of any of it (he either didn’t know what the thing in question was or didn’t understand why it was there - perfectly ordinary vehicle and weapons parts littered workbenches) and when he called back about it Wolf cut across Otacon to tell Liquid to focus on what he was here for. (On the plus side, Liquid was able to justify all that by eventually stumbling across a Ruger Mark III, which he took for himself.) He moved on.

It was almost suspicious how few guards there were. Were they really all busy with the aftermath of the Dead Cell exercise?

Around the time Otacon called him, increasingly anxious, for the third time regarding Solid suddenly not picking up his Codec anymore, Liquid carefully picked the lock (with appropriated paperclips - it was a rather dinged-up deadbolt instead of an electronic lock requiring a card, which was what Liquid had been expecting… how old was this place?) on a large metal door and nudged it open. It was completely dark in the room behind the door, and judging by the way the sound of the door scraping against the ground echoed, it was very large and the walls, floor, and ceiling were all made with hard, smooth, unforgiving material. Not an inch of carpet or foam to be seen.

Liquid squinted. Dimly reflecting the narrow strip of light let in by the door were what seemed to be rows and rows of large, round… canisters? Whatever they were, they were cylindrical and made of some dark gray metal - very shiny. There were some other details on them that Liquid couldn’t make out, but trying to imagine what they’d look like with more lighting… something tugged at the corners of Liquid’s memory. Hadn’t he seem something like this before? Just one, though… not a roomful.

There definitely weren’t any people in the room, and didn’t seem to be any security features, either, so Liquid stepped in, glancing around for a light - he closed the door behind him, rather experimentally, and after about three seconds of complete, cave-like darkness, the cylinders began to glow — eight interrupted red lines, four near the top, four near the bottom, shone red on each of them, along with a small, round spot of light just under the lines on top, a slightly orange color. With
the room bathed in faint blood-colored light, Liquid could now see that there were about fifty of the things in here, in five rows of ten reaching towards the back of the room. (He still couldn’t see the back wall, even in this lighting.) Something about this place put him on-edge… he decided to look for a lightswitch…

As soon as he took one step into the actual interior of the room, the lights all increased in intensity and the canisters spoke. Each had a female voice, the same female voice, and each one was offset from the others by a fraction of a second, causing their voices to overlap and drag and stutter, but they all said the same thing:

“JJJJJJJJJJJaaaaaaaaacaccccccccccccccckkkkkkkkkk?”

Of course Liquid had his handgun out and pointed at the nearest one, but it was an inanimate object. He looked around instead. No, it really was the ‘canisters’ that had said that name just now, but— whose name was it, even? What were these things?

“NNNNNNNNNNooooooooooo… yyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy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“I… yes, I think I remember that. All it did was sit there, no one had anything to do with it. A relic of some kind.”

“What was it?”

He pressed his hand to side of s. BS-Imago no. 152, then jerked it back at it spoke directly to him: “Why do you touch me?” The rest of the s. BS-Imagos dragged out the phrase in turn, still not quite synced up with each other, almost a full second behind no. 152.

“I think it was…” Mantis said, rather slowly like he really had think about it, “an old computer that had been salvaged from… Afghanistan? or was it Nicaragua? I think it came from Nicaragua originally, and your father retrieved it from Afghanistan. That’s right, everyone called it an AI pod…”

“Huh?” Otacon suddenly interjected. “An AI pod?”

“A tape…?”

“What are you two talking about?” Liquid said, frowning.

“No, it’s nothing,” Otacon said quickly. Mantis didn’t answer entirely, then glanced away like he’d decided he wasn’t interested in something and hung up. Liquid’s frown deepened. Whatever the hell Otacon had just been thinking about right now that had briefly caught Mantis’ attention was likely going to go completely unaddressed unless Liquid remembered to ask about it when he got back, so he made a mental note to do so. In the meantime, he called Solid and told him to get his candy ass over here.

Solid arrived with some woman in tow. One who only scoffed when Liquid pointed his gun at her.

“What?” he snarled. “Is something funny?”

“That’s a Ruger Mark III,” the woman said, raising her eyebrows, and casually flicking the lightswitch next to the door (which Solid had already closed behind them). The lights on the s. BS-Imagos dimmed again when the overhead lights started to buzz and come on, but they didn’t shut off.

“I noticed, thank you.”

“Yeah. It’s, like, mine.”

“…” That really didn’t help here, considering Liquid had found this gun in one of the labs that just confirmed Liquid’s knee-jerk conclusion that she was a CIA agent.

“So that means you don’t have any ammo. You’re just bluffing.”

“…what?” Solid said.

The woman glanced at him, then turned back to Liquid, who had gone completely still. This was not going well, a bluff was completely useless if it was called within ten seconds. “That gun’s new,” she said, “but it sucks. I went back to my old Mark II, but I only have enough bullets for one gun, so…”

“…oh,” Solid said, “those Ruger pistols are .22 cal. The standard-issue CIA guns nowadays are Glock 22s and 23s — .40 cal.”

“I’ve figured that out by now,” Liquid said bitterly, putting the, yes, unloaded gun back. “I’ve found more than enough .40 caliber ammunition, but this was the only gun I’ve managed to get ahold of.”
“You can keep it if you want,” the woman said.

“Who the hell are you? Snake, what’s going on?”

Solid took a deep breath, then gave Liquid a very truncated explanation: “this is Holly White. She’s a CIA agent, but she’s been having second thoughts about the government and I already knew her from the Zanzibar Land disturbance. We were on the same side then. She caught me but never called an alarm, so…”

“So what, you just decided to trust her?! And lead her right to me, too!!”

“Hey, if I wanted you two to actually get caught, I would have called an alarm,” Holly retorted, “but that’s not what I want. I want answers. Anyway, who are you?” She turned her head towards Solid. “You never told me you had a twin brother.”

“I didn’t know at the time,” Solid said flatly.

“…oh my god, I was joking. He’s really your twin brother?”

“Not another bloody word, Snake,” Liquid hissed. If Holly hadn’t yet made a comment about Shadow Moses, then it was entirely possible that she didn’t recognize him — after all, his relation to Solid couldn’t have been leaked, Mei Ling didn’t know about it until after she’d been rescued from the Patriots. As long as Solid didn’t address him as ‘Liquid’, Holly might not figure out that he was, in fact, Liquid Snake.

Solid shook his head. “L- er— brother, what are these things?”

“Not entirely sure.”

“They’re an AI,” Holly said. They both turned to look at her. She tilted her head. “Look, I’ve only been here for, like, a week. Normally I take assignments abroad — I only came here because I’d heard some funny things about this AI housed here. Except it’s not currently housed here, not really, I was told the ‘central’ program was relocated for reasons nobody knows. This is just the leftovers.”

“Relocated…?” Liquid said, then glanced at Solid. “Could these be the servers we’re looking for?”

“I guess,” Solid said, “they kind of match what Mei… I mean, the description we were given.”

“But we weren’t looking for an AI, we were looking for a network- a network hub. It shouldn’t be any more ‘artificial intelligence’ than Emmerich’s laptop.”

“This is the only thing like this here,” Holly said, crossing her arms and raising an eyebrow. (Uh. Did she pick up on Liquid accidentally naming Otacon just now? Maybe that wasn’t as bad as if she found out about FOXHOUND…) “If someone sent you two looking for a network hub, they were lying to you.”

“…”

“They actually meant the AI, huh?” Solid said.

“Well, yeah, but I guess they might not have known. If you’re just looking at them you can’t tell they’re an AI.”

Somehow, Liquid doubted that Ocelot just didn’t know.

“Actually,” Holly went on thoughtfully, “I’m not even sure they’re an AI. That’s just what I heard…
and maybe they don’t look like any computers I’ve ever seen, but if you ask me they don’t really look like some kind of artificial intelligence, either.”

Liquid cleared his throat and put his hand against s. BS-Imago no. 152 again. It reacted about the same as before, its lights flaring and the woman asking “Why do you touch me?” followed by the rest of the s. BS-Imagos repeating its action, delayed and out of sync with each other. Holly and Solid both started at it. Solid even pointed his carbine on instinct.

“Whatever it is, it speaks,” Liquid said.

“Huh…” Holly said, “I’m totally sure that they didn’t do that before. Maybe that’s something only the leftover programs do…?”

“I don’t think it really matters,” Solid said, “we’ve found what we were looking for, right? So now we just need to do what we came here to do.”

“Which would be?”

“Destroying them.”

Holly blinked. “Or,” Liquid added, “disabling them enough that they won’t be functional anymore. Now, how do we go about this? This metal casing seems to be…” he rapped his knuckles against the side of no. 152, although it didn’t react this time. It sounded hollow. “…thick, likely bullet-, explosion-, fire- and water-proof — not that we have bullets or explosives ourselves, or even a lighter, not unless Ms. White wants to loan—“

“Hey,” Holly said, “I came with Snake here because I wanted answers, and that’s it, okay? I’m not going to interfere with whatever mission it is you two are carrying out, but I’m definitely not gonna help. Except for intel. I trust Snake’s judgement, but I don’t know who you two are working for, so as long as it stays that way I’m staying out of this.”

“I figured. But be that way, we don’t need you.”

“Tch.”

“Inside the case it’s just going to be computer parts, right?” Solid said, “so if we can open at least some of them up, maybe we could…” he glanced around, then pointed up at the ceiling. “The fire suppression system. I’m sure that’d play hell with exposed electronics.”

“Good point, brother,” Liquid said, looking up at the sprinklers dotting the ceiling, then over at the alarm lever on the wall. “White, is that a fire alarm? Will it set off the sprinklers?”

“That’s a security alarm,” Holly said, looking at it, “the fire suppression system is automatic. But… I think you can get the sprinkler system to think there’s a fire if you, like, damage one of them.”

“Hmm… then, we just need to figure out how to open the casing… I don’t see any seams. Maybe up top…” He looked up at no. 152. “I’ll need to get up there in order to damage that sprinkler there anyway, it’s not like either of us can shoot it.”

“Don’t break your neck,” Solid said semi-sarcastically as Liquid jumped up and grabbed the edge of the flat top of the s. BS-Imago and hauled himself up — it protested, asking “What are you doing, child?” which was, as before, repeated by all the others.

“Looks like a hatch up here,” Liquid said, crouching on the top of the pod. No handles, though, or locks or any obvious interface. He couldn’t get purchase on it to just pry it open, either… “It must be
opened automatically somehow…”

“Let me see,” Solid said, stepping forward, and just like as happened when Liquid had approached, all of the s. BS-Imagos went off.

“AAAAAAAAAAnnnnnnnnoooooooootttttttthhhhhhhheeeeeeeeeerrrrrrrrrr ccccccccceoooooo00oo00ppppppppyyyyyyyy…?”

“What the hell?” Solid said, startled, stepping back again.

“It said something like that for me, too,” Liquid said, raising his eyebrows significantly.

“Huh… well, even if it knows who were are, that doesn’t help us figure out how to open the- casings —…”

As Solid spoke, the top hatch on every single s. BS-Imago popped open - the one on no. 152 nearly smacking Liquid in the face. He leaned back just in time, scowling.

“Oh, of course it listens to you,” he said, “I wonder if it’s some kind of voice-recognition thing…”

“You two have never seen anything like this before, though, right?” Holly said.

“Not really.”

“Never,” Solid said. “I have no idea why it seems to… know us, I guess.”

“Nevermind, I’m sure it doesn’t matter,” Liquid said, pulling the Ruger Mark III back out and calmly hammering the sprinkler - now only about eight inches above his head, the s. BS-Imagos were that tall - with the butt.

“You know,” Holly said as she and Solid watched Liquid do this, “it’s not just gonna be the sprinklers in this room that go off. It’s gonna be the sprinklers throughout the whole facility.”

“That’s good,” Solid said, “that should throw the place into enough chaos that we can make a clean escape.”

“I guess…”

“As long as you don’t talk, Holly.”

“Of course not! Even if it’s only because you saved my life back in Zanzibar Land… I kinda owe you, Snake.”

With a clink, the sprinkler head finally snapped off and a jet of water spurted out, directly into s. BS-Imago no. 152’s innards, which immediately began to spark and spew pale purple smoke. “Kill me,” the pod wailed, and half a second later the other sprinklers activated, raining on the rest of the s. BS-Imagos. None of the hatches closed. They all just began to shriek - unlike before they weren’t all saying the same thing, and they spoke all over each other, echoing, repeating “Kill me,” “Kill me now,” “Do it,” “Kill me,” “Kill me.”

“You’re a wonderful man,” no. 152 said, its voice getting increasingly rough and tinny, “kill me. Kill me now.

“Do it.

“There’s only room for one Boss… and… on…e… Sn…a……ke……”
Confused and marginally unsettled, Liquid glanced down at where Solid was standing, meeting his similarly perplexed and uneasy expression - and then he shifted his gaze to Holly just in time to see her, eyes wide and mouth set, pull the security alarm.

Chapter End Notes

True facts: the Ruger Mark III was actually pretty unpopular with Ruger fans. It was really hard to disassemble + clean, and clearing jams was difficult. The Mark IV fixed where it went wrong with the Mark III, but the IV didn’t come out ’til 2016.

Also, the “s.” is “s. BS-Imago” stands for ‘successor’ - it’s an abbreviation used in genealogy. And in case you’ve forgotten, “BS-Imago” was the official designation of the Mammal Pod, or rather, Strangelove’s AI version of The Boss. (Obviously.)
“You bitch!” Liquid shouted down at her as the same alarms that had blared during the Dead Cell exercise started up again. Holly didn’t stick around to respond - she shoulder-checked the door and was out into the hallway in a half a second, and Solid was hot on her heels. Liquid scrambled to get down off of the sputtering s. BS-Imago no. 152; with the floor now slippery with water, the last thing he wanted was to just jump down like he usually would have and potentially slip and break something. Himself, rather.

“Don’t bother with her,” Liquid hissed to Solid over Codec, “we just need to get out of here, we fulfilled our objective. She won’t be able to sell us out without the fact that she was helping you coming to light.”

“I’ve lost her already anyway,” Solid said. “Meet you up top. I’ll call Otacon and tell him what happened.”

“Right.”

Liquid paused before leaving the AI room — it was difficult to see anything in the spray of water, but he heard, under the wail of the alarm, footsteps splashing past, so he pressed himself to the wall next to the door and waited a few moments for them to be gone before dashing into the hallway himself. He didn’t know how long the sprinklers would be going off, so it would be best to get back to the surface and out of here as soon as possible——

His Codec rang. He picked up. It was… Wolf?

“Raven and I are headed to the facility,” Wolf said, “as a distraction. I can pick off guards from the top of the cab, Raven is in the bed with his cannon…”

“Wait, who’s driving?”

“Mei Ling.”

“Oh.”

“Also, it was her idea to blast music for extra attention-grabbing. Queen’s greatest hits.”

“I see,” Liquid said, blinking, “that does explain why I hear ‘Don’t Stop Me Now’ in the background.”

“Mmmhm. We are approaching from the south, so you need to get off the base’s grounds in any other direction while the guards are distracted. Flee into the woods and circle around to the RV when the alert dies down. I already told Snake, too.”

“Alright. See you then, Wolf.” He signed off and continued heading towards the exit at a cautious light jog. So far things had been going well, aside from Holly “stupid cunt” White throwing a wrench into their exfiltration; at this rate, Liquid thought he’d end up giving it an A or B rank.

And of course as always fucking happened whenever he had thoughts like that, the next hallway he passed the mouth of apparently had someone standing there that he couldn’t see between the haze of water and the fact that it was on his right - and he had admittedly poor vision in his right eye, thanks Ocelot - and somebody fucking shot Liquid.
He heard it long before he felt it, and before he felt it he had his (empty) pistol out, pointing at where the guard was, but - they were gone. Which was really strange, what sort of guard shot at an intruder only to flee instead of engage? Maybe they were a coward who had run off to report Liquid’s location — to that end, Liquid kept running down the hallway, faster now, and at this point a burn in his side started to set in and he realized he had, in fact, been shot.

He looked down at himself, instinctively clapping a hand to his wound. Shit. He was already bleeding, unsurprisingly - if it hadn’t been for the sprinklers still going off, Liquid would have thought that he’d been fired upon just so that he could be tracked down by bloodstains, or else the CIA intended to figure out who had broken into their Brunswick county bunker via DNA testing. Except the sprinklers were still going - the blood wasn’t going to prove useful to anyone, most of all Liquid, who kind of needed that stuff to stay in his body.

Goddamn he was really bleeding a lot. He could feel it on his back, too (or at least the heat of it, he was already soaking wet from head to toe anyway), so the bullet must have just gone straight through. Might have nicked an important blood vessel, though…

“Not to alarm anyone,” Liquid said, calling Otacon again, “but I am… definitely going to need a first aid kit ready to go as soon as I get back, please tell me we actually have one somewhere.”

Mantis shoved Otacon out of the way before the latter could get a word out. “You’re wounded?”

“It’s alright, Mantis, I’ve only been shot once and I don’t think the bullet’s embedded… I’ll be fine as long as I don’t manage to get it infected. First I have to get out of here…”

“No — at least, as long as I don’t strain myself. God, this is a lot of blood…”

“Find someplace to hide and stay put,” Mantis hissed before abruptly hanging up. Liquid blinked, but trusted whatever Mantis was about to do and ducked into a nearby janitorial closet, closing the door behind him and sinking down against the wall. There was a sprinkler in here, too, but at least the incessant blaring of the alarm was muted now.

About a minute later a slightly irritated Solid called to ask his location.

“Believe me, brother, I’m not happy about this either,” Liquid drawled.

“Is that so. Mantis was frantic, you know. Threatened to purée my entrails if I showed my face back at the RV without you.”

“He can be like that. But you know this wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t let your old flame tag along and pull the bloody alarm on us!”

Solid snorted irritably and hung up. After an interminable few minutes, he unceremoniously opened the closet door and got hit in the face with a broom handle.

“Whoops,” Liquid said, rather insincerely, “thought you might have been a guard.”

“I’m sure the Dead Cell uniform doesn’t help much,” Solid said dryly, rubbing his nose. “Can you even stand? You’re covered in blood. Is all that yours?”

“Unfortunately yes. But it’s not that much, I’m fine—“ He stood up, and Solid didn’t miss the way he briefly leaned on the broom for support, but it was only temporary and he was on his own feet in a second. “Believe me when I say I’ve survived much worse injuries. And that I didn’t ask for a
nanny. Let’s go.”

Solid started retracing the route he’d just been taking towards the exit before he had to double back to fetch Liquid - Liquid tagged along behind him, falling behind slightly but other than that and the fact that he was still clutching his side, giving no outward indication that he was wounded. At least for the first two or three minutes. Solid had to stop in the middle of the hallway because Liquid was lagging behind so far — he was pale, although he still looked angry, and when Solid reached out and grabbed his wrist to drag him along he could feel Liquid’s heart beating through the sneaking suit way faster than it should have been with how fast they were running (not very).

“Probably a good thing I took the sneaking suit after all,” Liquid said, his voice slightly strained, “there’s a reason why it’s designed to apply pressure… say, we can’t really wash this thing at a laundromat, can we…?”

“How much blood have you lost already?” Solid said, brow furrowed.

“Well obviously I wasn’t fucking measuring it out, Snake — I’ll be fine as long as it’s under 40%… that is, ah, two liters, I think… after that, you have to get a… a transfusion… or so…”

“Hrm.” At this rate, it wasn’t going to be long until Liquid could barely walk anymore. Still, they were close enough to the exit by now that it’d be better to just leave and get back to the RV as fast as possible instead of heading back deeper into the bunker in search of a first aid kit, or at least a towel. If nothing else, being out of the constant freezing downpour of water might help to keep him from going into shock…

Solid called Otacon and had him reroute the call to Wolf (since he’d never gotten Wolf’s Codec number personally). He heard Liquid make an offended scoff behind him when he flatly told Wolf that Liquid was not doing so hot and they needed to switch gears from ‘distraction’ to ‘retrieval’ like five minutes ago, but Wolf quickly agreed and shouted the change in plans to Mei Ling before disconnecting. Solid and Liquid were to just meet them right outside the south gate, Raven and Wolf could provide cover fire once they got out of the building.

Which was the hard part. They made it back to the staircase without too much issue, but there was only one entrance to it, and that was the only way back into the above-ground portion of the facility - which was probably in violation of some federal fire code, but then again, most fire systems typically didn’t spray down the entire building in response to one sprinkler-head activating somehow for upwards of fifteen minutes by now, either - and that entrance was guarded.

“Bluffing with the M4’s not going to work very well, is it?” Solid said, peering around the corner at the guards. A full half-dozen of them, waiting patiently at the edge of the spray…

“I still have the broom,” Liquid said helpfully.

“You seriously think I could beat off six armed guards with a broom…?”

“The handle’s metal. And I’ve done more with less before, I’m certain I could do it if I weren’t currently in the process of exsanguinating.”

You’d think a guy currently in the process of exsanguinating would shut up at some point…, Solid thought, but took the broom from Liquid and left him to lean against the wall (being careful not to smear any blood on it, not that it wouldn’t just get washed away). Solid stole up around the guards, using the water to mask his movements, and positioned himself behind a guard at the edge of the group who happened to be facing away from him - he raised the broom, and—
Solid hit the guy over the head so hard the broom handle snapped in two. He went down like a sack of potatoes and Solid jabbed the now-sharp end of the broken broom into one of his lungs so he’d stay down. By the time the other guards noticed and turned towards Solid, Solid had already stolen the downed guard’s Glock 23 and had it pointed at them.

“Huh? What just happened?”

“Is that a… Dead Cell soldier?!”

“What’s he doing here?!”

“Oh god, he killed Orton!”

Still five against one, but now that he had a gun with ammo in it Solid felt a hell of a lot better about his odds.

Of course the guards would have felt even better about theirs, so they were, predictably, the ones who started firing first. Solid ducked away, shooting back - trying to stick to the relative cover of the water pouring down from the ceiling. It wasn’t much, certainly wouldn’t do anything to stop a bullet, but it was obscuring enough that the guards would only be able to make out movement, so they’d just be shooting where Solid had already been instead of where he was going.

He managed to take out another two before ducking around the same corner where he’d left Liquid. Liquid wasn’t there anymore.

Probably not good.

Well, he could worry about that when the guards were gone. He shot another two and only had one left to go when his gun clicked. Out of ammo. Evidently the guy he’d murdered with a broom hadn’t been working with a full magazine.

“Uh-oh,” Solid said out loud.

The remaining guard advanced, one hand shielding his face from the water, the other training his gun on Solid. Solid took a step back. This was not going well… all this, and he could barely see what was going on… suddenly the guard stopped in his tracks, then dropped his gun, his hands shooting to his neck where he clawed at something. It took Solid a full second to process what was going on: the guard was being garrotted.

And, when the guard started to go limp and slump towards the ground, Solid saw that the person doing the garrotting was, in fact, Liquid. Even paler than before, panting harshly, his face had a homicidal scowl on it even when he flicked his eyes up to Solid.

“Payback for dragging me out of here,” he breathed, “I’ll be damned if I’m going to owe you anything.”

“Uh… yeah,” Solid said as the guard finally lost consciousness and crumpled completely against Liquid’s makeshift wire, whatever he was using — when Liquid dropped the guard entirely, Solid saw that he was using the shoelace from one of his boots. Liquid quickly unwound the cord from where it had brutally cut into the guard’s neck and, since there wasn’t time to re-lace his boot, merely tied it around his ankle so at least his boot would stay on. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Mm. Nice work with that first guard, I’ll admit,” Liquid said lightly - although he was still
obviously short of breath - and when he attempted to straighten himself he only fell back on his ass, clapping a hand to his side again, baring his teeth. Solid sighed and, after taking another Glock from a downed guard, walked over and helped Liquid up, and when he was unsteady on his feet ducked under the arm not applying pressure to his wound to support him. He definitely wasn’t pleased about having to do this, and Liquid seemed to be enjoying himself even less, noticeably tensing when Solid put an arm around his waist - more because he didn’t know what else to do with it than anything else, but from this position he could apply some pressure to the up-until-now-ignored exit wound. But at least Liquid didn’t say anything about it.

They made it up the stairs and to the building exit more or less alright, but they walked right into a group of guards just before leaving the building so they burst out the front door (rather haphazardly) being hotly pursued and fired upon. And of course the pickup truck with their cover fire wasn’t actually here yet, no, that would have been too easy.

“Where the hell are they?” Solid grunted.

Liquid blinked rapidly. “Do I hear… Freddie Mercury hitting a high note…?”

Liquid was neither dying (more than before) nor hallucinating from blood loss; a split second after he said that, the pickup truck crashed into view, taking out half the fence, still blaring Queen - specifically, the guitar solo in “Bohemian Rhapsody”. It was very striking, especially considering the truckbed was occupied by Vulcan Raven with his cannon at the ready, and Wolf was sitting perched on the cabin door (the window was rolled down) steadying her rifle on the top of the roof. She shot a man getting a little close to Solid and Liquid in the forehead as Mei Ling, in the driver’s seat, frantically gestured for them to get over there.

It was only about fifteen meters from the bunker to the truck, but it still seemed like an endless distance to Solid, what with the gunfire at his back and the way he had to support Liquid. At least Raven started up cover fire as soon as they got about six feet away from the door - or rather, he shot the building itself, just over the door, causing part of the wall and ceiling to collapse onto some of their pursuers. Wolf also kept up cover fire, just at a slower rate - granted, it wasn’t hard to fire at a slower rate than ten rounds per second. Still, the shriek of the alarms that had blared inside the bunker were pretty thoroughly replaced by the staccato rumble of gunfire. Solid was starting to wonder if he was going to come away from this with serious hearing damage.

Due to a combination of lack of room in the cabin and the fact that both Solid and Liquid were sopping wet, when they got to the truck they both climbed into the truckbed next to Raven; Liquid could barely pull himself up but irritably waved off Solid’s help. Solid got in the truck after him and as soon as his feet left the ground, Mei Ling gunned it.

“So you think you stop me and spit in my eye!?”

“They’re pursuing,” Wolf said, dropping back into the cabin as Raven shifted his fire from the guards outside the bunker to a sleek white car with armed guards leaning out most of the windows that tore out from a presumed parking lot somewhere behind the building. Both cars crashed into the woods, the pickup truck snapping branches against its grill and windshield.

“You two might want to get on your bellies,” Raven rumbled, finding that the pursuing car’s windshield was bulletproof. Both Solid and Liquid sunk down against the floor of the truckbed without protest.

Wolf slid open the back window of the cabin a few inches. “What happened in there, boss?” she asked.
“Solid’s girlfriend pull the alarm on us,” Liquid growled. “Things got hairy.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Solid said.

“And I have a few questions for Ocelot concerning the fact that those weren’t servers we just drowned - it was an AI.”

“Huh,” Wolf said.

“So you think you can love me and leave me to die!?”

“They’re gaining on us!” Mei Ling cried, staring at the side mirror.

“There is another one coming,” Raven said gravely. “Just behind the first. Looks like heavier weaponry, too.”

“Go for the tires!” Wolf said, “if you take out their tires they will probably crash into a tree!”

Raven jerked his cannon down, his bullets ricocheting off of the hood of the car before finally piercing the front tires. The car jerked around unsteadily, but didn’t crash into a tree - the guards in the car continued taking potshots at the pickup truck.

“D rank,” Liquid muttered to himself.

“Oh, baby—“

Solid looked up. “Er,” he said, “I didn’t think crows were this common in this part of the country.”

“Hm?” Liquid also looked up. “Oh, I believe those are ravens.” A conspiracy of ravens had appeared out of nowhere in the past few minutes, circling over the vehicles, occasionally alighting on branches to caw at the pickup truck and CIA cars as they sped by.

“Ravens?” Raven said, glancing away from the CIA car for a brief second. “A troubling omen…”

“I though ravens were a good omen for you.”

“Can’t do this to me, baby!”

“How far are we from the RV?” Solid called into the cabin.

“We’re taking the long way around, so a few miles,” Mei Ling said, “another couple minutes. Don’t die back there!”

Liquid grunted. “I’m working on it.”

Wolf shrugged off her jacket and shoved it through the back window at Solid (thankfully she had put on a tank top underneath it for once). “Try to mop up some of the blood,” she told him, “you are going to have a lot of people very angry at you if you allow him to die.”

“It’s not my fault he got shot,” Solid said, taking the jacket.

“Just gotta get out—“

“If you hadn’t brought White along then there never would have been an alarm!” Liquid snapped, but moved his hands so that Solid could press Wolf’s jacket against his wounds.
“Oh dear,” Mei Ling suddenly said.

“What is it?” Raven said, going back to trying to shoot the actual people shooting at them instead of their vehicle - not at all helped by the other car immediately behind that one that was also shooting at them, but with sub-machine guns instead of pistols.

“We’re coming right up on Indian Creek,” she said, “and it’s cut a little ravine in this part of the woods, so…”


“We’re going to have to jump it.”

“What?” Solid said at the same time as Mei Ling sped up even more. “What?!”

“Here we go!”

Raven stopped firing for a moment as the pickup’s wheels ran out of ground and the truck went hurtling off the edge of the ravine cut by the creek. The creek itself was only a few feet below them, but - Jesus Christ, they were airborne. Where the hell did Mei Ling learn to drive?!

“Just gotta get right out of here!”

The truck hit the ground hard on the other side of the creek, jolting everyone in it around and eliciting a long string of swear words in several different languages from Liquid. The conspiracy of ravens swooped low over Indian Creek following them, and the bulletholed CIA car in front pulled over sharply at the edge of the ravine, occupants still firing at the pickup truck.

The car behind them did the same thing Mei Ling did and hit the gas just before the edge, making the jump over the ravine with more apparent ease than FOXHOUND had.

“Shoot them, Raven!” Wolf screamed, “if they take out our truck, we’re finished!”

“How far away are we now?” Liquid said, his voice rather faint.

“Just another few minutes,” Mei Ling said, “hang in there! Smash the pots and sink the boats!”

“What??” Solid said.

“An old story from the Qin Dynasty,” Mei Ling explained, “a general named Xiang Yu lead a small army to war - after crossing the last river between them and their battle, he ordered their boats sunk and cooking pots smashed so that retreat would be impossible and his men would have no choice but to fight to the death!”

“That sounds like an awful strategy,” Wolf said.

“He won, though!”

“I don’t see how this is relevant,” Liquid muttered.

“Liquid did fight to the death,” Solid said, “he is dying.”

“No I’m bloody not! I’m not dead yet!!”

“He has survived worse,” Wolf said.
“Yes,” Raven said, still keeping up his rate of fire - surely he was going to run out of ammo sooner or later? - “we are all going to be very disappointed in you if a single gunshot is enough to finally take you down, boss.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it!!” Liquid barked. A raven landed on the edge of the truckbed, just over his head. He snapped his teeth at it.

“What’s with these things…?” Solid said as the ravens started to get closer and closer, still cawing ominously.

“They keep flying in front of the windshield,” Mei Ling said, “I can barely see!”

“Slow down a little,” Wolf said, “we are going to crash at this rate…”

“The pursuing forces are getting closer,” Raven said.

“Too close for comfort, huh,” Solid said, backing up as much as he could without raising his head.

A sunroof on the top of the CIA car slid open, and a man wearing a kevlar vest popped up, laying on the trigger of his machine gun. Raven forewent his vest and nearly tore his head off with his Vulcan cannon - but not before a spray of blood hit the pickup bed behind him. Raven had taken a couple scores of bullets to the chest. Not all of them went straight through. His Vulcan cannon sputtered and died.

The conspiracy of raven’s cawing reached a fever pitch.
“My soul is painted like the wings of butterflies…”

“Raven!!” Liquid shouted.

“What just happened back there?!” Wolf yelled from the cabin.

“Raven’s been shot,” Solid told her.

“What?!” Mei Ling gasped.

“How bad is it?” Wolf demanded.

Raven grunted. “Not good,” he said, then spat out a not-insignificant amount of blood. “But we are still being pursued…”

“Oh, god—“ Liquid started.

“The fairytales of yesterday—

“Grow but never die…”

Raven did what had to be the ultimate last-ditch effort: He hefted his entire Vulcan cannon in his powerful arms and physically threw it out of the truckbed. It landed squarely on the hood of the CIA car, causing it to flip forward and eject half its occupants. Within seconds it was no longer visible through the trees, as FOXHOUND’s pickup truck continued to speed away. Raven turned around and slumped against the tailgate, breathing hard. His chest looked pretty chewed-up and despite only being shot moments ago, he had as much blood on him as Liquid did already.

“I had run out of ammo anyway,” Raven wheezed.

“I can fly, my friends…!”

“Mei Ling, how close are we to the RV?!!” Liquid said.

“We’re minutes away!” Mei Ling responded.

“You keep saying that!”

“They’re already going to have a first aid kit ready,” Wolf said, “Raven, just hang in there!”

Raven grunted. “Boss…”

Liquid whipped his head around to face him. “Save your strength,” he hissed, “come on, that’s survivable, Raven—“

“Perhaps for you, boss. Not so for the rest of us mortals…”

“The show must go on…”

“Don’t say that!!”
“Boss… you were right… it is my existence which is no longer needed in this world.”

“No, that wasn’t what I meant-!”

“The show must go on…”

“How many minutes, Mei Ling?” Solid called over his shoulder.

“Uh… three! Let’s say three!” Mei Ling replied.

A raven landed on Raven’s shoulder. “My body will not remain in this place,” he said, spitting out blood again, “my spirit and my flesh will become one with the ravens… in that way I will return to Mother Earth who bore me.”

“No!!” Liquid yelled, “no one’s dying on my watch, goddammit!”

Raven batted away any attempts to apply pressure to his wounds with Wolf’s jacket. “Boss,” he said, “and you too, Snake… my spirit will be watching you. Understand?”

“I’ll face it with a grin…”

“We still need you!”

“…why?” Solid said to Raven.

“I’m never giving in!”

Raven let out a sort of laugh, sort of rattle. “You are snakes which were not creature by Nature. The two of you… you are from another world, a world I do not wish to know. Go and do battle with your world, I will be watching from above.”

The conspiracy of ravens began to swarm the pickup bed in earnest, forcing both Liquid and Solid to back up away from Raven.

“On with the show!!”

“You’re just going to give up now?!” Liquid said, “you can’t do this, Raven!!”

“Liquid, those are mortal wounds,” Solid said.

“Oh my god,” Wolf said quietly, looking out the back window of the cabin again. “Raven…”

“In the natural world,” Raven said, voice tight - the birds perched all over him, cawing aggressively, a few already poking their beaks into his wounds, “there is no such thing as boundless slaughter. There is always an end to it. But you are different.”

“I’m top the bill-“

“What are you trying to say?” Solid said, mouth dry.

“I’m overkill—“

“The path you walk on has no end. Each step you take is paved with the corpses of your enemies. Their souls will haunt you forever… you shall have no peace.” He tilted his head back, closing his eyes. “Hear me, boss… Snake… my spirit will be watching over both of you!”
“Oh my god,” Wolf said again, louder this time, as the crowd of ravens completely obscured Raven from view. “Oh my god, Raven, maro, tuxwa - na, na, na — jè kerema xwe!”

“Did he just… did Raven just die?” Mei Ling said nervously.

“Raven, hevalê min… bi xateré te… em ê disa hevdîtin.”

“I have to find the will to carry on…!”

Liquid was staring at the ravens with eyes wide, breath coming raggedly. Slowly he raised his knees to his chest and rested his forehead on them - Solid assumed that it was a combination of pain from his gunshot wound and emotional distress at Raven’s sudden death, but then Liquid abruptly whimpered “Oh god, my heart—“ and slumped sideways, unconscious.

Wolf screamed. “No!! Not you too!!”

“We’re almost there,” Mei Ling said, “we’re almost- look, there they are! The RV is in sight!!”

“Hurry!!”

“On with the show…

“Show must go on! Show must go on…

“Go on, go on, go on, go… on…”

A hotel suite in Richmond, Virginia. That night.

Liquid had only passed out for about thirty seconds before coming round, shortly before Solid started dragging him out of the truckbed - and was quickly chased off by Mantis, who used his psychokinesis to move Liquid back to the RV without jostling him too much. He was obviously reluctant to let anyone else even touch Liquid in this state (even Wolf, who tried to help), so he was left in charge of making sure Liquid didn’t die. It took him a while to get the bleeding to stop and the wound disinfected, and longer to get him warmed up again after the expected drop in body temperature from all that blood loss combined with being soaked to the bone with freezing water… but having the dogs helped, Benedict was the first to volunteer his body heat by wriggling up under Liquid’s blanket, and Bêdeng soon followed. (Frank stuck with Solid, who was completely uninjured although he kept coughing and was very glad to be out of those wet fatigues.)

It was far too late for Raven, though. If there even had been a chance anymore, it was gone by the time Mei Ling pulled up in front of the RV and minivan. Already half of his flesh had been stripped away by the ravens that no one could chase off even now, leaving a gruesome partial skeleton. Mei Ling cried out loud when she stepped out of the truck and turned around and saw it, and hid behind Solidus of all people… Otacon refused to even look again after his first glance. Octopus was the first one to ask what they were supposed to do with the body but the answer was unfortunately obvious: leave it. It wasn’t like they could take the pickup truck with them anyway, too many bullet holes. So they abandoned it, Raven’s corpse, and his avian chaperones to the great hereafter in the woods of Brunswick county and headed for Virginia’s capital.

They got one of those hotel suites where it was actually several bedrooms attached to one another instead of just one, all leading out to the front room that has a pull-out sofa bed and something the hotel called a kitchenette even though it was really just a counter included with the mini-fridge and microwave. For once Liquid didn’t protest or complain when Mantis herded him into the room with the double bed and made him lie down.
“This is not the first time you have lost someone under your command,” Mantis said, dragging the blanket up over Liquid, “it will likely not be the last.”

“I know,” Liquid said, quietly hating himself.

“…let me know if you need anything. Get some sleep, Eli.”

“Nn.”

He stepped back into the main room, softly closing the door behind him. Where exactly everyone else had gone Mantis didn’t know or care, but Wolf and Octopus were sitting on the couch in the main room, with a six-pack of the shittiest craft beer money could try to avoid being spent on.

“How is he?” Wolf asked.

“Fine,” Mantis said, “it was only a small-caliber wound. He just needs to rest.”

“A small-caliber wound, huh?” Octopus said, taking a swig of his beer, “you mean like a .22? That’s funny, CIA grunts usually use .40 caliber weapons.”

“Mm. It does not really matter.”

“But why did he faint like that?” Wolf said, her eyebrows drawing together, “the amount of blood he lost… it really was a measly amount, for him, anyway. I once witnessed him take half a dozen bullets to the abdomen and still get back up and try to rip someone’s throat out with his teeth.”

Octopus gave her a funny look. “When did this happen?”

“Back at Outer Heaven… we were partnered up for an outing, but things did not go well.”

“I remember that,” Mantis said, shaking his head, “he was off the medical platform again in a matter of days. No, I don’t think he passed out because of his wound. Perhaps he…” he trailed off. He didn’t really want to say that it had likely been heart problems even though he knew that that had been Liquid’s assessment of it at the time… by this point everyone was more or less aware of Liquid’s recurrent chest pain issues, but no one, Liquid included, seemed to think that it was anything seriously medically wrong with him (aside from Liquid’s persistent concern that he was getting prematurely old).

“…just the emotional toll of watching Raven die right in front of him?” Octopus said. “I mean, that’s fair.”

Wolf nodded. “It was so sudden…”

“Yeah,” Octopus said, raising his beer. “So what the hell. Let’s pour one out for our giant shaman friend.” He tipped the bottle over, spilling its contents onto the floor, where it soaked into the carpet for some hapless cleaning lady to deal with later. Wolf shrugged and repeated the move with her own bottle. “I’ll never forget him. My best friend, the only guy in our unit with a real college education and he could drink all of us under the table too. Could have snapped any one of us in half like a twig with one arm tied behind his back and he was great at cards… and where did that lead him? Dying for fucking nothing in the middle of nowhere…”

“I don’t think it was for nothing,” Wolf said seriously.

“It was for revenge,” Mantis said dryly.
“Oh, who cares about revenge?” Octopus said, “if nothing else, you shouldn’t die for it. What’s the point?”

“What do you mean?” Wolf said.

“Look, I’m just here because you all are - this is my team, it’s like my family, I’m not going to just abandon you. But you? All of you are going for this because you want revenge on the Patriots — but why the hell are you willing to die for it? You want revenge because the Patriots killed people you love… the boss lost his father, Wolf lost her mentor, Raven lost everybody in his combat group… but if you just get yourself killed while trying to get back at them for that, what the hell did you accomplish?”

Neither Wolf nor Mantis said anything for a moment. Octopus shook his head in disgust.

“Revenge doesn’t mean anything unless you can come out of alive, dammit, and better than whoever wronged you,” he said, “it means nothing if you die. And you died for it… well, there you go. Maybe the rest of us can make sure Raven didn’t die in vain, but that doesn’t mean there was any meaning behind his death.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Wolf said.

“What do you mean?” Mantis said.

“I don’t think this is about revenge anymore… not really,” Wolf said, “yes, it did start out that way, but… when you are fighting for revenge, you are fighting for your past. I do not think we are doing that. I think at some point, we… started fighting for the future.”

“And that’s what Raven died for?” Octopus said, “the future?”

Wolf nodded. “If it were just about revenge then we would not have to take down the entire system. That is something we only want to do to ensure that nothing like what happened at Outer Heaven ever happens again, to us or to anyone else. Our pasts can stay where they belong - behind us. It is our future we are headed for, and our future that Raven sacrificed himself to help propel us towards…”

“I see…” Mantis said, “is that what we’re doing? Instead of fighting for our pasts and dying for nothing, we…”

“…try to make the world a better place?” Octopus said, then opened another beer. “Sure. That sounds good to me.”

“That’s that, then,” Wolf said. “How funny. Here I thought we were a group of heartless, brutal killers. Who would have thought we’d stumble into being heroes?”

Chapter End Notes

When Wolf starts speaking in Kurmanji, she’s saying “don’t go, for God’s sake/please - no, no, no — please!” then “Raven, my friend… goodbye… we’ll meet again.”

So, rarepair week starts in two days and the next chapter is a timeskip, so I just won't be updating this fic until the twentieth. Also, I need to catch up on my buffer anyway, and I got other fics to write - the next installment of o1&0s, a longform version of that bacha
bazi fic, a new White Diamond fic, some stuff for Miscellany, and then over on my main account another #MGSHSAU chapter and a surprise AU that'll hopefully drop at the beginning of June... damn, I'm busy. Anyway, taking a break!
And sorry for killing off one of the good guys! :D
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter End Notes

Soraya’s pic is from a painting by Iranian artist Iman Maleki; Nadine’s is Disney concept art from *The Princess and the Frog*; Neela’s is a painting by Indian artist Ravi Varma; McGolden is a cap of Fox Mulder from one of the X-Files comics; Dr. Madnar & Col. Jackson were drawn by nightcheesus; Liquid and Catherine were drawn by me (obviously); Frank and Benedict are uhhh random photos from Google and everything else has an official source although some are edited.

And yes this does mean that Naomi is still alive after all :^)
Ending Outer Heaven Uprising simulation… program successfully deactivated. You may now leave the VR chamber.
Please return accessories to appropriate storage containers.

“Great job as always, Snake,” Maxine Work said cheerfully.

“If you say so, Max,” Jack said dubiously, putting down the boxy, matte white gun model used in the VR exercises. “I kind of flubbed it on the bull tank, and I always have a hard time with Fire Trooper…”

“You’re definitely improving,” Dr. William Wilson said.

“Yeah?”

“Indeed… as you learn how to fight the VR simulations of your enemies, the AI governing your enemies’ behavior also learns how to fight you.”

“Scaling difficulty!” Max interjected.

“Anyway, the average amount of self-adjustment the simulation AI undergoes with each session has increased by 12% in the past week alone.”

“So I really am I improving?” Jack said, “thanks, Doc.”

“It’s all you, Snake. I’ve done nothing.”

“Except design the whole program…! I don’t know if you’ve ever tried it out yourself, Doc, but it seriously feels real in there.”

“Snake,” Colonel Campbell cut across, “you’re through for today. You shouldn’t just sit around chatting.”

“Oh, right,” Jack said, “sorry, Colonel. Hey, Max, Doc — we still on for lunch tomorrow?”

“Sorry,” Max said, “I got a text from my mom, she wants me to come over tomorrow… I’ll have to cancel.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to cancel too,” said Doc, “I’m ashamed to say it, but I’d completely forgotten I have a new program due for implementation on Monday. I’m going to have to spend the weekend doing some final tests.”


“I hope so!” Max said.

Rosemary pretty much always met up with Jack when they were leaving for the day from the military base where they both worked - Jack undergoing something similar to his prior Force XXI training, her analyzing… stuff. Jack sighed when he saw her.
“Support staff canceled on you again, huh?” Rosemary said, wrapping herself around his arm.

“Yeah… this is the fourth time they’ve done it. I’m starting to think they actually don’t want to hang out with me,” he said, half-jokingly. But honestly… it wasn’t that bad to want to talk to his co-workers face to face once in a while, was it? Get to know them as something more than just voices in his ear and faces on a simulated Codec screen… Rosemary was always saying he really should have more friends than just her - he’d been pretty much completely solitary even before his recent transfer to New York.

But just her was fine, really. Sure he’d heard plenty of times that the person you’re dating isn’t supposed to be your only friend, but that only applied in cases where the person you were dating wasn’t letting you have friends besides them. Rosemary had only ever done the opposite; however, Jack was glad she never pushed the subject, because making friends was hard. He often had a difficult time feeling close to Rosemary, and he was dating her.

For like three weeks now.

Although to be fair they’d made love on their first date.

“Well, I can make up for it,” Rosemary said brightly, “you can just have lunch with me tomorrow.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jack said, “already got a place in mind?”

“Nope… I was thinking I’d do the cooking myself! Meet me at my apartment?”

“Sure,” Jack said, grinning. “A home-cooked meal by my girlfriend? You haven’t done that for me yet… how could I possibly say no?”

“I’m sure you’ll love it,” Rosemary said, squeezing his arm affectionately.

“—and so, to make a very long story short,” Solidus said, standing slightly apart from the rest of the group, “the cartel blew up our RV.”

“But not everything in it!” Mei Ling called, triumphantly holding up both her and Otacon’s laptop bags.

“Mei Ling, the Codec won’t pick up your voice,” Otacon said, fiddling with his Walkman. Slightly dented, but still functional. He’d only lost one tape, too, and it wasn’t even an important one - just a random sampling of sugary pop songs he’d poorly ripped from the radio when he was in middle school.

“Is that Ocelot he’s calling?” Solid said, looking up. He’d been carefully herding Frank away from the crumbles of safety glass in a fifteen-foot perimeter around the burnt wreck that once was their RV. “Solidus, remind Ocelot he told me he’d give me a way to contact Master Miller six months ago, will you?”

Solidus ignored him. “Uruapan?” he said, evidently repeating whatever Ocelot had told him, “that’s up in Michoacán, isn’t it? Ocelot, we’re in Guerrero, we’re eight hours away if we drive and we don’t have a— don’t you ‘Then you’d better start walking, sir’ me!”

“We could hitchhike,” Mei Ling said.

“We’re fugitives,” Solid said. “Otacon and I are officially dead and you and Solidus are both missing persons.”
“They might not recognize us! Or even if they do, we could convince them not to tell… I know! We could try to flag down a trucker.”

“A trucker?” Solid said, “truckers aren’t exactly the first people I think of when I think of ‘trustworthy’.”

“She has a point, you know,” Otacon said, shoving the Walkman in his pocket. “Well, sort of. It’s more that even if a trucker tells everyone they picked up a missing college student, a dead special forces operator, the ‘Shadow Moses martyr’, the former President of the United States, and a dog off the side of some random highway in Mexico, no one’s gonna believe them…”

Solid grunted. “If you say so,” he said, “but it’d still be safer if they didn’t know who we were…”

“I don’t think our faces are that famous,” Mei Ling said, “at least, not in Mexico! Plus it’s been two years, I bet everyone’s forgotten about Otacon by now…”

“I dunno,” Otacon said, “I was in the National Enquirer last week, remember? Octopus called about it. Of course, it was a bad picture, they didn’t get our location right and claimed we were being funded by Al-Qaeda for some reason… and didn’t bother identifying anyone other than me…”

“Oh yeah… but still!”

“And even if they don’t know who we are,” Solid went on like that whole exchange hadn’t even happened, “we still make a pretty weird group…”

“We can make up a cover story,” Otacon said thoughtfully. “Any suggestions?”

“No.”

“Well… hmmm…” Mei Ling put her finger to her cheek, “Solidus looks old enough to be Snake’s dad, so we can start there…” she tilted her head towards Solidus, who was still arguing with Ocelot over Codec.

“No,” Solid said again, “he’d get into his role and it would be really weird.”

“You and I are pretty obviously unrelated to either of them, though,” Otacon said, ignoring Solid.

“Yes, but,” Mei Ling said, smiling, “I can be Solidus’ pretty young new wife.”

“…seriously? Okay, what about me? I don’t think people would really buy something like ‘the son’s random friend who came too’…”

“Oh yeah… you can be Snake’s boyfriend!”

“Uh, I don’t think I like this plan anymore.”

Solid snorted. “At that point,” he said dryly, “wouldn’t it make more sense to say you were my and Otacon’s adopted-from-overseas daughter instead of Solidus’ obviously gold-digging wife?”

“Then you’d have to say you’re married,” Mei Ling said, then slapped a hand to her forehead. “Darn it, I forgot that we’d need fake rings in order to pull that off.”

“Maybe we can say the rings got blown up along with our RV.”

Mei Ling either missed his sarcasm or was doing this on purpose. “Yeah, that’ll work! Okay, just let me do the talking, all you three need to worry about is addressing everyone else appropriately. Like,
Otacon, you’ll need to call Snake ‘dear’ and ‘honey’ and that kind of thing, and Snake, you need to call Solidus ‘Dad’…”

“I really don’t think I like this plan anymore,” Otacon said, just as Solidus came walking over. Frank barked at him.

“We’re going to walk back to town,” he said authoritatively, “and get a hotel. Ocelot said he’ll be in the area next week and will be able to get us to a new vehicle.”

“And… what about the cartel?” Solid said. “Did he have any advice about that?”

“…”

“I guess that’s what you’re for, Snake,” Otacon said, adjusting his glasses.

Solid sighed, took out his SOCOM, pulled back the slide to chamber a bullet just in case, and reholstered it. “I guess so. …which way is Copala, again…?”

“Boss, it is already past noon,” Wolf said, opening the door to Liquid’s (and Mantis’, although he wasn’t there right now) room in the Cape Town safehouse (apartment). “How long do you plan on sleeping?”

“I’m not sleeping,” Liquid muttered. His back was to her.

“What? You’ve been lying in bed all day with the lights out and the curtains drawn. And Mantis is not in here with you, what on earth are you doing if you aren’t sleeping?”

Liquid half-sat up and turned to look at her, and she saw now that he was playing on that DS Otacon had gotten him last year (in exchange for getting his Gameboy back, since Liquid had been - perhaps predictably - holding it hostage). “I’m working on defeating the Elite Four,” he explained.

“…of all the hobbies, boss, this…”

“We don’t have anything else to do, do we?” Liquid sniffed.

Wolf frowned. It was true, they didn’t. And while all four of them had, at some point, gone out exploring the city - it was only natural, the dogs had to be walked, of course - they weren’t trying to push their luck. Even Ocelot hadn’t been certain about whether or not there were Patriots around, and if they were then Mantis’ ever-so-convenient SEP field wouldn’t do anything to shield him or whoever he was with from notice, thanks to the cybernetic implants. And unlike Liquid and his still-new (English!) copy of *Pokémon Diamond*, Octopus and his (extremely slow, he complained) internet connection, and Mantis and his new books he’d casually stolen from a local shop, Wolf herself didn’t have anything else to do. She’d tried target-practice from the roof - put a silencer on her rifle and aimed at cans being kicked around, that sort of thing - but it had attracted too much attention.

“That is probably bad for your eyes,” Wolf said.

“Hmph.”

“I mean, you are already half-blind in one of them as it is… I seem to recall you being prescribed glasses a few years ago, too…”

“They were only reading glasses,” Liquid snapped, sitting up all the way. “And the left lens was just
a plain piece of glass!"

“Should you not still wear them while playing video games…?” Wolf said, disregarding his second statement entirely.

“I left them at the old headquarters anyway. I don’t have them.”

Mantis leaned into view behind Wolf. “I put them in the suitcase before we left, Eli, I’ve been carrying them around these past two years in case you needed them.”

“What.”

Wolf blinked. “Mantis, why didn’t you give them to him before?”

Mantis shrugged. “He didn’t want them…”

There was a war on, after all.

Naomi— no, that wasn’t her name yet, she didn’t have a name yet, if her parents ever gave her one she’d been too young to remember it— she wasn’t sure if all the red staining the Zambezi river today was silt or blood or a starvation-induced hallucination. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d eaten. So she crouched by the bank of the river and balanced on her heels, staring into the crimson swirls of the water.

Boots crunched nearby.

Hello? Hello? Hello…?

“Hey, kid…” the man - the boy? how old was he? he was at dirty as she was and he looked strong and powerful an definitely an adult, but she’d seen teenage boys who’d looked like how her father or grandfathers had probably looked — he spoke to her, in Portuguese, which must have been her native tongue, and crouched down next to her. “Kid.”

Naomi, or whatever her name was, didn’t look at him.

Is there anybody in there?

He dropped a ration by her side. Slowly she looked at it, at him.

“Go on,” he said, opening it for her. “You must be hungry.”

Just nod if you can hear me.

The man’s (and he was a man) name was Frank, or Frankie she called him, and he’d always liked the name Naomi so that was he called her. He was a soldier; Naomi didn’t know for which side, because he never told her. Why would he? She was just a little girl, had no way of understanding the complex history and politics of Rhodesia and its civil war — all she needed to know was that people died, yes, but Frankie was her big brother now and he would protect her.

(Years later she would know that he’d been with RENAMO, stamping out the communist scum.)

Frankie had a protector of his own. Naomi knew even less about him than she did Frankie, but that didn’t matter. He was just a little bit shorter than Frankie but much older, or at least he looked much older with his beard and lined face, and he only had one eye. Frankie called him Big Boss. Big Boss responded to that so that must have been his name.
Naomi was glad to know him because the circumstances behind their first meeting had been his rescue of Frankie from a prison camp where they’d tortured him and cut off his nose and ears. Naomi had been all alone for that entire week - oh yes, it had only been a measly week — Frankie had left her behind one morning at their makeshift home, promising as he always did to come back safely, and he did eventually but it was a week later and he was disfigured and woozy with blood loss but he and Big Boss went “way back, Naomi - I first met him when I was about your age…”

Is there anyone at home?

Come on, now…

It was Big Boss who got them back to America. Helped them get fake ID papers for Naomi - being an American citizen, or at least a fake one, would make the process go so much smoother. Big Boss had a friend of his help out, but Naomi never met this friend or even heard his name, and Frankie didn’t seem to know him either.

The real Naomi Hunter, who had gone missing in Jordan earlier that year, was 54 years old, so that had to be changed. And African-American — that got changed to “white, non-Hispanic” even though no one was entirely sure what Naomi’s ethnicity really was. (Sure, she was brown, but a very light brown.) And she had a doctorate… but Frankie had laughed and told Naomi that was something to aspire towards. Go to school, kid. Not war.

Stay off the battlefield.

I hear you’re feeling down.

So when Frankie and Naomi got to America Naomi told everyone her last name was Hunter - it was close enough to her “real” last name, Frankie’s last name, that she felt comfortable doing so. She went to school. Frankie got plastic surgery, so he got his nose and ears back even if they looked just a little different now.

And then some snake had killed Naomi’s benefactor and sent her brother home a cripple.

Well, I can ease your pain…

Naomi vowed to curse him. Curse him…

But she was asleep now, wasn’t she? Asleep, because a wolf had torn out her eye… and she’d been cursed herself. Cursed by her own pursuit of the snake who’d turned Frankie into an automaton…

Get you on your feet again…

Relax.

“I’ll need some information first—

“Just the basic facts…”

Naomi blinked.

The ceiling was white.

“Can you show me where it hurts?”

Her mouth was dry. Her body hurt. Everything to the left of her seemed lost in black. Clumsily, she groped around with weak, numb fingers for the source of that noise.
The radio cut off as it fell to the floor with a clatter. Naomi let out a breath. Never much liked Pink Floyd anyway.

“Dr. Hunter?” said a voice from nearby. Naomi vaguely tilted her head. That was her, wasn’t it? Dr. Hunter… the woman Big Boss had bought the ID papers of, she’d been a cardiac surgeon, but Naomi was… what was she? She had a PhD…

She tried to say something but all that came out was a string of garbled Portuguese that didn’t sound right even to her ears.

“Ah, good. I’d been told you’d finally woken up,” the woman who’d spoken a moment ago said. She had a white coat, so Naomi surmised she was a scientist. No, an MD. This was a hospital. “That’s good. Very good. Your brainwave patterns had been picking up for weeks, we were expecting you to regain consciousness any day now. How are you feeling?”

 “…can’t see…” Naomi managed to get out, “…on my… left side…”

The doctor frowned, slightly, just for a moment, before returning to a disarmingly neutral - pleasant, almost - expression. “Tell me, Dr. Hunter: what do you remember?”

“A… wolf…”

That brief frown again. But the doctor pressed on: “Not to alarm you, but you’ve been in a coma for 31 months. You were shot in the head - your left eye was… unsalvageable. There are also some… other issues that we need to discuss as well, but later. With physical therapy, you should still be able to return to a normal life.”

“A normal life…?“ Naomi echoed. 31 months? That was a bit over two and half years… a coma? Just like Big Boss… and her left eye was gone, too.

Perhaps, she thought, if they offered her a glass replacement she should insist on an eyepatch.

“People are able to return to their usual work and routines after extended comatose periods all the time,” the doctor said.

“I can’t go back,” Naomi said.

“Hm?”

“I can’t go back. I don’t want to go back.” She tried to sit up, but was unsuccessful. Instead she stared up at the doctor, pulling her lips back from her teeth. “I’m not going back to a normal life.”

“…right,” the doctor said, her voice agreeable but skepticism visible in her eyes. “In addition to physical and oncological therapy, I would also recommend you make use of our psychological counseling services. Of course, this is all optional, but as your doctor I would advise—“

“I’m going to find the wolf who ripped out my eye,” Naomi said, trying again to sit up, and doing so this time. The doctor took a step back. “I’m going to find the snake who destroyed my family.”

“Dr. Hunter, please calm down.”

“I was trying to curse him, but it failed… someone intervened…”

The doctor sighed, scrubbing a hand down her face. “…Christ… this’ll be the last time I let shady
government types admit someone to my hospital if it's the last thing I do…”

Naomi swung her legs over the side of the bed. “I have to take matters into my own hands,” she said.

After all, there was a war on.

Chapter End Notes

Maxine “Max” Work and Dr. William “Doc” Wilson are actually real characters! Or rather, they were real characters, initially planned on being included in MGS2 but cut during development. You can read about them on the wiki. Of course, I changed Doc’s role completely…
Catherine filtered back through the crowd of graduates and well-wishers, diploma in hand, tugging out the bobby pins that had forced her cap to actually stay on her frohawk for longer than thirty seconds. So she was officially done with Western Carolina University — great. Already got a night nurse job lined up with the local hospital — even better. Father still missing and had even stopped updating Facebook to pretend he wasn’t — not good. She refused to think he might be dead, but anything could happen at this point.

She was startled by the sound of clapping behind her. She whirled around.

“McGolden…?!?”

“Hey, Cathy,” McGolden said with a lopsided grin, putting his hands down. “Congrats. Sucks that your father couldn’t make it to your college graduation, but at least you’ve got an entire nursing degree now, right? That’s cool.”

“McGolden!” She ran up to him and, almost despite herself, hugged him, lifting him a few inches off the ground as she did — he laughed nervously when she put him back down. “I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“Two years, as a matter of fact.”

“What are you doing here?”

McGolden looked around, then lowered his voice and said, “we shouldn’t talk out in the open. Let’s go someplace quiet, alright?”

“Right. Come on.”

She walked him back to the parking lot and let herself into her car - dumping her diploma, cap, gown, tassels, etc. in the trunk. McGolden took the passenger seat, mumbling something about taking a cab here anyway.

“New car, huh,” he said, moving the sun visor around pointlessly. “It’s nice. Chevy… Corvette, C6, right?”

“Yup,” Catherine said, starting it up, “remember how Ocelot stole my car two years ago? By the time I made it back to Cullowhee, this thing - brand-new! - was sitting in my usual parking space. Keys arrived in the mail the next day, along with a nice little note signed ‘R.O.’ that told me I’d better be a good girl and stay put and keep my head down for Daddy’s sake.”

“So the car came from Ocelot…” McGolden said.

“Kind of him, eh?”

“You know he put a transmitter or a bug or something in it, right?”

“Transmitter,” Catherine said, jerking her head towards the glove box. McGolden opened it up and found something tiny and electronic in a zip-lock bag sitting among the registration papers, napkins,
maps, and .500 S&W Magnum clips. “First thing I did as soon as I had the car unlocked — took me two hours to find it, bastard had put it between pages of the owner’s manual. Seriously, who reads those?”

“Must have been what he was thinking,” McGolden said, closing the glove box again.

“Yeah… but really, McGolden, what are you doing here?”

“Can’t I drop by to see my friend when she’s graduating without any family there?”

Catherine snorted. “Come on, McGolden.”

“Okay, fine,” McGolden said, and pulled out a CD in a paper sleeve that he’d had tucked into his ubiquitous notebook. “So a few weeks ago - and bear with me on this, I was in Australia when this happened - my editor Mr. Smithson sends me this. I’ve checked it - it’s legit.”

“What is it?”

“Do you remember the fall after you and I went to Alaska, there was a book out about the incident your father was involved in?”

“In the Darkness of Shadow Moses: The Unofficial Truth?” Catherine said, “yes, a little bit. I read it, actually, but it was really… well, short. And vague. Didn’t tell me anything I didn’t already know.”

McGolden nodded. “Right,” he said, “because that was the abridged version. The censored version. And its author, Nastasha Romanenko, went missing right after it was published — probably because even though it was abridged, it still told the public a lot of things that, up until then, were only being passed around conspiracy theorist circles.”

“Like the identity of Solid Snake,” Catherine said, “or the fact that the terrorists were a rogue Army special forces group… of course, no mention of the fact that it was the Secretary of Defense who nuked the island, or that at least some members of FOXHOUND are still alive… or that there was a Metal Gear there somehow.”

“Well,” McGolden said, unable to hide a grin, and shook the CD slightly, “all that wasn’t not included because Nastasha didn’t know about it. She knew. I know she knew, because this CD contains the full text of In the Darkness of Shadow Moses.”

Catherine glanced at him, raising her eyebrows. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. Confirms a bunch of things we already knew from what your dad told you, plus the 4chan leaker… and also brings up a couple things we haven’t heard before. Like the name…” he glanced around again, although they were completely alone on the road, before continuing. “…the Patriots.”

“…that means nothing to me,” Catherine said flatly.

“I kinda figured. I’ve never heard of them before, either, and even Nastasha wasn’t very forthcoming on them. But we already know there’s some huge conspiracy at play here, right? If I’m reading what Nastasha wrote right, then that’s what they call themselves: Patriots.”

Catherine’s grip on the steering wheel tightened. “So you think it’s these Patriots guys that have something to do with my father running off?”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it, Cathy. So that’s why I came straight here, as soon as I could! …remember, I was in Australia when I got this CD… anyway, I’m pretty sure this is our next step in finding your
“Asking Natasha Romanenko just what the hell is going on around here?” Catherine said, “you just said she went missing two years ago, McGolden. I don’t think that’ll be much—”

“No, no. I think we should go to Shadow Moses island itself.”

There was a long pause.

“It’s irradiated,” Catherine said bluntly.

“We don’t have to go on the actual island,” McGolden said, “or even the peninsula. I’ll bet you anything that whoever these Patriots are, they’ve got that place guarded somehow. We’ve just got to go do a bit of observing, that’s all.”

“Sounds more like using ourselves as bait to lure them out into the open…”

“Po-tay-to, po-tah-to. You still carry around that massive revolver, right?”

Catherine rapped her knuckles against her side, just under her armpit. They made a metallic sound.

“So I’m not worried,” McGolden said.

“I’m more worried about Ocelot, personally,” Catherine admitted. “But my roommate Veronica has a job lined up at the same hospital as I do and we’ve already decided to just keep our lease for awhile. I can put Ocelot’s transmitter in her car… that way, he won’t notice that I’m not where I’m supposed to be, at least for a couple months. And we can use this car to head back to Alaska.”

McGolden made a low whistle. “Smart,” he said admiringly, “we’ve definitely gotta get rid of that transmitter, but there’s no way Ocelot won’t notice if it were destroyed or get suspicious if it stopped moving…”

“Okay. Let’s swing by my apartment so I can pack a few changes of clothes, drop the transmitter off in Veronica’s car, and then head up to Shadow Moses.”

McGolden blinked. “Just like that?” he said.

“What?”

“You just said you had a job lined up at a hospital…”

“I do. I’ll just tell them I’ll have to reschedule my first day, though, no problem.”

“Cathy, I really don’t think is gonna take any less than a few months at the least… I mean, we’ve waited two years for this lead already…”

Catherine shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. If this takes too long then I’ll just cancel — I’m a registered nurse, McGolden, most of the world has a chronic nursing shortage. I can get a job anywhere.”

“Oh yeah. Good point.”

“And Daddy’s more important anyway.”

“I know you’re not as young as you used to be,” Ocelot said, stepping into a small, dark office
somewhere in an undisclosed city in the East, “but napping at your desk is just bad form, Kaz.”

“Shut up,” Miller groaned, not raising his head. For the past two years, Ocelot had had him - well, he ‘suggested’ he do it, anyway, like he had a choice - handling logistics for the Patriot resistance, whatever they were calling themselves. Managing financials, acquiring fake IDs and bank accounts, coordinating intelligence reports from people Ocelot was blackmailing, tapping into gunrunning networks… it was, as Ocelot was fond of snidely pointing out, just like being back with Diamond Dogs. Miller didn’t much appreciate being chained to a desk doing all the paperwork that Ocelot had too many irons in the fire to handle himself nowadays, but it did seem that, even after more than twenty years, he’d never lost his touch for it. (And it was much easier now that he wasn’t one-handed anymore.)

Ocelot placed a mug of fresh coffee on Miller’s desk by his elbow. “Quite literally,” he said, ignoring the fact that Miller had spoken at all, “it’s bad for your back. And at your age, you should really watch out for that.”

“You’re older than me, you asshole,” Miller snapped, sitting up (his back popped in several places) and snatching the coffee mug. At least Ocelot knew exactly how Miller liked it - and that wasn’t even something that happened because it’d been two years since he was pigeonholed into this, Ocelot had just remembered from the start how Miller had taken in coffee back in the seventies and eighties.

“Only by a few years. And I don’t sleep at desks.”

“You don’t sleep.”

“That takes care of the problem in and of itself.” He waved a hand. “Two orders of business—“

“Oh, Christ.”

“One, call the car dealership in Uruapan, Mexico. Snake and his group had a little run-in with the cartel and now they’re stranded and need new transportation.”

“Great,” Miller grunted, shuffling through a stack of papers on his desk.

“Two, EVA needs to get in touch with that munitions smuggler from South Africa - you know the one.”

“The one who should’ve quit when the Cold War ended?” Miller said, raising an eyebrow over a sip of coffee.

“That’s him. He’s the only one willing to sell Milkor BXP$s in the kind of quantities she wants… at a price she’s willing to pay.”

“Hm.” Another swig of coffee. “Does she know you’ve outsourced all these useful contacts of yours she likes to take advantage of to me?”

“I never saw a reason to mention it.”

“Of course you didn’t. Was there a reason there couldn’t tell me this over the phone, or did you just want to bother me, Ocelot?”

Ocelot smiled faintly. “Just wanted to bother you,” he said.
“Hm?” Mantis looked up from his book.

“Something wrong?” Octopus said from where he was on the computer, browsing conspiracy theory boards again. (Wolf had fallen asleep in front of the TV; Liquid was still playing *Pokémon Diamond* but had relocated to the balcony, along with Benedict and Bêdeng, for some fresh-ish air.)

“No… it’s nothing.”

He said right before Liquid threw open the balcony door. “Would it *kill* her to give prior warning that she’s coming?!” With the balcony door open, over the ambient noise of the city and Bêdeng and Benedict barking, the dwindling rumble of motorcycles being parked and turned off could be heard.

“What’s going on?” Wolf said, rubbing her eyes sleepily.

“EVA and some associate of hers just stopped in front of our building,” Mantis said dismissively. Then, without even turning around: “Eli, don’t you *dare* shut yourself up in your room, greet your mother when she comes to the door.”

“Tch…”

“I wonder what she is doing here?” Wolf said.

“Might have just been in the area,” Octopus said, closing his laptop. (It was actually Mei Ling’s old laptop, she’d gotten a new one the previous year and offloaded the obsolete-but-still-functional one on Octopus.)

A few minutes and multiple unsuccessful escape attempts by Liquid later, there was a knock on the door. Liquid grudgingly cracked it open.

“Hello, Mother.”

“Hello, Eli. Open the door the rest of the way.”

“What are you doing here?”

Audible sigh. “We just in the area on business, Eli, it has nothing to do with you, I just thought I’d —”

“What are you *doing* here, Mother?”

“Don’t be rude,” Wolf chided from across the room. Liquid ignored her.

“I didn’t want to pay for a hotel,” EVA said flatly. “Now let us in, Eli.”

Liquid closed the door, grumbling, but Mantis intervened, psychically undoing the chain lock and opening the door for EVA and her companion - whom she introduced as Záviš Čížek. It took Liquid about five minutes to remember that there had been a Čížek (Sisken) in the FOXHOUND R&D division, and he’d paid Záviš’ brother Blažej (Blaise)’s salary for four years.

In the meantime, Octopus was quick to jump on the introduction to Liquid’s mother.

“Enchanté, madame,” he said, kissing the back of her hand. EVA smiled at him.

“Jesus Christ,” Liquid muttered loudly, and stalked off to his room. Mantis didn’t stop him this time.

“What kind of business?” Wolf asked, leaning over the back of the couch.
“Guns,” Záviš said shortly.

“There’s an old gunrunner Ocelot knows who operates out of this country,” EVA said, taking her hand out of Octopus’, “Záviš and I are meeting up with him tomorrow, so we’ll only be imposing on you overnight.”

“I’m sure the boss’ll be pleased about that,” Octopus said, glancing at Liquid’s closed door.

“Actually, speaking of him,” EVA said, also glancing at it, “he and I do need to have a talk…”

“Give him a few minutes to get his mommy issues out of his system,” Wolf said. “How have things been going with your PF?”

“The term is ‘PMC’ nowadays,” EVA said, sitting down next to Wolf and crossing her legs.

“Hej,” Záviš said to Mantis, “Matka Pluki mi řekla, že jsi čech. Je to pravda? Odkud jsi?”

“Záviši, mluv anglicky, on česky neumí,” EVA called over her shoulder.

“Vážné…?” Záviš shook his head. “Sorry,” he said.

Mantis blinked. “Er…”

“Nevermind.”

It was about 45 minutes before Liquid slunk back out of the bedroom, and it was only because he was hungry. But of course he got caught out by EVA.

“So,” EVA said, leaning against the kitchen doorway as Liquid raided the fridge, “how’s the ‘marriage’ going?”

“We’re fine,” Liquid said sharply, closing the fridge door a little harder than necessary, leftover chakalaka in hand. “No problems whatsoever.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“Because Ocelot told me you two are still arguing a lot.”

He shot her a glare, grabbing a spoon. “What does he know,” he said, “he’s not even here.”

EVA shrugged. “I think Wolf told him,” she said, “she’s worried, you know. Evidently the two of you can get extremely vicious when you’re angry with each other.”

“It’s none of Wolf’s concern,” Liquid sniffed, “and it’s certainly none of Ocelot’s, either. And getting you to come after me about it, that’s just…” he trailed off, grumbling, and sat down at the table and started to moodily eat his chakalaka cold.

EVA sat down across from him. “Look, Eli,” she said, “a certain amount of arguing is normal and healthy in a relationship. There’s nothing inherently wrong with arguing as long as you aren’t attacking one another.”

“We’re not,” Liquid said irritably, deliberately looking at his food instead of at EVA. “It’s just arguing - debate. We have our disagreements sometimes.”
“Often, from what I hear. And loudly.”

“So what?”

“Well,” EVA said evenly, “if you’re arguing a lot, it can mean either one of two things. If you’re arguing about the same thing over and over, then that means that there’s some underlying problem that you’re both aware of but aren’t really solving. If you’re always getting into huge fights over different, unrelated things, then that’s… honestly, that’s a sign that you should take a little break and seriously think over whether or not you should be in this relationship.”

Liquid’s spoon stilled halfway to his mouth, then he put it back in his bowl. “We always argue over the same things,” he said, still not looking at EVA.

“Then… there’s clearly a problem, but it isn’t getting solved.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

EVA raised her eyebrows. “You’ve been ‘married’ for two years now, and this is something that was going on even before, wasn’t it?”

“…”

“Most problems can’t be solved by just ignoring them and hoping they go away on their own, Eli.”

“I’ve noticed,” Liquid snapped, “some woman trying to give me advice on my marriage despite never being in a successful relationship in her life won’t go away no matter how much I ignore her!”

“…”

Liquid shoved his chair back from the table with an aggressive, deliberate scrape and abandoned his dinner entirely, flouncing back to his room without another word. Faintly she heard Mantis criticize him for bailing on the conversation, and Liquid snarl at him in response (“Shut up—and don’t you fucking touch me, Mantis!”) before slamming the door to his room. EVA winced at the sound.

Well, that hadn’t gone well, which was probably about what she could have expected to begin with. Liquid was… difficult to work with, even if her offered ‘relationship counseling’ was really just common-sense advice.

Perhaps she’d have better luck with Mantis.

Chapter End Notes

Záviš’ Czech dialogue translates to “Hey, Matka Pluku told me you were Czech. Is that true? Where (are you) from?” EVA’s is “Záviš, speak English, he doesn’t know Czech,” to which Záviš responds, “Seriously…?” Translation provided by Brambora after Google Translate mangled it.
Chapter 59

“—no phone, no pool, no pets,” the two of them sang along to Catherine’s tapes on a highway somewhere in Alberta, “I ain’t got no cigarettes…"

“Ahh, but, two hours of pushin’ broom— buys an… eight by twelve four-bit room!"

“I’m a… maaaaan—“ the relatively high note defeated McGolden, who cut himself off with a cough. Catherine kept going.

“—of means by no means… king of the road!"

“You’re a lot better at singing than I am, Cathy,” McGolden said, rubbing his throat.

“I sang a lot as a kid,” Catherine said, “Daddy plays guitar. Or… played guitar, anyway.”

“Huh…” McGolden wrote that down, like that would help somehow or even really meant anything. “How long until we’re back off AB-16?”

“I have no idea,” Catherine said, “I drive, you navigate, remember?”

“Oh yeah.” McGolden wrestled a map out of the glovebox. “Right. Okay… where are we?” Catherine glanced at the highway’s shoulder. “Coming up on Edmonton,” she said, catching a sign.

“Okay… when you see the exit for AB-216 north, take it.”

“Roger that.”

Granted, it probably was a little… inappropriate for them to sort of act like this was some kind of for-fun roadtrip even though it was, in reality, an investigation into a parent’s disappearance — and Catherine was still convinced that Miller was in mortal danger; she hadn’t forgotten what Ocelot had said two years ago.

“Third boxcar, midnight train… destination: Bangor, Maine…"

“Old, worn-out clothes and shoes—“

But then, it was over five thousand miles from Cullowhee to King Cove, which Catherine suspected was about as close as they were gonna get to Shadow Moses. From what Catherine had heard, radiation in King Cove was down to tolerable levels (at least in the short term), but the entire Alaska Peninsula was still uninhabited.

“I don’t pay no union dues!”

“Hey,” McGolden said, “Cathy.”

“Huh?”

“I smoke old stogies I have found short… but not too big around…!”

“We’re gonna find your dad, alright?” He squeezed her arm. “I promise.”

“I’m a… man of means by no means…”
“What is this about?” Mantis said, leaning his head on his hand.

“Eli,” EVA said, “or rather, your relationship with him.”

“Oh. The arguing you were discussing with him this afternoon…?”

EVA glanced at the clock. “Technically, by now that was yesterday.”

“Semantics,” Mantis said, waving a hand. “What is the issue, precisely?”

“You and Eli are always at each other’s throats over something, aren’t you?” EVA said, taking a pointed sip of her brandy. “I know both of you are pretty high-strung, but this just isn’t healthy.”

“…”

She narrowed her eyes slightly. “If you’re not going to sit for this conversation either, then we don’t have to talk about it right now. I’m sure it would be a good idea for me to get some sleep tonight instead of worrying about my son.”

Mantis shook his head. “You are not wrong,” he said, “we do have problems that do need solved.”

“And you’re willing to let me help you with that?”

“I’m willing to let you opine about it. Eli has never shaken himself of his ambivalence towards you, but… I like you. I will hear you out.”

“Mm.” EVA nodded. “So what is it that you two keep fighting about?”

Mantis hesitated. EVA waited patiently.

“Ocelot, mostly,” he said finally.

“I see…” That wasn’t very surprising. “But hasn’t it been months since the last time either of you saw Ocelot face-to-face?”

Mantis looked away deliberately, folding his arms. “Eli… thinks about Ocelot a lot. I don’t like it.”

“So you pick fights over it?”

“I try to correct his behavior. It only becomes a fight when Eli gets fussy about it.”

EVA went ahead and finished her glass of brandy. This could get weird. “Okay,” she said, putting down her glass, rim-down. “Mantis. What do you mean by ‘correct his behavior’?”

“What do you think I mean?” Mantis said, looking back at her. “Is my phrasing not obvious?”

“…no. What do you do to him?”

“It… ties into our sex life, so I’d rather not discuss it.”

“That’s fair.” Positive reinforcement for good behavior, she assumed. Well, hoped. “But… you ‘try to correct his behavior’ because he was… thinking about Ocelot…?”
“It’s the way he thinks about him,” Mantis said, a slight hiss in his voice. “I don’t like it. I don’t like Ocelot, after everything he did t-” he cut himself off.

“Mantis,” EVA said, “I already know about what happened in Iraq.”

“…oh.” He didn’t say anything for a moment. “Then surely you understand how I feel about this?”

“You’ll have to tell me first.”

Mantis snorted. “You may have been told about what happened in Iraq, but you were not there thirteen years ago - or at least, not often enough to see how their relationship went down. It was abuse, EVA, there is no way around it.”

“Is that so.”

“So I think that it is only natural when… after so many things happened…” He ran his hand back over his head, sighing. “It is difficult to explain without making it sound bad…”

“Then put it bluntly,” EVA said.

“When Ocelot came to FOXHOUND, I was… concerned that something might happen there like what happened at Outer Heaven,” Mantis said, obviously choosing his words carefully, “so I took Eli as a lover… he did want it, he wanted it for years before this. I was just never able to bring myself to… anyway, Ocelot’s impending arrival forced me to make a decision and I decided to be with Eli in that way if it meant he would stay away from Ocelot - except in a professional capacity - out of loyalty to me.”

“So that’s how your relationship started out?” EVA said, “paranoia?”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘paranoia’ if I were you,” Mantis said coldly, “considering you just said you know what Ocelot did to Eli.”

“…”

He shook his head. “Certain events soon after Ocelot arrived at headquarters convinced me that my concerns were justified. Ocelot I can’t act against, so I tried to impose responsibility on Eli for his own safety… so, he wasn’t— isn’t- allowed to be in the same room with Ocelot, alone. He agreed to that…”

Again EVA was silent. To be fair to Mantis - and Liquid too, for apparently accepting this - it was very unsurprising that the absolute chaos of his upbringing and background would have left him with a rather warped view of how to address problems.

“But even without being in the same room as Ocelot, he still thinks of him in a certain way, and—”

“Why can’t he be in the same room as Ocelot, alone?” EVA interrupted, “are you afraid Ocelot is going to rape him again?”

Mantis seemed a little startled at how frankly EVA said that, but he nodded anyway.

EVA let out a sigh through her nose. “I’m sure even if Eli agreed to follow your rule about being alone with Ocelot, he’s still broken it at some point.”

“Yes.”

“Did anything happen? You can read his mind, you would know full well if Ocelot attempted to
assault him.”

“...no, he’s never again tried to assault him, but...”

“Has he ever tried to seduce him, then?”

“Not... per se, but...”

“But what?” EVA frowned at him. “I know you tend to get jealous, but... surely you’re not just afraid Eli’s going to cheat on you with Ocelot?”

Mantis actually cringed. EVA’s frown deepened.

“Mantis?”

“I...”

“Is that what you’re afraid of?”

“...” Mantis looked away again, his eyes hard. “Shouldn’t I be?” he snarled, “he has.”

EVA sat up straight, eyebrows shooting right up into her hairline. “What?” she said, “when?”

“Countless times. Each time he promised never to do it again, but he could never keep that promise.”

“Don’t tell me...” she said, covering her mouth with her hand, “those rumors about a threesome were just a cover for...?”

Mantis shook his head. “Not just gossip, we really did that,” he said bitterly, “but I let the rumors spread - even cultivated them, perhaps - on purpose as, yes, a cover. That way if anyone ever happened to walk in on Eli and Ocelot, they would think it was being done with my knowledge and consent, although that is the furthest possible thing from the truth.”

There was a long pause. EVA wasn’t entirely sure what to say to this other than going back to trying to give Liquid common-sense advice like “For the love of God, don’t cheat on your fucking boyfriend, that might solve a few problems with your relationship.”

“Although, to be fair to Eli,” Mantis said at length, his voice calm once more, “the last time that happened was all the way back in July of 2004. So it has been nearly three years since it’s gone that far.”

“I... I see...”

Briefly EVA wondered what the fuck she was doing playing relationship counselor. Of course her son couldn’t argue with his husband over shit like the wallpaper or hogging the bed or something. Of course this had to be about a doubtlessly incredibly complicated three-way relationship where the only one who wasn’t completely miserable was also—

Wait a fucking minute, that meant Ocelot had cheated on Solidus.

EVA put her head in her hands.

“Mantis,” she said after a moment, looking up, “I’m sure you don’t want to hear it, but if this is the way it is, why do you stay with Eli? Why don’t you just break up?”

“...I’ve considered it.”
“You have? So you’ve clearly decided against it.”

“I have. I… I need to stay with Eli.”

Ah, right, now EVA remembered. Thirteen years ago she’d gotten the definite impression - further bolstered by what little she knew about his interactions with Ocelot back at the KGB - that Mantis was more than just a bit co-dependant. Liquid might be the obvious attention whore in the relationship, but Mantis certainly craved Liquid’s affection and validation more than anything else.

“You could still be friends,” she said. She definitely wasn’t equipped to deal with the co-dependency thing…

“Eli wants me as his husband. I’ll comply. I have no problem with that, I just-“

“But he cheated on you!”

“He— he didn’t mean to,” Mantis said, and EVA suspected that that was what Liquid had said every time… of course, with Mantis being telepathic and furthermore having a psychic link with Liquid, if Mantis believed something Liquid said that meant that Liquid had been completely sincere when he was saying it.

“You two are only hurting each other like this, Mantis.”

“I’ll hurt him worse if I break it off with him,” Mantis said, “he is in love with me. Very much so. He’d be crushed if I left him, even if I insisted we continue in a platonic relationship.”

“But…” EVA sat back in her chair, groaning and scrubbing her hands over her face. “Alright. Maybe we should approach this from a different angle. Why did Eli keep cheating on you?”

“…because Ocelot manipulated him into it?”

“Really?”

“I think so.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” EVA said, “I mean, I don’t doubt that Ocelot is capable of it, but considering he’s got Solidus— I’m not certain he’d bother with the time investment, if nothing else.”

“…”

“Mantis, usually when someone… gets locked into an uninterruptible cycle of behavior it’s because they’re missing something in their life, I think. Since this is infidelity we’re talking about, then I’m pretty sure that means he feels, deep down, there’s something missing from your and his relationship.”

Mantis peered at her in such a way that she suspected he was frowning behind his mask.

She went on. “I know this has everything to do with the fact that Eli and Ocelot had a fling back at Outer Heaven — and I know Eli was - is? - utterly convinced that Ocelot cared about him very deeply… which I’m not saying he didn’t, but… well, I suppose I’m just wondering if any of this happened because Eli felt sort of… emotionally neglected?”

“So this is my fault now?”

“You’re the one who insists on staying with him even though he’s cheated on you, so yes, you have to take some kind of responsibility for the situation. Maybe it’ll lead to a turnaround in your
relationship.”

“Hmph.”

“I think your problem is communication,” EVA said.

“Isn’t that what you said last time?”

“It’s true, isn’t it?” EVA said. (To be honest, she was just covering for the fact that she didn’t know what to say in this situation.)

“…how could we possibly have a problem with communication, I can read Eli’s-“

“What about you?”

“Hm?”

“Eli can’t read your mind. Do you ever tell him how you feel?”

“I… yes, of course.”

“…when you’re not yelling at him during an argument.”

Mantis was silent.

“How do you feel about him?” EVA pressed. “Everyone knows he’s in love with you, but does it go the other way around?”

“No…”

“And why not?”

“Because love is… a completely meaningless word. To be ‘in love with’ someone is just, on a conceptual level, utterly ridiculous. I’d say impossible.”

“Really.”

“It’s vague, too. The closest thing I’ve ever found to a proper explanation of what ‘love’ is is to care deeply for someone while also being sexually attracted to them… that definition precludes me entirely. I’m willing to have sex with Eli but I am not sexually attracted to him, I only do it because he wants it.”

EVA sighed deeply, resting her chin in her hands. “Mantis,” she said, “you’re being too pedantic about this. How do you feel about Eli?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just try to describe it. It’s good practice, I’m sure Eli needs to hear something like this anyway.”

“…alright,” Mantis said, cocking his head, “I care for him deeply.”

“Elaborate.”

“I… want to protect him. I want to make him happy, too - when he is happy, I am happy.”

“He makes you happy?”
“Yes, I think so. As happy as I could be, anyway, I’m not sure I’ve truly felt what is typically described as happiness since before Eli left for the SAS. But… with him, I am… I feel… it feels nice. I enjoy his company, and I do not like the idea of a life without him.”

“And the way you treat him…?”

Mantis shook his head. “I try to be affectionate,” he said, “I know he likes that. As I said, I want to make him happy… it’s true that I do lash out at him sometimes. But I… don’t like that I do that. I get very distressed when he is upset, especially when it is my fault… I always try to make it up to him. I try to do better, be more patient next time. EVA, I’d do anything for him.”

There was a half a moment’s pause, and then EVA said, “okay. I get it.”

“…get what?”

“You love him, Mantis.”

“…”

She shrugged. “You don’t have to say you’re ‘in love with’ him if you don’t think that fits the way you feel,” she said, “but it’s obvious that you do love him.”

“I— I don’t. I only—“

“Mantis, what you’re describing - that’s love! That’s what love is.”

Neither of them said anything for almost half a minute.

Then Mantis said, blinking, “oh.”

EVA gave him a reassuring smile. “I know it’s probably hard to settle into your feelings, even after all these years,” she said, “but there’s nothing wrong in admitting you love someone you claim to be married to. And you don’t have to go shouting it from the rooftops, either… just tell him once in a while.”

“…he’d like that,” Mantis said quietly.

“Mhm. Plus it should help him feel more comfortable and fulfilled in your relationship… which might stabilize things. If you’re more upfront about how you feel, Mantis, it might help prevent him from getting so starved for affection he seeks it from… other people.”

“…I… I understand what you’re saying, but…”

“And let him say it to you often, too.”

“I…? Ah… alright.”

EVA definitely wasn’t sure that Mantis had entirely grasped her advice, but she felt confident enough that he was going to try and change things with Liquid that she bid him goodnight and left to get a few hours sleep on the couch before she had to meet with the gunrunner in the morning. She was sure Záviš, who was sleeping on an air mattress on the floor next to the couch, would wake her up on time for it…

She just made a note to herself before nodding off to tear Ocelot a new one over this next time she saw him.
Meanwhile, Mantis returned to the room where he and Liquid were staying in and sat on the bed next to Liquid, who had been asleep, but half-woke up when the mattress shifted and creaked slightly under Mantis’ weight.

“Mantis…?” Liquid murmured, drowsily reaching out for him.

“Shh,” Mantis said, threading one hand through his hair. “Go back to sleep.”

“Mmn…” Liquid wound an arm around Mantis’ hips, pulling himself closer to nuzzle his leg. “I was waiting for you…”

“I know. Go back to sleep, Eli, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“I love you…”


“Mantis… are you feeling alright…? You seem tense…”

“I’m fine. Go back to sleep.”
With Octopus’ laptop being Mei Ling’s old one, it still had the Codec software in it, although they’d changed it to another frequency by now - usually referred to as Mantis’ frequency even if Octopus was the one who’d pick up. After all, it was only through the computer that Mantis was able to use Codec.

Mantis borrowed the laptop (when Octopus wasn’t looking) and carefully set it to 141.23, and hit ‘send’.

Ocelot was, meanwhile, trying to decide between a flight to General Juan N. Álvarez International Airport or Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo International Airport - and internally cursing how often he had to take perfectly normal civilian flights, considering how much of a hassle they were - when his Codec rang. He raised an eyebrow at the number.

“What do you want?” he said dryly.

Mantis, unpleasant as always, said, “I am just calling to tell you I hate you.”

“Mm. Oh, that’s right, EVA’s been in South Africa lately. I suppose she stopped by and you’re feeling sore that I sicced her on your marriage?”

“What Eli and I discuss is none of your business, Ocelot.”

“I assume Wolf’s already been on the receiving end of one of your infamous tantrums for bringing it up to me in the first place.”

“With her I understand she is coming from a place of concern for her friend,” Mantis said irritably, “you, however, are just trying to ruin my life.”

“If I can ruin your life by recommending someone give you relationship advice, then I seriously question the quality of your relationship and life in general.”

“…I hate you.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“You do not understand. I hate you more than anyone or anything in the world. No person on earth has ever come close to matching how much I hate you. The very thought of you consumes my entire being with burning hatred.”

Ocelot wasn’t in the mood to approach Mantis on his own terms here. “Ah,” he said instead, “at that point, it’s no so different from love, is it?”

“Shut up,” Mantis growled, “I’ve read The Brothers Karamazov too.”

“Oh, have you? I would have taken you for more of a Tolstoy fan myself. You know, personally I prefer Demons.”

“Of course you do,” Mantis muttered.
Obvious bait, but Ocelot took it. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” Mantis said, the sneer clear in his voice, “it’s just that I am sure you found the silver-tongued agent of chaos mewling at the feet of a charismatic man who would never love him eminently relatable.”

Oh, ouch. For once Ocelot was speechless. Mantis gave him a moment to respond, then swelled with petty vindication at finally winning one out over Ocelot when he didn’t - probably drawing himself up to his full height for once - and signed off.

Ocelot let him have the victory. He had to admit, that was a pretty good burn.

Now… the flight to Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo was slightly cheaper, even if did leave later… Ocelot had some slack time, and he knew he’d get an annoyed phone call from Miller if he went for the more expensive option, anyway…

“Once I get you up there, where the air- is rar-i-fied—

“We’ll just glide… starry-eyed…!

“Once I get you up there, I’ll be holding you so near——“

“So what exactly is the plan?” Catherine said.

“Well,” McGolden said, “I have a cousin who lives up there - we’re pretty close, grew up together — he used to live in Belkofski, but now he lives in Sand Point, which is just outside the nuclear exclusion zone. He’s a fisherman.”

“Oh, really?”

“You may hear angels cheer, ‘cuz we’re together!

“Weather-wise, it’s such a lovely day…”

“Yeah. His name’s John-Dee. I should be able to get him to take us as close to Shadow Moses as possible without poisoning ourselves.”

“Huh. Alright. How do we get to Sand Point?”

“Daily flights from Anchorage.”

“Just say the words, and we’ll beat the birds—!”

“So we’ve still got quite a bit of driving ahead of us…”

McGolden shrugged. “It could be worse. We could be doing this not in the summer.”

“Point.”

“And leaving your car in Anchorage will be a plus… I don’t want the Patriots to get their hands on this,” he said, holding up the In the Darkness of Shadow Moses: The Unofficial Truth CD. “I can just hide it in your car and it’ll be hundreds of miles away from us…”

“Stop talking like we’re going to get captured or something,” Catherine said, frowning.
“Down to Acapulco Bay…

“It’s perfect for a flying honeymoon, they say!”

“You know what the Boy Scouts say: ‘Be prepared.’”

“What’s the itinerary once we have John-Dee’s boat?”

“I was thinking we should just go straight to King Cove,” McGolden said, “if I’m reading these maps correctly, then that’s the most likely place that supplies and personnel headed to Shadow Moses would be coming from… you know, before it got nuked.”

Catherine nodded. “So if there’s any evidence left behind of what was going on on that base… it’d be in King Cove. We might find something.”

“Come fly with me, let’s fly… let’s fly!”

“Or,” McGolden said, “we might trip some security measures.”

“Either way we’ll get some answers.”

“Pack up, let’s fly away!!”

“What the hell’s his problem now?” Liquid sighed, flopping on the couch next to Octopus after yet another half-conversation with Mantis where the other man had been unbearably distracted to the point of leaving to go brood somewhere else in the apartment while Liquid was mid-sentence.

“He’s preoccupied with something,” Octopus said, not looking away from the TV. Evening had already fallen and the nightly news had concluded itself, so now he was watching some trashy reality show. Liquid didn’t understand a word of what was being said.

“I’ve figured that much out… well, actually,” Liquid said, frowning, “I suppose I can even guess what he’s preoccupied about. When Mother was here…”

“Think they had a conversation that he’s still stuck on?”

“…I don’t doubt it, actually.” Liquid stood back up. “I’d better go talk to him…”

“Better to do that than just whine about it to an unrelated party,” Octopus waved him off, “ganbatte, boss!”

Liquid rolled his eyes and, shoving his hands into his pockets, wandered out onto the balcony where Mantis was sitting with his legs hanging out through the railing. He was watching the movement of traffic in the street below. Liquid leaned against the railing next to where he was sitting.

“Nice night, isn’t it?” he said evenly.

Mantis didn’t glance up at him. “Fairly cool,” he said.

“It is winter here.”

Mantis didn’t reply. Liquid stepped away from the railing, instead sitting on one of two pieces of balcony furniture - a slightly weather-worn lounge chair. It had a small table right next to it that had a battery-powered radio on it, which Liquid picked up and turned on, flicking through stations for about a minute before turning it back off after nothing caught his interest.
He sighed.

“It was not anything you did, Eli,” Mantis said.

“So, then…”

“…yes, your mother… after you refused to talk with her, she had the conversation with me instead. She was worried about us.”

“She’s just sticking her nosejob into other people’s business, Mantis, you don’t have to-“

“She wasn’t wrong, though.”

Liquid frowned, settling back into the chair. “What’d you talk about?”

Mantis kicked one leg, still not looking at Liquid. “She wondered why I stay with you even though you cheated on me so many times.”

“…you told her?”

Mantis shrugged.

Liquid looked away. “…it’s been,” he said deliberately, “three years. There’s no point in—“

“Eli, you haven’t changed over these past three years, only your circumstances have.”

“…”

Mantis untangled himself from the railing and stood up, but was still watching the pass of cars on the road behind the apartment building instead of looking at Liquid. “She told me that you might have been acting out because I was emotionally neglecting you.”

“…and then gave you the same tract about communication as she usually does, huh?”

“She may be right, Eli.”

Liquid worried his lip for a moment, then said, “I don’t feel emotionally neglected.”

“Eli…”

“And I don’t think we have a communication problem, either. She told you that you had to tell me how you feel, right? Since I can’t read your mind like you can mine… I’d only know if you told me. But that’s not… nonverbal communication is important, too… I can tell how you feel about me by how you act, you don’t have to say anything.”

Mantis glanced over his shoulder at him. “And what would that be, Eli?”

“I know you don’t love me, but—“ Mantis looked away again, Liquid pressed on: “You don’t say that you care for me, or that I’m your favorite thing in the world just to placate me. You’re perfectly willing to give me attention and affection when I want it, and even if your attempts to take care of and protect me can get… exasperating, I know they come from a place of great fondness for me.”

“Then why do we have such glaring problems with our relationship?”

“…because your baggage doesn’t go with mine?”
Again, no reply from Mantis. Liquid sighed again after a moment, and started methodically stripping the potted plant next to the radio of its leaves.

“Eli…”

“Hm? What is it?”

“…”

Liquid snorted. If he had something to say, then he’d better say it.

The radio switched on.

“—know it’s kind of strange…

“Every time I’m near you…

“I just run out of things to say—“

Liquid blinked.

“Every time I tried to tell you-

“The words just came out wrong!”

“Mantis…?”

Still watching the traffic. “What?”

“So I’ll have to say I love you in a song.”

“Did you do this on purpose?”

“…”

“Every time the time was right—“

“Come on, Mantis,” he said, getting up and walking over to him, taking one hand in his, “you can tell me.”

“I might have.”

“All the words just came out wrong—“

Liquid was positively going to kill Mantis with that smile.

And, while he was distracted, he grabbed him around the waist, dipping him and kissing the side of his face.

“Wh- Eli!”

“So I’ll have to say I love you in a song!”

“What are you doing…?!”

“What does it look like?” Liquid grinned, pulling Mantis up and spinning around, carefully moving to the beat of the music, “we’re dancing.”
“No- no, we’re not! I do not dance, Eli!”

“Clearly you do.”

“Yeah, I know it’s kind of late-

“I hope I didn’t wake you—“

“We’re outside, people are going to see us!”

“Let them,” Liquid said, twirling them again, “I don’t care.”

“But there’s something that I just got to say…”

“You’re… you’re embarrassing me, Eli,” Mantis half-heartedly protested as Liquid nuzzled him.

“I know you’d understand.

“Every time I tried to tell you…

“The words just came out wrong—“

“I love you, Mantis.”

“Eli…"

“So… I’ll have to say I love you in a song…”

“I wish I could… express myself in a more ordinary way, but…”

“Shh.” Liquid slipped his fingers under his chin, tilting his head to kiss the point where his jaw met his neck. “It’s alright. I understand.”

Suddenly Octopus slid open the balcony door - Mantis jolted - and stared at them. Liquid laughed nervously.

"You two," Octopus said very seriously, "are the corniest motherfuckers I've ever known."
"Please leave..."

“…so,” John-Dee said, eyeing Catherine, “who’s this, then?”

“My client,” McGolden said. “I’m helping her find her father.”

“Like… a detective or somethin’? Ain’t you an investigative journalist?”

“With where this case has been going,” Catherine said flatly, “that’s close enough.”

“Hmmm…” John-Dee scratched his beard. “She must be payin’ you an awful lot to pursue a ‘case’ all the way out here. The PenAir flights alone got you pretty well shafted.”

“Don’t worry about the money,” McGolden said with a laugh, waving his hand, “I got a nice hefty advance from my editor over this. Cathy’s paying me with the information I’ll use in the story I got the advance for.”

Catherine grimaced, hissing. John-Dee raised an eyebrow.
“And trust me,” McGolden went on obliviously, “this’ll be the story of the century.”

“If ya say so,” John-Dee said, “guess I’ll go get the boat ready. Y’all wait here.”

John-Dee left, leaving Catherine and McGolden standing awkwardly near the docks. Catherine fidgeted a bit.

“Um… McGolden,” she said, “about that info I promised…”

“Huh?” McGolden said, “you mean the fact that everything you could have told me I’ve already read either on 4chan or in *In the Darkness of Shadow Moses: The Unofficial Truth*?”

“…”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, “it’s not about the raw facts per se. A good journalist puts a human spin on every story - it keeps people reading.” He held up his notebook. “You’re the perfect emotional source for this! All your thoughts and feelings… *that’s* what’s going to bait people into learning the truth. Plus, going along with you gives me the best possible opportunity to investigate this directly.”

“Oh,” Catherine blinked several times. “Uh. I guess so?”

“Trust me on this, I do this for a living.”

John-Dee came back. “Boat’s all ready to go,” he said. “I can take y’all within a couple miles of King Cove, but…”

“A couple miles?” McGolden said, raising his eyebrows, “I’m paying you to take us *to* King Cove!”

“Look, it’s *already* in the exclusion zone, I shouldn’t be taking y’all at all. If you wasn’t my cousin, Gary…”

“Get us within one mile,” Catherine said, “then lend us a rowboat and two-way radios. We’ll row the rest of the way and then once we’re done, you can pick us up.”

John-Dee gave her a skeptical look. “Well, alright…” he said, “if you insist, little lady… but you had better not get into any trouble, y’hear? I could get in some serious crap for sailin’ into the exclusion zone.”

“Radiation’s not much of an issue by this point, anyway,” McGolden muttered.

“Thanks,” Catherine said.

John-Dee jerked his head towards his boat. “Better not waste any more time, then. It’ll take us a couple hours to get to King Cove as it is, and the less time spent in the exclusion zone, the better.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay I have to explain at least a little bit of the passage where Mantis and Ocelot are using Dostoyevsky books to drag each other. 1) A fairly major theme of *The Brothers Karamazov* is that you can be in love with someone and still hate them, often interpreted as “If you’re obsessed with someone, it’s the same whether you hate them or love them.” 2) Tolstoy fans are often stereotyped by Dostoyevsky fans as only reading him
because they’re pretentious and want to make themselves look good. Of course, I think it goes both ways, and most people into RusLit like both, but as a Dostoyevsky fan who couldn’t get through *War and Peace*, well… let’s just say I wouldn’t use “You look like you read Tolstoy” as a compliment. 3) One of the major characters in *Demons*, Pyotr Verkhovensky, shares a lot of obvious similarities with Ocelot, which Mantis outlines here. As in, sometimes I wonder if Kojima ever read *Demons*… wouldn’t that be interesting? (Anyway, Pyotr is a human disaster, obvious basket case, and pretty much the villain of the book. A comparison to him is not a flattering one.) (He’s my faaaaavorite!)

Also I think all my teeth fell out of my head after I wrote that Liqmantis bit which yes was *slightly* edited from the original, I do want to incentivize people to read the reuploads…
“So, Dr. Hunter,” Naomi’s physical therapist said, “I’ve been told that you harbor certain… delusions.”

“Not delusions,” Naomi said, slightly out of breath from walking laps. “The truth. Other people don’t… can’t see it.”

“And the truth is that a wolf tore out your eye, and you wanted to place a curse on a snake who tore apart your family?”

Naomi nodded.

Her physical therapist also nodded, then scooted over on the bench and patted next to her. “Come sit, Dr. Hunter.”

She obeyed. “You don’t believe me.”

“I’m not a psychologist, Dr. Hunter, what I believe doesn’t matter. Can you tell me a little more about this curse you intended to place?”

Naomi thought for a moment before answering, but instead of answering she suddenly hunched over and grabbed her head in pain, grinding her teeth.

“Take your time,” her physical therapist said.

“I… his heart… no. I don’t remember. I’m— no, I think… my brother went off to war, somewhere outside of Heaven, how were we supposed to know he wouldn’t come back the same?”

“And the snake, Dr. Hunter…?”

“My curse was… my revenge… to lay a curse on him so he could die at any time with no warning. To live in the shadow of his own death for the rest of his days.”

“That was your intention?”

“Yes. But someone… someone broke in, and…”

Her physical therapist cleared her throat, drawing Naomi’s attention. She held up one finger, moving it from side to side as Naomi struggled to track it with her eye. “Your curse was your revenge,” she said, “I see.”

“Yes. Revenge, I want revenge…”

“You haven’t yet lost your opportunity. The ‘snake’ is still out there, and he’s being quite troublesome. Same with the ‘wolf’. She’s escaped from our watch.”

“I… want to kill them. Make them suffer.”

“We know, Dr. Hunter. That’s why I’ve been authorized to make you a certain offer we feel you won’t refuse…”

Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Bering Sea, just outside Belkofski Bay. In the Shadow Moses Island Nuclear Exclusion Zone. Entry carries serious medical risks and, if caught, mandatory quarantine and potential fines of up to $500,000. Approximately one nautical mile away from King Cove.

“Careful now,” John-Dee said as Catherine cautiously climbed the ladder down the side of the fishing vessel to the little rowboat where McGolden was already waiting, “it might be summer, but the water here stays freezin’ all year ’round.”

“Don’t worry about us,” McGolden said, “we’ll make sure to keep our lifejackets on.”

“You sure you’re up for rowin’ a whole mile, Gary?”

“I can help,” Catherine said. “If he gets tired, I’ll take over.”

“Don’t worry about it, I work out,” McGolden said, flexing. What exactly he was trying to show off was unclear under his jacket.

“Let’s go, McGolden,” Catherine said, fiddling with the two-way radio John-Dee had handed McGolden when he’d first got in the boat.

“I’ll stick to this area,” John-Dee said, “just gimme a call when y’all need to be picked up. Remember, don’t take too long. If ya do, I’m ditchin’.”

“But you’ll come back for us, right?” McGolden said.

“Just don’t push your luck, Gary.”

McGolden stretched his arms then grabbed hold of the oars, starting to paddle them away from John-Dee’s fishing boat towards the shore visible in the distance. Catherine waved see-you-later to John-Dee, then turned around to face McGolden again.

“We could get into some serious shit for this, you know,” she said.

“Oh, I know,” McGolden said. “It might even be worse than a half-million dollar fine.”

“It looks totally deserted from here, though,” Catherine said, shadowing her eyes to look at King Cove. “We might not find anything…”

“Better to go all this way and find nothing than to skip out on it and miss something important.”

“Point.” She twisted around, looking out across the sea. “Huh… you can’t see Shadow Moses from here at all.”

“There’s definitely nothing there,” McGolden said, “plus, the island itself is still dangerous. The peninsula’s mostly just in the exclusion zone because living there for an extended period of time - like say a couple years - could increase your risk of cancer and that sort of thing… a daytrip like us, we’ll be a-okay.”

“What about the waters in the area?”

“Fishing’s permitted around Sand Point, but I think that was just a recent thing? At least commercially… but fish don’t exactly follow exclusion zones. A school of fish swimming right around Shadow Moses could easily head over to Sand Point and get caught and eaten by someone there, totally legally.”
“The ocean would dilute the radiation a lot, though,” Catherine said, “maybe it’s alright.”

“I mean, John-Dee’s still alive… plus I’ve been keeping track of this, there haven’t been any casualties from the nuclear explosion, aside from those who may or may not have been on the island at the time the bomb dropped. A couple cases of radiation sickness in King Cove and Belkofski, and one in Cold Bay…”

“But no one died?”

“Yeah, minor cases. Got treatment in time, everything cleared up. At least, you know, for now. I guess they might yet get cancer, but… say, how is that treated, anyway? Radiation sickness, I mean.”

Catherine thought for a moment. The only time she’d ever had anything to do with radiation in nursing was when she’d done a rotation in a cancer ward, but chemotherapy didn’t cause radiation poisoning. Still, if you want to be a nurse, you’ve got to learn how to treat even things you may never personally see… “Decontamination, first off,” she said, “which, by the way — these clothes we might want to burn when we’re done here.”

“Uh… right.”

“And shower, definitely. I’m not sure what we’d do about our shoes or my gun or your notebook or anything like that… I’ll need to look it up when we get back to Sand Point. Anyway, there’s medication you can take if their bone marrow gets damaged, or transfusions if it’s bad enough, and aside from that you’d be looking at taking potassium iodide, Prussian blue, or diethylenetriamine pentaacetic acid for a while. Any of those will help your body pass the radiation like it would any other waste.”

“Good to know, I guess,” McGolden said, “mind reaching into my pocket and grabbing my notebook? I want all that written down.”

“Sure,” Catherine said.

She was in the middle of writing *Thyroshield/Iosat, Radiogardase, DTPA* when a buzzing noise made her look up again.

“What the hell is that?”

McGolden also turned around, letting the oars still. “I… have no idea,” he said.

Whatever the hell it was, it was round and obviously made of metal - a fat, flat disk, or rather a ring, that hovered in the air, kept afloat by a rotor in the middle of it - there was a twitching camera on a tripod on its top — it was black with little lights on it and the way it darted from place to place, zig-zagging about forty feet over the surface of the ocean, strongly reminded Catherine of a hummingbird.

“That… doesn’t look good.”

“I think it came from the direction of King Cove…” Catherine said. “Could these be the security system?”

The hummingbird-ring flew over the rowboat without changing its motion patterns at all, heading in the direction of Belkofski Bay. McGolden and Catherine exchanged glances.

“Guess not…” McGolden said, starting to row again.
The two-way radio crackled on. “What in tarnation is this little UFO thing comin’ towards my boat, Gary?” came John-Dee’s voice.

“We don’t know,” Catherine said into the transceiver. “It just flew overhead without noticing us.”

“Huh… well, I don’t like the looks of it. I’m headed back to Sand Point.”

“What! Come on, it takes hours just one way! You’re just going to have to come back and get us sometime anyway.”

“I told you, I don’t like the look of this UFO thing! I’m not stickin’ around for it!”

“But—"

“Let him go, Cathy,” McGolden said, “he’ll come back for us, don’t worry.”

Catherine sighed, then lifted the transceiver to her mouth again. “Can you at least stay at the edge of the exclusion zone instead of going all the way back to port?”

John-Dee grunted. “Fine. And if that UFO thing stops hoverin’ around my boat before I get there, I’ll stop and wait where I am. I just wanna get away from this… thing.”

“Fair enough. Thanks.” She closed the connection.

A couple minutes later, there was that buzzing noise again, only this time it was louder. And not because a bigger one of those things was coming, either.

Six hover-rings appeared almost out of nowhere from the direction of the shore; two of them were flying at the same height as the earlier one and they passed Catherine and McGolden’s boat entirely, but the remaining four were so low to the ocean that they were wet with spray and headed straight for the rowboat.

“Oh-oh,” Catherine said as they rose dramatically into the air a few feet away from them, and positioned themselves directly over the boat. “McGolden…”

McGolden looked up. “Oh, shit.”

“These ones have guns…”

Two of them did, anyway. The other two had, as they immediately found out, long coils of wire with three-pronged pincers at the end, which shot out towards the rowboat. Catherine ducked out of the way of one of them, scrambling to get her gun out of her holster — McGolden wrenched one oar out of the water, smacking the ring’s line away from him. The other oar fell into the sea and started drifting away.

Catherine struggled to line up a shot on one of the rings - they wouldn’t stop moving, she was used to stationary targets - as the ones with the wire-arms both grabbed the oar in McGolden’s hands. The gun-mounted rings were each keeping a gun trained on Catherine and McGolden, but hadn’t opened fire yet… Catherine was hesitant to shoot, anyway. Fire might be being withheld because they weren’t seen as a threat, something that might change quickly with .500 S&W Magnum rounds in the mix.

McGolden lost the tug-of-war, nearly pitching both of them into the ocean as the oar was yanked out of his grip and hurtled somewhere into the water. Again the wire-arms shot out for them - McGolden made a grab for the radio—
“John-Dee?!“ he yelled over it as the wire-arms abruptly withdrew, “we kind of have an emergency here and could really use your fishing boat!”

No response.

“John-Dee?? Come in, John-Dee! This is serious!!”

Just static. The fishing boat was still technically visible from this distance, but it wasn’t close enough to clearly make out across the waves.

“Why isn’t he picking up-?”

Pop.

McGolden drew his hand to his chest with a hiss. The shattered remains of the two-way radio fell into the ocean, aside from a flew bits that clinked to the bottom of the rowboat. The ring-gun that had been pointed at McGolden’s head a moment ago, muzzle now smoking, readjusted its aim slightly so that it was once again aiming at his face.

There was a sort of standoff for a minute. Catherine thought she faintly heard sustained gunfire for a moment or two carrying over the sea from the direction of the fishing boat. Judging by the way McGolden’s blood drained from his face, he heard it too.

The wire-arms shot out.

“Cover your ears!” Catherine yelled right before she pulled the trigger.

BANG!

The Smith & Wesson Model 500 was an absolute beast of a gun, although Catherine, unlike what Ocelot had said two years ago, didn’t shatter her wrist firing it. It did, however, seriously throw off her aim when the gun jerked up and her whole body jolted from the recoil - it being double action didn’t help her much when it came to getting off another shot real quick, either, but just that one shot had obliterated half of one of the gun-mounted rings. It spiralled, smoking, into the water, where it exploded.

But there were still three more and while Catherine was still trying to get her balance - the recoil was bad enough without having been kneeling in a small boat - sharp metal pincers closed around the front of her shirt, dragging her up into the air as the ring that had ahold of her rose sharply upward.

“Cathy!!“ McGolden yelled, making a grab for her - his fingers barely brushed her shoe, and the other arm-ring caught hold of his elbow, yanking him up into the air as well. “Yeaaaargh!”

“Okay, hang on, hang on—“ Catherine said, trying to get a bead on the ring carrying her even as she swayed and spun around sickeningly. “Just stay calm, McGolden!”

“I am calm!!“

BANG! BANG!

Fuck. Missed both of those, even though she was close enough to see the U.S. ARMY CYPHER printed on the side. Hot casings hit her in the face. Her revolver had been fully loaded when they left but that was only five shots. She’d brought extra clips but there was no way she could reach them in this position, let alone get them into the cylinder.
“Cathy! The gun one!!”

“Huh?!”

She swung out of the way just in time for the *poppoppop* of rapid fire from the gun-ring (Cypher?) to narrowly miss her. A stray bullet tore a hole in her shirt where it was already under a lot of strain from having her weight hooked into it — it tore, sending her plummeting backwards down towards the sea, headfirst, from about seventy to eighty feet up by now.

That was survivable, right?

Catherine winced as the Cypher that had just dropped her grabbed her again, this time by the ankle. She was pretty sure the sudden stop had done something bad to her, medically speaking, but miraculously she’d managed to keep hold her gun and she took another potshot at the Cypher holding her. And missed again.

One shot left. Blood was rushing to her head; they were headed towards the shore, leaving the rowboat far behind them; who the hell knew what had happened to their ride; McGolden was screaming… Catherine lined up her last shot with the hovering Cypher that the gun aimed squarely at her stomach was attached to.

*BANG!*

It went the way of the other one, exploding in a cloud of smoke and sparks and spiralling into the ocean with a splash and a hiss. So at least that shot had counted for something. Which would just have to be good enough, because right after that the remaining Cyphers rose sharply into the air again, much higher than would be a lethal fall if either Catherine or McGolden managed to get loose, and the jerk of an ascension caused Catherine to finally lose grip on her gun. It fell into the sea.

A couple minutes later, after McGolden had finally gone quiet and Catherine was starting to remember all the nasty things that can happen to a human body if left upside down for too long, the two Cyphers that had headed towards the fishing boat flew up behind them, joining in formation with them. One gun-mounted Cypher and one arm-mounted Cypher, the arms of which were extended and carrying a limp John-Dee by one shoulder. His coveralls were soaked with blood and he had what seemed to be several dozen bullet holes in him. He was definitely, obviously not alive.

McGolden started screaming again.

And so they headed for King Cove.

__________________________________________________________

Someplace sixteen hours ahead of there.

Groaning, Miller groped for the ringing phone. It was the middle of the night, seriously… no, even worse. It was the small hours of the morning and it felt like he’d only managed to get to sleep mere minutes ago. Hell, maybe he had. Seemed like his insomnia only got worse with age…

He picked up the call and raised the phone to his ear (well, ‘raised’ would imply he wasn’t still lying down on his bed - which sucked anyway, the mattress was only seven centimeters longer than he was) with a grumble. “Hello?” There was a limited number of people he could think of who would reasonably *have* this number, but Miller wasn’t stupid - wasn’t about to say the name of whoever he assumed was on the other end of the line, no matter how likely it was Ocelot—

“Hello, Mr. Miller.”
Okay, definitely not Ocelot. Miller sat up. He didn’t recognize the voice, couldn’t even tell if he was speaking to a man or a woman and the accent was nothing more than vague Midwestern American, but it’d been a long-ass time since he’d met someone who called him ‘Mr.’. Hell, had that ever happened?

“Who are you?” he said warily, “how did you get this number?”

“…am I speaking to a Mr. Kazuhira ‘Benedict’ ‘McDonnell’ Miller?”

“Maybe. What do you want?”

“Oh, I am? Excellent. As for who I am… who I am isn’t important. Who I’m with… well, you’ll know in a moment.”

“What do you want?” Miller repeated. “If you want favors, you have to put out first.”

“Ha ha. You’re hilarious, Mr. Miller.”

“…I’m hanging up now.”

“I wouldn’t advise that.”

Miller stopped with his finger halfway to the disconnect button, then put the phone back to his ear. “Why are you calling?”

“It’d actually be best if I weren’t,” the other person said, “you never know what sort of unscrupulous types are listening in on phone conversations, after all.”

Miller snorted. On one hand, it would be just like Ocelot to bug this phone, but on the other hand, Miller had literally never gotten a call from anyone other than Ocelot over this line before.

“So perhaps we should meet up. I can arrange a convenient venue…”

“…uh-huh,” Miller said flatly. “As I said, if you want favors-“

“We want information.”

“That’s nice. I don’t have any. Unscrupulous types have gone pretty far out of their way to keep me isolated and in the dark.”

“Oh, but Mr. Miller,” said the other person, “we all know you’re cleverer than that.”

“Clever enough not to respond to an anonymous phone call demanding information for no reason. Fuck off.”

“I think you should hear us out, Mr. Miller.”

“Fuck off. I was asleep.”

The other person chuckled. Something about the sound made Miller feel like he was grinding sand into his teeth.

“What’s so funny?” he snapped. The chuckling continued, then suddenly stopped.

“We have your daughter.”
Yes all the information about the treatment of radiation poisoning is accurate because *who do you think you’re dealing with?*
Catherine’s word in Japanese is ‘kuso’, and if you watch animé you know what that means.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Ah, bugger. …Wolf? Wolf!”

Wolf stuck her head in the door. “What is it, boss?”

Liquid held up her shirt. “I ran out of the blue thread… do you mind if I finish this with some other color? I’ve got green, that’s fairly close…”

“Hm. No,” Wolf said, wrinkling her nose, “I am not you, boss, I do not like it when a repair is visible because the thread isn’t the same color as the cloth.”

“I don’t see how it matters… thread is thread, what’s wrong with just using whatever’s on hand?”

“It looks ridiculous!”

“Wh- no it doesn’t! It looks fine, no one will notice!”

“Eli,” Mantis said from nearby, “you could just go out a buy another spool of blue thread.”

Liquid frowned. “Isn’t the shop for that halfway across the city?”

“It is not. A thirty-minute walk at the most. I could go with you.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Wolf said, giving them a thumbs-up.

“Take the dogs with you!” Octopus called from other room.

Dramatically sighing and grumbling, Liquid put down his sewing, grabbed a jacket, etc., etc. Liquid refused, just because he was petty like that, to take Wolf’s half-repaired shirt with them so that he could match the color of thread he was going to buy. If anything he outright intended to get precisely the wrong shade of blue just so he could innocently say when he got back, “What’s the matter? You told me to get blue thread.” Mantis rolled his eyes at this entire line of thought.

While, as previously noted, Mantis’ passive SEP field wouldn’t have done anything to prevent notice by any Patriots potentially nearby, no one was particularly worried as he, Liquid, Bêdeng, and Benedict left; the shop Liquid had in mind was just a relatively short walk away along the canal. Quite frankly, at this point if there were Patriots out and about in Cape Town, they would have already moved in on FOXHOUND… as for everyone else, they couldn’t have seen anything even if they wanted to, so Mantis consented to Liquid holding his hand in public.

The shop didn’t allow dogs indoors but nonetheless forty-five minutes later they were headed back to the apartment, the most offensively neon blue spool of thread Liquid could find in hand. It was a nice day, bracing, the canal didn’t stink too bad—

“Benedict,” Liquid called, “you can’t go in there, I’m sure there are crocodiles in the water.”

Benedict barked from where he was trotting along as close to the canal-side as possible. A worrying drop, in Liquid’s opinion… at least Bêdeng had to sense to stay on Liquid and Mantis’ other side.

“I do not think he would crocodiles in there even if he did fall in, Eli,” Mantis said, “this canal is
directly from the ocean. Crocodiles are found more inland, in rivers and ponds."

“Then maybe there’s a shark in there or something.”

“I seriously doubt it. Perhaps a rotting corpse from a murder or something…”

“God, you can be so morbid sometimes.”

“Don’t smile when you say things like that…”

Benedict started barking at something down in the canal, still trotting alongside it. Liquid sighed and jogged up to him, grabbing him by the scruff and pulling him away from the canal. Bêdeng chuffed, passing by, then stopped suddenly, staring at a tall building a little ways off.

“Something the matter?” Liquid said to her.

“A bird, most likely,” Mantis said boredly, catching up.

“No… she’s right,” Liquid said, shading his eyes and looking up at the building Bêdeng was focused on, “something doesn’t feel-“

Mantis realized what was off a fraction of a second before Liquid did — Liquid’s eyes widened as he caught the telltale glare of light off the lens of a rifle scope on the roof.

Mantis shoved Liquid back just as the bullet tore through the filter of his gas mask, knocking his head to the side. Liquid reached out to him, mouth open but Mantis couldn’t hear him; his legs got caught by Benedict right next to him and he fell into the canal—-

The filter. The filter of his gas mask was broken.

He was in the middle of a city.

NO!!!

NO NO NO OH GOD

MANTIS!!!!!!!!!!

Liquid’s thoughts were first and loudest but tens of thousands of voices pushed into his mind before he could even finish drawing a breath, nearly drowning out Liquid as the back of Mantis’ head hit the pavement.

MANTIS MANTIS OH GOD

It’s time, go go go

Wat gaan an? fucking dog

god DAMMIT I can’t see anything in this water- it’s bloody freezing—

stupid dog, get off me! why are there dogs here!

What’s going on? Wat gebeur?

wat was dit? wat was dit geliuid

Hoe laat is dit? weermag…? Kwenzekani ngaphesheya? izibhamu?!
okubukeka njengenkathazo… better not get involved did he remember to pick up the groceries? We needed cheese too ek mis haar need to get back to Mantis, oh god

can’t be happening oh god Koloi ea ka e kae??
good, he’s still alive moferere… Hewu. Fuck! go right— no, he said I go left next I need to call Mom ezimbini iyure! course I read the book, how could anyone think I Ma…. forget it! ukuya ekhemisi Ek kan nie vanaand o bua ka bonako… a criminal? call the police Amerikaners?
oh no oh no ek dink e matha, ke tlaneha ho ea ka potlako I need a drink, god eiers, melk, brood, graan, bier, ramen Dit voel goed intshwarele Father, who art in may kill rival drivers only by pushing huge stones ga ke na madi we got him, let’s go what a woman! Van die drie forel spesies – die ander twee is Salmo en Oncorhynchus - wat na Suid-Afrika ingeoer is, ngokwe sintu nemeko ezikhoyo kweli lendlu kokweni okanye ekhaya. Amahla ndenyuka kweli lizwe

MANTIS Makgadikgadi Pan ke lefelo le le apesitsweng ke letswai mo bokoni jwa Botswana ntshe ke mmala damn dog… o gakolotse banni ba toropo eo gore one day, one day 'n Opdrag of bevel word tipies met die 'Enter'-sleutel afgesluit die meeste stamme van bakteriële patogene verantwoordelik oh shit I had homework yokuqala yeensiwa kwilizwe ukuza nezisombululo kwintlobo-nlolo informs the two student doctors who have go ngatla bolo e e latlhelwange

Meanwhile.

Liquid breached the scummy surface of the canal with a gasp. Blood was roaring in his ears, but he could hear a commotion — pounding footsteps, people shouting, Benedict and Bêdeng barking and growling and both cut off by yelps of pain. Someone with a loud voice was ordering people, in American-accented English, to stay back. Looking around frantically, wiping freezing saltwater out of his eyes with one hand, he quickly found a nearby access ladder that lead up to the road and swam towards it. It took him only seconds to wrench himself out of the water and up the ladder, stopping
just before his head cleared the top, suddenly remembering the sniper. If he stuck his head up now it could very well be a death sentence…

Fortunately a lifetime of getting himself into odd situations (especially the CIA bunker two years ago) had lead to a habit of turning every pocket into a cornucopia of situationally useful random objects he’d klepto’d from somewhere or other. After a moment of digging, he found a little handmirror, which he raised up over the curb, angling it so he could see the road—

Ah, fuck.

Certainly he was looking at the right spot: the ugly neon blue spool of thread lying on its side on the ground, as were Benedict and Bêdeng, who were at least still breathing from what Liquid could see. There were also plastic shards littered in a small area where Mantis had been standing and, fortunately, no visible blood and, extremely unfortunately, no Mantis.

“Where the fuck is—“ Liquid hissed, but was cut off by the handmirror suddenly shattering - he jerked his hand back to himself, letting the pieces of glass fall into the canal. Taking a second to glance at his hand he saw that it was bleeding (as he looked at it, it gradually began to burn and hurt) and there was a circular tear in the palm of his glove… dammit. He glanced back up towards the street. So the sniper was still there after all…

Liquid wasn’t stupid enough to go out unarmed but he only had a pistol; he couldn’t take on a sniper, especially not in the middle of a city in broad daylight. And right at this moment, the sniper didn’t matter anyway — what mattered was figuring out where the hell Mantis went. Liquid had seen the filter of his gas mask explode very clearly, so with how many people there were around wherever Mantis was he was undoubtedly deafened and overstimulated to the point of complete uselessness. The man had no way to defend himself and whoever was with the sniper had obviously picked up and dragged him away to parts unknown.

So, first order of business: Find these parts unknown, rescue husband.

Second order of business: Hunt down and kill sniper, and associates, with bare hands in the most brutal, over-the-top, gory way possible.

But first things first. Liquid dropped back into the canal, ignoring his wounded hand, and began swimming in the direction they’d been walking anyway. Sooner or later he’d come upon another access ladder out of the sniper’s range, and then he could just run through the streets until he got back to the apartment and enlisted Wolf and Octopus’ help in figuring out just what the hell exactly had just happened. Aside from “the Patriots”.

Fifteen minutes ago.

“I don’t like this assignment,” Meryl admitted with a sigh. “It’s nothing more than a hired hit.”

“The target’s a terrorist,” Ed said. Johnathan grunted in agreement.

“If it makes you feel any better,” Akiba said, “we’re not the ones doing it. We’re just here for cleanup and damage control.”

“It doesn’t, thanks,” Meryl said. She turned around to face the sniper her USACIDC unit, RAT Patrol Team 01, had been sent to accompany as one of their first assignments under her command. “According to the info, he should have one of his teammates with him, right? Psycho Mantis, most likely.”
“Yep,” the sniper Nocturne said, calmly adjusting her scope.

“Look… your orders are to kill Liquid. Only Liquid.”

“No one said anything about keeping any of the others alive. They’re all traitors.”

“I’m saying something about keeping any of the others alive. Your target is Liquid. Mantis doesn’t need to die.”

Nocturne gave Meryl a sour look. “Is that an order, Commander Silverburgh?”

“It’s a request.”

“Um, Mantis is a terrorist, too,” Akiba interjected.

Meryl put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him away. “I remember how FOXHOUND was at Shadow Moses,” she said, “as far as Mantis goes, if Liquid’s taken out of the picture then he’s harmless. He was with them because he followed Liquid around, not because of ideology.”

“What about the others?” Ed said.

“Raven died two years ago, according to our source,” Akiba said, “that leaves Wolf and whatshisface… Decoy Octopus.”

Meryl rubbed one arm at the mention of Wolf - the thought of her always seemed to set her old gunshot wounds a-twinging, although they were long healed. “We can worry about them later if we’re ever assigned to do anything about them,” she said firmly, “for now it’s probably Mantis we’re going to be seeing. He doesn’t need to die.”

“Well,” Nocturne said, raising her rifle and checking through her scope, “if you want to cut down on the loss of life here, commander, that’s your prerogative. But me…”

Meryl gave her a withering look. Nocturne rolled her eyes.

“I won’t go out of my way to spare Mantis, if he’s there,” she said, “if it’s any of the others than I’ll just take care of them now along with Liquid.”

“Not Wolf,” Meryl said firmly.

“You wanna take care of her yourself, huh?”

“Something like that.” More that she didn’t want to let Wolf go down without having a little talk with her, first…

Nocturne scoffed. “She and I have bad blood, Commander Silverburgh.”

“…”

“…fine. You can have her. Liquid’s dead meat, though.”

“That’s what we’re here for,” Meryl said, frowning. She turned to the rest of her team. “We’d better get in position now.”

“Yes, commander!” Johnathan and Ed both said, snapping to attention and then hurrying to the alley near the building Nocturne started walking towards, to get to its roof.
“…Akiba!” Meryl said.

Akiba jumped, then snapped to attention as well. “Yes commander!” He hurried off. Meryl followed.

“Why is Psycho Mantis the most likely one to be with Liquid?” Ed said when Meryl joined them in the alley.

“They’re close,” Meryl said in a clipped voice. “And ever since going fugitive, FOXHOUND members have travelled in pairs or groups to prevent situations like… well, this.”

“What do we do if Nocturne breaks her word and shoots the other one, too?” Akiba said.

“It’d only be breaking her word if she killed them,” Ed said.

“We can’t be certain that Nocturne is going to get a lethal shot in the first place, that’s why we brought these,” Meryl said, patting her sidearm. “And no matter what happens, we get out there and retrieve the bodies. Living or dead.”

“That sniper gives me the creeps,” Johnathan muttered.


“Stand by,” Ed said when Meryl signalled as such.

Time passed. Eventually Ed, who had been observing the streets with his binoculars, tapped Meryl’s shoulder and handed her the binoculars and the radio. She peered through them, then called Nocturne: “Do you have a visual yet?”


“That gray dog looks more like a wolf.”

“That’s your problem.”

Akiba groaned quietly. “How do I just know that I’m going to be the one that dog takes a chunk out of?”

“They don’t seem to be aware of us yet,” Meryl said, still watching carefully. Behind her, Ed shook Johnathan awake.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take out Liquid in the first shot,” Nocturne said. “You just get his carcass over to the van or whatever it is you’re supposed to do… and tase Mantis while you’re at it.”

“We only have two tasers, and they might be a little occupied with the dogs…”

“Hey, you don’t tell me how to do my job, right? I won’t tell you how to do yours.” She signed off.

“Get ready to move,” Meryl said, holding out her hand. “And don’t forget that both of them are dangerous as long as they’re still alive.”

“That’s not what you were just saying to Nocturne…” Akiba said.

“Shut up, Akiba. We all have ‘psychic insulation’ nanomachines, so Mantis is effectively hamstrung, but he still might throw a car at us. Stay on your toes.”

Down the street, Liquid and company suddenly stopped, with Liquid shielding his eyes up at the
building Nocturne was on top of. Meryl’s split-second worry that Nocturne had given herself away
was unfounded, though; one moment the terrorists were standing there and the next moment Liquid
topped backwards into the canal, arms stretched forward desperately, as Mantis crumpled to the
pavement like a puppet with cut strings. The dogs started barking and growling, Meryl signalled to
move out.

“Damn it,” Nocturne hissed over the radio, “Mantis got in the way of my shot. Liquid’s still out
there!”

Chapter End Notes

Don’t even ask about the languages in this chapter. It’s mostly Afrikaans with some
Xhosa, Zulu, Southern Sotho, and Setswana thrown in; I wasn’t keeping track of the
translations because for the most part it’s completely random. Don’t worry, none of is
was plot-relevant even in a sneaky way, except for the ones that mean stuff like “What
was that?” and “military…?” A lot of it was literally just random segments of random
Wikipedia articles.
Liquid threw open the door to the apartment. "Octopus! Wolf!! Big problem!!"

"Finally, there you are!" Wolf cried, "Bêdeng and Benedict showed up at our doorstep without you or Mantis five minutes ago! And Bêdeng was limping, and I had to dig taser hooks out of Benedict’s skin—"

"Bêdeng was carrying this in her mouth," Octopus said, gesturing to a scrap of black fabric on the table, "judging by the fabric I’d say it’s military BDU, but not South African military… boss, why are you soaking wet? And are you bleeding?"

"It’s only my hand," Liquid said brusquely, striding in only to start pacing around the front room in agitation, "and no, not South African. American. I heard them—"

"Where is Mantis?" Wolf said.

"That’s what the problem is, Mantis was shot—abducted—!"

"What? Shot??"

"How did that even happen?" Octopus said, "he was with you."

"A sniper. Must have been on one of the nearby roofs, I fell into the canal just as Mantis was fired at, by the time I got back up to street level he was gone, no blood, no trace — we’ve got to figure out what they did with Mantis, he might still be in the country, Wolf, I need you to search the rooftops for any evidence of the sniper, Octopus, I need you to—"

"Woah, boss," Octopus said, "calm down a second. Just running out there with no plan isn’t going to help."

"I have a plan!"

"Not much of one," Wolf said, grabbing a map of the city, "boss, I cannot search every rooftop, you need to give me a good idea of where the sniper might have been. Where exactly were you when you were attacked?" She spread out the map on the table next to the BDU scrap Bêdeng had brought back. "Do you remember the angle?"

"Of course I remember, seeing Mantis’ filter explode is burned into my mind. And the sniper took a shot at me, too, I was about here and—"

"Boss, give me your hand," Octopus said, "while you and Wolf are triangulating the sniper’s location I might as well clean up your wound."

"Fine," Liquid said, irritably tugging off his glove, "but as soon as you’re done with that I need you to go- go find any sort of information you can, anyone who might have seen— there were people around, I’m sure you can-"

"Relax, boss. Someone getting shot by a sniper and then bundled off by Americans in military uniforms…? People will want to talk."
Wolf and Liquid worked on figuring out what rooftop she needed to search (and possibly confront someone on) while Wolf continually pressed Liquid for details; Octopus worked on extricating a bullet from Liquid’s hand, which he kept perfectly still aside from the tips of his fingers occasionally twitching; Bêdeng quietly licked one of her front paws; Benedict sat at Liquid’s feet, every so often insistently nudging him and making a low bark.

“Hey,” Octopus said, holding the bullet up with a pair of hastily-sterilized tweezers, “does this bullet look kind of funny to either of you?”

Liquid glanced at it distractedly. “Not my area of expertise,” he muttered.

Wolf, however, did a double take. “That- that is a mercury bullet!”

Liquid looked up from the map. “What?” he said.

“Like you use?” Octopus said.

“Yes! But… as far as I know, I am the only one who does that - I practically invented that technique. I make my own bullets and all.”

“Does anyone else know about this technique?”

“No… I don’t… think so. Not outside of FOXHOUND.”

“Are you sure?” Liquid pressed, “think, Wolf, this is important. Is there anyone, anyone at all, you might have told about mercury bullets at any point?”

“I… let me see that,” Wolf said, snatching the tweezers from Octopus and examining the bullet closely. “…this bullet is faulty, it was made with a flawed design. The mercury didn’t release as it was supposed to.”

“Thank God for that,” Octopus said, “the boss’d be dead soon if it did.”

Wolf blinked. “I believe I can think of someone,” she said, “I am not sure though. But,” she added, putting the bullet and tweezers down, “someone who made their bullets in such a careless way… they would leave traces at their position. We might be able to find something…”

Octopus poured some disinfectant on Liquid’s wound, muttering about how it probably wouldn’t help much considering how far he’d swam in the undoubtedly nasty canal water, and bandaged it tightly, then left to the other room to get changed. Wolf left, Bêdeng limping after her, panting.

Liquid - after changing into dry clothes so as not to attract too much attention outside - picked up the BDU scrap and offered it to Benedict, who sniffed it before bounding over to the door, wagging his tail.

“Going to go back to the scene of the attack?” Octopus said skeptically behind him.

“If they let the dogs go then they’re already gone - probably to regroup about my escape,” Liquid said, then turned around. He raised an eyebrow at how Octopus was dressed. “How on earth did you SAPS uniform so quickly?”

“Happened to have one on hand,” Octopus said, semi-insincerely, smoothing his police uniform. “I’ll ask random people off the street about a shooting by the canal, say I’m looking for witnesses—“

“This is a military operation we’re talking about, the police wouldn’t just-“
“It doesn’t have to have anything to do with it. Just asking about a shooting will put what happened on people’s minds and as I said, they will want to talk about it. Anyway, I’m off,” he said, pinching his mask into place then putting on his cap, “I’ll only be able to get away with this for so long before the actual cops get curious.”

“Right.”

Wolf’s lip curled as she looked around the roof of the building that the sniper had positioned themselves at. (One of three possibilities, and the second one she’d checked.) It was obvious that someone had been set up here… not only were there two spent cartridges, recent, of the right caliber for a sniper rifle and consistent with the number of shots Liquid reported, but the sniper had also left behind an empty, crushed beer car, multiple smears of gun oil, a woman’s glove, and an unused clip.

“It was definitely here,” Wolf thought out loud, checking the clip and seeing poorly-made mercury rounds. She slung her rifle off her back and laid down where the cartridges were, focusing her scope on the streets below. “Yes…” she said under her breath, this had to be it. She could see shards of plastic still lying just by the canal’s edge that matched the color and general shape of Mantis’ gas mask.

God. She felt pretty bad for him - being without his mask at FOXHOUND headquarters had been enough to, so she heard, reduce the man to a whining wreck capable of following simple conversation only if he concentrated intensely, and that had been with, what, less than fifty people within his range whose thoughts he could hear? This was the middle of a city. Cape Town wasn’t the most populous city ever, of course, but that was still tens of thousands of people suddenly being shoved into his head. Poor guy…

Bêdeng barked at Wolf, drawing her attention, then nosed the beer can. Wolf blinked, then picked up what had been underneath it.

“A plane ticket…?”

No identifying information - of course not, that would have been too easy - but it was for a flight tomorrow morning out of Cape Town International Airport to Pulkovo Airport, St. Petersburg, Russia. And it had been left behind. The sniper wouldn’t be able to catch her flight without it.

Wolf shook her head. “She always was sloppy.”

Bêdeng barked again.

Wolf settled down against the railing, folding her legs and calling Liquid on Codec. “The sniper forgot something,” she said, “she will be back for it. I will wait.”

“She?” Liquid said.

“Yes, she. I suppose I cannot say for sure I know who she is, but she left behind a woman’s glove. But as I said, I will wait, and ambush her when she returns for her plane ticket.”

“Alright. Be careful.”

Liquid, meanwhile, had gotten back to the place where Mantis had been shot after pushing him into the canal - which made him shudder to think about, if Mantis hadn’t done that then it was likely Liquid would have been shot instead, and it probably would have been a direct shot, not a glancing one. What would have happened then? Would the sniper have simply adjusted her aim and taken out
Mantis, too? And what about the unidentified Americans who had, apparently, dragged Mantis out of the street?

Well, they had to be around here somewhere. Benedict trotted before him, nose to the ground. One he reached the spot near where Mantis had fallen, he barked a few times then started walking faster, still sniffing the pavement, headed towards an alleyway not terribly far away.

“Good boy,” Liquid muttered, scratching the top of Benedict’s head absent-mindedly as he looked around the alley. Trash, only some of which was in bins, and a bit of graffiti, but nothing that indicated a military presence, American or otherwise. It wasn’t even dry enough here for dust to collect in alleyways, so he couldn’t go off of bootprints…

He fished the BDU fragment out of his pocket and offered it to Benedict again. Benedict sniffed it, then barked, turning around and putting his nose to the ground, following the same trail, this time out of the alley and back towards where Liquid had been pushed into the canal. After a moment or two of sniffing, Benedict barked and started running off in a seemingly random direction — Liquid jogged after him, the two of them coming to a stop by the side of the road, where Benedict sat down, panting and looking up at Liquid.

“This is it?” Liquid said, “the end of the trail?”

Benedict cocked his head, evidently aware of Liquid’s frustration but completely lacking any way to fully understand it.

Liquid glanced around. There were quite a few cars parked along the side of the road here, although this particular spot was empty… he crouched down, looking closer. Of course he wasn’t sure what he was looking for… if it had been a different time of year he might have been able to see leftover dampness from where an air conditioner had dripped its condensation, but it was too chilly out for A/C. The only reason why Liquid was thinking that there had been a car or van or some sort of vehicle parked here was because it was the only thing that made sense, the only reason why the scent trail should suddenly die here on the side of the road that was actually reasonable. There had been some sort of vehicle here, owned by the American military personnel who had been working with the sniper (she couldn’t be with them with them, why would she have a plane ticket to leave behind if she did?), and clearly they had dragged Mantis into that vehicle and driven off.

It made sense. Liquid stood up.

And kicked the curb angrily, gritting his teeth and clenching his fists so hard that his wounded right hand actually spasmed.

“Dammit. Goddammit!”

His Codec rang. It was Octopus.

“Did the scent on the BDU bring up anything?”

“Nothing,” Liquid snarled, “just where they parked their getaway vehicle. Not very useful.”

“I turned up something. More than a few people told me that the guy who was shot and dragged off by American ‘army people’ went either north or east… so, northeast.”

“Great. What’s northeast of…? Oh my g- the Wingfield Aerodrome. They’re flying out of the country with him. Of course they are.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking. Hang on, I got a car and I’m gonna drive you there.”
Liquid nodded. “I can pop in and see if they haven’t left yet. What’s our ETA?”

He turned around just in time for Octopus to pull up beside him and wave. Liquid cut off the Codec connection and got in, Benedict following.

“It’s only a couple miles away and traffic’s pretty light this time of day,” Octopus said, stepping on the gas, “we’ll be there in about fifteen minutes. Or…” He flipped a switch on the dashboard, and the lights atop the cabin began flashing and a siren started wailing. “Less than five.”

“How on earth did you get a police car on such short notice…”

“Honestly, boss,” Octopus said, accelerating sharply and swerving around a couple cars immediately in front of them, “it’s better not to question my methods.”

Octopus dropped Liquid off a non-suspicious distance away from Wingfield Aerodrome and drove off in an inconspicuous manner (with Benedict now in the passenger seat) as Liquid skirted a security camera, hopped a fence, and snuck his way in. He called Wolf to keep her posted on what was going on; he also called Ocelot for good measure, informing him of the high likelihood that he’d have to ask around his Patriot circles about Mantis’ location because it was pretty much undoubtedly them who just kidnapped him.

“…well, that’s not good,” Ocelot said.

“Yeah. The boss is hysterical.”

A long sigh. “I can’t just send out a general call for information on Mantis’ location or what’s being done with him,” Ocelot said, “that’s not exactly a good look. However, if the three of you can get the location narrowed down to at least a general area, I should be able to find an individual who might know something. If we get lucky, I might get asked to pass on some demands to Liquid…”

“You think they’ll keep him hostage for some kind of ‘ransom’ instead of outright killing him? Because I thought you said that the Patriots relied more on SIGINT than HUMINT — HUMINT would tell them that the boss would do anything to get him back, but if they’re just looking at what was on our official FOXHOUND files, they’re only going to see his tactical advantage and…”

“—decide it’s more worth their while to just get rid of him, yes, I’m fully aware, Octopus. But it’s not impossible that even if an order were handed down for his execution, an agent might intervene with an attempt to blackmail Liquid. We’ll just have to keep our fingers crossed.”

“Uh-huh. Okay, hopefully we’ll have a general area by the time someone calls you back — it looks like they’re flying him out of the country, so the boss is infiltrating where they’d be taking off from, and Wolf’s hunting down the sniper. There’s gotta be a lead one way or the other.”

“I see. Good luck.”

“By the way, Ocelot…”

“Hm?”

Octopus frowned. “The last couple times the Patriots found our location was because you ‘leaked’ that information in order to maintain your cover as a spy and-or try to root out any actual spies. Was this…?”

“No,” Ocelot said, “this one wasn’t me. As for who else might have known your location…”
“EVA’s trustworthy, right?”

“More than I am.”

“Hah. What about that guy she had with her - Záviš Čížek? Maybe he talked.”

“…I’ll look into him.”

Meanwhile.

Bêdeng’s ears pricked, and Wolf looked up from her hiding spot. The knob of the door leading to the roof jiggled slightly, then clicked, then turned as the door opened — a hooded figure slipped through, audibly grumbling under her breath about a hole in her pocket. Wolf glanced at Bêdeng, putting a finger to her lips, then took her rifle in hand, silently creeping up on the woman.

At a suitably dramatic moment, just as the woman was crouching to pick up her plane ticket, Bêdeng bounded out in front of her, growling.

“What the hell?!” she gasped, stumbling backwards - right so that the muzzle of Wolf’s rifle pressed into her back. She went shock still, then turned around, raising her hands slowly to push back her hood, revealing a round, freckled face pale with fright.

Wolf sneered. “Quoll,” she said. “It has been a long time, hasn’t it?”

The sniper formerly known as Drowsy Quoll’s face instantly contorted into a scowl. “I don’t use that code anymore,” she spat, “my trade name is Nocturne.”

“Oh? Completely distanced yourself from Outer Heaven, have you?”

“No!” Nocturne snapped loud enough that Bêdeng barked warningly. “I’m not like you - you, and Liquid, and Mantis — all three of you ditched after the Galzburg FOB was bombed, I remember. But I - I stayed until the bitter end, until Zanzibar Land…!”

“You shot Mantis!”

“Big deal. I was hired to.” She drew her lips back from her teeth. “Actually, I was hired to take out Liquid, but that leather-loving jackass got in my way.”

Bêdeng’s growling at Nocturne got louder as Wolf frowned angrily. “You were to shoot Liquid?!” she said, “how could you? We were all in the same combat group once, he was our comrade!”

“Like that matters!” Nocturne snapped, “god, Wolf, I’ve always hated you!”

“What?”

“You were always so freaking arrogant! Introducing yourself as your unit’s best sniper even though we were the only two snipers in the group—“

Wolf was taken aback. “But I was better than you,” she said, “I was S+, you were A.”

“The evaluation was too generous with you! You were graded on a curve, dammit!”

“I was eighteen years old, I was still in training!”

“That has nothing to do with it — you were Quiet’s favorite, you- eep!” She cut herself off when Wolf shoved the muzzle of her rifle almost into her mouth.
“Even if I were as sloppy as you, I still would not miss from this distance,” Wolf snarled.

“S… Sloppy…?!”

Wolf rolled her eyes as insultingly as possible. “You left so many traces… if you had not, I might not have you cornered now.”

Nocturne blinked, then all the blood drained back out of her face. Good. Apparently what kind of situation she was in now was starting to dawn on her.

She licked her lips nervously. “What are you going to do with me?”

“I am not going to do anything,” Wolf said.

“…huh-?”

“My boss is going to decide what to do with you.” She jerked her head. “Come. We will wait for him back at our apartment. …and don’t try anything. Bêdeng will rip your legs off.”

Chapter End Notes

What? A minor character from a single chapter of Miscellany suddenly became part of a major plot point? Really? Would I do that?! 0:-)
Octopus (now sans mask and SAPS uniform) and Benedict were already back at the apartment by the time Wolf and Bêdeng arrived with Nocturne in tow; Liquid was nowhere to be seen. Octopus told Wolf where he was, then shrugged, gesturing (with a pantomime of politesse) for Nocturne to sit down on the couch, which she did, looking around warily. Wolf called Liquid over Codec.

“Any luck?”

“No,” Liquid said shortly, “Mantis wasn’t there, I’m certain.”

“On your way back now…?”

“Yes. Damn it… I did find some hapless employee to interrogate, he told me a U.S. Army plane flew out not twenty minutes before my infiltration—“

“Army?” Wolf said, “are you sure he did not mean Air Force?”

“He insisted it was the Army, it must have been something from the Aviation Branch - oh, and also I strangled him because he’d seen my face, so probably by now someone’s found his body and security in the Aerodrome has really tightened so if we need to go back there—“

“But Mantis was on that plane.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it,” Liquid said with a hiss, “but I couldn’t get the destination out of the employee, he didn’t seem to know.”

“The sniper might now,” she replied, “so you had better come back to the apartment as fast as you can.”

“?”

Nocturne did her level best to appear as un-intimidated as possible, sprawling out on the couch with her arms behind her head - quite frankly, it was a good imitation of Liquid, whether she knew that or not. “So,” she said, “what exactly do you plan on doing with me?”

“The boss’ll interrogate you,” Octopus said, “so save yourself the trouble and just tell us what you know now so that we can hold him back when he gets here.”

“That’s funny,” Nocturne said, with a sarcastic bark of a laugh, “I already know that Ocelot’s the interrogation expert in your group.”

“Well, yeah, but just because we aren’t experts like he is doesn’t mean none of us know how to pump someone for information,” Octopus said, “you don’t need to have a torture fetish in order to break a few limbs and threaten to kill someone.”

“Pfft.”

“Quoll,” Wolf said, walking over—

“Don’t call me that. It’s Nocturne.”

“Quoll, do you have any idea what you have gotten yourself into? Liquid is going to mangle you.”
“Oh, please.”

“You had to have a source to tell you about our location, right?” Octopus said, “did they happen to share with you that Liquid considers Mantis his husband?”

Nocturne went completely silent.

“To be fair,” Wolf said, glancing at Octopus, “he would probably act similarly if either of us were abducted instead of Mantis.”

“True. Although probably a little bit more level-headed instead of completely frantic.”

“That is what we are for.”

“Right… to make sure Nocturne here actually talks before the boss kills her.”

“I’m not going to say a word,” Nocturne snapped. Benedict barked at her. She shut up.

Wolf waited on the balcony until Liquid showed up again, riding an obviously stolen bike that he didn’t bother locking to anything after getting off of it, instead throwing it on the pavement in front of the apartment and walking briskly for the door. About a minute and a half later he threw open the front door, his eyes immediately settling on Nocturne.

“…you look familiar,” he said. “Drowsy Quail, wasn’t it?”

“Quoll,” Wolf said.

“Nocturne,” Nocturne insisted.

Liquid walked up in front of Nocturne, hands in his pockets and extremely false smile on his face. “Wolf told me you may have information I’d be interested in,” he said pleasantly.

Nocturne grunted. “I’m not here voluntarily. I’m no traitor.”

“Very well. We can do this either the easy way or the hard way. Which would you prefer?”

“…what’s the easy way?”

“You talk. I let you live.”

“And the hard way?”

“I make you regret being born.”

She rolled her eyes.

Liquid leaned forward slightly. “Well, Quoll?”

“You could at least get my name right.”

“I don’t care about what you call yourself nowadays. I don’t even care if you live or die — that’s why I’m offering to let you go if you cooperate.”

“Promising to let me live isn’t what I’d call great incentive,” Nocturne said, curling her lip, “you’re supposed to sweeten the pot now, you know.”

“Alright.”
Faster than the eye could track, Liquid pulled out his SOCOM and shot Nocturne squarely in the right knee. She screamed, clutching her leg. Wolf and Octopus both took a step back, exchanging glances.

Liquid was still smiling.

“I’ll let you keep your other leg,” he said brightly. “Sweet enough for you?”

“Ghh… g…go… to H-Hell….”

He leaned forward until their faces were only inches apart, smacking Nocturne’s hand away from her wound, replacing it with his own and squeezing. She let out a choked cry. “I think there’s something you don’t realize, Quoll,” he whispered, “something you haven’t thought through.”

“N-No…!”

“Do you have any idea how hard I have to work to prevent myself from ripping you to shreds right now? To utterly destroy you for what you did to Mantis? Do you know what kind of willpower it takes to stop myself from doing that? And furthermore I’ve even offered to let you live, to let you go…”

She whimpered. He squeezed harder.

“The fact that you’re still alive is a testament to the kind of will I possess. You and your employers underestimate me, Quoll.” He leaned closer. “I fully intend to impose this will of mine on the world,” he breathed, “I wouldn’t recommend getting in my way.”

“I… I’m… o-oh, god…”

“Tell me everything.”

“America,” she blurted out, “they’re taking him to America. The West! That’s all I know, I swear—we knew you were here because there’s a Patriot plant in your resistance, I promise I— I promise I don’t know who it is, but— th-they told us where you were! I was just following orders, I didn’t— I —! I came here with an American Army group, the, uh, the CID, that is, the Criminal Investigation Command, a-a unit of theirs was sent to clean up after me, after I shot you, I don’t know why them specifically, maybe because FOXHOUND was an Army group — but Mantis got in the way, I didn’t mean to kill him, no, I mean, he’s still alive, the CID team retrieved him and they probably sedated him for the flight and I swear I don’t know where they’re taking him, just that it’s in the West somewhere! N-Not the West Coast, I mean, they would have said West Coast if they meant West Coast, just… just… the West… I-I… I… that’s all I know…”

“That’s all?” Liquid said.

“I-I promise!”

Liquid let go of her leg and stood. “Well. This has been… illuminating.” He glanced behind him. “Octopus, you said that Ocelot told you he should be able to find the specific location as long as we could come up with a general one?”

“Yes, sir,” Octopus said.

Liquid turned back to Nocturne. “Very illuminating,” he said.

Nocturne stared up him with wide eyes, drawing her wounded leg up to her chest, trembling like a
leaf. “You’ll… you’ll let me go now, right? You’re not going to kill me?”

“Hm? Oh, about that,” Liquid said, raising his SOCOM again, “I lied.”

Nocturne didn’t even have enough time finish gasping in horror before Liquid shot her in the forehead. After that there was a brief pause of a few seconds as Liquid re-holstered his gun, eyes cold. Benedict walked over and started licking Nocturne’s blood off his hand.

“…well,” Octopus said at length, “that just happened.”

“A Patriot plant…?” Wolf said, her eyebrows drawing together. “So Ocelot was right about that.”

Liquid’s lips twitched. If Mantis were here then he’d surely make a comment about how the Patriot plant was Ocelot himself but… well, they were one step closer to getting him back, hopefully unharmed. Liquid’s own experiences as a prisoner had taught him to not dare be optimistic, though…

“I need to call Ocelot,” he said, his voice somewhere in the neighborhood of calm, clenching his right hand. “I’ll be a few minutes.”

“That’s fine, boss,” Octopus said. Liquid stepped away, and Octopus turned to look at Nocturne’s body, then shrugged. “…we couldn’t keep staying here anyway. I’ll pack our shit - Wolf, can you look up another safehouse? The boss is definitely going to want to go straight to the West, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it has to be there. We could split up.”

Wolf tilted her head, making a small noncommittal sound, her eyes still locked on Nocturne.

“…guess it depends on what the boss decides,” Octopus said, then walked off as well.

Bêdeng nudged Wolf’s arm. She looked down at her, then scratched her behind the ears.

“Folding so easily under pressure like that…” she murmured, “Quiet would be disappointed in her.”

Ocelot was in Colombia when Liquid called about Mantis’ location and he pre-empted the fact that Liquid was going to want to go fetch his husband personally. Ocelot would just be there for intelligence’s sake and so, functionally, just along for the ride. He agreed to meet Liquid in St. Louis, saying that if all they knew was that Mantis was in the West, the best place to start their search would be none other than the so-called Gateway to the West.

Since that was decided, Wolf and Octopus were just going to hole up in Madagascar until they inevitably had to move again, and they’d be taking both dogs with them. They were set to leave the following morning - Nocturne’s corpse had been shoved into the fridge after Octopus removed all the shelves, so the smell wouldn’t bother them overnight — Liquid was taking a red-eye to St. Louis tonight. Ocelot’s flight from Colombia was supposed to get there about half an hour after Liquid did.

“Hey, take care of your hand, alright boss?” Octopus said, “seriously, change that bandage once in a while.”

“Hm.” Liquid glanced down at said hand. It had been burning for most of the time since he’d been shot, and by now it was starting to swell a bit… not a good sign, but he had more important things to worry about.

“Try to get some sleep on the flight over,” Wolf said, “I know you will run yourself to exhaustion with this…”
“I’m sure I won’t be able to sleep even if I tried,” Liquid said shortly, snapping his suitcase shut. “I can’t stop thinking about…”

“He’s probably fine,” Octopus said, “or… you know what I mean. He’s gotta be more valuable as a hostage than a corpse, so the Patriots have a vested interest in keeping him alive.”

“I… hope so.”

Wolf took his uninjured hand in one of hers, digging out her tin of diazepam from her pocket with the other. “Here,” she said, shaking out a dose into Liquid’s palm, then carefully closing his fingers over it. “Take it when you get on the flight.”

“…Wolf…”

“You aren’t going to be much help if you are out of your mind with anxiety and running on no sleep, boss. Just take it.”

Liquid nodded.

Wolf sighed, then threw her arms around him and pulled him into a hug - squishing his face against her chest, though Liquid was too distracted already to really react to it. "He will be fine," she said, "I know he will. If they moved him to America they obviously don't want to kill him yet, I know you will be able to rescue him before it comes to that... do not worry so much... take care of yourself, Liquid."

"...alright. Alright."

"Come on," Octopus said, tapping Wolf on the shoulder, "we need to drop him off at the airport ASAP."

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“Cancer?”

Naomi clutched at herself.

“Cancer?” she repeated, eyes wide, “eating away at me?”

“Yes, Dr. Hunter,” the nurse said patiently as she changed out Naomi’s IV, “you have cancer. You had it for several months before you were shot, and it had metastasized to most of your organs already. You would have had less than year to live at that point — this is the eighth time I’ve told you this, Dr. Hunter, have you forgotten again?”

“Only a year to live…?” Naomi said, then looked at her hands.

“Shortly after you stabilized, the oncologist decided to, since the cancer had already progressed too far for normal therapies to be of much use, try an experimental treatment… nanomachines. I believe they were of your design. I’m not sure how this hospital got ahold of them…”

“Nanomachines?” Naomi said. “My design? How funny…” She couldn’t recall, exactly, ever working on that, but it seemed familiar nonetheless. Tiny electric things at her command, to eat away at what was eating away at her…

“It’s a marvellous design, Dr. Hunter,” the nurse said, “they allow your body to continue functioning despite the tumors, and they were even able to scrub your blood of the lethal dose of mercury. However, they aren’t able to reverse the spread of your cancer, or even completely stop it, just slow
“it… you’ve only bought yourself another few years.”

“Oh.”

“But I would say,” the nurse said, tucking Naomi’s blanket up to her shoulders, “that if you work hard on your psychical therapy, you might be able to go back to your research before your time is up, and perfect your anti-cancer nanomachines. Not only would you save your own life, but you’d completely revolutionize medicine — a universal cure for cancer would save millions, maybe even billions of lives, Dr. Hunter!”

“No thank you,” Naomi said calmly.

“…what do you mean, no thank you?”

“I don’t mind having only a few years left. I should only need a few years to take my revenge. I don’t care what happens to me after that.”

“…Dr. Hunter…”

Naomi ignored the nurse, staring blankly off into space instead. “I don’t mind the cancer,” she said, “it’s alright if it eats me… it saved me, didn’t it? Gave me the chance to continue.”

“It’s true that it was a tumor in your brain that prevented your death,” the nurse said, “since if the bullet had penetrated even a fraction of an centimeter more, it would have been inoperable… but… it didn’t save you, Dr. Hunter, it’s going to kill you. Do you understand that?”

“Yes. I’m fine with it.”

Another psych consult piled up for Dr. Naomi Hunter.

When Ocelot got off the plane in St. Louis, Liquid was already waiting for him in the international arrivals lobby, pacing like a caged animal, wringing his hands and obviously distressed enough that he was attracting funny looks from security. As soon as he spotted Ocelot, he ran up to him and grabbed his arm.

“Where were you?! You told me that your flight came in thirty minutes after mine, it’s been over an hour!”

“There were delays, boss, nothing I could do about that.”

“This is precisely why I hate flying commercially…!”

“If they haven’t already killed him then an extra half-hour won’t make any difference,” Ocelot said. “I’ve already made arrangements - there are a few people I’m meeting up with but I still have another hour and a half before the first meeting. You, in the meantime, need to stay at the hotel and behave yourself.”

“…” Liquid jerked his head to the side, deliberately silent. He looked awful — haggard, bags under his eyes - perhaps understandable, considering a flight from Cape Town to St. Louis took about 24 hours with two layovers - there was a slightly dazed air to him that he was struggling to conceal and he kept rubbing his bandaged right hand.

“You’re sure you’re alright, boss?” Ocelot said as they walked towards the exit.

“I’m fine,” Liquid said stiffly.
“You seem exhausted.”

“I slept on the plane.”

“I’m surprised you could even bring yourself to sleep.”

“Wolf gave me a dose of diazepam…”

Well, that might explain it. Liquid had a natural (engineered) resistance to depressants, narcotics, and tranquilizers, but Wolf had been a diazepam addict for years - it wasn’t too unlikely that her idea of ‘a dose’ could keep Liquid knocked out for almost an entire day. At least he’d made his connections, but the drug might still be in his system… if he was still drowsy, though, then Ocelot didn’t have to worry about him running off and doing anything stupid while Ocelot was squeezing Patriot peripheries in St. Louis for information.

This whole situation was irritating, to say the least, but Ocelot could certainly play it off — simply (“simply”) find out where Mantis was and then bow out, leaving Liquid to retrieve him on his own, something he was more than capable of. No one would be stupid enough to think that that and Ocelot asking around would be unrelated, but Ocelot would have no trouble convincing the Patriots at large that maintaining his cover was more important than whatever they were planning on doing with Mantis. He could even claim that sending Liquid in on a rescue mission was supposed to be an opportunity to capture and/or kill him too, but he must have overestimated the competence of whoever was guarding Mantis.

Of course, Ocelot noted, the wound on Liquid’s right hand was clearly in the beginning stages of an infection, so depending on how bad that got and/or how long it took to narrow down Mantis’ location, Ocelot might have to change the plan.

One rental car that would never be returned later, Liquid was dumped at a cheap hotel and Ocelot was off to his meeting(s). Liquid quickly grew restless and his hand was bothering him - he washed it in the bathroom sink a dozen times, but it never helped — rather belatedly he realized that he hadn’t eaten in about two days and ordered delivery, but only ate about half of it before succumbing to exhaustion and his diazepam hangover, falling asleep sitting up against one of the beds.

The sun was up by the time Ocelot came back and woke Liquid up.

“Any news?” Liquid said, rubbing his eyes with his uninjured hand.

“A step in the right direction,” Ocelot said, “I’ve been directed to a couple possible locations between southern Idaho and the Mexican border, and Patriot presence is light in the Mormon Corridor. It shouldn’t take too long to get specifics.”

“Where do we start?” Liquid said, standing up and cracking his back.

“Arizona. We can drive there in about a day.”

“Not fly?”

“Driving’s more inconspicuous, boss.”

“Point. We don’t know what they’d do to him if they knew we were coming… or that I was coming, at any rate. I’d like to think he’s still alive right now- no. No, I’m sure he’s still alive right now—“

Ocelot was getting the oddest feeling of nostalgia for the KGB.
They weren’t sure they were even still in Alaska.

Nor did they know what had happened to John-Dee’s body. Catherine and McGolden were both dumped (quite literally) at, according to signage, King Cove’s Department of Public Safety, in their “Emergency jail” cell. Then the Cyphers flew off.

“This isn’t good,” McGolden said, wiping his face. “This is really, really not good.”

Catherine tried the door and swore under her breath. “Those damn things managed to lock it somehow.”

“Yeah? But they didn’t search us,” McGolden said, walking over, then pulling something out of one of his coat pockets.

“Is that a… lockpick set?”

“You know how to use it?”

“No.”

“Watch and learn, Cathy.”

He reached through the bars and picked the lock after a few tries, then opened the door. It creaked. He and Catherine both went totally still for a few moments, then he let out a breath.

“You stay here for a sec, alright?” he said, “I’ll go see if the coast is clear.”

“But—“

“You lost your gun, Cathy, you’ve got to be extra careful right now!”

“I’m not just going to stay here in this cell while you go and risk your neck,” Catherine argued. “I’ll stay behind you if you want, but I’m coming with.”

“Fine.”

They both left the emergency jail and walked out into the hallway. Only a few lights were on, and they had to be careful where they stepped - papers and miscellaneous pieces of garbage littered the floor, left behind in the evacuation rush. Dust coated everything and there was a not-insignificant amount of water damage on the walls and ceilings.

“Do you think there are any people here?” Catherine whispered.

“I don’t know,” McGolden whispered back, “this police station is definitely deserted, but maybe there are security people who live in this town… those flying things might have gone to summon them or something.”

“Then we’ve gotta get out of here before they come…” She hissed. “How are we supposed to get back to Anchorage?”
“We just need to get back to someplace where we can catch a flight or borrow a car or something. Still, it’s gonna be a lot of hiking just to get out of the exclusion zone…”

They both went quiet. McGolden carefully checked around the corner and found a door that lead to the outside - the rest of the abandoned town was visible through the glass. He motioned for Catherine to follow him, tip-toeing up to the door and nudging it open, looking around again.

“No sign of anything, human or mechanical,” he muttered.

“Good… let’s go!”

They started walking swiftly down the empty street, looking around, watching each other’s backs. They both froze when they heard the telltale buzz of a Cypher’s rotor somewhere behind them, then exchanged glances — and bolted in opposite directions.

McGolden’s strategy was to run, Catherine’s to hide; she concealed herself in a dumpster in the shadow of a building, the garbage inside long rotted past the point of stinking. From her hiding spot she saw McGolden sprint through an empty, cracked parking lot, a single Cypher trailing behind him about thirty feet up in the air… the buzzing got louder as more Cyphers showed up from all corners, some of them passing right over Catherine.

One of the Cyphers caught up with McGolden, hovering directly over him for a few seconds before one of those accursed wire-arms shot out down at him, scruffing him and lifting him into the air, struggling and flailing. At about twenty feet, it dropped him — he fell to the ground with a sickening crunch, and didn’t move after that.

Catherine put a hand over her mouth, her heart pounding. She didn’t know from this distance whether McGolden was still alive or not and wasn’t sure which option left them more screwed here: If McGolden were dead, then that left Catherine all alone to give the Cyphers the slip and hike back to a more populated area where she might be able to get help, but if McGolden were still alive… she couldn’t just leave him and save herself… and he hadn’t fallen from high enough that she could be reasonably sure he wasn’t. She had to go help him.

The Cyphers circled McGolden’s limp body for a while, then started to meander off in different directions; once they’d gotten a ways away, Catherine climbed back out of the dumpster and crept across the street to the parking lot, as quickly as possible. A nearby Cypher stopped mid-air, then slowly started to turn its camera around — Catherine skittered back to the dumpster, hiding behind it as the Cypher looked around, then flew off again.

Direct approach wouldn’t work. Alright. Catherine cut around the back of the building, hoping she could get to him by a different angle. She was keenly aware of what kind of injuries he might have - fractured bones, broken spine, traumatic brain injury, internal bleeding, aortic rupture - time was of the essence.

“Well well well… what do we have here?”

Catherine spun around. There was a pair of men standing behind her - men dressed in military uniforms (although not from any military she’d ever seen, even though the man who’d spoken had an American accent), plus gloves, head coverings, and gas masks. They were armed, one with an M16A2 assault rifle and the other with an M870P shotgun.

“So you’re the one we have orders not to kill…” said the one who hadn’t just spoken.

“Where’s your companion?” said the first one, glancing around, “the footage showed you were with
Catherine growled, backing up, her eyes flicking around the space around her, looking for a weapon. A rusty pipe… no, there were two of them and they already had their weapons out, and for all she knew the safeties off as well. The ‘reactionary gap’ her father taught her about wouldn’t help her any in this situation… damn, if only she still had her gun!

Of course, the one saying that they had orders to *not kill her* had made a mistake in letting her know that. Catherine turned tail and ran, ignoring one of the soldiers shouting “Hey!” at her, throwing garbage cans onto their side behind her to slow them down. One of them fired at her back, but shot wide intentionally - it tore a divot into the wall next to her but apart from some chips of brick striking her she was completely untouched.

Catherine had just turned behind the police station when she was tackled by a third soldier who probably weighed about twice as much as she did. She screamed and swore, spitting, struggling, and clawed at the soldier’s gas mask, trying to tear it off so she could scratch out his eyes — the first two soldiers caught up, one of them digging around in his belt-pouch that Catherine had assumed held ammo.

“Hurry up!” snapped the soldier pinning Catherine down.

“I know, I know,” said the other soldier, pulling out a syringe and uncapping it, then approaching. Catherine’s eyes went wide.

“H-Hey, wait a minute!” she said, “don’t just fucking stick me with that! You have to at least make sure you get all the air bubbles out, do you want to give me a goddamn embolism!?”

The syringe-wielding soldier stopped, then, his body language sheepish, held the syringe upright and cautiously pushed the plunger until clear fluid began to dribble out of the tip of the needle… probably like he’d seen on TV… and then he approached again, and that was the last thing Catherine remembered for a while.

When she woke up, she was in the back of a truck with McGolden, who was conscious although his pupils were too dilated for how dim it was (and not equally dilated, either) and smelled faintly of vomit. The van was clearly headed somewhere, and travelling quite fast; judging by the way the whole vehicle rattled around, it wasn’t on a paved road.

And that was how Catherine and McGolden came to be unsure that they were still in Alaska.

“Thank God you’re awake,” McGolden said, his voice ever-so-slightly slurred. “You’ve been out for a while. So was I, I think… I just woke up. I think. My head hurts.”

“You might have… ugh,” Catherine said, sitting up and rubbing her temples, “you might have a bit of brain damage.”

“From the fall? Yeah. I remember that Cypher thing dropping me. I think I sprained my ankle, too,” he added, rubbing his left ankle.

“Let me see,” Catherine said, crawling forward. She palpated his ankle for a moment, and he hissed - she frowned. “This might be a fracture, McGolden.”

“That’s great. What’d they do to you?”

“Injection, sedatives,” Catherine said, then checked herself over quickly. “Looks like they didn’t do anything else to me, just threw me in here…”
“Well, at least there’s that.”

There was a long pause. Catherine looked behind her, to where the driver would be, but they were completely blocked off from the cabin. She snorted.

“Wonderful,” she said.

“Yup,” McGolden said. “Just peachy.”

“Yeah. Now where the hell are they taking us…?”

The initial plan was to make Liquid drive part of the way to Arizona, but halfway through the drive Ocelot noticed, when Liquid was changing his bandage, the state of the gunshot wound on his palm: by now it was swollen and purulent, it and the whole area around it red, which had streaked his skin where his veins were. Ocelot kept his thoughts to himself, but a few hours later he noted that the lines of red travelling up his hand could no longer be covered with the bandage.

“An infection doesn’t bode well, boss,” he said.

Liquid grunted. “Turns out that Cape Town canals aren’t great places to have a fresh open wound, who knew?”

“I’m serious. That’s only going to get worse, you know.”

“I’m fine, Ocelot. Keep your eyes on the road.”

It took Ocelot about half an hour to goad Liquid into confessing that the pain in his hand was bad enough to distract him and he did in fact feel rather feverish. By the time they got to Texas Liquid wouldn’t have been able to hide it anyway; he kept shivering, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, and sweating, and any and all conversation unceremoniously died in favor of Liquid staring off into space with unfocused eyes. Changing the radio station to music Ocelot knew Liquid didn’t like failed to get a reaction out of him.

Ocelot had an at least moderate amount of faith that Liquid’s immune system would beat back the infection soon, so for now he decided to keep driving, stopping first at some random grocery store/pharmacy near Amarillo to get him some ibuprofen and a large bottle of water. Ideally by the time Ocelot actually found out where Mantis was Liquid’s fever would have broken and infection would have died down, at least enough for him to carry on as normal. If not… Ocelot always had backup plans.

They stopped in Mesa, Arizona, after over twenty hours of continuous driving. Ocelot was glad to do so — obviously he couldn’t have let Liquid drive in his condition, so by now he himself could certainly use some rest, or at least some good blow. Liquid initially protested at being herded into a hotel room, but quieted down after Ocelot told him that yes, they were in Arizona by now, and in the morning Ocelot would pay “friendly” visits to certain Patriots he knew who lived/worked here to see if they knew anything.

Ocelot booked a hotel room with two twin beds but they ended up only using one of them.

And it started innocuously enough, too. Liquid had laid down on one of the beds, uninjured arm resting over his eyes, and Ocelot had passed right by him in order to place the bottle of ibuprofen and a cup of tea on his beside table when Liquid grabbed his sleeve. Ocelot sighed.

“What do you want, boss?” he said as Liquid ‘climbed’ his hand up Ocelot’s arm until he reached his
scarf, which he wound his fingers into.

“You,” Liquid breathed, dragging Ocelot down to meet his lips with his own.

Just in case Ocelot hadn’t already thought that Liquid’s fever was high enough to impair his judgement, the kiss proved it — both because of the way his skin was almost scorching hot, and because of the fact that the kiss happened at all. If Ocelot were a better man he would have just pushed Liquid off and reminded him that he was supposed to be married, that he wasn’t thinking clearly, that he didn’t mean this and would regret this…

No one in their right mind had ever accused Ocelot of being a good man.

He opened his mouth for him and his clumsy tongue, straightening himself a bit to encourage Liquid to sit up. He did, still keeping his injured hand cradled to himself as he pulled at Ocelot’s clothes with his other. Eventually Ocelot broke the kiss, leaving Liquid panting.

“What is this?” he said, “a show of gratitude?”

“I…”

“Or has the fever merely broken down your last line of resistance?”

“…I… ah…”

“How long have you been thinking about this?” Ocelot said, one knee on the bed, starting to unbutton Liquid’s shirt.

“I… d-don’t know…” He winced as Ocelot pulled his sleeve over his wounded hand, immediately drawing it in to himself again once his shirt was off. “Ocelot…”

“…it has been a while…”

Ocelot pushed him back on the bed, nudging his legs apart with his knee. Liquid stared up at him with a strange expression of almost innocence, like he was lost little child and didn’t at all understand what he’d just initiated.

Little bit of a shame, really. Truthfully Ocelot enjoyed Liquid’s sharp tongue and had been half-hoping he had the presence of mind to call Ocelot “old man”, make a joke about brushing cobwebs off his prick, and accuse him of having erectile dysfunction. Which he didn’t, he was just not as young as he once was and could only readily get it up under specific circumstances.

Which was why he took Liquid’s hands - gently - and pinned them to the bedspread by his wrists, then moved his left hand up Liquid’s right, pressing his thumb against the bandage squarely over his infected wound. Liquid gasped, then grit his teeth, then squirmed — Ocelot shifted so that Liquid’s squirming would result in him rubbing his crotch up against his knee - Liquid’s eyelids fluttered and he let out a pained whimper.

Much better.

Ocelot let go of Liquid’s wrists, considering the merits of flipping him onto his stomach but deciding against it because he liked seeing Liquid’s dazed expression, and undid his belt and pants, sliding them down to his knees before working his cock out of his own fly. This wasn’t about to be the most elegant thing in the world, anyway.

His initial push against Liquid was met with resistance - Liquid whined, pulled back, turned his head
away from Ocelot. Ocelot bit the inside of his cheek. Of course Mantis would spoil the man, convince him it was okay to get all fussy about things like preparation and lubrication. But on the other hand, Ocelot couldn’t take full credit for Liquid responding to fingers placed in his mouth by sucking them exactly the way he sucked dick, right down to the heady moaning.

Saliva made for terrible lube but it wasn’t like Ocelot had been planning this - which wasn’t to say he was surprised by this, or if he was then it was only because there was a high fever involved and Liquid was offering him his body, not just his mouth. Liquid cried out when he was penetrated, gripping the bedsheets — and Ocelot almost had to pause, now that he could feel, in great detail, the extent of Liquid’s fever. He was burning up.

Perhaps this infection was, in fact, getting very bad.

Ocelot fingered him until his whole body started to shake and he moaned pleadingly, bucking his hips, uninjured hand tangled into Ocelot’s hair. Ocelot caught Liquid’s injured hand with his free hand when he twisted his body, squeezing it again so that Liquid writhed and choked and tried very ineffectually - his coordination was shot - to pull his hand away from Ocelot’s. He whimpered again, gazing up at Ocelot in some kind of confusion, squirming desperately.

Without saying a word, Ocelot removed his fingers from him and shoved his dick in, none too gently. Liquid groaned, his back arching off the bed.

“Oh— ohh g-god, Oce— ow—”

Liquid’s arm - and his ass - were spasming and he was grinding his teeth together by the time Ocelot gave him some respite from having his wound manhandled. He wheezed as he came down from the pain, fingers twitching, then seemed to fully process that he had a cock in his ass and grinned lopsidedly, shifting his pelvis to force Ocelot deeper, pulling his hair to drag his head down to kiss him - or rather, to pant against his lips, moaning again.

That Ocelot shouldn’t be doing this was a given. He just hunkered down and thrust into that unbearable heat.

Fuck it, it felt good.

Liquid met each stroke, gasping, clinging to Ocelot and mumbling incoherently, slipping between languages. A few “oh, c-c’est si- bon—”s and “harder, h-harder!”s and a few complaints about how Ocelot’s right hand was freezing made it through his delirious murmurings, his breath hot over Ocelot’s ear.

Halfway through he suddenly switched tracks to dry sobbing, stammering out apologies and self-degradation, and occasionally choking out Mantis’ name instead of Ocelot’s. Ocelot stayed silent, biting his ear, his neck, his shoulders, his lips — it wasn’t any of his business who Liquid was thinking about. It didn’t affect the situation.

Liquid finished before Ocelot did, quickly reaching an overstimulated state between the steady, rough pounding and his fever. It took him over a full minute to realize that he’d even had an orgasm, but once he did he started trying to push Ocelot off of him, his movements weak and clumsy. Each thrust now tore a whine out of him.

“Oc…Ocelot… p-please… I c-can’t…”

“What’s the matter, Liquid?” Ocelot murmured in his ear, finally speaking.

“I… I f-feel… t-terrible… please, O-Ocelot, I feel s-sick…”
He stopped trying to push Ocelot off of him and instead started trying to wriggle out from under him, breathing raggedly. Ocelot caught him by the wrists again - and even though he didn’t directly touch Liquid’s wound this time, he still half-screamed at the pressure on his arm and his whole body tensed, his muscles tightening, which was enough to tip Ocelot over the edge.

Liquid tilted his head back when Ocelot finally stopped moving, his eyes unfocused and half-closed. He barely twitched when Ocelot pulled out of him and brushed a few sweat-slicked strands of hair from his face, then straightened himself, running his hand down Liquid’s body to trace a finger over the upside-down-v-shaped scar on his stomach.

(Medically speaking it wasn’t surprising that it was still visible after 13 years. But nonetheless it seemed appropriate.)

A post-sex Liquid was a dazed, vulnerable one. That, combined with the infection symptoms, made him extremely suggestible. Anything said to him right now he’d believe wholeheartedly, even after he came back to his senses. Ocelot could plant any idea in his head, convince him of anything. Anything he wanted.

Anything.

So he whispered in Liquid’s ear:

“I’ll bring Mantis back safe and sound, for you.”

About twenty minutes later, an anonymous phone call was made to 911, citing the need for hospital transport from room 44 in a certain hotel in Mesa. EMTs arrived to an unidentified collared naked man shivering but otherwise unresponsive under a blanket in one of the beds. A note was left on the bedside table, saying, *The sex was consensual. Wound on his hand is several days old. Recently travelled from South Africa. Check for mercury. & leave the collar on if possible, he’ll get upset without it.*

He arrived at the hospital in the beginning stages of septic shock.

Chapter End Notes

“C’est si bon” is French for “that’s so good”/“that feels so good”, and as far as I can tell the phrase does indeed have a sexual connotation to it…?
Chapter 66

Chapter Notes

(so you’ve probably noticed my unusually late updates these past few days... i’ve been kinda busy... i’d be surprised if i got anything up at all tomorrow, and starting sunday there’s going to be a change to the update schedule. i mean, daily updates will continue for a few more days until we hit chapter 72 of this fic (yay!) but i mean the specific hour will probably be earlier... -pp)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ocelot watched the ambulance leave, sitting in the stolen rental car in the hotel parking lot. He sighed, tilting his head back. He’d taken a shower before calling EMTs for Liquid, which he knew from the start was cutting it close… by the time Ocelot had gotten dressed again, Liquid’s heartrate was through the roof and he was practically hyperventilating - and still not responding to anything Ocelot did to get his attention. At least he knew which hospital Liquid would be taken to from here… still, he wasn’t comfortable with leaving him there for long, even if it was as a John Doe. He’d have to get someone to come pick him up.

His phone rang. Tiredly he checked the caller ID — unknown number, could be anyone. He answered. “This had better be good.”

“Ah, Ocelot. Pleasant as always.”

“Jameson, wasn’t it?”

“Jameston, Ocelot. You really think that I buy that you always forget my name? You, of all people?”

“What do you want, Jameston?” Ocelot said, “if you don’t have any information I’ve been looking for, then I’m not interested.”

“Oh, Ocelot, Ocelot, Ocelot… you really think I’d be calling if that wasn’t the case?”

“You? Yes. You’re a bother. Get to the point.”

“Tch! Well, I have to say I certainly noticed you asking around about the location of Psycho Mantis - and I find it somewhat odd…”

“Am I supposed to be impressed or intimidated by your suspicions?” Ocelot said flatly.

Jameston snorted. “You never were impressed by anything I did.”

“You never gave me reason to be. Incidentally, I was ordered by Liquid to try to find Mantis — do you honestly think it would be better for me to blow my cover than to avoid letting Mantis go?”

“Oh ha ha. You can give as many excuses about your ‘cover’ as you like, but I don’t believe it. You’ve turned, Ocelot.”

“If you’d like to believe that, that has no bearing on me.”
Jameston audibly growled, and the line rustled like he was moving his phone around. “Well, I’m not
the only one who’s noticed you bothering people about Psycho Mantis’ location. The higher-ups
have too, and they even presumed that you’re just pretending to follow Liquid’s orders… so they
thought they’d get the best of both worlds. Let you run around and make a show of things in order to
fool Liquid, and in the meantime quietly kill Psycho Mantis off so the so-called resistance won’t get
to have a psychic working for them anymore.”

“Is that so?” Ocelot said calmly.

“But,” Jameston said, “but as it happened… I was in a position to intercept. Sure, the order to kill
Psycho Mantis has been sent out, but as of right now, he’s still alive. Why, I could even put him on
the phone, if you like! Except he can’t do much besides whimper for his mask…”

Oh? “Where are you going with this, Jameston?”

“I’m suspicious of you, Ocelot. As I said, I think you’ve turned. So… I’d like to give you a little test
- get you to prove your loyalty to the La Li Lu Le Lo once and for all.”

“Go on.”

“Meet me in Utah — tomorrow. I’ll give you a more specific location when you cross state lines.
Have a good excuse ready for your ‘boss’.”

“Hm.”

“And,” Jameston added challengingly, “if you make any funny moves… a certain bug is going find
himself getting squished.”

Jameston probably thought he was real clever for that comment - but knowing Jameston’s temper,
Ocelot held his tongue against the fact that snark could put Mantis in very real danger. “I’ll see you
tomorrow, then,” he said instead.

“Excellent. I’ll be looking forward to it.” He hung up.

Wonderful. Just wonderful.

Following an urgent Codec call from Ocelot, the Solidus/Solid/Mei Ling/Otacon group had split up,
with Solid and Otacon heading for the border and Mei Ling and Solidus staying in Michoacán for
now. (Solid told Mei Ling that she should use that Sphinx AT380-M of hers if Solidus tried
anything, but Mei Ling just huffed, put her hands on her hips, and said she’d probably be happy if he
did try anything instead of being an “oblivious herbivore”. Which confused Otacon because he said
that was a Japanese term, not a Chinese one, but then again Mei Ling watched a lot of animé too.)
(Mei Ling had also volunteered to watch after Frank until they met up again, which Solid reluctantly
consented to at Otacon’s insistence.)

The border check wasn’t hard even if Solid did forget that, according to his passport, he was
supposed to respond to the name “Justin Halley” — Otacon covered for him, explaining that Solid
usually went by the nickname “Edmond”, and then the border guard started getting suspicious about
why they were travelling together… after some awkward, evasive scrambling and mumbling about
‘work’ from Otacon, Solid just looked the guard directly in the eye and said flatly, “We’re dating and
went on vacation together for our anniversary. Do you have a problem with that?”

“Uh, no,” said the guard, surprised. “Um. Anything to declare?”
“No,” Otacon said, his face a deep shade of red.

The guard waved them through. They drove into America, Otacon (who was driving) still blushing furiously and Solid staring boredly out the window.

“Edmond?” he said at length.

“Edmond Halley was the name of the guy who discovered Halley’s comet,” Otacon mumbled, still flushed. “Dating, Snake?”

“It got him off our back, didn’t it?”

“I… guess it did…”

They’d crossed the border at Lukeville, just north of Sonoyta, so from there Mesa was only a couple hours away and they arrived before evening fell… of course, they had to be at Arizona General Hospital and that was technically in Phoenix, not Mesa, but the two cities were right next to each other. The sun was setting when they pulled into the hospital parking lot and Otacon dug his laptop out from under the driver’s seat.

“Snake, you can’t smoke here;” Otacon said as he typed, not even glancing away from the screen, “this is a hospital.”

“A hospital parking lot.”

“At least roll down the window.”

Solid rolled his eyes, and lowered the window and flicked a bit of ash out. Otacon didn’t even notice him doing it, he was so focused on his hacking.

“…oh, yikes,” he said at length, “that was way too easy.”

“Like ‘it’s a trap’ easy…?”

“More like ‘HIPAA breach waiting to happen’ easy. It should not be this simple to break into their patient records just using their wifi. But nevermind… that just makes things easier for us…”

“Hrm… Liquid’s probably not going to be the only John Doe there, though. Every hospital always has a couple.”

“Oh, I know. But we know he’s here for a really bad infection from a gunshot wound to his hand, so it shouldn’t be too hard to narrow him down.”

“If you say so.”

Privately Solid wondered just how bad an infection had to get before Ocelot of all people would risk abandoning Liquid in a civilian hospital. Granted he’d done that last night and had immediately called about getting someone to pick him up… or kidnap him, in effect, since just checking him out against medical advice would have been too easy. (Okay. Too risky. Apparently they couldn’t rely on Liquid to check himself out since the infection had scrambled his brain, and posing as a relative - or admitting to being a relative, in Solid’s case - in order to check him out without his input would require proof of identity and such and that would attract attention.)

“Okay,” Otacon said after a while, “I think I found him, he—oh my gosh.”

“What?”
“Er… it’s nothing. You’ll see for yourself when you pick him up - room 330, it’s on the third floor. Let me know if I need to get into their security network so I can disable cameras or anything like that.”

“Got it,” Solid said, opening the door and stepping out of the car, tossing his cigarette away.

“And don’t be too rough with the nurses, alright?”

“Mm.”

“And after you get Liquid, bring him back to the car,” Otacon said, rolling down the window after Solid closed the door again, “and go back to get some things from the hospital pharmacy… they’ve got him on some medication and I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t be a good idea to just, y’know, cut him off from it, he’ll probably get infected again if we do — and he’ll need painkillers, too…”

“Okay, okay,” Solid said, “I’m going now.”

“Don’t get caught, Snake. Getting caught in a hospital has got to be dumbest possible way to go out.”

“I don’t plan on it.”

Room 330 had the lights dimmed and the curtains drawn, but the singular bed was clearly occupied. Carefully closing the door behind him again and approaching, Solid saw that the bed’s occupant was in fact Liquid, although he was plainly asleep. Or he wasn’t awake, anyway. But while he did have an IV and some other general tubes, he didn’t seem to be hooked up to any… monitoring… thing that would make Solid’s mission here more difficult than it needed to be.

He was marginally surprised that the hospital staff hadn’t removed his collar - probably because he didn’t need one of those tracheotomy things — of course if he’d been wearing anything else when he came to the hospital, he wasn’t wearing it now. He’d instead been saddled with a hospital gown, which meant that Solid was kind of tempted to steal the blanket as well just so he wouldn’t have to acknowledge Liquid’s bare ass while he was carrying him out of here.

Wait. Hang on.

“Otacon,” he said, calling over Codec, “how are you supposed to remove a catheter?”

“…uh. Lemme Google that. One sec, Snake.”

Solid waited awkwardly for a moment or two, checking over his shoulder once or twice at the door. Still closed, and while he heard a nurse or doctor or whoever walk by once (ducking out of sight behind the bed when he did), no one even cracked open the door to check on the patient. Other than that the only sound was the soft wheeze of Liquid’s breathing.

“Okay,” Otacon said at length, “I found a wikiHow article.”

“Great.”

“…okay. First it says to wash your hands with soap and-“

“Otacon. I don’t have time for that. And he’s on antibiotics already, what’s the worst that could happen?”

“Alright, alright…”
“I have gloves on anyway.”

“Not exactly sterile, but alright. Step two is to empty the… the bag…”

Solid looked around for the catheter bag, eventually found it, and breathed a silent sigh of relief. “It’s pretty much empty already,” he told Otacon, “I must have gotten here right after a nurse did.”

“Oh… that’s good. I’m pretty sure they check patients on schedules, so if someone came by right before you arrived, that means you’ve got some time before the next check.”

“Mm. What’s the next step?”

“Make sure the nozzle on the bag is twisted shut so it doesn’t spill…”

“…done. What next?”

“Uh, cleaning, but we’re skipping that, so… you gotta find the balloon port, Snake.”

“Balloon port?”

“It’s on the tubing, it should be near his… you know,” Otacon said, looking profoundly embarrassed, “it kind of branches off. The empty branch is the one you’re looking for.”

“Hang on,” Solid said, glancing at the door again before flipping Liquid’s hospital gown up and leaning in to inspect the… tubing. It wasn’t easy in this low light, Solid had to get closer to it than he would have necessarily liked… he did his best to keep his eyes from lingering on Liquid’s limp penis.

He was much more uncomfortable with the fact that he wasn’t uncomfortable with Liquid’s cock than he was with Liquid’s cock itself.

“What do I do with it?” Solid said, locating the balloon port.

“Did you pick up a syringe anywhere?” Otacon said, “one without a needle, I mean. You need one that fits into the port.”

“No, I don’t have one. Give me a second to look around.”

There was the faint sound of Otacon drumming his fingers against either the car’s armrest or his laptop. “I just want you to know, Snake,” he said very seriously, “that this is the weirdest support I’ve ever ran.”

Solid grunted. “Not exactly heavy competition if you ask me…”

“This might be one of the weirdest conversations I’ve ever had, period.”

“You’re not the one pulling surgical tubing out of your catatonic twin brother’s dick. By the way, I can’t find a syringe.”

“Oh… hang on, let me find an alternative source.”

He abandoned Solid to awkwardly not looking at Liquid’s crotch for about half a minute, then called back.

“I found something on answers.com that says you can just use a pair of scissors to cut off the balloon port, and let gravity take care of it.”
“Scissors?” Solid said, “I don’t have any scissors, is a knife okay?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Hn.”

“And just so you know,” Otacon said as Solid pulled out and unfolded his knife, then started looking for a good angle to cut the catheter from so that he wouldn’t, in this lighting, cut either himself or Liquid, “it’s only saline solution that’s going to come out of that, not… yeah. So don’t worry.”

That was good to know. A fairly small amount of fluid tricked out of the now-cut port as Solid glanced up, checking Liquid’s face to see if he’d woken up — nope. Still unconscious. Not even a stir.

“The balloons are only about the size of a quarter, so there shouldn’t be much saline solution in there,” Otacon said, pushing his glasses up his nose, “and once it’s drained… you just pull it out.”

“Pull it out? That’s it?”

“Well, you have to do it kind of slowly - gently, y’know - and if there’s any resistance, then the balloon’s probably still a bit inflated. Trust me, you do not want that thing coming out while the balloon’s inflated.”

“I figured. Okay, here goes.”

Unfortunately for him the only real way to get any decent leverage on the catheter was by grabbing hold of Liquid’s penis with his other hand. Greeeeeat. Biting his lip and checking Liquid again for any signs of awareness - which he didn’t find - Solid somewhat tentatively grasped Liquid’s dick.

The warmth and weight in his hand made his stomach do a weird little flip that reminded him extremely uncomfortably of the ‘attempted twincest kabe-don incident’ two years ago. Solid, keenly aware of his face starting to heat up a bit, pushed the thought from his mind, pinching the catheter tube and tugging carefully.

It slid out easily enough, followed by a tiny trickle of urine, and Liquid made a breathy little sound as Solid pulled on it that turned into an audible hiss by the time it was out. Hurriedly flipping Liquid’s hospital gown back down and tossing the catheter to the side, Solid looked up once more.

Oh. Eyes still closed. Even if Solid had managed to rouse him a little with that (honestly, he was surprised Liquid didn’t wake up shrieking and trying to fight him off, that had to sting) he wasn’t yet completely conscious. With that in mind Solid pulled the rest of the blanket off of him and—

…oh.

Liquid’s right arm abruptly ended in a swath of bandages just below the elbow.

“…yyyyeah,” Otacon said over Codec, “I wasn’t really sure how to put it… but his infection must have gotten so bad that they had to amputate. That’s most likely the real reason why he hasn’t woken up yet — he’s still kind of drugged from the surgery.”

“So he probably doesn’t know yet…”

“I feel sort of bad for him…”

To be perfectly honest, Solid didn’t. Liquid might be unfortunately attractive and an apparently
important part of the team, but he was still a jackass and Solid might still have been harboring a bit of grudge over Gray Fox’s (second) death and, well, getting Solid involved in all this fuckery in the first place.

Liquid’s IV was in his left arm, so Solid just ignored the amputation completely and pulled that out - fortunately intravenous catheters were a lot more intuitive than urinary catheters. Lift tape, tug out, apply thumb for pressure. (Might have been a good idea to change gloves or something considering where they’d just been, but that didn’t occur to Solid until it was too late.) Again Liquid hissed at the removal, but this time he actually opened his eyes, blinking groggily and taking a good twenty seconds to actually focus his gaze on Solid - who by this point was gathering up the blanket.

“What…” Liquid said in a parched voice, then coughed, licked his lips, and tried again: “What’s going on?”

“I’m getting you out of here,” Solid said.

Liquid squinted at him for a moment, and tilted his head. His lips moved silently, then he said, “Father?”

“…what?”

“What are you doing here? You look different, you look- younger—“

“Uh…”

“Hang on, what year is it? Oh, I just had the strangest dream, Father…”

“Is he… delirious?” Otacon said.

“What makes you say that?” Solid said dryly as Liquid struggled to sit up straight, obviously woozy and still oblivious to his missing arm. “What do I do?”

“We do need him to cooperate… just play along, Snake.”

“Um.” Hell if Solid knew what Venom had actually acted like, he’d only met the guy once and that hadn’t exactly been on friendly terms.

“I can tell you about it later,” Liquid said in an airy voice, shaking his head like he was trying to clear it, “I’m glad you came for me, Father, I couldn’t… couldn’t get away… on my own. F-Father…” he looked up at Solid again, eyes wide, “Tretij… h-he’s in danger, Father, you’ve got to go—“

Solid’s brow furrowed. “Tretij?” he said.

“Yes,” Liquid said, suddenly agitated, “Tretij, you know him, he’s- he’s gone missing, I was trying to get him back and I— I ended up here, and then I… you… Father, you’ve got to go rescue Tretij, please, I’m so worried he might-…”

The fact that ‘Tretij’ was referring to Mantis finally clicked with Solid. Weird… couldn’t be his actual given name, it literally meant ‘third’ in Russian. “He’s going to be alright,” Solid started anyway, “we just-“

“Please! Please, I-I can’t do it on my own, Father, he’s running out of time!!”

“Keep your voice down!” Solid hissed, looking at the door again.

“But Father— Tretij-“

“Oh,” Liquid said, his voice floaty and faraway again, “alright. Tretij doesn’t like Ocelot, but I do. I trust him. Don’t you trust him too, Father? He’ll bring him back for me, I know he will… I just know it…”

 “…right. In the meantime, I’m here to get you out of here, okay?”

“Okay~”

So far so good. “I need you to cooperate with me. Just do what I tell you to-“

“I can. I’ll be good, Father. …although, my arm hurts…”

Solid let a breath out through his nose, then threw the blanket over Liquid’s back and said, “Don’t struggle.”

“Huh…?”

He bodily lifted him over his shoulders - no fucking way was Liquid going to be able to walk out of the hospital like this, even with Solid’s support. Better just to carry him. Liquid tensed briefly when picked up, but then relaxed, hanging on. Good - he was heavy enough without squirming or going completely limp…

“Is this good, Father?” Liquid murmured.

“Uh… yeah. Good. Just…” Oh shit his arm. He didn’t seem to have noticed it yet, so Solid couldn’t really discount the possibility that he’d freak out when he finally did - and knowing Liquid it’d be loud — what if he noticed he was sans an entire forearm while they were still in the hospital? “Close your eyes, Eli,” Solid said quickly.

“Okay,” Liquid said again.

“Don’t open them until we’re in the car. And… don’t talk, either. Don’t make any noise until we’re in the car.”

Liquid didn’t respond this time. Excellent… he was taking Solid’s instructions seriously.

All Solid had to do was pretend to be a man he killed.

Chapter End Notes

Might have fudged the timeline a bit in getting from Michoacán to Arizona in about a day… Google says that’d take about 26 hours. Maybe Otacon speeds a lot…
Also, rather like the CDC fifty chapters ago, the actual architecture and operations of the Arizona General Hospital (yes, a real place) are completely made up~
“For both our sakes,” Catherine said to the interrogator, “I’m going to up-front with you. I’m HIV positive.”

“…what?” the interrogator said.

“I’m HIV positive. And I’m off my medication, so it’s more likely to be transmitted. So if you want to try to rape me, or if you get any of my blood on you, you’ll—“

“Why are you off your medication?”

“Because you fucking kidnapped me,” Catherine snapped, rattling the handcuffs behind her back, “do you think I was planning on that? Do you really think it would have occured to me to have my meds on me just in case I got abducted and held hostage?!?”

The interrogator blinked. “Wait a moment,” he said, his eyes narrowing under his balaclava, “you’re just bluffing. Anyone can say they’re HIV positive.”

“Ha!”

“If you really have HIV, then you should be able to tell me the name of the medication you’re on for it.”

“Atripla,” Catherine said immediately. “It’s a multi-class combination drug consisting of efavirenz, emtricitabine, and tenofovir disoproxil fumarate. It’s- I take it once a day. Or I’m supposed to, anyway.”

“…wow, you sure know a lot about it…”

“Of course I do! I’ve been taking it every day for years! I can even tell you what the side effects are: dizziness, trouble sleeping, drowsiness, unusual dreams, trouble concentrating, headache, nausea, vomiting, gas—”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” the interrogator said quickly, “I’m not quite sure I really believe you, but… I get it. I won’t take my chances.”

Catherine hid a shaky smile. Fucking idiot. Didn’t they know she was a registered nurse? She didn’t have to have HIV to tell them all about what it was like and how to treat it in excruciating detail. (She did not, in fact, have HIV. Although sometimes she was surprised she didn’t a congenital form, considering her dad had gotten, as far as she could tell, extremely lucky to have not caught it and passed it on to Nadine.)

“Oh, by the way, just so you know,” she added thoughtfully, “I’d be careful with McGolden too if I were you. I haven’t gotten around to telling him I’m HIV-positive, but we fucked during the road trip here so he might have it too, and…”

“You expect me to believe that?” the interrogator said suspiciously.

Crap. She hadn’t pushed it too far, did she? Nonetheless she nodded - McGolden was already in
rough enough shape as it was, considering his broken ankle. “Of course if you ask him he’ll deny it, what with the age gap between us and all. But we totally did it. And the condom broke. Really!”

There was a long pause. The interrogator was clearly still suspicious, but then he shrugged - hopefully deciding to not take his chances with McGolden, either - and turned around, back to his obligatory ominous black case.

“I really don’t know anything,” Catherine said as he picked up some scary-looking… florescent light tubes…? No, had to be some kind of torture device. Electric shock sticks? “Like, I’m pretty sure you all already know the whole situation and everything McGolden and I have done and you probably know where my father is, too.”

“…”

“So here’s the whole story,” she said, “my dad went missing. I wanted to know where he was. Figured it might be related to the Shadow Moses incident since I knew he was involved in that somehow. My college roommate was Gary McGolden’s niece, so I asked her where to find him because there was no way I could get a regular private detective to take this case and I couldn’t call the police or anything since Daddy obviously left voluntarily. So we looked around for a bit,” she shook her head, “didn’t turn up anything and gave up the search for a while so I could finish school… after I graduated, we came here as a last-ditch effort to find something, since Daddy hasn’t gotten in touch with me at all these past two years…”

“…you know, miss,” the interrogator said, “this really isn’t about information.”

“Huh?”

“You don’t know anything we don’t. We do know where your father is. And that’s exactly why you’re being held - you and your boyfriend or whatever he is.”

Approximately twenty minutes later Catherine was thrown back in the same weirdly sterile, white-walled cell as she’d been in before, with McGolden, before she’d been dragged off to the interrogator kicking and screaming. McGolden was still there, sitting on the bottom bed bunk. He cringed when she sat up.

“Are those electrical burns?” he said.

“I’ll be fine,” Catherine said, touching one of them gingerly. Two slightly elliptical scorch-marks just underneath her collarbone, on opposite sides of her body… damn, that might scar. She’d never be able to wear a low-cut shirt again. Unless she just decided to not give a fuck, which she very well might.

“I don’t get why they have to torture you, you don’t know anything…”

“I’m a bargaining chip for whatever it is they’re trying to do with Daddy, just like Ocelot said,” Catherine said, looking up at him, “they’re just trying to scare me into compliance.”

“At least we know they won’t kill you.”

“How’s your ankle, McGolden?”

He shrugged. “I can limp over to both the door and the toilet. That’s good enough for now.”

For a while neither of them said anything.
Finally, Catherine said, “just who the heck are these people?”

“Honestly?” McGolden said, “I think they just might be those ‘Patriots’ we were looking for.”

“…great.”

Otacon squinted at the approaching figure underneath the parking lot lights, realizing a second later it was Solid with Liquid over his shoulders. He stepped out and opened the back door for Solid, who nodded at him before dropping Liquid rather unceremoniously in the back seat of the car. Liquid blinked several times in mild confusion, but didn’t say anything.

“So everything went alright, huh?” Otacon said.

“Yep,” Solid said. “It’s a hospital… not exactly heavily guarded, and they make the security cameras noticeable on purpose.”

“Oh yeah, as a deterrent… well, you’d better get back in there. I’m sure they keep a closer eye on the medication in the pharmacy than their patients, so be careful.”

“Yeah,” Solid said, then coughed, cleared his throat. “I know what I’m doing, Otacon.”

Otacon nodded. “I’ll keep an eye on Liquid,” he said, getting back in the car, “let me know when you’re where they store the medicine, I’ll tell you what you need to, er, borrow.”

“Mm.”

Solid walked briskly back to the hospital. Otacon and Liquid sat in silence — Otacon discreetly adjusted the rear-view mirror to look at the back seat, and while Liquid hadn’t really sat up or moved much at all, his eyes were half-open and he was staring at the ceiling.

“Uh,” Otacon said, “hey.”

Slowly Liquid turned his head and managed to more or less focus his gaze on Otacon.

“How are you feeling?”

Liquid squinted, then gave Otacon a dirty look and turned his face back to the ceiling. “Thought they got rid of you,” he muttered sourly.

Otacon frowned. If Liquid had mixed Solid up with Venom, then chances were good that he was, well, delirious and disassociating to the point of thinking it was still the eighties or something. So that meant that he’d probably looked at Otacon and saw Otacon’s father. Otacon himself didn’t know how to feel about that.

Oh wait, yes he did: Bad. He felt bad.

Most hospitals have an in-house pharmacy open to the public; even those that don’t still have some place they store all their medication to dispense to patients. Arizona General Hospital fell into the former category, although that wasn’t much help to Solid. For one thing, this time of night the public pharmacy was closed, and for another thing, he wouldn’t be able to get into the actual medical storage part of it from there anyway, not without tripping some security measures. No, he had to go the back route, the same way that hospital employees got in.

Which was, of course, locked electronically. It needed a keycard.
Honestly, that was fair. Solid had heard more than a few news stories about violent junkies breaking into hospitals looking for drugs — and in a way, that was exactly what he was, except he really was stealing this medicine for a legitimate reason, not for a high. Hell, it wasn’t even for him. (Solid wouldn’t argue about the violent part, though, even if he took no pleasure in admitting it.)

Otacon’s insistence that Solid not rough up the hospital staff was also fair, but it had left Solid going in unarmed “just in case”. At least it wasn’t too hard to ambush an unsuspecting nurse and put her in a chokehold with his hand over her mouth…

“I’m not going to hurt you,” hehissed in her ear, “I just need to borrow something.”

“?!?”

Solid reached down into the pockets of her scrubs, but they were empty aside from a few bandages and IV caps. Frowning, he noticed her lanyard and made a grab for it.

“!!!”

Hey, she did have nice boobs, but that wasn’t what Solid was here for. He reaffirmed his grip on her head and took the plastic pouch attached to the lanyard off of it. (Or rather, he took the whole lanyard. It was the break-away type, presumably in case a combative patient or whoever tried to choke her by tugging on it.) Then he returned his arm to her neck, choking her until her struggling stopped and she fell limp and unconscious. It’d be a while before she woke up, but she’d be fine (if disoriented) when she did…

Leaving her in a nearby restroom stall - and having the courtesy to dump her in the women’s bathroom, despite a chiding Codec call from Otacon for going in there - Solid doubled back to the pharmacy, rifling through the cards he’d just taken off of the nurse. Hospital ID, a couple checklists, multiple keycards… one of them was labelled ‘PHARMACY’ though, so Solid had what he needed.

From that point on getting into the pharmacy was easy, even if Solid did have to get a little creative to get around the security camera guarding the door. (Welcome back, cardboard box.) As soon as the camera moved away, Solid quickly used the nurse’s keycard and stepped inside. Only a few lights were on and it seemed deserted, at least for now. At any second some tech could come walking in to fetch a refill or something… Solid had to be careful.

“I’m in the pharmacy,” Solid said, looking around at the shelves of jars of medication. “What is it I need to grab? Antibiotics and painkillers?”

“They’re in his file somewhere, hang on,” Otacon said, then a few keystrokes later he continued, “the antibiotics you’re looking for are gentamicin and metronidazole… actually, that one’s antiprotozoal, too, but I guess that doesn’t really matter to us… and they had him on fentanyl, so I guess you should get that. Or some hydrocodone, at least. He can use that longer since it’s not nearly as strong.”

“Gentamicin, metronidazole, hydrocodone. Gotcha.”

Of course it was easier said than done. Solid found the hydrocodone first, but there were a full dozen different varieties of it and he wasn’t sure how much he was actually supposed to get — as he vaguely recalled from getting his wisdom teeth taken out in high school, pain medication was sometimes (oftentimes?) a “take as needed, maximum of like three a day but technically optional” thing, so he grabbed an indiscriminate handful of a random hydrocodone/ibuprofen tablet - since he knew what the heck ibuprofen was, not so much acetaminophen or homatropine - and called that good. (Just to be on the safe side he found some plastic baggies and a sharpie, which he used to label
He moved on to the antibiotics. He found the metronidazole first, which was much simpler because there were only a couple different types, no combinations with other drugs Solid had never heard of, just different “mg”s. He called Otacon to ask which one he should get.

“I don’t know,” Otacon said, “you’re talking about pills, the hospital had him on an IV.”

“…so it’s different?”

“Um, yeah? Well, just get the one with the smallest number. Looking at his chart, they weren’t putting a lot of it in him… unless it’s pretty potent…”

“…we really need to get someone with actual medical experience on our team…”

“Hey, I’m doing my best, okay?”

Solid added a handful of metronidazole 200 mg pills to the second baggie, labelling that bag “Antibiotics #1”. They could figure out how the hell dosage was supposed to work later - once a day until they were all gone, right? If nothing else, Liquid had thus far proved himself nearly impossible to kill, so Solid wasn’t worried they’d mess this up too badly…

He was looking around for the gentamicin when the pharmacy’s door opened and someone walked in. Solid dove under a desk, concealing himself in the shadows as two techs walked by.

“—dunno, I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“Strange, she’s usually so on top of things. No one knows where she is?”

“I heard Abernathy say that she saw her in the bathroom… well, saw her shoes under a stall, anyway. That was half an hour ago, though.”

“Think she’s still there?”

“C’m on, half an hour, really?”

A stifled chuckle. “You know, I’ve read that nurses are disproportionately likely to abuse prescription drugs.”

“Seriously…? You think Kiser’s been off in the bathroom getting high? Are we talking about the same Kiser here??”

“Hey, the more perky and hardworking a nurse is, the more I suspect she’s been skimming from the patients. —oh, what’s this?” One of the techs stopped walking abruptly.

“What’s wrong?”

“Someone’s been messing around with the hydrocodone…”

“Seriously?” The other tech walked over the first one. “Oh man… you don’t think…?”

“I guess we can ask security if it was her keycard that got logged coming in here or not…”

“Maybe we should keep quiet — confront her ourselves, you know. Better to get her to get help without the admin finding out… she’ll lose her job…”
“Mmmm… well, let’s not be rash. Check with security, then stage an intervention if she needs one.”

“Sounds like a plan. Now, where’s that levothyroxine again…?”

“Right over here…”

They walked off to the other side of the pharmacy. Solid cautiously poked his head up over the desk, watching them carefully, then finally noticed the drugs sitting on top of the desk: gentamicin.

Huh.

“Otacon,” he said as quietly as possible, still keeping a close eye on the drug-sorting techs as he called over Codec, “gentamicin isn’t a pill.”

“It isn’t?”

“No… it looks like some kind of injection. Should I grab it anyway?”

“Seems risky… let me Google some alternatives. Hang on a sec.” He signed off.

Solid ducked back under the desk as he waited both for Otacon to finish Googling and for the techs to finish up and walk off. The techs actually finished first, leaving the pharmacy still gossiping about other hospital staff and closing the door behind them. For a moment the only sound was the soft buzz of fluorescent light, then Solid’s Codec rang.

“Try ampicillin,” Otacon said, “from what I can tell it’s a half-decent alternative to gentamicin, although I’m not sure it’s as strong… still, it should be fine. I even looked up if it had any bad side effects when taken with metronidazole, but I didn’t find anything.”

“And this one comes in pill form, right?” Solid said, standing up.

“Yeah. Uh… get the 500 mg ones.”

And so Solid, after about two minutes of looking around (and looking over his shoulder), found the ampicillin and grabbed a decent amount, putting in the third plastic baggie and writing “Antibiotics #2” on it. He left the pen, along with the nurse’s lanyard, on a desk and exfiltrated quickly. No further problems on the way out.

“Let’s go,” Solid said, closing the passenger side door behind him.

“Right,” Otacon said, closing his laptop and returning it to under his seat, then adjusting the rear-view mirror back to normal before starting the car and shifting out of park, rolling out of the parking lot at an inconspicuous speed. “Where are we headed?”

“Ocelot said he went north from here… think we should try to meet up with him?”

“I guess. Or at least be in the area.”

Solid glanced over his shoulder at Liquid. Still hadn’t moved much from how Solid had laid him in the back seat, but it looked like he’d pulled the blanket to a more comfortable coverage - either that or Otacon had tucked him in.

Otacon caught his eye. “He fell asleep about ten minutes after you went back in,” he said, “and you know, it can get kind of chilly at night here, especially considering how hot it is during the day, so… erm… nevermind.”
So he had tucked him in…

“Want to stop and get something to eat on our way north, Snake…?”

“A drive-thru?” Solid said.

“Sure. I’m sure it won’t be hard to find something good.”

“I don’t really care if it’s good or not, as long as it’s edible…”

Several hours later. U.S. Route 160.

“Where are we?” Liquid said groggily from the back seat.

Otacon glanced at the rear-view mirror. “Ute Mountain Reservation, according to road signs,” he said.

“Just crossed the Colorado border,” Solid said, sucking on an unlit cigarette. “We still have french fries if you want them.”

“…I’m not hungry,” Liquid said, his voice uncharacteristically quiet.

Solid turned around in his seat, raising an eyebrow at him. “You feeling okay?”

“My arm hurts… but other than that…” He half-sat up, then settled back against the seat again. “I had the strangest dream…”

“Dream?”

“I dreamed my father came to get me out of a hospital, and then I woke up here.”

“Uh, that wasn’t a dream,” Otacon said, “you were in a hospital.”

“I was? I thought Ocelot left me in a hotel. That’s the last thing I remember, anyway… and what do you mean it wasn’t a dream?”

“Snake was the one who got you out… you weren’t asleep, though, you were awake, just… well, delirious. You got Snake mixed up with…”

“You kept calling me ‘Father’ and wouldn’t listen to me unless I called you by your given name,” Solid said bluntly.

Liquid blinked, then tipped his head back and groaned theatrically (which obviously meant he was fine), raising his arms to cover his face with his hands — then went completely rigid, evidently realizing that only his left hand had made it to his face. After half a moment, he lowered his arms and stared at them.

“Where the fuck is my right arm.”

“Well, y’see,” Otacon said, “that’s why you were in a hospita-“

“Where the fuck is my arm! Why am I missing an arm?!?”

“You’d know better than us,” Solid said, “all we know is that you got shot in the hand somehow and then got a severe infection because of it.”
“They must have amputated to keep the infection from spreading,” Otacon said, “they got rid of your arm to save your life.”

Liquid stared at his stump for a long time, face blank. Finally, he said, “I’d heard all about phantom pain, but I didn’t think it was like this…”

“You can just get a prosthetic like Ocelot did,” Solid said.

“Yeah,” Otacon said, “his looks pretty good, actually.”

“When he has his gloves on… I think Master Miller’s look a lot better.”

“But they’re not realistic at all, aren’t they just plain metal? He doesn’t do anything to hide the fact he lost two limbs.”

“Does he need to?”

“…oh… I guess not, actually…”

Sighing, Liquid laid back down. Even notwithstanding getting a prosthetic when the wound healed, relative ambidextrousness was important for any soldier and aiming with his left eye for the past 10+ years had lead to him to favor his left hand while shooting anyway. Being without his right hand, either temporarily or permanently, wouldn’t be too difficult a transition to make.

And right now he was more worried about Mantis. At least he was, somehow, completely confident that Ocelot would retrieve him no problem.

Chapter End Notes

Atripla is a real drug and Catherine’s description is accurate, haha. Speaking of medication, shoutout to my mom (an RN) for providing me with the names of drugs a hospital might put in your IV if you have a killer wound infection. She actually told me a whole bunch so I’m not 100% sure that the ones I picked are the most appropriate for Liquid’s situation, since I didn’t double-check with her, but I did look up the interactions between the drugs, at least… gentamicin and metronidazole have no known interactions, and fentanyl had a minor interaction with both of them, slightly lowering their efficacy. I think that’s typical, though, fentanyl is a seriously strong opiate so it’s gonna do weird things to your metabolism… (Also, does the fentanyl explain why Liquid was so out of it for this segment? lol) (And yes, Otacon Googling alternatives for gentamicin and coming up with ampicillin is because that’s exactly what I did instead of asking my mom….)
“Dr. Hunter!”

Naomi kept walking.

“Dr. Hunter! Get back here!!”

“I’m going, goodbye nurse,” Naomi called over her shoulder about three seconds before she stumbled, lost her balance, and fell into a bush.

The nurse hurried over, helping her up and clicking his tongue. “Dr. Hunter,” he said, picking leaves out of her hair, “you aren’t ready to leave yet. You’re still recovering.”

“You can’t hold me here,” Naomi said, “that’s illegal. I have the right to leave whenever I want.”

“It’s true that patients can check themselves out, even against medical advice,” the nurse said, “but you’re not currently considered mentally competent to check yourself out. You have to stay at the hospital.”

“I’m being held against my will!”

“It’s only temporary, Dr. Hunter, and for the sake of a healthy recovery… you were in a coma for nearly three years, that’s not something you just walk away from…”

“Ah, Dr. Hunter, there you are,” Naomi’s physical therapist said, walking briskly up, “I’ve just been told by the hospital administrators — you’re getting transferred.”

“Wait, really?” the nurse said, “to where?”

“A hospital in Washington, D.C… Rawmack something or other. WRAMC, that’s it.”

“…you mean Walter Reed Army Medical Center…?”


“That’s an Army hospital! I thought you were a civilian, Dr. Hunter.”

“She did work on an Army R&D team somewhere,” her physical therapist said, “perhaps that’s it.”

“I didn’t know they served peripheries… and they had that neglect scandal earlier this year, and weren’t they recommended for closure back in 2005?”

“I don’t know anything, just that Dr. Hunter’s getting transferred.”
“This could be interesting,” Naomi said. “When do I leave?”

“Dr. Hunter…” the nurse said.

“I want to go.”

The radio in their cell was a new feature, although as far as Catherine could tell it was only one-way. The audio input was coming from the torture chamber (or whatever euphemistic official name they called it), so most of the time it was silent.

Right now Catherine could hear McGolden’s voice over it.

“Look, fellas, I really didn’t do anything wrong — okay, yeah, we were in the exclusion zone and all but we were being careful about it, the only one being put in any danger was us and we weren’t stealing anything so if you ask me that’s a victimless cri- OW JESUS MY ANKLE!”

Catherine winced. That being kicked in a still-healing broken ankle was not conducive to the healing of said ankle was rather an understatement.

“Ow… ouch… ah, go easy on me, will ya? I promise I don’t know anything useful…”

The fact that whoever was interrogating him didn’t seem to know that McGolden knew the goal here was just to use Catherine to threaten and/or control Miller evidently confirmed that the cell didn’t have listening devices in it. Although there was frequently a guard or two standing just outside…

“Hey, what’s that? That doesn’t look, uh… friendly…” There was a slosh of water and a clink of a bucket being set down.

Catherine sort of wished whoever was interrogating McGolden would talk once in a while. Couldn’t be the same person who’d used the electric shock sticks on her the other day — that one had been rather chatty, and gullible.

“Hey— hey, hey, no, don’t, no, no, hey, stop that— no— aagh-!” A lot of coughing, choking, gagging, and sputtering all of a sudden. It died down after a few moments, replaced by dripping water and McGolden gasping raggedly, then “no, no!! Stop it!!” and more choking.

“Hey!!” Catherine shouted at the guard just outside the cell door, “I told you to go tell that asshole to leave McGolden alone! He doesn’t have any information!”

“I don’t have anything to do with that, miss,” the guard said.

“Then you’d better start!! There’s no reason to torture him, he wasn’t even causing any trouble!!”

“Sorry.”

“Enough,” McGolden coughed on the other side of the radio, “enough. Enough! I’ll talk!! Just stop it, ugh…” he coughed some more.

Catherine sat back on the bottom bunk with a huff. Goddamn useless guards.

“Okay… so…” Cough, wheeze, sputter. “You see…” Wheeze. “You see, right here - yeah, look - this little hole right behind my ear? You see that?”

…what the fuck was he talking about?
“When I was a kid… I was abducted by aliens—“

More splashing water and sputtering for a few moments.

“Did you know,” McGolden wheezed, “that the Loch Ness Monster is telekinetic? That’s where we get UFOs from, you know, that’s their true energy source— noooo!”

Catherine put her face in her hands as the thrashing and drowning noises started up again. She knew that McGolden was completely sincere with his… zanier beliefs, but bringing them up now was clearly just him fucking with the Patriots.

Because that was a smart thing to do right now.

Ten minutes later McGolden, sopping wet from his head to his stomach, catatonic and sagging in the arms of a pair of guards, was thrown back into the cell. Catherine waited until they were gone and then said, “You can get up now, McGolden.”

McGolden sat up, pushing his wet hair out of his eyes. “Those morons,” he said, “do they really think I haven’t been waterboarded before?”

“Are you okay? It sounded like they didn’t do it long enough to trigger a dry drowning…”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” He stood up, but grimaced, balancing on his uninjured leg instead of putting any weight on his ankle. Catherine got up and helped him over to sit on the bed, then gave him the sole towel in the cell to dry off. He took it gratefully.

“Guess they think they can get my cooperation by threatening you instead of me.”

“I guess so,” McGolden said, rubbing behind his ear, “but you know, that’s typical. It’s the same principle behind why they’re using you to get your father to… do whatever it is they want him to do, I have no idea… anyway, they’re using his daughter to threaten him instead of just threatening him directly because some people will just say ‘Go ahead and kill me!’ if they’re the only one in danger.”

“You’re saying I’m one of those people?” Catherine said, marginally skeptical.

“C’mon, Cathy. I’ve seen first-hand how far you’re willing to go to protect your dad. And… back in King Cove, when I got knocked out by those Cyphers… you could have just run.”

“No, I couldn’t have,” Catherine argued, “I knew you might still be alive, I had to go help you!”

“That’s my point!”

“Well… you didn’t have to come back after two years. You didn’t even have to assume that Romanenko’s book had anything to do with Daddy’s disappearance!”

“Yeah, I know,” McGolden said, “I told you, Cathy, I like to help people. Do the right thing. That’s just the kind of guy I am.”

“…” Catherine looked away from him. “I’m sorry,” she said, “I shouldn’t have asked you for help in the first place. I… didn’t know it would be dangerous, but still… I put you in danger.”

“I like to live on the edge.”

“I’m being serious, McGolden.”

Neither of them said anything for a few minutes.
Then McGolden said, “hey, Cathy… while we’re being serious, can I tell you something?”

“Hm?”

“Growing up, I… had an older sister, you know, Trinity’s mother. Our parents only had her and me. But we lived in the same town as our cousins, like… like John-Dee…” He was quiet for a moment, then continued, “John-Dee’s - well, he was older than me, and he had two brothers older than him, plus an older sister. We were so close growing up that it was like I had three older brothers and two older sisters.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Catherine said.

“I’m getting to that. See, Cathy, I always wished I had a younger sister. And… as I grew up I just let go of that. Sometimes I thought about if I had a daughter instead, but I’m still unmarried in my thirties, so anyway… and I love my niece Trinity, but—“

“McGolden, you’re rambling.”

“Sorry. Look, what I’m trying to say is that I always wanted a little sister and I think now that that’s… kind of what you are?”

Catherine blinked. “Your little sister?”

“Yeah. Is that weird? I feel like that might be kind of weird.”

Catherine stared at the opposite wall, thinking. “I don’t think that’s weird,” she said at length. “I guess we have gotten pretty close.”

“…so are you just acknowledging how I feel, or—“

“No,” Catherine said, “I mean, I’ve always kind of wanted an older brother. It’s probably because I’m an only child and Daddy was… way past the average age for having a first child when I was born, but… it was just me and him, a lot of the time. So that’s… what Solid Snake was to me, to be honest.” She looked at McGolden. “But he’s not here. He’s dead, I think.”

“Yeah… if he were here, we could probably bust out of here.”

“We’ll find a way,” Catherine said, “we just need to… trick one of the guards or interrogators, somehow. All we need is half a clue about where we’re going and we could make a break for it.”

“You could,” McGolden said, “I’d just slow you down with my ankle.”

“No way!” Catherine said, confidently smiling at him. “I’d never leave my big brother behind.”

Several miles outside of Provo, Utah.

There were only a few people left scattered at the edges of Mantis’ range, lying here gazing up at the late afternoon sky in the middle of the desert. The inside of his skull was the quietest it’d been for… for several days at least but for Mantis it felt like forever. Over a hundred thousand people - all their thoughts and memories, millions of years worth of memories, had flooded his mind and he’d lost sight of which ones were his to begin with. It felt like all he had left of himself was a vague notion of what people once called him: Psycho Mantis, Bogomol, Tretij Rebenok, the Floating Boy… and some other name he’d forgotten a long time ago.

He had no idea what he was doing here, how he came to be here, what he was doing before he was
here. Did any of that matter? Had he ever had a life of his own, any goals, any ‘self’? Did anyone know he was here? Was anyone coming for him? He couldn’t think of anyone who might have cared…

Staring blearily up at the suit-wearing man standing next to him didn’t offer any answers.

Mantis closed his eyes. It felt like his skin was burning under the sun but it was quiet, quiet enough that he could almost make out the thoughts he could hear individually instead of just an unceasing din. Somehow he thought that if he hadn’t just spent the last… who knew how long… being inundated with other people’s minds then he might have been able to endure this long enough to escape, no problem. Or not much problem anyway. He felt like a man weakened by chains being held back now by thread.

He opened his eyes again to the sound of hoofbeats.

“There you are,” the suited man said in annoyance, “I was beginning to think you wouldn’t show.”

Mantis tilted his head enough to see the man riding a horse come into view. He looked familiar somehow but Mantis just couldn’t place it. “I’m not the one who decided to set the rendezvous to a location several miles from any road, Jameson,” the man said, “my current car only has two-wheel drive. I had to stop and get an alternative means of transportation.”

“It’s Jameson,” the first man - Jameson - said through gritted teeth. “And of course you of all people would decide to get a horse instead of an ATV or something.”

The familiar-looking man dismounted his horse and walked up to Jameson and Mantis. “If I brought an ATV you’d accuse me of expecting to leave this place with someone other than my own self.”

“Hmm… you’re right. Then, I suppose you’ve already predicted what I’ve called you here to do…”

“To prove my loyalty.”

“Precisely,” Jameson said, then gestured to Mantis. “You’ve been pretending to be this man’s ally for years - him, and his team. And I think you’ve turned. I think you’ve grown fond of them, Ocelot.”

The name Ocelot stirred something somewhere in Mantis’ memories, memories that were probably his own, but he couldn’t place it. It just seemed that… he knew him, and he’d known him for a long time. But where…?

Ocelot raised an eyebrow. “You think I’ve done wrong by fraternizing with people I’ve been ordered to fraternize with?”

“I think you’re sincere about it!” Jameson said, stomping his foot. “Now, as I told you before, the order for Mantis’ execution has already been handed down. I delayed it until you could arrive, and brought him out to this secluded location for one reason… I want you to be the one to carry it out!”

“Me?” Ocelot said. There was no surprise or reluctance in his voice.

“Yes… I want you to prove that you haven’t genuinely sided with FOXHOUND by personally killing the one member of FOXHOUND that the La Li Lu Le Lo has sunk the most resources into getting around.”

FOXHOUND? That sounded familiar as well. La Li Lu Le Lo? Not so much. And they were planning on killing Mantis…? Mantis blinked slowly. At least if he were dead then the unbearable noise in his head would be done with, forever. It’d be a mercy-kill. He could hardly wait.
“And what am I supposed to tell them?” Ocelot said, his voice dry. “You really think that killing Mantis won’t blow my cover?”

Jameson scoffed. “Just tell them about my ultimatum,” he said, “tell them you had no choice but to eliminate their comrade so that you could maintain your ‘cover’ in the La Li Lu Le Lo. I’ve heard their boss is a rather abrasive and arrogant man… I’m sure he views his underlings as disposable.”

“Abrasive and arrogant, yes,” Ocelot said, “but he does get very attached to his teammates.”

“That’s his problem. And you, Ocelot, have never had a problem with convincing anyone of anything you wanted. They’ll swallow your lies easily enough - they don’t have to like it.”

There was a pause, then Ocelot said “Very well, then,” and stepped up to Mantis. Mantis found himself staring down the barrel of an old-fashioned revolver.

This was fine. Go ahead, he would have thought, if he could articulate his thoughts that clearly.

“Ah ah ah,” Jameson said, stepping up and tugging on the wrist of Ocelot’s sleeve, “not with that gun.”

“What’s wrong with this gun?” Ocelot said, sounding mildly offended.

“I don’t trust you not to have some trick up your sleeve. Blanks, perhaps…”

“You can check to see if he’s still alive or not after I shoot him.”

“Or maybe tranquilizer rounds, as potent as a fake death pill…”

“You can take his body with you. I don’t have room for it on my horse, anyway.”

Jameson shook his head. “No,” he said firmly, “I don’t want you using your own weapon.”

Ocelot re-holstered his revolver, shrugging. It seemed to Mantis like he’d seen that a million times before, so he wondered how long he really had known him.

“What, then?” Ocelot said. What was their relationship, anyway? Were they relatives, friends…?

Jameson pulled out his pistol and handed it to Ocelot. “You do know how to use an automatic, right?” he said sarcastically.

“Of course I do,” Ocelot said, taking the pistol, “I used a Makarov before I used revolvers.”

“…then you know what to do.”

Ocelot twirled the pistol around his finger once then drew a bead at Mantis’ head. Mantis could only look impassively up at it. He really couldn’t bring himself to care that he was about to die. He was exhausted.

“What’s the hold-up?” Jameson said, irritated, after a few seconds in which nothing happened.

“…just savoring the moment,” Ocelot said, “you know, Jameston, I bet you think you’re asking me to make a difficult choice.”

“What?”

“But this is actually extraordinarily convenient for me. A chance to finally get rid of Mantis, who just
loves to undermine my rapport with the boss…”

What? He did?

“He and I have never gotten along,” Ocelot said, his eyes still fixed on Mantis, “too many disagreements, rivalries — I’d go so far as to say we hate each other. Certainly he hates me.”

Was that right? It seemed right. Mantis couldn’t remember why he did hate him, though, perhaps it was his mention of rivalries… no, that was it, wasn’t it? Ocelot was his rival… for something…

“I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to murder him for years.”

Or… for someone? No, that was right. For someone. There was someone.

“Then do it,” Jameson said.

Ocelot’s finger curled around the trigger. There was someone— Mantis squeezed his eyes shut.

“Of course.”

There was someone he needed to get back to, someone who was waiting for him, someone who meant the whole world, someone he needed to protect——

BANG.
The world went silent.

Mantis opened his eyes to someone strapping a gas mask onto his head.

“Still with me?” someone said in Russian.

He struggled to focus his vision on Ocelot’s face, less than a foot from his own. There was a soft clink of spurs as Ocelot retreated, sitting back on his heels instead of leaning over Mantis.

Mantis touched the gas mask. “What…?”

“Put-together enough to speak? Good, I was concerned.”

“You were… going to…”

“Look to your right.”

Mantis slowly turned his head. Jameson was lying dead on the sand, a single bullet-hole between his eyes.

“I was never going to shoot you,” Ocelot said, “killing Jameston was my plan from the moment he told me he wanted to test my loyalty.”

He helped Mantis sit up, then stand, unsteadily. Then he frowned and started taking off his duster.

“I left the car at a stable in Wallsburg, but we won’t get there for a few hours,” he said, then draped the duster over Mantis’ shoulders. “You’ll get sunburn, dressed like that.”

Mantis weakly grasped the lapels, pulling it closer to himself. “Why are you… why didn’t you kill me?”

“I had no reason to,” he said, taking off his hat, “I don’t hate you. I’ve never hated you.”

“You…”

“And despite how much time has passed, and everything that’s happened to you… to me, you’ll always be the same neurotic child who liked to hang out in my office at the Lubyanka…”

He put his hat on Mantis’ head, smiling faintly.

“…Bogomolechik.”

Somehow the diminutive made Mantis’ chest feel tight.

“Come on,” Ocelot said, putting one hand on Mantis’ shoulder and steering him towards the horse. “Let’s get you back to Eli.”

“Eli…? Oh, Eli,” Mantis said, surprised. He couldn’t quite recall his face or many details at all, really, but he knew who that was. Eli was the someone he needed to get back to.
Ocelot had to help Mantis get up on the horse and while he initially thought that Mantis’ lack of coordination and balance at the moment would pose an issue - mostly because he was too tall for Ocelot to just sit him in front of him - but once Ocelot got in the saddle Mantis just tiredly leaned against his back and held on loosely. Not a murmur of complaint as Ocelot spurred the horse back to civilization.

“Still awake back there?” Ocelot said after a few minutes.

“Mnn…”

“That’s probably for the best. I sincerely doubt you’re very… stable right now and it may be too easy for you to simply slip away while sleeping. And besides,” he added, smirking, “you don’t trust me enough to close your eyes around me.”

“No…” Mantis said, “no, of course I don’t,” but it was a tone of empty agreement because he didn’t know any better, not actual declaration of his hatred.

Ocelot didn’t have hard proof of anything but based off of logic and what relatively little he knew about the research done into Mantis as a child, he suspected that Mantis’ ego had been - or had nearly been - dissolved or swept away by the inundation of outside minds over the past few days. That seemed to be a large part of the reason for his parasitism as a child: a complete lack of an ability to anchor his ‘self’ to himself, because for a long time the researchers hadn’t granted him any access to a way to shield his mind, i.e. his gas mask. Likely enough right now he was feeling (aside from exhausted) disoriented, amnesic… dissociating and possibly clinging, in his confusion, to thoughts and memories that belonged to someone else.

Yeah. Ocelot had seen this before. Not in Mantis specifically, but he’d seen this before. Put someone in this state before himself. And as such he knew what to do to keep someone in this state grounded:

Random, quasi-relevant trivia.

“So they kept you at Provo?”

“…mhm…”

“That must have been rough. The Mormon church has their ‘Missionary Training Center’ there, I imagine you got tired of listening to religious rhetoric 24 hours a day. You could probably recite their holy book in fifty different languages by now.”

Mantis made a little noise of disapproval.

“I’m sure you knew a few of those people back in Washington,” Ocelot went on, “all the alphabet soup agencies - the FBI, CIA, NSA — they love hiring Mormons. They’ll specifically seek them out, in fact.”

“Wh…?”

“It’s true. Theirs is a culture of hard work and obedience, so they follow orders well. They’re squeaky clean, so nearly impossible to bribe or blackmail. An unusually high number of them are at least bilingual and have foreign experience - in fact, back during the Cold War, Mormon missionaries who returned from Finland were highly sought after, because the U.S. government desperately needed Finnish-speakers. And, they’re rather blasé about death…”

“…”
“Of course you’ll rarely if ever find them in the upper echelons. And it’s not entirely because you’re not going to find one at a cocktail party, either. They’ve got a funny relationship with the government - they’ll obey laws, support leaders, serve in the military, follow orders… but there’s never going to be complete trust on either side.”

“Huh…”

“There’s historical reason for that, of course. The Mormons,” he said, sweeping his arm out to indicate the desert, “didn’t start out here. They started out in New York and kept moving west - chased off their lands many times by mobs with torches and pitchforks. It was legal, on a state level, to murder a member of their church in Missouri until 1976. They fled out here and settled, at the time, in the Salt Lake Valley, which was such a worthless bit of land that not even natives lived there at that point. Obviously they’ve since expanded…”

“That’s… interesting?” Mantis said, sounding confused.

“They’re an interesting people,” Ocelot said, nodding, “I can’t think of many groups who would pray to thank God for freedom of religion while standing in the remains of a fort their ancestors burnt down as the Army advanced on them.” He paused, then added, “actually, it was the frontiersman ‘Wild Bill’ Hickman who did that, but he was Mormon.”

It seemed Mantis was ignoring him now.

“Anyway,” Ocelot said, “Mormons don’t hold any authority in higher esteem than their prophet, so governments tend to be wary of them. So that’s why Patriot influence is a bit spread thin in this part of the country - Mormons are one of those demographics that they just don’t bother with, so when a lot of the local governments are made up of them, there’s no point to it. They’re ultimately considered harmless if left alone.”

“Why are you… why do you know all this?”

Ocelot snorted. “I do have socially acceptable hobbies, you know,” he said, “and people often pass it over, but if it weren’t for Mormons the Old West as we know it wouldn’t have existed. So I found it worth my while to look into their history at the very least.”

“I… I see…”

Good, he was paying attention again. Ocelot glanced up at the sun, shielding his eyes with his hand. Wouldn’t be too long until evening fell…

In the end Ocelot had defaulted to just telling Mantis pointless facts about the local wildlife, and he considered it a good sign that Mantis was more responsive when he talked about bugs. By the time they got back to Wallsburg and Ocelot (sadly) had to return the horse to the stable-owner, Ocelot had actually exhausted his knowledge of arthropods of the Great Basin. Should have brushed up on it before meeting up with Johnston…

Mantis was mildly confused by Ocelot’s English conversation with the stable-owner, but didn’t really question it and placidly accepted Ocelot herding him into the backseat of his car. Ocelot wasn’t particularly worried - given a little time, his knowledge of other languages besides Russian would return to him, sooner rather than later. And even if this whole incident had done irreparable damage to Mantis’ personality, Ocelot really didn’t mind his sudden docility.

Rather like the FBI serial-killer-investigation-gone-wrong incident, but in reverse.

This should be interesting.
“You’re taking me back to Eli…?” Mantis mumbled.

“Yes. You remember who he is, don’t you?”

“…a little… he’s important to me, I remember that much.”

“You two are close,” Ocelot said, merging onto the freeway - per habit driving just a few miles per hour under the speed limit, to weed out anyone who might be following - “he’ll be overjoyed to see you returned safely. I called and told him to expect us just before we left Wallsburg.”

“…close…” Mantis repeated. “Ocelot, are Eli and I… no, that seems strange—“

“Lovers?”

“…”

“As a matter of fact,” Ocelot said, “you do care enough about him to have accepted his pr-“

Mantis cut him off. “He’s the reason why we hate each other.”

“…yes.”

“Because he was… also your…” Mantis looked away from Ocelot, drawing his legs up to himself. “…a long time ago.”

“Yes,” Ocelot said, “a long time ago. I was only with him for a little over one year, twelve years ago.”

“…I see.”

It was silent in the car for a little while, and Ocelot could tell by the tenor of Mantis’ breathing, audible through the gas mask, that he was still awake… but at this point, he’d shown enough of a connection to his own personality and memories that Ocelot didn’t see a problem with letting him sleep. He stayed quiet.

Gradually he became aware of muted sniffling from the backseat. He adjusted his rear-view mirror to look at Mantis, who was pressing his gas mask against his knees. It seemed he was… crying.

“What’s the matter?” Ocelot said, exasperated.

“Eli…”

“You’ll see him soon, Mantis. We’ll be at their location by sunrise.”

“No… it’s not that…” he shook his head, then curled a little more in on himself, “I- I remember—back then, he was yours, then I took him from you… he was never happy with me. I couldn’t make him happy… I— humans… weren’t designed to bring each other happiness.”

“…”

“But you’re not human.”

“That seems to be the popular rumor, yes,” Ocelot said dryly.

“…I know he was never mine to give away, but… you can have him.”
“Pardon?”

“You can have Eli. I won’t fight you over him, I’m sure he’d be happier with you. I… I think he…” he put his hands to his head, his nails digging into his scalp. “Somehow, I keep thinking that… he loves you more than he loves me. I’m certain of it.”

Ah, so his real feelings came out… Ocelot raised an eyebrow. “You’re just giving up on him?”

“He… never belonged to me.”

“…you idiot.”

Mantis looked up. “What?”

“He was never mine,” Ocelot said, “he never came close to loving me, even twelve years ago. All I ever was to him was a convenient lay. He loves you. Back then, he would have been yours in a heartbeat if only you’d asked — no, I’d go so far as to say he’s always belonged to you, just as you always belonged to him. You were, and are, symbionts. That never changed, only you did.”

“I…?”

“That’s why he’s unhappy.” Ocelot sighed. “You are, without a doubt, the single densest excuse for a psychic I have ever had the misfortune of meeting.”

Mantis bristled at the insult.

Ocelot continued. “You forget how much the human mind filters information. Every thought anyone’s ever had has been twisted by that person’s biases and neuroses. Eli’s not exactly the most rational person around, and hardly what any sane person would call ‘in touch’ with his emotions - and that’s not even getting into his obvious mental illnesses - yet you take his every thought as objective fact. And then you filter them through your own foregone conclusions, and that’s what passes for communication in your relationship. You never let Eli know how you feel unless you’re blowing up at him, and on his end it’s just a sad ouroboros of self-loathing, doubt, and resentment. And then you wonder why he’s unhappy? Why the both of you are unhappy?”

“What are- what are you trying to say?”

“I’m sure you’ve already heard that you need to be more forthcoming with how you feel about him, but it’s equally important that you let Eli articulate himself instead of simply focusing on whatever half-baked notion passes through his head. Not just how he feels, either - let him explain himself when he upsets you. Let him tell his side of the story. Ignore what you see in his thoughts. Listen to what he has to say.”

Mantis looked away again, his body tense. Ocelot let his tone soften.

“The two of you need to talk instead of just react. At this rate you’ll just tear each other apart… think of me what you will, but I for one don’t want that to happen.”

“…”

“…I’m sure it’s going to take you a while to pull yourself back together after this. I have every intention of dumping you on Eli while you recover - he knows you better than anyone else, after all. I suggest you use this as an opportunity to fix where you went wrong.”

“Hn.”
Somewhere in Colorado.

“Mantis… Mantis! Wake up!”

Mantis groggily opened his eyes, then froze, pressing himself flatter against the backseat of Ocelot’s car as he realized Liquid’s face was about an inch and a half from the filter of his gas mask.

Liquid backed off. “Do you have any idea how worried I was about you?!”

“…”

“He’s having a hard time with English right now,” Ocelot said. “Мантис, это Илай.”

“A,” Mantis said, half-sitting up and peering at Liquid curiously, “ты красивый.”

“…what?” Liquid said.

“He just called you beautiful,” Solid said from where he was leaning against a nearby lamppost and smoking.

“Oh,” Liquid said in surprise, going slightly red, then turned back to Mantis, helping him sit up fully and get out of the car - which very quickly turned to him just picking him up and holding him bridal-style. “You can’t just say things like that, you know - not in front of everyone else, anyway…”

“…” Mantis tilted his head at him, but then wrapped his arms around his neck, tucked himself under his chin, and seemed content to stay like that.

“He must be exhausted,” Otacon said, “Liquid, you said that without his gas mask, he…”

“It’s alright now, he’s got his mask back,” Liquid said brightly. Having his truncated forearm propped under Mantis’ legs probably hurt, but then again he’d just taken some hydrocodone about half an hour ago. Probably couldn’t feel shit right now. “And he seems to know who I am, at least, so being submerged in other people’s thoughts… it was only a few days, it must not have done too much damage!”

“He’s been pretty out of it ever since I picked him up,” Ocelot said, “it may take him a while to return to his normal self… and there may be a possibility of him not returning to his normal self.”

“We’ll see, then,” Liquid said. “As long as he’s alive, I’m happy. And besides, I’m a tad out of commission myself for a while anyway.”

“…did he just fall asleep on you?” Solid said, dropping his cigarette and rubbing it out with his boot.

“Looks like it,” Otacon (who was standing closer to Liquid and Ocelot) said, cautiously checking the lens of Mantis’ gas mask.

“Well then don’t make any noise!” Liquid barked at both of them. Otacon stepped back and Solid just rolled his eyes and muttered about how Liquid was louder than the two of them combined. Liquid turned back to Ocelot (just barely missing the way Ocelot’s eyes had flicked rather impassively down to his bare ass still hanging out of the hospital gown). “Thank you,” he said, as sincerely as he could.

“It’s no trouble,” Ocelot said, tipping his hat, “or at least not much trouble. But now that this is taken care of I need to look back into that leak.”
“Any clues so far?”

“EVA hasn’t turned up anything. It seems Paradise Lost Army is still clean.”

“So what now?” Otacon said.

“I have a few things to check myself.” He glanced at Liquid. “Boss, don’t mind me if I stop answering my Codec for a few days.”

“Of course,” Liquid said without stopping to give it much thought.

Ocelot got back in his car and drove off into the night. Solid watched him go with a rather skeptical expression, then turned to Liquid and asked him if he didn’t want Solid to carry Mantis back to their car instead of him, citing his missing arm. Liquid got huffy about him even asking that and Otacon didn’t even bother to keep the peace, just walking back to the car and getting behind the wheel. Apparently he was driving.

“Where to?” he said when Solid got in the passenger seat and Liquid (plus Mantis) got in back.

“It doesn’t matter,” Solid said.

“I have a call to make,” Liquid said, fussing over Mantis, who was still wearing Ocelot’s borrowed duster. “I may be able to tell you after that.”

“…then make it.”

“In a minute, brother. —oh, what’s this?” He pulled a worn copy of Lord of the Flies out of the duster’s pocket, then, after staring at it for a moment, laughed. “Of course Ocelot made sure to return that somehow. Thought I’d finally lost it at that hotel.”

“Uh… right,” Otacon said, “look, I’m just gonna get on the freeway and head east for now.”

“That’s fine.”

“Who do you need to call, anyway?” Solid said. “Otacon already passed on to Wolf that Mantis was recovered, remember?”

“Oh, no, I remember. I need to call…” he sighed. “I need to call Mother.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh how I dearly miss the wild speculating that took place in the comments section of the last chapter in the ORIGINAL FeetGround. I was even planning on doing some non"canon" sidestories in Miscellany about them, but I seem to have forgotten all of them (except the one where Liquid's arm gets replaced with Mantis'). ...I still haven't written them. So if you have anything you'd like to see, just comment?!

Actually, everything that Ocelot says about Mormons is true. Except for the Patriots bit, obviously… (probably) Also, that little sidenote about “[praying] to thank God for freedom of religion while standing in the remains of a fort their ancestors burnt down as the Army advanced on them” is actually something I saw myself… I went to a rendezvous at Ft. Bridger last September, and Ft. Bridger is the fort in question here…
rendezvous are fur trade-era, so that pre-dates Ocelot’s preferred ‘cowboys and Indians’ time period, but nonetheless it seems like the kind of place he’d hang out at if he actually had some free time.

Also re: the thing about Mormons taking their church leaders more seriously than political readers - dang but I did not know how true that was when I wrote this. Last December I got the opportunity to meet Donald Trump, as he was touring my mission. As soon as the pictures hit Facebook, guess what everyone was commenting on? …the fact that I also got to meet Henry B. Eyring, who was running the church at the time, and Russel M. Nelson, who is running the church now. Yeahhh. Wild.

Thank you to Dacryphilia for Russian translations/checking my Russian! Ocelot’s phrase is just “Mantis, this is Eli” and, well, Solid translated what Mantis said for y’all…
A Red Roof Inn in Ogallala, Nebraska.

“Come on, Mantis, wake up. We’re leaving now.”

Mantis drowsily pushed Liquid away. “Я устал…” he mumbled, “дай мне поспать…”

Liquid frowned at him, but persisted. “It’d be difficult for me to just carry you out to the car, so you’ve got to get up.”

“Я сказал, что устал, уходи…!”

“Mantis, you know I can’t understand you. Now come on, Snake and Emmerich are waiting for outside. I told them we wouldn’t be late if I came and dragged you out of bed last.”

“Я хочу спать…” he waved Liquid off, doing his best to bury his gas mask in the thin motel pillow.

“Mantis! Don’t make me call Snake back in here to carry you out for me. We have a limited amount of time to get to Indianapolis.” He physically grabbed Mantis with his one hand and forced him to a sitting position. “We need to meet up with that bloke that Mother-“

Mantis glanced down and his eyes went wide. “Подожди, подожди—“ he gasped, clutching onto Liquid’s shirt, “где твоя рука…?!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Что случилось с твоей рукой?! Почему у тебя только одна рука??”

Liquid finally noticed that Mantis’ gaze was fixed on his bandage-wrapped right elbow, and quickly hid what was left of his arm behind his back. “It’s alright, Mantis,” he said quickly, “that’s part of the reason why we’re headed for the Czech Republic. The person who made Ocelot’s prosthetic hand lives in Prague - that’s where we’re going.”

“…?”

“Come on, come on,” Liquid said, dragging Mantis out of bed, “I know you must be exhausted, but… oh, and please speak English. Or a language I know, at least. Do you remember any Kikongo, or Arabic?”

“…Eng…lish?”

“Yes, you’re fluent in it. You understand me, don’t you?”

Mantis nodded. Liquid gave him as best he could of a reassuring smile and started leading him outside to the parking lot.

“Took you long enough,” Solid said. For once he was driving, although Liquid and Mantis were still both consigned to the backseat.

“Someone wasn’t exactly feeling up to jumping out of bed so suddenly.”
“I told you to wake him up fifteen minutes ago.”

“Cut him some slack, Snake,” Otacon scolded, “you’d be tired too if that happened to you. We’ll still make it on time.”

“He can sleep in the car,” Solid grunted. “Why are we going to Indianapolis again?”

“I need to go to Prague to get a new arm,” Liquid said, gesturing with his missing one, “once this heals, anyway. But in the meantime… well, Mantis is, I believe, Czech originally.” He glanced at Mantis, who had wasted no time in falling back asleep with his head in Liquid’s lap. “Or rather, I’m not really sure and he doesn’t know himself, but he has certain… reactions to the Czech language—“

“What kind of reactions?” Otacon said.

“Nostalgia, seems like. Anyway, things happened to his village and this was back before the Velvet Divorce so nobody really knows for sure if he’s Czech or Slovakian or what, but the point is… I think it might do him good to be in the Czech Republic for a bit. It’s almost like he’s lost himself…”

“…and you’re hoping he might remember something from his distant childhood if he’s in the Czech Republic, and that’ll help him recover?” Solid said.

“Something like that, I suppose. So I called Mother to ask about it and she, ah, went ahead and made flight arrangements for Mantis and I. Some private light jet charter that she knows. We’re supposed to meet up with him in Indianapolis on Friday morning, and he’ll take us to Prague.”

“Friday morning, great,” Solid said, “it’s already Wednesday. Indianapolis is, what, fourteen hours away?”

“I can take over driving if you need me to,” Otacon said. “I guess Liquid shouldn’t because he’s still on hydrocodone…”

Liquid grumped. “That’s exactly why Mother insisted the charter pilot fly us instead of just loaning us a plane. I am perfectly capable of flying it myself, thank you, even with only one hand. I could fly a plane with my teeth!”

“Yeah, but you’re still on hydrocodone. Plus, isn’t dizziness one of the side effects of metronidazole?”

“…yes…”

“I really don’t think it’d be a good idea to fly a plane while dizzy… and that’s not even getting into some of the other side effects of both that and the ampicillin… ugh… there’ll be a bathroom on the light jet, right? You’re going to need it.”

“Actually, the hydrocodone side effects cancel out those side effects quite nicely,” Liquid said dryly.

“Liquid,” Solid said, “remind me again how many times you’ve thrown up today alone.”

“…”

Well, if nothing else the conversation reminded Liquid he had yet to take his antibiotics today.

『あかいりんごにくちびるよせて…』
『だまってみているあおいそら！』
The doorknob clicked. Rattled.

“I know you’re in there. I can hear your music playing.”

They don’t play this song on the radio here, Miller.”

Bang. Out with the door lock.

Bang. Out with the stereo.

Ocelot slid two bullets back into the now-empty chambers of his revolver, spun it a few times, then returned it to his holster.

“Miller,” he said again, his voice hard. Miller didn’t even look up from where he was hunched over his desk, his head in his hands.

“Why didn’t you run?”

“…”

Ocelot snorted. “No, I get it,” he said, his voice exceptionally dry, “you thought you wouldn’t be stricken by a crisis of conscience if you sold out the red-headed stepchild instead of your favorite son. Couldn’t help but notice it was Liquid’s group you tried to send up the river, not Snake’s…”

“…”

“Let me guess: Even though I never explicitly told you their location, it was still easy enough for you to figure out simply by what sort of resources they needed, what transportation they took, time zones, and travel time.”

“You…” Miller looked up slowly, his expression drawn but otherwise unreadable, “knew this could have happened the whole time.”

“Of course I did. I didn’t give you any direct information to provide you with an excuse for not leaking information all over the goddamn place if and when the Patriots came after you. How long, Miller?”

Again Miller was silent.
Ocelot stepped up and splayed his hands on his desk. “How long?”

“…only since two weeks ago.”

“Two weeks ago.”

“I swear. …they have my daughter.”

Ocelot took a half-step back and considered it for a moment. “Two weeks,” he said again, “yes, that seems right.”

“Excuse me? Do you know something?”

“Hm? Oh, Catherine headed off for Shadow Moses three weeks ago.”

“What? You knew?”

“Of course I did - you remember how you nagged me about getting her a replacement car after I stole hers two years ago? It was only natural that I put a transmitter in the new one. Which of course she found it and got rid of it… but, Miller, either your daughter is not as clever as she thinks she is or I am a good deal cleverer than she thinks I am. I actually put two transmitters in her car. I knew she wasn’t just going on a post-graduation road trip when I saw that transmitter one was still in Cullowhee while transmitter two was en route to Alaska.”

“You knew and you didn’t stop her?!” Miller stood up abruptly, slamming his hands on the table at the same time as his chair crashed backwards. “You didn’t at least tell me?! The Patriots are holding her hostage!!”

“They’re not going to kill her, Miller, without her they won’t have anything to hold over your—“

“You fucking know what they might do to her,” Miller snapped, gesturing with his prosthetic arm. “I want my daughter back. I’ll do whatever it takes to—“

“Even switching sides?”

“You’re one to talk about betrayal, Ocelot.”

“Mantis almost died because you told the Patriots their location. And it was Liquid they were going after — Mantis sacrificed himself for him. I only barely got him back alive.”

“…I don’t care.”

“Look me in the eye and say that.”

He couldn’t.

Ocelot narrowed his eyes. “I didn’t stop Catherine because I was expecting her to die before they could use her against you.”

That was the last straw. Miller snapped, leaping over the desk at Ocelot, screaming and catching him around the neck, sending them both to the floor. But Miller was a former drill instructor while Ocelot was former Spetsnaz — only seconds passed before the tussling stilled. Ocelot didn’t even bother squirming out from under Miller’s body, simply freeing his arms, knocking Miller’s hands away from his throat, and whipping his revolver out of his holster to jam the muzzle against Miller’s forehead.

There was a long pause.
“Do it,” Miller whispered down at Ocelot. “Kill me. You said you would. I deserve it.”

“…”

“Do it.”

“No.”

“…what?”

“Get off of me.”

Miller stared at Ocelot for another moment then, almost hesitantly, sat back, then stood up. Ocelot sat up, rubbing his back and glaring up at Miller.

“What?” Miller said again.

“Get out of here.”

“You’re… letting me go?”

Ocelot sneered. “By this time tomorrow everything you know will be outdated and this office will be nothing but a pile of ash,” he said. “Now get out of here.”

Miller’s eyebrow twitched, but he stepped over Ocelot, taking a few uncertain steps towards the door, walking backwards so he was still facing him. “Why are you…?”

“Because you’re predictable,” Ocelot said, standing up and reholstering his gun again. “I know you’ll… make the correct decision. When the time comes.”

“…you trust me.”

“Apparently I’m a fucking idiot. Go, Kaz.”

Another few steps back towards the door. “Catherine—” he started.

“I’ll clean up my mess. Now run and don’t look back.” He cracked a predatory grin. “You know the Singapore Police Force isn’t tied into the Patriots. They won’t be any help if they catch you, Mr. Illegal Alien.”

Miller booked it.

Ocelot stared at the open door for almost a full minute, then sighed and shook his head. It was rare that his suspicions ever turned out to be incorrect, but just this one time, he… well, nevermind. The whole business with Catherine was supposed to avoid this but somewhere along the line he’d miscalculated. Though of course he knew that once Miller got back in with the Patriots it’d be exceedingly difficult for him to get back out, even with Catherine no longer in danger or otherwise out of the picture.

But difficult was not the same as impossible. Ocelot wasn’t about to place all his chips on Miller being their sleeper agent who just didn’t know it yet, but…

Ocelot often found himself the type of man who said “hit me” with a 19 in blackjack.

And win.
“Mhm… mmhm. Is that right. Yes, thank you, Old Boy. I’ll talk to you later.” Solidus hung up the Codec call.

“So what was that all about?” Mei Ling said. (She wasn’t entirely paying attention to Solidus, focusing more on tossing corundas con carne in Frank’s general direction and watching him snap them out of mid-air.)

“Just general updates… some new Codec technology that the Navy developed and Dead Cell is using now…”

“Oh? What’d they come up with?”

“Something about nanomachines, and being able to talk without opening your mouth—“

“What!” Mei Ling stood up and put her hands on her hips. “Ugh! It seriously took them over two years to finally catch up with me?”

“What?”

“I was working on a new iteration of Codec when the Shadow Moses incident happened!” Mei Ling said, “it was going to be ready to test out on FOXHOUND when they got back from assignment. But, of course, that never really… happened… the way we thought it would, anyway.”

Solidus blinked. “So…”

“So it was nanomachine-based technology instead of an inner ear implant! When you’re thinking, or more specifically thinking about speaking, your vocal cords make tiny movements that match the words you would say if you were speaking out loud - the purpose of the nanomachines was to pick up on and transmit those, since one of the big flaws behind Codec has always been that anyone nearby can still hear what you’re saying to the person on the other end of it, even if they can’t hear what they’re saying to you.”

“Oh,” Solidus said, “I see. But with nanomachines, you would be able to communicate entirely in silence.”

“Exactly!”

“That does sound useful.”

“Think Dead Cell can hook us up with some of those nanomachines?” Mei Ling said. “Once we had some I’d be able to configure them to our team no problem. It is my technology the Navy was building off of, after all.”

“I could check, but I doubt it,” Solidus said. “Dead Cell wouldn’t have any spares and they have little to no access to any R&D labs.”

“Unless they raided one!”

“…I like the way you think, Mei Ling.”

Chapter End Notes
Thanks again to Dacryphilia for fixing my Google-assisted shittastic Russian! Mantis’ phrases are, in order: “I’m tired… let me sleep…” “I told you, I’m tired…!” “I want to sleep…” “Wait, wait— where’s your arm…?!” and “What happened to your arm?! Why do you only have one arm??” No accounting for punctuation.

The conversation about side effects refers to diarrhea being a side effect of both metronidazole and ampicillin; constipation is a side effect of hydrocodone and, well, opiates in general. But nausea/vomiting is a side effect of all three!

Oh and the Japanese song lyrics are from “Ringo no Uta” by Michiko Namiki - it was probably the most popular song in post-war Japan. Real interesting backstory, you should look it up. Note that the lyrics may be misspelled because I could only find them in romaji and I had to use some random website to convert them to hiragana… Also the thing Mei Ling says about vocal cords is true.
Chapter 71

Chapter Notes

Whew... so... this is it. The final chapter of the original FeetGround. Starting tomorrow, it's all going to be original stuff that no one's seen before. I'm... kind of nervous. I never got my buffer back up to snuff (working on chapter 93 currently), and it's been so long... plus this reupload thus far hasn't caught the attention of any new readers, really, and I know the sheer length of it all is pretty intimidating... but... well... here we go.

“ADAM.”

“Yes, EVA?”

“Why did it take you forever to pick up your Codec? What are you doing?”

“I’m obviously busy, EVA, why were you trying to call me?”

EVA stared at her overflowing desk with her hands on her hips, then made a pointless gesture towards it that Ocelot couldn’t see. “All this, ADAM! What is this?!”

“This’ could refer to a lot of different things…”

“Bank numbers, passwords, credit card accounts, half-filled fake passports and IDs, addresses, bills, reams and reams of contacts! Where did all of this come from? Why did you suddenly dump this on me?!”

“Oh, that,” Ocelot said, in a rather disinterested tone of voice, “just the essential trappings for moving people around undetected. Coordination, you know.”

“I… I see… so why-?”

“Despite what everyone seems to think, EVA, I am only human. There quite literally aren’t enough hours in the day for me to handle all that. Up until two years ago I simply used the Patriot network to do it under false pretences, but just before the act of sabotage on the CIA’s Brunswick county bunker, I moved as much of it as I could into more… private hands.”

“Great. That can’t be me you’re referring to, the CIA bunker thing was two years ago.”

“Yes, but the man in question happened to run off the other day.”

“So you dumped this all in my lap?!”

“You’re more organized than we are, I’m sure you can handle it.”

“Organized?” EVA sputtered, “ADAM, I’m not your goddamn secretary—“

“I didn’t mean to imply that you have to handle it,” Ocelot said with disdain, “but you do have an entire PMC at your command. I have a handful of nonpersons with emotional issues.”
“…”

“Have fun.”

“Jesus Christ, ADAM. You’d better come here and help me sort all this out in person.”

“Because you have something else to ask me about, don’t you? Something you don’t want to say over Codec.”

EVA bit her tongue. That was true, although the way Ocelot phrased it made it sound like he thought it might be something a lot more ominous and/or important than a lecture about infidelity and enabling self-destructive behavior.

“I’ll come when I’m able,” Ocelot said, “and not a day before.”

“See you around, then,” EVA said with a snort.

Mantis woke up halfway, and stretched himself across the back seat of the car, yawning behind his mask. He was the only one back here - it felt very wrong for reasons he couldn’t place at the moment.

“Why are we stopped?” he asked thickly in Russian, sitting up and rubbing the back of his neck.

Solid jerked his head towards the window. “Had to pull over so Liquid could go throw up in the bushes.”

Oh. That’s why it felt wrong. He felt a little embarrassed, both for not realizing it sooner and for how unsettled he got about not having Liquid right next to him.

“Otacon followed him out with a bottle of water, just to be nice,” Solid continued.

Mantis glanced out the window. Indeed, Liquid was hunched over in a patch of flowery plants by the side of the freeway, visibly retching. At least his ponytail meant that he didn’t have to worry about getting vomit in his hair, that would be gross. Otacon stood awkwardly a few feet away, holding some bottled water and speaking, although it obviously wasn’t audible in the car and Mantis couldn’t read lips. He wanted to read his mind to find out what he was saying to Liquid (for some reason he couldn’t recall he felt rather… on edge about Otacon and Liquid together) but the very thought of doing it made a sharp ache roll through his head.

“You alright?” Solid said, turning around in his seat as Mantis massaged his temples.

“I can’t… I have powers. I can’t use them. I have powers, don’t I?”

“You do, but considering you’ve slept from Nebraska to Illinois, you probably just don’t have the energy to do anything. I wouldn’t worry about it.” He paused, then dragged his hand down his face and abruptly switched to English. “Don’t tell Liquid we were talking in Russian, okay? He said he wanted to encourage English-usage.”

“The parasite,” Mantis mumbled reflexively.

“Parasite? Huh?”

“Oh… I don’t know. For some reason I just had the thought that the English language is a parasite.”

“…you must be really out of it still. How much do you remember before being abducted?”
“Not much. Are we friends?”

“I’m your brother-in-law.”

“?”

Solid sighed. “Nevermind,” he said, “if you aren’t sure about something, just ask Liquid. He knows you really well.”

“Okay.”

Eventually Liquid came back over to the car, clutching the water bottle, sniffing and looking appropriately miserable. Solid’s nose wrinkled at the faint smell of vomit on him, but didn’t comment aside from pointedly cracking the windows — it was June, after all, a good temperature outside for having car windows down anyway. Otacon cleared his throat.

“Let’s get going, then,” he said lamely.

Solid grunted, resting his head in one hand. “Might take a while to merge back onto the freeway… Illinois drivers are assholes.”

“I’m sure there’ll be a break in traffic eventually.”

“…you… alright?” Mantis said to Liquid uncertainly, touching his shoulder.

“I’m fine,” Liquid said shortly, rubbing his sleeve over his face. “My sinuses sting, that’s all. And my mouth tastes bad. I’m surprised you’re up, how are you feeling?”

“Ah…” He didn’t know how to articulate that. “Snake told me to ask you if I wasn’t sure about something,” he said instead.

“Oh? Had a conversation with Snake, did you?” He turned towards the front of the car, leaning forward to frown coolly at Solid. “In English, I hope?”

“Of course,” Solid huffed.

Liquid frowned, then settled back next to Mantis. “Mantis?” he said.

“Hm?”

“Were you and Snake speaking in English?”

“…”

Mantis backed up from Liquid and then curled in on himself, staring at his feet - hiding his face against his knees after a moment, his shoulders shaking. Needless to say Liquid was alarmed, and immediately turned on Solid, furious.

“Snake!! What did you do to him?!”

“I didn’t do anything!” Solid snapped, “we were talking in Russian, alright? He’s probably just scared you’ll get mad at him for not using English. Either that or it’s because I asked him not to tell you that and he’s panicking because you just asked him about it directly and doing what I asked him to would mean lying to you.”

Liquid opened his mouth to argue or tell Solid off for not helping with the whole English thing, but
decided against it (or decided to do it later, at any rate) and set instead about trying to coax Mantis back out of a shivering ball, gently explaining that he wasn’t mad about his language choice and/or his current inability to sort out whose requests it was appropriate to carry out. Solid rolled his eyes.

They were back on the freeway by the time Mantis calmed down — afterwards Liquid made half a comment about how Mantis was acting childish and then went real quiet for rather a long time.

“Eli?” Mantis said when they were stopped a gas station in Peoria, where Solid and Otacon haggled outside with maps under harsh florescent lighting. “I can ask you questions when I’m unsure about something, can’t I?”

“Of course you can,” Liquid said, as warmly as he could.

“Okay.”

“…did you have something to ask, Mantis?”

“Um… in a minute. I don’t know how to… phrase it.”

They were interrupted by Solid and Otacon getting back in the car, Otacon at the driver’s seat (once again) this time. “I told you we can just go straight through Champaign,” he was saying, “it’s just down I-74. All we need to do is keep going!”

“Alright, alright,” Solid said, slumping into his seat and rubbing his eyes with one hand, “I get it. I was wrong.”

“Honestly… taking I-155 down to Springfield and then heading east… I-72 would just put us right back on I-74!”

“I said I get it, Otacon! Geez. I’m tired, alright?”

“Then get some sleep, no one’s stopping you,” Liquid snarked.

“Stay out of this.”

“Eli, why do you wear a collar?” Mantis said abruptly.

For a beat no one said anything, then Liquid said stiffly, “I really don’t want to explain that in front of Snake.”

“Huh…? You’re embarrassed all of a sudden?”

“Wait,” Otacon said, “what’s the matter with explaining in front of Snake?”

“I asked him about it once,” Solid muttered, staring pointedly out the window as Otacon pulled out of the gas station parking lot, “things got… awkward.”

“That’s a hell of a way of putting it,” Liquid snapped.

Otacon laughed, somewhat uncomfortably. “I bet it wasn’t as awkward as the time I asked about it.”

“Emmerich, shut up.”

“Oh, really?” Solid said. “What’d he do?”

“Don’t you fucking dare, Emmerich!” Liquid snarled.
Otacon merged back onto the freeway, his hands tightening on the steering wheel. “Oh, it was nothing,” he said after considering what to say for a moment, “it’s just that it can’t be anything like when you asked, Snake, I mean, you two are brothers and all. It’d be… well, let’s just say it’d be pretty incestuous.”

Solid grunted. Liquid put his head in his hands.

“I don’t…” Mantis said, blinking, “I think I’m missing something.”

“Forget it,” Liquid said irritably, his cheeks flushed, “Mantis, the collar’s a sign that I belong to you, that’s all.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Yeah,” Solid said, still looking out the window, “‘belong’ to him in the ‘kinky sex slave’ kind of way.”

“Snake!” Liquid said waringly.

“I’m kind of surprised he doesn’t have a tag that says ‘Property of daddy Mantis’ on it.”

“Snake!! No one asked you!!”

“It sounded to me more like a wedding ring,” Mantis said, “except made of leather instead of gold, and worn where it’s more visible. What’s the problem with that?”

Solid snorted. “There’s no problem with that,” Otacon said, “it’s just kind of, uh, unusual. It takes everyone around him a little while to get used to it.”

“Otacon, don’t encourage their weird public sex shit,” Solid said.

“It’s not public sex!!” Liquid interjected. “It’s just a collar.”

“It’s weird.”

“Can’t we just not argue about this…?” Otacon sighed. Mantis nodded.

“You’re weird,” Liquid said to Solid, the very picture of maturity, ignoring Otacon and Mantis entirely.

Solid turned around in his seat. “You wanna talk weird, Liquid??” he said, “remember how Ocelot gave us your suitcase when he was dropping off Mantis and you didn’t even notice and I had to put it in the trunk for you?”

“I had more important things to worry about at the time,” Liquid said, tossing his head.

“Yeah, I forgot to tell you that it busted open while I was throwing it in there. Guess what I found when I was closing it back up.”

“…oh my g- Snake, shut up, don’t you dare say another—“

“Silk panties.”

Otacon choked.

“There were silk panties in your luggage,” Solid said with a hint of triumph. Liquid went as scarlet as
an ibis.

“Um,” Mantis said.

Liquid failed to engage his brain-mouth filter in time to not say, “Well, at least I never propositioned my own fucking twin, Snake.”

“What,” Otacon said very loudly at the same time as Solid’s eyes went wide and he hissed, “that was two years ago! I thought we were past that!”


“It- it’s not what it sounds like!

Liquid put his head in his hands. “Why the hell did I say that. That was supposed to be a secret.”

“I’m being taken out of context!”

“What context, Snake?” Otacon said in a high-pitched voice, “what possible context—“

“I’m very confused…” Mantis said.

Meanwhile in Madagascar.

“Hey, Wolf,” Octopus said, holding up two bottles of toaka gasy in one hand and a deck of cards in the other. “Wanna get completely smashed and play strip Magic: The Gathering?”

Wolf looked up from where she was administering twin belly rubs to Bêdeng and Benedict. “Sure,” she said.

“So,” Solidus said as they drove north, Mei Ling in the passenger seat and Frank lying down and panting in the back seat, “the closest Naval Research Laboratory location is at Stennis Space Center in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. It’ll take us about 23… 24 hours to get there, assuming we don’t stop for anything longer than gas breaks and we drive in shifts instead of stay at hotels.”

“Do we have a deadline?” Mei Ling said.

“Dead Cell raids are unannounced, so while I did already tell them to target this lab, they are fully capable of waiting as long as they need to for us to get there.”

Mei Ling nodded. “That works,” she said. “To be honest, I’d rather stop at a hotel and actually sleep… after twelve or thirteen hours, I guess? But I don’t mind eating on the road. I’ll miss the Mexican food, though…”

“Alright. It’s possible that that NRL-Stennis won’t have the Codec nanomachines at all, they specialize in things like oceanography and marine geology. The Chesapeake Bay Detachment may be more likely, they’re the ones who work on communications technology.”

“I dunno… we don’t have to go to where it was actually developed, just somewhere we can steal the nanomachines from. I think we’ll find them at NRL-Stennis.”

“You think Codec has geophysics applications?”

“Oceanography applications. Oceanographers have to go out to sea in order to take measurements
“and stuff, right?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“So what better way to stay in communication boat-to-land or land-to-boat than a Codec?” Mei Ling said, “even if someone fell into the water, they wouldn’t lose their way to contact their colleagues. And, with the nanomachine version, divers would be able to speak directly to people on the surface, which they couldn’t do before because of the mouthpiece!”

“I see,” Solidus said. “That does make sense. Even if it does sound a bit like a sales pitch…”

“Oh, considering how many times the FOXHOUND budget got slashed while I was there,” Mei Ling said, “I very quickly learned how to talk up my projects so the R&D chief wouldn’t cut them.”

“Oh, right… just so you know, I personally did not oversee the federal allotment of funds to FOXHOUND specifically. It was some Army brass that was in charge of that.”

“I figured.”

“Actually, I remember being surprised when I saw that FOXHOUND still managed to have six members in it by the time Shadow Moses happened. I didn’t think they could afford to pay the salary of five agents plus a squad leader.”

“Oh yeah,” Mei Ling said, “yeah… Liquid cut his own salary and took the same pay as everyone else. I think he did that in, um, 2002 or so? Before I was there. But I heard people talking about it every so often.”

“…oh.”

“I mean, to be fair,” Mei Ling said, “they mostly talked about it in the context of ‘the commander must be so lazy because his salary’s so low!’, but still…”

“That actually makes me feel better. Amazing.”

It was very late in the evening by the time they crossed the Texas border - Solidus received a comment from a border guard about how he looked uncannily like the currently missing former President, but Solidus just laughed it off and said he got that a lot - so Mei Ling was watching the exit signs carefully for a decent motel. As they passed a ‘food’ sign she realized she was hungry.

“Wanna get something to eat before we turn in for the night?” she said.

“That would be nice,” Solidus said, “did you have anywhere in mind?”

“Let’s just go to a drive-thru… oh, there’s a McDonald’s off that next exit. Let’s go there.”

“Alright,” Solidus said, moving over to the rightmost lane. “…come to think of it, I’ve never had McDonald’s before.”

“Really?” Mei Ling said, blinking. “Even after spending so much time on the road…?”

“We always seemed to go to other establishments.”

“Ahh, well, let’s definitely go to McDonald’s, then! You’re not truly an American until you’ve had McDonald’s!”

“Yes,” Solidus said, “yes, that sounds right. McDonald’s is an American icon. It’s practically
symbolic of our nation.”

So once they got off the next exit, they went to the McDonald’s. Solidus ordered a hamburger and Mei Ling got a salad and a bunch of McNuggets to share with Frank. They kept driving.

As soon as Solidus bit into his hamburger, he made a face. He chewed and swallowed it with difficulty, then sighed.

“What’s the matter?” Mei Ling said.

“It’s terrible.”

“Well, yeah. It’s McDonald’s.”

Solidus was silent for a moment, then nodded. “I see,” he said. Then he finished off his hamburger.

Because that’s what America is all about, baby.
Chapter 72

Chapter Notes

As of this chapter, I have officially cleared the “longest fic in the Metal Gear tag on AO3” mark by over 1,000 words. 🤖

Whoever doxxed me can eat my entire fucking ass. You tried to stop me and I made it anyway, bitch.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Indianapolis.

Liquid’s impulsive revelation of Solid’s former(?) incestuous tendencies had caused their car to devolve into a lot of indignant squawking and shrill questioning for a good five or six minutes until Otacon just insisted they drop the entire conversation, saying it didn’t matter and he really didn’t have any right to judge anyway. By that point Mantis was hiding under Ocelot’s duster and had gone back to sleep. It didn’t occur to either Solid or Liquid to question just why the hell Otacon didn’t have a right to judge for another ten minutes, at which point they just exchanged glances and Solid shrugged. Better not to re-start all that…

They pulled up to a small tarmac and got out of the car, Liquid having to shake Mantis awake yet again only to get a flurry of sleepily slurred curses in Kikongo for interrupting his nap, so he left him alone for now. A man standing next to a Cessna Citation CJ4 waved to them and approached.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” the man said, “Snake! It’s been ages. How’d things work out with Holly?”

“Uh…”

Liquid did a double-take at the man’s voice, and spun around; the private light jet character EVA knew was, apparently, Charlie, one of FOXHOUND’s former helicopter pilots and answer to Pequod. Budget cuts had started very shortly after Liquid took command, so it wasn’t long until their transportation division had been reduced to just Charlie, and in early 2001 Liquid had to lay him off since from that point on they could only afford to maintain a handful of cars and all other transportation they had to beg favors from other branches of military for. Highly annoying. Liquid had liked Charlie, too.

“It’s good to see you again, Liquid!” Charlie said cheerfully, clapping him on the shoulder. He glanced back to Solid. “Now that I see the two of you together… yeah, you really are twins.”

“You could have mentioned it earlier,” Solid grumbled.

“Hey, I didn’t meet him until after you left the unit. And how the hell was I gonna bring it up during Zanzibar Land? You were too busy schmoozing it up with Holly.”

Liquid snorted. “He probably wasn’t in the mood to hear about family, anyway,” he sneered, “he did just kill his own father.”

“Huh-?”
Solid cleared his throat. “So you’re the one taking Liquid and Mantis to the Czech Republic?”

“Yup,” Charlie said, “I owe his mother a favor.”

“…you know she’s our mother?”

“That’s… kind of how she introduced herself to me.”

“Oh,” Liquid said, “great.”

“I’d just lost my job with FOXHOUND, and being with a top-secret special forces group for so long blacklisted me from a lot of places I might have otherwise been able to find employment,” Charlie explained, “so I figured, what the hell, and emptied my bank account to go backpacking through Asia. I met Big Mama in China — she told me my old boss was her son and that she’d help me get started in private sector as long as I agreed to help her out every so often.” He gestured back to his Cessna. “For the most part I just fly rich businessmen around, but when I’m not doing that I’m a shuttle for her PMC.”

“I suppose that’s convenient… we need to go to wherever Paradise Lost Army’s headquarters is Mother can find us a place to stay while we wait for…” Liquid trailed off, then raised his severed arm with a shrug.

“Yup,” Charlie said again, clapping his hands like he was wiping dust off of them. “But it’ll take a while to get there, we need to stop in Greenland to refuel.”

“That’s no trouble.”

“At least you’re finally getting him out of our hair,” Solid said.

“Snake, don’t be rude,” Otacon said.

“Oh, who’s this?” Charlie said, turning to Otacon.

“A- a friend of Snake’s,” Otacon said.

“Like, friend friend or friend friend—“


Liquid, meanwhile, had finally succeeded in convincing Mantis to get up and leave the car, and he gave Charlie an extremely blank look when he did. Charlie returned with a questioning glance — Liquid mouthed ‘Amnesia’ to him and that was the end of that.

Since there was no fussing to be done with luggage (Liquid and Mantis only had a singular suitcase between them) and the Cessna was already fueled, there was no waiting around. Liquid, Mantis, and Charlie went to the plane - Liquid having to drag Mantis along by his hand since the latter was too busy looking at their surroundings to pay attention, so Charlie had to carry the suitcase since Liquid didn’t have a free hand — Solid and Otacon got back in the car.

“So,” Otacon said.

“So.”

“Now what?”

“I have no idea. Do we meet back with Solidus and Mei Ling?”
“Where are they?”

Solid blinked. “I don’t know,” he said, “maybe they’re still in Mexico.”

“…I don’t really feel like driving back to Mexico. Do you feel like driving back to Mexico?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

Solid sighed. “Let’s go find somewhere to lay low. I know Mei Ling’ll take good care of Frank, at least.”

Catherine was getting real sick and tired of getting dragged off to the torture chamber, especially the part where, by this point, the Patriot guards had gotten real sick and tired of her biting and kicking and headbutting them and now they just pre-emptively tasered her every time she had to be removed from the cell.

Muscles aching, Catherine sat handcuffed in the chair in the torture chamber. She was the only one here, but that absolutely didn’t discount someone watching her through a camera or from behind that two-way mirror. “Hello?” she said to the camera. “Hello! Are you just going to leave me in here until I piss myself? Because it’s not going to happen. I’ve got the bladder of a camel!” (Which was true, actually, she was a nurse.)

No response. Fuck it. She jerked her body experimentally a few times, finding that while she couldn’t get her arms unlooped from the back of the chair, she could get the chair legs to leave the floor by a fraction of an inch. So she started hopping the chair over to the door.

Honestly, she had no idea what she was hoping to accomplish with this.

She was about six inches away from attacking the door handle with her teeth when the door suddenly opened, sending her crashing back to the floor. She cried out — it was a good thing she wasn’t heavier, she might have broken her radii and ulnas like that.

Eyes squeezed shut in pain, it took her a moment to actually squint up at the person who’d opened the door, but she felt a spike of fear go through her when she did: Revolver Ocelot.

“Don’t look so scared,” Ocelot said dryly, closing the door behind him. “I’m only here to talk.”

“What-?”

He jerked his head towards the camera. “It’s off,” he said. “So is the one-way radio to your cell. And there’s no one behind the two-way mirror, either. We’re completely alone.”

“…yeah, I really don’t like the sound of that.”

Ocelot snorted, picking up Catherine’s chair and dragging it back to the center of the room, then, much to Catherine’s surprise, uncuffing her. She blinked at him, and he just made a ‘stay seated’ gesture — which she decided to obey for now, instead taking the opportunity to massage her stinging forearms.

“How’d you know I was here?” Catherine said, “I thought you weren’t with the Patriots.”
That’s only true from a certain perspective. But no, I knew you were here because I sent you here. You really think I ‘let slip’ those clues to where your father might have gone two years ago?”

Catherine was silent. She had thought that Ocelot’s hints were unintentional.

Ocelot sighed. “I knew you’d come to Shadow Moses, eventually. It didn’t particularly matter to me when. And I knew that the closest you could come to Shadow Moses was the supply depot at King Cove - which happens to be guarded by Cyphers.”

“Yeah,” Catherine spat, “it was those damned Cyphers that caught McGolden and I.”

“The trouble is that those Cyphers are, ordinarily, programmed to kill all trespassers on sight — all trespassers, Catherine, you included.”

“You… you lead us here to die?!”

Ocelot shrugged. “Keeping you alive was a liability all along,” he said, “but killing you myself would just ruin everything I’d built with your father. No, I wanted to get rid of you and keep my hands clean at the same time.”

“!!”

“I assumed that the Cyphers would take care of you for me… wrongfully assumed, as it turns out.”

Catherine snarled at him. “Guess an arrogant asshole like you has to slip up once in a while!?”

Ocelot started pacing across the interrogation room, one hand behind his back, the other thoughtfully twisting his moustache. “The only way the Cyphers would have been able to capture you instead of kill you was if your face was, for whatever reason, added to their facial recognition database with express orders to capture alive. Your companion McGolden was presumably spared simply because he was with you - ‘capture alive’ very often turns into a plus-one affair where Cyphers are concerned, I’m afraid.”

“Is this supposed to be shocking? Because I already knew that the Patriots captured me alive to hold my safety over Daddy’s head.”

“What’s shocking is that the Cyphers at King Cove would have your face in their database to begin with,” Ocelot said, turning back to her. “Your face wouldn’t have been added unless the programmers knew you were coming, the Cyphers don’t have the memory for everyone who ‘might’ come ‘just in case’. No one knew you were coming. No one knew you had set off to search for your father… except for me.”

“And you… didn’t tell the Patriots?”

“Of course not. My intention was to have the Cyphers kill you, so notifying the Patriots of your plans would have been extremely counter-productive.” He started pacing again. “Tell me, Catherine, did anyone else know about this?”

“Oh… I guess… some of my friends knew I was searching for my dad. But I didn’t tell them I was headed for Shadow Moses—“

Ocelot waved a hand. “If anyone in Cullowhee were an active Patriot agent, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. You would have been captured there with much less fuss. What about McGolden?”
“I don’t think he, um, has friends. What about his editor?”

“The editor of MEGASURPRISE magazine is as clean as they come - in fact, he’s an active nuisance to the Patriots. They wouldn’t have heard about your plans through him.”

Catherine shook her head. “Then I can’t think of anyone. We both knew it’d probably be dangerous to tell people where we were going.”

“Damn…” Ocelot kept pacing. If Catherine didn’t know better, she’d say he seemed… nervous. “Someone’s outplayed me,” he muttered, “I don’t like this.”

“Hard to feel sorry for you when you were trying to get me killed…”

“I’m not looking for sympathy, Catherine, it’s answers I want.”

“I don’t know anything,” Catherine said immediately, holding her hands up defensively.

Ocelot spared her an extremely dismissive glance, not even breaking stride. “I have no interest in interrogating you,” he said, “nor the time. Even if I do happen to know you lied to your guards about being HIV-positive.”

“Uh…”

“Oh, please. Don’t get me wrong, that was a neat trick, but it only works on the assumption that you have no medical background and therefore no reason to know anything about HIV medications unless you were personally taking them.”

“…”

He stopped pacing again, standing in front of Catherine and putting his hands in his pockets. “Catherine,” he said, very seriously, “how did you even find out that Miller had left his home in the first place?”

“…um…?”

“Did someone tell you?”

Catherine blinked. “Oh,” she said, “yeah.”

Ocelot frowned. “Who?”

“My… my mother. She told me—“ she cut herself off as Ocelot’s jaw visibly tightened.

“Dammit,” he hissed through clenched teeth. “This would be Nadine, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah, that’s her.”

“Of course. Of course. I should have known - that’s how the Patriots knew you were coming!” He turned around. “It’s been so long since she’s actually done anything that I’d entirely forgotten about her…”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your mother’s a Patriot spy, Catherine,” Ocelot said flatly without turning back around. “She always has been. That’s the whole reason why you exist.”
“…excuse me?”

“Was I not clear?” Ocelot said, his voice hard, turning around to face her again. Catherine scooted her chair back pretty much on instinct - his facial expression was only one of annoyance, but his eyes were furious. “Miller never knew until it was too late - didn’t believe my warnings, thought I was only being jealous and petty — but it’s why they split up, eventually. Nadine was with the Patriots from the start, and the Patriots are accustomed to playing a very long game, Catherine.”

“I don’t… I don’t follow.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Nadine slept with your father on Patriot orders. She had a child with him on Patriot orders. That’s why she never cared about you—“ Catherine winced. “—you were always meant to be nothing more than a bargaining chip against your father. That’s your entire purpose.”

“No… no, that’s not-“

“You don’t have to like it. But you were born for this reason, and now here you are.”

“I’m not…! I’m not just a goddamn game piece, Ocelot!!”

“You can’t change what you were born as,” Ocelot said with a slight sneer. “But nevermind. The Patriots had Miller under watch, so they must have noticed when he ran off to join the resistance. That’s where you came in. Nadine was the one who told you that Miller was ‘missing’… she told you in order to lure you out here, where you could be captured and fulfill your purpose.”

“No…! No, come on, that’s ridiculous! If- if she was just trying to get me captured, why didn’t she just kidnap me back at WCU?!?”

“Because you’re as tall as she is, younger, and carry a .50 caliber revolver,” Ocelot said dryly, “kidnapping by force wouldn’t go well, and would you really trust her enough to get in a car with her of your own volition?”

“…”

He turned his head to the side. “You played into their hands perfectly, just as you were always meant to do… damn. I should have known…. I played into this. I helped you with your search, however subtly…”

“So… Nadine outfoxed you.”

“Apparently so.” He sighed deeply, closing his eyes. “And now it’s all too late, I’m afraid. Miller’s surrendered to them.”

“What?! You mean Daddy’s-“

“-with the Patriots now, yes. And it’s hardly a ‘temporary, under duress only’ arrangement — he’s had dealings with them before, and plenty of them. He’s merely stepping back into an old role. He might not ever step back out.”

“Wh…?”

“So they don’t need you anymore.” He opened his eyes in time to catch Catherine’s alarmed look, then rolled his eyes. “They won’t kill you,” he said, “they can’t kill you. That would turn Miller against them for sure, and defeat the point of your entire existence.”
“Oh.”

“However… with Miller already in their ranks, and there to stay… if you were to, somehow, escape,
then recapturing you would be a very low priority unless you caused some trouble of your own.
Now that you’ve been captured once, their point is proved to Miller anyway - resist, and your
daughter dies. Crude but effective.”

Catherine’s mouth felt very dry. Escape? It was good to know that if she managed to escape then she
wouldn’t have to worry too much about the Patriots coming after her, but did Ocelot really think she
could somehow manage to escape? It seemed impossible…

Ocelot’s expression had returned to unreadable impassivity. He gazed down at her for an extremely
tense half a minute, then pulled something out of one of his holsters and handed it to her:

A brand-new Smith & Wesson Model 500.

Catherine took it cautiously, looking back and forth between Ocelot and the gun before flicking open
the cylinder. It was totally empty, but…

“The central office of this facility is one floor up, in the southwest corner of the building. The
staircase is just north of here, one hallway over. Your belongings are both being kept in a desk
drawer in the central office.”

“…and that includes my ammo, huh?”

“Mm. If you can just get to that office, you’re home free.”

Catherine kept staring down at the revolver in her hands. “Why did you…?”

“A gift,” Ocelot said, “keep it. Though remind me to convert you to SAAs sometime.”

“…are you expecting me to call you ‘Daddy’ too now??”

“Nice to know that you have the exact same non-sense of humor as Kaz does.” He shook his head.
“No, I’m not playing at being your step-father, don’t be absurd. I’m cleaning up this mess I helped
make, that’s all.”

“Ahh. I see.”

“…one more thing.”

“What?”

He eyed her critically. “McGolden has a broken ankle, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Leave him behind.”

Catherine stood up, “What?!”

“He’ll only slow you down — I told you that the Patriots won’t want to kill you and you’ll be a low
priority for recapture if you do escape, but during the actual escape attempt, things work differently.
If you are caught outside of your cell when you are not supposed to be, you will be killed. Especially
if you resist. And if McGolden’s with you…”
“No! I can’t just— I can’t just leave McGolden behind!!”

“Face it, Catherine, you’ve got no experience when it comes to sneaking around. You’ll be lucky to make it to the central office by yourself. Dragging around a second person, one with a broken ankle…”

“I— I can’t!!”

“Then you’ll both die.”

“…”

Ocelot walked back to the door and put his hand on the knob. “Better hide that gun,” he said, “I’ll be escorting you back to your cell now, and if you let anyone know you have it your escape will be foiled before it’s even begun. Not to mention my cover will be in jeopardy.”

“I… can’t abandon McGolden… I can’t just leave him here to rot…”

“You don’t have a choice. If it makes you feel better, they might not kill him without you here. Or if they do, they won’t have any reason to make it particularly painful.”

“…” She tucked the revolver under her shirt, face downcast.

“Come on, Catherine.”

“…McGolden…”

Chapter End Notes

Also, this marks the end of daily updates. I'll be shifting to an every-other-day or every-two-days schedule, depending on how much progress I make per day...
Malaysia wasn’t so bad this time of year. True, it was the rainy season, but not all that different from Singapore - just further inland, at least where Miller was. Which was waiting by a bus stop on the outskirts of Temerloh, huddled under an umbrella and feeling a vague humidity-induced ache at the seams of his prosthetic limbs.

A shiny black Proton Putra with illegally dark tinted windows, slick with rain, pulled up in front of the bus stop. The windows rolled down just a crack.

“Dans la voiture.”

…

They drove until they were stopped by flooded roads, whereupon the car was turned off and the two of them sat in complete silence, apart from the drone of rain on the roof. Neither of them had said a word for the entire drive so far. Miller stared resolutely out the front window at the jungle ahead of them.

“How many years has it been?” Nadine finally said, in English now.

Miller grunted. “Haven’t seen you since the divorce. How long ago was that? Twelve years?”

“Thirteen,” Nadine said, leaning one elbow on the steering wheel, resting her cheek in her palm and scrutinizing Miller.

Miller let out a hollow laugh. “Lucky us. And here I said if I ever saw you again it’d be too soon.”

“Don’t be like that.”

“Turns out Ocelot was right about you after all.”

“Heh… you were right not to believe him back then — who takes the word of a man who crashes someone’s wedding drunk?”

“He didn’t crash anything, everyone in Diamond Dogs was free to come.”

“You specifically said that he was not invited and would be considered unwelcome. Also, he wasn’t even drunk, he’s merely a good actor with the ability to vomit on command.”

This many years in retrospect, Miller couldn’t help but smirk at the memory. Of course Ocelot had just had to cause one last scene before Miller went…

“Oh well,” Nadine said, glancing out the window at a large hornbill that landed on the hood of the car for a moment to shake the water out of its feathers before taking flight again. “I burned that dress the day you kicked me out of our home, anyway.”

“Hmph.”

More silence passed. Without even looking at him, Nadine reached out one hand — for a hot second Miller thought she was going to try and hold his hand but instead she just grabbed his thigh, pressing
lightly. Which was, and it made Miller feel sick to admit it, a much better alternative.

“We’re too old for this shit, Nadine.”

“Ha. You’re almost two decades older than me.”

“That still puts you firmly over the hill.”

“I happen to know people in their mid-sixties who get some regularly.” She slid her hand up his leg, almost to his hip, still leaning her head on her hand and staring out the window as if bored. “Or one man, anyway. And from what I hear you’re one of the reasons he does get some.”

“Oh, very funny. Don’t pin that on me, that man’s practically got a harem of boys half his age and I’m not sure they all know about each other.”

Idly she ran her fingers low across his stomach. “Whose side is Ocelot on, anyway?”

“Hell if I know.”

“Be serious. He tells us that he’s spying on the terrorists; he tells the terrorists he’s spying on the La Li Lu Le Lo. Who is he lying to?”

“Knowing him, it’s either neither or both. He’s never been on anyone’s side but his own,” Miller lied. But it was true enough, wasn’t it? Ocelot was on Big Boss’ side but Miller had been the one to tell Solid he could use a can of aerosol spray and a lighter to MacGyver a flamethrower. Then he’d blurted out that he was Solid’s father and died ignominiously in pain. Not exactly in a position to tell Ocelot what to do.

“Hm. You trust him with Catou?”

Miller twitched. “Don’t bring up my daughter while you’re groping me,” he muttered.

Nadine shot him a glare, but then turned back to the jungle. Rather pointedly, her hand shifted down to Miller’s crotch and she squeezed his balls hard enough that he let out an undignified squawk and swatted her away, scowling.

“For fuck’s sake, Nadine-! Ask me for consent before you do that, will you?”

“I’m not going to waste another five years of my life trying to navigate your foutues kinks.”

She turned the car back on and shifted into reverse, backing away from the flooded section of road then turning around. “By the way,” she said, “your roots are showing, ‘Benedict’.”

Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.

“King,” Vamp said warmly with open arms, “finally, you’ve returned to us.”

“Yes. Hello.”

“So this is Dead Cell,” Mei Ling said, looking around. Frank started barking at Fatman, who took several steps back.

“So this is the engineer?” Colonel Jackson said, blinking at Mei Ling, who was shushing Frank. “She’s a lot younger than I thought she’d be, sir.”
“That’s one of her charm points,” Solidus said.

The corner of Colonel Jackson’s mouth twitched in a half-smile for half a second, then he introduced Mei Ling to the rest of Dead Cell - starting with Old Boy and only getting as far as Chinaman, since Mei Ling immediately took offense to his codename.

“They choose their own codenames, Mei Ling,” Solidus said to her in an undertone.

“That’s still a racial slur!”

“He’s not even actually Chinese,” Fatman said.

Chinaman swelled indignantly. “I,” he said, “was raised in New York’s Chinatown—“

“My parents are from Guangdong,” Mei Ling interrupted.

“He’s Vietnamese,” Fatman said.

“Oh my god.”

“Let’s just move on…” Colonel Jackson said.

“And, um, didn’t you say Old Boy used to be a colonel? How come he’s not a colonel anymore?”

“Because he was a colonel in the Wehrmacht,” Fatman said helpfully. “He can’t keep his title since it doesn’t exist anymore.”

“Wasn’t… wasn’t the Wehrmacht the armed forces of Nazi Germany?”

“I don’t see how this is relevant,” Old Boy said.

Mei Ling rounded on Solidus, hands on her hips. “Why does this special forces group you made have a racist guy and a literal Nazi?!!”

“Er… actually, the only members I hand-picked were Colonel Jackson and Vamp,” Solidus said.

“Subsequent members were all recommended by Navy brass,” Vamp said, “and it… was not entirely optional, in many cases.”

“You should see who got rejected,” Colonel Jackson said, rubbing his eyes.

“Rude,” Chinaman muttered. Old Boy crossed his arms and huffed.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me?” a dark-skinned blonde said from the corner of the room, where she was boredly reading a magazine. She didn’t bother to look up as she spoke.

“Oh, right,” Colonel Jackson said, then gestured to her, “and this is my wife, Helena.”

“Hi,” Mei Ling said.

“It’s good to see you again, Helena,” Solidus said. “It has been a while… but what are you doing here?”

She put her magazine aside and stood. “Dead Cell already has a plan for how we’ll retrieve those Codec nanomachines,” she said, “and we’ll have to bring you in with us.”

“Huh?” Mei Ling said, “me?”
“‘We’?” Solidus said.

Colonel Jackson waved a hand. “Mei Ling here is the only one who’d definitely be able to get the correct nanomachines, if they are at NRL-Stennis to begin with. Therefore she has to actually go into the facility… the plan is to run a ‘solo terrorist with hostage’ simulation, with Mei Ling playing the hostage. Using her as a meat shield, our operative will force their way into the facility and get Mei Ling as close to the labs as possible before ‘losing’ her. She’ll then steal the nanomachines and smuggle them out at the conclusion of the exercise.”

“And for some reason the Colonel thinks that she would be uncomfortable if one of us were the ‘hostage taker’—“ Vamp said, gesturing to himself, Old Boy, and Chinaman.

“Well, of course,” Mei Ling said, “Old Boy’s a Nazi and I don’t even wanna be in the same room as Chinaman.” She shot him a glare as she said his codename.

“…and Fatman already declined—“

“Obviously,” Fatman sniffed. “Rushing in with a hostage is hardly my style.”

“—so Queen volunteered to be your escort.”

“You mean Mrs. Jackson?” Mei Ling said.

“Yes.”

“…Helena, you’re not part of this unit,” Solidus said. “Are you certain you’re… capable of this? It’d be bad if Mei Ling were caught.”

“I’ve been doing some training,” Helena said, “this will be my first mission, but if it’s successful then I’m thinking about officially joining Dead Cell.”

“It shouldn’t be too hard,” Colonel Jackson assured them. “And we already have a codename for her: Fortune.”

“Literally because she bought a lotto ticket this morning,” Fatman muttered. “She hasn’t even scratched it off yet.”

“It’s a good luck charm,” Helena (Fortune) scolded Fatman.

Mei Ling frowned for a moment, then said, “I don’t mean any offense, but… why can’t I just go with him…?” She thumbed towards Vamp. “He’s experienced, right?”

“I have no objections to this,” Vamp said.

Colonel Jackson shook his head. “We can only let you go with Vamp if you sign a waiver agreeing not to sue if and when he sexually harasses you. And we didn’t bring our waivers.”

“Wait, what?” Mei Ling said.

“He isn’t joking, you know,” Solidus said, “that’s one of Vamp’s charm points.”

“I’m flattered, King,” Vamp said, kissing the back of Solidus hand (and being ignored in the process).

Mei Ling turned to Fortune. “Please don’t get me killed,” she said.
“We’ll be fine,” Fortune said, smiling reassuringly. “In the meantime… you’re still in the missing persons database, so we’re going to need to disguise you a little.” She clapped her hands on her shoulders and started leading her out of the room. “I’m in charge of that, too. Better me than any of these men.”

“Good point,” Mei Ling said.

“We’ll be about two hours. Don’t wait up.”

They left, leaving the male members of Dead Cell (plus Solidus, and the dog) in a semi-awkward silence.

“…so, sir,” Colonel Jackson said eventually, “how’s your son?”

“Still haven’t seen him since 1996,” Solidus replied.

“…right, right.”

Operation Intrude N313…Infiltrate the enemy fortress, Outer Heaven, and destroy the final weapon, Metal Gear,” Colonel Campbell said flatly, “first, contact Gray Fox, who’s vanished, and learn about Metal Gear. We’ll contact you from frequency 120.85.”

“Uh, Colonel,” Jack said, “can I break the fourth wall for a minute?”

“What is it? Is there some issue with the simulation?”

“No, I’m just wondering…when Solid Snake was doing this in real life, the person he was talking to over radio was Big Boss, right? That’s why it was such a shock when he got to the heart of the fortress and found out that the leader of Outer Heaven was Big Boss.”

“So you’re wondering why I’m the one giving you instructions instead of Big Boss?”

Doc took over. “We considered creating an AI version of Big Boss to provide you with appropriate radio support,” he said, “but in the end we decided it would be a more positive experience for you if your CO was played by the part of Colonel Campbell, who is trustworthy and familiar.”

“Oh,” Jack said, “I see. So the whole betrayal thing doesn’t really matter to me much, does it?”

“What matters is completing the mission, Snake,” Colonel Campbell said, “not what Solid Snake’s personal feelings were.”

“I bet the guy must’ve been devastated…he quit FOXHOUND right after this, didn’t he? Probably couldn’t stand to still be there after getting backstabbed like that…”

“Hey, Snake,” Max cut in, “don’t forget that one of the categories you’re scored on is time.”

“Oh-oh, right! Nevermind then, we can talk about this afterwards.”

“Very good, Snake,” Colonel Campbell said, then continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted at all - Jack always just kind of assumed there was a script he read off of, since he said the same things every time. “This is an infiltration mission. Avoid detection by the enemy. Take weapons and equipment from enemy trucks and caches, and take ammo from guards!”

McGolden did a double take at seeing Catherine escorted back to their cell by Revolver Ocelot of all
people. There was no mistaking it, he looked just the same as he did two years ago. But why was he here?

And what was up with the fact that Cathrine’s hands were cuffed in front of her body, instead of behind like she’d been lead away in?

Neither Ocelot nor Catherine said anything as he ushered her back into the cell and closed and locked the door behind him. The closest thing to an explanation he offered was a wordless nod at McGolden.

“How’s your ankle?” Catherine said before McGolden could ask her what was up. “Think you could walk very far like this?”

“I don’t know, Cathy… I could try. Why? Found us a way out?”

“You have no idea.” She sat down on the bed in front of him and raised her hands — her cuffs hadn’t actually been locked, so she must have been holding them in place herself. “Ocelot’s on our side.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you didn’t trust him.”

“Don’t have much choice, do we?”


“I’ll show you in a second,” she said, then reached around to her back and… unhooked her bra…?

“Can you pick locks without your lockpick set?”

“I… yes? Cathy, what are you—?”

She tugged her bra out from underneath her shirt and handed it to him.

“Here.”

“Uh, what? Cathy? What are you doing??”

“Keep it down, McGolden, someone’s going to hear and I don’t know about you but I do not want to get caught! Anyway, check this out.” She lifted her shirt, letting a Smith & Wesson Model 500 fall into her lap, between her legs.

McGolden blinked at it in shock. “Cathy, that’s your—!”

“Hey, what’s going on in here?”

They both froze at the sound of the guard suddenly appearing at the door, then slowly turned towards him, eyes mutually wide. There was a pause. McGolden suddenly realized how this situation must have looked: him holding Catherine’s bra, her with her shirt still halfway pulled up (side note: Catherine had some serious abs, she must have had a gym membership back in Cullowhee), and from the angle the guard was at it must have looked like McGolden was gawping at her crotch when he interrupted them, since he wouldn’t have been able to see the revolver that he was actually staring at. And everything they’d said after Catherine brought up his lockpick set could probably, in the wrong context, be interpreted as…
“Um… sorry about that,” the guard said sheepishly. “I’ll give y’all some, uh… privacy…”

Catherine gave him a sort of smile, mostly grimace as he walked away quickly. McGolden shook his head.

“Well, that’s awkward.”

“Forget it, it means he’ll leave us alone for a while. Anyway, this isn’t my old one — that one fell in the ocean.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Then where did you…? Oh, Ocelot must have… wow.”

For some reason she suddenly looked awfully troubled, but just said, “he told me where I can find the rest of our things, including my ammo.”

“So it’s unloaded right now.”

“Right. So we need to get to the central office so I can arm myself, and we can get out of here.”

“You really think we can?” McGolden said, raising an eyebrow. “I mean, with my ankle…”

“We definitely can!!” Catherine suddenly shouted, loud enough that the guard could probably hear at whatever respectful distance he was giving them. Then she cleared her throat, glancing off to the side, and continued in a lower voice: “I’m not going to just leave you behind, McGolden. I’ve told you this already.”

“Alright, alright…” he remembered that he was still holding her bra, and raised it, pinching one strap between two fingers like it was radioactive. (Which, actually, it might have been. Slightly.) “So… why’d you throw this thing at me…?”

Catherine rolled her eyes. “It’s an underwire, McGolden.”

“…I don’t follow.”

“There’s a thin, metal wire in it. I thought you might be able to use it to pick the lock on the door.”

“Pick the…? Holy crap, Cathy, you’ve had this the whole time?! Why didn’t you tell me before?”

He turned the bra over in his hands, finding the place where the wire was sewn in then starting to bend it, trying to get the wire to pierce through the fabric at the corner. “We could have gotten out of here weeks ago.”

“And then what, McGolden? Just wander around on your broken ankle? No, I wanted to wait until we had some kind of semblance of a plan… and now we know we need to get to the central office, and Ocelot told me where it is.”

“Ugh… good point, I think. Okay.” He got up, wincing slightly and noticeably limping on his way to the door. Wire in hand, he stuck his arms through the door and groped around for the lock. “Here goes. …hope that guard doesn’t see us…”

“I’ll keep an ear out,” Catherine said, joining him at the door. “If I hear him walking by, I’ll just… start fake moaning I guess, that’ll drive him back off.”

“Maybe I’ll leave this whole thing out of my book about this…”

“As long as we survive long enough for you to write a book about this. I don’t think I’d be very happy with post-humous publishing, either.”
McGolden fiddled with the lock for a moment. Catherine listened carefully for the sound of the guard’s footsteps, and was about to hiss at McGolden to stop because she thought she heard him coming when he groaned in frustration and said, “I can’t fit it in. It’s too thick.” Which drove the guard back off. Catherine bit the inside of her cheek.

She glanced down. “Aren’t your boots steel-toed?”

“Huh? …oh, of course!” He handed Catherine the wire and sat down, unlacing one boot and grimacing as he worked it off his foot. “Damn… hurts like this, but I’d probably pass out if I tried to use the boot on my injured foot as the ‘anvil’… okay, hand me back that wire.”

He placed the end of the wire on the tip of the shoe he was still wearing, and started hammering it into shape with the toe of the other. Catherine hung on the bars, watching closely for the guard.

She saw the a foot and the muzzle of a casually-held rifle stick out from the corner of the hallway immediately adjacent to their cell. Shit - probably wondered what that repetitive thumping was. Didn’t quite sound like the bedframe against the wall. So she cupped her hands around her mouth and half-shouted, “Ohh! Harder, baby~!! ♥ ”

The guard quickly scrambled away. McGolden had to stop hammering the wire so he could double over with laughter.

“That was bad,” he said at length, wheezing slightly. “That was really bad, Cathy.”

Catherine gave him an appropriately embarrassed expression. “I’ve never had a boyfriend, okay?” she said heatedly. “Daddy was kind of overprotective, and most of my classes had mostly women and WCU’s not exactly a party school.”

“Hey, I’m not judging! Much.”

After a few tries he managed to get the wire bent into shape enough to fold it over and - awkwardly, working backwards from how he usually did it - pop the lock on their cell door. For a moment they both just stared at each other.

“We can’t just make a break for it,” McGolden whispered. “I can walk, but I can’t run. I’m not even sure how far I can walk.”

Catherine tucked her empty revolver into the band of her jeans and patted it. “If it comes to it,” she said, “I’ll bluff. They won’t know whether or not I’ve got ammo until I actually pull the trigger.”

“And if they shoot at us first?”

“…we’ll just have to make sure that doesn’t happen,” Catherine said, trying to sound much, much more confident than she actually felt. “I figure that if Snake could take out Big Boss on his very first solo infiltration mission, then this sneaking stuff can’t be that hard.”

“Plus we’ve got a lot more at stake here than just some assignment…”

“Exactly! So… we’re getting out of here. Both of us,” she added, very significantly.

“Right.”

She opened the door, careful not to let its hinges squeak. “You ready, McGolden?” she said.

“Yeah. Are you, Cathy?”
“Mhm. Okay. Let’s go.”

“…uh, are you sure you don’t want to put your bra back on for this…?”

Chapter End Notes

“Dans la voiture” means “in the car,” as in, “get in the car.” “Foutues” means, roughly, “fucked (up)”/“damned” in an annoyed sense. (It’s actually “foutu”, Nadine’s just using the plural feminine bc the nearest French word for ‘kink’ I know is feminine.) The using steel-toed boots as a hammer & anvil in order to MacGyver a lockpick was something I saw on *Mythbusters* years ago, but IIRC they were using the filament of a lightbulb, not a bra wire. The bra wire thing was inspired by *Detective Conan*. Hell if I know if that’s remotely plausible IRL, but this is Metal Gear, so who cares.
Cessna Citations could only go so far on one tank of fuel, so Charlie set down at an international airport in a small Greenland town to refuel. There was also some minor maintenance to be done, so they had a two-hour break until they would be on their way to Prague. Charlie informed Liquid that EVA had warned him about letting him wander off - “She said you’d probably just get lost and I’d never see you again, and quite frankly, knowing you, that’s completely accurate…” - but Liquid had just scoffed and said it’d be alright because Mantis would be with him.

Charlie raised an eyebrow at him. “Seriously…? He’s been pretty, uh… dazed for the whole flight. Honestly I think he’d be more likely to get lost.”

“I’ll have you know I have a very good sense of direction. …the only concern is actually coming back before our two hours are up, but Mantis can remind me…” he turned to Mantis, “can’t you?”

“Two hours?” Mantis echoed vaguely.

“It’ll be fine,” Liquid said brightly, clapping Mantis on the shoulder. “We’re just going for a walk.”

Charlie gave them a skeptical look. “Okay,” he said, “but if you’re not back in time for takeoff, I’m leaving without you and your mother can just come get you herself.”

Liquid rolled his eyes and took Mantis’ hand, wandering off to the outskirts of town, towards the fjord.

“It’s very green here,” Mantis said, looking around.

“Yes, rather beautiful,” Liquid said instead of pointing out that they were in Greenland.

Mantis turned to him, blinking quizzically. “Are you certain you’re up for a walk, Eli…? You were complaining earlier about feeling light-headed…”

“Oh…” He did still feel a little light-headed, actually, but it wasn’t too bad. “It’s nothing to worry about.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, it’s just a side effect of the medication. One of the antibiotics, I believe.”

“…are you sure? Somehow that does not seem right.”

“No, dizziness is definitely a known side effect of… metronidazole, I think it was. Emmerich said so.”

“I thought he said the side effect was loss of balance… are you… are you sure this wasn’t something that was happening before…?”

“Don’t worry about it, Mantis,” Liquid said, squeezing his hand. “I promise I’m alright.”
“If you say so… how is your arm?”

“Hurts. The phantom pain’s driving me crazy, but I’ve been through worse — it’s just weird, since I look down and, well… there’s nothing there.”

Mantis was silent, troubled. Wind was blowing; eventually Liquid let go of Mantis’ hand so he could brush his bangs out of his face, and didn’t return his hand to Mantis’. They kept walking for a while.

Eventually Mantis got tired and wanted to ask if they could just go back to the airport now, but when he turned around Liquid was gone.

“Eli…?” he said uncertainly, glancing around. “Eli? Where are you?”

Hugging himself uncomfortably, he remembered Liquid throwing up by the side of the road on their way to Indianapolis, and wondered if he’d just snuck off somewhere real quick to go do that and forgot to tell Mantis he was going… Mantis tried reaching out to him mentally, but aside from a vague feeling that he was somewhere close by, all he got was a headache. Or a crescendo to his already-going-on headache, anyway.

Starting to get nervous, Mantis told himself that his assumption about Liquid just stepping away to vomit was correct, so he sat down on large nearby rock and waited. And waited. A few minutes passed. Mantis was starting to get really uneasy.

He jumped with a high-pitched gasp when he felt an arm suddenly wrap itself around his waist from behind.

“Sorry,” Liquid murmured, nuzzling the back of his ear. “I just had to make sure.”

“Make… make sure? Of what?”

Liquid sighed, pulling Mantis closer to himself. “Snake told me… that you’d lost your powers. And that must be so, since you didn’t sense me coming.”

Mantis stiffened. “I, ah…”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” He let go of him, turned him around to face him. His expression was serious. “Why tell Snake instead of me…?”

Mantis stepped back from him, running his hands over his clothes frenetically. “I… I…”

“It’s alright, Mantis, just tell me.”

“But…”

“I’m not mad. I just want to know.”

Mantis turned away. “I… was afraid to tell you… I thought you wouldn’t be happy.”

“Of course I’m not happy, Mantis. I’m worried about you!” He made a grab for Mantis’ arm that Mantis wasn’t fast enough to avoid, although he did struggle when Liquid tried to draw him back to him. Liquid let go, looking confused.

“No, that is not…” Mantis shook his head. “I meant… with my powers gone, Eli, I am no longer… useful to you. I can’t help you with anything. I am just dead weight.”

“Mantis…”
“I was afraid to tell you because… you were so happy to have me again… but I’m useless.”

“Mantis, don’t be ridiculous. I didn’t fly halfway across the planet and lose an arm because I thought you were ‘useful’. I didn’t want you back because I needed your psychic powers to further my own goals.”

“…”

He gripped Mantis’ arm again, and this time Mantis passively accepted him pulling him up against his body and nuzzling him again. “I wanted you back because I love you, Mantis.”

“…even though I’m useless…?”

“Even if you were like the bloke from that Dalton Trumbo book and I had to take care of you like that for the rest of your life, I’d still have done it, even if there were a heavier price to pay than just my arm.”

Mantis blinked. For some reason the sentiment seemed familiar.

“…Mantis, I’m sorry I wasn’t there. I… it couldn’t be helped.” He raised his amputated arm vaguely. “This happened because I was shot right after you were - I was trying to see what happened to you… and I don’t think I took care of the wound properly, I was too busy panicking over you. In the end, all I could do was pass out in a hotel room and… hope Ocelot took care of you for me.” He half-laughed. “Kind of makes us even in a way, doesn’t it?”

“…”

“But you’re here now,” Liquid said, squeezing Mantis’ arm affectionately. “So everything’s alright.”

“But… my powers…”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it. They don’t seem completely gone to me, you do keep randomly picking up on my emotions.”

“We have a link, though…”

“That doesn’t do anything without your powers, Mantis. Considering what you’ve just been through, I’d say it’s like… when you overexert yourself and tear a muscle. You can’t move it for a while, and even once you can again it hurts so much you don’t want to, but soon enough it heals and you’re back to normal.”

Mantis cocked his head. “You think this is like that?”

“I don’t see why not,” Liquid said brightly. “Your abilities will return to you, Mantis. And even if they don’t, I won’t mind. Even if you never return to normal…”

“…normal?”

Liquid was silent for a moment, his smile slowly fading to a frown. He let go of Mantis with a sigh and stepped over to sit on the same rock Mantis had just been sitting on, facing away from him.

“Eli, what’s wrong?”

“…it’s nothing. You, I suppose. You’re…”

“?”
“You’ve changed again. I don’t know how to feel about this.”

“I don’t follow.”

Liquid scrubbed his hand over his face. “How you are normally,” he said, “is different from how you’ve been acting since… since Cape Town. You’re ordinarily rather dry and sarcastic and your temper is terribly short, you’ve no patience even with me, you’re hostile and paranoid and a bit of a control freak and you tend to be possessive and you can be so very cold…”

Mantis didn’t think he liked the sound of what he was like.

“…and sort of arrogant, too, you like to do your own thing instead of what’s asked of you. And you’re opinionated. You yell at me a lot but by the same token you love to- to take care of me… protect me, spoil me, even, when you can… you have a hard time communicating your emotions, it was only last week that you finally told me that you love me.”

“I… I did? I do?”

Liquid shook his head. “Nevermind. This is just like before.”

“Before… what? What are you talking about, Eli?” Mantis started fingering the edges of his clothing frenetically again — he noticed Liquid absent-mindedly picking at the bandage on his stump. Who’d picked up the habit from who?

“Like before the serial killer incident,” Liquid said, “oh, I don’t know. I wasn’t there for it. But you… you’re… childish, now. So uncertain about everything.”

“…I’m… sorry…”

“I’m not upset about it, Mantis,” Liquid said, although Mantis knew he was lying. He could feel it. Besides, Liquid couldn’t even look at him as he said that. “You being the way you were before isn’t necessarily a bad thing, back then you were… a lot sweeter. You seemed happier, I think. But… I really don’t know. I just don’t know how to feel about this.”

There was a long pause. Mantis wasn’t sure how to feel about this either. What Liquid was saying sounded vaguely familiar enough that he didn’t think he was exaggerating or mistaken (somehow Mantis thought he was always know if Liquid lied), but it was all… very strange. He didn’t like the sound of his own personality, he sounded like a cruel person. And maybe that didn’t matter, just that he sounded like he was cruel to Liquid, which… didn’t make him feel good.

But on the other hand… it sounded like the way he was before ‘Cape Town’ happened, he didn’t live his life with a constant prickle of fear down his back, getting almost physically ill with anxiety every time he was more than fifteen feet away from Liquid, and perpetually confused about what was going on. He sounded decisive and dominant, capable of taking care of Liquid instead of just wanting to hide behind him.

Liquid stood up, shaking his head again. “Forget it,” he said. “I’m sure that’s simply a result of your amnesia… we’ll see what happens as you gain back the rest of your memories. I’m certain you will, soon.”

“Oh… alright.” So were they just leaving it up to fate, then…? Mantis was hesitant to outright ask which personality Liquid would prefer him to go back to, if he had a choice.

“That was only part of the reason why I snuck off with you like that, anyway — I wanted some privacy.”
Liquid took his hand again. “Mantis,” he said, almost grimly, “do you remember anything about your captivity? Anything at all?”

“What…?”

“I did check you over for wounds back at that motel in Nebraska, while you were sleeping,” he said, “except, of course, for your face… I didn’t find anything obvious, just a few bruises, which is pretty normal for you… but…”

“I do not think I am wounded… only my head hurts.”

“It does?” He let go of Mantis’ hand to brush his over his ear, cupping the back of his head and bending it down to inspect it. Mantis fidgeted a little.

“Not like I was hit in the head, Eli… just a headache…”

“Oh.” He let go of him. “Probably from your psychic ‘torn muscle’, eh…? What about your mouth?”

“What about it?”

“Loose teeth or anything? I really don’t know anything that they did to you, Mantis. Did they hit you, beat you?”

“No… well, I don’t remember. But only my head hurts. I think I am uninjured…”

“Then, did they do anything that didn’t leave any lasting injuries…? They didn’t torture you, did they? Or… anything… like that?”

There was a weird significance to the way Liquid said “anything like that”, but Mantis didn’t get it. He just shook his head. “I really do not remember anything, Eli,” he said, “it is all a blur. I only remember unbearable noise in my head.”

“Nn… I see. Trying too hard to keep the flood of outside thoughts at bay to actually register anything they did with your body…”

“Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s nothing. If you don’t remember, then don’t worry about it. It’s just that once we get to Prague, I think we ought to take you to a clinic or something, if we can. Get you tested.”

“What do I need tested for?” Mantis said, perplexed and somewhat alarmed.

“Just… er, you know, in case they injected you with something! Have to watch out for that sort of thing. I did find needle marks on you, of course I know they sedated you for the flight from South Africa to America, but maybe there was something else.”

“Oh, I see.” He tilted his head the other way. “That is a good idea.”

“Mhm.” Liquid leaned towards Mantis, nuzzling him again and pressing a quick kiss against his cheek, right on the edge of his gas mask. “Promise me you won’t freak out about the needle. Those kinds of tests do tend to require blood being drawn, to my knowledge.”

“Ah…” Mantis might not have been able to remember a whole lot, but he did remember an intense dislike of needles. …and medical equipment in general, come to think of it. “Alright.”
“Good… alright, I just wanted to check on that. You have no idea how scared I was.”

Mantis didn’t reply, resting his pounding head against Liquid’s shoulder. Liquid rubbed his back.

“We’ve still got time before we have to go back to the airport, do you want to keep walking?”

“No… I’m fine here, with you…”

The first challenge was to get past their cell’s guard. It was a lot easier than it would have been had he been patrolling the hallway directly outside their cell like he was supposed to, but he’d awkwardly retreated more than just a little bit in order to give them privacy. So, much less chance of being spotted immediately.

Except Catherine wasn’t entirely sure where he was presently.

Their cell was one of many cells (the rest of which were empty) along a hallway — there was another hallway more or less directly across from their cell, perpendicular to them, which emptied out into a parallel hallway that was even longer. Taking a right would lead them to the torture chamber, a route both of them knew well. Ocelot had said the stairwell to the next floor up, where the central office was, was a hallway over from the torture chamber - just north. So they needed to turn right.

“Isn’t the guard in that hallway?” McGolden hissed.

“Maybe he’s in the left part of it…” Catherine whispered, “if he’s facing away from us, then all we’d have to do is be— oh…”

“Yeah… sorry. Can’t exactly be fast on this ankle.”

“You can’t, but I can. If we see him I’ll just run up to him and hold him up. If I can catch him off-guard then he probably won’t call my bluff.”

“But if he sees you then I’m sure he’s going to shoot first!”

Catherine grit her teeth. McGolden was absolutely right, of course, and truth be told she wasn’t remotely confident in holding up someone from behind anyway. Think, think, she thought to herself, what would Snake do!?

Difficult question to answer, considering she hadn’t seen him since she was nine…

“You wouldn’t happen to have an empty magazine, would you…?” Catherine said in an undertone.

“No…?”

“Hm…”

If she could hold the guy up she could take his gun, though… but mostly she just had to figure out how to get past him — how to get both of them past him, considering McGolden’s injury. And once they got past this guy… ugh… who knew how many other soldiers were wandering the facility?! No, she could think about what was next when she got to ‘next’. One thing at a time. Cross that bridge when you come to it.

Catherine desperately raked her brain for memories of times she’d sat in on her father training FOXHOUND members. “Adversity only makes the human will stronger…” no, too generic. “A soldier who loses their head in combat is called a ‘target’…” relevant, but not what she needed. Damn, what she wouldn’t give to actually be able to call Miller right now, but if he was with the
same group of people holding her hostage in the first place, then…!


“Shh! I’m thinking.”

Just go back to the cell and close the door behind them, pretend they were still locked up until the guard passed? No… the cell door clanged as it closed, no matter how softly the person closing it tried to close it. The guard would hear it and no amount of fake sex noises would alleviate his suspicions. And if they didn’t close it completely, then there was no way it was going to hold up under anything more than a cursory glance, maybe not even then, and then she and McGolden would already be cornered, and— she was overthinking things, wasn’t she. All she had to do was get past this one guard.

“Your mind is your most dangerous weapon,” she remembered Miller saying to the FOXHOUND cadets. “If things are getting too complicated, try to simplify your thoughts.”

Had to get past this guy. Just one guy. One easily-flustered guy. He was approaching.

Catherine’s bra was kind of useless with only one underwire.

She heard McGolden make a vaguely startled noise behind her as, once again, she unhooked it and whipped it out from under her shirt, then balled it up and threw it into the parallel hallway like she were throwing a baseball.

“!”

Quickly she dragged McGolden behind the corner, peering out cautiously as the guard walked up to the bundle of fabric on the floor and stared down at it, plainly confused. He picked up, unfolded it — his face went red enough that it was visible in the sight-hole of his balaclava. He looked around frantically, and Catherine ducked behind the corner again.

When she peered back out the guard was still holding her bra and staring at it, muttering to himself. “Now, what am I supposed to do with this…? Maybe I should… no… maybe… maybe take it to the laundry room…?” He turned around, and Catherine didn’t duck away in time but he was too focused on the bra to see her. “Yeah… that sounds… or maybe I could take it somewhere else…”

He wandered off down the hallway, off to the left. Catherine grabbed McGolden’s arm.

“Come on,” she hissed, tugging him along, “we’ve got to hurry.”

“I’ll try,” McGolden said, limping behind her.

They made slow progress towards the interrogation room, but security was light - probably because they were, as far as either of them could tell, the only prisoners. Catherine seethed internally. Ocelot had been so insistent about her leaving McGolden behind so he wouldn’t slow her down, but they’d been loose for almost fifteen minutes now and the only guard they came across was the one Catherine had distracted with her discarded bra, everything was fine, everything was under control—

REEEEEEEE REEEEEEE REEEEEEE REEEEEEE REEEEEEE

“ちくしょう!” Catherine exclaimed, pulling out her gun.

“Shit, that’s an alarm,” McGolden said unnecessarily.
“They must have noticed our cell is empty! くそ… well, we’re almost to the staircase! We just need to get to that office, then we can fight our way out of here if we need to!!”

“‘We’? I’ve got a broken leg, Cathy!”

“Come on!” She grabbed his hand and started running towards the adjacent hallway, McGolden gasping in pain with every other step.

“Cathy, Cathy, stop…” he wheezed as they cleared the top of the stairs, “please, Cathy, I can’t do it —”

“We’re almost there, McGolden!”

“I can’t! I can’t. I’m going to pass out from the pain, Cathy. Leave me!”

“No!”

He dug his heels into the ground, grimacing. Catherine could hear his ragged breathing over the sound of sirens. “That door over there,” he said, jerking his head, “it looks like a broom closet. Leave me there. I’ll stay put, won’t draw any attention — you go by yourself for a while, get our things, then come back and get me. Okay?”

Catherine blinked, then nodded, helping him over to the closet. Fortunately (unfortunately?) it didn’t have a lock; McGolden sat down heavily on an upside-down bucket with a groan.

“I’ll be right back,” Catherine promised.

“Be careful! If you get caught…”

“I won’t!”

“Then go!” He waved her off. “I believe in you, Cathy.”

Catherine closed the closet door behind her, glancing around again. No guards in the immediate vicinity but with the alert still going, that could quickly change. Now… if the stairwell had been north of the torture chamber, then… she turned around. This way must be southwest. Had to make it to the corner of the building. Hopefully she wouldn’t need a key, or else she would be able to find the key…

“Hey! You there!”

“Shit!” Catherine said, glancing over her shoulder at the armed guards running up the staircase. They had their guns trained on her but none of them had fired yet. Maybe under orders to use lethal force only as a last resort?

Catherine took off sprinting.

Chapter End Notes

Dalton Trumbo book = Johnny Got His Gun. That’s why Mantis finds it familiar; he references it in “Рокси Харт и Вэлма Келли 4” in pretty much the same context as Liquid did in this chapter.
Mei Ling and Fortune came back after four hours. Both were dressed differently. Solidus, for one, did a double take when he saw Mei Ling.

Fortune was dressed inconspicuously, with jeans, a plain gray hoodie, and mirrored sport sunglasses, her hair pushed up into a black baseball cap. She looked largely the same, if the kind of person who’d get funny looks from bank employees. Mei Ling, on the other hand, looked completely different. For one thing, she’d gotten a haircut, all her lovely long hair cropped off into a neck-length bob. For another thing, she was wearing flashy makeup - bright blue eyeshadow visible under her cats-eye sunglasses, heavily lined lashes, and shockingly red lipstick. Her clothing was that of an especially cheap prostitute.

Okay, that was harsh. But it wasn’t a look anyone had ever seen on Mei Ling — spaghetti strap tank top over a tight skirt so short that too energetic a stride would put her in danger of panty-flashing everyone, capped off with dark nylons and six-inch stripper heels.

“…a very effective disguise,” Solidus said, managing to tear his eyes away from Mei Ling’s legs.

“Well done, Helena.”

“No one’s ever going to recognize me,” Mei Ling said, putting on an American accent. (Or dropping her Chinese one. Solidus knew it was affected, but didn’t know to what extent.) She twirled around, arms out, somewhat unsteady in her shoes. “This is the first time I’ve ever gotten a chance to dress like a slut, this is fun!”

“This was predictable,” Colonel Jackson said with an eyeroll. “Do you have a purse or something to put the nanomachines in once you find them?”

“Or something,” Mei Ling said, gesturing to her (admittedly less than generous) cleavage.

“Whatever works.”

“Where’d the others go?” Mei Ling said, looking around.

“They left a few hours ago,” Solidus said, crossing his arms. “No reason for them to stick around since this is just you and Hel- Fortune, I mean.”

“…and the dog?”

“Vamp’s taking him for a walk.”

(Meanwhile, on a nature trail in Buccaneer State Park, Frank had decided he didn’t take too kindly to Vamp after all and had been chasing him, barking and snapping, for the past half-mile. The only reason why Vamp didn’t just slit the damn dog’s throat was because he was sure Solidus would be angry at him for it. In the meantime he just had to keep moving so he wouldn’t get a few chunks taken out of his legs…)

“Well, anyway,” Colonel Jackson said, clapping his hands together, “you’d better get going, dear. NRL-Stennis won’t know what hit them.”
“Of course,” Fortune said, adjusting her baseball cap and putting a hand on Mei Ling’s shoulder.

“We’ll… we’ll be fine, right?” Mei Ling said, suddenly nervous again. “No one’s going to shoot at us?”

“Probably not. You’re my hostage, after all,” Fortune said. “They won’t want to hit you.”

“And knowing my wife’s luck,” Colonel Jackson said, “even if someone did think they should shoot at you, their gun would jam.” Fortune laughed.

Mei Ling smoothed her skirt. “Let’s go, then,” she said. She and Fortune started walking off.

“Oh,” Solidus said, then cut himself off.

“Huh?” Mei Ling turned around. “What is it, Solidus?”

“…nothing. You look… nice, is all. Your haircut, I mean. …I hope you maintain it.”

She smiled at him.

NRL-Stennis. Right out front.

“Nobody move!”

“Eeeeeeeek!!”

Mei Ling and Fortune put on a good show, Mei Ling ineffectually struggling against Fortune’s one-armed chokehold as Fortune dragged her towards the doors of the Naval Research Lab, pistol held out. The lone security guard at the doorway made an abortive move to grab his firearm, but stopped, raising his hands in surrender, when Fortune dug the tip of her gun into Mei Ling’s temple.

“Help meeee!” Mei Ling screamed.

“Let me in the building,” Fortune said. “Now!”

The poor security guard quickly opened the door for them, and Fortune stepped in, muzzle-sweeping the whole lobby. There were more security guards in here - armed, too - but they were unwilling to act with Mei Ling’s life supposedly in jeopardy.

“Everybody on the floor,” Fortune ordered, “hands on your heads!”

Still aiming in turn at everyone scrambling to comply, Fortune walked backwards, dragging Mei Ling with her further into the facility. Once they were alone (and she had shot out the nearest security camera), Fortune let go of Mei Ling.

“Are you sure we’re not going to get ambushed by a SWAT team or something?” Mei Ling fretted.

Fortune shook her head. “This is a Navy facility,” she said, “they’ve been trained to handle this themselves. But we’ve got limited time before the security guards regroup… you’d better run.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Mei Ling said, slipping off her high heels and taking off down the hallway shoeless, looking around for signs to point her towards the lab.

Fortunately everything was pretty clearly labelled for the researchers’ sake. And Codec technology wasn’t super proprietary, so she didn’t have to go deeper into the facility in order to reach the ‘Top
Secret’ labs, although she would have liked to given the chance… she ran into a security guard at the mouth of a hallway of labs.

“She’s that way,” Mei Ling blurted out before the guard could say anything, pointing behind her. “She wants everyone to gather in the lobby, she sent me to tell everyone!”

“Miss-“ the guard started.

“She’s serious! Please, she’s going to kill me and everyone else if you don’t comply.”

The guard nodded, face pale, then turned around and started walking down the hallway, opening the doors to a few labs to tell the scientists inside that they had to go. Mei Ling figured that his actual plan here was to smuggle them all out back before going to the lobby himself to report to Fortune that there weren’t any/very many researchers actually here today - she imagined that was protocol in a situation like this — but it didn’t matter.

What did matter was getting into those labs once the scientists were gone. To that end she crouched behind a potted plant, not really a great hiding spot but it’d hold up as long as no one looked too closely, and waited for him to come back. The guard glanced around, presumably for her, but didn’t say anything and just lead the handful of researchers away from the hallway. Must have assumed that Mei Ling either returned to the lobby herself or was still carrying out her assignment to gather the rest of the hostages…

Now free to look through the labs at her leisure, Mei Ling proceeded to do exactly that. Solidus had said that she would be the only one able to know what she had to grab, but… to be honest… they were nanomachines. She wouldn’t know what she was looking at unless they were clearly labelled. And she was pretty sure the Naval Research Laboratory was organized enough to label things clearly. So there was really no reason why Fortune couldn’t have gotten these herself, not that Mei Ling was really complaining about getting to do this. This was pretty exciting.

On the third lab she checked she found a plastic carrying case that she recognized from her days in the FOXHOUND R&D labs — sure enough, opening it she found vials of nanomachines (suspended in saline) packed in foam. Each vial was labelled on the side although she couldn’t see clearly what they said past the foam, and she had to stop herself from just going and picking them up because it occurred to her at the last moment that she really wasn’t supposed to be in here and didn’t want to leave fingerprints.

One pair of disposable plastic gloves later, Mei Ling was rifling through the vials. They were mostly labelled with acronyms and project names she didn’t get, but she did find a couple with CODEC v2.7.4.1 written on them. And now she was faced with a dilemma and, presumably, the reason why she had to be the one to get these.

How many vials did she need to steal, anyway?

If nanotechnology hadn’t changed too much in the past two years, then one vial correlated to one person, since a certain number of nanomachines was required in order to carry out their intended function. Of course Mei Ling wasn’t sure how many vials there were in the lab, either… still, she started counting off on her fingers. Dead Cell, if they didn’t have any already, would probably get some from the Navy soon anyway. Ocelot was still technically ranked among the Patriots as far as Mei Ling knew, so he’d probably be covered by them, and as far as she could remember EVA was in the same boat. Miller she probably shouldn’t worry about because no one had seen him since he’d driven off with Ocelot after Cambridge. And Mantis would probably refuse on principle although she couldn’t safely assume that anyone else would turn down a new Codec. She and Otacon could probably both continue to make do with the laptop setup if they were really strapped for supplies. So
that left… Solidus, Solid, Liquid, Wolf, and Octopus. So five to seven vials would be good. Maybe eight.

It was probably going to take her all day to jailbreak them before they could injected, though. And where was she going to get ahold of appropriate syringes?

Or, wait, if she took one set from here, jailbroke them, and then duplicated them herself - which she knew how to do, she just needed to get ahold of the equipment and raw materials for it somehow - it’d save time and they wouldn’t be limited by amount.

Where she was going to get ahold of these resources and equipment she could worry about later. She slipped the Codec v2.7.4.1 vial into her bra and ran back out into the hallway.

Catherine was running for her life.

Not just her life, either; McGolden’s life, too. No longer slowed down by McGolden’s broken ankle, she was free to fly through the echoing hallways towards the southwest corner of the building. The facility was on high alert, but if she could just get to that office, then she’d be armed, at least…

She could hear soldiers shouting just around the corner, so she slid to a stop, peeking out around it. Seemed they were discussing which way the escaped prisoners had went, or something. The ones closest to her had their backs turned, but if she tried to just sneak by then the ones facing them would see her…

Cursing under her breath, she turned around, retreating and running into another hallway. She’d been going to the southwest corner of the floor as directly as possible, but maybe she’d have better luck avoiding the guards if she went to the west wall of the building then headed south. And it really didn’t help that she’d never been on this floor before and the layout was really not all that similar to the floor they’d been held on.

Stupid Ocelot, she thought sourly, peering around another corner to check if the coast was clear before continuing on, he could have at least slipped me a map or something.

Regardless she was making good time. And maybe she wasn’t exactly the most stealthy person in the world, but she was fast and knew how to time her movements and the Patriots didn’t seem to know that she was headed for the southwest corner office, not the exit - wherever that was. After all, evidently Ocelot really was on their side after all and hadn’t happened to tell anyone that Catherine knew where she could get her and McGolden’s things.

(Unless she was walking right into a trap? No… there’d be no point in helping her escape from imprisonment only to put her right back in it.) (Or maybe he was still trying to get her killed. But that wasn’t the Patriots’ intention…)

The central office needed a keycard to get into but some idiot had left said keycard in a wall-mounted inbox next to the door. Either that or it was another gift from Ocelot. Catherine was past the point of questioning things. Looking around quickly, she fished the keycard out of the box — the door opened as soon as she had hold of it, so it must have been a PAN card.

The office was empty and the door locked automatically behind her. Good… gave her a second to breathe. The blare of alarms was muted in here, too, although she couldn’t relax just yet… if McGolden’s broom closet hiding spot was found and he was recaptured or killed, then Catherine’d have no way of knowing until it was way too late.

Catherine felt a little prickle of anxiety again. Now that she had a moment to think, she realized that a
broom closet was probably the shittiest possible hiding place, especially considering they were actively being searched for. What would she do if McGolden were recaptured? … go and bust him out again, right? But what if they changed his security level so that it was way more than she could handle? Already she thought they’d bitten off more than they could chew. Suppose they killed McGolden outright… suppose they killed her?

She shook her head. No no no. She was overthinking again, making things more complicated and dire than they needed to be. All she had to do was get her stuff, get McGolden, get out of here. Turn the Patriots into her own personal target practice if she had to.

“Your ability to survive depends on the limits of your mental strength,” she remembered hearing Miller say to Solid years ago, during the Zanzibar Land incident. “In the end, it all comes down to your will to live.”

Catherine was not going to die here, and neither was McGolden.

She found their things - both their wallets, McGolden’s notebook, the ammo to her revolver - in the bottom drawer of an imposingly large desk sitting in the middle of the room. Her confidence returned to her as she shoved a full moon clip of rounds into her new S&W Model 500. There. Now she was ready to take them on if she had to.

When she stepped back out of the office, the alarm had stopped entirely, although there was a certain tension in the air… This must be ‘caution’ mode, Catherine thought. Had to be careful…

Since the alert had died down, the active search was off, leaving the guards to patrol warily, guns at the ready. Fortunately a set patrol route meant their movements were predictable, so after a little bit of observation Catherine was able to find the gaps she could dash through and made her way back to the northern stairwell and the broom closet where McGolden was hiding.

She jiggled the handle, glancing over her shoulder. Huh, it didn’t have a lock, so— “McGolden,” she hissed, “it’s me.”

No response.

“Come on. You’re still in there, right? McGolden!”

A few seconds passed; she was about to try and talk through the door again when it opened. McGolden peered out through a crack, then opened it the rest of the way.

“Sorry,” he said, “wasn’t sure it was you. And I blocked the door so the guards would think neither of us would have been able to get in in order to hide in the first place.”

“I have our stuff,” she said, handing him his notebook and wallet. “Let’s go.”

“Are you sure we can do this?”

“Yeah. Let’s go!”

“Do you even know where the exit is?”

Catherine gestured vaguely back the way she came. “I saw a window that looked like we might be able to open it… seems we’re on ground floor.”

“Okay.”
McGolden leaned on her on their way back down the hallway, and Catherine kept her revolver out. The guard who patrolled this area was in the next hallway over presently, but she definitely walked faster than Catherine and McGolden could.

“What’s it like outside?” McGolden whispered.

“A forest,” Catherine whispered back, “or at least there’s a lot of trees. All behind a fence… that must be the perimeter. In front of the fence there’s just a big open field.”

“Probably to make it easier to target escapees…”

“We’ll just have to run.”

“Cathy… I can’t—“

“You have to! Just for a minute or two. Don’t stop for anything, okay?!“

“I’ll- I’ll try,”

Catherine let him lean against the wall while she worked on opening the window. She had to use the PAN card to jimmy the lock, probably ruining both of them in the process, but how much did that really matter?

“!”

“C-Cathy!”

The alert started up again. Catherine whipped around, training her revolver on the guard who’d just spotted them - who hesitated. McGolden threw open the window and awkwardly clambered out, grabbing Catherine’s elbow.

“Come on!”

Without taking her eyes off the guard, Catherine stepped backwards out of the window, then whirled around quickly, taking McGolden’s hand and starting to sprint across the lawn towards the fence.

McGolden’s run was uneven and within seconds he was panting in agony but it took long enough for the guard who’d just spotted them to process what just happened that by the time she opened fire on them, Catherine and McGolden were already far enough away that her shots had started to go wide and miss them.

“Keep running, McGolden!” Catherine said, “we’re almost there!”

“Ah- oh god— Jesus—“

“Once we get past the fence, we’ll be-“

“Sh-shit, Cathy, I’m going to die…”

“Shut up! We’re nearly free!”

“Cathy, they’re right behind us!”

Catherine glanced over her shoulder. A handful of soldiers were running out of a doorway to the building - not too far away from the window, but not in an area Catherine had passed through - and towards them, rapidly catching up. Those M16A2s definitely didn’t look friendly…
McGolden stumbled over nothing, falling to the ground with a yelp. “McGolden!” Catherine cried, skidding to a halt a few feet in front of him.

“Just go, Cathy!” he yelled, “I’ll be fine!”

“McGolden, they’ll kill you!”

“Catherine! Just go!”

One of the guards was slightly faster than the other ones, and was about two meters away from McGolden, switching his aim between Catherine and McGolden before pointing his gun at McGolden, staring at Catherine. The message was clear. Run and he dies.

“Run!!” McGolden said, and flinched as a bullet hit the ground right next to his head.

The other guards were coming up fast. Catherine made a split-second decision.

(It's not fear itself that makes the difference between a hero and a coward.)

(It's whether you've got the mental fortitude to overcome that fear and get the job done.)

She lined up the S&W Model 500’s sights between the eyes of the guard aiming at McGolden and, without hesitation, pulled the trigger.

BANG!

There was a big difference between pulling a trigger and watching a bullet punch a baseball-sized hole in someone’s head. It was almost an explosion of blood and brain matter, some of it splashing on McGolden, as the guard stumbled and slumped, quite dead. It took Catherine’s mind a moment to catch up with what her body had just done.

She couldn’t move. She felt cold.

What she had just done.

She’d just killed someone.

Her hands started to shake, but her finger was still curled around the trigger, not letting go. Her eyes were fixed on the dead guard, and in the meantime more were coming and that wasn’t even registering with her.

“—thy! Cathy!!”

McGolden half-sat up and lunged for the dead guard’s M16A2, yanking the bolt once and wasting no time with opening fire on the other pursuing guards, now too close for comfort.

“Cathy, hit the deck!”

Catherine’s knees gave out and she fell down on her butt, eyes still wide, ears ringing. She hardly noticed the brief but intense firefight before McGolden clambered to his feet with a groan and tossed the stolen, now-empty assault rifle to the side, then tugged on Catherine’s arm. She looked up at him, in shock.

“I—“ she started.

“We can talk about that later,” McGolden said, “I see a hole in the bottom of the fence over there. I
think we can crawl under it.”

“I- I killed— he’s dead—“

“Later!” He pulled her to her feet and started dragging her towards the hole in the fence he indicated. “More are going to be coming out, real soon-!”

“Don’t touch me!” Catherine shrieked, yanking her arm away from him a panic. “You’ve got his blood all over you! —oh god, it’s on me now! Oh god, oh god… どうしよう…”

“Just keep running, Cathy.”

Chapter End Notes

This is almost definitely not how NRL-Stennis works, in terms of security, but what the heck was I supposed to do, call them and ask? There’s no graceful way to do that without ending up on a terrorist watchlist…
JP dialogue means roughly “What do I do…”
Chapter 76

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Cathy.”

“Nooo… no, no…”

“Cathy, come on.”

“No, no, no no—“

“Cathy, please. Snap out of it.”

It had taken a good twenty minutes for them to get lost enough in the woods outside the Patriot facility that the still-audible alarms finally stopped blaring and the searching guards breathing down their necks finally shrugged and gave up on finding them. A good twenty minutes until the tension drained and the adrenaline receded and Catherine took another look at the gore on her and McGolden and fell to her knees again, sobbing.

“We’ve gotta get back to Anchorage, Cathy,” McGolden said, kneeling in front of her and putting his hands on her shoulders. “So first we need to figure out where we are… it’s going to be a lot of walking, Cathy, and I can’t do it on my own. I need your support. Literally. My ankle, remember?”

“I just killed someone,” she sobbed, wiping her face, eyes stinging as she got blood and dirt in them. “Someone’s dead because of me. I killed him. I shot him with my own gun. I looked him in the eyes and I shot him.”

“It was him or us, Cathy.”

“What if he had a family? What if he had a wife and kids and their d-daddy’s not coming home tonight because I sh-shot and k-killed him…”

McGolden sighed, sitting down next to her and rubbing her shoulders soothingly. “It’s okay, Cathy,” he said.

“No it’s not! He’s dead and it’s all my fault, I-I’m a murderer!”

“No, you’re not. They were holding us prisoner, we had to escape, and he was about to kill both of us in order to stop that.”

“I took a life, McGolden! I killed someone! Th-there’s blood on my hands now,” she said, showing him her hands, “look, it’s still there, a-and it’s all over you, too…”

“Calm down, Cathy. Take a few deep breaths.”

“I killed someone!!”

“It’s never easy the first time you take a life,” McGolden said. “But the burden does get lighter. Just give it time.”

Catherine shook her head, then abruptly pushed him away, suddenly angry. “And what the hell was that back there, McGolden?!” she said, standing up and glaring down at him, fists clenched. “You
stole that AR and mowed down half a dozen of them without even blinking! Who are you?"

“I’m just a guy who gets into weird situations sometimes,” McGolden said, raising his hands, palms-up. “I’d be lying if I said this was the first time I’ve had to shoot some people, but… I don’t do it unless my life’s in danger. No, more than that… I don’t do it unless somebody else’s life is in danger. If it’s just me I just make a break for.”

“What, do you think you’re some kind of fucking hero?!”

“I never said—“

“There are no heroes!” Catherine screamed, clawing at her face. “None! All the world’s ‘heroes’ are just cold-blooded murderers with good PR!!” Her sobs renewed. “I’m a murderer, McGolden! I murdered someone! I’m not supposed to be a murderer, I’m a nurse, I’m suppose to save lives, not take them!”

“Cathy…”

“What gives me the right to decide who lives or who dies?!”

“What gives the Patriots the right to do that?!” McGolden snapped up at her. “If we don’t do something about this, then we’re just as bad as they are! So what if a little blood gets spilled along the way… they were trying to kill us, the moment you raise your gun to someone else your life is forfeit!”

Catherine shut up, sniffling and wiping her face again. “Someone ought to kill me, then.”

“No. You did the right thing. You saved yourself. You saved me.”

There was a long pause. Slowly Catherine got ahold of herself.

“McGolden…”

“…uh, sorry I yelled at you, Cathy.”

“Um… sorry I’m being so… so hysterical about this.”

“It’s fine. Not your fault.” McGolden shook his head and raised one of his arms. “C’mon, help me up. I bet it’s a long way to Anchorage.”

“Guess we need to find out where the heck we are, first,” Catherine said, helping him stand and letting him lean on her shoulder again. “Hopefully we’ll walk right into town somewhere… and they won’t be searching for us.”

“We don’t have much in the way of supplies, either…”

“Need me to set your ankle again?”

“No, the last one’s still holding. Ha… but hang on to your revolver, Cathy.”

Catherine hesitated. “McGolden, I’m not sure I… can…”

“Better them than us, Cathy,” McGolden said solemnly. “Better them than us.”

Prague.
“Eli! It’s good to see you again. Thanks, Charlie.”

“No problemo, Big Mama.”

“Hi, Mother,” Liquid said, glancing away awkwardly.

EVA frowned. “You’re being more civil than usual… and Mantis, why are you hiding behind him?”

“…” Mantis just stared suspiciously at her, his grip on the back of Liquid’s shirt tightening a little.

Liquid half-turned, dragging Mantis out from behind him to stand next to him. “Come on, Mantis,” he said, forcing some cheer into his voice, “you haven’t forgotten my mother, have you? EVA? Don’t be shy now, you actually like her.”

Mantis shook his head uncertainly. EVA gave him a reassuring smile, then gestured for them to follow her, leading them to a plain, slightly dented sedan with one of her PMC employees sitting in the front seat, and told them to get in back, she’d be back in a sec but shotgun was hers by rights.

“Hello,” the driver said brightly. “You’re Matka Pluku’s son, then?”

“Yes,” Liquid said, somewhat stiffly.

“Who are you?” Mantis said.

“My name’s Radka. Or, Radoslava Kolář if you want to be formal.”

“Radka’s fine, if you prefer that. As long as you don’t call me by my given name.”

“Oh, I know. Matka Pluku told us to refer to you as Liquid.”

Liquid let out a sigh of relief. “Thank God. I wouldn’t have expected her to think that far ahead.”

“And you must be Liquid’s partner Mantis,” Radka said, peering at him over the back of the driver’s seat. “Matka Pluku said you were from a village in this country originally… maybe… or you could be a dirty Slovak. Haha! Just kidding!” She smiled brightly. “I wouldn’t care even if you’re Russian. We have all sorts of types in Paradise Lost Army!”

“Um…” Mantis said, looking rather uncomfortable.

Liquid blinked. “Is this a recruitment pitch…?”

EVA opened the door and got in the passenger seat. “Sorry about that,” she said, “had to settle things with Charlie. Okay, Radka, do kostela.”

“And you must be Liquid’s partner Mantis,” Radka said, peering at him over the back of the driver’s seat. “Matka Pluku said you were from a village in this country originally… maybe… or you could be a dirty Slovak. Haha! Just kidding!” She smiled brightly. “I wouldn’t care even if you’re Russian. We have all sorts of types in Paradise Lost Army!”

“Um…” Mantis said, looking rather uncomfortable.

Liquid blinked. “Is this a recruitment pitch…?”

Radka started the car back up and began driving away from the airport and deeper into the city. EVA turned around in her seat to talk to Liquid at Mantis just as Radka had done earlier, although unlike Radka she didn’t have a seatbelt on — leaving her the only one in the car with one, funnily enough…

“So as far as your arm goes, Eli,” EVA said, “naturally I’m still in touch with the man who made Ocelot’s prosthetic. He does good work and he’ll take any job that comes with a referral from me. Oh, and that student that Wolf and Octopus and David’s friends rescued from Massachusetts two years ago — she’s been working as his assistant, so even though they’ll have to construct a whole new forearm for you, I wouldn’t worry about it taking too long.”
“That’s good to know,” Liquid said, rubbing his stump somewhat self-consciously.

“But that can wait, anyway… it’ll still be a couple weeks before it’s healed enough to handle a
prosthetic, won’t it? Since you only got it amputated a few days ago.”

“Feels a lot longer than that.”

“I’m sure that’s just all the travel talking.” She turned her gaze to Mantis. “And how have you been
doing? I only got the barest details - I heard about your abduction, and losing your mask for a few
days, and the amnesia…”

“I… think that is about all there is to it,” Mantis said, then cocked his head in thought. “Oh, no… Eli
said I changed.”

The corner of Liquid’s mouth twitched down for half a second. “This is the second time he’s done a
180-degree personality change…”

“Oh,” EVA said. “That’s… interesting.”

“Well, I’m sure he’ll go back to normal when he starts to remember things…”

“How much do you remember now?” EVA said. “You remember everything after Ocelot rescued
you, don’t you?”

Mantis nodded. “I don’t think I’m having any trouble forming new memories.” (Liquid grimaced and
shook his head beside him. EVA glanced at him, blinking, but he just pinched two fingers together in
the sign for ‘a little bit’.)

“So… do you remember anything before that, then? What’s the oldest memory you can come up
with right now?”

“Fire. Burning.”

“…”

“That’s actually pretty normal,” Liquid said, kicking back in the seat. “Mantis, as far as I know you
didn’t remember that very well even before this happened.”

“Remember what?” Mantis said.

“You know… burning your village down. Killing your father?”

“Hmm…”

“…he burned his village down?” Radka said. “Yet you don’t know where he’s from exactly? Seems
like finding records of a devastating fire in a village somewhere in a certain decade wouldn’t be very
hard…”

“He tried that, once,” Liquid said. “I remember he wrote me about it. Neither of us were surprised to
find that there weren’t any records of such an event in the years we think it would have happened
in… it’s only expected that it would have been covered up, considering someone salvaged an ultra-
powerful psychic from the ashes.”

“Oh, I looked into that…?” Mantis said. “I didn’t think I cared.”

“As I recall I was the one who brought up it originally… but anyway, I suppose you just didn’t have
the necessary clearance to see if any villages were mysteriously wiped off the map overnight anywhere in the Eastern Bloc back in the seventies…”

There was a pause. “Maybe I should ask Ocelot,” Mantis said at length.

“You don’t hate him anymore?” EVA said, eyebrows raised.

“Oh. Ah. No, of course I do,” Mantis said, sounding extremely confused. “I just…”

“…don’t remember why?” she said with a cringe.

Liquid dragged a hand down his face. “I am not looking forward to that conversation…”

Mantis looked between the two of them in bewilderment. “Why? What is going on, what am I missing? I thought he and I were…”

“Don’t worry about it for now, Mantis, if you’re going to try to force yourself to remember something then I’d prefer to start with some happier subject.”

“Which is why he thought to bring you here,” EVA said. “Maybe being in the Czech Republic will trigger some sort of childhood nostalgia… and if nothing else, PLA will give you a nice safe place to rest and try to figure things out while Eli waits on his new arm.”

“Have I been here before?” Mantis said.

“No,” EVA said. “At least, not to PLA’s headquarters.”

“Don’t think you’ve been the Prague, either,” Liquid said, “but then again, I don’t know much about what your life was like before I met you. Don’t know what part of Czechoslovakia those nasty researchers you used to be so scared of were in…”

“Oh…” Mantis said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“…and I suppose if you’d ever taken a trip here while you were at the KGB, I wouldn’t know…”

“That seems unlikely to me,” EVA said. “I heard from Ocelot that Mantis had almost never left Moscow while he was still with the KGB. Or, really, left his apartment if he wasn’t working. Quite the shut-in, evidently.”

Liquid only kept himself from laughing for a few seconds. “Ahaha— that certainly sounds like you, Mantis!”

“Is that- bad?” Mantis said, blinking.

“Of course not,” Liquid smiled, squeezing his leg affectionately. “You know, I happen to think it’s cute.”

“Ohhh,” Radka said suddenly, looking at them in the rear-view mirror. “So you’re that kind of partners… that wasn’t what I thought Matka Pluku meant…”

“…” Mantis looked embarrassed…

“Yes, and?” Liquid said coldly, raising an eyebrow, at the same time EVA said, “Prosím, ber to s nadhledem, Radka.”

Radka didn’t say anything for a moment, then mumbled, “I don’t have a problem with it, it’s just…”
well, headquarters is… oh, we’re here!”

Turned out headquarters was a church.

A big, old, Roman Catholic church that had plainly survived fires and bombings and floods, Nazi and Soviet occupation… although it did seem to have been renovated at some point in the past couple decades… Liquid gave EVA an extremely questioning look.

“If you want to get technical, the real headquarters is actually underground,” EVA said. “A basement. I believe it used to house nuns or clergymen or something like that… I really don’t know the precise history of this building…”

“It’s actually pretty nice down there,” Radka said, pulling into an alleyway beside the church and turning into a large garage with another sedan, a couple of vans (one armored), and several motorcycles - Liquid recognized EVA’s Triumph Bonneville T1000, and the other ones all seemed to share the manufacturer. “As long as you don’t mind stone walls. But we have heat, electricity, plumbing, and it’s only two to a room, except for Matka Pluku!”

“That’s nice,” Liquid said. Not that Liquid didn’t appreciate the amenities of civilized life, but weren’t those things kind of to be expected in the middle of the capital city of a developed nation? Nevermind the age of the building…

“There’s a priest who comes here to hold Mass a couple times a week,” EVA said as they stepped out of the car, “and things like that… he knows about us, but he’s not really affiliated with us. He’s just our cover to keep the location of this building a secret from the government and therefore you-know-who… in exchange we pay for upkeep.”

“Sounds like a reasonable arrangement.”

“The parishioners and the other church staff don’t know about us, though. So if you hear religious proceedings going on upstairs, don’t go wandering into the chapel…”

“Mantis, are you paying attention to this?”

“Hm?” He was looking at the motorcycles. “Oh. Stay away from the Catholics?”

“Close enough,” EVA said with a very maternal smile.

“The entrance is over here,” Radka said, leading them out back into the alley and to a small, easily-missed side door painted the same color as the exterior of the church. It opened immediately to a staircase leading down. “Ah, and there’s a garden right behind the garage, but you do have to go through the chapel in order to get there… and there is a way to go from the basement to the chapel without going outside…”

EVA conveniently vanished as Radka gave Liquid and Mantis the tour, although she was more enthusiastic about it than either of them — Liquid was rather bored and vastly preferred exploring places himself, while Mantis couldn’t focus on any one thing for longer than a couple seconds and was frustrated at how fast they were moving, because they always moved on before he’d entirely grasped what he was being shown. Being introduced to some of the PLA soldiers/employees did feel like a bit of a waste of time, considering how long they’d be staying. But at least they knew where the kitchen was. And the room they were put up in at its own attached bathroom although it wasn’t obvious whether or not that was true of all the rooms or not.

“Think you can settle in here for a few weeks, Mantis?” Liquid said, unceremoniously dropping their suitcase on the floor.
“…it’s cool down here,” Mantis said, glancing around, “even though it is summer.”

“We’re underground, that’s only to be expected. What are your thoughts so far?”

“…”

“Mantis?” Liquid walked up to him and took his chin in his hand. “Is something wrong?”

“No… I don’t think so…”

“Your head hurts again, maybe?” He stroked just underneath his ear.

“I’m not sure it ever stopped,” Mantis said, leaning into Liquid’s touch. “Every moment I’m awake…”

“If you want to sleep now, you can.” He jerked his head towards the bed.

“Is that really alright?”

“Mmhm. I’ll let you be — I need to go talk to Mother about those tests I mentioned…”

“Oh.” Mantis glanced away, but Liquid caught him and kissed the side of his face.

“I’ll be right there with you if you need me to be,” he whispered. “Alright? I swear, I’m never going to break that promise again - I’m never going to break any promise to you ever again. Now get some rest.”

“…okay…”

Liquid left Mantis to his nap and went to go find EVA. It took a little while but he eventually found her going over a whole stack of papers in her office— huh, she had reading glasses, too. Although unlike Liquid she actually wore them.

“Sorry I left like that,” EVA said, looking up. “I thought Radka had you covered.”

“Oh, no, the tour was fine,” Liquid said, resisting the urge to roll his eyes and/or say that sarcastically. “I was just wondering… actually, while I’m at it, I was wondering what exactly is PLA? It’s not like any PF I’ve ever seen.”

“It’s ‘PMC’ nowadays, not ‘PF’. Private military company,” EVA said, jabbing her pen at him. “And of course it’s not like any you’ve ever seen, your scope of experience is pretty limited to Outer Heaven. Those were the big dogs, Eli, I don’t play like them.”

Liquid snorted. “I’ve had run-ins with smaller PFs before. And don’t forget I was a freelance merc between Outer Heaven and FOXHOUND.”

“Yes, well, you’re still talking PMCs that operate out of areas of conflict, or at least near them. The Czech Republic is a peaceful country, the worst that’s happened here the whole time PLA’s been operating is a couple political demonstrations or protests that had to be broken up by the riot police. And those had nothing to do with us.”

“Great. Why on earth did you headquarter your PF in Prague, then?”

“Because on paper we’re more like a security company,” EVA said, turning back to her desk. “Usually we’re just hired to guard events… and demonstrations, but I make it a point not to take any jobs in the Bohemian Basin. Don’t want to draw too much attention to where we’re actually
“centered.”

“Hm.”

“Off the record we’re here because Patriot control over governments comes from the US, and to a lesser extent from Russia. The former Eastern bloc is particularly resistant to them, not that most of the government employees are really aware of what they’re resisting aside from ‘foreign influence’. To be honest, it’s only a matter of time until they fall, too, but…” she shrugged. “I figure if nothing else, I can be there when it happens.”

“And I suppose the Czech Republic was just where you found the cheapest old building for rent.”

“Pretty much. Was there something else you need to ask about, Eli?”

“Oh, right. What’s the medical care like here, Mother?”

He tried to pose the question casually but EVA glanced up again in mild alarm nonetheless. “Is something wrong? We’ve usually got at least one medic around for emergencies.”

Liquid waved a hand. “It’s not exactly an emergency situation. It’s just that… well, Mantis… he’s just been held prisoner for several days and considering my experiences with that sort of thing I thought perhaps he might…” he trailed off. Somehow he felt like saying it out loud would, strangely, make it be true.

The corner of EVA’s mouth twitched. “So you want to have him checked for anything he might have caught while being held?”

“Yes, exactly. Any sort of… illnesses… or any drugs they might have forced on him, his metabolism’s so slow they might not yet have been burned off.”

“Looking for an explanation for his odd behavior, huh?”

“Just wanting to cover all the bases…”

EVA leaned back in her chair, tapping her lower lip with her pen. “Our medics are really only trained for emergencies,” she said, “you know, in case someone gets wounded, they can patch them up. As far as that kind of thing goes… we don’t even have the equipment, you’d have to go to a normal clinic.”

“That’s what I figured. Do you know of one?”

“Erm… sorry about that.”
“No, it’s fine. Actually, I should have anticipated this. …but you already checked him over for everything you could?”

Liquid nodded. “He wasn’t wounded anywhere, except for a little injection site,” he said, pointing at the crook of his elbow, although the exact location was lost under the bandages, “but as far as I can tell that was only to keep him sedated for the flight from South Africa to America.”

“No transmitters?”

“None that I felt, although I suppose technology’s long past the point of using the kinds of transmitters you can feel… still, we didn’t run into any trouble on the way here at all. If they put any kind of transmitter on him then Ocelot must have gotten rid of it before bringing him back and just didn’t happen to mention it to me.”

“It’d be good to double-check, though, we can’t rule out that they wanted to wait until he stopped travelling to come after him again - or that a certain amount of time was supposed to pass before the transmitters activated.”

“Right. So this needs to get done as soon as possible.”

She stood, taking off her reading glasses. “I’ll handle it,” she said. “You can help me with this paperwork in the meantime.”

“…seriously…?”

“Oh, no complaining.” She strode over to the door, then turned around and gestured back to her desk. “All I was doing right now was sorting everything into similar categories. Bank documents go in this pile, contact information goes in that pile, and so on. That sort of thing. Have fun.”

“Hmph.” Liquid sat down in EVA’s chair with a huff and noted, much to his displeasure, that her office was dim enough and the print was tiny enough that he had to squint to read it.

In the meantime EVA left, out into the hallway. “Hej, Zdeněk!” she called, “potřebuji vaši pomoci…”

Chapter End Notes

EVA: Okay, Radka, to (the) church.
Radka: Yes, Big Mama!

EVA: Please, take it easy, Radka.
(Thank you to Brambora for fixing that.)

EVA: Hey, Zdeněk! I need your help…

I really know nothing about Catholicism. Even though I have Catholic family. Who are originally from the Czech Republic, even. Well, and Poland.
Mei Ling slipped back into the lobby. She nodded at Fortune, who nodded almost imperceptibly back, then holstered her gun as Mei Ling trotted up to her side again.

“Well, everyone,” Fortune said brightly, “I’d say you did… um… not that well. You failed to repel me in the allotted time, even when I’d lost track of my original hostage, although, uh, the way you followed protocol was commendable! We’ll… we’ll be getting back to you on your official score and how you can improve should this situation happen for real… later.”

There was complete silence for a moment, then someone said, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m with Dead Cell, this has been a simulation,” Fortune said. She gestured to Mei Ling, who waved cheerily. “She’s just my assistant.”

“Dead Cell doesn’t have any female members,” someone else said.

“I’m new.”

“You can’t just come in here, hold us hostage, and try to play it off like you’re a member of Dead Cell!” someone shouted. “You won’t get away with this!”

“Get behind me,” Fortune said urgently to Mei Ling, who complied. Fortune looked around the room sharply. Befitting of her role, she’d confiscated all of the security guards’ guns, and Stennis was a gun-free zone so it was, presumably, only the guards who were armed — but it was possible that an illegally conceal-carrying employee was about to tip their hand, or that one or more of the guards had concealed another firearm on them since Fortune didn’t frisk them very thoroughly…

There. One of the guards was, subtly, reaching for his ankle, probably thinking Fortune was distracted by all the yelling. She backed up towards the door, herding Mei Ling behind her.

“I’ll just be going now,” she said calmly. “You can talk to my husband, Colonel Jackson, about your final assessment.”

“You’re not going anywhere!” the guard who had been inching toward his ankle shouted, suddenly whipping up to a standing position with his pistol out. There were several loud pops of gunfire and Fortune shrieked, pushing back against Mei Ling, shielding her—

From a shot that never hit.

The guard emptied his whole magazine (about ten rounds) in Fortune’s direction, but either he had the aim of a Stormtrooper or the bullets just magically veered around Fortune and by extension Mei Ling. Both of them were unscathed, but the glass of the door behind them was shattered.

The security guard gasped in shock as his gun clicked, empty. “Wh-what the hell…? Why weren’t you—?!”

The phone rang. The receptionist hiding meekly behind the desk reached up and answered it, and after a long pause, made a few “uh-huh”s and “yes, sir”s and hung up again, then stood.
“She’s telling the truth,” she announced. “That was Colonel Jackson on the phone just now. This was a Dead Cell simulation to test how we would react to a hostage situation.”

An annoyed groan rippled through the crowd of researchers, guards, and employees, who started to stand up, grumbling. Fortune flashed an uncomfortable smile. “So… I’ll take my leave now.”

“That’s right, get out,” said one of the irritated researchers. “You’re damned lucky you and your assistant didn’t get hurt. And your unit owes us a new security camera!”

“So how’d it go?” Solidus said.

Mei Ling pulled the vial of nanomachines out of her cleavage. “Success,” she chirped. “Although I’ll need equipment to make it so that we can use it unmonitored on our frequencies… and I’ll need to replicate it, too. I think this is only enough for one person.”

“I see. We’ll figure something out.”

“I had an idea already, actually…”

“Just so you know,” Colonel Jackson told her, “they’re almost definitely going to figure out that you took some nanomachines when Helena ‘lost track’ of you. We’re already planning on taking blame only for not vetting our interns thoroughly enough, so as far as theft of government property goes, you’re on your own. You can probably expect to go from being a missing college student to America’s most wanted overnight.”

“I only took some Codec tech,” Mei Ling said innocently. “Besides, I’m the one who invented it in the first place. But oh well. It’s not like they don’t want to kill me already.”

“Yes,” Solidus said, “plastering her face all over the news as a spy or terrorist won’t have any functional effect on our operations.”

Colonel Jackson nodded, frowning, then turned to Fortune. “You did a good job, honey.”

“I still can’t believe those bullets didn’t hit us,” Fortune said, putting a hand on her chest. “That was… incredibly lucky!”

“Didn’t hit you, huh…?”

“Perhaps,” Vamp said, “now would be a good time to scratch off that lottery ticket from this morning.”

“Oh, you’re right,” Fortune said, digging it out of her pocket. Vamp handed her a coin. No one said anything as she scratched it off, then stared at it silently for a moment.

“So?” Mei Ling said at length.

“Better luck next time,” Fortune said, holding it up to show everyone a losing ticket.

Anchorage.

McGolden and Catherine shambled through the woods like a pair of zombies until evening fell. It was a damn good thing that it was summer and they didn’t have to worry about the temperature — but by the time they finally found some scattered outskirt of civilization, they were both dehydrated and McGolden was woozy with pain.
They stumbled into some random gas station in Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, just off the Klondike Highway. The stoned cashier gave Catherine an odd look as she slammed a couple crumpled American dollars onto the counter to pay for their bottled waters, but didn’t say much and evidently didn’t feel the need to call anyone even though it was late, they both had blood on them, it was kind of obvious that Catherine was carrying a gun and had no bra on, McGolden had a broken limb, and asking cashiers just where the hell was this place, anyway, was not a normal thing to do.

Fortunately they were able to wash up in the bathrooms and catch a ride with a trucker back to Anchorage, where Catherine’s Corvette was found in the same location as they had left it. Plus or minus a broken window.

“Oh, no,” McGolden said, holding his head and staring at it. “Oh no. This means… they must have gotten…”

Catherine grit her teeth. “They must have searched it as soon as we were captured…”

“Actually, no,” came a voice from a nearby alleyway. They both whirled around. (Or at least Catherine did. McGolden just jerked his head over his shoulder.) “They didn’t bother with a search until you’d escaped, because they were certain you had outside help somehow and figured that your car might provide some clues—”

“Ocelot!” Catherine screamed, dashing in front of him and throwing a glorious, uncoordinated haymaker straight at his face.

He barely leaned, tilted his head slightly, and dodged it effortlessly. “Okay. Nice try, kid. May I continue?”

“What are you doing here?” McGolden said, leaning against the car while Catherine clenched her fists and growled through gritted teeth.

“I was waiting. I knew you’d come here - before I dropped by the facility I found the car, because I knew it would be searched as soon as you escaped and I needed to get rid of my transmitter. It isn’t exactly a good look.” He pulled the In the Darkness of Shadow Moses: The Unofficial Truth CD sleeve out of an inner pocket of his jacket and tossed it to McGolden, who caught it with minimal fumbling. “Didn’t see any reason to let this slip into their hands, either.”

“Oh, wow…”

“What were you waiting for?” Catherine said.

“You,” Ocelot said with a shrug.

“Yeah, I bet — and me alone, huh? You son of a bitch! You told me to leave McGolden behind!!”

“Wait, what?” McGolden said, looking between her and Ocelot.

Ocelot tilted his head. “Figured you’d only slow her down.”

“Hm.”

Catherine pointed an accusing finger at him. “You’re a goddamn sociopath, Ocelot! You don’t know a thing about friendship or loyalty!”

“I know far more about loyalty than you can even comprehend, Catherine,” Ocelot said dryly. He shook his head. “This isn’t about ideals, anyway. It was a test.”
“…a what?”

“Seriously?” McGolden said, “what were you testing?”

“Whether she would take the advice of her betters or risk everything for her idea of ‘doing the right thing’,” Ocelot said. “What kind of woman she is, in short.”

“Huh.”

Catherine folder her arms, snorting. “Guess it turns out I’m the kind of woman who refuses to live your sad little world, Ocelot. I could never just leave someone to die.”

“That’s your prerogative,” Ocelot said, raising his hands. “Anyway, now that I see the results of my test there’s no point in sticking around… I’ll be off. Goodbye.”

“Bye,” McGolden said, somewhat awkwardly, as Ocelot turned around and started sauntering off.

“Good riddance,” Catherine crowed after him, then turned back to McGolden. “What an asshole.”

“You could have told him I saved your life, y’know.”

“Erg… I didn’t think he’d believe me. Plus I’d rather not think about… well…” she scrubbed a hand over her face. “Forget it. How’s your ankle holding up? We better get you to a hospital.”

“Cathy, they’re going to be looking for us. Even if I checked in under a false identity—“

“McGolden, that kind of break requires a surgical fix. No hospital means you’ll never be able to walk normally again.”

“I’ll be fine,” McGolden insisted. “The pain’s gotten down the point where I can just ignore it, and I don’t mind limping. Let’s just leave it alone.”

“Ugh, fine. But I’m only letting this go because yeah, getting that looked out probably would attract the Patriots’ attention… damn.”

McGolden shrugged. “We could stop and get me a cane, though. That’ll take some weight off, I’d like that.”

“Okay. In the meantime… you’re pale as shit, dude, you’d better lie down. Here.” She opened the back door of the car and did a double take.

“What is it?” McGolden said, peering over her shoulder. Lying in the backseat was a brand-new adjustable cane. Somehow neither one of them thought that the Patriots who had smashed her window had left the cane there.

But Ocelot had no way of knowing if McGolden was even still alive until this very meeting.

Catherine whirled around and cupped her hands around her mouth. “Hey!” she shouted. “How did you know all along that I’d bring McGolden with me?!”

Ocelot didn’t turn around or reply, just waved one hand before vanishing out of the pool of light from the streetlamp. The clinking of his spurs faded out of earshot a moment later.

Catherine blinked. She turned back to McGolden again. “He’s always six steps ahead of everyone else, isn’t he?”
“That’s the impression I get,” McGolden said. “Man… you’d think he could just tell you to make sure you brought me with you to start with, though. Why pull that reverse psychology… whatever it was?”

“…I guess this was a test,” Catherine said.

“What’s he testing you for, though?”

“I don’t know… but…” She looked up at the sky, rubbing the back of her neck. “…did I pass?”

Neither of them said anything for a moment, then McGolden glanced down at the CD sleeve he was still holding and cleared his throat, showing it to Catherine. Neat handwriting, the same as that note in Miller’s driveway two years ago, was inked across the front.

_You’re just like your father._

The two of them exchanged glances, neither speaking out loud. Was that a passing grade, then? Was that how Ocelot had known she’d rather take risks than abandon her partner? Why did it matter to him, anyway — what did he want with them?

McGolden flipped the CD sleeve over and lifted the flap. Just underneath was written an address in Oregon.

The clinic trip went smoothly, more or less; the doctor EVA bribed saw them after hours and had been paid too much to care about why Liquid and Mantis had to conceal their identities and come with a PLA escort, Boris, in case of trouble. (Which pissed Liquid off, even lacking one arm he could still more than handle anything that came their way. Boris was forced to stand outside for the duration of the appointment.)

Nanomachines and transmitters were both quickly ruled out with an x-ray, which having one made Mantis extremely uncomfortable, but he knew almost instinctively that the more he cooperated and followed the doctor’s instructions the quicker and easier this would be. Drawing blood was a bit more of an ordeal; despite Mantis’ best efforts he kept flinching every time he was approached with the syringe and couldn’t relax enough for the doctor to actually get at any vein. Eventually Liquid got him to calm down (somehow ending up with Mantis curled up sitting in his lap and hiding his face against his neck so he wouldn’t have to look at the needle) but by the time Mantis’ blood was actually done being drawn the poor man was nearly in tears.

Mantis understood the reasons why he had to go to the clinic in the first place but nonetheless he was upset with Liquid for “forcing” him to go — and Liquid was a little surprised at how he was acting, sure he knew that he had some childhood trauma with medical settings but… well, come to think of it, he hadn’t ever seen Mantis interact with formal medicine until he was in his twenties, when his reaction to it was to throw a fit instead of tremble in fear…

He felt sorry for putting him through this, so Liquid borrowed (“borrowed”) a couple crowns from their escort and stepped into a 24-hour bookstore on their way back to the church and bought Mantis an old English-language entomological encyclopedia. So Mantis practically forgot about the clinic visit entirely. He was a few sections into the book before figuring out that he was, in fact, literate, although in his defense it was an _illustrated_ encyclopedia and he had mostly been looking at the pictures anyway.

The blood test came back clean. Liquid breathed a silent sigh of relief, still not wanting to tell Mantis what exactly he’d been so worried about. But hell, he remembered how awful it was to take a
cocktail of antibiotics and antiviral drugs every day for a month straight back in ’94 and he was glad Mantis didn’t have to go through any of that. (Just being on two antibiotics at the moment was wearing down on Liquid. Especially since both of them seemed to fuck with his sense of balance and that was… pretty bad for his reputation.) The aching in random parts of his body, especially his head, stomach, and chest, was also bad, but he could conceal that extremely well. Especially the chest pain, since that wasn’t anything new and… come to think of it… might not have been related to the medication at all…)

Mantis was still getting used to things.

Of course he knew he and Liquid were lovers; Ocelot had told him as much before he’d even had the wherewithal to recall Liquid’s face, but even then it would have been obvious anyway, the way Liquid treated him when Ocelot handed him over. But Mantis had been… surprised to hear that he’d told Liquid he loved him and that the two-year anniversary of their marriage had passed mere days before Mantis’ abduction. (He wouldn’t have expected them being married. They didn’t have any rings or anything like that - Liquid told him he’d promised to get them some, eventually.)

Considering the circumstances, maybe it wasn’t all that strange that Liquid insisted on sleeping with his body pressed up against Mantis’.

In all honesty it was comfortable. Mostly because, Mantis thought, PLA headquarters was naturally cool by way of being underground, and Liquid was plenty warm. But the way he slept seemed familiar and soothing to Mantis… he’d shift around and murmur unintelligibly, sometimes even say something nonsensical (and/or in a language Mantis didn’t know) at a normal volume, and tended to kick off the covers and knock his pillow onto the floor instead of keeping it under his head.

At least once every night he’d suddenly wake up with such a start that he’d have to catch his breath for a moment afterwards, then frantically search for Mantis, reaching out blindly in the darkness, even sitting up and looking around if he’d happened to roll away from him. Then he’d pull Mantis against him and bury his face in his chest or back (whichever was closest) and sigh and kiss him gratefully.

“Is something wrong, Eli?” Mantis finally asked him.

“…”

“…Eli?” Did he go back to sleep?

“Everything’s alright, Mantis…”

“Oh… you seem… um, distressed.”

Liquid nuzzled the back of his neck sleepily. “It’s nothing. Bad dream, get them all the time,” he mumbled. “Just had to make sure you were here.”

“…? I don’t think I could have left without waking you, Eli.”

There was a long pause. Mantis would have thought that Liquid had fallen asleep again, but some odd feeling he had said that he was awake.

“I miss Benedict,” Liquid said randomly.

“Your dog?”

“He’s Snake’s dog, technically. He’s with Wolf right now, do you remember?”
“Wolf… your pretty friend. The sniper.”

“Yes, that’s her.”

Somehow Mantis didn’t really believe that Liquid was getting so clingy like this because he missed his dog, though. That would be odd, wouldn’t it? There must have been something he wasn’t letting on.

Mantis was about to ask him about his bad dream when Liquid suddenly said, “You know, I think I understand you a bit better now.”

“…what?”

“About Ocelot. You have no idea how glad I am that he brought you back safe and sound for me, but… somehow, I can’t help but resent him for it. For being the one to rescue you, while I myself was unable.”

“…”

Liquid’s grip around Mantis’ middle tightened. “It should have been me,” he whispered. “I keep thinking that. It should have been me. You weren’t their target, you… you sacrificed yourself for me, the least I could do was bring you home myself.”

“Eli…”

“And I tried, I did. But I… couldn’t. I simply couldn’t. I was on death’s door. And so Ocelot had to be the one to rescue you instead of me.”

He pressed his face harder against the back of Mantis’ neck, like he could hide from the world in doing so.

“Is this how you felt, Mantis?” he murmured. “Is this… the real reason why you hated him so much? Because he took away your chance to be my savior… how unfair.”

“Eli,” Mantis said quietly, “I don’t… know what you are talking about…”

“…that’s alright. Nevermind. It’s— it’s nothing, Mantis.” Mantis could feel his chest seize against his back as he struggled to compose himself. “It’s nothing. I’m sorry. They broke you and I don’t know if you can be fixed. I’m sorry. Maybe if I’d been a little faster—“

“Eli…”

“—if I’d been a little faster then maybe that damned sniper would have shot me instead of you. Or maybe I could have come after you before too much of your mind was worn away and maybe I could have gotten you to safety before I died. I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“Please stop apologizing. You did not do anything wrong.”

“Yes I did,” Liquid said, his voice and his shoulders shaking. “I’ve done everything wrong. I’m so sorry, Mantis, I don’t deserve your love. I failed you.”

“Eli, you—“ Mantis turned around in his one-and-a-half-armed cling with difficulty, and tried to tilt Liquid’s head up to look at him but Liquid kept his face stubbornly hidden against Mantis’ shoulder. “Don’t say that.”

“I… it should have been me, Mantis. You should never have to go through this. I’m not… I’m not
enough to fix this…”

“Are you crying…? Eli, don’t cry. There is no need to cry.”

“N-No… no… I’m sorry, Mantis. I am. I really am. I fucked up…”

“Eli, shh… I do not understand why you’re upset.”

“I f-fucked up,” Liquid choked out before dissolving into tears completely.

This time he did let Mantis raise his head, smooth his hair back. Mantis wasn’t really sure what to do aside from that, though — he knew there had been plenty of times when he’d talked Liquid down from an emotional breakdown but he couldn’t piece together the process for it. Did he even have a process, or did he just wing it every time? “Eli…”

Liquid turned away, half-smothering himself in the pillow instead of looking at Mantis. Mantis kept stroking his hair.

“Eli, would it make you feel better if I told you I love you? Would you like that?”

“O-Only… only if y-you’re not just telling me wh-what I want t-to h-h-hear, Mantis. Only i-if you’re not l-lying to me.”

Mantis hummed, pulling himself towards Liquid again, wrapping his arms around his shoulders and pushing down lightly on the top of his head with his chin.

Such a nostalgic position.


He repeated himself like a broken record until Liquid finally calmed and drifted back to sleep, tears still drying under his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Literally nobody is going to notice this unless I point it out but the number of times
Mantis says “I love you” to Liquid in this chapter is the same number of times as Mantis
says “I hate you” to Ocelot in chapter eight.
Oh and Liquid’s “Only if you’re not lying to me” parallels the final chapter of Make It
Home, but y’all probably figured that out on your own.
“Oh wow,” Octopus said. “Mei Ling’s on the news.”

“Seriously?” Wolf said, coming over to the computer.

“Yeah, look. Just American networks, though. And they still haven’t… quite figured out her identity, but it’s pretty clearly her.”

Wolf stared at the screen. “I do not think I have ever seen her in this much makeup. She looks awful.”

Octopus turned around in his chair. “She looks fine,” he said, aghast. “I mean, she’s what, 22? That’s a good age for wearing brightly-colored makeup and showing off your tits.”

“I disagree.”

“Wolf, you’re in your thirties and you wear green lipstick.”

“It looks good on me,” Wolf protested, “it brings out my eyes.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m just saying, you really don’t have grounds to criticize how Mei Ling disguised herself for… whatever it is they were doing at a Naval Research Lab… isn’t she just with Solidus right now?”

“I think so. Didn’t Liquid say that it was just Snake and Emmerich who picked him up from the hospital in Arizona?”

“Uh-huh. Yeesh, Solidus finally gets some time all alone with a cute girl a hell of a lot closer to his age than Ocelot, who has a crush on him—“

“Mei Ling has a crush on Solidus?”

Octopus snorted. “Come on, it was obvious. Get with the program, Wolf.”

“…are you sure you are not another psychic?”

“No, just good at reading social cues. Anyway, I guess their idea of a good time was stealing technology from the Navy. And getting caught on security cameras. In that skirt, ugh.”

“You have worn much worse. Who has no right to criticize Mei Ling now?”

“I only wore that as part of a costume and you know it.”

Bêdeng chuffed.

No matter how many times he did this section of the VR training, Jack always found it a little weird how warmly Gray Fox greeted him. Okay, the Gray Fox AI, but still. He’d been briefed on the background between the real-life Gray Fox’s relationship with the actual Solid Snake — they’d been comrades-in-arms, obviously, closer than brothers, but even aside from being in the same unit Gray
Fox had been like some sort of mentor to the then-rookie. How exactly Jack wasn’t sure; he did know that Gray Fox wasn’t supposed to have been teaching Solid anything in any **official** capacity… but he’d been told that all of Solid’s pre-Outer Heaven missions, the training wheels ops where he had a partner right by him every step of the way, had always been done with Gray Fox.

Jack actually kind of envied how close it sounded like they were. He didn’t have anyone he was that close to. It almost seemed insulting, the way the Gray Fox AI existed only to be rescued, and then run Jack through a quick “demonstrate for me, Snake” course to see how well Jack could keep up with randomly-generated commands being barked at him.

“There’s only one way to destroy Metal Gear,” Gray Fox said, slapping Jack on the back. “The developer — Dr. Madnar — knows it. He’s somewhere in this building.” Jack nodded absently. “Find Dr. Madnar!”

Gray Fox started to practically shove him out of the cell, as he always did. As he must have done to the real Snake. Jack opened his mouth, closed it, and decided to ignore the time requirement - just for today.

“Hey, Fox,” he said, “you and I went on a couple missions together, right? While I was still learning how to… do all this stuff.”

Gray Fox chuckled. “Of course we did, Snake.”

“What was that like?”

“What do you mean? We went in, completed the objective, I watched your ass. It went about the same way every time.”

“Yeah, but… what did we do?”

Gray Fox’s face blanked. “Huh?” he said.

“Do you… know? The kind of thing you and Sn- and I did on these training ops.”

Gray Fox continued staring at him expressionlessly for a few more seconds, then suddenly emotion returned to his face and he said, in a slightly irritated tone, “Come on, Snake, this isn’t a training op. Now get out there and find Dr. Madnar!”

“Uh—“

Jack’s radio beeped. He sheepishly answered it, knowing about what to expect.

“What are you thinking, Snake, asking him things like that?” Max scolded. “It isn’t even relevant!”

“I… I just wanted to **know**,“ Jack said defensively, “I think it’d be good to hear about the kinds of things that the real Solid Snake and Gray Fox went through together!”

“It’s outside the scope of the mission, Snake,” Colonel Campbell said sternly.

“And you don’t have the time to sit around and chat!” Max said.

“Oh, come on!” Jack said, “it’s just VR. It’s not like anyone’s in danger if I slack off just **once**.”

“That is a **terrible** attitude to take,” Colonel Campbell said. “We can’t allow you to set this kind of precedent for yourself while training. Max, make a note of this.”
“Yes, sir,” Max said.

“Yeah, yeah…” Jack grumped. “He just gave me a weird answer, anyway… didn’t even make sense…”

Doc tutted. “Snake, the Gray Fox AI hasn’t been programmed with anything outside the immediate requirements for this mission. ‘He’ doesn’t know about the real Gray Fox’s past exploits, because they aren’t in its memory banks. They’re entirely unnecessary for this simulation.”

“I don’t know about that,” Jack said. “I’ll bet those training ops together had a pretty big impact on how the real one felt about the real Snake.”

“Does it matter how the real Gray Fox felt about the real Solid Snake…? Perhaps if we ever progress you to the Zanzibar Land disturbance, that sort of thing will need to be programmed in. But as far as the Outer Heaven uprising is concerned, the AI has no need to ‘feel’ anything towards you.”

“…hang on. I might do a simulation of the Zanzibar Land disturbance sometime?”

“Oh, yeah,” Max said, “once you get infiltrating the Outer Heaven fortress down to a science. Once you start getting perfect runs we’ll move you on to some of Solid Snake’s other missions.”

“But… I thought the only one I was doing at all was Outer Heaven. If I’m just doing Snake’s missions, why haven’t I done any of those training ops he did with Gray Fox? Wouldn’t it make more sense to start there?”

“The emotional journey of Solid Snake is of no matter to you or your training, Snake,” Colonel Campbell said. “Your previous Force XXI training was a suitable replacement for the real-life Solid Snake’s FOXHOUND training.”

“Yeah, but, if I’m in FOXHOUND now, shouldn’t I get the same kind of training the real Snake did…? I mean, he was in the Green Berets before FOXHOUND, right? They still retrained him.”

“Times have changed, Snake.”

Jack frowned. “Where is all of this going, anyway?” he said, “why do I have to do Solid Snake’s solo missions specifically?”

“Snake,” Doc said, “do you remember the Shadow Moses incident two years ago?”

“Shadow Moses? Of course I do, how could I forget? A group of terrorists detonated a nuclear weapon on U.S. soil!”

“Right. The Army did attempt to stop the terrorists. They sent in one of their best men to do it, too.”

“Don’t tell me… Solid Snake?”

“That’s right,” Max said.

“Guess that’s why no one’s heard from him in so long… he’s gotta be dead now.”

“Exactly,” Doc said, nodding. “His mission on Shadow Moses was a failure.”

“Hey, he still managed to keep the terrorists from nuking anywhere with more people than some practically deserted island in Alaska!” Jack protested. Maybe it was because he was constantly pretending to be him during his VR training, but he found himself pretty defensive of Solid… “Things could have gone a lot worse.”
“They could have gone a lot better,” Colonel Campbell said flatly. “At present, that is the end goal of your computer simulation training: to find out how things could have gone better at Shadow Moses.”

“How…?”

“Once we’re confident you’ve reached Solid Snake’s level,” Max said, “we’ll start running you through a simulation of Shadow Moses island the night the terrorists took over. Ideally you’ll be able to ‘solve’ it — figure out where Solid Snake went wrong, what he could have done to prevent the nuclear strike in the first place.”

“The data gleaned from this will be very valuable,” said Colonel Campbell. Jack blinked. Sounded more like something Doc would say - hey, Doc wasn’t hanging out with Colonel Campbell in his off-hours, was he? Kind of a dick move considering how many times Jack tried to get him to come grab a beer with him or something… he really needed some guy friends…

“Anyway,” Doc said, “get back to work, Snake. You’ve wasted enough time as it is, and put unnecessary stress on the AI.”

“Oh. Uh. Sorry. I’ll get right back at it,” Jack said, then closed the radio link. Gray Fox, who had waited patiently while he talked, repeated his line about finding Dr. Madnar and continued pushing him towards the exit to the cell.

“Eli…”

Someone was touching him. Touching his face, his shoulders.

“How are you feeling?”

“…I’ve been better.” He opened his eyes again, rubbing them with his left hand, as EVA helped him sit up. “What the hell am I doing on the bathroom floor?”

“I was just about to ask you the same thing,” EVA said. “You were in here for about half an hour and didn’t make any kind of response when Vavrinek knocked on the door. I just came in to see if you were okay.”

“EVA… that’s right, I remember now… I fainted…”

EVA stood and offered Liquid a hand, which he declined, standing up by himself although he did lean back against the wall, rubbing his forehead. EVA frowned at him, then turned around and ran the sink for a few moments.
“…you need to eat more,” she said at length.

“Hm.” Liquid didn’t know if she was commenting on how the vomit in the sink was mostly bile and watery enough to be simply washed down the drain, or if she’d noticed him skipping meals every day, or if he just plain looked terrible.

“I’m serious. You aren’t eating enough, that’s probably got something to do with why you passed out.” She turned back around, folding her arms.

“It’s not like I can keep much down right now.”

“Side effects hit you hard, huh?”

“I figured I’d give the antibiotics two weeks, and see what happens after that — I’ll stop taking them in a couple days. Be done with them as long as the infection doesn’t come back.”

“Are fainting spells any of the side effects?”

“Of course they are.”

EVA silently raised an eyebrow, then stepped forward and touched the side of Liquid’s face. “You’re bruised,” she said. “You must have hit your head on the way down. What exactly happened?”

Liquid sighed. He didn’t have the energy right now to argue with her on this. “I was getting sick in the sink and suddenly I got all light-headed, my ears started ringing, I couldn’t see - then my legs gave out and I’m fairly certain I tried to catch myself with the wrong hand. I don’t remember hitting my head, though. Or the floor.”

“Hmm…”

“Look, I’m fine, alright Mother?” Liquid said, pushing her away. “You’re right, this is probably just because of a lack of food. Once I get off those stupid fucking antibiotics I’ll have this whole fainting thing back under control.”

“‘Back’ under control?” EVA said, putting her hands on her hips. “What do you mean, back?”

“Er…” Shit.

“Was this sort of thing going on before you had to go on medication for your arm?”

“No— well, no. Not really.”

She gave him a very severe look. The corner of Liquid’s mouth twitched.

“It’s just an occasional thing,” he said. “Sometimes I’ll just get light-headed, I think the only other time I’ve blacked out like this was two years ago, when I got shot and nearly bled out.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Oh, I’m not sure. A few years. Started around the same time the chest pain did, now that I think about it.”

EVA blinked. “…the chest pain,” she repeated flatly.

Liquid grimaced. “It’s really not a big deal.”
“Eli, chest pain and fainting spells kind of are a big deal.”

“I’ve got it under control, Mother.”

“There might be something wrong with your heart or your lungs. I can bribe that doctor again, Eli, see what’s going on…”

Liquid shook his head. “It’s not a big deal and I have it under control. This only happened because I haven’t been eating enough, those meds are bloody hard on me, and I am under a lot of stress right now considering Mantis’ situation. In a few days I’ll have the first two factors taken care of — this won’t happen again.”

“Eli.”

“I don’t want to see a doctor about this, Mother. It’ll just be a waste of time and money. And even if something is wrong, what would he even do? Prescribe me more medication? I’m not in a position to pick up prescriptions regularly.”

EVA was silent. Liquid rubbed his head again, awkwardly, glancing away.

“Please don’t tell Mantis about this,” he said at length.

“What?” EVA said.

“I’m alright now, but… Mantis… when he saw my arm he was almost screaming. I know if he knew about this then he’d just worry and worry himself sick…”

“He didn’t know about this already?”

“Well, he did, but he hasn’t really… remembered about it yet. And I don’t want him to, he’s got enough on his plate right now without fussing over my perceived health issues. He needs to focus on his own recovery.”

“…”

“Please, Mother.”

“Alright, fine…” EVA said, “I won’t tell him, but only because he’ll figure it out himself soon. And I won’t push the doctor thing as long as this doesn’t happen again. If you pass out on me one more time, or I catch you acting like you’re dizzy or your chest hurts, you are going to the doctor no matter how much of a struggle you put up.”

“That… that works.”

EVA let Liquid go. His mouth tasted like vomit and cotton, so he wandered off to get a drink of water and eventually returned to his room, where he found Mantis sitting on the floor still working his way through that encyclopedia. His musing about if he could possibly avoid Mantis noticing the alleged bruise on his face was interrupted by Mantis noticing the alleged bruise on his face.

“What happened?” he asked, mildly alarmed.

Liquid shrugged. “Lost my balance,” he said. “Bit hard to recover with only one arm and me not being used to that, yet.”

“Oh…” Mantis stood, touching the side of Liquid’s face the same place where EVA touched it. “Well, it does not look so bad.” He ran his hand back, brushing his fingers over Liquid’s hair. “…
you have more white hairs than you did a year ago, Eli.”

Liquid opened his mouth to snap at him but closed it again, blinking. “You remember what my hair looked like last year?”

“I. I suppose I do.”

Liquid smiled at him. “That’s a good sign, Mantis!”

“It is… easier with more recent memories…”

Over the course of the past few days Mantis’ amnesia had started to abate, though he still struggled with using his psychic powers and, although he didn’t vocalize his complaints much, his persistent headaches weren’t showing any signs of going away yet. And of course there was a catch to Mantis’ memories coming back, too: Like coffins floating to the surface of a flooded graveyard, the inundation of others’ minds had dredged up memories Mantis had long ago repressed on account of the fact that they weren’t *his*.

Liquid tried to help where he could, assisting Mantis in piecing together his internal timeline and clarifying which events he described happened to him or to someone else. Nearly everything after ’84 was easy, it was either Liquid’s own feelings or memories, or Mantis’, or some random thing that Liquid was sure hadn’t happened to either of them that he sort of presumed originally belonged to that serial killer who’d fucked up Mantis’ personality. Simple process of elimination. Liquid was slightly hampered by the fact that he didn’t know much about what Mantis did, precisely, while he himself was in Iraq (Mantis had never, in particular, told him anything about the KGB), but somehow he didn’t think a random serial killer would have gotten into tiffs with United States Attorneys about why did *he* have to be the one delivering the overly-detailed psychological profile of the criminal of the day to the (stressful, judgemental) court when he’d really rather just stay home (safe).

The main problem was that Liquid didn’t have much of a clue about the other people Mantis had ever developed a psychic link with. Aside from the serial killer, he only knew of three: the Man on Fire, Skull Face, and of course his father. Except Liquid didn’t know a damn thing about the Man on Fire (except that he’d once been a colonel in the GRU, deflowered teenage Ocelot, and was “killed” by Big Boss and had been literally fuelled by revenge for that) and didn’t know anything about Skull Face’s life story, and he didn’t know if Mantis’ link with Venom had ever reached deeper than Ocelot’s creepy hypnosis bullshit did - in other words, he didn’t know if memories dredged up from Mantis’ connection with Venom would be, technically, Big Boss’ memories or if they’d be from… whatever Venom Snake had been before he was Venom Snake. Liquid honestly didn’t really know who that was. Even aside from all that, Mantis would occasionally refer to something that didn’t fit in with what Liquid knew about *any* of them.

He’d… honestly, he’d have to ask Ocelot about this. He might know.

“Eli? You’re troubled about something."

“Hm?” Liquid glanced back up at him, snapped out of his reverie. “No, it’s nothing. I’m just a bit tired, that’s all.” He brushed Mantis off and went to go sit on the bed, stretching out, then simply lying down with his arm over his eyes. He’d told EVA he was fine now but he still didn’t feel exactly great.

“Can we still talk?”

“Yes, Mantis, go ahead.”
He paused slightly. “An offshore plant… that was Mother Base, yes?”

“Mhm.”

“There was a woman who walked around in her underwear?”

“More than one woman who did that, actually, but if you mean on a consistent basis then that would be Quiet. Head sniper, Wolf’s mentor, Father’s girlfriend. You and she got along alright. What about her?”

“Ah… I was just reading about lepidopterans and I remembered a time she showed me a moth she found, that is all. Do you know what year that was?”

“Mnn, I don’t know that specific incident, if I was there at all then I must have forgotten it.” He half-sat up. “Do you recall what she was wearing specifically? Back in ’84 she always wore this black bikini and ripped tights, but at some point before we came back she started wearing more of a uniform.”

“…sports bra with some kind of logo on it?” Mantis said, cocking his head.

“That’s it,” Liquid said, lying back down again. “So what you remember — must have been ’94 or ’95.”

“I see. And what year was I born, again...?”

“1974 or thereabouts. Why?”

“So… seeing Nazis…”

“Wasn’t you. Must have been Skull Face or the Man on Fire.” Liquid assumed, anyway. Venom and Big Boss both would have been pre-teens (at the oldest) when the Third Reich fell, and as far as Liquid knew neither of them had been in Europe at that time…

“Volgin,” Mantis said suddenly.

“…what?”

“That’s his name. Volgin.”

“His name? Whose name? Skull Face’s?”

Mantis shook his head. “The Man on Fire,” he said, “his name was Yevgeny Borisovitch Volgin. He was a colonel in the GRU, Ocelot served under him.”

“…right. Thanks.” Mantis had told him the latter in almost those exact words, like, two years ago, and as for the former Liquid didn’t know what to do with that information. Oh well. “So what was Skull Face’s name?”

“Oh, I have no idea.”

Helpful.

Chapter End Notes
I got relatives in town starting tomorrow so if y'all want me to keep pushing out updates anyway despite being busy y'all gotta comment ;0
“So what exactly is our plan, Mei Ling?” Solidus said as she drove them north.

“I need a way to replicate these Codec nanomachines,” Mei Ling said, “there’s equipment I could do that with really easily in the old FOXHOUND R&D labs.”

“…you think we can just wal-“

“Last I heard FOXHOUND headquarters was abandoned,” Mei Ling interrupted. “I’m sure they took a bunch of equipment from the R&D building, but what I need you can find in practically any research institution - the government has a zillion of them and even back in 2005 there were a bunch of universities and private companies that had access to this kind of thing, too.”

“Not at all proprietary, then,” Solidus said. “They might have simply left it.”

“Yeah! Anything going and out of headquarters always had to be in complete secrecy, so I’m sure removing things ran up a cost. So I’m betting they just left behind anything less valuable than how much taxpayer money they were already spending to relocate the super-expensive and top-secret things…”

“There is a flaw in your plan, Mei Ling.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Abandoned Army institutions are usually guarded by Cyphers — saucer-type unmanned aerial vehicles. They’re used for surveillance and many of them come with mounted guns, and will kill any trespassers unless specifically programmed not to.”


“…I think we could get around them, though,” Solidus said. “We do have Frank, after all.” Frank, who was lying in the backseat, raised his head at his name being said.

“What?!” Mei Ling said, “we can’t just use Frank as bait!”

“No, no. I just meant that dogs run faster than Cyphers can fly. He should be able to serve as a distraction while staying out of their range, while you and I sneak in the building.”


“…he’s a dog, Mei Ling, he doesn’t ‘think’ anything of this plan.”

“Don’t be rude, Solidus! …oh yeah, once we confirm the equipment and computers I need are still there, we’ll probably need to restore power to the R&D building before I can get anything done.”

Solidus raised an eyebrow. “FOXHOUND headquarters had its own on-site generator, did it not?”

“It did. I still remember where it is, too.”

“Excellent. That’s our plan, then. …er, where exactly is FOXHOUND headquarters, anyway? I was
never clear on that.”

Mei Ling shrugged. “North Dakota,” she said. “There’s a little town called Mastincasiha about an hour’s drive from headquarters, so we can set up base there. It has a hotel.”

“Mastincasiha, huh…”

Even though it had taken a while, Liquid had managed to get Mantis comfortable enough with sleeping beside him again that he could now be the little spoon again when he wanted to — which, honestly, he usually did. And Mantis was getting back to the point now where he wouldn’t sleep through the night, instead taking a short nap and then lying silently next to Liquid until morning.

Sometimes he’d absently run his hands over Liquid’s skin. Tonight was one such night. The slow trace of fingers over the scar on his stomach was something extremely familiar to Liquid, but for once it didn’t have any relation to Mantis’ bitter obsessing over Liquid’s past. Of course he couldn’t remember that past right now, so…

“Mmm…”

“Hm? Eli…”

“I like it when you do this…” Liquid murmured, placing his hand over Mantis’, stilling them. “You remember, don’t you?”

“Not very well.”

“I can show you,” Liquid said, guiding Mantis’ hand lower, shifting back against him a little. “I’ve been waiting for this… I even got myself all cleaned up for you when I showered this evening.”

“Oh… I see.”

Liquid turned around in his arms, pressing them close and kissing his neck, his jaw, the underside of his chin. Mantis didn’t react for a moment or two, then one of his hands trailed up Liquid’s back, his fingers slipping under his collar. Liquid made an approving noise.

“I love you,” he breathed in Mantis’ ear.

“…ah…”

“Do you still love me?”

Mantis nodded, somewhat uncertainly, but his arms around Liquid tightened. Liquid beamed at him — then pushed him on his back, sitting up and straddling him.

“What are you doing?” Mantis said, watching him quizzically.

“Taking the lead for once,” Liquid said with a smirk. “You know, I think I’m going to ride you tonight, Mantis.”

“Are you now?”

“Mmmhm.” He ground down against Mantis’ crotch, his smile widening as Mantis visibly tensed, his breath catching. “Like this I get to dictate the pace… you don’t usually let me do that, you like to be the one in charge…” He tilted his head, leaning back a little, putting himself on display. It was true, part of the reason why he tended to sleep in the nude was simply for easy access… “You only let me
do this as a special treat - if I’ve been very good lately.”

Mantis, seemingly for lack of knowing what else to do with them, rested his hands on Liquid’s thighs. “Have you been very good lately, Eli?”

…Liquid faltered.

“? What is wrong?”

“N-Nothing,” Liquid said, shaking his head. “Nothing’s wrong, I just… no…”

“Eli, what’s the matter? You are upset all of a sudden—”

“No, I— I haven’t been… Mantis, I’m sorry…”

Mantis sat up, wrapping his arms around Liquid’s shoulders. “Haven’t we already talked about this?” he said softly. “Please don’t get upset again.”


“Eli…?”

“Just make love to me, Mantis. Fuck me.”

“…do you… still want to ride me?” Mantis said, blinking.

“Of course I do.” Liquid slid out of Mantis’ lap and tugged at the waist of his pants. Bit difficult to slide them down smoothly with only one hand to work with… “Guess I’ve got to get us ready, then, eh?” He flashed him a seductive smile (that he just knew was slightly shaky).

“Um… right.”

Mantis awkwardly tugged his pants down to his knees for Liquid, who almost immediately made a grab for his dick. Mantis started as he touched it. Liquid worked his hand over it, scooting forward to kiss Mantis’ shoulders and neck again.

“You really don’t remember this very well, do you?” he whispered.

“No, ah… I am afraid I don’t…”

Liquid ducked down and kissed the tip of Mantis’ cock, then trailed his mouth up the side, relishing the way it twitched under his lips. “Your dick certainly seems to,” he chuckled, pressing a kiss against Mantis’ hip.

“What do you expect from me…?” Mantis wound his fingers into Liquid’s hair.

“Nothing. Everything.” He kissed him again. “Just be good to me.”

“…”

Liquid interrupted himself briefly to slick two of his fingers with saliva, then struggled to find a position he could keep sucking Mantis’ cock to full hardness in while also stretching himself — he couldn’t keep himself balanced with his right arm, since even resting on his elbow sent distracting jolts of pain up his stump.

“Argh… damn…”
“Eli,” Mantis said suddenly, taking Liquid by the jaw and tilting his head up. “I can— I will take care of you.” He brushed his fingers over Liquid’s lips.

“That’s more like it,” Liquid murmured before taking them into his mouth.

He was impatient, though — as much as he liked being fingered he was eager to get to the main event, so as soon as he was satisfied with the state of Mantis’ erection he pulled himself off of it with a wet pop and sat up, pushing Mantis’ arm away, biting his lip as he felt his fingers slide out of him.

“A-Aha… I c-can’t wait any longer, Mantis…!”

“Fine… fine…”

Again Liquid straddled Mantis; Mantis kept hold of his hips so he could keep his balance as he reached down and guided Mantis’ dick to rest against his asshole, then worked himself down on it with a long moan.

“Hush,” Mantis said, lifting his hand and brushing strands of hair away from Liquid’s face. “We’ll be heard.”

“I-I don’t care.”

“Ha… no, of course you would not… Eli, have some decency, we are in a church.”

“We’re i-in a church b-basement, and anyway w-we’re married— a-ah, hang on… oh…” He started rolling his hips. “Th-there we go… mm… that’s g-good…”

“…it… it kind of… hurts, Eli…”

“Aha… w-well… I’m afraid s-saliva doesn’t make f-for very good l-lube, but…”

“Oh. We forgot the—“

“Shhhh. Shh. I l-like it like this, M-Mantis, and anyway it’ll g-get— mnhn— i-it’ll get e-easier… ah, n-now let’s—!”

Liquid groaned as he rode Mantis hard and fast, gradually slowing down as he started to get dizzy. He felt Mantis grasp his previously ignored erection - even though Mantis was currently unaware of his rule against self-stimulation, Liquid was still following it, mostly because he only had one hand right now and he needed it to stay upright while he bounced up and down on Mantis’ cock. Mantis used the same gentle stroke as always — muscle memory, perhaps… Liquid chewed his lower lip, his eyelids fluttering and eyes rolling back in his head.

“N-Nnmh… mhnh… M-M-Mantis…”

“Is this good?” Mantis panted. “Do you like this, Eli?”

“Y…Y-Yes, Mantis, I-I— aahhh, I l-love th-this, I love y-you!”

“Aah… how many times have you… said that to me?”

“O-Oh, I d-don’t—I d-don’t know, M-Mantis, but it’s t-tr-true… I l-love you, I d-do…”

“You’re close, aren’t you…?”

Liquid nodded, shivering, fingers absently clenching and scraping against Mantis’ chest. He was trying to hold back. “A-Are you…?”
“Mm... mhm. Ah... yes, I’m very... Eli...” Mantis’ grip on Liquid’s hip tightened. “Maybe I should... pull ou-?”

“No,” Liquid hissed, clenching around Mantis. Mantis gasped. “No, no, f-finish inside me, M-Mantis, I w-want... I want e-every last drop!! I-I’m yours, so m-make sure you— mhh, m-make sure you m-mark your t-territory properly, Mantis-!”

“Oh... oh, of course...” Mantis reached up and hooked his finger into lead of Liquid’s collar, pulling him down - and sitting up partially himself - to nuzzle his face. “That’s right. You are mine.”

“Y-Yes,” Liquid gasped.

“My Eli... you... you belong to me...”

“Yes, yes— you, o-only you, Mantis - I’m yours, yours, yours—”

“Gh... Eli, I’m... I think I am about to- ah! A-Ah, Eli!”

He cut himself off, his whole body jerking and twitching, his back arching as he climaxed, pumping semen up into Liquid, who writhed in his lap, moaning exultantly.

“Ah... ha... E-Eli...”

“M-M-Mantis,” Liquid choked out, squirming, “p-please, t-tell me I can f-finish!”

“What...? I need to tell you...?” He nuzzled Liquid tiredly.

“Y-Yes, you n-need to— a-ahhh, I c-can’t... Mantis, I-I can’t g-get off w-without you giving me p-permission, so pl-please... t-tell me— tell me I can c-cum! Tell m-me to cum...”

“Really...? Alright...” He pressed the filter of his gas mask against Liquid’s ear. “Spill your seed for me, Eli.”

“A-Ahh yessss—!!”

Liquid could barely keep himself upright as he came down off his orgasm, swaying pathetically on top of Mantis before slumping over on him entirely. At least he didn’t see a reason to be worried about this... really good sex had always left him largely unable to keep his eyes open and feeling like his bones had been turned to jelly...

“...Eli?”

“Hm?”

“You are heavy. I can hardly breathe.”

Liquid laughed breathily, and rolled off of Mantis, pulling himself off his dick at the same time and letting out a high whine at the sudden gaping empty feeling. “I’ll... I’ll be walking funny tomorrow, I think...”

“You started this...”

“Was it good, though?” Liquid pulled himself close, kissed his neck again. “Was it? Did I do good?”

“Of course, Eli.”
“…” He waited.

“…ah.” Mantis blinked, then turned and nuzzled Liquid’s face. “Good boy, Eli.”

“Thank you. God, I love it when you say that.”

“Yes, I remember now. I think I’ve remembered quite a few things about our relationship, actually.”

“I’m glad…”

A few minutes passed in comfortable silence. Mantis’ breathing had slowed - he’d be asleep soon, Liquid was sure - and once again one of his hands had wandered down to Liquid’s stomach, absentmindedly tracing the upside-down-V-shaped scar. Liquid was drifting off already…

“Eli?” Mantis said softly.

“Mn…?”

“Where did you get this scar?”

Liquid blinked drowsily. Better not to lie, he thought. “Ocelot gave it to me.”

“…why?”

“I… was imprisoned for years, in Iraq, after my SAS squadron got shot down. Ocelot was the one who found me… but he did it as ‘Shalashaska’… he had to torture me to maintain his cover so that he could get my location back to Father without any complications.”

“Oh…” Mantis leaned his head against Liquid’s shoulder. “I remember now. You being MIA.”

“…mhm… I don’t like to talk about it much…”

“I understand. You’ve mentioned this before. But… is this why I hate Ocelot? Because he tortured you?”

Liquid worried his lip for a moment. “More or less,” he said at length. “It’s that, and jealousy, and some drama between the two of at the KGB that neither of you ever told me the details.”

“Oh. That makes sense.” Mantis paused, then added, “I think,” the paused again and added again, “but he only tortured you in order to save your life, why would I hate him for that? I don’t have to like what he did, but I should be grateful you are still alive…”

Liquid didn’t much feel like sleeping anymore. “Mantis… ah… you’re protective of me, that’s all. You hate anyone who hurts me.” He rolled over, facing away from Mantis. “Even yourself.”

“…”

He could almost physically feel a clumsy attempt at a mind probe, but Mantis gave up after a few fruitless seconds, and let out a pained breath.

“Eli,” he said in a small voice, “why are you hiding things from me?”

“Oh, Hal, can you forgive the mother who couldn’t protect you?”

“The one who let them take it all away from us?
“There's still hope.”

“…?”

“You - the one he took away. He'll never break your will.

“The will to make this world... the way you saw it could be. I buried code — just to be sure.”

“…t…on?”

“Inside of you, there's an——“

“Otacon?” Solid pulled out one of his earbuds. Otacon sat up quickly, unintentionally yanking out the other one.

“Huh?! What’s wrong?”

“Uh. Nothing. Sorry,” Solid said. “I couldn’t get your attention while you were listening to your Walkman.”

“…oh. It’s fine,” Otacon said, grabbing his Walkman and pausing the tape. “Wasn’t anything important. Did you need something?”

“Not really. I was gonna go out and buy a couple packs of cigarettes, figured I should tell you where I was headed.”

“Hmm… actually, Snake,” Otacon said, swinging his legs off the couch and standing up, “I’d better go with you. Safety in numbers, y’know?”

“I’m just going on a cigarette run. It’ll take twenty minutes at the most.”

“You never know what might happen. We are fugitives.”

“I can handle myself. If anything I’d be more worried about someone breaking in and bugging the safehouse while we were both out.”

Otacon frowned. “Point,” he said, “but if someone were to break in and I was still here… I’m not you, Snake, I couldn’t—“

Solid sighed. “Okay, okay,” he said, “you can come with me if you want.”

“Well, now I’m wondering if it’s really a good idea or not... if someone did plant bugs, do you think we’d be able to find them when we got back?”

“How am I supposed to know? You’re the tech guy, not me.”

“I guess we could just make extra sure we lock up and check for any signs of a break-in when we get back.”

“Sure. Whatever.” Solid wandered off to the front door, and was putting on his shoes when Otacon caught up with him after simply shoving his Walkman in his pocket. “By the way… what is that tape you keep listening to?”

“Huh? Uh… music.”

“No, I mean the tape you were listening to just now. You usually tap your foot or something when
you’re listening to music, but *this* one you were just lying on the couch with your eyes closed.”

“Er…” Otacon looked at his feet, frowning. “It’s just… something sentimental. Something I’m still trying to figure out, really.”

“Figure out?” Solid said, raising an eyebrow. “Can I see it, then?”

*What’s the harm?* Otacon thought, pulling his Walkman back out with a shrug. He ejected the tape and handed it to Solid.

“‘A.I. Pod’s Final Recording (Copy)’…” Solid read out loud. His brow furrowed. “Otacon…”

Otacon raised his hands defensively. “I don’t know what AI pod it’s referring to,” he said, “as far as I know it’s not related to what you saw in Virginia two years ago.”

“No, that wasn’t what I… where’d you get this?”

“Someone, uh, mailed it to me after my father died. Why?”

“Someone? Was it someone you knew?”

“No, it was anonymous — *why*, Snake?”

Solid looked up from the tape, his expression troubled. “This is Master Miller’s handwriting.”

Chapter End Notes

Although I usually use actual real-life towns, Mastincasiha, ND is not in fact a real place. I made it up. The name comes from the Dakota (Sioux) words “maštinca” and “siha”, or “rabbit” and “foot” respectively. I imagine the town population is somewhere in the low 100s, but it’s a commerce hub for local ranchers and such…
“Master Miller’s handwriting?” Otacon said, blinking. “Wait, what?”

“It is! I’m sure of it,” Solid said. “The way he wrote the ‘F’ is a giveaway. The ‘a’ and the ‘n’, too.”

“They’re… pretty distinctive, huh?”

“I think it’s because he grew up writing in Japanese. Otacon, what’s on this tape? Why did Master send it to you, where did he get it from? What’s it a copy of?”

Otacon shook his head. “I don’t know, Snake,” he said, “I really don’t know.”

“You at least know what’s on it.”

“…” Otacon hesitated. “It’s a recording of my mother,” he said finally. “It’s the only thing I have of her. …it’s her last words.”

“Why would Master have something like that…?”

“I— I don’t know. I’ve only met the guy once, Snake, and he didn’t even say anything to me. He…”

he adjusted his glasses nervously. “He must have been the one who wrote that letter… oh my gosh, it makes sense now, why he was avoiding me.”

“Letter? What letter?”

“About my father…”

“Your fa— oh,” Solid said, rubbing a hand across his forehead. “I forgot. Master told us about him, he used to work for Outer Heaven - except it wasn’t called Outer Heaven yet, it was…”

“Diamond Dogs?” Otacon said. “Yeah, I heard a little about it growing up. Dad… always said they were a bunch of fanatical murderers.”

“Master said that he pushed to have your dad exiled from their base because he murdered your mother. …er. Sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

“No,” Otacon said, shaking his head, “I already know. But… when’d he tell you about this?”

“Two years ago, when Liquid had me under house arrest. Why?”

Otacon took back the A.I. Pod’s Final Recording (Copy) tape. “Because I’ve had this tape for ten years now,” he said. “The letter, too, even though I don’t have it anymore. It… detailed my father’s crimes. The person who wrote the letter - Master Miller, I guess - mentioned he pushed to have my father executed.”

“…oh.”

“And also said how…” Otacon looked down at the tape in his hands. “…this tape was the only real evidence they had about how exactly Mom died. And it sounds pretty damning, it starts with my mother yelling at my father to open the hatch on… on the AI pod, I guess. Apparently the theory was that my father had trapped her in there and left her to suffocate, which is… how she died.”

“…sounds like Master acted reasonably to me, then.”
“Except in his letter he admitted to cutting off the first part of the recording before the—’air quotes, ‘—‘trial’.”

Solid’s eyebrows drew together. “He framed your father?”

“Well, I mean, not really, I think. He said the AI pod that took the recording only recorded what was happening inside of it, so the part he deleted was just the sound of Mom climbing in there. It didn’t really rule out anything — I’m sure they were already thinking my father didn’t so much force her in there so much as he tricked her into getting in herself, since my father was in a wheelchair all his life while my mother was ablebodied.”

“So he wouldn’t have been able to shove her in there in the first place.”

“Yeah. So the first part that Master Miller cut off… didn’t do anything to disprove his guilt. But it didn’t do anything to prove it, either. Plus, since it sounded like my mother climbed into the pod of her own free will, it seemed to support my father’s version of events, at least as far as that goes. That’s why Master Miller got rid of it.”

There was a long pause. Solid wasn’t really sure how to feel about this - Otacon had never before mentioned anything about his father, aside from him being born on the day Hiroshima was nuked. When Miller had told the long story about how he knew Liquid, Mantis, and Ocelot, Solid had just kind of assumed that Otacon didn’t know about any of that and had hardly remembered it afterwards himself.

“Do you think your father did it?” he said, without thinking.

Otacon looked at the floor again. “…I don’t know. I don’t… know.”

“…do you want to know?”

He shrugged helplessly. “How am I gonna find out at this point? It’s not like there’d be any evidence of what happened left. Or if there is, I wouldn’t know where to find it, or what to look for.”

“Hey, I don’t know anything about that detective stuff either,” Solid said, walking back into the house. Evidently they were going to forgo the cigarette errand for now. “But Master gave us different stories about this, so the only thing I can think to do in this situation is ask him about it. Maybe he’ll give us the truth this time.”

“If he even knows it. And Snake, you don’t even have any way to contact him. And Ocelot hasn’t picked up your Codec calls in months! …probably because you kept pestering him about getting you in touch with Master Miller.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Solid said, picking up the phone. “Maybe I’ll have better luck off of Codec… and I actually have a reason for wanting to talk to Master now, so he shouldn’t ignore me about this.”

“I dunno, Snake…”

…”

Of course Ocelot didn’t actually pick up his phone, either. Solid wasn’t surprised.

“I should have asked him about it when he called us to get Liquid out of the hospital,” he grumbled, putting the phone back down, then walking over the couch and flopping onto it. “Sorry, Otacon. As far as I know Ocelot’s the only one who knows how to contact Master Miller, and I don’t know who he actually picks up calls from.”
“Uh… it’s alright,” Otacon said. “It’s been ten years, I’ve kind of gotten used to not knowing.”

“Yeah… point.”

Otacon came and sat on the couch next to him. “Would you want to know, if it were you?” he said without looking at him.

Solid grunted. “Up until I met EVA it never even occurred to me that I even had a mother. So I can’t really relate to any of this.”

“It… doesn’t really matter, Snake.”

Washington, D.C.
WRAMAC.

Meryl glanced around the hospital warily as she was lead through the halls by one of the nurses, accompanied by an easygoing security guard. She was here representing RAT PT 01, but she was on her own. The reason she was here: Their immediate superiors had told her a patient here supposedly had information on Liquid Snake’s whereabouts. Even if coming here hadn’t been an order, she would have jumped on this lead anyway — until Liquid was dealt with, RAT PT 01 was stuck on this awful assignment, but no one had seen hide nor hair of him ever since he’d slipped away in Cape Town while she and the rest of her team were clearing the street after Mantis was hit on accident. Well, hide nor hair as long as Meryl didn’t count that (unsubstantiated) rumor that someone had broken Mantis out of Gitmo or wherever the hell the Army was holding Mantis prisoner after RAT PT 01 handed him over. (Meryl assumed he was awaiting trial. Part of her hoped they’d commute his inevitable execution; he might have been a creepy jerk, but she really did think it was all Liquid’s fault he was even part of the insurrection in the first place. He’d come across as pretty clingy and was probably just trying not to disappoint him.)

“Alright, Commander Silverburgh,” the nurse said, stopping in front of a door on the very end of an otherwise-empty hallway in an apparently disused wing of the hospital, “this is Dr. Hunter’s room. It’s been… requested that you come in alone.”

“Really?” Meryl said, glancing at the security guard who didn’t even look at her. She shrugged. “Alright then.”

She stepped into the hospital room, closing the door behind her. She felt keenly aware of the fact that the hospital front desk was holding her sidearm, but after a quick glance around the room she relaxed. There was only one person in here, standing by the window with their back to Meryl; even if something did happen Meryl felt pret-ty confident she could take a hospital patient. Especially one who was thin enough that their gown hung off of them in amorphous drapes, obscuring their gender.

“Dr. Hunter?” Meryl said after a moment in which Dr. Hunter didn’t acknowledge her presence.

“Please, call me Naomi,” Dr. Hunter said — so she was a woman.

“Dr. Hunter, my name’s Meryl Silverburgh. I’m with the CID. I was told you had information regarding our current manhunt.”

“Oh, yes,” Naomi said, turning around. Meryl could already see that her hair was what would have been shoulder-length if it hadn’t been pulled back into a low, sloppy ponytail - though she also had loose bangs framing her face - but the eyepatch over her left eye was a bit of a surprise. “Yes, I have information on Liquid Snake.”
“How do you know him?” Meryl said, raising an eyebrow. Naomi’s tone of voice was oddly clipped, sort of… stilted.

“I used to be part of his unit… ah,” she rubbed her head with one hand, “what was it called again…? FOXGLOVE?”

“You mean FOXHOUND?” Meryl said, narrowing her eyes.

“Forgive me for forgetting,” Naomi said, “I was in a coma for three years, I only recently woke up.”

“Oh. I’m— wait, then how on earth do you have information?”

Naomi grinned joylessly, clapping her hands together. “The information doesn’t come from me per se,” she said, “I’m your cutout. Your go-between.”

“To?”

“…oh, of course you don’t know. Look, Meryl, if you have to ask then I can’t tell you.”

“Wha…?”

“Suffice to say it’s above your pay grade. That’s what they told me to say. ‘Your pay grade’.”

Meryl was silent. Suffice to say she had no idea what was going on right now.

She sighed and pressed on regardless. “It doesn’t matter to me how you got your information, I’d like to hear it.”

Naomi nodded. “There is a condition,” she said.

“I can’t make any promises.”

“You’re to take me with you.”

“Excuse me?”

Naomi waved a hand. “This isn’t an order from me,” she said, “you can confirm with your superiors if you want. True, it was my condition but I asked it of the people who sent you to me, not of you… I have unfinished business…”

“What was your position in FOXHOUND?” Meryl said warily.

Naomi didn’t answer that, instead pointed at her eyepatch. “It was a wolf who tore out my eye,” she said with complete sincerity, “the leader of her pack is the serpent I have information on. His brother is the one I want revenge on.”

“…”

“But, you know, there was a certain incident recently. One of his packmates got abducted…”

“…you mean Mantis?” Meryl said. “Yeah, I was there.”

“Abducted from our clutches.”

Meryl raised an eyebrow at the way she said “our”, but didn’t comment. At least Naomi being completely off her rocker cleared up the ‘above your pay grade’ thing. A tip was a tip, though - even
if Meryl *would* have to give the CID an earful about Naomi’s so-called condition. “You think those rumors about him being busted out are true.”

“Rumors? But they *are* true. ‘They’ think the fair serpent, Liquid, was the one who did it. But… if you had just rescued someone from being held prisoner, what would you do with them?”

Meryl considered it for a moment. “Get them medical attention,” she said. She figured that Mantis would continue to be kept drugged so he wouldn’t be a danger to anyone, himself included, so that probably wasn’t very good for his health, especially with things like aftereffects and withdrawal to deal with.

Naomi nodded. “So with that in mind, we’ve deduced a likely location for the two of them, and that information was handed to me to pass on to you.”

“Uh… sure. But why you specifically?”

That humorless smile again. “Because I’ve sold myself into their service for revenge. I will do anything asked of me.”

Mastincasiha.

“Hey,” said the hotel clerk to Mei Ling, “you look kind of familiar. Didn’t you used to live around here a few years back?”

“Not all Chinese people look the same, you know,” Mei Ling scolded.

“Uh— uh, right. I’m sorry, ma’am, that wasn’t what I meant. Um… you’re in room 200. Separate beds like you asked. Here’s your cardkeys. It’s on the left.”

“That was kind of mean,” Solidus said as soon as they were out of earshot of the flustered clerk.

Mei Ling shrugged. “I kind of figured there was a chance someone might recognize me around here — but, I think those of us at FOXHOUND were the only asians in the whole county. Say, is it really okay to just keep Frank in the car?”

“I cracked the windows for him… didn’t you see the ‘no pets’ sign?”

“That’s never stopped me before…”

In their hotel room, Mei Ling laid out a piece of paper over the bedside table (after Solidus dragged it away from the wall a bit so they could both lean over it) and drew a crude map of the FOXHOUND headquarters campus.

“The equipment I need is going to be either in the R&D labs or the medical labs,” Mei Ling said. “Back when FOXHOUND was still operational it was in both, so they should still be there, but we could go after whichever one is easiest.” She pointed at the west side of the larger building on the map. “This is the main building — these are the medical labs. They used to be over here,” she added, pointing at a separate building she drew with interrupted lines, “but this one, like, burned down back in 2003.”

“Where are the R&D labs? Is it this building?” Solidus said, pointing at the third and final box on the paper.

“Yeah. Each building has - or had - an emergency generator, but the master control switch for power
to the whole facility was in the main building, near where the furnace was... it was near the residential quarters, I think,” Mei Ling said, sketching out dividing walls in the main headquarters building, the tapping the section on the opposite side of the building as the med labs with her pen. “Right around here.”

“Do you know of any security measures besides the Cyphers?”

“Well, there was an electric fence, but it’s probably just a regular fence now. Maybe we should bring boltcutters. They’re in the trunk, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Yeah, other than that I think we just need to worry about Cyphers. You’re sure they can’t catch up with Frank, right? What if they flank him?”

“Their targeting wouldn’t be able to track him even if they did catch up with him. As long as he keeps moving then he shouldn’t be hit.”

“Unless by chance…”

“How much time will you need to replicate the amount of nanomachines you need?” Solidus said, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

Mei Ling balked. “Um... first I’d have to see if the old equipment’s still compatible with this design of nanomachines, since it’s a lot newer. I was planning on duplicating the nanomachines seven times, to give us a total of eight vials... oh, and we’ll need syringes, too. But I think, so that junkies wouldn’t come steal the leftover ones, the only sharps left behind are under lock and key.”

“So should we focus on the main building?”

“What’s your opinion on splitting up?”

Solidus shook his head. “The only reason to split up would be to mutually keep the Cyphers’ attention off of the other. We have the dog for that.”

“I’m leaning towards the R&D building, though,” Mei Ling said. “The equipment we used to create nanomachines was a lot newer and more advanced than the equipment in the med labs.”

“Why didn’t you just say that to start with?” Solidus said, then took a pen. “Alright, see how this sounds for a plan: We send in the dog first. He draws the attention of the Cyphers and keeps them occupied - they typically ignore animals but if one is running around and has a collar then they will take notice. They may even simply follow him around without firing at all. Anyway, once we’re sure that the fire is off us, we cross the fence and head towards the R&D building.”

“‘We’? So we’re sticking together.”

“Would a standard syringe work for nanomachines?”

Mei Ling thought about it. “Yes, but not the tiny little insulin needles you can get a pharmacy. We need at least a 25 gauge, the kind doctors use for vaccines.”

“You can still get those at pharmacies.”

“You can? Really?”

“Yes. Not all of them, but yes. So we can skip the main building entirely — once we’re inside, you’ll
head directly for the labs and I’ll find the backup generator and turn it on. I presume that’ll be enough power.”

Mei Ling nodded. “The backup generator’s mostly just to run the lights, heating, and fridges and stuff, but give me five minutes with a pair of insulated pliers and I can get the nano-constructors up and running.”

“You amaze me,” Solidus said.

She giggled. “I’ll be counting on you for backup, Solidus. Let’s not get ourselves killed over some Codec tech, alright?”

“Of course.”
“Hey, Snake? We might have trouble out front.”

“What’s going on?” Solid said, tossing his smoldering cigarette butt onto the lawn (still wet from the rain earlier in the day) and stepping inside off the back porch.

“Well, it could be nothing,” Otacon said, shrugging hesitantly, “but there’s been a Corvette slowly circling the street for the past ten minutes. I… think they might be trying to find our address.”

“Really? Damn.” Solid picked up his SOCOM and racking the slide. “You’re right, that could be trouble. I’ll handle it.”

“What are you going to…? What are we doing, Snake?”

“Not sure yet. I’ll stand by the front door and keep an eye on them, you throw our things together and wait in the car. We’ll need to leave quickly if these really are… well…”

“…right…”

“I’ll keep you updated.”

Otacon nodded and scurried off. Solid took up position by the door, peering out through the blinds — sure enough a red Corvette with a garbage-bagged window was idling in front of the safehouse, and as Solid watched it shut off. The driver’s side door opened.

…did Solid know this kid? She looked familiar. He definitely didn’t know the scruffy brunet with a cane who got out of the car after she did, though. And judging by the way they seemed to be talking to each other, they appeared pretty close. So if Solid had met her somewhere before, then he… wait…

Wait. Wait a minute.

He did know this kid, Solid realized as she strode up to the door - he quickly stepped back from the window before she could notice him. He knew her because he had met her somewhere before: FOXHOUND headquarters, last seen twelve years ago. She’d been just a kid back then, elementary school-aged, but shit that would put her in her twenties now. She certainly looked it. Solid felt old.

Catherine hesitated for just a moment before knocking on the door.

Solid stayed still and silent, gun still out. Maybe he should wait and see what Catherine should do - what the hell was she doing here? She knocked again after a few moments, then made some muffled conversation with her limping companion. Sounded like they were wondering if this was the right address or not. But how’d they even get this— Solid’s Codec beeped.

“So what’s going on over there? It’s been quiet,” Otacon said.

Solid grunted. “Master Miller’s daughter just showed up on our doorstep,” he replied in an undertone.

“His what? He had kids?”
“Just the one. I don’t know what she-“

“Let her in, Snake, I’ll be right there.” He signed off.

Solid gave the door a dubious look, but - lowering the Mk23 to his side, not putting it down - cracked it open as Otacon suggested.

“What are you doing here, kid?”

“Snake? Is that you?” Catherine said, trying to see into the house.

“What are you doing here?”

“Ocelot sent us,” her boyfriend(?) said. “So we don’t really know either.”

“Great. Who are you?”

“C’mon, Snake, open the door,” Catherine said, grabbing the doorknob. “I haven’t seen you in years, let me say hi properly.”

Somewhat reluctantly, Solid opened the door. Catherine immediately lunged forward to embrace him, despite the cane-carrying man exclaiming, “Cathy, don’t! He’s got a gun!”

“I missed you, Snake,” Catherine said brightly, then added in a scolding tone: “You still smell like cigarettes.”

“Uh…” Solid said.

Catherine ducked down and pressed her ear against Solid’s chest. “I can’t believe this, Snake! Your breathing sounds awful, these are smoker’s lungs!”

Solid coughed self-consciously, grabbing her shoulders and pushing her away to arm’s-length. “I am a smoker, Cath,” he said.

“A fifty-year-old smoker’s lungs,” Catherine chided. “Aren’t you only in your mid-thirties?”

“Ugh…”

“So this is Master Miller’s daughter, you said?” Otacon said, poking his head out around the corner. He blinked at the other guy. “You look familiar. You don’t write for a magazine, do you?”

The guy nodded. “MEGASURPRISE magazine,” he said. “Name’s Gary McGolden. You a fan or something?”

“More like a casual reader, but I know a guy who’d probably ask you to sign his chest… so, who…?”

“This is Catherine Miller,” Solid said to him. “No, I don’t know what they’re doing here.”

“Ocelot gave us this address,” McGolden said.

“You know Ocelot?” Otacon said.

Catherine scowled. “He’s been stringing us along on weird plans of his since 2005.”

“He kind of just saved our lives, though,” McGolden said.
“It was his fault we were there in the first place, he was trying to kill us!”

“…can you start from the beginning?” Solid said. “I really want to figure out why Ocelot would send you here. Does this mean you’re on our side?”

“I don’t know what ‘your side’ really is, Snake,” Catherine said. “I… I honestly thought you were dead.”

“I’m pretty sure I am, legally.”

“Come on in,” Otacon said, “Snake, put your gun down.”

“Mmph.”

“By the way, I’m—"

“—Dr. Hal Emmerich, the ‘Shadow Moses martyr’,” McGolden said, nodding, “yup. I’ve been saying this whole time that you were still alive.”

“Erm… right. Just call me Otacon. Um… Snake and I are the only ones here right now. We split off from the others about three or four weeks ago.”

McGolden glanced at Solid. “You know, you look pretty much the way I thought you’d look, the way Cathy described you. Except… a bit scruffier… not that that’s a bad thing!”

“A lot’s happened between now and the last time I was around her,” Solid said, eyeing McGolden warily. “Okay. Just tell us what exactly’s going on...”

Catherine and McGolden exchanged glances. “We got kidnapped by the Patriots,” McGolden said very seriously. “But then Ocelot showed up and gave Cathy a new gun, so she was able to get us out of there.” Catherine glanced to the side, frowning, as he said that.

“Yes…” she said, “but anyway, the reason why he helped was because it was his fault we were there in the first place. See, McGolden and I are together because I sort of hired him two years ago to help me find my father, since he disappeared right after Shadow Moses.”

“Oh, yeah,” Solid said. “That must have been when Ocelot convinced him to leave his home to come fight against the Patriots.”

“So it’s Ocelot’s fault he was gone in the first place?” McGolden said.

“Of fucking course it was,” Catherine snarled. “Anyway, our search led us to King Cove, since we wanted to see if we could find any clues about what happened at Shadow Moses itself at the abandoned supply depot… that’s where we were abducted… but Ocelot had helped us get there because he was hoping the Patriots would kill us so that they couldn’t use me as a bargaining chip against Daddy!”

“…I think I see the flaw in his plan there,” Otacon said awkwardly, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“Actually, the security system’s automated,” McGolden said. “If our faces hadn’t been in their databanks, we would have been killed. It’s just that the Patriots knew we were coming, and Ocelot didn’t know that part.”

“Oh.”

“After we escaped the facility,” Catherine continued, “we ran into Ocelot again. He gave us this
address but didn’t tell us anything about what we were supposed to do, but we figured it was… some kind of recruitment thing.”

“And we’re already involved, right?” McGolden said. “So we came.”

“Uh… right,” Solid said.

“You’re part of some kind of resistance against the Patriots, right? You might be able to use us. I’m really good at gathering information - well, maybe that’s a bit redundant, but wider networks catch more leads — and, uh, helping people disappear and stuff. All the paperwork that goes with that. I can type.”

“And I’m a nurse,” Catherine said, “I’m sure you need medical personnel, right?”

“Oh, I know we need her, Snake,” Otacon said, then turned back to Catherine and McGolden.

“Okay, so there’s also—”

“Otacon, hang on,” Solid said, pulling him away from the other two for a minute. “Are you sure this is a good idea?” he said quietly.

“What’s the matter? You already know Catherine, right?”

“I knew her when she was ten.”

“But she’s Master Miller’s daughter, and from the sound of it she’s pretty close to him. Plus if Ocelot gave them this address…”

“They could be lying to us. It is definitely her, but… who knows what she’s really thinking? She’s an adult now, there’s no guarantee she’s following in Master’s footsteps.”

“Well, did Master Miller say anything about her to you in the past couple years?”

“Hrm… two years ago he mentioned that he moved up to Alaska after she went off to college. I guess they still lived together up until that point, but that doesn’t mean they were close, or alike really…”

Otacon glanced back at them. They were both silently waiting, somewhat tensely, for them to finish their muttered conversation. “They seem trustworthy.”

“Otacon, the last time I decided to trust someone just because I happened to have met them a few years before, Raven died. The only reason why the rest of FOXHOUND didn’t skin me alive afterwards was because they got distracted by Liquid almost going the same way.”

“Oh…” Otacon cringed. “Yeah. I guess you have a point. …though it probably also helped that Ocelot covered the whole break-in up afterwards.”

Solid narrowed his eyes. “Ocelot did that? Are you sure?”

“Well… who else would it be? He’s got connections in the CIA, doesn’t he? Wolf mentioned it once.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he were capable of it, but… I don’t think anybody’s even once heard him say anything about that in the past two years. Shouldn’t he have taken some kind of credit for it at some point?”

“…where are you going with this?”
Solid shook his head. “Nevermind. That was off-topic. Maybe that’s just another example of Ocelot being weird, anyway. The point is that we can’t trust Catherine - or McGolden - just because I already knew one of them.”

“But if Ocelot was the one who sent them to us…”

“Do we really trust Ocelot?”

“Do we have a choice?”

There was a long pause. The implicit answer was no.

Solid sighed, walking back over to Catherine and McGolden. “Do you have any… I dunno, proof that Ocelot was the one who gave you this address?”

“Actually, we do,” McGolden said, digging a CD sleeve out of his pocket and handing it to Solid. “You know what his handwriting looks like, right?”

“…”

“Let me see,” Otacon said, taking it. “…well, I’m pretty sure this is his, but I could always send a picture to W.-” he caught Solid’s eye, “—to one of our teammates who knows him better than we do, and see what she has to say. I’ll go do that now.” He left.

“Great,” Catherine said. “So if she says it’s Ocelot’s handwriting - which it is - then you know that we’re on your side.” She clenched her fists, scowling again. “Whatever you all are doing to take down the Patriots… I want in. These past couple weeks have just… I… my whole life…” McGolden patted her shoulder, and she looked to the side again. “This is ridiculous,” she muttered.

There was a slight pause. “You’re really just like your father, kid?” Solid said at length.

“Huh?” Catherine blinked at him.

“That’s what it said on the paper.”

“Oh. Yeah. Yeah, that was Ocelot’s assessment of me. I… don’t know yet if that was intended as a good or a bad thing.”

“Hm.” Solid had no reason to believe that Ocelot and Miller didn’t get along, but he wasn’t sure that Catherine actually knew about the whole ‘they evidently used to fuck’ thing. Maybe he shouldn’t tell her.

“Wolf says this is definitely Ocelot’s handwriting,” Otacon said, returning. “So… they must be legit, Snake.”

McGolden smiled. “So can we join you?”

“Uh… I guess?” Solid said, “I don’t know, I’m just a grunt. I’m honestly not sure who is in charge here.”

“Isn’t it Ocelot?” Otacon said.

“Is it? You’d think he’d pick up his Codec more often in that case. Actually, I think it’s supposed to be Solidus.”

“Then we need to get in touch with him.”
Nadine stalked in, scowling. Miller only barely glanced up at her before turning back to the gun he was cleaning.

“J’en ai ral le cul,” she growled, “ce salaud… pourquoi suis-je la seule qui le soupçonne?”

“Nadine,” Miller said, “you know I don’t speak-“

“Aret donn grenn, kouyon,” she snapped. “You speak Spanish, that should be close enough to get the gist of what I am saying.”

“Not when you slip into your weird island creole,” Miller said. “What are you upset about this time?”

“Ocelot,” she said, sitting down across from him with a huff and crossing her arms and her legs.

“Join the club.”

“Shut up, Bene. I know you know him very well. Very intimately well.”

“Yeah. We fucked, Nadine. Get over it.”

“This isn’t about that!” She snorted. “The rumor mill never stops turning. I’ve heard some interesting things.”

“About him?”

“Close enough to him. That terrorist you gave us the information on, who was captured… you know he disappeared? Someone came and broke him out.”

Miller’s hands stilled. “Really?”

“Yes, a while ago. One of our men was killed in the process, Jameson or Jameston or something. Apparently this happened just before you officially defected.”

“I see.” He went back to cleaning his gun.

Nadine eyed him suspiciously. “…you knew already,” she said.

“…”

She glanced away, huffing again. “You probably saw this coming, didn’t you? From what I hear, per the La Li Lu Le Lo’s conclusion about this… the version of events they’re going with is that Liquid Snake was the one who ‘rescued’ his comrade. Personally, I think.”

“It’s not like that’s out-of-character for him,” Miller said, “though you sound like you don’t believe it.”

“Of course I don’t, it’s too convenient,” Nadine said with a sneer. “Apparently just before this happened Ocelot was asking around about Stickbug’s location…”

“Mantis,” Miller corrected. “And Ocelot’s supposed to be ‘working for’ Liquid, remember? What’s he supposed to do if Liquid asks him to find where Mantis is so he can go rescue him - refuse?”

“No, but…”

“You’re being ridiculous, Nadine.”
She glared at him. “Ocelot was obviously involved, but that doesn’t even matter — this would all be perfectly normal if not for this strange rumor going around.”

“Strange rumors about Ocelot of all people?” Miller said disinterestedly. “Color me surprised.”

“Apparently before Jameston or Jameson or whoever was killed, he said… *something* to an old partner of his. I heard it was something about some sort of test of Ocelot’s loyalty, and if he didn’t make it back…”

“…then what?”

“Then I don’t know. I didn’t talk to this former partner myself, I don’t even know his name. What I *do* know is that he died suddenly in a car accident mere days after the terrorist escaped.”

“And that’s what makes you so suspicious of Ocelot.”

Nadine crossed her legs the other way. “That’s what makes me wonder why he isn’t under some kind of investigation already. He’s always pulling this sort of thing, isn’t he?”

“Why are you here, Nadine?” Miller sighed, finishing up with his gun.

She frowned at him. “I already told you. You know Ocelot.”

“Doesn’t mean I can tell you what he’s up to, or if he’s even up to something at all.”

“…”

“You know that.” He raised an eyebrow at her. “What are you really here for?”

“What do you mean?” Nadine said icily.

“In general. You keep coming by to bother me - I’ve seen more of you in the last month than everyone else combined. Why?”

“Someone needs to keep an eye on you. No?”

“Yeah, but why *you*? You hate me.”

She turned her head deliberately to the side, scowling again.

“…don’t you?” Miller said, scrutinizing her thoughtfully.

“I’ve certainly never loved you,” she said coolly.

“…real flattering to hear from your ex-wife here, Nadine.”

She shot him an *Eat a dick* look. “Do I need some kind of ulterior motive? I was asked to keep an eye on you. I wasn’t exactly busy.”

“Maybe I should expand my ‘In general,’” Miller said, leaning back in his chair. “If you never loved me, why the hell’d you stick around for so long after we got married?”

Nadine was silent.

“You could have just ghosted after I knocked you up and left Catherine on my doorstep later,” Miller said, “or you could have ran off as soon as your nine months were up. The only important thing for
you was to make sure I had a kid, right? …it’s not like I would have kicked her to the curb if you weren’t around. You know that, you’ve always known that.”

“Why I stayed with you so long is my business,” Nadine said coldly, “and mine alone. If it means anything to you, I do regret it. It wasted my time.”

“Wasted mine, too. And Catherine’s.”

“…”

“You should have just left her on my doorstep. It wouldn’t have changed much.”

Nadine stood up, her chair scraping the floor loudly as she did. Her perfect nails scratched the tabletop. “Don’t you ever imply,” she snarled, “that our daughter doesn’t mean anything to me. I said I never loved you, not that I never loved Catou.”

“Oh?” Miller said, glowering. “You didn’t seem to care much about her being kidnapped and held hostage by our ‘employers’.”

“She’s fine. She is a grown woman and can handle herself. …she even tricked a guard into letting her escape.”

“…what?”

“I wasn’t supposed to tell you that,” Nadine said, sweeping out of the room. Miller stood up.

“Nadine, wait—“

The door slammed.

“…the fuck is wrong with her?”

Chapter End Notes

Nadine: (standard French) I’m so fucking fed up/tired of this. That bastard… why am I the only one who suspects him? (seselwa) Cut the bullshit, dumbass.

“Bene” (pronounced like Bené, dropping the last syllable of Benedict), is a more French-style nickname for Benedict than “Ben”. Normally she’d just call him “Benedict” but she’s annoyed here. Also she probably used a slightly cheesier and even Frencher hypocorism when they were married, something like Benot or Nene.
“—and you think you can vouch for them? Then keep the nurse around, she would definitely be an asset. I don’t care about the other man. …really, how am I supposed to know what to do with him? Isn’t that sort of thing already handled? …well, have you tried calling Oce— I see. What- no, that is not my solution to— well you could try calling EVA. Do you have her frequency?”

Solidus paused thoughtfully. Mei Ling gave him a funny look, then looked back at the road.

“Just see if she needs him. Keep the nurse with you… actually, it’d be best to keep her on-hand when anyone’s carrying out some kind of op, so— what? …no, of course not. Why? …you remember where FOXHOUND headquarters is, right?” Another pause. “No, we… should be fine, I was only thinking—— tch.” He frowned irritably. “He hung up.”

“That was Snake, right?” Mei Ling said.

“Yes. Evidently a new recruit and her plus-one just showed up on his doorstep.”

“Ahh. But you know, I don’t think I’m a fan of this ‘taking Codec calls while driving’ thing, Solidus.”

Solidus shook his head dismissively. “It’s nothing but flat land for miles and we haven’t actually passed anyone for nearly half an hour.”

“Yeah, yeah… anyway, so new people? Can we trust them?”

“Snake said we could, though he sounds dubious.”

“I can get why… I mean, after last time… this isn’t another mysterious old flame from years past, is it?”

“I don’t think so. He said he knew her when she was about six.”

“So I really hope not, anyway. How’d they find us?”

“Ocelot sent them.”

“Okay. So they must be legitimate, right?” She turned around in her seat, checking the road behind them. “We should be at headquarters soon… hey, Frank, you ready for a run?”

Frank barked, wagging his tail.

“Good dog!”

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(Former) FOXHOUND headquarters.

“So I vaguely know what Cyphers look like,” Mei Ling said, stepping out of the car and shielding her eyes against the sun, “but I don’t see any yet.”

“They don’t come out unless something trips their sensors,” Solidus said, opening the back door so
Frank could hop out. “It’d be a waste of power for them to patrol constantly - especially on a day like today, when it’s overcast.”

“Oh, they’re solar powered? Makes sense,” Mei Ling said, grabbing the bolt cutters and insulated pliers out of the trunk, and slipping the latter in her pocket. “Okay, let’s do this.”

“Just be aware that we can’t allow ourselves to be seen by the Cyphers at all,” Solidus said as they walked up to the fence. Mei Ling handed him the bolt cutters. “That would likely bring the Patriots down on our heads.”

“We’re so far out in the middle of nowhere that even if it’s instant transmission, we’ll be long gone by the time the Patriots get here even if we are seen,” Mei Ling replied flippantly as Solidus started dismantling the (already run-down) fence. “Either that or we would’ve already been shot by the time they get here.”

“I’d rather not be shot.”

“Okay, Frank, go get ‘em!” Mei Ling said, nudging Frank towards the hole in the fence.

Frank barked and bounded off into FOXHOUND’s campus. He sniffed around a bit, wagging his tail, and trotted off towards what once was the airfield. After about half a minute, a whirring sound started up and three Cyphers, one of which had a gun mount, rose into the air from behind the main building. Mei Ling and Solidus lingered tensely by the fence, but their cameras didn’t even sweep over them, instead fixating on Frank and lazily drifting over to him. Frank barked at them, dropping half his body to the ground in the universal canine ‘Let’s tussle!’ gesture, then jumped up and ran towards the opposite side of the compound as the hole in the fence. All three Cyphers followed placidly.

Mei Ling breathed a sigh of relief. “So they didn’t fire at him after all…”

“That’s understandable, it’d be a waste of bullets,” Solidus said. “As I said, he’d probably be ignored if he didn’t have a collar - I think they’re programmed to differentiate between wild and domesticated animals.” He stepped past the fence, gesturing for Mei Ling to follow. “Come. Sooner or later their rudimentary AIs are going to work out that Frank’s owner must be around here somewhere, so our time is limited.”

“Right. To the R&D building!”

Solidus glanced around as Mei Ling just walked directly there. He’d never been to the FOXHOUND headquarters before, but not a bit of how it looked surprised him - likely enough it would have looked ugly and run to seed even before Shadow Moses happened and the unit was diss solved. Both buildings were squat and square, though sprawling (especially the one they weren’t headed towards - the main one), and the exteriors were plain, drab concrete. Perhaps they would have looked a little cleaner when this place was still in operation, though. As for the grass - somehow the plantlife in the area between the main and R&D buildings had been permanently killed, and the former airfield looked patchy too, but other than that it was all knee-length.

“Animals trails,” Solidus mumbled, mostly to himself, “the fence must have been broken down in some place anyway. We didn’t need to cut it ourselves.”

“Too late now,” Mei Ling said with a shrug. “You know, now that I think about it… it’s a good thing we’re going to the R&D building. I heard that there’s a section in the main building somewhere where the wall and ceiling is only plywood.”
“What?”

“I don’t know. Ask Liquid about it, I guess, if he even remembers. But since it’s been a few winters, parts of the main building probably have water damage by now… if that effected the electrical system, then…”

“I understand.”

Predictably, the door to the R&D building was locked, but Mei Ling pointed out a window that lead directly into a hallway right next to where they needed to split off, and Solidus easily broke it with his elbow and picked the shards of glass out of the frame, and gave Mei Ling a boost to climb in before following.

“Okay,” Mei Ling said, tennis shoes crunching on the glass, “the lab is this way.” She pointed at the opposite end of the hallway. “The generator’s that way. There should be a sign on the door.” Solidus nodded. They split.

Solidus grumbled as he walked down the hallway; it was more or less completely dark, and unlike Mei Ling he didn’t really know anything about the layout of the building. He had a lighter on him, though, for as little reach as that had. In the dim, flickering light, not much stood out to him— oh wait, there was that door. Said BACKUP GENERATOR on it clear as day. Didn’t even seem to have a lock, either.

As Solidus opened the door, a few rats scuttled out, but they ignored him and he ignored them. “Are you ready for me to turn this on?” he said to Mei Ling over Codec.

“Just a… okay, go ahead! It should turn on the nanomachine printer and relevant computers now instead of a fridge somewhere. Uh… the lights’ll stay off, so wait for me to tell you it worked.”

“Okay. Here goes.” He threw the switch.

“…did you switch it on yet?”

“Nothing happened? …you don’t suppose this is broken, do you?”

“I hope not, because then we came all the way out here for nothing…”

“We could always try the backup generator in the main building, or the main generator.”

“Hmm… well, first try turning it off and back on again.”

“Really? Alright then,” Solidus said dubiously, pushing the switch back up and then pulling down again. “…so?”

“It flickered… oh, wait, it’s— yes, here we go! The power’s on! Meet me in the lab.”

“Where exactly is the-“ Mei Ling hung up. Solidus blinked.

The end of the hallway that Mei Ling had gone down was a t-shaped intersection, and Solidus saw no evidence of movement or activity down either hallway - at least in this lighting - so he picked left at random and walked down it silently. He passed labs, which were windowless, but upon closer inspection of the doors he saw a gap at the bottom through which he should be able to see at least a little light from the room Mei Ling was in - if not from the lights themselves, then from computer monitors.
His Codec rang. “Are you lost?” Mei Ling asked him.

“I might be. These are starting to look like residential quarters.”

“Oh. You went the wrong direction. That’s okay, I should be done soon. The Navy’s version of the Codec software is pretty close to mine, so it’s easy for me to jailbreak, and replication is simple.”

“I think I found your room. Is your last name—“

“You don’t need to go in there, I took everything with me when the unit dissolved!”

“Hm? I wasn’t planning to…” Mei Ling hung up on him again. Solidus was starting to think he didn’t really understand women.

Though Solidus could easily imagine both of his brothers going into Mei Ling’s room after effectively being told not to, he himself had no desire to and turned around instead, heading back down the hallway towards the labs. He had just spotted a door with flickering blue light seeping out from under crack when the light blinked off and, a moment later, Mei Ling stepped out, small black plastic carrying case in hand.

“Eight vials of Codec v2.7.4.1,” Mei Ling chirped, holding it out to him. “Let’s get the dog and get out of here!”

They came out the same way they came in, though Mei Ling did cut herself this time, so once they got back to the car Solidus had to get out the first aid kit—she insisted on patching herself up, though it wasn’t a bad wound, anyway. Solidus whistled for Frank. Frank came tearing towards the car, panting happily, the three Cyphers still following him around.

“!” “!” “!”

The Cyphers noticed the trespassers idling in the car just outside their patrol perimeter just as Frank was wriggling through the fence. Frank jumped in the car and Solidus slammed the door shut and kicked up dust behind them, driving away immediately, as the gun-mounted Cypher let loose a burst of bullets at them.

Too late, though. They were gone. Frank looked like he enjoyed himself.

“We’re going to have to get another car, aren’t we?” Mei Ling said as Solidus checked the rear-view mirror to see if the Cyphers were pursuing. They weren’t, but they stayed in the air at the edge of the campus. “They must have our license plate.”

“We just need to change the plate. I don’t think make and model will get us into much trouble.”

“Bulletholes might.”

“Oh, was the car actually hit?”

“…I guess we can check back at the hotel.”

Frank barked again.

“By the way, Solidus,” Mei Ling said, “thanks for this. I thought I’d be scared to do it, like I was with Fortune, but I wasn’t… since I knew you were around.”

“Hm…? Er, you’re welcome, I suppose. We… could use those Codecs, couldn’t we? Making sure that went off without a hitch is practically my duty. And you… you’re… you’re a very valuable
It had always been Liquid’s natural instinct to head towards a commotion.

When he got to the chapel - though he lingered on the doorstep, not quite passing the doorway and instead just cautiously peering around the edge - about two dozen PLA soldiers were surrounding four people in US military uniforms of some kind (which raised Liquid’s hackles immediately). Everyone had their weapons out, though for now neither side was actually pointing them at each other. The redheaded woman in the group of US military personnel was talking to one of the PLA soldiers rather casually.

“Eli, move,” EVA said, coming up behind Liquid. Liquid ducked out of the way, and EVA made a ‘stay here’ gesture as she passed. Liquid stayed put although he assumed she knew he wasn’t going to continue doing so if something came up.

“Alright,” EVA said, walking up to the redhead (who looked and sounded… really familiar, now that Liquid was thinking about it). “I’m Matka Pluku, what do you want?”

“We just have a few questions, ma’am,” the redhead said. “Your son is the former FOXHOUND commando and wanted Shadow Moses terrorist, Liquid Snake, isn’t he?”

One of the PLA soldiers made a chuckled comment in Czech, but judging by the look the redhead shot him she didn’t speak the language, either. EVA raised an eyebrow. “What’s it to you?”

“Ma’am, my name is Meryl Silverburgh—“ ohhhh so that’s who she was, “I’m with the United States Army Criminal Investigation Command, and…”

Liquid blinked. Hadn’t… hadn’t that sniper, Knockburn or Sleepy Quoll or whatever her name was, say that the group she had been working with back in Cape Town was the CID? Had they tracked him down here…? Silently he slipped into the crowd and gestured for one of the PLA grunts standing in the back to lend him his machete, which he did with a shrug.

“…tip that suggested that at that point your son may have sought asylum with you. So you’re suspected of harboring two fugitives. At least two fugitives.”

“You’re the one who shot Mantis?”

“I didn’t shoot anyone, ma’am. And we arrested him, he-“

“You stupid bint!” Liquid shouted, pushing his way to the front line and brandishing the machete at Meryl. EVA groaned and put her face in her hands. Meryl and the rest of the CID folks trained their guns on him, prompting the PLA soldiers to also raise their weapons. “I’ll maul you for what you did!!”

“L-Liquid!”

“Eli, knock it off!” EVA shouted, “we don’t need a firefight in here!”

“No, we don’t,” Liquid snarled, “because I’ll tear her apart with my bare hands!”

Meryl’s eyes flicked down to Liquid’s bandaged, missing right forearm, but aside from her mouth drawing into a thin line, she didn’t comment.
“Commander, what should we-“ one of her guys started, but she shushed them.

“Stand down,” EVA said to her troops. “Stand down. We don’t want trouble.”

“Hand over Liquid,” Meryl said.

“No,” EVA said. “He’s not going anywhere.” She shot a glare at Liquid. Liquid grit his teeth.

“I thought I lost him,” he growled.

“Is Mantis here now?” Meryl said, “because he’s also—“

“You ungrateful cow! You know if it hadn’t been for him and I you would have been raped back at Shadow Moses!”

“Wh-what!?"

“Wait, is that what happened to Holwell?” one of her other men said. Hmm. Were they all Shadow Moses survivors, or just the two of them?

“Both of you shut up!” Meryl said, “Matka Pluku, are there any other-“

“I’m not handing them over,” EVA said, crossing her arms.

“You’ll have to go through me first,” Liquid said, jabbing the machete at her for emphasis.

“Eli, go back downstairs. Silverburgh, we have you outnumbered here.” Meryl was silent, narrowing her eyes, but she still had yet to signal for her men to start firing.

“How did you even find us?”

“We tailed one of you all the way here!” said the CID grunt who’d made the comment about Holwell a moment ago.

“What? Is that true?” EVA said, glancing over the assembled PLA group.

“U-Um… sorry…” Radka said sheepishly. “I didn’t notice them…” A couple other soldiers groaned sourly.

“Matka Pluku,” Meryl said, drawing the attention back to herself, “we’re with the US Army and we have the cooperation of the Czech government. If you don’t hand over the fugitives—“

“That’s not happening,” EVA said flatly.

“I’d rather negotiate a peaceful surrender,” Meryl said. “Hand them over now and only you will be prosecuted - the rest of your… security company… won’t be charged with anything.”

“No.”

“I’m going to kill you,” Liquid said.

“Eli, go back downstairs! You don’t need to be here.”

“She’s the one who—!”

“Eli!”
“You can’t hide him forever,” Meryl said, “but I’ve been instructed to do this quietly. So we’ll give you… three days to hand him over peacefully. Don’t even think about trying to escape, this position will be monitored closely and if you haven’t surrendered by the time 72 hours are up then your headquarters will be raided and we’ll outnumber you. And all of you will be held criminally responsible for harboring fugitives.”

“Try anything and I’ll skin you alive, Silverburgh!”

“Eli, shut up! You’re not helping!”

Meryl sighed and motioned for her group to start backing towards the door. PLA kept their guns trained on them as they did, but still neither EVA nor Meryl was willing to open fire. They had just reached the door when it was thrown open behind them, by a woman in a white coat. She had an eyepatch over her left eye.

“Dr. Hunter!” Meryl said, glancing over her shoulder. “You were supposed to stay in the van!”

“Wait, what?” Liquid said, blinking, “Dr. Hunter?”

“Naomi?” EVA said.

“What?! You’re supposed to be dead!”

Naomi grabbed one of the CID guy’s guns as she passed and strode up to the front of the group, pointing it at EVA. “Whore mother of serpents!” she shrieked at her.

“…what?” EVA said.

“How the fuck are you still alive?” Liquid said, pointing his machete at her instead. “Wolf shot you. In the face.”

“That wolf tore out my eye, yes,” Naomi said, still approaching. EVA glanced around at her troops. “And sunk me into a deep sleep for three years…”

“She was in a coma,” Meryl said, almost apologetically, “whatever exactly happened, the bullet got embedded in a brain tumor, so it managed to be operable.”

“She’s kind of nuts right now,” the other Shadow Moses survivor in Meryl’s group said.

“Dr. Hunter, you need to get back h—“

“You killed him! And he wanted it, too!”

Naomi screamed. She lunged towards Liquid, but Liquid swept the machete, catching her gun and knocking it out of her hand — one of the PLA people nearby caught it neatly. He sneered at her.

“I killed him! And he wanted it, too!”

“Pathetic,” he said. “You really hate me now, don’t you?”
“You killed my brother!” she snarled at him, holding the hand that had just been holding the gun - one of her nails had been torn down to the bed when Liquid knocked the pistol away. A few drops of blood dripped to the floor. “Damn you… I’ll have my revenge!”

“Dr. Hunter, get back here,” Meryl said, “you don’t want to antagonize these people!”

“Why’d we bring her in the first place, commander?” the only CID man who hadn’t spoken yet said.

“I don’t know, it was an order! That’s why she was supposed to stay in the van!”

“You’ll… you’ll feel my curse,” Naomi growled at Liquid, “you’ll suffer for what you did, I’ll make sure of it—”

“I’d like to see you try,” Liquid said mockingly. “I have something you’ll never have.”

Naomi cocked her head at him. “What?” she said with a scoff, “a close bond with your comrades? friendship? love?”

“Do I look like the protagonist of a bloody Saturday morning cartoon? I’ve been an active duty soldier since I was seven, you daft bitch. I have decades of combat experience on you.”

“…did he say ‘seven’?” one of the CID men said.

“You’ll never be on my level, Dr. Hunter, so don’t even bother trying. Challenge me again and I will— no, I suppose Wolf will kill you. It’s just not like her to not finish the job, you know? She’d be terribly upset if I were the one to finish her hunt. But don’t worry. I’m sure she’ll appreciate hearing your location.”

“Glad to know you’re taking this seriously,” EVA muttered, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Eli, get out of here. You’re making things worse.”

“You should probably listen to your mother, I think,” one of the PLA people said to Liquid. Liquid only glanced at them dismissively, then returned to Naomi, smirking now.

“Oh, that’s right,” he said, “I suppose I do have one of those silly things that you don’t have. I have living family.”

It was a low blow but it hit Naomi hard — she screeched, lunging towards Liquid again, reaching out to stab her nails into his eyes, but he leaned back slightly and flipped the machete in his hand, punching her hard in the stomach with the handle of it. It knocked the breath out of her and he easily kicked her away, into one of PLA soldiers, who caught her. She tore herself out of their grasp with an angry wheeze.

And then she did something unexpected: She had apparently learned CQC sometime between waking up and tagging along with the CID team. It was clumsy but fast and EVA’s men weren’t trained on it. Before anyone could react Naomi had grabbed a nearby PLA soldier by the shoulder, snatched his gun, flipped him to the ground, and, with her foot on his neck keeping him pinned there, shot him in the face with a resounding crack.

“Záviš!” EVA yelled.

Every gun in the chapel, CID’s included, was now trained on Naomi. “Nestřílejte,” EVA said as she grabbed Liquid by the arm roughly and shoved him back, stalking towards Naomi and Meryl, her expression murderous.
“Take this woman and go,” she said quietly. “I’m not about the have the consequences of her death down on my head.”

Meryl started. “Matka P—“

“Get out of my headquarters.”

The other Shadow Moses survivor grabbed Naomi’s wrist, and the CID group quickly backed out of the church, leaving PLA (plus Liquid) standing silently with a corpse on the floor.

EVA clenched her hands. “Mirek, Boris, Władysław — with me. We’re pursuing.” She raised her voice slightly. “That ’72 hours’ thing was bullshit. I fully expect them to double back and launch their raid while I’m out, or else to have already had troops ready to go. My son’s in charge in the meantime.”

Liquid stepped forward. “But—“

“No, Eli. You’re the only one here with actual combat experience in the last five years. Make sure no one else dies on me. And don’t do something stupid like turn yourself in.”

“…”

“…besides, Mantis is one of their targets too. You want to be here to make sure they don’t get him, right?”

“…” Liquid nodded. “I’d better go check on him, actually. He was wandering around half an hour ago.”

“Take care of everyone, Eli.”

Chapter End Notes

If this was a dating sim (and don’t lie to yourself, this series would make a GREAT dating sim) then when Solidus finds Mei Ling’s old room there’d be a >Respect her wishes and go find the lab >Go in and see what she’s hiding choice that would lead to some kind of whacky CG if you picked the latter option.

EVA’s Czech line is just “Stand down”/“Don’t shoot”. Thank you Nagat for translation.
“Where the hell is Mantis?! Find him!! Is anyone else unaccounted for?”

“No, it’s just him,” said the PLA soldier Liquid was yelling at. “Except for the three who went with Matka Pluku and… and Záviš… everyone is here.”

“But if they’d gotten Mantis then the Americans would contact us about it, right?” Radka said, “send someone back to tell you that they had him so that you’d surrender on your own! He must be around here somewhere.”

“Um,” said another woman, sidling up, “Dmytro said he saw him go outside a while ago, before the Americans showed up.”

“Outsi-?!”

“To the garden, I mean! I think…”

“I’ll go- I’ll go check right now. Hang on.”

He barely spared a glance at Záviš, who was covered in a spare white (now bloodstained) sheet but hadn’t been moved yet, as he rushed through the chapel on his way to the small fenced-in yard behind the garage. He looked around - in some abstract way he could sense that Mantis was nearby, but he couldn’t see— oh, there he was. Sitting on the grass by a bush.

“What are you doing out here?” Liquid cried, running up to him and dropping to his knees next to him. He grabbed Mantis by the shoulder and turned him to face him when he just impassively shrugged. “How long have you- do you know what’s happened just now?”

“I heard a commotion inside,” Mantis said, “and a gunshot. So I thought it would be better if I stayed out here, since returning inside meant going through the chapel.”

“…you probably have a point. But still - Jesus, you worried me, Mantis. Why are you even out here in the first place?”

“I was just… watching,” Mantis said, looking back at the bush, “there’s a spiderweb here… it caught a fly. I was watching the spider eat it.”

“For forty-five minutes? …come on, Mantis, let’s go back inside. It’s dangerous out here right now.”

“Oh, it is?” he said as Liquid helped him up. “What was the commotion about, anyway?”

“The CID again. Do you remember them? They’re the ones who abducted you in Cape Town - they came back.”

“Wh…? Oh, that is not good.”

“No, it’s not. They said we had three days to surrender but we’re anticipating a raid any minute now. You’re not ready for that kind of thing again, so I need you to stay in headquarters where it’s safe. … relatively safe. …there are others between you and the enemy.”
“Who was that?” Mantis said, nodding at Záviš’ corpse.

“Er… that reminds me, I need to get in touch with Wolf right about now, too…”

“No, I promise, you’d look great,” Octopus said, “really.”

“No, I would look stupid,” Wolf said. “Why are you so insistent on this?”

“I just want to see how it’d work out.”

“What’s the matter with giving me a new ear without making it all pointy at the tip? …especially since you’d have to make my intact ear pointy too, so it would match.”

“I think it’d look really cool, that’s all,” Octopus said, stirring his coffee. “I still think you’d make a great elf, Wolf.”

“But I don’t want to be an elf!”

“And elves are traditionally archers. They’re the snipers of high fantasy!”

“Forget it, I am operating perfectly fine missing half of my right e- oh, hang on,” she said, touching the side of her neck.

“Codec ringing?” Octopus said.

“Go ahead, boss,” Wolf said, staring vaguely off into space.

Octopus shrugged, drinking his coffee. Bêdeng rested her chin on his knee, wagging her tail. “Not for dogs,” Octopus muttered to her. “Or wolves.”

“What?!” Wolf said suddenly, jumping up out of her chair. Benedict also jumped up, yawning and stretching. “Really!?”

“I hope it’s good news,” Octopus said to Bêdeng. Bêdeng chuffed.

“Wait, start over. How did this happen? What was- oh. Oh.” She paused. “Wait… the ones Quoll told us about? She is? And then…” Another pause. “Well, at least there were minimal casualties.”

“…does not sound like good news,” Octopus commented.

“But yes, I will be there as soon as I can. I must finish my hunt… even if the reason she isn’t dead is just… …right. Exactly that. Take care.” She blinked, then turned back to Octopus, grimacing. “Have you ever heard of someone getting shot in the head, but only receiving nonlethal brain damage because a conveniently-placed brain tumor prevented the bullet from travelling far enough into the brain for it to be considered inoperable, so instead of dying they simply are in a coma for about three years?”

“Haha, what?” Octopus said, “hell no. Who…?”

“Dr. Naomi.”

“Hooooly shit. That’s insane. What kind of complete hack would even write a development like that? And we’re supposed to just accept this as real life?”

“I do not know, but regardless this means that she is still alive, and therefore I have to kill her.”
“Great. Have fun with that.”

“…are we splitting up, then?”

“Yeah,” Octopus said, leaning back in his chair and stretching. “Take the dogs with you, if Naomi’s in the boss’ location then you can drop Benedict off with him. That’ll probably cheer him up after the whole ‘amputation’ thing… me, I’m going to take this opportunity to do a little digging.”

“About what?”

“I want to look into Snake’s weird ex-girlfriend.”

Though the atmosphere remained tense, everything had been quiet the past few hours. Záviš’ body was dealt with, perimeter checks all came back with nothing to report, talk spread about evacuating headquarters and relocating permanently. Liquid didn’t weigh in - he was sure they were being watched, but he was also sure EVA already had some kind of contingency plan in place just for this kind of situation. He just didn’t know what it was. Eventually she called back and said that Naomi and the CID team had driven into Germany - using the road that would eventually lead them to Grafenwöhr and the US Army base there.

“…so we’ll be back in about two and a half hours,” she said. “Anything going on on your end?”

“Nothing so far. You don’t think they were serious about that stupid three days thing, do you? I think they’re more likely to try attacking tonight…”

“I’m not sure. Definitely don’t let your guard down, but if it’s that Silverburgh woman who’s calling the shots here, then… well, she seemed earnest to me. Besides, it wouldn’t be in anybody’s best interests to start a battle in the middle of a major population center. If anything they should want to drive us out of Prague first.”

“You have a point. I’ve been kind of assuming you actually have a plan here, so—“

“Of course I have a plan! Just hold down the fort until I get back. …by the way, how is Mantis doing?”

“Couldn’t find him for about fifteen minutes but he’s safe and sound now. If a little frightened. Perhaps I should have left out the bit about this CID team being the ones who abducted him in Cape Town.”

“Oh well. As long as you know where everyone is. See you soon.” She signed off.

A nearby soldier caught Liquid’s eye, and he sighed to himself. “Sisken—“ he started, then corrected himself: “sorry, Čížek, wasn’t it? Listen, about your brother…”

“Oh, no,” Blažej said, shaking his head. “It’s… well, it’s not fine, but it’s not your fault either.”

“Don’t bother with that. Look, I know that I picked the wrong woman to antagonize.”

“It’s not bother with that. Look, I know that I picked the wrong woman to antagonize.”

“I should have accounted for the possibility.”

Blažej kept shaking his head. “You’d disarmed her. And Záviš was caught off-guard, too, really he should have been able to counter that, but…”
Liquid snorted in frustration. “You realize that if I weren’t here then that entire CID group would never have-?”

“Do you think I care about that?” Blažej said. “I don’t. I don’t care that you’re here and I don’t care that you and your boyfriend or whatever he is are wanted by the US Army. Back when I was on your R&D team, I always thought you were a good guy, so no matter what happened at Shadow Moses… if you ask me, that was never terrorism. Whatever the hell you did up there was… probably the right thing.”

Liquid frowned. He’d been expecting a heavy conversation, but not in this direction.

“…anyway, I’m not mad about Záviš. That woman is a lunatic and I’m sure she would have done that no matter what you, or anyone else said or didn’t say. And I don’t think it’s your fault that they came here in the first place any more than I think it’s Radka’s fault for being tailed here and giving away our location.” He shrugged. “Actually, I am mad. Of course I’m mad. But not at Radka or Matka Pluku or you or anyone else in FOXHOUND. This is the CID’s fault, and whoever it was who ordered that redhead to bring that fucking weirdo from the old medical team here.”

“…right. Alright.”

“Yeah. What, you feel bad or something?”

“I just wanted to clear the air about it before it became an issue.”

Blažej barked out a laugh. “I always knew you were a sociopath like the rest of your unit. But hey, thanks. Even if you don’t really care about Záviš’ fate, that bizarre attempt at some kind of apology did make me feel better about my little brother dying right in front of me.”

“I… you’re welcome?”

“Mostly because I know you’ve already sicced Wolf on that bitch who shot him, haven’t you?” Blažej continued. “You said she was her prey, right? Doesn’t that mean Wolf will tail her to the ends of the earth?”

“Yes. I can’t say how long it will take, but Dr. Hunter will certainly be killed.”

“Good. I’ll leave the shady US government shit to you. …boss.” He saluted. Liquid blinked, then saluted back.

Of course not everyone handled it as well as Blažej. Someone found Radka crying in a closet later. Mantis stayed quietly in their room in the basement and only said that his head hurt when Liquid checked up on him.

Liquid was watching from the steeple when EVA and the other three returned, just past sundown. He dropped down to the church’s roof, slid down it to the garage’s roof, and jumped to the ground from there just as EVA was exiting.

“…you’re sure you should being doing those kinds of acrobatics with only one hand, Eli?” she said.

“You haven’t seen ‘acrobatics’, Mother,” Liquid replied. “Everything’s still too quiet - even aside from potential military forces in hiding. This whole section of the city’s been awfully dead, you lot were the first vehicles to come down this street since Silverburgh left.”

EVA nodded. “We had to get around a blockade to get here.”
“What, so we’re under siege then? Is that their strategy?”

“The city’ll probably have all our utilities cut off soon. But as I said earlier: I do have a plan.”

“To get out of here?”

“Precisely.”

EVA lead them through the basement to a door tucked away in the pantry, behind which was another staircase leading to a subbasement. Liquid vaguely knew about the subbasement already - mostly the fact that it was used for storage, with nearly all of that being “decommissioned” weaponry in various states of disrepair, waiting around to be cannibalized to fix, modify, and upgrade their current loadouts. There was also one of (presumably) EVA’s motorcycles down here, an old IMZ-Ural M-72 instead of a Triumph. There was a sidecar nearby, but not currently attached.

“…it’s awfully drafty down here,” Liquid commented, looking around. There were a few lightbulbs that didn’t illuminate the entire room.

“This way,” EVA said, picking up a flashlight and heading down an open hallway previously invisible in the dark. The hallway was lined with doorless doorways, and EVA stopped at the last door on the left and swept her flashlight into the room.

There was a large, yawning hole in the wall, behind which was seemly impenetrable darkness.

“What’s that?” Liquid said, leaning in. “Some sort of tunnel?”

“That’s exactly it,” EVA said. “It’s over a century old - part of a system commissioned by Ladislav Rott in 1889. It was intended to be a sub-surface railway system, but the city wanted no part of it… nonetheless he had part of his proposed line dug out, using the work being done on the city sewers at the time as a cover.”

“And it’s just been here, abandoned, ever since?”

“Yes. When Prague finally constructed an official metro, Rott’s original plans were pretty much completely ignored. This section in particular went untouched… the city doesn’t even know about it, there aren’t official records. It just so happened that part of it was close enough to our church that, when this area was hit by floods five years ago, the partial collapse gave us a last-ditch escape route if we were ever surrounded.”

“Hm. Sorry to make you use it so soon, then.”

“Ah, it’s alright,” EVA said, waving a hand. “No matter how that had panned out, since Radka gave away our location we would have had to move anyway. We do have hidden FOBs further out - more in the countryside — it’s just that, well, this was a lot nicer and more centralized… oh well. We’ll be fine, Eli.” She shone her flashlight into the tunnel, where it reflected off of glistening, mossy brick. “There are a couple places get to the surface from this tunnel, but even the nearest one is in the next městské části… municipal district, I mean. That should take us past the the blockades and surveillance, but we can follow the tunnel all the way to… Běchovice, I think, which is near the east edge of the city.”

Liquid raised an eyebrow. “We’re not all planning on going at once, are we?”

“Of course not,” EVA said. “I’ll send an advance party to see if it’s still even safe - since the Czech government doesn’t know about this tunnel, there weren’t any cleanup efforts after the flooding. The water’s probably drained by now, but…” she turned to the three PLA personnel who had followed
them down here, possibly because EVA had never given them any instructions not to. “Boris, you’ll lead… Mirek, Wladyslaw, you two go tag out with, hmm… Ľubomír and Luděk.”

“Luděk’s claustrophobic, Matka Pluku,” one of them (Wladyslaw?) said, “he wouldn’t do well in a scouting party. What about Alojz?”

“No, I want Alojz here, he needs to reattach the sidecar to my old bike. Get Peťa, she’s observant.”

“Peťa as in Petra Jahoda or Petra Schovajsa?”

“Schovajsa.”

“Yes ma’am!”

“Anyway,” EVA said as Władysław and Mirek, whichever one was which, left back upstairs, “we’ll trickle out in groups over the course of the night - we should all be gone by morning…”

…but it’ll be slow enough that anyone observing us won’t notice this place is empty until it’s too late,” Liquid said.

“Right. But the first group after Boris, Ľubomír, and Peťa - I want you and Mantis in it.”

“What? —no, you’re right. If worse comes to worst, you may be able to minimize casualties if the Army’s actual targets aren’t present.”

EVA nodded. “So the both of you need to be at our FOB as soon as possible. That’s why I’ll have Alojz reattach the sidecar — you and Mantis are taking that bike. Or, more specifically, Radka is taking that bike, you’ll be in the sidecar, and Mantis can either ride behind Radka or sit on your lap.”

“What, seriously?” Liquid said, making a face.

“Radka knows where the FOB we’re going to is! And more to the point, I am not letting you drive my bike with a missing arm, and I’m not letting Mantis drive in general, in his state.”

Liquid was about to argue, but a man and a woman who must have been Ľubomír and Peťa chose that moment to show up, so instead he just trailed off to muttering something about how he’d better go get Mantis, then, and stalked off. He heard Boris make a comment to EVA in Russian as he went.

I really need to learn that language sometime, he thought, heading back upstairs. He’d honestly lost track of how many times he’d thought that and really, considering he was already septulilingual it wouldn’t even be hard to pick it up, he just hadn’t found the time somehow in the past thirteen years.

“Mantis,” Liquid said, opening the door to their room.

“!”

“It’s just me, didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Oh…” Mantis looked up at him, upside-down. He’d been lying on the floor, apparently staring up at the ceiling for God knew how long. “Did something good happen? You seem calmer now.”

“If you mean Mother’s found us a way out of this mess, than yes. There’s an FOB out in the countryside we’re going to get a ride down a secret tunnel to.”

“The… countryside?” He sat up and rubbed the back of his neck. “Sounds peaceful.”
“If nothing else it should set the CID to scrambling about wondering where I’ve escaped to, again.” Liquid knelt next to Mantis and took him by the shoulder. “I’m not going to let them get their hands on you. You understand that, right?”

“Yes, Eli, I understand.”

“Good.” Liquid pressed his lips to his forehead. “Naturally I’m going to tear them apart for you, but I’d rather engage them on my own terms… once I get a new arm. Or at least my stump heals enough so that it doesn’t irritate me every time something so much as brushes the end.”

“You want revenge on them, for me.”

“Of course I do.”

“Revenge…” Mantis shook his head. “Revenge, Eli, you’re just like that woman you were telling Wolf about over Codec. That’s all that was in her heart.”

“…? I didn’t mention anything like… and you couldn’t read her mind back before.”

“I felt it,” Mantis said plainly. “This morning, when I was watching the spider in the garden. I felt you, too. You were both… burning.”

Liquid shifted a little closer and lowered his voice. “And did you like that?”

“Huh?”

“Did you like the burning?”

“I…” Mantis glanced away. Liquid curled his fingers up below Mantis’ chin, coaxing him to look at him again. “I think…”

“Tell me, Mantis.”

“I think I did. It felt… like waking up after a nice nap.”

Liquid smiled. “That’s just what we needed, then. Welcome back.”

“Eh…? Eli, I… I’m not back to normal. …am I?”

“Well. No. But you’re getting better all the time and now at least I know I can count on you to back me up in battle.”

“What?”

He stood, grabbing Mantis’ wrist and pulling him to his feet. “That burning you felt, Mantis?” he said, “that’s power. That’s pure, raw power. That’s what anger does to you.”

“Oh.”

Liquid tilted his head. Mantis’ voice sounded so flat just now. “Something the matter?”

“…no, nothing. But you’re so angry because of me, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am! They abducted you and tore your mind into pieces and even now you’re having trouble putting it all back together. For God’s sake you can’t even remember why you hate Ocelot —“
“The topic changed suddenly…”

“Come on, then,” Liquid said, fumbling with their suitcase, “throw your things in here. We’re leaving soon.”

“Ah… alright…”

Chapter End Notes

Can you tell I read the History section of the Wikipedia article on the Prague Metro

>__>

also fucking RIP Dmytro I forgot him over in Miscellany, guess I'll have to go back and fix that, though I got everyone
Radka was mildly uncomfortable with Mantis sitting directly behind her and needing to anchor himself to the motorcycle by clinging to the back of her shirt. Liquid was relegated to the sidecar, where his legroom was nonexistent due to the suitcase crammed below the seat, but if need be it would be easy for him to twist around. He was ready to go in hot if they had to, despite Boris and his companions making it all the way to the FOB without a hitch.

“And don’t forget that’s a powerful engine, Radka,” EVA was saying. “Be careful - the ground’s uneven in a lot of places, unstable in others. Don’t get a scratch on my bike, this one’s a real classic.”

“Ano, Matka Pluku,” Radka said, turning on the IMZ-Ural M-72 and revving it. The roar of its engine echoed loudly in the tunnel. “And the rest in this group?”

“Walking behind you. Don’t worry about them.”

“Matka Pluku!” someone called from upstairs, “they’ve cut off our electricity!”

“T ook them long enough. Eli—“

“I know, Mother,” Liquid said. “Just like we discussed.”

EVA nodded. “Go, Radka. I’ll see you later!”

Mantis waved as Radka sped off down the tunnel. There was a curve only a few hundred yards down the tunnel, so soon enough they were plunged into complete darkness aside from the motorbike’s headlamp. The echo and reverberation of the bike’s rumble made it difficult to tell how long the tunnel stretched ahead of them.

“We’re sure that all the noise won’t have any negative repercussions, right?” Liquid half-shouted at Radka.

“Not in this section of tunnel,” Radka answered in kind, “remember, no one knows about this except us and a bunch of dead nineteenth-century guys. If someone hears they still won’t know where we are or where we’re going - plus they’ll probably just think we’re a train anyway.”

“Does the tunnel branch off?”

“I’m not sure. All I know is that I just keep going straight…” Another curve. “…or at least, I keep going down the tunnel until we reach a dead end in Běchovice, near the railway station.”

“And from there we surface and head out to the FOB?”

“Uh-huh. We’ll drive directly there, Schovajsa will be waiting at the railway station with a van for the others behind us.”

They continued down the tunnel, silent aside from the engine; Radka occasionally steered around a patch of rubble or uneven ground. Sometimes she didn’t quite steer all the way around it, giving Liquid in the sidecar a nice jolt, but he hung on and the further they got into the tunnel the more she got used to driving the bike with the sidecar.
That is, until the ground cracked suddenly beneath them, stone giving way to soft, wet soil beneath their wheels. Radka shrieked, swerving, the front wheel catching on a hunk of debris and sending them screeching towards the wall—*through* the wall…

“Another tunnel?” Liquid said, looking around at the branching tunnel they hadn’t noticed in the darkness, then shutting up when the sidecar clanged against the side of the tunnel they were in hard enough that dirt and gravel showered over them and stones fell from the ceiling. Radka stilled the bike, its rumble sounding louder than ever in the silence following the partial collapse.

“What just happened?” Mantis said.

“We’re blocked off,” Radka said. “I can’t drive over all that rubble in the entrance to the tunnel we were just in.”

“Mantis, can you move that out of the way?” Liquid said.

Mantis was silent for a moment, then shook his head. Liquid huffed.

“It’d take ages for Radka and I to move them enough for the bike to traverse. Radka, can you keep going in this tunnel?”

“Uh… I think so,” Radka said, looking around uncertainly. “Judging by how far we drove, I’m pretty sure I know what section of the city we’re under. As long as we don’t hit a dead end, we should still be able to make it to Běchovice, or near enough to it that we’re past the Americans.”

“Then let’s keep going. And try not to scrape me off against the wall this time, will you?”

“I- I’m sorry!” She revved the bike again, and they kept going. Uncharted territory, but unlikely it was known to the Czech government (and therefore US Army) either, much like the previous tunnel. Radka drove slower now, keeping a closer eye out for unstable sections of tunnel.

“It makes sense, I suppose,” Liquid said, wiping mud from his face, “these tunnels are about a hundred years old and have probably never seen *any* kind of maintenance, nevermind *recent*.”

“Flooding would not have helped, either,” Mantis commented.

“This whole place is rotting… we’re lucky it didn’t come down on our heads, just blocking off the entryway instead…”

“…ah… well, that… Eli, I’m tired now…”

“You can rest when we get to the FOB, Mantis.”

“It’ll be a few hours,” Radka said.

“You can stay awake that long, can’t you? …here, Radka, slow the bike a bit. Mantis, you and I will switch spots and you can sleep in the sidecar.”

“Um… right.”

The balancing act of transferring people from moving bike to moving sidecar was a piece of cake for Liquid, especially now that all those damned medications were out of his system. Also Mantis was thin enough that it wasn’t hard for him to fold up next to the suitcase. Why hadn’t they just done this from the start again?

“There’s a dead end ahead!” Radka yelled as they approached.
“Those look like wood planks,” Liquid said, squinting at the circle of light the headlamp threw. “And it sounds hollow behind it…”

“What?”

“The echoes in here! It’d be echoing differently if there weren’t more tunnel behind the wood planks. Smash through! It’s a dead end, anyway, if you don’t do that we’ll have to turn around and deal with that rubble!”

“A-Alright!”

…oh yeah. Only having one hand made it a bit hard to hold onto the bike.

Liquid gritted his teeth as the bike smashed through the wood planks blocking off another tunnel - one caught the edge of his shirt, almost yanking him off the bike or else his arm out of his socket, and he came dangerously close to getting his pantleg caught in the back wheel, but within seconds he rebalanced himself and was looking around. Huh. It was a lot… smoother in here. Concrete, not stone. Pipes on the walls. Electric lights in recessions in the ceiling.

“Radka,” Liquid said cautiously, “where are we?”

Radka swore in Czech, slowing the bike. “We’re in the Metro,” she said. “City territory.”

“If we are in the Metro, then where are the trains?” Mantis said, looking around. “I don’t even see track.”

“We must be in a maintenance area.”

“We can be tracked here,” Liquid said, glancing at the smashed wood behind them and muddy tire tracks leading directly from it. The rubble-blocked entrance to PLA’s secret tunnel wouldn’t slow down the Army nearly as much as it would them. But, if they drew attention away… “Radka, do you know where we are?”

“Yes, I… I used to work public transportation,” Radka said, “I know these tunnels. It’s not far from here to someplace to surface - we’ll just have to go around Běchovice and take a different route to the FOB entirely.”

“What are you waiting for, then? Go!”

“But- but our tracks—“

Liquid pulled out his MK23 and shot one of the pipes on the wall, then shot it again. It cracked and water gushed out, quickly spreading over the ground and spraying the bike’s tires. Water tracks would disappear as soon as they dried, unlike mud tracks.

“That takes care of that. Now go!”

Radka accelerated the bike again, turning a corner and heading parallel to the tunnel they’d just been going down - heading closer to (former) PLA headquarters and the Army.

“You’re sure this is the right direction?” Liquid said.

“Yes! We’re a few blocks away from an employee access point, it’ll take us straight to street level!”

Liquid tried to raise EVA on Codec as they roared smoothly through the modern tunnels, but just as he suspected he wasn’t getting anything here. What was it, harmonic resonance or something? All he
knew was that Codec tended not to work in tight quarters.

“They’ve probably heard us by now,” Liquid said. “Keep your eyes peeled.”

“What do we do if we run into them?” Radka said anxiously.

Liquid was silent for a moment, glancing at Mantis. It seemed he’d nodded off, probably courtesy of the smoother ride. “I’ll hop off and hold them off,” Liquid said, “you keep going. Get to the FOB.”

“What?! But Matka Pluku told me to—“

“The situation changed, so the plan needs to change, too. I can handle myself, Radka, what you need to do is make sure Mantis gets there safely. He’s in a vulnerable state right now and I’d rather die than have him in danger.”

“But— you really might die!”

Liquid scowled. “I don’t intend to,” he spat. “I’ll just be late meeting up with you.”

“And, and the Americans, they’re your comrades! I mean, they’re even from the same branch of military as you are, right? You can’t just fight them like that!”

“Ha! I can and I will. I know where my allegiance lies… where it’s always laid.” He narrowed his eyes. “Those shadows ahead… looks like a checkpoint. Smash through.”

Radka accelerated and careened around the corner. Sure enough, a handful of US Army and AČR soldiers were waiting with their guns drawn - but before any of them could fire, Liquid sprang off the back of the bike, tackling the nearest one and forcing him to discharge his weapon in the direction of his comrades, shooting some sap in the stomach. Instantly attention was focused on Liquid, apart from a few potshots at the retreating M-72, but they didn’t seem to hit at all considering Radka was still taking evasive action like a champ and Mantis had jolted awake, twisting around and shouting a panicked “Eli!” over his shoulder before disappearing further into the tunnel.

Liquid jumped away, dropping into the well of the train track next to them and firing back with his SOCOM. He only needed to buy a few seconds— there it was. The receding rumble of the motorcycle gave way to the approaching roar of a subway tram. Liquid backed up against the opposite wall, still returning fire, and then the train passed between him and the soldiers. Liquid quickly shoved his gun back in his thigh-holster and jumped on, grabbing a joining between cars. (And nearly breaking his wrist in the process.)

The train whipped him through the tunnel in the opposite direction as Radka had headed, so… in the direction of Běchovice, but that was about all Liquid had as far as directions went. Still, if he could get to the Běchovice railway station he could hide until a PLA group showed up and tag along to the FOB with them. In the meantime the train was starting to slow as it approached a platform. Liquid jumped off, rolling across some adjacent track and scrambling up onto a service walkway on the edge of the tunnel.

Subway announcements in Czech echoed through the tunnel as Liquid started running again. It had just finished up with “Ukončete výstup a nástup, dveře se zavírají!” when someone shouted “There he is!” and a bullet ricocheted off the wall just above Liquid’s head.

“What, took you long enough!” Liquid said, spinning around and shooting one of the soldiers in the chest. “Really pathetic that someone like me could evade you so easily, isn’t it?”

“Make sure you leave something to identify him by,” one of the soldiers - the leader of this little
band, presumably - said. The others opened fire again, drowning out the groans of the one Liquid had shot. Vaguely an announcement from the platform could be heard, possibly regarding the audible gunfire and urging passengers to remain calm and/or evacuate.

Liquid ducked into a maintenance tunnel like the one they’d come out of three kilometers ago. Unfortunately this one had no boarded-up entrance to century-old abandoned tunnels. On the plus side, thus far they’d managed to stay out of the sewers entirely and it seemed unlikely that he’d have to go there at this point, either.

He growled as he reloaded his gun, nearly dropping the magazine in his struggle to keep the gun steady with his right elbow. Dammit, Miller had made this look so easy back in 1984 and- and hadn’t he only been missing his arm as long at that point as Liquid had now?! It was so easy to forget that that had been a recent development by the time Liquid showed up. Or that he’d ever had an arm and a leg in the first place.

The gun was reloaded just in time for Liquid to swing it back to the entrance of the side-tunnel and shoot someone in an AČR uniform. Shit he was cornered here, wasn’t he? Unless the tunnel happened to branch off somewhere past that corner there… Liquid took off running again. He only had so many clips and he was at a disadvantage anyway - horribly outnumbered, one-handed, and his boots were still leaving traces of mud on the floor they could follow him by. Standing his ground and fighting them could wait until he found backup somehow, or else the CID group decided to take him on. Throwing Meryl underneath the wheels of an oncoming train might trump any sense of strategy he marginally had.

On the plus side, he was pretty sure he was serving as a very tidy distraction.

The Metro’s service tunnels were, while largely parallel to the subway lines, functionally a maze as far as Liquid was concerned. And of course the soldiers pursuing him would have half a clue about how to navigate; they probably had someone with a map chattering to them over radio. So Liquid just needed to figure out how to get back into Rott’s leftovers…

Though it had been a few tense minutes since the last direct engagement, Liquid could hear the soldiers’ footsteps - moving carefully, sure, but the US Army generally didn’t train for stealth outside of certain special forces units (FOXHOUND, for example) and as far as Liquid was aware the AČR didn’t at all. So now he was at an advantage - he could hear them coming, but they couldn’t hear where he was going. He just had to try not to make a wrong turn and run right into one of them.

Slowly the footsteps were drowned by a mechanical purring. Liquid thought for a moment that it was another passing train, but as it grew louder he realized it was a motorcycle. Surely Radka hadn’t—?! No, wait, this was a different sound——

Liquid had just enough time to register the Triumph Bonneville T100 and the helmed woman driving it before she zoomed past him, grabbing his arm and yanking him over the back of the motorcycle in the process.

“Ow! You could do that with a little more grace, you know, Mother?!” Liquid shouted, scrambling to right himself and hang on.

“I thought that was plenty graceful!” EVA replied.

“How’d you know I was—“

“Radka and Mantis made it to Běchovice and radioed me as soon as they were aboveground. Took me long enough to find you after that!”
“Has the main tunnel been compromised?”

“No, but we’ve decided to pick up the pace — headquarters should be completely empty by now. We’ll get out of the Metro and get to the FOB… once we lose any pursuers.”

Liquid got off another shot at a soldier as they tore by, just to add insult to injury. Before long they were out of the maintenance tunnels entirely, jumping the walkway to land hard on the track itself.

“Try not to get hit by a tram,” Liquid said dryly.

“Eli, if you’re this far away from where you got out of the old tunnels… you hitched a ride, didn’t you?”

“Well, it was there. And I’ll bet the looks on those soldiers’ faces were pretty funny once the train passed and they saw I was gone.”

“And that didn’t strike you as reckless? You were holding on with just one hand.”

“Oh my god, Mother, the last thing I need right now is you nagging me.”

“Separating yourself from Radka to ‘hold them off’ was pretty reckless, too! Especially considering you’re their target in the first place!”

“I didn’t want to endanger Mantis, alright?! Stop nagging me! I’m a grown man!”

They came up on a platform, which EVA ramped off of the slight incline in track bedding in order to land on the platform itself, drifting through a crowd of confused passengers who dived away, screaming, and she almost clipped a shiny chrome pillar. A police officer pulled out a radio but EVA was already gone, driving straight up a staircase and bursting out into the streets above.

“Where the hell are we?” Liquid said.

“Er… let’s see, that was a Green station… oh, Skalka! Excellent. We were almost at the end of Line A anyway, we just need to keep heading east! We’ll be at Běchovice in no time!”

“Where did Mantis and Radka end up getting out?”

“Employee access point somewhere near Náměstí Míru. A little close for comfort as far as the Army roadblocks go, but Radka knew a shortcut from there to Běchovice.”

“…right.” Liquid had no idea where Náměstí Míru even was, so come to think of it he wasn’t sure why he’d even asked.

Unlike the last time EVA had picked Liquid up on a motorcycle and proceeded to have a car chase, there was no disguising themselves now. A mud-covered man with one arm was a bit too conspicuous for that, after all. So she simply tore through the streets of Prague, occasionally driving on the wrong side of the road or on the sidewalk, and more than once cutting across a tram line mere inches before the tram actually got there, forcing the Army (and the single, out of place police car) to halt and wait for the streetcar to pass. Plus, the Army seemed reluctant to actually fire on Liquid and EVA, probably because the chance of catching innocent civilians in the crossfire was incredibly high here.

So EVA managed to lose them. Half the city was in an uproar by the time they got to the suburbs, but soon enough EVA found an opportunity to go off-road entirely, driving through parks, unused building lots, and eventually wild fields and farmland. Didn’t help with the mud situation but did
keep them safe from being spotted, even when a Hind swept over them.

“Must be pulling from the Czech Air Force’s inventory,” EVA muttered as they idled in a rundown barn. “They generally use L-410 Turbolets for reconnaissance, though.”

“So they intend to kill us if they find us,” Liquid said. “What else is new?”

EVA laughed. “I haven’t had this much fun since Atlanta three years ago,” she said.

“I think I would have enjoyed it more if I hadn’t spent almost that whole excursion being jerked around…”

“Oh, you’re fine. You’re just in a bad mood because you’re worried about Mantis.”

“So what if I am?!”

“That’s not a bad thing, Eli,” EVA chided. “And we’ll see everyone soon. Well… more or less - the first group, Mantis included, will be there at least. As for everyone else… it’s a lot of walking through that tunnel.” She sighed. “It’d be so much more convenient if we actually had a way of getting our vans into it… just getting my bike here from the garage to the subbasement was a huge hassle, especially since we had to cover it in sheets and move a bunch of other random things from the garage too so we wouldn’t raise suspicions.”

“I suppose it was worth it, though, wasn’t it,” Liquid said, rolling his eyes.

“Pretty sure you’d be dead now if I hadn’t shown up when I did.”

“Oh, please. They had no idea where I was.”

“Besides, it’s not like I ever planned to leave it behind,” EVA went on. She revved the bike and threw a smile over her shoulder. “I only get off my bike when I fall in love… or fall dead.”

Chapter End Notes

The subway announcement in here is a real one, according to an online travel guide I found… I’ve never been to Prague… yet

Though apart from that I do have to admit I’m pretty full of shit about how the Metro works. We’ll call it artistic license!

Since I’ve only just started chapter 95 and worried about my dwindling buffer (and also kinda want to work on other fics once in a while...), I'm cutting back on updates again. I still might be able to update more than once a week, but, uh...
“Eli! Eli, I was so worried about you!”

It was evening by the time Liquid and EVA finally made it to the FOB, arriving at the same time as the last vanful of PLA personnel and inventory did. The FOB looked like a large but old, possibly abandoned house, or at least a not well-taken care of one… on the exterior. Peeling paint and overgrown weeds covered for the fact that the interior of the house was as well-maintained as any, even if some of the rooms very obviously hadn’t been touched in ages and a couple of the earlier arrivals had had to busy themselves with dusting and oiling hinges.

“Come on, Mantis,” Liquid said as Mantis nuzzled him, “you knew I was alright, don’t give me that.”

“I knew you were alive. I was afraid you had gotten hurt!”

“Nope, not a scratch.” Thought maybe some bruising from all his stunt-falls and getting yanked around. “Now let go, you’re getting yourself all muddy too.”

“Oh, fine.” Mantis stepped back. “I can show you where a shower is, though. And I’ve already found a room for us, it is very small but we only needed one bed anyway… yes?”

“Of course,” Liquid purred.

“No trouble so far?” EVA was asking Boris.

“None,” Boris said.

“Good… still, we’ll need to keep our guard up until this blows over. But aside from that, business as usual. …even if we do get branded a terrorist cell.”

“Well… I am sure the Czech government was not exactly approving of a group of mercenaries operating out of their country in the first place, ah?”

EVA sighed. “Harboring fugitives is as good an excuse to get rid of us as any, I suppose…”

“…though we are actually harboring fugitives…”

“Um… Snake? Can we talk?”

Solid looked up. “…sure, Cath. Is something wrong?”

“N… yes,” Catherine said, sitting across from Solid. “Yes, there is. I…” she looked at her lap. “Do you remember the first time you ever killed someone?”

 “…yeah.”

“How did you… feel about it?”

 “…” Solid blinked, then shook his head.
“Huh? Do you… not remember how you felt?”

“It was a long time ago, kid,” Solid said, dodging the question. “I’ve killed a lot of people since then.”

“…so I guess it doesn’t matter to you much anymore…”

Solid grunted. He did remember the first time he had killed someone, but only because it was his first combat engagement - the actual act had left next to no impression on him. The only times he’d ever really felt something while killing someone had been when killed Venom (since he and everyone else had thought that he was Big Boss), when he killed the actual Big Boss, and… when he killed Gray Fox - he’d been almost surprised at how deeply that had effected him. But other than those three, every other time Solid had taken a life, he… well, not that he’d ever admit to it out loud, but Liquid did have him figured out. He did take an almost perverse joy in war and killing. Sometimes he felt kind of envious that his brother could openly admit that without shame. Catherine didn’t need to know that.

“So what happened?” he said, “that’s a pretty heavy question to ask someone out of the blue like that.”

Catherine frowned. “Well… when McGolden and I were escaping from the Patriots… I… I had to shoot someone. In the face. There was blood everywhere… he was dead before he hit the ground.”

“…”

“I don’t think my gun’s ever felt so heavy.”

“What kind of gun do you use?” Solid asked, trying to change the subject. He knew where this was going and he wasn’t good at emotional stuff like this.

“Hm? Oh…” she pulled a revolver out of an underarm holster and placed it on the table. Solid didn’t ask if carrying her sidearm in the house had always been a habit of hers, or just lately. Could go either way considering she was raised by Miller.

“Kind of a big gun for a little girl,” Solid commented, eyeing it.

Catherine frowned again, but more of a pouty one this time. “I’m as tall as you are, Snake,” she said, “besides, Daddy taught me how to use a gun when I was in fourth grade. I started using this gun in high school.”

“So did Master get that gun for you in the first place?”

“Y— actually, I lost that one. Ocelot got me a new one.”

“That… okay. I don’t think I trust Ocelot to just give someone something for free, what’s he up to?”

Catherine shrugged. “We couldn’t have gotten out of the facility if he hadn’t given me a new gun,” she said. “I guess if he went out of his way to get the same kind of gun I had before, that’s his business. Though he did say he wanted to ‘convert’ me to SAAs sometime.”

“Ah,” Solid said, cringing. “You know what Ocelot’s like about his SAA, right?”

“Uh… no?”

“…I wouldn’t take him up on his offer if I were you.”
“…right… anyway, you changed the subject. I was… kinda hoping you’d be able to tell me… something, I don’t know.”

“I don’t have anything to say,” Solid said. “If you shot someone while trying to escape, then it sounds to me like you shot an enemy and it was either you or him. I don’t see anything wrong with choosing yourself.”

“…”
Solid sighed. “Cath, do you just want me to tell you you’re a murderer and a horrible person and let you go feel guilty in peace?”

She was silent.

“Because I’m not going to do that. Can we talk about something else now?”

“…”

Catherine seemed unwilling to contribute anything, and somehow Solid didn’t think he’d get very far bringing the conversation back around to the S&W Model 500. Fortunately Otacon happened to walk by right at that moment, yawning and drinking a Pepsi. “Hey, Cath,” Solid said, catching Otacon’s eye, “did Master ever tell you anything about Diamond Dogs?”

“Well, yeah, a little,” Catherine said, blinking, “I know they were a mercenary group and he ran it for nine years and that’s how he met Ocelot and he was still working for them when he met Nadine.”

“Did he ever mention an engineer named Huey?”

“Errr… I think so, a couple times. Don’t think he liked him much.” She frowned in thought. “I think Daddy got news he died the summer after… when I was in sixth grade, I think?”

“He got news about that?” Otacon said, “…I guess that explains why I got the letter after his funeral.”

Catherine looked at him. “Wait, did you know-”

“That was my father.”

“Oh my god I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Otacon flatly, then cleared his throat and took an awkward sip of Pepsi. “But, actually, now that we’re talking about this… I don’t suppose you have a way to get in touch with your father, do you? I have some, uh, questions for him.”

Catherine gave him an annoyed look. “If I had a way to contact him,” she said, “I’d be blissfully working at a hospital in Sylva, North Carolina right now.”

“Okay, sure, but now that you’re with us…” he glanced at Solid. “Snake, did anyone ever come up with, y’know, a team name or something for us?”

“Not that I know of,” Solid said.

“I think we need to do that sometime. Oh, we could ask McGolden for ideas, he is a journalist so he could probably come up with something good.”

“Where is he, anyway?”
“He took some of the painkillers that Liquid lost in the car awhile back and took a nap.”

“Ah. I thought it was too quiet around here.”

“What does me being on your team have to do with getting in touch with Daddy?” Catherine cut across, “it’s not like Daddy’s also here.”

Solid waved a hand. “We don’t know where he is, but technically—“

“No, I mean, he’s not on the team. …right?”

“Huh?” Otacon said, “I thought you said you knew Master Miller was… you know, Ocelot recruited him? That’s why he went missing?”

She gaped at them. “Wait, you don’t know?” she said.

“Know what?”

“Daddy’s with the Patriots now, he defected!”

Solid stood up. “What?!?”

“What?” Catherine said, alarmed. “Ocelot told me about it. Daddy’s switched sides, the Patriots were threatening him.”

“With you?” Otacon said, “because now that you’ve escaped from them, I don’t think Master Miller will-“

“No, Ocelot said he’s there to stay.” Catherine glanced away. “I don’t think I want to believe him on that, but… he did say that for Daddy, it’s just stepping back into an old role.”

“Wait, what?”

Solid exhaled through his teeth. “She’s right,” he said, “back in the seventies Master worked for the Patriots… though if I remember correctly, they were called Cipher back then.”

“Cipher??” Catherine said. “…this explains a lot. …he used to get high and bitch about them.”

Solid’s jaw worked. Otacon laughed anxiously. “Come on, Snake,” he said, “this has to be some kind of ruse. Like he’s a sleeper agent or something.”

“…” Solid scowled at nothing.

“Snake?” Otacon tugged on his sleeve. “Catherine, can you excuse us for a moment?”

“Uh… sure,” Catherine said as Otacon dragged Solid into the next room.

“Look, Snake,” Otacon started.

“We don’t need to have a talk about this, Otacon,” Solid said stiffly.

“Well, I just… Master Miller’s the whole reason why you went along with this, right? If it hadn’t been for him you would have just stayed in Alaska.”

“It’s not like I had much choice, with Liquid around,” Solid said, putting an unlit cigarette in his mouth and biting the filter restlessly.
“Oh come on. You’ve had plenty of opportunities to escape or just leave in the past two years, and if you did that I don’t think they’d really be able to bring you back in…”

“Wolf assured me that she’d hunt me down if I ran off.”

“You’re scared of her?”

Solid looked up at him, agitated.

Otacon set his jaw. “Snake, admit it. You’re not throwing in with this… with this revolution because you’re under duress. You’re a part of this, you’ve helped because you believe in something. But… is it the cause you believe in, or Master Miller?”

“Do you believe in this cause?” Solid fired back, “or do you just want a place to belong?”

“Don’t turn this back on me! Snake, I just want to know if Master Miller defecting means you’ll also…”

“I’m not defecting,” Solid said, rolling his eyes. “The Patriots probably won’t want me anyway, I don’t know anything.”

“…”

“And I’m in too deep now. I don’t think I could justify it to myself if I did leave.”

“…you thought about this, didn’t you? It crossed your mind when Catherine said Master Miller turned on us.”

“…yeah. Yeah it did.”

There was a pause. At length, Otacon asked, “if you ever have to face Master Miller, what would you do? He’s… kind of like a father to you, isn’t he?”

Solid just shrugged irritably. “I’d kill him,” he said flatly, “just like I did my actual father.”

—

“Hey, Rose,” Jack said cheerfully, catching up with her. “Did you get that information I asked you for?”

“About the sniper that was at the real-life Outer Heaven?” Rosemary said.

“Yeah! It’s driving me crazy in the VR. One moment she’s there, the next moment she’s gone in a puff of black smoke or something. All Colonel Campbell tells me is that I’m not supposed to engage her… and Doc gets offended when I ask if her jumping around and disappearing like that is a bug or something.”

Rosemary nodded and pulled a piece of paper out of the manilla folder she was carrying. “I did dig up a little on her,” she said, “but I was only able to find her personnel file from Outer Heaven. It’s like she didn’t exist before she joined up with them.”

“That’s good enough, babe,” Jack said, making a grab for the paper. She snatched it away from him before he could take hold of it.

“Some of this information is still classified,” she scolded. “I’ll just read the relevant parts off to you.”

“Oh, fine.” Then Jack smiled at her. “Or do you just not want me looking at her picture since she’s
half-naked in the VR?”

Rosemary stuck out her tongue at him. “Anyway,” she sniffed, “that woman… she was the best sniper in Outer Heaven and Big Boss’ top soldier. Rumor was they were romantically involved… those ‘glitches’ you saw, Jack, she could actually do in real life!”

“Come on, Rose,” Jack said, struggling to get the hallway vending machine to accept his dollar, “that’s impossible.”

“No, really, she could,” Rosemary said, “it’s right here in her file. Also, the reason why she’s scantily clad is because she breathes through her skin - if she wore a normal uniform then she’d suffocate, and if she had a special uniform with light fabric it’d still restrict her airflow too much. Like trying to fight in a gas mask, I guess.”

“Yeah, that’s unpleasant.”

“Can I get a Diet Dr. Pepper?” Rosemary interrupted him before he could make his selection.

“Ugh, fine,” Jack said, selecting it, “I have no idea how you can drink that stuff, Rose.”

“It’s tasty!”

“Even regular Dr. Pepper is pretty awful. Anyway, how come she could do all that stuff? And breathing through your skin…” he handed her her drink, “that’s not normal.”

“I don’t know,” Rosemary said, sticking her papers under her arm and opening her soda. “Either I didn’t have clearance to that information or more likely they just never wrote it down at Outer Heaven.”

“Okay… that’s pretty weird, though,” Jack said, buying a Snapple for himself. He could really use the sugar right now… “So if she was Big Boss’ top soldier, why am I not allowed to engage her? It can’t be a difficulty thing, they made me fight Big Boss himself my first run-through of the program.”

“The real Solid Snake never fought her,” Rosemary explained, “apparently, her assignment was simply to stand guard over the prisoners. She wasn’t allowed to engage, either.”

“So she’s essentially in the VR as window dressing? …hang on, if she’s guarding the prisoners, why do I always spend half the run freeing prisoners without her interfering? and that segment where I’m a prisoner, she never does anything to stop me from leaving.”

Rosemary shrugged. “Maybe that was just part of her orders not to engage Snake - she couldn’t stop him from escaping his cell, either. I guess Big Boss really wanted something with him.”

“…that makes sense.”

“As for the other prisoners, I don’t think you really help ‘free’ them, Jack. According to reports from the real Outer Heaven uprising, even though Snake uncuffed people and unlocked cells, none of the prisoners actually escaped until the bombing campaign was about to start - not even Gray Fox!”

“Ohh. So she prevented them from actually getting away, even though Snake took out the security around them.” He took a thoughtful sip of his juice. “She really must have been good, then…”

“Well, she did have superpowers…”
“But even those weren’t enough to protect her from NATO blowing the place to hell,” Jack sighed. “No point in feeling sad about it, though… this was over a decade ago, and besides, she didn’t exactly work for the most… reputable company…”

Rosemary nodded. “The lack of background is suspicious, too,” she said. “Oh! By the way, Jack…”

“Hm?”

“You want to come over tonight? I’ll cook!”

Jack blanched. “Uh… I have a better idea! I’ll take you out somewhere.”

“Jack…”

“Somewhere really nice! And… we can head to your apartment afterwards.”

Rosemary considered it for a moment, then smiled at him. “Sounds good to me,” she said, “but this time you have to stay ’til morning.”

“Uh… Rose, you know I have to get here a lot earlier than you do…”

“…” Rosemary’s smile faded. “You could at least wake me up before you go.”

“Um. Right! Right, I mean, I’ll try. You know, say good morning before I head off! I just love waking up next to you and all… ergh… y-you know, Rose, you sleep like a log, so don’t get mad at me if I can’t wake you up before I go…!”

“What are you so nervous for all of a sudden?” Rosemary said, taking his arm.

“It’s… it’s nothing! Nothing at all…”

Langley, Virginia.

“…………………………………………” Holly called over her shoulder, waving to the restaurant owner as she carried her order back to her car. Another take-out dinner eaten alone in her apartment directly out of its white styrofoam container… as a single woman in her thirties, this was starting to get a little depressing. The fact that she lived alone aside from her cat, Gustava, just made things worse.

A lot of her colleagues at the CIA said that she needed to settle down and get married already. She wasn’t opposed to the idea (especially since the same colleagues would say the exact same thing to unmarried male agents around her age, so it wasn’t, like, sexist or anything) but she hadn’t had any kind of long-term relationship in… well, ever. When she’d met Solid, she’d still been in her mid-twenties and considered herself too busy for a boyfriend, and meeting Solid had tainted men for her forever.

Both because it was hard to measure up to a super-handsome special ops commando with a sexy voice who rather literally swept her off her feet, and because Solid had been such a heartless jerk in the end. And that was just talking 1999. After what happened in 2005, well…

She still didn’t really know what to make of that…

Maybe I should just give up on men entirely and go lesbian, Holly thought with a snort. The flaw in that plan was the fact that she was pretty straight, but she did know a few women she’d be willing to experiment with. Like maybe that buff redhead who commanded a CID task force that she’d met
once? Nah… she was what, twenty? Twenty-one? Holly would be better off asking out people that wouldn’t be asked for their ID every time they wanted a refill on their drink. If nothing else.

Sighing, Holly turned into the alley shortcut to her apartment. Going in alleyways was generally ill-advised, especially ones that lacked clear views to the street, but for one thing it was less “alley” and more “narrow one-way street” and for another thing she’d been walking this route for years without trouble. Or at least without trouble that hadn’t been solved by flashing her sidearm.

A car’s horn pealed for a full second behind her before its hood slammed straight into Holly.

Chapter End Notes

Raiden’s opinions on Dr. Pepper are bad and he should feel bad

Holly’s Thai is just “Thank you… see you later!” Obviously she’s getting Thai food and knows the restaurant owner pretty well… (Side note: My cousin went on a mission to Thailand and loves Thai food now, but a lot of times Thai restaurants won’t give him the really spicy stuff until he speaks Thai to them…)
“…Eli?”

“Mnnhg… Mantis, it’s four in the morning…”

“3:26,” Mantis said, checking the faintly glowing alarm clock.

“That clock’s ten minutes slow… what do you want?”

“Um…” The room Mantis had staked out at PLA’s FOB was tucked away at the very end of a hallway, right across from the study (that had immediately had boxes of papers dumped in it - EVA had forced Liquid to help her sort them into piles once he’d gotten himself cleaned up the other day). It wasn’t a whole lot bigger than the small double mattress pressed flush against the wall - Liquid dumping half their suitcase on the floor didn’t help much — since the bed was so narrow, Liquid and Mantis could barely both fit on it. Mostly because of the way Liquid sprawled all over the place in his sleep. So Mantis had just ended up just draping himself over Liquid every night, to wait for him to wake up again…

“…you keep doing that…”

“What?”

“Trying to get my attention for something, then trailing off and not saying anything…” Liquid ran his hand over the top of Mantis’ head, where it was resting on his chest. “Easily distracted, hm?”

“…s-“

“Don’t apologize, Mantis, it’s alright.”

“Oh… well, I was just wondering…”

“Another question about something?” Liquid yawned, shifting under Mantis.

“Sorry, should I… wait until morning?”

“No, go ahead, I’m already awake… besides, I’m more than happy to help you figure out things you can’t remember on your own.”

“It’s… not that, Eli,” Mantis said, “I have a question about some things I do remember.”

Liquid kissed Mantis’ ear. “Go ahead.”

“It is awkward, though…”

“And? Go on. I’m your husband, you talk about awkward things with me.”
“…alright.” Mantis half-sat up, looking down at Liquid. “Why do I remember having so much sex with Ocelot?”

If Liquid had been drinking something than he would have sprayed it everywhere right about now, but after half a second he remembered, *Oh right,* Mantis still had a bunch of jumbled memories that were never actually his to begin with. He’d gotten much better at identifying foreign thoughts and promptly forgetting them, but this must have been too awkward for him to do anything other than nervously defer to Liquid’s judgement…

“W-Well,” Liquid said, suppressing a little laugh, “they could be *my* memories… or maybe, what was his n- Volgin, they could be Volgin’s memories… ha, maybe Skull Face, I don’t know.” Couldn’t be Venom, he was straight. …or was that just after the brainwashing or whatever that was kind of started to wear off? No, Liquid didn’t want to think about it. That was his *father.* He already knew that Ocelot had never managed to get any from Big Boss himself, anyway, so it definitely wasn’t a memory of Big Boss’ that had made it over to Mantis by way of Venom.

“So have you decided whose memories they are, then?” Mantis said innocently.

“…what?”

“What? You are thinking about it. Trying to decide, no?”

Liquid sat up and put his hand on Mantis’ shoulder. “Mantis, love,” he said very seriously, “I am really glad that you’re getting better all the time at looking into my mind, but you really need to work on interpreting what you see.”

“…” Mantis turned his head away. “You’re not glad that I…”

No. Not about to let him change the subject. “If you could just tell me about how old Ocelot was in these… memories of yours… then I’m sure I could tell you whose they are actually, aside from not being yours. You really want to know?”

“It makes more sense to me if I do know,” Mantis said, looking back at Liquid again, then raised one hand. “I think I can just show you, though.”

“Hm-?”

Mantis put his hand on Liquid’s face and clumsily shoved his memory into Liquid’s head.

Electricity arcs across the kid’s skin and he collapses against the desk, gasping. He’s blond and ultra twinky and the way he’s breathing, it’s like his lungs are about to give out. His black GRU uniform is open across his bruised chest and his pants are scrunched down around his shins.

He’s currently being impaled by a comically large penis belonging to the person whose memory this is. Volgin, Liquid assumes. Obviously that’s Ocelot. It’s only confirmed when Volgin says something in Russian — Liquid doesn’t understand it, of course - but he catches the name Ocelot in there.

He also knows just enough Russian to understand the slurred “Yes, colonel,” that Ocelot offers as Volgin is almost splitting him in half. Red-gloved hands curl and scrape against the surface of the desk. Ocelot’s dick is soft, but there’s semen on his stomach; he must have already climaxed and now had to suffer being fucked straight through his refractory period. Ocelot takes the overstimulation like a champ, gritting his teeth and only occasionally letting out a quiet grunt.

Liquid can feel Volgin smirk. “Хороший мальчик,” he says.
Liquid knows that phrase.

“This explains SO GODDAMN MUCH, Liquid thought, reeling back from Mantis. Mantis looked alarmed.

“What? What’s the matter?”

“I-It’s nothing, Mantis!” Liquid choked out, flapping his hands. “Everything’s fine! Ergh… that must have been Volgin’s memory, Mantis. You can just forget about it.”

“I seem to remember a lot of incidents rather like-“

“All of them, Mantis! I mean, they’re not yours, so…”

“…” Mantis glanced down. “Eli…” Liquid hastily covered his crotch with the blanket. “…you were not supposed to get hard from that…”

“I- I’m sorry!” Liquid blurted out, shrinking in on himself, “i-it’s not my fault, I—“

“What are you so anxious about all of a sudden?” Mantis said, cocking his head.

Liquid blinked. “Er… you… th-that was Ocelot, i-in the…”

“So? …that really was very graphic, I should have seen this coming. I am sorry, Eli.”

“Erm… uh… huh? B-But I… Ocelot. Aren’t you… aren’t you mad?”

“Why would I…?”

Liquid glanced around, squirming. “I f-found him, ah, rather a-attractive, he was really… w-when he was younger. So seeing that… I… I’m s-sorry.”

“I do not understand what has you upset about this,” Mantis said, then looked at his lap for a moment, thinking. He looked back up, blinking. “Oh,” he said, reaching out for Liquid again, “you want one of those silly ‘punishments’.”

“Aha… y-yes,” Liquid said, licking his lips and taking Mantis’ hand in his own, “th-that’s exactly it. Of course.”

“So I am supposed to be annoyed that you got an erection because of someone other than me, and… treat you roughly as retribution?”

“Yes, yes, that’s it,” Liquid said, pulling him into his lap and keeping him there when he shyly tried to slide back out, “e-exactly that, that’s what I… that’s w-what I want, of cOURSE…” Damnit he needed to get a handle on this nervousness before Mantis figured out why he was really so jittery right now.

“Um, Eli…” Mantis said as Liquid nipped at his neck, trying to distract him - and himself. “Wait.”

“Hn?”

“You… you want me to be more… dominant than I think I am really… capable of being right now.”

“…”
“Eli? I— I do not want to disappoint you, Eli.”

“It… it’s fine,” Liquid murmured, nuzzling Mantis’ throat. “I’ll walk you through it.”

“Eli, I’m not sure about—… but I suppose if… this is how we are usually.”

“Mmmhmm…”

Wolf was picked up at Brno–Tuřany Airport by one of the PLA members who had initially scouted out Rott’s tunnel. She had both Benedict and Bêdeng with her, so even though Liquid had come outside to greet her as she got out of the car that was short-lived since he was bowled over by both dogs as soon as the car door opened.

“I think they missed you,” Wolf said as Benedict licked Liquid’s face insistently while Bêdeng kept him pinned.

“Yes, I- ow! —noticed… ouch, Bêdeng, stop i- Benedict! Down boy, down— ack! pht!!”

“I think I read somewhere that dogs’ mouths are cleaner than humans’ mouths.”

“Well I should hope so after this! Benedict, stop it!”

“I heard about your arm,” Wolf said as Liquid managed to get out from under the dogs. “You are alright, though?”

“I’ll be getting a prosthetic soon,” Liquid said, standing up and brushing himself off. “Been trying not to worry about it. I’m not even taking the heavy-duty painkillers anymore, do you want the leftovers?”

“No thank you… I’m sure we should save them in case someone else grievously wounds themselves.”

Liquid pouted, absent-mindedly scratching Benedict behind the ears. “Just say you mean me, Wolf.”

“Haha. Where is Mantis? You said…”

“Oh, he’s inside. Come on. I think the dogs are allowed in, too.”

Mantis’ first reaction to seeing Wolf again was to give her a wide-eyed, startled look and attempt to leave the room. Instead Wolf caught him in a hug and, when he made a distressed little noise (presumably at having his face rather forcibly shoved into her tits), said, “So you really are shy now! Mantis, that is adorable. Why can’t you always be like this?”

“Wolf, don’t bully the bug,” EVA said, leaning against the doorway with her arms crossed.

“But that is an option now,” Wolf said, holding a very confused Mantis at out at arm’s length, “normally he is so uptight and rude.”

“Please let go of me,” Mantis said quietly.

Wolf laughed and handed him off to Liquid, who rolled his eyes as Mantis (not so) subtly hid behind him. Wolf put her hands on her hips, getting down to business. “So… Naomi.”

EVA spread her arms. “I know,” she said, “it’s bullshit.”
“Even if a brain tumor stopped my bullet from killing her,” Wolf said irritably, “if she has a brain tumor, then why is she not dead anyway?”

“Suppose they removed the brain tumor along with the bullet?” Liquid said. “I mean, that was why she is alive, yes? Because they took the bullet out?”

“If it makes you feel any better, Wolf, you did enough damage to put her in a coma for about three years,” EVA said.

Wolf snorted. “How absurd! I will have you know that this has never happened before. I have always killed my targets - except for Snake, but I was under orders not to kill him.”

“…you’ve lost interest in him by now, right?”

“Of course I have! And even if I had not… I can only concentrate on one target at a time!” She tossed her hair. “So until I find and murder Naomi, she’ll be—”

“All you think about, yes, Wolf,” Liquid said. “What I can’t figure out is… you did use your mercury bullets on her, didn’t you?”

Wolf blinked. “I did,” she said. “Even if a brain tumor prevented lethal penetration, she should still have been poisoned to death within 24 hours.”

“Something’s funny about this…”

“I’m pretty sure that that really was Naomi, though,” EVA said. “Unless… they’re not going around making more body doubles, are they?”

“For some random scientist?” Liquid said skeptically. “Remind me again how much time and resources it took to turn my father into Big Boss.”

EVA frowned. “True… and I don’t think there have been any great leaps in brainwashing and hypnosis since the seventies. Also, somehow I doubt that they could have found someone with Ocelot’s skill level - the whole phantom thing could not have been done without him.”

“And they would have no reason to do it as far as we know,” Wolf said, “Naomi cannot be that important to the Patriots. …it is them who brought her back, isn’t it?”

“Most likely,” Liquid said. “So it seems, anyway.”

“Mercury poisoning can be counteracted before it proves fatal,” Wolf said, “with chelation therapy. But usually my poisoning is not even noticed until it is too late - if Naomi survived the mercury, then that would mean that the hospital they took her to did test for it, no? Why would they do that?”

“Why would the Patriots order us to kill her and then save her life?” Liquid said. “That doesn’t follow logically. She wouldn’t even have any good information, it’d all be outdated by the time she woke up.”

“Maybe it was something else,” EVA said, “the tumor could have… I don’t know, prevented your bullet from leaking the mercury properly.”

“Does that… even make sense?” Wolf said.

“I don’t know, I’m more concerned about the cancer! When did that happen?”

“First I’d heard of it,” Liquid said, raising his hand (and stump).
“Maybe she didn’t know…” Wolf said. She shook her head. “I am not sure the specifics matter. What I need is to find out where she ran off to. So…?”

“So she was in Prague on Tuesday,” Liquid said, “and she’s apparently tagging along with a CID squad headed up by Meryl Silverburgh.”

“Right,” Wolf said, blinking. “You told me. It certainly is… interesting.”

“And that’s really about all we can tell you.”

“That and she’s hell-bent on revenge on both Eli and David,” EVA said. “Over the whole Gray Fox… situation.”

“Oh, yes, Liquid mentioned that too,” Wolf said. “She keeps referring to me as ‘a’ wolf who ‘tore out’ her eye, so he said.”

“She’s insane,” Liquid said brightly, “completely bonkers.”

“Maybe that’s the brain tumor…” EVA said.

“I thought she had it taken out?”

“It could be just general brain damage that caused her sudden change in personality, not the brain tumor specifically. Ocelot told me once about some man who went off with the Mormon Battalion, got kicked in the head by a donkey or an ox or something like that, and changed his personality so much that when he got home his wife divorced him.”

“…interesting,” Wolf said again.

“Why does Ocelot know so much about Mormons?” Mantis asked.

“I…” Liquid blinked, “am almost afraid to ask how that came up in the first place, Mantis.”

“Oh, nevermind!” Wolf said, throwing up her hands. “I will find her, no matter how long it takes. But I need to someplace to start — surely she and Silverburgh’s CID team are not still in Prague at this point!”

“I’d be very surprised,” EVA said, then clapped her hands together. “That’s right! Grafenwöhr! I think they went to Grafenwöhr the night they made contact.”

“The US Army base in Germany?” Wolf said, then considered it for a moment. “I think I have been there once.”

“Yes, you had a brief training assignment there back in ’97 or ’98, remember?” Liquid said, “you brought us all sorts of chocolate when you came back.”

“Hmmm… I suppose that was too long ago to be helpful. But I know she went from Prague to Grafenwöhr, then that is a very good starting point.” She nodded to herself. “I will take Bêdeng with me, too. She was very useful when it came to apprehending Quoll.” Bêdeng barked, wagging her tail.

“So we’re stuck with the other dog?” EVA said. Benedict panted happily.

“Do you have a problem with that, Mother?” Liquid said, pouting.

“No… I mean… he’s housetrained, right?”
“Of course he is, what do you take me for?”

“I thought it was Snake who housetrained him,” Wolf said.

“Pfft. …yes. So?”

“…I like the dog,” Mantis said as Benedict nudged his hand away from his side, demanding headpats. “He stays?”

“Yes, Mantis,” Liquid and EVA said at the same time.

“He’s so cute,” Wolf whispered.

“Weren’t you going now, Wolf?” Liquid said, annoyed.

“Fine, fine. You do not want to share, I get it.”

“Whatever.”

“You could at least stay for dinner,” EVA said, rolling her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you hingabee for coming in clutch with the Russian translation. Also thanks again to Dacryphilia for double-checking Mormon Battalion thing is true as far as I know, it’s actually a family legend and supposedly happened to one of my ancestors.
Chapter 87

Holly came into the CIA headquarters with bandages around her head only sort of covered by a beanie and her arm in a cast. She just laughed sheepishly when her co-workers asked if she was really fit for work after being hit by a car.

“I might, like, have a little bit of a concussion,” she said, adjusting her beanie with her functional arm. “I feel like I’ve… y’know, forgotten some things.”

“I’ll say,” one of her colleagues said. “We were supposed to have that meeting, remember?”

“Um? …sorry, no, I don’t. What about?”

He tsked at her. “We can’t say in front of everyone else.”

One of Holly’s female co-workers giggled and smirked knowingly. “Get it, Holly,” she chirped, pushing Holly after the male colleague who had stalked off.

“How ridiculous,” the man muttered once he and Holly were in a secure area. “She just has to make that same joke every time you and I need to discuss something privately.”

“Oh, does she?”

“…White, are you sure you shouldn’t still be in the hospital?”

Holly waved a hand. “I’m fine,” she insisted. “What were we supposed to meet about? I really can’t remember.”

“…come walk with me,” the man said, setting off down a long empty hallway. He walked a little too close to her to be, strictly speaking, comfortable. “Perhaps I can jog your memory.”

“Hmmm.”

“It’s about the La Li Lu Le Lo… do you remember now?”

“A little bit,” Holly said thoughtfully, putting a finger to her bottom lip. “At least I, like, know who they are. Or what, anyway. I remember… um, it was sometime in the past two years that I first heard about them, right?”

The man nodded. “About six months after that strange… incident in our Adsit bunker.”

“Oh yeah… I think I kinda remember that incident. What happened again? Was I there? I think I remember being there.”

“Yes, you were there, White,” the man said, “but other than that… well, I don’t know. All you could tell us about was the Dead Cell raid that took place immediately before the sabotage.”

“Wasn’t Dead Cell, like, involved?”

“Only tangentially. It seems that the saboteur in question stole a uniform and used their raid as a cover to get past security.” He sneered. “I recall you were absolutely livid that Dead Cell would let something like that happen right under their noses - and my, were you ever smug when word reached
us that the Navy was investigating their head for… what was it, embezzling?”

“Corruption?” Holly guessed.

“Thaaaat’s it. Corruption and misappropriation of government funds. Heh, arrests should be happening in the next few months. Don’t know what’ll happen to that unit after that…”

Holly shrugged. They were still walking but still hadn’t passed anyone or even turned a corner, though they did now come upon some stairs that her co-worker and fellow Patriot lead her down. “No great loss, if you ask me.”

Her colleague laughed. “Never one to mince words, eh, White? But anyway… you never happened to come across whoever snuck in with Dead Cell, sadly. But very few did, to be fair. As far as we were ever able to figure out, the alarm they tripped was an automatic one.”

“Something to do with the broken sprinklers, I guess,” Holly said, “I do remember that. I got soaking wet!”

“Mmhm. That’s what we thought, too. Whoever carried out the sabotage should have passed security cameras on their exfiltration, of course, and in fact they seemed to, but—“

“—but we still don’t have, like, their identity?”

The man shook his head. “Strange camera failures prevented us,” he said. “In fact, you can track the exact route they took and the exact side of the perimeter where they got into their getaway vehicle - which, incidentally, we were only able to trace back to Canada of all places - based on the sections of security footage that were conveniently missing.”

“Like, they were using some kind of jammer missing, or deleted after the fact missing?” Holly said as they exited the stairwell.

“Deleted after the fact. The trouble is we can’t figure out who or how.”

Holly tilted her head, thinking. “An inside job?” she said at length.

Again the man shook his head. “No evidence of it,” he said, “either whoever did it was very good, or else the fact that it was the computer system there that was attacked opened holes in the bunker’s cybersecurity.”

“Oh… yeah, maybe that’s it…” Holly smiled to herself.

“Of course… the computer system in question was a part of the La Li Lu Le Lo’s network,” the man said. “So while ‘officially’ we have no answers, those of us in the know are aware that this must have been the work of the fabled ‘resistance’.”

“Those terrorists, huh,” Holly said. Her brow furrowed. “Who’s supposed to be…?”

“While they are reportedly receiving aid from a mercenary group based in the Czech Republic, at present the only confirmed members are four Shadow Moses survivors - Psycho Mantis, Sniper Wolf, Decoy Octopus, and the apparent leader Liquid Snake; a hacker we only know by the codename ‘Otacon’, which doesn’t match up with any established groups; former FOXHOUND operative Solid Snake; and allegedly the unidentified asian girl who stole technology from NRL-Stennis recently. She also used a Dead Cell raid as an infiltration method, so at present we think it may have been her who attacked the Adsit bunker.”
“Really?” Holly said, “ain’t infiltration more, say, Solid Snake’s style?”

“How do you— oh, that’s right, now I’m the one that’s forgotten. You worked with Solid Snake during the Zanzibar Land disturbance.”

“Yeah… but like, if it had been Snake who infiltrated the Adsit bunker…” she paused and for a moment the only sound was the click of their respective footsteps in the somehow even more empty basement hallway. “I dunno. I would have liked to run into him.”

“Perhaps you could have convinced him to abandon his foolish crusade and turn himself in,” her co-worker said dryly. “Even our spies in the resistance don’t know how the group found out exactly about the La Li Lu Le Lo, but their acts are not random ones of terror - they are specifically targeting them, or rather us.”

“…spies?” Holly said, blinking.

The man tilted his head in a half-shrug. “I know there are multiple, but the only one I know the identity of is the one who previously worked for the Company and retired to join FOXHOUND — ADAM, Revolver Ocelot. I believe you’ve met him, perhaps once.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Oh well. Can’t be helped, I suppose.”

“Sorry you had to give me so much, like, background.”

“It’s no trouble, White,” the man said, “actually, the meeting we were supposed to have was to bring you up to speed on some things anyway. Do you remember what was originally housed at the Asdit bunker?”

Holly considered it for a moment. “An AI?” she said.

“An AI designated ‘GW’, yes,” he said. They stopped in front of a door, which Holly’s co-worker unlocked with a cardkey. Holly followed him in. “It was relocated to different, temporary servers in New York while our programmers reworked it to better adapt to the high volume of information flow constantly being generated by the internet’s steady expansion.”

“It’s still there, right?”

“Yes, it’ll be an estimated two more years before it’s ready to be moved back to more permanent housing. And none too soon,” he added as they stood in front of the hollow, dead-looking shell of what Holly now realized was one of the Imago pods from Brunswick county. “The temporary servers can only handle so much. The circuits will be burned out two years from now, so the programmers are on an exceedingly tight schedule.” He grumbled. “No wonder the La Li Lu Le Lo saw fit to bring in some teenage girl to act as the main programmer… that kid’s a prodigy, and practically a machine herself. I heard she once coded for eighty-five hours straight.”

Holly whistled. “Impressive,” she said. “But… when she’s done fixing up GW, what are we gonna do with it? This thing was one of its, like, servers, right? Looks like it’s toast. Are they trying to fix it?”

“They were all deemed unsalvageable,” the man said, pressing a palm flat against its smooth outer surface. It did nothing. “The La Li Lu Le Lo is working on a new project to house GW… of course, the nitty-gritty details are all above your and my pay grade. All I know is that the name is ‘Arsenal Gear’.”
“Huh,” Holly said. “…why ‘Gear’? Anything to do with Metal Gear?”

“Marginally, from what I’ve heard. Something to do with all the Metal Gears popping up around the globe… since someone sold the data plans from Shadow Moses’ Metal Gear REX, apparently. One of the terrorists, looking for a quick way to fund their so-called revolution and not caring about the potential human cost of selling super-weapons to despot and mass murderers. Wide swathes of the world are destabilizing at a faster rate than we - the Company, I mean, not the La Li Lu Le Lo in general - can manage or even anticipate.”

“Yikes,” Holly said. “But like, how come I needed to hear about Arsenal Gear?”

“Because in August - less than a month from now - construction on Arsenal Gear is scheduled to begin,” the man said. “Seems like it’s some kind of underwater facility; it’s being built in the Hudson River. A Marine tanker is going to sink there, and cleanup efforts will disguise Arsenal Gear’s construction.”

“…Marines, really?”

“Well,” the man said with an irritated twitch of a smile, “despite protests from the Intelligence Community and the La Li Lu Le Lo itself, Commandant General Dolph went ahead with his Pentagon-backed project to build an anti-Metal Gear ‘Metal Gear’, codenamed Metal Gear RAY I believe. Taking out the tanker transporting it to their testing ground will just be killing two birds with one stone.”

“I see,” Holly said, frowning.

“You don’t have to like it, White. At any rate, when the supposed cleanup starts up, you’ll be involved. You’ve been assigned to relocate to New York in order to protect Company interests in the La Li Lu Le Lo’s project.”

“Me?” Holly said, “but I’ve only been in the loop for less than two years!”

“You’ll do fine,” her co-worker assured her, patting her shoulder. “You won’t be heading up any drawn-out negotiations, merely reminding everyone on the Arsenal Gear project that we at Langley have a stake in this too. Don’t forget that the La Li Lu Le Lo was supposedly born out of the CIA.”

“It was?” Holly said, not nearly as shocked as she could have been.

“According to popular rumor, yes. I don’t think the upper echelons have ever made it very clear, but it doesn’t matter much. What does matter is making sure we don’t get cut out here. GW is ours. … and if anything comes up, don’t be afraid to contact me, or our superiors. You’re just a field agent, White, you’re only our boots on the ground in New York.”

Holly nodded. “When do I leave?” she said.

“At your earliest possible convenience, you only need to be there before the La Li Lu Le Lo’s agent sinks the tanker - which, as I said, won’t be for another month.” He frowned at her, his eyes flicking to her bandaged forehead and casted arm before returning to her face (subtly lingering on her chest en route). “You should probably rest up before you go. In fact, I wouldn’t recommend returning to work tomorrow. Seriously, you just got hit by a car and were in the hospital… why did you come in today?”

“I think I must have, like, remembered I had a meeting with you somehow,” Holly said with a faint laugh.
“Hm. Perhaps I should have stopped by your apartment…?” he said in an… almost hopeful tone.

“Eh… I don’t think so.”

A brief frown but the man didn’t let much emotion show anyway. “At any rate, further instructions will be relayed to you when you get to New York. The Company’s holding a decent apartment not far from the river for you, so don’t worry about that. Oh, and uh… you can bring your cat with you if you want, you’ll be on this assignment for at least a year, so… just in case you can’t find someone to take care of her for that long…”

“Oh, my cat!” Holly said, clapping her working hand to her face. “Who was taking care of her while I was in the hospital?!”

“It was only a few days, White, I’m sure she’s— actually, I think Karen stopped by to check up on her the other day. But now you’re out of the hospital, so…”

“Ah… haha. I was worried for a minute there.”

“Anyway…” it was very awkward suddenly. Holly scrutinized the Imago pod to avoid making eye contact with her colleague. “You can just go home for the day. I’m sure no one will mind, you did just… get out of the… you get my point.”

“Yeah…” Holly said. “Yeah, I think I’ll, like, do that.”

When Holly opened the door to her apartment, a long-furred brown cat with yellow eyes and tiny paws approached cautiously, mewing questioningly. Holly crouched down in front of her, scratching her behind the ears then checking her collar, turning over her tag.

“Gustava, huh,” she said out loud. “That’s right… that’s the name of that chick who died during the Zanzibar Land disturbance, eh?”

Gustava meowed.

“Cute. Is naming pets after dead girlfriends like a female thing or something?” Holly stood up and tugged her arm out of her cast, tossing it aside and setting about to searching through the apartment. She hadn’t really gotten the chance to check this morning, or really at any point since she got hit by a car.

The door cracked open. Holly stilled.

“Hands where I can see them,” said a voice behind her.

Holly slowly stood, raising her hands, and glanced over her shoulder. Standing in the doorway to her apartment was her exact duplicate, minus a beanie, except this one still had a cast on the arm not being used to level a semi-automatic pistol at her.

“Ruger Mark II, huh,” the first Holly said, slowly turning to face the second Holly. “That’s, like, funny. .22 cal, a lot smaller than the standard-issue Company guns.” She narrowed her eyes. “And like, the only small-caliber gun at that bunker two years ago, right?”

“Who the hell are you?” the second Holly said, also narrowing her eyes. Gustava trotted across the room to rub up against this Holly’s legs, purring.

“Like, I’m you, Holly!”
“Ha ha. Real hilarious, smartass.”

“No, seriously,” the first Holly said with an innocent expression. “You just got out of the hospital for being hit by a crazed hit-and-run driver who stole your purse, and came straight here, right? To check on Gustava?”

“…”

“How do you know I’m not a hallucination caused by your concussion?”

“You really expect me to buy that… Decoy Octopus?”

“…” The first Holly frowned, then dropped the act, crossing her arms and shifting back to a more masculine posture. “You couldn’t have stayed in the hospital for another fifteen minutes?” he said, replacing Holly’s voice with his normal, distinctly male with a light Mexican accent one.

“Like, the fuck are you doing in my apartment?!” Holly demanded, not lowering her gun at all.

“The fuck are you doing with the Patriots? I thought you were supposed to be suspicious of the government, then you go and join the literal Illuminati?” Octopus sighed deeply. “Then again, I never bought that ‘questioning her employers’ thing that Snake told us about. After all, you’re the one who pulled the alarm on ‘em.”

“You would have done the same if you’d heard—”

“Like hell I would!” Octopus half-shouted, suddenly angry. “Their exfiltration was botched when you pulled that alarm and my best friend DIED because of it!! My boss nearly went the same way - you were the one who shot him, even!”

Holly flinched, though her Ruger remained trained on Octopus. “I wasn’t trying to get anyone killed.”

“Yeah, well, it happened.” Octopus’ voice returned to being as calm and casual as ever. “Raven’s dead because of you. Thanks.”

“…”

“You can put your gun down, by the way. I’m not armed.”

Holly glared at him. “What. are you doing. in my apartment, Octopus?”

“Looking for information on the Patriots,” he said with a shrug. “I’ve already gotten plenty from that co-worker of yours that has a crush on you—”

“Ugh.”

“…but I figured that if anyone would have some convenient notes written down, it’d be the award-winning director of The Unknown Bloodshed.” Holly raised an eyebrow at him. “What,” Octopus said, “so I’m a fan of your work. Anyway, you showed up before I could find anything useful.”

“Like I’d write that kind of ultra-sensitive information down,” Holly said with a snort. “Do you think I’m stupid?”

“Aren’t you?” Octopus smirked. “You haven’t shot me yet. Why don’t you? Maybe you can get me in the liver like you did with my boss. Lots of blood.”
“Go on,” Octopus said, spreading his arms. “Shoot me. Do it.”

“You’ve got some kind of backup plan, don’t you,” Holly said, “you recorded everything my colleague said to you or something? Maybe you’ve already sent it wirelessly. You wouldn’t challenge me to shoot you unless shooting you wouldn’t change anything.”

“Nope,” Octopus said, “that’s not how I work. And this is a solo operation anyway, only one person knows I’m here and she doesn’t know what I went in. Shoot me now and nothing of what I just found out will ever reach the rest of the so-called terrorists.”

Holly glared at him silently, her finger curling behind the trigger guard pensively.

Octopus smiled. “You won’t,” he said.

“What makes you think that?” Holly said, “maybe I’m just waiting for confirmation that you’re telling the-“

“You’re the one who covered up our raid on the CIA bunker in Brunswick county.”

“…” She frowned and finally lowered her gun. “Guess that was obvious at this point.”

“It’s funny, actually. Everyone thinks Ocelot did it, but he in freaking Budapest when all that went down, and you had to have deleted those security recordings within minutes of the alarm going off. And yet you were the one who pulled the alarm - even though the twins had already clearly demonstrated they were capable of sneaking around just fine, they didn’t need a ‘controlled’ alert — and, I can’t emphasize this enough, you shot my boss. You weren’t trying to help.”

“I never said I was going to help,” Holly snapped.

“Then why did you? Sudden crisis of conscience? …or did you just want to make sure Snake got away with it?” He scoffed. “If the twins hadn’t exfiltrated together then you would have thrown Liquid under the bus, right? Only would have covered up Snake’s involvement. You weren’t sympathetic to or intrigued by our cause like you pretended to be to gain Snake’s trust — you just liked Snake!”

“Well, so what if I did?!” Holly said through gritted teeth.


“You’re a dick. …wait, how the hell do you disguise yourself as a woman so well?” Holly said, glancing down.

“I have a vagina.”

“…why did I even ask that. Nevermind! I don’t care what you think my intentions are, it doesn’t matter either way. Get out.”

Octopus raised his eyebrows. “So you’re really not going to shoot me?”

“What?” Holly said, flabbergasted. “Weren’t you completely confident about that a minute ago?”

“I’m an actor, sweetie, I can bluff when I need to. But seriously, you don’t care about information leaks?”
“Makes things more interesting, don’t it?” Holly said.

There was a short pause. “I like your style, Holly,” Octopus said at length. “I mean, still not happy about the whole getting my best friend killed thing, but I think he’d like the cut of your jib too.”

“Uh… thanks? Besides, I was more thinking that at least one of the La Li Lu Le Lo’s spies was actually on your side after all anyway. You people are little too close at our heels.”

Octopus shrugged. “Could be. Or maybe we’re just clever.”

“Yeah, I’m… I’m going to go with the spy thing.”

Another pause.

“Now get out of my apartment,” Holly said, gesturing towards the door with her Ruger.

“Are you sure?” Octopus said. “Now’s your chance to find out what it’s like to have sex with yourself.”

“Oh my god!! Leave!”
Mantis woke up that day with a splitting headache that actually managed to put him back to his usual irritability - to point where he pushed Liquid out of bed (even using his psychokinesis to do it, though it wasn’t enough to actually move Liquid, he had to get up himself) — though it was pretty clear to Liquid that right now he was just ornery because he was in pain. Offering to fetch him some painkillers didn’t help any because that would require taking off his mask and the very prospect terrified Mantis, so Liquid left him to just sit quietly in the dark and maybe sleep it off.

To his surprise when he exited the room he found Ocelot sitting at the desk in the study directly across the hall.

“…morning,” Liquid said awkwardly.

“I heard Mantis yelling at you, is he back to normal?” Ocelot said without looking up from the paperwork he was going over.

“N…not really. His head hurts and it’s made him all crabby, that’s all. Where did you come from?”

“Istanbul.”

“…not what I meant, Ocelot. I meant, what are you doing here?”

Ocelot sighed, still not looking up from the papers. “A bunch of contacts and accounts and such I dumped on EVA after my secretary ran off with some floozy. EVA made me agree to come here and sort them all out myself before she’d actually take them over.”

“…right…” He was kidding for at least part of that, right? Though Liquid knew what all the paperwork entailed, considering EVA had made him put it in stacks that Ocelot seemed to have dismantled anyway… “By the way, did you want your duster back? Mantis is still using it.”

“He can have it,” Ocelot waved him off.

“Are you sure? He’s starting to smell like you.”

Ocelot finally looked up at him, spocking an eyebrow. “Does that bother you?”

“No. …though I feel like it should.”

There was a pause.

“Is me being around going to make things awkward, boss?” Ocelot said.

“Oh, no,” Liquid said, “I mean… I don’t think so, Mantis doesn’t— er, doesn’t… remember why he
hates you…”

Ocelot gave him an even look, putting down his pen and steepling his fingers. Liquid fidgeted. Rather not think about Arizona right now…

“Even… well, when he goes back to normal - starts acting like he usually does - I’m not sure he’ll still hate you. You did save his life, after all.”

“Boss, you have no idea how many times I’ve already saved his life.”

“…?”

“Nevermind. What’s your rationale here?”

Liquid shrugged. “Saving him like that is really definitive proof that he was wrong about you, yes? If you’d asked him about this before this happened, he’d have been utterly convinced that you would opt to let him die or even kill him yourself in order to get him out of your way. And here you were handed the perfect opportunity, but instead you brought him back to me… how could he still say that you aren’t on our side after this? I suppose he could argue that you saved his life to convince him that you’re on our side after all, but why do that when murder was an option? That’s not like you. That leaves too much to chance.”

Ocelot twirled his pen in his fingers. “You’ve got Mantis’ logic down pat,” he said, “except for the part where he doesn’t actually follow his own logic. He just works backwards from whatever conclusion he’s already come to.”

“…”

“He’ll still hate me when the amnesia wears off. Might even hate me more depending on what he remembers first.”

“…at least you think he will return to himself.”

“Of course he will. He’s much more resilient than he’s ever given himself credit for.”

EVA came swanning into the room. “I think you should tell me more about your ‘secretary’ and this floozy, ADAM.”

“How long were you listening?” Liquid said to her, blinking.

“Long enough to hear that.”

“It’s not a particularly interesting story,” Ocelot said dismissively, going back to his paperwork. “Just that Miller is no longer on our side.”

“What?” Liquid said.

“Oh,” EVA said. “I see.”

“Mm.” Ocelot put down his pen suddenly, leaning back in his chair and stretching. “At any rate, I anticipated something like that happening, so the amount of damage Miller could do with the information he had was limited. He left our ‘team’ entirely before he could gather any more, too. It’s the other leakers we have to worry about.”

“Any clues on that end?” Liquid said skeptically.
“…no. But big things are coming up soon, boss. Shake things up enough and what you want always falls right into your lap.”

“Sounds ominous.”

“What’s going on?” EVA said.

“Some Patriot scheme I’ve been ordered to participate in,” Ocelot said. “Boss, remember how we were trying to get the Patriot servers relocated to that submarine?”

“Of course I do,” Liquid said. “It looked like a horseshoe crab.”

“Construction is scheduled to start soon, but first they need a cover, which I’ve been instructed to provide.” He waved a hand. “We’ll still come out ahead on this even aside from Arsenal Gear.”

“…do you intend to share your plans with me, Ocelot?”

“In due time.”

“When he’s already done it,” EVA clarified. Liquid groaned.

“ADAM.”

Ocelot glanced over his shoulder. “Hm?”

“We need to talk.”

“It’s late, EVA.”

“Good for us,” EVA said. “Just about everyone’s asleep, including my son. …who you’ve been hiding things from.”

“So you suppose that now’s a good time as any for this conversation. You still haven’t told him?”

“You asked me not to. I’ve been holding off on the assumption that you would, eventually.” She frowned. “And I think he’d take it better hearing it from you than from me.”

“Oh?”

“He’s closer to you, ADAM. And from his perspective, your relationship to Big Boss is much less… complicated.”

“If you say so,” Ocelot said. “But I haven’t had the opportunity to bring it up yet.”

EVA snorted. “For God’s sake, ADAM,” she said, “it’s been three years already, don’t you think he’d be better off knowing what this is all about?”

“He’s been doing just fine not knowing.”

“…” She narrowed her eyes. “You’re afraid, aren’t you? Afraid that he’ll run off and do exactly what you don’t want him to do.”

He shrugged. “I prefer to take calculated risks, EVA.”

“Eli can be levelheaded when he needs to be.”
Ocelot’s expression plainly read *You don’t really believe that, do you?*

“…and besides,” EVA went on, “he was much more attached to V than he ever was to Big Boss. He might not *care.*”

“You overestimate his capacity for forgiveness.”

“Not forgiveness. The opposite, really - he’s too focused on his desire for revenge for V’s death that I don’t think it’s even going to *matter* to him that-”

“I *said* I would tell him,” Ocelot interrupted her, “and I *will.* …when the time is right.”

“You always do this,” EVA huffed.

“I always have to do this. Timing can be a very delicate issue.”

EVA gave him a suspicious look, but let the conversation die there, stalking off down the hallway. Ocelot sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. EVA probably did have a point. He couldn’t hide this forever - and really, he *shouldn’t.* Big Boss’ sons had a right to know, didn’t they? Ocelot wasn’t even opposed to telling Solid or Solidus — the former wouldn’t care (if anything he’d be relieved), the latter would be intrigued and would likely support any and all efforts to bring about Big Boss’ awakening in an attempt to *mean* something to the man. Liquid, on the other hand…

“You knew I was standing just around the corner, didn’t you? That’s why you cut her off. Just like you did with Sigint two years ago.”

Ocelot dropped his hand from his face. He could practically feel Liquid’s glare at his back. “I suspect she knew, too,” he said, “and was just hoping she could say it out loud without me thinking it odd.”

“Well?” Liquid said. “Get on with it, then.”

“I’m afraid not, boss.”

Liquid grit his teeth. “Not until ’the time is right’, eh, Ocelot? And it’s never been the *right time* for the past three years… or however long you’ve been hiding this from me.” He leaned forward, narrowing his eyes - it was actually kind of impressive how well he really could have passed for EVA’s son. “Bit over *seven* years, would be my guess. It has something to do with how Big Boss died, doesn’t it?”

“*Would* you care?” Ocelot said.

“…”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence between them. At length Liquid jerked his head away and spoke again.

“It hurts, doesn’t it?” he said. “You lost my father to the Patriots, and then four years later you lose Big Boss to them too. I suppose whatever *mistakes* you made in ’95 you didn’t actually *learn* from.”

Ocelot gave him a strained smile. “Either that or I learned what it’s like to face the worst moment of my life again and *flinch.*”

That shut Liquid up, for a moment. He visibly scrambled for a response, silent, then shook his head and turned around to go slinking back to his room. “I expect you to talk sooner or later, Ocelot,” he said sourly over his shoulder.
“I will, boss.”

Liquid slunk back to his room, no longer caring about the glass of water he’d gotten up for in the first place. He bumped into EVA waiting right next to the door with her arms crossed, leaning against the wall.

“He still didn’t tell you, did he?” she said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Liquid snapped, “you’re hiding something from me, too!!”

“Shh! It’s late, people are sleeping. …at any rate, Ocelot really did ask me not to tell. And I really did agree to that on the assumption that he would tell you.”

“Fat lot of good that’s done me, Mother.”

“He did intend to tell you, Eli. When the time was-“

“The time is never right, and he bloody well knows it!!”

“It isn’t, but no, he doesn’t realize that,” EVA said. “He’s not infallible.”

“Fucking obviously.”

“He’s also not as invulnerable as he likes to think he is.”

Liquid squinted at EVA. Just what the hell was going on around here?

Was she implying Ocelot was… afraid to talk?

EVA sighed through her nose, pulling herself away from the wall. “He’s not going to be staying here very long,” she said, “so if he leaves without telling you the truth… I’ll tell you myself.”

“…”

“Now go to bed. Don’t forget you’re going to go see Dr. Madnar tomorrow morning.”

“…fine.”

Liquid closed the door behind him a little louder than necessary, not particularly caring whether Mantis was asleep still or not, not caring either as he flopped into bed next to Mantis, grabbing him around the waist and pulling him close.

“What are you so angry about?” Mantis murmured. Liquid could feel him nudging at his mind.

He shook him off. “Seems like everyone’s hiding things from me,” he said bitterly, “lying by omission, letting me believe things that aren’t true… I hate it.”

“Hm. Go to sleep.”

Liquid sat up, scowling. “What, not even an ounce of sympathy for your own husband?”

“No, I just…” Mantis looked up at him, blinking slowly. “I thought you would feel better if you slept.”

“…” Liquid laid back down, tugging Mantis closer to him again and pressing his face against his chest. “I’m sure I won’t. I hate this, Mantis, I don’t like people going around behind my back.”
Mantis didn’t say anything, just patted Liquid on the top of the head. It didn’t make Liquid’s mood any better - while Mantis still struggled with using his psychic powers, he’d gotten reading surface thoughts down pat (aside from Liquid in particular being able to sort of feel him do it), so he absolutely knew that this was about Ocelot. And even though he knew Mantis wasn’t like that right now, Liquid was still somehow expecting Mantis to make a bunch of snide comments about how he always understood that Ocelot was purposefully misleading and hiding things from Liquid, and Liquid was a naïve gobemouche for never wholly realizing it before…

“Why are you upset about this?” Mantis asked him.

“Is it not obvious?” Liquid said disdainfully. “I think I have a right to be upset when I’m essentially being lied to. I want to know what’s going on here, it’s only reasonable. Why are they hiding things from me, why do they feel the need to hide things from me…?!”

Mantis muttered something Liquid didn’t quite catch.

“Excuse me?” Liquid said, incensed, sitting up again.

Mantis sat up too. “Hypocrite,” he repeated. “You hide things, too.”

“I’m a bloody spy, it’s in my job description!”

“To hide things from me?”

“I— I’m not hiding things from you!”

Again Liquid felt Mantis trying to probe his mind. Losing his temper, Liquid lunged at Mantis, grabbing his shoulder despite the probe snapping off in a burst of second-hand alarm.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” he snarled, shaking Mantis violently.

“I, I just— Eli— please s-stop it—“

“…!”

Liquid let go of him, breathing hard, quickly drawing his hand back to himself. “I,” he started, grimacing, “I’m sorry, Mantis— I didn’t mean to lash out at you. I’m just… I’m frustrated, I’m sorry.”

Mantis just looked away.

Nervous now, Liquid tried to extend a peace offering: “Look, if you think I’m hiding something from you, why don’t you just ask? Instead of attempting to read my mind without my permission… I don’t like you doing that, don’t you remember? I don’t have anything to hide from you, just— oh god he was babbling. But the truth had to come out eventually, didn’t it? About what Liquid did while Mantis was suffering in Provo…

To Liquid’s surprise, what Mantis asked was, “Could you tell me why I hate Ocelot?”

“Huh?”

“I thought I understood it,” Mantis said, subtly withdrawing his body into himself, “I thought I understood that I was jealous that Ocelot was your lover first, and for some reason unwilling to accept the fact that he had to torture you in order to rescue you from Iraq, but… now that he is here…” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I feel strange about it. I feel angry… and sad. I do not
understand, Eli. Please tell me what happened between us.”

Liquid’s throat felt kind of dry suddenly. “Well… you see…”

“It is something to do with you, isn’t it? That is why you’re so uncomfortable, because I asked that.”

“…yes. But… I don’t know, Mantis, I’m familiar with you being angry at him, but… sad? I don’t…”

Mantis reached out, took Liquid’s face in his hands, scrutinizing him. Liquid blinked.

“We already talked about this, Mantis, I’m sure it’s just that this is the first time you’ve seen Ocelot since you found—” he felt Mantis trying to read his mind, his memories again and pulled away slightly, “—out about— Mantis, I’m warning you, don’t—!

Liquid couldn’t help but remember that last morning in the prison camp whenever it came up in conversation. Even now it seemed far away and unreal, but still he thought about it and Mantis couldn’t help but see it now. Liquid heard his sharp intake of breath. He tried to shove his thoughts in a different direction, slapping Mantis’ hands away from him, trying to remember instead-something— anything, anything but this! The rumble of EVA’s motorcycle as he rode on the back of it, the night in Solid’s cabin when he married Mantis, the smell of salt air on Mother Base, the faint sound of music coming from Venom’s earpiece as he carried him over his shoulders away from Hell —

in close i heard a voice standing stretching every nerve had to listen had no choice i did not believe the information just had to trust imagination my heart going boom boom boom boom son he said grab your things i’ve come to take you “Ocelot did what to you?!”

“It’s fine!” Liquid said immediately, backing up to the very edge of the bed, “it’s fine, it had to happen, he did it to save me, Mantis please it was thirteen years ago, please don’t—“

“Oh, god.”

“-don’t freak out about this, we had no choice, it doesn’t matter anyway it was just one more out of a million and he didn’t even hurt me that bad, it was just his fingers—“

“So that’s why…” Mantis also backed away, holding his hands up to his neck, “that’s why I…”

Liquid panicked. “You would have done the same in his position!” he half-shouted, “anyone would have, he had to break me or we would have both been in danger! He had to- to play to my trauma and crush the hope he gave me, if he hadn’t done that then Father could have never—“

“Both of us…” Mantis whispered with wide eyes.

“…?” Liquid had to stop. “Mantis…? What do you mean?”

“Ocelot… took advantage of both of us. That’s why I…”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Mantis gave him a startled look. “I… you don’t know?”

“No,” Liquid said, a sour taste in his mouth. So Mantis had been hiding things from him, too?! No… no, it couldn’t be… or maybe he had a damn good reason for it. “What are you talking about, Mantis? Tell me.”
“…I do not think I should.”

Liquid reached out, took one of Mantis’ hands and lead it to the side of his face, cradling his cheek in it, making as deliberate eye contact as he could in this lighting all the while. “Tell me,” he said firmly, “and if you can’t, then show me.”

Mantis swallowed audibly. Liquid could hear his breathing starting to go a little uneven. “I… but…”

“Go on.”

“…it was back in the KGB,” Mantis said in a small voice. “Ocelot and I were… close.”

Somehow Liquid could sense that Mantis didn’t have the words for this. Not now. He pressed Mantis’ hand as reassuringly as possible. “Show me,” he breathed, his eyes wide.

Mantis nodded shakily.

This kiss is a submissive one.

“…oh,” Liquid said.

Ocelot waits until Bogomol breaks it, taking an uneven breath as he does, then wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Ocelot surreptitiously licks his lips.

He stands up abruptly, pushing a rather startled Bogomol onto his back on the kitchen table - knocking over his vodka glass in the process, but neither of them pay any attention to that - positions himself between his legs, and stares down at him. Bogomol almost cowers under his gaze, tensing and staring up at Ocelot with wide eyes and parted lips.

“Oh no.”

Ocelot leans closer. “Perhaps it’s just what you want, Bogomolechik.”

“Oh, no, Mantis, stop, oh god I don’t want to see—“

“…or were you, perhaps, excited?”

“Ah… I… I just want… aah…”

Ocelot lets him devolve into gasping out little sounds, shuddering against the friction

“Oh… ah, Ocelot—“

The tent in Bogomol’s shorts grows ever larger and more noticeable, and Bogomol blushes all the way up to his ears, almost as red as his hair. He claps a hand over his mouth when he lets out a little yelp at Ocelot shifting his hand down to massage his balls before pressing hard against his perineum.

Bogomol lets out a choked noise, his hips bucking.

“Ah— agh- ghh— Ocelot… aahhh-“

Bogomol is rocking his hips against Ocelot’s hand,

“Ocelot- Ocelot— oh, this is… ohh, ah- Ocel— ah!“

tips his head back and makes a high-pitched moan.
“O-Ocelot- I’m gonna—!”

“STOP!!” Liquid shoved Mantis away, gasping for breath. Mantis was shaking. “Stop, I don’t… oh my god. Mantis, how old were you - sixteen?”

“I don’t remember,” Mantis said quietly.

Liquid clenched his fist, swallowing hard. There were a lot of thoughts, a lot of emotions running through his mind right now, and most of them were fury. Anger at Ocelot, anger at Mantis for hiding this for over fifteen years, for letting him believe that he had been his first— but no, no, he’d been a damn kid and this was- this was…

This was not Mantis’ fault.

Liquid stood abruptly, grinding his teeth together. “Eli?” Mantis said. He sounded almost scared. It just made the pit of Liquid’s stomach boil even more. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to go find Ocelot,” Liquid said, in a passable façade of calmness, “and kill him.”

Chapter End Notes

lol yes I did copy/paste from Рокси Харт и Вэлма Келли 5 here (and change to present tense for consistency’s sake)
Chapter 89

It took Liquid long enough to find Ocelot that his knee-jerk reaction of *rip his torso open, tear his intestines out, and use them to strangle him* had cooled to just mostly wanting a god damn explanation of whatever the *fuck* Mantis had just shown him. Now that he knew about it, it was bothering him that Mantis had never told him about this before - recent mindrape notwithstanding, there was no way Mantis hadn’t known that Liquid would react like this.

So, then, why wouldn’t he have ever told Liquid about it to make him hate Ocelot? He certainly *wanted* him to, and he certainly wasn’t shy about using his *other* traumas as weapons with which to bludgeon people into submission. What was special about this? Not to say that Liquid would buy any excuse Ocelot gave, but he did want to at least hear the other side of the story before shoving Ocelot’s face against the front wheel of EVA’s motorcycle and turning it on.

Ocelot managed to make himself scarce until Liquid finally ambushed him in the front room around five in the morning. Almost literally - Ocelot sidestepped him at the last moment and Liquid probably would have snagged him if he’d still had both hands.

“Well, Ocelot?” He spread his arms. “I’m giving you a chance to explain yourself here. Because what I saw from Mantis was... not a good look for you, to be sure.”

“Well, Ocelot?” He spread his arms. “I’m giving you a chance to explain yourself here. Because what I saw from Mantis was... not a good look for you, to be sure.”

“Like hell you didn’t, I saw it!! You fucked him and he was sixteen!”

“Oh god. So Mant...”
“Do you want me to?” Ocelot said with a shrug. “It happened. I’m not proud of it. But it was over fifteen years ago.”

“That’s always your excuse, isn’t it?” Liquid snarled, “you aren’t proud of what you’ve done, but it was years ago, so why should you-“

“Are we still talking about Mantis?”

“Finally I understand why he hates you so much! Even Mother could accept what you did to me as a necessary evil, but him? He never could, and this is why! You have a track record that only he knows about.”

“—track record of being a predator, right?” Ocelot said, cocking his head, “so it naturally follows that your dear husband, seeing things from the perspective of former prey, would view me as simply victimizing you in your vulnerable state.”

“Is that an admission?” Liquid said coldly.

“I’ll admit I hardly took the high road back then, but I never went out of my way to make either of you suffer.”

“You fucked a sixteen-year-old!”

“I told you, we didn’t fuck.”

“You raped me!”

“And I thought you understood why I did that.”

Liquid growled, clenching his fist. Ocelot was being infuriatingly calm about this. “Then what’s your excuse for doing that to Mantis, eh? Hell, what’s your excuse for letting me when I hopped in bed with you mere weeks after getting out of that prison camp?? I was unwell, even a blind man could see that!”

“Oh?” Ocelot raised an eyebrow. “It took you over a decade to decide that I took advantage of your sorry state?”

“Something happens once, Ocelot, maybe it’s reasonable — but if you do it twice, if I was just your second go-round for exploiting emotionally vulnerable people-“

“So this is what it comes down to, huh.”

“I can’t believe I ever loved you!!”

Maybe Ocelot overestimated how much losing a hand and forearm would cripple Liquid, or maybe he was just getting old - or maybe he was caught off-guard by the l-world, because he didn’t duck or even roll with Liquid’s punch, instead catching it full-force in the face with a crunch as Liquid finally did what many had tried but none had accomplished: breaking Ocelot’s stupid nose.

Goddamn it felt good. Not just to hurt someone, to hurt Ocelot, but to finally feel anger - true, genuine anger, not that shallow pantomime he’d used as an excuse to get the pain he craved— Ocelot deserved his anger and he knew it all along——

“Boss,” Ocelot started, reeling, hand up to his bleeding face, but Liquid struck again, this time body-checking him straight into a small table, the vase on top of which fell to the floor with them,
shattering. Liquid pinned Ocelot down in the shards and punched him again, scowling and hissing in rage — but it was difficult to pin and punch with just one arm, and Ocelot caught his wrist and prevented him from doing any more damage in time for one of the PLA soldiers who’d been standing watch tonight to come up behind him and grab the back of his collar, yanking him to his feet.

“What is going on here?!” the soldier said. (It was the burly Pole who’d gone with EVA to chase down RAT PT 01, Mirek.)

“A little disagreement,” Ocelot said, his hand still at his face. His voice had an unpleasantly nasal quality to it now. “Not an easy one to settle without coming to blows, I’m afraid.”

“Shut the fuck up, Ocelot,” Liquid spat, yanking himself away from Mirek. “You-

“Keep your voice down, boss, it’s late and we’ve already caused enough commotion.”

“You just-!”

“What’s going on??” Mirek said again.

Ocelot snorted out blood. “Boss,” he said, “surely you’ve had to ask yourself why he didn’t tell you earlier.”

“…” Liquid bared his teeth at him. He didn’t want to listen to excuses.

“I don’t intend to justify what I’ve done, but you’re missing some vital context. Ask him if he remembers Kuznetsov.”

“Kuznetsov?” Liquid had heard the name before, but was under the impression that it was an exceedingly common one. “…fine. I’ll ask. Anything to dig your grave deeper, old man.”

“As you wish.”

Liquid whirled around and stalked back to his room, bits of glass falling from his pants as he did. Behind him he could hear Mirek asking one last time what was just going on, then insisting Ocelot receive some kind of first aid for his broken nose. Liquid couldn’t make out Ocelot’s reply but he hoped the sick fuck drowned in his own blood and snot, at any rate.

Mantis jumped when he irritably kicked open the door, and didn’t say anything as he sat down on the edge of the bed and started picking the rest of the glass out of his legs and feet, eventually giving up with a frustrated huff and stripping off his pants entirely.

“Um… Eli?”

“What?”

“…please do not be mad at me, I-“

“I’m not mad at you,” Liquid snapped, glaring at him over his shoulder. “I’m mad at Ocelot. For what he did to—”

“But he was right.”

That threw Liquid for a loop. “…what?”

Mantis shrunk in on himself. “I- I’m sorry,” he said, “I was worried about you, so I was…
eavesdropping on your thoughts and feelings, I… I should have told you earlier, you are right about that, but—"

“But what, Mantis.”

“I remember… the rest,” Mantis whispered. “When Ocelot said that name. I… remembered.”

Liquid gaped at him for a moment, then snorted, flopping down next to him. Like hell. This had to be some hypnotism trigger word bullshit——

“No, Eli, it really… I…” Mantis stared at his lap. “Kuznetsov… no, it is better to start at the beginning. May I?”

“Fine.”

He felt Mantis’ hand hesitantly touch the side of his head, but swatted it away. “No,” he said firmly, “I meant tell me. Use your words.”

“…”

Liquid could feel a prickling shame from Mantis; awkwardly he realized that he wasn’t helping and sat up again, this time leaning towards Mantis and hooking his arms around his shoulders, raising the intact one to pat Mantis’ cheek.

“Alright,” he sighed. “Sorry. I’m not trying to be so… look, I know you weren’t hiding this from me, you just- it’s an uncomfortable topic, yes? If I assumed that your first kiss, your first everything was me when it… wasn’t… well, that’s my problem, isn’t it?” It seemed like such a stupid thing to even be offended about, in this context… now that Liquid was saying it out loud.

Mantis shook his head. “This is not about that,” he said.

“…then tell me what happened. Tell me what’s going on.”

Mantis took a deep breath before speaking. “Back at the KGB,” he said, “Ocelot… he… I couldn’t make it on my own. That was obvious within the first week, I was helpless and alone and afraid. But Ocelot was… there. And I was a loose end from 1984, he only intended to keep an eye on me, he—"

“So what did he do?” Liquid said with distaste. “Groom you? That’s why you accused him of grooming me, isn’t it, because you knew—“

“W-Well, yes, but… but…” Mantis leaned his head against Liquid’s shoulder. “It didn’t… not at first. He took such good care of me but there was nothing between us. He coddled me for convenience’s sake and nothing more - I knew that. I did not like him and he did not like me, even though he acted like a father to me, it was only- it was only because he had to, I… I never…”

“So what changed?”

Mantis flinched, scooted away from Liquid. Liquid let him go.

It was a moment before Mantis spoke again. “You got shot down,” he said flatly.

“Oh.”

He glanced away. “You don’t know how that affected me,” he said. “I fell apart. I needed you, Eli, you, your letters, the knowledge that you were safe and happy in the SAS… everything was ripped away from me so suddenly…”
“I…” Liquid wasn’t sure how to react for a moment. “…I’m sorry, Mantis.”

Mantis shook his head. “It was not your fault,” he murmured. “But, when that happened… I was alone, and I was never meant to be alone, but Ocelot… Ocelot was there.”

“So you got attached to him,” Liquid guessed. Though it wasn’t much of a guess when it phrased like an emotionless statement.

 “…I don’t know.” Mantis shifted a little closer to Liquid, kneading the bedsheets with his hands. “It was over fifteen years ago, Eli. It was a different time. A different me. …I don’t know how I felt back then and I don’t know how I feel now, looking back on it.”

“…”

“But Ocelot was so kind to me. He… he helped me cope with losing you, and many days he would stop by my apartment just to make sure I was… okay.”

“Making sure his asset was still functional, hm?” Liquid said coldly.

“Of course,” Mantis said, his voice faint. “Why else would he have done that? His kindness didn’t mean- never meant anything, I was only…” he trailed off. Somewhat cautiously, Liquid took hold of him and pulled him into his lap, his touch and movements as gentle as possible. “He was doing me a favor… that was all.”

“He did that a lot, I suppose.”

“Yes. Every day he was in Moscow. I would have ended up back at the University if it weren’t for him.”

Liquid grimaced. Hell of a thing to hold over Mantis’ head, but even he could see how it would have been effective.

“So- what I saw— did he decide to cash in on-?”

“No, Eli,” Mantis said. “Ocelot never asked for anything in return. He said he did not consider me in his debt, because I was a child.”

“…? Then… why…?”

“It was my fault,” Mantis said, then stopped talking, refusing to respond to any of Liquid’s prods or questions until Liquid finally hit upon, “Who was Kuznetsov?”

“One of my superiors in the KGB,” Mantis replied, his voice faint again, and hoarse. “The kind of man who sleeps with his secretary and fires her when she asks if they are ever going to get married.”

“So? What happened?”

“I caught his eye.”

Mantis left it at that. It wasn’t hard for Liquid to figure out his implication: Kuznetsov had propositioned Mantis, holding his job over his head to ‘encourage’ him to ‘consent’ to sex with him.

“Then, Mantis, did you…?”

Mantis shook his head.
Oh. …well, alright then. What does this have to do with Ocelot?” Liquid said, confused.

Mantis kept shaking his head. “Kuznetsov did not take rejection well,” he said, “after I said no, he attempted to rape me.”

“What?!”

Mantis drew back from him, startled in a mild, sleepy way - like he was anywhere but here and now mentally. “He didn’t get very far,” he mumbled. “It was just his fingers. And it did not matter much, back when I was a child at the research institution they would always touch me in ways I did not like or—“

“Stop,” Liquid said, squeezing his eyes shut. “Stop it. You sound like me.”

“…”

God. How could this happen? Mantis completely and utterly lost his shit because of what happened to Liquid, but when the same thing happened to him it was no big deal. Nothing worth raising a fuss over or even sharing with his own fucking husband.

“…then Ocelot came,” Mantis said, lying back down and resting one of his arms across the lens of his gas mask. “He interrupted, chased Kuznetsov off…I never saw him again…a few weeks afterwards, his badly decomposed body was pulled out of the Moskva River.”

“Ocelot’s doing?” Liquid said.

“Mm. But that night… I took off work early, after that happened. Ocelot covered for me. He stopped by in the evening to see if I was alright.”

“And were you?” It seemed like a stupid question, but…

“I was terrified,” Mantis whispered. “Ocelot had saved me again, and I was terrified of it - of how much I owed him. I did not want to be in his debt. So I… I…”

“…”

“…I tried to wipe it out, start over. I tried to use sex to do so. My body, for one night, in exchange for my freedom.”

“……” Liquid clenched his fist until his nails drew blood from his palms. Somehow this felt worse than Mantis being groomed into infatuation and going at it with Ocelot willingly. This felt so much more… predatory. “So Ocelot took you up on it. He fucked you.”

“No,” Mantis said.

“No?” Liquid said, blinking. “But- you showed me—“

“There was no actual penetration. He didn’t even take off my pants, he just… rubbed. For a while. Until I was about to…” Mantis drew his legs up, uncomfortably. “Then he left.”

Liquid was stunned. “He left?”

Mantis said something in Russian, then cleared his throat and said, in a dissonantly lilting voice, “‘You’re a child, Bogomolechik. I don’t hold debts from children. …finish yourself off if you want. I’ll be seeing you around if you ever forgive me for this.’”
“Bogomol…echik…” Liquid echoed, his brow furrowing. He didn’t know how to process any of this.

“Neither do I,” Mantis snapped, suddenly sitting up. “I know why he did that, Eli, but—“

“Why the fuck, then, Mantis??”

“To teach me a lesson,” Mantis said, resting his chin on his knees. “I was so humiliated afterwards that we both knew I would never again attempt anything like that - not with him, not with anyone else. I am sure I never did anything like that again until… you.”

“Hmph.”

“Is it so different from what I do with you all the time?” Mantis said, cocking his head. “Humiliation to modify behavior?”

“Yes,” Liquid said heatedly.

“How so?”

“Well, Mantis didn’t currently know that he ever doled out punishments to teach Liquid legitimate lessons, as opposed to just letting Liquid get off on being pushed around. Liquid didn’t want to bring it up, though. Even if… this incident must have been where Mantis had even gotten the whole idea in the first place… “I’m not sixteen bloody years old,” Liquid said at length.

“…”

“Mantis. Why the hell didn’t you tell me? I would have listened to you about Ocelot back then, if I’d known.”

“…back then?”

“At Outer Heaven.”

Mantis was silent for a long while. Liquid came to sit next to him, drawing him close again, letting him tuck himself away against his body.

“I decided right after it happened not to tell you,” Mantis said, so quietly that for a moment Liquid thought Mantis had figured out how to speak directly into his mind again. “Ocelot walked out on me and I was still… I… I had to do something to get rid of… it.” Liquid could feel Mantis’ body shiver, a little. “I was so distressed, I needed comfort… familiarity. I needed… I needed you, Eli, but all I had of you was… was…”

“…was what? An old letter?”

“The… photo the Iraqis sent to the British government to prove they had you hostage.”

Liquid inhaled sharply, and successfully quashed the impulse to shove Mantis away again. “You wanked to a photo of me as a POW???”

“I-I am sorry, Eli, I’m—“

“No, no. Fuck. Jesus tapdancing Christ. No, Mantis, it doesn’t matter and- and anyway, that’s a stupid reason, you really wouldn’t still hold to that when you thought I was being abused. What the hell, Mantis?”
Mantis sniffed. It almost sounded like he was starting to cry - Liquid pulled him a little closer, trying to comfort him despite his own confusion and disgust. “I know it was bad,” Mantis said, “I know—objectively. It was a terrible thing and Ocelot should not have done it. I know that, but…”

“But what?” Liquid prompted.

“But it doesn’t… I cannot feel like it is,” Mantis said, a pleading edge to his voice, a desperation for Liquid to understand. “I cannot reconcile how I feel with the fact that I know I have every right to hate Ocelot for what he did to me, not just what he did to you. But I can’t. I can’t…”

Liquid silently rubbed his back as he tried so hard to suppress his sobs. Maybe this was the real reason why Mantis was so quick to despise Ocelot. Not for what he did to Liquid, nor for cutting in and rescuing Liquid while Mantis couldn’t no matter how badly he wanted to. He just needed a reason to… finally know how he was supposed to react to the man.

Hell, maybe he had been jealous, too, in the opposite direction everyone had always assumed.

“This was the worst thing he did to me,” Mantis said, his voice and body trembling. “He made me feel like he cared about me. He made it impossible for me to look back on those times and call it for what it was: manipulation, abuse… I was a kid, Eli— I was just a kid. I was stupid. I still cannot… I… I miss those days, Eli… I miss Ocelot, in the KGB…”

Liquid just held Mantis, rubbing his back, a sour taste in his mouth. He couldn’t help but wonder if - despite Ocelot’s well-worn track record of casual manipulation - Ocelot had even done anything besides attempt to be nice in his own strange way. Did Ocelot manipulate Mantis, or did Mantis manipulate himself — develop a teenage crush on his ‘caretaker’ and carry the tension between them with him for the rest of his life? Hell, was it even possible for Liquid to get a clear answer on this from either of them?

No. No, it probably wasn’t.

“Eli,” Mantis whimpered against his chest. “Eli, my head hurts.”

“It’s probably just… how you got back a bunch of memories just now,” Liquid murmured to him. “I’m sure you’re alright.”

Whatever Ocelot’s intentions were, though, even if he didn’t technically fuck Mantis when he was sixteen-seventeen-ish with the presumed mentality of a fucking nine-year-old, he’d still pretty much molested him. The fact that he left before it was done, didn’t whip out his own dick, and had done it to teach a lesson was probably irrelevant here. But by the same token he had actively stopped Mantis from being outright raped, and considering the end result Liquid seriously doubted that that had been any kind of set-up. Ocelot had been genuinely looking out for Mantis back then, huh…

“You’ll feel better if you sleep,” Liquid promised Mantis. He hoped the same would apply to him as well.

If he could even manage to close his eyes with all these questions spinning around his head.
“So the new Codec works pretty well, huh?” Mei Ling said as Solidus blinked rapidly.

“Yes,” said Solidus, “though ending a call is rather… disorienting.”

“Umm… yeah, I’m glad that I’m the one driving, not you,” Mei Ling said, “but how is it? Talking without moving your lips, I mean.”

“It’ll take some getting used to. I assume that if I need to be doing something else during the Codec conversation, I just speak normally?”

“Yeah… seems like that’s the big drawback with the Navy version,” Mei Ling said, “you have to stop everything for a conversation if you want to have it without being heard. I was working on that myself, if I could have kept working on it normally then I would have had a way around it by now, but…”

“Could you still continue development?” Solidus said.

“I can try,” Mei Ling said with a shrug. “At least, I could hardcode a prototype version on my laptop, but I’d need that same specialized equipment in order to do the hardware updates. By the way, Solidus! Thanks for being my guinea pig!!”

“It’s no trouble at all, Mei Ling,” Solidus said, somewhat awkwardly, “but phrasing it like that makes it sounds like something could have… gone wrong…”

“Eh… I’ll admit that new versions of Codecs aren’t entirely without their risks,” Mei Ling said, “there was a reason why Raven used to… but anyway, I’m sure the Navy had already had this all tested and debugged and stuff before I stole some!”

“And that is very fortunate.”

Frank poked his head up from the back seat and started barking. Mei Ling slowed and pulled over to the side of the road, next to a nondescript man who had been waiting with his thumb out and one pant leg hiked way up. Solidus rolled down the window.

“Mr. President,” the man said, lowering his sunglasses.

“Hi, Octopus,” Mei Ling said cheerfully. Frank barked again, wagging his tail.

“When you said you’d meet us on I-40 in Tennessee,” Solidus said testily, “I had assumed we would find you at one of the rest stops.”

Octopus shrugged, opening the back door of the car and climbing in next to Frank. “I planned on that, but the last couple of folks I hitched a ride with decided to just dump me right before they got off their exit. Kind of inconsiderate if you ask me, but what can you do?”

“I assumed you’d call if you were anywhere specific,” Mei Ling said. “I mean, all you said was to just keep heading east, so…”

“So you dropped the accent, huh?” Octopus said, raising an eyebrow, before kicking back and pulling out some makeup wipes.

“Nevermind that!” Mei Ling said, “speaking of calls, Solidus, I was about to ask what that call you
just got was all about. Was it anything important?"

Solidus half-shrugged, tilting his head. “Helena is pregnant,” he said.

“Oh! Well, congratulations to her!”

“Colonel Jackson’s wife, right?” Octopus said, “man, haven’t they been trying for one for years now? I was starting to think the guy was infertile. We’re sure the kid’s his?”

“Don’t be rude,” Mei Ling chided. Octopus laughed. Solidus was unamused.

“Well, nevermind all that,” Octopus said, whipping off his wig dramatically. “Let me tell you about my little trip to Langley…”

Sleep hadn’t helped with Mantis’ headache any but he still dutifully helped Liquid pull his hair back into a ponytail, in silence. Liquid kissed his temple before leaving him the dark and quiet again, listlessly hoping that there wasn’t anything really wrong with him and headaches were just a natural side effect to… all this.

Ocelot was back in the office across from Liquid and Mantis’ room again, door open and desk radio playing soft static as Ocelot worked. Apart from his bandaged nose and the bruises around his eyes, it was if nothing had changed with him. Even when he glanced up and caught Liquid’s eye - Ocelot gave the same bland smile he normally would, and turned back to the files. Liquid didn’t know how to react. He fled.

“Morning, Eli,” EVA said as Liquid entered the kitchen. She was leaning against the counter with a cup of coffee, a sleeping Benedict sprawled out at her feet. Liquid found himself kind of frustrated at how much Benedict liked EVA and PLA in general.

“Good morning, Mother,” Liquid grumbled, kicking his boots from where he’d abandoned them by the kitchen door the other day to where he could easily reach them sitting at the table, then dropping into a chair and rubbing his head.

“Sleep well?” EVA said, “how’s your chest feeling?”

“I’m fine.”

EVA tossed him an apple. “Here,” she said, “breakfast before we go.”

“‘We’?” Liquid said, catching it neatly. He’d be glad to have a right arm back, but it wasn’t like his left hand was too shabby.

“I don’t use cutouts with Dr. Madnar,” EVA said as Liquid bit into the apple to hold it in his mouth while he stubbornly laced his boots with one hand. “It’s not that he’s paranoid, exactly, but he’s more comfortable with me than just someone claiming to be sent by me. I don’t blame him. It’s a valid precaution.”

“Hm.” Crunch.

“…you’re in quite the mood this morning, Eli.”

Liquid just glared at her, sourly chewing his apple.

“Anything to do with you breaking Ocelot’s nose last night?” EVA said, raising an eyebrow. She was being way too casual about that… though, Liquid supposed, she and Ocelot had also been
having their differences the previous night.

“I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“Then we can talk on the way to Dr. Madnar’s lab,” EVA said, picking up some car keys and shaking them.

“I don’t think so.”

Liquid was marginally surprised that they EVA decided to make the trip in one of PLA’s nondescript vans as opposed to her motorcycle, but of course keeping a low profile always paid off when you’ve been branded a bunch of domestic terrorists. The plates had already been switched out and EVA took a meandering route away from the FOB and through several towns before finally making it to Prague and parking a couple blocks away from an old Soviet-era block of flats at the edge of the city.

“His lab’s just in the basement of this panelák here,” EVA said, walking briskly. Liquid glanced around as he followed, but no passerby seemed to really notice them. “And stop being so moody, Eli.”

“I’m not.”

“You are. Now, Dr. Madnar is kind of shy, so don’t do anything to scare him off. And don’t get pissy if he brings up David.”

Liquid raised his eyebrows. “Dr. Madnar knows my brother?”

“Yes… through the Outer Heaven uprising, so I really would not recommend you get into with him.”

“Hmph.”

At least he successfully made it to Dr. Madnar’s lab without EVA being able to conversationally corner him about Ocelot. He still hadn’t decided what he should do about that whole… situation — but publicly hanging up his and Mantis’ dirty laundry probably wasn’t the wisest course of action.

“You must be Liquid Snake,” Dr. Madnar’s Indian nurse greeted him, her eyes only flicking to his collar very briefly. “I heard a lot about you back when your team rescued Mei Ling and I from the Patriots. It’s good to, like, finally meet you!”

“Ah, you must be Miss Kovalam, then,” Liquid said with an appropriately fake smile, then held up his stump. “Shame we couldn’t meet under more pleasant circumstances.”

“Um… yeah. Also, I… heard about Vulcan Raven. I’m sorry. He was… really nice.”

“That was two years ago,” Liquid waved her off. “And at any rate, at that time, didn’t you also have a dear friend recently die?”

The shadow of a frown passed over her face. “Soraya…” She shook her head, then turned around. “Ilya!” she called, “the patient’s here!”

“Neela, I told you stop calling me that in front of patients!”

“Big Mama’s here too!”

The fabled Dr. Madnar rounded a corner somewhere and appeared in the lab, carrying a box of spooled wires. “Good morning, Matka Pluku. And you… you must be her other son!”
Liquid rolled his eyes. EVA smiled. “So about his arm…”

Neela unwrapped the bandages around Liquid’s arm while Dr. Madnar flitted around his workbench, having a rapid-fire conversation in Czech with EVA, with Neela occasionally chiming in. “Looks like your arm has been healing pretty good,” Neela said, switching back to English. Liquid hmmed disinterestedly.

“Do you want your prosthetic to look realistic?” Dr. Madnar asked Liquid.

“It doesn’t matter,” Liquid said. “Honestly, I wouldn’t.”

“Oh!” Dr. Madnar said, “well, that’s good then - if you don’t mind your new arm looking like a machine, you can be on your way with it by the afternoon, no follow-ups necessary.”

“?”

“We have plenty of prosthetic arms lying around ready to go,” Neela explained, “we would just need to adjust one to fit your body. Realistic ones take longer to make because they have to be custom - y’know, artificial skin and all that stuff.”

“Ocelot got a realistic one and it only took about a week, Eli,” EVA said.

“I still think I’ll go with the other kind,” Liquid said, blinking. It sounded more convenient, and besides, Venom’s prosthesis had been shiny metal and obviously artificial, so why shouldn’t Liquid emulate that?

Though he had to admit that he didn’t like the way Neela had to touch him in order to get measurements - oh, there was nothing wrong with her measuring his intact arm, or the shoulder above his amputated arm, but touching the stump itself… well, it had already been driving him nuts. The phantom pain was bad enough (and nothing ever really seemed to calm it, even back when he was still taking the hydrocodone); then there was the constant itch of the still-healing wound on the end - he’d removed the stitches himself with a pocketknife the other day, and got lectured by EVA about that, but he’d really wanted to avoid his skin growing over the nylon and it getting embedded in his flesh forever like had happened with Mantis decades ago… plus the natural wound drainage was sort of gross, and that particular bit reflected on Neela’s face although she dutifully ignored Liquid’s overdramatic grunts of pain.

Once measurements were completed EVA and Liquid were left to a several hour wait while Dr. Madnar (and Neela) fine-tuned the prosthetic arm. “So…” EVA said once it was obvious that neither of them were paying any attention to Liquid and EVA, “about last night…”

“Which part?” Liquid said stiffly.

“I suppose there’s no point in asking if Ocelot actually told you anything. Or at least, told you anything related to what we were discussing.”

Liquid shook his head, scowling.

“I thought so,” EVA said. “So what was it, then?”

“Nothing.”

“Eli, you don’t break people’s noses over nothing. …okay, you do, but not Ocelot’s nose.”

Liquid glanced away. “It wasn’t even something I was strictly involved in,” he muttered, “just some
old drama I found out about right then. ...well, and maybe it was a little bit related to ’94, but…”

“…” He caught EVA giving him a sympathetic look out of the corner of his eye, and snarled.

“I hope you’re not expecting me to apologize for attacking him, he certainly deserved it.”

“I’m not disputing that. If nothing else, it’s his own fault for not dodging.”

“But I’m not going to tell you what it was about either, Mother. It’s a very personal matter, for someone else entirely—"

“Mantis?” EVA guessed.

Liquid frowned. He supposed the list of possibilities here was a very short one. “Yes. Well. The point is that I’m not going to be giving away these… sensitive parts of his past without his express permission. Also, don’t you dare ask him about it, you know he’s still all—"

“I know, I know,” EVA said with a shrug, “he’s still recovering from having his brain run through a blender, so trying to get information out of him right now would be nonsensical answers at best and taking advantage of him at worst.”

“Exactly.”

“I won’t ask Ocelot about it either - even if I could trust Ocelot’s side of the story, whatever it is, if it’s old drama that you only just heard about then I’ll respect Mantis’ reasons for keeping it to himself for so long - whatever they are.”

“Thank you.” Though he wouldn’t be surprised if she asked Ocelot anyway, just kept it secret from him and Mantis. Oh well, probably about par for the course with her.

“But next time you decide to confront Ocelot about something, leave my vases out of it,” EVA said sternly.

Liquid snorted.

It took ages for the arm to get attached, and Liquid apparently nearly gave Dr. Madnar a heart attack when he swore loudly upon the forced neural connection when the arm was on - the initial connection was much more painful than Neela’s “This may sting, that’s normal” warned, and it outright burned for several full seconds before Liquid’s arm abruptly went numb all the way up to the shoulder.

“That’s also normal,” Neela said as Liquid sourly watched his new fingers twitch uselessly when he tried to make a fist.

“The numbness will wear off in a few days,” Dr. Madnar said, “it should feel like a natural extension of your body in time, so usually there’s a noticeable reduction or even elimination of phantom pain… though only the tips of your fingers have afferent sensors.”

“Meaning a sense of touch,” Neela said.

“It’ll take a few weeks for your prosthetic arm to function the same way your natural one did,” Dr. Madnar continued cheerfully, cleaning up his workbench, “rebuilding your hand-eye coordination will be the most difficult part, but as long as you aren’t avoiding using that arm entirely, you shouldn’t need any kind of specialized physical therapy. Just do normal tasks to the best of your ability, and it’ll get easier and feel more natural as time goes on.”
“Got it,” Liquid said.

“Oh, and… do you still have any painkillers leftover from the amputation itself? You… might need them.”

Neela nodded at him. “The prosthesis won’t interfere with your arm finishing healing, but you need specialists like us to actually remove it, so…”

“That’s fine,” EVA said before Liquid could reply, “we needed a way to make sure he couldn’t scratch and pick at his wound anyway.”

“It itched,” Liquid whined. “Scratching an itch is a perfectly natural instinctual response.”

Neela rattled off a list of potential complications covering everything from being numb/clumsy a little longer than expected to straight up blood poisoning, and told Liquid to come back here if any of that happened or seemed like it was going to happen. (Though presumably infection would lead to Liquid getting dumped at a hospital again.) Liquid cut a quick exit as soon as they were done, EVA following, and he ignored Dr. Madnar hesitantly calling after him a request to tell Solid he said ‘hi’.

“Honestly, even if you did tell him he said ‘hi’,’” EVA said once they were back in the car and driving back out of the city, “I don’t think he’d have any idea who you’re talking about.”

“Snake’s forgetful like that, hm?” Liquid said, more preoccupied with slowly getting his new metal fingers to curl more on-command. Getting better already, though he still couldn’t feel a damn thing.

“…mm… right. Something to that effect.”

Once they got back to the FOB, of course the first thing Liquid had to do was show off his new arm; several of the PLA soldiers thought it was ‘cool’ and then Liquid got sidetracked by the desire to go check up on Mantis (and show him his new arm, too). He opened the door to an empty room.

Remembering the PLA headquarters raid-that-never-was, Liquid was about to go check outside for him when he picked up on some muffled conversation from behind the closed door of the office behind him.

Slowly he turned around, face blank. Of course it could be anything. Maybe Ocelot was on the phone. Though even if that were the case, Liquid was finding himself increasingly not a fan of being on a need-to-know basis… he silently stole up to the door and pressed an ear against it.

Damn. Russian. He knew just enough Russian to know when it was that language in particular being spoken, and that was all.

He was about to leave Ocelot be and just go find Mantis when he heard another voice cut in: also speaking Russian, but higher-pitched and even more illegible between the door and the gas mask.

“What the hell is going on in here?!” Liquid shouted, kicking open the door. Mantis jumped about a foot in the air from where he’d apparently been leaning against the desk while Ocelot worked; Ocelot merely glanced over impassively.

“I- I just wanted to talk, to clear the air,” Mantis said nervously as Liquid stormed over and grabbed him by the arm, pulling him away from the desk-- “Ow! Eli!! Let go, you are hurting me-!”

“Careful now,” Ocelot said dryly as Liquid snatched his hand away, feeling sick. Mantis’ skin now had the perfect impression of Liquid’s new hand in angry red. “It’ll take a bit of practice before you’re able to properly regulate your grip with that thing.”
Liquid turned on him, growling ferally. “What do you think you’re doing with him?!”

“Clearing the air,” Ocelot said simply. “He had a few questions. I was answering them.”

“As if! Filling his head with lies, more like!!”

“But—” Mantis started, but Liquid grabbed him again, this time with his real hand, pointedly steering him so that Liquid was between him and Ocelot. “But, Eli—“

“Mantis, I don’t want you talking with him like this. You never know—“

“Boss,” Ocelot interrupted, “you’ve never had a problem with him and I having private conversations before.”

“I didn’t know before,” Liquid hissed.

“And? You may know what happened now, but that changes nothing between the two of us. You don’t have anything to do with this.”

“…!!”

Liquid stormed off, Mantis forcibly in tow. For once, he thought, he understood the man’s stupid rules.

______________________________

Grafenwöhr.

“Akiba,” Meryl said, irritated, “put down the magazine.”

“But it’s a good article!”

“And that’s basically the worst tabloid out there, it- where did you even get it, that’s an American rag!”

“He has his ways,” Ed said cryptically.

“Anyway,” Akiba said, “these guys have found some pretty interesting evidence that that girl who stole top-secret technology from the Naval Research Lab in Mississippi is actually the same person behind the infamous Shadow Moses leak.”

Meryl scoffed.

“What’s the matter, commander?”

“Come on, Akiba, you were there too. You know what happened.”

“Was there something wrong with the leak?” Johnathan asked.

“According to the leaker, Solid Snake is still alive and out there somewhere,” Akiba said, turning a page of the magazine, “or at least, he might be.”

“He’s not,” Meryl said darkly. “I watched him die myself.”

Naomi suddenly jerked her head up from where she’d been passed out across a table. “She’s here,” she gasped. “The wolf.”

Meryl looked around - up, mostly. They were outside, in the outdoor seating area of a shut-down
café, but there weren’t any classic sniper’s positions nearby; nonetheless Naomi’s words put her on edge and made her old wounds ache. Naomi might be absolutely nuts, whatever she was before her coma, but most of her babbling was consistent and being stalked by a wolf - that is, Sniper Wolf, Meryl soon deduced - was as real as anything.

Though Wolf had yet to directly confront them. Maybe because if she did, then they’d leave Grafenwöhr, and Wolf found them being in Grafenwöhr more convenient for her weird ass getting off on stalking the crazy lady. Or something.

“I really don’t think it’s your other eye she wants, doc,” Meryl said boredly, turning back to Naomi.

“Yeah, she just wants you dead, right?” Akiba said, finally putting down his MEGASURPRISE issue.

“Akiba!!”

“Sorry, commander!”

“Well,” came a voice from the top of a nearby building, “you can hardly say he is wrong.”

Meryl had her Desert Eagle out in a flash, but Wolf stared impassively down at them, rifle slung across her shoulders.
Chapter 91

Chapter Notes

(sorry for the long random delay in updates, aireyv has been super busy i guess and hasn't sent me any new chapters to post lately... this trend will probably continue in the future... -pp)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Wolf!!”

“Good morning, everyone,” Wolf said brightly, ignoring the fact that all of RAT PT 01 were now pointing their weapons at her, not just Meryl. But she only had eyes for Naomi. “It was starting to seem as though you were all getting a little too comfortable here.”

“What do you want?!” Meryl demanded. Johnathan and Ed both grabbed Naomi by one arm each and started dragging her to a nearby building, but stopped when Wolf flipped her rifle down off her shoulders and aimed it them. Lazily, without looking through the scope, but her intended message was still clear.

“I only wanted to take this opportunity to find a few answers,” Wolf said smoothly.

“I’d like a few answers myself,” Meryl snapped.

“Oh? Then perhaps we can exchange.”

“Why are you hunting Dr. Hunter?!?”

“Why is she acting against us?” Wolf said, “what does she have to gain?”

“Revenge,” Naomi spat.

“You shot her, Liquid killed her brother,” Meryl said, “it seems simple enough to me.”

Wolf shook her head, sitting down on the edge of the roof and kicking one ankle onto the other knee, still carelessly pointing her rifle in Naomi’s direction. “True,” she said, “but Liquid and I are not the only ones she is currently standing against.” She narrowed her eyes. “Though I suppose you have no idea who it is she is standing with.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You!” Naomi snarled, “you and your band of demons — I know what you’re after! While my benefactor sleeps… you stalk him-“

“Benef- you mean Big Boss?” Wolf said.

“What’s he got to do with anything?” Meryl said, glancing over at Naomi very briefly.

“The wolf and her pack want to destroy him while he is asleep, just like I was!” Naomi yelled, “years ago he was forced into cursed slumber after being narrowly spared by death. And now you
want to kill him before he the curse can be broken! But my masters will protect him… he may wake in time, but until then, he will be safe from you… Big Boss will never die!!”

“Dr. Hunter. What the hell are you talking about?”

“Big Boss is dead, you idiot,” Wolf said.

Naomi jerked her arms out of Johnathan and Ed’s grip. For a skinny woman who recently got out of a coma, she was surprisingly strong - her physical therapist had definitely done a number on her.

“You liar!!” she screeched at Wolf.

“This is not 1983, this is 2007! Big Boss has been dead for eight years now,” Wolf said. She tapped her forehead. “Your mind is all messed up. You are mixing past up with present.”

“No! Big Boss is alive, I know this, I’ve seen him sleeping!! They brought him back, just like they did my brother.” She started advancing towards Wolf’s position - RAT PT 01 kept their guns trained on Wolf. There wasn’t much they could do about Naomi right now. “They brought him back but let him sleep, so he would not be tortured the way Frankie did…”

“Brought him back after a helicopter crash, yes?” Wolf said. “That happened in 1975. Did you even know him at that point?”

“Stop talking, you bitch! You can’t trick me!” Wolf’s rifle tracked her as she approached. Naomi picked up a chair. “He is not dead!!” By this point it was obvious Naomi was headed for the fire escape, intending to meet Wolf on the roof herself.

“Dr. Hunter!” Meryl called, “don’t engage! Get back here!”

“I-“ Naomi yelled, “we will kill you before you can kill him!” She ignored Meryl, still advancing towards the fire escape, dragging the chair behind her. Wolf watched with an exasperated expression.

“Dr. Hunter!!”

“You ruined my life, killed my brother and stole my eye, put Big Boss in that cursed state to begin with and now seek to finish the job! Well, I won’t let you—“

“Dr. Hunter, for the love of-“

“I will have my revenge and I will protect the person who protected me!”

“You are crazy,” Wolf said.

“Dr. Hunter!” Meryl tried again, “get back here, we don’t want Wolf opening fire!”

“I’ll kill you!!” Naomi screamed at the top of her lungs.

“Start climbing that staircase and it is all over,” Wolf said, raising her scope to her eye.

“Hold your fire,” Meryl hissed to her men, “we need to track her back to her comrades— Dr. Hunter, no!!”

“Wolf!” Naomi lifted one foot to step onto the fire escape, and immediately fell forward onto it, twitching and seizing. Akiba stood just to the side of her with a taser.

“…um.” Meryl blinked. “I guess that’s one way of solving it.” Wolf was laughing.
“Well then,” she said, lowering her rifle. “that was illuminating. I was wondering why on Earth she was working for them - just seems that they took advantage of her delusions. How cruel.”

“Who are ‘they’?” Meryl asked, narrowing her eyes.

“You would not believe me if I told you. Oh, and I did hear what you said about tracking me back to my comrades.” Wolf smiled down at them. “You assume that if you can keep Naomi alive long enough, I will eventually give up and return to my team, and you can follow me there and attempt another arrest… no?”

“…”

“I still don’t feel very good about using a civilian as bait,” Akiba muttered, dragging the unconscious Naomi back towards their group, putting Johnathan and Ed between her and Wolf.

“I’m not sure she can really be considered a civilian at this point,” Ed said.

“But you know,” Wolf was saying, “that will never happen. I will not abandon my hunt. Naomi will die by my bullet eventually - unless you manage to kill me first. Oh, but you can’t, can you? You want to think your plan will work?” She started laughing again, then suddenly stopped and glared. “Don’t get in my way,” she snarled at Meryl.

Meryl fired a warning shot.

Wolf was already running away. Johnathan, Ed, and Akiba spread out, looking for her and asking civilians if they’d noticed anything prior to the Desert Eagle gunshot, leaving Meryl alone with Naomi, who was gradually regaining consciousness. Meryl grabbed her shoulder, a little harder than necessary. Maybe she would have been gentler if Naomi had any visible injuries from smacking her face into metal stair steps.

“Come on,” she said, “we need to get back to the Army base right now.”

“What…? Where did- that bitch—“

“We need to get out of Grafenwöhr, Dr. Hunter. Maybe the wolf won’t follow you this time.”

“You amaze me in a really terrifying way, Nadine,” Miller said dryly, putting his hands in his pockets and leaning his back against the wall.

Nadine growled to herself, pacing back and forth across the basement room. “I am in big trouble if they ever find about this.”

“I don’t see how. It’s not like she’s with them,” Miller said, eyes fixed on the shivering Indian woman tied to a chair with a bag over her head. “And besides, aren’t you doing this to investigate a potential traitor?”

“It’s the traitor I’m worried about, kouyon! If the La Li Lu Le Lo knows something then most of the time it’s only a matter of time until he finds out about it. He may come to kill me.”

“I think if Ocelot wanted to kill you he would have done that twenty years ago,” Miller said, raising an eyebrow.

Nadine glared at him. “He didn’t have a reason to back then.”

“Didn’t he?”
“…” Nadine stalked over to the woman in the chair and ripped the bag off her head. The woman gasped, tears in her eyes.

“H-Hello,” she said meekly.

“Priya Chapman, née Patel,” Nadine said coldly. “Second generation Indian-American, one sibling - a brother — married to the recently deceased Henry Chapman, an agent of the La Li Lu Le Lo and former partner of one Mathias Jameson.”

“Jameston,” Miller corrected.

“What?”

“You said it was Jameston yesterday.”


“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Chapman said, shaking from nervousness, “my husband wasn’t an agent of the La Le… whatever it is you said. He was just a minor government official.”

“Then why did you flee to Thailand?”

“Um… please don’t think badly of me, but with his life insurance payout… I thought he would have liked it if I used it to go on a nice vacation…”

“Nadine found you in a hostel in Hat Yai,” Miller said. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s a nice city, but it’s not exactly at the top of anyone’s list of tourist hot-spots. Why not Bangkok?”

“…” Chapman’s jaw worked. “The… the circumstances of Henry’s death were suspicious. Whatever had happened, I didn’t want to get involved.”

Nadine and Miller exchanged a glance.

“It was a car crash,” Miller said, “how was it suspicious?”

“…”

“Benedict,” Nadine said without taking her eyes off of Chapman again, “those ten years you spent hanging around with Shalashaska… didn’t you pick up some of his techniques?”


“Do you want to go grab some tools?”

“Don’t need any.”

“What do you want?” Chapman burst out, “well?! What is it you want from me! I don’t know know anything!!”

“Jameson told your husband something before he died,” Nadine said, folding her arms. “Something to do with a colleague of ours. We want to know what he said.”

“Do I look like I was party to that conversation?!” Chapman snapped.

“I assume your husband wasn’t stupid. If Jameson told him what I think he told him, then he would have passed this information on to someone just in case he was… eliminated. And who better to pass
it on to than his dear wife?”

Chapman went silent again, looking at her lap.

“Because it was, of course, the kind of word he would want to spread.”

“That’s just what you say,” Chapman said through gritted teeth.

“Looks like she doesn’t want to talk,” Miller said.

Nadine huffed, and pulled a small folding knife out of her pocket, flicked it open and began flipping it through her fingers expertly. It made a tiny *clk* noise against each perfect nail it rolled over. “That’s too bad.”

“Settle down, Nadine,” Miller said, walking over to Chapman. “Listen, lady. Priya. Maybe you’re not technically a part of the La Li Lu Le Lo, but you know how they- how we work. Now, we’ve heard that Jameston may have passed some information on to your husband, information about a test of loyalty of a certain agent. All we want to know is what he said.”

Chapman looked away. “Will you let me go if I talk?”

“Sure. Maybe you’ll even be rewarded, if it turns out that’s exactly what we need to chase the fox out of his hole.”

“……” Chapman took a deep breath. “Henry told me what Mathias said before he ran off to Provo. Mathias… was testing the loyalty of an important agent for the La Li Lu Le Lo, as you said. I don’t know who. I guess that Ocelot guy you were just talking about. The test was, Mathias would demand he shoot a prisoner that I guess the agent was close to. He wanted Henry to keep an eye on the results, and tell everyone about it if he had to… if the prisoner died, then the agent could probably be trusted, even if Mathias also died. But if the prisoner escaped… according to Henry, that meant that the agent had freed him or allowed him to be rescued himself… he’d be a traitor. He’d be actively undermining the La Li Lu Le Lo.”

Miller’s lips twitched. “Then?” Nadine said.

“Then I don’t know. Henry died suddenly. The timing was too… strange, so I decided to run for it. I don’t know the results of the test, I only just now heard that Mathias died, from you. I don’t know the results of the test, so I haven’t told anyone, I swear!”

“…intéressant,” Nadine murmured to herself, the knife still in her hand.

“Hang on,” Miller said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Something’s fishy.”

“What?” Chapman said, alarmed, “but that’s the truth, I swear!”

“It’s not that. It’s— why are *you* still alive?”

Nadine blinked, turned to Miller. “You’re right,” she said, “Ocelot must have killed both Jameson and Chapman; it doesn’t make sense that Ocelot wouldn’t kill her too. There’s no way he wouldn’t think that Jameson’s old partner’s wife wouldn’t hear about his death-switch.”

“He left her alive on purpose.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know,” Chapman said, “I really don’t, maybe he knew I wouldn’t, uh, tell anyone
important?"

“What’s Ocelot’s game?” Nadine said, narrowing her eyes.

“You got me,” Miller said with a shrug. “Maybe he knew you’d be the only person suspicious of him enough to hunt down Mrs. Chapman. Which means he meant this as a message to you.”

“Ocelot doesn’t know about me. Maybe it’s a message to you.”

“I don’t need this kind of message,” Miller said, straight-faced.

“…” Nadine turned away, scowling. Chapman backed up in her chair as much as she could as Nadine stalked back over to her. “We’re finished here.” She circled around back, raising her knife.

“Oh, thank you,” Chapman said, “please be careful when cutting the ro-“ She didn’t get to finish her sentence because Nadine grabbed her jaw and slit her throat without even blinking.

Miller saw it coming enough to step out of the way before he got covered with the spray of blood, but he still gave Nadine a hard look. She gave him an even harder one in return. (He was starting to remember why they’d hooked up in the first place.)

“You’re not planning on passing this along, are you?” Miller said. “That’s why you killed her, so she can’t do it herself.”

“This information stays with me,” Nadine replied.

Miller raised his eyebrows. “Don’t tell me you’re planning on blackmailing Ocelot.”

“Do you think I’m as big an idiot as you, Bene? Please. This makes it clear - I am the one being blackmailed.”

“…you lost me.”

Nadine sighed, agitated, and wiped the blade of her knife off on the now-dead Chapman’s shirt. “This more or less proves that Ocelot’s loyalties ultimately lie with the terrorists, no?”

“So?”

“You already knew.”

“I never believe a word Ocelot says.”

Nadine gave him a Don’t even kid yourself expression. “Remember how I said Catou escaped the La Li Lu Le Lo?”

“Yeah.”

“I left out a detail. Ocelot was there, just before she broke out.”

“…”

“I had not thought anything of it. If he had spurred her to escape then it must have been an accident, because he’s so detestable and all, it would encourage her to break out… but knowing where Ocelot’s allegiances really lie, I’m starting to think that Catou escaped when she did because Ocelot helped her.”
“Good for him,” Miller said.

“Don’t you understand?” Nadine snarled, “that means- if she was aided in her escape by someone with the terrorists— where do you think she is now?”

“Ah,” Miller said. “I see.”

“She has gone from our custody to theirs. And they are nothing but a rag-tag group of anarchist radicals. Don’t you see? If I pass this information along about Jameson’s test of loyalty, then Ocelot will most certainly be able to get away with killing Catou in retaliation! No one would stop him!”

“Nadine, that’s just paranoia. I mean, Ocelot hasn’t threatened you or anything. You’re right, he doesn’t know about you - at least, I’m pretty sure I’d know if he did.”

“You brainless-” Nadine jabbed her knife in his direction, then folded it back up, hissing. “If he assisted Catou in escaping then he’s surely talked to her, about more than just the La Li Lu Le Lo. That would mean he does know about me. This is blackmail, Benedict, a very indirect form, but isn’t that exactly what Ocelot does?”

“Okay, so it’s his style,” Miller said, annoyed, “but… instead of blackmailing you to keep you from outing him as an enemy spy, why the hell wouldn’t he just kill Mrs. Chapman before you could find her so you would never find out he’s a spy in the first place? I’m sure you being suspicious of him is very annoying, but without this information, you’re harmless to him.”

“…” Nadine looked away. “There must be something else to this, then. Some other, deeper message.”

“…can’t deny that that’s Ocelot’s style, too. I think everything he does has to have at least two meanings.”

“Maybe it is a message intended for you. Perhaps that Catou is… safe?”

“You told me she escaped without any tricks.”

“It takes more than escape to be considered safe,” Nadine pointed out.

“…ah.” Miller rubbed his forehead. “Right. Maybe he really is trying to tell us where she is. …with the resistance. Safe.”

“I suppose an overconfident, heartless traitor like him would consider that safe,” Nadine spat. “Even if he holds her life in his hands… even if, any day now, the La Li Lu Le Lo will wipe out those terrorists!”

“Listen, Nadine,” Miller said, putting his hands back in his pockets. “Serious question: Why did you kill Mrs. Chapman?”

“I literally just explained that to you.”

“I would have thought that you’d care more about the La Li Lu Le Lo than Catherine. I don’t believe that you don’t see Ocelot as a legitimate threat to them - that means you’re picking her over them. Doesn’t that make you a traitor yourself?”

“…”!

Miller reeled as Nadine slapped him across the face, hard.
“You do not get to assume my motives!” she shouted at him, hand still raised. “You do not have the right to question my loyalty!”

“…”

“Now come on,” she snapped, suddenly turning around and striding out of the basement, “we can’t keep staying here with a dead body in the basement. It’s time to leave.”

“…aw. And here Malaysia was starting to grow on me.”

Mantis’ headaches were only getting worse. The pain was bleeding over to Liquid, who had enough on his plate, but didn’t mind taking it if it gave Mantis some measure of relief. What was worrying him was the fact that Mantis was now past the point of being foul-tempered because of the pain — he was getting to be completely despondent.

“Just try to get some sleep,” Liquid said quietly, squeezing his hand with his flesh one. “It always goes away for a while after you sleep.”

“Nn… I can’t…”

“Please? Just try.”

“I really cannot, Eli… it hurts… too much.”

“I’ll go get you some painkillers,” Liquid said, standing up.

Mantis pulled his hand out of his. “I am not taking off my mask,” he said thickly.

“I know.”

…

“Ocelot.”

Ocelot glanced up from the desk and dwindling pile of paperwork. “Boss,” he replied.

“I need… your help with something.” Liquid was, understandably, tense. He was restlessly clenching and unclenching both hands, his new prosthetic one on a bit of a delay. “You have some sort of painkiller that’s delivered by injection, don’t you?”

“You really think Mantis trusts me enough to let me inject him with something?” Ocelot said, raising an eyebrow.

“He’ll stay calm enough if I’m there.”

“Do you trust me?”

“…” Liquid looked away. “I’m asking you for this, aren’t I?”

Ocelot leaned back in the chair, kicking away from the desk. “I do have something,” he said, “it’s not a painkiller per se, but something like a headache it’ll take care of easily. In effect, he’ll be too high to feel it, and hopefully it’ll end on its own before the drug wears off.”

“…right. Then… let’s do that.”
“Fine. I’ll go get it.”

…

Mantis didn’t seem very disturbed by Ocelot coming into his room, but that quickly changed as soon as he noticed the syringe. Liquid had to hold him down.

“It’s alright,” Liquid told him, “he’s just going to make your headache go away—“

“No!!”

“I’ll make sure he doesn’t hurt you, alright? I’ll protect you-“

“Get that away from me!”

Ocelot didn’t say a word as he injected Mantis, despite the hysterical screaming that prompted EVA to stick her head in the door. “What’s going on in here?” she asked.

Liquid grimaced. “Mantis needed some painkillers and, er, refused to take his mask off, and—“

“So you thought this was the best idea?”

“He’ll feel better once he calms down again.”

Ocelot pulled off, capping the spent syringe and ignoring Mantis swearing at him in Russian. Liquid kept holding him down, but eased up on him, more just keeping him close now and trying to comfort him. He rubbed the injection site with his thumb. “You’re alright,” he murmured. “It’s over, it’ll stop hurting soon, you can just sleep now. That wasn’t so bad, mm?”

“Dosage depends on weight, so I didn’t give him much,” Ocelot said, “still, he’s got one of the slowest metabolisms I’ve ever seen. It’ll take him a few days to burn it off.”

“You hear that, Mantis?” Liquid said, “your head won’t hurt for a few days.” Mantis just groaned.

“Wait a minute, ADAM,” EVA said, “I thought you were leaving tomorrow night.”

“I am. I’ll leave the counteragent with you.”

Liquid looked up. “What do we need a counteragent for?”

“Oh, just in case,” Ocelot said. “Allergic reaction, or if it overwhelms his system, something to that effect. If he stops breathing, it’s another injection, but don’t reverse his high unless you have to.”

“Ah. Got it.”

“He’ll be out of it, but that’s normal.”

“Shouldn’t we do something to, you know, address the root cause of his headaches?” EVA said.

“I don’t think there’s anything we can do, Mother,” Liquid said. “I’m fairly certain they’re caused by all the psychic strain he was under while in the Patriots’ custody. Like a torn muscle. Sometimes the pain gets worse before it gets better.”

“Ah, I see… so he just needs time to heal? …I think I’d still feel better if a medic saw him.”

Liquid hesitated. “He really isn’t good with medical settings…”
“I’m aware.” EVA sighed. “I suppose that’s something to hold off on until the drugs wear off, anyway. He can’t answer any questions about his symptoms if he’s like…” she nodded at him. Mantis had practically fallen asleep in Liquid’s arms already, his head lolling and his eyes half-open. “…that.”

“You’re welcome,” Ocelot said.

Chapter End Notes

On s’en fout = whatever (rude).
Chapter 92

Chapter Notes

I was gonna put off updating for a while longer since, as PP said, I've been busy (just starting school in fact, so expect updates to get waaaaaaay slower from now on) and my buffer is dwindling. I just started chapter 99 a few days ago and haven't made any real headway into it...
But, of course, Leo begged me to update so (´・ω・´)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ocelot had told Liquid very plainly that he doubted there were going to be any complications with Mantis, but Liquid still worried and insisted on staying by Mantis’ side, holed up in their room, leaving poor Benedict out in the hallway. It was ordinary concern for the most part, but also a bit of not wanting to be around Ocelot anyway. Especially now. The fact that Ocelot could so easily calculate a dose for Mantis wasn’t out of the ordinary for him, but the fact that he seemed to know a bit about what drug allergies he may or may not have rubbed Liquid the wrong way. He couldn’t help but wonder if… back at the KGB… well…

“Mmn…”

“It’s alright, I’m here,” Liquid whispered, rubbing his thumb over Mantis’ knuckles. His discomfort and anxiety had driven him to not only hanging out in the room while Mantis laid around in a haze, but to sitting next to the bed and holding Mantis’ hand. He’d been doing this for several hours at this point. Mantis kept drifting in and out of sleep.

“No, Eli…”

“Do you want something, Mantis?”

Mantis slowly shook his head, weakly squeezing Liquid’s hand. Liquid squeezed back, worried that there was something wrong that Mantis just wasn’t letting on about.

“Well, just tell me if you do,” Liquid said, clumsily patting the back of Mantis’ hand with his prosthetic. Mantis made a little “nn” noise and for a moment Liquid thought he hurt him, but…

Liquid tried to avoid touching him with his prosthetic hand - he was still wary of it after the incident right after he got it where he left a bruise that was still visible on Mantis’ arm. It didn’t seem to be bothering him, at least.

“Nothing hurts right now, yes?” Liquid asked him.

“Mm-mm. It’s… good.”

“Good. I’m glad.” He raised Mantis’ hand to his mouth and kissed his fingers. “I’m worried about you, you know.”

“A-Ah…”

“…”
Mantis turned away. Liquid told himself to settle down. There wasn’t anything obviously wrong here - Mantis just kept making those little sounds… sounded almost like…

Well, even there was nothing wrong there was something weird. “I need to go talk to Ocelot for a second, is it alright if I leave?”

“Mhm…”

“I’ll be right back,” Liquid promised, kissing his hand again, then quickly left the room. He found himself glad now that the office Ocelot was perpetually hanging out in was directly across the hallway, so he could be there and have the door closed behind him in less than a full second. (Though he did give Benedict a pat on the head in passing.)

Ocelot raised an eyebrow at him. “Is something the matter, boss?”

“Are there…” Liquid started, somewhat flustered, “…any… side effects you should have mentioned?”

“What do you mean?”

“Mantis keeps making… certain sounds.”

Ocelot stared at him for a half a moment, then put down the folder he was holding. “Sounds.”

“You know,” Liquid said, a little bitterly, glancing away evasively.

“…right. What were you doing to him?”

“I wasn’t doing anything,” Liquid snapped, “I was just sitting next to him and holding his hand. That’s perfectly normal!”

“You weren’t…” Ocelot made the motion of rubbing a thumb over knuckles, “stroking his skin or anything?”

“…again, that is perfectly normal.”

“I’m not accusing you of anything, boss. Anyway, perhaps I should have mentioned the true nature of the drug I gave him earlier. It’s actually a drug I use to aid in interrogations.”

“I figured as much,” Liquid said, annoyed, “he isn’t all there right now, so I imagine he’d be a terrible liar in this state.”

“It’s not just that. There are plenty of drugs that do that. This particular one I chose for its effect on the nerves — things like headaches, stomach or chest pain - internal sources of pain - become unnoticeable. It’s even effective on wounds. However, it makes skin more sensitive.”

“Makes skin more sensitive…? Oh, I suppose that’s how it aids in interrogation.”

“Mm. That’s why I said not to use the counteragent unless absolutely necessary. It’s an injection, and in Mantis’ current state the pain of having a needle pierce his skin could very well be too much for him.”

“Ah, so…” Liquid looked at his hands uncomfortably. “I must have been hurting him, then.”

“I don’t know about that,” Ocelot said, turning back to the folders on the desk. “It makes the skin more sensitive, not just more receptive to pain.”
Ocelot sighed. “Bad sensations become unmanageable,” he said clearly, “while good sensations now feel *very* good. Are you following me, boss?”

“…” Liquid flushed. “Oh. So I’m… he’s… because I…”

“Looks like you’ve got it,” Ocelot said, and Liquid let himself be shooed away. He had to stand out in the hallway for a moment to think it over. He still felt that fretting and hand-holding was a very natural response to one’s husband being doped up for a few days, but… if it aroused him, however unintentionally… in his drugged state, was that really okay? Or was Liquid overthinking things?

He slipped back into their room (again petting Benedict in passing) and back to Mantis’ side. Mantis didn’t ask him what he had to go talk to Ocelot about, just reached for his hand again. Somewhat reluctantly, Liquid took it. He cleared his throat awkwardly.

“So… you, ah, like having your hand held more than you do normally, hm?”

“Hmm?” Mantis looked at him vaguely. “I… like it…”

“I know, I know.” This seemed weird. “Eh… apparently that’s a side effect of the drug you’re on right now… things feeling… good.”

“I see.”

“Then…” Liquid hesitantly touched Mantis’ arm with his bionic hand, as gentle as he could manage it. “…is this really alright?”

“I think… it is.”

“…right. Right.”

Liquid supposed if it were him, *he* really wouldn’t mind. (As long as it were Mantis doing it, anyway.) They were married and all, surely there was no problem with making him feel good, especially after all that pain? It wasn’t even like these touches were inherently sexual, no matter how Mantis’ body reacted.

“Mmm…” Mantis rolled onto his side, putting his other hand on top of Liquid’s. “Eli… I do want you to… touch me more. It does feel good. I do not think it is… weird, or bad…”

“Ah… well…”

Liquid had an idea.

A really terrible one.

Mantis seemed oblivious to it - probably couldn’t concentrate enough to read his mind right now anyway. Liquid worried his lip for a moment before proceeding. “Mantis?” he said carefully, “can I ask you something?”

“Of course, Eli.”

“Really? It has to do with something you… were hiding from me.”

“…” Mantis closed his eyes. “About Ocelot?”
“No. Something from a few years ago, I only remembered it because I was worrying about, well, what else you might have been hiding from me. Not that I’m saying I’m suspicious of you or anything, but… you do… hide things from me sometimes, and I want to clear the air.”

“…”

“I don’t think there should be secrets between us, Mantis.”

“…I don’t want to talk.”

Liquid leaned forward, squeezing Mantis’ hand and arm a little. Mantis twitched, probably at the pressure from the prosthetic. “Mantis,” Liquid said, “if you tell me what I want, I’ll give you a backrub.”

“A… backrub…?”

“Yes. Doesn’t that sound good right now? Mantis. Just think about it…”

“…” Mantis blinked at him. His fingers twitched in uncertainty. “That… does sound nice.”

“It does, doesn’t it? Something that feels very good normally, it must be really wonderful in this state you’re in, no? I will take very good care of you, Mantis. But only if you talk to me.”

“…and what happens if I don’t want to… answer your question?”

Liquid shrugged, pulling back. Mantis tried to hold onto him but his grip was too weak. “No backrub,” he said, “that’s all. I’ll keep holding your hand, but no more. No consequences if you keep hiding things from me. No threats or punishments… just a reward if you talk.”

Mantis sighed, his fingers scrabbling against Liquid’s hands. “I want… I want a backrub, Eli.” It was almost a childish whine.

“Then you’ll talk to me.”

“You may ask.”

This felt dirty. Very dirty. “Three years ago, when we went to Washington, D.C. You suddenly started doing some research about the Cold War, trying to figure out how exactly the Patriots were founded.”

“Ah… that’s… what you wanted to know about?”

Liquid turned his hand over and gently stroked the skin of his wrist. Mantis made a breathy little noise. “I want to know why you cared so much,” Liquid said softly. “It isn’t the sort of thing that would normally interest you. Did something happen in Washington?”

“No, no… being there made me remember… something I’d forgotten.”

“From your FBI days?”

“Earlier. Before I was born.”

“Right.” Liquid raised his hand and kissed his palm, trying to encourage him to keep talking. “Whose memories?”

“Your father’s…”
“…”

“But I… was never certain of it. Even now I am not certain of it… I read some things in EVA’s mind before she got implants, Dr. Clark’s too, that seemed to… corroborate… but that was so long ago, I didn’t know what I was looking for then, and your father… his mind was a mess, Eli, what I saw— I didn’t know if it was true, or a delusion, or a false memory planted by Ocelot during the hypnosis… I… I just wanted to confirm…”

“Confirm? Confirm what?” Liquid pressed, “did my father know how the Patriots were founded?”

“No… your father per se. Big Boss. Most of your father’s memories were his - all of them were, back when I was linked to him.”

“Right. So Big Boss knew how the Patriots were founded. And you tried to confirm what you thought you remembered, since you remembered it from an unreliable source. …and then you couldn’t confirm it, so you just dismissed it in the end.”

“Yes… can I get that backrub now…?”

“No until you tell me why you were so evasive about it.”

“…”

“Come on, Mantis. Just tell me, it’s alright.”

“I don’t…”

“Go on.”

“Ocelot…” Mantis trailed off. “And,” he tried again, “your mother…”

“What about them?” Liquid said. He was getting increasingly on-edge, but was working very hard at not letting on about it. He didn’t want to disturb Mantis.

“A-Ah… well… EVA was with Cipher since… almost the very beginning. About a year after they… were founded.”

Liquid’s mouth was dry. “What year?”

“1971.”

“Just before Les Enfants Terribles.” He wasn’t… surprised. In fact, for his whole childhood he’d assumed as much — just, for some reason, when he actually met EVA he started thinking of her as not really being a part of Cipher, just used for the project, or something, and had nothing to do with anything else the organization had pulled. After learning three years ago that she was, in fact, technically with the Patriots, he’d never bothered reconciling it with his previous assumption. Just somewhere in the back of his mind he figured she’d joined them specifically to destroy them from the inside out, maybe as revenge for having her sons taken from her…? But in this case… well, she must have just changed her mind about them. Probably for taking her sons from her. EVA could be pretty fickle.

“Mmm… but… Ocelot.”

“…go on.” Ocelot wasn’t fickle. Ocelot didn’t change his mind, he merely took complicated routes to get to his goals.
Mantis fidgeted on the bed. Liquid pet him gently. “Ocelot, we… had always assumed… he was with Cipher for a long time.”

“Of course he was,” Liquid said, “he’s made it very clear he’s high-ranking. Joined early on. Playing the long game.”

“Not… quite…”

“…” This couldn’t possibly be going where he thought it was going, was it? “Mantis,” Liquid said, a slightly sharp edge to his voice, “what’s going on around here?”

Mantis squeezed his hand, hard. “The Patriots were founded by… five people. Cipher… Sigint, Dr. Clark… Big Boss… and— Ocelot.”

Liquid stood up, just on instinct. “He what?!

Mantis grabbed for his hand, fingernails scraping against the smooth metal. “I… that’s why I always doubted… why would Ocelot destroy his own creation…? Even if it started doing things he does not like… surely he could just change it. All the other founding members… they’re dead, I think. Does that not leave him in charge?”

“I…” Damn. Damn damn damn, fuck, this was bad. Or, it could be bad. Very bad. Liquid grit his teeth. This- this couldn’t just be some sort of ploy, could it? No, surely that was too elaborate, even for Ocelot! Maybe Mantis was wrong, or the memories were, or something… Liquid had to go talk to Ocelot again. EVA, too. He made to leave. Mantis whined.

“Eli…” he weakly tried to pull Liquid closer to him, “Eli, you promised…”

“Tch— your backrub, hn?” Had to make it quick, then… Liquid scolded himself again. Settle down. This wasn’t a time-sensitive issue, Ocelot left the following night (knowing him, it’d probably be the dead of night, too, not just the evening) and even then the PLA FOB would hardly be Liquid’s last chance to confront him about this. Though it may be a while before he could talk to EVA face-to-face about this, once they left the FOB. But did he really need to question both of them about this at the same time? …anyway, he had time, was the point.

And besides, his sudden agitation is was apparently making Mantis nervous. Liquid sat back, rearranging his face into an expression much calmer than he felt. “Alright,” he said, keeping his voice gentle, “roll over, love.”

Mantis did so, rolling onto his stomach, keeping his head turned towards Liquid to watch him expectantly. Liquid climbed onto the bed for a better angle, kneeling across Mantis’ lower back and resting his hands on his shoulders.

“Let me know if it doesn’t feel good, alright…? I’m not very confident with my new hand yet, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Mhmm.”

Liquid sighed, a little shakily. It was hard to concentrate on the massage with that bombshell just dropped on him, but he kind of had to concentrate because he wasn’t really accustomed to doing this seriously. He tried to put aside the whole Patriot business for now. Just for a few minutes… he was sure it’d be fine.

“Mmmmmnn… gh, Eli… not so hard…”
“Sorry,” Liquid whispered, self-conscious. He felt out of his element here, and really just wanted to run off and hide somewhere.

“Ah… that’s… good.”

“Is it?”

“Mhm. You are… doing a good job, Eli.”

“…am I?”

“Of course,” Mantis mumbled. He shifted underneath Liquid, making another breathy sound. Liquid wasn’t really used to him being this… vocal. “Hnh…”

“You’re cute like this, you know.”

“Shut up. Ah-h—“ Liquid felt Mantis’ skinny ass bump up against his, and blinked.

“Now, what are you lifting your hips for…?” he murmured, moving one hand down Mantis’ side and to his front.

“Nnh-! E-Eli, no—!!” Mantis gasped as Liquid palmed a half-hearted erection. “Please, it is… it’s too intense…!!”

“I’m sorry,” Liquid muttered awkwardly, withdrawing. He’d just done that with his prosthetic hand, and wondered briefly it was another pressure regulation issue, but decided not to push it. “Then, ah… what am I supposed to do?”

“Hn?”

Liquid sat back, then pulled Mantis up by the hips - Mantis shuddered at being grasped - so he was sitting in his lap. Liquid rested his chin on Mantis’ shoulder. “Hn?” he mimicked, “hm? What do I do, then? Don’t you want me to take care of you?”

“Yes, but… you can’t…” Mantis squirmed. Liquid circled his arms around his waist. “Do not touch… there. It hurts.”

“You’re just too sensitive…”

“I—“

“It’s alright, Mantis, it’s just the drug. Say, do you think I can get you off without touching your prick? That’d take care of this, mmm?”

“I… you may try.”

Poor Mantis sounded so dazed, but Liquid was pleased he was acting a little less shy than he had the other time(s) Liquid had seduced him. (Seduced? Seemed a funny term to apply to his husband.) It was a step in the right direction, of his own normal personality coming back… things had been going that way lately, generally.

Liquid would miss this Mantis. Again.

“You know I like a challenge,” he said, then caught Mantis’ earlobe between his lips. Mantis jerked. Liquid nipped.
Liquid ran his hands up his sides. “Don’t fuss,” he said, “just tell me if it hurts or stops feeling good, alright?”

“Ah… al…alright.”

“You’re sure?” Mantis was vaguely shifting from side to side, presumably caught between the heat of Liquid’s flesh hand and the cold bite of his prosthetic. “I don’t want to-“

“Eli- be a little more confident…”

“Er. Sorry.” Really he was just being polite… right? Okay, so he was using it to cover for the fact that he was, in fact, not very confident at the moment and still felt very out of his element. Holding pretty much all the power in a sexual situation — he never… except maybe that last time…? “Hrmm. I… still, let me know if…”

“Eli, shut up and touch me.”

“Nn.” Liquid cupped Mantis’ chest (palms flat), and thumbed his nipples. Gently. Mantis tilted his head back, gasping, writhing. Liquid held him close. “Good?”

“Keep… going.”

“Mmm.” Liquid shifted, kissing his neck, the sides and the nape. He was kinda used to there being at least a moderate amount of talking during sex, but most of that came from Mantis so Liquid didn’t really know what to say here. Better to just keep quiet. Mantis kept squirming in his lap, breath rasping through his mask as Liquid kissed him and played with his nipples.

Liquid ended up feeling awkward staying silent. He had to say something. “Is… i-is this good?” he muttered, moving one hand down, across Mantis’ stomach and hip, to massage the inside of his thigh. Mantis’ hands moved restlessly around, touching Liquid’s arms like they could ground him.

“Mmhm…!” Mantis’ fingers dug into Liquid’s arms (well, arm, couldn’t really dig into metal) as Liquid squeezed his thigh. “Ah, Eli…!” His damn pants were in the way, Liquid thought, but worried that tugging them down would drag over his dick too much. He really was too sensitive like this, no wonder he’d cried out in pain when Liquid had touched it.

He didn’t have to worry about that, at any rate, because Mantis let go of him and pushed down the top of his pants and underwear, tugging it just below his erection, and leaning back against Liquid and whimpering, presumably at the cool air on it.

“Is that better, then?” Liquid said to him, kissing his ear again. “Less pressure?”

“Yes… I… still do not want you to… touch…”

“I know, I know. I won’t. Being overwhelmed isn’t bad, but… if it’s so intense it hurts… I don’t want to—”

“Shhh… Eli. You are… talking too much.”

“Mmph.” How did Liquid still manage to get told repeatedly to keep quiet when he was dominant one here…?

Liquid picked Mantis up by the hips again, turning him around on his lap - making him sit more on
his knees so he wouldn’t be squeezing his cock up against his stomach - and placed his hands around his lower back to steady him. “E…Eli…?”

“I- I wish I could see your face right now,” Liquid whispered. Mantis stiffened, but Liquid rubbed his back. “You must have such a cute expression… you don’t normally, ah, let go like this.”

“I…”

“You feel good, don’t you?”

Mantis nodded.

“Then it’s alright,” Liquid smiled. He trailed his flesh hand down, rubbing between Mantis’ meager cheeks. Mantis squirmed in his grasp. “Sh, shh. I won’t put my finger in you, okay?”

“Ahha… okay, Eli—“

“I’m just going to- to touch a little.” He brushed a finger over Mantis’ asshole, teasing it, making him gasp. “Is that too much?”

“…good,” Mantis rasped. “That is good.”

“Mmm.” Liquid ducked his head down, kissing at Mantis’ shoulder and sharp collarbones before getting to his nipple again. He kissed it, sucked on it, tongued it a little — Mantis started rocking back and forth in his lap, thrusting his hips against nothing, hands tangled tight in Liquid’s hair. He was moaning softly, more of a hoarse, wavering hum. Liquid, hoping Mantis could steady himself like this, moved his right hand to Mantis’ thigh, brushing along the inside part. “Enjoying yourself?” he interrupted himself to say, nuzzling Mantis’ chest.

“I’m- I’m—“ Mantis shivered so prettily. “I’m close…!”

“Oh? I’ve barely touched you.”

“Ahggh—“

“Can you get off like this? Or do I need to…?”

“Mmmm-! Oh… n-no, no…”

“You’re alright,” Liquid said, kissing his jaw. He squeezed his thigh again. Again Mantis stiffened, but Liquid knew what it was really about this time.

He moved his prosthetic out of the way so it wouldn’t get any semen on it as Mantis clung to him and orgasmed with a strangled whine. Liquid let Mantis ride it out, still kissing him and rubbing at his asshole. Eventually Mantis’ shuddering turned to just exhausted trembling, and Liquid carefully moved his hands to a more neutral around-the-waist grip.

“Good?” Liquid asked him, nuzzling his mask.

“Ah… yes…”

“You got a little messy, want me to clean up?”

“…yes.”

Liquid carefully laid Mantis back down the bed, wasting no time in lowering his head after him and
cleaning up the semen with his tongue. Mantis let out that same strangled whine, clumsily tugging at Liquid’s hair and trying to writhe away. Liquid was done in seconds — a short burst of painful intensity to push Mantis all the closer to just passing out.

“That’s better,” Liquid said in a low voice as Mantis panted. He’d be asleep again soon, Liquid didn’t want to leave until he was asleep but he had things to do. (What a shame. Normally right about now he’d be asking Mantis for permission to take care of his horribly neglected arousal himself. But no, it was time to stop thinking with his dick.)

“Eli…” Mantis’ grip in his hair loosened enough that his hand just fell to the bed.

“You’re alright?” Liquid asked him, tucking his dick away. Mantis twitched.

“That… yes. But I… I am so very tired…”

“I know, it’s okay.” Liquid brushed the side of his face with the back of his fingers. “Get some sleep. I’ll be right here.”

Mantis weakly grasped his wrist. “Stay…?”

“Of course. Don’t worry.”

He crawled into bed next to Mantis, settling in and gathering him in his arms, and brushing his hand over his head - not that he seemed to have noticed at any point, but Mantis had gone so long without remembering to shave that patchy soft baby-bird hair was starting to grow again like it had two years ago. Mantis squirmed a little at the touch; if he was sensitive before, he must have been really sensitive now. But between the apparently soporific effect of the drug and the post-sex sleepiness, Liquid didn’t have long to wait until Mantis nodded off. He stayed there a minute, not quite wanting to leave, and making sure that Mantis really was asleep.

Then he disentangled himself and got up. Slid the covers over Mantis and kissed him on the forehead. He had to go talk to Ocelot now.

And run some cold water over his erection first.

Chapter End Notes

never forget that that no matter how much of a whiny traumatized bottom Liquid is he's still a devious amoral little shit (´・ω・´)
“Ocelot!"

It had taken Liquid a horribly long time to find Ocelot again, eventually tracking him down on a disused upstairs balcony, just finishing a phone call.

“Boss,” Ocelot said, turning towards him very casually, putting his cell phone back in his pocket, “what is it n—"

Liquid grabbed him by the scarf, shoving him backwards into the railing and half-bending him over it, an implicit but astoundingly clear threat to just push him over. “You have a lot of explaining to do, old man,” Liquid hissed.

“Is this about Mantis still? He already told you everything we did in—“

“No! This isn’t about him anymore. I don’t want to talk about that anymore. …rather, Mantis has given some very… strange… information just now.”

“In his state?” Ocelot said, eyebrows raised coolly.

Liquid sneered. “You’re the one who loaded him full of an interrogative drug. His guard was down. I had suspicions. He talked.”

“About what, boss? What’s got you so upset?”

“I’ll answer that question with another question: Who founded the Patriots?”

“…” Ocelot didn’t have an immediate reaction. That was all the reaction Liquid needed to know Ocelot hadn’t expected him to find out about that on his own.

Liquid narrowed his eyes. “You never thought this was relevant information, hmm?”

“You never asked,” Ocelot said flatly.

There was a pause. Liquid let out a single, dry laugh and let go of Ocelot, taking a step back. Ocelot stayed leaned against the railing, watching Liquid rather warily.

“Big Boss’ memories, I take it,” he said at length, “dredged up by what happened at Provo.”

“Yes. But he remembered even before this. Back when Solidus had you take me to D.C. to meet him.”

“Ah. I thought he was acting oddly at that time, but I wasn’t sure what was on his mind.” Ocelot rubbed the back of his neck. “Strange that he didn’t bring up any of this before.”

“He wanted… verification. Any memories he got by way of my father… couldn’t be trusted.”

“And…”

“And what?”
“Did he ever get verification?” Ocelot said. “Did he finally find something that proved that your father’s memories of the early days of the Patriots were real?”

“…” Liquid clenched his fists. Distantly he was aware that his prosthetic one was trembling. “Your reaction just now is all the proof I need.”

Ocelot sighed. “Maybe I do owe you an explanation.”

“Maybe.”

“At any rate, it’s related to what EVA was pestering me about telling you anyway. So,” Ocelot folded his arms and pinned Liquid with an extremely serious look. “What did Mantis remember?”

“Not… a whole lot, I think,” Liquid said, blinking. He was expecting more resistance. “The identities of the people who started this whole mess.”

“Those being…?”

“Erm. Cipher, Sigint, Dr. Clark, Big Boss, and you. Then Mother joined the following year.”

“That’s correct.”

“And of those people… only you and Mother are still alive.”

Ocelot shrugged. “Zero - Cipher - isn’t technically dead. However, he’s in no position to give orders. He’s been a vegetable since 1979.”

“…”

“After that point, it was Sigint who was in charge of the Patriots.”

“And you ‘accidentally’ killed him two years ago.”

“Does it matter at this point if it was an accident or not?” Ocelot said, tilting his head.

“His death left you in charge of the Patriots by default, didn’t it?!”

“If I were running the whole system, do you really think I’d be here?”

“Who knows anymore with you!!”

“Boss, if I had the power you think I do, your father would still be alive.”

Liquid opened his mouth, the closed it, thinking it over for a second - and then he scowled. “Unless you’ve been lying to me.”

“How so?”

“You keep telling me that it was the Patriots who were behind the death of my father, and Big Boss was only following their orders… how am I supposed to know that’s true?” He took a step forward, threateningly. “Maybe he wasn’t. Maybe it was entirely Big Boss’ idea, and even the Patriots under you couldn’t prevent it. You couldn’t stop Big Boss— no, you were unwilling to. Your loyalty always laid with him, didn’t it? So when the time came to turn against my father… well, ‘turning against’ would imply you were ever on his side, no? ‘No man can serve two masters’…”

Ocelot gave Liquid a perfectly blank expression. “You’ve never read the Bible.”
“I’m aware,” Liquid said coldly. “What does that have to do with-“

“You don’t know the rest of the verse.”

“…”

“Matthew chapter six, verse 24. ‘No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.’ …never thought it made much sense, myself.”

“What are you talking about,” Liquid said through gritted teeth.

“*Hate the one and love the other,*” Ocelot said, “I never saw how that could happen. For over a decade I served two masters, and doubt me if you will but I will go to my grave insisting that I loved both.”

Liquid was silent.

“…maybe it’s better if I start at the beginning. It’s important that you trust me, boss. If I have to explain every little thing to you in order to achieve that, then I will.”

“Fine.”

“Alright then. How much do you know about Operation Snake Eater?”

“Er…” Liquid racked his brain. This was quite the jump in subject. “Almost nothing. I know it’s when you and Mother first met Big Boss, and I know it ended with Big Boss killing his mother or mentor or something.”

“His mentor, yes, The Boss. Though perhaps ‘mother’ wouldn’t be inaccurate either. Anyway, that’s about all you need to know, except that Zero previously knew and was close to The Boss and the point of Operation Snake Eater was to acquire a large sum of money known as the Philosophers’ Legacy.”

“The…?”

“Think of the Philosophers as the original Patriots, boss. They haven’t been around for a long time, though. They collapsed following World War Two, leaving just their money. To make a very long story very short, Zero ended up with the full sum of the Philosophers’ Legacy. He used it to expand his influence and eventually found an organization known at the time as Cipher.”

“…but, why?”

“He wanted to make The Boss’ vision a reality. Her vision being… a world without borders.” Ocelot looked off to the side, out over the surrounding countryside. “However, it quickly became apparent that those who founded Cipher didn’t all agree on what exactly this *entailed.* Zero was of the opinion that one world government, a single system in control of the entire Earth, would be the ideal. Meanwhile, Big Boss took ‘no borders’ rather literally to mean ‘no nations’. He envisioned a world of stateless anarchy… and, inevitably, perpetual war.”

“I see.” That wasn’t new information and sounded more than fine to Liquid; he’d seen this same vision in practice at Outer Heaven - an entire world like that… Liquid didn’t know who The Boss really was, so he couldn’t care less if that was what she’d *meant,* but it was certainly *his* ideal. “So I take it things were tense.”
“You could say that.”

“Right. And what the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“Big Boss split from the Patriots after you and Snake were born,” Ocelot said, “I assume it won’t come as any surprise to you to hear that he’d been cloned without his consent and didn’t want to accept the outcome of that.”

“…hm.” Also not new information.

“No one followed him out the door, but EVA and I… well, we were both closer to him than to anyone else. We were still technically there, but our standings suffered. EVA’s especially. It didn’t help her that she resented them for taking her babies from her.”

“And you?”

“I had Zero’s personal trust. And I’ll admit, for a long time everything was just fine between the Patriots and I. It was because of them that the XOF situation could be handled — despite Miller’s assumptions back then, Skull Face and XOF had actually split from Cipher. Cipher actually aided your father and sent me to keep him safe in that hospital.”

“…”

“Any questions so far, boss?”

“What changed?” Liquid said, suspicious. “I know you still technically retain membership, but you claim to only use that membership to get intel for us.”

Ocelot nodded. “I had Zero’s personal trust, but not Sigint’s. That started to complicate things. And then in 1995… you know what happened. The Patriots wanted to weed out any ‘wrong’ interpretations of The Boss’ will, and your father was causing a stir in South Africa.”

Liquid’s suspicious look turned into a glare.

The corner of Ocelot’s mouth twitched. “They went behind my back,” he said, “and they weren’t quite as pervasive in the government in the mid-nineties as they are now. When I first heard about Gray Fox’s failed infiltration, I assumed it was the Army acting by itself, not the Patriots. With that in mind I assumed Big Boss would purposely fail the assault on the Galzburg FOB.”

“…yes. I remember you telling me as much.”

“If nothing else, getting rid of his body double would have been inconvenient.” Ocelot shook his head. “But perhaps, in a sense, you were right back then. I still think Big Boss sent Snake in to fail… but his flight from FOXHOUND proved that he knew he might not, or else he knew he’d be forced to send more and more operatives or even infiltrate the FOB himself. He was under pressure from the Patriots, and after he was forced to use FOXHOUND to kill your father, he used that to his advantage so he could escape the Patriots.”

Or maybe he cut out the middleman, Liquid thought.

“But in the end, they got him too. It was at that time I decided I’d had enough.”

“Hm.”

“What’s the matter?”
“I know you, Ocelot,” Liquid said. “You’re… persistent. I’ve seen you lie, change sides, and backstab people, but it’s always because of some plan you have. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you genuinely change your mind on anything.”

“I did on this one.”

“Maybe I can buy you being caught unawares about the Patriots targeting my father. Maybe. But I don’t believe that they could have gone behind your back when it came to Big Boss, especially after the Galzburg incident.”

“Then I don’t know what to tell you,” Ocelot said.

“You may not have had the full trust of the man in charge, but you were still one of the founders,” Liquid snapped, “you could have prevented Zanzibar Land, you could have prevented Galzburg, you could have prevented all this. And you expect me to believe that you just didn’t? You’re up to something! I swear to god, Ocelot, you’re not going to leave this porch alive!”

“Settle down, boss.”

“What the fuck have you done⁉️”

“I was completely blacklisted after Zanzibar Land,” Ocelot said flatly. “Now I’m out for petty revenge, just like the rest of you.”

“…”

“And you say I never change my mind? …well, you’re actually right. I don’t.” Ocelot smiled tiredly. “But you’re assuming that because I helped found the Patriots, the Patriots’ existence was and is my goal. You couldn’t be more wrong. The Patriots were a means to an end, nothing more, and they outgrew their usefulness a long time ago.”

“What…” Liquid swallowed hard, “is that goal, Ocelot?”

“Some days I’m not even sure myself.”

Liquid snarled. What a cop-out of an answer. “Wait a minute. If you were blacklisted, how are you still one of their agents? And if Sigint is dead and you’re blacklisted, who’s in charge now? Mother? Couldn’t be.”

“Funnily enough, those two questions are related. The truth is, the Patriots haven’t been run by people since shortly after Zero slipped into his coma. Sigint, along with some other programmers, created a series of AIs at Zero’s direction. Those AIs run the Patriots now.”

Liquid gaped at him. “You’re telling me a computer runs the whole bloody world nowadays?”

“Many computers,” Ocelot corrected. “But I’m sure you remember what you found at that CIA bunker in Virginia. Some sort of AI tried to talk to you, I heard?”

“I… yes. …come to think of it, you did tell us about computer systems and all that. You just let us believe they were being directed by humans.”

“I didn’t think the fact that they were being directed by AIs was very relevant. My apologies, boss.”

Liquid shook his head. He was still angry, but that sort of statement was so typically Ocelot that it entirely failed to make him angrier. “Anyway, that AI - we destroyed it. So…”
“That wasn’t the AI normally housed there. I can confirm that that one, GW, still exists. To be honest, I have no idea what it was you destroyed in Virginia. Perhaps some leftover program, a predecessor to the current AIs?”

Somehow Liquid didn’t believe that Ocelot didn’t know, but it was beside the point, wasn’t it? “Get on with it, Ocelot. Don’t try to distract me with irrelevant—”

“It’s because the Patriots are run by AIs that I was able to retain my position,” Ocelot said, “via an exploit in their programming. Unless and until I do something very visible and very directly against them, I’m hard-coded to be considered trusted - which gives me access to resources and information that most people working for the Patriots can never have. However, I’m not considered a founder. I have none of the power I once had.”

“…I see.”

“If you want, you can verify this with EVA. She can confirm the existence of the exploit, and that I was blacklisted in the first place. …oh, and before you ask, EVA never had to begin with the kind of power the rest of us had. And anyway, she’s been on probation for a very long time, only getting more and more restricted every year. At this point I wouldn’t be surprised if she were blacklisted as well, considering that CID group confirmed she’s harboring you and Mantis.”

Liquid worried his thumbnail with his teeth, thinking it over. What Ocelot was saying… ultimately, it sounded believable. The Patriots really being AIs was awfully convenient, but after what he’d seen in Brunswick County two years ago, it seemed plausible. And the way Ocelot explained it all left no contradictions with his character — he did have a point about Liquid assuming that the Patriots’ existence was Ocelot’s goal simply because he helped found it, but if his goal really was something else… no.

No, Liquid couldn’t accept this until he found out what that goal was. Ocelot stopped at nothing to achieve his objective, even if he nearly always took an extremely roundabout path; if his endgame included the destruction of the Patriots, so be it, but who was Liquid to say it did? Even if Ocelot didn’t care about the Patriots themselves, perhaps they could better serve him than Liquid and the rest of their ragtag resistance ever could. Maybe he was only with them temporarily until his ‘exploit’ got him un-blacklisted and made him king of the world by default.

“Ocelot,” Liquid said, “I’m going to ask you again, and if you give me another bullshit answer I’m going to throw you over the railing, alright?”

“Ask me what?”

“What are you doing? What are you after, what do you want? What’s your endgame here?”

“Revenge,” Ocelot said. “Just like the rest of you.”

“That’s awfully… nebulous.” It hadn’t occured to him before. But Ocelot never wasted time working towards something ambiguous and subjective - emotional and primal. His long-term motivation was never ‘to feel good’. Liquid should have asked this before. Years before.

“…” Ocelot turned around entirely, exposing his back to Liquid. “EVA said she would tell you if I didn’t,” he said, his voice carefully neutral, “so I suppose now’s as good a time as any.”

“Tell me? Tell me what?” About the Patriots and the AIs? “Is there something else?”

“Big Boss is alive.”
“Snake, who was that on the phone?”

“Uh… no one, Otacon,” Solid said, quickly closing it and putting it back in his pocket. “It’s nothing.”

“…really?”

“Well…”

Otacon leaned against the doorjamb, folding his arms. He had a very expectant expression.

Solid wasn’t quite sure why he felt hesitant to talk. Probably because telling someone about the call might as well mean agreeing to carry out the request it entailed. “That was Ocelot just now.”

“…and…”

“And he wants me to do a favor for him.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“It sounds kind of sketchy.”

Otacon shrugged. “It’s Ocelot,” he said. “I’m pretty sure everything he does is sketchy.”

“I guess so. Though if he sent Cath to us, maybe he isn’t so bad?”

“Oh yeah, speaking of her, she and I were talking about maybe—“ Otacon started chattering about some plan they’d come up with to mobilize Catherine against the fact that she was, barring some patch-job medics EVA may know, the only person with genuine medical training (beyond a couple first aid/CPR courses) associated with the resistance. Solid didn’t mean to tune him out, or rather wasn’t doing it to be rude, but retrofitting a small RV with black market medical equipment was something that honestly had nothing to do with him or his skillsets. Wasn’t like it was a bad idea or anything, chances were good that Solid himself would need that kind of thing in the future - maybe the next CIA bunker would end with him getting shot instead of Liquid - but this was kind of over his register. “So what do you think?”

“Um. Yeah. Good idea. Can’t really help with it, but good idea.” Hopefully he hadn’t just said that to something weird.

“I figure Solidus might be able to help more with materials acquisition. Anyway, what was Ocelot calling about? He’s in Prague right now, right? Did something happen? Something we didn’t already hear about from Octopus, I mean.”

“It’s more like something’s about to happen. He asked me to do him a favor.”

Otacon blinked. “What… kind of favor?”

Solid frowned and scratched the back of his neck. “I’m not really sure, to be honest. He said he’d send me more instructions later - sounds like he got interrupted. But I’m supposed to go to New York.”

“Oh. Alright. When are we leaving?”

“I think I’d better do this alone.”
There was a long, uncomfortable pause.

At length, Otacon cleared his throat. “That should be fine,” he said, sounding a little strained and lost. “I mean, we’ve got Solidus around, so we should be alright at this safehouse. And, uh… well, you can handle yourself and all, so…”

“Yeah. So don’t worry, seriously.”

“Sorry. I guess this whole revolution thing has got me kind of jumpy.”

“Probably doesn’t help that not much had happened related to the Patriots lately, then Mantis and Cath both got abducted suddenly,” Solid said, taking out a cigarette and putting it in his mouth. “I think everyone’s tense.”

Otacon smoothly plucked the cigarette back out of Solid’s mouth. “So are you going to take Mei Ling’s car?”

“I figured, it’s newest so it should be harder to track. I was going to leave in about an hour.”

“Alright. I’ll look after Frank.”

“Thanks,” Solid said.

Solid planned to just sneak out without saying goodbye, but since Otacon had caught him he was kind of required to awkwardly announce his intentions before he left. Obviously Frank couldn’t comprehend that Solid was leaving until he’d already left, so that was just normal dog behavior - both Solidus and Octopus more or less ignored him, aside from Solidus commenting that he’d have to call Ocelot to get some information on this so-called ‘favor’ for himself sometime soon — Mei Ling told him to be careful, Catherine hugged him and told him to be careful because Ocelot was a “tricky son of a bitch”, and McGolden was the only one who actually pointed out how weirdly well that lined up with what Octopus had said about Holly White.

“New York’s a big city,” Solid said, rather dismissively, “we might not run into each other.”

“Or you might be in town for the same reason,” McGolden said, “think about it. She’s supposed to be in New York sometime on Patriot business, right? Octopus?”

“Yes,” Octopus said, ticking away on his laptop. “If Ocelot’s asking you for a favor, I wouldn’t be surprised at all if it was related to said Patriot business. But I really don’t think Ocelot’s stupid enough to put Snake in a position where he’d bump into a known Patriot. Just a thought.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Solid said, even though it really wasn’t. He hadn’t thought as far ahead as everyone else apparently had.

“Might be better if you don’t. Snake, didn’t Wolf make you agree to kill Holly if you ever met her again?”

“…”

“What?” Otacon said, “she did?”

“Snake, you really agreed to something like that?” Catherine said, raising an eyebrow.

Solid raised his hands. “To be fair, I’m pretty sure Liquid’s friends were ready to skin me alive at that point.”
“Yeah,” Octopus said, still not looking up from his laptop. Looked like he was on a forum. “Count yourself lucky Wolf called Mantis off.”

“What about yourself?” Mei Ling said, coming back in the room, adjusting the teabag in her mug.

“Hey, no eavesdropping from the kitchen. It’s rude.”

“Wait a minute,” Solidus finally spoke up - he hadn’t seemed like he’d been listening to the conversation at all — “Octopus, what do you mean it might be better if Snake doesn’t kill the CIA woman? She’s a Patriot, our enemy.”

“Maybe so,” Octopus said. “Something tells me it’s hard to catch her in a sincere moment, though, if you catch my drift.”

“…I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Heh. Women.”

“What?” Mei Ling said, very confused.

“Anyway, I’m going now,” Solid said, raising his hands. Frank wagged his tail. “No, not you.”

“Well, good luck,” Catherine said, somewhat dubiously.

“Try not to run into Holly,” McGolden said, “or do, and try to get more information out of her than Octopus did.”

“And then kill her?” Otacon said with an expression somewhere between fear and distaste.

“Hmm. What would Wolf do if someone broke a promise made to her?”

“I… don’t know.”

“I don’t want to find out,” Solid said.

“She’s kind of busy with the whole… ex-FOXHOUND medical chief… cancer-coma-eyepatch situation, though,” Otacon said.

“Totally BS,” Mei Ling said, taking a swig of her tea. “I feel like we walked into Dan Brown book.”

“Anyway, I’m going now,” Solid said, raising his hands, “I didn’t need everybody else’s input. Goodbye.”

“Stay safe, Snake,” Catherine said fervently.

Solid cut a quick exit, waving half-heartedly. All things considered, he was glad to get out of the safehouse - it had gotten crowded over the past few weeks, and it put him on edge. He’d been under the impression that their ‘team’ was supposed to keep themselves spread out so that a single attack couldn’t wipe out half of them in one go… just, say, a third of them. Wow he really wasn’t making himself feel any better. Frank barked at him as he left.

In the car he realized he had no idea, precisely, where he was going. New York City was all he knew — up until now these kinds of things had been accompanied with a specific location to report to, where accommodations had been prepared and/or meetings arranged. Again it seemed like Ocelot had been interrupted before he could give him that kind of information.
Probably not a good sign.

Octopus was probably right about Ocelot routing around Holly’s assignment, though.

Figuring Mei Ling was in no position to complain if he smoked in the car, Solid lit up a cigarette as he left town, and absent-mindedly turned on the radio as he got on I-84.

“—says home is where the heart is, but what a shame!

“Because everybody’s heart doesn’t beat the same...

“It’s beating out of time.”

Chapter End Notes

Who do y’all wanna see fuck in chapter 100? Don’t say Solicon or Ocelmantis, the latter is getting reserved for Cicero, and please be mindful of the fact that Gabir is already fucking dead
Chapter 94

Chapter Notes

HA HA HA MY LAPTOP BROKE SO I COULDN'T SEND NEW CHAPTER TO PP or work on chapter 100 but honestly all the "who be fucking this chap" requests were pre-rendered impossible by the plot so \(_(¥)_/\)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

EVA knew it was already too late at night for this when her door was still closed and the only portent of things to come was inarticulate shrieking from elsewhere in the FOB. It was soon followed by angry footsteps and EVA quickly threw on a shirt (she’d been getting ready for bed) before Liquid kicked her door open, cursing.

“You knew about this! the whole time!! and you never told me!!!!”

Behind him, Ocelot looked for once as tired as his kind of lifestyle would usually entail. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what had just gone down.

“ADAM,” EVA started, but Liquid cut her off and furiously drew the attention back to himself.

“You knew! You knew and you deliberately didn’t tell me, didn’t tell anyone—! You didn’t think it’d be the kind of thing I’d want to- that I’d need to know?! I can’t believe you’ve been lying to me about this for years!!”

“Eli, calm down,” EVA said, “people are trying to sleep.”

“I don’t care!!! You lied to me!”

“No, Eli, I—”

“You lied to me about your whole reason for even doing this! My god, I thought it was-“ Liquid’s voice broke, “I thought it was because of your sons, but no, it’s because that bastard didn’t have the sense to die when he ought to have—”

“Eli…”

“I can’t believe this!!!!”

“We can talk about it when you’ve calmed down and not a second before,” EVA snapped.

Immediately Liquid dropped into a glowering silence.

EVA sighed through her nose. “Alright… so, I take it Ocelot finally told you about Big Boss.”

“Yes,” Liquid said sourly.

“He didn’t take it well,” Ocelot said dryly.

“That’s why I told you should have told him years ago,” EVA scolded Ocelot. He didn’t reply. “Now, Eli… did you have any questions or something, or did you just want to yell at me?”
“I can’t believe this,” Liquid repeated, his fists trembling.

“Okay, so you just want to yell at me.”

“You deserve it.”

“Did Ocelot tell you why we decided not to share this information with you immediately?”

“No,” Ocelot said before Liquid could reply, “he just got upset and stormed off, looking for you.”

“I figured.”

“Well?” Liquid growled. “Explain yourself, then.”

“You hate Big Boss for everything he put you through and even blame him for killing V,” EVA said flatly. “I know your homicidal rage towards him cooled off a bit after V adopted you, but you do still want to kill him, don’t you? And him being in a coma leaves him vulnerable and unable to defend himself - a perfect opportunity to give him an ignominious death, right?”

“…”

“The only reason why I’m ultimately okay with you knowing he’s still alive is because we don’t know where he is. You’re definitely a threat to him, but as long as his location is unknown, you can’t do anything to hurt him.”

“You’re doing all this to save him.”

EVA frowned, folded her arms. “…yes.”

“That was always what it was about,” Ocelot said.

“The injuries that David gave him in Zanzibar Land… they were extensive, and you’re right, he should have died. He was hanging onto life by a thread when he was recovered from there — to be honest, I can’t be entirely certain he isn’t brain-dead. But… you remember Gray Fox, don’t you?”

“I do,” Liquid said, wary.

“The whole reason why Dr. Clark was experimenting on him in the first place was so she could revive Big Boss. Gray Fox might have been supremely fucked up, but he was a success and Dr. Clark only improved on those techniques for Big Boss… by the time Ocelot and I got Dr. Hunter to have her killed, we’d confirmed that Big Boss was technically alive and theoretically healthy, but—“

“was still in a coma because he was being held in an induced coma,” Ocelot finished with a sigh. “But instead of the barbiturates being administered via IV as is typical, they’re administered automatically via nanomachines. Even if we did know where he is, we’d have no way of deactivating the nanomachines and there wouldn’t be much we could do.”

“The original plan was to get Dr. Clark to deactivate them for us, but she refused,” EVA said with a shrug, “and she may not have even been capable in the first place. We know that the nanomachines are under the control of the AIs— wait, Ocelot told you about them, right?”

“Yes,” Liquid said.

“We think it’s JD specifically that regulates Big Boss’ nanomachines,” Ocelot said.

“Sigint wouldn’t or couldn’t agree to shut them down for us either, before Ocelot killed him,” EVA
said, “but we kind of saw that coming, so… anyway, the whole plan for the past five or so years has been to just eliminate the Patriots entirely. With JD gone, the nanomachines should automatically deactivate.”

“And Big Boss will wake up.”

“Hopefully.”

“Good for him,” Liquid said emotionlessly.

“…boss, you need us,” Ocelot said. “I can’t speak for your mother, but if you undermine my goal here, I won’t help you anymore. I don’t care if the rest of the world burns.”

“I figured you’d say something like that.”

“Eli…” EVA said, “getting Big Boss out of that coma… it’s not the only reason why I’m doing this. Even without him, I’d still stand with you, but… well…”

“…fine.” Liquid scrubbed his hands over his face. “Fine. If it’s really like that.”

Neither EVA nor Ocelot spoke.

Liquid growled. “You two want to bring that coward back into the world? …fine, go ahead. I’ll carry on as before. This changes nothing.”

“You’re not going to just let him go, though,” Ocelot said.

“Like hell I will! I’m going to kill him, you’re right — but I’m not going to do it while he’s in some stupid Patriot-induced coma. I want him awake and cognisant when I murder him. I want to make him answer to my face for his sins. Do you understand that? You bring him back - I’ll even help you bring him back - and then I will have my revenge.”

“I thought as much,” Ocelot said, stony-faced.

“…we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” EVA said, “we have the same end in mind for now, so that’s good enough for me. Eli, if you think your brothers and everyone else should know about this… I’ll leave that decision up to you.”

“Alright,” Liquid said. And turned on his heel and left.

Ocelot and EVA stood in silence for a moment or two.

“That went well,” Ocelot said at length.

“I hope you’re not planning on killing him at the end of all this,” EVA said.

“If it comes to that.”

“If you can.”

“What,” Ocelot said, raising an eyebrow, “you think I couldn’t pull the trigger? Just because he looks like John?”

“Even after everything between the two of you?” EVA waved him off. “Nevermind, that wasn’t what I was implying. I’m just going to ask… don’t put me in a position where I have to choose between the life of my son, you, or Big Boss.”
“You’re going to have to make that choice eventually.”

“That’s a defeatist attitude, ADAM. Goddammit, I’m going to have my cake and eat it too.”

“C’est mauvais… c’est grave, c’est mauvais…”

“What are you muttering to yourself about over there, Nadine?”

“Ocelot…”

Miller dragged a hand down his face. “This again?”

“I’m worried!” Nadine snapped. “I have every right to be! My daughter—”

“My daughter.”

“Our daughter is in the custody of the terrorists and we don’t have any idea what they’re up to.”

“…okay,” Miller said, expression blank.

“This wouldn’t have been a problem if you hadn’t come scurrying back to the La Li Lu Le Lo at the first sign of trouble,” Nadine snapped, “you should have stayed with the terrorists longer - weren’t you handling logistics?! You could have given us so much information, but all you did was throw out a tiny little scrap and render everything else you knew out of date!!”

“Ocelot caught me,” Miller said with a shrug.

“That still does not explain why the only thing you told the La Li Lu Le Lo was the location of only one of the terrorist groups… you knew that they’d split up like that, please, that was obvious, and you clearly would have known everyone else’s location as well, so-“

“Nadine, at this point everyone would have changed locations anyway. And stop pacing, you’re making me nervous.”

“I don’t care if they’ve changed locations, that’s beside the point entirely,” Nadine said, turning on her heel towards him and putting her hands on her hips. “I’m asking why you didn’t talk about that when the La Li Lu Le Lo contacted you in the first place!”

“…”

“It’s because of Solid Snake, isn’t it?”

“What gives you that idea?” Miller said, doing his best to sound offended.

Nadine gave the kind of exaggerated, eminently disdainful eyeroll that only Africans could pull off. “You know there were rumors, Bene.”

“Why do you take every rumor you hear seriously?”

“I don’t know, probably because making your best student blow you would be completely in-character for you.”

“Oh, shut up, Nadine. Besides, it’s not like I was the only one leaking information from the resistance.”
“Ocelot doesn’t count.”

“I know that. There’s someone else, though. Possibly multiple someones.”

Nadine narrowed her eyes.

Miller just frowned at her, folding his arms. “I don’t know who it is and it’s probably not someone from the core group. Last I heard Ocelot didn’t know who it was either, but he’d mentioned them before. Someone was leaking intel long before the La Li Lu Le Lo ever kidnapped Catherine and blackmailed me.”

“Hmph.”

Nadine started pacing again. Miller gave up. “Why are you so worried about this all of a sudden, anyway? It’s not like we’re in a different situation than we were last week, aside from not being in Malaysia anymore.”

“We are in a different situation than we were last week,” Nadine said stiffly.

“…okay, I’ll bite. What?”

“Something’s happening in New York, soon.”

“…what’s happening in New York, Nadine?”

“…I don’t know. It has nothing to do with my assignment.”

Miller sighed loudly.

“But it’s something big and important and Ocelot is involved,” Nadine pressed on, ignoring him. “We know now that he plans to betray the La Li Lu Le Lo! So if he’s involved in something big…”

“Nadine…”

“‘Something big’ always means that people are expected to die. If you’re right about there still being actual spies in the terrorist cell, then I think that won’t matter for long because Ocelot will use this event in New York as a cover for getting rid of them.”

“Good for him.”

“Bad for us!”

“I thought you were just trying to convince me that your priority is protecting Catherine,” Miller said, annoyed, “if anything, the resistance locking down information leaks would help her. Whether or not she’s actively helping them - and you know she might be - she’s not going to be in the actual line of fire unless the La Li Lu Le Lo launches more attacks on them directly. Which they can’t do if they don’t know where the fuck they are because no one’s telling them.”

Nadine stopped and raised her hand like she was going to slap him, but the changed her mind and lowered it again. “I don’t think it’s likely that Catou would be accidentally killed in a raid. Besides, I can have more than one priority at a time.”

“True, but by definition one has to be higher than the other.”

“…”
“Not going to tell me which, huh?” Miller said.

“De quoi je me mêle.”

“…” Miller removed his sunglasses, rubbed his eyes. “I’m pretty sure we’re doing just fine for now. Or as fine as we can be expected to. But if Ocelot gets rid of the other plants in the resistance then someone can always just get a new one.”

“They seem cautious about who they ally with…”

“Relax, babe. I didn’t get roped into this just because Catherine made me a convenient target…”

Solid’s Codec rang. Liquid’s frequency, meaning it could be anything, so he kind of had to pick up. “What do you want?”

“Are you busy?”

“I’m driving.”

“So, no,” Liquid said. He seemed kind of unsettled somehow.

“Actually, did anyone from back here already call you? Recently, I mean.”

“Er- no, why? Did something come up?”

“Mei Ling has new Codec tech. It’s more, uh, immersive. I didn’t get it in case someone calls while I’m in the middle of something… like driving… but apparently it does something with your vocal cords that makes it so that you can talk on Codec without actually speaking out loud.”

“Hn. Sounds interesting, but I’d rather not have anything messing with my vocal cords, thank you.”

“?”

“Wait, where are you driving to? I’m serious, brother, did something come up?” Yeah, he was definitely on edge about something.

“I’m headed to New York. Some weird errand from Ocelot, I don’t have all the details yet so I’m going alone.”

“…”

“…you okay? Um, how’s your arm?”

“…it’s fine. I got a new one. Looks a lot like Father’s, except it’s blue.”

“That’s… good, I guess?” Solid was only vaguely aware that Venom had had a prosthetic because of Liquid; he was fairly certain that he’d been wearing long sleeves and gloves when he’d faced him in Zanzibar Land. “Liquid, you seem kind of distracted.”

“…I suppose I am.”

“How’s Mantis doing? Everything alright over there?”

Liquid hemmed and hawed for a moment. “Actually, I’m afraid he isn’t doing so well. I’m worried…” Ah. Could that be what it had to
do with him, so maybe Liquid was calling just to have someone to talk to with Mantis out of commission and Wolf on the hunt. (Solid tried not to worry about Meryl - hopefully she’d be smart enough to stay out of Wolf’s way.) Solid was… intrigued by the possibility that Liquid felt he could, in fact, turn to him. “He’s been having really terrible headaches lately…”

“He’s still recovering from being without his mask for several days, though, right? I’d be more surprised if his head didn’t hurt.”

“That’s what I thought too, but while he’s definitely been getting better with that, the headaches are just getting worse. I’m starting to think it’s something else.”

“Something else? Something… medical?”

“Possibly. I don’t know anything about medicine beyond first aid, though, and I don’t want to take him back to the clinic because he’ll just get all upset again.”

“Hrm. Maybe you could try to figure something out over phone? We just got a nurse, she might know something.”

“Eh… a nurse? Who?”

“Catherine Miller.”

Liquid paused for a moment. “Oh, right, he got married and reproduced. Still think that’s a bit… unexpected of him. So she’s a nurse? Is she the one someone called Mother about?”

“Yeah. So EVA should have her number. Codec should work, too.”

“I’ll look into it, I suppose. I can’t think of anything else to do.”

The conversation died briefly. If Liquid hadn’t hung up yet, there must have been something more; Solid huffed. “Was that all you called to talk about?”

“No,” Liquid said, then paused again. “To be honest, I called you before I’d really decided whether or not I wanted to actually tell you about… the thing.”

“What thing?”

“Well…”

“Liquid. Spit it out.”

“Mmph. Fine. I had a very interesting conversation with Ocelot about an hour ago and after some deliberation I think you might want to also be privy to what he told me.”

“Okay…”?

Liquid took a deep breath. “When you killed our biological father… you didn’t finish the job. He’s still alive. He’s in a coma, the Patriots have custody of him, and his location is unknown. Ocelot and Mother both have been looking for him for years, with the goal of waking him up.”

“…”

“…Snake? Did you hear me?”

“Yeah, I’m just… processing this.” Actually Solid was trying to focus on the highway ahead. He
was feeling a lot of different emotions right now, ones that he largely didn’t understand or feel comfortable with — what was the point in feeling relieved that he hadn’t killed his father after all? what was the point in feeling ashamed of himself for failing to complete his mission back then, angry at Big Boss for failing to die when he was killed?

“Don’t get too comfortable with it,” Liquid said, his voice suddenly cold. “Once Big Boss is found and awoken, I will kill him. I have every right to. He took everything from me… over and over.”

“I thought you said I did that.”

“You were complicit, so shut up. Don’t forget that you’re next on my list after the Patriots.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Solid grumbled. “If you want a fight to death once the Patriots are gone, fine, but first we have to get rid of them… and we both have to survive.”

Liquid snorted. “I’m not worried about myself. And aren’t you billed as ‘the man who makes the impossible possible’?”

“I’m billed as a lot of stupid things, Liquid.”

“Fire your marketing department.”

Solid had to laugh, a little. “If I could fire my ‘marketing department’ then I never would have gone to Shadow Moses and my house never would have gotten burned down. How’s my dog doing?”

“He’s doing fine and also he’s functionally my dog and you know that.”

“You’re a dog thief, Liquid.”

“He likes me better than you.”

“Probably because he spends more time with you on account of you stealing him. Anyway, I have to go. My exit’s coming up.”

“Fine. …no comment about Big Boss, eh?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” Solid said. “I don’t think him being alive changes anything for me.”

“Hm. Well, if it hits you later, don’t come crying to me.” Because that was likely? “And ah… maybe keep this information under your hat for now.”

“I hate hats.”

Chapter End Notes

Nadine: This is bad… this is bad, this is bad… […] It’s none of your business.
Chapter 95

Downtown Manhattan.

“I would apologize for dumping this on you,” Ocelot said over Codec, “but we both know you weren’t actually doing anything.”

“Hrm.”

“I’ll have more specific instructions to give you later, but for now, Snake, you’re just acting as my representative to Colonel Gurlukovich. He’s former Spetsnaz and currently runs a private army mostly comprised of GRU vets. Be polite.”

“Is there a reason why you couldn’t just do this yourself?” Solid grumbled.

“I’m busy.” Solid didn’t doubt that, actually, but he did doubt that Ocelot was incapable of squeezing this into his schedule. “Besides, you’ll see eventually why I couldn’t do this job myself. But to tell you ahead of time generally: This is the first part of a Patriot assignment of mine. Sending you to do it instead of me will enable us to turn the assignment to our advantage instead of to the Patriots’.”

“Hm… a Patriot assignment, huh?” Solid said. “I don’t see how I’m supposed to act as your representative with that… I don’t know anything about how Patriots act with each other.”

“No need to worry about that,” Ocelot said smoothly, “Gurlukovich is a third party in this war. You won’t be monitored by the Patriots directly… so long as you stay discreet. I trust you can do that, Snake.”

“Sure. …but why me?”

“I need the plausible deniability.”

Solid raised an eyebrow. He supposed that made sense. The Patriots probably wouldn’t be very happy with Ocelot for ‘misjudging’ a lackey, but Solid assumed he’d already planned a way around that.

Ocelot gave Solid the details of today’s meeting and they quickly finished the call and hung up. Ocelot seemed generally less interested in Solid than he was with his brothers, but Solid didn’t trust that impression; Solid didn’t particularly like or trust Ocelot, but he really didn’t have a reason to distrust him. Ever since Shadow Moses he’d been - as far as Solid was concerned - consistent and straightforward. At this point Solid no longer cared about the fact that Ocelot had tortured him once, because hey, they’d been on opposite sides then — he was more bitter about Wolf shooting Meryl for basically no reason. Actually, keeping all of the remnant of FOXHOUND at arms’ length was a good idea, Solid had found. But he did know they were all on the same side here, and he could trust any one of them to watch his back… if nothing else.

Except Ocelot gave off a weird vibe that made Solid uncomfortable. It probably had a lot to do with Solid being on the receiving end of Mantis venting about how much he hated Ocelot a couple of times, mostly before he’d gotten to know Ocelot… not that he could even say that he did know him now. Not that he could say that he cared to get to know Ocelot. His business was his business and Solid would stay out of it as long as he stayed out of Solid’s.

Though, hearing that Big Boss was alive… and Liquid had said both Ocelot and EVA had been searching for him this whole time… started to go a bit of the way to explaining why an infamous spy
Solid shook his head and kept walking. He’d been trying not to think about Big Boss still being alive. Every time it crossed his mind it set off a surge of conflicting emotions just as intense as when Liquid had first told him. But he hadn’t really been lying to Liquid when he’d claimed it didn’t change anything for him. It didn’t. Liquid was morbidly obsessed with his genes and his adoptive father’s death, Solidus apparently thought about Big Boss while he had sex, EVA and Ocelot had their own issues going on, and Solid didn’t even know about everyone else, but… him, personally? Big Boss was his former CO. He didn’t realize they were related until Big Boss was on fire in Zanzibar Land. His strongest emotions towards the man he’d felt only after his ‘death’, because he thought he’d killed him.

So, with that not being the case, Solid wasn’t left with a whole lot to think about regarding Big Boss. He was his father, but he’d had grown up without him and never got told about their true relationship in the years he trained under him. He was his CO, taught him everything he knew about tactical espionage, but he betrayed him, threw him under the bus, lied to him and later tried to kill him.

Big Boss might have still been alive, but he was still dead to Solid. It just… wasn’t really his fault anymore.

That was both a weight off his shoulders and an even bigger one back on it.

The venue for the initial meeting with Colonel Gurlukovich was a suspicious-looking Slavic restaurant that gave the impression of being a mafia front. Ocelot had sent Solid a picture of Colonel Gurlukovich over Codec, so Solid recognized him - he was sitting at a table with an open seat towards the back of the restaurant. With him was a young woman who strongly resembled him - probably a daughter, or maybe a niece or much younger sister. The tables surrounding them were all filled with just under a dozen burly Russian men who were eating or nursing drinks silently and not-so-surreptitiously watching Solid. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that these were some of Colonel Gurlukovich’s men acting as security. Apart from them, the restaurant was empty.

“Come, sit,” Colonel Gurlukovich said, gesturing to the empty chair across from him. “This restaurant is seat yourself.”

“Hm.” Solid wasn’t here to get into a fight, but nonetheless he was glad he’d brought a sidearm. He was mildly surprised that he was being extended the courtesy of not being searched for it.

“I assume Shalashaska has filled you in on everything you need to know already?” Colonel Gurlukovich seemed almost amused as he said that. Probably because of ‘Ocelot’ and ‘need to know’ being in the same sentence.

“I assume Shalashaska has filled you in on everything you need to know already?” Colonel Gurlukovich seemed almost amused as he said that. Probably because of ‘Ocelot’ and ‘need to know’ being in the same sentence.

“Just the basic details,” Solid said flatly, crossing his arms. “I was told that you’d fill me in on the rest.”

“Ah, yes. Though I suppose an introduction first would be prudent.”

“I know who you are,” Solid said.

“And I know who you are, Solid Snake.”

Solid raised an eyebrow. Obviously the Patriots were aware he was still alive, but he’d been under the impression that they were keeping that a secret. Not that it came up very often. Maybe Colonel Gurlukovich had been surprised when he’d heard about it, or maybe he’d had no clue who Solid was - a bit unlikely, but in Solid’s opinion preferable.
“This is my daughter, Olga,” Colonel Gurlukovich said, gesturing to the young woman next to him. She nodded. “She insisted on coming here today to meet you, but she will not be joining us for the-“

“I am joining you for the upcoming operation,” Olga interrupted.

“Olga, don’t argue with me in front of our guest.”

“You are giving him false information.”

“You are not going to be present at the-“

“What’s the matter with her tagging along?” Solid said. Olga seemed capable enough, if her biceps were anything to go by.

“I’m pregnant,” Olga said.

“Oh.”

“I am still in the first trimester though, so it’s fine.”

“No it is not!” Colonel Gurlukovich said. It was very obvious they’d had this conversation before.

“O…kay…” Solid said, face blank. He didn’t know anything about kids, so…

Colonel Gurlukovich sighed irritably. “My daughter’s whims aside, as Shalashaska’s, ah, representative, you will be expected to take his role in our upcoming operation. I trust you are capable of it.”

“Sure.”

“Very good. Now, what is happening is that on the eighth, a supposed oil tanker operated by US Marines will be passing through the New York Harbor… and we will get our opportunity to seize the new Metal Gear model, Metal Gear RAY…”

Catherine unintentionally smacked her (new) cell phone off the bedside table as it rang at ungodly o’clock. Grumbling, she got up and chased her phone across the room, picking up only to be greeted by someone with an obnoxious BBC-style British accent. “This is Catherine Miller, isn’t it?”

“That depends, who’s asking?”

“I— I heard you’re our nurse, I have some medical questions and I got your phone number from EVA?” He sounded vaguely nervous, in the sense that he was trying to force too much confidence into his voice and ended up coming across as somewhat aggressive. Still, the mention of EVA lowered Catherine’s hackles.

“Yes, what’s going on? Who is this?”

“Liquid Snake.”

“Ah, Snake’s brother. The one he actually likes.”


“Mantis…” Catherine thought for a moment. She still hadn’t met half of the resistance, seemed like.
“The psychic one, right? Chronically underweight, recently got kidnapped?”

“Yes, that’s him. We did take him to a clinic after we recovered him, and there wasn’t anything wrong with him, er, physically. Did blood tests and all that sort of thing.”

“Okay…” Catherine pushed some hair out of her eyes and looked at the clock on the bedside table. It was about three in the morning. She supposed that it was a much more reasonable time of day where Liquid was… not that she, as a nurse, had any right to complain about unholy work hours, right? This was her first chance to prove herself as the resistance’s de facto medic, too… “Alright, what’s the problem? You wouldn’t be calling if there wasn’t one.”

Liquid sighed. “I don’t know how many details about Mantis’ condition have been mentioned to you already, but being without his mask - that is, his psychic insulation - for several days put him under unimaginable strain and gave him amnesia and all that. And that is actually getting better, I believe at this point he remembers mostly everything important and he’s sort of starting to act like himself again, but… well, I just thought they were related to him recovering from that… like when you sprain a muscle, and using it hurts, but it’s healing—“

“Liquid, what are you referring to?” Catherine interrupted in a no-nonsense, professional voice.

“Headaches. He’s been having terrible headaches, and they’ve just been getting worse.”

“Terrible as in, like, debilitating?”

Liquid made an affirmative noise. “So you can see why I thought up until now that it was just a side effect of his recovery… but if his mind is getting better, why would his headaches get worse?”

“Oh. Hmm. Well, I can’t exactly make a diagnosis over phone…” Catherine said, somewhat hesitantly, knowing full well she hadn’t been trained to make diagnoses in the first place, “but maybe I could still advise you… are there any additional symptoms? Actually, can I just talk to Mantis himself?”

“Ah. Hmm. Well, I can’t exactly make a diagnosis over phone…” Catherine said, somewhat hesitantly, knowing full well she hadn’t been trained to make diagnoses in the first place, “but maybe I could still advise you… are there any additional symptoms? Actually, can I just talk to Mantis himself?”

“Oh, he can’t talk on the phone. The gas mask prevents it, and we won’t take it off.”

“I… I see… could you at least pass on my questions to him, and pass on his answers to me?” Catherine grabbed a slip of paper and a pen, turning on the desk light. She might need to jot some things down. “I know HIPAA doesn’t really apply to us since we’re working outside the law and all, but I was told you two are married, so it wouldn’t matter much anyway.”

“Right. And, er, he is right here but he’s a little out of it right now, so I don’t think he’s going to be very helpful.”

“Okay. Well, tell me about any additional symptoms that you’ve observed or he’s complained to you about. Anything, even if you think it’s not relevant.”

Liquid hummed in thought for a moment. “All he’s really complained about is that his head hurts…”

“Do you know what type of pain? Dull, throbbing? Localized to a specific area?”

“I’m not sure… sometimes he doesn’t like it if I touch his head.”

Catherine jotted down Scalp tenderness? “What else? What does he do when his head starts hurting?”

“He just wants to lie around in the dark, alone. I think light and noise bother him.”
“I see… do you know if he gets dizzy or lightheaded, is that why he lies down?’’

Liquid paused for half a moment. “No, I think he’s just tired. When we first recovered him, he slept a lot, so I don’t know if that’s related to what’s causing the headaches.”

“How long do these headaches last?’’

“Hours. Sometimes days.’’

“Hm.’’ Catherine tapped the short list of symptoms in front of her with her pen. “You haven’t given me much to work with, but it sounds like migraines. That could be secondary to the, ah, psychic strain he was under recently, but… well, we didn’t exactly study telepathy in nursing school…”

“I thought so…’’

“I think you’re right to be concerned that this is largely unrelated, though. It’s not exactly common for one secondary symptom to worsen over time while the other ones taper off. But it’s possible that there’s something else that exacerbating his headaches… tell me what you’ve done to treat these. Painkillers?’’

“I told you, he won’t take off his mask,’’ Liquid said. “That includes for taking pills. …and actually, he really hates medicine, so getting him to take pills in the first place is an ordeal anyway, even if he can be convinced to take off his mask.’’

“So no painkillers.” Standard OTC painkillers could be effective on migraines, but a lot of people weren’t aware of the hazards of overuse and Catherine had wondered about rebound headaches. She scratched that possibility out.

“Yes. Until a few days ago.’’

“You convinced him to take off his mask?’’

“No… Ocelot injected him with something.’’

Well, that sounded important. “Do you know the name of the…?’’

“No,’’ Liquid said, starting to sound frustrated, “all I know is that it’s not technically a painkiller. It’s some kind of interrogation drug, it just sort of knocked Mantis out for a while… just made him too high to care about his head.’’

“…”

“And increased skin sensitivity, he gets… bothered… if he’s touched too much. Do you know of a drug like that?’’

“Increased sensitivity to pain, or just increased sensitivity in general?’’

“In general.’’

“And this didn’t happen before Ocelot gave him the injection.’’

“No. This is part of what the drug does.’’

“…” Catherine sighed through her nose and wrote DO NOT LET OCELOT TOUCH MY PATIENTS on her makeshift chart. “I don’t know of a drug that does that. I can’t think of any drugs off the top of my head that even have that as a side effect.’’
“Hn.”

“Injecting your husband with an unknown substance with the intent to get him high is not an appropriate way to treat pain,” Catherine scolded. “Any medic that approved that should get dragged out into the street and shot.”

“I’m… sorry? We didn’t have a medic approve that, though, the only medics in my mother’s army are just for patch-jobs…”

“Liquid, this is just common sense.”

“I— well, it’s starting to wear off, anyway!”

“That’s good! But for all you know it’s made the underlying problem behind his headaches worse.”

“Gkk— I- I…”

Catherine let him stew in that for a few moments and then got back to business. “Painkillers are only a temporary measure, anyway. Regardless of what you’re doing for his pain, what we really need to be doing is figuring out and addressing the underlying cause.”

“Nn. Right.”

“Again, I can’t make a diagnosis over phone, but let’s work off of the assumption that the underlying cause is Mantis not being completely recovered yet from his psychic strain, and the reason why his presumed migraines are getting worse instead of better is because there’s something else that’s exacerbating it.”

“Alright…?”

“To your knowledge, is Mantis under any more stress now than he was before his headaches started getting worse?”

“I don’t think so,” Liquid said, though he sounded uncertain. “There has been… some stress related to Ocelot dropping by, but… his headaches started getting worse before that. If anything I think he was less stressed than usual when they started getting bad. Oh, hang on.”

“Hm?”

No response from Liquid for almost a full minute - Catherine actually checked her phone to see if the call had dropped. When she put the phone back to her ear, Liquid was talking again. “—just Mantis, my apologies. He isn’t completely asleep right now and wanted my attention.”

“Is he up to answering questions himself?”

“I can try.” Then, muffled: “Mantis, was there something that was stressing you out before Ocelot came? …no, that’s normal.” Regular volume: “Mantis said the same thing I did.”

“Um, right… how has he been sleeping?”

“His sleep schedule is actually more or less back to normal,” Liquid said. “Though he does sleep in an extra hour or so.”

“…what’s his sleep schedule normally like?” Catherine asked, suspicious.

“Er… maybe four, five hours of sleep every five or six days? And also, after…” Liquid cleared his
throat delicately, “physical activity… he usually sleeps for two or three hours, I think.”

Catherine really hoped that that being a ‘normal’ sleep schedule for Mantis was part of his whole weird psychic deal. “…okay… well, if his sleep schedule is normal, then that probably isn’t it… how often is he drinking?”

“Drinking? Water?”

“Yes,” Catherine said, rolling her eyes. Good thing this was over phone.

“He drinks water whenever he’s thirsty. It seems like a normal amount to me, so I doubt he’s dehydrated.”

“Alright, what about eating?”

“……”

“Liquid? Oh, I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Welllll… as I said… he won’t take off his mask, so…”

Fortunately Catherine had the training to not shout So you give him a fucking smoothie, Jesus Christ! into the phone and wake half the safehouse. “So he hasn’t eaten or drank anything except water ever since he was abducted.”

“…it sounds bad when you put it like that… besides, it isn’t like he eats very much to begin with, so —!”

“His blood sugar is undoubtedly way below optimal levels, to say nothing of salt and other vitamins and minerals generally regarded as essential for life. But blood sugar is probably the big thing here for his headaches - low blood sugar and low magnesium are common triggers for migraines, and with them steadily dropping due to a lack of intake, it’s not surprising that any migraines would become more intense and more frequent.”

“I… oh my god… I’m an idiot.”

Catherine didn’t dispute that. “He can still drink with his mask on, so put him on a liquid diet. Smoothies, juice, broth, milk, protein shakes, high-calorie drinks… get some powdered nutritional supplements and add them to his drinks. I don’t know what’s available in your area.”

“Hmm. Right.” Liquid sounded slightly sheepish.

“More importantly, you’ve got to get him comfortable with taking off his mask so he’ll eat solid food again. Right now it sounds like he’s almost starving.”

“Again, in my defense,” Liquid said, “he didn’t eat much to begin with. For years he mostly subsisted off of multivitamin tablets!”

“And that is probably why he’s chronically underweight,” Catherine said sharply. “I understand if he has a unique physiological makeup, but if he’s really as skinny as everyone says he is then he is clearly not eating enough.”

“He doesn’t like-“

“Then as his husband it’s your job to make sure he does anyway!”
“…” Catherine could pretty much hear the shame in the silence over the line. “I. Right. I’ll do that. And I’ll, er, call back if it doesn’t help. Thank you for your time.” He hung up quickly.

Catherine pinched the bridge of her nose. “Just what am I getting myself into here…?”
The drug hadn’t quite worn off yet, but was starting to, leaving Mantis awake enough for Liquid to start plying him with juice and broth like Catherine had recommended. Liquid wasn’t expecting dramatic results but did notice Mantis perking up more than he thought he would. He actually felt up to getting out of bed and wandering around the FOB, though he was still high and Liquid had to tag along after him to keep him out of trouble.

“Where are my clothes?” Mantis asked him randomly.

“What?” Liquid said. “You’re wearing them.”

“No. These are your clothes.”

Liquid peered at him for a moment. Mantis had forgotten his usual sense of style, so ever since they got him back he’d been more interested in loose, comfortable clothing - mostly sleepwear, but Liquid’s clothes, which didn’t fit him at all, also fit the bill. Liquid had just gotten used to him wearing them… “Actually,” he said, “those might be Snake’s clothes. We tend to get them mixed up whenever we’re in the same place.”

“Oh… does Benedict like me more when I wear Snake’s clothes, then?” He glanced under the table, where Benedict was sleeping at (on) Liquid’s feet, legs twitching.

“He likes you plenty already, Mantis.” Liquid smiled at him. Though he did have to admit he was saddened to think that Mantis becoming more aware of his appearance spelled the end of times for his baby bird hair, which was a shame because Liquid was very fond of it.

EVA walked into the kitchen, and blinked. “What are you two doing here?”

“Having breakfast,” Liquid said cheerfully.

“It’s four in the morning.”

“It’s like that sometimes.”

“It’s four in the morning?” Mantis said, looking around vaguely.

“Mantis, drink your smoothie.”

EVA looked over at the blender, which Liquid had not cleaned. “So I take it actually feeding Mantis helped a lot…”

“Don’t take that tone with me, Mother,” Liquid said, annoyed, “if it had occured to you that his blood sugar or whatever was that terrible then you should have reminded me about it.”

“Tch.” EVA took the jar of the blender off and rinsed it out in the sink. “Well, it’s good that you’re doing better now, Mantis. How’s your amnesia coming along?”

“I think I mostly remember everything by now,” Mantis said. “There are still a few gaps, but they don’t seem important.”

“He’s a lot calmer now that his head isn’t bothering him anymore,” Liquid said, back to being cheerful.
“You don’t think Ocelot’s drug had anything to do with that?” EVA said, putting the jar back on the blender.

“I just want to believe he’s nicer now, let me have this, Mother.”

“Nicer ‘now’…?” Mantis said, sounding mildly offended. Liquid sighed.

EVA changed the subject. “Anyway, Eli, how’s your arm doing?”

“Just fine, I can pretty much use it as normal now.”

“That’s good. You adapted to that about as quickly as Ocelot did, if I remember correctly. I would have thought it’d take longer, since it’s a lot more of your arm.”

“Well, I still have my original elbow and all that, there probably isn’t much functional difference compared to Ocelot losing his at the wrist.”

“That happened at Shadow Moses, no?” Mantis said.

“Yes, it was that crazy ninja Gray Fox who did it.” Liquid paused. “Maybe I should have told Dr. Hunter that her brother killed her parents while I had the chance.”

“I don’t think antagonizing her any more would have helped that situation, Eli,” EVA said.

“True, but honestly - who teaches a woman straight out of a coma CQC? I’d like to check that physical therapist’s license.”

“I’m just surprised she was strong enough to manhandle Záviš, CQC and catching him off guard aside. I guess they could have done the same muscle therapies for her that they did for V, but I can’t fathom why they would.”

“Right. She was a scientist, not a soldier.” Liquid frowned, absent-mindedly playing with his collar. “I suppose the brain damage made her quite useless as a scientist, but…”

“Mhm.” EVA nodded. “The whole situation is just… fishy. The only thing I can guess at is that it’s got something to do with her relationship to Big Boss, but… why? It wasn’t like they were close. Gray Fox and Big Boss were, yes, but I think Big Boss and Naomi met each other maybe twice.”

“Maybe Wolf knows,” Mantis said. “She likes to antagonize her targets, doesn’t she?”

“Yes…” Liquid said, “and with all the blabbering we heard, maybe Dr. Hunter gave something away while Wolf was doing it. I’ll have to call and ask. I wonder if she’s left her mark on her yet?”

“Her… what?” EVA said, raising her eyebrows.

“Oh, she likes to give her targets minor wounds to mark them. She did Snake by scratching his cheek with her nails, but it really depends on what’s available. Could be she thinks of Dr. Hunter’s missing eye as it.”

“Ah. Okay. The way you phrased it made it sound like she pees on them or something.”

“No. Well, actually, I wouldn’t put it past her…”

Holly did a double take.
She actually stopped walking mid-stride. Her initial reaction was one of denial, because there was no fucking way Solid Snake was brazenly walking around Manhattan, smoking a cigarette and paying more attention to the river than the people he passed.

But, in fact, he was. Holly stared at his back. He was probably here for the same reason she was — though whether he heard about it from Octopus, or if this confirmed her assumption that at least one of the La Li Lu Le Lo’s spies had turned some time ago, Holly wasn’t sure.

She must have been gaping at him for just a moment too long; Solid noticed her. Didn’t turn around yet, just noticeably tensed in his shoulders and threw his cigarette into the river. He didn’t run, speak, or look at her. Apparently breaking the tension was, once again, Holly’s job.

“What’s a dead guy like you doing in a place like this?” she said.

“I think I got set up,” Solid deadpanned.

“You think?” Holly put a hand on her hip. “I take it you weren’t expecting to see me.”

“No.”

“Even though we’re here for the same reason… aren’t we?”

Solid shrugged, frowning.

Holly narrowed her eyes. “Here for the same reason… but on opposite sides.”

“Opposite sides?” Solid said. “Are we really?”

“…” Holly sighed. “We shouldn’t talk in the street about this. Come on.”

“Wh…?”

“Back to my apartment, stupid. It’s the one place I know we won’t be overheard.”

“It’s not bugged, huh?”

“Made sure of that myself,” Holly said, starting to walk off. Solid followed her, though she didn’t miss the way his hand drifted towards a concealed holster as he did.

The CIA-provided digs were actually quite nice, a little cramped (it was New York, after all) but in a very convenient location with an excellent view of where the Marine tanker was scheduled to sink in a few days. Holly had already set the place up nicely to hole up in at for the next two years. As soon as they walked in the place, Gustava trotted up to them and sniffed at Solid’s boots curiously, gave him a disdainful look, and ducked behind Holly’s legs.

“I probably smell like dogs,” Solid said awkwardly.

“Gustava’s got a good nose for people, too,” Holly said, picking her up.

“…Gustava?”

“My cat. I… named her after her.”

“I named a dog after her, too,” Solid said.

“Hm.”
There was a brief, awkward pause. Holly felt very aware of the fact that Solid’s hand was still hovering by his sidearm, and the weight of her own pistol under her shirt.

“So…” Holly started.

“Are we really on opposite sides here?” Solid asked, eyebrows raised.

“I work for the Company,” Holly retorted, “you’re a terrorist.”

“You covered for me back in Virginia. You let Octopus go, too. Did you even tell anyone at the ‘you’ at the CIA that day was actually him in disguise?”

“…” Holly dropped Gustava off on the kitchen counter, and gave Solid a cold look. “…no,” she said at length. “It didn’t matter at that point. When I came back to work the next day, I just played along when they assumed I was suffering memory loss from the concussion Octopus gave me with his car.”

“Octopus hit you with a car?”

“And stole my purse, but I got it back.”

“Ah. Still… first you help us destroy those servers and escape, then you do nothing about a massive intel leak…? Holly, if they catch you, you’d probably be charged with treason. You could be executed.”

“I’m not about to get lectured about betraying our country by a wanted terrorist, Snake,” Holly snapped.

“Wanted terrorist? I thought I was dead.”

“Ugh… okay, yes, you were ruled KIA at Shadow Moses but, like, that’s the public record. The La Li Lu Le Lo operates on a… different level.”

“So I heard.”

“Forget it,” Holly said, folding her arms. “It doesn’t matter whose side you think I’m on. It’s fine by me if you doubt my allegiance to my employers - it means you’re not going to shoot me. Want a drink?”

“…sure,” Solid said. “Non-alcoholic. I quit.”

“Good for you, you can have some Coke without the Jack. You still stink like cigarettes, though.” She turned around, opening her kitchen cabinet to grab some cups. “Maybe you should look into that.”

The click of a safety being switched off. Holly whipped out her Ruger, pointing it behind her at Solid before the rest of her body finished turning around.

Again, an awkward pause. This time with both of them staring at each other over the barrels of their pistols.

“I agreed to kill you if I ever met you again,” Solid said flatly.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And Wolf might just kill me if I let you go.”
Holly smiled. “Then we’ll just have to make sure Wolf doesn’t find out about this, ‘kay?”

“…”

“How about a little co-action, Snake? Like old times.”

“You mean the old times when I killed my father, or when you shot my brother?”

Holly’s smile twitched. “Let’s just both lower our guns on the count of three. Okay, one… two… three!”

Neither of them moved. Gustava meowed.

“Goddammit.”

“What do you mean ‘co-action’?” Solid said.

“What do you think I mean?” Holly said, rolling her eyes. “I’m not going to give you active aid on whatever it is exactly you’re here to do. As I’m sure you know, I’m just here to remind the people building Arsenal Gear that the Company has a stake in it too. No interference.”

“So…?”

“So my assignment *obviously* gives me access to information you don’t have but might need. I’m willing to talk to you, Snake, *if* you tell me what you’re up to here.”

Solid raised an eyebrow, and slowly lowered his gun. Holly quickly followed suit. She didn’t want to get into a shootout in her apartment - and furthermore, didn’t have the kind of firearms training and experience Solid had. She was confident enough to point a gun at him, but not enough to pull the trigger.

Holly laid her pistol on the counter and gestured for Solid to have a seat at the table - Solid, instead of reholstering his SOCOM, laid it down on the table just out of arms’ reach. Holly got drinks, pouring a can of Coca-Cola into a glass for Solid and making a Jack and Coke for herself. She noticed Solid paying very close attention to the bottle of whiskey.

“So what *are* you doing here?” Holly said, taking a sip.

“Why are you doing this?”

“What, you think I’m just, like, trying to wheedle information out of you? C’mon, Snake. I’m offering information in return. Give and take like any other relationship, right?”

“I’m kind of doubtful that you can tell me anything Ocelot can’t, Holly.”

Holly set down her glass. “So it’s true, then,” she said. “ADAM’s in the terrorists’ pocket after all.”

Solid shrugged.

“He’s supposed to be our spy, but I guess you knew that. Then, he’s been giving us false intel the whole time?”

“I don’t think so,” Solid said. “I’m pretty sure he’s the reason why your… employers found out that we were hiding at my cabin in Alaska right after Shadow Moses. They burned that place to the ground. Killed one of my dogs.”
Holly winced. “Sorry. But I meant like, maybe less false intel and more— totally accurate intel that’s missing key details that makes it seem way more useful than it actually is?”

“I guess so.”

“So what now?”

“You tell me,” Solid said.

Holly sighed, and took another sip of her drink. “What do you want to know?”

“The identity of the other spies, for starters.”

“Sorry. I only know about ADAM - he used to work for the Company. I’ve heard there are others, but I have no idea who they are.”

“That’s not very helpful.”

Holly spread her hands. “You had one of your guys present for my briefing. Kinda goes without saying you have the intelligence advantage here.”

“…you expect me to believe that you of all people — the only information you have came from the briefing?”

“…” Holly grimaced, then recomposed herself and finished off the rest of her Jack and Coke in one gulp. “There is one thing I did a bit of digging on.”

Solid perked up.

“Did Octopus tell you that my idiot co-worker told him about the head programmer on the GW reboot thingy?”

“Yeah,” Solid said. “Some kind of teenage prodigy?”

“I looked into her. Legal name’s Emma Danziger, but she goes by… Emmerich.”

“Emmer…??”

“Yup. Her mom’s second husband’s last name. She’s the step-sister of the one and only ‘Shadow Moses martyr’.”

“…”

“Look. I know it’s just a conspiracy theory, and trust me when I say the La Li Lu Le Lo still thinks he’s dead, but - Dr. Emmerich, he’s alive, isn’t he? He’s alive and he’s working with you.”

“…yeah.”

“Figured. Otacon, right?”

“How did you…?”

Holly shrugged. “I did some digging on him, too,” she said, “the La Li Lu Le Lo knows ‘Otacon’ exists and is the terrorists’ hacker and software guy. They just don’t know who he is. His identity is a complete mystery and hell, they’re not even sure he’s a man to begin with.”
“Hm.”

“But working off the assumption that Dr. Emmerich is with you… it’s not hard to put two and two together. Did you know that he used to work for FBI’s Engineering Research Facility while he was a Princeton student?”

“…no. He never mentioned it.”

“That was before he started building Metal Gears, so I guess he didn’t think it was relevant. But, like, he got fired from the FBI for hacking their databases.” Holly traced the rim of her empty glass with her finger. “In other words… he’s a got a track record, y’know?”

“Hrm.” Solid stared down at his soda contemplatively. “So basically, Otacon’s identity is kind of obvious…”

“Yeah, except for the part where the La Li Lu Le Lo thinks he died at Shadow Moses. Honestly, I don’t think they revise intel very often. Dr. Emmerich’d pretty much have to get up in their faces to get them to realize he’s still alive.”

“Huh. Still…”

“What does it matter if they find out his identity anyway?” Holly said, suddenly flippant. “He’s travelling with you guys, right? What’s at stake for him, being more wanted than he already is?”

“You just told me his sister is working for the—”

“Exactly.” She was serious again. “That’s why I’m trying to help you out here, Snake. That kid, Emma - I don’t know what exactly happened but she’s angry at the world and most of all at her step-brother. She knows what she’s doing — or at least, she thinks she does. She wants revenge.”

“…I know a lot of people like that.”

“I don’t think there’s anything I can do for her. But if you and your pals are getting involved with Arsenal Gear… maybe you can put things right.”

“Why do you care, Holly?”

“Uh, ‘cuz she’s fucking sixteen and looking at getting liquidated if GW does anything other than go off without a hitch?” she said. “She put herself in danger to get vengeance on whoever hurt her. But I’m pretty sure she doesn’t know how much danger she’s in. She’s just a kid. Hiring her in the first place was, like, crazy unethical on my employers’ part, put it that way.”

“…and…?”

Holly gave him a sharp look. Solid frowned. Clearly he didn’t think there was such a thing as being too young to throw your life away just because you’re mad.

“Think about it this way, then,” Holly said, “I don’t think I’m the only one who’s figured out that Otacon is Hal Emmerich. I’m pretty sure Emma knows, too.”

“So?”

“So, the La Li Lu Le Lo finding out about Otacon’s identity is probably gonna cause more trouble down the line than just holding his step-sister hostage. Which would be bad enough, Snake! You might not care about Emma, but you care about Otacon, right? Even if it’s just in the sense that you
know you need him for your little revolution…”

“…”

“Dr. Emmerich is a weak spot,” Holly said. “You might not know it yet, but the bad guys are starting to figure it out. So you’ve either gotta cut him loose, or make sure he can’t be targeted like that. You get it?”

“Seriously, why are you doing this, Holly?” Solid grumbled, narrowing his eyes. “It can’t be just because you feel bad for some teenager.”

“Why do you care about my motives?”

“Maybe this is all a trap.”

“Maybe. But you’re the one who followed me into my apartment and didn’t shoot me when you had the chance.” She stood up, gathering the glasses and taking them to the sink. “You keep asking whose side I’m on, but you clearly don’t actually think I’m on your enemy’s side.”

“I don’t really think you’re on our side, either,” Solid replied.

Holly tossed her hair. “Maybe I’m not on anybody’s side. Maybe the only side I’m on is my own.”

“Is that really an option here?” Solid said, also standing up. Gustava trotted over and headbutted his leg. “I’m pretty sure this is clear-cut for or against here, Holly. You can’t pick a middle ground.”

“I didn’t say that. I know there’s no middle ground. But going around behind the La Li Lu Le Lo’s back doesn’t make me part of your terrorist cell. I’m gonna make things right, but I’m gonna do it my way.”

“Great. Is your way ‘for’ or ‘against’, Holly?”

“If you have to ask then I can’t tell you,” Holly said, “but what you think of me doesn’t matter as much as how much you’re willing to trust me does. Do you trust me?”

“…I don’t know.”

“Snake. The Marine tanker. What’s the plan?”
“Eli… we need to talk.”

“Mm?” Liquid looked up at Mantis. It was sometime past midnight but neither one of them was quite asleep - Mantis was in fact very awake, and calmly reading (though he’d just put his book aside), while Liquid dozed with his head in his lap. “Do you have a question about something?”

“Yes. …not what you think, though. I believe I have the memory situation more or less sorted out now.”

“That’s good. Things are going back to normal, eh?”

“…”

Liquid sat up. “What’s the matter?”

Mantis scrutinized him for a moment. He remembered wondering back in Greenland if Liquid would prefer for things to go back to normal at all, and felt like he was standing at the crossroads of two different Mantises. “You… you’ve been hiding things from me.”

“No I haven’t.” Liquid’s response was automatic, like a wince.

“Yes, you have,” Mantis said, narrowing his eyes. His telepathy was still on the mend, so he couldn’t read particularly deep into Liquid’s mind without him feeling it and getting agitated, but he could still sense some things. “I think you should come clean… about a few nights ago?”

“Hn?” Liquid blinked. “A few nights ago?”

“When you interrogated me about the Patriots.”

Liquid gave a sheepish little laugh. “I wouldn’t really call that an interrogation, Mantis.”

“If you say so. At any rate, it was a really random subject to ask me about.”

He shrugged. “I explained it to you already, don’t you remember? I was, er, a little hurt that you took so long to- I mean— well, it’s fine, anyway, but… ha… the point is that I got to thinking about what else you might have… decided to hold off on telling me about for whatever perfectly valid I’m sure reasons you had at the time, and…”

“Hmm.”

Mantis didn’t say anything for a moment. Liquid, figuring the conversation was over, laid back down in his lap. Mantis, almost automatically, threaded his hand through his hair.

“Afterwards, then. What did you go talk to Ocelot about?”

Liquid twitched, closing his eyes. “I don’t want to talk about Ocelot right now. Is that alright with you, Mantis?”

“…of course you don’t.”

“What’s that supposed to mean…?”
“Lately you’ve been pretending that I never told you about what happened when I was seventeen. You have been trying to block it out and act like you don’t know about it - or that it never happened in the first place, hm?”

“…” Liquid grit his teeth. “It wasn’t like you wanted to ever tell me about that in the first place.”

“Eli, I know you must be bitter about the fact that you never had this choice with me, but… I did choose to tell you.”

“No, you just forgot that you hadn’t already told me, so…”

“Eli. It doesn’t matter how many lies you tell yourself to change your memory, the reality of it stays the same.”

Liquid sat up again, this time glaring at Mantis. “I suppose you’d know about that, wouldn’t you?” he spat.

Mantis was genuinely taken aback. “What are you talking about?”

“Ocelot! You tell me the whole sordid story about how he groomed and molested you back in the KGB—” Mantis stiffened. That was too blunt. “—then you cap the whole thing off by crying on my shoulder about how he cared for you and you’ve still got feelings for him!!”

“I thought you would understand that,” Mantis said. He’d wanted it to come out as a cold or at least firm rejoinder, but it was more of a meek protest.

“Why the hell would I understand that, Mantis? I know we’re both fucked up but I never fell in love with someone who abused me.”

“Ocelot, you idiot,” Mantis said.

Liquid growled. “Anything I ever felt for him died as soon as you told me what he did to you.” His demeanor abruptly changed, and he grabbed onto Mantis, upset and almost weepy suddenly. “God, I can only imagine what it was like to see me fooling around with him, knowing what he’s like - you must have been thinking about the same situation you were in, weren’t you — despite that, you still missed him? Seeing how he treated me? It wasn’t right, I know that now, but you…”

“Eli—”

“Did it hurt, Mantis? Me being with him? Did it bring up bad memories or were you just jealous? Who were you jealous of, Mantis?? Me or him?? Which one of us did you really want???”

“That’s enough,” Mantis said, pushing against him. Might as well have tried to move a stone wall, but it was the gesture that counted. “If you want to talk about this, then we will do it when you are calm. Not right now.”

“…I’m sorry.”

“Shh.” Mantis nuzzled him. Defusing Liquid’s mood swings felt like second nature to him; quite understandable. “You are still trying to process this… revelation. I know it upsets you. I know you are just lashing out because you do not know how to handle it.”

“Stop… you’re making this about me.”

“I deal with my traumas in my own way, Eli. I never meant to pass them on to you.”
Mantis felt a sense of shame and regret creep to him over their bond. He felt Liquid grip his forearms as if trying to ground himself. His prosthetic hand was freezing.

“Mantis,” he said quietly, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

Mantis pulled back enough to look him in the face. It was blank, though his irises were moving restlessly, flicking between Mantis’ eyes. He was nervous. Obviously. “What is it?”

“Back when Ocelot and I were looking for you… I… I… I’m so sorry, Mantis, I-I shagged him again.”

“You what?!”

Mantis hadn’t meant to shout. Maybe that didn’t matter. And Liquid Snake, whom Mantis had always regarded as the strongest, bravest person he’d ever known, did something that literally knocked Mantis’ breath out:

He flinched.

Liquid flinched. He was afraid. He was afraid of Mantis, of Mantis’ anger at him. Mantis silently tried to process this, horrified and bewildered, as Liquid visibly panicked and scrambled off the bed and away from him, started babbling out excuses and apologies, his whole body tense.

”—I’m sorry, please, I- the infection, you know, I had a fever, I wasn’t thinking straight, I-I don’t know what I was thinking, Mantis, I’m sorry, I’m so s-sorry, I really am, I love y-you—“


Liquid fell to his knees like his tendons had been cut, and stared up at Mantis.

“…what are you…”

“Punish me,” Liquid murmured, “so we can get past this and- act like it never happened. Things can go back to normal.” He started crying. “I just want things to go back to normal.”

“This— this is… normal?”

“Yes! Do whatever you want to me, I deserve it, I’ll— I’ll be good, I’ll submit to you.. I know I deserve it… I ch-cheated on you again and then I hid it… I’m sorry… I-I didn’t want you to- I know how it hurts you, when I do that - I don’t mean to - I didn’t want to hurt you while you were still recovering, so I… I… I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have, I…”

Mantis felt cold. “Eli, I can’t—“

“You have to! Please, this is- th-this is the only way I know how to apologize! I-I don’t want you to hate me for this, Mantis, please, I love you, so you have to— you have to punish me- you have to t-take your revenge on me!!” Liquid grabbed Mantis’ hands and lead them up to his throat. His pulse was racing. “Pay me back, make us even! I hurt you… i-it’s horrible, I know, to betray your trust and take you for granted like that… hurt me in turn, Mantis, I promise I’ll take it, whatever you give me… I’ll be grateful for it… please, Mantis, I love you…” His hands squeezed around Mantis’. “And afterwards, everything will be alright, and you’ll forgive me… things will go back to the way they were before…”
With his hands around Liquid’s neck, Mantis saw for what must have been the first time that the leather collar that Liquid was so proud of was more of an ugly, barbaric, insult to his basic human dignity festering against his skin.

It must have been the amnesia that flipped his perspective on this upside-down, but it was making him feel dizzy and sick. He remembered all the other times he’d punished Liquid for his infidelity - and didn’t he have a right to be angry at him for it? — but he’d never had the right to kick dirt over the line of consent and make Liquid afraid of him. Mantis was sure he was going to throw up in his mask.

“I can’t do that,” he whispered.

“Wh-what? Why not?”

“I can’t… hurt you like that, Eli. I am sorry. I was wrong to treat you like that.”

Liquid was the opposite of reassured. The blood drained from his face. “What do you… mean…?”

“I cannot… punish you for this. I can’t be that cruel anymore. I do not want to hurt you. I don’t…”

“…then what?”

“Eli—“

He started to hyperventilate. “No. No, I’m sorry, please, you have to do this or- or you’ll just be angry at me forever, you’ll hate me, I c-can’t have that, Mantis, so you have to—“

“Stop that.” Mantis tried to pull his hands out from under Liquid’s, but he wouldn’t let him go. “I won’t. Things will be different now, Eli.”

“D-Different…??”

“Just calm down. We need to… talk. A talk that is long, long overdue…” If he couldn’t move his hands off Liquid’s neck, then, Mantis decided to just unclasp the collar and drop it to the floor. He was starting to think that his overt possessiveness was doing more harm than good as far as Liquid was concerned. It wasn’t right to ‘mark’ him as ‘his’, right?

Liquid bolted.

In an instant he was standing on the other side of the room, defensively clutching his collar, trembling all over and staring at Mantis plaintively. Mantis could feel the fear and heartbreak from him so strongly that he could barely breathe. “Eli-!”

“Please don’t leave me,” Liquid said, his voice shaking, “please don’t divorce me, please just stay with me, Mantis, I love you, don’t leave me.”

“Eli, I am not going to—“

“You are, oh god, you are,” he sobbed, “this was the last straw! I’m so sorry, Mantis. That’s why you won’t punish me anymore. You’re just going to leave me instead! There’s no point in keeping me around, right?! You could never love someone like me, after everything I’ve done! I’m sorry…! I can’t be forgiven anymore…”

“That was not what I—“

“I’m yours. I’m yours. I want to be yours, I want to belong to you, Mantis! Why won’t you have me
anymore?!! I told you I’m sorry for what I did, I didn’t even mean to do it, I don’t try to hurt you, you know that— I’m s-sorry, I’m so sorry, please— Mantis— M-Mantis, you have to, you have to punish me so you can forgive me, please d-don’t hate me!!”

“Eli, calm down!”

Mantis knew Liquid was terrified of abandonment and rejection, but had somehow never connected that trauma with their relationship - or, if he had, he’d forgotten. Liquid’s panic was only building, and was already out of control; he wasn’t listening to a thing Mantis was saying, already convinced that Mantis was going to divorce him just like that and a refusal to abuse him couldn’t possibly mean anything else.

Jesus, the man needed help. They both did.

“I don’t want you to hate me!! Why do you hate me?! I’m sorry!!!”

“Eli…”

Fear bubbled up into anger. “You can’t do this to me.”

“Eli, I’m not-“

“I won’t let you do this! You can’t leave me, I won’t allow that!”

“Will you stop it?!?” Mantis yelled. His head was throbbing, he was on the verge of losing it himself, and he was anxious that someone might hear them shouting and come see what was going on. This was a private matter.

Liquid grabbed his SOCOM and pointed it at Mantis. Mantis jumped up.

“Put that down!”

“You said we’d be together for the rest of our lives!! If you want to end this, then there’s only one way to do it!”

“You wouldn’t dare!!”

“…” Liquid’s aim shook. “I don’t… I just don’t want to lose you…”

“So you’d rather kill me?? …no… no, Eli, you could never do that. Not to me.” Mantis took a step forward. This meltdown was getting extremely dangerous. He had to calm Liquid down at all costs.

Liquid scrambled back from Mantis fast enough that Mantis wouldn’t be able to maintain the distance between them without spooking him further. Fortunately it was a small room, though that could prove to be very unfortunate if Liquid pulled the trigger.

“Eli… just relax. Put the gun down. We will talk, calmly, and things will be better.”

“I-I don’t want ‘better’,” Liquid hissed, tears streaming down his face, “I want you.”

“I am not leaving you, Eli.”

“Liar. Liar! You’re just scared I might shoot you if you do!”

Might? Mantis thought. That was exactly what Liquid was threatening to do. Mantis shook his head. “You will not shoot me,” he said confidently. “We both know that. You could never sever our bond
so violently, I know I am safe with you.”

“Ah... M-Mantis...” Liquid was breaking down further. That was good. Usually when he crumbled, he crumbled to nothing, shutting down and becoming passive and docile. It was a sad state, but he couldn’t do any damage in it. “I... I know that... I-I’m sorry I...” He started lowering his gun.

Mantis took a half-step forward, raising his hands. “There you go,” he cooed, “good boy, Eli. Put it down.”

Liquid stared at the SOCOM in his hand for a moment, then raised it to his temple with a reflex-like jerk. “I can’t live without you by my side, Mantis,” he whispered hoarsely. “I can’t do it. I can’t be alone again.”

“E-Eli!”

Mantis knew what Liquid was going to do a fraction of a second before he actually did it, and he swept his hand through the air, telekinetically ripping the pistol from Liquid’s hand and at the same time throwing Liquid to the floor and immobilizing him there. It was a very good thing that SOCOM was silenced, but even then the thud of Liquid hitting the ground covered for it pretty well. The gun skidded to a corner harmlessly. There was a hole in the wall just past where Liquid’s head had been a moment before. Mantis had pinned him down with such force that Liquid was visibly struggling to get his breath back, was undoubtedly developing bruises, and there was an unnatural dent in the wrist of his prosthetic arm.

Liquid dissolved into silent weeping, rubbing his cheek against the carpet. Mantis tried to collect himself. The tension in the room gradually cooled and drained, and at length he dared to speak.

“I am not divorcing you, Eli. I want to stay with you, too.”

Liquid didn’t reply.

“I just don’t want to hurt you anymore. I know how much it would hurt you if I left, so I... cannot do that. Please, do not worry about that.”

“...M... M-Mantis...”

“You were already under a lot of stress. I understand that you only... you... you’re acting unreasonably, Eli, you’re just afraid...”

“P-Please... don’t... hate me, Mantis...”

Mantis sat down next to Liquid. He’d already released his hold on him, but Liquid didn’t move. “I don’t hate you,” Mantis said. He - carefully - touched Liquid’s head, and when he wasn’t rejected, started to stroke Liquid’s hair. “Are you alright?”

“No,” Liquid mumbled.

“I meant physically.”

“...I don’t know.”

“Come here.” Mantis patted his leg. Liquid gave him a dubious look for a few moments, but eventually lifted himself up enough to crawl into Mantis’ lap and hide his face there. “Good boy. You feel calmer now?”
“…mhm.”

“Good. Sit up, and give me your right hand. I want to make sure I did not damage it.”

Liquid obeyed, sniffling and miserable, and leaned his head back against Mantis’ shoulder. Mantis didn’t need to read his mind to know he was emotionally exhausted and already kicking himself for that dumb stunt with the pistol. Mantis nuzzled him softly, then took his hand.

“Move for your fingers for me… like that. Is there any pain or stiffness or… anything… different from usual?” (He knew how injuries to flesh worked, not so much to bionics.)

“No… it seems fine.”

“Alright… then, move your whole hand around. Is it fine?”

Liquid nodded.

“Rotate your wrist.”

It clicked as he did. “It feels normal,” Liquid mumbled, “it’s just a sound…”

“You don’t think you need to go have it checked out?”

“No… I remember… Father’s wrist used to click, too. He’d do that instead of knocking on something to attract attention… it was useful…”

“I know, Eli.” Mantis sighed. “You are tired, aren’t you…? It’s late and we have already caused too much of a commotion, I’m surprised nobody has tried to check on us… I think we should go to sleep now, hmm?”

“Nnn.” He resisted the move as Mantis tried to stand them up, but was no match for a gentle psychic push. As soon as he was back in bed he buried his face in the pillow. Mantis sat down next to him. They were both quiet for a moment, then Mantis touched Liquid’s collar… “Please don’t.”

“How else am I supposed to do that…? We’re married, but I still haven’t gotten us any rings…”

“That’s alright, Eli.” He rubbed his shoulder. It’d probably be better to just drop the issue - pushing Liquid on something too hard right now could very well lead to him getting upset again. “You can keep the collar, then. I was just worried that it… well, I don’t know… it seems sort of creepy, does it not?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Mm.” Don’t push. “Things are going to be different from now on, Eli.”

“I don’t want that.”

“Different as in better.”

“I don’t want that, Mantis. I want things to go back to normal. I’m tired of all this.”
Mantis bit the inside of his cheek. “Eli… our ‘normal’ was… ah… we should talk about this in the morning instead of right now.” He laid down next to Liquid - after half a moment’s hesitation, Liquid moved closer to him and started clinging. “Go to sleep.”

“…stay with me…?”

“Of course. What else would I do?”

“…” Liquid took a shuddering breath. “Mantis… you’re really not going to do anything about the… Ocelot… thing?”

“We will talk about it later, Eli. But I won’t punish you. I do not know what to do, but… I’m sure that we cannot continue the way we have been going. It isn’t… healthy.”

“Do you hate me?”

“Of course not,” Mantis murmured. “You made a mistake. You were taken advantage of. That is not reason to hate you.”

“…do you… still love me?”

“Yes, Eli.” He rested his chin on the top of Liquid’s head. “I do. That is why…”

“—why you punish me? You’re trying to protect me, I know that, I…”

“We aren’t doing that anymore, Eli. Things will be better from now on.” Once Mantis figured out what all the problems were and how to approach them. The urge to run away for Liquid’s own safety was overwhelming. “Get some rest.”

“Mnh…”

Mantis had to change his behavior — so did Liquid. They were both being horrible to each other, Mantis was starting to realize. There were a lot of things they needed to… fix. There had to be some way to pull themselves out of this downward spiral, right? They were both only doing things the only way they knew how, but… they must have been insane to think that two people with their backgrounds could have a healthy relationship just going off of what they were used to. What were they thinking?

As usual as after one of his little episodes, Liquid was out like a light as soon as he was kept silent and still for a few minutes. Mantis watched him sleep for a few minutes longer.

He was at a crossroads, and decided to forgo both paths ahead of him and just keep walking straight, into unknown territory. All he wanted was for Liquid to be happy. Neither the Mantis of 1990 nor the Mantis of 2000 could do that.

He got up and went to the kitchen. EVA was there, and she hid her midnight snack behind her back as Mantis walked in.

“Didn’t think anyone was still up in this part of the house,” she said. “Or, actually… I heard a bit of noise coming from your room a little while ago, Mantis. Did you and Eli get into another argument?”

“Yes… we did.”

“Hm. Is everything alright?”

“No.”
EVA raised her eyebrows. “What happened?”

“I am starting to think that I have done some things wrong,” Mantis started, but then shook his head, recomposed himself, and looked at EVA squarely. “I’ve been abusing your son for seven years,” he said, “if you want to just shoot me now, I won’t defend myself.”

“…what?”
“You what?” EVA said, blinking.

“I’ve been—“

“Wait a minute.” She turned around. Mantis leaned to the side slightly, trying to see what she was doing. She was… making a sandwich.

“Wh…?”

She turned back around, brandishing the sandwich like a weapon. “I’m going to drive you out to the middle of nowhere, you’re going to eat some real food, and we’re going to talk about what you just told me. Okay?”

“O…Okay.”

…

EVA stopped the motorcycle in, as promised, the middle of nowhere. She handed Mantis (who was in the sidecar) the sandwich in its little bag, and turned her back to him. She completely understood that Mantis would be scared to take his mask off, considering what happened recently the last time he’d been without it, but she knew the two of them were the only humans within three miles in any direction, and he couldn’t read her mind anyway, so without his gas mask things would be just as silent for Mantis. And with her back turned, there was no reason for him to be particularly uncomfortable with his appearance.

After way too much hesitation, the raspy sound of Mantis’ breathing cut out as he finally took the damn thing off and started to eat. EVA chewed on her tongue, trying to think of how to approach the situation - how to start the conversation. Maybe say something while he wasn’t expected to respond.

“Usually,” she said, just winging it, “when there’s any kind of… accusation of abuse… in a relationship, the best thing to do is just… break up. Never see, talk to, or interact with the other person again — both for their safety, and your own, since to be honest, a lot of times when there’s abuse, it happens because the relationship is toxic both ways.” She paused. She’d known, obviously, that Liquid and Mantis had their problems, but didn’t think it was this bad. She’d have to dig more to see how clear of a grasp Mantis had on the situation. “That being said, I’m not going to tell you and Eli to break up. It’s not that it’d be… bad, or anything — it’d actually be the quickest, easiest way to make things better, but…”

“…but?” Mantis said at length.

“I don’t think you’re a lost cause,” EVA said with a shrug. “You came to me and told me what’s going on. That means you’re aware of the problems, and you want to fix them. It won’t be easy. It’ll take a long time and a lot of hard work, and I’m sure that maybe, I don’t know, some things will never really get solved - maybe the two of you will never be able to fully trust each other no matter what you do. Maybe it just won’t work out no matter how much effort you put into it.”

“I… know that,” Mantis said. “But I want to at least… try.”
“Eli needs to work at it, too. I know a lot of the problems with your relationship have to do with him and Ocelot.”

“…”

“If you’re the only one trying to change things, Mantis, then it’ll never work. You both need to make an active effort.”

“I know,” Mantis said, “I know. I think he will come around.”

“Good.” EVA paused again. She was a simple mother-in-law (and mercenary), not a relationship counsellor. “Okay, tell me what’s going on, then. Give me all the gory details.”

“But…”

“I can’t give you specific advice if I don’t know the specific situation.” She would have liked to give Mantis a disarming smile, but she still had her back turned to him. “Why don’t you start with what happened tonight? There must have been something that spurred you to come talk to me, right?”

“…right.” Mantis took a deep breath. “It started because I wanted to talk to Eli about something that happened when Ocelot gave me that ‘painkiller’.”

“What happened?”

“We had sex, sort of, I think. I am pretty sure I was fine with it happening at the time, but I was thinking about it afterwards and thought… maybe Eli should not have done that…”

EVA grimaced. This was just the tip of the iceberg, she already knew. “I don’t think you’re wrong there… you were just trying to talk about it, though?”

“Yes. I wasn’t angry or anything… I just wanted to talk to him about why he did it.”

“I see.” That sounded normal and reasonable, so she suspected she wasn’t getting the whole story here… “Okay, go on.”

“Eli changed the subject… he was upset that I… I would rather not talk about…” Mantis made a frustrated sigh. “There was something that I hadn’t told him about before, because I was… not comfortable talking about it. Eli was bitter that I hid it, especially because he cannot hide anything from me, he had no choice in whether or not I knew about his traumas, but…”

“I don’t really think you’re in the wrong there, Mantis, you don’t have to tell him everything… but I understand Eli’s frustration.”

“Mm. He ended up changing the subject anyway.” Out of the corner of her eye, EVA saw Mantis fold over the sidecar, burying his head in his arms. When he spoke again, his voice was muffled. “He and Ocelot were alone together when they went to go retrieve me after I was abducted. You can imagine what happened next.”

“…oh my god, Eli cheated on you while you were being held hostage?”

“…yes…”

She’d beat that boy’s ass if she didn’t already know there were bigger problems lurking under the surface here. Instead EVA took a deep breath through her nose and told Mantis to continue.

“What happened next was, I got angry.”
“That is completely understandable.”

“Yes, I know. But Eli’s reaction… was…” Mantis looked up at EVA. She’d never actually seen him without his mask before, but successfully kept a blank face. “Frightening.”

“So what happened?”

“He was scared of me. He flinched when I yelled at him, I expected him to get defensive and yell back, but instead I, I scared him.” He stared at an invisible point off in the middle distance for a moment or two; EVA waited for him to continue. “He was afraid of me, not of me being upset with him. I started to- remember. I thought I had remembered everything important already, but… I think this, I was trying to remain ignorant of…”

“…of what?” EVA prompted when Mantis clammed up again.

Mantis started to worry the edges of his clothing with his fingers, staring at his lap. The poor man really looked like he was about to burst into tears, though his expression was otherwise frustrated. “The previous times Eli has cheated on me, I punished him for it. It was a system that made sense to us; if I inflicted some sort of pain or distress on him then we could be even for the anguish he caused me by sleeping with Ocelot behind my back — I could forgive him, and he could accept that. It still… makes sense to me. Doing that. But…”

“That’s just what happens when you center your lives around revenge, I suppose,” EVA said. “And you do have every right to be mad at him for cheating on you. …but I take it your ‘punishments’ aren’t limited to just reading him the riot act.”

Mantis nodded. “That is what I remembered at that moment. The ways I punished him. And I realized - I do not know if this is the first time I have realized this, but I realized… I have taken it too far, again and again. I have damaged Eli... maybe irreparably… in my jealousy… I’ve punished him before for simply thinking about Ocelot in a way I do not like, or for being alone with him for too long, even if nothing happened. I just could not stand them being together in any way, but there was nothing I could do to Ocelot about it, so I… took out all my anger on Eli instead.”

“You told me that you don’t let him and Ocelot be in the same room before,” EVA said, “but you didn’t say you… Mantis, what exactly do you do? Be blunt about it.”

“…I... get creative.”

Oh dear.

“What did you do the last time he cheated on you? Before you were abducted, I mean,” EVA suggested.

Mantis’ hands clenched into fists. “That was back in 2004,” he said. “Everything is all jumbled, EVA, I…”

“Tell me something. I want to understand what’s going on, Mantis.”

“I— I think things have been alright the past few years. We are not around Ocelot as much as we were in FOXHOUND… obviously… we were doing better.” He shook his head. “What I remember most happened before Shadow Moses, since we were still at FOXHOUND headquarters. It… it was around the time you came there?”

“I wouldn’t know, sweetie,” EVA said.
“I am not sure that was even a time Eli did anything wrong. Or maybe I just… caught him on the way to do it, but since I intercepted him he… did not do anything… but I was still angry. I wanted to teach him a lesson, even though I knew he would not actually learn anything. We always go back to how we started. We…” Mantis recomposed himself again. “He asked to be punished. He asked tonight, too, he begged. All I remember is… I forced him to the bed. He was terrified, he felt out of control and violated but nonetheless I… I kept… I used a vibrator on him in a way that, ah, the manufacturers did not intend.”

EVA blinked. “You what?”

“I think there was a Scrubs episode where they have something called an ‘ass box’…?”

“Oh. Oh.” Personally she mostly remembered that episode because of ‘magic breasts’. “Oh boy.”

“…erm… I also forced him to orgasm several times so that he was oversensitive, and the whole thing went on for several hours.”

“…”

“I am fairly certain that qualifies as torture…”

“Well. Yes,” EVA said, a sour taste in her mouth. “And that was… typical, for a punishment?”

“I think so. I could not really feel as though we were even until he was so far into a panic attack that he was no longer entirely conscious.”

“That… well, at least I get now why you told me you were abusing him.” The infidelity was bad enough, but if she’d heard about this kind of disproportionate retribution earlier… “And it didn’t really occur to you until tonight that that was wrong?”

Mantis shook his head again. “It seemed like the only way to keep things going. I… do not want to lose him. I can’t lose him. And Ocelot… I really thought that he would be worse for Eli… I wanted to protect him, and if hurting him was necessary to do so…” He stopped and rubbed his eyes. “I must sound insane.”

“Mm.”

“But I know for a fact that Eli would rather have this than me leaving him. He has always been neglected and abandoned - by Cipher, by his biological father, by his comrades as a child and in the SAS, by government after government… even by his father dying, even by you when he was a teenager… I am the one person he expects to never leave him. If I did, he would break.”

“You do realize that even if you broke up, you could still be friends, right?” EVA said. “Divorce doesn’t necessarily mean cutting all contact. It might be better to get some distance, but you could still remain close in some way.”

“No… I could not. I think I— I knew that from the moment I decided to seduce him back when Ocelot joined FOXHOUND. I could not reverse the level of intimacy in our relationship. If I backed off from Eli at all after that, that would be hurting him worse than I ever could otherwise if I wanted to.”

EVA worked her jaw for a moment, then said, “obviously, that isn’t healthy.”

“I suppose not.”
“I take you think he’d do something… extreme if you ended your romantic relationship with him?”

“I know he would,” Mantis said. “Tonight, when he begged me to punish him and I refused, he thought that the only reason why I might do that is because I was planning to divorce him.”

“So what did he do?”

“He became hysterical, threatened to kill me, and then when I tried to talk him down, he attempted to shoot himself. I had to restrain him. …by the way, I think there is a bullet hole in the wall in that room now, so that should probably be fixed.”

EVA was silent. In her head an alternate history was playing out where she’d actually been able to take him in when he was thirteen and she’d gotten him enrolled in therapy and put on medication and all that sort of thing before he ended up being… like this.

“I know he was stressed,” Mantis mumbled, looking away. “He feels… unstable. When I got abducted, that was a bad shock, and adjusting to my amnesia must have been difficult, especially as I started recovering… I understand all that. I know he craves going back to the way things were before — back to ‘normal’. …so he panicked when I said that things were going to change, and be different from now on… it did not really matter to him that I promised I would make things better. He just did not want his life with me to be turned upside-down again.”

“I see…”

There was a long silence.

“What do I do?” Mantis said at length.

Fuck. EVA was out of her depth here; generic advice was more her thing. But she had to do her best, because she was really the only thing they had, wasn’t she? “Hmm… let’s see if I’m understanding this right. You and Eli are very co-dependant, so no matter how gently you let him down, he’d probably do something drastic in response to a divorce, and you would be miserable too. That’s, um, really not good, actually, but in this case, you may be able to make it work for you. If breaking up would be a disaster, then that means that both of you have no choice but to actually work on everything else wrong in your relationship. Besides, usually co-dependence comes from insecurity, so fixing all the other things would probably help with that, too.”

“Hn.”

“So… it seems to me that you are just trapped in a cycle of retaliation. Eli sleeps with Ocelot, you torture him in response— and, I suppose, Eli stops feeling safe around you, or feels uncomfortable having sex with you, or something like that, and so he seeks what he feels you’re not giving him with someone else. Then, of course, you react, and the whole situation gets worse… does that sound about right?”

Mantis pondered it for a moment, then nodded.

“So, tell me,” EVA said, “is Ocelot the only person Eli has ever cheated on you with?”

“Yes. There have been some close calls, but I found myself only irritated because of those, not genuinely angry. I suppose I just do not see Emmerich as much of a threat to Eli.”

What the heck was Liquid doing having a ‘close call’ with Otacon…? Nevermind. “Are you and Ocelot the only people he’s ever slept with?”
“Consensually?” Mantis said, looking vaguely puzzled.

“…”

“I remember killing everyone else, so…”

“Mantis, what I’m trying to figure out here is if he ever cheated on Ocelot back when they were fooling around on Mother Base, and if he had any flings between Ocelot and you.”

“Oh. No. Everyone thought he was cheating on Ocelot with me, but that was not true, and there was no one else. And after we left Outer Heaven, he was celibate up until I seduced him.”

“Ah… okay.” So maybe the reason why it was Ocelot specifically here was just because Liquid had fond memories of their relationship in 1994-95. Except that was ridiculous, because EVA had witnessed that stupid relationship and the two had actually been quite standoffish with each other outside of the bedroom (presumably). Nothing at all like frequent, open, casual declarations of love for Mantis, as much PDA as Mantis let him get away with (a truly unfortunate amount after the mindrape thing), and the freaking collar. There must be something else going on here - perhaps something else other than the obvious conclusion that Ocelot was manipulating Liquid, at that. “Are there ever… abnormal circumstances around when Eli sleeps with Ocelot? This last time, he had that infection in his arm - if it was bad enough to get it amputated, it might have been bad enough to impair his judgement at the time he actually had sex.”

“Oh, I don’t know… I think he was usually in one of his moods, but…”

“Moods?”

Mantis blinked. “His moods,” he said, like he expected EVA to know what he was talking about. “He goes through these funny phases sometimes.”

“Such as…?”

“Well, sometimes he gets very depressed, even though nothing in particular happened to upset him. Sometimes he gets very excited over nothing - rather hyperactive, rambles at lot, gets extra reckless…? It is those moods that I have to look out for, because he gets very sexually demanding when he’s like that and… I-I suppose you are right, and I am just not giving him enough… that is usually when he has sex with Ocelot, when he is like that.”

Okay. Things were starting to come together, though EVA would have do some research on this. In the meantime, things were looking worse and worse for Ocelot. “As I recall, you insist that Eli never ‘means to’ cheat on you.”

“No… but he does anyway. Because he can be terribly impulsive — he does not set out to have sex with Ocelot, but he gets an urge to suddenly and does not stop to think about what he is doing until after he has already done it. Ah… now that I think about it, most of the time after he has cheated on me, he tells me himself before I read it from his mind.”

“He turns himself in, huh? …have you ever tried figuring out a way to redirect that impulse? Maybe rewarding him if he comes to you when he gets that urge, instead of Ocelot?” (He was already wearing a collar, they might as well try to train him like a dog.)
“I tried once,” Mantis said thoughtfully, “but it did not work. Um... he started intentionally fantasizing about Ocelot just so he could ‘turn himself in’ and get something from me... so I believe that all of those evil thoughts were the reason why he slept with Ocelot that time...”

“Right... okay. Well, anyway, if this is all more or less reactive, then I think addressing the root of the problem will go a long way to making things better. It seems as though the root of the problem may just be Ocelot himself.”

“Because he keeps taking Eli up on it when he comes to him...?”

“More like because he keeps taking advantage of him, sounds like.” EVA sighed loudly. “I know he claims he can’t help it, either. Hell, that may even be true. I think unrequited love sent him off the deep end years ago - might have completely killed his self-control when it comes to Snakes.”

“Huh...”

“It takes two to cheat, Mantis. I’m not trying to exonerate Ocelot by saying he’s got massive issues at play here too. But whatever’s wrong with him shouldn’t be a factor in your relationship.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m going to strangle Ocelot next time I see him for contributing to this. In the meantime, you and Eli need to... well, you need to talk. And both of you need to stay calm when you talk.”

“Uh... huh.”

“That’s really the only way you’ll be able to work something out.” She checked her watch. “You two are welcome to stay at the FOB as long as you like, of course, even if you’re both physically recovered by now. Maybe it’ll be easier to control your emotions if you feel like you’re ‘home’.”

Mantis nodded.

“And I understand if you need a mediator... no, scratch that, I think you will. So let me know when you two sit down to talk, and I’ll be there to make sure things go smoothly, okay?”

“Okay.”

EVA finally smiled. “Good,” she said, “all I want is for my boys to be safe and happy. Now, we should probably head back. I get the feeling Eli will be very distressed if he wakes up and you’re not there.”

... When Mantis returned to their bedroom just before dawn, the bed was empty and Benedict’s back half was visible under it, tail slowly wagging. Mantis grimaced behind his mask, then knelt down.

“Eli...?”

“...” Even if Mantis could not sense the anxiety and misery off of Eli like a noxious cloud, it still would have been obvious from the way he was literally curled up under the bed, silently letting Benedict lick his face.

“I am sorry you woke up alone. I went to go get some advice from your mother.”

“What does she know,” Liquid muttered.

“We need all the help we can get, Eli. Now come out from under there. I am here for you...”
“I thought you weren’t going to come back,” Liquid said, his voice breaking.

“I will always come back for you. Come on. I think you should sleep in this morning, mm?”

“…”

“You can even let Benedict on the bed with you if you want.”

“With us,” Liquid said thickly, finally crawling out from under the bed. Benedict followed, nudging his hand. Liquid listlessly pet him in an automatic response. “Don’t you dare run off on me again, Mantis…”

“I won’t,” Mantis promised.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve never actually watched *Scrubs* but I hear it’s pretty accurate
Chapter Notes

fuck college I wanna die

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Olga narrowed her eyes. “I don’t trust this,” she said.

“Good for you,” Solid said, taking a drag.

“The whole plan makes no sense. I keep telling my father not to let Shalashaska ‘help’ plan things - I am sure he must be up to something he didn’t tell us about.”

“If you think he told me about it, then, you’re nuts.”

Olga looked entirely unamused. “Even the fact that he sent you as a ‘representative’ instead of coming himself is fishy.”

Solid shrugged, blew out smoke. “I thought we were supposed to be going over the plan one last time, not complaining about a spy acting suspicious.”

“Hmph.” Olga irritably smoothed out the map of the USS Discovery. Apparently they were actually just cleaned-up blueprints of that model ‘oil tanker’ that Gurlukovich managed to convince someone in the Marines to leak. They weren’t guaranteed accurate, but it was as good as they were going to get; Solid just thought it was interesting that the tanker shared a name with the submarine that had taken him to Shadow Moses. “In order to get the Metal Gear, we must get the whole tanker. It won’t be too difficult - there is a commandant on the guest list, and he’s scheduled to give a briefing. When that happens, we will simply take out the few soldiers left on-deck and lock all the soldiers attending the briefing in the hold. From there we can take the tanker to the shore and unload the Metal Gear ourselves. Afterwards the ship will be scuttled.”

“Mm.”

“Originally we were going to take the Metal Gear as soon as we could and sink the tanker in the harbor, but that plan revolved around Shalashaska being here to pilot it through the water. No one else knows how to do it.”

“Including me,” Solid said.

“…that is why I am, in a sense, happy that we did change the plan away from that. I am not sure Shalashaska can be trusted… I know Father likes him, but…” she shook her head angrily. “He has little to do with this now. And you, Snake, are only our backup.”

“I’m plan B, huh?”

“Yes, if necessary we will return to our original plan. Should the captured Marines put up too much resistance, we will detonate the explosives we will have placed around the ship.” She gestured to various markings on the map. “Our men will evacuate, and you will pilot the Metal Gear. Shalashaska informed us that while you are of course not familiar with this model, you are familiar
with earlier models and should be able to figure it out in case of an emergency.”

“Yes,” Solid said. The intended end result of this whole thing was never really made clear to him, but that wasn’t to say Ocelot hadn’t given him instructions — mostly to pretend to Gurlukovich that he really did know how to pilot a Metal Gear. Of course he didn’t, but he was fairly confident he could figure it out if put in a cockpit, given a little time. Also, Ocelot recommended calling Liquid and asking him to describe what it was like, but Solid elected to not bother him in the wake of the whole Big Boss thing that Liquid was undoubtedly feeling much more sorely.

“To make things foolproof, we will require you to infiltrate the tanker before the rest of us board it and before the briefing begins, while the hanger is still mostly empty. By the time we launch our attack, you should already have found a way into the cockpit and be hiding in there.”

“Got it.”

“I trust you are capable of such a thing, Solid Snake?” Olga said with a smile that came across as rather hostile.

“There’ll probably be fewer soldiers on that tanker than there usually are in places I infiltrate.”

“Yes, but it is an extremely small environment. And you will be trying to climb into the Metal Gear right under their noses.”

“A little beauty sleep never hurt anyone,” Solid said.

There was a long pause. Olga leaned back in her chair slightly, folding her arms. Solid got the impression that she was kind of hoping Solid would get himself killed in the infiltration phase, not out of any particular dislike towards him but more out of a kind of professional disdain.

“Aren’t you pregnant?” Solid said at length.

“Yes,” Olga said coldly, “what is your point. I can still stay and fight.”

“Uh…” Actually, Solid was more curious about who the father was. He didn’t see any rings on her fingers, but after spending so much time with Liquid and Mantis he was starting to think that that wasn’t a thing mercenaries did.

“I finally convinced Father to allow me to board the tanker, though I’m sure he will try to send me back to shore as soon as we have everything secured.”

“I take it you figure he can’t actually force you to do that.”

“No. Once I am on the tanker, he will have no way to get me back off of it except by my own will.”

“…strikes me as kind of reckless. You are carrying his grandchild, I think he has a right to be worried.”

“Tch!”

“And I can’t imagine there are a lot of female soldiers who don’t just take those nine months off when they’re going to have a baby…”

“I’ve been on the unit since I was born,” Olga snapped. “I grew up on the battlefield. Conflict and victory were my parents!”

“I wasn’t saying—“
“The unit is my life, my family. We've shared everything - all the bad and all the good. I have no one — nothing except the unit! Nothing else matters to me!!”

That didn’t clear up the issue of the kid’s father either, though it wasn’t exactly Solid’s business anyway. Solid raised his hands defensively. “It doesn’t matter to me,” he said. “I was just wondering if it was, um, going to complicate things.”

“Of course not!”

“Okay, okay… it probably won’t affect me any if you mess up, anyway. I’ll already be in the Metal Gear.”

Olga scowled.

Getting Liquid to come out of hiding for ‘couple’s therapy with mommy’ was a complete non-starter. EVA almost managed to corner him while he was walking Benedict, but he managed to slip away as soon as she took her eyes off him for three seconds and barricaded himself in his room again. He was very resistant to the idea of having a chat with Mantis about their relationship, especially with EVA acting as mediator, and did his best to stubbornly pretend there had been no incident where everything blew up in his face after he tried to tell Mantis he’d gotten taken advantage of again. Any attempt Mantis made to bring it up was, evidently, poorly deflected by Liquid acting like Mantis’ brain was still all messed up and he couldn’t be taken seriously.

EVA and Mantis agreed that if Liquid wouldn’t come out, then they would go in. It wasn’t like EVA didn’t have the keys to the room in her own FOB, after all. Or that she couldn’t have picked the lock if she had to. Though Mantis’ brain was still a little messed up and he proved rather useless for moving the bed away from the door so they could go in, so EVA ended up having to enlist Boris to shoulder the door in for them.

“Go away,” Liquid hissed ferally.

“Eli, if you don’t want to talk, then it’s hopeless,” EVA said sternly.

“There’s nothing to talk about! Everything’s just fine!”

“Eli,” Mantis tried.

“Get out! Leave!! Go spend time with Mother if you’re so fond of her suddenly!” (All of this was being shouted from underneath the empty suitcase. The fact that Liquid managed to fold most of himself into it was honestly quite impressive.)

EVA scrubbed a hand down her face. If Liquid had to be dragged into this kicking and screaming, so be it; he’d come around quickly enough, or else. She dropped the copy of the DSM-IV-TR she’d been carrying on the bed with a muffled thud. Mantis spared it a curious glance — EVA hadn’t explained herself yet.

“If you don’t want to talk, Eli, that’s fine. There were some things I wanted to discuss with Mantis anyway,” she said. “It’s about you, so you’d better listen even if you’re being too stubborn to contribute right now.”

“Mmph.”

EVA sat on the bed, crossed her legs, and flipped open the book. “So, Mantis,” she said, “you mentioned the other day that Eli has ‘moods’ or ‘phases’ that he goes through.”
“Yes,” Mantis said, a little lost.

“I’m going to read some of these and I want you to tell me if they sound accurate, okay?” She put her reading glasses on. “‘Increased self-esteem or grandiosity’?”

“During his moods?”

“Yes.”

“He once told me he wanted to fight God, so yes.”

“I didn’t mean that literally,” Liquid whined.

“‘Decreased need for sleep’,” EVA read, ignoring Liquid.

Mantis nodded. “I try to make him come to bed anyway, though.”

“That’s good… if hypocritical… alright then, ‘more talkative than usual or pressure to keep talking’… I don’t think I need you to answer that one.”

Liquid threw the suitcase to the side. “I’m not that talkative,” he said sourly.

“You held Dmytro as a conversational hostage for four hours last week, dear.”

“Mnnnrgh.”

“What is next on the list?” Mantis said.

EVA cleared her throat. “‘Flight of ideas or subjective experience that thoughts are racing,’” she read.

“His mind is a mess in the best of times.”

“Hey!”

Again Liquid was ignored. “‘Distractibility’ — yes, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Mantis echoed.

“Don’t talk about me like I’m not bloody here,” Liquid grumbled.

“Eli, go put on a shirt.”

“No.”

“‘Increase in goal-directed activity,’” EVA continued. “Say, isn’t that how this whole Patriots thing got started? Or at least Shadow Moses…”

“He was definitely having one of his moods when we started planning Shadow Moses, yes. Everything is accurate so far, to one degree or another,” Mantis said.

“How long do these moods last, again? The depressed ones too.”

“A few weeks, at the minimum. Sometimes months.”

“I thought so.” She sighed. “Eli, from what Mantis has been describing to me, it sounds like you’ve been having manic episodes.”
“Manic episodes?” Liquid repeated, sounding distinctly like he wasn’t sure if he should be offended or not.

“Mmhm. I’m not a psychologist, so I can’t tell you if you have some form of bipolar disorder or if it’s just cyclothymia - that is, cyclical mood disorder - but the manic episodes combined with the depressive episodes that Mantis also told me about… well, it all fits.”

“Hn.”

“That’s… good to know?” Mantis said, confused.

“I wanted to look this up because there’s a point here about manic episodes that I don’t think either of you realized before,” EVA said, tapping a line in the book. “One of the potential symptoms of a manic episode is ‘excessive involvement in pleasurable activities that have a high potential for painful consequences,’ and one of the listed examples is ‘sexual indiscretions’. I think that’s what you’re dealing with in regards to the whole… Ocelot situation.”

Liquid and Mantis both exchanged a look.

“What?” Liquid said at length. “What do you mean, exactly…?”

EVA closed the DSM-IV-TR and put it to the side. “I’m hoping that this makes things a little easier to deal with - now that we can assume the only reason why you kept having sex with Ocelot was because you were, through no fault of your own, completely not in a right state of mind. You don’t do that sort of thing at your ‘baseline’, do you?”

Liquid blinked. “Erm… I… suppose not?”

“So you are saying he only cheats on me because he is crazy?” Mantis said.

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” EVA said, “but… yes. My point is that in a sense, Eli, it really isn’t your fault.”

Liquid fell silent, glanced at Mantis, then turned back to EVA, face blank. Expectant.

“Of course… just because it isn’t your fault doesn’t mean you’re off the hook,” she said. Liquid’s lips twitched. “You still have to take responsibility for it. I just think that you won’t be able to find a way to take responsibility for your manic actions if you aren’t aware that they happen when you’re not in full control of yourself. Mantis, you have a right to be upset, you really do, but you’ve been treating these indiscretions as personal failings, not mental illness. What the two of you need to do is find a way for Eli to manage his manic episodes so that he stays in control of himself when he’s having one.”

“Easier said than done,” Mantis said.

“I don’t feel out of control,” Liquid protested.

“Eli, that is literally what you always say when I catch you with Ocelot.”

“No, it’s- it’s different. It’s not like I’m dissociating, or on auto-pilot or that sort of thing… I know what that’s like. It’s more like, ah, you know, when you’re holding a small animal, and you break its neck because it’s there and it’s easy but the first actual conscious thought you have about it is ‘Why did I do that?’ But you certainly know you did it.”

“…uh, no, I don’t know,” EVA said. She was surprised Solid let him around his puppies. “But
we’re talking about a mood disorder, Eli, not a dissociative disorder. It’s not that you’re unaware of your actions, it’s just that your judgement is completely screwed up to the point where you might as well be. Like being drunk or high, except without the option to just not drink or do drugs.”

“Oh. Hm. That… that sounds about right, actually.”

“Somehow,” Mantis said, “that does not make me feel any better. For a variety of reasons.”

“Your problem here is that you go much too far in trying to ‘correct’ Eli’s behavior with regards to Ocelot,” EVA told him. “What you do is bad on its own-”

“It’s really not,” Liquid interrupted - and got no response…

“—but it also makes the overall situation worse, too. You mentioned the other day that Eli didn’t have any lovers between Ocelot and you, even though during ‘one of his moods’ - that is, manic episodes - he gets very sexually demanding.”

“I don’t want to have this conversation with my mother! Hello?!”

“That’s right,” Mantis said, leaving Liquid to sulk by himself.

“So it sounds to me like for all those years, he actually did have some way to manage his episodes… or maybe they just weren’t as bad. Eli?”

Liquid grumbled, folding his arms. “I don’t know what you expect me to say. Everyone’s always said I have mood swings and such, but I thought it was normal. Never thought it was ‘episodes’…”

“I know, but looking back on it now, what do you think?”

“…I suppose they weren’t as bad… in that time.”

“Can stress make manic episodes worse?” Mantis said.

“I think so,” EVA said.

“So perhaps it was because Ocelot suddenly came to FOXHOUND. Things have been better ever since FOXHOUND disbanded and we are not around him as much. So being around him must-“

“Oh please,” Liquid snapped, “if anything’s stressing me out related to Ocelot it’s you always throwing tantrums over him.”

“I—“

“He has a point, you know,“ EVA said.

Mantis looked like he was going to protest for a moment, then deflated. “I know,” he said. “This is as much my fault as it is his. Moreso, even.”

“…” Liquid looked away. “Don’t say that, Mantis.”

“Eli, you need to acknowledge what I’ve done to you.”

“You haven’t done anything, I deserve— and anyway it is my fault, you told me as much yourself, if I hadn’t gotten shot down in the first place then you never would have-“

“You are still worrying about that? Eli, it wasn’t…”
“It was! If I had been there, then-!”

“I thought we were just talking about the problems from the last seven years,” EVA said, blinking. “What’s all this?”

Mantis’ ears turned pink. “I would rather not talk about it.” Liquid looked somewhere between crestfallen and frustrated.

“…I see.” Probably what had been part of the catalyst interaction the other night, the subject they’d been presumably arguing about just before Liquid finally fessed up to sleeping with Ocelot again. EVA wasn’t sure whether or not she should pry here. What she mostly wanted was to get Liquid and Mantis to sort this shit out themselves. “Eli, Mantis is right. You do need to acknowledge what he’s done to you. That was abuse. It shouldn’t happen.”

“It’s fine,” Liquid said, “I deserved it, and anyway it’s not like I can’t handle being a little uncomfortable for a few minutes.”

“A…? Eli, this is bordering on delusional,” Mantis said.

“How do you know your memories of it are even real, eh?!”

“You! Because of you!”

EVA stood up, between them. “This is why I came to mediate,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Yelling at each other won’t get you anywhere.”

“Mantis is being absurd, Mother!” Liquid half-shouted, “he’s so morbidly obsessed with the idea that I’m some sort of victim of domestic violence that he’s suddenly started accusing himself of it! What we do is unusual, I’ll admit, but it isn’t bad or wrong, I’m not being hurt, Mantis just had a few screws knocked loose at Provo-“

“You are the one who is being absurd!” Mantis fumed. “And how could you say you were not being hurt, you’re terrified of me!”

“I am not!”

Mantis raised his hand threateningly. Liquid took an alarmed step back, then grimaced and buried his face in his hands as soon as he realized what he did. EVA watched them with raised eyebrows.

“…I feel sick,” Mantis said, lowering his hand. “I never wanted this. Eli, please, I am trying to fix things. I need you to try, too.”

“You’re trying to fix something that isn’t broken.”

“It is broken, you just refuse to see it.”

“No! I just want things to go back to normal. Stop trying to change everything, I’m tired of it!!”

“It’s a change for the better, Eli!”

“Oh, I doubt that!!”

“Both of you calm down,” EVA interrupted. Fuck. How did they do this on TV? No one had ever trained her in conflict resolution - just how to instigate conflict. “Eli, why don’t you try to explain why you don’t think change would be better?”
“Pardon?”

“Describe your feelings here. Use your words.”

Liquid’s expression soured. “Mantis can read minds and you don’t have anything to do with this. I don’t see why I should verbally explain myself.”

“No, wait, this is exactly what Ocelot told me about,” Mantis said, “he told me that if you do this, then it would be… easier for both of us to understand your thought process… or something like that.”

Liquid snarled. “When did he tell you this?”

“When he was bringing me back to you… I was worrying about you, somehow I was thinking that you- loved Ocelot more than you loved me, and I said as much. But he told me that you have… always loved me, you always would have been mine if I had asked.”

“…he told you that?”

“Almost those exact words, Eli.”

EVA had to wonder what the hell Ocelot was up to, telling Mantis that, but for once it seemed positive and she wasn’t going to take that away. Meanwhile, Liquid stared at Mantis for a moment or two, then huffed and sat down on the bed heavily.

“Fine,” he snorted. “Explain myself. Hrm… I… I don’t know what I’m expected to say. I’m not good at that kind of thing.”

“You’re good at it when you’re being self-depreciating,” EVA said.

“That’s…! Nevermind. Ah…” Liquid twisted his wrist frenetically; EVA noticed a clicking sound that wasn’t there before. “I’m just tired of things changing. Everything was just fine, then Mantis was abducted and when he came back he was like he was… before… I left.” He frowned. “It took me so long to get used to that, when I first saw him again. It was… uncomfortable, I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately, and… hmm… well, things have started to settle down again, haven’t they? I thought things- I thought Mantis was going back to normal. But then he starts going on about this… I don’t know what to make of it. All I want is for things to go back to normal. It’s damn near the only consistent thing I have in my life, and it’s just getting pulled out from under my feet all over again.”

“I told you he feels unstable,” Mantis said quietly.

“Tch. I told you explaining myself is pointless when my husband can read my mind.”

EVA made a placating gesture. “That wasn’t the point, Eli,” she said, “we’re just, um, trying to establish what you want here. Both of you need to have goals. You want things to feel normal and Mantis, er, wants to stop torturing you.”

“…”

“Is being punished really such an integral part of our relationship that you feel upset without it?” Mantis said.

“No… I mean… it sounds bad when you put it like that,” Liquid mumbled. His face clearly said he felt like EVA and Mantis were ganging up on him.
“I do not think that the other parts of our relationship were bad,” Mantis said, glancing at EVA for reassurance. She nodded and he continued. “We just need to work out this particular part of it, so that we can both be… more comfortable around each other. To trust each other more… safety, and stability, and all that. I am not very good at explaining myself either… but all I want is to make you happy, Eli. I realize I have not. I am trying to take responsibility for it, so please stop placing all the blame on yourself as an excuse to stick to the status quo because you are scared of yet more change.”

Liquid winced. “You can’t just say you’re no good at explaining yourself and then call me out like that.”

“Eli, focus,” EVA said.

“Nngh. Fine. I… I’ll admit things… could be better. This is just- this is just about getting back to those times these past few years when we weren’t around Ocelot at all and everything was alright, right?”

“Yes, except hopefully with less arguing.”

“From now on I am not going to be angry with you when you think things I do not approve of,” Mantis said, “or at least, I will remain calm and try to, ah, talk to you about it, instead of yelling or… other things.”

“And, Eli?” EVA said when Liquid stayed silent.

“And what?” he said.

“You set a goal for yourself, too. What will you do to start on the road to a healthy relationship?”

“I, er… I’ll…” Liquid twisted his wrist again. “I’ll just do my best to avoid Ocelot… I can’t really stand him anymore after recent developments, anyway… and, erm, I’ll work on… taking responsibility for my alleged manic episodes…?”

“Maybe start with just learning how to identify them. I’m sure everyone close to you will be able to help you stay in line if you’re able to tell when you’re having one.”

“I am not so sure about my ability to safely keep him in line,” Mantis said.

EVA shrugged. “You’re not the only one in Eli’s support network,” she said. “Eli, I know you feel like Mantis is the one person you can always rely on, but don’t forget you have other friends and family as well. Me, for instance, and your brothers… maybe… and Wolf and Octopus, definitely.”

“…um, right,” Liquid said, scratching the back of his neck.

“Same thing applies to you, Mantis,” EVA said with a smile. “You shouldn’t isolate yourselves so much. Anyway, I think we’ve made a good start today. Now you two kiss and make up.”

Liquid and Mantis exchanged an awkward glance. Mantis shrugged and spread his arms — after a slightly mistrustful, embarrassed look at EVA, Liquid stepped forward and accepted Mantis’ embrace, leaning his head on his shoulder.

“I love you, Eli,” Mantis whispered.

EVA clapped her hands. “I’m glad someone in this family has a shot at a happy marriage,” she said brightly. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to go check and see if the Codec frequency I have for Solidus is correct.”
“Why?” Liquid said, visibly confused.

“Because I can’t strangle Ocelot without screwing the rest of us over, so I’m going to do the next best thing: get another one of Big Boss’ clones to break up with him.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 100

Chapter Notes

We hit the big triple digits 😁 I can't believe I actually asked y'all who y'all wanna see fuck as celebration when like, most ships are locked out for plot reasons rn

Here's to another 100 fucking chapters for some ungodly reason

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liquid turned his head away as he felt Mantis’ hand creep over his stomach and to his hip.

“You’re worried,” Mantis murmured.

“Nn.”

“You have been lying awake and staring at the ceiling for over an hour now. Talk to me.”

Liquid stared at the wall, then rolled over, shrugging Mantis off. “It doesn’t matter,” he said.

“Don’t even start with that, Eli. Tell me what is wrong.”

Liquid was silent for a moment, and felt Mantis’ arms wind around his waist again, Mantis’ front at his back. A comfortable and familiar position, and one of the few ways Mantis could actually use his height advantage over him.

“That little… therapy session or whatever you want to call it… sitting through my own mother psychoanalyzing me like she has half a clue what the hell she’s talking about…” Liquid sighed. “It’s just given me a lot to think about, that’s all.”

“Then?”

“Then… well, you. Feeling guilty all of a sudden for something that’s— that I thought… was normal. Maybe you have a point. I don’t know. How am I supposed to know? I’ve never had a normal relationship. I thought that was us…”

“I know, Eli. You need time to readjust your worldview.” He squeezed Liquid lightly. “As long as you let go of the denial. That has never been good for you.”

“Ngh…” Liquid placed his hands over Mantis’, picking at them nervously. “You always said you did it because you cared for me and wanted to protect me,” he blurted out.

“…”

“That’s why I can’t accept that it was abuse. How is it— you don’t abuse someone you love. Abuse is done out of contempt and hatred. You were just trying to protect me from Ocelot, and I know now why that was so important to you when I didn’t understand before… knowing what happened between you and him, I find it completely justifiable that you would be so harsh and extreme in order to keep me away from him. So why are you calling yourself abusive? I just… don’t understand it, Mantis.”
“Eli… I…”

Liquid huffed. “What am I supposed to believe? If I say that you were abusing me, then that would be the same as saying that you didn’t care for me, you were just trying to hurt me.”

“I was not trying to hurt you.”

“Then why are you accusing yourself?” Liquid said, frustrated. “It’s one thing to call me toxic, I-I cheated on you— but I don’t think you did anything wrong, because you only had my best interests in mind!”

“Eli, I… did do wrong.”

“So you lied, then?” he asked bitterly. “You lied to me and said that you cared for me and just wanted to protect me and you even said you loved me and- and that was all a lie?” Liquid covered his face with his hands, biting back tears. “You said it was my fault that you punished me, you said you only punished me for my own good, and I believed you! I still believe you, I don’t want to think you’d do that without a reason, without me forcing your hand, I… I… you’re telling me now that that wasn’t true…?!”

“Eli, shh. That was not what I was trying to—“

“Give me a clear answer, Mantis, did you lie or not?!!” Liquid sat up, wiping his face with his flesh arm. “Either you lied and it was abuse, or you were telling the truth and it wasn’t. Either you care for me or you don’t!”

“Eli, I care for you, of course I care for you,” Mantis sat up too, taking Liquid by the shoulders. “I love you. I know I struggled for so long to express that, but I do.”

“Then— it was all for my own good.”

“No.”

Liquid cried out. “Then you lied!”

“No, I-“ Mantis shook his head, making a discouraged sigh. “Eli… I never meant to hurt you. That was… accidental.”

“The entire rules system and punishment process seemed pretty bloody intentional to me, Mantis.”

“It was my intention to protect you. I thought I was protecting you, or at least doing all I could to do so. I really believed that. I never lied to you, Eli.” Mantis looked down. “I lied to myself.”

“……”

“I wanted to control you… I was so insecure, jealous, and afraid. I suppose I cannot really be blamed for that, but I think… deep down, I must have known the truth… wouldn’t I?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Liquid said.

“Some things are still… difficult for me, Eli. Knowing what I was thinking. But I know how I felt, how I feel now. I want to… ensure your happiness. It is possible to want that and still hurt someone without malicious intent. I just did not know how to handle the… situation.”

“…” Liquid looked away. “I’m sorry.”
“I am sorry. I never meant to hurt you, but I did. And I know that you never meant to hurt me. We both, ah, behaved badly, not out of contempt or hatred but simply out of… ignorance, I suppose… or out of powerlessness. We could not cope with our pasts and our fears and we just lashed out against each other and thought it was normal.”

“…I’m… sorry, Mantis.”

Mantis pulled him close; Liquid didn’t even put up token resistance. “We will get through this, Eli. I know you want things to be better just as much as I do.”

“Mnh.”

“Do not worry. No matter what happens,” he said, nudging his ear with the filter of his gas mask, “you will always be mine.”

“…will I…?”

“Mmhm. I wouldn’t have anyone else.”

Liquid’s spirits were lifted a little bit, though he was, of course, still unsure. “But…”

“I can prove it if you want me to.”

It took Liquid a second to realize what Mantis was insinuating - he flushed, drew back. “Benedict is watching us,” he hissed, flicking his eyes to where Benedict was lying on the floor. (He thumped his tail a few times at the mention of his name.)

“Benedict is dog, I really do not think he will care.” Mantis grabbed Liquid’s hands, intertwining their fingers. “Besides, we haven’t been… intimate… in quite a while.”

“Yes, we have.”

“While I actually understood what was going on?”

“…”

“I’m not upset,” Mantis promised, “you just have a very interesting concept of consent.”

“I didn’t mean…”

“Hush.” He lead Liquid’s hands to his thighs, then hips, keeping gentle with him. It hardly needed pointing out that Mantis was aware of how mortifyingly timid Liquid was feeling right about now. “I want you to make love to me, Eli.”

“Ah… ah, erm…”

The only other times Liquid had ever topped was their wedding night and subsequent anniversaries - which didn’t give him much in the way of experience, and he half-expected Mantis to talk him through it (rather condescendingly) like the last time they did it. Liquid felt horrifically clumsy and awkward just prepping him.

But Mantis stayed gentle with him, murmuring encouragements and letting him take the lead as much as possible. He wrapped his thin legs around Liquid’s waist as he pushed forward, holding on to him and arching his back, praising him and stroking his hair, slipping his fingers under his precious collar. Mantis sighed as Liquid rutted into him almost violently, face buried in his shoulder, teeth digging in.
“Good boy,” Mantis said hoarsely. “That’s right. Just like that.”

“Nnn…”

“You are doing good.”

It was aching and monotone but so satisfying, feeling Liquid relax against him, finally finding some distraction from all this drama. Getting dicked down in the process was nothing to sneeze at, either.

“M-M-Mantis…”

Mantis dug his heels into the backs of his thighs as he felt him tense and tremble. “Go on,” he cooed. “I want all of you, Eli.”

“B-But you’ve never—“

“I want it this time… don’t be shy.”

Liquid orgasmed inside him with a confused whimper. Mantis gasped, and rocked his hips against him, grinding against his stomach so he could get off too before Liquid went soft.

“Good boy, Eli,” he panted, “good boy.”

“I l-love you,” Liquid mumbled against his neck.

“I know. I know…”

“Don’t leave me, don’t ever leave me… Mantis, promise me. P-Promise you’ll never leave me.”

They were soldiers. Such a promise would be meaningless.

Mantis reached up and tucked a lock of sweaty hair behind Liquid’s ear. “I promise,” he said.

Solidus’ Codec rang, and he did not recognize the number at all.

He picked up. “…hello…?”

“George!” Ah, EVA. …he hadn’t talked to her in over a year, if he remembered correctly. Vaguely he wondered if she still bothered considering herself his mother. “Are you busy? There’s something I need to talk to you about. Actually, it’s something I should have told you about a while ago, I’m sorry, I didn’t know how to bring it up.”

“Wh-? Uhm, no, I’m not busy. I assume this is important, then?”

“As far as the revolution goes, no, it’s got nothing to do with it. But I thought you might want to know anyway… it’s about Ocelot.”

“What about him?”

EVA sighed dramatically. “Are the two of you still supposed to be an item?”

“‘Supposed to be’?” Solidus said skeptically, raising an eyebrow. “I didn’t think that was in doubt. Even if we haven’t had the opportunity to spend much time together in a while, I wasn’t aware we’d broken up.”

“Okay. I thought so. …and just to make sure, it’s not an open relationship, right? You’re supposed to
be exclusive?"

“Well, I suppose I wouldn’t really have any objections if Ocelot were required to romance someone else as part of a ploy for information or something similar, but I was under the impression that he hasn’t used that technique since the eighties…”

“So you two are exclusive.”


EVA sucked in air through her teeth. “Weeell… how do I put this… Ocelot’s been cheating on you since the year 2000.”

“…excuse me?”

“Pretty regularly up until 2004, I think. And then when he ran off with Eli looking for Mantis, he found something else, if you catch my drift.”

“I… how do you know this?” Solidus said, letting himself sound suspicious.

“Eli and Mantis told me all about it. They’ve been having issues with him for years, obviously, but I only recently found out and there was no way to tell you this without outing Eli for it, too.”

“…” Ocelot was fooling around with Liquid? Liquid? The son with the least physical resemblance to Big Boss and only one who went so far as to consider someone else his father? “Why are you telling me this?”

“Would you rather I didn’t? I can’t imagine Ocelot telling you himself.”

She had a point. “I… I see. Thank you for informing me.” He closed the channel before EVA could inquire after his health… then proceeded to just sit there and stare blankly at the well.

Ocelot cheated on him. With his brother. With his screwed up genetic experiment brother. And he’d never so much as hinted at it. Never tried to insinuate that he might have to sleep with Liquid to manipulate him into something. He just did it and expected Solidus to never find out. Well, Solidus supposed, maybe he wouldn’t have considering Liquid was cheating too, and that kind of thing tended to be kept secret.

But still. Ocelot cheated on him repeatedly and it seemed so casual— Solidus never thought it would hurt like this.

He called Ocelot’s number. To his surprise, he actually picked up. “Something the matter, sir?”

“…”

“Sir? You’re upset about something.”

“You had an affair.”

“…is this EVA’s idea of revenge, or did your brother finally come clean about it?”

“So it’s true?” Solidus said, unable to keep the shock and hurt out of his voice.

“Yes, but if you want to go deep into denial I’d be willing to encourage you, by all means.”
“Wh— Ocelot, I can’t believe you—” Solidus cut himself off, biting hard on his lower lip. “I see how it is.”

“…I’m sorry, sir,” Ocelot said. He didn’t sound very sorry. “You know I—“

“I don’t want to hear your excuses. We’re through. Feel free to sleep with anyone you like now, it won’t have anything to do with me.”

“Sir—“

Solidus hung up before he could change his mind. It was almost a physical pain.

Maybe, all things considered, he should just be grateful that Ocelot had chosen this way to backstab him.

“What does Liquid have that I don’t?” he asked himself quietly. Vulnerability? Charm? Youth?

“Um, Solidus?”

Solidus started, glanced over his shoulder. Mei Ling was watching him from behind the couch. “…yes?”

“You’ve been staring off into space for a couple minutes now, are you okay?”

“Yes, of course I am,” Solidus said automatically. He’d been trained since he was a small child to control his emotions. But - Mei Ling was looking at him with such concern, that maybe, right now, he didn’t have to. “…no, actually, I’m not.”

Mei Ling sat next to him on the couch and put a friendly hand on his arm. She was so tiny in comparison to him. “What happened?”

“I just broke up with Ocelot.”

“You- you what?”

“I just found out he’d been having an affair for the better part of a decade. I broke up with him.”

“You were dating Ocelot for the better part of a decade??” Mei Ling said.

Solidus raised his eyebrows. This wasn’t the reaction he wanted or expected. “Yes?” he said, “I thought that was common knowledge.”

“Uh… no?? No one told me, anyway. You didn’t tell me.”

“Well, I’m…” Solidus cleared his throat awkwardly. “I’ve never been the type to flaunt relationships like that… but I hadn’t intended to keep it a secret. If you had asked I would have…”

“I literally thought you were single.” She shook her head. “Um, sorry! I guess that’s really besides the point right now, isn’t it?”

“You’re right, though. I am single now…”

“No, I meant… I’m really sorry, Solidus. I know breakups are rough, especially if you broke up because you got cheated on. You must feel horrible…”

Solidus sighed and looked at his lap. “…yes,” he said, “I do. I wonder what I did wrong.”
“I’m sure you didn’t do anything wrong!” Mei Ling said, “I think Ocelot’s just an asshole. And by ‘think’ I mean he is an asshole and everyone knows that. So I don’t think it’s that you weren’t enough for him or something, I just think he didn’t care about your feelings. Like a jerk.”

“I… always thought he did care.”

“Aw, Solidus…” Mei Ling leaned over and hugged him. “I’m so sorry… you don’t deserve this. You deserve to be with someone who treats you right. You’re too good for Ocelot anyway.”

“Hm.”

She withdrew. “Is there anything I can do?” she asked kindly.

“Hmm… actually, there is one thing.”

“What is it?”

“Do you mind being my girlfriend?”

Mei Ling choked on nothing. “What?!”

Solidus raised his hands. “I phrased that poorly, let me explain. I just want to prove that I… this is harder to phrase than I thought… well, I want to show Ocelot that I don’t need him. I think the best way to do that would be to immediately start dating someone else, so that it doesn’t seem like I was only with Ocelot because he was the only one that would take me. Does that… make sense, Mei Ling?”

“Um.” Mei Ling blinked. Her face was totally blank. “Ummmmm.”

“I don’t mean a real girlfriend, of course,” Solidus tried to reassure her, “I just need you to help me fake a relationship until Ocelot gets the point. No actual feelings involved.”

Mei Ling stood up, suddenly furious. “Is that all I am to you?!”

“…what?”

“I can’t believe this! A rebound? A fake rebound? Just to prove to your stupid creepy ex that you— ugh! You can’t be serious!!”

“…Mei Ling, I don’t understand what you’re—“

“I’m a living, breathing woman with thoughts and feelings, Solidus, not just some- some prop to use in your dumb relationship drama! I can’t believe you’d be so heartless!!” She turned on her heel and started stalking off.

“Wait,” Solidus said, jumping up, “wait, Mei Ling, that wasn’t what I meant—“

She turned back around and slapped him hard across the face. It was probably like hitting a brick wall to her, and it didn’t even move Solidus (apart from the surprise that she would do that) but to her credit she didn’t even flinch — though she did have tears in her eyes as she ran off to elsewhere in the safehouse.

“Wait!” Solidus called out after her. But he knew better than to pursue. He didn’t entirely understand why she was so upset, but figured the best course of action was to give her some time and space to herself to calm down, then go back and explain himself more fully. This whole thing was just a misunderstanding.
The sad part was that he actually wouldn’t have minded so much dropping the ‘fake’ part of a ‘fake relationship’. given time.

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Vicenza, Italy. Well after sundown.

After a period of suspicious silence from Wolf, Meryl decided to go it alone with Naomi for a few nights. Hunting down Wolf by using Naomi as bait didn’t sit well with her, of course, but the more time she was forced to spend with the woman the more she had trouble thinking of her as the hapless brain-damaged civilian Meryl had originally pegged her for. She didn’t know what Naomi was but it gave her a bad feeling…

So she ditched the rest of RAT PT 01 to go wandering around the city in her civvies with the one-eyed wonder, with the express goal of luring a sniper back out of her hole. So what. The fact that Meryl had personal beef with Wolf was why she tolerated this whole stupid assignment — she wanted to ask Wolf just what the hell happened at Shadow Moses before she shot her with her ever-handly Desert Eagle.

Naomi looked over her shoulder suddenly. Her hair looked so damn limp and stringy in the light from a nearby 24-hour store; Meryl often got the urge to shove her head in a sink and forcibly wash it, mostly because she seemed to be the only one on the team who actually noticed how filthy Naomi was.

“What’s the matter, Dr. Hunter?”

“I hear something.”

Meryl raised an eyebrow, following Naomi’s gaze. She hadn’t heard anything, but delusions about Big Boss aside Naomi seemed pretty well-connected to reality. Not, like, hallucinating or anything.

“…it’s just a dog, Dr. Hunter.”

“Hn.” Naomi watched creepily intently as the gray-furred dog slowly meandered over to them from a nearby alleyway, panting.

“Wow, you’re a big girl, aren’t you?” Meryl said, holding out a hand to the dog. The dog sniffed it, tail wagging. “Huh. I didn’t think huskies were popular in this country.”

“That’s a wolf,” Naomi said.

“You think everything’s a wolf.”

The dog abruptly sank her teeth into Meryl’s hand and started dragging her away from Naomi.

“Wh-!”

“You are both half right, Bêdeng is a wolfdog. And if you hurt her I will skin you alive, by the way.”

Meryl pointed her Desert Eagle at the rooftop, snarling. “Wolf!” She couldn’t tell where exactly Wolf was - Bêdeng had dragged her out of the pool of light from the 24-hour store, not that that would have helped much - but she could at least tell that her voice had come in the general direction of above them. “Dr. Hunter, get down!”

“Get down here,” Naomi called to Wolf.
“Dr. Hunter! Oh, for the love of God…” Meryl tried to pull her hand away from Bêdeng, but she only bit down harder. She wasn’t going anywhere, not if she didn’t want to turn her hand into ribbons anyway.

“Where are your boys?” Wolf said - Meryl tried to refine her aim. “You have been going out alone with Naomi for the past few nights — why? did you think I was more likely to strike if Naomi had less of an entourage?”

“You’re here, aren’t you?” Meryl spat.

A red dot appeared on the pavement by Naomi’s feet, lazily circling towards her. Meryl was finally able to trace where Wolf was by the glimmer of the lazer sight in the fog of the cool wet air. She wasn’t even going to question how she got up to that church steeple that undoubtedly had no public access. Damn woman could parkour when she wanted to.

“Did you expect to be able to kill me by yourself?” Wolf said.

“I don’t want to kill you,” Meryl said, “my assignment is to arrest you and your remaining teammates so you can stand trial.”

“You should kill her,” Naomi said flatly, turning to Meryl. The laser sight was still fortunately on the pavement instead of her body.

“Liquid and Mantis slipping the line had to have stung, no?” Wolf said, “I bet your superiors were not happy, maybe that is why they put you on babysitting duty.”

“Liquid and Mantis got away because Dr. Hunter caused a scene and we had to put PLA on lockdown,” Meryl said through gritted teeth. “That wasn’t my fault.”

“Didn’t you kill someone?”

“Dr. Hunter killed someone.”

“He startled me,” Naomi said.

“You have limbs like toothpicks, I thought Liquid was hallucinating when he described what happened to me,” Wolf dismissed her. “I’m surprised, Meryl. I do not think your heart is really in this job.”

Meryl narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Shouldn’t you be pursuing us harder, as revenge for Snake? …could it be that hate you those who sent him to Shadow Moses more than you do us? those who nuked the island and removed the last hope in your mind that he might still be alive?”

“He was dead before the bomb dropped and you personally made sure I saw that,” Meryl snapped, jerking forward. Bêdeng growled. By now Meryl’s hand was bleeding profusely. “And I’m not going to blame the Army for doing everything they could to make sure you terrorists didn’t get your hands on Metal Gear! Are you insane?! They had to do something!!”

Wolf sighed dramatically. (It had to be very dramatic in order for Meryl to hear it all the way down here.) “You really do not know anything.”

“I’m sick and tired of this, Wolf. Stop toying with us and come down here.”
“Oh, you want to go one-on-one?”

A divot of pavement smashed out of the street by Naomi’s foot - Naomi jumped. Barrel-smoke briefly flitted through the line of Wolf’s laser light. Meryl’s first instinct was to fire back but Wolf had deliberately shot the ground instead of either of them and since her rifle was silenced and Meryl’s pistol was not, they still had a chance to get out of this without a public disturbance.

“Not that I am not willing to give you the attention you crave, Meryl,” Wolf purred, “but you forget that Naomi is my target. Let me have her and then I promise you will be next.” Meryl couldn’t tell if she was threatening her or flirting with her.

“Why the hell would I hand her over?” Meryl said, ignoring Wolf’s weird gay implications. Naomi finally had the sense to get behind Meryl - Wolf’s laser sight drifting up Meryl’s legs was sending her into a cold sweat — Bêdeng remained latched onto Meryl’s arm, apparently uninterested in Naomi.

“Surely you have gotten fed up with her by now.”

“…that has no bearing on my assignment.”

“Just shoot her,” Naomi said.

“You stay quiet. I can’t get a bead on her in this light,” Meryl replied in a whisper.

“Come out where we can see you, you cowardly mutt,” Naomi called up to Wolf.

“Dr. Hunter!”

Wolf whistled. Bêdeng let go of Meryl’s hand and before she could even process that she had use of it back Bêdeng was jumping up on Naomi, barking and snapping. Being a giant damn wolfdog, she was almost as tall as Naomi was reared up on her hind legs and probably weighed more; Naomi went crashing to the ground, and Meryl’s immediate priority had to switch from keeping Wolf pinned to shouldering a mountain of angry fur off of Naomi.

A bell jingled as the 24-hour shop door swung open. “Fottuti turisti!” the shopkeep yelled, “torna al tuo hotel!”

As if commanded by the irritable local, Bêdeng suddenly backed off, turned tail, and ran down the same alleyway she’d appeared from, leaving Naomi and Meryl in the middle of the street covered in dog hair. Meryl looked up at the steeple - no laser sight. She’d have to check to be thorough, but had no doubt that Wolf had already ran off and hadn’t left any clues behind her.

“Cancel the alert,” Meryl said in the hidden radio mic in her shirt collar. “She’s gone now. And I want a faster response next time or I’ll have all three of you transferred.”

Chapter End Notes

*t/n: Fucking tourists! Go back to your hotel!*
Chapter 101

Hudson River docks.

RAY was (supposed to be, at least) already in the hold of the USS Discovery, but as it was masquerading as a normal oil tanker in order to hide that from the public, pretend stops to load and unload fake equipment and personnel were necessary. And, convenient for Gurlukovich’s men — but mostly Solid.

And Olga.

“Not that I don’t think you shouldn’t sit this one out in the first place,” Solid grumbled, peering out from behind a shipping container, “but wouldn’t it be safer for you to board with the rest of your father’s men?”

“I am just as much a soldier as you are,” Olga hissed. She was standing next to Solid, with her back against the shipping container, gun drawn. “I don’t care for what’s safe.”

“Do you care that this part of the plan was supposed to be a solo operation?”

“I don’t know why my father trusts you alone - rather, I don’t know why he trusts Ocelot so much that he sends you in ahead of us just because he sent you! You could ruin the whole plan easily! Now tell me what you see or get out of the way so I can look myself.”

Solid grunted. The Discovery would be arriving soon, so he had a limited amount of time to steal a ‘maintenance’ uniform (hopefully from a locker, but if he had to he’d knock out one of these undercover relief-shift Marines) and slip into the loading area undetected (only way in that he could get to in time had a guard). Olga tagging along would complicate that heavily. “If I wanted to ruin your plan, then you couldn’t stop me anyway.”

Olga’s gun clacked as she racked the slide. “So you’re playing your hand, then?”

“If you’re going to shoot me, that gun better be silenced.”

Without further ado, she shoved him out from behind the shipping container and into the open. Solid had about a split second to hit the floor and roll behind a nearby crate before one of the Marines spotted him.

Fine. If that was how she wanted to play it.

Solid fired off a tranquilizer at her head but either it just grazed her or pregnancy hormones made her more resistant to the sedatives — Olga seemed wholly unsurprised that Solid had escalated this from shoving match to firefight, but in lieu of shooting back she shot off the fastener of a nearby tarp. The wind from the burgeoning storm whipped it out in front of her. Solid wasn’t surprised that she’d prioritize safety (of both herself and her baby) over kicking his ass, but he wasn’t about to let her escape. She’d go right back to Gurlukovich and tell him Solid had betrayed them.

Which, aside from not putting up with Olga inserting herself into his op, he hadn’t even done.

Yet.

Solid ducked past a Marine ‘dockworker’, using the cloudy-night inky darkness as cover. He knew movement outside of the pools of light from the dock’s floodlights would just be dismissed as NYC’s
famously large rats provided he didn’t make any noise. He wasn’t sure if Olga was thinking the same thing, though, and if she got caught by the Marines before he got her, well…

The problem was Solid didn’t know which way she went - there were multiple infiltration points at the docks, because they had to look way less high security than they actually (supposedly - the Marines didn’t send their best here) were. That gave Olga several different ways out. Solid spotted her footprints from stepping in a greasy puddle, but rain was already starting to fall again and soon Solid wouldn’t be able to use those to track her anymore.

He could, however, use what sounded like her getting into a scuffle with a Marine.

Sure enough, when Solid crept up behind her she had a ‘dockworker’ in a chokehold. He kept his M9 trained on her, silent, waiting. Eventually the Marine lost consciousness and Olga let him drop to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Solid got another dart in to the back of the head before noticed him. “Freeze,” he said quietly before she could even turn around. She raised her hands.

“…” After a moment or so, she slowly started lowering her hands again.

Two full doses of tranquilizers made her sluggish, though, and she wasn’t able to reach her gun or her knife before Solid shot her again. She swayed, stumbled, and fell to her knees. Solid quickly grabbed her and dragged her further out of the light. He had to pull her gun out of her hands, then swath her knife away, and fortunately for him his sneaking suit protected him pretty well when she resorted to just scratching and biting him.

“Stop it,” Solid grunted, “you’ll get us both caught and put your men in danger.”

“They can handle the Americans, I just don’t want… you…” she struggled against the effect of tranquilizers, “you dirty, slimy—”

“Shut up.”

Olga looked up at the sky, eyes fixing on the pale moon visible through a break in the clouds, despite the storm. “My father said… a bad feeling about…”

She didn’t get to finish her sentence. She passed out. Solid hid her limp body in the shadow of some crates and tugged a tarp over her so she wouldn’t get even more soaked while she was unconscious. She’d stay asleep until well after Solid’s - and her company’s - business here was over.

In the meantime, Solid took advantage of the fact that Olga had knocked out a Marine for him and dragged his limp carcass behind some other crates, where he stripped him and put his disguise on over his sneaking suit. (He hid the guy’s body only to hide it, not to be nice, because he figured a strangled Marine could handle the cold and wet better than a drugged up pregnant woman.) Solid pulled the dockworker cap as low as he could over his eyes and headed for the loading zone.

“Some fuckin’ weather, huh?” the loading zone guard said as Solid walked right by him, only grunting in reply. Letting someone pass by without question just because they were in the right uniform wasn’t exactly top-notch security, but hey, it was dark and rainy and they weren’t necessarily expecting trouble, so the Marines had an excuse and Solid wasn’t complaining. He just hoped no one would stumble upon Olga or the anonymous mostly-naked Marine.

The loading zone had a few more undercover soldiers milling about than the rest of the docks, but it wasn’t much of an issue for Solid, considering the only lighting was the harsh illumination of floodlights — direct, sharply outlined pools of light, not ambient lighting, no matter how much fog
and mist there was from the rain falling. Solid would be glad to get in a box, and dry, soon. At least it wasn’t hard to sneak up on a bunch of unsuspecting crates. He was completely unsurprised to find that said crates were completely empty.

The *Discovery* went from distant lights down the river to visible ship approaching the dock just before Solid closed the lid over himself and took the disguise back off. Now he waited.

Running a mission without radio support was just the worst. Solid was tempted to call up Otacon just to have someone to talk to, but he wasn’t sure if that idea worked with the time zones involved. *Oregon* was behind *New York*, and anyway Otacon kept night owl hours a lot of time anyway, so… wait. That probably meant he would be asleep. For some reason Solid’s mind supplied Liquid as a backup conversation partner, but he really didn’t want to get into it with him. Plus he didn’t know what time it was in the *Czech Republic* right now anyway. (Not that time had any apparent effect on Liquid’s sleep schedule either.)

The crate jolted as someone picked it up. “Thought these things were supposed to be empty!” he heard someone joke, muffled. The dock creaked below him as the pallet jack trundled towards the tanker and then, up the loading ramp. From the sound of it the fake equipment was just being dumped in a random room on the interior of the ship. Got him closer to RAY.

His box was dropped on the floor with an uncaring *thunk*. Outside of the room (in the hallway? next room over?) Solid heard someone sternly tell someone else to hurry it up. The whole tanker lurched as it pulled away from the dock. The room outside the box became quiet. Solid popped the lid and peered out. Empty. And didn’t look like anyone had swept in quite a while.

Okay. Had to get his bearings and figure out where the hold was so he could be there in RAY’s cockpit (somehow) before Gurlukovich landed - which would be just past when the tanker passed underneath the *George Washington* bridge, which was around the time there was a scheduled briefing that would put almost every Marine on the ship in the same room as RAY. From the docks it’d be about half an hour, and Solid had already lost a few minutes waiting for the fake cargo to get settled in.

The hallway outside the storage room (closet, really) was also empty but lacked any convenient signs giving directions to the cargo hold. Solid opted to head towards the sound of the engines.

For a boat supposedly filled with Marines, Solid had an easy time going through it — he would have thought everyone would be on the interior of the boat considering the weather (he didn’t envy the ones stuck patrolling the decks) but it seemed they’d all confined themselves to breakrooms or something. It was more of a hassle sneaking past security cameras than wandering guards. The real hard part was not knowing where the hell he was *going*. Gurlukovich could have given him a map…

Solid was thinking about jumping a Marine to interrogate him for directions when he finally stumbled upon the main cargo hold. There was no mistaking it - RAY was right there, towering in the back, fenced in by catwalks. Solid was… surprised. RAY didn’t look like he was expecting it to. Instead of looking boxy and video game-y like previous Metal Gears, it was very sleek and resembled a misproportioned penguin or some sort of *Pokémon*. Gurlukovich had mentioned it was amphibious, though, so that explained that design choice. Solid just couldn’t see where the nuclear missiles were supposed to go. If it didn’t have those, did it even qualify as a Metal Gear?

…regardless, it qualified as a Metal Gear just based off of overall shape, which was good because it meant Solid could guess where the cockpit was. But first he had to take out the guy most likely to notice him getting in: the poor IT worker fiddling with a projector in the back of the room, in preparation for the commandant’s briefing.
Solid just tranquillized him. Considering the *Discovery* crew was about to get sacked by Russians and lose an entire Metal Gear, taking a nap during work was probably not going to matter during his quarterly performance review.

Witnesses removed, Solid climbed up onto the catwalk and approached RAY, looking over it carefully. Its beak-like head made it easy to tell where the cockpit hinged open, but how to open the cockpit was a lot less intuitive. There’d been some kind of latch on REX, he was pretty sure, but how exactly Liquid had opened it (a key? remote electronic command?) he’d never asked and also, he didn’t know how many of REX’s design notes RAY hit considering REX and all its data had been reduced to radioactive dust.

So upon spotting what kind of look like a hatch Solid just attempted to pry it open with his bare (gloved) hands. To his surprise RAY just popped right open. Apparently they hadn’t gotten around to add security features like locks. Maybe the construction team was a bit crunched for time.

Solid climbed into the cockpit and hit the button with the ▶ | ◀ symbol on it. It slid smoothly shut and it occurred to Solid that having the actual seat be in the ‘jaw’ and moving the pilot up and down like that was a really dumb design choice. Oh well. He fiddled around a bit to make sure all RAY’s external lights/signs of being activated were off, hoping to avoid whatever button presumably made it roar like a dinosaur (seriously, why did all Metal Gears do that? At least with REX he could understand, considering Otacon was, well, Otacon…) then eventually found the button and just shut the whole thing down.

It went pitch black in the cockpit. Maybe not such a good idea.

Sighing, Solid dug his flashlight out of his inventory and looked around RAY’s dashboard until he figured out how to put it back on standby like it had started out. Then he figured out how to activate the external audio and visuals without taking it off of standby. Thank God all the buttons were labelled; this thing was definitely designed with jarheads in mind.

“Verrazano Bridge checkpoint passed. All non-essential personnel, report to the holds in ten minutes’ time for the scheduled briefing session with the Commandant. You are ordered to continue manning your posts until that time.”

“Not a moment to lose, huh,” Solid said. Gurlukovich and his men should already be aboard the ship. The commandant should be arriving at any minute, and at the end of his speech the cargo hold would be stormed and it’d be time for Solid to act. In the meantime, he just had to sit here and wait. As far as Gurlukovich was concerned, that was all he’d do until they reached the shore again. Maybe making him the passive Plan B was in deference to Olga’s suspicions?

It was really too bad he’d been warned about smoking in RAY’s cockpit. Something about cigarette smoke not playing nice with delicate instruments.

The Marine commandant entered the hold, along with some other men. They immediately noticed the unconscious IT guy, but didn’t seem alarmed; they woke him up, and at this distance (he wasn’t getting the audio from the other side of the hold) Solid couldn’t tell if the Commandant was scolding the soldier for falling asleep or asking if he was okay since he apparently fainted. Either way, the IT guy scurried off and someone from the Commandant’s entourage took over the job of setting up the slideshow.

Boring. No one suspected a thing. Solid decided to take a quick nap until Gurlukovich got here.

“Okay,” Otacon said, “I knew black market medical stuff *existed*, but, um, I kinda always assumed it
was just Schedule II and III drugs. Not… Octopus, how did you even find this?"

“I know people,” Octopus said.

“There’s a black market for everything,” Catherine said, “especially in medicine. The lack of regulations makes it way cheaper, so for some people that’s the only way they can afford it.”

“Doesn’t the lack of regulations make it more dangerous, though…?” Otacon said.

“What are you, some kind of socialist?” Octopus said, “besides, how dangerous can an unregulated x-ray machine be?”

“You could get cancer,” Catherine said very seriously.

“…cool.”

“Uh,” Otacon said.

Catherine waved a hand. “The machine itself is fine since Octopus got it from the manufacturer and I did a radiology rotation so I actually know how to give x-rays without giving people cancer. I still want to test it out, though…”

“I don’t think I wanna volunteer to try out a shady Mexican x-ray machine in the back of a stolen camper trailer.”

“I’m gonna go get McGolden,” Octopus said, “you probably need to check his leg anyway, right?”

“Oh, good point,” Catherine said. Octopus left, leaving Catherine and Otacon by themselves in the camper. “So… do you know how Snake’s doing?”

“He hasn’t called,” Otacon said.

“What is he up to, anyway?”

“Dunno. Ask Ocelot.”

“…I’d rather not.”

McGolden’s cane made a clunk against the doorstep as he climbed into the trailer, followed by Octopus. It was starting to get cramped in here, especially considering Frank was already sleeping on the cot which could have theoretically been used as a seat for one of the various bystanders.

“Octopus said you wanted to give me cancer?” McGolden said, taking a seat by the x-ray machine.

Catherine rolled her eyes. “You’re not going to get cancer. I just want to do a full-body x-ray on you to see if this machine works properly.”

“I don’t need a full-body x-ray, it’s just my leg that’s—“

“To see if this machine works properly! I just told you. Don’t move.” Catherine started fiddling with the controls. “Hopefully we won’t be using this thing too much. Octopus didn’t get any lead vests.”

“Hey, the machine was hard enough,” Octopus said.

“Should we really be standing here?” Otacon said.
“Yeah, it’s fine if it’s just the one time. Besides, even if we do get cancer, the Patriots are probably gonna kill us before the cancer could anyway.”

“That’s encouraging.”

“We’ve managed to evade them this long,” McGolden said.

“McGolden, don’t move. That includes talking,” Catherine said sternly. “Also… I know we’ve managed to not die so far, but have we actually made any real impact against them?”

“There was the thing in Virginia,” Octopus said.

“And whatever Snake’s doing… I think,” Otacon said. “I hope.”

“Ocelot’s a bastard, but he’s trustworthy if you ask me. Or… consistent, anyway. Oh yeah, speaking of Ocelot, what’s the deal with Solidus and Mei Ling?”

“How are those two statements even related?”

“Um… because Ocelot just broke up with Solidus and that’s clearly got something to do with why Mei Ling is so pissy about him now?”

“Wait. You mean Ocelot and Solidus were…?”

“Not anymore.”

“…isn’t he like twice his age?”

“Yup.”

“Uh.”

“Will you two shut up?” Catherine said, “if you want to gossip, you can go back inside.”

“But that’s where Solidus and Mei Ling are,” Octopus said innocently. “By the way - what’s that square white thing on McGolden’s skull?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” Catherine said, scrutinizing the screen, then adjusting the tube head then starting the machine back up. “Whatever it is, looks like it’s embedded. McGolden, you’d need actual surgery to get it out.”

“That’s okay, I know what it is,” he said, “can I get up yet?”

“Sure.” Catherine shut the machine down and moved it back flush against the wall, out of the way. “Oh yeah, your leg’s healed about as well as we can expect it to heal.”

“So I’m stuck with the cane, huh?”

“What’s the square thing?” Octopus said.

“A microchip,” McGolden said confidently, pointing to a small divot in his skin just behind his ear. “I was abducted by aliens as a kid. They left a souvenir.”

“Oh my gosh, that was for real?” Otacon said.

“Uhm… this seems fishy,” Catherine said. “It does look like it could be a microchip on the x-ray,
but… I dunno about aliens…”

“Come on, Cathy. I remember my abduction as clear as day. …well, maybe not the specific details,” McGolden said, “but I was a kid and they used some sort of intergalactic knock-out drug on me… but even my family members will confirm that I disappeared and came back with the side of my head all swollen.”

“Whether or not it was aliens is a moot point if we can’t even get the microchip out,” Octopus said. “Unless you want to go under a bone-saw, McGolden?”

“Yeah, no thank you.”

“What if it’s a tracking device or something?” Catherine said. “Or, I guess that would have come up already…”

“If it’s really just a microchip, then it’s going to be completely inert embedded in someone’s skull,” Otacon said, adjusting his glasses, “especially if it was implanted twenty-plus years ago. I don’t think we’ll really have reason to worry about it if we can confirm what it is.”

“I could always do a minor exploratory surgery,” Catherine said, “all I’d need is some local anaesthetic. I should be able to see it just by making a small incision.”

“I’d rather not,” McGolden said, “…but I guess I don’t really have a choice in the matter, do I?”

“Nope,” Octopus said, pulling on some rubber gloves. “Don’t worry. Dr. Miller and Enfermero Pulpo will take good care of you.”

“Octopus, I don’t have a doctorate. I’m the nurse here.”

“Okay, Nurse Miller and Doctor Octopus.”

“You’re not a doctor either!”

“Yeah, but I play one on TV. Also I know how to inject lidocaine.”

“I don’t want to watch,” Otacon said, leaving, “come on, Frank.” Frank barked.

“So what’s the verdict?” Otacon said, poking his head back in the camper. Octopus was wrapping gauze around a somewhat groggy-looking McGolden’s head while Catherine was writing something on a clipboard.

“Just a standard old-fashioned microchip,” Catherine said. “I was right about it being embedded, too — it’s been there about as long as McGolden says, I guess. His skull just grew around it.”

“Oh. Well, if it’s twenty years old… it wouldn’t have much storage space at that size. That’s assuming it even still works. Being in someone’s body for two decades is gonna corrode things.”

“Unless it’s alien technology,” Octopus said.

“Oh yeah! In that case, we don’t know what it’s capable of. It could be anything.”

“Get real!” Catherine snapped, putting down her clipboard. “It’s not alien technology, it’s just a regular old microchip. The only way anyone could do literally anything with it is if they took it back out of McGolden’s skull, and even then it’s probably busted anyway!”
“Geez,” Otacon said, “I was just saying… we should account for all possibilities here…”

“Oh my god. No wonder all your accomplishments in two years just amount to *not everyone has died yet*.”

“Hey,” Octopus deadpanned, “that’s harsh.”
Chapter 102

Chapter Notes

Fuckin' finals, man

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A gunshot jolted Solid awake.

Grumbling, he squinted at RAY’s screen. Marine Commandant Scott Dolph was standing on the catwalk in front of RAY, being gripped from behind by Colonel Gurlukovich. With his other hand Colonel Gurlukovich was holding out his pistol — Solid followed his aim. A random Marine lay dead. Several of Gurlukovich’s men were also pointing their guns at the Marines who had tried to advance on the hijackers. It wasn’t obvious which of them had shot the dead guy.

“Don’t try anything,” Gurlukovich said, “we have rigged this ship’s key structural points with SEMTEX. It would be easy to blow it out of the water.” One of his men raised a detonator up demonstratively. “We will not give this up and we will not be defeated — either you will die, or we both will. We are almost at the target, go on!” He shouted the last bit in Russian. His men began undoing the lines keeping RAY in place. Solid felt the beast settle against the tanker’s deck.

“What do you intend to do with RAY,” Dolph said, “sell it on the streets?”

Gurlukovich returned his pistol to Dolph’s head, digging it into his temple. “I was raised in Snezhinsk, formerly known as Chelyabinsk-70, the nuclear research outpost.”

“What are you talking about?”

“After the Cold War ended, my home was bought out by the Americans.”

Dolph snorted. “Is there a point to this sad story?”

Gurlukovich twisted the muzzle of his gun against Dolph’s skin, snarling. “Not that you would understand,” he spat, “land, friends, dignity...all sold to the highest bidder -- the United States of America. Even the technology that gave birth to these weapons is Russian, developed by us!”

“What do you intend to do?” Dolph said again.

“Russia will rise again — and RAY is the key.”

Solid drummed his fingers against RAY’s dashboard, then decided it was time to go. He was in no mood for nationalistic rants and Gurlukovich’s men had removed the last obstacle to getting RAY out of the tanker in one piece. He hit the ‘activate’ button.

RAY shuddered to life, drawing itself to its full height, startling the hell out of both Gurlukovich and co. and the Marines. “What are you doing?!” Gurlukovich shouted up at him.

Solid didn’t reply, mostly because he didn’t know how to without opening up the cockpit, which after REX he knew would be a very bad idea.
Instead he fiddled with the controls, trying to get a feel for how RAY moved. He accidentally obliterated one of the catwalks with RAY’s ‘arm’, sending several men plummeting to the floor of the hold. Solid winced. He knew he was totally screwing Gurlukovich et al. over with this, but he had no hard feelings against them and didn’t want them to die.

“How dare you——” Gurlukovich sputtered, “damn you, this was set up by Ocelot, wasn’t it! This whole time! That dog!!”

“Well, yeah,” Solid said to himself. Ocelot sent him here with the specific instructions to get RAY away from Gurlukovich; the fact that his role in the hijacking plan had played into that perfectly was just icing on the cake to the point that Solid suspected Ocelot had somehow planted the idea himself. Solid couldn’t even argue with keeping a Metal Gear away from a bunch of Soviet nostalgiks; why Ocelot wanted RAY and what it had to do with some vague Patriot assignment he was milking for resources, Solid hadn’t asked.

Gurlukovich shoved Dolph forward - the Commandant stumbled — Gurlukovich snatched the detonator out of the hand of the soldier who had previously been holding it. “We will all die together, then!” he shouted, pressing the button. The whole ship shook. Solid raised his eyebrows. “You especially, you damned American lapdog!”

“Engage!” Dolph shouted. A shootout between the Marines and the Russians began. Bullets bounced harmlessly off of RAY’s exterior as Solid watched the chaos. He didn’t know the Gurlukovich soldiers were the death before dishonor types. He felt a little bad about the fact that he didn’t feel particularly bad about the looming 100% casualty rate on both sides.

The shootout was interrupted by the tanker tilting dangerously and a wave of water crashing into the cargo hold. Soldiers on both sides were swept off their feet and Dolph and Gurlukovich had probably already killed each other, Solid couldn’t really tell. It was time to bail. He yanked the controls, demolishing another catwalk (oops - at least this one was empty) and cracked a big RAY-sized hole in the ceiling of the cargo hold. More water flooded in - apparently the tanker was already listing that hard. Made it easier for Solid to move RAY around, though. He just slipped into the water and propelled away from the USS Discovery like a torpedo, leaving the no-longer-floating-really mass grave behind.

Poor Olga.

... 

RAY’s cockpit poked above the water, scraping along the shoreline with an unpleasant grind. Solid had to raise the thing higher than he would have liked in order to open the cockpit without flooding it - he wasn’t sure if there was another way. A figure in a raincoat picked its way down the beach, waded into the cold water of the Lower New York Bay and removed her hood. Holly’s blonde-brown hair whipped in the wind.

“How I’m surprised you didn’t die in the Narrows,” she called up to Solid.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Solid grumbled, “you could have just done this yourself, you know.”

“What? I can’t hear you. Get down here.”

“Down there? You want me to beach myself?”

Holly waved her arm impatiently. Solid shrugged and laid RAY’s hulking body down in the surf.
After all this rough handling, it was already starting to lose the newly-minted sheen on its armor. Holly climbed in the cockpit, squeezing in next to Solid - Solid flushed, there was only room for one in here — and closed the cockpit.

“Uh,” Solid started.

“It’s the only way to use the display screen,” Holly said shortly, pulling back on the controls so RAY slid smoothly back into the water. “Plus I don’t wanna be seen. Scooch over.”

“Holly, unless you want to sit on my lap—“

“I’m not sticking around, I’m just checking what kind of autopilot we’re working with. Put your dick back in your pants.”

“Mrph.”

Holly softened a bit. “You piloted it this far, though, that’s better than I was expecting.”

“Everything’s labelled, so it wasn’t too hard to figure out. Gurlukovich wasn’t happy, though. Set off all the SEMTEX in an effort to stop me, I guess.”

“Oof. Anyone make it?”

“Don’t think so.”

Holly scowled. “That’s so typical of them,” she muttered, “those poor jarheads enlisted to serve and protect their country, but they ended up getting sacrificed on American soil just because some stupid Navy brass wanted to make the biggest, baddest Metal Gear ever.”

“Hn.”

She shook her head. “Nevermind. I guess if you’re gonna die for some overpaid gloryhound sitting on his ass in Washington, it doesn’t matter if you’re in New York or Diyala.”

“You’ll never make Director with that kind of talk.”

“Very funny.” She pulled up a set of coordinates on the display screen. “Huh?”

“What is it?” Solid said, squinting.

“Did Ocelot tell you where to take RAY after you blew the tanker?”

“No… he said there’d be a preset location in RAY’s navigation… thing.”

“There is,” Holly said, “a shipping dock in Delaware. It’s run by a La Li Lu Le Lo shell corporation. Ocelot was supposed to hijack RAY for them, yeah? That must be where he was supposed to take it - they preloaded its autopilot with that destination.”

“Makes sense,” Solid said, “except I don’t get why Ocelot would send me to do his dirty work if he was just going to hand RAY back over to the Patriots anyway.”

“Maybe he’s handing RAY back over — and you with it, Snake.”

Solid thought about it for a minute, then frowned. “I wouldn’t go down that easily and I think Ocelot knows that.”
“…yeah… keeping a con like this going for so long means he’s not in the habit of underestimating people. You sure he didn’t mention something like- there was some target in Delaware, too?”

“Nope.”

“Well if there was then it’s his own fucking fault he didn’t tell you earlier,” Holly said, swiping at the touchscreen and clearing the coordinates. “RAY is specifically designed to combat proper Metal Gears, and since it’s amphibious you could take this one literally almost all over the world if you, like, maintain it properly. You’re gonna want it on hand when my employers get into the ‘mass-produced Metal Gear for standard combat’ game.”

“Guess I better learn how to pilot it then, huh.”

“Yeah, or make your dumb brother do it. He piloted REX when he rebelled on Shadow Moses, right? I mean, why the hell wouldn’t he? If I had a giant walking nuclear deathmobile at my fingertips I’d want to give that puppy a spin too.”

“How did you not get found out at Zanzibar Land?”

“Who said they never let me run around in one of those Metal Gear G’s?” Holly said with a cheeky grin. “Anyway, I’m setting the autopilot to take you to Middle Caicos, in the Caribbean. It’s over a thousand miles and I’m not sure what RAY’s top speed is, so I hope you peed before you left.”

“Middle Caicos?”

“It’s practically uninhabited, so it’s discreet. There’s a private dock there you could store RAY at - I think it’s run by drug traffickers or something, so you don’t need to worry about the government realizing what’s there.”

“Huh. Guess I have no right to complain about shady allies after FOXHOUND, though…”

“There’s an international airport on Providenciales for once you’ve dumped RAY. And um, call me when you get there so I know you weren’t hunted down by the Coast Guard, alright?”

“Sure,” Solid said.

Holly exhaled. “Okay. Let me get out on the shore, then just get back to cruising depth and press this button. Good luck, Snake.”

“Mm. Thanks for your help, Holly.”

“…anytime.”

Colonel Jackson walked into the bedroom, toweling off his hair after a shower, to find his lovely wife sitting on the side of the bed with the phone in her hands and a shattered expression. Immediately he was alarmed. “Helena? What’s wrong?”

“I just… got a call…”

“About what?”

“…” Fortune started crying.

Colonel Jackson sat next to her and put an arm around around her shoulders. “Try to calm down,” he said, “remember what the doctor said about getting too stressed, it could be bad for the baby-“
“My dad… my dad is dead. The notification officer will be here tomorrow.”


“H-He was… oh… I don’t know, it was official business but they got a-attacked by mercenaries and there weren’t any survivors—“

“Oh god… honey, I’m so sorry…” he hugged her tightly. “This is so awful.”

Fortune nodded, then burst into tears again and sobbed against his chest. He rubbed her back, trying to be as calming a presence as possible.

“Let’s go to your mother’s house, okay? The notification officer will find us there. We’ll figure this out together…”

“Jack! There you are!” Rosemary caught up with him. “You left my apartment before I woke up again, dummy.”

“Uhhh, haha, yeah,” Jack said awkwardly, “you always sleep right through your alarm and all…”

“Through your alarm, maybe. I always wake up with mine.”

“Oh. Right. Not to change the subject, but have you seen the news yet today?”

“Hm?”

Jack grabbed her by the arms and marched her over to a breakroom, where the dinky TV was tuned to CNN. They were showing an absolute circus of a news bulletin about a terrorist attack on an oil tanker in the Hudson river; a breathless reporter standing on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge talking about the biggest ecological disaster in New York’s history and an emergency summit between President Johnson and Russia’s top officials to determine the exact ties of the terrorists to their country of origin and…

“Oh my…” Rosemary gasped. “That explains all the helicopters this morning.”

“Yeah, that’s right near here! They’re already putting up oil fences.”

“That’s good!”

“But what I want to know is,” Jack said, slapping the top of the TV, “why would a bunch of Russian mercenaries attack an oil tanker? What’s the goal here? Was it because the Marine Commandant was on it? How did they know he was and why was he there if it was just a normal oil shipment to the Marine’s stockyards? Who leaked that information and who hired the mercenaries? And they all died, why? If they were gonna blow up the tanker you’d think they’d get off of it first.”

“Maybe it was a suicide mission,” Rosemary said.

“The news said there were over two dozen mercenaries, and the leader of their whole outfit. Why would he come along on a suicide mission?”

“Maybe it wasn’t supposed to be a suicide mission and the Marines just put up more resistance than they were expecting,” Rosemary retorted, “why are you so determined to make this out like some kind of conspiracy?”

“Huh? But I wasn’t saying… I just think there’s too many unanswered questions right now, that’s
“It happened last night, Jack, it’ll take a while before they finish the investigation, let alone release it to the media.”

“I know but— how come the news networks aren’t asking these questions themselves? They’re so focused on the fact that the terrorists were Russian that they barely mention they’re mercenaries, so now they’re placing all the blame on Russia instead of speculating on who hired them. How do we know it wasn’t Al-Qaeda?”

“Why do you care if the blame gets placed on Russia?”

“Um… because I don’t think we need any more international tension?”

“Oh, Jack,” Rosemary sighed, “you don’t know anything about politics.”

Nadine slammed a newspaper down on the table in front of Miller. ECOLOGICAL DISASTER IN NEW YORK CITY, the headline read, TERRORIST ATTACK SINKS OIL TANKER, KILLS 117 INCLUDING MARINE COMMANDANT. Miller lowered his sunglasses, squinted at it, then raised an eyebrow at her.

“I told you something big was happening,” she said.

“Ocelot’s an ecoterrorist now?” Miller said.

“Ocelot was sighted in San José, Costa Rica around the same time this was happening. He didn’t get his hands dirty with this one.”

“Wait, what was he doing in San José and how do you know-“

“Everyone in the La Li Lu Le Lo is suspicious of him - except for the higher-ups. If I want someone to keep an eye on him, that isn’t hard to find.”

“Yeah, until they turn up dead like Jameson did.”

“Jameston’s problem was that he didn’t get his findings out before getting killed,” Nadine scoffed. “And you’re missing my point. This has Ocelot written all over it but he clearly was not even present.”

“So he got someone else to do his dirty work for him, what else is new?”

“Since I don’t know who he used, he must have passed the job off to someone in his little terrorist cell.”

Miller stared at her blankly. “And?”

“And,” Nadine said, visibly fed up with Miller’s unwillingness to follow her conversational lead, “this tanker thing was something he was ordered to do by the La Li Lu Le Lo. He’s using the ‘resistance’ to further our goals.”

“…let me get this straight. You’re mad that Ocelot didn’t betray us.”

“Fuck you.”

“So you can insult me in English!” Miller said in mock surprise.
“Divorcing you was the best $5,000 I ever spent.”

“You paid for that out of my bank account, you witch.”

“You’re getting off topic!” Nadine shouted, putting her hands on her hips. “The point is—“

“—Ocelot’s unironically working with the terrorists and has no qualms about setting us up using our own resources, I know, I know.” Miller yawned and stretched. “It’s Ocelot. If it makes you feel any better, this could just be an elaborate triple-cross and he’s really on our side after all.”

“I doubt that.”

“Do we know why Ocelot would have an interest in taking down the La Li Lu Le Lo?” he continued, cracking his neck.

“…” Nadine sat down with a huff, folding her arms. “You know him better than I do.”

“Just because we used to fuck doesn’t mean I ever got to see what he is underneath all his bullshit. If there’s anything left, anyway. I saw him go into withdrawal once, it wasn’t pretty.”

“Great,” she said flatly, “our greatest enemy fried his brain back in the 70’s and no one knows what his motivation really is.”

“I don’t know if no one knows, it’s just that I don’t know.” He shrugged.

“…I still think I would feel better if we could get Catou away from the terrorists. Whatever happened to ‘not getting roped into this just because you were a convenient target’? You implied you could still use your connections with the terrorists.”

Miller raised his hands. “Maybe,” he said, “I don’t want to play my hand too soon, though - not while the La Li Lu Le Lo still has its own spies in the resistance. I seriously doubt any of them were on that tanker when it sunk.”

“So what?”

“So if and when Ocelot ferrets out whoever else is leaking information, I’ll cooperate with you. But I don’t think Cathy will leave them so easily, not after what she’s seen by now.”

“She doesn’t have to leave them voluntarily.”

“I don’t think kidnapping her is going to fix her relationship with you.”

Nadine snorted. “She already hates me, thanks to you.”

“I didn’t turn her against you,” Miller countered, “you did that yourself by running off and leaving her alone with me. Even at her age she knew what it meant when you didn’t try to get custody—“

“That wasn’t my choice,” Nadine hissed, suddenly incensed to the point of making her earlier anger look like mild irritation.

Miller blinked, dropping out of his defensiveness more out of surprise than anything else. “…?”

Nadine shook her head. “Laisse tomber,” she said, “it doesn’t matter anymore if Catou hates me or not, I just don’t want her to be involved in this.”

“You’re the one who got her involved in this, Nadine. If you hadn’t asked her where I was she’d still
“That’s because I wanted her to be under the La Li Lu Le Lo’s protection from the start - I knew she would be involved in this no matter what I did,” she said. Sadness crept into her voice. “She is your daughter, after all.”

Chapter End Notes

Laisse tomber = forget it. (Colloquial, so not sure if it’s accurate for a Seychellois to say?)
Chapter 103

Meryl looked into the empty tampon box and swore.

“You okay, commander?” Akiba said.

“I gotta make a quick run to the nearest store,” Meryl said, grabbing her coat and wallet. “I won’t be long. Don’t let Dr. Hunter wander off.”

“No problem, she’s been passed out in front of that documentary Ed found for the past hour.”

It was nice, at least, to get some time to herself without having Naomi tag along. After last time, Meryl had nixed the whole “using Naomi as bait to lure out Wolf” thing and pretty much just gave up on ever finding Wolf in a way that wasn’t essentially a random encounter. Leaving Naomi with the boys and popping over to the shop by herself wasn’t going to have any bearing on said encounter rate, Meryl was pretty sure.

In the feminine hygiene aisle of the pharmacy a few blocks away, it ocurred to Meryl very belatedly that Naomi had, in the whole time she’d been imposed on RAT PT 01, never once asked Meryl to lend (“lend”) her a pad or anything. Her getting her own products - while that would have been preferable - was impossible, because she wasn’t allowed to go anywhere by herself and certainly didn’t carry money. Meryl was also sure that she would have noticed if Naomi had just been taking her stuff without asking. She was also sure that everyone would notice if she were just bleeding everywhere.

Maybe she’s just too damn skinny, Meryl thought. It had never happened to her personally but she knew that when women dropped below a certain weight they tended to stop having periods. It could also be a warning sign for any number of health problems, which made Meryl wonder if she could talk her bosses into sticking Naomi back in the hospital. Probably not. In all likelihood it was just because of those pills she was always taking.

The alternative being, of course, that Naomi had somehow gotten pregnant, which was frankly too horrifying a prospect for Meryl to even consider — especially because the only men she’d been around had been the members of RAT PT 01! If one of them fucked Naomi Meryl would have him court-martialed. Naomi’s brain was clearly made of pudding. There was no way she could consent.

Shaking her head to herself, Meryl made her purchase and stepped back out into the street. It was the middle of the day, hot, moderately overcast with a strong wind blowing over the Guadalete River. The streets were moderately busy for now - a mixture of locals and US military personnel from the nearby joint naval station, which was putting up RAT PT 01’s accommodations in the sense that they were paying for the rooms at the inn since the Army contingent there took issue with the CID carting around a civilian. Boy, this whole assignment was messy as hell. All Meryl wanted was for the remnants of FOXHOUND to face justice for blowing up Shadow Moses and killing Solid Snake…

A dog barked. Meryl jumped and turned towards the source.

It was fucking Bêdeng again, and Meryl was so not emotionally prepared to hurt a dog no matter how much her here meant that Wolf was nearby and probably about to sicc the bitch on her—

To Meryl’s surprise, Bêdeng just cocked her head at her, then turned around and trotted away. Meryl blinked. She was fully expecting to get mauled; she still had bandages wrapped around her hand
from last time. Maybe Wolf was nearby but not interested in antagonizing Meryl as long as she didn’t have Naomi with her.

Bêdeng stopped and turned around again, looking at Meryl from a short distance away. It almost seemed like she wanted Meryl to follow her… well, Meryl reasoned, if she went straight back to the inn from here then that would probably lead Wolf straight to Naomi, assuming she didn’t already know where RAT PT 01 was holed up. (She was probably expecting them to have actual room and board at NAVSTA Rota.) So, she decided to not head back immediately and in the meantime might as well see what Bêdeng was up to.

She had, after all, brought her sidearm.

Meryl followed Bêdeng (who occasionally stopped to look back at her, to see if she was keeping up) through the narrow winding back-streets of the town. Where’d Wolf get a dog this smart, anyway? She said she was half wolf, so that probably explained it, but still… wait, there had been wolfdogs at Shadow Moses, Meryl recalled, and Bêdeng seemed about the right age to have been picked up then. Meryl felt great distaste suddenly. It was like the poor puppy had been taken as a trophy when her whole pack got literally nuked.

Something small and hard prodded the small of Meryl’s back. “You really should not let yourself be distracted by Bêdeng, even if she is very cute and fluffy. Hands up.”

“Wolf! What the—“

Bêdeng barked, wagging her tail. “Shouting will not help,” Wolf said, her lips almost touching Meryl’s ear. “It’s siesta time, no one will come for you.”

Begrudgingly, Meryl dropped her grocery sack and raised her arms. Bêdeng nosed the bag while Wolf sneaked a hand under Meryl’s shirt to unclasp her underarm holster and confiscate it. Meryl felt really, really stupid right now; Bêdeng had been a very obvious trap and she had quite literally walked right into it.

Though she was alone. If Naomi were here it’d be a different story but as it stood Meryl could just call this… reconnaissance.

“Where is your radio?”

“I didn’t bring it with me.”

“You are not stupid. I know you would not leave your team without a way to communicate with them, even if you are just shopping. Where is it?” Whatever was poking her back pressed harder.

“Under my shirt collar,” Meryl admitted. Wolf quickly divested her of that, too, then finally stepped back from her. Meryl glanced over her shoulder irritably, arms still raised. Wolf was smirking, one hand in a finger-gun position. “You’re not even armed?”

“I have your Desert Eagle,” Wolf said.

“You just held me up with your hand? Oh my god.”

“You must be so embarrassed,” Wolf said agreeably. Bêdeng picked up Meryl’s bag with her mouth and gave it to Wolf, who looked in it. “Really?” she said. “Tampax?”

“Shut up,” Meryl snapped, flushing.
“You know rayon is not nearly as good as cotton. It is so drying and you are much more likely to get TTS.”

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you not to give unsolicited advice?!”

“I don’t have a mother,” Wolf deadpanned. “Now follow me.”

“Huh?”

If Meryl wanted her gun and her radio back, she didn’t have much of a choice but to follow, but well, it didn’t seem like Wolf was particularly interested in harming her, at any rate. Probably wanted to just pester her about Naomi and her ever-so-mysterious motivations. She hoped Wolf wasn’t expecting much of a resistance when it came to information on Naomi’s whereabouts; Meryl had little doubt it would be ridiculously easy for Wolf to find out where RAT PT 01 was currently stationed even without any help.

“What do you want from me?” Meryl asked as she followed Wolf up some stairs on the side of a quiet residential building. “I’m not going to just hand over Dr. Hunter.”

“Not even if I hold you as her ransom?”

“Am I a hostage now? You know that won’t end well for you.”

“Just like old times, no?” Wolf said, ignoring Meryl’s second sentence. Meryl rolled her eyes as Wolf let her into her ramshackle hideout. It looked like Wolf had only been there for a few days at the absolute most. “You can use the bathroom if you want. I trust that you will not try to escape from there. Or cannot, rather.”

“Uh… generous.” This was way too casual for a hostage situation - Wolf had to be up to something else.

Wolf’s bathroom was, somehow, despite the fact that Meryl knew Wolf literally could not possibly have been here that long, a disaster. Mostly because the counter around the sink was littered with loose (some crushed) diazepam pills and Wolf had… apparently… given Bêdeng’s coat a summer trim in the bathtub and then neglected to rinse it out afterwards…

Wolf did take showers occasionally, right? …she had to. There were long greenish-blond strands of hair mixed in with the dog hair.

“What the hell did you do to your bathtub?” Meryl asked when she exited the bathroom. She still felt dirty despite washing her hands.

“I shaved,” Wolf said. She was lounging on the couch, scratching Bêdeng behind the ears, and had tucked Meryl’s weapon and radio into her oversize pants pockets.

“…shaved what?”

“I am a Kurd,” Wolf said, “and eastern women tend to be rather hairy. Plus I only shave if I am expecting to fuck.”

Meryl blanched. “Who are you expecting to…?”

“Hm?” Bêdeng started thumping her leg against the floor.

“I'll have you know I'm straight,” Meryl said quickly.
“Do not worry. I used to think that too until I met a really hot female sniper.”

Meryl got the impression that she really didn’t want to unlock Wolf’s backstory. Instead she sat down - on the floor, since there was nowhere else to sit besides the couch - as conspicuously far away from Wolf as possible.

Despite the uncomfortable innuendos, this was still way too casual for kidnapping for ransom.

“Alright, so what is it that you want?” Meryl said, “if you just want to hold me hostage in exchange for my men to hand over Naomi, you would have contacted them by now. You have my radio.”

“I will contact them, but not yet. I want to talk to you first.”

Meryl bit back her immediate impulse to say I don’t, because frankly, she did. “Okay,” she said instead. “About what?”

“Shadow Moses.”

She exhaled. Great. “What happened back there? What were you thinking?!”

Wolf tossed her hair. “You think it was just a terrorist attack aimed at gaining power, no? All we wanted was REX and the ransom?”

“Liquid seems dumb enough to attempt it.”

“Well, yes, but even he had his reasons. We all did.” She sat up. “Do you ever wonder who really runs the American government?”

“You’d better not say ‘the Jews’,” Meryl said.

“Compelling, but no. It is not lizard people either, before you ask. Just mega-rich oligarchs who stole a bunch of money from Russia and China during World War Two.”

Meryl raised an eyebrow.

“And then,” Wolf said, “with this money, they committed a bunch of human rights violations and eventually built a massive computer network that runs the government using algorithms.”

“Alg…? What?”

Wolf shrugged. “I do not really know how to it works… my area of expertise is guns, not computers. But I do know that they switched over to have computers make all their high-level decisions so as to remove the biases and foibles of humans.”

“…you expect me to believe that everyone in the government takes their orders from a computer?”

“Well, have you ever seen who’s giving them orders?”

“I don’t think anyone’s giving them orders,” Meryl said, “I think our representatives make their own decisions, and if anyone’s influencing that then it’s just their constituents.”

“Hmm.” Wolf gave Meryl a severe look. “I figured that you would be naïve, but I did not think that you are stupid.”

“I’m stupid for not blindly believing that some kind of AI controls the government?? I would have believed lizard people more easily!”
“You are stupid for not believing the truth when it was shown to you.” Wolf got up and walked over to Meryl, crossing her arms.

“You didn’t show me anything!” Meryl snapped, also standing. “Except that you and your fellow terrorists are crazy. You killed people over a conspiracy theory!”

“Conspiracy theories are not, by definition, false,” Wolf said, getting way too close and putting a hand on Meryl’s shoulder. She looked so disappointed in her. Meryl scoffed. “Besides, we have always kept casualties to a minimum.”

“Torturing Snake to death on Shadow Moses was keeping casualties to a minimum?!?!?”

“No,” Wolf said, “but Snake did not get tortured to death.”

“I saw— hmph. Even if he was still technically alive after what Ocelot did to him, the bombing still.”

“No, no. Snake is alive.”

Meryl stopped. “What?”

Wolf squeezed her shoulder, almost reassuringly. “Snake is alive, he is with us. He is on our side now.”

Meryl processed that for a moment, then slapped Wolf’s hand away, shoving her off. “That’s not funny or cute.”

“I am not lying.”

“Come on! Why would Solid Snake join a bunch of cult-y delusional terrorists?! He went in there to take you down! He gave his life for it!”

“We faked his death and kidnapped him,” Wolf said, “and once the situation was explained to him, he decided to join our side.”

“Bullshit!”

Wolf sighed, glaring at her. Meryl belatedly remembered that this was technically a hostage situation and yelling at her captor probably wasn’t the wisest course of action.

“Relax,” Wolf said, shaking her head. “I do not like killing women or children, unless the woman is specifically my target, which you are not. And frankly, Meryl, I am starting to think of you as more of a child than a woman anyway.”

“…” At least that meant Wolf wouldn’t get touchy-feely again. Hopefully.

Wolf returned to the couch, sitting down next to the Bêdeng again. She carelessly tossed Meryl her radio. “Here,” she said, “call your boys. Naomi in exchange for your life. It is an easy trade, I know that you do not like her and consider her detrimental to your mission.”

Meryl hesitated. “And when you get Naomi, you’ll kill her?”

“She may know about the ‘conspiracy’, so I will interrogate her first. But yes, I will kill her. She escaped my hunt once, she’s not going to do it again.”

“……”
“Besides, if you summon the rest of your team here you could make a good case to your boss about how you were just using the exchange as a pretext to attempt arresting me. It won’t work, of course, but you can say you tried.”

Meryl rubbed her arm where Wolf had shot her over two years ago. It still hurt sometimes. It somehow hurt more knowing that all that had happened for… this.

She flicked on the radio. “Ed? You there?”

“Commander? Where have you been? We thought you’d be back thirty minutes ago.”

“There’s been a… situation. I was abducted by Wolf.”

“What?!”

Meryl cringed. For dignity’s sake she was going to leave out the part where she followed a dog halfway through town while fully aware it belonged to the enemy. “I’m unharmed, but she disarmed me. She’ll release me if we surrender Dr. Hunter to her.”

“…and are we going to do that?”

Meryl glanced at Wolf. Wolf nodded imperiously.

“Bring her here,” Meryl said, “I could use the backup but Wolf won’t let you get close if you don’t have her with you.”

“Roger that. I’ll tell Akiba to go get her.”

“Huh? Did she go somewhere?”

Ed didn’t reply immediately. When Meryl’s radio link went live again, it was Akiba talking.

“Uh, funny thing, commander…”

“What is it? This had better be good.”

“We don’t know where Dr. Hunter went.”

Meryl almost dropped her radio - threw a glance at Wolf, who seemed just as bemused as she was. “What? What do you mean you don’t know where she went?”

“That’s just it, we can’t find her. It’s like she just disappeared into thin air.”

“Dammit, you were supposed to be watching her!” Meryl put her fists on her hips. “Wolf! Do you know anything about this?!”

“Not a thing,” Wolf said, “bring me an article of her clothing and I can have Bêdeng track her, though—“

“Like hell! We don’t need your help. We’ll find her and we’ll find her before you do. …give me back my gun.”

“May the best woman win…”

“Mei Ling, please go talk to Solidus,” Otacon begged. “The rest of us can only take so much
“sulking.”

“He’s a jerk,” Mei Ling said, sniffing.

“No, I think he just has the social awareness of a potato and that’s saying something coming from me. At least give him a chance to explain himself.”

“I don’t owe him anything!”

“Yeah, you do! As long as you live in the same house you owe him that much. Or at least you owe the rest of us that much.”

Mei Ling grumbled. “Fine. Where is he?”

…

“Mei Ling,” Solidus said, surprised that she was even approaching him. “Can we—“

“Are you going to apologize to me? Because if you aren’t I don’t wanna waste my time.”

“Of course I—“

“What you said was really hurtful,” Mei Ling said, “I feel like you don’t see me as another human being, or at least as another adult. I’m not a dumb middle schooler and I’m not a prop.”

“I know,” Solidus said, frowning, “I didn’t mean to offend. I’m very sorry you took it that way, it wasn’t my intention at all. I’ll choose my words more carefully in the future to avoid any further misunderstandings, I do value our friendship and—”

“Stop being so diplomatic and give me an actual apology!” Mei Ling said, stomping her foot. “It’s like you don’t even know what you did wrong! Did you learn everything you know about relationships from romantic comedies?!”

“Well,” Solidus replied, “frankly, yes.”

“…” Mei Ling deflated, then after a second or two of staring blankly at Solidus covered her face with her hands.

“Growing up it was always assumed that I would never have the time, reason, or opportunity to form any sort of meaningful interpersonal relationship,” he attempted to explain, “I struggle with even making friends and my only context for romance comes from movies and Ocelot. I really wasn’t trying to insult you or imply anything about you. I will admit I was rash, and insensitive, but…”

“Now I feel mean,” Mei Ling said, face still in her hands.

“I do think I understand why you’re upset, Mei Ling. I was angry at Ocelot and thought you would be willing to do me a favor, and didn’t take your feelings into account.”

“Yeah, and I didn’t take the fact that you literally don’t know how people work into account.” Mei Ling sighed and looked at him apologetically. “I overreacted.”

“…”

“Umm, don’t feel bad about your social skills, you’re plenty self-assured without them! Lao Tzu said, ‘He who knows others is wise. He who knows himself is enlightened.’”
“I don’t think my social skills are that bad,” Solidus said. “For the most part I haven’t had any trouble.”

“Oh, I thought maybe you were insulted by me calling you heartless just because you misunderstood something. Otacon told me you’ve been sulking for days.”

“I haven’t been sulking,” Solidus said, a touch defensively, “it’s just that I haven’t been feeling well.”

“Uh-huh. It’s okay, I’m sorry I slapped you, Solidus. And I forgive you for being so clueless.”

“I wasn’t sulking… I’ve been sick, I’ve lost weight.”

Mei Ling peered at him. “Yeah, now that you mention it… you do look kind of haggard. Hey… is it just me, or are the whites of your eyes pretty… yellow?”

Solidus shrugged. “That could just be this hallway lighting.”

“What’s the matter? Maybe you should go talk to Cathy.”

“It’s just stomach problems…” He frowned suddenly, then put his hand against the wall. “Though I believe I should go lie down now.”

“You okay, Solidus? When was the last time you ate? You haven’t joined us for dinner the past few days.”

“Haven’t been hungry…”

Mei Ling grabbed his arm. “Let’s go get you some lunch,” she said, “you’re all pale and sweaty. I think you should talk to Cathy, too.”

“Mm.”

“How long has this been going on? You should have said something!”

“…I’m getting a call.”

“Hey! Don’t avoid the subject!”

“I’m serious, I’m getting a call,” Solidus said, pulling a silently vibrating cell phone out of his pocket and flipping it open. “Hello? …Vamp? What happened?”

“I thought Vamp had Codec,” Mei Ling started, but Solidus shushed her. She made an annoyed expression.

“…when did this— Old Boy is? What about Chinaman? …oh.”

Mei Ling’s annoyed expression deepened.

“Fortune and Colonel Jackson were still with her mother, though, weren’t they? What?”

“Huh? What’s going on?”

Solidus was silent for a while, then from the looks of things Vamp abruptly hung up - Solidus, vaguely startled-looking, closed his phone and just held it in his hand for a minute.
“Solidus?” Mei Ling prompted.

“Dead Cell has fallen.”

“What?? What do you mean?”

“There was… a raid, by other Navy personnel. Colonel Jackson was arrested. …Vamp and Fatman escaped, Old Boy and Chinaman were both killed. Fortune was still at her mother’s house for the funeral.”

“Wait, they- killed?! And Colonel Jackson was arrested, why?? He was so nice!”

“The Patriots must have suspected them… I’m sorry, Mei Ling, I think I need to go sit down. I’m not… h…”

Mei Ling was still holding his arm as he tilted, and toppled over backwards out of her grip and started seizing.

“Oh my god!!!”

She had learned first aid back when she’d been in the ROTC, but first aid guidelines for seizures were limited to just pulling Solidus’ head into her lap (the only pillow-like thing around) so he wouldn’t bang it against the floor and frantically calling for help.

Otacon poked his head in the hallway. “What’s— oh, hey, Mei Ling, that’s not-“

“Go get Cathy!”

“What happened??”

“Just go!! Now!!!”
Chapter Notes

It's April 30th (in most of my readers' time zones), so I am posting the first chapter of the third AND FINAL and longest arc.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
**Paradise Lost Army**

**EVA**
Tatyana / Tanya / Matka Puku / Big Mama

**Boris Vyacheslavovich Popov**

**Radoslava Kolář**
Radka

**Dr. Ilya Dragovich Madnar**
Elliot / Yelena Dragovna / Elien

**Kovalam Udayasooriyan Neela**

**Charlie**

**Dead Cell**

**Vamp**

**Helena Dolph Jackson**
Fortune / Queen

**Fatman**

<p>|  |  | current location: Vysočina Region, Czech Republic |
|  |  | current location: Vysočina Region, Czech Republic |
|  |  | current location: Vysočina Region, Czech Republic |
|  |  | current location: Prague, Czech Republic |
|  |  | current location: Prague, Czech Republic |
|  |  | current location: Mistelbach, Austria |
|  |  | current location: New York City, New York |
|  |  | current location: New York City, New York |
|  |  | current location: New York City, New York |</p>
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## Chapter End Notes

credits:
Liquid stolen from soulfulquail
Cathy is a drawing of tennis player Naomi Osaka from a news article
Frank is an oil painting by artist Kate Tova
McGolden is a panel from an X-Files comic book again
Dr. Madnar drawn by nightcheesus
Sunny is a slightly edited Yotsuba
Nadine is from an animé I guess I couldn't find the proper sauce (・ω・´)
“So,” Solidus said, flexing the arm Catherine had drawn blood from, “your verdict?”

“If it were up to me I wouldn’t even let you out of this trailer,” Catherine said, resting her chin on her fist. She was glumly sitting in front of her computer in her ‘office’. “Let alone participate in a hostile takeover of a government installation. You must be nuts. You’ve lost weight again, you’re down to 140 pounds.”

“That’s what the muscle exosuit is for.”

Catherine sighed loudly, then stood up. “Look - I get it. Ocelot said you’ve had an age cap since you were born and it’s pretty obvious that this cap was in your pancreas the whole time. I’m not going to mince words, you don’t have much time left.”

“I’m well aware,” Solidus said, “but you’ve bought me a few extra years so far.”

“Not really. I can load you up with pills to keep the symptoms under control, but I can’t do a thing about the tumor. The fact that it hasn’t spread or blocked anything really important so far is basically a medical miracle. Normally with pancreatic cancer, by the time you get symptoms it’s already too late because it’s probably already metastasized…”

“You’re not going to talk me out of this, Catherine.”

“I know. But it’s reckless as hell — it’s not that I want to take away your chance to go down in a blaze of glory or something, but I think we’d all be better off if you just stayed behind the scenes as a strategist. You know, drawing up plans and organizing things.” She folded her arms. “Things you can do on bedrest.”

“There’s no reason to worry if we know that my time left is limited, anyway,” Solidus argued.

“Don’t act like you aren’t scared to die!”

“…”

Catherine stepped back behind her computer. “Your blood glucose levels are still too low - have you eaten today?”

“I had breakfast.”

“Could you keep it down?”

“No.”

“Is your pain still located more towards your back, or your stomach?”

“My back.”

“Hopefully that means the tumor isn’t pressing on your stomach or small intestine too much…” she sat back in her office chair and rubbed her chin. “I can do a scintiscan to see if you’ve developed gastroparesis yet, but I need radioactive material for that and obviously I don’t have any on hand. Frankly, it’s better if your weight loss these past two years has all been from cancer cachexia, because at least then you’re still physically capable of eating. If you’ve got gastroparesis then there’s no more room in your stomach for anything.”
“Hm.”

“You know glucagon kits are hard to come by in our market, right? Keep your blood sugar up, I don’t want you having more seizures.”

“I’d rather not have any more seizures either,” Solidus said. “Especially not during—“

“I can’t believe I’m even letting you go! You’re literally dying of cancer!!”

“Did you ever get graded on bedside manner in nursing school…?”

“I was told mine wasn’t the best,” Catherine said flatly. “Ugh. There’s gotta be some way to actually treat you, not just manage symptoms indefinitely. But surgery or chemotherapy just aren’t feasible considering we’re internationally wanted terrorists. Hell, I doubt surgery is medically feasible anymore, you need chemotherapy. And I’m not an oncologist!”

“Surely those aren’t the only two options?”

“I’d say the third option is palliative care, but you’re literally already on that, it’s just taking you longer to die than we all thought.”

Despite Catherine’s sarcastic tone, that made Solidus smile briefly. “It’d be nice if we had the same sort of nanomachines Vamp has,” he said.

Catherine nodded absently. “Absolutely wouldn’t work for cancer, though,” she said, “those stupid things are designed to accelerate the body’s natural healing processes to crazy Wolverine levels. The problem is that cancer cells are your cells, just totally out of control. At best nothing would happen. More likely it’d ‘heal’ the tumor or even help it grow.”

“True,” Solidus said, “but, now that I think about… didn’t the person who invented those nanomachines mysteriously survive brain cancer?”

There was a long pause. Catherine and Solidus stared at each other.

“You think Naomi Hunter has anti-cancer nanomachines?” Catherine said at length.

“It’s a possibility. If she does have them, they’d be in her blood. You could extract them, no?”

“Yeah, if I had a sample. But how are we supposed to get a sample when nobody’s known where she is since right after the tanker thing? Even with Wolf actively searching for her… for all we know she’s already died.”

“Somehow I get the feeling that Wolf would have found out if she did die.”

“…” Catherine suddenly slammed her hand on her desk. “Then,” she shouted, “we’ve got to go find Naomi!!”

“Now?”

“Yes now, you’re dying ばか! If we find Naomi and get her nanomachines, then maybe you’ll live long enough to at least see the revolution through to the end!”

“If anyone’s going to find her, it’s Wolf,” Solidus said, “and we need her at the Big Shell.”

“Sure, but—“
“I might be killed there anyway,” he said firmly, “there’s no point sending a valuable soldier out on an errand that could very well be rendered meaningless by the thirtieth. This is something to think about after, and only after, our mission in New York is completed.”

Catherine frowned at him for a moment, then sighed again, then glared. “Fine,” she said. “It’s your health, not mine. And if you get killed at the Big Shell then I can stop losing sleep over this, great.”

“You’re losing sleep over me? Flattering.”

“Don’t get comfy, Solidus, I still think it’s weird that your girlfriend is literally my age.”

“……”

Solidus looked awfully surly as he returned from his checkup out in Catherine’s medical trailer (pseudo-affectionately dubbed “the Cathymobile”, which was just a translation of Octopus referring to it as “el Catacoche” once). It was parked right outside the New York safehouse, disguised as a boring just-retired empty-nester white married couple-type camper; this safehouse was in a convenient but rather risky location, being so close to the city, and was the sort of modest home that said just-retired empty-nester couple would live in, which made it horrendously small considering that for the first time since the Virginia raid four years ago the whole team was in one location.

Because, of course, they were gearing up to sack another Patriot installment and highjack another Metal Gear.

Solidus had planned mostly the whole thing, though he’d often consulted Ocelot for his insight on the Patriot plans with the place. (Their personal relationship Solidus had deemed unsalvageable, but their working relationship wasn’t any more tense than it had ever been. Ocelot had a knack for that sort of dynamic.) Some of the more… grandiose aspects he’d quietly scrapped after his brothers caught wind of them and wouldn’t stop making fun of him; Solid and Liquid were truly terrifying when they actually agreed on something, and they tandem ripped Solidus’ plans to metaphorical shreds, saying that if New York went offline the gangs would just take over and Solidus would know that if he’d ever left the Upper East Side. His dreams of a republic quashed, Solidus just decided to stick to the more general plan of seizing the uplink to the Patriot’s AI network…

Tomorrow they launched, because tomorrow President James Johnson was making a special visit to the so-called state-of-the-art environmental cleanup facility, ostensibly as a way to remind his voters of all his ‘going green’ campaigning in 2008. Everyone would have to be in position before he arrived - and the Secret Service had to be gone, too — so tomorrow would be an early start just to get to the Hudson River in time and everyone was preparing in their own ways.

Charitably speaking, of course.

Mei Ling and Otacon were still working on a way to crack the security systems at the facility without having any prior access - it was starting to look like one of them would have to actually be on-site tomorrow morning, and they were arguing about which one of them should go: or, if a hardware- or software-based approach would be more effective. They’d already decided on disabling the biometrics completely, since there wouldn’t be time to overwrite them.

Wolf had taken a bunch of diazepam and passed out in the bedroom. Her assignment was looking after the high-priority prisoner(s) that the Patriots might prefer to have killed rather than let them be in the rebels’ company. She’d complained loudly and endlessly ever since being informed of this since it meant she had to be at the Big Shell, but there was no one better for the job and she literally hadn’t made any progress on her search for Naomi in the past few years, unless draining a few bank
accounts counted as progress.

Octopus’ whole contribution had been providing the uniforms they would need for both the initial infiltration and the twins being assigned to keep an eye on whoever the Patriots would specifically send in to take them out; Ocelot had been very, very certain that a FOXHOUND-successor-type agent would be sent in, though he didn’t seem to have any actual information on who that would be. Octopus was demoted to hanging back to assist Catherine if necessary after the eventual exfiltration, and for now he was making dinner.

Mantis was also not going to be physically present at the Big Shell, since the ever-increasing prevalence of psychic insulation cybernetics/nanomachines made him increasingly out of his depth, and brute psychokinesis wouldn’t be well-applied here. He was good with first aid and surprisingly got along with Catherine, though, so he had no complaints about being her nursing assistant. In the meantime he was sitting with Liquid on the couch, or rather resting his head on Liquid’s shoulder as the latter sat in his lap playing *Pokémon Platinum*. They’d gotten ridiculously domestic over the past two years, mostly because Mantis had calmed way the fuck down; even his appearance reflected that, since he’d strayed from (visibly) wearing tight leather all the time and now mostly borrowed Otacon (the second-skinniest person available)’s clothes and he’d even grown out his hair, though it was embarrassingly fine, patchy, and prone to shedding. Liquid had developed a tic of clicking the wrist on his prosthetic arm when he was agitated, which was annoying but he didn’t fly off the handle as often anymore. Living with them was obnoxious because they *still* had loud sex but, much to everyone’s relief, it was no longer preceded by screaming at each other in Kikongo. All in all they were much happier together, though they still hadn’t gotten around to acquiring actual wedding rings and Liquid still wore that stupid collar…

“Don’t you think you have better things to be doing than playing a video game?” Solidus said, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m trying to level up my Gabite so it will evolve into a Garchomp,” Liquid said without looking up from his DS.

“Your what?”

“I think the Gabite is fine the way it is,” Mantis said, also not looking at Solidus. He was absently threading a hand through Liquid’s hair, which had gotten noticeably paler as of late.

“Yes,” Liquid said, leaning his head into Mantis’ touch, “it’s very cute, isn’t it? But I’ve heard that Garchomp is ridiculously powerful…”

The remnants of Dead Cell weren’t at the safehouse; they were currently en route to New York City in Vamp’s old van. It was a little surprising Vamp and Fortune were tolerating being with Fatman in such tight quarters — obviously, the two of them had been pretty effected by relatively recent events. Vamp had lost a lover and several close friends; Fortune had lost both of her parents, her husband, her unborn child, and her previous cool and carefree personality, sinking into a deep depression that had lasted the whole past two years. Fatman, meanwhile, continued to only care about his bombs. At least that was an applicable skill.

Also en route to New York were the remains of Colonel Gurlukovich’s mercenary army, now headed up by Olga. A whole other bank account had been drained to hire them as extra muscle/cannon fodder for the upcoming attack. The fact that Olga openly, murderously despised both Ocelot and Solid wasn’t taken into account.

“We hired them for their discretion, not their loyalty,” Ocelot said where he was sitting in the kitchen with Solid. He was drinking straight vodka, though Solid was still stubbornly on the wagon and
drinking coffee instead. (Shitty decaf coffee so he’d be able to get some sleep tonight.) “You’re going to be essentially placing yourself on the opposite side, anyway.”

“Which I’m sure she’ll use as an excuse to shoot me.” While Liquid had grown more white hairs, Solid had started to take on a bit of salt-and-pepper coloring, especially around the temples. He looked like he’d aged ten years in the past four.

“Frankly, I think that once their contract is up she’ll order her men to turn on all of us. We’ll just have to put some distance between them and us before that happens.”

“Right,” Solid grunted, “distance.” It wasn’t hard to figure out that Ocelot considered the Gurlukovich soldiers to be *eminently* disposable, despite his claims of having a high professional opinion of them. “You’re sure they’re going to send in a solo stealth operative when we repel the SEALs? Why are you so sure they’ll send in the SEALs after us, anyway?”

“They’re close by, and have close ties to the Secret Service,” Ocelot said, “besides, Dead Cell wants their involvement publicized. They want people to know just how far off the fringe the Navy has pushed them. And the Navy is, of course, going to want to clean up its own mess.”

“Its own mess, huh? Isn’t Arsenal Gear a Navy project?”

“Yes, but it’s not the SEALs already stationed there. They’ll send the SEALs in because they’ll want the best of the best protecting their project once they realize it’s in danger. Not that *that* part is public knowledge.”

“But you don’t think we’ll have a problem with them.”

“Of course not,” Ocelot said, a little smug. “The only problem will be keeping Liquid out of that Harrier before they land. It’ll be hard to pose as a couple of SEALs if they all got shot down on the way in.”

“And you think that the agent they send in will have some kind of access credentials to GW?”

“Not necessarily, but their actions at that point should clue us in on how we can gain access ourselves.”

“I don’t think I like how this whole plan just turns into ‘We’ll figure it out when we get there’ after a certain point,” Solid grumbled, drinking his coffee.

Ocelot shrugged. “The Patriots certainly don’t make things easy.”

“You would know.”

Frank barked as Benedict wandered into the room, sniffing around for the kibbles that Bêdeng had scattered all over the floor earlier. That was Benedict’s cue to trot over to Frank and start playing with him, an attitude that was probably encouraged by the fact that Liquid had as of late been physically incapable of going 24 hours without breaking something while roughhousing with Benedict.

“…no one’s going to die this time around,” Solid said, mostly to himself. “Or at least, not any of us, and not any of the hostages.”

“Are you still bothered by the fact that we’ll be taking hostages?” Ocelot said, sipping his vodka in a moderately disapproving manner. “You know we won’t be taken seriously if we don’t. And we’ll definitely need the President.”
“I’m not saying we shouldn’t do it - I just don’t have to be comfortable with it.”

“True enough. We can let the hostages go once Arsenal Gear is activated, anyway. We won’t need the pretense anymore at that point.”

“How, though? We’ll be in the middle of the Hudson River. You expecting them to just swim all the way to shore?”

“We’ll have helicopters,” Ocelot said, “and Liquid isn’t the only one who knows how to fly one.”

“Otacon and Mei Ling used VR to learn how.”

“And flight is mostly automated nowadays. It’s safe enough that there’s no point in distracting yourself worrying.”

“I’m not worrying,” Solid said. “I’m just not a fan of getting people involved who shouldn’t be.”

“Still bitter about getting dragged away from Twin Lakes, hmm?”

“…” Solid looked down at Frank. “Regretting the past… that’s just a waste of time. It’s been four years, I’m as much a part of the team as anyone else here. Nothing I can do about that, except for see this through to the end.”

Ocelot raised his vodka glass to him slightly. “Well put,” he said. “The past can’t be changed, after all.”

“If it could we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Ocelot, are you ever going to ask him to fuck or are you two just going to run philosophical circles around each other forever?” Octopus interrupted, putting a lid on the pan. Solid choked on his coffee.

“I thought we were just having a conversation,” Ocelot said, annoyed.

“I do not want to fuck Ocelot,” Solid said. “No offense.”

“…” Ocelot didn’t bother to say ‘none taken’.

“Watch out, Snake,” Octopus said, jabbing his spatula towards him, “that’s how he gets to you.”

“I’m not trying to seduce him,” Ocelot said, “he’s too dense for that kind of subtlety.”

“Gee, thanks,” Solid said.

“Anytime.”

“Make sure you use a condom with him,” Octopus said to Solid, “you don’t know where he’s been.”

“I know where he’s been the past few years,” Solid said, hiding his face in his hands as he went slightly red.

“That thing with Liquid is long over,” Ocelot said coolly, “don’t bring it up, I’m sure Mantis can hear us from here.”

“Nowadays he’s more likely to have a tearful heart-to-heart with the boss than try to murder you again,” Octopus said.
“It’s been fifteen years since he last seriously tried to murder me.”

“You know what?” Solid said abruptly, picking his coffee mug back up. “I’m happy for Liquid and Mantis. It’s good that they sorted their, uh, relationship out.”

“I still think Cathy should put him on mood stabilizers,” Octopus said.

“Which one?”

“Both. Maybe Solidus too. Well, not mood stabilizers for him, I just wanna see what Adderall would do to him.”

“Can you even take Adderall if you have cancer?”

“Octopus, you’re going to burn the potatoes,” Ocelot said.

“I am not,” Octopus said irritably, turning back to the stove. “It’s fine. Carry on.”

“Actually, I think I’m good,” Solid said, standing up. “I’m gonna go see if Otacon and Mei Ling have figured out what’s going on yet.”

This left Ocelot and Octopus alone in the kitchen with the dogs, who were now lying on top of each other and panting. “Stop sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong,” Ocelot said to him.

“Can’t do that if I don’t have a nose,” Octopus retorted, stirring the potatoes.

“Don’t pretend that your motive is to lessen the drama around here. I thought things were finally settling down, are you just getting bored?”

“Actually, I think I prefer staying behind during the major engagements. Being Cathy’s bandaid bitch is more appealing than taking on the Secret Service, the Navy SEALs, and whatever souped-up brainwashed special agent they’re gonna use this time.”

“Hm. I wonder…” Ocelot put his chin on his hand.

“…” Octopus turned around. “You’re not seriously going to tell me you really don’t know who the agent is?” he said, flabbergasted.

“I wasn’t lying when I said I didn’t have the details. I know about a FOXHOUND successor project, but I wasn’t directly involved. I know the plans they have for the activation of Arsenal Gear, and why the President is making the visit tomorrow, but as for who they’ve got on retainer in case of trouble… all I can tell you is they’re already in New York.”

“Uh… huh. Well, I guess there was no reason to think you’d tell me specifically what you’re not willing to tell the rest of the team.”

“Mnhmm.”

“Because you still think we have a Patriot plant.”

“Oh, we absolutely do,” Ocelot said, “but that won’t be a problem much longer.”

“…”
Approximately 30 kilometers away from the Commandant Scott Dolph Memorial Hudson Bay
Marine Recovery Center, also known as SDMMRC or the “Big Shell”.

1:19 AM.

“Where did we even get a boat?” Wolf yawned.

“That’s your concern?” Octopus said. “Put the uniform on. You’re leaving in like twenty minutes.”

Wolf wrinkled her nose at it. “It’s ugly.”

“Yeah, they’re ostensibly designed for marine decontamination, not fashion. You can take it off once
you get rid of the Secret Service, jeez.”

Wolf opted to change in front of everyone else. Otacon went bright pink and looked away. No one
else really cared enough to. It was Wolf. This was normal.

“You’re not taking Bêdeng with us,” Solid said.

“But she’s useful.”

“She can’t climb ladders.”

“Where are they?” Solidus sighed, checking the time again like he had been doing every thirty
seconds since one o’clock.

“They’ll be here soon, sir,” Ocelot said. “Boss, leave the dog alone.”

“No,” Liquid said, flat on the ground. Benedict barked, wagging his tail. He and Liquid were
roughhousing again and he’d just given up a firm grip on Liquid’s ponytail.

“If I cannot bring Bêdeng then you cannot bring Benedict,” Wolf said, tossing her hair over her
jacket collar.

“I wasn’t planning on bringing him, we’re just playing,” Liquid said as Benedict gnawed on his
prosthetic.

“You’ve really had too much energy lately,” Mantis commented. Unlike those who were preparing
to go, he was sitting cross-legged on a nearby bit of piling. He had opted to come with Octopus for
the sole purpose of seeing them off.

“I’m alright. I feel fine. Really good, actually.”

“Meaning he’s manic,” Solid grumbled, lighting up a cigarette.

“Hey! Put that out!!”

A black windowless van pulled up.
“That’s their van?” Otacon said, “could they get anymore suspicious?”

“Maybe if they spray-painted ‘Dead Cell’ on the side of it,” Wolf said.

“Or got one of those ‘Colonel Jackson was framed’ bumper stickers Octopus was selling online.”

“That was cold. I am glad Solidus put a stop to that.”

“All I did was offer to forward the proceeds to Fortune, as his widow,” Solidus said, “he ended their sale on his own after that.”

“Not before Cathy’s weird friend bought one…”

“Where the hell did Octopus even mail it to?” Liquid said, still on the pavement with Benedict. “I didn’t think the postal service actually, ah, services Mother’s FOB?”

“Mail what?” Fortune said, stepping out of the passenger side of van. She was already disguised, and with a dour expression. “I thought you were going to be ready to go by the time we got here.”

“We are,” Ocelot said, “we were waiting. You were late.”

“My apologies, Queen,” Vamp said to Fortune, closing the driver’s side door behind him. “I’ll take responsibility for that.”

“I suppose you did drive us,” she said coldly. Vamp went around to the back of the van to let Fatman out and retrieve Fortune’s railgun; Fortune, meanwhile, turned to the rest of the assembled group. “I don’t believe we’ve formally met. And I was expecting Mei Ling to be here?”

“Oh, sorry,” Otacon said, pushing his glasses up his nose. “We figured I’d be a better fit for the job.”

“Liquid, get up,” Solid said, lightly kicking him. Liquid stood with an exaggerated sigh.

“I don’t think introductions are necessary,” Solidus said. “They know who you are, and you know who they are. Except perhaps with the exception of Dr. Emmerich.” Otacon waved.

“Which one of the former FOXHOUND folks was the one who shot Vamp in the stomach back in 2000?” Fatman said.

“We usually just blame Liquid for that sort of thing,” Wolf replied.

“Ah,” Vamp said, approaching Liquid. “No hard feelings.”

Liquid shook his hand. “I literally don’t even remember that, I just think it was funny that my little brother sent you after us.” Solidus rolled his eyes in the background.

Vamp didn’t let go of Liquid’s hand. “It is good to meet face-to-face after all this time,” he said - it was hard to tell if he was talking in a deliberately slow and sexy way or if his voice was just like that — “you don’t look quite as much like your brother as I assumed you would.”

“Aha… well, that’s probably because Solidus looks so much older than I do.”

“You do smell like him, though.”


He moved closer, into Liquid’s personal space. “I hear your propensity for surviving… difficult
situations is almost as good as mine is. So we’ll both still be around afterwards.”

“Yes, I wasn’t… planning on dying here… I mean, not that I’m on planning on letting anyone important die here.”

“Once we get back to shore, we should…” Vamp licked his lips in a frankly obscene way. “…get to know each other better.”

“…?” Liquid looked visibly confused and moderately repulsed and, judging from the way Mantis put his face in his hands, was probably assuming that Vamp’s intentions were to literally drink his blood or something like that. Not that that was unfair.

Vamp reached around and grabbed a handful of Liquid’s butt. It was a very quick move that frankly could have been passed off as incidental to everyone except Solid, who was standing right next to them, eyebrows raised. Liquid, however, immediately froze up, his whole body tensing like someone had run a jolt of electricity through him.

“A-Ah, um, I—” he stammered, flustered, yanking his hand out of Vamp’s.

“Yes?” Vamp said.

“Eli,” Mantis said loudly, not even bothering to get up. That snapped Liquid out of it, and he reflexively cold-cocked Vamp and scuttled away towards Mantis, blurtling out, “I’m married.”

Solid and Wolf both stifled a laugh and everyone else just stared, either blankly or in exasperation, as Vamp wrenched his jaw back into place with an uncomfortable grinding sound.

“Try that again and I will castrate you violently,” Mantis said, pulling Liquid close to him.

“Kinky,” Vamp said. Mantis snarled.

“Just glad it’s not me this time,” Ocelot said.

“Hilarious,” Liquid muttered. He looked like a kicked dog.

“Can we get things started?” Fortune said, irritated.

“Yes, we’re wasting daylight,” Fatman said, crossing his arms. It looked kind of ridiculous with his cartoonish proportions. He had put the worker’s uniform on over his blast suit.

Solidus jumped from the pier to the boat and opened up the loading ramp. Those who were going shuffled aboard; Liquid lagged behind a bit, not entirely willing to part with Mantis, who had to gently push him towards the quay. “We will keep in touch by Codec,” he promised. “Stay safe.”

“Mmn.”

“Bon voyage!” Octopus called, waving them off. “Give ‘em hell!”

“Hah. I don’t remember the Secret Service being such jokes.”

“I don’t think they were expecting this kind of trouble,” Solid said, tightening the rope around the unconscious Secret Service agent’s wrists.

“More fool them. Say,” Liquid added, discarding his uniform cap, “do you think any of them will recognize Solidus?”
Solid shrugged. “Probably. Wasn’t that why Solidus wasn’t planning on actually letting the hostages see him?”

“Well, that makes sense… but that’s also unbelievably boring… and isn’t it a bit rude to take someone hostage and not even introduce yourself?”

“It wouldn’t be introducing himself if they already know him.”

“Oh, fair point.”

There was a bit of a quiet moment as Liquid and Solid dragged the limp, tied-up Secret Service prisoners over to the work-cart they were going to take them to the Shell One Core; the B1 Conference Room there was being repurposed as a holding cell. By the time the Secret Service guys woke up, they’d be joined by the rest of the President’s entourage and any odd Big Shell employees luckless enough to show up to work today.

“Are you okay?” Solid said suddenly.

Liquid looked up. “Eh?”

“You still seem kind of jumpy. From what Vamp did earlier, I mean.”

“…”

“I know that kind of thing, uh, makes you uncomfortable.”

Liquid flushed angrily. “What business is it of yours?” he said coldly.

“I’m just asking if you’re alr-“

“Of course you know first hand how uncomfortable it makes me, what’s the point of even asking?! Don’t try to play the concerned brother act now! It’s not going to save you when this is all over. I will kill you.”


“Hmph.”

Again, silence. Solid was a little stung at the ‘concerned brother act’ comment, though he wasn’t really sure why. Even now he didn’t consider himself to have any strong personal feelings re: Liquid, considering the man was still an asshole who liked to bring up his revenge fantasies whenever Solid was starting to think they could act normal around each other. He still didn’t really think of him as his brother, certainly. Though he was honestly a bit worried about him, yes — maybe he just didn’t want him distracted during the mission, or to derail it somehow getting back at Vamp for humiliating him. Or maybe he was just bothered by the reason why Liquid still freaked out over being hit on, because four years ago he had assumed it was because Mantis was… well… what Mantis was like back then… but Solid had been under the impression that things had changed.

“Stop brooding,” Liquid snapped. “Excuse me for not liking having my arse grabbed by a complete stranger! You don’t need to get hung up on it, it has nothing to do with you—”

“I didn’t even say anything.”

“No one likes getting sexually harassed!” His face was bright red and he sounded so defensive that Solid wanted to laugh. He stifled it, though, because he was pretty sure if he did then Liquid would...
CQC him into the ocean.

“I’m not disputing that,” Solid said, “I’m just surprised you waited for Mantis to call your name before you dislocated Vamp’s jaw.”

“I was— caught off-guard, alright?”

“Usually when you get caught off-guard you throw punches even faster…”

Liquid snarled and punched Solid in the arm, hard. If he’d been anyone other than Solid Snake he probably would have been knocked to the floor over that.

“Come on,” Liquid sniffed, grabbing the cart and tossing his hair with an arrogant, presumptuous manner, “let’s go meet up with the others.”

Solid rubbed his arm. “Yeah, yeah.”

Holly watched the sun rise over the harbor. From here she could see the Big Shell but it was impossible to tell what was lying in wait for Marine One and entourage. Everything looked normal. If Holly didn’t know any better, then she would have thought that Snake and pals had either missed the jump or been thwarted before James Johnson even got there. Well, no. That would have cancelled the whole tour. Secret Service was strict as hell… when they were conscious.

Media boats surrounded the Big Shell, rocking in the waves just outside the oil fence, cameras focused on HMX-1. Their sleek white tops and spinning blades gleamed in the early morning light and it must have looked good as hell on TV broadcast — Holly had the radio turned out, though. She was just sipping her coffee, Gustava on her lap, only half-listening to the inane chatter of the news station while she waited for something to happen.

The choppers landed on the roof of one of the external struts on Shell One — Strut E, Holly was pretty certain. At this distance she couldn’t make out anything other than the fact that the President had landed. She wondered how the terrorists dealt with the Marine who was always supposed to greet him when he got off Marine One. Probably “borrowed” the dress uniform.

“…years ago. The decontamination has been reportedly going according to schedule and it was just announced the other day that the Big Shell is slated to be disassembled within six months. According to an EPA spokesperson, the water of the Hudson Bay has now almost returned to pre-disaster levels, with about 90% of the oil removed. Several local politicians have proposed keeping the structure up and turning it into a monument or museum, though this idea has drawn much criticism from prominent environmentalists around the country. President Johnson’s visit today would seem to support the memorial proposal, but he has made no official comment about…”

Holly waited. Gustava stretched, meowed, and hopped up on the counter, pushing the radio to the floor.

“…—rt of his campaign last year, with a new, greener platform for the Democrat party. The Hudson Bay ecosystem has been on the decline for decades, with the 2007 tanker disaster serving as the straw that broke the camel’s back. Even returning the area to pre-oil spill levels isn’t enough, according to environmental activist groups. A petition demanding that the Big Shell remain open permanently to deal with all pollution from the city reached over 700,000 signatures, most of them online, but so far no official response has been made. Protesters are gathered on the banks of the— oh my god.”

HMX-1 exploded.
Holly saw the flames before the sound of it reached her apartment. The news broadcaster was scrambling to describe events but considering it had literally just happened there was no information except what her eyes were telling her. The sound of sirens began to drift over the harbor. The NYPD boats shepherding the media boats began to herd them back towards the shore.

Holly’s phone rang. She picked it up without taking her eyes off the Big Shell; she glanced at the caller ID and had barely enough time to register that it was someone from the La Li Lu Le Lo before the voicemail picked up. So, it was less a call and more an announcement to whoever was listed in the source phone… and if Holly was being called from the Big Shell, that was going to be a substantial amount of people…

“Did it work? — I think- yeah, you’re live.”

Two voices. One sounded like a slightly nasally geek, someone Holly didn’t know; the other was former President of the United States George Sears.

Those crazy motherfuckers, they actually pulled it off. And they stole someone’s phone to contact their enemies directly. Holly wondered what story the media was going to be fed.

“You wrote down what you were going to say, right?”

Holly put her head in her hands. Oh yeah. How could she have forgotten. The whole resistance had to share one brain cell. How had they evaded the La Li Lu Le Lo for so long?!

Ex-President Sears cleared his throat warningly. “This is a notification to the Patriots,” he started. “— Are we really doing this like this?” That was Solid’s voice in the background. “— Stop that.”

“Oh my god.” Holly peeked up over her hands at the Big Shell. The wreck on top was still smoking but other than that it was all quiet for now, at least until the counterattack started. In the meantime, she wasn’t even sure why they were bothering with a speech. Did they have demands? Solid hadn’t mentioned anything.

There was a scuffling noise, and then Liquid’s obnoxious voice took over the whole broadcast. “Attention Patriot scum,” he crowed, “this is the resistance calling, you know who we are. We’ve taken over the Big Shell and we’re holding your pawn, President James Johnson, along with his whole entourage and anyone else we found here this morning hostage. No one’s been harmed — yet.”

Ex-President Sears got ahold of the phone again. “We are aware of the Big Shell’s - that is, Arsenal Gear’s - true nature. From now on, consider Arsenal Gear ours. I wouldn’t recommend crossing us. It won’t be hard to persuade Johnson to authorize a nuclear strike; I, of course, remember the process perfectly well. We, the Sons of Liberty, will take good care of him in the meantime.”


“We’ll get what we came for and take our leave. There’s no point in causing extra trouble. Be reasonable.”

Liquid’s voice grew louder, like he’d snatched the phone. “If my brother won’t say anything then I’ll say our demands: unconditional surrender.” He laughed. “You’ve already tried many times to get rid of us, and look where that’s gotten you! Surely you’ve figured out by now that we aren’t going anywhere. We will triumph over you eventually. It’s inevitable. So, do yourselves a favor and save us all the time. Give up this whole game now. The longer you wait, the more painful your destruction will become. There’s no benefit to fighting us… you can’t win. You’ll never win. Forfeit
now and some of you may even be allowed to slink back into the shadows.”

“Liquid, they’re never going to-“ Solid again. Liquid cut him off.

“Those are our terms. If they find them unacceptable, then that’s their business. We’ll continue with ours.” He laughed again. “Well, Patriots — I suggest you consider your options carefully.”

The voicemail ended with a beep.

Holly scratched Gustava under the chin, and picked her coffee mug back up. “A direct challenge, huh…”

Chapter End Notes

Marine One is the callsign of whatever helicopter the POTUS is on, like how Air Force One is whatever plane they’re on. It always flies with a bunch of identical helicopters so the whole thing is called Marine Helicopter Squadron One, or HMX-1. It seemed more plausible to me that they would take helicopters over rather than a boat…

Also, having dealt with the Secret Service in real life, it fucking boggles me how anyone would be able to pull off taking the POTUS hostage. That’s half of the reason why I just cut to another perspective. The other half is that I, ironically, don’t want the Big Shell to be a repeat of Shadow Moses… ;0
“Snake, do you remember the sinking of that tanker two years ago?”

“Of course.”

“Foreign terrorists blow a hole in an oil tanker full of crude, barely twenty miles off the shore of Manhattan, your classic nightmare. It didn't take long for the government to put an oil fence around the whole mess. And then that massive offshore cleanup facility went up inside.”

“The ‘Big Shell’,” Jack said, nodding slightly as he swam. “I hear the cleanup isn't quite over yet.” The news reports just that day had said 90%, hadn’t they? The water was still damn murky. Maybe it was just because it was the Hudson Bay…

“It takes time,” Colonel Campbell replied. “But in the meantime, the Shell's become a landmark, a symbol of environmental protection. Approximately six hours ago, the Big Shell was seized by an armed group.”

Jack wondered about that. Six hours seemed like an awfully long time to let the terrorists do what they wanted there; had there already been a failed counterattack? Or maybe negotiations had just broken down. There wasn’t much news out right now - there was already some kind of information blackout in place by the time Jack woke up this morning. “Do we have an ID?”

“Former members of the Navy SEALs’ special anti-terrorist training squad, ‘Dead Cell’. Russian private army members may also be involved. It's a highly trained group and they have the Big Shell under complete control.”

A shadow passed over Jack, accompanied by the muffled and water-distorted sound of a helicopter. Maybe two, Jack thought, glancing up. It was hard to tell what was going on from down here. He hooked his fingers through the netting of the oil fence. Durable stuff.

“What are their demands?” he said as he sawed through it with a diving knife.

“Thirty billion dollars,” Colonel Campbell said like it was the most normal thing in the world.

Jack almost choked on his respirator. “Thirty billion dollars!? What makes them think they can get that much?”

“There was a government-sponsored tour going on at the Big Shell that day.”

That’s right. They said something about that on the news. It wasn’t clear if anyone had gotten away or not, since the NYPD claimed that it would endanger the victims to release information about it. “Hostages, huh?”

“A VIP from one of the major conservation groups,” Colonel Campbell said, “and one from our own government - the Most Important Person in a sense.”

“The most important person—?”

“James Johnson.”

“The President!” Raiden gasped, squeezing himself through the hole in the oil fence.
“Unless the demands are met, the terrorists intend to blow the Big Shell out of the water.”

“And the crude will ignite, turning the Manhattan Harbor into an inferno.” He definitely still wouldn’t wanna be here if that happened.

“That's not the worst-case scenario. If the chlorides being used to decontaminate the seawater go up with the oil, toxins containing catastrophic levels of dioxins will be released. In other words, the bay’s ecosystem will be wiped out, and the sea will turn into a toxic soup for centuries - becoming the worst environmental disaster in history.”

*Considering what we're starting with here, that's gotta be pretty bad,* Jack thought, approaching the dock.

Colonel Campbell continued. “You have two missions objectives. One: infiltrate the offshore decontamination facility ‘Big Shell’ and safeguard the President and other hostages. And two: disarm the terrorists by any means necessary.”

Jack finally breached the surface of the water; even within the Big Shell dock, it still had a chemical sheen to it. He glanced around the room. It was filled with random junk presumably related to marine decontamination, but in terms of human life, it was just him here.

“You should know…” Colonel Campbell said as Jack climbed the ladder out of the water, “that SEAL Team 10 is also conducting a rescue operation.”

“Is this a joint effort?” Jack asked.

“No. FOXHOUND remains a covert body. Don't alert them to your presence — that is an order.”

Jack switched to a more secure mode of communication. “This is Snake,” he said, “I am now inside Strut A of Shell One.”

“How are things?” Colonel Campbell said. The Codec always did weird things to his voice, like he was speaking through some kind of robotic filter.

“We're in luck. Looks like there are no sentries posted here.”

“What’s the visibility?”

“The lights on the plant's struts are functioning. I won't have to use the IR goggles.”

Colonel Campbell nodded approvingly. “Any problems?”

Jack shook his head. “None so far. Has anything happened with Seal Team 10 yet?”

“They landed on the roof of the Big Shell as planned. And by the way, Snake, we're changing your code name for all following communication.”

“What’s wrong with ‘Snake’?” Jack said, annoyed.

“Just a precaution. You are now designated ‘Raiden’.” Huh. Not quite as cool a history behind it as *Snake,* but it did have a certain ring to it. “All right, Raiden. You've already covered infiltration in VR training.”

“I've completed three hundred missions in VR,” Jack- Raiden— said proudly. “I feel like some kind of legendary mercenary…”
“Okay, we'll skip that part. Make sure nobody sees you. If you need to, contact me by Codec. The frequency is 140.85. When we need to reach you... contact you, the Codec will beep. When you hear that noise, be sure to answer immediately, regardless of situation. The Codec's receiver directly stimulates the small bones of your ear. No one but you will be able to hear it.”

“All right. I'll contact you if anything changes.”

“First, make your way to the upper section of the Big Shell.”

“How do I get up to the next level?”

“There's an elevator at the far end of that area. Use that.”

“Sounds good.” Sounded risky, actually, but Raiden had ridden a lot of elevators during his VR runs, so he supposed it wasn’t that bad.

“Your new sneaking suit uses electrofiber technology, a by-product of fiber-optics research. The texture isn't far removed from rubber, but the material protects against a wide range of toxic substances. The suit itself has a wide array of built-in sensors. It is referred to as ‘Smart Skin’ in military R&D. Data about damage to different regions of the body, including blood loss, is exchanged between the suit and the intravenous nanomachines to create a bio-feedback system.”

“There’s a lot of pressure on my torso,” Raiden mumbled.

“Relax. The suit applies varying pressure to major internal organs to maximize performance and safeguard their functions. They call this the ‘Skull Suit’ in FOXHOUND.”

“Skull suit—” Raiden had literally never heard anyone call it that. Maybe because it was new. Or maybe, now that he thought about it, because he didn’t actually know anyone in FOXHOUND aside from Colonel Campbell, Doc, and Max - and obviously none of those three were running around in sneaking suits. “Seems appropriate somehow.”

“The hatch with a circular handle will open into the elevator area,” Colonel Campbell moved on, “locate the hatch first.”

“Copy that. Moving onto main mission objectives.” He signed off.

He was briefly worried about an enemy on the other side of the hatch noticing him opening it, especially with that awful squeak it made as he turned the handle, but the hallway behind was empty. Raiden couldn’t help but feel that was a little weird. Shouldn’t the dock be considered an obvious point of entry and therefore more heavily guarded? …or, wait, Seal Team 10 had come in on helicopters. That was even more obvious. The terrorists must have been busy with them right now.

He peered through the doorway into the next room. There was the elevator, alright - and in front of it, waiting casually, a soldier. Raiden ducked back into the hallway before he was spotted and called Colonel Campbell again.

“Colonel, I've sighted an enemy sentry,” he said. “AN-94 and a Makarov... those grenades... all his equipment is Russian-made.”

“Must be a Gurlukovich man.”

“Gurlukovich?”

“A Russian private army,” Colonel Campbell explained, “they allegedly had connections to one of
members of the Shadow Moses takeover group, four years ago.”

“What’s their stake in this one?” Raiden asked. Revenge? If they really were connected to Shadow Moses, then that’d be all they had to go off of, considering the whole island was obliterated.

“They must have made a deal — an arrangement with the terrorists. They've become a band of mercenaries, an army without a country.”

“Oh…” Money, huh? Why bring up Shadow Moses, then, just to make things lively?

“Now get to work,” Colonel Campbell said before Raiden could ask. “There's a terminal in front of the elevator, a node.”

“Did you say ’nerd’?” Raiden said, confused.

“Not ‘nerd’ — ‘node’.”

“Oh.”

“Use the node to gain access to the Big Shell's facilities network.”

“Then what?”

“Pull up the map of the structure; that'll let you activate the Soliton Radar.”

“The Soliton Radar? True, that radar came in useful during VR training.”

Colonel Campbell explained how to activate the node and access the data needed for the Soliton Radar; it was simple enough. He did as instructed. Somehow he got electrocuted. Colonel Campbell did not acknowledge it when Raiden called him back.

“How do I save the mission data?” Raiden sighed, sore.

“I've set aside a proprietary frequency for saves. And an analyst to work on the data too.”

Raiden wondered if Doc or Max drew the short stick and which one he would prefer. Then the analyst came on screen and it was decidedly neither of them.

“Jack, is everything alright?”

“What are you doing here!?”

“Jack, can you hear me?”

“Rose!” Raiden said, flabbergasted. “You're not supposed to be involved! What's going on!?”

“Jack, I'm a part of this mission,” Rosemary said.

“Colonel,” Raiden said, ignoring her, “what the hell is going on?”

“Raiden, meet the mission analyst,” Colonel Campbell said calmly. “She'll be overseeing the data saving and support.”

“Why her??”

“The FOXHOUND analyst that was supposed to take part in this mission was in an accident. Rosemary was brought in as a replacement.”
“An accident…?” He wondered what happened - Max and Doc seemed pretty close, so he supposed if it was bad enough and one of them was in the hospital, then the other would be visiting them. He’d have to ask about it as soon as this was done.

“And according to the files,” Colonel Campbell went on, aware that Raiden wouldn’t derail his assignment by bugging him for details, “she knows you better than anybody else.”

“Rose may be in the service, but an intelligence analyst is no field officer,” Raiden snapped.

“Not to worry. She has our technical staff at her disposal.”

“She's never been a part of a field mission. This is insane.”

“I have my own reasons for selecting her for this mission, soldier.”

*What* reasons?! “Colonel, I fail to see—-”

“I know your VR training performance in and out. But sometimes that's not enough. You're familiar with the Outer Heaven incident?”

Raiden grumbled. “You know I covered it in VR.”

“If there's a crucial tactical detail that case taught us, it was the power of the operative's will to survive.”

Even if the operative in question ended up dying in action anyway a decade later? “I was trained to fight,” Raiden said, “my personal feelings have no place in a mission.”

“We've learned that it doesn't work that way. And on the field, you need all the help you can get.”

“Jack?” Rosemary said. “You're stuck with me whether you like it or not.”

“Rose…” Raiden sighed.

“You need someone to watch your back. But I have conditions that need to be met, Colonel.”

“What is it?” Colonel Campbell said.

“I'll perform my duties and save that mission data. But I'm aware that technically, I'm not part of the mission control team. After all, I'm just a normal girl who's worried about Jack. But that means, Colonel, that I am not required to follow your orders outside of my immediate duties. Jack is not simply a field personnel for me to track. His safety comes first to me, not the mission. And because of that, I will be monitoring and keeping a record of every communication you have with him, Colonel.”

“…given the circumstances, you're free to do what you see fit.”

Somehow, Raiden wasn’t sure he felt very reassured by Rosemary’s attitude.

“Hey, I prefer this to being kept in the dark, waiting,” Rosemary said.

“I’d like to make a request, if I may,” Colonel Campbell said.

“Of course.”

“His handle is *Raiden*. For the duration of the mission, could you call him that?”
“Yes sir. All right—Raiden.” Raiden already knew that this was going to be the only time she actually called him that. He didn’t bother to complain, it wasn’t like he minded being called Jack by his own girlfriend. “Let me know when you’re ready to turn in a save. The proprietary save frequency is 140.96. …I just switched frequencies. Jack?” Yep, there it was.

“What?” Raiden said.

“Do you know what day it is tomorrow?”

“April 30th—“ Fuck. Her birthday? No, that was a couple months off. His birthday? That wasn’t it either. “Is there something special about it?”

“Isn’t there?” Rosemary said coyly.

Fuuuuck.

“Fuuuuuck. I can’t remember,” Raiden said, “I’m sorry.”

“Oh well, I’ll keep trying ’til I hear the answer.” Fuuuuck. “I’m going to let you go now, Jack. Take care.” She signed off.

Raiden sighed. So much for not getting distracted during the mission. The elevator dinged as the sentry from earlier returned. Raiden quickly ducked out of sight, waited for him to pass, and slipped into the now-empty elevator before the doors finished closing. As it ascended, he took off his dive mask; his face felt damp and sweaty from it, and the cool breeze felt good against it. His hair blew back from his temples.

“The terrorists call themselves ‘Sons of Liberty’,” Colonel Campbell said.

“Sons of Liberty?” Raiden repeated. What kind of name was that for a terrorist group?

“The name of their leader is Solid Snake.”

“The—? But… huh. So that’s why you changed my codename.”

The elevator reached the top, startling some seagulls. Raiden had to shield his eyes against the glaring sunlight. It was quite the departure from the nighttime gloom of the Outer Heaven VR.

“Right,” Colonel Campbell was saying. “But it can’t be the Solid Snake. He died four years ago, when the Shadow Moses terrorists detonated their own nuke.”

“Could he have— survived?” Raiden thought about those 4chan conspiracy theories that had gotten popular in the last two years. Wasn’t there even a book now?

“Not a chance,” Colonel Campbell said firmly.

Oh well. Back to work. “Colonel, I’m on the roof. There are no sentries, but it would only take one to spot me in this light.”

“You never had daylight VR training, after all. Stay extra sharp until you can find a node to log in from.”

“What about the commandos?”

“SEAL Team 10 has landed on Struts B and C.”

“And the President?”
“Seems he was spotted on Strut B.”

“Strut B?” Was that the strut to the right or the to left?

“The Big Shell is comprised of Shells One and Two,” Colonel Campbell explained, “each unit consists of a central core and six struts surrounding it.”

“So the whole thing is shaped like two hexagons connected end-on-end.”

“Exactly. And you're on the roof of Strut A, Shell One at the moment. First, get to a node. Log into the network.”

“Got it.” That didn’t answer his question… or maybe getting the map from the node would anyway. He signed off. First of all, he had to get off of the roof. There was no node up here and, regardless of which strut was which, no way to get to Strut B. He had to go inside.

Colonel Campbell called him right back as soon as he was inside. “Raiden, SEAL Team 10 is in.”

“Do we really have no line of communication with the SEALs?” Raiden said, exasperated.

“They don't know a thing about us. You know we work in the dark, and this mission is no exception. Only a few people know about your presence here.”

“…” He knew FOXHOUND was top-secret and all, but… even going so far as to hide from military elites on their own side? They had the same goals, they reported to the same commander-in-chief… this was weird.

“There's no need for concern,” Colonel Campbell said firmly. “This operation is under Pentagon's direct command, and the NSDD came from the Vice President and the Secretary of Defense. Your mission may be top-secret, but it's gone through the usual channels.” He signed off again.

…but that doesn't make it any less weird, Raiden thought. If it was just random grunts, that’d make sense. But these were Navy SEALs. Come on.

He got yet another call back from Colonel Campbell just as he was crossing the connecting bridge to Strut B.

“Wait a second,” he said, “I just intercepted new intelligence on the operation being executed by SEAL Team 10.”

“Intercepted?” That was definitely weird!

“As I said before, they need to be kept in the dark about our presence.”

“So we just listen in…” There was no point in arguing, Raiden decided.

“I’m patching it through,” Colonel Campbell said.

“This is Alpha Zero. We have the President.”

“Is he safe?”

“He is safe.”

“What about the package?”
“Tell the guys upstairs that we’ve secured the package. Eeea-sy money.”

“Good work. Your retrieval is on the way. Come on home…”

Well, that was anti-climactic…

“Roger that... H-Holy-!”

*bang bang bang pow bang bang ratatatata*

“Alpha Zero! Report!!”

“Dammit! Cover the President!!”

“Come in, Alpha Zero!”

“This is Alpha Zero.” (out of breath) “We are under attack! This is crazy! Is that…?!”

“Alpha Zero, respond! …all Alpha, respond!!”

“Raiden,” Colonel Campbell said, abruptly taking the transmission over again. “The President’s life is in danger! Head to Strut B now!”

End Notes

(any and all comments will be forwarded to aireyv! i will either copy/paste their reply to me or they will reply on their own account! have a nice day!!! if you have any questions, just ask!!!!)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!)