The Chain

by midgetnazgul

Summary

It wasn't that Jesse had lived his whole life with nothing - it was about keeping what he'd managed to cobble together.

For Hanzo, it was about trying to make anything truly his own.

And for both of them, the virtue of letting go.

Notes

Henlo~

The basics: character tags will be updated as becomes relevant. The graphic violence warning should be taken very seriously, as Jesse and Hanzo are contract killers for cash and kicks. Some specific trigger warnings listed above will be added to beginning chapter notes when.
directly relevant. Posting will be about every two weeks.

I am fudging some canon events within the timeline for my own purposes, but all Blizzard's information is pretty fuzzy anyway.

Some chapters will have an ending AN with links to a relevant track off my personal Hanzo and Jesse playlists, should you be so inclined.

[whispers] yes the title is reference to the Fleetwood Mac song it's what made this fic happen shhh I know I am That Basic Bitch it's fine

Major Credits:
- meowrails for that sweet sweet Validation Juice, rough draft reading, and Spanish consultation
- miraphora for betaing like a boss

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Jesse flicked the hammer on his lighter restlessly. On, off, yet the cigar in his teeth remained unlit, the stub beginning to fray under the grind of his teeth. Once again, he was questioning himself -- even five years out, his growing doubt still felt unpleasant and new. Never had to doubt when he was just a gun. Overwatch certainly made him a better man, but doubt was reserved for others, the greater and untrustworthy world. He, Jesse, could accept that because when it hit the bottom line, he could always control himself.

But that sense of self-control was gone, and he had been slow to realize it. Overwatch had given a lot of security he’d taken for granted, and that was increasingly discomforting to acknowledge. Choosing to walk away was possibly the first truly independent choice he’d made in his entire life – a good one, but hell if that wasn’t fucked up. He plucked the shredded cigar from his mouth and tossed it aside. It’d be easy to fuck off, keep up his crusade, pretend it meant anything beyond trying to feel better. And he would – for a while. Those returns were diminishing fast. It was time to give a shit about himself. Watch – that’d be what finally fucking killed him.

“Serve me right,” he muttered as he tapped open the holo on his arm to reply to his contact.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3aQ2InB4rhU
A nigh-inaudible pat of feet was the only noticeable passage of a short, stocky shadow in the pounding rain. As he leant into a small crossway, a sliver of Hanzo’s face was doused in violet from the eternal neon blinking above him. Shanghai was difficult to hide in even on days like this, between the crowds and the perpetual false day, but that only meant the secret places found were all the better. Quite a suitable place to hide a critical cache, if you were mean enough to dig for it.

He scaled the wall rather than cross the threshold and leapt onto the roof. Crouching, he nocked a reconnaissance arrow, and in one smooth action bent over the edge to shoot it down another nondescript alley and into a wall. No pings came back – good. He took off at a sprint, bridging the few buildings leading to his target with practiced grace. There was no need to concern himself with noise, now, so he skid down the backside of the building.

Once upon a time, munitions manufacturing had taken place here right on the water, when China still felt enough hubris to believe Korea’s perennial insurgence was unique. That was some thirty years past, but no one who lived it had truly left the Crisis behind. Hanzo understood the impulse, even if he could not directly relate.

He stowed his bow in favor of a dagger. A door made itself convenient ten paces off – unlikely as it would be to encounter resistance here, he approached with caution.

“Wouldn’t recommend that,” came a low voice from behind – and far too close. Hanzo wheeled knife-first, only to see sparks skid off metal.

"Christ, calm-"

Hanzo didn’t let him finish, instead kicking out a knee and getting underneath his opponent’s forward momentum to flip him over onto his back and lay the knife reverse-hand against his throat. His assailant kept his hands aside his head in surrender.

“Fuck, you’re quick.”

Despite himself, Hanzo balked a little. How could someone this…chatty come so close?

“You have ten seconds.”

“Aw, c’mon now, you’ll give me better than that,” the man slurred back, and realization began to set in. It’d been years and he’d only seen him in pictures from counterintelligence reports, but there was no mistaking the…aesthetic.

“What are you doing here?”

“Ha, leaning on that ‘you’, huh? You do recognize me. I’d hoped. Let me on up, why don’tcha?”

Not only did Hanzo choose not to do that, he pressed in with his blade just a hair to punctuate his point. Jesse didn’t seem the least bothered and gave an exasperated sigh.

“Same reason you are,” he finally answered.

“You tracked me here?”
“Hell no, but I clocked you about ten minutes ago. What’s the secret with you all and wall climbing? You’re in fuckin’ socks.”

Hanzo let him up with a haughty sniff.

“You’re in spurs. Hardly conducive to recon.”

“Didn’t hear me coming, though, did you?”

Jesse took great delight in Hanzo’s pinched and dour expression in response. He chuckled as he swiped hopelessly at the mud on his chaps.

“Anyway, you were about to run yourself up shit creek, so here I am: your paddle.”

Hanzo’s eyes narrowed with confusion at the idiom, so Jesse let it go with another sigh.

“What’s in there ain’t what you think it is.”

“And I am supposed to trust you know better?”

“If you wanna live,” Jesse replied so flatly Hanzo couldn’t help but take it seriously. He gestured for Jesse to continue. “He don’t keep caches like you expect. Never has.”

Well. Hanzo’s eyebrows shot up and he uncrossed his arms. A wheel in his mind turned, churning his accumulated intel anew. Still, he couldn’t just spill his assets like that. Trust was a credit line, and none of it came up-front.

“You have been hunting The Reaper as well? How long?”

“Nope,” Jesse replied as he glanced up and down their surroundings, searching for some unknown token. His tone was light, but it wasn’t the same ease as previous. It was lacking genuine affect. Another cog slipped into place. Curious as the denial was, the accompanying reticence was understandable, he supposed, even now. Jesse caught his insightful gaze.

“You get it, then.”

“I do. I had suspected it was him for some time, but material proof is…difficult to come by.”

Them fuckin’ shotguns are kind of a giveaway. Not that more than a couple dozen people on Earth are still alive and in a position to know.”

Even in the low light, Hanzo could see the line of Jesse’s jaw cutting evidence of his stress. All his swagger had evaporated, replaced with head-to-toe rigidity that seemed seconds from being loosed on the crumbling concrete beside them. He frowned and grew reflective for a moment.

“You have right to him as quarry first. I did not realize you had vested interest. Forgive my intrusion.”

Jesse blinked away his reverie.

“Say again?”

“I am sorry. You have a personal investment to act on. It would be unseemly to rob you of it.”

Jesse gave Hanzo a long up-and-down. Honor was a big thing in his family, he knew – it
was fucking impossible to encounter a Shimada without learning that – but this was more than simple courtesy. It was genuinely thoughtful and…dare he say *compassionate*, as he watched Hanzo’s apologetic expression? He thumbed the tip of his goatee.

“Why’re you lookin’ for him?”

Now it was Hanzo’s turn to be put back on a heel.

“I thought that would be obvious. I am well aware of how my reputation precedes me.”


Hanzo didn’t reply right away – he was suspicious of the question. Even for a man guilty of as deep of sins as he was, they remained relative to their target’s. The embedded rage had been evident in Jesse’s own voice moments ago. What could he possibly want to hear that he was not already aware of, perhaps even painfully so? Jesse had dipped his head low so his hat obscured his eyes, and Hanzo couldn’t help but feel a stab of pity. To be stuck in an impossible place between choosing life or death of someone you know…Hanzo could certainly sympathize.

“I hold no grudge towards Overwatch, if that is your concern.”

Best to try the easy answer first, but alas, Jesse silently shook his head no.

“He has done significant harm,” Hanzo began again, soft and slow as he gathered his thoughts. It was an uncomfortable amount of candor but it felt…needed, though for what purpose, he didn’t know. What did his perspective matter? “Pointless suffering. Very few are qualified to end it - and I am. Whatever he did before as an agent of Overwatch has become irrelevant. It is a duty that must be seen done. I can, and I must, if no other will. For men such as him, every death brings honor. And with honor…redemption,” he finished with a gentle crack in his voice. He didn’t have to explain why.

Neither spoke for a long time, the patter of rain the only filler in the yawning space suddenly between them in the alleyway.

“Join me,” Jesse blurted. Hanzo’s head shot up from where he had been regarding an oily puddle. “I’ll need help, and there’s no reason we can’t both get what we want.”

“You would…I am-”

“A reformed gangster,” Jesse cut him off with a half-smile. “Welcome to the club.”

A relieved bit of laughter escaped Hanzo despite himself.

“You honor me.”

All Jesse’s charm disappeared in a second as his brow knit together with a fiery seriousness that made Hanzo stand up straighter involuntarily.

“One condition.”

“You name it.”

“Don’t take the shot unless I say. Under any circumstances.”

“The kill is yours, I already--”
The whole six feet of Jesse's imposing silhouette drew up on Hanzo in a blink of an eye, his finger held almost against the tip of his nose six inches lower. It was difficult to fight off the impulse to defend himself — Jesse’s eyes were wild and dark, at once resolute and inexplicably desperate.

“Unless my last fucking words are ‘kill him’ as I bleed out, you don’t take the shot. Am I understood?”

Was Hanzo getting in over his head? Overwatch, particularly the branch to which Jesse and Reyes had belonged, was a well of history and secrecy that might rival the six hundred years of existence his own clan could claim. Even a glance at a summary of Hanzo’s life by the most casual observer could illustrate how poorly he had managed with the weight of his own family’s legacy.

“Understood,” he replied, steady and sure.

Immediately, Jesse backed off, light on his feet and bright-faced once more. Hanzo had known a number of people living on a knife’s edge of a personality, but this all but took his breath away. No dossier could quite illustrate…all this. Nonetheless, it was compelling beyond his usual restraint and common sense. So much rage, but so carefully kept, like a favored blade. Jesse offered his gloved hand, and Hanzo took it in a firm grip. What new innovation of familial disappointment he would craft next, Hanzo didn’t know, but that was guilt for another day.

Still, one question lingered, though he asked it with far less suspicion that he originally would have.

“It’s been five years. If you always knew, why now? What changed?”

The question should have been expected, but Jesse was glad he’d turned away — it was easier to allow a witness to the bone-deep shudder he was sure was obvious even in the dim alley’s light than the flinch in his expression and pained look in his eyes he was sure was there.

“Me,” was all he could manage, and Hanzo knew well enough to leave it at that.
Uncomfortable candor now passed, Jesse and Hanzo both returned their attention to the task at hand.

“No,” Jesse said, waving off Hanzo as he reached for the door. He held up his hands, one gloved and the other metal, and wiggled his fingers.

“Don’t touch anything."

It felt a little preposterous to go to such an extreme level as to prevent fingerprints, but Hanzo obliged him for his greater familiarity. Jesse caught the dubious look.

“He’ll know. Maybe not tomorrow or next week, but he will. That’s the point,” he explained as he crossed the threshold.

“Traps?”

“Nah, nothing so obvious. He only kills if you’re in his presence. Keeps it personal, old-fashioned. But that doesn’t mean he isn’t being proactive.”

It was a decrepit warehouse with rows of automated manufacturing equipment left as it lay by a business to terrified too worry about its assets when they fled. Jesse took a long moment to survey the whole – it’d be hidden but not too well. The offices on the opposite side were a good candidate.

“Who tipped you off to this?” he asked as they walked. Hanzo returned a half-hearted glare. “Oh, come on, we probably share half our underground contacts. Don’t be stingy.”

“Fine. A gunrunner – no one particularly accomplished beyond knowing when and where to be a middleman with at least the veneer of confidence.”

“Shit, that sounds like old Skag.” Hanzo balked tellingly. “Is it? Hot damn, I thought he was still in prison – I put him there, y’see. Professional interest.”

“Ah, well, he would be if not for…” Hanzo couldn’t help hesitating in this company.

Jesse stopped up short and wilted with realization.

“Second Adjudication.”

After Overwatch’s forced disbanding, The Hague as well as the UN had called a lot of the organization’s practices into question, egged on by global interests determined to tear its legacy apart. Overwatch had made a lot of questionable extrajudicial choices, leading to extra-long prison terms at best and assassinations at worst. Jesse readily agreed – he’d performed many of them – but stood by most of it, save parts of the last few years. Bad leadership after Morrison, Amari, and Reyes’ deaths was a huge contributor to his departure before it imploded publicly. The retrials were colloquially referred to as the Second Adjudication. Most were released as a political statement, especially omnic prisoners.


“Most?” Hanzo couldn’t help asking pointedly.

“Shut up, I’da put your ass in a cell without a second thought back then, and you’d have earned
“Fair. But now?”

Jesse kicked in a door to an office with far more force than necessary, but it made him feel better.

“There’re worse things on Earth than you.”

The first room was a bust. It was so thoroughly looted, even the cabinetry had been dismantled. Another was equally stripped and graffitied to death; the third, however, appeared merely wrecked, as if someone had used it as a rage room. Storage was still in place, if ruined by endless blows with a baseball bat. The damage was very old, which meant… ah. Jesse gently prised a door open on a cabinet on the floor.

“It was placed somewhat recently. A year, tops. How long you been lookin’?” he asked. He looked up at Hanzo to watch the truth dawn on him.

“Four months.”

“A-yup. Honeypot. See? Aren’t you glad for your paddle here on shit creek.”

Worry scratched at the back of Hanzo’s mind. Surely he hadn’t blown his cover that easily. He wasn’t keen on having to go underground for weeks, if not longer.

“Do you think he knows I am looking specifically?”

“Was the tip given to you personally?”

“No. I, uh…overheard.”

“Then no. Makes sense; you’re definitely not the only one on the hunt. Skag’s probably a fourth-tier conduit of information deliberately fed ages ago. A hook on a long-ass line.”

“That is a particularly cruel form of counterintelligence,” Hanzo quipped, though he was impressed by the cleverness. No point in being angry; this was the price of the life they had all chosen.

“He loves a good cat-and-mouse game,” Jesse replied, a lilt of sadness evident in his tone.

“Is there any point in opening it?”

“With me here, there is. It’s all bullshit like you suggest, but diversionary bullshit is still information, long as he isn’t able to tell who came by.”

Jesse pulled a small box out – there wasn’t even a lock on it. Sloppy. Anyone who bought into this frankly deserved the business end of a sawed-off. Inside was what anyone who’d seen too many spy movies would expect: passports, all with a fake photo under multiple names. Cash. Hanzo leant over to look, but dutifully obeyed the command not to touch; now, he respected the intelligence at hand.

“Gaudy.”

“Good news for us, though. He’s expecting idiots. He knows that international warrant will net every chickenshit with half a bounty on his resume.”
There was a key at the bottom – probably still bullshit, but he’d be remiss if he didn’t catalogue it. From a small pack on his belt, he procured a one-eye visor to scan it in all dimensions. If it turned out as something, he could remake it without taking the one today and tipping his hand.

“Everything back the way it came?” Hanzo said.

“Naturally.”

Within five minutes, they were done and outside again. Hanzo felt a bit chastened for letting himself walk this far into a long-game trap and needing to be reminded better by another.

“Don’t feel too bad,” Jesse reassured. “You saw through it because you’re smart. The goal, we were taught, was stay ten steps ahead. If I hadn’t run into you today, you’d just be eleven steps behind.”

“How reassuring.”

“Hey, I’ll be as far behind as necessary if it means living to fight another day. Dinner?”

“I suppose.”

They took off down the sodden alleyway together when soft clicks caught Hanzo’s ear. His eyes shot down to Jesse’s boots – the spurs, silent just moments ago, now tapped along with his footfalls.

“Thought you’d realized by now. I know what I’m fuckin’ doing,” Jesse shot with a wink and a smug grin.

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“So,” Jesse began as they tucked into dinner at a hole-in-the-wall restaurant a few districts over, “Let’s compare notes.”

Hanzo sat back a little aghast. Surely discussing respective intel on an international terrorist could wait until they were somewhere they wouldn’t be so easily overheard. Jesse gestured dismissively with his chopsticks.

“No, no. We ain’t fuckin’ working right now. I meant about each other. I want to know how close y’all got,” he continued, mischief thick in his tone. “You go first, if it makes you feel better.”

Though he tried glaring, Jesse’s delighted, expectant expression wouldn’t abate. Very well.

“You are an orphan of the Crisis from the age of seven or eight, but do not officially appear as part of the Deadlock Gang, who adopted you from the desert, until you were nine. Presumably, you were scouted for smuggling. You grew to prominence very quickly despite your age and were assisting in robberies by age twelve. Rumor gives you credit for masterminding a particularly brazen train heist at just fourteen with a group of similarly-aged children.”

The word *children* struck something deep and unpleasant inside Jesse, like knocking a nearly-healed bruise.

“It’s true. The whole thing was a kind of initiation for full membership as an ‘adult’, so to speak.”

A ghost of a victorious smile rose and fell on Hanzo’s face before he continued.
“Any illustrious career in criminality was cut short at fifteen upon being caught by an
Overwatch strike team led by Major Gabriel Reyes. You were offered a post with him instead of a
lifelong prison term. Common knowledge describes it as Reyes having ‘seen your potential’, but
more elaborate rumor says it happened because you got the drop on him and very nearly had him
pinned for capture, had subordinates not come to his rescue.”

Jesse blinked back in shock. Precious few people knew that story and almost all of them were
either in prison or dead, now.

“Jesus Christ.”

“That is true? I had dismissed it as hyperbole.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say nearly, but yeah, I left him with a bloody nose in front of his team.”

Having now met Jesse personally, Hanzo could easily picture it. There was little doubt the now-
highly-disciplined man sitting across from him would have been wild in his youth.

“I do not think I need to prove myself further with descriptions of your covert work. Hardly
anyone knows anything about you before you were a teenager. Besides, I know far less about the
latter half of your career. I left Hanamura long before Overwatch’s demise, as I am sure you are
aware. It was no longer relevant to me.”

Quick as it came over him, Hanzo’s positive demeanor vanished, and he appeared almost
existentially tired to recall the past. Jesse shifted uneasily in his chair as he considered for a moment.

“I gotta…you should…or maybe you already—"

“I know you worked with my brother, yes,” Hanzo offered, to Jesse’s great relief. “However, I
only learned that a few weeks ago.”

Jesse’s face immediately fell.

“All that time…?”

“I believed him dead, yes. The clan has likely known for years that was not the case, but
obviously they would not disclose that to me.”

“Well, I, uh…if there’s anything you want to—"

“I do not.”

Whoops.

“Okay. I just thought…it wouldn’t be right to…if we’re going to work together, there’s got to
be trust, and it ain’t right to act like I know nothin’ about something that huge.”

Hanzo sat back, drumming his fingers on the table. His appetite had inevitably vanished as it
often did when Genji came to mind. Nevertheless, Jesse’s impulse was appreciated. Trust was indeed
paramount, and that level of honesty earned Jesse significant psychological capital.

“He came to me. That is how I learned he still lived.”

“Fuck,” Jesse murmured.

“Indeed. I looked into it afterward – I was a fool not to take notice, but I suppose I encourage
my own blindness."

“I mean, it’s understandable,” Jesse tried, but Hanzo cut him off with one severe swipe of his hand.

“Your sympathy is unwarranted.”

For lack of anything else to say, Jesse only nodded, but that seemed to be enough for Hanzo; he wasn’t openly angry, at least. They ate – or rather, pushed their respective dishes around their plates – in silence for some time. At last, Hanzo leant onto his elbows on the table, hands folded before his face.

“Your turn,” he said as a quiet but genuine offer.

Jesse gave a half-nod and tried to gather his thoughts.

“You’re the first son of Sojiro Shimada, tasked with ascending to the head of the Shimada crime family. Your mother died when you were very young, reportedly from an omnic attack on Kyoto when she happened to be there on family business.”

Hanzo shook his head.

“She was visiting my grandmother. Both were lost. Only I remember her at all – Genji was four at the time.”

“I’m sorry,” Jesse replied, to which Hanzo merely shrugged.

“I was told father changed after we lost her. Genji and I rarely left Shimada Castle for many years after that, until we were teenagers properly learning the trade. The Crisis did not affect our lives much beyond her death, and even then, I was quite small. Anyway…continue.”

Jesse hesitated, but Hanzo fixed him with a permissive, reassuring look.

“Um, so…you were taught from childhood in clandestine techniques, survival, and stealth combat. At the end of the 40s, a high-profile assassination of a prominent Tokyo businessman was attributed to your father, but Blackwatch had circumstantial evidence to believe that was, in fact, you.”

“Correct. My first. I was eleven. Father was largely pleased with my work, save for upending the corner of a Persian rug in the target’s bedroom.”

“Wh—Seriously?”

“My father was not a soft man.”

“Shit, I guess. Blackwatch kept tabs on you for the duration, but Talon was always more pressing, from what I know. Sometimes your low-level guys gave good intel, even. Y’all didn’t quibble over customers. After Sojiro died, though…”

“Everything changed,” Hanzo finished quietly.

“And…and after, uh…all that, you disappeared off the radar, and your clan just sorta…shut up inside itself for a while.”

“Father died as result of an internal power struggle. He was the first death, but far from the last. I understand the entire organizational structure is in disarray, but I forsook all that, even if many
of the people responsible for the events leading to my departure are dead.”

“You choose not to go back?”

“I suspect the body count to seize power is still high, but regardless, I… feel I must follow another path and hope honor will find me there.”

Jesse sat back, metal arm draped over the back of his chair, and hat tipped back so he could assess his new ally as he spoke. He’d joked with his ‘reformed gangster’ comment earlier, but he could see now that it really was the case. Hanzo was newer to it, though. Perhaps Jesse could help – if he wanted it.

“Honor’s about why, not how, and I think you’re off to a good start,” he said with a feigned-casual shrug.

The lingering discomfort between them eased and dissipated. Clumsy as they both were about it, at least all their respective cards were on display. Fair and honest. Jesse thumped the table with his hand.

“You safehouse or mine?” he asked with a just a hint of humor.

“Mine,” Hanzo replied drily. “Yours is almost certainly a hovel.”

“Hey, it’s a nice hovel,” Jesse shot back as they rose from the table to pay and leave.
Over the next two weeks, Jesse and Hanzo went to work coordinating their information and parsing out more probable leads. Hanzo had been as correct as he had been snide; Jesse’s safehouse in China (all of them, in fact) were hovels compared to the almost palatial flat his new compatriot owned in a high rise. Apparently, this was Hanzo’s most permanent home. Though Hanzo kept no guest room – what man in his profession would – Jesse was perfectly content falling asleep amongst piles of papers and dim-lit holo displays on a couch in the main room. It was much more comfortable than most anywhere Jesse had laid a cot in the past few years.

Intelligence, more times than not, was about triple-checking a rumor from a guy that knows a guy that might have talked to somebody months ago who knew what the fuck he was talking about …and following that trail backward from z to a. Jesse had initially been disappointed with this unglamorous truth in his youth, but as he learned to accept that fact, he found he deeply enjoyed it. Gabe used to tell him he was born for the work, but that was years ago, now. Normally Jesse did a good job of avoiding reflection on Gabriel in general, but it was much harder with his target being what it was. He was just going to have to get used to it, he supposed.

One of the more plausible tips the two of them had separately learned was about a significant theft of weaponry by a Talon subsidiary group a couple months previous. It was nothing direct, but following a theft trail of such an arsenal, which had to be the result of orders from Talon high command, could yield significant results eventually. They would be remiss to let the lead pass them by, so they packed up and made for Taiwan. For anonymity, they opted for a simple commercial flight and alighted in Taipei in a driving rain.

“Do you speak Mandarin?” Hanzo asked as he attempted to hail a cab.

“Poorly. I’ll do better playing dumb, if that’s your angle.”

“Most serviceable, I agree. Hopefully we will need to do little talking. Keep it as clandestine as possible.”

“Aw. Somethin’ to be said for a good cover game, though.”

Hanzo gave a petulant sigh.

“I am not an actor.”

“With that gleaming personality and perpetual scowl? Can’t imagine how that would be,” Jesse replied with warmed sarcasm.

“And I cannot imagine you without that rag on, or parting with the hat, for that matter,” Hanzo sniffed.

“I clean up mighty fine, as a matter of fact.”

They took a room at a high-end hotel for two nights (“I want a chance at that minibar after work,” Jesse had cracked) and waited for nightfall. After a short dinner, the two of them unloaded their luggage, bristling with weapons and armor, cool as cucumbers. Hanzo had chosen their accommodations carefully: an historic location on the water with old-fashioned windows they could
come and go through with relative ease. All that evening, the two didn’t talk much; they were both still getting used to having another human being around while they were working. The silence had grown easier between them, however, since the first few days after meeting in the alleyway.

Just past midnight, Jesse finally decided Peacekeeper had been cleaned within an inch of its life and began reassembling it.

“Ready?”

“Yes,” Hanzo replied as he stood, holding a coil of vinyl rope. He swept aside a desk at the window, opened it, and stuck his head out surreptitiously to measure the drop. He could jump, but it wasn’t just him anymore. Jesse appeared right at his shoulder and pointed up.

“Right next to the end of the rod here. Nobody ever notices.”

Hanzo handed him the self-drilling piton they’d brought. He was taller, after all. Jesse obliged with a dramatic sigh, and within five minutes had rappelled down to the ground. Hanzo stayed long enough to stow the rope before leaping out and landing in a single, graceful roll next to Jesse.

“Fuck you,” Jesse murmured, and off they went into the night.

The target, another faceless warehouse, was sequestered far from the center of the city. The stolen cargo wasn’t going to be there, of course, but their goal in this case was to scrounge up a manifest as quietly as possible. In, out, done…theoretically.

After casing the building as well as they could, they decided Hanzo would make entry first by scaling the wall to the second floor, where a window was broken and covered with a garbage bag. It would also serve as a good interior sweep; there were bound to be guards even at that hour. Jesse would skulk over by a back door until Hanzo came to give an all-clear. So he sat for ten minutes, until he heard a shout.

Even for someone as well-trained and attuned to danger as Jesse was, nothing stopped the biological surge: wide eyes, that first, shallow breath, the hair going rigid on the back of the neck. The trick was always about schooling what you couldn’t prevent so you could still control everything that was still in flux. Much as he wanted to, until he was sure Hanzo’s cover was blown, it was too huge a risk to bust in and ruin something that had been perfectly safe seconds ago. He counted twenty seconds in his head, his ears perked for the slightest change. That came in the form of a sharp ping against the wall separating them; Jesse recognized it instantly as an arrow strike. Hanzo didn’t miss like that.

Rather than use Peacekeeper, he opted to tear the padlock off the door he’d been hovering at with his left hand. It would be far too loud to shoot; they didn’t need to attract attention outside as well. He was immediately met with a man watching something above and beyond him upon opening the door, and Jesse gave the bewildered man a cordial “howdy” before punching him in the throat.

He found Hanzo on some exposed scaffolding, fighting hand-to-hand with someone who was shouting continuously in Chinese. Though Hanzo was clearly putting effort into his blows, his expression seemed…almost bored. On the floor twenty feet from Jesse was the bow – it must have been abandoned after firing the SOS shot at the wall. He made a run for it and scooped it up just as two more men toting rifles appeared from behind a stack of pallets. He dove for cover with his prize from their fully-automatic fire; at least he could use his gun, now.

Above him, he could hear Hanzo and his assailant still duking it out; he had to help,
somehow. For now, he slung the bow across his body, riser against his back, and drew Peacekeeper from its holster. He chose to come back around the same corner he had hid and spooked one of the men on approach. Before he could even train his sight, Jesse shot him square in the face, which promptly disappeared in a shower of viscera. The heavy *crack* of the revolver made everyone else start in spite of themselves, and the now-faceless gangster melted to the floor, tangled in the harness of his own weapon.

As Jesse tried to find a path up to Hanzo, the other gangster came at him from amongst the tight crowd of containers, rifle butt first. He swatted it aside once, twice, and the third time caught it with his left hand. In one flourish, he spun Peacekeeper back up and shot him in the gut. Now he just had to hope it was only the four of them and nobody else was hiding out on the horn calling for help.

A crash made his heart stutter; he turned to see a dark shape fall and disappear behind crates. Hanzo, still above, called for Jesse and rushed over to vault down to him. Jesse handed him his weapon.

“All right?”

“Of course,” Hanzo sniped back, but he was clearly winded and looked like he’d have a quality shiner on his jaw by morning.

“What was all that shouting about, anyway?”

“Typical gangster blather. Chest thumping. Exhausting just to listen to.”

“No wonder you looked bored.” Jesse glanced around, but no other threats presented themselves. “We got fifteen minutes at most.”

“Probably. The mistake is mine – I was caught as soon as I entered.”

“They were surprisingly thoughtful to cover the second floor. That ain’t your fault. We went in cold.”

The search began for any kind of accessible terminal, and they found one near the front garage door.

“Just dump the drive. We don’t have time to look for anything specific. I’ve got your back.”

Hanzo gave a stern hum of acknowledgement as he installed a data stick to download the terminal’s data onto. On top of everything else, he found that everything was encrypted, so they’d have needed to do it anyway and hope they could crack it open later. It took five minutes at most, but it felt like an eternity sitting there on full alert for the sound of tires crunching on gravel or an unexpected footfall.

“Let’s go,” Hanzo barked at last. He put the stick safely away in a pouch on his belt.

“Sure. I guess that coulda been—”

They were interrupted by an explosion of gunfire. The man Hanzo had knocked from the upper level was very much alive and had found his weapon. The two instantly split for cover. Once hidden, they shared a look across the threshold, unsure quite what to do. If their attacker had time to call reinforcements and set up an ambush, they were fucked. Jesse decided to take it in his own hands; he drew Peacekeeper, mouthed *go* at Hanzo, and jumped out shooting for cover fire. For a few seconds, Hanzo could only sit, stunned by the magnanimity, but forced himself to shake it off in
favor of his own plans. He took off and scaled a pole to get back up where he had fought earlier.

Jesse had gotten the shooter to duck away; when more automatic fire began anew, he fanned the hammer and retreated to goad him out. He caught Hanzo climbing out of the corner of his eye when he went to reload, but it was quickly forgotten when the gangster charged out, firing wildly again. He looked positively wrathful, red in the face and blood trickling down out of his hair. A bullet just nicked Jesse’s arm, making him flinch; the gangster emptied his clip, ran up, and pounced to hit Jesse full-on in the face with the broad side of the rifle. He was only able to deflect the worst of the hit and fell to the floor against a wall, cracking his head against the cement. The yelling had started again – Jesse could pick out random epithets and the word ‘death’, but little else. He got his senses together just soon enough to bat aside a knife coming down on him. Now he was stuck on his back, knocked prone. Not good.

Before he could try kicking out a leg, however, a heavy thunk flung the weight atop him aside. He peeked through his arms protecting his face to see the gangster, gibbering like a fish out of water, shot through the neck and stuck by the arrow to a pallet. A small arterial spurt from the man’s death struggle hit Jesse in the face; he swept it aside with an irritated grunt. Hanzo landed in a crouch next to him and helped him up.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, completely unbothered by the wet, stuttered gasps coming from the floor.

“Nothin’ serious. The headache tomorrow will be worse.” Jesse and Hanzo watched the man die. “Couldn’t aim a little higher?”

“I wanted him quiet more than dead,” Hanzo replied flatly.

“Yeah, fair.” Jesse rubbed his face. His nose wasn’t broken, but fuck that still had hurt. “Thanks, by the way.”

Hanzo pulled the arrow from the deceased’s neck with a dispassionate jerk and flicked the excess blood on the point carelessly onto the floor.

“I freely admit I am not terribly good at working on a team, but I am at least aware that ‘keeping them alive’ is a critical element.”

Jesse let out a hearty laugh that echoed against the metal ceiling.

“How’s that a fuckin’ joke? Careful, you’ll grow a sense of humor if you keep that up.”

Try as he might not to, Hanzo broke out in a tiny smile. Their moment of reprise, however, was broken by the sound of a car door. It seemed like it was coming from the opposite side than where they’d entered, so they made for the door Jesse had broken open. Alas, another car was pulling up there, too. Like a flash, Hanzo nocked and drew an arrow, sending it straight through the windshield to kill the driver, and for good measure, Jesse shot out one of the car’s turbines as they ran. Several men unloaded from the car to chase after them, so Jesse fired a blind shot behind to scatter and slow them.

“Split up?” he gasped.

Hanzo’s expression set with a strange combination of gravity and…worry, perhaps, before he shook his head no.

Teamwork, he reminded himself. Commitment.
Okay, fine with Jesse.

Upon coming around the block, the car they’d heard parking at the front roared up the street. Jesse, at Hanzo’s back, provided cover fire at the men on foot while Hanzo skipped a single scatter arrow up under the car. Something under the hood began smoking and dim cries of pain could be heard from inside as well. As Jesse continued to fan the hammer on Peacekeeper, they took off for a random alleyway – that would limit how many could come at them at once. One bullet got a lucky hit, striking a gangster in the leg and splitting his knee in a fantastic snap of bone from the high-caliber weapon. Blood rapidly pooled on the asphalt where the man fell, and his desperate wail didn’t make his associates slow even for a moment.

Hanzo took point and, using the advantage of Jesse’s taller form to block immediate view, nocked an arrow.

“Down!” he shouted, and Jesse threw himself into a combat roll without hesitation. One arrow flew so close and at such a velocity it passed through the first man pursuing them entirely and stuck in the second. It created an opportunity for Jesse to shoot another effortlessly in the head as he struggled to get past. They began running again, but the victory was short-lived.

“Fucking seriously?” Jesse spat as they came up on a wall around the corner.

“At some point, I should teach you how to climb, if you’ll give up those asinine boots,” Hanzo sneered, but nonetheless dropped and laced his fingers to help launch Jesse up the extra few feet to vault it.

“If we live that long.”

He took the offer with a short running start. Hanzo boosted him easily; Jesse had himself pulled halfway over when the last two pursuers reappeared. One of them, a smaller man, took a potshot with a pistol and missed. Hanzo ran headlong at them only to be stalled by an attempted clothesline by a bear of a man accompanying the shooter. Everyone was too close now for a gunfight on anybody’s part, so fists and feet began swinging in every direction. Hanzo parried well, but Jesse could see how tired he was. Jesse flipped back around and dropped to earth, but before he could get in to help, Hanzo let out an angry, pained shout – he’d taken a nasty gash in the shoulder from a knife. His reactionary wrath drove his kick back round and knocked the smaller man cold in the face, sending him skidding a few feet. The body was clear enough, so Jesse shot him without a second thought.

That emptied the cylinder; Jesse threw Peacekeeper aside and leapt between Hanzo, who was struggling, and the gangster. The man was a whole head taller than Jesse, but he was undeterred. He crossed his arms just in time to block a full-force punch that nearly dropped him to his knees. Hanzo took the opening to kick out their enemy’s leg. As he fell, Jesse got his mechanical hand around the enemy’s neck and, with a long, rough growl, drove him to his back on the ground. With an audible crunch, he crushed the man’s larynx; he went limp so fast Jesse lost his balance and flopped over. One of his cruder victories, but a win was a win.

Hanzo had gotten very quiet – Jesse slogged to his feet and rushed over. Blood was soaking through the silk of Hanzo’s yukata at an alarming rate.

“You with me?” he asked as he tossed off his hat and tore off his serape to press it hard into the wound.

“Yes, yes,” Hanzo replied, still with his characteristic aloofness underneath the exhaustion. “What are you…”
“Don’t need you going into shock.”

“It cannot be that bad.”

“Your ruined pajama shirt says otherwise.” He was teasing, but it was softened by the obvious worry in his tone.

“You know what a damn yukata is. We have to go.”

“We’ll get there. I’m sure they think ten guys was enough to kill a couple of idiots bustin’ in on their shit. Give it a few, okay?”

Hanzo’s head sank.

“I am better than this.”

“So’m I. Do better next time. Kickin’ yourself ain’t gonna get us home.”

That put a bit of wind back in Hanzo’s sails; his eyes brightened and regained some of their usual acuity. The mission came first. Besides, Hanzo always made plenty of time to hate himself off-duty. Nothing new, there.

After a few minutes, Jesse pulled his serape gingerly away and found enough clotting to be satisfactory. Dawn was maybe an hour away, so they had to hurry back if they wanted to scale back up the hotel unseen.

“Sorry,” Hanzo offered as Jesse put the now-stained serape back on for lack of any better way to carry it.

“I got it in red for a reason,” he replied with a reassuring smile.

The sky had a dark pink line along the horizon when they got back. Hanzo gave his climb up to the third floor a long scowl, but there was no alternative. He took a deep breath to center himself and started up. Watching him climb, it was as if he had never been hurt. Jesse suspected continuous momentum was part of the secret. That theory confirmed itself when Hanzo got to the windowsill to pull himself inside; he faltered and let out a clipped noise that made Jesse’s heart stop. At the last possible second, Hanzo caught himself on the sill under his left arm, scrabbled his feet up the wall, and rolled himself inside like a sack of flour. The rope flew out the window after him. When Jesse got back up into the room, he found Hanzo plopping himself down on the tile floor in the bathroom.

“Just…didn’t want to bleed on anything,” he said. His cut had split open anew on his climb.

“Your bank account can handle a room damage charge or two,” Jesse mumbled, but the joke landed insincerely for his concern. “Be right back.” He dug back into his luggage for his personal triage kit. It came with him as often as he could manage, especially when he could get away with as much cargo space as they had for this trip. Upon returning, he set the kit on the sink in anticipation of doing some stitches and took off his serape once more. Might as well keep using it rather than deal with the hassle of ditching any evidence on the towels.

“A first aid kit?” Hanzo marveled.

“Of course. You don’t…”
“It is rarely needed.”

“Until it is,” Jesse murmured grimly.

Hanzo turned his nose up at it, making Jesse’s brow furrow with real irritation.

“I’ve been hurt in the field and watched others die because it wasn’t there. You want to take that chance, you earn the body bag that’s coming to you.”

The rebuke stung. Hanzo knew perfectly well it was his pride talking, and to top it off, a glance at Jesse’s prosthetic arm leveraging against his chest to provide pressure on his wound made him feel outright guilty.

“I…I apologize.”

“What?” Jesse followed the line of Hanzo’s gaze. “Oh, this? Not what I was talking about,” he said, flexing his metal fingers. “More traumatic things have happened to me than losing my arm.”

Puzzling.

“You, er, had two last I had seen,” Hanzo noted hesitantly.

“Oh. Yeah, I did, didn’t I? I mean, I still do, kinda, right?”

True; Hanzo didn’t know quite how to respond to that. They both fell awkwardly quiet for a while, but when Jesse pulled away his serape with intent to clean Hanzo’s cut, he instead fidgeted with the ratty hem.

“I lost it in Switzerland. So, on balance…it wasn’t…the worst thing that happened to me that day.”

Well, now Hanzo felt terrible for saying anything.

“You…were there?”

“Wasn’t supposed to be, but yeah.” Jesse tone grew flat, almost robotic as he spoke. Concentrating on treating the injury felt like a good way to disassociate. True to form, Hanzo gave little indication of the pain beyond the occasional flinch or hissed breath. “Got back early from a mission. It got crushed under rubble. Wouldn’t have been salvageable either way, but it took so long to find me under all that shit, it had to come off right quick. Came to almost a week later in the hospital. Angela just…looked at me, and I knew. We’d lost Ana just a few months before.”

“You trust me with such a story so…easily,” Hanzo murmured.

“Was saving my ass tonight just out of convenience?”

“No.”

“Didn’t think so. You give a shit, I can tell. And I guess I need to say it, long as that’s okay with you.”

The moment made them both recollect their first conversation back in China: quiet, awkward, a strange but oddly reassuring intimacy. Maybe they both needed it after so much time completely on their own. Hermitage did a number on the psyche.
“It is.”

“Okay. Yeah, good,” Jesse said, surprised at the ease with which Hanzo agreed. What else should he have expected? “And, I mean…it goes both ways. Just sayin’. If you ever got…anything to say.”

“I…will take that under advisement. Thank you.” Hanzo’s reply was stiff, but genuine.

Their moment seemed to be over, so Jesse at last knotted and clipped the ends on the stitches.

“Anyway,” he opened with a nervous, prefacing cough, “After tonight, you gotta admit a robot arm is pretty handy, right?”

Hanzo turned slowly on the spot to stare at Jesse with mingled confusion and shock. At Jesse’s crooked grin and careless shrug, however, Hanzo couldn’t help but return an exasperated smile of his own.

“Fuck you,” he breathed. Jesse busted out laughing.

“It’s bad puns and whisky all the way down, buddy. Speaking of: minibar, on me. C’mon,” he said, and reached out to help Hanzo up.

Chapter End Notes

a selection from Jesse’s playlist: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVbb_a8Q2yA
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

hi fronds~

this chapter would be one of those I mentioned at the beginning for which the content warnings exist

so, for this one, as well as the next and a little bit of seven, the following trigger/content warnings apply:
-suicidal ideation and discussion of it
-graphic discussion of gang violence

don't worry, I will reiterate this as necessary in subsequent chapter notes!
in additional news, I have re-made my tumblr and will be cross-posting there at the handle midgetnazgul, should you be interested

thanks! you're all great~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“McCree.”

“Yeah?” Jesse asked without looking up from his typing.

“I have it.”

“Shit.” Jesse shoved his work aside to sit next to him. It’d taken over a week since the trip to Taiwan, but Hanzo had at last decrypted the data they’d stolen.

“Deceptive fuckin’ egghead, you are.”

“I only dress like a rabid traditionalist.”

Most wouldn’t realize it looking at Hanzo, but Jesse had since learned he was exceptional with computers, from code all the way down to engineering architecture. He was unexpectedly humble about it, too, but he had massive aptitude for math in general. Jesse was no idiot, but it quickly became clear after returning to the safehouse that it should be left for Hanzo to puzzle through. Apparently, Sojiro hadn’t found it particularly impressive or helpful for Hanzo’s planned station in life, so he was largely self-taught – not that it had ever seemed to impede him, as far as Jesse could tell from his skill.

Once the list of manifests was found, Hanzo split it and copied half over to Jesse’s personal display. They sat reading quietly until Jesse happened to glance up and see Hanzo with a tight frown and his eyebrows arched with concern.

“What?”

“I think I found it.”
“Well, good.”

“No, not good. It…has passed through Shimada hands. Not in Japan, fortunately. Seattle.”

“Really, Seattle?”

Hanzo looked up, surprised.

“Of course. We have had major operations there since the late 19th century. My ancestors felt no qualms about entering into underground business with the west. It is where most of our modern generational wealth came from. This…creates complication. Not insurmountably so, but still.”

“There’s a contract on you?”

“Naturally.”

“Yeah, the risk of being shot on sight is kind of a complication.”

“Oh, no,” Hanzo replied passively. “Killing me on sight is not optimal. Standing orders are for capture, though I am sure they realize they would end up killing me anyway, were an apprehension attempt ever that successful, because I refuse to be taken.”

“Uh…why?” Jesse asked, though the sinking pit in his gut wasn’t there because he was clueless.

“Execution, ideally, would be handled by the elders in Hanamura. It makes it much more difficult to do anything about me, but they are far too enraged and stubborn for simple solutions. They want to do as tradition dictates. Killing me is only the latter half.”

“Y’all have a tradition for that?”

“Yes. I am not the first to betray the family, though a major member has not done so for nearly twenty years. I attended those proceedings.”

A tense, dark expression came over Hanzo as he recalled the memory, and that was not lost on Jesse. He shook it off and refocused.

“I cannot return to Japan often, as you can imagine. I only return once a year for—”

For.

And like that, rationality slipped through Hanzo’s fingers once more to be replaced by a leaden weight in his chest. He wouldn’t have to do that anymore, now, would he? The last weak excuse he had to return home had been robbed from him. Justly so; it was not as though he deserved it.

“For what?” Jesse asked with conscious hesitation, as he could tell Hanzo was having a moment.

“I used to. It is no longer relevant.” Hanzo didn’t sell the lie very well, but Jesse was never going to buy it anyway, so he was merciful in letting it drop.

“What kind of risk would going there put you at?”

“None, without capture. With it, I will be beaten within an inch of my life, returned to Hanamura, have this removed by some violent means,” he explained, gesturing dispassionately to his sleeve tattoo, “I suspect by belt sander as maximum punishment for my cowardice, and held in
captivity until forced to commit ritual suicide for forgiveness. Should I refuse that, I would be beheaded instead and buried without it in an unmarked grave. To contrast: my father is whole in his, though he is not in the ancestral family burial plot.”

Jesse was no wilting flower – his blood-in to join Deadlock as a child had involved tournament-style knife fights – but this was beyond the pale. Hanzo’s face was a stony mask as he stared at nothing on his computer.

“Hold the fuck up; cowardice?”

“I hesitated in the face of my task, fled, and as it turns out, ultimately failed. It is cowardice of a level unacceptable for rank and file, and infinitely less so for the firstborn son of the leader.”

“Didn’t they fucking murder him?”

“Immaterial. I am a Shimada even before I am my father’s son. I had an opportunity to live beyond Sojiro’s perceived sins. I did not; fantastically so, as a matter of fact.” The bitterness in his voice was unmistakable. “I doubt they would be as harsh even to Genji at this point, despite the past.”

Jesse chewed his lip and grew contemplative.

“So, when you went to Genji…”

Hanzo’s head snapped over to fix Jesse with a blistering glare.

“I did not want to. I knew perfectly well what Genji wanted and would have been content to leave him be, if rather bitterly. What the hell makes you think I went with any intent—” he cut himself off, but his tone was soaked with real and vicious anger so potent Jesse sat up straight and put his hands up in surrender.

“Whoa, hang on, I didn’t mean—”

“Yes, you did.”

Okay, maybe he had, but it hadn’t been about judging Hanzo. He hadn’t done a great job of explaining that, however. This was beyond a touchy subject, and Jesse kept tripping all over it like his feet were made of concrete. Try again, with softer footfalls.

“I’m makin’ it sound like judgment, and that’s not my intent, sorry. I know you regret what happened.”

“What intent is there, if not that?” Hanzo asked, but much of the previous rage had disappeared, replaced with hollow self-deprecation.

“I just…what was asked of you was fucked from the jump. I can sympathize with—”

“I told you before: your sympathy is unwarranted,” Hanzo cut in with a cold finality Jesse finally submitted to with a frustrated sigh. He’d done something horrific, that was undeniable – Jesse had done and witnessed a lot of terrible things himself – but what happened to cause it was straight-up un-fucking-fair; surely Hanzo could admit that much for his own benefit?

“We can go,” Hanzo finally spoke again to break the strained silence. “It will be fine.”

He set aside his work and rose from the sofa. Difficult as it was, he made himself hold Jesse’s
wide, nervous eyes.

“I trust you with my safety, and failing that, to know to kill me first if everything goes poorly.”

_Fuck_, this man was so goddamn melodramatic.

“Okay, Captain Nihilist, I will if it comes to that, but we ain’t goin’ _nowhere_ until I feel good about it, and I sure as shit don’t right now. Justify to me it’s worth going. There’s no way the package is still there. It’s gotta mean somethin’ if I’m putting another life on the line.”

“It is only mine,” Hanzo replied, his head tilted with genuine confusion. No nihilistic joke, no overwrought angst. Just an empty fact. For a full ten seconds, Jesse couldn’t follow up, he was so floored by the complete lack of self-preservation.

Judging from the silence, Hanzo assumed Jesse wanted a deeper answer. He walked into the kitchen adjacent for drinks; atrociously expensive Japanese whisky for Jesse, sake for himself. He returned and explained as he poured glasses.

“My family has never acted directly on behalf of Talon before. Information brokerage is one thing; moving such hot merchandise is totally other. It makes little sense. This development _does_ explain something for me, however.”

“What’s that?” Jesse asked as he tried to shake off his distress.

“Talon has attempted to recruit me in the past. Once a year since I left Hanamura, but last year, it happened twice, and much more formally.”

“Talon _what_?” Jesse spat as finished a sip.

“I have politely refused,” Hanzo explained without a hint of concern and sipped his wine. “They would be fools not to at least try. I am an excellent asset. However, I am simply a killer, not a terrorist.”

Compared to the stone-cold devaluation from a literal _minute_ ago, that was some impressive ego on Hanzo’s part, and he didn’t seem to realize the discrepancy at all. How could a man so value in growing and crafting his skill – not simply to be effective, but _the best_ – yet be so careless with the self that used it? There was a _lot_ more going on under the hood there than Jesse had initially given credit for.

“Someone in the family may be using Talon to get a leg up on competition, or more likely, Talon is manipulating _them_ on that empty hope. At worst, the elders lost or gave up command to Talon directly, but I doubt it is that drastic because I repulsed one of their periodic attempts on my life early last year. Talon would not care, were they in charge. Irrespective of all that, I am an inside man, and this is a much more direct connection to exploit, if you want justifiable reward for the risk.”

Jesse had to concede that much; still, he’d seen better bad ideas.

“All right. I just want to know _you’re_ going to be okay.”

“That is hardly relevant to you. Purely my—"

“The fuck it ain’t,” Jesse cut him off, stern and firm. “It’s my ass too if I gotta plan to clean up after you for something you can’t handle. I’ll do it – gladly, too – but _you_ need to be up-front with me. It’s like pullin’ teeth, but for the most part you have been so far. I’m just underlining the point so there’s no question between you and me. So: are you good?”
Hanzo shifted uncomfortably under Jesse’s laser-sight gaze and stared back over the rim of his glass. It was a fair demand.

“I will make it good.”

Though he wished he could, Jesse didn’t quite believe it, but he settled the matter with a nod. Even if Hanzo wanted to discount his inevitable humanity and fallibility, Jesse knew better. Chest-pounding got people dead. But then again, that was the reason they had teamed up, wasn’t it? He could help make it all right, too, and he found himself willing to do it in a way he hadn’t felt in a long time; Jack and Gabe had exhausted a lot of his emotional reserve, and his five years in seclusion seemed to have refilled a substantial measure of that capacity. It was more risk than he’d like, but the returns were indeed promising. He’d just have to do his best to keep the psychological budget in the black.

“Next week, then.”

The trip didn’t begin auspiciously. Getting out of China proved difficult due to weather, and the surprise of a potential warrant for Jesse in India had necessitated a hasty overnight departure into Pakistan that cost Jesse a few favors to accomplish without visas. They talked their way onto a cargo flight to the Philippines, and at last, a genuine commercial flight for the United States. Arrival at Sea-Tac brought little solace; in ninety-six hours, neither of them had slept much more than twelve. Tequila hangovers were better than this.

“We should take a day. Portland’s close but out of the way. I got a place there,” Jesse tried.

“No. Today,” Hanzo barked, and Jesse was too tired to even act on his wild impulse to sock him in the face. He should put his foot down, pull the plug altogether, the hell with everything else. It’d been a bad idea from square one and was rapidly devolving into a terrible omen. However, Jesse knew good goddamn well Hanzo was liable to march in there solo purely on principle, and he hadn’t completely handed over his last fuck to give for others.

“We case it. Nothing else,” was his bargain instead of his better judgment screaming at him, but it got Hanzo to agree.

Hanzo had been to the location twice before, but well over a decade ago, and since his flight from the wrath of familial revenge there was no telling how much things had changed. They staked out in an empty office a block away and settled in for an all-nighter. It quickly became clear as the night stretched on that their surveillance wasn’t going to work. Jesse was nodding off; Hanzo did not, but he frequently tended to stare off into the middle distance and required a nudge from Jesse to shake himself out of it. Biology’s attrition eventually won out and they conceded enough to get a fitful half-night’s sleep underneath desks hoarded in their makeshift hideout.

On waking just after dawn, Jesse caught Hanzo sat with his back to a filing cabinet. He hadn’t seen Jesse stir; he was bent, face half-hidden and one knee to his chest. An anxious thumb scrubbed along the ridge of his brow. Even in the dim light, Jesse could see how distressed his expression was. It seemed to be an attempt to psych himself up that wasn’t going very well. Again, Jesse considered abandoning the mission.

Hanzo abruptly stood and walked to stand at the window. His fist pulled so tight where it hovered in front of his face Jesse could see the knuckles go white and shake a little. Was it right to interrupt such an obviously personal moment, even if it seemed Hanzo needed it? He hadn’t been right since the decision to come, and it wasn’t improving.
“None of it matters,” Hanzo murmured.

His fist loosened, which put Jesse’s mind a little at ease, but the grim expression that replaced the anxiety erased any net positive reaction Jesse might have felt. He shut his eyes and dreaded the moment he would pretend to awaken twenty or so minutes from then.

True morning brought no relief. The silence between them could be felt by both in the deepest recesses of their gut, but neither could bring himself to break it in any substantive way. Jesse stole away to get a rudimentary breakfast they picked over, and then shifts of surveillance began. For the first one, Hanzo stayed in and eyed the men coming and going for familiar faces while Jesse, stripped of his weapons and flashiest tokens of clothing, stalked the streets for more direct angles of approach. They still didn’t have a hard objective, and that haunted Jesse.

_I should talk to him. He needs it even more than I do._

He didn’t.

Around five, a large group filed out from the building, loaded into SUVs with completely tinted windows, and left.

“Well,” Jesse said with pleased surprise. A look at Hanzo, however, dampened the reaction. “What?”

“Nothing. We should go. Now. This is the best opportunity we will ever get. Swiftness is paramount,” Hanzo explained as he lifted his quiver and bow. Jesse pulled on his chest armor and held his tongue.

After a conservative approach – Taiwan was still fresh in both their minds – they found that complex was totally empty. Jesse thought he heard Hanzo mumble “makes sense” as they searched, but now was not the time to argue about it. The place was set up like a legitimate office, cubicles and everything; the Shimadas ran their business much like a corporation. Hanzo made a beeline for a larger corner desk.

“This should have what we need.”

He accessed the terminal and didn’t even bother with the password, opting instead to pull a battered data drive from his belt and install it. He let out a sigh of relief.

“We don’t have time for decryption again,” Jesse hissed.

“Yes, we do. It will not take long.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I wrote their encryption software, and they were foolish enough to keep it. My family, as you already should understand, does not change frequently or gracefully.”

It did not slip past Jesse that Hanzo had neglected to give him a heads-up on an iota of that ahead of time, irking him even further. As promised, it was readable in a few minutes – for Hanzo at least, since it was entirely in Japanese. Jesse could only make out a few phrases here and there.

“It is not here, but scheduled to move for a sale, soon. The deal is intended for Los Angeles.”

“Any confirmed attendees?”
“Just the expectation of Talon command. Nothing specific. The family is acting as broker for the sale, and there are notes about a prospective ‘partnership’. I cannot believe—”

“Can’t you?” Jesse interrupted with no small measure of bitterness. He was tired of humoring Hanzo’s bullshit today. “Y’all ain’t angels.”

“Our station is greater than peddlers and fences.”

“Oh, so weapons trafficking is just beneath you, got it.”

“You cannot understand. Just because you have knocked over trains for crumbs does not mean you appreciate true organization. Grand larceny is child’s play.”

“Bombin’ hundreds of tons of metal goin’ 400 miles an hour is a little more than grand larceny,” Jesse snapped, but he immediately regretted it. Why the hell was he defending his criminal record, even to a born yakuza? It just irritated him more because it meant Hanzo had gotten under his skin. “You know what, fuck you, you wanna keep this clown car of murderers as your kin, fuckin’ do it. They only wanna peel your skin off your bones and throw you in the Pacific fuckin’ Ocean. Finish the hell up and let’s get out of here.”

Hanzo wilted to the point of meekness. Silently, he took a screenshot of the information and closed up. They filed out and headed for the exit down the main artery between cubicles when a voice came from the overhead speakers that made their blood run cold.

“Hanzo.”

They turned; at the far end was a previously-tinted glass enclosure for another office. Now, it was clear, revealing a tall, older Japanese man flanked by ten others holding fully-auto rifles. Their leader lifted his phone and wiggled it with his fingers – the screen was on, presumably with video of them inside.

“So much for sacred family trust,” Hanzo sniffed. It was tradition within the family to never surveil operations, even at risk of usurpation. He had been counting on that.

“You only have yourself to blame for that,” the man replied.

“The hell is this?” Jesse whispered.

“Takeru. Second cousin on my father’s side.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

“Not in the least. I suspect he assisted in my father’s murder.”

“You weren’t expecting me? It’s February, Hanzo. Same as every other year. So quickly you forget.”

Every year, all foreign outposts received a visit from main family members as a sort of audit. Hanzo, in fact, had not forgotten. He’d recognized it when so many men left at once earlier – they had simply come back much more quickly than anticipated, but no one else needed to know that. It was mostly pomp and circumstance; Sojiro and other representatives (including Hanzo himself) had made the journey without fail. Takeru hadn’t been included in those visits when Hanzo still lived in Hanamura.

“You think you can slaughter your way to the top?”
“I have,” Takeru sniffed.

“See how long it lasts.”

“Cheap talk from a weak, posturing prince. The elders have their grudges, but to me, it’s not worth my effort. For ten years you’ve lived watching over your shoulder and scraped the bottom of the barrel for targets I wouldn’t assign to my youngest for their simplicity. The old threat of you returning for usurpation was always fantastic, but the council insists its fear is justified. When I return to Hanamura, I’ll have proven the truth I’ve always known; you’re a coward not fit to fall under a single one of our blades. Death, fast or slow, is a wasted effort on any of our parts. Go; there is nothing you’ll do today – or ever – to change what you are at heart. I can plan around you.”

“Selling scrap for Talon is hardly anything to laud,” Hanzo spat back, but Jesse could see in his eyes how deep the words had cut.

“Their power and wealth are unparalleled by anyone since the Crisis. Our fortunes tied to theirs will return the status your father so conspicuously let slip through his fingers, but at least he died fighting.”

Hanzo let out an enraged howl and let an arrow fly before anyone could blink, but it stuck in the glass, shaft only halfway through. The glass flickered and went opaque again.

“Goodbye, Hanzo.”

One more, just one more, and—

Before he could nock another arrow, Jesse snatched his forearm and pulled him towards the door. Automatic fire began pinging off around them, but too high for any immediate lethality; it was purely meant to chase them off. Jesse all but had to throw Hanzo out the door. Still, he struggled, so Jesse pinned his chest with his metal arm against the wall.

“Hanzo, stop.”

“No! I’ll split his head in two, I swear to god,” Hanzo shouted. He was positively wild with rage, eyes wide and jaw bulging under the skin for his gritted and bared teeth.

“It’s fucking suicide, you can’t—”

Hanzo ripped at Jesse’s right hand holding him at the shoulder and tried to escape; they exchanged a few hand-to-hand blows that ended in Jesse being knocked onto his ass, but unhurt.

"I don’t care!" Hanzo shrieked.

No other blows came, and Hanzo didn’t run. Jesse stared up as he stood above panting. The rage was melting away to naked despair, and at last Jesse understood his own nagging discomfort from the beginning.

Hanzo absolutely would throw himself at them and kill himself just to do it.

There was no outrage or vengeance in his expression – nothing to imply a hope of victory or escape. No sense of purpose or duty. The singular interest was simply an end, and whatever that gained him from the living after the fact, he didn’t care. Nothing less would take away the feeling inside.

It doesn’t matter.
The it had been him and any effect he could possibly make, Jesse knew now, as he matched it with the haunting look that had accompanied the sentiment. Jesus, and to think what he’d said before the confrontation…

“I do,” Jesse replied in little more than a gasp. “I care.”

Despair morphed into confusion; Hanzo had no idea what to do with that kind of reply.

Footfalls grew audible. Jesse scrambled to his feet and hauled Hanzo off with him by the arm again down the street. He didn’t resist; in fact, he seemed totally numb. Once at a safe distance, Jesse turned to him.

“Go get our shit. I’ll get us a ride. Can you do that?” he asked and shook him by the shoulder a bit to emphasize the point. He got a nod in return, and Hanzo left. Jesse watched him go, genuinely terrified something would change, but Hanzo was dutifully headed for their stakeout location. Now Jesse had to keep up his end. He ran a couple blocks further, but no one followed. That douchebag hadn’t been kidding about letting them go.

A parking garage was nearby. Jesse, running completely on adrenaline, chose the first car model he recognized and tapped at the holo interface on his arm; he kept scripts on it to hack cars specifically for times like this. Within a minute, it unlocked and he was peeling out to meet Hanzo. A massive wave of relief rushed over him when he saw Hanzo as he pulled up, and he resolved not to let him out of sight again for the foreseeable future. They’d been forced to abandon a lot in Pakistan, so they only had two paltry backpacks between them. Hanzo threw everything in the trunk and off they went. Portland was a much better guarantee for safety, Jesse decided.

The entire ride on I-5 was deathly silent. Jesse hadn’t been on as uncomfortable a ride as this since Jack was alive – just long enough to have forgotten how shitty it was. All the while, Hanzo had sat looking straight out the windshield, alternating between the despair Jesse had seen before and total expressionlessness, as if he were astral projecting and not there in spirit.

When they pulled off the interstate for the city three hours later, Jesse wrung the steering wheel. They’d arrive at his safehouse within 15 minutes and he had no fucking idea what to do next. He thought back once more to Taiwan and took a deep breath.

“Want to talk about it?”

“No,” Hanzo replied, voice rough and low.

Jesse nodded nervously to himself. A thought came to him – something a bit easier for everyone involved.

“Want to get wasted about it?” he tried instead. In the corner of his eye, he saw Hanzo actually relax a little, even if in defeat.

“Yes.”

“Okay, we’ll do that, then. Keep in mind I ain’t gonna find good sake where we’re goin’,” Jesse said in an attempt for even a smidgen of levity. It didn’t work this time.

They holed up in his spartan efficiency with a handle of Jack apiece – all Hanzo’s usual snobbery towards Jesse’s favored liquor was absent tonight. He went hard for it, too, but not as recklessly as if he’d been alone. Jesse recognized that restraint just as well as he himself did, and Hanzo was inwardly grateful for it.
By the end of his second very generous glass, he felt ready to speak at last. Jesse deserved it after all his bullshit that day. He thumbed at the rim of his highball.

“Were you hurt?” he asked quietly, referring to their brief scuffle.

“Nah. It’ll take more than that. You’re not the first friend to take a swing at me,” Jesse replied easily. He was still nursing his first drink, since Hanzo would need minding. “It’s fine, promise.”

The word friend stuck in Hanzo’s head, at once baffling and soothing.

“I said I would make it okay, and I did not. An apology cannot possibly make up for my failings today, but it is all I have.”

Jesse looked to Hanzo with distress and surprise. He was making it sound like his completely-understandable mistake was some kind of mortal sin. Shit like that needed to be nipped in the bud.

“Look,” he began, leaning his elbows onto his knees, “You let yourself down today, sure, but I let you down, too. It was way too much to ask of anybody. I questioned myself so many fuckin’ times – for your benefit – in the past few days and I didn’t say jack shit. It ain’t what a friend should do. Nothin’s worth the price you paid today, and I’m sorry for makin’ you pay it all by yourself. I’ve lived through too many fights that took pieces of people’s souls away to keep doin’ it now I’m makin’ my own rules.”

There it was again. That word.

“Is that what we are?” Hanzo asked. Try as he might, he couldn’t quite look over at Jesse; today had been too much for that level of courage. Coward. “Friends?”

Jesse took in Hanzo’s body language as he asked the question: reticent, self-conscious, even a little afraid. He chose his words carefully.

“I like to think so. If it ain’t too familiar.”

No answer came for a long moment, but Jesse was content to let Hanzo take his time. It was very, very obvious Hanzo was unfamiliar with relating any emotion whatsoever as he watched him restlessly trade his glass between his hands, eyes darting this way and that in his head to look at anything but McCree.

“No. Not too familiar. I am…merely uncertain what to do. I cannot…cannot recall ever having had…a friend.” He struggled to say it to the last syllable, but there it was.

Heartbreaking as it was to hear, Jesse couldn’t say he was surprised after meeting what Hanzo called family. Sharks, the lot of them. The whole situation offered zero opportunity to meet anybody as an equal – even his own fucking brother, as it turned out.

“Well, you got one now,” Jesse said, leaning across the table to thump it reassuringly with his palm. “True-blue.”

“Why?” Hanzo asked. He genuinely didn’t understand.

“Why not?” Jesse replied with a shrug, but Hanzo shook his head with the most emotion he’d expressed in hours.

“Not good enough.”
“Okay. I mean… I just like you. You’re kind of a stodgy shit, yeah, but you’re not as mean as you pretend to be. You can’t fool me: I love pretending to be mean, too. You like shootin’ stuff, bad jokes, drinking – hell, even dressing up like you lived two hundred goddamn years ago,” he added, counting off on his fingers. It was only because Jesse was watching Hanzo so closely that he witnessed the tiniest smirk turn up the corner of his mouth for a half-second. “We got a lot in common, in my opinion. You ain’t gotta be anything special to count. Not that the ability to hit a quarter at two hundred meters with an arrow ain’t special, mind you.”

Hanzo drained his glass and immediately poured another. Compliments were…difficult to cope with.

It wasn’t quite the same, but Jesse could somewhat empathize. He had chosen to leave Deadlock, and it still had taken him a long time to really figure out how fucked up his situation had been and let go of the wistfulness and guilt in abandoning the gang. On top of that, Jesse had been a kid, still; it was a chief reason Gabe had chosen him over the others. What it must take for Hanzo to do everything Jesse had – as a full adult, and involuntarily at that – was unimaginable. Gabe had understood back then that Jesse’s life, his morals, were still very malleable. Hanzo was the result of keeping someone locked in a crate for a couple decades only to dump it off on the side of the road and leave the person inside to the wolves. There was absolutely no vector to cope unless he made it himself. Surviving was a herculean task – thriving, almost impossible.

“I know it’s easier said than done, but you have to know everything you heard today is horseshit. You know they ain’t worth it on your good days, you’ve suggested as much yourself. And if you can’t believe yourself, believe me. I’m here. He’s not.”

Hanzo emptied the new glass and poured yet another, but at length, he nodded.

“Thank you,” he rasped after another long silence. “For today. For everything else.” Jesse plucked the half-empty fifth off the table and put it at the foot of his chair out of reach.

“It’s what friends do.”

Chapter End Notes

a selection from Hanzo’s playlist: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8HO8e9CXmM
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

hi friends!

the content warning for discussion of suicidal ideation is still in effect, pls take care of yourselves~

special thanks to meowrails for the Spanish help, and UrbanHymnal for taking up beta-ing!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hanzo kept his own council the next few days. Since the weapon sale was only a couple weeks away, it seemed best to just stay in Portland until the event was closer – no need to attract attention to themselves by being too close to Los Angeles. Jesse let his friend do as he pleased to blow off steam, which included day drinking, long periods of meditation, and obsessive maintenance of his bow. When he got stir-crazy from the enduring silence, Jesse took walks so Hanzo could have his space in peace. All those three days, Hanzo did not set foot outside the safehouse, so on day four, Jesse decided it was time for some gentle persuasion.

“We’re going out,” Jesse said late that morning. “There’s a great place up the way for breakfast.”

Hanzo, previously absorbed in his daily habit of fastidiously brushing his hair, turned in surprise.

“Impossible. My—”

“Yeah yeah, you’ll only get in fifty of your hundred brush strokes today. You’ll survive, and I bet all that hair’ll be just as shiny and flawless anyway. You’ve barely eaten the past few days. Up and at ‘em.”

A glare did not deter Jesse in the slightest. He threw a hooded sweatshirt from his neglected closet at Hanzo, which landed with a soft *poof* on his head.

“My jeans won’t fit, but this is Portland. Your parachute pants won’t look out of place if you wear that.” It was better off Hanzo’s characteristic tattoo remain hidden as well. No telling who had eyes on the ground.

“Fuck you,” Hanzo replied as he pulled off his yukata and replaced it.

“There he is,” Jesse said warmly. “Glad you’re back.”

After a short walk in Portland’s seemingly-interminable drizzle, they took up a table in a diner several blocks away. Hanzo skulked in his seat, huddling into the baggy fabric of the hood pooled at his neck. A teenaged waitress appeared, grinning ear-to-ear at Jesse.

“Same as before, sunshine,” Jesse purred – he must have come before on one of his walks, Hanzo belatedly realized. “And somethin’ rib-sticking for my buddy here. He ain’t picky, don’t let
him scare ya.”

“You know perfectly well how picky I am,” Hanzo grumbled once she was out of earshot. _Sunshine_ had been an appropriate nickname; even Hanzo couldn’t bring himself to foist his dour mood on her, with her bright smile and pleasant attitude just pouring coffee for them.

“Does it look like I give a fuck?” Jesse asked from behind his cup of coffee. “I told you to get out, and you did. I’ll tell you to eat, and you will.” He set aside his mug and folded his hands on the table. “I’m being crass, but you need it. You’ll stay cooped up for a week if I let you. It ain’t healthy.”

“We have not known each other terribly long, but I believe you can grasp how _healthy_ I am,” Hanzo replied with a mix of sarcasm and true bitterness. Regret simmered inside him for his honesty when a wounded look crossed Jesse’s face.

“I do. That’s why we’re here. We all need an outside kick in the ass, sometimes, and that’s okay.”

Comforting reassurances chafed dually at Hanzo’s contemporary mood and lifelong education in emotional asceticism. Maybe that was _fine_ for others. Lesser mortals, better people. The temptation to shift focus was overwhelming.

“You have been traveling in much the same way as I have for several years. Who does it for you?”

_That_ was an unexpected turnabout. Jesse scratched the back of his head. It was uncomfortable, but this wasn’t about him right now. No time for distractions – refocus on what really mattered.

“I ain’t the one looking for any excuse to kill myself.”

Hanzo visibly winced. Jesse spread his palm out on the table between them.

“You don’t want to talk about it, I get it. And I told you a bunch of shit when we got here I hope you took seriously, because I meant it. But…I want to be frank about it. Make sure you know that I know you weren’t just having a one-off shit day. You’ve been here before, many times, for a long time.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Nothin’ you don’t want to. I saw a lot of shit in Deadlock and _Overwatch_. Both fucked up and ended a lot of lives without being on a battlefield or a job. I’ve pulled people off balconies and hauled bodies up out of rivers. Talked to others and even got ‘em to change their mind once or twice. There’s been enough death the past forty years. Don’t add to it because your shit family thinks you didn’t do a murder right.”

All logic told Hanzo that most days. But judging from the heavy stress-relieving sigh he released and the first real unclenching of his jaw in days, he needed to hear it from someone else. No one ever had, much less so bluntly. He stared down at the table; for the first time in days, he _felt_, hearing Jesse explain himself. Much as before in Seattle, he was confused more than anything else. He would never be so brave as to actually speak the question, but…_was this_ what friendship really meant? In the past three days they’d barely spoken, and yet Hanzo had never felt so…_seen_ in his life. Feeling watched was certainly familiar to him, but not like Jesse did it: completely without judgement. At some point, surely the other shoe was going to drop and Jesse would tell him he was
thirty-eight fucking years old, get it together already because we have real work to do, but it hadn’t happened, and it wasn’t going to. The lash he’d feared turned out to be just an extended hand, patient and steady to help him up out of the hole he’d dug himself into.

“It is not that simple.”

“Never is. But this is part of it, and you need the help.”

“I do not need help.”

“Yeah, you fuckin’ do.”

A spark of rage mixed with the continuing morose pinch in Hanzo’s expression. How fucking dare he. It passed, and the usual rush of regret for his anger swelled anew. Despair, wrath, regret, deprecation: the same cycle had always been there. The same one that killed Genji. Or didn’t, maybe, at least not literally. Hanzo definitely murdered multiple somethings that day, regardless of actual body count.

Jesse could see Hanzo slip away inside himself. The stoicism remained in some measure, but now Jesse realized he was familiar enough to catch the microexpressions as they flit by. Hanzo was getting too deep; lord knows Jesse had been there before. He knocked on the table, and Hanzo jumped in his seat. Empathy bled from the concerned tilt of a frown in his mouth and his narrowed, piercing gaze.

“Point is. I got you, if you’ll let me. Don’t gotta be every day, but I’ll talk you off a ledge ‘til I’m blue in the face. Deal?”

He held out a hand to shake, and when Hanzo took it, Jesse squeezed it a bit for effect.

“You’re gonna be okay,” he said, tone low and reassuring. He even got Hanzo to hold his gaze for a few seconds.

“I…will do my best,” was all Hanzo would confess. Peak character to the last, but it was good enough.

Fuck, Jesse wished he could light up in here. No more preventable deaths. He was too goddamn tired. The brief malaise had to be put aside, however, as Sunshine returned with their food. Simple eggs and bacon for Jesse, but Hanzo’s breakfast turned out to be a massive serving of French toast – his enduring and occasionally-indulged sweet tooth aside, this was something with many hundreds of times more carbs than his vanity would permit on most other days. Hanzo gave the waitress a tiny smile and courteous bow of the head before tucking in.

“You did not answer my question,” he said. “Who kicks your ass, so to speak?”

Jesse’s heady discomfort returned, but he was determined to power through it.

“Nobody, lately. Been keepin’ to myself since everything went to hell. I got tired and fed up and needed to be alone. Some things have slipped through my fingers because of it, though. Lost touch with friends.”

“Did you disappear on them?”

“I left, but I didn’t…at least I thought I didn’t do it implying I was lookin’ to cut everybody off. A lot happened in the space of a couple years. We all tried to keep it together in some way, but…I stopped calling. Didn’t answer some messages. Made excuses in others. Eventually, all of it
stopped. I think they knew I needed space, but I took advantage of it to just fuck off. Now it’s guilt more than anything else keeping me away. Especially with Fareeha. I did her wrong.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Girl--? No, no. Fareeha is Ana…Captain Amari’s daughter. We’re close, she’s like a little sister. She and I went through a lot when her mother died. But I…drifted away after a while.” There was an exact date stamp on the while, too, but it was too difficult to even think about. “If I really needed it, they’d answer, but…I make sure I don’t need it.”

Hanzo was a skilled interrogator – in legitimate and illegitimate methods – so he could tell Jesse was talking around himself. However, Jesse had also said Hanzo didn’t have to spill every one of his own secrets. He should respect it in kind.

“You’re a good man and have experienced much tragedy, McCree. No one should fault you for seeking solitude,” he reassured softly. There was plenty of self-blame in this particular diner booth already.

“Thanks. It’s been a long five years. Hopefully time will vindicate me.”

“You deserve it more than most. But I have to say, you neglected the obvious answer to my question even as you invited it.”

“Don’t recall inviting anybody to kick my ass.”

A smile, equal parts his character smugness and a newer, precocious humor spread across Hanzo’s face.

“Did you not, when you told me you consider me a friend?”

Jesse broke out in a warm, hearty laugh.

~

Four days out from the sale, Jesse had decided it was time to pack up and head out.

“Now?” Hanzo had asked.

“Yeah. I ain’t driving seven hours a day if I don’t have to.”

“Surely you are joking.”

Now, two days deep into driving and only halfway down California, Hanzo at last realized Jesse had not been joking in the least. He had been to many large American cities in his life, but had never traveled it like this. He was grateful for Jesse’s forethought; he grew squirrelly after a few hours’ drive and couldn’t understand how Jesse did not.

“Our country is far too big.”

“So you’ve said at least four times since we left,” Jesse replied with a snicker.

“Are you certain it is not expanding as we drive?” He chided, but he was largely enjoying it. Despite the war, the climate, and everything else, the drive was still a beautiful one. “I can appreciate your fascination with the American west better now, I suppose.”

“This? It’s lovely, but it ain’t my West.”
“No? Is this not it? The eponymous West?”

“Just a part. If we get the chance, I’ll show you what I call home.”

Hanzo’s presence helped, but Jesse was far less at ease on the drive. Every mile brought them closer to a reality Jesse grew more and more uncertain he was prepared for. It had seemed so easy a few short weeks ago. A lot had changed – principally, the inclusion of his new friend – but now that the moment drew up, he realized how monumentally stupid his plan, or lack thereof, was. While driving, he and Hanzo had talked over tactics: what they would do if Gabriel was there, what they would if he wasn’t. If things went sideways.

And every word Jesse had spoken was a lie.

To be fair, he honestly hadn’t expected Hanzo to stick it out as long as he had, much less as enthusiastically. He was pretty sure Hanzo was equally incredulous; sometimes he looked at Jesse like he couldn’t quite believe he was there. Both had walked into what they expected would be a cooperative association and come out with something else entirely. They were real friends, now. Jesse hadn’t been lying about that, but with friendship came a kind of accountability Jesse suddenly wasn’t sure he could pay up on. His own hypocrisy ate at him as the hours passed and he spoke none of his reservations. The anxiety kept him in a cyclical stranglehold the entire trip.

On the third day, they hit the outskirts of the city in the mid-afternoon. Los Angeles had recovered from the Crisis, but it wasn’t the same whole. The basin was pockmarked with wasteland areas from small precision nuclear detonations decades before. Gabe used to tell Jesse stories about the slow decay of law there in the years before the Crisis and the early skirmishes in which he’d fought after it began when he got drunk enough. Places like Hollywood and its ilk had achieved revival, but the core downtown of old was now largely omnic-majority slum, as it had experienced frequent riots and sustained outside assault from which it had never recovered. No one wanted to clean up at this point because it meant remembering. That was the problem for so many places across the world since the Crisis – willful amnesia and unwillingness to learn its lessons.

At Hanzo’s insistence, they spent the night in one of the nicer hotels on the north side. (“I will pay for a decent mattress,” he had griped.) All the better they stay away from the seedier parts they would be invading the next day, Jesse told himself, as if he wasn’t trying to put it as far off in his mind as possible.

Hanzo wasn’t stupid – Jesse telegraphed his stress in every ounce of his body language, no matter the words – but he was committed to letting his friend have his space. He had to trust that Jesse would talk when he was ready, after everything they’d been through the past two weeks. That time would probably come afterwards, when the reality of the death began to set in, based on his own…experience. Maybe that experience, that perspective, could be of value to someone at last, and he could provide something to Jesse he certainly hadn’t had in the immediate aftermath of what had happened with Genji, even if it was an example of what not to do. In the meantime, Hanzo felt he could provide reassurance simply through his presence. He hoped so, at least – he wasn’t very good at anything more substantial than being there and sharing a knowing look. Words were elusive and what he could string together in his mind seemed cheap.

The evening was spent well enough, though Jesse was chain-smoking his anxiety in full defiance of hotel rules. Hanzo let him have it; he had budgeted for the fine. Before he turned in, however, Hanzo couldn’t let their last moment of known peace slip by without acknowledging a couple of things.

“I want you to know I still remember and will respect our accord,” he opened hesitantly from where he sat on his bed. Jesse turned from where he’d been staring out the window.
“Accord?” he asked. His eyes were unfocused and distant, as if Hanzo had interrupted him from slumber.

“Yes. About taking the shot.”

Jesse’s mouth drew into a thin line, but he nodded.

“Okay. Thank you. I know it’s a lot to ask.”

“Not at all. I trust you, McCree. Your judgment as well as your faith. If…if that helps you to know.”

It didn’t; in fact, it was leaving him a bit nauseous. What the hell was he supposed to do? Hanzo didn’t deserve this.

“I’ll try to remember that tomorrow.”

He didn’t sleep a wink all night.

In the morning, they set out to begin reconnaissance. To cover the most ground the most efficiently as well as stay safe, they split up and radioed each other over their newly-established secure channel for each other. They started a half-mile out and slowly closed in on the site as described in the Shimada memo. Hanzo had been absolutely positive the location wouldn’t be changed; the deal was far too important to this particular cousin to tip his hand and reveal a possible intelligence leak. They’d simply take the risk and increase security. Eventually, Jesse found a prime sniper’s nest in a ruined structure two floors up. The deteriorating edifice provided ideal cover and good potential vectors to either drop in or take a long shot, if desired.

If desired.

Nobody would have to wait for complete nightfall. This part of the city was well-insulated from all but the most daring intrusive eyes. Jesse and Hanzo made sure to be completely settled in their perch by late morning and sat in wait for 4 o’clock. They didn’t speak all afternoon; it was far too dangerous this deep in enemy territory, and that danger grew every hour closer to the assigned time. Mostly they communicated by hand signals or, if necessary, scribbled notes back and forth. Hanzo was definitely keeping an eye on Jesse – he could feel it. Where it should have been reassuring, it only ground more heavily on his nerves.

On the way out, Hanzo had suggested a plan in case Gabe didn’t show, but Jesse had never doubted for a second he wouldn’t. Los Angeles was home turf. No one in Talon was more qualified to spearhead a high-volume munitions sale in the city. It had likely been Gabe’s idea to begin with, judging from the manifest’s detail. It listed a lot of Gabe’s favored weaponry – not that Hanzo knew it.

He should have, though, if I’d been honest.

At 3:59, Gabe – or The Reaper, as it was – strode out of an alleyway with three helmeted goons in tow. Jesse’s vision began to tunnel as he watched him walk. It was November all over again; a rush of cold unknown to Los Angeles shuddered across his body as sense memory. The crumbling edifice that was their perch darkened and closed around him as his mind went back in time. He nearly let out a yelp at a touch to his shoulder and spun his head around to see Hanzo behind him looking incredibly concerned. Jesus, what he must look like right now. He shook his head unconvincingly and tried to concentrate on the task at hand, but it was hopeless. There was no chance to get what he’d really come here for. Killing him would be so easy from here, too. Game,
set, match. Hanzo’s well-crafted explanation back in China echoed in his mind. He deserved it. So many deaths. But the only murder that seemed to hold any weight in the moment was the one that hadn’t happened when it should have.

_Fucking idiot._

Guilt, thick and dark, drowned his lungs.

Initially, Hanzo worried Jesse was going to have a panic attack – it certainly looked like it. All the blood had drained from his face as the three parties, dealer, buyer, and broker, had arrived; his hand shook visibly when it pulled away from his body. But as the minutes stretched on and the event went on uninterrupted below them, Hanzo began to think differently. Jesse’s right hand found and held his gun tight, but by the cylinder still in its holster, not the pommel. Soon, he was no longer even looking out on the area below anymore. He didn’t dare look at Hanzo, even to help himself in his obvious distress. There was guilt and fear, but not out of cowardice.

There had never been any lethal intent from the first to shrink from. Hanzo had been lied to.

The sale didn’t take long. Within twenty minutes, it – as well as the best chance either of them individually or anyone else on Earth had ever had at killing Gabriel Reyes – passed, and everyone left. Jesse could feel Hanzo’s rising fury without looking up. Everything about this had been a mistake.

Hanzo barely waited five minutes after the departure to stand and stalk off. Jesse scrambled up and trailed after, desperately trying to find the words to explain and falling short.

“Hanzo—”

“This is why you made the demand you did,” he spat. “Under no circumstances, you said.”

“Please—”

“There was never a kill to make. I signed on, put my life on the line at least three different ways, and you have lied to me from the outset!” he thundered. Fuck being overheard. “After everything you have said the past two months.”

“I didn’t—”

“Didn’t what?” Hanzo slowed his enraged pace to turn and bark at Jesse behind him. “Didn’t trust me? That is overwhelmingly clear, McCree.”

It wasn’t the danger or the loss of a target, of course. The past few weeks had been hard on him, and after fostering an extremely tentative sense of hope for something new and different in his life, betrayal had suddenly crushed it before his eyes. Turning to look at Jesse to speak, however, proved to be a mistake; his patent desperation and anguish dealt a heavy blow to Hanzo’s justifiable wrath. Even if Jesse hadn’t truly wanted to lie, he had. Hanzo wasn’t sure if regret made up for it after everything in Seattle. The episode had left him feeling raw and exposed beyond any measure he’d dared to allow in his entire life, and now it felt not simply wasted, but like a violation.

Jesse could feel Hanzo slipping away from him with every step. All he would have needed to do was talk. He’d been carrying on about it for days, and he couldn’t do it himself. Any and all external rebuke was richly deserved, but it didn’t compare to the way Jesse was currently tearing himself apart inside. The impending loss lingered just on the tips of his earnest, grasping
fingers, seconds from falling away into the void of the past forever; it wasn’t just Hanzo who needed a friend after literal years alone, and Jesse could barely stand to live in his own skin knowing he’d completely fucked up the best opportunity he’d had since leaving Overwatch. Just this once, please, let him keep something that mattered. He could fix it, if he was allowed to try. He had to.

They made it back to the car. Hanzo half-wondered why he’d let himself walk this far back at all, but he couldn’t kid himself. He knew exactly why.

“Can I get a chance to explain?”

God damn the defeat in Jesse’s voice.

“The only reason I am still here is because I respect you enough to demand an explanation,” Hanzo replied, thudding his fist on the car as emphasis. Hurt was rapidly overpowering the anger in his voice. “If I didn’t, you would be unconscious back in that wreck and I’d be on the first flight back to Shanghai. And if you can’t give me a satisfactory explanation now, I may still do it. I cannot and will not stay if you insist on this level of duplicity.”

“Then get in the car,” Jesse said. His voice was weak and creased with emotion.

“No! You will—”

It was Jesse’s turn to take his frustration out on the vehicle, but in his rage he used his left hand, ending in an ear-splitting shriek as he put a visible dent in the sheet metal.

“Móntate en el pinche carro!” Jesse shouted, and Hanzo was taken completely aback. Though he had always known Jesse could thanks to his dossier, he had never heard him actually speak Spanish since they met. He didn’t know Spanish himself, but translation was hardly needed. With obvious effort, Jesse wrested his hand from the crumpled mess. His voice fell flat and weak again. “I’m gonna eat my fucking gun if I have to be here another ten minutes.”

Hanzo noticed Jesse was shaking again. It was impossible to look at him and not feel a shade of pity. Incensed as he was, he took the threat seriously and obliged it by getting in the passenger seat without another word.

Chapter End Notes

a selection from Jesse's playlist: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPQrcSo2ee4

a selection from Hanzo's playlist: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukKQw578Lm8
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

hi friends~

this is the last chapter for which my trigger warning for suicidal ideation actively applies! next couple chapters will be decidedly more lighthearted and fun, I promise :) gotta have some levity.

I will be adding a substantial amount of tags, including character tags, and I just want to be clear that any character I tag will be featured in a substantial capacity beyond a passing cameo, though most of them are not imminent. I'm adding a few other tags, too, just to...reassure everyone.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

How they got out of Los Angeles without a horde of cops chasing them, Hanzo didn’t know, because Jesse had steered his way across the city with a vicious mix of fury and precision stunt driving Hanzo had rarely seen even during his days of having a professional driver. Soon as they hit open freeway, Jesse floored it to a reckless speed straight east on I-10 for the desert. Twice, Hanzo tried to speak, but each time Jesse would rev the engine as Hanzo moved to preface, so he took the hint and let it go. It wasn’t like he was going anywhere under his own control.

The sun set; night came and deepened. Still, they drove. At least this time, it wasn’t silent – Jesse had brought music along when they left Portland, and he played it now at pounding volume. Little by little as manufactured green gave way to the natural rock and brown expanse of desert, Jesse relaxed, but his distant, lost expression never wavered. Hanzo watched the landscape peel by. This wasn’t nearly as lush or typically beautiful as the coastal drive, but it seemed given Jesse’s tentative ease that this was closer to the home he’d referred to the other day. Forbidding. Desolate. Empty of all but for the most stubborn clinging to a life defined by defiance. Hanzo gave Jesse a surreptitious glance up and down in the driver’s seat.

Fitting.

They shot past a sign so fast Hanzo barely had time to read that it was for the California-Arizona border. Before today, he wasn’t sure he would have been able to name it correctly in place on a map and probably would have confused it for Nevada. Jesse let out a long, heavy sigh – the most noise he’d made in hours.

They drove a while longer before Jesse began to slow. Hanzo sat up, puzzled, because they had passed a tiny city a few minutes before. It was nearly midnight and they were out in the middle of nowhere in the desert. Undeterred by Hanzo’s reaction, Jesse pulled off the interstate, rode straight out into the sand and rock a few hundred meters, and finally stopped amongst a small crowd of mesquite trees. Silence dropped in with suffocating force when he cut the engine. He sat back and said nothing.

“I take it we have run far enough,” Hanzo murmured, unable to help the sarcasm in his tone.
“Eat shit, Hanzo,” Jesse hissed, and he kicked open his door. Pausing just long enough to dig out the last unfinished bottle of bourbon from Portland from the backseat, he climbed onto the hood of the car and sat.

Hanzo regarded the upholstered ceiling with a frustrated grunt. Bridging the gap seemed too difficult. Had he been this fucking obnoxious in the midst of his own spiral two weeks before? Again, he knew the answer. He had fucked up and lied to Jesse about a lot of things in Seattle, too, and Jesse had taken it in stride when he’d realized how much Hanzo had been falling apart. What if Jesse had left him there, as he would have been well within his rights to do? Hanzo’s toes curled in his boots to consider it. Despite his own anger, he appreciated where Jesse had lied and where he hadn’t, and that discrepancy was what got him out of the car. There was no way on Earth he was going to replicate Jesse’s graceful empathy, but he had to try.

“That was harsher than I intended. I am sorry.”

Jesse regarded him with narrowed and insightful eyes as he took a long drag of bourbon.

“No, it wasn’t. You meant that down to your bones. But you are sorry,” he said at last. Exhaustion weighed on every word. He knocked on the hood in gesture to take a seat, and Hanzo did.

“Yes,” he confessed. “Just trying to…”

“Yeah.” Jesse stared at the label on the bottle and fretted a loose corner of the sticker. “You’re right, though. I’m runnin’.”

“Another trait we have in common,” Hanzo replied before he could think better of it. Instinct drove him towards blooming regret, but the wry half-smile that flickered across Jesse’s face put his mind at ease. He had no idea what to say, but that seemed to work.

“I’m sorry,” Jesse said quietly.

“I know.”

“It wasn’t about not trusting you.”

Hanzo shook his head. The hem of his yukata drew his gaze away, making it feel safer to be honest. Throughout the drive and without anything else to distract him, Hanzo had had plenty of time to cool off and really think through the day. Reflection on what had seemed like moments of predictable stress from Jesse had revealed themselves as the red flags Hanzo should have recognized— he never had been terribly good at properly appreciating others’ feelings. Now, more than anything, he was simply disappointed in the lack of faith, but even that was fading now he was talking to Jesse.

“Fundamentally, it is – was. But, all things considered, that is understandable. It has been clear from the beginning how deeply anything related to Reyes affects you, and explaining anything that personal is a privilege to bestow. I have granted that privilege to you for…many things I have never told anyone, because I never anticipated anyone would want to listen. So speak, and I will return the favor. All I want is to understand; nothing you could possibly tell me, as long as it is the truth, will anger me or make me judge you. Contrary to how pretentious I am on any other day, I am the very last man on Earth who should judge you for anything. Today’s events aside, I…would like to believe you trust me enough to know that already.”

A rush of relief and gratitude swamped Jesse. He hid behind his gloved hand for a moment
to compose himself in its wake.

“I do. I do know that. You’ve had a hell of a time, too. I just…fuckin’ a, Hanzo, why’s this all gotta be so goddamn hard.”

“If I knew the answer to that, I would never have met you, McCree. It requires a level of self-actualization beyond either of us.”

“Thanks for the cynic’s take.”

“Simply stating facts.”

Hanzo’s tone was consciously light and sarcastic, clearly stating it just to get a rise out of Jesse for levity, and even worse, it was working. The little shit was quicker-witted than he gave himself credit for. Thank god he still had one trashy gas station cigarillo left in his belt pouch; he lit up and tried to cut his tension in a long, smoke-filled sigh.

“Guess I’ll start at the beginning.”

“Whatever makes the most sense to you. I will catch up.”

“You asked me what changed in China, and I said it was me. What I didn’t tell you was why, because it’s a long goddamn story. I didn’t stay long after Switzerland. Couldn’t work even if I wanted to with my arm, but that’s not what did it. Gabe…had been organizing a coup. Mutiny, I guess, is more accurate. But that’s what the smart money thinks caused the explosion. Maybe Jack found out too soon. Maybe Gabe got impatient. No way to know.”

Hanzo’s jaw dropped. That was a hell of a cold open.

“I didn’t know- no, that ain’t true. He didn’t tell me, but I suspected trouble. But you have to understand, trouble was always between Jack and Gabe. I never thought…but by that time, Gabe and I were…distant. It was a slow decline, but he changed after he brought O’Deorain on. It just wasn’t right from the start. She…did something, said something, I don’t fuckin’ know, but he didn’t act the same anymore. Not my point, anyway. After I was pulled out of the rubble, every rat in Overwatch and out appeared from under the rocks for me as all the political jockeying for Jack’s commandship took off. Plying me in my goddamn hospital bed with favors and poorly-veiled threats. I give legitimacy, y’see. I’d been trot out the year before as poster boy when Blackwatch’s ranks were leaked. Face of the future and shit. And of course, I had been part of the inner circle. I went public for Ana and Jack because I understood what it was all meant for. Overwatch was a vision they worked themselves literally to death for, and I believed in it, so I was willing to pay whatever price that came out of making myself known. I knew in doing it that Jack and Ana would have my back if something went bad, too. Hell if I was going to do that for anybody else posturing at me like I hadn’t just buried half of everything I called family in the space of months.”

The grief was just as patent and deep in Jesse’s voice as if it had happened a week ago. Hanzo found it difficult to witness; it felt like an invasion. He settled for staring at one of the mesquite trees.

“So you left.”

“The second I got my new arm and was well enough to travel. Angela and Torb didn’t even try to stop me. Reinhardt tried a few half-hearted messages. That was about five months after the base was destroyed. The Rio bombing was a few weeks later. I saw the video the day after. I knew it was him soon as I watched it; even without all that reverb shit, I know that voice anywhere.”

Rio had been a Talon attack notable for supplying the first known image of The Reaper. Most civilians only ever had seen a grainy picture on international news, but it was a crop from ATM camera footage. The video had lit up information brokerages at the time. Hanzo had purchased a copy from an underground information trader when he’d begun researching Reaper for his solo mission, and he recalled watching it when it had first made it to the internet as well. The video showed Reaper slaughtering a military convoy in a flurry of shotgun fire. Hence the cropped image for public consumption: it was a very gruesome sight.

“I couldn’t handle it, so I fucked off to Mexico. I don’t remember most of the next couple weeks.”

Hanzo glanced down to see Jesse was holding the neck of the bourbon bottle so tight it probably would have shattered were he using his left hand.

“And you’re the only thing keepin’ me from doing that over again now,” he added, though it sounded agonizing to admit. “Whatever plan Gabe had before Switzerland, he knew I’d never agree to it, and I’d have done just about anything for the son of a bitch. But after, I thought…I thought, well, he’s dead. Jack’s dead. Ana’s dead. It’s done, even if I’m the one left holding the pieces. Maybe someday I’d be able to put it away and it wouldn’t…hurt anymore. Then he wasn’t dead, and had thrown away thirty years of service to…”

He couldn’t finish and hung his head.

“Eventually, I got my shit together enough just to be fucking furious. I decided I wasn’t going to drink myself to death under a saguaro and leave what’s left of me for the vultures. That felt like a waste.”

“It would be,“ Hanzo said. They shared a look – another thing we got in common.

“So instead,” Jesse began much more softly, “I spent my time wandering, taking commissions and requests for help.”

“Requests? Unpaid wetwork?” Hanzo asked, stunned.

“Wasn’t just wetwork. All kinds of shit. Chasing off stalker ex-boyfriends. Finding stuff, or people. All I’d ask is that it be for a good reason, or they needed rescuin’. Even helped a little girl in Amarillo find her dog, once. I just…wanted to put some good back in the world. I owed it that. Still do.”

“It sounds much the opposite from here.”

Jesse shook his head.

“I’d a been dead over a decade ago if not for the few blessings I’ve gotten. I don’t forget it, and I aim to repay it long as I’m able.”

The humility astounded Hanzo. It was one thing to accept that life necessitates suffering – Hanzo certainly had – but Jesse’s daily choice to do something anyway was an achievement of superheroic proportions to him. He made a reason to get up every morning and try in a way Hanzo had been unable to muster in a very, very long time, and it would be more than fair to say Hanzo, even with his struggles, had never suffered in the way Jesse had. It was a lesson he knew would be wise to listen to.
“I’ve been doing that for a few years all over the states and little bit overseas. Got myself a bit of a reputation, now, and some come askin’ for me. ‘Til Philly, that is,” Jesse continued.

“You went to Philadelphia?”

“Around it. Nobody goes there anymore, of course. Outside the crater is a cesspool, too – nothin’ but the meanest can make it there. I was out that way on a job when I…encountered him.”

Hanzo didn’t need to ask who Jesse referred to purely by his haunted expression.

“What happened?”

“Nothin’,” Jesse replied in a cracking voice after far too long. “Ran up on some Talon shit purely by accident. Decided to get a closer look, so I ducked in a building to try getting a perch on a fire escape, and there he was inside. We weren’t more than twenty feet apart, just me and him.”

Jesse took off his hat and raked a hand through his hair, pulling it into a fist on top of his head.

“We just stared at each other I don’t know how long. Didn’t say anything. He finally turned and walked away.”

All the usual spark in Jesse’s eyes had faded; Hanzo could tell he was right back in that moment, just as he had been in Los Angeles. When he spoke again, the words came slowly, like a calm, reassuring hand to pull Jesse out from underneath some dark place.

“I…do not understand.”

Jesse sat up and rubbed his face as if trying to regain sensation in his skin.

“Hanzo, I should’ve been fucking six ways from Sunday. He had a bunch of jackboots not fifty feet away, and two fuckin’ shotguns in his coat. He’s out killing ex-Overwatch agents a clutch at a time on every continent, and he chose not to kill me.” Heartbreak wracked his voice. “Why didn’t he fucking kill me?”

Oh. Now, he understood.

“And then, I got that…” Jesse trailed off in a whispered curse.

“What?”

Jesse picked at a bit of something stuck in the grooves of his metal forearm. Talking about it felt…wrong, as if he was breaking a security clearance where none existed. No, that wasn’t quite right; more like exposing a family secret.

“I got a call. The worst possible one at the worst possible time. Winston got it in his head to break the international goddamn law and activate recall. Made a whole video and everything.”

“Recall what?” Hanzo asked. The name wasn’t immediately familiar.

“Overwatch, Hanzo. Overwatch.” His saying the word sounded like an overwhelming task to suffer through. Hanzo could only blink back and gibber his shock in response.

“Yeah, that was about my reaction, too,” Jesse said, his voice laced with just a touch of acid, until he looked up and saw real fear in Hanzo’s face.
“Have you…have you, this whole time—”

Jesse sat up straight, waving his hands back and forth emphatically.

“No, no. I’d have told you up-front if I was working on behalf of anybody, please believe me.”

Hanzo’s burgeoning panic subsided. With Overwatch being explicitly illegal and so aggressively monitored on a global scale, it could warrant a death sentence via multiple avenues if any true recall came together publicly.

“So you haven’t responded.”

“I can’t. I just…can’t even think about that right now. You don’t go through what we did and just put the band back together. But that’s what I meant by me changing. Philly fucked me up something awful. I have to…do something about it. I gotta put this to bed before I even consider that.”

“All well and good, but what does that mean, if not killing him, McCree? As I said in Los Angeles, you had zero intention, I could tell. What do you want out of it?”

“I wasn’t lying when I said I’d kill him if I had to.”

“But you don’t think you have to.”

“I…I don’t know. But I have doubts, and I can’t kill anybody that close to me with doubts.”

“So what did you want to accomplish in going to Los Angeles? Did you have a plan?”

“Thought I did, but I guess not. I realized what I was doing, what I was asking of you, and I got cold feet. I…want to talk to him,” Jesse confessed with a wince. He knew how out-and-out stupid that sounded.

“You want to talk to the most internationally-wanted human being on Earth.”

“Yeah,” Jesse replied weakly.

Hanzo drummed his fingers on his knee in thought. His face was completely inscrutable, so Jesse spoke again haltingly.

“So again, I’m sorry. You’ve got much better things to do than trail after a jackass tryin’ to fix his personal problems in the dumbest way possible. And lie to you about it, at that.”

“In all honesty, I do not,” Hanzo replied, to which Jesse turned and stared at him, agape. “If that is what you want to do, it will be done. Between the two of us, an impossible task becomes remotely probable. You were correct in Shanghai that you would need help, so help I shall. To quote: that is was friends do, yes?”

“Hanzo—”


“Don’t lie to you?”

“That is implicit from our conversation. You will not do it again, so that is not my
Oh. R-right. Okay."

“If I judge your decisions to be too foolish, I will kill Reyes, and I reserve the right to not warn you beforehand. In return, you have my personal assurance I will do it only to save your life, my own, or both.”

He held Jesse’s eyes, looking for a single ounce of holdout.

“You shrank from accountability today. I will keep you in check.”

They both needed that accountability to each other. It was time for Hanzo to rise to the occasion. *Honor resides in one’s actions*, as Genji had told him last fall, and keeping a good, well-meaning man like Jesse alive in spite of his self-acknowledged foolishness felt like a proper place to start. Jesse acquiesced with a nod.

“You got it.”

At last, the day felt over, and had ended much more satisfactorily than Jesse ever would have imagined it could. This was the best he’d felt in months. Hanzo was feeling it, too; he dropped his stern manner and waved for Jesse to share the bourbon.

“Are you all right? That was a challenging story to tell,” he asked hesitantly.

The bottle paused its journey between them, suspended by two hands. Concern for his mental health at this point felt like an afterthought to Jesse, and frankly a surprise to hear from Hanzo at all, especially after being so angry.

“I’m okay enough to not be,” was his honest answer. “Glad to get it off my chest.” He relinquished his grip on the bottle and laid back into the windshield so he could look up at the stars. Hanzo grew thoughtful as he recalled the afternoon.

“If I may ask…is Spanish your first language?” He asked the question carefully, given how Jesse had chosen to reveal his skill. “You used it before English when you were angry.”

It had been wise to preface; Jesse’s demeanor went flat and his eyes a bit distant.

“Don’t know which one came first. So, both, I guess. Sorry about that, too. It’s no good to yell at you in something you can’t understand.”

“Oh, I understood, do not worry,” Hanzo said coyly. That earned a giggle from Jesse. “Where do we go from here?”

“Don’t rightly know. It’ll take forever to find him again. I picked a hell of a way to choke. Can’t say I much relish starting all over again either,” he confessed.

“Fine. There is hardly a timeline.”

“Sorry, did I just hear you say you didn’t need a bulleted itinerary?” Jesse cracked.

“I contain multitudes,” Hanzo replied flatly, but the smile just turning up the corners of his mouth told the real truth. “You said you would show *me* your west had we the time. We seem to have that in abundance, if you are accepting submissions.”

A true grin – the first in days – spread across Jesse’s face.
“Done.”

Chapter End Notes

a selection from Jesse's playlist: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J07YlZgvT7M
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

hi friends!

hahaha no YOU retroactively added in an entire chapter because Retribution happened at the same time your beta told you to "add a scene" ahhahaha >_>

I want to pop a hearty note of thank you to my most excellent friend JoJo Seames for her patient consultation on Tucson as well as Arizona flora/fauna, graciously offering her home to stay in while I visited her there, and taking me to the desert museum to yell at me about cactus all day. you are an inspiration!

JoJo has also been illustrating a few chapters as it fancies her -- links to her ink works/tumblr will be at the end of the chapter!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All around Jesse, plates and crystal exploded in every direction. He could feel hot streaks of fire snap past, but no bullet ever actually touched him. The chaos rang dull and distant in his ears; he moved at a glacial speed while the restaurant around him was annihilated. Shadows, distinctive only by their silhouettes, flanked him left and right; tall and imperious, hunched and red-eyed. Familiar, if not entirely friendly, presences. Evac was coming. Had to come. This wasn’t going to be the end of it today. All of them were better than this.

Gabe was better than this. He’d still believed that then, and desperately wanted to still.

A shotgun burst Jesse would recognize at a quarter-mile went off behind him. He felt no pain, but the sensation of leaking told him how serious the wound was. Degree by aching degree, he turned, and found that mask towering over him, making the world around him go dark.

He woke with a ragged combination of a gasp and wounded cry.

Hanzo also woke instantly and slapped his hand over Peacekeeper where Jesse kept it on the nightstand between their beds. The hammer was cocked before Hanzo let his full consciousness come to him, when he realized Jesse was an upright lump on his bed, head rested against a bent knee in shame.

“Sorry,” Jesse said, voice still rough with sleep. “Didn’t mean to.” Good thing Hanzo had excellent trigger discipline – the last thing they needed would be a 4am visit from the police for a gun discharge. “Shit. Shit.” It’d been months since the last time he’d had such a potent nightmare, back when he’d still been alone, and he wasn’t sure if that wouldn’t be better right now.

With any threat now irrelevant, Hanzo replaced the gun where he’d found it, but didn’t immediately leave his bed. They’d stayed sitting out on the car a while longer before they backtracked to the small town they’d passed and found a fleabag motel to crash in. That had been barely three hours ago. Hanzo had no idea what to do; their talk not long ago had felt like a herculean task by itself. Dreams were a topic far more primal and personal to broach.
“If you want to be alone, I can take a walk,” Hanzo offered. Jesse heard the matching rust of exhaustion in his voice as well. That didn’t seem fair after such a goddamn day. Week. Month. Life.

“No, you don’t have to do that. Look, I’ll just—” Jesse moved to settle back in and hope to sleep again.

“You and I both know that isn’t going to work.”

Daring only accessible in half-waking distress at 4 am drew Jesse’s gaze to meet Hanzo’s across the carpeted threshold. The hesitance they saw in each other conversely bolstered them within, but Jesse chewed his lip anxiously, still deeply reluctant to go into any detail. Perhaps Hanzo was trying to care, and at a more humane hour Jesse would be willing to open up, but right now it was more akin to advancing on a cornered, wild animal.

“The hell you want from me?” Jesse asked; though his tone was warmed over with aggression, it sounded disheartened more than anything else.

Hanzo’s brow knit together as he considered. He combed nervously at his sleep-rumpled hair in futile attempt to control it.

“Nothing you do not want to give.”

“You gonna keep quoting me at me all night?” Jesse asked testily.

“Until you listen,” Hanzo immediately fired back. He wasn’t going to be cowed easily – nothing Jesse could try in deflecting him would be something Hanzo hadn’t done himself.

Jesse winced. Fair. He wasn’t about to let all the good they’d accomplished tonight backslide on his account. Hanzo only was infuriatingly correct, after all.

“It was a mission,” he began flatly. “You know what happened to Antonio Bartalotti, right? Officially, I guess.”

Hanzo was surprised by the depth of the poisonous bite in Jesse’s voice.

“Dead. Failed capture attempt by Blackwatch.” The official description. “You were there, I assume.”

Jesse didn’t speak again for a long beat, glaring into the sun-worn pinstriped wallpaper opposite his bed. He was tired, he told himself. When light came in a few hours and revealed just how real the two of them were sitting here, Jesse would regret speaking any further. No amount of context would make the story sound okay. None of it had been; that Jesse had been party to it, irrespective of his willingness, still bothered him as much today as it had eight years ago. And nothing he could say would make his tempestuous feelings about it make any sense.

Fuck it.

“I sure fuckin’ was,” he finally answered. “Gabe shot him dead in the chest in cold blood. It had not been the plan.” It hadn’t been Gabe, either. Jesse didn’t know how to explain that to Hanzo, but he hoped his friend might nonetheless begin to understand it in some measure from the sorrow in the downcast arc of his eyebrows and mouth.

“An unwarranted murder by someone you know and trust would haunt anyone, no matter the training,” Hanzo said as passively as he could muster. As if he had no personal experience committing homicide in a fit of incandescent rage. This was not the time to postulate openly on
Gabriel’s perspective, but just as well he could appreciate the weight of the betrayal and despair etched in Jesse’s hunched form. Hanzo lived both sides every day, simultaneously, as his own greatest victim and villain.

“It’s not who he is, Hanzo,” Jesse confessed, his voice weak and tired beyond the simple late hour, and it only deteriorated as he corrected himself. “Was.” He hung his head low, leaving his dusty-brown hair lank and nearly touching his legs now crossed in front of him.

That was too much even for Hanzo’s considerable reticence – he got up and crossed over to sit at the far corner of Jesse’s bed. Closer, but still polite. He took a deep breath and dove in without stopping to think. This was too important to let his difficulty relating to others stop him.

“I believe you,” he opened, and kept his line of sight deliberately away from even suggesting he would meet Jesse’s eyes. “I have only ever known him by reputation, but that rarely is an entire story. Whatever happens going forward, I want you to know that I believe you believe something is still there that matters. You are hardly a witless fool given to trusting anyone casually. Reyes earned something from you that deserves to be validated, even if he will no longer do that himself. I cannot make Reyes’ better nature real for you, but…you are not wrong to feel conflicted and hurt about your situation, even years later.”

Jesse was speechless as he raised his head to stare, though Hanzo was steadfast in not looking at him. The soft, pressurized silence brought by soulful pre-dawn confession settled on both men’s shoulders as a new yet comforting weight. No one in Overwatch had ever told Jesse that. No one in Overwatch wanted to agree with him on that, even to help Jesse cope. It was understandable, too; many of them had relationships even older and deeper than Jesse’s has been. Jesse hadn’t served or fought during the Crisis, only survived it. His was not the only wound, and all of them had reacted to Gabriel’s emotional drift and ultimate betrayal after Switzerland in a spectrum of ways. Reinhardt, for example, had used the word traitor at the time with a bone-deep hatred Jesse never would have believed of the man. For the first time in five years, Jesse had gotten what he needed out of leaving: an outsider telling him he was being reasonable.

“Hey.” It was impossible to keep his voice steady, but he didn’t really have to right now, did he? Even with the invitation, Hanzo was still reluctant to look up; he scratched at nothing on his bare shoulder in anxiety as he did. “Thank you,” Jesse continued with equally-heavy emphasis and relief in his words. “Can’t tell you how many times and from how many people I ever wanted to hear that.”

Hanzo had no further illuminating wisdom to give, so he only nodded and picked at a loose thread on his pajama pants. To think anyone, much less someone he liked and respected, would so hang on his words and need them. Such a novelty.

“Just trying to help.”

“Y’are. Really. You’ve stuck it out for me in a lot of ways I haven’t earned, and I need you to know I appreciate it.”

Appreciation seemed to only wound Hanzo, as his jaw went tight and his eyes narrowed as if he’d been invisibly struck across the face.

“I have nowhere else to be, no one else to turn to.” Panic flickered in his eyes and he shook his head. “No, that…that makes me sound ungrateful. As if I’m—”

“I know what you mean, Hanzo. It’s okay.”
“You do?” Hanzo asked; Jesse gave him a small, teasing smile and nodded. “Oh. Good. Then I suppose I…need you to know I am…keen to prove myself as…as a friend. A good one.”

“You’re succeeding.”

“Uh. Good.” Stop talking, for heaven’s sake.

None of the awkwardness bothered Jesse a bit – it was sweet, to be honest. Hanzo had such a way of being incongruous when he let himself be himself, even if he didn’t mean to. Jesse also knew this was a side of him Hanzo didn’t let many people see, either, so that added to the authenticity.

“Sorry for scarin’ you.”

“Hm?” Hanzo said, head tilted. He remembered the gun on the nightstand. “Oh. No, that was simply reflex. Attempts have been made on me in the past while sleeping. It is routine at this point to note locations of any weapons before turning in. They have long since learned that the opportunities to strike at me are few, far between, and only slightly less challenging.”

“How many times has the family tried to get the drop on you?”

Hanzo toyed with the point of his goatee and squinted as he thought it over.

“Fourteen? No, no, fifteen. No attempt this year as of yet. Only two have ever approached being dangerous for me.”

“Jesus fuck.”

“What? I am fine, obviously.”

The bravado didn’t stick the way it might on a stranger, now that Jesse had lived through Seattle with him. Jesse slept light as a consequence of a life lived on both ends of a gun, too, but he couldn’t count direct assassination attempts in double digits. But then most of his experiences waking to extreme danger had been…different. Less personal. Wilder.

Hanzo recognized that Jesse knew better; he grew avoidant and quiet once more.

“I kept you up long enough,” Jesse said. “But again: thanks.”

“Of course,” Hanzo replied as he got up and returned to his bed, but paused as he settled back in. “Is there anything else?”

That made for an uncomfortable question, but Jesse supposed they were both old enough, battle-weary enough, and close enough to give a real answer.

“Ain’t there always?”

Hanzo let out a knowing snit of embittered laughter

“Fair point. Get some rest.”

~

Jesse woke late that morning. Not so for Hanzo, apparently – he was sat on his bed, hands on his knees seemingly in meditation, already fully dressed and prepared for the day. He looked like he’d been up for a while. It’d been unsettling for Jesse to wake up to the first time after the night mission in Taipei, with Hanzo looking so serene in contrast to his bruised torso and cut, taped-up
shoulder. Now, it was... *almost* normal.

“D’you *ever* sleep a whole night?” he rumbled as he sat up.

“Four hours. Plenty,” Hanzo replied without opening his eyes.

“I...*of course* it is for you.”

“Surely you are used to operating on very little sleep in your career.”

“Yeah. And it still fuckin’ sucks.”

The corner of Hanzo’s mouth tipped up despite himself. He opened his eyes and unfolded himself to lay out on his bed.

“There is breakfast for you on the desk.” A humble pair of pastries was all he could secure for Jesse, but it seemed to be good enough, given Jesse’s relish seizing it off the table before retreating back to his bed to eat it. “Are...you feeling better?” Hanzo asked.

The question came as Jesse was jamming the end of a croissant in his mouth, so he shrugged and nodded hesitantly as he finished eating it.

“Yeah, I’ll be okay. Thanks for askin’.” All the regret for his honesty that he’d feared would assail him when he awoke didn’t materialize, much to his relief. He was lucky as hell Hanzo was *even here* to talk to, so yeah, he *should* be feeling pretty good. “So. Where d’you want to go? I’ve been just about everywhere we can easily get to in a car, and then some.”

“I have been considering that while waiting for you to wake up, and I believe I have—”

“Hold up.”

“What?”

“You fuckin’ *meditated* about vacation planning?” Jesse asked, gesturing at him with the last half of a danish.

“N...not like that,” Hanzo stuttered. “Just...thinking. I stopped meditating hours ago, went for a walk, came back, and spent the rest of the time considering what to do next. Where do you think *that* came from? I willed it into being?”

“I damn near wonder if you can, sometimes,” Jesse replied dubiously, but continued eating his danish irrespective of how it manifested. “Your stare could skin a cat, why *wouldn’t* you be able to summon breakfast through sheer force of will?”

Hanzo rubbed at his brow and let out an exasperated sigh. Jesse licked the last dab of cream cheese off his thumb and laughed.

“It’s a compliment. Don’t know hardly anybody out-and-out magical.” An odd shadow passed over Hanzo’s face for the comment, but it disappeared too soon for Jesse to feel confident to call him out on it, so he let it go. “But it sounds like you know what you want to see first,” he offered, and Hanzo perked up again to nod.

“Yes. After all the billboards we have passed, I would like to see this... *Thing*.”

“*Thing*?” Jesse asked, frowning for a moment before it dawned on him. “Oh. *Oh*. You want to see *The Thing*?” he continued, delight in every syllable. “You *bet your ass* we can do that. I haven’t
been out in years. *Fuck yes.*

Hanzo had yet to see Jesse so excited about anything, which was in turns intriguing and worrying. The things that held Jesse’s interest were not exactly *typical.* But whatever this *Thing* was, it probably didn’t pose any kind of lethal risk if it was mass advertised on an interstate, so…

“Very well, then. When do you want to leave?”

“Shit, soon. It’s a haul out there from here. Let me take a quick shower and we can take off.”

“If the distance is inconvenient—”

“Nope, nope, we’re *goin’.* You got me all ramped up for it.” Jesse said, and let out a short, almost maniacal laugh Hanzo had no idea what to do with.

Within the hour, they were loaded up in the car and headed south in the general direction of Tucson. Jesse’s impish grin lit his face the entire time; Hanzo’s reticence increased, but he couldn’t help feeling lighthearted in spite of it. For having very little civilization to recommend it, Hanzo was surprised by how much *stuff* there was: Pueblo ruins (“Shit, you wanna *learn* something on vacation?” Jesse teased when Hanzo voiced interest), an ostrich farm, and a distressingly-large sex shop set at the base of a mountain. When Hanzo asked with genuine alarm why anyone would live and work so close to a volcano, Jesse had dissolved into hysterics and had needed to pull off the interstate for a few minutes. They passed a sprawling airplane graveyard as they prepared to enter Tucson; Jesse told Hanzo about the time he’d broken in there as a preteen and explored the ruins.

“So what is this place?” Hanzo asked as Tucson faded behind them in the rearview mirror. They’d passed yet another billboard for *The Thing* just seconds before.

“Mm-mm. You gotta see it for yourself. That said, you got cash? I completely forgot before leaving.”

“*Cash?* What on Earth for?”

“Admission. It’s a dollar apiece. Only way to pay. The place has never even seen a *credit card,* much less any virtual payments. That’s fine, the gas station’ll have an ATM.” Jesse struggled to contain his laughter at Hanzo’s incredulousness. “C’mon, you’ve seen *one* gas station in your life *somewhere,* they’re not all gone.”

Hanzo slowly and condescendingly shook his head with narrowed eyes.

“How long has this thing—”

*The Thing, Hanzo."

“Uh, *The Thing,* been there?”

“No one knows,” Jesse replied with overwrought spookiness. “Perhaps it always *has* been there.”

“Your poor attempt at theater is unbecoming,” Hanzo sneered, but he had to bite the inside of his cheek to contain his insistent smile. It was good to see Jesse back to his usual, good-humored self after the past several days and especially last night. As a matter of fact, this was the happiest he’d ever seen him since meeting. But he was home now, wasn’t he? He should be happy, being where he belonged. That left a pang in Hanzo’s chest, but he shook it off. Not today.
“The desert is full of the inexplicable, Hanzo. Things you’ll never find anywhere else that choose to be here. Like Roswell – and we’ll be going there too, by the way. Nobody would ever buy its existence if it was in Florida. It’s because it’s here, where nothing else is, that people buy it. Why would it be out here, if it wasn’t supposed to be? That scares and mystifies people.”

Hanzo wasn’t sure if he particularly enjoyed that answer the same way Jesse did, no matter the veracity.

“Do you buy it, then?”

“Don’t need it sold to me. I’ve seen it.”

“I sincerely doubt you have ever seen an alien.”

Jesse rolled his eyes and let out an impatient tch.

“It ain’t any one of those specific things. It’s the whole of it. The *ambiance*. Don’t need literal extraterrestrials to make it alien. Magic. *Special*, I guess, to put it simply. Did find a piece of meteorite outside Albuquerque once, though, so fuck you.”

“A rock does not qualify as an alien, even if it came from space.”

“Pedantic shit,” Jesse replied, smacking Hanzo in the arm across from him. “Wait, Winston’s from the moon. Ha! There, eat shit, I know an alien.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Winston! The guy I told you about yesterday. He’s a sentient, super-intelligent gorilla born and raised on the Horizon moon colony,” Jesse explained, clearly looking like he expected Hanzo to be deeply impressed. “He helped Torb make this,” he continued, holding up his metal arm.

“The…one you told me made the video about Overwatch?”

“Yup, that one.”

“Is a talking gorilla.”

“Sure as shit is! Give him more respect than that if you ever meet him, though. He was working on his second PhD when I left Overwatch. Probably on his fifth or sixth by now.”

The blitheness with which Jesse described his former colleague was the only thing that made any of those words seem real. Hanzo glared into the glovebox as he considered Jesse’s baffling argument.

“Gorillas are a native Earth species. His return from space *also* does not qualify him as alien.”

“He was born there!”

“Native. Species,” Hanzo replied flatly, as if that was the end of it. Jesse let out a long-suffering whine and thumped his head back against his headrest.

“You are just no fucking fun at all.”

“I agreed to visit your mystery park…national monument…Thing. I am plenty fun.”

Jesse laughed. And Hanzo was going to hate it, but that was exactly what Jesse was so
goddamn excited about. Every passing reaction was going to be a *treasure*.

“You think it’s a national monument. *Fuck*, Y’know what? We’ll call it that. It probably qualifies for the National Register of Historic Places at this point.”

“Every new thing you choose to divulge about this frightens me just a little bit more,” Hanzo said drily.

“*Good,*” was all Jesse offered in a cryptic, sinister voice.

The signs for their destination slid past in seemingly-innumerable clutches, now they’d passed up Tucson. Very little else existed beyond the spiny groups of bushes – Jesse said they were mezcal and yucca, respectively, but Hanzo honestly could not tell the difference. It grew emptier and emptier of anyone or thing else, including other cars.

“Be there in twenty,” Jesse said after what seemed an interminably long while.

*There* turned out to be a brown, flattened spit of dirt surrounded by outcroppings of tall, rounded rock formations worn by centuries of wind erosion, upon which sat the aforementioned gas station and a long, garishly-yellow building emblazoned with *THE THING?* in cheesy horroresque typeface. Jesse parked, and as Hanzo stepped out of the solar-powered hovercar, he distinctly felt as if he’d managed to slip back in time well beyond his – or even his father’s – life. He glanced over at Jesse headed for the station, presumably to acquire his two dollars in cash for them; he was *giddy*.

“This…is it?” Hanzo asked.

“The Thing? *Nope!***

*God,* that utterly baffled curl in Hanzo’s lip made this whole thing worth it already. He waved for Hanzo to follow him inside to get money. When they walked in, he tipped his hat to the cashier as he passed. The cashier gave Hanzo’s confusion a knowing look and smiled, delighting Jesse further.

“Why do I feel as though I am being pranked?” Hanzo murmured as Jesse fussed with the ATM.

“Your idea,” Jesse purred. “Don’t you ever forget it.”

That done, Jesse led them down the long storefront to the entrance, where a teenaged attendant was waiting. Next to her was a sign, cheeky in its brazenness: 125TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL: $1 ADMISSION. Again came that *knowing* look from her up and down Hanzo’s form. She shared an amused moment with Jesse, who winked as he handed over the cash.

“Enjoy the museum,” she said, slow and deliberate.

Hanzo could see a shed in more sickly, violent colors extend out the back, nothing more than pre-fab aluminum. They headed in; Jesse pointed to the drab concrete below. Footprints of dubious taxonomy were pressed into it, though they were worn by one-hundred and twenty-five years of feet having trod across them.

“Wh—”

*The Thing,*” Jesse said with relish. No further explanation followed.

They walked the length of the first shed. *Jesse drank* up Hanzo’s condescending glare at the
“WWII Rolls Royce” and had to slap his hand aside when he reached out to touch the desiccated, rough-hewn plaster mockup of Hitler sticking its head out the back window.

“You got any idea how long that’s been sittin’ there? Shit’s gonna disintegrate, don’t.”

“You are concerned with the physical integrity of this…exhibit?” Hanzo sniffed.

“Goddamn right I am.”

Hanzo stared at him for far too long, torn between laughing at him and genuinely being concerned Jesse just might think this was real. That fear, at least, was allayed when Jesse pat him reassuringly on the back and led them on with a gigantic grin. By the time they got to the far end of the shed, Hanzo’s expression had melted into slack-jawed astonishment. He heard a click at his feet and looked down to find pennies littered the ground leading to a faded, threadbare Persian rug that might have, at one point, held real value.

Jesse paid the exhibit zero attention, as he was far, far too enraptured by Hanzo’s entire face journey as his eyes traveled up from the floor to see the dusty, bare-mattressed four-poster bed next to an empty armoire. Undisguised horror filled his eyes as he stared down the extremely unsettling wooden mannequin sat in a chair to their right, its head turned at an inhuman angle away and up towards the ceiling, possibly in some craven appeal to a deaf god to free it from its imprisonment there.

“Is—”

“Nope,” Jesse preempted the question. “Two more, c’mon.”

“Two?”

A warning sign greeted them at the threshold to the second shed. Hanzo barred Jesse with an arm as he stopped to read it.

“What the fuck is a….’gi-la’ monster?” he demanded in something just short of a shriek.

“The g is soft.”

“The fucking what?”

“It’s ‘hee-la’ monster. They’re venomous lizards. It ain’t too hot yet, but lots of critters’ll hide in a place like this during the daytime no matter the season. Don’t worry, I’ll see ‘em coming a lot sooner than you ever will and let you know. Speakin’ of: you better start checkin’ your boots in the mornings while we’re tooling around out here. Unless you want me to, I don’t mind. Dunno how you feel about scorpions and tarantulas and shit, but they’ll find a way into and hide in your shoes. Doesn’t matter if you’re outside or not. I don’t carry antivenom on me all the time like I used to, so you need to be careful, okay?”

Hanzo’s face took on a gray cast and he took a deep breath.

“Are…are you afraid of—”

“N-no.”

“It’s okay if you are. Even I get spooked by scorpions. Them shits are fast.”

“Please, please stop talking.”
Hanzo needed a little bit of a shove to get him through the next door, and he thoroughly scanned the floor before visibly relaxing. While this shed featured far less terrifying artifacts, they were no less mismatched and baffling. Jesse explained the significance of the Native-craft pottery and what the Kachina figures on the wall were, which Hanzo found surprisingly enlightening, but their being paired with antique photographs of Europe and random pieces of driftwood painted with alarming, unrecognizable portraiture made for strange viewing. And guns, so many guns, from all across history.

“Your gun thing cannot be anything less than biological compulsion,” Hanzo muttered as he scanned the displays. “I cannot make sense of it in any other way.”

"My gun thing?"

Hanzo waved his hand around in gesticulation of their current location and rolled his eyes.


At last, they came upon their final destination. It was another, smaller shed, completely empty save for one grey-bricked sepulchre in the center.

“I am not sure I understand, McCree, can you walk me through this one?” Hanzo sniped as he eyed the two large, yet-again-brutally-yellow signs with cartoonishly-large arrows pointing to the singular exhibit on display. Snideness aside, Hanzo still felt a shade of hesitation in approaching it, unsure what new and more-existentially-terrifying thing he was going to see now. Jesse hauled him up by his arm to peer into the glass enclosure. Inside was a flattened, incredibly cheap-looking plaster cast of a vaguely-human mummified shape with a basket-like piece laid over the torso (for its…virtue?) and holding an equally-unconvincing corpse of a child in its arms.

Hanzo gave it a long scan before turning slowly to look at Jesse, unafraid to disguise his mingled confusion, disappointment, and remote disgust. This felt like a pretty massive waste of an afternoon that would color Hanzo’s dreams and nightmares for the next several months. But joy lit Jesse’s eyes to see it, and Hanzo at once understood that this – Hanzo himself in the spectrum of his experience, more than any final result – had been the entire point of the trip. Jesse probably hadn’t had the opportunity to share something like this with anyone in a number of years, possibly ever. That realization softened his knee-jerk saltiness and vague sense of being ripped off. After all, it hadn’t even been his own paltry dollar.

“I understand less than I did three hours ago,” Hanzo confessed, but a smile and helpless little breath of laughter took the edge off any potential harshness.

“Exactly the right reaction to have, buddy. Shit’s totally meaningless.”

“But…” Hanzo said, turning away to take in the fullness of their surroundings. “Why?”

“Nothin’ scarier than the power of someone who says why not, don’t you think?” Jesse replied, tone flat as a board.

“That is the single most terrifying thing I have ever heard from you.”

Jesse gave him a waggle of the eyebrows and pointed back the way they came.

“There’s ice cream back outside, though. My treat.”

“No temptation will assuage me of being mildly irritated with you for driving me out into the middle of nowhere to show me the debased collections of a dead madman for your own
“Amusement.”

“Mm, I saw how fast you ate that french toast in Portland, so I rather think otherwise.”

“You saw nothing.”

“I bet they got something with strawberries. Seems you like ‘em,” Jesse said lightly as he took off to leave without Hanzo, who swore under his breath and rushed to catch up.

Ten minutes later, they were sat on the hood of their car once again with their treasures: a pecan turtle sundae for Jesse, and a banana split with no pineapple and extra strawberry and fudge for Hanzo that Jesse had insisted on ordering over Hanzo’s weak objections. Smugness was radiating off Jesse as Hanzo ate with deliberate slowness and did his best not to look over at his friend.

“You…aren’t actually mad, are you?” Jesse asked, suddenly hesitant as he poked at his ice cream.

“No, McCree, I assure you, I am not. As you said, I asked. This was…bizarre beyond any description, but it was definitely what we needed to do today.”

Relief eased the tension in Jesse’s shoulders. It had been. With their friendship repaired, it felt incredibly good to know that Jesse could get a little goofy and Hanzo would ride along with him. It’d been a long time since he’d had that in his life, and only now with being exposed to it again did he realize just how much he’d missed it. His life had gotten a bit…cold, and his general attitude had with it. He used to be fun, quick with a joke; he still was, but nothing like it had been in his twenties. Age had been his internal excuse, but he damn well knew better that loneliness had far much more to do with it.

“I have to say, this certainly was…the most American experience I have ever had,” Hanzo said.

“We should head back to Phoenix after this, hit up an immigration office. All you need to do is tell ‘em you went to The Thing today and they’ll give you a full-fledged passport and social security card. Ain’t nothing more American than this shit, fuck any knowledge test about the Constitution,” Jesse replied, and Hanzo had to cover his mouth as he ate and snickered simultaneously. Jesse’s gaze grew soft and distant.

“Best day I had in an age,” he admitted.

“Agreed.”

They were quiet for a few minutes as the finished eating, watching the sun set off to their right and each separately contemplating the difference between how their day had ended compared to the previous night. Eventually, Jesse reached into his pocket to pull out his smattering of change from the ice cream.

“I had to take out a twenty, y’know. Again?” Jesse asked, and Hanzo gave him a surprisingly-wide and enthusiastic smile.

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes
a selection from Jesse's playlist: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb9azVA3HS4

JoJo's Illustrations
Chapter 1: http://jojoseames.tumblr.com/post/173442209333
Chapter 2: http://jojoseames.tumblr.com/post/173442237233
Chapter 3: http://jojoseames.tumblr.com/post/173442386783
Chapter 4: http://jojoseames.tumblr.com/post/173442411863

Bonus illustration of Hanzo glaring at a cactus:
http://jojoseames.tumblr.com/post/173493772753
Chapter Notes

henlo!

once more, a huge thank you to my fren JoJo for her consultation on these silly adventures, and pointing out the bar mentioned here out to me while driving around together

Over the next several weeks, Jesse and Hanzo crisscrossed the southwest, hopping the international border as they pleased – their alias’ passports were more than good enough for it. Each day was treated spontaneously; if the location crossed Jesse’s mind, they went there. After the sun set, it was nights of hopping dive bars and trading stories while sobering up in interstate truck stops before starting the whole cycle over again. Jesse taught Hanzo a few simple bits of Spanish; Hanzo taught Jesse how to play Shōgi with improvised pieces fashioned from motel note paper. Neither could remember the last time they’d cut loose so thoroughly.

After spending most of a day touring the Saguaro National Forest as well as its adjacent museum and conservatory (“Forests have trees – cacti do not count, so I will not call it a forest,” Hanzo had sniffed, despite his purchasing a number of souvenir crystals from the museum gift shop), Jesse suggested they retire to one of his favorite bars on the south side of Tucson. When they pulled in to park in a dirt lot marked with a weatherbeaten, flickering incandescent sign featuring a poorly-wrought illustration of a deer, Hanzo pointed at it and shook his head.

“I am far past the point of being surprised by what nonsense catches your fancy, but what the hell is that creature?”

“Bambi, dipshit,” Jesse replied with a smile. “Says right on the sign. Don’t keep up on your animated film history, do you?”

“…No?”

“I’d make you watch it, but it makes me cry every time, and I’m just not ready for that emotional level with you,” Jesse explained so casually Hanzo wasn’t quite sure if he was kidding or not. The subsequent wink as they walked into the bar only mystified him more.

It made for a curious dichotomy, too, because the general ambiance of Jesse’s chosen establishment was…rough, to say the least. It was crowded, choked with cigarette smoke, and echoing to the brim with the chorus of several dozen brutish voices, largely male. The walls were festooned in worn, mid-last-century brewery ephemera, much of it inexplicably mirrored or featuring useless, non-working analog clocks. Shredded bits of peanut shell covered the floor. This was Jesse’s standard fare, however, Hanzo understood now. He’d convinced Jesse one night to try a much higher-end locale in Denver during the second week, but it had necessitated Hanzo shoving a $200 bribe at the maitre’d paired with a barely-veiled threat to get Jesse in the door, though he’d gone without the serape, chaps, gun, and hat to tone down his generally-ragged appearance. Top-shelf liquor wasn’t worth further insults even for Hanzo’s incredibly poised tastes, so dive bars it was. They turned out to be more entertaining, anyway.
Jesse had been talking Hanzo through the myriad nuances of Mexican food when three burly men, clearly biker gang material, shouldered their way into the crowded bar. One of them gave Jesse a long, suspicious look across the room. Both clocked the staring but kept talking amongst themselves until Jesse saw the man point them out to a compatriot, who immediately stood and appeared furious.

“Shit,” Jesse whispered. There was no easy path for a fast exit, and the angry one was muscling through the crowd over to them.

“You!” he barked and pointed.

Hanzo was supremely unbothered.

“What did you do?” he asked lightly.

“Don’t know. That’s the trouble getting blackout drunk in big cities. Can’t recall who you piss off. He’s got a long memory – haven’t been out here in a couple years.”

“For heaven’s sake,” Hanzo drawled before finishing his drink and waving to order another. He likely wasn’t going to get another chance to.

“Just let me handle this.”

“Certainly,” Hanzo’s face split in a wide, expectant grin.

“Hey there, boss, what’s the trouble?” Jesse opened warmly, hands out and to either side to lower appearance of being a threat, but careful not to raise them too high and reveal Peacekeeper under his serape.

“You got some balls comin’ out here, you son of a bitch. Think I’d forget you stealing 50k and my brand new fuckin’ car?”

“That doesn’t sound like you,” Hanzo interrupted casually, bewildering the stranger.

“Don’t care what he fucking sounds like. I’d know that towel you’re wearing anywhere. I found my car two weeks later in Phoenix. You gave it to some homeless people to live in. I got 15 months in Maricopa County beatin’ the hell out of ‘em tryin’ to get it back!

“Never mind, that was definitely you.”

“Fuck off, Hanzo,” Jesse murmured. So much for trying to talk his way out. Dimly, he could remember a particularly colorful night peeling out onto Speedway in a cherry-red sportscar to punish and distract a gaggle of thugs hassling some women in a parking lot. He’d passed out in it somewhere between Tucson and Phoenix and found the bag of cash as well as several guns in the trunk the next afternoon when he’d woken up. He’d loaded up the cash (well, half of it) and guns together in the bag, dumped it at the doorstep of a random police station in Phoenix, and left the car – along with a hefty chunk of the money he’d taken – in the care of a young couple he’d met outside a taqueria, as was his typical MO when he stole a car for whatever reason.

“You got fifty thousand goddamn bucks to keep your ass where it is?”

“Sure do, matter of fact,” Jesse replied easily. “Right here.”

With a flick of the wrist, he popped a flashbang off between them and used the ensuing shouting and confusion in the crowd to get some space. That was the best he could ask for; the
patrons further away and unaffected by his stunt closed them in a circle. They weren’t going to let a perfectly good fight just pass them by. Hanzo slid off his barstool and cracked his neck with a contented sigh. The crowd parted only to let the other two bikers in before resealing around them.

“Don’t kill ‘em,” Jesse murmured as he put his fists up.

“Spoilsport,” Hanzo sighed in reply.

The one closest to Hanzo pulled a knife and attempted to threaten him by putting the point to his own neck; Hanzo chuckled and gave him an oh, you flap of the hand. Their leader rushed Jesse, and Hanzo let him have it in favor of the other two. A slightly bigger challenge, but still child’s play. The goon that had flashed his knife came at Hanzo first, but it was so slow and uncoordinated Hanzo could have spent the first five seconds checking his messages and still struck first. He got under and caught his enemy’s right arm in one fluid move to pin it back behind him and shoved up to break it. The crowd roared at the merciless snap of the bone, drowning out his agonized wail as he fell to the floor. To underline his unspoken point, he pressed into the shattered elbow with his foot; the crowd’s ecstatic cheering rose in volume with the resulting scream.

Hanzo snatched up the cheap butterfly knife his assailant had dropped and took his time patiently tucking it back into his pocket, holding eyes with the wounded man’s friend the entire time. The biker was clearly having second thoughts, given his gray pallor and the way his hand shook when he revealed his own knife, but it was far too late for him now. Hanzo patiently circled him with a predatory grin, hands behind his back and bouncing a bit on the balls of his feet in condescending imitation of a leisurely stroll. He had all the time in the world.

Meanwhile, Jesse easily dodged the initial attack and kept his distance. It seemed only fair to give the poor bastard the illusion of traction. The leader also pulled a knife and came at him swinging. One, then two strikes were parried for theatrical effect with his left arm, and that felt like enough. On the next thrust, Jesse caught it by the blade, bent it (to further delighted cheering of the spectators), and used the shock to pull in his enemy and smash his face down into his knee. When he stumbled back, Jesse swept his feet out from under him and chased the fall to the floor with a merciless right-hand punch that finished putting the man out in an instant. He was probably going to have breathing problems for the rest of his life, but he would live. The crowd cheered and a couple of them even patted Jesse on the back and offered him some cash, which he magnanimously waved off.

Hanzo could tell from the crowd’s reaction that Jesse was about finished, so he sprung back into action as well. His assailant tried one pathetic stab, which Hanzo caught, disarmed, and traded the knife between his hands before slamming it into the bartop right through the man’s palm with a satisfying, meaty thunk. The responding howl caught Jesse’s attention; he threw up a hand in exasperated gesture at the wounded man ruining the furniture. Hanzo returned a disaffected shrug.

“He is alive.”

“Goddamn true enough, Hanzo, he ain’t fuckin’ dead, is he?” Jesse replied drily. He sauntered over and peeled off a few hundreds from a pouch he kept for times like these and placed them in front of the bartender, who took it and yanked the knife out of the bartop to let the wounded man slide to the floor. Hanzo pushed the whimpering, bleeding man aside with a foot to make room around his barstool with all the affect of a marble bust. Around them, the crowd dispersed; the show was over.

“Why not?” Hanzo asked as they reclaimed their seats. He watched the two injured bikers struggle to haul their unconscious friend out the door and offered an icy grin as farewell. “No one here appears to be concerned with the legalities.”
Jesse rolled his eyes amiably as he lit a new cigar. *Typical Hanzo.*

“They’re not, and neither am I. But there’s no need to overdo it. Being stupid shouldn’t necessarily earn a death sentence. Some things can and should be solved with a fist over a bullet.”

“I sincerely doubt those three will appreciate your generosity.”

“They want to waste it, that’s their business, and I’ll manage that problem if and when it comes to pass. The point is me, not them. It’s the life you don’t take, more times than not.”

“Second chances? Mercy? That tends to complicate lives like ours, McCree.”

“Killing’s easy. Hangin’ onto enough of something to believe you don’t always have to is what’s hard.”

*That* stymied Hanzo. Even if Jesse hadn’t meant to, it felt like a thorough rebuke. He worried his lower lip and stared emptily at worn varnish of the bartop until Jesse nudged him to get his attention.

“It’s okay. Your reaction means you’re listening. That you understand. It ain’t ever too late to stop thinkin’ like that. *Never.* I did. And killing when you have to doesn’t take the good away, either. We’re just people tryin’ to get by, Hanzo.”

“We are…a *little* different from the rest of the populace, you must admit.”

“Still end up in the ground like ‘em, just…with a little more *style.*”

Hanzo chuckled into his glass and conceded the point with a shrug.

They stayed for one last drink before relieving the bartender of any further anticipatory anxiety. Jesse had just started the car when two black jeeps rolled up, flanked by two men on motorcycles. They were wearing the same vests as the three men from before, and *all* of them had guns.

“McCree,” Hanzo murmured. “This is more than a fist fight.”

“Get in.”

Hanzo didn’t even get the chance to shut his door before Jesse threw it in reverse and floored it. The car clipped the front end of one of the jeeps, tearing the open door off before Jesse turned, making the turbines spray the jeep with rocks and dust.

“Backseat, stay down,” he barked as he took off. The rocks bought them a sliver of time to get around a corner, but the cadre was hot on their tail within a minute or two. The shooting began as soon as they got close enough; pistols first, but someone had a battered, ancient assault rifle and began letting loose on the trunk. The back windshield shattered over Hanzo, who swore violently as he was covered in safety glass. Their singular saving grace was their location on the south side of Tucson, which was largely empty lots and industrial sites – little chance of crossfire victims. He pulled Peacekeeper and held it by the barrel out to Hanzo in the back.

“She kicks like hell. Don’t shoot like I do.”

“She? What is the American fascination with gendering possessions? It is not even grammatically *necessary,*” Hanzo griped as he took it and checked the cylinder to make sure it was fully loaded.
“Just shoot the fucking gun, Hanzo,” Jesse replied before taking evasive maneuvers from more automatic fire.

The bikes’ engines throttled and grew closer to surround them. Fortunately, most of the glass was shot out on all sides, so Hanzo was able to surprise one by leaning out the back passenger side, Peacekeeper in in classic military firing grip, and shot into a bike turbine. It was like holding a cannon in his hands for the force of the gunshot and its ensuing kickback. How did Jesse do this single-handed? The shot wasn’t a terribly difficult one, even with an unfamiliar weapon; the turbine promptly exploded.

As Jesse was distracted watching the victim careen into a brick wall in flames in the rear view, the other biker had used the opportunity to ride up next to him and draw a gun. Just in time, Hanzo saw and kicked open his door on Jesse’s side, nicking the side of the bike. The windowless door tangled with something sticking out; Jesse swore and swerved to compensate for the force of the door tearing off to send rider and motorcycle spinning out and into an overgrown parking lot in a shower of sparks on concrete. Concentrated retaliation fire barely missed Hanzo’s legs. As he curled himself up back inside to protect his feet, Jesse made a hard turn, making Hanzo slam up against the opposite side’s door.

“For fuck’s sake, McCree!” Hanzo sniped, kicking the back of Jesse’s seat once he recovered.

“You stick to fuckin’ vertical surfaces and can jump from third-story windows, you’ll be fine.”

“I do not stick to anything, that is not how it works and you know it!”

“Sorry I don’t give a single shit about the finer points of your goddamn twinkletoes when I’m tryna keep us from gettin’ shot!” Jesse hollered over the popcorn sound of pistol fire, but both of them had big, wild grins plastered across their faces.

With the biggest immediate danger out of the way, they caught each other’s glance through the rearview mirror. At this point, they could try escaping to the interstate and outdrive their enemies in the desert. It’d be safer. Saner. Hanzo gave Jesse a mischievous raised eyebrow. He’d been spoiling for a fight all evening, and truth be told, it was infectious. An on-ramp for the interstate flew by as Jesse kept driving. Instead, he ducked down sidestreets in the general direction of the airport. Hanzo grinned.

“No mercy for them?”

For a bunch of one-percenters almost certainly trafficking meth up and down the west coast?

“They shot first. And their friends wasted my graciousness, anyway. Told you I’d manage the problem if it came to pass, didn’t I?”

“Excellent.”

One of the two jeeps pulled off and disappeared; they were having trouble nailing Jesse down as he dodged between warehouses and close-walled sidestreets, so they were naturally looking to box him in somewhere up ahead. As long as they kept moving, it’d be fine. Probably.

“I can’t reload like this, so you got five more tries. Give ‘em hell,” Jesse said.

“I will do it in four,” Hanzo declared. Jesse laughed.

“Sure, buddy.”
An opportunity presented itself when the rifle-holder appeared to have a jam. Hanzo’s first shot ended wild because both vehicles had to dodge an unexpected low-hanging sign, but before the enemy could recover his footing from the swaying, Hanzo scored a hit in the middle of his chest, just below his neck. The high-calibre bullet created visible blowout behind the man; he dropped facefirst onto the middle strut of the roofless jeep and hung upside-down in the cab. His compatriots let out horrified shrieks audible even over the revving engines. Jesse watched that too in the mirror and gave an ecstatic shout of victory.

“Will you yeehaw next?” Hanzo asked as he took cover again, unperturbed by the gunfire just over his head.

“And I’ll hog-tie you, too, you mouthy son of a bitch,” he shot back.

They raced onto another empty lot. Jesse waved for his gun.

“Hold onto something.”

Soon as he felt the reassuring weight of Peacekeeper in his palm, Jesse spun the car out in wide circles with his right hand and shot out the window with his left. He wasn’t nearly as good with the off-hand – he couldn’t feel the gun the same way, even if the mechanical one moved more precisely – but in three shots, he still wounded the driver and killed a man sitting behind him. Hanzo shouted out the back in exultant Japanese and Jesse holstered his now-empty gun as they peeled out again for a proper street.

The victory was short-lived as the other jeep appeared in front of them heading the opposite direction across the esplanade. Jesse had to shield his head with his arm even though he had been sitting low the entire ride – one bullet pinged off the forearm and made his arm and chest shiver for the force of it. The jeep shot by and swung around at an empty stoplight, turbines screaming for the shear in turning, to come back up from behind.

Time for this to end, Hanzo decided. If Jesse got to have fun, so did he, goddamn it. His bow had been with him in the backseat, though he’d needed to secure it with a seatbelt to keep it from falling out of the car now it had lost a door. He freed it and pulled one arrow from his quiver looped over the back of the front passenger seat.

“Do that again when I tell you.”

“Are you fucking k—”

“Just do it,” Hanzo cut him off. Jesse saw him wrap the shoulder portion of a seatbelt around his right calf several times and yank the excess hard enough to get it to lock. He braced his left foot against the side of his usual seat and took an arrow in hand. It was far too claustrophobic to set and draw it just yet, however.

“Hanzo—” Jesse warned. Nope, too late. He clapped a hand around Hanzo’s ankle just behind him where it was bracing.

“Go!”

Jesse slammed the brakes and wheeled left. As Hanzo’s side of the car came around, he let the upper half of his body hang out of the car entirely and drew his weapon. Though it only took the time of one rushed breath, Hanzo felt it in ages, watching his target’s eyes go wide with panic millimeter by millimeter. The metallic twang of the string pulling taught with murderous intention reverberated in his ear hovering mere inches from being grated off by the pavement flowing by
below him. The rush was better than any tawdry one-night stand, any sense of accomplishment in all his other, more common covert jobs. A real challenge was a rare gift; he constantly needed something, anything that made him remember just how exceptional he was with his single viable skill. These times, so few, so precious, were the only ones in a decade of exile that had given him the illusion of a truly lived life.

And in a flash, it was over; the arrow moved from riser to lodged through the driver’s head and the headrest behind him as if by quantum mechanics rather than ballistics. The car immediately lost control and went over the esplanade to clip a tree, fall onto its side, and screamed to a halt in the opposite traffic lane. Jesse slowed, but didn’t dare stop. Hanzo hauled himself back inside once more and uncoiled the seatbelt from his leg.

“Told you I would do it in four,” he said, utterly smug.

Jesse nearly crashed the car for laughing; Hanzo reached over the seat to clap him on the shoulder, grinning. Obviously, their trusty steed from Seattle would have to be dumped. Even the worst state trooper would have questions about a car missing two doors and riddled with bullet strikes.

“Steal us something with a sunroof this time. It will be much easier for me to help properly,” Hanzo said as he clambered back up to his seat in front.

“How’s that?” Jesse asked, though he said it with an air of mischief Hanzo didn’t understand. He gave him a baffled look.

“So I can stand and fire out from the roof?”

“Yeah, but how, you’ll only be able to just peek your head out the top,” Jesse continued, completely unable to disguise his giggling at his own joke.

It took Hanzo three solid seconds to get it, but when he did, he socked Jesse hard in the shoulder.

“You motherfucker,” he replied, and broke out in full-throated laughter. Jesse had never heard Hanzo laugh so hard before. A sardonic chuckle here and there, sure, but this was different; it was rough and came in slow, deep peals as proof of how rarely it was used. His omnipresent ponytail had come free at some point during the drive, making his hair fly wildly about his face in the generous breeze through the ruined car, adding to his lighthearted aura. Distantly, Jesse wondered when was the last time Hanzo had been so relaxed. Watching it now felt like a bigger victory than the scumbag body count they’d just left behind.

“I’ll get us a new car, don’t worry. And I got a place we can lay low a while, but it’s a drive.”

“Of course it is!” Hanzo cackled with delight as he struggled in vain to keep his hair somewhat contained. “Might as well go to the fucking moon!” He was beaming, his cheeks gone a bit pink for all his laughter. “Wherever you think is best. At this point, I am here simply to enjoy myself.”

Jesse couldn’t bring himself to stop watching Hanzo in his uncharacteristic jubilation and returned a grin of his own.

“You and me both.”
hello fronds!

gonna put a minor CW on this chapter for some short discussion of suicidal ideation!

additionally, my good good friend JoJo did some more ink illustrations! links will be in the end chapter notes~

The place Jesse had said would be “a drive” to reach proved truer than Hanzo expected: all night and into dawn. He fell asleep on the ride, which would have been unthinkable to him weeks ago. The sheer amount of time he’d spent in a car made for a rapid acclimatization.

“Hey,” Jesse said, shaking Hanzo by his arm to wake him. “Almost there.”

“Where are we?” he mumbled as he stretched best he could in his seat.

“New Mexico, again.”

Hanzo cast his bleary gaze out the window. Absolutely nothing besides the road – little more than a dusty, unkempt county highway – could be seen in the early morning light. No power lines, no road signs. Just mountains rising all around them in the distance. The *emptiness* sat deep in his chest as a discomfiting yawn.

“This is…nowhere.”

“Exactly.”

Upon coming around a large outcropping of rock, a small ranch-style home came into view. It was of old, stripped wood, but improved and reinforced by modern pre-fab construction, giving it an anachronistic, patchy look. Solar panels lined the roof and a spinning communications relay sat in the dirt just off a porch.

“Is this your *home*?”

“Closest thing I’ve ever had by the dictionary definition,” Jesse replied as he parked. “When I hit thirty, I started seeing the writing on the wall for Overwatch and figured I should plan for some kind of early retirement. Didn’t expect what actually happened, of course, but I knew an end was coming.”

“How did you find this?”

Hanzo turned to just catch a wince flicker by in Jesse’s eyes. Wistfulness dulled by reticence colored his expression.

“I didn’t,” he explained carefully. “Had to go looking for it, technically, but I didn’t ever *not* know it was here.”
It was too many double negatives for a non-native English speaker, Jesse could tell, so he took pity on Hanzo’s puzzled response with a sigh and let his evasiveness go.

“It, uh…was my grandfather’s.”

“Oh,” was all Hanzo could offer in stunned reply.

“Had to use satellite footage to track it down, but I knew roughly where it was and some landmarks to identify it. All secondhand knowledge. I surprised myself when I did find it.”

“Secondhand knowledge?” Hanzo asked as they walked up to the porch together. Jesse’s jaw shifted back and forth in anxiety as he considered the question.

“Yeah. I’d never come here before. My…parents told me about it. Long time ago. Never forgot.” He pushed open the screen door and dumped his hat and serape on a humble kitchen table. “If you want to sleep some more, bed’s through there, unless you’d rather eat.”

“Breakfast is fine,” Hanzo replied gently. Belatedly, he realized his overreach.

“You got it.”

Stiffness still lingered in Jesse’s body language, but it certainly made sense. Next to no one knew anything about Jesse before Deadlock, and anyone who may have had personal experience was likely long since dead. It was the only true secret Jesse kept. Questions tumbled over each other in Hanzo’s mind, but it was hardly prudent to pry. What Jesse had let Hanzo know at all was in itself a completely alien concept. To have nothing but dim memory and the sparsest of clues to your own life and family was unthinkable; Hanzo could list off ten generations of clan leaders and their lived years on command. What a bizarre liberty and curse it must be to have to divine your own history. No wonder Jesse was so independent: he’d been forced to create his entire self, unassisted, from the first. That, Hanzo could admit only in his innermost secrecy, was something he coveted.

Rather than dwell on that any further, Hanzo distracted himself by taking in his surroundings while Jesse dug through his kitchen something to eat. The house was small, but cozy, and had most modern amenities. A full holo terminal was at a desk in the corner thanks to the array outside. Jesse had updated the lighting from its last-century incandescent fixtures, but the plumbing was clearly dated. Pictures and art – mostly desert-centric and comprised of animal skulls – decorated the walls. A group photo of him and his Overwatch compatriots stood out over by Jesse’s computer. Handmade woven blankets covered a worn sofa and easy chair set against a wood-burning stove.

“This is the desert,” Hanzo mused, pointing to the arrangement.

“Still gets damn cold at night out here, though. Even now, with spring.” Jesse set a cast iron skillet to heat and disappeared back out to the car. When he returned with a single grocery bag and Hanzo stared as if he’d grown a third arm, he snickered.

“There’s a town about twenty miles out and I knew we’d be here a couple days at least, so I stopped. You were out cold, so I didn’t bother you with it.”

“You…cook?”

Jesse turned to fix Hanzo with a raised eyebrow, arms spread in exemplary pose while holding butter in one hand and a can of beans in the other.

“Look at me, Hanzo. I run around looking like I peel up roadkill for dinner. Yeah, I cook.”
“Fair point. I do not.”

“Could have told you that fifteen years ago when I saw a picture of you for the first time.”

“Fuck you.”

Jesse was conscientious enough to merely smile to himself rather than openly laugh at his friend as he turned back to his task.

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The day seemed primed to be simple and quiet as they ate breakfast. As afternoon settled in, Hanzo decided to use Jesse’s computer to catch up on the outside world. Neither had bothered since arriving in Arizona four weeks earlier – they had taken the idea of a true vacation seriously. That choice descended over Hanzo in a chilling vice of reality when he began reading up on the most recent news.

Jesse emerged from his bedroom freshly showered and dressed.

“What’s up?”

Hanzo didn’t immediately respond; he was loath to, because he knew exactly what it was going to do to his friend.

“Hanzo?” Jesse tried again, now obviously worried.

“Ogundimu has escaped prison,” he finally replied, slow and grave.

“What?”

Jesse rushed to him and read the article over Hanzo’s shoulder. In the corner of his eye, Hanzo watched Jesse’s demeanor shift from shock, to disbelief, to rage. He made a fist and slammed it hard enough into the desk to make everything shake before turning to stalk outside; the screen door snapped against the frame loud enough to make Hanzo jump in his seat. Though he’d expected the reaction to be poor, that had been extreme, given how much Jesse had kept a rhetorical distance in talking about Overwatch. At length, Hanzo followed, taking much greater care with the door for the sake of both their sensibilities. Wrath burned off Jesse as he paced the porch and tried his damnedest not to take it out on a wall.

“That son of a bitch almost murdered Lena,” Jesse spat. “Getting that collar meant so fucking much to her and Winston. That was Overwatch’s last real fucking victory, and everybody…”

He was overcome; he snatched a dusty, months-old abandoned bottle up from next to a chair he kept on the porch and threw it hard as he could out into the dirt, where it shattered on a rock. As Hanzo came around to watch Jesse in profile, he could see far more anguish in his eyes than the rage that was coiling in his body.

“The fuck did I even do it all for?” he seethed.

“As you described, you believed in it,” Hanzo tried hesitantly. Jesse rounded on him and got up in his face, his hand flexing in and out of a fist between them, but none of it earned even an involuntary blink from Hanzo. He had nothing to fear from Jesse, even if he did lash out; Hanzo was more than capable of getting Jesse back under control even in the worst-case scenario.

“Don’t. You haven’t got a fucking leg to stand on lecturing me about any of this.”
“My intent was not to lecture,” Hanzo replied calmly. “Only remind.”

It was the last thing Jesse wanted to hear, but Hanzo was right. God help him, he had, and he still did. All the past five years, he’d insisted to himself that nobody had the right to question his choice to leave or continuing unwillingness to return in any capacity, even just to keep his patchwork family. Any recall was only a small, recent development related to an enduring problem. The truth was, of course, that he was nowhere near beyond reproach in comparison to the others, and most of them still reached out to each other in some way, he knew. Winston and Lena; Reinhardt, Angela, and Torbjorn’s entire family. Fareeha and her father. Jesse had been in those pictures, too. He loved them all.

Ana, Jack, and Gabriel may have been his heart’s core, but it wasn’t all there ever had been; it just hurt so goddamn much to keep trying. The belief he’d found in Overwatch’s cause would never die – he never tried to kill it, either – but it felt safer to live with that simple pain rather than commit to anything deeper ever again. Now, he was faced with the inevitable casualty he never let himself consider, because it took all his excuses away: the erosion of all the good he and all those people he loved had done together in shared responsibility. A responsibility some of them had died in service to.

A strange anxiety gripped Hanzo as he watched Jesse wrestle with the news. Despite having been personally courted by Talon – he had even met Akande Ogundimu once – the organization felt like a distant, foreign entity both as a teenager aware of their operations as well as an adult. It had never threatened his life, taken away anything he cared about, or undone anything he’d worked for. Seeing its destruction wrought on another brought it home in a new and distinctly uncomfortable way. He hadn’t joined because he held none of their convictions. He didn’t believe in much of anything, good or bad. Now, the stakes laid themselves out before him, and he couldn’t help feeling scolded for the selfishness and inaction. He’d been raised to have only one closely-held value: the well-being of his clan. That was long gone, now, and killing for cash was no true cause.

Standing out here in the desert and pushing forty, he realized he’d never cared about anything as much as Jesse was caring right now. Indeed, he had no place at all to speak, even to be helpful.

“McCree—”

“No, stop. Don’t apologize. You’re right. I ain’t mad at you. But…I gotta get out of here. Take a walk, clear my head. It’s been a hell of a time fucking off like we have, but now…I’ll be back later, okay? I don’t want you thinking I’m pissed off at anything other than…the universe, I guess.”

Hanzo nodded; his own sudden, crushing insecurity was his to handle.

“I understand.”

“Okay.”

Jesse went back inside for his hat, gun, and a canteen.

“I will be here when you return,” Hanzo murmured at Jesse’s back as made to step off the porch. He stopped but didn’t turn back to look.

“Thank you.”

Hours crawled by and Jesse didn’t return. Eventually, Hanzo drifted off while reading. He awoke with a start to realize the sun had set; as he got his bearings in the dark, he registered the soft
twang of a guitar from outside. A voice, low and longing, joined it singing in Spanish. Jesse had come home. For a few minutes, Hanzo sat transfixed, listening to the words he could not understand and unwilling to move, as if the moment were an illusion he would break if he made a sound. The notes rose and fell largely with practiced ease, though at one point Jesse played a chord that fell flat and Hanzo could hear him curse at his “fuckin’ claw” briefly in frustration. An unbidden, sweet smile lit Hanzo’s face as he listened to Jesse grumble unintelligibly before beginning to play again. The cold won out – Jesse had been right about that too – so he stood, took one of the blankets off the sofa to wrap himself in, and slipped outside to join Jesse. His playing faltered in surprise, and he offered a self-conscious smile. He hadn’t meant for Hanzo to hear any of it.

“There you are,” he greeted warmly. “Sorry if I woke you.”

“It is fine. I had no idea you could play. But…”

Hanzo pointed to Jesse’s left hand clad inexplicably in a silicone gardening glove; Jesse’s neck went a bit pink and he flexed his fingers.

“Yeah, uh…the metal doesn’t work too well for fretting. Makes my whole arm reverberate and it feels weird as hell, too. Had to adapt if I wanted to keep playin’. I picked it up as a kid, taught myself. Couldn’t read music until Jack showed me, though. The guys in Deadlock liked it well enough, but none of ‘em were keen on actual education of any kind.”

Jesse offered a beer from a case next to his chair; Hanzo passed on it in favor of staying in his cocoon.

“Told you it got cold,” he sniped, but it was half-hearted, telling where his headspace still lingered. Hanzo, however, wasn’t listening. He muddled the guitar explanation with everything else he’d learned that day.

“Is it your real name?”

By the last syllable, he realized he’d actually spoken the question and, even worse, with no implication it had been joking or rhetorical. Far too late to take it back. Jesse’s eyes went wide and he froze, his beer hovering halfway to his face in his hand. Hanzo watched him chew the inside of his cheek and try to re-center himself. Inexplicable anger, distant but noticeable, settled in a frown.

“You mean my birth name.”

The distinction confused Hanzo; had he missed some colloquial nuance in English?

“…Yes?” He was committed now, he supposed.

Jesse’s gaze slid over to meet Hanzo’s. At first, it was suspicious and even confrontational, but he must have found something reassuring in Hanzo’s continued confusion, because the reaction softened, but did not abate.

“Jesse’s my birth name, yeah.”

Nothing about his surname immediately followed. Just as Hanzo began to truly worry, Jesse spoke again.

“McCree is what I am, because I made it. Anything else that ever might have been is just a story. If that’s real enough for you.” The dulled bitterness in his tone clued Hanzo in at last to the source of the anger.
“It is,” he replied, soft with deference as its own request for forgiveness. It worked.

Jesse’s tension eased and he plucked mindlessly at his guitar strings. It’d been silly of him to get upset at all with Hanzo for the question, after all he’d already learned about Jesse. The reflex to hide that part of him was still virile and insistent. He liked to pretend it didn’t matter, that it hadn’t for decades; it didn’t, insofar as the loss upsetting him, but the aftermath…that still sat close in his heart. His oldest wounds and sins informed his life far more than any of the deaths themselves had. That, he refused to talk about in any capacity. With anyone. Gabe, Ana, and Jack had all tried to no avail. But he’d been different then. More raw, angrier. More desperate to please, too. Afraid. All those emotions had kept his mouth shut back then, because admitting an ounce of it would mean the moments that defined his rarest, worst nightmares had all been real, and meant something about him. The only witnesses to parts of his life had been him and the desert; no one who respected him should be added to the list.

But he’d brought Hanzo out here. He didn’t have to – they had plenty of options all over this part of the country to hide out in after getting into trouble. And even then, the hiding out was only being conservative, just in case. Their skipping town had almost certainly been enough to cover their asses. Deep down, he understood he had wanted to share this with Hanzo, just like their trip to see The Thing. Questions were inevitable, and his tiptoeing around it was disingenuous, considering that. It was time for that to change, he told himself, though the knot in his gut couldn’t be convinced to released despite the confidence of the sentiment. Come on, it’s Hanzo. It’s fine.

“No one has ever asked me that,” he offered quietly.

Hanzo turned to stare, surprised both by the statement itself and Jesse’s sudden willingness to discuss anything further.

“What, never?”

“Not a one. People just assume it probably isn’t given my background, and that suits me just fine. Plenty of people have tried to nose in on that shit in general, but nothing so specific. Then again, you like bein’ different, don’t you?”

“If I have imposed—”

“You ain’t imposed a thing. Didn’t have to tell you a word of that.”

They lapsed into a silence broken only by Jesse’s continued sporadic chords. Hanzo, with little else to focus on, stared out into the desert. The stars, though on full spectacular display out here, did little to actually illuminate the oppressive emptiness just outside the false safety of the porch. Tension pulled at his spine and made him huddle into the blanket wrapped around him more.

“You’re scared of it.”

Hanzo started and turned again to see Jesse watching him closely.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Hanzo, I’ve lived out here off and on for twenty years. I know when people are afraid of the desert. It’s the correct emotion to have. Shit’ll kill you. Nearly killed me on several occasions.”

“You say that so cheerfully,” Hanzo drawled. One good dead-of-night exposure deserved another, though, didn’t it? “Why stay, then? Why go wander in it for hours? Why run to it?” He’d been sitting on the question since fleeing Los Angeles.
“Because of that. It doesn’t let you hide anything. Makes for a good place to think. Forces you to reckon. It doesn’t care who you are or what you do, but if you can’t respect it, it will kill you.” Jesse paused before continuing to try and crush the continuing reticence balled in his torso. He mostly succeeded and spoke again before he could think better of it. “I learned that respect young. Had to, if I wanted to make it to an age that had double-digits. But you’ll come out the other side with something really, really goddamn hard to kill, promise you that.”

That description only widened the existential rift Hanzo felt inside. He definitely hadn’t needed that colorful of an explanation. Reckoning was not a thing he was looking for. What did he have to show for in a life steeped in murder, cowardice, and intellectual idleness? His struggle was pathetic in scope compared to Jesse’s, and still, he had failed, and continued to every day. If this place was a moralistic reflection of the soul, Hanzo was a void, doomed to damnation and the annihilation Jesse so effortlessly described.

A tight grip on his shoulder made him wade back to reality; Jesse had risen from his chair to be at Hanzo’s side.

“Nobody said you had to reckon right now,” he offered gently. He’d been so swept up in himself and trying to open up that he hadn’t considered what honesty might do to his friend.

Short gasps escaped Hanzo from his involuntary fit of anxiety. Normally, it was rare he let himself slip away like that. The consequences were far too serious to allow it. He shook his head in frustration and pinched the bridge of his nose. Every panic-ragged breath made him feel magnitudes heavier, and the gentle pass of Jesse’s hand up and down his back in attempted reassurance only added to his shame. What a waste that was. That he was.

“I am doomed to reveal my insecurities around you,” he said. “A mistake I keep repeating.”

“No shame or mistake in that at all, y’know. This ain’t a contest.”

Hanzo grit his teeth and let out a long, stressed sigh.

“That is not what I was taught on either count.”

Jesse squeezed Hanzo’s shoulder.

“I’m tellin’ you this because I don’t want to, and that ain’t right. We’re both drowning in our own shit, but the difference between us is I know better. I know how much better it gets once I stop cutting myself off, and I’d be the worst fuckin’ friend on Earth if I didn’t remember that and try harder for your sake. So I’m telling you: you have kill that shit if you ever want to make anything yours, Hanzo, or it’ll kill you. It’s been tryin’ real hard to, I know, but you’re tougher than you think.” He relinquished his grip and sat back down with his guitar. “You can get there. I know that, too.”

Jesse might as well have kicked Hanzo out onto the gravel. That faith, every time, was what got under his skin. A faith not simply for Hanzo’s better tomorrow, but that he was worth it right now. His thesis was about sculpting detail and depth into a version of him that already existed, even as Hanzo couldn’t even begin to see it. That he was a work in progress, not so many pieces of an attempted, flawed masterwork shattered and left as it lay in pieces far too small to ever hope to put back as it had been when whole. It left him adrift once more, disconnected even from his feet to the ground. The guitar began again in languid, sweet chords – something to ease both their minds. Each note was a mental buoy for Hanzo to mark a trail back to the tangible. He took his time settling back into himself and let the music soak into him inch by inch.
“I am going to turn in.”

“Fine. Take the bed. I don’t want to hear your whining about the sofa,” Jesse teased. A familiar smile lit his features, though he didn’t look up from the guitar. “One of us ain’t too proud for it.” Hanzo was too absorbed to properly respond, but Jesse wasn’t bothered. It was clear his friend had a lot on his mind.

Hanzo drifted back in, huddling the blanket a bit tighter around his shoulders. Nothing was natively his – his name had been a great-great-grandfather’s, his home an ancestral hand-me-down, even his capacity to kill wasn’t something he made so much as was given to him. How could he find something he’d never had? Forget skills and things; no person wanted to associate with him.

But that wasn’t quite true anymore, was it? Jesse did. Enthusiastically. Was his friend. He had such a knack, consciously and not, for taking so many things Hanzo didn’t notice about himself and giving them back as some new and novel gift he’d never seen before. Surely all Jesse’s observations were just stories about some other, better person he was acquainted with, but every time he proved his case. Whatever Hanzo could claim as an improvement came from that forced perspective Jesse supplied. Was that still...his? A low, warm drawl in his head chastised him for suggesting otherwise, and though it had never actually been spoken, it lifted his spirits all the same because it was exactly what Jesse would say, of that Hanzo felt no doubt.

Jesse’s bedroom was small – the bed only just big enough to accommodate his large frame took up most of it. It was so close and snug and...intimate – Hanzo needed to take a moment at the threshold to adjust, even perhaps embolden himself a little bit. Every token of a room that was not his enveloped him: the pictures of a life he had not lived; the sheets and pillow unfamiliar in feel and scent; the aridity of a climate completely alien from his native one permeating the air around him. As he settled into bed and it creaked in protest, singing joined the guitar again. Louder this time, too – Jesse wanted Hanzo to hear it. Rough, full baritone drifted in and settled as an anxious knot at the small of his back more than as sound in his ears. This was a place he had never been before but felt like home all the same, and the crushing void he’d felt standing outside had been replaced with a new, white-hot mix of fear and compulsion so brilliant even his mind’s eye couldn’t stand to examine it too closely.

He slept, even as it consumed him.

Chapter End Notes

I was a dipshit and forgot to post the song for last chapter, a selection from Jesse's playlist: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZCCey_22ws

links to JoJo's illustrations for chapter 4:
http://jojoseames.tumblr.com/post/174128941998
http://jojoseames.tumblr.com/post/174129094603

and chapter 5:
http://jojoseames.tumblr.com/post/174129313573
http://jojoseames.tumblr.com/post/173442411863

and this chapter's song selection, from Hanzo's playlist:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfoxXxBHTak
Hanzo found Jesse already awake the following morning contemplating his cup of coffee. Another mug was set out for Hanzo, as well. The remote discomfort in Jesse’s expression put lines in his forehead and the corners of his mouth. Once Hanzo had gone to bed, Jesse’s mood had taken a steep drop with nothing to distract him. It was always so much easier to fret over someone else than focus on himself. When he’d at last tried to sleep, he’d tossed and turned for hours, only to give up at dawn. All his walking yesterday made itself known anew with a deep ache in his knees and hips. He was so tired, it hurt. The coffee he’d made remained largely untouched, as just a few sips had made his stomach turn.

“Did you sleep at all?” he asked as he joined Jesse at the table.

“Enough.”

Hanzo gave a dubious sniff, but let the matter go.

“We did not talk about yesterday.”

“Nope,” Jesse replied flatly as indication he wanted to keep it that way.

Hanzo let out an irritated huff and crossed his arms. He soothed himself looking over Jesse’s ragged, hunched form at the table – exhaustion was the source of Jesse’s testy attitude more than anything else. Temporary. Fixable. Maybe a different introductory vector would work.

“I only wish to know what you want to do next. If you want to change—”

Jesse interrupted Hanzo with an aggressive wave of his hand before running it up his forehead and through his unkempt hair. He could tell Hanzo was trying to talk around his concern for Jesse, aiming for the tactical angle over the emotional one. This wasn’t fair to Hanzo, no matter how wrecked he was.

“No. Jesus Christ, no. It took a half-ton gorilla losin’ his sentient shit to get that bastard in a cell. You and I ain’t qualified for it.”

Hanzo was still having an incredibly difficult time imagining Winston as something... real, much less in a situation fighting a man as deadly serious as Akande Ogundimu. He was sentient, super-intelligent, but...could stop being that? Overwatch had been stuffed to the gills with the incredible and fantastic, he knew, but this tested the limits of rationality. Did Jesse himself ever struggle with this? Nonetheless, Hanzo shrugged nonchalantly.

“You underestimate us both,” he replied lightly, but the attempt at humor wasn’t going to do it today.

All night, endless doubts and questions had choked Jesse’s rational mind – about his purpose, his family, the value of his choices – but with Hanzo now sat in front of him, the chiefest of them demanded to be heard.

“Why do you want to come with me? Friends, I know, but you don’t have a real stake,” Jesse asked.
Twenty-four hours ago, that would have been a much easier question for Hanzo to answer. All of… *everything* last night had greeted him soon as he’d awakened; he’d been up for over an hour already trying to silently contain it in his mind. Clearer personal motives were making for infinitely more difficult circumstances, but that was his problem. Whatever the epiphany, Hanzo wasn’t going to fool himself about any expectations. There was another, equally-honest answer to give anyway, and now with a deeper secret to keep, he finally felt ready to tell Jesse.

“I do. For one, it will kill you, otherwise. I will not stand by and let that come to pass. For another, if you demand purely personal interest…”

Jesse watched the tendons in Hanzo’s arms tighten and pop out. His whole demeanor stiffened where he sat across the table. He knew well enough now to recognize the cause even from a rhetorical distance.

“When…” Hanzo ground his back teeth. It was perfectly safe to relate this to Jesse, he knew, but reticence demanded its presence be felt in a band of pain at the base of his skull. He was long overdue for a bout of his usual tension headaches. “When Genji came to see me, he…”

There it was. Nothing left Hanzo as incapable of words or reason as Genji did.

“Yeah?” Jesse nudged for reassurance. With Hanzo to focus on rather than his own struggle, he found the wherewithal to sit up straight and somewhat sharp-eyed. “I know it’s tough, but I’m here to listen.”

Hanzo couldn’t help it; he had to get up and pace.

“He forgave me,” he finally murmured while his back was turned.

Of all the explanations Jesse had expected, that had been at the very bottom of the list. He remembered Genji’s entire attitude during his time in Blackwatch well. It had not suggested any kind of compassionate mood.

“You’re *sure* It was Genji? Believed what he said?”

Something snapped – Hanzo spun back around and threw up his hands.

“No, I’m not! I didn’t recognize him! I didn’t see his whole face! I lived ten years with a murder just to learn I never finished it! That I left something worse to rot *in life* while I made excuses for myself believing at least one of us didn’t have to suffer! Why *would* I let myself believe him?” Too late, he restrained himself, crossing his arms tight about his chest. It only accentuated how shallow his breathing had become.

Jesse put his face in his hands and swore; how was he still so fucking terrible at this? Each of them was susceptible to meltdowns these days, playing hot potato with their respective personal issues. The practice should have earned Jesse some level of skill above the equivalent of wandering drunk into traffic, but alas and fucking *alack*. Just as true, though, Hanzo wasn’t much better at it, either. They made for quite a pair with their haphazard attempts to haul the other up from going under, never noticing their own feet sinking in the same weak and crumbling psychological soil. Their best days seemed to be the ones where they met in the middle, all trembling knees and ankle-deep in their troubles, arm in arm but eyeing the other’s feet for the first sign of collapse. Mutually sinking though they may occasionally be, without Hanzo to help, it’d have all gone to straight to the deepest circle of hell for Jesse weeks ago. Today, he was here, and it was the latest in a long line of days that never should have been. That helped stave off a burgeoning sense of failure.
Hanzo watched Jesse flail. Explosion aside, he was grateful his friend even tried. It kept him going, he was realizing more and more, and when Jesse recovered enough to look up and meet his eye, he could sense the same thought process was also running in Jesse’s head. However poor the execution, they were cooperating, and that was leagues better than anything Hanzo could claim of his life up until recently. He waved his hands in awkward, reassuring gesticulation before wringing the back of his chair with anxious hands.

“If nothing else, he…proved his identity beyond a shadow of rational doubt. Just because it is…traumatic doesn’t change the fact.”

“How?”

His knuckles went white with further discomfort where they strangled the furniture.

“Family members can…do certain things. Main branch members, especially, have…gifts. Genji used his. There is no mistake.”

“Gift? What gift?”

The confusion wrinkling Jesse’s expression at once stressed and reassured Hanzo. Jesse had no idea; it was a bit of a surprise Genji would keep the family secret, all things considered.

“You would know, had you ever seen in Blackwatch, trust me. Any more than that, I cannot reveal, even to you. Think of it as…sacred.”

“I…okay,” Jesse conceded with a heavy sigh.

“Someday, I might be made to reveal it, but we should both hope that is unnecessary.”

That explanation did nothing to ease the sinking in Jesse’s gut.

“So Genji forgave you. I didn’t mean to challenge you, but that…doesn’t sound like Genji as I knew him, to be honest. At all.”

“It does not for me, either,” Hanzo breathed. “Though he was not…gentle about it. The release was for him alone. As it should be.”

“That ain’t true.”

Hanzo didn’t raise his head as he stared at the seat of the chair but watched Jesse in his defiance from peripheral vision. No words were needed for Jesse to appreciate Hanzo’s doubt. Moments like these gave Jesse the smallest glimpse of what appeared to be the bottomless well of self-deprecation Hanzo kept closely guarded using his frosty rapport and standoffish manner. Killing Genji hadn’t been the cause for that self-isolation; it had only been the final nail in the coffin to prove to Hanzo he truly deserved it. He didn’t have to live that way – Jesse didn’t want to let him
live that way. He’d seen enough of the man underneath the pretense to appreciate his value, and that it was worth sharing.

“That is your answer. I recognize my opportunity. If I am meant to find what Genji sees, I will find it here. With and through you.” Hanzo sounded overwhelmed simply to speak. “I claimed to honor him in death for my own vanity. He stripped away the veneer I manufactured since leaving and made me stare down my hypocrisy. And I feel that you will help me turn that ruin into something worthwhile.”

Jesse had to confess feeling genuinely touched. For having so thoroughly fucked up at the outset of their friendship, this was an unprecedented show of trust towards Jesse. He’d been right back at the noodle shop months past; Hanzo wanted to be and do better, and Jesse had done a better job than he realized fostering the emotion. He was an example without ever really trying. Their circumstances had met each other in the right way at the right time, even if the growing pains were… considerable. But followthrough was necessary, and Jesse knew that would mean having to push sometimes. It was going to hurt Hanzo to do it, too; Jesse knew that intimately from his own experience. Growing a conscience was uncomfortable, to say the least.

“And what do you think Genji sees?”

“I do not know.”

There it was: time to push.

“Bullshit. You know better than you want to think you do. We wouldn’t be having this conversation otherwise.”

Hanzo scraped his teeth hard over his lip, which drew into a thin, white line. Twice, he opened his mouth to speak, only to fall short. On the third try, Jesse had to concentrate to hear his words, he spoke so weakly.

“He saw his brother risk his life one night a year to return to a home that does not want him and pray to a god he does not believe in because he did not know what else to do.”

Immediately, Jesse rose from the table, but Hanzo shied from his obvious intent to offer overt comfort. He cared so much, goddamn it. Hanzo was having increasing difficulty dealing with it. Jesse would not be completely denied, and ultimately they compromised with a simple reassuring hand on Hanzo’s arm, though he held it tight as emphasis.

“We are not supposed to be talking about me,” Hanzo eventually said. “Enough about my—” he drifted off before speaking the word that first came to mind: uselessness.

Jesse retreated, inwardly a bit rueful – there he went again, shunting aside his own immediate problem in favor of another’s. He sat again and ran his hands up and down his thighs anxiously.

“You’re right, sorry. I just…I’m asking a lot, even if you want to come along. I’m interrogating everything about this, including myself, way more than I am you, so please, don’t take it personally. But Ogundimu getting out is…a blow. I didn’t even have a part in that operation, but his capture got us that close to putting Talon out of business for good. Everything I worked for over fifteen years is falling apart, but I ain’t an innocent victim in it. I left. I abandoned the real work and filled it with shit I pretended was enough to feel better. I got bitter, plain and simple, and I’m scared it’s gonna…it’s gonna turn me into something like Jack and Gabe if I don’t do something about it.”

Hanzo grabbed his chair and pulled it over to be next to Jesse’s before sitting again.
“Why do you still respect them? Even disregarding Reyes’ betrayal, it seems your relationship with both was…challenging.”

Hanzo felt compelled to ask the question, but chastised himself for it as he watched Jesse’s head tilt down and began using his fingers to trace the inlaid LEDs in his metal arm.

“They gave me everything, Hanzo. Top to bottom, from the hat to my life. After a war that almost killed off the species, anybody would be fucking up; they stood at the front of the line and climbed over the bodies of a lot of people they cared about to come out the other side. They still gave enough of a shit to pull me out of bombing trains for the rest of my short-ass life and make me something better than some shotcaller’s best gun, and they did it because they wanted to. I wasn’t a charity case for PR – I don’t have a government-listed identity, okay? Nobody knew me from Adam until I went public at thirty-one. It was a long while after they took me in before I realized I could have something I lost really fuckin’ early on. That I was...wanted somewhere.”

The explanation was making his voice waver, but Jesse could tell from Hanzo’s openly-sympathetic reaction that he didn’t need to speak the implication as it related specifically to his struggle with Gabriel: the sense of abandonment. A loss compounded from simple familial death to something far worse. After all their time together, why? Had it all meant that little? And if so, why was he not dead like so many others? What did Reaper choose to hold onto, if Gabe was gone? Was he?

“I know you’re worried about my being reckless and killing myself doing it, but you have to believe me when I say that not trying will kill me a lot fucking faster.”

“I do.”

Jesse took a long, shaky breath and rubbed his eyes. This wouldn’t be so fucking upsetting if he wasn’t so goddamn tired. It was embarrassing, to be honest, even if Hanzo was so clearly understanding about it.

“This just fucking…makes Winston more right than he already was. He talked about feeling shitty for just sittin’ and watchin’, but I turned my back on all of it. I knew how bad it was and chose not to look, for all I talk about helping people. One or two lives saved here and there is great, but it won’t mean shit if another Crisis happens.”

“Society continues to make the same mistakes it did before we were born. Of course another Crisis is possible,” Hanzo replied gently. “You are not responsible for the world, McCree.”

“No, but as I recall, you cited your ability as part of your responsibility to chase Gabe down. I got ability, too. That makes me more responsible than a shitload of others. Maybe...maybe later we can put it all back together for Overwatch, somehow, but I have to put me back together, first. Hopefully Winston and everybody else will forgive me for it when it’s all over.”

“Everyone else? Others have answered his call?”

“Don’t know who in particular but yeah, people will. I know nobody but me believes Gabe could come home again, but I also know I ain’t alone believing in the overall cause. They’re out there, but they’re scared of the repercussions. Winston’s just reading the room and hoping somebody’s got the balls to stand up with him. I...hate to say it, but it ain’t me, Hanzo. Not today.”

He worried his lip and stared at his mechanical hand again as he flexed the fingers. “And...I don’t know if it ever will be. Even if I get what I want out of chasin’ down Gabe, I don’t...everything...it’s all so fucked. I got faith, but I don’t know if that’s enough to get me out there again.”
The world didn’t much deserve Jesse’s compassion, in Hanzo’s self-acknowledged nihilistic opinion. Jesse shook his head and his voice grew thick again.

“Maybe that makes me a coward, I—”

“No,” Hanzo cut him off, seething. “Shut your mouth.” He leant in and pointed to Jesse’s prosthetic. “That is not the mark of a damned coward. As far as I am concerned, you have been chewed up and spit out by two separate organizations with little more than a tepid acknowledgement of your value. You left, yes, but nobody had to listen to you and let you rot all alone in the desert, if they truly cared. Who was to know you did not disappear to die in some gorge you threw yourself into?”

Such an impassioned refutation – from Hanzo of all people – made Jesse balk. His perspective around Overwatch’s seeming aloofness was understandable; he only knew about the end. He didn’t know about all the birthdays celebrated, the shared victories, the moments coping together over the failures, the late-night talks about life. Those were times someone had to live to understand how important they were, but his emphatic reassurance about Jesse’s valor did help buoy him.

“I was never gonna listen, and they knew it. The way it fell apart ain’t their fault any more than it is mine. They care, I promise. And I care about them, still. But it means a lot to me that you care, too. I’ve had a lot of friends in my life, but you’re the best I’ve had since…well, I’m sure you can figure it the fuck out, but the point remains,” Jesse explained.

Hanzo shrugged, suddenly discomfited by his outburst. He knew nothing about Overwatch beyond any tactical lens – it was foolhardy to be so presumptuous when Jesse had previously explained how much the individuals that had comprised it meant to him. Hanzo was no more special than any of them. He shouldn’t be so selfish. Additionally, it was a bit overwhelming to go from never having been anyone’s friend to being described as a best friend in the space of months. Coupled with his own abrupt internal realization the night before, Jesse’s words had made for a potent knot in Hanzo’s gut.

“I have never kept very good company, but even of my most casual acquaintances, you are the best human being I have ever had the grace to meet. I simply cannot stand to hear you disparage yourself as a coward. Forgive my presumption about Overwatch.”

“You couldn’t have known any better,” Jesse replied easily.

“I…wish I had enough personal experience to qualify my friendship with you as thoroughly as you have,” Hanzo added haltingly. “But know…know that I would not trade it for anything.” His heart twisted in his chest in protest – perhaps one bargain could be reserved if it existed, but he knew better. This was enough. More than he deserved, to be frank.

Jesse returned a tired but enthusiastic smile. That was exactly how he should have expected Hanzo to describe him as a best friend in return – talking around it in a circle with a mile-wide diameter. Maybe someday Hanzo would feel comfortable enough in his own skin to act wholeheartedly about…well, anything, but for now, Jesse treasured what Hanzo was willing to speak on at all. Though he felt much, much better, he scrubbed clumsily at his face and let his head hang.

“You need rest,” Hanzo said.

“Is it that obvious? No, fuck off, I know,” Jesse replied, preemptively waving off Hanzo’s inevitable sarcastic reply. He stood and weaved a bit on his feet, so Hanzo also got up and steadied him by holding his shoulder.
“Considering you drove all night to get us here, it has been nearly forty-eight hours since the last time I know you slept. Bed, no arguments. I will barricade you in your room if you test me,” Hanzo said sternly.

“I fuckin’ believe you.”

“As you should.”

They crossed the room together; Jesse paused at the door to lean on the frame and turned to Hanzo, repentant.

“Sorry for makin’ you talk about Genji.” He had to say something before he gave into his exhaustion.

“You did not make me do anything.”

“Yeah, I did. You wanted me to talk about me, and I didn’t.”

“You needed to know why I keep choosing to stay, and I owe it to you to explain. If that had to come first for you to speak, it is no burden.”

Jesse nodded, but still appeared troubled as he regarded the floor, making his scraggly fringe shadow his face.

“I know I’m a mess, but days like this make me realize just how bad it is.”

“No more so than I am…but that is an exceedingly low bar,” Hanzo replied, and as he intended, got Jesse to give up a little smile. “You are tired and upset. Sleep will ease your mind.”

“I will. But…don’t let me get away with that shit, okay? It ain’t right to make you pay a toll first.”

Hanzo didn’t reply right away. He, too, was reflecting on his own reticence.

“In all honesty, I am not sure I will discuss my brother any other way.”

Jesse made a fist and nudged Hanzo in his chest playfully.

“Between the two of us, I think we make a diagnosable behavioral disorder.”

“For heaven’s sake, sleep,” Hanzo replied, snickering a little as he responded with a shove in kind to get Jesse across the threshold. When Jesse prefaced to tease him further, Hanzo shook his head, offered a shrewd smile, and shut the door in his face. A dull whine drifted through. Thudding footfalls announced Jesse’s petulant retreat, but still Hanzo remained where he was, staring at the door. His expression wrinkled with distress.

Jesse was so good. He didn’t deserve the weight he carried, even if much of it was self-imposed; everything else that wasn’t borne of an overbearing sense of responsibility had been earthly cruelty. Hanzo was increasingly realizing that his first and foremost motive was getting a rise out of his friend – a smile, a weak joke, anything that let Hanzo know Jesse was still keeping his head above water. It was a wholly new thing for Hanzo; even his brother wouldn’t easily believe it was true if he knew. Genji was The Fun One, and always had been. The impulse wasn’t purely selfless – nothing Hanzo did was – as he had grown quite attached to seeing that smile. If there was something more substantial he could accomplish for Jesse’s betterment, Hanzo didn’t know what it could possibly be. He didn’t know how to make anything that was…good from whole cloth.
His headache resurged, making his eyes flutter shut. None of this contemplation was going to do him any good. He collected the barely-touched mugs of coffee to dump them out and tried to put the entire train of thought out of his mind by putting himself to cleaning. Jesse hadn’t been home in months, and the house needed it.

Jesse did not reappear until early afternoon, but Hanzo was relieved to see the characteristic spark had returned to his eyes when he looked up over the top of an ancient copy of *A People’s History of the United States* he’d found in Jesse’s single bookcase.

“You seem better.”

“Yeah, much,” Jesse said. He ambled up to the sofa where Hanzo had stretched out and leant against the backrest. He smoothed his hand over one of the wool blankets folded over the side.

“Listen…”

“I have been. Unless I am mistaken, that is what a friend is *supposed* to do.”

“You shit, shut up and let me thank you.”

“You are welcome. There, now we are done, what a *relief*,” Hanzo said dryly and gave Jesse a humorous raised eyebrow before turning his attention back to the book.

“I just… I was really—”

“Upset, yes. Near tears, I could tell. I hardly think less of you for it. Just because I look like I have not wept in twenty-five years – which is true – does not mean I think you weak for feeling compelled to.”

“Well, I appreciate that, but… you’re joking, right?”

Hanzo pulled the book away to hold Jesse’s gaze with an expression absolutely devoid of affect.

“Twenty-five years?” Jesse repeated dubiously.

“March 27th, 2051. I fell on a training exercise, ending with a compound fracture in my leg.”

“…Yeah, okay, I don’t know why I’m surprised.”

Not even the day Genji…? Jesse wouldn’t dare speak the thought, but it stuck in his head nonetheless. He knew better than to believe Hanzo was quote-unquote really a monster for the revelation; he had plenty of heart in there, hermetically sealed though it was. No wonder Hanzo was given to explosions. I imagine you can tell just how healthy I am.

“My point, McCree, is that everything is fine. Your capacity for expressing yourself is a positive quality,” Hanzo continued, and Jesse didn’t miss the distant note of wistfulness as he spoke. He’d had a few chances to broach the topic on Hanzo’s behalf so far, but it was slow going, and they both had done more than their fair share of wrestling with their emotions in the past forty-eight hours for Jesse to try arguing with him about it now. Better to play the long game with Hanzo’s stubbornness, anyway.

“That… that’s kind of you to say.”

Hanzo returned a seemingly-disaffected hum, but he definitely made a double-take to make sure Jesse knew he wasn’t really that cold about it. Neither quite knew how to continue without
stumbling into more emotionally-unstable territory, so Jesse wandered off under the guise of making new coffee for himself. He felt oddly nervous about broaching another, equally-important topic, despite all Hanzo’s assurances just hours ago. He was here for The Work and the companionship – that was not necessarily the issue anymore, so much as it was Jesse’s apprehension about what any of this meant. If it meant anything.

“I know we just got here, but I…I’ve been thinking about the next step,” he opened carefully.

“Have you?” Hanzo asked with deliberate easiness.

“Yeah. Spent a long while out on my walk yesterday considering options, and I have an idea on cornering and disarming Gabe. It’s going to take a trip to get what I need, but it’ll pass the time waiting for him to pop up on the radar again. If that’s okay.”

(Of course it is. We have wasted——” Hanzo paused, looking away from the book to stare off into space and reconsider his words. When he spoke again, it was soft and considerate. “We have each had our fill of recklessness and cavorting, I think.”

They met each other’s eyes as Hanzo sat up to address Jesse more fully.

“But only if you are ready.”

A whole-body flinch passed in a blink over Jesse. There was no fooling Hanzo about anything anymore.

“I’m not,” he confessed softly. “But I won’t ever be. I just…gotta accept that, after LA. Accept that and…and ask for help.”

“Yes,” was all Hanzo could come up with as a response. It wasn’t like he was much better at doing that himself and could offer anything other than an acknowledgement of mutual struggle. Jesse gave him an appreciative and understanding nod as he waved Hanzo over to his computer. He brought up a messaging window.

“You’ve seen Gabe do that thing where he floats around.”

“Yes. Theatrics.”

“Nope, shit’s real. He dematerializes at will.”

Hanzo did a double take when he realized Jesse was completely serious.

“How?”

“O’Deorain,” was Jesse’s simple, terse response. “I think she used Gabe as a trial run, too. She can apparently do something similar herself, now.”

“I see. She was recently brought on as a Minister for Oasis’ scientific commission. Breaking into governmental offices is a lot more fraught than what we have done so far. That could bring too much attention to bear and tip our hand to Reyes.”

“Not looking to be that bold. You’re right about the risk, but I also don’t trust myself to get within a half-mile of her and not give in to the compulsion to give her the doubletap she deserves.”

“You…do not like her, even as a former comrade, I take it.”

“She’s comrade to nobody. Fucking evil, straight up. Hiring her was a mistake and not up to
me. Gabe commanded with authority, but respected input from everybody and valued transparency within the team – until he didn’t anymore,” Jesse explained in low, exasperated tones. “Anyway, she made the tech Gabe uses to control the ability, too. The specifics were classified even for me in my time, but I know the technical notes and schematics for it are in the old Blackwatch archives, so we’re gonna go get one of ‘em.”

Hanzo gave a heavy sigh.

“So much for hoping your alternative was in any way more sane or pragmatic.”

“Look, it was hacked after I left, and it wasn’t like they were going to let me take anything as a goodbye present when I did.”

All of Overwatch and Blackwatch’s mission archives had been seized as part of the Second Adjudication, but a year after the collapse, the database kept by The Hague was hacked by the notorious and internationally-wanted internet persona Sombra. After retrieval, Sombra reportedly made three verified copies, distributed them to pre-arranged buyers, and kept the original for themselves. Who the buyers were had been a mystery since. No token of them seemed to exist anywhere, and nobody had acted on any intel that could be directly linked to information in the archives. Jesse had never been terribly concerned about the leak for himself – most of what he might have feared from its publicity had been wrapped up in his volunteering to go public years before. As for the unredacted record of his activities, well, plenty of cruel people already knew what he’d done and were out for him. It hadn’t slowed him down yet.

“How do you plan to find the unfindable?” Hanzo asked. He was familiar with the case and had even gone looking himself early on in his Reaper investigation, to no avail.

“I know a guy. If she doesn’t know where, she can put us on a good trail. She keeps to herself and always has an ear to the ground. Gonna call her and make sure it’s safe to come by. I haven’t been out to see her in an age. Name’s Sadie.”

“Very well. What desert cave will we find her in?”

“None.” A knowing smile crept across Jesse’s face. “It’s another, uh, drive. Don’t even ask about flyin’. Can’t happen.”

Hanzo rose to Jesse’s bait only with a roll of the eyes.

Chapter End Notes

a selection from Jesse’s playlist: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NgbBy9hmZjA
hi frens~

first, some content warnings for the chapter:
- consider this a re-up on that graphic depictions of violence tag
- a brief content warning for a single use of a racial slur -- not by Jesse or Hanzo, don’t worry -- for which the user is...punished

additionally: my irl existence is gonna be a little hectic over the next month and a half. first, I will be on an extended road trip for a wedding, and heading into the tail end of July and August, I need to focus a bit harder on my submission for the McHanzo Reverse Big Bang on tumblr to meet the deadline (I am participating as a writer). I have done the best I can juggling both fics since May, but I am running low on buffer chapters on this fic, so I am -temporarily- backing off posting to once a month until the RBB is done and I have more chapters of this done for some breathing room. DO NOT FRET! I have still written ahead, and posting will continue. Chapter 15 has simply proven to be a bit of a bitch to carve out to my satisfaction, and I don’t want to have to go on a hiatus because my dumb ass took on a bit too much work all at once.

this takes effect this chapter, so you will hear from me again here in August, and hopefully with another hot-n-fresh (and drastically fluffier) fic for the RBB around then as well!

if you have a question about any of the above (or want to know why it’s taken me two months and ten thousand words for one goddamn chapter what the fuck) feel free to ask in a comment here, or message me on tumblr/twitter. my username is the same everywhere.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Is this Kentucky?”

“I swear to god, Hanzo, I will kick your ass out onto the freeway and never stop. But yes.”

Jesse had called his contact and gained permission to visit, so they had left the next week to give themselves at least a little bit of time outside a car. Hanzo had needed to not-so-surreptitiously google the destination state (“I can see what you’re doing, the car ain’t that big,” Jesse had chided) and the distance was newly mind-boggling. They were on day four of driving and all the bustle of Nashville gave way to increasing wilderness. Certainly remote, but not nearly as oppressive to Hanzo as the desert had been. At least something lived here.

“We have to be there before sunset. She doesn’t like people coming and going at night because of headlights. Never know who’s watching, even out in the middle of nowhere.”

“Where does she live? It must be quite rural for that to be an issue, given all the trees.”

“On a mountain. It’s the only way to get good satellite signal out here. It’s on the edge of a
As promised, they made it to the top of a winding gravel road just as the sky began to dim. They pulled up to a swanky-looking cabin with a wide wrap-around porch. Jesse’s friend was obviously monied – and had good taste, in Hanzo’s opinion. Barking greeted them; Jesse launched himself out of the car to catch an ecstatic border collie in his arms. Hanzo passed them up to approach a forty-something woman on the porch with long, graying blonde hair and round wire glasses.

“I see where your priorities are,” she snarked at Jesse, and extended a hand to Hanzo. “Sadie. Hanzo, right?”

“Correct. My pleasure,” he said, meeting her handshake. She had a surprisingly aggressive grip.

“Look at those manners,” Sadie said a bit more loudly than necessary. Jesse took the hint and came up to give her a hug.

“What? Loukanikos is cuter than you.”

“Piss off,” Sadie shot back with a grin. She led them inside and gestured in grandiose introduction. “Make yourselves at home.”

This had…not been what Hanzo expected in meeting a clandestine contact.

“How do you know each other?”

“Ha! He didn’t tell you?” Sadie asked as she took a seat in a floating chair in front of a massive, multi-display holo terminal. “He arrested me in ’68.”

“She used to be an anarchist,” Jesse explained.

“Keep that past tense to yourself. Just because I don’t steal crypto off trillionaires and bomb banks anymore doesn’t mean I gave it all up. I live on a mountain self-sufficiently, thank you very much. I stuck to it better than the rest of my so-called revolutionaries did, even if I did flip. Shitheads just wanted to blow shit up and chase ass.”

“She turned state’s evidence. I debriefed her, and we hit it off.”

“Most delightful interrogation of my life. As I like to remind him—”

“I’m the only cop you ever liked,” Jesse finished with a wink. “Where’s Robin?”

“Medical symposium. Doctor Ziegler’s keynote, you know.”

“I didn’t,” Jesse replied, unable to help feeling a bit wistful. “We ain’t talked in a while.”

“Well, I’ll make sure Robin tells her you’re alive and making new friends. The doc’s a worrier, according to her.”

“Do you befriend all your former arrestees and underground contacts?” Hanzo asked, bewildered.
Sadie giggled as she texted her wife with the aforementioned instructions.

"'Course. He’s a straight shooter," she joked without looking up from what she was doing.

Jesse smacked the back of her chair, his face turned inexplicably red.

"Your favorite fuckin’ joke…you buy me bourbon?" he asked. Unless Hanzo was mistaken, Jesse looked for all the world like he was making a hasty, embarrassed retreat while Sadie continued to chuckle to herself.

"I do not understand. That is exactly what he does. He’s an incredibly accurate marksman," Hanzo said, fixing Sadie with a confused look as Jesse disappeared towards what was presumably the kitchen.

"Not that kind of straight, hon," Sadie replied. She glanced up from her phone to see Hanzo put the joke together and pull a jaw-dropped stare off towards the direction Jesse had left in. His distraction let her witness the briefest slip of his guarded expression; with it came a flicker of – dare she think it – hope that was born, lived, and died in a half-second before his stoicism returned. This was clearly news to him and had consequences. Whoops.

"When did you meet?" she asked Hanzo as casually as she could, quickly feigning attention on her computer.

"Sorry?"

"Jes. How long have you known him?"

"I have known of him for many years, but formally met…four months ago? About that."

"No kidding? What’s your record?"

"My what?"

"Jes doesn’t make friends with anybody that fast unless they’ve committed at least five felonies."

"I fuckin’ heard that," Jesse drawled as he returned with three fingers of neat bourbon in hand. A touch of pink still lit his neck, but he seemed mostly recovered. Sadie offered a brief apologetic look for the uninvited outing, which he waved off with an understanding smile.

"I have no record per se, but I assure you, I qualify for more than five," Hanzo replied smugly, making Sadie laugh.

"I like him."

"Look at you, being fuckin’ likeable," Jesse snarked, elbowing Hanzo.

"Speaking of felonies," Sadie said, "I read your newest post. Flashy, even for you. Your friend is a hell of a bad influence."

"Post?" Hanzo blurted. Sadie gave Jesse a raised eyebrow.

"Keeping secrets, Jes?"

Jesse stuttered and gesticulated vaguely.
“Look, it’s not that…it ain’t a secret, just...”

“He keeps an anonymous opinion blog, and I run a botnet to push his posts’ hit count and make them go viral. Don’t need it so much anymore – he’s made a bit of a pen name for himself.”

“We...made the news back in Tucson. Not by name, of course, but you can’t just take out an entire intersection with a car and kill a clutch of bikers without somebody noticing later. Sometimes, I write about shit I do if I make the news. Defend myself and my perspective for the record.”

Hanzo straightened where he sat in realization. This explained Jesse’s odd reserve around his computer the last couple nights they’d been in New Mexico. He’d slaved over it for hours typing, but wouldn’t let Hanzo read.

“The armed robbery in Hanamura. I have read that...You are Joel Morricone? Wait, I should have realized, given the reference. Obviously,” Hanzo said, and instantly went rigid as he realized what he’d let slip.

“You watch Westerns?” Jesse replied, nonplussed.

“A few.” Hanzo replied vaguely, but both of them knew perfectly well just how many he’d have needed to see and how much he needed to care about them to recognize the reference on sight. An ecstatic grin split Jesse’s face while Hanzo suddenly became fascinated with his boots. “I watched several Kurosawa films as a teenager and deeply enjoyed them. I learned of the Western adaptation of Seven Samurai, decided it would be amusing to see and mock and...well, now you know.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I keep all of em on my personal server in New Mexico. We could have shotgunned a bunch!”

“Most of them are not exactly cinematic masterpieces, McCree.”

Jesse’s grin became downright victorious.

“But you like ‘em anyway, don’cha?”

Hanzo had nothing to say that wasn’t a painful admission, so he let out a heavy sigh of resignation and didn’t respond, to which Jesse let out a delighted bark of laughter.

“We’re all learning about each other today,” Sadie added brightly as she pulled up Jesse’s blog. Hanzo leant over to read, thankful for the distraction.

“Running a one-man propaganda campaign for the sake of justice. How very...you,” he said, fondness thick in his tone.

“He loves a crusade,” Sadie said, and Hanzo nodded his enthusiastic agreement.

“He took me to El Paso a few weeks ago. A teenager tried to pickpocket me; he caught her at it, sat her down, and eventually earned her trust talking with her. She told us – well, told McCree, since it was in Spanish – about a neighborhood thug pressing her family for a protection racket. He had killed the family dog as a threat, which was why she was looking for easy tourist marks. She was understandably terrified. All three of us ended up having dinner together. McCree told me to stay with her and disappeared for an hour. He returned, told her to go home, and gave her $1000. In the morning as we were preparing to leave, we overheard some people talking about a body turning up in the river.”
“You don’t have a clue who that was,” Jesse cut in lightly. “Or what he had to do with anybody.”

“I have never seen anything like it,” Hanzo continued, ignoring Jesse entirely.

“You’ll get used to those kinds of stories quick, I promise,” Sadie replied.

“It was a mistake bringin’ you out here. I’m never gonna know any fuckin’ peace,” Jesse sniped, but without any real heat, and a stubborn smile lit his face. He slapped Hanzo on the arm and pointed towards the front door. “We still need to get our shit from the car.”

Hanzo obliged and Jesse went to follow, but Sadie caught him by the wrist. Even before she could open her mouth, her expression told Jesse exactly what she was going to say.

“Sadie, really, it’s fine. I ain’t worried about it – Hanzo doesn’t care, I promise. He’s scary-lookin’, but he’s plenty good despite himself. It just…never came up.”

He patted her hand and took off again; Sadie let it go but nibbled gingerly on a fingernail as she watched his back retreat.

“Oh, I think he does,” she breathed worriedly to herself.

Though he kept his external cool, Sadie’s revelation had struck deeply in Hanzo. Up until that moment, he had never so much as considered Jesse’s potential sexuality. What he felt about Jesse was his own; the idea he’d ever be able to act on it was so inconceivable, he just assumed that whatever, whomever his friend might be into, it had nothing to do with Hanzo. Gender, personality, nothing. Learning something like this didn’t help in the least; it merely felt like a secondhand rejection. Sure, Hanzo was male, and maybe Jesse might appreciate that in general, but the rest of him came along, too. Still made for a no, only a slightly more personal, qualified no.

“Sorry about that,” Jesse opened hesitantly as he caught up with Hanzo out on the porch. “Didn’t expect to be put on the spot quite that fast. She’s smart as a whip but has a hell of a mouth. It gets away from her.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“I, uh. I don’t know.”

“You cannot be…are you concerned about my reaction?”

“No! No.”

“I would hope not. Neither the quality of your friendship nor your tactical lethality is affected by however many men you choose to sleep with, date, whatever.”

Jesse couldn’t help a bit of a laugh.

“Just tickin’ all the most important boxes for my personality, huh?”

“You say that as though your capacity to kill as well as care are not the two aspects you hold most precious within yourself,” Hanzo replied blithely as he circled the car.

Well, shit.

“Wh—…I guess…when you put it that way…”
“There is no other way to put it.”

Hanzo had been hauling their bags out of the back while he was speaking, unaware of how impactful his words had been until he looked up to shut the trunk and found Jesse was staring intensely at him.

“Bisexual.”

“Sorry?”

“Me. I am. You mentioned just men before. It’s not. Especially considering the time with the omnic—look, whatever, you know what I mean.”

“Oh.” The description stung anew. Just another qualification of a negative. He shook it off – Jesse was clearly having a moment that demanded respect. “Presumptuous of me. I apologize.”

“Th-that’s not…I’m not tryin’ to be pedantic. I’m just…I can’t just leave it at Sadie tellin’ you something about me like that. I need to. I’ve never been really good at that, especially…”

Jesse drifted off and stared out into the trees; Hanzo came around to where he’d left Jesse standing between the porch and the car to address him more directly.

“Especially about this?” Hanzo offered carefully.

“…Yeah. Had to keep it…to myself a long while. Before Overwatch. And after, but that was…paranoia on my part. Gangs like Deadlock ain’t exactly…inclusive groups.”

The sympathetic pinch and obvious struggle to scrape together an emphatic response that Jesse witnessed in Hanzo made him feel better than any words could, but he was going to let Hanzo try anyway. It’d be a bonus.

“I see. It…infuriates me to know you ever needed to,” he said slowly, and Jesse could tell from the soft emphasis on *infuriates* just how deadly serious Hanzo was about it. He shrugged in response.

“That’s life.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Hanzo said; his distant rage led him to overenunciate the sharper syllables.

Jesse gave Hanzo a grateful smile. Picturing Hanzo snapping a few choice necks from his days in Deadlock made for an unnecessary but nonetheless fun bit of catharsis. He didn’t need protecting anymore, hadn’t for many years, but the thought was…nice. Hanzo was in his corner no matter what, and at this point, that was worth more to him than any bounty he could haul in, or any satisfaction he could gain from doing the work he had been alone in his time after leaving Overwatch.

“Thank you.”

“Of course.”

Jesse sidled past Hanzo to get his bag, a blush unmistakable in his face and neck.

Once settled in, Sadie made them dinner and they traded stories of daring-do and past criminality. They gravitated back to the living room when they finished; Jesse and Hanzo took chairs
near a window, and Sadie her technological throne.

“So, business. What do you need? Must be serious if you won’t even summarize on the phone.”

“Yeah, it is. I’m hoping you can get me somewhere with finding Blackwatch’s lost archives.”

Sadie grew unexpectedly stone-faced.

“What now? It’s been years.”

“There’s something in it I can’t get any other way. If you know anything—”

Jesse fell silent as Sadie put up a hand. She reached into the lights comprising her holographic display and made a slow fist; as she did, the terminal disappeared, the house went dark, and all electronic hum around them ceased. Instead of all the trappings of the modern age, she flicked on a single incandescent lamp and sat back in her chair.

“That bad?” Jesse asked.

“It’s a precaution I have to take for tangential reasons.”

“Do you know who purchased a copy?” Hanzo asked.

“No, I know who sold it.”

“Well yeah, that’s no—” Jesse began.

“No, Jes. I know who sold it.”

“You know Sombra?”

“I knew Sombra before Sombra. We don’t speak often. They have to be extremely careful about where and when to contact me because of the personal risk.”

“So it is one person,” Hanzo murmured.

“Yes, and that is all the contemporary information I will tell you. I worked far too hard to give up an identity I put so much effort into destroying.”

“How do you mean?” Jesse asked.

Sadie scratched anxiously at her chin, but ultimately conceded to the request with a nod.

“Sombra is brilliant. I met them when they were very young, barely middle-school age. But being preteen and brilliant can fuck you up, and it did them. They did something—to this day, I don’t know exactly what—and caught some very intense heat. They had to go way underground and seek physical protection. When they got that, they reached out to me in ’59. Even then I was making a name for myself for my independent work off the revolutionary bomber clock.”

Jesse turned to Hanzo, who was looking a little lost.

“She specializes in liberating people and omnics from trafficking. Getting slave-trade omnics off the grid is especially hard, and she’s the best.”
“Sombra is, to date, still the hardest job I ever took. They did as much as they could for
themselves, but there was just too much and some of it would have called attention to themselves in
their seclusion. I took in every scrap of their relatively short life and destroyed it. They and I are the
only two people on Earth who know their birthdate, for example. But after I was done, that was it.
They have contacted me once since then: to pay me. Sombra bought Robin’s doctorate, the house,
the acreage…and it would have paid my bail for Jesse’s arrest, too, had it been necessary. I never
asked to be paid, but, well…they were grateful.”

“Was it the archive sale?” Jesse asked.

“No, timeline doesn’t fit. Whatever they did for their physical protection must have also
paid extremely well. I think the archive sale was a return on investment to third parties as well as to
let Sombra cut loose and work entirely self-sufficiently.”

“Self-sufficiency is not the word on the street. They are reportedly working for Talon,”
Hanzo said. He caught Jesse’s darkening expression in the corner of his eye.

“Some way to pay back your kindness.”

“You don’t know why they’re doing it, Jes.”

“The fuck other reason is there? Don’t do that, Sadie, you know better.”

“I hate Talon, too, but I don’t doubt for a second that Sombra is there for anything other
than their own ulterior motives. They want to know what happened to them years ago and why they
had to give up their entire life. Answers to that requires looking in very dark places. I know enough
of what they fucked up to understand that.”

Sadie’s explanation sounded eerily close to Jesse’s perspective around Gabriel to Hanzo,
but he wasn’t so stupid as to just say that aloud.

“They seek to undo Talon from within?” he asked, and Sadie shook her head.

“Talon is a means to a personal end. Nothing else.”

“Except for a body count,” Jesse rumbled.

“Like you haven’t left one of your own, Jesse,” Sadie shot back before she could think
better of it.

Jesse was on his feet in an instant; Hanzo was right behind, arm out to halt him. It was
obvious Sadie had instantly regretted her flippancy. Hanzo could sympathize, having accidentally
done the same to Jesse himself. However, Jesse recouped, put his hands up, and sat back down.

“Ain’t the same,” was all he said, though the bitterness in his words made the shadows
around all three of them feel heavier. “Ain’t the same.”

“Jes, I—”

Jesse stopped her with a single raised finger.

“You trust Sombra, I get it. I’ll take it under advisement.”

“Sorry.”

“I know you are. Sorry I got mad.”
“I just shit all over your work, so...it’s my fault, even if you hate getting mad.”

“Sombra matters to you,” Hanzo said, and Sadie nodded.

“They’ve been through a lot. But what I’m saying about why they stole and sold the data is purely my speculation. I deliberately never went looking for more information about the sale because of my connection. However, there is one thing I can tell you: a middleman.”

“Really?” Jesse said, leaning forward with interest.

“Technically, it’s rumor, but I believe it. There’s a kid out there calling himself Flinch who has bragged more than once about securing the data for one of the buyers. He’s smart enough not to divulge who, of course. That’s why some don’t buy it, between that, his age, and the fact he’s always been pretty flashy about his stunts.”

“Why do you believe his boasting?” Hanzo asked.

“He’s well-known for being willing to do anything for the right price or his pet causes: crypto and paper laundering for fascist organizations, hosting secure child porn servers, scrubbing ID tags for guns or other stolen goods. He’s qualified enough to remotely secure something that important for someone buying intelligence just to sit on it and let it gain valuation. I’ve had a finger on this particular fuckhead’s pulse for a while because he pals around with sex trafficking rings. For being twenty-four, the ability to purchase a large tract of land with a former National Guard armory on it and collect last-century weaponry is very expensive. You have to have done something valuable indeed for that kind of spending lifestyle.”

“When you say ‘weaponry’…” Jesse said.

“Guns, all the way up to reassembled Panzers. He’s a white supremacist with a taste for illegally-acquired Nazi paraphernalia, on top of everything else. Very little of anything like that on the black market is operable, however. I wouldn’t worry about him coming at you with a tank.”

“Charming. You know he bought all this shit, so you must know where he is.”

“I do: Pennsylvania. He bought up most of an abandoned town outside the crater.”

“Fuckin’ Philly,” Jesse whispered to himself. He wasn’t keen to be back there so soon, but there was nothing to be done for it.

“That sounds like the best lead we are going to get. What do you think, McCree?” Hanzo said. “Shall we go?”

“Yeah, we’ll have a chat with this fine upstanding member of society.”

“Fuck him up for me,” Sadie requested warmly. “And if you kick up anything I can use —”

“It’ll come straight to you, scout’s honor.”

“To that end, Sadie,” Hanzo began as he rose from his chair to approach her, “If I may ask you more specific questions about his methods and security as you have encountered it…”

“How technical do you want to get?”

“As much as possible.”
Sadie’s eyes lit up with delight; she rarely got to talk shop with anyone. It wasn’t her wife’s wheelhouse.

“You’re full of surprises.”

“He likes his aloof assassin mystery persona,” Jesse teased. He got up as well and left them to discuss the finer details, smiling to himself. It felt good to see Hanzo getting along so well with another, even if it came at the cost of Jesse’s bruised ego. With time, maybe Hanzo might even find a place where he felt he belonged. They wouldn’t be doing all this traveling around and working together forever. Their friendship was concrete, of course, but Jesse couldn’t let himself believe circumstances wouldn’t demand their separation eventually. His whole life had been defined by involuntary transience – Hanzo wasn’t going to change that.

A pang stung his gut to consider it.

The trip to Pennsylvania was quiet and uneventful, but stunning. Hanzo had discovered an abiding love for the Shenandoah’s beauty, so when its seemingly endless rolling green abruptly turned to stripped wasteland at the state line, he sat up in alarm.

“Told you nobody comes out here anymore,” Jesse said quietly. “It’s fucked twenty miles out from the city, kinda like a mini-Outback. Most survivors went to Pittsburgh, New York, or Boston. DC’s never been the same, apparently, even after being scrubbed for the radiation.”

“It reminds me of Kyoto, though at least it was spared the nuclear effect,” Hanzo replied.

The devastation continued and worsened, though Jesse was very careful to take a circuitous route around where Philadelphia itself once stood. Spring hadn’t yet fully taken root this far north, so it was abysmally gray and cold out just to add to the apocalyptic mood. It started to get dark before they made it to their general coordinates; Jesse drove with Peacekeeper easily-accessible in his lap for the last two hours of the trip.

Sadie couldn’t be sure the entire town wasn’t under some kind of surveillance, so they stopped and hid their car at a wrecked garage in a deteriorating township just outside the former city limits. It’d be a couple miles’ walk, but much safer for an approach, and all the better to let the darkness grow before they got too close. As they walked, Hanzo considered their plans more thoroughly.

“Ideally, I would like direct and unfettered access, but that will require actually going to his location. Sadie gave excellent context – I am not completely confident I can hack his security without being noticed, and there is only one attempt at that we will ever have.”

“I don’t think there’s any option besides putting hands on him, anyway,” Jesse replied. “And if we want to get Sadie intel, too, we’ll need the king’s keys. Which, by the way,” he continued, poking at his arm’s holo display, “here’s her contact information.”

Hanzo stepped in Jesse’s path and reached for his arm to stop him sending it.

“What are you doing? After all the precautions you took for your friend just to get there—”

“It’s fine, Hanzo. She told me to give this to you; she’s your friend, too. You got a lot of credence up-front just knowing me, but still, she wasn’t kidding sayin’ she liked you.”

Hanzo’s lashes fluttered with surprise that put him back on his heels. Was it that simple?
No thought had been put into it whatsoever, and he had only been there a day. True, though, he and Sadie had stayed up late talking, and he had soaked up her greater expertise with relish beyond simply learning it for The Job.

“I did not realize. You two are astonishingly close, especially for her to trust me based on your reputation.”

“Yeah, we are. After throwing all her former associates in prison, we kept in touch. She’s a great CI.”

“That...does not explain the depth of your personal relationship.”

Jesse toed at the rocks underfoot and nodded.

“When I left Switzerland, I came back to the States and ended up at her door. Didn’t know what else to do, but I knew I shouldn’t be by myself, even if I couldn’t stand being around anybody from Overwatch. She and Robin let me stay for those first few weeks. I told them about everything that led up to it, what happened after. My arm alone needed an explanation – friends don’t expect you to show up out of nowhere with a brand-new prosthetic and just let it go. I was...still there when Rio happened, but...but after, I...took off on them. She was pissed when I called her a month later. Ain’t been yelled at that much since before Gabe stopped giving a shit. So...yeah. She’s listened to a lot of my bullshit. The two of them are the closest friends outside Overwatch I had until...well...you.”

“I see. Then...I am honored she holds me in such high regard,” Hanzo said hesitantly. “I imagine her respect is difficult to earn.”

Jesse clapped him on the back as he continued walking.

“Oh yeah, it is. Got yourself two friends, now. Keep it up.”

By ten o’clock, they closed in on the city. As much as possible, they stuck to the scattered brush and anemic, leafless tree cover they came across until buildings began cropping up. The nights were still long; they had plenty of time. Hand signals were once again their only mode of communication, but they made their way efficiently enough from the outer residential streets towards downtown. It was still and dead quiet – it appeared to Jesse that Flinch’s methodology was to live nondescriptly and avoid confrontation from local roving motorcycle and truck gangs entirely, but the theory didn’t sit totally right with him. He hadn’t seen any

The town had a large industrial brewery; it felt like a good place to lay low and reorganize, so they made entry through a broken window and walked along a wall with tall windows at waist height. A distant clatter made them freeze, weapons drawn, but nothing further revealed itself. Jesse was staring off into the fermenters when Hanzo caught movement outside through the filthy windows. Something sat on top of a car on the near side of the street, difficult to make out until Hanzo recognized the distinctive barrel of a Bastion unit slide into turret form.

Without a word, he dove, taking Jesse straight to the floor with him, just as the assault fire began.

Glass exploded over them; they huddled into each other against the spare couple feet of brick wall off the floor. Since Hanzo was on top, Jesse covered the back of his head with his prosthetic hand best he could from falling debris just in case. The shooting went on for almost a full, excruciating minute, casting left and right for a thorough spread. When it finally stopped, Hanzo and Jesse feared simply to breathe, lest the noise reveal them in the sudden silence. Each could feel the
other shivering from the adrenaline comedown, and no sound gave indication the Bastion unit had moved or left. Jesse tapped Hanzo’s collarbone with two fingers to get his attention. *You okay?* He mouthed, to which Hanzo nodded. He asked the same of Jesse and got a thumbs-up.

Jesse craned his neck to look for options best he could despite being on his back, but Hanzo demanded his attention again with a wave in his periphery. With deliberate care, Hanzo held his eyes as he reached behind to laterally pull an arrow from his quiver, so the point would not reveal itself above them. There was little glass closest to the wall; he rolled off Jesse to be on his back and nocked the arrow to fire in the direction they had entered from. Jesse cottoned on and put a single finger to Hanzo’s arm.

*One.*

Then another.

*Two.*

Hanzo fired; the sharp ping of steel beyond as it hit something netted an instantaneous hail of bullets in that direction. Jesse rolled up and onto his feet to sprint for the relative cover of the fermenters he’d been assessing – Hanzo could not follow for his position and distraction in firing. Once safe, he drew Peacekeeper again and thought frantically about a next step. Another arrow strike interrupted him before he could decide; he looked to his right and just caught Hanzo as a blur disappearing into the canning and bottling assemblies from continued fire. One less thing to worry about for now.

Simply escaping wasn’t a great solution, as there was no telling how many more bots there may be. He appreciated his knee-jerk skepticism better now – Flinch *actually* chose to annihilate trespassers with blitz attacks. Any locals had probably long since learned to stay far the fuck away from the area. At least the Bastion wasn’t sentient. That gave them a fighting chance.

Yet another ping echoed. Hanzo had attempted a retaliatory attack, but it bounced off the plating around the turret barrel. Even Peacekeeper wasn’t enough for a frontal attack unless at close (and almost 100% fatal) range. The key had always been their exposed power units in back, from Jesse’s experience destroying and killing dozens of them, sentient or not, in his career. He’d only ever done it solo once: in London during the Null Sector incident, and he’d been extremely fucking lucky to have done it.

He was just going to have to be half as lucky this time, since Hanzo was here. Surely, that was how it worked, right? He got low under the fermenter and tried to raise Hanzo on their frequency.

“*You read?*”

“*Yes,*” came a whispered reply.

“I need cover fire.”

A reply didn’t immediately come through. Hanzo had probably figured out his half-baked idea.

“You are insane.”

“But you’ll help nonetheless.”

A long, exasperated sigh was the only further transmission.
“Stay low. Stay safe,” Jesse replied.

“Right, just as you are,” Hanzo muttered to himself as he closed the channel. Once he’d found good cover, he’d made his way as far back from the Bastion as he could so he’d have time to line up good shots. It was infuriating to watch his arrows plink off the shielding harmlessly or only do enough damage to warrant a second’s worth of it using its repair protocol. Jesse’s plan was the best they had with both of them stuck on the wrong side to try and get it to turn its back.

He knew roughly where Jesse was, so he headed to his right, dipping low amongst conveyor racks to remain hidden. A small catwalk wrapped around the fermenters, so he crouched underneath a strut to just see Jesse hiding on the opposite side and pinged their frequency. They caught each other’s gaze even in the low light and Hanzo gestured for Jesse to come over. To cover, he shot one arrow high but with little tension, so it disappeared into the middle of the room and clattered to the floor. Predictably, more shooting followed, so Jesse sprinted again and ended up sliding to a stop under the scaffolding to meet his friend.

It seemed wisest for Jesse to go back out the window they’d entered through, but getting there unseen would take time. Flashbangs, Hanzo mouthed, and held up two fingers. Jesse handed them over, leaving one for himself. With a few more hand signals, they agreed Jesse would make his way back and outside to flank the enemy, while Hanzo made aggressive feint attacks. Before Jesse could leave, however, Hanzo caught him by the forearm and held his eyes with a somber look. Be careful. Jesse tipped his hat and winked before making his way out along the back wall.

Time to go to work – Hanzo shot three arrows in rapid succession, high and scattered. Two were destroyed mid-air. Without pausing, he palmed one of the flashbangs, climbed onto the catwalk, and threw it straight up. The flash created a momentary false daylight, revealing a convenient gap for Hanzo to leap into under a control platform. The subsequent barrage fell so close, Hanzo had to cover his ears for the noise and curl up into himself in a corner to avoid ricochet. He let it go quiet for a minute or so before sliding out from underneath on his back to fire up into an upper-level catwalk. The Bastion was firing in shorter and shorter bursts; even if it wasn’t sentient, it was obviously equipped with machine learning and had calculated that this was all diversionary. Continuous fire from the Bastion was necessary to cover the sound of Jesse’s approach.

A narrow causeway split the room, framed by twin spiraling bottle conveyors for the capping machine. Hanzo huddled against the far end of the left one from the Bastion and pulled the second flashbang. He shut his eyes as he lobbed it over and behind him into the path; the flare only garnered a small burst of fire. Now he had its attention, he took a deep, steadying breath and stood to pantomime shooting an arrow in the open. There was no need to waste ammo at this point. For a chilling moment, Hanzo and the Bastion stared each other down in the causeway, but he never stopped moving, pivoting on a heel and dropping into a combat roll underneath the right-hand machine. It worked; the Bastion had seen him and let loose a full clip. The roll didn’t get Hanzo clear of potential ricochet, so he seamlessly leapt to his feet to vault over cobwebbed cases of beer.

At this point, he had come nearly to the side they had entered on, but Jesse was nowhere to be seen, so he must have made it to the street. One last big distraction would probably do the trick. Stairs up to the higher catwalk lined the back wall; once he crept to the top, he could see the entire length of the room to the fermenters where he had started. Hanzo eyed a good path all the way across, but he’d have to be fast. He stowed his weapon and let out another heavy, relaxing sigh.

Jesse had indeed made it outside and was using an abandoned car to hide behind. He’d successfully flanked the Bastion, but since he’d taken a circuitous path to achieve that, he was still a good hundred feet away. He dared to look over the hood when he heard loud crashing followed by sustained machine gun fire; the Bastion was tracking along the ceiling. This was his chance, he could
tell. Even over the shooting, he could still hear further sporadic, metallic crashes as he slunk closer. The brewery was lit up with sparks from bullet ricochet. Just as he came within reach and set to line up a bullet for the Bastion’s back, Jesse noticed Hanzo atop one of the fermenters, bow fully drawn and utterly exposed.

He disappeared in a shower of sparks.

Jesse must have screamed; the Bastion spun in place to look for him. Horrifying shock aside, Jesse still had enough wherewithal to set off his flashbang, vault the turret’s reinforced shielding, and put his mechanical fist through the power unit to yank the wiring free. The Bastion shut down instantly, but the victory was totally ignored in favor of running straight back into the brewery through the skeletal edifice where the windows had been, heedless of the noise he made underfoot on the glass or any other possible threat. There were no signs of life at first glance.

It took Jesse far too long to find the capacity to speak at all, and when he did, it was frantic.

“Hanzo! Hanzo!”

“For heaven’s sake, McCree, quiet.” Hanzo seethed as he trot up, bow in hand. “What happened to being careful?”

“Careful?” Jesse bellowed; he was only just able to school his rabid compulsion to punch Hanzo full-on in his snide-ass face. “You call that fucking stunt careful?”

“As careful as destroying a Bastion unit by hand is,” Hanzo snapped back. Jesse’s eyes went wide with rage and he shoved Hanzo hard into a stack of kegs, much to his wounded incredulity.

“You son of a bitch, don’t you dare!” Jesse was scarlet. “That had been a plan we agreed on, not some stupid fucking trick for style points!”

“What the hell is wrong with you? You needed a distraction, I supplied it. I knew perfectly well—”

“You!” Jesse thundered. “You knew, you selfish fuck. Not me, watching that shit and thinking I’d being taking you home in whatever bite-sized fucking pieces of you I could fit in my hat!”

All Hanzo’s reactionary anger died. It never occurred to him what his tactics might look like without context. He was very, very good at what he did, what real risk was he taking, he thought. He’d only wanted to keep Jesse safe best he could. Belatedly, he recalled hearing a shriek as he’d flipped backward off the fermenter; he’d thought it had been the Bastion being destroyed. It had not been. His heart sunk to his feet.

Jesse let out a genuine growl as ripped off his hat and ran a hand through his hair.

“McCree—” Hanzo tried, but Jesse wasn’t having it.

“Fuck off, fuck off,” he repeated as Hanzo moved to speak again. His voice was shaking, and he was struggling to get his breathing under control. Hanzo was at a loss – they’d argued before, but never like this, stepping so far over an emotional line to make Jesse this furious. The argument Sadie and Jesse had back in Kentucky came to Hanzo’s mind. How they’d been honest, acknowledged each other, and apologized. At the time, Hanzo had been floored by how easy it
seemed between them, but then...he had never been one for conflict resolution. Now, he knew, he had to try, and that situation felt like a decent template.

“McCree, please, listen. I never, never intended—”

“To fucking terrify me?” Jesse cut in.

“No. I was only doing what I thought was best to—”

“Don’t make this my fault.”

“That is not what I am saying,” Hanzo quickly corrected himself. In halting steps, he came up to Jesse and gently held his shoulders. “I was caught up in the moment. I was not trying to show off. I never even set an arrow, McCree – you would not have been able to tell, and neither could the turret. It was catching onto my bluff, and I decided to give it a harder target to get it to commit. But I never considered what it would look like from another perspective, and I am sorry.”

After weighing the apology, Jesse’s aggression wilted and his whole body sagged with the stress release.

“We’re a team, Hanzo. You just...you have to let me be a part of it. One message, just a second’s heads-up. Jesus fucking Christ.”

“I...am still learning what that means, it appears.”

“Yeah, I’d fuckin’ say so.”

Though the anger had dissipated, Jesse was still visibly upset. He paced, hand clutching his hair in a rough fist. Hanzo followed in his wake, unsure how to respond.

“A-are you all right?”

“No, I ain’t fucking all right, but—”

Jesse had turned to address Hanzo directly, but he suddenly went silent, dropped his hat, and yanked Hanzo by his arm to pull him over and behind Jesse. Peacekeeper materialized in his hand and he shot twice before Hanzo could register any danger. Two smaller, bipedal mechs collapsed, flawlessly headshot even though Jesse’s hand clearly shook as he kept his gun aloft.

“But I don’t have the time to not be,” he finished weakly.

Hanzo plucked up the hat and reached out to press on Jesse’s forearm so he would lower his gun.

“We will make time. Come on.”

Words failed Jesse; he didn’t resist being led to the back of the room and out of immediate sight. Hanzo gave their surroundings a thorough scan for any further surprises, but more mechs were likely still on their way. Let them; it would hardly be a challenge.

“Look at me,” Hanzo said, and Jesse did. Now he’d been given a measure of permission, he appeared ashen and worn from still-lingering irrational fear. “I did something foolish and reckless, but I am unhurt, as you can see. I will not do it again. You are also unhurt. Tell me what still troubles you.”

Inwardly, Jesse couldn’t help feeling at least a tiny bit amused that Hanzo, even in his
empathy, still made his request like an imperial demand.

“I just…I’ve seen people I care about die, Hanzo. A lot. Don’t need to be made to remember ‘em, and I don’t need another name on the list, either.”

An icy thrill ran down Hanzo’s spine, and his intestines gained a mind of their own squirming in sympathy with the unpleasant mixed feelings of regret and…the rest. Looking at the unintended devastation he’d wrought in Jesse, Hanzo could almost let himself believe…

But this wasn’t about him right now.

“I will respect that more carefully from here on out.”

Hanzo offered his hand. Jesse took it, only to stumble a bit when his friend pulled him in for an astonishingly brave, if awkward, one-armed embrace.

“Th-thank you,” Jesse stuttered. Alien as all this was, he really did feel better. Clumsy but forward was an acceptable form of shock to cancel out the traumatic version. When they parted, Hanzo was flush for his uncharacteristic sentimentality, but Jesse pat his shoulder in reassurance. “Don’t second-guess yourself. I needed that.”

“I…am trying,” Hanzo replied stiffly.

“That you are.”

Clanks and whirring interrupted their moment. Hanzo elbowed Jesse: okay? He got a confident nod in response. Peacekeeper was in Jesse’s hand again with all his usual swagger.

“You’re running low,” he said, pointing to Hanzo’s quiver. “I’ve got this. Just watch my back.”

“Always,” Hanzo replied before he could really think it through. His inner terror was assuaged when Jesse gave him a grateful smile; it was simply a further reassurance to Jesse’s mind, and Hanzo’s poker face was far too professional to reveal any greater truth. All the better. Jesse headed for the stairs to the higher catwalk, and Hanzo pulled an arrow.

“You fucking fool,” he whispered to himself as he cast his eye around for a decent sniping position.

Jesse made his way up the same three flights Hanzo had just twenty minutes before, but he wasn’t interested in repeating the acrobatics. He was quick, but no gymnast.

“There are ten,” Hanzo’s voice came over the radio.

“All grouped up, too. No organized strike team. Their boss is a goddamned idiot.”

Even crouching on the catwalk, the angle gave Jesse perfect view as well as plenty of time to watch them move, pick up the patterns of their rotors, how fast the heads turned. The world faded away for the depth of his assessment, until the group began to form into two teams of five. Perfect.

He spun Peacekeeper on a finger; the rotations were a blur to the outside eye, but Jesse felt every pass of the pommel and counted them as if they were entire seconds. When it snapped into his palm, six heads like lanterns in the dark were all he perceived. He emptied the cylinder with unearthly speed, extinguishing the lamps with all the casual patience of snuffing a candle with his prosthetic hand. He heard no shots – he never did when he did it right – but Hanzo’s stuttering voice
came over the radio to shake his reverie.

“—king hell.”

Jesse reloaded and didn’t respond. The last four dropped with far less panache, but the same fatal accuracy. Nodding to himself, he holstered his gun and headed back down, footfalls clattering freely now that he didn’t have to care. Hanzo met him at the bottom, agape and wide-eyed.

“How?”

It was the expected question, but the last one Jesse wanted to answer right now, especially after his little episode. Hanzo wouldn’t know about that, of course, but salt didn’t understand what it did to wounds, either.

“Ana,” was all he replied. “Come on. There’ll be more.”

Getting to the armory was simple enough. The resistance was sporadic and poorly-organized. They didn’t bother with any covert effort; it would only give their target time to potentially get away. Jesse made entry through the front door as aggressively as possible (including throwing a torn mech limb as he walked in for dramatic effect on camera) to cover Hanzo’s entry up the wall to a second-floor window. They were almost certain Flinch was in the clock tower. Since Hanzo had the more direct route, Jesse was not surprised to find a mech with an arrow through its head when he arrived at the top. Inside the door it had been guarding was Hanzo and a lanky twentysomething he was keeping in a rear chokehold, one noodly arm wrenched up behind Flinch’s head to incapacitate him. The kid’s face was almost purple; Hanzo looked bored.

“Finally. Here.”

He released the hold and kicked Flinch in the backs of his knees to send him crashing to the floor. That was Jesse’s cue; he put a knee in the small of Flinch’s back to pin him and the barrel of Peacekeeper at the base of his neck while Hanzo took a seat at the terminal.

“Stay right there for me,” Jesse said.

“What, so your pet gook can check his mail?” Flinch spat.

It had been an exceptionally long as well as physically and emotionally-exhausting day for Jesse, and one scrawny bastard launching slurs at anybody, much less a friend, was not only beyond his capacity for reason, but enough to send him completely over the falls. An enraged roar made Hanzo turn in time to see Jesse flip the kid over, backhand him with the broad side of Peacekeeper, and shove the barrel down his throat.

“¿Qué carajo dijiste, cabrón?”

“McCree.”

Jesse’s head shot up to look at Hanzo, where he was holding up a conciliatory finger.

“Please, he cannot choke to death on his own teeth just yet. I may still need his input.”

His flat affect toed a fine line between serious warning and too-casual sarcasm impeccably; it even got a little bit of a relaxed smile out of Jesse. To enhance the effect, Hanzo turned back to the computer, made a few exaggerated gestures on the holo display to move around the open windows, and let out a sarcastic hum.
“Oh. Never mind.”

Jesse spit out a few chuckles despite his mood.

It didn’t take Hanzo long to override the security settings and put the console permanently under his control – getting to Flinch while still at his rig meant it would be properly open and unencrypted. He installed a remote-access worm on the system and made a mental note to pass the new security protocols on to Sadie later.

“Done.”

When he turned to face Jesse again, Hanzo was a picture of frosty imperiousness staring down Flinch, who was bloodied and still-dazed with pain on the floor. Jesse was pretty sure he’d broken his face in some way with his gun. The intent written in Hanzo’s furrowed brow and curled lip wasn’t hard to guess, and it wasn’t like Jesse was going to argue the point. He grabbed Flinch by the neck of his t-shirt, hauled him to his feet, and pushed him back with one hand, the fingers flicking out dismissively as he did.

“Don’t make a mess.”

Shame Hanzo didn’t get to see the terror dawn on Flinch’s face. He seemed to understand anyway, judging from the grin splitting his face that Jesse was sure matched his own. It vanished only for a moment as Hanzo’s hands swept to hold the sides of Flinch’s head and snap his neck in one deft move. He crumpled to the floor between them.

“Have you ever known me to be anything other than fastidious?” Hanzo asked lightly.

“Can’t say I have.”

“Damned right. Take care of that,” Hanzo continued, waving carelessly at the body as he reclaimed his seat.

“You killed him,” Jesse argued even as he seized a limp arm.

“Do I look like a man often concerned with disposing of his own corpses, McCree?”

He sure as shit didn’t, Jesse thought as he watched Hanzo loosen his ponytail and comb his hair with his fingers while working at the computer. But the dichotomy was what delighted Jesse so much. The theater was all to buoy his mood, too, Jesse knew. For all his claimed impersonality, Hanzo was getting fucking good at making Jesse laugh, at least. He regarded the cooling body he was dragging along the floor – then again, their vein of humor was more than a tad skewed. What Hanzo was doing was for Jesse alone.

The passing thought struck a chord he didn’t know what to do with. There was no taking it back now; it was going to strum on quietly inside.

Chapter End Notes

a selection from Hanzo's playlist
Touch Me I'm Going To Scream, Part 1-- My Morning Jacket:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aq-eULCcqJw
The armory was as good a place as any to crash for the night, so they did, right there in the clock tower. A rough cot, certainly, but warmer and far safer than the car. Jesse woke mid-morning to see Hanzo was once again at Flinch’s computer, unkempt from sleep but enraptured by his work.

“Good morning,” Hanzo called. His voice was still gravelly. He must have only just woken up himself.

“Morning. Can’t keep away, huh?”

“Mm,” Hanzo grunted back distractedly.

“Thought so.”

Jesse got up and stretched, watching Hanzo type away all cast in green through the holo display. Kanji ticked by, catching Jesse’s fancy; he wandered over to consider the seeming novelty. It shouldn’t surprise him, but Hanzo’s thick accent and general dress when they were working coexisted with his flawless English so naturally in Jesse’s mind that he tended to forget it wasn’t his first language. As someone who swapped freely between Spanish and English in his own thoughts and occasionally even when speaking, the lack of it from Hanzo seemed odd.

“You don’t use much Japanese,” Jesse said, gesturing to the language change on the holo screen.

Hanzo’s previously-focused expression grew wooden.

“Have you been hiding fluency from me all this time?”

“I know enough to get by, I just…you don’t even count to yourself in it. Or curse at me under your breath in it, which I know you do, by the way. That’s kinda strange, especially considering how you run around in a super-goddamn-traditional kimono on workin’ days,” he said, offering a smile. The distant, avoidant look in Hanzo’s eyes quickly made it fall.

“There are few occasions it is required, but more than that, I do not like to. My clothes are second nature; I do not think about them beyond functionality. But language…that reminds me of home. To which, as you know, I cannot return but for the gravest reasons, and at extreme risk to my life.”
Jesse briefly covered his face with a hand out of embarrassment.

“Oh, shit. I…didn’t think that through at all, Hanzo.”

“You are not given to,” Hanzo replied with a casual shrug, but a tiny frown belied his attempt at passiveness. “You yourself have said you grew up with no permanent home. I cannot begrudge you for a unique ignorance.”

The blistering truth of it made Jesse drop his eyes to regard the floor. He had never conceived of home as a place – even the house in New Mexico, despite the effort he had put in to find it and how he genuinely loved it. All it represented was a single, battered piece reclaimed from a scattered puzzle. It hadn’t meant what he’d hoped it would when he originally went looking for it. Switzerland, Gibraltar...none of his outposts had been home, either. 

Overwatch had been, which was something entirely different: people and a feeling. Now, it was just a picture he kept on a wall in New Mexico, which he constantly fought with himself to not take down.

“I must look foolish to miss it. Your colorful metaphor about a clown car of murderers was very apt. Most of what I was raised in was a lie, and what was true was unrepentantly violent. But I do,” Hanzo continued, in turns wistful and pained.

“You ain’t a fool for that. Wish I could relate, is all.”

Hanzo gave a single sardonic huff of laughter and hung his head, staring into the illusory keyboard. His hair draped over part of his face, and Jesse had never seen him look so…tired. It took a moment and what looked like massive effort, but he pulled himself out of it and raked back his hair to put it up in his usual ponytail.

“You should not, in my case.”

No good reply existed, so Jesse didn’t try. Killing was a skill Hanzo was proud of, but Jesse saw real passion when he was at work like this. Here, he could absorb himself in something guilt-free. Something he’d learned himself and had done so in defiance of his family. Jesse wondered if Hanzo was cognizant at all of what that meant.

In another time and place, he could have been something so different, but then Jesse could have been, too. It wasn’t something to mourn, necessarily. They had both managed to chip out spaces for themselves in contrast of what their circumstances would have demanded of them. Whether or not this was what they were supposed to be in a just world was irrelevant – it was and would be, and that seemed well enough, for all the struggle.

Hanzo saw the hesitation and regret in him, so he held Jesse’s eyes with significance as he finished fixing his hair.

“It is fine, McCree. I did not have to tell you any of that.”

As he’d hoped, the reassurance put Jesse more at ease.

“I’m gonna clean up and go get the car.”

“Good. I am still going through messages and administration logs. We are fortunate – he kept meticulous notes and records for blackmail purposes. It is a miracle he was not murdered sooner with his predilection for double-crosses.”

“Glad to hear it. Keep looking.”
Since Jesse had to walk, he took his time. Bots and assorted pieces of them littered the street in uneven patches as he walked back the exact path they’d come the previous night. Here and there, he came across a few arrows and picked them up. When he came to the brewery, he gave a *fuck it* shrug and hopped down from the shattered windows to look for more.

The fermenter he’d seen Hanzo stand on seemed to loom over him even from across the room and darkened his mood. An arrow revealed itself poking out of a keg – Jesse was pretty sure it was the first one Hanzo had fired after the Bastion revealed itself. He yanked it from the sheetmetal and regarded the point, damp with god-only-knew-how-ancient beer. After the scare yesterday, had Hanzo *really* come to understand what their camaraderie meant? What the consequences of loss in a team environment were? Sure, gang members saw compatriots die, but it wasn’t anything close to the same, Jesse knew *very* well. Even if you *did* care about your fallen brother – and in truth, you probably didn’t – that death was acceptable loss. Expected.

Overwatch had taught Jesse to *cherish* life and preserve it. Now Jesse considered it from that angle, he realized Hanzo almost certainly didn’t. He readily admitted he had no cause to fight for, and that Jesse’s would do in a pinch. And that was fine, even a massive improvement, but it was also a show of hubris. Was Hanzo ready to do *anything* for the sake of another? A *team*? Not just a friend, like Jesse was, but a complete stranger, or an intangible concept. Running into burning buildings, hauling wounded children from rubble. That kind of thing.

Hanzo still seemed to lack the understanding how necessary it was to appreciate the value of investment in external principal as part of his growth. He acted as he did with Jesse largely because he liked his friend and was willing to help, not because of any in-born compulsion. Had he grown out his perspective enough to *truly feel* that compulsion to act purely in the interest of Something Better in earnest with others? One needed it when the chips were down. Sometimes, that was the only thing you had, and it *still* wouldn’t be enough to bring everybody home. That camaraderie fostered from those values would *still* be the only thing you had to help you cope with the failure afterward. Hanzo’s first instinct in the face of failure, irrespective of his own human inevitability, was to retreat into self-hate and isolation. Jesse didn’t know if he could *teach* that when it was just the two of them. Jesse wasn’t even living it *himself* anymore, so it was pretty hypocritical of him, too.

It could be *unlearned* too, he understood now, through Gabe. A steel strut presented itself as a tempting punching bag for his prosthetic, but Jesse kept the compulsion on lockdown. Gabe had helped him understand all those years ago, yes, but Jesse had learned and *internalized* what he had through experience. Anybody could *tell* you to care, but the experience was what made it real. Context could only come individually, and that had to be *felt*. He recalled Hanzo’s expression when Jesse had exploded in his face and realized what he’d done. Anguished. Repentant. Hanzo was definitely coming to feel, and Jesse took a lot of heart from that to conquer his own, sudden self-doubt. Time; that was all Jesse had needed. Time with the right people to become not simply a better person, but more *whole*, which was what Hanzo needed and deserved, too. Jesse still qualified well enough as the *right people* for Hanzo. Perhaps someday, it wouldn’t just be the two of them working alone, either.

Even if Jesse wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to share. Getting to know Hanzo had made for…a very comfortable bubble, untouched by the numerous struggles throughout his life. Somewhere safe he could put all of the ruins those struggles had left behind where they would be heard, but not judged. It was a long-lived craving he’d at last found a way to sate. He was a fool to believe that would last forever, because true strife would visit them eventually. It had to, if Jesse was going to dive into dealing with his problems around Gabe directly, but…

He shook his head. *Fuck strife*. They were both tough enough separately *and* together to
stick it out. All this doubt should only be an academic exercise. He trusted Hanzo with his life, period. Whatever happened, they would pull through as long as they were both still alive. And should the worst come to pass...all the planning and anticipation in the world had never helped Jesse cope before.

He bundled the arrows together in one hand and made his way for the street. This damn building was fucking with his head.

It took him over an hour to finish his walk back to the car. Upon returning, he was met by an ebullient Hanzo.

“I have a name.”

“No shit,” Jesse replied with a relieved gasp. As he hurried over to join Hanzo, he saw Hanzo’s spiky and normally-aggressive eyebrows soften in surprise.

“My arrows?”

“Yeah. Figured you wanted ‘em back.”

“Is that why you took so long?”

“I, uh...yeah.”

“McCree. They have beacons in them. It would have taken me a half hour at most to get them all. I was going to before we left.”

“You put fuckin’ what in ‘em?”

“Beacons, you dolt. I know where each one is at all times unless they are destroyed.”

Jesse plopped his forehead onto the top of the backrest of the chair Hanzo sat in, exasperated.

“For fuck’s sake.”

“Still, it was...very gracious of you,” Hanzo replied, struggling not to laugh.

“Bustin’ my ass for no good, more like. You ain’t never told me!”

“I assumed that was rather obvious. Did you think I kept record of it entirely in my head? Instinctively understood where my shots would land?”

“Seen you do weirder and more fantastic shit, in my defense,” Jesse said with a shrug.

“I am good, but not...supernatural.”

Vague distress brought out the lines around Hanzo’s eyes. Dimly, Jesse recalled a similar discomfited frown come over Hanzo on their first day in Arizona when he’d made the offhand joke about being magical. Three months and far too many late-night story-swapping drinking sessions later, he knew much better now than he had that morning what it meant. Something was going on behind those eyes, and the reaction was an involuntary expression of it. Even if Jesse could recognize it now, it didn’t mean he could describe it any better. And if he couldn’t do that, he wasn’t going to get anything out of Hanzo about it. Not something so clearly that deep. He let the train of thought go and thumped the leather side of the chair.
“Fair enough. I’m just bein’ stupid. You said you had a name for me.”

That shook Hanzo from his reverie.

“Yes. The relevant messages were archived. First contact was through an intermediary, but there was direct correspondence once trust was established. It’s a billionaire omnic out of Oasis: Jawhar Arazi.”

“The…” Jesse trailed off in surprise.

“The VR pornography emperor, yes. Sadie’s hunch that the data were being held purely for valuation over time was an accurate one.”

“I guess even Sombra needs a sugar daddy.”

Hanzo choked on an involuntary giggle.

“Uncouth,” he chided.

“Mm, I could say a lot worse,” Jesse replied in a low, precocious tone that made Hanzo have to concentrate to keep from squirming in his seat. It’d be very obvious with Jesse hanging over his shoulder at the moment.

“So it seems we must go to Oasis anyway. Are familiar faces a worry?”

Jesse shook his head.

“Arazi’s pretty famous for his parties on Tharthar Lake. O’Deorain wouldn’t be caught dead at any party, much less one like his. I ain’t been to Oasis before. You?”

“Once, yes, on a corporate espionage contract. The predictive-algorithm crime surveillance is pervasive, but not insurmountable if you know what you are doing. However, I have never been featured on international television,” Hanzo explained, turning to give Jesse a look. “It will clock you immediately with facial recognition software.”

“But nobody there’s lookin’ for me,” Jesse countered. “Surveil as much as you like, but somebody ends up having to dig through terabytes of metadata and put real eyes on it eventually. Shit ain’t that smart. Long as I keep my toe on the line until we book ass out, should be fine, right?”

A disheartening thought came to his mind as he spoke. “But if what you’re saying is true, going in with me is gonna put you on at least one list you’ve never been on before: an Overwatch Associate list. We can’t have that.”

“I am not deterred by being recognized as associated with you, or even Overwatch,” Hanzo spoke again quietly. “It is true.”

“How is that relevant? Overwatch is defunct. The recall you mentioned before has not come together publicly.”

“Plenty believe it only went underground. Truth is it’s just individuals like me doing what they can on their own, but people love a conspiracy. Some even fuckin’ think Jack’s alive. That Switzerland, of all fuckin’ things, was a false flag. Tell that to the grass all this is feedin’,” Jesse spat, gesturing with his prosthetic arm. He was getting caught up in his feelings – now was not the time for that particular angst. Awkward silence sat between them in the wake of his outburst.

“I am not deterred by being recognized as associated with you, or even Overwatch,” Hanzo spoke again quietly. “It is true.”

“Just because it is doesn’t mean you should be honest about it. My list of enemies is a lot
“I understand. But as far as appearance of alliance is concerned… I have made my decision.” Genji’s last words to him in Hanamura last fall whispered in the back of his mind. *The world is changing once again, Hanzo, and it is time to pick a side.* “A decision I am overdue in making. I will live – or perhaps not – with the consequences.”

“Hanzo,” Jesse murmured, concern and admiration blended in a single chord.

“We are fooling ourselves to suggest someone, somewhere, has not noticed we are working together. To shrink from commitment at this point is a waste and cowardice. So…here I am, committed, to you and… the cause, such as you refer to it. Anyone with malice will ignore any nuance of my willingness, so I may as well act wholeheartedly.” Hanzo corrected himself, “Wait, that… makes it sound contrived. It is not, if you will allow me some ignorant missteps. Even a reformed gangster still has his muscle memory.”

The show of fidelity filled Jesse to the brim with pride. To think how far Hanzo had come since February. Since yesterday, for Christ’s sake. All his concern dug up from his contemplation earlier at the brewery vanished like fog in the sun. Hanzo had a real talent for overcoming himself after suffering a tangible setback, like yesterday had been. Sometimes he had to run headlong into a wall to remember it was there, but he figured out how to climb over it on a second try and continue on to the next challenge with plenty of enthusiasm. Jesse respected the hell out of that kind of bullish effort.

“You get as many missteps as you need, long as you keep tryin’ like that,” Jesse replied, soft with appreciation and deference.

“I will.”

Hanzo’s legendary self-deprecation notwithstanding, Jesse admired his tenacity. It was probably the only thing that had gotten him this far, knowing what he did now about everything Hanzo kept locked up inside. Consistent suicidal ideation paired with stubbornness still made for a will to live in some measure. Hearing him now, Jesse felt this was the first time since Seattle he didn’t have to worry about Hanzo’s mental state quite so much anymore. There would be bad days, he didn’t kid himself, but Hanzo was taking a huge step for the better that Jesse wasn’t sure Hanzo himself completely understood yet. That was fine; Jesse would be there when he got lost in the details.

“Okay. Oasis it is, then, you and me. We need a plan,” Jesse said.

“Yes. More research will be required. We could stay here, but…”

“Sadie has a kitchen with real food.”

“…Yes.”

“Glad we’re of a mind.”

Sadie welcomed them back with open arms. Robin was still away, and the house was far too quiet without her. The boys were a delight to have around the first time, so she was hardly going to turn them down. She could see immediately there was a difference upon their return – or, perhaps, she had been much more ignorant than she’d initially thought. Which led to a more belated discovery: the two of them had picked up bits of each other’s mannerisms. Though she hadn’t known Hanzo long, of course, she still recognized a shadow of Jesse’s idiosyncratic swagger in the
way he sometimes stood, legs wide and thumbs tucked into his obi. He’d even taken to doing
fingerguns every once and again, and Sadie didn’t have to know Hanzo’s life story to know that was not something he’d done his entire life. On the other side of the coin, Jesse’s laugh had grown lower and rougher, much more like Hanzo’s than the way Sadie remembered his laugh being. And the way he moved was different, too – more...precisely. With less exaggerated gesture than he used to. How had she not noticed on the previous visit?

Despite that, the trip had pretty obviously created some kind of conflict. They had only been gone three days, but both were reluctant to discuss their trip beyond a shared smugness over Flinch’s death. Asking about the rest made them go quiet and glance askance mutually. Whatever it was, they had powered through it, but it had left an effect both positive and negative, as far as Sadie could tell. Hanzo especially carried something new in his attitude Sadie couldn’t place, but at the very least, she could spy a wistfulness in his eyes when left to himself. With the two of them seemingly closer than ever, that left Sadie worried, but she barely knew Hanzo well enough to broach the subject and Jesse still appeared entirely oblivious, so she held her tongue and got comfortable between her rock and hard place for lack of any other alternative.

The change grew more obvious as the week passed and the boys firmed up their plans for Oasis. They’d decided that, to start, Hanzo would go solo to a weekly social their target held at a club in the city, intent on securing invitation to Arazí’s more intimate parties at his home. As far as their research had told them, it wasn’t terribly difficult to secure. Hanzo would pose as personal security for a reclusive wealthy businessman – McCree – seeking a new social circle. (“No acting required for you; being a standoffish shit one too many over-friendly hellos away from punching someone in the throat is your natural state,” Jesse had snarked.) Jesse would stay concealed as backup in case Hanzo’s cover was blown, but it would be very long-distance and if it got messy, it would be problematic.

“Biggest issue is Peacekeeper,” Jesse mumbled, tapping his gun with a finger as he pondered. Hanzo and Sadie turned to regard Jesse with surprise.

“You...named your gun?” Hanzo asked.

Jesse went a little pale for revealing such a secret. Only his closest former Overwatchers had ever known the gun’s name. Spouting it off so casually was unheard of for him because it was so personal. Not that Hanzo didn’t know quite a bit of personal information about Jesse already, but this...was different. Only a few things in Jesse’s life were true and complete secrets, now, and that was one of them.

“I guess that shouldn’t be a surprise,” Sadie tried hesitantly. “Very Western hero, like the rest of you.”

“It ain’t like that,” Jesse snapped before he could yet again try to control himself. No good. He sighed and rubbed at his forehead.

“What is it like?” Hanzo asked. The question came casually and without a note of expectation or judgement, teasing or otherwise. It wasn’t in his eyes, either, Jesse could see as Hanzo caught and held his skittish gaze. Jesse thought back to the night he’d awoken with his nightmare; perhaps he shouldn’t be so surprised he was...comfortable around Hanzo. Nonetheless, he couldn’t respond for the sudden and violent anxiety. The name would come off as cheesy without emotional context – context he was incredibly unwilling to give, no matter how unconsciously assuaged he was in his friend’s presence.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Jesse blurted.
Hanzo gave a single, firm nod.

“Very well,” he replied reassuringly, and patted him on the shoulder. “So, you say the gun is an issue, and I agree. Far too much of a noise problem.”

Jesse looked Hanzo up and down for a long beat before the reticence in his body language dissipated.

You don’t have to tell me. I understand if it’s too hard.

And yet, it only made Jesse want to with a newfound desperation. But not here, not now.

“Yeah,” he rasped. “Even taking a nine-millimeter or a .22 is probably a bad idea.”

“Going unarmed is off the table,” Hanzo countered flatly. “If you will not allow me to, neither can you.”

Sadie remained silent but was absolutely rapt watching them go back and forth, unbeknownst to them and their concentration on each other and the task at hand.

“I…fair.” Epiphany struck, and Jesse’s mood lightened considerably. “Well, there is one option.”

It took a moment for Hanzo to cotton onto Jesse’s coy eyebrows and burgeoning smirk.

“You are ludicrous,” he said when he realized.

“What? I know how. No, really, I do!” Jesse insisted when Hanzo gave a derisive sniff. “Fifty bucks I can’t hit a bullseye in five.”

Hanzo made a show of pretending to ignore Jesse, casting his eyes dramatically around the room and up at the ceiling.

“Okay, three. Three shots.”

“Better. Fine. Meet me outside.” Hanzo rose to fetch his weapon.

“You got something to make a target with, Sadie?”

“I’m sure we can find something,” she replied.

A collapsed cardboard box with hastily-drawn circles served as that something well. It was nailed to a tree just off the porch.

“Jesus Christ,” Jesse marveled as he tested the heavy draw on Hanzo’s empty bow.

“I kill actual people with it, in case the fact eluded you.”

“Fuck you,” Jesse replied with a chuckle. It was a hell of a pull, but he could do it with little real difficulty once he got used to it. In the darkest recesses of Hanzo’s consciousness, he let himself silently enjoy watching the strain in Jesse’s forearm bring out the underlying tendons and veins as he practiced drawing. Surely, he deserved the single luxury.

“Where did you learn?”

The question brought Jesse up short, nearly making him snap the string – thank Christ he’d
thought to put his glove on.

“Ana,” he explained evenly. “I’ve always been a good shot, but I used to be really impatient about it. Did a lot of flashy shit from the hip thinking that was skill. She put my ass in my place and had me start on archery to properly think through lining up on a target because it made me slow down.”

It stuck out that he was suddenly willing to discuss Captain Amari at all, especially compared against his past relative freedom talking about Morrison and Reyes. Those deaths and, in Gabriel’s case, the deteriorated relationship were perhaps in some measure expected by Jesse. Whatever had happened with Amari’s death must have been much more unexpected and traumatic to leave Jesse so tongue-tied and obviously distressed even just to be witnessed thinking about her.

“Smart woman.”

“You have no idea,” Jesse replied. He gestured for an arrow, and Hanzo obliged. Before he could properly set it, however, Jesse puzzled over Hanzo’s exotic nocking point.

“Here,” Hanzo got up from the stump he was sitting on to show him how to use it. “I will calculate this into a handicap, by the way.”

“Shut your yap.”

“You absolutely invited this and buyer’s remorse will not grant you mercy,” Hanzo said with a knowing smirk.

That done, Hanzo stepped aside and behind Jesse to watch him fire. Jesse took a long moment to consider the distance before drawing. At the last moment, he tilted the angle up a hair, earning an unseen approving nod from Hanzo as the arrow flew. It landed in the third concentric circle; Jesse let out an irritated *tch*.

“Once more,” Hanzo said with uncharacteristic patience as he offered a new arrow. “Pull, do not fire,” he instructed as Jesse set it. As asked, Jesse did, holding the string taut and steady despite the high tension.

“Unlock your knees. Keep your elbow in line when you raise the angle.”

Jesse followed his words to the letter – Hanzo knew in watching the line of Jesse’s shoulders relax just before he fired what the result would be.

“Ha!” Jesse cheered at the arrow stabbed the edge of the bullseye. “Pony up, asshole,” he teased as he turned to grin at Hanzo. Precocious haughtiness sat in every line of Hanzo’s face and he didn’t respond as he gestured for his weapon. A breeze filtered in through the trees as Hanzo prepared to shoot, so he paused only long enough to let it pass before drawing and firing in one flawless action to split Jesse’s better shot in its place on the target.

“You *shit!*” Jesse shouted and burst out laughing.

Before Hanzo could get his smug word in, he had to dodge a playful slap headed for his arm and dropped his bow to retaliate. The two traded a few teasing blows at each other; even Hanzo couldn’t maintain his usual disaffection and added a theatrical *ha* and *en garde* between his own rough peals of laughter. However, even in play, Hanzo would not suffer the indignity of defeat – he caught Jesse’s metal hand and hooked a sneaky foot behind a boot to get him to fall on his ass, making him swear and giggle in turns. The hat came off and landed between them, so Hanzo scooped it up to wear it himself as the final insult to his vanquished foe.
“Howdy,” Hanzo offered in his very best/terrible imitation of McCree. Jesse curled up in hystericson the ground, and Hanzo thought he might just lift off the ground for how light and contented he felt in turning Jesse’s mood around so completely. Movement above caught Hanzo’s gaze while Jesse was distracted in his mirth, and he came eye to eye with Sadie on the porch watching him with intense assessment. Realization slammed down around him as if the sun blotted out and only a spotlight remained on him before every man, woman, and child on Earth.

She knew. She could tell.

Whatever terror was painted across Hanzo’s face seemed to satisfy her in revealing her knowledge because her demeanor grew tender and understanding. She straightened up from leaning on the porch banister and resumed her casual affect.

“Come on, you idiots, help me make dinner.”

Jesse had finally managed to regain most of his composure, though he was still chuckling to himself.

“Soon as I get my goddamn hat back,” he said as he stood and dusted off.

After the vacuum of shock, all Hanzo’s reactionary emotions collided with the joy he’d felt just moments ago, leaving him shaking his head a little and blinking in confusion, but he did manage to return Jesse’s hat and fetch his bow.


That helped smooth out Hanzo’s rankled mood on the surface, at least, but he knew exactly what kind of panic attack he was going to have when he went to bed tonight.

“Fuck you,” Hanzo shot back with a mostly-sincere smile.

All the way back up into the house, Jesse held Hanzo’s shoulder and kept him close, and Hanzo had never so thoroughly wanted to spontaneously evaporate into the starstuff from whence he’d come.

Dinner passed with no real incident, though Jesse was the only one of them in truly good spirits the entire time. Hanzo and Sadie did their best to keep it all afloat for Jesse’s sake, but as they began cleaning up, Hanzo complained of a tension headache and decided to turn in early. How Jesse didn’t see the desperate, pleading flicker in Hanzo’s eyes as he fret over his friend’s condition before he bade him goodnight, Sadie couldn’t understand. She cut the tension for herself by making a pot of hot toddy for her and Jesse as a nightcap. They took to a swingseat outside and, for a while, just enjoyed each other’s company and the mild night.

“Gonna miss this when we pull out for Oasis,” Jesse murmured.

“Why are you doing this, Jesse?” Sadie asked, her tone flat and almost confrontational. For a couple seconds, Jesse entertained dodging the question until he glanced over to take in Sadie’s frown and creased forehead. He stared into his mug.

“Gabe,” he confessed softly.

“Shit. Are you sure you’re ready for that?”

“I’m not gonna…it’s more complicated than that.”
“Does Hanzo know that?”

“He does, yeah. I didn’t tell him the truth at first. We’ve been over all that already. Ain’t takin’ advantage of him, Sadie, I swear. He knows perfectly well what I’m doing is dumb as a box of rocks.”

“And he’s still here.”

Jesse let out a heavy sigh and rubbed at his brow.

“Yes,” he said, marveled by the truth of it.

“What’s the endgame, then?”

Silence was the best answer Jesse could give, even if it wasn’t intentional.

“You see why I asked you why you’re doing what you are.”

“Look, we’re a long, long way from the end, even if we pull this off. We’ll have to go through all the information and then…probably get some help from Winston, maybe, for understanding the specifics. I know what I want, but getting there is…hard,” Jesse explained.

Sadie took a few beats to weigh her response; it was a dangerous one, but necessary. She understood Hanzo’s perspective well enough, now, but Jesse still felt oddly inscrutable. That didn’t make sense, given the fact she’d known him so much longer, but then, Jesse was so good at hiding his heart as a necessity of the life he led. But the very last thing she wanted was to tip her hand and tell Jesse something Hanzo wasn’t ready for. What she wanted to know was for her own edification. Though she adored and trusted Jesse, she vividly remembered the hollow face that had come to her door five years ago. A face that would do and say anything to escape the long shadow running him ragged across the entire planet. Even if he was better, was it...healthy?

“And someone you met four months ago is just going to keep tagging along for your health? Because I really don’t see a benefit for him out of this.”

Jesse bristled.

“Yeah, he is,” he snarled back. “What the fuck is your problem? You have no idea what he’s done for me. You know even less about what he’s been through. His benefit is none of your fuckin’ business unless he decides it is.”

Sadie was looking for a specific answer for herself, Jesse could tell, but fuck if he knew what it was. The sense of being observed under a microscope, crushed between pieces of glass, was hard to shake. Being skeptical about intentions for Jesse’s sake would have been understandable on the first visit, not after welcoming a near-stranger back into her home and fed him her goddamn homemade enchiladas. They stared each other down where they sat, and little by little, her expression smoothed out.

For Sadie watching Jesse’s smoldering outrage and defensiveness, the pieces shifted and finally came together. Of course. He hadn’t been lying to her or stringing Hanzo along, Jesse simply didn’t see it in himself. How could he – he was far too busy being happy. She remembered the feeling well when she’d first met Robin. There was nothing to hide if you weren’t paying attention to the heart you’d blithely displayed on your sleeve. Hanzo wouldn’t recognize the positive difference in Jesse, either; all he’d ever known was a version of his friend magnitudes improved from the one that had knocked on her door five years earlier. Now, she understood that Jesse wasn’t simply better, he was better because of Hanzo. As she’d hoped, it didn’t take a lot to illustrate the difference, but
that reassurance was necessary for her if she wasn’t going to divulge anything about Hanzo. She couldn’t make it happen, but the knowing sure could give her enough stress to cause a stroke anyway.

“You’re right, it’s not. I just don’t want to see anybody get hurt. Please think that through.” What hurt she meant by that, she kept to herself, though her conscience rebelled with every passing second.

“I think about it every goddamn day, Sadie,” Jesse replied with exhaustion. Even more now, since the trip to Pennsylvania, but he couldn’t bring himself to admit that to her. Everything about that day felt oddly cherished, somehow. Something he needed to keep safe. She reached over to cover Jesse’s metal forearm with a hand, and he turned his up in invitation to hold it.

“Whatever happens, just…don’t make me go through obits and John Doe listings for weeks on end again,” Sadie said.

The stressed line of Jesse’s jaw from his grit teeth was apparent even in the low light on the porch, but he returned a single, solemn nod.

“It ain’t fun to hear the hard questions from somebody other than me, but…I need it.”

She squeezed his hand, trusting he could see it, even if he couldn’t feel.

“You do. I hope Hanzo does it, too. I can’t surveil your dumb ass all the time.”

Jesse lightened up enough for a tiny smile and returned a careful squeeze of his own.

“He does. Almost as mean as you about it, too.”

“Good! You usually deserve it. I’ll give him some pointers.”

“Love it when my friends get along.”

Despite the words, both spoke with contradictory, gentle empathy. Jesse stood, took Sadie’s mug, and went to refill them off the stove. When he returned, he found her off the porch, regarding their hastily-assembled target with the arrows still stuck in it.

“Sorry about your tree,” he said as he offered her mug back.

“It’s worth it to see you smiling like that again. You’re much more like yourself these days. It’s…a relief, to be honest.”

“I…feel more like myself,” Jesse replied thoughtfully. “Been fuckin’ off for too long. I think that’s why I’m not worried about an endgame with Gabe right now. This is gettin’ me back on the horse, remembering the important shit.”

“Glad to hear it. You deserve to find your happiness.”

“Don’t know about that. Still working on the sanity part.”

Sadie made a noncommittal hum into her mug and left it at that.

The headache excuse had not been a lie, but Hanzo quickly found that solitude was not going to ease it in any way. Sadie’s home was large enough to accommodate Hanzo and Jesse in separate rooms — a first for them in their travels – and Hanzo was grateful for it as he’d closed the door and turned out the lights in pantomime of turning in. Sleep was going to elude him tonight, he
knew.

Was Sadie going to try and talk to him? He couldn’t imagine a fate more horrific than that. But what if she didn’t? Was that worse? Tacit disapproval? But then, she had been openly sympathetic, hadn’t she? Jesse had told him Sadie liked him, considered him a friend, but did that extend to respecting hopeless, latent pining? He sat on the edge of his bed and put his head in his hands.

Unbidden, his memory of that night on Jesse’s porch returned to him. The guitar. The gentle, still warmth of the desert. The closeness and Jesse’s emphatic reassurance – the touch. The bottomless pit of feeling he’d sunk into while drifting off to sleep. Want and appreciation and…care. It had been an exceptionally long time since Hanzo had felt anything beyond a fleeting, lizard-brain attraction towards a man. All of this was unprecedented. Hanzo had made it a laser-accurate point in his life not to treasure people. He had his friendship – why couldn’t that be enough for him? Why must…his…his heart, to be upsettingly tawdry, insist on something over his rational, correct, safe intellect?

He should leave. This was untenable, he told himself.

The desire died before he could even finish processing the thought. He couldn’t do that to Jesse, irrespective of any unreturned feelings. No real value existed in his leaving. What would he do if he did, anyway?

Could just kill myself after all.

But that, too, offered none of the twisted comfort he’d long counted on. His life’s value had appreciated too much, if only in the eyes of another. Now, for the first time ever, Hanzo felt the weight of the rest of his life tangibly. He raised his head enough to weave the fingers of both hands together so tight his knuckles went white. The rest of his fucking life, lived and felt. A life that was going to end at an undetermined time and not by his own intent. That had largely always been true, of course, but without the cold comfort of his daily willingness to die in the course of his work, it was newly terrifying. Hanzo had stopped living on a five-year plan the day his father had died; each day since had ended with a small measure of surprise he was still intact, even if he had never been in danger. Now, he was looking at years to muddle through. The ache of his fingers wrestling each other wasn’t enough to distract him; he had to duck his head between his knees and try very hard not to let his ragged, panicked breathing carry too much noise. He’d always had a tenuous relationship with his own mortality, but this was proving to make the whole thing overwhelming.

He was trapped here. The universe couldn’t even grant him the clemency to want his life when making him feel and need without the possibility of release. Deepening existential panic made him pull the hair at the base of his skull into his fists; the resulting twinge at the follicles helped him keep a toe in rationality. When the worst of the episode subsided, he sat up again, hand clamped over his mouth just in case another wheedling, pathetic noise managed to escape him. At least he could find solace in his lack of tears – he would rather die than break his streak, especially over something as pitiful as a man he could not have.

Maybe he couldn’t kill himself anymore, but he wouldn’t argue if this managed to make him simply drop dead somehow in the near future. A heart attack or an aneurysm, perhaps. Something fast and relatively painless. He offered a silent apology to Jesse unto the universe for the thought, knowing how much it would bother his friend if he heard such a sentiment.

The fear was giving way to psychic pain now but that, at least, he could tape up haphazardly and ignore enough to dull it. He took a deep breath and set himself up on the floor to meditate. Today had been a cold shock, tipping his delicate scales; once they left, he could safely
stow all this away and relish Jesse’s continued ignorance. Too many other, far more important things were on the horizon to permit this kind of emotional compromise. Discipline. Patience. Self-denial.

Nonetheless, his heart’s want still trumpeted its presence even in muted tones until dawn, when at least his mind had steadied enough for sleep.

Chapter End Notes

a selection from Hanzo’s playlist: Helplessness Blues, by Fleet Foxes - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HHgedNNQco
hi frens!

though the RBB is now over and my fic is posted, I still have a lot of recouping to do to give myself more buffer chapters on this fic again, so the once-a-month posting will remain in effect for a while.

additionally: this chapter is subject to a content warning for discussion of suicidal ideation, jsyk~

They stayed with Sadie two more days – just long enough for Hanzo and Jesse to make a few necessary purchases, book accommodations under Hanzo’s best alias, and for them to pack. Despite Hanzo’s fears Sadie had not, in fact, tried to talk to him about Jesse, but she made her support known in passing affirmative glances when Jesse was otherwise occupied. It helped Hanzo more than he would have expected; her willingness to keep a secret and still show she cared was exactly what he needed. Someday, he was going to have to figure out how to thank her for it.

On Tuesday morning they loaded up the car and readied to leave for Atlanta. Both Jesse and Hanzo noted Sadie’s tension; only one truly understood all the reasons it was there.

“It’s been awesome. When you two finish all this bullshit, you should come by again. Robin needs to put a face to a new name.”

“I would be honored,” Hanzo replied quietly.

“Don’t talk like that,” Jesse said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Makes for bad omens.” He took initiative and pulled Sadie in for a hug.

“Be fucking careful,” she murmured.

“We will, promise.”

They parted, and Sadie moved to stand in front of Hanzo. She opted for a more polite approach, opening her arms as invitation, and Hanzo let himself indulge.

“Call me if you need anything.” She spoke casually, as if for both of them, but she held Hanzo just a bit tighter when she did before letting him go.

“Your generosity is unrivaled. Thank you,” he replied, and held her hand just a touch longer than necessary as they split. He dreaded the day he might need to take her up on the offer.

After passing off the car to a homeless couple, they flew out of Atlanta for Amman and then, to soften their entry into Oasis, they chose to drive from Jordan into Iraq. One simple in-person border crossing entailed far less scrutiny than flying directly to Baghdad. Though the cities were lively and glistening with the most cutting-edge tech of their age, the stretches of desert they would pass between Amman and Oasis would remain much as it had for centuries – largely empty and
expansive. The Sonoran Desert where the boys had spent their time forging their friendship would appear lush in comparison.

This was nothing like the Iraq their grandparents had known; the cultural and scientific renaissance gave the country over to an open-borders, tourist-friendly attitude unheard of in a century. Oasis was also regularly in the news for scientific discoveries and G7 meetings; it was the new neutral center of the world since Switzerland had been so damaged by Overwatch’s presence and ultimate deterioration there. The healthy application of state surveillance in the bigger cities all across Iraq assisted in that generosity, of course, but most called it wise rather than oppressive.

Given their greater plan, they had booked a Bentley as their rental car.

“More damned desert,” Hanzo quipped as they prepared to leave.

The comment gave Jesse pause; the quip reminded him of their talk about Hanzo’s fear of the desert back in New Mexico. He leant into the frame and tapped the roof to get Hanzo’s attention.

“Should I split up the drive? There’s a couple tiny towns halfway.”

“Why?” Hanzo asked, confused. “We have done ten-hour drives in the past. It is long, but nothing I am not used to at this point.”

“Well, I just thought…if you don’t want to…y’know…be stuck staring out at all that once…once the sun sets…” Jesse explained haltingly.

Hanzo gibbered, stricken by the concern.

“I…was being glib, McCree. You do not have to…worry about me,” he replied in equally-stuttered phrases. “It is fine.”

“Sure?” Jesse asked with emphasis.

“Yes. Still, it’s…gracious of you to be so conscientious.”

“Of course.”

The trip out of Ammad’s city center passed in total silence, filled with a new, unsettling pressure between them that took almost an hour to dissipate.

Arriving in Oasis helped clear both their minds, given a real task at hand. Rather than booking one of the city’s endless swanky resorts, Hanzo chose a more low-key but no less lavish option in renting a luxury flat in a neighborhood. There was no doubt every single resort room had some kind of surveillance the Las Vegas of yore would lust over, and most of the housing in the city existed as timeshare property anyway – making it easy to come and go with pretty thorough anonymity insofar as any human or omnic observers were concerned. The purchases made in Kentucky were waiting for them on arrival: proper eveningwear befitting both their cover identities, as well as ropes and pitons for rappelling, easily-enough disguised as common tourist climbing equipment. Another, far more nondescript box was there, too: hidden amongst golfing equipment were the disassembled parts for two .22-calibre pistols, acquired through one of Jesse’s most trusted supply contacts.

Before even unpacking, Hanzo began reassembling his bow from when he in turn had taken it down to smuggle it effectively past the border patrol.

“Do you need help with anything?” he asked as he began setting out the pieces. “I will be
“No, go ahead. I get it.”

“Get what?”

“You ain’t been right since you took it apart. Edgy. Not havin’ it makes you feel exposed.”

“You…are correct. Not that I question your—”

“Oh, I know that. I’d be just as unsettled without Peacekeeper.” Saying his gun’s name aloud again made his heart twist uncomfortably, but he shouldn’t keep treating it like a secret since he’d let it slip. That’d only create more questions, and as touching as Hanzo’s reassurance about it had been, Jesse wasn’t really in an emotional place to talk about it. It was too close, too deep a part of why he was here.

“You will be working without it. Are you certain you are comfortable taking my weapon?” Hanzo asked.

“Yeah. It’s different, sure, but it’s yours, too. It makes as much sense as you do, and I think I get that pretty well.”

Hanzo dropped his riser, scattering the hardware pieces he’d put in front of him. He could feel how infuriatingly warm his face had become. Jesse smiled and bent to pick up some parts near his feet.

“Come on, you’re just as capable of readin’ me at this point. Remember your bit about what I cherish most about myself? You’ll get your chance to drop some new and astonishingly insightful commentary on me eventually.”

Was this what death by poison felt like: an interminably slow rot from the core out? Hanzo should hunt some down, just to compare. Certainly, it would make for a vastly more fun and entertaining afternoon than what he was currently experiencing.

“You will regret it when I do,” Hanzo replied, and impressed himself at how well he faked his normal acerbic sarcasm, despite how very sincerely he meant his words. Hanzo had no insight to give that wouldn’t destroy the both of them as they were right now.

“Lookin’ forward to it,” Jesse said as he handed off the washers and screws he’d retrieved.

The afternoon wore on and Hanzo was never quite able to shake off the paranoia Jesse’s words had caused. It left him more high-strung than usual and even a bit snappy, but Jesse took it in stride. Somehow, that patience only made it worse. As the sun began to set, he found some distraction and comfort in preparing for the mission that night. An excessively hot shower left him wincing, but it helped sear off the anxiety and frustration that had plagued him for hours. Upon emerging from it, he caught his own glance in the mirror – for someone as punctilious and vain as he was, he generally hated regarding himself in them, and right now was no exception.

He hadn’t been sleeping well since his last, most serious panic attack at Sadie’s house, and he could see the evidence of it under his eyes and in the seemingly-permanent tight grit of his jaw. As he dried his hair, he could swear the gray in his temples had increased, but there was no way to be sure. It was just another sign of his thirty-eight long years, like the lines aside his eyes and mouth; another sign of the waste and pointlessness he’d wreaked since pissing away his twenties. Loathing creased his brow and turned his mouth up in a sneer, but still he could not stop glancing back at the unending proof of his self-imposed misery staring him down from the glass.
“Is it gonna be two or three hours for your vain ass to finish?” Jesse’s voice called through the wall; Hanzo flinched so heavily he nearly slipped on the still-damp floor and had to grab the sink to steady himself. Leaving Kentucky had not helped the way he’d desperately hoped it would. If he continued to deteriorate like this, he had no idea what he was going to do. Forget his own stress – this kind of distraction in such a high-risk environment could genuinely kill one or both of them if he wasn’t careful. That helped put the ground back under him in some measure. He could not afford a breakdown right now. Courage born of desperation and self-hate was all he could find, so he took it and razed the never-ending ache in his chest with a few seconds of concentrated thought.

_for once in your damned life, do not kill a good thing you have stumbled across with your incompetence. You have never had anything to give back to anyone else, and that will not change now just because you are grasping for something like a desperate child. There is nothing to make from something that never existed. Keep your pale imitation of purpose as it is. As it always should be._

He opened his eyes; he didn’t feel better, but definitely calmer. Scoured and empty was enough of an improvement.

Something was off to Jesse from the moment Hanzo reappeared from his room. His affect was flat, the eyes dull – too much like how he’d been when they’d first met. The suit only added to the aura of impersonality and disaffection, even though it cut a very good silhouette on him. Hanzo had chosen to wear his hair down, too, but rather than giving a bit of uncharacteristic casual flair, it come off almost as…morose, paired with the circles under his eyes. He stood and handed Hanzo a shoulder holster for one of the pistols they’d smuggled in.

“For once in your damned life, do not kill a good thing you have stumbled across with your incompetence. You have never had anything to give back to anyone else, and that will not change now just because you are grasping for something like a desperate child. There is nothing to make from something that never existed. Keep your pale imitation of purpose as it is. As it always should be.”

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“Hey. You in there?” he asked gently, but the question seemed to land like a physical blow on Hanzo, who visibly winced and took a sharp breath.

“Fine. Jet lag,” he replied in the most unconvincing way possible.

Jesse reined in his first impulse to try and joke his way through it – whatever this was, he could tell it was far too devastatingly serious to try.

“Look,” he tried again, and Hanzo froze in the middle of pulling off his jacket to put on the holster. “Whatever’s up…it’s gonna be fine, okay? Just tell me you got your head on straight for tonight, and I’ll let it go unless you want a pep talk. I don’t want to see you like Seattle again.”

For a beat, Hanzo didn’t move, even though the suitjacket sat off his elbows. Worry clutched at the base of Jesse’s throat as he watched Hanzo’s eyes shift back and forth in assessment of nothing in front of him. At last, he tugged an arm free of a sleeve, ruefulness in every inch of his body language.

“Again.”

“Huh?”

Hanzo tossed the jacket onto the back of a sofa and shrugged his shoulders aggressively to settle more comfortably in his dress shirt.

“Tell me again,” he said, and surprised Jesse with how determined he was to meet and hold his eyes. “Convince me.”

A chilling rush zipped down Jesse’s gut, making his toes curl a bit in his boots, but he tipped his chin up and set his jaw with confidence.
“You’re going to be okay. You’ve got this, and I’ve got your back.”

For a few seconds, Hanzo’s demeanor grew incredibly soft – when it faded, some of his normal self-assurance had returned, but a piece of him still felt absent. It only distressed Jesse further.

“Thank you.”

“Anytime. You know that.”

“I do, in my…better moments.”

Sadie’s interrogation about Hanzo played over in Jesse’s mind, adding to his sense of dread.

“Do we need to stop?”

Hanzo tightened the strap on the holster around his left shoulder, pulled the slide to load the chamber on his new .22, and put it inside.

“No. This is something you need, and you will have it.”

“Maybe, but…you don’t.”

The reaction was unexpectedly extreme; Hanzo physically drew up, shoulders trembling at his ears and his right hand pulled into a fist. Before Jesse could interject, he released the fist and held out his palm in gesture to wait as he took a deep breath to calm himself down.

“Do not presume to know what I need.”

“O-okay. Uh. Sorry.”

“We…are a team, as you keep having to remind me. Do not forget that now.”

If anything, Jesse should have felt vindicated by Hanzo’s response – it was exactly what he’d defended to Sadie just days before. Now, it only made his heart thud heavily in his chest and the tips of the fingers on his good hand twitchy enough he compulsively flexed them. Hanzo pulled his jacket back on and fluffed his hair out from under the lapel – it’d grown to just past his shoulders in their time together.

“I ain’t about to. I’m askin’ because I’m worried. It ain’t just my health. Please don’t do something just because I need it,” Jesse said.

Hanzo let out a sniff of sardonic laughter. As if he had ever been that selfless of a man, but then Jesse would believe that of him, wouldn’t he.

“You know perfectly well that is not true. I have told you as much directly.”

“Yeah, but—”

“But what, McCree? Is a martyr to your cause all you see?” he challenged, real and bitter steel in his voice.

“Goddamn it, just let somebody give a shit about you for ten fuckin’ minutes,” Jesse snapped back.

Both of them remembered themselves and stared at the floor in shame. Jesse trod off under
the thin veneer of picking up Hanzo’s quiver just to put space between them.

“Sorry,” Hanzo offered first, to Jesse’s back.

“Yeah, same.” Still, Sadie’s words tugged at his memory: And someone you met four months ago is just going to keep tagging along for your health? He shook his head and approached Hanzo once more, earnest and concerned. “You know you ain’t just a tool for me here, right? I want you to help, yeah but I… I need somebody I trust watchin’ out for me. Shit, no, you ain’t my minder, either, that’s not what I mean. You’re my friend, and that means you matter.”

“Where is this coming from?” Hanzo asked evenly, as if he didn’t feel like he was going to die on the spot listening to Jesse be so emphatic.

“It’s…it’s Sadie. She asked me a bunch of questions before we left, and I guess it got under my skin.”

So that’s what she had done, rather than come to Hanzo. It made sense; she knew Jesse better and it was less confrontational, all things considered. Covering for her felt like a good way to show his gratitude, however indirectly.

“What I told you in Arizona and New Mexico has not changed, McCree. Sadie is not in a position to know any of that, unless you explained it to her. It is understandable to hold suspicion of me and my motives.”

“I get that, and of course I didn’t tell her anything. It ain’t my story to tell.”

“Then what on Earth are you worried about, you asinine bastard?” Hanzo breathed. For all his terrible mood today and continuing anguish now, seeing Jesse tie himself into knots over nothing for Hanzo’s benefit made an exasperated smile bloom on his face.

Jesse honestly had no answer; he tipped his hat back to scratch nervously at his fringe.

“Well, shit.” The tension shook loose as they both began snickering at Jesse’s expense. He shrugged carelessly. “I guess I’m worried about lookin’ like a fuckin’ idiot. Too late.”

“By decades.”

“Fuck you,” Jesse shot back warmly. As their gentle fit of relieving mirth wore off, Jesse grew self-conscious again. “I do mean it, though, okay? I don’t ever want you to think you’re bein’ taken advantage of, or I ain’t thinkin’ of you as an equal part of the plan.”

“I would never even believe you capable of it,” Hanzo replied, and earned an inward bit of delight from getting Jesse to flush a bit in his neck for it.

“You okay? Really?” Jesse tried once more, and this time, Hanzo mostly believed himself when he nodded back. Perhaps a shade of honesty was worth risking for Jesse’s peace of mind.

“Keep telling me I will be, and I shall.”

If that was what it was going to take, Jesse thought it a bargain, considering what he was willing to pay to see it happen.

“So no tie, then?” Jesse asked, peeking shyly in his periphery at Hanzo.

“I loathe ties. Too restrictive and tight. They were part and parcel of official dress for my
position in the clan. I have not worn one since leaving Hanamura, and I never will again. Oh no, do not even start,” Hanzo said, immediately countering Jesse’s wry grin. “I doubt you have ever worn one in your entire life. I am allowed to look a little unprofessional playing bodyguard for you in your ridiculous chosen getup.”

“Hey, I got a valid reason for not bein’ able to wear a jacket,” Jesse said, pointing to the cylinder jutting out of the joint in his mechanical elbow.

“The damned party is black tie and you will be in a vest and rolled-up sleeves.”

“That black fuckin’ tie’ll be on, though.”

Hanzo burst out laughing and Jesse shoved him jovially by his shoulder.

After taking a few minutes to review the layout of the club that he would be infiltrating as well as the outlying area, Hanzo left by himself. Jesse would give it twenty minutes before he took off on a much more circuitous route there – he needed to change into something a bit stealthier than his usual getup, anyway.

A black shirt and his usual dark brown pants – sans armor and chaps – would suffice, but the desert night was going to get chilly without his serape. He caught himself missing his old leather slicker from his days in Blackwatch. Dispelling the thought proved impossible, much to his chagrin. Thinking about any of that was only going to cause problems; the ultimate target wasn’t just information, though. It was memories, and for as many of those as Jesse treasured, there were just as many he wished he could purge with a good bout of electrotherapy. Much of what those missions – those memories – contained were things he wasn’t sure he wanted Hanzo to see, and for all kinds of reasons, but principally because of his previously stated confidence in Jesse’s good nature. It hadn’t always been there. He’d cultivated who he was today with care, despite what Hanzo insisted, and it had come at a hefty price. Perhaps that would be a comfort to his friend in his own quest for redemption, but if it wasn’t…Jesse didn’t want to ruin that image, for Hanzo’s sake just as much as his own.

Peacekeeper greeted him on the nightstand when he walked into his room. Already, he was feeling its absence – he’d been unconsciously reaching to rest his hand on it all afternoon. He sat on the bed and he picked it up, his thumb tracing the edges of the spiraled inlay leading to the sight. The weight of its inherited promise, older than the gun itself, outstripped the simple gravitational measure of the metal that comprised it.

“I kept up my end. Don’t I deserve some peace, too?” he mumbled to himself.

This had started as an effort to give back to himself. To make himself more whole again, after nearly being ruined as much as ruining himself. So far, he felt like he’d succeeded, and even found some help to get him there. Perhaps that’s what bothered Jesse so much about Hanzo’s lows – deep down, he was just as desperate as Hanzo was, even if he coped better overall. The supportive feedback loop Hanzo had made reference to was truer than Jesse was willing to openly admit to.

So what was his endgame at this point? He didn’t have one, as he’d told Sadie.

He didn’t want one, he was increasingly realizing.

_The fuck do I want?_

He put Peacekeeper back where he’d found it, but kept his fingertips just brushing the pommel. It was a psychic center, but these days it only seemed to slow the unsteady swaying he felt
in his gut, rather than dispel it entirely. Going without the revolver reminded him how far afield he’d drifted. Just growing pains, he told himself, because he was remembering what it was like to feel again. Letting the world back in.

But he couldn’t shake the sensation he’d left the door open to something he shouldn’t have, and now it stalked every quiet moment, lingered in the last second before he drifted off every night and skittered away as he came to every morning. So it was now – an inescapable feeling of being circled by psychological buzzards, omniscient in their lofty perspective while Jesse was just trying to put one foot in front of the other. It was going to get him, too, he knew. Eventually. And it would still be a shock from some dark corner he’d overlooked. That was the worst part: the sense of inevitability. He pulled his ragged fringe into a fist at his hairline and sighed. Ana came to mind – not a first for moments of emotional weakness for him – and his metal hand joined his organic one covering his face. He’d give up his shooting arm to talk to her right now. Just five minutes. Hell, even Jack would be fine in a pinch. Or…or.

No, not now. Not when he was needed somewhere else. By someone else. Caring about others would always be part of the promise, even when he was trying so hard to make it real within himself. Someday he would learn how to avoid giving everything up at expense of himself, but it wasn’t today. The box for Gabe stayed firmly closed in his mind.

Hanzo came first right now.

~

Being years away from any similar situation as this had not dulled Hanzo’s instincts and skills built from literal childhood – time did not change the enduring, predatory nature of the wealthy in social repose. Neither did it frighten him. The lilting, polite gaiety did little to hide the permeating malice Hanzo could feel just as keenly as his new and unfamiliar clothes against his skin. Attending one ostentatious gathering of the empowered and moneyed jockeying amongst one another meant you attended them all, and Hanzo universally hated them. Grasping sharks they all may be, seeking the first smidgen of blood to seize upon, but so was he, in every way, from birth. He parted the perfumed air of the club undetected. None of them would ever see him coming, and he knew exactly what the mortal helplessness on each of their faces would look like if he chose to act. The only joy he’d ever taken out of playing the tawdry chess game around him was the pride in understanding he was the apex predator of them all, deigning to play because he knew he would win no matter what. However the victory came – whether via a well-placed acidic comment, a crushing revelation based on intelligence, or on the blood-soaked point of a knife – was never much of a difference to a Shimada.

“What’s your twenty?” Jesse came over their channel. They would be keeping it open so Jesse could listen in, since he would be too far away to see if anything got truly out of hand.

“Bar,” Hanzo murmured, taking an empty bit of real estate near the open patio window. The bartender came by; Hanzo waved him off, telegraphing he was working. That would get him noticed faster. Nobody wanted a paycheck-earner that didn’t serve liquor or food to them to linger any longer than strictly necessary. An employee, especially an unrecognized one, was effectively a spy, and he would be treated as such.

“Even at 200 yards I can see how pompous you are,” Jesse sniped over the radio – Hanzo had to put effort into suppressing his reactionary smile.

A tall omnic with an oblong, sloping cranial case parted a gaggle of women, offering some tidbit of coy nothingness that elicited giggles as he passed and approached Hanzo. His visual sensors were set in a glowing inverted vee rather than as traditional eyes, but Hanzo could absolutely feel
how thoroughly he was being sized up without any pupils to reveal how long the omnic’s gaze lingered on his chest and torso. A far more tactical up-and-down on Hanzo’s part revealed no weapons, but the omnic, in testament to his profession and globally-recognized boldness, was wearing a suit – if it could be called that – of cashmere that draped over him in pieces held in place by an elaborate Shibari rope and knot pattern across his chest. Jewels were set directly into the sheetmetal of his fingers, and filigree set off the panels at the base of his skull. Though he had no regional accent, his voice was high and lilting, even shrill on peaked vowels.

“Good evening. I am Jawhar Arazi. A pleasure.”

Hanzo chose simply to bow long and deep as greeting.

“I spied you on arrival, but I confess being surprised you were here on behalf of another. You must be paid well for your services. There’s quite a monied air about you. It’s a shame strangers put the snowbirds so on-edge, or I’d keep you for better acquaintance.”

“Generous of you, but my employer would note the absence,” Hanzo replied.

“Mm, he should miss you. I certainly would. If absence should ever fail to make his heart grow fonder, do come by.”

Arazi caught Hanzo’s wry eyebrow at the assumed pronoun and relationship; he laughed in tinny, inhumanly-fast peals.

“Please, darling, men as top-heavy and cold as you only go one way, even if you’re not earning that handsome paycheck on your excellently-sculpted back.”

Vicious swearing from Jesse hissed over the radio. However concerned Jesse may have been for Hanzo’s supposedly-wounded honor, he was more than capable of taking care of himself. This was hardly the most cutting passive-aggressive insult he’d ever suffered, even if it was colorful.

“All due respect, but I would be able to buy you out were I earning a salary on all my skills,” Hanzo replied, enunciating the final word so heavily it should have split the omnic’s steel carapace in two. Jesse went dead silent, and Arazi let out a delighted and intrigued hum accentuated by the reverb inherent in all omnic voices.

“Now I simply must meet your employer, if he keeps such mouthy help on-hand. What a treat he must be.”

“He would like nothing better. The company he has been keeping of late lacks a certain wit you prove to have in spades.”

Arazi nodded and leant in close to trace the line of Hanzo’s jaw with a single ruby-encrusted finger, purposefully drawn up to his full height to tower and hang over Hanzo’s shorter form. They held each other’s gaze in a silent power struggle. Covert mission be damned; Hanzo refused to be intimidated by anyone.

“Gods help me if he cuts a finer profile than you. I doubt it,” Arazi said at a low hum. His tone grew poisonous. “Perhaps he’ll let you out on loan when he learns how embarrassing you’ve been introducing him.”

Hanzo set his jaw and kept his mouth shut, though that didn’t stop his imagination going wild on all the ways he knew how to kill omnics with minimal effort in close quarters.

“Good boy. Pass on how much I look forward to meeting him this weekend. He need not
bring any invitation – you have a very memorable face.”

Permission to leave didn’t come right away; Arazi took his time, drawing his unfeeling finger down from Hanzo’s jaw and along the tendon in his neck to just sneak under the seam of his shirt between the collar and shoulder as one last invasive reminder of just who could buy who.

“Mm, lovely tattoo,” Arazi murmured as his finger lifted aside enough of the right shirt panel to just see the edge of it. Never once did Hanzo wince or even blink as he stared straight past Arazi’s head with a manufactured passiveness that eroded with every passing second. When at last he retreated, Hanzo didn’t forget another long parting bow that left him simmering with rage as he strode back out the door.

“I will see you back at the apartment,” Hanzo immediately barked when Jesse made a prefacing sound in his ear and cut the channel.

Jesse crouched and pressed the arm of Hanzo’s bow hard into his forehead.

“Fuck. Fuck!” he spat. Barely-contained rage shook him from head to toe. He would never have been able to land the shot, but he’d drawn and trained an arrow for several minutes on the black-and-silver oval that was Arazi’s head just to make himself feel better while listening to them talk, and now his arms were sore from the strain. What had he just been fucking tripping over himself to prove a couple hours ago? Jesus fucking Christ. Hanzo was going to be furious, as well he should be. This had been an irresponsible thing to do. Desperate worry and bone-deep dread fought it out in Jesse’s chest as he shouldered the bow and disappeared into an alleyway to make his way back to the apartment. The walk didn’t help the rising tumult within Jesse at all. He couldn’t drown out the wheedling, snide voice taunting Hanzo playing on a loop in his mind. If he had felt anything close to the powerlessness Jesse had in just hearing it…this had been a gigantic fucking mistake.

When he’d left the flat, Jesse had gone out a rear window into an alley to conceal his departure. Now he’d returned the same way, and in his distraction almost walked right past the window he’d left open. Just in time, he stopped himself; overcome by that last pithy evidence of his incompetence, he swore and put his left fist through the stucco edifice decorating the wall. It wasn’t as satisfying as a metallic skull, but it would do in a pinch.

“You will pay for that if we’re charged for damages.” Jesse started and looked over to see Hanzo leaning out the window, sedately eating falafel from a takeout box. He’d already changed into a tank top and track pants. “Get in here and have your fit in the privacy of four walls like the rest of civilized society. I bought dinner.”

How was he so calm? It hadn’t seemed like he was when they’d disengaged from the target. Jesse hauled himself inside and forcefully took off Hanzo’s bow and quiver.

“You will put those down carefully,” Hanzo hissed as Jesse made to throw them onto a chair. He turned on a heel to instinctively fight back, but it just as quickly petered out and he did as asked, gently propping them against a wall.

“Thank you.”

Jesse didn’t move, even when Hanzo offered him his own box of falafel. Pained confusion was written all over his features.

“Ain’t you gonna yell at me?”

“What for?”
Jesse shrugged helplessly, gesticulating in the direction they’d come with accompanying wordless, exasperated grunts. Hanzo returned a baffled look as he chewed.

“You think I am angry with you? Truth be told yes, that was humiliating, but that is hardly your fault. I was angry, but that has passed.”

“Just like that?”

“Once I remembered the salient point, absolutely.”

“That fuck talked at you like he owned you and…fucking…” Jesse trailed off for his skin crawling at the memory of that voice and how close he’d been. “I put you—”

“Do not finish that sentence,” Hanzo interjected. “One: I chose to go. Two, which is the material truth of the matter: what he thinks he owns is a projection. He doesn’t own me. No one does, and more to the point you’re attempting to make, neither do you.” Acid dripped from Hanzo’s last words, burning something deep inside Jesse so thoroughly it triggered his fight-or-flight response, and was leaning heavily towards the latter.

“A-after what I said—”

“And so quickly you dismiss my words – I am not your martyr. Treat me as the equal I am and respect my ability to measure and control risk. Can you?” he seethed.

Jesse dumped himself onto the couch and put his head in his hands.

“I can. You ain’t incompetent. Listenin’ to that shit was just…fuckin’ awful. Treating you like you’re somebody’s goddamn rent boy, assuming shit about who you are like you’re a doll…”

Watching the defeat in Jesse’s entire demeanor soothed Hanzo’s anger. All Jesse was trying to do was care, as was his way. It had probably been very difficult to hear and know nothing could be done to help. Hanzo wasn’t sure what he would have done in Jesse’s place, but he was certain it wouldn’t have ended as relatively well as it had for Jesse. He set aside his dinner and sat on a coffee table to face McCree on the sofa. This had to be quick, if Hanzo was going to be as honest as he planned to be; stopping to think it over was only going to end in anxiety. Just spit it out and move on.

“On the contrary. I may be lacking prostitution on my resume, but he was surprisingly astute enough to be correct about his core assertions on my wealthy background and my sexuality. That is more distressing than anything else, because it is truth,” he explained hesitantly. “He is cunning. We need to be careful.”

Jesse’s head shot up.

“He…he was?” His eyelids fluttered with surprise. “You’re…”

“Gay, yes, McCree.” Admitting it made for a strange release. “Seems we’ve both been outed in ways we did not anticipate.” He could see the gears turning in Jesse’s head, changing his perception of Hanzo, though to what end was impossible to tell. Jesse relaxed, and a smile eased the stress in his expression.

“Knew I was right tellin’ Sadie you wouldn’t care when she tried to apologize to me.”

Somehow, Hanzo managed to return the smile, even as the indirect rejection landed like a knife up under his ribcage. Fucking hell, did he ever care.
“Why didn’t you tell me in Kentucky? You know I’d have listened,” Jesse asked.

“You were having a moment. It would have been gauche.”

“Relating to me isn’t gauche, Hanzo.”

“I… fair. But when have I ever freely given anything about myself without being directly prompted, forced to by circumstance, or exploding from bottling it up?”

“If you fuckin’ know that… whatever, yeah, you’re right.” Jesse sat back and frowned. “However right about anything that son of a bitch was, though, what happened ain’t right, Hanzo. Neither of us anticipated just how much of a sick bastard he is. Shouldn’t be, considering he’s willing to hire somebody like Flinch to do shit for him. I don’t want him catching you alone again when we go to his place, okay? Stay with me as much as possible.”

“Distasteful as he is, his interest is very real. Shouldn’t we keep the opportunity open to—”

“Absolutely not.”

The sudden dark fury and low, flat tone from Jesse left Hanzo reeling.

“But—”

“No,” Jesse repeated with a chilling finality Hanzo had never heard from him before. “I fuckin’ mean it.”

“McCree, I just told—”

“McCree, I just told—”

“This ain’t about a vote of confidence on you. It’s too fucking dangerous. Seduction plots only work for an in on low-level shit. Done it plenty in my time. But you don’t try it on motherfuckers with as much money and power as that one got. There’s no telling what kind of depraved shit he gets up to, and the second you learn what any of it is will be one second too late. It can go way too wrong way too fast, and I won’t be able to help you the moment you need it, if I can even get there at all. It’s too much risk for me – if anything ever happened to you, I’d never forgive myself. I’d have told you that before tonight, and it’s doubly fucking so now.”

The emotional knife still stuck in Hanzo’s gut twisted and took on a terrible searing sensation. All this was far, far too much. Kentucky had been a deluge of comfort and closeness Hanzo had tried to flee from, only to arrive to a mission steeped in sex and passion he knew he would never get to make his own. Once again, the inexorable feeling of being trapped in this time and place and body threatened to consume him.

“Okay,” he said, though it came out a bit strangled.

“Okay? That’s it?” Jesse asked in surprise.

“Yes. You are correct. Always are.”

“Now hang on—”

“That is not meant to be begrudging. It is earnest. Forgive my recklessness.”

Questions lingered in the worried crease of Jesse’s brow, but he let them go with a conciliatory nod.

“Nothin’ to forgive, Hanzo.”
Hanzo sat back and tried his best not to completely telegraph his internal emotional erosion. He reclaimed his dinner and thrust the other box into McCree’s hands where he sat.

“Enough of that. Eat. Your hand is shaky and your eyes won’t focus properly. Your blood sugar is dictating your feelings. I swear to you that tonight has done no permanent damage.”

Jesse took it and stabbed at a piece a little more forcefully than necessary with his fork.

“See? Told you you’d get to drop some perceptive bullshit today. You got me pinned down just fine. Sorry for getting all dramatic.”

“McCree, you have befriended ostensibly the most dramatic man on Earth, according to my brother. Pot, meet kettle.”

Hanzo had hoped getting Jesse to laugh would help himself as much as it did Jesse, but as he watched his success bloom in McCree as a soft, relieved chuckle, alas it did not. That smile imprinted itself in reverse image on his heart as if with a laser’s cauterizing touch. Every day – hell, every hour – with him proved more and more that what Hanzo was experiencing was not only insistent, but distressingly potent and deepening by the second.

He was well and truly fucked, and not in any way he actually wanted to be.

They ate together largely in silence, but neither could bring himself to seek any solitude for the night just yet, though it was late. When they finished and their weak excuse of a purpose faded, Jesse rubbed at tension in his neck and eyed Hanzo in hesitant periphery.

“You gonna turn in? No offense, but you look like shit.”

“I should, yes. I wasn’t lying about the jet lag.” Hanzo replied; you know, like a liar.

“Not like we have to get up early, either, y’know. Got a few days before the big event. Let yourself sleep in for fuckin’ once, hm?”

“I make absolutely no promises.”

Jesse laughed and stood to head for his room, but lingered for a few beats to regard Hanzo with a mix of concern and fondness that made Hanzo genuinely want to excoriate himself with the closest sharp instrument.

“G’night, Hanzo. Sleep well.”

“And you.”

To Hanzo’s credit, he did try, even knowing how futile it would be. Nearly two hours crept by, and the desperation in his gut petrified to make his spine tense and ache for the stress. With it came unrelenting restlessness – all he wanted to do was move. He got up and dressed in his usual clandestine ops outfit. Get out. Run. As far and as hard as he could, until the emotion died or he just didn’t feel at all anymore.

It wasn’t even a conscious decision – the world felt separated from him as he opened and escaped out a window. Surely, he wasn’t really here; surely, he died ten years ago and this was his spiritual penance scoring his soul over and over. No hands or feet scaled him up walls and across roofs and over alleyways for hours across the spread of Oasis’ neighborhoods. All he could possibly be was an empty shade of some corrupted, incompetent creature that lived sometime long ago, drifting on the soft breaths of warm desert air amongst the buildings. Nothing so…pathetic should be
deigned to exist in corporeal form.

Jesse wasn’t having much greater success falling asleep, either. Begging Hanzo to take care of himself and getting avoidant half-answers back weighed heaviest on top of everything else that had happened in the past seventy-two hours since leaving Kentucky. Crowding him was never, ever going to work, but the compulsion remained all the same. He heard a distant thud around two and sat up slowly in bed. It was far off and soft enough to have been literally anything, but Jesse’s nerves weren’t exactly tolerant of any odd moment right now. Was it time to give up and watch shitty local reality TV until he passed out on the sofa? Hanzo would realize he hadn’t slept well, though. Unless he would join him? Whatever his reassuring words, Jesse was very much aware of how pervasive Hanzo’s insomnia could be.

He got up and crept out into the living room in just his sleeping pants. The moon was in nearly-full flourish, so it was well-lit despite the hour and the lack of ambient city light in their neighborhood. He trod over to the window and stared out into the empty street. Stuck — that’s how he felt. Not just today, but since New Mexico. That had been his official decision to go back to work after Los Angeles, but he hadn’t felt like this when he’d left for China in January. He’d taken that tip because he’d felt stuck before his encounter with Gabe. Where had all his progress gone? Was he still that shaken by the failed attempt to corner Gabe in Los Angeles, and Hanzo was just making it easy to ignore? All the self-interrogation in the world wasn’t netting him anything.

He turned to regard Hanzo’s door shut tight. 50/50 he was indeed still awake and merely being politely quiet. Maybe meditating as a distant second-best to actual sleep; Jesse had picked up on that habit months ago. If either was true, that would be an intrusion, and Jesse wanted to believe it was, for his friend’s sake. Rest was a precious commodity in lives like theirs, and Hanzo deserved it more than most.

Maybe someday Jesse could convince him of it.

He shook his head at himself; his own exhaustion was dictating his feelings. Even if Hanzo was never truly okay, he would reach out if it was desperate. He had before. He had today, when he asked Jesse for reassurance over an unnamed anxiety. That was their deal, after all. No specifics were necessary. It wasn’t fair to start living like that suddenly wasn’t enough…even if it sometimes felt like it.

Only a few moment’s hesitation, eyes still lingering on Hanzo’s door, kept him from returning to his room. Soon as he settled back into bed, he fell asleep quickly, but he had an endless, arduous dream of wandering empty hallways in waist-deep, viscous water that he would vividly remember into the next morning.

A minaret came into Hanzo’s view — something good and tall to climb. Remotely, Hanzo noted the shiver of overworked muscle warning him, but he ignored it. Should his body fail him, that would only be the last failure atop a weighty pile of its kin, the proof of his too-long, wasted life. And so it did, when he tried to grasp the ledge at the top where adhan would be called soon.

He missed.

The fall passed in a blink. Hanzo’s singular saving grace was a vinyl awning to break the worst of it, but that, too, gave and dropped him into a display of lush rugs with a staggered crash that could be heard for blocks in the still, pre-dawn vacuum. He had no time to hurt; soon as he got half a
breath back in his lungs, he rolled out from the wreck and stumbled away between the tallest buildings with the deepest shadows he could find. He had no idea where he was, and dawn was in an hour or so. After limping blindly down a few blocks without sign of anyone taking notice or following him, he let himself drop to the ground and rolled onto his back to watch the sky in its lightening gradient of blue. Everything hurt, but he was relatively sure nothing was broken. A single stroke of luck in an incredibly shitty week. What a news story he would have been, if he’d landed on his thick skull first.

Mysterious Japanese Man Found Dead In Market, Victim of Inexplicable Fall.

To think he’d nearly made Jesse wake up to that. Why, why was he like this. Angry, reckless, self-imploding, useless. He had achieved his objective in running himself ragged to exhaust himself, but fucking up this thoroughly erased all his progress eradicating the feelings, too. Now, he was wrung out, in pain, and desperately upset by his stupidity and failure and…and need. He covered his face with clawed fingers. No tears. Not one. He took one long, deep breath, and let it out in an aggressive huff that ended in a sound somewhere between a growl and a plaintive wail, but as promised, none came. It was like punching dough that refused to stop rising, but little by little, Hanzo made the tempest inside him submit to being locked up once again in the deepest, darkest corner of his mind. He struggled to his feet and summoned his reserve of strength to climb the nearest wall. Time to get his bearings and go home.

The sun had just crept over the city skyline when Hanzo made it back. Closing the window meant raising his arms over his head – big mistake. He let out a pained cry he had to smother with a hand. Had he fractured his ribs? Fuck it; it wasn’t like he was in a position to get it looked at.

Oh McCree, let’s run down to the clinic, I went on a ludicrous all-night run and nearly fell to my death because I cannot stop thinking about you. Anyway, I may have broken a rib or two, better check and make sure it’s fine.

Very reasonable. Jesse would completely understand.

Hanzo rolled into bed and mashed his face into his pillow to muffle his heavy groan from continuing ache. Jesse probably would understand, though, wouldn’t he. That’s what he did – fucking listened and empathized and…fuck what was he doing, he wondered to himself as his mind drifted off in his exhaustion. This wasn’t simple attraction. It was something far worse. As long as he kept it at a mental distance, it wasn’t real. He kept it right there at the back of his mind, eyeing it with the same acuity and latent violence as he did a target for assassination. A blink meant a point of no return.

Maybe he almost killed himself tonight – accidentally, for once – but there was a benefit to be found in beating himself to hell: it got him to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

a selection from Hanzo's playlist: Solitude, by M83 -- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HA6kS5WeYw
Chapter 15

The week dragged on, and to Jesse, he and Hanzo were fine and then not. Very little actually happened – Jesse had to limit his time outside to minimize his exposure to Oasis’ omniscient security, but Hanzo was also loath to do much of anything either. Their mingled quietude inexplicably rose and fell between comfortable and restless. Jesse knew Hanzo could feel it, too, because he would grow fidgety when the low moments came. Neither said a word about it and carried on as though the feeling didn’t exist, contented however poorly to simmer in it rather than potentially damage…something by acknowledging it. The same mental buzzards haunting Jesse the previous Monday laughed at him from somewhere deep inside; whatever his gut knew, it wasn’t ready to tell his brain just yet, and his heart constricted in anxiety every time he considered it.

Saturday arrived, and Jesse couldn’t be more grateful for the distraction the evening would provide. But first, he’d have to get through the day. Hanzo’s downright surly expression as he appeared from his room didn’t bode well. Jesse took a quiet, deep breath.

“How hungry?”

“No.”

No worry; that had been the expected answer.

“You’ll thank me when your blood sugar gets back up and breaks your shit mood,” he tried again, deliberate in making his tone soft so his rough words wouldn’t land too hard. It didn’t work.

“What part of no don’t you understand?”

Hanzo tried to brush past him, presumably for the door to head out and take a walk. It had been the only reason besides getting food that Hanzo had gone out all week. Jesse caught his tattooed arm to stop him, pulling just a bit as he did; Hanzo let out a heavy gasp and slapped his right arm across his chest, just aside Jesse’s hand pulling at him. Immediately, Jesse let go, but the damage was done, and he could tell it wasn’t just pain making Hanzo’s face go paper-white.

“How?”

As he struggled to meet Jesse’s eyes, Hanzo saw the worry he anticipated, but steely expectation came with it. Don’t you dare try to lie to me. He had to take a moment to prepare himself; with a long, low groan, he raised his arms up over his head to peel off his t-shirt and reveal a massive bruise spread like oily water across his left shoulder, down his chest and all the way to his waist, where it had begun to yellow on the very edge from healing. Jesse fell back in shock.

“Oh my fucking god, what—”
“Nothing is broken,” Hanzo replied without an ounce of emotion. “Though I will not scale walls tonight unless I absolutely must.”


The spark of fear in Hanzo’s eyes made Jesse’s heart bottom out in terror.

“I made a mistake.”

Terror morphed to despair.

“The fuck you mean, mistake?”

Hanzo didn’t understand the reason for the fray in Jesse’s voice. He was bruised, certainly, but hardly in any imminent danger.

“I could not sleep Monday night, so I…left. Spent some time drilling myself, as it has been a while since we have worked. And I…slipped. Fell.”

“How fucking far?” Jesse asked, and only just managed to stop himself from reaching out to touch Hanzo’s bare, purpled shoulder.

“Probably forty feet before I hit the awning. That broke my fall.” Hanzo continued to explain himself robotically, but as he finished, he caught an unexpected emotion in Jesse’s expression: doubt. He slid away a few inches to look Jesse over at a wider angle. “You do not believe me.”

Instead of anger, Jesse once again surprised him by growing patently upset.

“I don’t,” he replied weakly. “I fuckin’ don’t. You’d have told me if it was that simple.”

“Please, you know how unwilling I am to own up to—”

“No!” Jesse shouted.

Still, despite the yelling, Jesse was obviously not angry. Hanzo didn’t know what it was, and his anxiety wasn’t helping him figure it out, either. He checked the expression against a rolodex of possibilities in his head, and was astonished at his result. Scared. Jesse was terrified.

“You…you know you can tell me anything, Hanzo. I promised you that.”

The pieces pulled together for Hanzo; his throat closed up, making it difficult to speak.

“Do you think I tried to kill myself?” he could barely get the words out above a whisper.

Jesse’s speech had been devolving into a particularly slurred version of his drawl from the beginning, but as he drifted towards real and pitched distress, Hanzo had to concentrate to catch every word as he spoke.

“The hell else am I supposed to think? You ain’t been right since we got here. You’re up, down, and I can’t figure out what happens anywhere in between. Y’can’t just tell me you fucked up doin’ somethin’ I seen you do over n’ over like it’s breathin’, and then go on not tellin’ me you’re hurt. I seen whatcha looked like that drive to Portland. It’s the same. Just like Monday, I told you – I’m scared. Like…like you’re slippin’ away, and I don’t know why. Depression don’t gotta have a reason, I know that, but that don’t make me feel any better, and it don’t mean it ain’t really killin’ you.”
“McCree, listen to me,” Hanzo said, holding his hands up in gesture to stop. “I would never do that to you.”

“Fuckin’ Christ, Hanzo—” Jesse interrupted, anger at last in his voice. His presence and friendship wasn’t magic, that had been his whole point in describing Hanzo’s depression as he had, and it was insulting for Hanzo to try and package up and sell the lie when he had just underlined it himself.

“Let. Me. Finish.”

Jesse straightened up involuntarily in the face of Hanzo’s severe tone, shrugging his shoulders to cool his temper off and nodding apologetically.

“I will tell you the truth: I live with the impulse every day. It is never not there. But I will never do that to you. I have already thought through the aftermath more than once. I would rather live with what I feel about myself than go into death knowing what I left behind. I made that decision, and I continue to every day. It takes effort. I cannot give you a happier answer than that, but please believe it. I injured myself making a mistake. Nothing more.” Hanzo dropped his arms in helpless frustration. This was getting far too...dangerous.

Okay, that was fair enough, Jesse supposed, in a...hollow sort of way.

“I’ll…take it, I guess, but it ain’t supposed to be about how I feel.”

“Your estimation of my worth is the only one that has any intrinsic value,” Hanzo replied before he could stop himself; he shook his head and pinched at the bridge of his nose. “No, I should not have said that. It is the last thing you want to hear.”

“If we’re talking about what I want, it’s for you to never feel like that in the first place and need to hide it from me, but I’m not as stupid as I look, so I won’t insult your or my intelligence suggesting it’ll suddenly happen. That was my whole goddamn point.”

Hanzo winced behind his hand still covering his face; what a good man.

“Nothing about you is stupid, McCree. Not a thing.” He let out a stressed huff and pulled his shirt back on with a few pained grunts. “You think about about this…often?”

Jesse’s head tilted to the side and he chewed idly at his thumbnail as he grew evasive.

“More’n I should, probably. I’m not tryin’ to...hover.”

“And I’m trying not to impose,” Hanzo confessed with equal discomfort. “My misery is not going to define whatever time I spend with you. I can—” he cut himself off and grit his teeth.

“Do it on your own time?” Jesse challenged, eyes narrowed and tone sharp. Caught, Hanzo hung his head.

“McCree—”

Before he could finish, Jesse interrupted with a soft-bitten curse and pulled him into a tight hug. As Jesse expected, Hanzo went stick-straight and rigid as a two-by-four in his arms. That was okay – this was just another battle in the continuing war of emotional attrition that came with knowing this man.

“Shut the fuck up, Hanzo.”
It was the kind of permission Hanzo needed: gruff, authoritative, indirect. He nodded into Jesse’s shoulder and let go with a long sigh. Being a big man, Jesse had little trouble folding around Hanzo’s shorter stature despite his broad shoulders, and it was absolutely impossible for Hanzo to avoid thinking about how…satisfying his thick arms felt crisscrossed at his back felt. A resigned kind of enjoyment settled in Hanzo’s gut – this was wonderful, but it wasn’t…his. This was simply how Jesse cared in general: with his whole heart.

“I—”

“If you’re about to apologize for your goddamn feelings, I swear to god, I will throw you out the window, fuck your bruises.”

Hanzo shut the fuck up and hesitantly returned the embrace, hands safely placed just under Jesse’s shoulderblades. He could give in right now. Pour his heart out and get the whole thing over with. Jesse would listen, even if he was going to say no. It’d be fine. Perfectly fucking fine. It’d be so easy – he didn’t even have to look Jesse in the eyes where he was, close and…kept.

“I need you around,” Jesse continued. “I couldn’t have done half of what I have since January without you here. But you gotta stick around for you, too. I can’t make that for you.”

Jesse could feel Hanzo’s face scrunch against his chest. Was he about to cry? He had no idea how he was going to deal with it if Hanzo did. He recalled Hanzo’s streak of emotional asceticism. Twenty-five years of…that would be pretty overwhelming for both of them. No, it would be okay, Jesse told himself as he rallied himself from self-doubt and reiterated his embrace, that was what he was here for. Fear swamped his chest nonetheless, leaving him scatter-brained and unable to hold a coherent thought, even to try and discern just what he was afraid of.

The honesty cascaded over Hanzo, clearing away much of his anxiety. Jesse did need him, he knew that, and had for ages. Their confrontations about accountability played back in Hanzo’s mind. Between Jesse’s fuckup in Los Angeles and Hanzo’s own mistakes in Pennsylvania, trying to validate each other’s high opinion of the other had been a running theme for some time, now, and Hanzo was threatening to let it all fall to pieces again because he’d gotten too wrapped up in himself.

Behaving as he had the past week or so had unduly frightened Jesse. Hanzo had been justifiably miserable, yes, but only because he’d let his self-pity ruin his perspective. Jesse deserved better than that; Hanzo was better than that. Feelings didn’t override his responsibility to Jesse or the mission. It didn’t serve or honor someone he claimed to care about to carry on and get hurt being foolish and melodramatic. What’s more, he’d hurt his friend unintentionally as well. If he wasn’t going to speak his mind, he at least had to act on the imperatives it made him feel. That was what he’d been taught from youth – doing meant more than saying.

And he would do anything for Jesse.

Hanzo pulled away, but Jesse only let him get far enough that he could keep his hand on Hanzo’s good shoulder.

“You are correct, I have not been well since arriving in Oasis. I am…very out of practice in being seen at all, much less every day and at any given moment, as you can imagine. But I will reiterate; what happened to me was not intentional. I knew you would react poorly no matter what, but had I imagined you would believe something so serious, I would have reconsidered keeping silent. Stupid of me to think I could get away with it at all. But nonetheless, it is not…fair to tell you I will not harm myself on your account. You struggle, too.”

Jesse shrugged. However right Hanzo was, it didn’t mean Jesse was comfortable
acknowledging that on average, he and Hanzo really weren’t far removed from each other on the scale of mental health. He’d meditated on that exact fact last Monday, and hearing Hanzo speak it now added a sense of eerie, preternatural anticipation to the whole thing. The only real difference was that Jesse’s highs and lows were greater and more sporadic, compared to the more consistent, droning malaise his friend dealt with.

“Helpin’ you helps me. Look…I’m being so emphatic because I stopped giving a shit long before Overwatch died. I did the work, but I checked out on the people around me. They checked out on me, too. Every day was stress and problems, deaths started stackin’ up, and it turned into a blame game. It ruined us, and I lost everything before I could try to fix it. I can’t do that to you. I probably…probably will check out on you, too, at some point because I’m a jackass, but I promise I’ll fuckin’ fix it when it happens. I got fucked over in Venice harder than anything Deadlock ever did to me because I cared, and I let that shit fester. Because of that, people I fuckin’ hate won the long game.”

“You have done nothing wrong, McCree.”

“I know, I’m tryin’ to explain why I’m…freakin’ out, basically. My knee-jerk expectation at his point is for people to die. I keep catchin’ myself waitin’ for the other shoe to drop.”

Hanzo didn’t know how to respond.

“That…that’s—”

“Super fucking depressing?” Jesse replied, aiming for warmed-over nihilism and only achieving a hobbled, barely-veiled desperation. He finally let go of Hanzo to retreat for his own sense of space, giving a single, weighty sigh. How much of this was his own projection, his own fear? Was he so tired that the mere suggestion of personal struggle would send him into a spiral of self-doubt? Or was it specific to Hanzo, his closest personal relationship in literal years? Jesus, that was fucking sad, but then again that made it sound like Hanzo was a stand-in for something. A placebo. If something happened, he would miss Hanzo, not just a body to occupy space with.

What was he supposed to do with that?

“We need to get out of here,” Hanzo said.

Jesse roused himself from his contemplation, but the knot in his gut remained.

“What?”

“We have been locked up in here too long, both of us,” Hanzo explained. “To hell with surveillance.”

“Oh. I thought…”

“Thought what? Leaving Oasis? Heavens no. Not without what we came for. But we are stir-crazy.”

A distant piece of Jesse mourned Hanzo’s unwillingness to pick up and fuck off. But I’m the one who asked to come here.

“Shit, yeah, that’s gotta be it.”

“A short walk will not ruin our seclusion, if my flattening some poor shopkeeper’s display with my pratfall did not do it.”
“That’s one way to describe death-defying falls,” Jesse snarked, but he did crack a smile.

“As if you would not make some equally flippant comment were you shot or something. Oh Hanzo, don’t worry, it’s just a bullet in my head, nothing important there,” he drawled.

“I wanna be mad, but…ah, fuck.”

Hanzo pat him on the arm.

“We are coping.”

Jesse reached – careful to grab the uninjured side – and pulled Hanzo over so they were shoulder-to-shoulder.

“We’re somethin’. Okay, let’s go.”

It was still early, so the residential streets around them weren’t terribly busy. A breeze at their backs helped both of them shake off the claustrophobia of their week together. Just a few minutes out walking got Jesse to stand up straighter and feel more…present. Hanzo was right, cabin fever had got him good; but then, Hanzo was always right about him.

“Sorry I did not tell you about my injury.”

“Sorry for freaking out.”

The came to a small pavilion with an ornate fountain. A hard-light sculpture formed the water’s path from the top in elegant curves. Jesse wandered up to it and stared into the water for far too long.

“Maybe goin’ back to work was a bad idea,” Jesse mumbled.

Now it was Hanzo’s turn to be alarmed. Such a lack of Jesse’s usual can-do attitude and dedicated work ethic warranted it.

“Why do you think that?”

Perhaps speaking his mind was a mistake – the obvious concern in Hanzo’s response externally confirmed how Jesse was feeling might indeed be something to worry about. He didn’t know how to answer Hanzo’s question, either. It all felt nebulous. He hated that.

“I don’t know. I feel…tired. Aimless. Everything I consider doing feels wrong, and I can’t figure out why.”

“You know what you want from here, at least. It is simple.”

Jesse conceded that with a nod but gesticulated emptily into space and tried to distract himself by running his good hand under the water.

“Yeah, but what about after? And…after after?”

“You mean how this all ends.”

“Yeah,” Jesse replied with a helpless weight in his voice Hanzo didn’t understand.

“I certainly cannot tell you.”

“Don’t that bother you?”
Confusion knit Hanzo’s brow when Jesse looked to him with a mysterious expectation.

“No?”

“Not at all?”

“No,” Hanzo repeated, no less confused. “Why should I be? If you think I demand that answer from you, I assure you, I do not. I understand how difficult this is, personally and professionally. A timeline is impossible to determine, much less an outcome.”

“We can’t do this forever. Well, you can’t, I guess. I’ll chase stupid shit ’til the day I die. But what happens six weeks from now? Six months?”

“Who says I cannot?”

“Hanzo, c’mon—”

“You doubt,” Hanzo interrupted, suddenly exasperated and serious. “You doubt me and my place so much. Why? What have I not done to prove – No, that is a stupid question, considering what I just revealed to you under duress. Never mind, you are justified.”

“No, wait. Stop. I’m…I’m flakin’ on you. Fuck, I gotta stop that. This…you see what I meant about the other fuckin’ shoe dropping.” Jesse sat on the edge of the fountain and took off his hat to play with the edge of the brim. “I’m so fuckin’ lucky to have you here. You don’t deserve the receiving end of my bullshit from Overwatch.”

“McCree, take a breath.”

Jesse did, but it was…difficult, being watched so closely. Hanzo took a seat next to him at the fountain and put a hand to Jesse’s wilted shoulder.

“I did not realize you were struggling so thoroughly to focus,” Hanzo said ruefully. Another mistake of his self-consumption. “You are…deceptively good at hiding your particular difficulties.”

“Dunno if it’s a good thing.”

“Relative morality is immaterial.”

“Dunno if expecting that answer out of you is all that great either,” Jesse added, chuckling. Hanzo joined him.

“Fuck off. The point is we are here, now, and we know what we need. Tomorrow is tomorrow. Six weeks is an eon. It is not like you to lose yourself in pointless what-ifs. Is it the fact that it is so closely related to Reyes that bothers you? I can accommodate, McCree.”

“It’s…yeah. That’s part of it, definitely. They’re not just debriefs to me, y’know?”

“They are not. But there is nothing you can have done that outstrips what I have, surely you understand that.”

“Maybe.” Jesse’s feet shifted nervously in place and he stared off into a building. “Don’t know if I believe it, though.”

“How—”

“You don’t know what I done, Hanzo,” Jesse finished sharply, though he remained staring off
into the distance.

The knee-jerk reaction Jesse expected and Hanzo felt inwardly – insisting upon Hanzo’s irredeemability – didn’t come. Hanzo didn’t know specifics, but he did know Jesse had lived a very extreme existence from a young age. That could mean any number of terrible things had been done to him as well as exacted by him. Fratricide was a sin, but it wasn’t the only one on the books. Hanzo simply hadn’t expected Jesse might still carry a heavy load of guilt as well, given how he had chosen to live his adult life. From the outside, Jesse seemed to process and cope with most of his trauma well enough.

“I do not care,” Hanzo finally replied. “That is that. You worry you are wasting my time: you are not. I do not suggest prospective ideas or comment without prompting because this is your plan and meant to serve your issues. If you want me to be more collaborative, I will.”

“I don’t know what I fuckin’ want, Hanzo, and it’s driving me crazy.”

“Then let it go.”

“Well, shit, genius—”

“I am completely serious. If you do not know what it is, it is nothing. When it becomes something, you will know. Our task tonight is to find an item. That is all; we do not even have to take it. We may not be able to. That is unknowable until further information clarifies for us. Such is the same for your feelings.”

“Goddamn. You make it sound so easy. I can compartmentalize, but hell.”

“Do not laud it too thoroughly. My ability to compartmentalize let me murder my brother and live with it for a decade.”

“How many times am I gonna have to tell you to shut the fuck up today?” Jesse asked, a crook forming at the corner of his mouth. Hanzo smiled back.

“The feeling is mutual.”

They went quiet for a while, letting the rising sounds of the morning coming to life around them make a more comfortable filler for their silence than the dead space of their flat. Each watched people come and go through the pavilion with an appreciative wonder; it was easy to forget in their job that the rest of the world went on around them so much more quietly and simply than their own. It came with a measure of envy when they did recall the fact. A war had colored many of the older lives around them, but that was a separate terror and pain that had been given an end of sorts. That would never truly exist for Hanzo or Jesse.

“Are we all right?” Hanzo asked softly.

But they were still human, still had their microcosm, didn’t they? Petty issues and minor victories. Not everything was effortless headshots in life-or-death struggles for the fate of the world streaming by around them. Hanzo was still learning to appreciate how…acceptable that was. Needed. And Jesse was trying to remember it didn’t all end with a bad taste in his mouth at best or a desire to die under a rock at worst.

“Righter than a left-handed amputee,” Jesse replied with reverence cut with just a shade of cheekiness.

Hanzo threw up his hands in amicable exasperation.
“You fucking…breakfast?”

“Breakfast.”

~

The party wasn’t going to begin until eight, and being fashionably late was wholly acceptable, so they spent most of their afternoon cutting the pre-mission nerves watching a few Westerns they could find streaming on the apartment’s television. Jesse kept dropping random trivia to test Hanzo’s knowledge, knowing full well he’d rise to the bait in his never-ending quest to be right, no matter how much he was embarrassed by his seemingly-questionable taste. Hanzo pretended he didn’t immediately recognize the game until he called out Jesse’s attempt to fool him by deliberately misnaming the director of photography on *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*.

“It is Delli Colli, and yes, I unironically love Westerns. There, are you satisfied?”

“A little. What’ve you got to be ashamed of? A shitload of it is classic American cinema. Won Oscars and everything.”

“Americans are brash and tasteless. Make it gigantic, overwrought, and saccharine, and you will go mad for it.”

“But we’re fun,” Jesse shot back, elbowing Hanzo. “Hey, I’m all that shit and then some, and you like me just fine, don’tcha?”

“I suppose.” *Just fine, fuck me all the way to hell.*

“I got you drinking well liquor, eatin’ street food, enjoying bullshit tourist traps. Strap in, it’s all downhill from here. Congratulations on your newly-acquired shitty taste, it’s how the rest of us peons live,” Jesse said, laughing as he got up. “It’s half-past, I better start cleaning up. Should shave.”

“Is it all coming off?” Hanzo asked, inwardly trying not to immediately go into mourning over its potential loss.

“Nah. But I gotta look a little less like I’m homeless, even if they don’t deserve the courtesy.”

“And yet you did not get a haircut. Oh my god, are you going to do it yourself?”

“Hey, hey, fuck you, I do most times, and I do a good job. But I got a solution for that tonight without so much effort.”

Hanzo’s eyes narrowed.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Calm down, Versace, I’ll dress up all nice. This is not the first time I’ve done this.”

“You make me wonder,” Hanzo muttered to himself, but stood as well to head for his room. It didn’t take him long, having already unpacked and prepared everything for his first sojourn earlier in the week. Within thirty minutes, he was back on the couch, suit jacket carefully laid out on the coffee table in front of him. He was mindlessly perusing the internet for some time when he heard Jesse kick his door back open, grumbling to himself.

“This motherfucker. I’ll getcha.”
Hanzo glanced up without thinking and almost dropped his phone. The outfit shouldn’t have been a surprise – *he* had bought it per Jesse’s instructions – but Hanzo had grown complacent and hadn’t stopped to consider ahead of time what seeing it *on* him would look like. Jesse immediately stalked over to an accent mirror running along the far wall, so thankfully he didn’t notice Hanzo staring. Starting up from the feet, clad in patent leather opera shoes, Jesse’s slacks were tapered to the ankle, showing off the volume of his thighs. Then the waist – *the waist* – cinched tight in a silk vest that had thin running LED trim up in a vee from his hips up to the shoulder, where they continued on in the same way back down the front panels. As promised, his crisp shirt sleeves were rolled up to accommodate his mechanical arm, but folded neatly over to show the wingtips on the cuffs coming off his elbows.

Had his shoulder to waist ratio *always* been that extreme? Hanzo had seen Jesse in various states of undress, even naked a couple times – an inevitability when you lived day and night with someone for months on end in small spaces – and yet nothing in the experience had been so close to pornographic as Jesse appeared right now. He’d put his hair up and everything, styling back enough of his usually-ragged fringe to let just a bit of hair frame his face and class up his rustic charm. He’d even secured a thin black ribbon from somewhere to tie it up, the loose bow and ends trailing down his neck.

Hanzo was not a man given to pontificating on his sexuality terribly often, but he could safely say that in his entire life, he had *never* felt so utterly weak for a man, even as he failed miserably to put on a bow tie. Dimly, Hanzo recalled a conversation he and Jesse had had months ago in Taipei – *I clean up mighty fine, matter of fact.* How naive Hanzo had been, then.

“Ah, fuck me,” Jesse spat at the mirror.

**Absolutely.**

“Hanzo, I need…I need a hand. Two. Both with fuckin’ fingerprint ridges. This shit ain’t gonna cut it. Never got the hang of silk.”

“Oh course,” Hanzo replied easily, taking his last second of privacy to shut his eyes and clear his mind of the last thirty seconds. Jesse turned to regard him, face a little flush with frustration.

“You told me you’ve done this before.”

Hanzo was teasing, but Jesse noticed it was…gentler than usual.

“Yes, but last time I couldn’t crush steel with that hand. Not that I did a great job at it *then,* mind you,” he explained as he popped his collar once again to give Hanzo space to start over. “Contrary to you. I bet you can do this upside-down and half-asleep.”

“You would be correct. I invariably had to do it both for myself *and* Genji, so I am practiced.”

“I…no, I can’t imagine Genji in any kinda tie.”

“He would be delighted to hear that.”

Jesse stayed still for Hanzo as he worked. A comfortable quiet pressed in on them standing so close. Considering how the day had begun, Jesse felt good hearing Hanzo so casually offer up a simple fact about his brother. It was a testament to their mutual trust that Hanzo would speak at all, much less with such reassured ease. He didn’t have to blame himself around Jesse. There was nothing to prove or posture in atonement for. For a fleeting moment, Hanzo’s life could be *simple,* and no one gave that to him *but* Jesse.
“What is *that* face all about?” Hanzo asked – Jesse felt like he’d been yanked off the edge of a cliff face.

“What?”

“Idle daydreaming is hardly appropriate within an hour of going undercover,” Hanzo tsked, rolling his eyes fondly.

“Shit, you got me,” Jesse replied with a teasing air he did not feel.

“Have you always been so absent-minded?”

*No.*

“Don’t you worry, I’ll have it all in hand when I need to.”

“I never doubt that.”

Hanzo finished his work and retreated; Jesse’s chest hurt as if he’d been kicked with a steel-toed boot. If Hanzo could have faith like that, Jesse had to live up to it, because he knew it was also a reflection of himself. Like the peace and simplicity Jesse fostered, faith came from him, too. Up until now, the responsibility fell comfortably on his shoulders. But Hanzo was taking his own steps, now, giving back to Jesse what he’d learned, all with his own spin. Even those as well-practiced in bruised optimism as Jesse forgot sometimes and still had spaces to grow into. This was real, and moreover, it had consequences. Jesse had *changed* something more material than the lives he’d ended and saved in the past five years. They mattered, of course, but they were little more than ideas in the greater perspective of Jesse’s life. Hanzo was here, *with* him, *acknowledged* him as something equally-tangible. Equally needed and wanted. The sense of presence he’d found freeing earlier during the walk now felt too thorough, tight against his skin as if he’d been wrapped in plastic.

“Let’s get what we came for,” Jesse said.

Hanzo didn’t hesitate for a second over the collective pronoun when he nodded affirmatively in response. It was their task, *together*.

Jesus, Jesse couldn’t think about this right now.

It certainly wouldn’t do to take anything less than a car to a soiree with such a volume of money watching, hence the Bentley rental. But as they left the condo to fetch it in an adjacent unjoined garage, Jesse paused and cursed at his own thoughtlessness.

“Oh *shit.* Can you drive?” he asked.

Hanzo already had his hand on the driver’s side door. He turned, fixing Jesse with equal parts amusement and exasperation.

“Yes, I fucking can, and you just *now* considered it?”

“Uh.”

“You will have to go a very long way indeed to convince me you are not the most consistently-addled human being on Earth. Get in, moron,” Hanzo said, snickering.

Jesse obliged and forced himself not to think about just how uncharacteristic it *really* was for him. The drive was short, since they only needed to get to the edge of the city near the lake. Neither
spoke, though Hanzo appeared more contented with the silence than Jesse was. As the manse came into view, so did a line of cars waiting to alight its gilt cargo.

“Fuckin’ processional, Jesus Christ. Am I livin’ an Austen novel?”

“I would not know, I have not read her work,” Hanzo replied.

“‘Course you fuckin’ haven’t, you’d recognize yourself in a second, Darcy-ass motherfucker,” Jesse muttered to himself.

“I will take that as a compliment,” Hanzo said mock-sternly.

“Yep,” Jesse shot back, popping the p on the end concisely. “You fuckin’ would.”

Their parade inched forward, but Hanzo didn’t relax his overworked and harried bodyguard affect for a moment, while Jesse was permitted a measure of freedom to make faces out the tinted windows and try to make Hanzo laugh. He very nearly succeeded, too, when he pantomimed having a monocle with his good hand and used the metal one for a bristly mustache as an older man walked by.

“You truly loathe these people,” Hanzo noted.

“Yeah, of course. They’re a big reason why I’m here at all, philosophically speakin’. They fucked the world. Still do. I guarantee you half of ‘em write checks to Talon knowingly in one way or another. And before Talon, they just let the shit like me rot.”

Jesse looked over to see Hanzo’s eyes, cast low and dark with regret, in the rearview mirror.

“I…wait—”

“No, don’t correct yourself. I was ignorant of…many things in my – jejunity, I suppose we will call it – until I was forced to flee, and willfully blind to in others. My family traffics heroin, McCree. I know what I am heir to. There was a time I, too, would have let you rot.”

“Ain’t you glad it’s gone, then?”

“Yes? I know I am supposed to say yes. Some days I truly am. But…not all of them.”

“I ain’t gonna judge you for that. I got days I miss Deadlock. My life was very, very simple. That’s probably what you miss.”

“That, yes. And home, like I told you before. Purpose. I worry I have abandoned a calling, though what that might have been, I could not tell you. Can you be called to criminal enterprise in any kind of wholesome way?”

“Jesus, Hanzo, you’re worth a lot more than bein’ a drug lord first on everybody’s list to murder as soon as convenient. I get family tradition, but shit.”

“That was how my father died, but not how he lived.”

“How d’you mean?”

“Another time. We are next in line.”

Hanzo pulled up and fetched the valet key out of the glovebox before sliding out the door. In those scant moments circling the car, Jesse composed himself. Erased his doubts. Anything like it
right now would only kill them. Hanzo had been poignant that morning: now was now, and they knew what to do. The door opened on his right – time to go to work. Hanzo met him with confident eyes when he emerged. The valet key was passed off and the car pulled away. They were committed.

Already, Jesse was earning looks for his loose interpretation of dress code, but his very best shit-eating smile defused a lot of the burgeoning irritation and judgment. It even got him a few waves and cooing from a small circle of women lounging in a small garden pavilion. Jesse waved theatrically; Hanzo had to put effort in not to roll his eyes. They headed for the stairs up to the wall-to-wall patio doors open to endless guests coming and going from the house to the garden.

“Remember,” Jesse murmured.

“Stay close, eyes out for Arazi. I’m sure he will come looking.” Hanzo saw a faint shadow of the rage he’d seen talking about the omnic on Monday pass over Jesse’s countenance.

“Yeah.”

“Behave.”

Jesse turned, about to argue, but found only mischief in Hanzo’s tiny crook of a smile. He relaxed and returned one of his own.

“If I feel like it,” he said with a wink and took the lead to find somewhere to set up camp. The party was a far cry from the sedate affair Hanzo had invaded alone; here, the crowd – dozens of people, as opposed to the scant handful at the lounge on Monday – was noisy, even boisterous despite the early hour, and in constant motion. Some were dancing, others merely making their way in various states of decreasing sobriety, and some making scenes that, under normal circumstances, would earn an arrest for public indecency and it was only a quarter to nine. This was the calmest it was going to be. They found a free spot at a circular sofa and table safely between the bar and the garden – best insulated by crowd noise for them to talk relatively unnoticed.


Jesse turned to Hanzo and openly looked him up and down in surprise. Staid, bookish, stern Hanzo?

“I was credited one pass for licentiousness. It was treated as a coming of age thing – one evening of irresponsibility. Never mind that—” He abruptly cut himself off before speaking Genji’s name. Gigantic fucking mistake, from speaking the simple word in such a venue to the distant, insistent bitterness filling his chest. “Never mind.”

“So your father—” Jesse had to stop himself, now. Personal questions should be off the table as a matter of course right now, no matter how interesting.

“Yes,” Hanzo replied anyway. He didn’t need to hear the entire question to understand it was about his father’s perspective on his sexuality. “And it was fine.”

Quite a blessing, Jesse thought ruefully to himself. No wonder Hanzo had been so upset by the revelation of his own sexuality back in Kentucky. He’d never known...difficulty like Jesse had. He still had the energy for outrage and defensiveness, where Jesse only felt a resigned calm and compulsion towards silence rather than label himself.

A waitress – human, surprisingly – appeared as a welcome distraction, eerily calm despite everything going on around her. Jesse hoped she was paid her weight in gold.
“Vodka and soda, please. Tea for my associate, here,” Jesse said, flooring Hanzo when every last trace of his usual affect had vanished from his voice. He might as well have been a weatherman from Los Angeles, it was so devoid of all Jesse’s color and character.

The waitress left and returned in a seeming blur, though perhaps both Jesse and Hanzo were a little too distracted by their half-conversation to truly notice how much time slipped by. He dropped her several hundred thousand dinars cash as appreciative tip and told her Hanzo himself would come by for more if needed to give them more permanent privacy. Not like there was much else to do besides wait to be called upon, anyway. Jesse made a show of people-watching, offering winks and appreciative words to passersby, while Hanzo was content to sit up straight as rebar and glare when people took Jesse’s passive flirting too seriously and attempted approach. It made for a very pleasant catharsis.

“Christ, when I was twenty-three I’d have died and gone to heaven – well, probably hell, whatever – to work something like this,” Jesse quipped softly to Hanzo without looking at him, pretending to watch a woman dance on a platform on the far end of the room.

“And now?” Hanzo asked as he glared at a young couple staring a bit too long as they passed.

“I’m really fucking glad I’m not twenty-three anymore. He was a dipshit.”

They turned to each other and shared a smile.

Hanzo saw Arazi coming first and got Jesse’s attention with a discreet hand at his elbow just out of sight under the table.

“8 o’ clock.”

“My blind spot. Thinks he’s clever.”

The accent was still missing now, even in casual conversation between them, and it was just odd enough to get under Hanzo’s skin. Arazi meandered, clearly in attempt to pretend he was simply going to run into Jesse and Hanzo, but his choreography never let him keep the two of them out of field of vision. He had too easily known their location, too – no doubt there was some kind of visual surveillance in the most common guest spaces – Jesse was pretty certain there was a camera hidden inside the lighting fixture closest to them twenty feet up. But that had been anticipated from the first and frankly, both of them would have felt a little insulted if that hadn’t been the case.

“Well,” Arazi hummed as he swanned up, tonight bedecked in nothing but a gauzy, open dressing gown loosely cinched with a thick gold byzantine-linked chain at his waist. He extended a hand for Jesse to shake, but deliberately turned to regard Hanzo as he did. “Here you are.”

“A pleasure,” Jesse opened with such precise enunciation Hanzo briefly wondered if perhaps his normal folksy speech pattern was in fact an act as he had first assumed when they had met in January. “I was wondering when I’d get face-to-face time with you. Still waiting, as a matter of fact,” Jesse added with a touch of razor-sharp steel in his voice as he leant into Hanzo’s space, still holding Arazi’s hand in a vice grip he couldn’t feel, to actually meet Arazi’s eyes. No power plays today for this shitstain, fuck any mission. Arazi retreated, though it took a little bit of a tug for Jesse to release his hand, slid a hair further back than was necessary and tittered.

“Living in anticipation, excellent. Just how all my guests should be prior to arrival.”

“Anticipation, indeed. I’ve been told about your unusual methods for greeting representatives of prospective guests.”
Now he properly had Arazi’s attention, Jesse had sat back casually against the curved sofa and put his arm behind Hanzo’s back where he sat next to him. They hadn’t discussed a plan for individual presentation after the first go-around; frankly, the situation would be too fluid to go in with a script, and would come off wooden anyway, no matter their acting skills. Both of them were more than accomplished enough – and comfortable enough with each other in virtually every respect – to respond as needed on the fly for this bit of covert work.

“You’re asking to enter my home. Gracious as I am to host in the fashion I do, surely you cannot begrudge my taking a small fee of personal enjoyment,” Arazi cooed.

“I have guests for all kinds of business and pleasure. None of them yet have been demanded to offer up their wives for me to fuck on the kitchen table,” Jesse replied with a frigid smile.

Hanzo didn’t try to hide his immeasurable amusement.

“Ah. Yes. Forgive a smattering of too-casual humor. You are new here, and not necessarily attuned to our idiosyncrasies. Ours is a sharing culture,” Arazi replied stiffly, gesturing widely to the scene around them, which included a party of six some ten yards off making a mess of the furniture. Jesse had spent a while watching earlier trying to figure out if it was poorly-executed hired entertainment or not.

“Is that on a list of rules somewhere? Out by the pool, maybe?” Jesse counted sarcastically on his fingers. “Don’t run on the tile; don’t dive in the shallow end; have spare entourage on-hand for passing out as party favors.”

“I have offended you.”

“Just a touch. It’s the tone more than anything.” Jesse leant forward where he sat and, shadowed with threatening energy, reached back with his right hand to hold Hanzo’s thigh alarmingly high up. A thin ray of light moving back and forth on Arazi’s vee-shaped visual sensor signaled his gaze popping back and forth between the possessive display and Jesse’s cold, even stare.

Thirty-eight years was a good run, in Hanzo’s opinion. Many more than he ever thought he would get. And this was a hell of a way to go, because he couldn’t imagine doing anything other than up and dying in reaction to being the unexpected focus of such a devastatingly sexy display and touch from the object of his unspoken affections. However, death did not arrive to mercifully carry him away in the flash of the immediate shock, so Hanzo was forced simply to externalize the endless smugness he felt secondarily to everything else and gave Arazi a poisonous smile. As a final flourish, Hanzo responded in kind, smoothing his appreciative palm up Jesse’s back to his shoulders and just brush the bit of hair not tied up at the nape of his neck. A tiny bit of reactionary frission in Jesse’s back could be felt even through the shirt and vest he wore; Hanzo’s vision blurred a bit in distraction to recognize it.

“What’s mine is mine. Seems that virtue isn’t terribly respected out here,” Jesse explained.

Arazi was clearly at a loss as he rocked back and forth between his steel feet and adjusted his gilt belt fretfully; few people had the asteroid-class balls to talk down to him in his own home. After a too-long moment to rally himself, he stepped forward and tried towering over them where they sat.

“Remarkable. Being so willful, I’m surprised you put on a collar for anyone, especially with that yakuza tattoo. You two make quite an insolent pair,” Arazi tried, simultaneously vicious and unctuous as he shifted target back to Hanzo. Jesse wasn’t having it. He stood, slow and deliberate – he didn’t quite match the omnic’s height, but it was enough to meet him relatively eye-to-eye. Arazi backed up in spite of himself to concede ground for Jesse’s power play.
“And you’re seconds from coughing up any price to find out what our safe word is,” Jesse replied, eyes dropping to trace the embroidered hem of Arazi’s gown with condescension. No eyes were needed for Jesse to know a blink from an enemy when he saw one.

A long, intense pause seemed to dull the raucous around them. Jesse and Arazi stared each other down, two pillars in an undulating sea fixed in silent societal combat. This had been a massive gamble, Jesse had understood before he began, but now he’d made it this far, he knew he was going to win, so the aggression he fielded with a simple look came not only effortlessly, but with a heaping helping of smugness. Arazi couldn’t stomach a scene, even to throw Jesse and Hanzo out.

Arazi’s gaze dipped to the lower left half of his visor to look at Hanzo once more.

“I retract my final thought from the other night. Your man does indeed keep even finer company than himself.”

“You’ll retract more than that if you want a snowball’s chance in hell of sating your curiosity,” Jesse said, drawing his enemy’s gaze back to him. He caught a little bit of visual timbre in the vertical, white line – a tell. The omnic was back on his heels and damn close to scared.

“Forgive my impishness, ah…” Arazi said, lifting his tone in suggestion.


“Mr. Marshall,” Arazi finished, laying into the prefix. “Please, enjoy yourself here tonight as thoroughly as you feel compelled. You and your companion’s needs will be attended to if you merely ask. I hope my hospitality sits more comfortably in your mind from here on out.”

“I certainly hope so, too.”

Jesse gave him another steely smile and reclaimed his seat, as well as put his arm back around Hanzo. Arazi made a physiologically-pointless, discomfited harrumph as clearing his throat, gave a small tilt of his head in repentant farewell, and left. That done, Jesse paid him no further mind and turned to murmur conspiratorially in Hanzo’s ear, knowing perfectly well Arazi would see and assume he was giving Hanzo less-than-wholesome attention.

“Good thing he’s exactly as submissive as he pretends not to be, yeah?” he cracked.

Hanzo couldn’t help spitting up in laughter and curled into Jesse’s body, hand to his friend’s chest; Jesse snickered quietly along with him. Hanzo glanced up in time to see Arazi jerk his head away to address a random woman.

“What’s that face? What’s he doing now?” Jesse said with something just shy of lascivious enjoyment in his tone.
“Looking for satisfaction.”

“Well, he sure ain’t gonna get that, is he?” Jesse said, letting his drawl leak back in and making everything below Hanzo’s neck turn to jelly.

_He and I both_, Hanzo thought ruefully, but this still made for an obscene kind of fun. He wouldn’t let his mood be spoiled now. Watching Jesse quote-unquote defend his virtue was a scene that was going to fuel more than one dream and immodest bit of imagination for some time. He turned to regard Jesse, alarmed for a split second by how close he was now they were facing each other. Jesse, by contrast, seemed entirely at ease.

“Certainly not, no matter what hedonism he gets up to later to soothe his wounded ego. That was…impressive of you,” Hanzo said as he finally drew back, though he let his touch linger a hair longer than necessary as he slid his hand away from Jesse’s vest.

“Why thank you. Always ready to take a motherfucker down a peg.”

“That you are.” Hanzo resumed his surveying. “What shall we do now? He will hardly come calling again anytime soon after such a thorough defeat.”

“How will he ever let himself be seen in society again?” Jesse shot back with mock haughtiness. It made Hanzo genuinely laugh, eyes scrunched and nose visibly pink from underneath his fingers where he’d raised it to cover the lower half of his face.

Unbidden, burgeoning thoughts pressing at the door of Jesse’s consciousness were swiftly let out and swept away to be shuttered in the box he kept in his head for every involuntary and impermissible emotion that bubbled up during missions, and that was the end of that, all in the space of a breath. The world settled around him again in perfect focus. Everything in his mind was square and ordered, just as it should be in his current position.

But the metaphorical box rattled distantly as the unanalyzed emotion demanded to be released, manifesting in a remote discomfort floating just under Jesse’s ribcage.
Chapter Notes

hellooooooo~

so, kind of a big author's note this time to cover something important, so please bear with me

I know a lot of you are returning readers and do not necessarily pay attention to my tag changes, but this is a big one: I have added a secondary character death tag, per some feedback from friends

some things to note about this addition:

- you have my personal guarantee neither Jesse nor Hanzo will die in this fanfiction. I do intend to do some malfeasance for them -- that is what the 'serious injuries' and 'major character injury' tags are for -- but this fic DOES have a happy ending they will both live to see.

- these deaths are in no way imminent in narrative. this was what I was unsure of vis-a-vis tagging norms, and my friends told me I should do it well ahead of time. the deaths are well beyond the eight-to-ten chapters I already have firm, detailed plans for.

- yes, deaths, meaning plural. as it stands, there are two, and I do not currently anticipate more, however, you will recognize and know these characters. they are not random, nor are they OCs.

- both instances will be tagged in their respective (very, very) future chapters with an author's note at the beginning, much like you have seen me do for when I graphically describe Hanzo's suicidal ideation, and what I WILL do when the "serious injuries" and "major character injury" chapters come to pass as well.

I am not trying to pull a fast one, promise. I have never written a fic with this kind of content before, and didn't really know quite what to do in covering it, and in the case of one of these deaths, wasn't even quite sure if, where, or when I was going to include it.

If this is not what you had hoped for, I apologize for the delay in bringing it up, and I fully understand if the prospect of that is too much for you! If you have any questions, please do feel free to message me here, tumblr, or twitter (all are under the handle midgetnazgul). Perhaps this is not a surprise -- I do not fool myself in thinking this fic is all sunshine and rainbows -- but character death, even for lesser appearances, is a tricky one.

If you are especially hesitant, I AM willing, on an individual basis, to tell you who is subject to these deaths in DMs on twitter or tumblr with the assumption you will not spoil it for anyone else. I just want to do all I can to put people at ease. <3

In case you are curious, the answer is yes, I will continue to add tags, but at this point, those tags will mostly relate to later sexual material (this fic is rated E, and I will earn it, /promise/) and some additional characters once I have firmed up just.../where/ they will go.
Okay! That done, please enjoy this extra-long chapter that in no way is exciting or ends on a massive cliffhanger. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“McCree?”

Jesse blinked and shook himself from his mental lockdown. It took a moment, but he dimly recalled the hum of Hanzo asking an important question. What now?

“We should find somewhere quiet to look into security,” Jesse murmured.

“A fine plan. You want a drink to go?”

Jesse’s face split in a smile and he offered a cheeky eyebrow waggle.

“Ain’t I working? Or are you deliberately out to give me a challenge, because it’ll take a lot more than two to compromise me.”

“You will still make an ass of yourself well before you make a real mistake, and I would enjoy laughing at you,” Hanzo shot back easily.

“Fucker. Go get me another vodka soda and we’ll do a walking tour,” Jesse said with a smile.

Hanzo rose to fulfill the order. When he arrived at the bar, a tired-looking bartender greeted him with a nod, and Hanzo gave him an equally-beleaguered nod of solidarity to fit his role.

“What’s he need?”

“Vodka soda. Additionally: is there…anywhere one can—”

“East wing. There are a couple dozen rooms. The smaller ones are towards the front – the further back you go, the more…communal they get. There’re lights over ‘em noting occupancy, but still lock the door behind you. Nobody here is sober enough to pay attention to them. It’s better to claim one now while it’s still early.”

“Wow.”

The bartender shrugged and gave a heavy sigh.

“Look, we all know why employees like you are here. I hope just your boss is decent to you.”

Hanzo couldn’t help feeling a bit wistful over the assumption about his relationship to Jesse as well as horrified by the bartender’s cynicism. This poor man had probably seen…a lot.

“He is.”

The bartender passed off the drink order – he looked genuinely relieved to hear Hanzo’s positive answer.

“Good. Hope you enjoy yourself, then.”

Hanzo took the drink and left with a bizarre ache in his chest. He was enjoying himself, and he shouldn’t be – at least, not in the way he was right now. But Jesse clearly was as well, just as much
as Hanzo. What did that mean? He scanned the room to center himself again and found Jesse amongst the weaving throng, easy to find because he was inexplicably on his feet.

And buried tongue-first in a passing woman’s mouth.

Thirty years of crisis response training was the only reason Hanzo didn’t drop the highball in his hand on the spot, even as his vision tunneled watching them. He turned on a robotic heel and fled into the shadow of a ghastly bit of sculptural work to compose himself. What the fuck, top to bottom. What the fuck, Jesse. What the fuck at himself. What the fuck at this entire fucking thing.

“You read me? What’s taking?” Jesse voice came softly at his ear again – breathy and soft as how he’d been egging Hanzo into taunting Arazi minutes ago, Hanzo’s mind very unhelpfully reminded him – and…irritated? “I need you back, stat.”

Hanzo just managed to curb a vicious, cutting do you? in response.

“There was a line.”

“Flash a hundred-thousand dinar note at him. Whatever it takes. Get back here.”

“Yes, yes.” Why?

Hanzo took a deep breath and imagined gathering his stress into a great, glowing ball and crushed it in size until it could hardly be felt. When he opened his eyes, the same great and hollow chasm he’d made within himself when he’d lambasted his feelings on Monday returned and he was able to resume his walk back. He found Jesse sitting at the table again, flush and vaguely awkward.

“Finally. Don’t leave again. These people are vultures,” Jesse hissed as he took his drink and downed a substantial portion of it.

“How do you mean?”

“Some woman took a smile a bit too seriously and ended up all over me within thirty seconds of you leaving. Stuck her goddamn gin-soaked tongue down my throat and everything. It was a hell of a job talking her down smoothly.”

“I see.” Jesse’s obvious distaste was making Hanzo feel better, and that fact only made him feel more terrible after the fact. He was…compromised.

“I thought you were being a little aggressive with the glaring earlier, but never fucking mind. Have fun.”

Hanzo wished he could take the simple pleasure he’d been enjoying just twenty minutes earlier again. This was seriously an issue, and he didn’t know what to do.

No. No, it wasn’t going to be, he told himself, recalling the resolution he’d made that morning. Jesse had to come first. Yes, he’d made a mistake, but in truth, it was hardly one at all; no one had paid him any attention. Even Jesse had no idea. He was allowed to slip up and feel, but he wasn’t going to allow himself to do what he always did to himself when he fucked up. He was only one half of what was going on, and if he made it all about him, real mistakes would follow.

“What has to happen to permit me pulling my gun?” Hanzo asked dryly, reaching for their usual shared sarcasm to shore up his confidence. “That is my definition of fun.”

“And you told me to behave. Shall we?” Jesse asked.
“Yes. I made an inquiry, and apparently the east wing will have an abundance of privacy for us.”

“Of course it will.”

They made their way across the ballroom together, Hanzo parting the crowd for Jesse by walking a hair in front of him. Better to make their move now, when they could be relatively assured their movements wouldn’t immediately get back to Arazi, since he was still on the floor mingling. To stay close, Jesse kept hold of Hanzo’s shoulder, which seemed to burn through Hanzo’s suit and into his skin. As promised, they found a long hallway of rooms with small lights in green and red above each door. Jesse pulled a face.

“Tacky.”

“You just met him, how are you surprised?” Hanzo asked.

“You think he charges hourly? He can’t be gettin’ his money’s worth when these bastards probably can’t last two minutes.”

A clipped sputter of laughter escaped Hanzo as he went for the door. Jesse was right up behind him, hand at the small of Hanzo’s back, still playing the part. Even once inside and door locked behind them, they lingered in the opening alcove, Hanzo half-cocooning Jesse to shield him from possible camera view as he leant back into the wall and poked at the interface on his arm to run a bug scanner he kept literally on-hand for times like these.

“We’re good. Nothing in fifty feet,” Jesse said.

“Excellent,” Hanzo replied and opened his jacket to remove his puck-sized virtual desktop. He turned it on and held it in his left hand while flipping through screens with his right. Jesse left him there to take a seat on the large, plush bed and finish his drink. At least Arazi didn’t cheap out on accommodations. The decor was more of the same gilt, gaudy shit, but then Jesse had never known a single extravagantly wealthy person to have taste. He pondered the offerings for something worthwhile to steal and fence later just to make himself feel better for having to spend time, however unwillingly, in such opulence. Maybe they’d get lucky enough to simply trash something.

“McCree.”

“Hm?” Jesse said as he kicked off his shoes – fucking slippers, more like. He missed his boots.

As Hanzo had been setting himself up, he’d noticed he’d already connected to the internet automatically. Normally, that would make sense – it was probably an open network for guests. Upon further inspection for potential hacking purposes, however, Hanzo realized he had actually connected to the employee secured network. Since he was running a virtualized connection to Flinch’s computer in Pennsylvania, that meant at the very least Flinch had come here before and saved all necessary information – that was, until Hanzo saw Flinch had administrative credentials.

“Flinch was Arazi’s entire network administrator.”

“What?”

“He must have been remotely working for him. Maybe he talked Arazi into it when he was brought on to manage the Blackwatch cache. Whatever the case…we have access to everything here. Every door, computer, ID scanner.”

“You’re fucking kidding,” Jesse breathed. He abandoned his glass on the sidetable and slid
aside to make room for Hanzo to sit next to him on the bed.

“I wouldn’t dare. Look, a live feed of the entire building,” Hanzo said as he set the computer in his lap and enlarged a holographic schematic of each floor with moving, differently-colored dots for classification of employee. A huge grin formed on Jesse’s face and he reached for Hanzo to shake him victoriously by the shoulder – too late, he remembered that was Hanzo’s left side and grasped too hard, earning a hitched breath from his friend.

“Oh shit, I’m so sorry, Hanzo.”

“It is fine,” Hanzo wheezed. He pointed to the interior of the basement. “Looks like the vault is here. He likely keeps whatever the data is stored on there. I can check, of course, but I highly doubt Flinch was so stupid as to allow the storage method to have access to an internet connection or even a power source. It is probably on some stable external storage.”

“Dunno, that motherfucker was pretty stupid,” Jesse replied coyly. “So how do we get there?”

“Hmm,” Hanzo considered the question, toggling between floor plans and utility layouts. “This is the desert and the mansion is a perfect twenty-two degrees inside. There is likely ductwork I can exploit. Any security measures within them to prevent entry is something we can control from here.”

“Duct crawling? Hanzo, you’re hurt. You told me—”

“I said I wouldn’t climb unless I had to. It seems I do. Any other option runs the risk of being seen by another person, McCree. This way, I can take my time and not overexert myself. It truly is safest.”

“It’s still gonna hurt, though. I don’t like makin’ you work past pain.”

“Oh, please. This is hardly pain. You recall my story about breaking my leg? I was back scouting a target two weeks after using experimental bone grafting technology. That is pain.”

Jesse recoiled a little at how…casually Hanzo described that.

“And what happened?”

“An opportunity to strike arose and I made my kill. I got back to the forward stakeout point and I finally allowed myself to pass out,” Hanzo replied, utterly devoid of emotion.

Jesse’s expression grew pinched. In between all those words explaining what had happened left a chasm where Hanzo hadn’t spoken.

“I get what you’re sayin’, but that ain’t makin’ me feel any better about it, Hanzo,” Jesse replied honestly.

“All I am trying to say is that I have been through worse. So have you, correct? That’s a fact of this life. However we arrived here, you and I both choose to continue when either of us could have walked way years ago. I am…far happier to know I can put myself at risk for something I care about. To know I am helping someone who deserves it. Snaking my way through HVAC for half an hour is a more valuable use of thirty years of training than all my time spent in service to my family’s petty whims and grudges.”

Jesse conceded Hanzo’s emphatic rebuttal with a nod and combed at the tip of his beard in anxiety. That was reassuring, but Jesse couldn’t just let Hanzo just…tell that story and say nothing.
“You…you know that wasn’t right, right?” Jesse asked.

“Of course I do,” Hanzo replied, but his tone was flat and disaffected. He wouldn’t look over at Jesse, either.

“Hanzo—”

“What was I supposed to have done? Please, tell me,” Hanzo snapped. He never should have brought it up at all. Talking about any of his familial experiences was an inevitable mistake.

“Jesus, I ain’t blaming you.”

Hanzo let out a heavy sigh and nodded as he rubbed at his forehead.

“No, you’re not. I just…your response makes me…think too hard about my past experiences. I didn’t question anything then, or any other time I should have, and I have paid a very, very heavy price for it. Genji is the worst example, but certainly not the only one.”

“That shit’s like a cult, Hanzo, you done what you done, but…consideration has to be made for —”

“Please stop talking.”

“No,” Jesse insisted. “I get it. I’ve been there. It took me years to throw off Deadlock, and you can let your clan shit go, too.”

“McCree—”

“It’s okay to look back and say ‘fuck, I did what I did to survive’. That’s—”

“Stop,” Hanzo barked and stood, tossing his handheld computer onto the bed as he did. “This is not the time, and you are not helping the way you think you are.”

The latter half of Hanzo’s sentence irked Jesse, but the former half was definitely true, so Jesse had to let his knee-jerk irritation over Hanzo’s transparent attempt to brush off the compassion slide in some measure, but he wasn’t about to let Hanzo get away with using a semi-legitimate argument to pull the escape hatch from Jesse’s point. They were safe enough here.

“I…you’re right, it ain’t the time, but I sure as hell ain’t wrong, either, and I’ve let you walk right on past the fact too many—”

That was one too many qualifying clauses for Hanzo; he advanced back across the room to get up in Jesse’s face.

“I survived, Genji did not, and that is the end of the conversation,” he seethed, nearly touching Jesse with the finger he aggressively pointed at him with.

“But he did, Hanzo,” Jesse replied evenly.

Hanzo’s face twisted in a combination of grief and shock that Jesse would be so blunt. All the aggression had zero effect intimidating Jesse – in fact, he softened further to see his friend so stricken.

“That’s my point,” Jesse continued. “He did. The conversation isn’t over. Even if he were gone, it wouldn’t be over, long as you’re still breathing. I think that’s the part you struggle with.”
Every one of Hanzo’s go-to responses – to leave, to shout, to throw or break something – was unavailable to him in their current circumstances. Their entire night so far had been marked with downright unprofessional conduct between them, considering what they were supposed to be doing. Their only saving grace right now was the lack of surveillance in this fifteen foot square ornate front of a love hotel room. Bad comparison, Hanzo rebuked himself as he stared down Jesse’s kind, handsome face in a seemingly eternal moment trying not to completely lose his shit. The struggle must have been all over his face, because Jesse’s frown deepened as the silence seemed to eat up all the oxygen in the room.

“Sit down,” Jesse said gently.

All Hanzo’s typical emotional contrarianism must have disappeared, because he did so without another word. Jesse just as well should have slapped him across the face. All Jesse had wanted to do was make Hanzo understand that he understood. He’d been trying to make that clear for months, virtually from the moment they met.

Maybe he’d succeeded, and a little too well at that. Just because he meant well in trying to level with Hanzo didn’t mean the result would end well. It hadn’t yet. And his unassailable need to make his point still didn’t hold up against Hanzo’s previous argument – this was the worst place possible, short of a live firefight, to have this conversation. Why did he have to have that answer right now? This clearly wasn’t good for Hanzo, Jesse had to admit just from one furtive glance in his periphery at his friend’s continued silent, stunned expression.

“Are you okay?” Jesse asked weakly, as if he didn’t already know the answer.

Hanzo decided the only safe and fitting way to express the deep and abiding aggression bordering on unrestrained violence he felt was with suffocating silence; Jesse got the message loud and clear. He ran anxious mismatched hands up and down his thighs and tried to bear the cold shoulder with repentant grace.

“That was over the line. What I’m doin’ doesn’t even help you – I’m just…tryin’ to be right.”

Hanzo dropped his head down to his knees and covered the back of his skull with his hands – he was well beyond his limit today, not that Jesse would know even ten percent of it. Jesse winced to watch him do it.

For all they’d been through together in United States, he’d never seen Hanzo quite like this before. He was used to the numbness Hanzo usually externalized; seeing him openly upset left Jesse feeling downright anguished, especially to know that he had been the one to cause it for pushing the envelope too damn hard.

A hand came to rest on the hunched curve of Hanzo’s back and he took a deep breath to steady himself. Let it go, he tried to convince himself. He’d done it twice already today; surely he could do it again. That was easier said than done with anything attached to Genji. But he had to find a better vector out of this disaster of a conversation than what he was naturally given to do. It wasn’t simply the responsible thing to do for the job they were on, it would be wrong and cruel to take it out on Jesse even in minutia. The terrifying track record for violence Hanzo knew he had scared him more than anything else, and he would rather die than repeat his history on the only friend he had ever had. The soft, repeating pet of Jesse’s thumb over a single bump in his spine helped center him.

“But that does not mean you are wrong,” Hanzo admitted tightly, and Jesse’s hand on his back curled at the fingers.

“I don’t want to be right at your expense. It defeats the whole fuckin’ point.”
Hanzo’s flashpoint flickered and receded, but even Jesse’s comforting presence didn’t quite take away the predictable wash of soul-crushing regret that always followed. Defeat made Hanzo’s whole body slacken in toxic release.

“My leg…never quite healed,” Hanzo spoke again as he slowly sat up. “We have not traveled to any cold climates, so you would not have noticed, but when it slips below freezing, it tends to ache. I will even occasionally limp. I am not sure why – perhaps the graft was not tested for more extreme temperatures. Either way, it is likely no one would have cared what the repercussions might be for me.”

Jesse’s hand hadn’t left Hanzo’s back even as he’d sat up; in fact, it slid up and lightly held the base of his neck. Since it was Jesse’s good hand, it was warm enough to notice even through the collar of Hanzo’s shirt.

“I’m sorry,” Jesse said.

“As am I.”

Jesse was putting Hanzo through a hell of a day today, wasn’t he. What the fuck was wrong with him? We should leave right now. He moved to speak the thought, but at the last moment, caught himself and corrected his burgeoning authoritative tone. There had been more than enough of that out of him for one day.

“What value is there in leaving? We only make another attempt more difficult. You yammered on about respecting my time and effort this morning,” Hanzo replied sharply and finally met Jesse’s eyes with a narrowed gaze. “Giving up is a guaranteed way to insult that.”

“I just want you to be okay,” Jesse blurted out and threw up his hands in frustration at himself. “That’s the one fuckin’ thing I can’t do today.”

“Because you are trying to fix me, McCree. You cannot just…do that, today or any other day. I know you are trying to help. Most times, you do. And I admit I have not helped by being obstinate.”

Jesse gave a heavy sigh as he rubbed at his face with both hands.

“It’s your goddamn right to do it. Maybe it makes you a bit of an asshole, but I earned it. I am prying, even if I’m…” Jesse gave up and hung his head.

“Even if you are my best friend,” Hanzo offered as an olive branch.

Jesse chewed at the inside of his cheek, touched by the explicit description.

“Ain’t doing a great job of it right now, though.”

“Better than our combined professional effort tonight,” Hanzo added, rubbing at the tendons in his wrist aching dully from all his tension.

“Generous of you to make it collective.”

“I have brought up Genji twice despite myself. That is my own fucking fault.”

“So that’s what never mind meant when you were talkin’ about your twenty-first.”
“Yes. My brother...had a far more slackened leash than I, and he took great advantage of it with very few repercussions from my father. For many years before, I would insist it did not matter to me, but...that was a lie. I was terribly envious, and I am still bitter today, however pithy that may sound, given my extreme privilege growing up.”

Jesse’s eyes dipped low and away. This was not his first time hearing a story like Hanzo’s. He recalled what he’d said then, in another time and place and life, with a painful little knot in his throat. It still rang true, even for Jesse’s radically-altered perspective.

“All the money in the world don’t make you free or give you a purpose.”

Hanzo’s expression winced as if he’d accidentally cut himself.

“It does not.”

Jesse stared at his feet. This was the most that Hanzo had ever spoken about his formative experiences. As much as Jesse appreciate the trust, he’d gotten what he wanted at too high a price. Guilt pinched his brow. What was he supposed to do? His sense of disconnect that had so plagued him that morning returned. Normally, a good application of gallows humor was the perfect cure, but that felt cheap, here.

Silence continued, but sat a little more comfortably. They were friends because of equitability, Jesse realized. Respectively, their lived experiences could not have come from more diametrically-opposed poles, but where and when their lives had intersected was a perfect average. Each man’s previous five years could be interchanged simply by different location names. For all Jesse might be fostering in Hanzo, he wasn’t a mentor so much as a gracious helping hand. An experienced equal, helping a friend navigate just a few paces behind. All that came from empathizing. Tit for tat. It was stupid and self-absorbed to gnash his teeth over cost like he couldn’t afford compensation.

“When I was thirteen,” Jesse opened as he rubbed at the palm of his good hand with a metal thumb, “I fell off a train – a stationary one, thank god – and broke my wrist. My shotcaller shoved it back in place, tied it with an old bandana, and called it a sprain like he hadn’t heard the bone snap. We were way out from base planting shit for a robbery, so I worked for two days like that. It wasn’t ever right again, even after I got back and had it treated.”

Hanzo looked up enough to stare at Jesse’s hands as they wrung at each other.

“That...is awful,” he replied woodenly.

“I still ain’t sure which was worse: actually breaking my goddamn wrist, or catchin’ hands from my shotcaller later for cryin’ over a pipe bomb I was settin’ because it hurt so goddamn bad. Backhanded me right across my damn face. But I got the last laugh. It got better eventually – and I could crush his face in if I ever saw him again,” Jesse continued, flexing his prosthetic with a wink.

Hanzo would never stop being impressed by how easily Jesse could muster a smile, even in describing low, painful points in his life. To find his humor and remember life went on. All Hanzo could ever seem to find was rock bottom, no matter how high he scrabbled up to try and escape.

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"Are you implying we attempt amateur amputation of my legs and find a suitable prosthesis later? Surely, that will fix all my problems."

“Well, we sure ain’t puttin’ in working hours right now, are we?”

Humor was all you had, sometimes. Maybe it was time Hanzo learned to lean into it. He shook his head and chuckled along with Jesse.
“But that’s what I mean when I say I get it. I’ve been at it more like I’m comin’ at you with a
crowbar, and I’m sorry,” Jesse said.

Hanzo nodded his understanding and smoothed at an invisible crease in his slacks.

“You are forgiven, McCree, and you always will be, as long as it is because you care.”

*I do,* Jesse thought, but couldn’t quite find the ability to speak it.

“I just hate for you to think you’re alone.”

An odd weight pressed at his diaphragm; his alternative thought seemed...*more* than the simple
confession he was hesitant to speak.

It seemed to be a bit too potent for Hanzo, too, as he stood and strode off a few feet for no real
reason. He shed his jacket for lack of anything else to do; whatever Jesse’s original protest, Hanzo
was determined to follow through on his idea.

“I have *been* alone for an exceptionally long time. You must understand a few months,
even...even if they *are* arguably the best I have ever had...cannot reverse it in one go.”

Jesse nodded and fretted at his beard. Hanzo carefully folded his jacket and laid it across a
nearby chair before returning to stand before Jesse, arms crossed.

“But just as well, do not believe that means this time we have spent traveling together is
pointless. Nothing could be further from the truth.”

With his arms strapped tight across his chest, Hanzo appeared ready to burst out of the seams of
his tightly-tailored shirt. The collar rode up, too, giving the impression Hanzo was trying to duck into
it and hide. He didn’t meet Jesse’s eyes. All of it, evidence of a big man struggling not to curl inside
himself to become tiny and invisible.

“Well, I’m prepared to invest the time to catch up,” Jesse replied softly. “However long that
takes.”

Jesse had turned to stare to the left and down at the floor; Hanzo was still emptily glaring to the
right at a print on the wall. And yet, both watched the other from periphery, testing the strength of the
metaphorical ground they shared.

“I been carryin’ on long enough. If you’re good, you’re good. Just...be fuckin’ careful, Hanzo,”
Jesse finally spoke to settle the matter.

“I am always--”

“Pennsylvania begs to differ,” Jesse cut Hanzo off, though he did with a crook of a smile and
warm gentility to emphasize he was only teasing. Hanzo gave a little devil-may-care shrug.

“And Tucson,” Hanzo admitted.

“And Seattle.”

“And Taiwan.”

"We should count Chi--”

“You know what, fuck you,” Hanzo finished, waving his hand.
Rough, mingled snickering filled the room with a low hum. It finally felt safe enough to try the real work again, so Hanzo clambered back on the bed to retrieve his handheld computer and brought the holographic map back up for them.

“So what do you think, north to the elevator shaft?” Jesse asked, eager to show his confidence in Hanzo’s plan and ability.

“Yes. Were I...in better shape, I would stay in the HVAC even between floors, but...that would be a bit much. The antigravity in the elevator will let me move downstairs without having to strain myself as much.”

“Totally up to you,” Jesse replied firmly. “You know your limits.”

“Thank you,” Hanzo murmured. “Of course, you will have to guide me as necessary.”

“Yep. No problem. You sure it’s all as simple as flippin’ switches, though?”

Hanzo gave a thoughtful hum and drew his mouth into a tight line as he focused on the hologram, turning it this way and that. Eventually, he zoomed in on the vault itself. Status menus appeared, and after a beat assessing it, Hanzo gave a little fuck it shrug and pressed the virtual button next to OVERRIDE DOOR LOCK. Jesse noticed a second too late and belatedly wrestled for Hanzo’s wrist to stop him, stuttering while Hanzo had a precocious giggle to himself.

“Did you just unlock the fuckin’ vault door, you dumb son-of-a-bitch? What did we just say about you bein’ careful?” Jesse asked, equally exasperated and tickled.

“Maybe.” Hanzo said with a smile and zoomed out to the overall map. “And no one is panicking, see? Totally fine.” He opened the menu again and re-locked the vault. “So the answer is yes, you will not need to force your will onto anything. All the better, since I am not going to talk you through how to write invasive worm scripts while stuck in a ceiling vent.”

“Hey, give me a little credit. I hacked a vending machine once.”

“You what?” Hanzo asked, whipping his head over to stare at Jesse.

“The motherfucker ate one too many of my goddamn dollars, so I showed it what’s what. I wasn’t about to get my arm stuck up inside the bastard again because it wouldn’t cough up my chips. Yeah, it took me a week to write the script because I had zero fuckin’ clue, but I did it.”

Hanzo fixed Jesse with an openly befuddled look, eyes fluttering and jaw a little agape.

“It was about justice, Hanzo. Nothin’ less,” Jesse continued with a toothy, knowing smile.

“And how many times did you get your arm stuck inside the vending machine before you came up with this brilliant heist?”

Jesse’s mouth pursed and tilted with self-consciousness.

“...Three.”

Hanzo put his face in his hands and gave a melodramatic sigh.

“You are wholly unfathomable,” he said, though it was muffled by his fingers.

“Mm, I don’t think so. You’re picturing the scene just fine, I can tell,” Jesse replied, lightly smacking Hanzo’s thigh was the back of his hand. “You just can’t stand knowin’ how fuckin’
shameless I am and enjoy it all the same.”

Enjoy it, Hanzo did, and he desperately hoped the creeping warmth in his neck he was sure was a flush didn’t telegraph anything he was feeling too thoroughly. Time to leave.

“Just open doors as I need, you...buffoon.”

“Ooh, that’s a new one,” Jesse cackled as he took over the computer and began poking at it himself.

“Would you prefer something more akin to your native tongue? Pea-brained jackass, perhaps?”

Jesse fell on his side laughing. The intense severity with which Hanzo said the normally-rounded and slurred syllabary was funny as hell.

“My brain’s the size of a lima bean at least,” Jesse countered as he recovered from the worst of his fit.

A dubious hum was all Hanzo would offer in return as he searched the ceiling. The tiles were for aesthetic only – somewhere, his path was hidden. He spied a grate just above the head of the bed presumably for the air conditioning, and stood on the bed to press up on the panel. An ache poured down his side for raising his arms over his head, and he couldn’t suppress pulling a pained frown.

“Good?” Jesse asked as passively as he could as he watched.

“Yes,” Hanzo replied, though he had to work to minimize the strain in his voice. “This will do nicely. Are you ready?” he asked as he began undoing the buttons on his cuffs, marring his clean-cut look as his tattoo revealed itself from under the sleeve as he rolled it up.

“Sure am. Go on and keep the line open.”

Despite the verbal confidence, Jesse hesitated. If anything happened...all he’d be able to do was listen. His brow set to consider it. Wouldn’t be the first time, either. He blinked a few times and threw the fear aside. Hanzo was more than capable, and Jesse had come through far worse scrapes himself. There was almost nothing to be afraid of.

Almost. And suddenly, that felt like far too much in Jesse’s mind.

"Of course. I’ll keep track of junctions, since we have no way of tracking me directly. Additionally,” Hanzo said, pointing to the computer as he took a seat again next to Jesse, “You should have all my security credentials for this, just in case. I do not know how you want to save the information, however.”

“Oh, for Flinch’s shit?”

“Well, yes, but I meant...everything. Flinch’s console and mine have separate credentials. Perhaps you need to vacate the room and secret that away. You will need to be able to log in again.”

“Don’t try to soften what you’re sayin’,” Jesse replied a little too aggressively.

“It is the intelligent thing to do, McCree. Whether it becomes necessary for something trivial or tragic.”

Jesse pinched the bridge of his nose and nodded. Did Hanzo just know when Jesse was consumed with existential doubt?
“Yeah, okay. You’re right. I shouldn’t be backtalking.”

“It is fine. And do not feel you need to give me yours. I assume you...you already have a designated survivor.”

The corner of Jesse’s mouth twitched and his brow wilted.

“I don’t. Not...not anymore.”

Hanzo immediately understood from Jesse’s pained look he didn’t need to ask why he didn’t.

“I should not have presumed anything.”

“No, don’t...just let it go. Here.”

Using their encrypted channel, they exchanged their passwords and secure server information without further discussion. Tonight had been plenty discomfiting already.

“All right,” Jesse mumbled. “Go do what you do best.”

Despite all the reassurance and logic, Jesse still appeared distressed, so Hanzo took a moment to reach over and squeezed Jesse’s shoulder in solidarity.

“This is simple. Do not make it into calculus or pessimistic augury.”

That seemed to bolster him; Jesse sat up straighter and squared his shoulders.

“Yeah. This fucker don’t know his ass from a hole in the ground. We can run circles around him.”

“Much better,” Hanzo said warmly. The tone made Jesse look over in time to catch a fond, soft expression on Hanzo’s face that made Jesse’s concentration fade into static before his friend’s face settled back into his usual, flat professionalism. “That confidence is back where it belongs.”

Hanzo took his leave at last, and Jesse forced himself to re-focus on the task at hand. He had shit to do; enough sentimentality for one night. A tiny thunk was the only token of Hanzo jumping up and hauling himself up into the ceiling.

“Your first turn is about a hundred meters up. Mark when you make it, okay?”

Hanzo returned a ping on their frequency – he was still coming down from the rusty grind of pain in his chest from lifting himself up into the vents. Better he stay quiet as possible anyway. No telling how easily-heard he could be. The crawl was a tight fit for his broad shoulders, too; he was going to feel all of this in the morning. Jesse didn’t need to know that, though. Still, despite the close quarters and ache, he made his way at a steady clip.

“Mark,” Hanzo whispered.

“Left.”

So they went for almost twenty minutes, all the while the reverb-y sound of the antigrav elevator passing by growing in volume. He arrived at the grate and spied small depressed circles just aside of the frame – sensors.

“This one is alarmed.”
“Okay. Uh...yep, found it, one sec. There you go. It’s magnetically-sealed, but I turned it off.”

Hanzo rolled onto his left side best he could to give himself as much space as possible. The elevator hummed by on a trip up as he took hold of the grate, pushed out to remove it, and pulled it into the steel corridor with him. After sliding it well back behind him with a foot, he rolled back onto his chest, a low groan escaping him before he remembered the channel was open to check himself.

“What’s wrong?” Jesse came over the line, voice tight with concern.

“Nothing. Just...a little uncomfortable.”

“Okay,” Jesse replied after a long pause.

Hanzo distracted himself by timing the elevator as it passed over the next several minutes. It must have been for service staff, given its near-constant use.

“Where do I go from here?” he asked once he felt confident in the timing and movements of the carriage as it worked.

“West – left. Twenty feet down. I already took care of the alarms all up and down, but it probably shouldn’t stay that way too long. No tellin’ who’s monitoring on-site.”

"Yes."

The elevator passed again going up and Hanzo carefully eased his upper body out of the bent once it was clear. As anticipated, the antigrav field made itself apparent in a strange pressure around his head and chest as he entered it. Reassured, he shoved himself out wholesale and tried his best to ignore the compulsive spike of terror expecting to fall, only to hover instead. Now suspended, he drew his hands and feet above himself and waited for the elevator to make its return journey. Since there were only a few floors, the elevator rose and fell at a leisurely pace and Hanzo wouldn’t need to hold too tight or worry about downward velocity. The carriage came down and slowed to stop on the floor he and Jesse were on in their room – it pushed him down as it came to a halt. The grate was still out of reach with him facing north. He found purchase on the bottom outside edge of the carriage and used the leverage to pull his feet into the recessed bottom.

“I ain’t heard from you,” Jesse murmured.

“I am fine. Underneath the elevator carriage. This is simply delicate work.”

“Mark when you get in that vent, then.”

“Copy.”

Hand over hand on his makeshift banister, Hanzo adjusted his position ninety degrees counterclockwise in zero-g. The elevator went up, leaving Hanzo a little disoriented by the dichotomy of the unexpected acceleration without the sensation of intentional bodily movement. When it drifted back down a few minutes later, however, Hanzo was ready for it and used his target destination as a visual center as he hung upside-down and floated down to it. With his left hand still holding him in place, he reached and jerked hard on the grate as he passed and it came free in one try. He kept hold of it and waited out the pause as the elevator unloaded below the open vent on the basement floor.

When the elevator left, Hanzo held onto it only for a moment to overcome inertia and caught himself on the inside of the vent to stop. He slid the grate inside first and climbed in after – the wash of gravity reasserting itself on his body landed in a wave of nausea. For all the times he’d done it, this part had never gotten easier.
“Mark,” Hanzo wheezed.

“Good. You okay?”

“I hate antigrav.”

“Ooh, yeah, that’s shitty. Take your time, all the seals are re-engaged. The system can’t tell the grates are missin’.”

“Excellent.”

“You need a peptalk? Somethin’ don’t sound right.”

Maybe it was the muscle strain and nausea catching him at a low point. Maybe Hanzo just wanted to hear Jesse’s voice. Maybe he didn’t want to hide anymore. Nonetheless, the physical excuse was the only one he would acknowledge.

“Just talk while I get my legs under me.”

The mic caught Jesse’s little *buh* of surprise.

“A-all right. I figured out how to run two holo instances and have the big map running while I’m followin’ you. As I’ve been doing that, I’ve watched three different pairs of employee dots ‘disappear’ into storage closets on different floors. Is there somethin’ in the fuckin’ water? I can’t think of a job less sexy than theirs. At least you and me get cool costumes.”

Hanzo snickered quietly into his hand.

“There’s another one that’s been set up in the bathroom for ages. Like...a *distressingly* long time. He might died in – oh wait, he’s movin’, he’s leaving.”

Hanzo’s hand tightened into a fist as he strained not to break out into complete, audible laughter. Everything felt better for the stress release, and the world was solidifying around him again.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Of course. Whatever you need, Hanzo.”

*Don’t tempt me.*

“I’m ready to move on.”

“All righty. Take your second right.”

Ten minutes later, Hanzo stopped above the vault. Even from his odd angle, he could tell it was essentially a treasure room, loaded with goods on tables and shelves.

“I am here.”

“Great. I’ve been lookin’ over the security measures. Pretty standard stuff, but it is heavy-duty government-grade equipment. The seismic sensors on the floor are top-notch. Every angle has motion-triggered recording, looks like stored *in* Pennsylvania. Laser triggers just under you. More magnetic seals on the grates.”

“And a gigantic switch for all of it.”
“A-yup. Which has been flipped, by the by. Have fun.”

Hanzo picked up the grate and set it aside. Just to be sure, he tugged off the topmost button on his shirt and dropped it into the vault.

“Anything go off, McCree?”

“No, why?”

“Just testing. I will head inside.”

Getting down was going to be more strenuous than climbing up had been. Hanzo eased himself through the opening feet first and took a deep breath before letting his weigh hang entirely on his upper body strength. Though he couldn’t suppress the deep grimace, he lowered himself towards the floor without too much trouble. A tiny spike of fearful anticipation ran up Hanzo’s neck when his feet hit the floor, barely jostling the items on the shelves aside him, but nothing further came from Jesse, so he let the anxiety go with a crack of his neck.

The holomap had, of course, been scaled, but Hanzo wasn’t prepared for how large the vault was. It reminded him dimly of the place his family kept their most treasured, ancient artifacts back home in Hanamura. Art lined the walls. Jewels and other valuables were placed in cases neatly on tables and shelves. He spied a glass enclosure off in a corner – probably a sealed, temperature and humidity-monitored cellar. Hanzo’s eyebrow peaked with interest, but first things first. He surveyed his immediate surroundings and found nothing that stood out. With nothing to go on, Hanzo gave into his knee-jerk interest and headed for the glass cellar. It stretched for thirty feet, and the shelves inside went to the ceiling ten feet up.

“Do you see additional security for the cellar?’

“Hmm? There’s a cellar?” Jesse asked. “Oh shit, that’s what all the temperature sensors are for. No, nothing I can see. But eyes on the prize, buddy.”

“I know you have no interest. I doubt Arazi keeps sugary swill bent towards your tastes in there.”

“You claimin’ I ain’t got a palate, motherfucker?”

Hanzo laughed aloud. Only Jesse would say it like that.

“I confess some surprise, yes.”

“You bring back one or two, whatever you want. I’ll give your ass a whole fuckin’ set of tasting notes.”

Before Hanzo could fully craft a suitable scathing comeback, an assortment of tech items caught his eye – a few in particular. His eyes lit up.

“Remarkable.”

“Anybody can drink grape juice and list flavors, you fuckin’ idiot.”

“No,” Hanzo replied, snickering, “Not what I mean. I think I may have found what we need.”

“Oh? What’d you find?”

Hanzo reached out to smooth a hand over, of all things, an ancient LCD computer monitor.
He’d never seen one in person before. A mechanical keyboard and everything. His heart lifted and surged with a kind of excitement he rarely felt about anything.

“A magnificent antique,” he replied in awe.

Jesse sat back, surprised by the animated tone and soft wonder in Hanzo’s voice. It was pretty unprecedented to hear from him. It brought a small but deeply fond smile to Jesse’s face, matched with a bloom of warmth in his chest.

“Now what’s that mean?” he asked, amused.

“An early-century silicon motherboard.”

“What? No shit! Man, I ain’t seen one since my Deadlock days. Learned to type on one.”

“You did? I have never seen one.”

“Let’s just say Deadlock didn’t have state-of-the-art record keeping equipment for its gun-running. You still know what you’re doin’, egghead? Not exactly quantum computing.”

“I have read extensively on the history and technical aspects. It is no problem. Ah!”

As Hanzo admired the computer, he spied a stack of plastic squares with cables. He grinned and picked one up. What a novelty.

“Physical hard drives,” Hanzo announced.

“Hell yes.”

“Not original, clearly remanufactured, but certainly a secure choice in this day and age. The equipment needed to interface with it is difficult to find and the average person does not know how to use it, much less how to decompress the data inside.”

The data was probably heavily compressed for storage on such limited media – Hanzo likely didn’t have the time to sort through what was what. He stacked the six drives and their connection cables and looked around for something to haul them in. A few minutes’ scanning of some shelves turned up a bunch of designer handbags – Hanzo snatched up the least openly-gaudy one and dropped the drives inside.

“I do not have all the tech necessary to read these, but it should be found easily enough in the underground markets back in Shanghai, even if it means I have to assemble it by hand.”

“We gotta go all the way to China for that shit?”

“Not specifically, but my console in my safehouse there is the best place to do the work necessary to access everything on these drives. My handheld isn’t nearly fast or secure enough.”

“Good point. I didn’t finish that whiskey you bought me, anyway.”

“And you chastise me over the wine. Speaking of, as I recall, you owe me tasting notes,” Hanzo replied as he turned back for the cellar.

“Oh my god, you jackass.”

“Do we not deserve a celebratory token?”
Jesse drummed his fingers on his knee, recalling his train of thought earlier about stealing or breaking something to satisfy his lingering irritation with having to come here at all.

“Y’know what, we fuckin’ do. Fuck him, his massive fuckin’ hubris running all his security out of one guy’s terminal, and his investment vehicle wine. Jack some shiny shit, too. We can split the take.”

“Such entrepreneurial spirit. Yes, I will. This bag is hardly full.”

“Bag? It ain’t custom, right? The bastard probably commissions kinky bullshit for his fuckin’ purses, too.”

"Not to worry – I recognize this one. It was a very popular pattern from Hermes’ last fall-winter season.”

“How did I ever not realize you’re gay,” Jesse snarked.

Hanzo rolled his eyes and huffed dismissively.

“Were that as much of an accurate correlation as you suggest, you should have at least some hobbling, pithy sense of taste,” he shot back in scathing but obviously-delighted tones. “At least by half, considering.”

“You know good goddamn well that is not how bein’ bisexual works,” Jesse replied, openly laughing.

“Humor me.”

Hanzo cracked the cellar door and a resulting psssh announced the seal breaking. The winery labels were familiar to him despite being universally exclusive ones; he’d seen more than his share of multi-thousand-dollar bottles in his time before leaving Hanamura. A special bit of shelving towards the middle, differently-organized from the rest, caught his eye. Trophy wines.

“Shit,” he whispered as he looked them over.

“What?” Jesse asked, worried.

“Oh – no, sorry. There are extraordinary vintages in here. More than one bottle of Saint-Emilion area wines from the early 2040s.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Most of Bordeaux was lost in the European Offensive of 2045.”

“…Oh.”

“Yes. These are priceless.”

“Maybe steal somethin’ a little less red-hot. I can see the international news chyron about historic wine theft in my head.”

“Agreed. There are plenty other fine cabernets in here.”

Hanzo perused the slightly more quote-unquote common offerings and selected a couple bottles of his personal favorites. Jesse would just have to deal with it if he demanded sharing. They, too, went in the bag. On his way back towards the jewelry, Hanzo spotted a host of loose diamonds and
snatched up a few of the lower-carat bags. Good as cash. A half-dozen luxury watches later, he felt he’d done enough shopping for one day.

The trip back was quick enough, even allowing time for him to pause after navigating the anti-grav elevator shaft back up to their floor. Once returned, Hanzo dropped the bag in first and let himself down with a long sigh after it.

“Oh shit, diamonds? Good catch. And watches. This ain’t your first smash-and-grab, huh?” Jesse said, pleased as he dug through the take.

“It is not as though I have access to my trust in my exile, hm?” Hanzo replied. Jesse had moved to sit right up against the headboard, so Hanzo just flopped onto his back where he’d landed from above, gingerly rubbing his aching side. He’d shut his eyes in his attempt to relax, so he didn’t notice Jesse grows contemplative and serious as he turned a hard drive over in his hands.

“Thank you, Hanzo. Really.”

Hanzo opened his eyes to look up and over from where he lay to see Jesse where he sat, but wasn’t courageous enough to meet his eyes.

“Of course. Whatever it takes for you to find what you seek,” he said, voice soft enough to accentuate the natural rust in his voice. Jesse frowned and had to concentrate not to let his robotic hand tighten too much as it held the drive.

“I don’t know what I’m lookin’ for.”

“Remember what I told you,” Hanzo replied patiently.

Jesse nodded to himself. His mind eased even as his chest filled with constricting pressure. Who was centering who, these days? What did Gabe even have to offer him anymore? Why did Jesse have to fucking care? Rhetorical self-interrogation, of course, but that was the helpless thought he always returned to. Hanzo was telling him to let that thought go on the back burner until he himself and/or outside circumstances solved it for him, but it felt impossible. Like he was going to be stuck, doomed to eventually fall back into living in suspended time like the first year he left Overwatch. Did life exist outside that time, that headspace, for him?

“McCree.”

“Hm.”

A hand nudged at Jesse’s prosthetic, rousing him, Hanzo wasn’t quite holding his forearm – the tip of his fingers sat atop the edge of the skull-decorated bracer, equal parts hesitant and insistent.

“Put it away.”

Hanzo’s hand turned palm up to take the hard drive. After a pained beat, Jesse surrendered it and Hanzo stowed it back in the handbag. Jesse’s troubled countenance didn’t change, so Hanzo slid himself up to sit next to Jesse against the headboard.

“I think tonight’s success calls for something a little stronger than wine.”

“Yeah, pickin’ something up on the way home --”

“No, no,” Hanzo drawled, hands folded in his lap and face lit with unusual precociousness. “Why should we pay for it?”
Jesse’s head popped up and stared out into empty space, measuring what he’d just heard. A sly twinkle brightened his eyes and his mouth creased in a smile.

“Maybe we do deserve a little bit more fun. What’re you thinkin’?”

Hanzo nipped up his computer to reference the map again.

“I will take care of it.”

“More climbin’?”

“No, I think I have expended myself for the evening.”

“Y’know if we ask for bottle service, we’ll probably get it.”

“Hmm, true. Arazy’s hospitality,” Hanzo sneered, but suddenly brightened. “Do you think that extends to taking more than our share off-site?”

“Maybe not for others, but I bet it does for me tonight,” Jesse said, gloating.

“Ha! Then I think I have a plan to get us free alcohol and some of the most sensitive data on Earth out of here, then.”

“All right. Go on then, master thief,” Jesse replied in a rough lull far too low and suave for Hanzo’s fragile sensibilities.

“Yes. I...I shall,” Hanzo stuttered a bit as he got up. He lingered for a moment as he automatically went to unroll his sleeves. Looking down at himself, he found a surprisingly low amount of residual dust on him, mostly concentrated at his shoulders in two gray spots. A little bit of dusting off rid him of the worst of it. Thanks be to industrial-grade HEPA filters. He snapped another button off as he strode to the bathroom to watch himself in the mirror and ruffle his hair. Artfully ragged, yes.

“Ooh, gunnin’ for an Oscar?” Jesse teased – he’d followed Hanzo, interested in the sudden inspiration.

“I will preemptively cut off your joke about me qualifying for a Razzie.” Hanzo turned abruptly on a heel to regard Jesse, looking him up and down with an imperious gaze and sarcastic, quirked eyebrows. “You need to come to the realization I let you make me be the butt of a joke when and where I choose to,” Hanzo said, proud and aloof.

Jesse wasn’t buying it for a moment, however.

“Now I know that ain’t true,” he shot back warmly. “But that’d be pretty convincing to anybody else, I’ll grant you that.”

Hanzo sighed melodramatically.

“I tried.”

“I just know you too well,” Jesse replied, leant against the doorframe and hips set jauntily. With his arms crossed on his chest and unusually-dressed to the nines, he made for quite a picture of handsome cockiness.

Their mutual teasing ended there, as abruptly as if a glass had been dropped and shattered on the floor. A too-long beat of silence between them left each man feeling far too seen. Hanzo edged
past Jesse on his way back out to the main room, hitting him with a jocky elbow to ease the sudden tension. Too close. Far too close. Tighten up. Nothing to see here. Certainly nothing to read into from Jesse’s wide, soft eyes staring a beat too long.

“I will be back in fifteen minutes.”

Hanzo slid out the door without further discussion, leaving Jesse feeling oddly anticipatory. Whatever. Tonight had ground on both their nerves, and alcohol was the perfect recipe to fix that after a successful heist. They both needed to chill the hell out.

As Hanzo stalked down the hallway, utterly uncaring of the stares he was drawing for his seemingly-sex-bedraggled appearance, he felt much the same about a good, quality bender. He deserved it after the week he’d had. Thanks to the map, Hanzo found the kitchen in short order. He strode without hesitation into the prep area, making several line cooks visibly jump. A half-dozen sets of eyes shot over to him, but he never dropped his icy glare and squared, aggressive stance.

“Your best brandy, and two bottles of your best whiskey. Now.”

The sous chef didn’t even try to question him and disappeared through a door on Hanzo’s left. In seconds, lightly-trembling hands pass off his requests. This was probably not the first time this had happened in this palace and its weekly nonsense attempt at parroting Bacchus. He whipped around and marched back out without a whisper’s worth of acknowledgment. It was almost like being back home again, in all honesty. The suit, the bad attitude, the waitstaff scattering from even the mildest suggestion of retribution. He could summon the act with expert, practiced grace, but no longer could he ignore the fear he’d seen in the waitstaff and... felt sympathetically the way he hadn’t when was twenty-one, spoiled, and stupid.

Jesse was right. Hanzo should be glad to miss his erstwhile position in Hanamura, simplicity of purpose be damned. Maybe things were better now. Maybe he was.

“Everything okay?” Jesse’s voice broke in.

Hanzo had gotten back, but didn’t recall a moment of the walk. Jesse had returned to bed – no, not like that, stop it, Hanzo admonished himself – and he was eyeing Hanzo perceptively.


“You gonna let me have any fun tonight?” Jesse chastised with a wink.

“You got to rhetorically destroy our host, and--” Hanzo said, holding up his acquisitions, “--I got extra whiskey for you. Am I not the very best friend you have ever had?”

“Hmm. I guess,” Jesse replied, holding a hand out to take a look at the bottle. “Ooh. Ain’t had this in a spell. Okay. Ain’t had this in a spell. Okay, yeah, I take it back, you’re downright spoiling me.”

Hanzo jerked the bottle up out of Jesse’s hand as he tried to take it, earning a theatrical pout.

“Not here.”

“Suppose it is best to get messy back home.”

“Precisely. And I have had enough of this nonsense. All right; I will go first and bring the car
“Wait, by yourself?”

“Yes. I think it best, given the intent to get our merchandise out. It makes the most sense I would do this for you and you follow later.”

“And you’re just gonna...walk out with a handle of liquor in each hand and a cache of nuclear-hot intelligence in your handbag?”

“The wine and brandy are covering it,” Hanzo replied casually.

“And if you catch static and get searched?”

“I will not allow that to happen.”

“Hanzo--” Jesse sighed, but he wasn’t trying that hard to admonish him. The confidence and swagger in Hanzo was the most continuously-upbeat attitude Jesse had seen out of him all day. Was their argument only just this morning? Surely, it had been weeks ago. Time was so odd in Hanzo’s presence.

“While I recall your commentary on my perpetual scowl detracting from my acting skills...”

“Now hang on--”

“McCree, look at me.”

Jesse looked up from where he’d been staring at the floor in contemplation and found a smile waiting for him. Facetiousness. Duh. Jesse rubbed the back of his neck and returned a shyer smile.


“Copy that. Keep the line open?”

“Yes. Keep my computer, find a suitable exit vector if the worst comes to pass.”

The immediate blazing and overwhelming knee-jerk response Jesse felt but his sense of self-preservation managed to choke back was no way – I’ll just fight my way out to meet you. In together, out together.

Tricky motherfucking adverb, that one.

“Ready?” Hanzo asked. Thank Christ he hadn’t thought to question Jesse’s silence.

“Whenever you are.”

“Excellent. Just relax and wait. I may not be silver-tongued like you, but I have my own methods.”

“Oh boy.”

Hanzo didn’t even bother to clasp the bag shut – a good tactic in Jesse’s mind. The kind of passing casualness that lent credibility to the con. He shouldered the bag, grabbed his jacket to sling it over his left arm, and took a whiskey bottle in each hand.

Jesse got the door for him and found the hallway empty, so he watched Hanzo’s back retreat
until he turned out of sight. He shut the door and leant back against it – being rid of this place would be a huge weight off his mind, and the sooner, the better. The whole fucking country needed to be in his rearview mirror. Nothing had been right since leaving the States. It hadn’t all been miserable, but the sense of being off-kilter was irrepressible even in the best moments. All that had changed was venue, so what the fuck? This wasn’t all about Gabe; thinking about him created a very particular and unmistakable curl in his spine and pain in his gut. His time in Oasis had been that feeling exchanged with...an anticipatory fear that sat right off the tips of his fingers.

Whiskey, he reminded himself. Whiskey solved all those pesky thinking problems.


“What,” snapped Hanzo. Jesse knew full well it was an act, but he’d be damned if he could have caught any kind of theatrical tell in Hanzo’s voice if he didn’t already know that. In their time together, Jesse had had ample opportunity to see Hanzo at his very bitchiest towards a number of unwitting victims, and this sounded no different from the genuine thing. Jesse couldn’t help a smile.

“No containers off-site, sir.”

“Your employer could buy a small country, what the fuck does he care about this?”

“City ordinance.”

“None of them are open, as you can see, and I am upsettingly stone-cold sober. Fuck your ordinance.”

“Sir--”

“By all means, call Arazi down here, I will relish watching Mr. Marshall embarrass him in front of a third party. If he will even show.”

“You are--”

“With Mr. Marshall, yes,” Hanzo said with cloying condescension. “So good of you to catch on. Now, I have had an exceptionally long evening and your dime-a-dozen cardboard mattresses have done enough damage to keep my chiropractor employed for a decade, so if I may.”

“O-of course, sir. I will have your Bentley brought around.”

“In five minutes or less.”

Jesse had to admit being impressed. That had to be a world record for efficiency with pure bitchiness. Four minutes later, Jesse could hear the distinct sound of a car door.

“Fucking told you,” Hanzo’s smug voice came over the line.

“I’ve never been prouder, you gigantic bastard,” Jesse replied, laughing.

“Get out here, but make everything look the part.”

“Ooh, shit, yeah.”

Jesse untied his hair and mussed it with his mechanical hand while hastily unbuttoning his vest with his right. The tie came off next and was shoved in his breast pocket. Sleeves were unrolled and messily shoved back up; shirt, untucked and three of those buttons undone, too. That should do. He
scanned the room – now, the rest.

The pillows were the first victims, shoved off the bed as if batted away in irritation. As he pulled back and tangled the bedspread, he was struck with inspiration. He climbed back onto the bed and stood on his knees facing the headboard.

“What is taking you?” Hanzo asked.

“Bit of workin’ man’s revenge,” Jesse explained with strain in his voice as he squeezed the solid oak of the headboard with his left hand. A heavy crack announced its splintered destruction.

“Was that--”

“The headboard, yeah. Thought about puttin’ a fist through the wall, but this is more artful.”

“You broke it? With your hand?”

“You said make it convincing. Just...drawin’ on personal experience.”

“I see,” Hanzo replied as passively as he could before pressing his closed fist hard against his mouth, trying and failing miserably not to think too deeply about what Jesse’s explanation meant. Fuck it – he plucked up one of the whiskey bottles and began stripping it of its wax seal.

“All right. Tastefully trashed. Be out soon.”

“Mm,” Hanzo hummed from under a healthy introductory drag of whiskey.

When Jesse slid into the backseat five minutes later, Hanzo passed the opened bottle back to him and pulled away from the stairs to return to the city proper. Jesse let out a pleased and reassured little sigh.

“Kanpai, motherfucker,” Jesse said, tipping the neck of the bottle towards Hanzo in the front seat before taking a drink of his own, and Hanzo had to bend over the steering wheel for the violence of his ensuing fit of laughter.

As soon as they got back to their flat, they hit the ground running. Hanzo had intended to crack the brandy to satisfy his sweet tooth, but straight bourbon was too easy and neither of them were in any mood to actually contemplate their liquor. Any other night, Jesse would decry such a waste of top-shelf whiskey on collegiate-style bingeing, but the hell with it. They had returned just after midnight and by 3am, they’d finished one entire handle between them, trading bad jokes and sophomoric insults at each other, and now Jesse was clumsily attempting to open the second.

“Fuck off, I’ll get the little shit,” Jesse giggled as his good hand slipped tearing at the wax.

“Give it here,” Hanzo said before dissolving into stuttered snits of mirth and flopped against Jesse’s side. That, of course, made Jesse’s arm shift and he lost grip again. He smacked Hanzo hard on the top of his thigh.

“I see it now. It’s subter...snubber...you’re fuckin’ me up,” Jesse eventually gave up. “Sly son of a bitch.”

“I’m doing no such thing. You’re just in...incomp...munou.”

“No, no Japanese, I ain’t know it. S’cheatin’.”

“You said you can get by.”
“Yeah! And by that I mean count to ten, say hi, fuck off, I’ll kill you, and I’ll eat you out,” Jesse confessed, howling with laughter.

*I bet you can.*

The involuntary thought brought Hanzo up short. Uh oh. *Uh oh.* Time to slam on the brakes and behave himself. Jesse could have his fun, but almost too late, Hanzo recalled the terrifying precipice he’d been existing on for weeks and had now added alcohol to. He’d earned the opportunity to cut loose, not hang himself on his own empty folly. This was supposed to be *fun.* They both needed it.

“Everything one would *ever* need to know in visiting my homeland,” Hanzo replied dryly.

“Aaw, come on,” Jesse soothed, leaning hard into Hanzo. “I been teachin’ you Spanish. Whyn’t you teach me some Japanese?”

“Not right fucking *now,*” Hanzo chuckled. Heaven help him, Jesse was so *warm* and *soft* right up against him. Hanzo was far too drunk to fool even himself with stoicism.

“Sure we can! I just won’t fuckin’ remember!”

There: another real, toothy smile split Hanzo’s face. Jesse had seen far too few of them in the past week. A snap drew his scattered attention – Hanzo had opened the second bottle. He only poured one glass, though. Was he tapping out? Shame, but then this was the drunkest they had ever been together. While out wandering the southwest, they’d certainly gotten tipsy, but had otherwise been responsible about it.

Man, that trip. This was the first time since leaving New Mexico for Kentucky that it felt like he and Hanzo had achieved a similar level of... *comfort.* Jesse had *really* fucking missed it. Just them, a room, liquor, and time. He’d fucked it up by insisting on chasing shadows.

“Why the fuck am I still wearing this? I hate it,” Hanzo muttered, gesturing with a barely-controlled hand to his button-up and slacks. He stood and weaved on his feet. Both men laughed, but Jesse was mindful enough to reach out and hold Hanzo’s wrist to help center him.

“If that’s where you’re at, you sure all those buttons ain’t gonna outwit you? I was startin’ to believe you ain’t ever *seen* a goddamn button before comin’ here, considering what you usually wear.”

“Insolence! I am a *master assassin,* asshole. They will *never* see me coming,” Hanzo shot back as he wandered unevenly towards his room.

Jesse returned his attention to his fresh glass of bourbon with a huge grin. See, now *this* was what it was supposed to be. Stupidity and companionship and *joy.* Y’know what? Fuck Overwatch. Fuck Gabe. Fuck *everybody,* because this was -

An unexpected and overwhelming chill settled over Jesse. Hanzo’s advice from this morning came back to him as if the man was standing behind him and speaking at his ear: *If you do not know what it is, it is nothing. When it becomes something, you will know.*

And *this,* right here, right now, was nothing more or less than *exactly* what he wanted, he realized as he let the frightening depth of the emotion soak into him with all the eagerness of a desiccated sponge plunged into a merciless ocean tide. The psychic buzzards that had mocked his ignorance just days past cackled again now, and the shadow he’d known would catch him by surprise now had him by his throat, unafraid to show its face to him under epiphany’s light. Time.
Time with Hanzo was what he wanted. All he wanted. The trips and jobs and seeming righteous cause of the journey had, at some point, become a pretense he was afraid to let end, lest some illusion break.

Because if the job ended, that meant everything else did. Would Hanzo choose to stay just for its own sake? For...for Jesse’s sake? The everything else Hanzo gave him had become something...irreplaceable. Precious. Needed. Did Hanzo...need, too? An old, old memory surged to the forefront of Jesse’s mind, vivid as the day he’d lived it.

Jesse had been eighteen. Gangly, angry, evasive. He’d been spending an afternoon with Ana at shooting practice. In almost two years, she’d had probably the most success in getting their young recruit to lighten the hell up, even if he was still unwilling to be forthcoming about himself in any real detail. Gabe was teaching him discipline and had earned his trust, but Ana was giving him the sense of humor, however dry and occasionally-morose, that he desperately had needed.

They had been packing up their weapons when a young man – a couple years older than Jesse had been at the time – came into the range. Tall, broad, rugged as Jesse himself would be one day...and handsome. Jesse had seen him in passing many times before, but had never learned his name. Just meeting eyes with him sent a blazing spark down Jesse’s torso. Ana, sharp-eyed as she was even without a scope, had immediately noted and caught onto the look as well as Jesse’s subsequent skittishness as they left together. Maybe she’d assumed it was fine to speak because she’d seen him start to generally open up to others on base and even be so bold to chat up a few girls in the past year. Jesse had never been sure.

“Staring at him won’t change anything,” Ana had snarked. Her tone was always flat and sharp, but Jesse had been learning to notice when and where it gave just enough for the people she liked and trusted. Still, the teasing callout had struck painfully for very different reasons.

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about,” Jesse had replied woodenly and stared at his feet as they walked.

“Oh pl--”

Ana had turned to tease him further, but her face immediately fell registering Jesse’s wide, fear-flattened eyes and paled skin. She stopped in the hall and caught Jesse by the arm, instinctively understanding he was liable to bolt.

“Jesse?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he repeated even more robotically. It wasn’t convincing in the slightest, but Jesse’s fight-or-flight instinct had kicked in and he didn’t have the intellectual bandwidth to perform any better. Adrenaline left his consciousness trudging along at an all-consuming, droll hum, waiting for the first possible exit vector for escape.

An equipment room Ana dragged him into became exactly the opposite of that, but it was a better place to talk. To date, meeting her troubled gaze was one of the precious few times Jesse could ever recall seeing her appear truly at a loss.

“You’ve never told anyone, have you? Not even Gabriel?”

It was so very her to be so devastatingly direct. He turned away, fear and shame driving him equally. No. Especially not Gabriel. He was pretty okay, but no way he would ever embrace something like this. Why should he? Jesse didn’t reply, but Ana’s hands reached for and planted themselves on his shoulders nonetheless.
“Jesse. You are safe here. You have been from the start, and I know you actually believe that now. That will not change.”

It took him a very long time to speak again, but Ana was patient enough to wait out his extreme reticence. Literally every question he had stuffed away somewhere inside him was stupid, he knew, no matter how understanding Ana might be.

“It’s okay?” had been the only one he felt brave enough to speak.

“Completely.”

“What if someone--”

“If a single person gives you an iota of trouble, I want to know about it, and it will be dealt with.”

That hadn’t eased Jesse’s mind as much as Ana hoped it would. If anything, it unsettled him more. No matter what, it entailed being...seen. He’d gotten a very long way in his short life on the virtue of invisibility. It should stay that way. Being different, being out of line, did nothing but got you dead.

“Why’ve I...gotta be like this?”

Easily, Jesse could see the flash of surprise that morphed to hurt on Ana’s face. Instinct probably drove her to smother it, but she’d given a soft sigh and let real tenderness soften her usually-severe countenance.

“I can’t tell you why. I’m not a neuroscientist. But that’s not what matters; it’s a part of you, just like the color of your hair and your smart-ass mouth,” Ana explained, offering a shade of levity that got Jesse to give up a flicker of a smile. “It’s supposed to be there, and it’s worthwhile, just like the rest of you. You have nothing to be ashamed of, no matter what you may have heard in the past, and you deserve to have whatever you feel reciprocated by someone who respects that. Respects you.”

“No...no matter who they are?”

“No matter who they are.”

Something dark, suffocating, and unnameable physically vented from him and let him take the fullest breath he’d been allowed as far as he could remember. It was a release completely unlike any he’d ever felt before and would rarely experience after.

“I know you keep a lot locked up inside you, and that includes things you want and think you cannot have. Your heart does as it pleases, and that is more of a virtue than you believe. Give yourself the chance to live this out honestly before you decide for certain it’s the terrible thing done to you that you believe it is right now. ” Ana’s grip on him had tightened as the tension in his shoulders had melted away.

“Maybe. But don’t tell Reyes.”

“I won’t tell anyone if you want, but there is one thing you should know if you’re that worried.”

It was easy to still pretend to look down and away, yet glance to see Ana’s face, given their height difference.
“What?” he’d asked.

“Gabriel is just like you.”

Hanzo re-emerged from his room, dressed down and still weaving in his journey back to the couch where Jesse was camped out. Hanzo immediately noticed the change in Jesse’s demeanor in the short time he’d stepped away – he’d leant onto his knees, bourbon glass dangling precariously in the fingers that held it by the rim. His face was darkened with deep, intense thought, and his mechanical hand covered his mouth, though the fingers were spread wide and seemed to barely stick in place, telling of Jesse’s drunkenness. All of it was deeply troubling to see after a space of maybe three minutes.

As Hanzo shuffled closer, he saw Jesse’s eyebrows lift and tilt in distress, and it was too heavy a strike on Hanzo’s raw and all-too-earnest heart. He dropped to sit on the coffee table to regard Jesse face-to-face, just as he had earlier in the week.

“What is wrong, Jesse?”

Instantly, Jesse’s flat, empty eyes lost in thought snapped to and stared, incredulous, over at Hanzo. Hanzo, in turn, realized his irrevocable mistake in one long, slow tsunami of regret suffocating everything in him stem to stern.

Did that happen? Had Jesse been too lost to memory? No, Jesse could see as he stared up at Hanzo’s stricken expression. Hanzo had called him by his first name. And as Jesse watched his friend’s face shift towards open panic, the entirety of the past week fell into place with perfect alignment.

Hanzo didn’t have to be afraid of being so familiar unless it meant something. Something different. Something the term best friend didn’t quite fit. The fights, the odd silences, the reticence, the fucking fall, Jesse recalled as he looked over at Hanzo’s mottled shoulder visible under his tank top – all of it, in one, great mental upheaval, made sense. One second had become a decoder ring for the several thousand seconds that had preceded it. And for Jesse himself, too, the signs had all been there, had he the courage in sobriety to acknowledge it: his intense, abiding need to know how Hanzo was feeling. Trying so hard to earn another smile out of him. The disproportional distress over the smallest suggestion of difficulty between them or unwilling separation from each other.

Jesse’s lower three fingers uncurled from his glass and reached, the tip of his middle finger just brushing Hanzo’s knee where he sat on the coffee table in front of him.

Ana had been right – she always was. Jesse’s heart did want as it pleased, even with his mind’s ignorance, and sometimes even at the cost of himself.

Hanzo balked further. Did he really just say that? Jesse’s first name, apropos of nothing, in that tone? Careful, quiet, tender? What had he just been telling himself? The soft dusting at his leg distracted him from falling completely to despair. His eyes dipped low, absorbed the extremely hesitant offer, and zipped back up to meet Jesse’s eyes again and find...find...

Acquiescence?

Surprise, certainly. Worry, too. Uncertainty. But amongst all those, too, was an irrefutable yes. It sat in widened spot of black pupil inside Jesse’s gold-flecked irises. Jesse was seeing Hanzo in a new truth for the very first time in the midst of his own precipitating...something. Jesse was drunk enough to let a particular emotion come to him, and Hanzo had conversely been too drunk to restrain a similar one. And now, all Hanzo had to do was ask, and he could indulge in the desire he’d kept
It’d be fun, too. Hanzo felt no doubt that it would be, functionally, the worst sex he ever had, what with both of them so far gone – it would probably be difficult to even get up, much less off. But there would be plenty of tripping over themselves and each other, clumsy hands, and laughter. Sweet, if ineffectual.

All he had to do was ask.

But tomorrow? Tomorrow.

Who would regret the most, first? Hanzo knew how much he would, and knew enough of who Jesse was as a decent man to appreciate what his guilt might look like. He’d think he imposed himself, somehow, no matter how Hanzo might try to reassure him. He’d blame his stress, his personal angst overriding his better judgment. Whatever epiphany Jesse was currently having about himself, Hanzo and... them, that wasn’t enough to jump into bed with, no matter the lack of sobriety. Especially so, in fact. Jesse’s shock was just as evident as burgeoning... interest, if not moreseo. Hanzo could ask, and Jesse might say yes and yes and yes, but a decision made in a state like theirs was inherently a bad idea.

And in Hanzo’s case, an exceptionally selfish one.

Jesse was still transfixed, too stunned and drunk and consumed to figure anything out past the unreadable expression on his friend’s face. Want had been there, Jesse was sure of it, but Hanzo was holding back in some unknown analysis. After an entire month of not knowing what to do or be, the suddenness of knowing strangled Jesse’s rationality and ability to act on an ounce of it. He’d gotten the answer he’d been blindly grappling to understand, and the significance of the revelation landed like so much lead in his arms, he couldn’t possibly parse its entirety.

But that tiny line of touch between them, barely able to be felt by either man, remained, neither to pull away nor edge closer and complete the circuit.

For the first time in... twenty seconds, hours, minutes, whatever, Hanzo blinked.

“I am going to bed.”

No further discussion followed – Hanzo stood and stiffly marched back into his room. Jesse remained frozen in place for almost an hour, utterly unable to comprehend what had just happened to him. Slowly-returning sobriety only left a terrifying hole where his ramshackle emotional levee had finally breached.

Chapter End Notes

a selection from Hanzo’s playlist: I Think I Love You, by The Partridge Family - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bb4FMn-IWEY

a selection from Jesse’s playlist: Losing All Sense, by Grizzly Bear - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Av-BCG0xjS0
As soon as Jesse began hovering up towards wakefulness the next morning, the long, tearing pull of a hangover headache mercilessly and almost immediately finished the job. No gentle, lazy lay-in for him. The recollection of why he was hungover chased the hot throb in his head, adding to the burning weight in his gut. He rolled over and covered his head with his pillow to muffle his groan of pain, just in case Hanzo was awake and had even the slightest chance of overhearing.

“What the fuck,” he mumbled into the sheets, making it sound like he’d stuffed his dumbass maw with a shitload of cottonballs. That was how it felt, too, thanks to the hangover.

What had he done? What the fuck had Hanzo done? Jesse’s single saving grace was the blessing he’d woken up alone. Thank fucking god for that. He already didn’t know how to clean his emotional mess up – he could have handled those last moments with Hanzo better, but at least he hadn’t been so callous as to ruin such a perfect goddamn friendship with one stupid, drunken…

Well, not a mistake, per se. That implied Jesse hadn’t had a genuine epiphany. He had. Shit. Fuck.

“Goddamn it.”

He hadn’t needed to deal with this in years. Many years. He had always lived pretty fast and loose with his physical relationships, but Blackwatch had taught him how to do it responsibly. The job made it very easy to beg off more permanent attachments, enjoy moments as they came, and leave it at that. He wasn’t a heartbreaker – everyone he had bedded had joined him with no illusions, being in Overwatch and Blackwatch themselves. It was an environment that naturally fostered a lot of friends-with-benefits situations, being on the road all the time…and in near-constant danger. He didn’t keep anybody more seriously than a sure-thing booty call on speed dial. Any more intense crushes he’d had in the past had been flights of fancy at most. Something to fill an idle hour as a what-if for entertainment. He’d been too busy in Blackwatch to even think seriously about partnership, much less the time to waste wanting it. And after Blackwatch, well…he hadn’t exactly kept up with friends, had he?
This, Hanzo, was...not that. No lying to himself; he’d caught feelings. Very real ones that, now that he saw and recognized and internalized them, filled his lungs with something thicker and hotter than air. He mashed his face harder into the mattress. Sobriety was not making any of this any easier. It didn’t help knowing something would have to be done about it. They had to talk. Today. Hanzo fucking deserved that.

And Jesse had zero clue what the fuck to say.

If he’d wanted something casual and easy, Jesse could have had it ten times over by now. No matter that he hadn’t known Hanzo’s sexuality until recently. He’d have asked, gotten a yes or no, and left it at that, come what may. A lot of their time in the States would have been very different if they had been casual fuckbuddies, and Jesse’s knee-jerk emotional reaction recoiled from the idea. They’d grown close organically. Come to care, entirely divorced from any impulse to maintain appearances for anyone else. Through real suffering Jesse would have felt compelled to keep to himself, had they been more physical together. It had been a perfect vacuum to remake himself in a new image, for Hanzo’s benefit as well as his own.

Nothing about their...their friendship, their relationship, had been quote-unquote casual from the start. Jesse’s fists knotted up the hair on the back of his head.

It occurred to him that the situation was exactly as true on Hanzo’s part, too. Had an interest in casual sex ever occurred to him? Jesse honestly hadn’t given it a single thought. Why? Normally, he would. Hanzo was...gorgeous, after all. Nobody but him could make a murderous scowl look like it just as easily belonged in a couture fashion ad for bullshit cologne. Jesse wasn’t fucking blind – just stupid. What did that mean? Did Hanzo matter too much? Not enough? Was he just...lonely? Well, he knew the answer to that, but…

This was all so completely unprecedented and sudden. He was flailing, and he knew it, but knowing it didn’t stop the sense he was disappearing under a terrible emotional morass, never to be seen again.

Time to stop, take a very deep breath, and catch up to himself. Start from the end and work back. He considered that look Hanzo had given him. The final tip-off. Jesse couldn’t decide if he really did wish he’d been blackout drunk and had forgotten what it looked like. It was irrelevant, anyway; he did, in painstaking detail. Big, dark brown eyes opened wide and uncharacteristically plaintive. Hanzo’s jaw hung a little open in worried surprise at himself, making that pouty lower lip appear just on the wrong side of unseemly. What Jesse’s name had sounded like, coming off Hanzo’s tongue; the way he’d held onto the double-consonant s as his first language had taught him.

The rumination broke as Jesse’s breath caught in his chest. Holy shit, what the fuck was he doing, waxing poetic like that?

A piece of him had worried/hoped his being wasted had maybe assumed too much out of so little, but as Jesse recalled it now, perfect and clear as if it had been five minutes ago, that had clearly been paranoia on his part. Hanzo really had been keeping something from him since arriving in Oasis. Maybe longer – who knew?

Christ, how long had Hanzo planned to keep it to himself? Forever? Jesse knew Hanzo too well to assume anything else. If that had been Hanzo’s intent, why? Did he think it was a passing fancy, or was it because he didn’t think Jesse would ever reciprocate? A painful, almost sickening weight made Jesse’s heart sink. It would be very much Hanzo to assume not only that, but that he didn’t deserve to find out at all.

But all this was speculation, no matter how well-informed. Only one path existed to answer any of those questions, and Hanzo would expect many answers of his own in return. Jesse should have at
least some of his shit straight before making an appearance. Try again.

So, back to last night. The look. His own reminiscing before. That had been the actual catalyst for him more than anything. The omnipresent, distant ache in his chest had had a root; the all-consuming desire to drag Hanzo into their rental car and fuck off permanently. Part of that was simply avoidance, to not deal with his own problems. But...life was better with Hanzo. It made more sense. It was fun again. He wanted not just to keep it, but secret it away where no one would see.

Or interrupt.

It was a specific and potent kind of selfishness, and Jesse had never been in the business of stinginess with his friendships. He loved being amongst the people he cared about in any volume, and reveled in the opportunity to share in togetherness, at least typically. That hadn’t entirely been the case even in Kentucky, he had to admit to himself. Hanzo was...special. Intense. Dangerous.

Unbidden, the memory of their night having a shootout in Tucson returned to him. That smile they’d shared in the rearview mirror while driving a car shot to hell. Two like minds, chasing a high together. That was the last time they’d lived in a moment together, completely unbound by any whim or compulsion beyond making it to the very next second. Jesse could recall his inability to turn away from watching Hanzo’s joy at the end of the night, as well as his own, fleeting craving for an indescribable more, again as he’d raced off into the void of the midnight desert. All of it, something a tawdry crime-thriller romance would salivate to describe on a page. Overwrought allegory comparing Bonnie and Clyde would be irresistible. How had he not seen it then? They just...fit; two murderous thrill-seekers out to tease the clock they knew they were already outliving.

Panic swamped Jesse. This was happening way, way too fast, and he had yet to even look at the son of a bitch today.

What if he got up to find Hanzo didn’t want to talk? Should Jesse insist? It wasn’t a hysterical stretch of the imagination to suspect Hanzo might just do that – bury himself and his feelings in whatever pit he kept...all that in and try to move on without a moment’s acknowledgment. After all, he’d fucking...run off last night and left Jesse hanging out to dry. What the fuck had that been?

Thinking about this was not helping him divine anything useful. His brain was working overtime and liable to simply short out before supplying anything constructive. Maybe he should just go in half-cocked. Jesus H. Christ, no, bad metaphor, bad metaphor. He rolled over and smeared his hands down his face. But in all seriousness, this was only making him stupid and anticipatory. Hanzo was his friend, goddamn it, his best friend, and they’d talked their way through a lot of rougher shit together. Somehow, they would figure it out.

No matter what, they both wanted to keep each other around. No matter what.

Right?

Jesse let out a sigh equal parts distraught and frustrated, peppered with a long string of expletives mingling English and Spanish.

Hanzo had slept his customary and exact four hours despite all the drinking. At seven AM, his eyes had slammed open, the hangover had descended with violent force, and it had taken a thirty-minute lukewarm shower sat pathetically on the tile floor to get him feeling even halfway human again.

None of that was apparent now, however, as he sat in one of the individual chairs – he did not have the courage to reclaim a seat on the sofa again – perfectly posed and pretending to read on his mobile. He was fully dressed, hair tied up, every inch of him seemingly functional. As if he hadn’t
been fending off being sick all morning, between the hangover’s continued intensity and his all-consuming anxiety.

*You moron. Fucking idiot degenerate. Incomprehensibly thick incompetent.*

That had been the dim chant in his head from the moment he had numbly abandoned Jesse and (mercifully) passed out in bed, to return again the second he woke, and up until now.

He had done so well. Been so fucking responsible. Okay, maybe not, considering the mood swings and accidental injury brought by them, but at least he’d been able to talk himself out of an ill-timed and pointless...confession. Just thinking the word made him pull a massive frown of distaste. He had not expected relief in doing it, and now that he was stuck in the middle of his self-made disaster, the suspicion was confirmed. Truth did not bring reconciliation; only deepened misery.

Even if Jesse had seen something in Hanzo. Even if Hanzo hadn’t committed the...second-biggest mistake of his fruitless, empty life by sleeping with Jesse while smashed. All that was temporary before the cold, eternal fact he’d told himself the week before: you have never had anything to offer anyone else. If anything, he owed Jesse an apology for the inconvenience.

Hanzo allowed himself a despondent sigh and covered his face with a hand. Jesse’s twang echoed in his head, admonishing him for the self-inflicted emotional violence. That had grown...distressingly common for him to do these days. When he felt he couldn’t control himself, simply the image of Jesse helped him put himself back together the way he knew he should be; the tactic was both deeply reassuring and unsettling. It was obvious enough why Hanzo found it reassuring, but the unsettling part was...more complicated. He wasn’t sure what the compulsion meant.

The primary and core, unassailable fact of the matter was that Jesse mattered to Hanzo. A lot. So much so, he’d grown to rely on his friend’s wisdom, courage, and steadiness even within himself. And, of course, Jesse could not possibly know about that without being told directly. That was Hanzo’s sticking point – all things, all feelings considered, was that reliance a red herring? Was he simply...infatuated by a passing, lofty high? No one had ever been so...kind to him in his life, shameful and genuinely upsetting as it was to admit. Which did Hanzo so appreciate, then: Jesse as himself, or the placebo effect he put on Hanzo’s long-nihilistic perspective? Was it even actually a placebo? Could he do this, could he keep his improved attitude and new sense of purpose and...and hope, without Jesse’s presence reinforcing it every day?

As he’d considered in pained, half-conscious distress the previous week, Hanzo wasn’t drawn only by an aesthetic attraction – though Jesse’s rugged good looks and that...that fucking smile...certainly helped. It was his graciousness, his understanding. His patience and simple hope that made Hanzo feel that hot lance strike up under his ribs just to look at Jesse. But all that, it was fair to say, did not do much beyond making Hanzo feel better about himself. Valuable though it may be, it was something Hanzo took from Jesse – and did not return. Did Hanzo want to?

Well...yes, an impossibly-tiny piece of him cried out from somewhere very deep inside. But could he? Was he generous, kind, healthy enough to do so?

Maybe, maybe, and...no, respectively.

Jesse was very good for Hanzo. To a certain extent, it would be reasonable to say Jesse might even be taking care of him, though the admission kicked off an involuntary and rabidly angry response Hanzo did not know what to do with or have anywhere to put.

*I do not need help,* he’d said in Portland.
Yeah, you fuckin’ do, Jesse had parried without missing a beat.

Yes, he fucking did. But that was nowhere near an adequate circumstance in which to pursue...whatever. Help was all well and good, but was ultimately meaningless if he could not learn to make what Jesse gave him under his own power. The thought he’d had in New Mexico also remained true – he didn’t know how to make anything good of his own. Hanzo was a selfish, petty, angry man, but he knew well enough to keep all those things to himself.

Look what those traits had done to someone else he claimed to care about. If he was to have...anything, or anyone, things had to change. He had to.

“This is all academic,” Hanzo muttered bitterly to himself.

“By all means, lecture,” a hesitant but warm drawl replied from behind him. Hanzo bolted up and had to choke down at least the third wave of panicked nausea he’d felt since waking. Jesse’s voice was rough and weak; he must be feeling equally-terrible. “Sorry,” Jesse continued. “This is the last fuckin’ time to be sneakin’ up on you.”

Predictably, Hanzo was one-hundred percent in form, or at least appeared to be. Jesse knew better, of course, but the understanding only added to the tightness in his chest. Hanzo wouldn’t give himself a goddamn day off, even now. Beyond wrangling his hair into a stubby ponytail, Jesse had not attempted to put himself together at all. He was still in his pajamas and even a casual glance would note his haggardness.

Hanzo stared down at his hands and wrung them hard.

“You look terrible.”

“Better’n you, I gotta say, and I know I’m little better than warmed-over shit,” Jesse said as he lowered himself to sit on the sofa with visible ache.

Despite himself, Hanzo spit up a single laugh and rubbed at his forehead.

“I am sorry.”

Jesse regarded his suddenly-shifty bare feet nudging at the floor rug and ran his cottonmouthed tongue over his teeth. Tricky man, ain’t he. Not today.

“What exactly are you sorry for?”

This was a test, and they both knew it.

“For...for leaving as I did.”

Hanzo saw Jesse give a deliberate nod from his periphery. Passed, it would seem.

“Accepted. Not like...like either of us were much for talkin’ anyway.”

“No,” Hanzo breathed.

“I’da done the same stone-cold sober, so. I ain’t about to claim moral superiority.”

Jesse could all but hear each and every one of Hanzo’s tendons pulling taut as bowstring sitting just a few feet off.

“What matters to me is you ain’t apologizing for the wrong reasons.”
“I...suspected that.”

“Yeah?” Jesse said. He popped a joint in his thumb and caught Hanzo’s resulting flinch in the corner of his eye; he immediately regretted doing it, involuntary anxiety though it may have been. “You ain’t lied to me, now, have you? Don’t give me the answer you think I wanna hear. You’re gonna be wrong.”

“I have not.”

“Good.”

The ensuing, anticipatory silence was mutually excruciating.

“How long you been holdin’ onto this, Hanzo?” Jesse finally asked. Concern pitched his voice lower than his usual animate tone.

Hanzo let out a quiet, short hiss as if Jesse had nicked him with something sharp.

“Since New Mexico,” Hanzo replied gruffly. He could tell Jesse’s head had shot up to stare, but all Hanzo could do was pinch the bridge of his nose and shut his eyes tight. He could not possibly finish this conversation – it was going to kill him first from the shame of it.

Jesse was floored. That long? He took a minute to think about their time in Kentucky. Nothing had seemed – oh. All Sadie’s suspicions and questions made a very different kind of sense, now. Again, how had Jesse not seen, if someone like Sadie could catch on from such limited interaction?

“How long were you gonna go without tellin’ me?”

Hanzo didn’t answer, but truthfully, he didn’t really need to.

“Yeah, okay. I figured.”

“I do not want my mis--”

“Not another fuckin’ syllable,” Jesse cut in with a severe swipe of his prosthetic hand. “I hear the word mistake out of your mouth again, this conversation is over. We clear?”

They met eyes for the first time since the previous night. Both could see matching tight shoulders and worry-shrunken pupils, and that cut enough of the awkwardness and suddenly borderline hostility to be bearable.

“Understood.”

Jesse didn’t much like that submissive tone. He let out a stressed grumble and scratched at his beard.

“I’m...I’m not tryin’ to boss you around or nothin’, Hanzo.”

“I know.” Hanzo knew perfectly well Jesse was walking a careful tightrope to ensure that, regardless of outcome, he didn’t invalidate Hanzo’s feelings. Because he was a decent and good man. Hanzo grit his jaw. This would be easier if Jesse intended to be cruel. “You have nothing but good intentions.”

Jesse felt better to hear Hanzo say that explicitly. They weren’t talking around each other. Hanzo simply understood without having to be direct, which eased at least a little of the burden between them. It meant they were somewhat on the same page. They really were so close as to intrinsically understand and appreciate each other’s perspective. After learning Hanzo had successfully kept such
a big secret from him, Jesse had to admit he wasn’t sure what to believe anymore.

Not that he suddenly doubted Hanzo’s friendship and commitment; the doubt was solely in himself. This shouldn’t have been as profound a surprise as it was, if he’d really been paying attention to Hanzo the way he should have. All he’d done this week was react to everything Hanzo had let slip. He’d never stopped to dig deeper, even as he’d claimed over and over and over to care. It wasn’t caring to let somebody stew the way Hanzo clearly had. For a fucking month. He’d hurt himself, for Christ’s sake. The peace of mind that had begun to settle inside him dissipated.

Hanzo saw Jesse relax a little. Had Jesse been worried about that? However terrible Hanzo felt about himself, he never, ever doubted Jesse’s good faith. He wouldn’t be in this goddamn position if Jesse wasn’t the way he was. His empathy had fostered a...potent addiction. Hanzo’s eyelids fluttered and he picked at a cuticle. If he understood that much, then he shouldn’t really have anything to fear in being honest. Rejection wasn’t even necessarily an issue anymore.

No, never mind; that made it far more terrifying. His inadequacy would ruin everything.

So far, all of Hanzo’s responses to Jesse’s questions were exactly what he’d expected. It wasn’t helping the way he’d first thought it would; it was only widening the scale of his fuck up. If it all made such effortless sense now, how had he been so fucking stupid before? And real questions still remained for him on top of everything else. Ones that had scared him before his self-confidence had taken a mortal hit.

“Why’d you take off?” Jesse asked.

Hanzo glanced up, involuntarily intrigued by the suddenly-reticent tone, and found Jesse staring resolutely at the floor, elbows on his knees and fingers laced together between them. The good hand’s knuckles had grown lighter than the rest of his skin from the force of grasping his mechanical hand. This was not the awkwardness he’d opened with – it was genuine fear. Jesse wasn’t asking another rhetorical question. He needed to know, and was terrified of the answer. Hanzo thought his projection had been so obvious in the moment that there was no question as to why he’d up and left.

But now, he stopped and switched their places. How could Jesse know? He’d been eaten up by...something that night. Hanzo still didn’t know what. Their silent exchange had told each other a lot, but certainly not a whole story. In fact, Hanzo held a lot more of the pieces than Jesse did. If he had been the abandoned one, Hanzo knew his first and overwhelming assumption over any rationality would be the worst possible outcome.

“Because if I had stayed, I would have made a terrible mis-- choice,” he answered. “But since I am incompetent, I did not...articulate that well.”

“Terrible?” Jesse pressed.

“Irresponsible,” Hanzo corrected. “And selfish.”

“You wouldn’t have if I said no, and...I wasn’t gonna tell you no,” Jesse spoke again slowly, rubbing hard at his metal palm with his thumb.

Hanzo was torn between finally being sick right there in the chair or throwing himself through the window. Anything appropriately violent to shake him from what had to be the cruelest waking nightmare. This couldn’t possibly be...turning out okay? In his favor?

“Tell me what had you so upset last night.”

“Upset?” Jesse asked, eyes narrowed in confusion.
“You were staring at nothing. Like you were remembering something.”

“Oh.” So that’s what had made Hanzo so...tender and call Jesse by his first name. He’d believed Jesse was suffocating under some awful memory. Jesse hunched over and rubbed at the back of his neck. “I wasn’t...it was just...thinkin’ about the...the first time I, uh. Came out. No, no, don’t...it ain’t a bad thing.” Jesse sputtered as he saw Hanzo grow stricken with concern. “It just, uh, was like...part of the...the thing. The whole thing.”

“I do not understand what that means.”

“I mean I was...figuring out how...how I feel. I told you I couldn’t figure it out. I still haven’t, not completely, but...” His skittish eyes flit up to meet Hanzo’s. “I get it better now.” Had that conversation been yesterday? Surely, that was a decade ago.

“If...if it is any comfort, I am not sure of myself either,” Hanzo confessed. Now he was being made to deal with it, his silent flight of fancy had to end and he didn’t know what he was going to do with the frightening and inscrutable puzzle box of feelings he was juggling.

“No?” Jesse said, intrigued.

Hanzo shook his head and raised his hand to gesture vaguely at his chest.

“I do not know if you have met me, but I am not terribly well-equipped to deal with...any of this.”

A sweet little smile cracked Jesse’s face. If Hanzo could find humor, Jesse fucking had to, as well.

“That can’t be. You’re the most well-adjusted son of a bitch I know.”

“Fuck you,” Hanzo replied warmly, as one or the other of them had dozens, if not hundreds of times before in the past five months.

But both of them caught on the unintended double entendre a second too late and fell awkwardly silent again. It stretched for several long minutes as each man tried and failed to find any appropriate way to backpedal and, once the moment clearly passed, no idea how to start over anew.

“I hate you ever thought you couldn’t say nothin’,” Jesse finally confessed with a heavy sigh.

“It was never a question to me if you would listen. It was...”

“After?”

“After.”

The after they’d wandered into anyway.

“I am sorry for lying to you,” Hanzo murmured. “I did not...I have been...”

“A fuckin’ mess,” Jesse finished gently. Hanzo shut his eyes and hung his head. “No, wait, now. That’s not on you. That’s on me. I’m the idiot, here.”

“I do not recall you being present when I fell off a fucking building.”

“I wasn’t! That’s my point. I seen all this shit, took your explanations at face value, and let you...fuckin’...drown in it.”

“That is not true. You interrogated me over it as was appropriate. That you did not magically predict
a very unlikely reason is not a failing.”

“I been so wrapped up in my own shit--”

“That,” Hanzo blurted and pointed aggressively. Fire lit his eyes from behind.

“Huh?”

“That right there. What you just said. That is why I left. Why I didn’t sleep with you.”

Jesse’s blood ran cold to hear Hanzo say it so explicitly.

“I appreciate how difficult it is for you to absorb this so suddenly, trust me. I knew if I had, you would find a way to cook up some nonsense that it was...weakness, or you were some damn infliction. You were in no right mind, and I could not deal with the implication I was a witless third party to it. And I cannot deal with it now.”

“Whoa, whoa, Hanzo. Tap the brakes.”

"Tell me I am wrong,” Hanzo dared.

“You...you’re not,” Jesse replied in a strained voice. Hanzo had his ass nailed upsettingly well. His natural tendency to make himself the fall guy at his own expense endured, and seemed to be magnified by the...complicated situation Hanzo’s presence encompassed. “You’re tryin’ to do right by me. That was the smart thing to do. Do you need to hear me say that? Because it’s true. You did the right goddamn thing in both our interests.”

Hanzo ran his hand through his hair and pulled it free from his ponytail, looking distraught. As he scrubbed at the back of his head to get his hair to fall, his fingers caught in a tangle, making him wince and swear more viciously in Japanese than necessary. He was so profoundly not ready for this. This conversation, the possibilities it presented, dealing with its nuance. His superlative skill was in ending lives, not living his own.

“Yes, I needed to hear that.”

“Hanzo.”

When Hanzo glanced over, Jesse was right there waiting for him, hands up in calming placation.

“You’re doing just fine.”

“No, I really am not,” Hanzo rebutted as he buried his face in his hands.

“Neither of us got our heads screwed on real tight right now. But you give a shit, and you’re lettin’ that guide you. It’s really fuckin’ important to me above everything that you know I respect the hell out of what you’re doing. I’m tryin’ to do right by you, too. That’s all I mean by worryin’ I ain’t paid proper attention. I know what you do to yourself. I hate to think what that thick-ass skull of yours might’ve been up to trying to cope.”

Fair. And accurate.

“Only a bit,” Hanzo replied quietly. “Were I as miserable as consistently as you suspect, you would have noticed.”

“I appreciate the faith--”
“You would!” Hanzo insisted and slapped his thigh in frustration, sounding newly anguished. “You have. You do,” he continued, and Jesse immediately understood from the way Hanzo said it that that was the heart of the whole thing for him. Jesse cared openly and profoundly, and Hanzo had no idea what to do with what that did to him.

And Jesse, in turn, did not know what to do with that. He certainly wasn’t going to stop caring – he physically couldn’t, for one, and for another, he...didn’t want to. Hanzo wasn’t a charity case. Jesse was drawn to him. They fed off of and sustained each other through the good and bad, and any official relationship status notwithstanding, were becoming something new and better for it together.

Jesse abruptly stood and ambled off with no real intent to go anywhere. His breathing had picked up again and his good hand fidgeted restlessly.

“Listen. I know you think I’m doin’ somethin’ magic or some shit, but I’m not. It’s like I told you in Portland – I just like you. The thing you ain’t gettin’ about that is it’s because I see pieces of me in you. Why do you think we get along so well? I made it a joke back then, but it’s fuckin’ true. We’re simpatico. And the things I see are good things. Shit I forgot I had. So...I don’t know what to tell you beyond that, but that’s important to me. Really fuckin’ important to me. I’m here because I wanna be, too, y’know. I just ain’t realized ‘til now just how...much that is. I think we both need some time to figure it out. But I wanna be super goddamn sure that whatever happens, I ain’t out the best thing that’s happened to me in ten years.”

Hanzo turned to look up at Jesse. He’d wandered towards Hanzo’s right flank and was staring at nothing in the vague direction of the floor. He looked lost, but that was actually reassuring. At least they both had the same destination in mind; the rest could be made up for by shouting for each other from amongst the thickets of their own feelings, experiences, and damage.

“I can promise you that,” Hanzo murmured. Jesse’s entire body slackened with relief. “I kept it from you because I wanted to preserve what I have, not because I remain under false pretenses,” Hanzo continued. It was well past time for him to take the situation seriously. Accountability was the running theme between them, and keeping everything about his...evolving emotions at arm’s distance also meant dodging accountability. It was all fine and good to do it to himself – okay, not really – but it was impermissible to continue on now that Jesse was fully party to it.

“I get it. I’m not angry with you,” Jesse reassured him.

Anxiety nonetheless peaked again in Hanzo as Jesse watched him rub at his forearms and pull his shoulders tight to his neck.

“Pursuant to...figuring things out...”

Terror took Jesse by the throat in an iron grip. The hesitance spoke Hanzo’s intent before and more thoroughly than his words ever could.

“You wanna split up.”

“Temporarily,” Hanzo replied emphatically. “A month at most. We have achieved our objective here and do not have pressing business – at least as far as I am aware. But Jesse--” Hanzo reached over from where he sat to take him by the forearm to add weight to his point. “I will not go if you do not want me to.”

A second iteration of hearing Hanzo say Jesse’s first name had not dulled the resulting effect one iota. The added touch was making him a little dizzy. Hanzo wanted to go, but he didn’t want to leave anything behind, either. A nameless hurt gouged Jesse somewhere deep inside.
"Hanzo, I can’t tell you what--"

"No, it is completely unfair to dump this on you so suddenly and then demand to take off. I can see what it is doing to you. But...it is also true that being around you makes it...very difficult for me to...be objective. To...understand my place and perspective. I do need and want to parse that out. For me."

"Makes sense. It ain’t just about me, after all," Jesse replied softly. The hurt exchanged for a spreading numbness he couldn’t get back under control. He felt as though he was leaving himself, and just a sliver of him remained to steer him around in pantomime of function.

"It is not. I am relieved you understand that,” Hanzo agreed with a nod. Though his gaze had drifted away from Jesse’s as part of his uncomfortable honesty, he hadn’t let go of his friend’s arm. He squeezed it a little tighter. “But that is my problem. If my leaving is too much to ask of you for whatever reason, I will stay and manage that on my own time. No questions asked, and without any grudge."

Inwardly, Jesse had to admit he was impressed. This was an extraordinary request for Hanzo to make, and Jesse knew it. It wasn’t about permission to leave, per se, but permission to...be honest about himself. Permission to emote, admit something frighteningly personal to someone else that not only could judge him, but that judgment would seriously wound if it came to pass. It almost didn’t matter if Jesse saw the process of Hanzo figuring himself out or not – it was an achievement for Hanzo to ask at all. To speak his need. Though it made the numbness expand and encapsulate Jesse’s aching heart for it, he couldn’t possibly take that away from Hanzo.

"I don’t ever want to get in the way of the person you’re supposed to be.”

Why was Hanzo so taken aback by that answer? It was the only possible one Jesse could have given. Somehow, it simultaneously proved Hanzo had to go, and yet never should have considered it to begin with. Perhaps if Hanzo had contented himself with ignorance, he could have been self-indulgent last night and continue to now. But by insisting on the question, he’d forced himself to act as a better man.

Maybe that was just how this shit worked. Maybe he was too fucking stupid to do it some easier way.

“Then...I shall.”

“Good,” Jesse replied affirmatively, as if he didn’t already recognize his own mistake. *This isn’t for me, so it shouldn’t be up to me. Don’t be selfish.* “But I gotta know where you’re going.”

“Oh, of course. I had no intention...” Hanzo shook his head and let out a heavy sigh. “I do not have any particular destination or plan, so I think I will simply return to China. You could...join me there later?”

“Yeah, okay.” Jesse impressed himself with his surety fabricated from whole cloth. “If you’re gonna do that, take the drives. You said you wanted to do that at home anyway. It’s okay,” he preempted Hanzo’s move to interrupt and put his metal hand over Hanzo’s holding him, “I think it’s safer that way. No one expects you to have it. You have no obvious reason, unlike me. If anybody figured out what happened, and that’s a stretch by itself.”

“Are you certain? I am sure Sadie could--”

“No. Sadie don’t know most of what I’ve done for a reason, confidential informant or not. She can’t
take care of herself the way you can, knowin’ something so important. And in the long run, that’s ten times safer for me.”

“That...is a fair point.”

His arm sizzled from the ghost of Hanzo’s touch as Jesse walked to the table to remove the drives from the handbag, piling them in a neat stack at the end of the table for Hanzo to do with as he saw fit. His mouth drew into a thin line and he pointed to it.

“That’s a few hundred lives there, y’know.”

“And yours,” Hanzo added at a husk. They shared a long stare, mutually searching the other not so much for answers, but whether or not the questions crowding their own mind matched the ones each knew were tumbling around behind their friend’s eyes.

“Take care of it,” Jesse said just above a whisper.

“I will.”

Neither one was courageous enough to speak the acknowledgment, but both knew and felt Hanzo shouldn’t linger. Their negotiated separation see-sawed on a very delicate point; bringing too much attention to bear would...end something. Maybe for good, but far more certainly for bad. Hanzo gathered up the drives and made for his room to secret them away in his luggage.

“Hanzo.” Jesse hadn’t meant it to, but the single word came down as a boom.

“Yes?” Hanzo replied, turned just enough to show his profile to Jesse.

“There’s nothin’ in there you can’t read.”

That got Hanzo to fully look back and give him a long, purposeful up-and-down in surprise. The significance of the invitation made the heavy stone he’d been harboring for weeks in his chest feel as though it would burst from him.

“It’s fine. You’re welcome to, even. Someday, I might even let you ask questions about it.” If Jesse had been trying for a joke, he failed miserably.

All Hanzo could do was summon one slow nod of understanding before he disappeared back in his room.

It didn’t take long after that. In tight, minimally-worded exchanges, they split their take from the previous night. Jesse took the wine at Hanzo’s insistence (“For later,” he’d said stiffly, and Jesse had given him a flicker of a smile); Hanzo took the diamonds, and Jesse, the watches. The hard liquor would be abandoned – both of them had had their fill for a while. Within an hour, Hanzo was fully packed and had set up at the door to leave, but Jesse caught him standing and staring seemingly without purpose, hand on his bag containing his gi and clandestine gear.

“Ready?” Jesse prompted. He assumed Hanzo was simply nervous to leave.

An answer didn’t immediately come, but after a long beat, Hanzo’s head bobbed in a decisive nod to himself.

“Almost.”

“How d’you mean?” Jesse asked as he watched Hanzo open the bag he’d been touching with
sudden determination. He unearthed one of the tool bags kept on his obi and he popped it open. When his hand reappeared, he opened his palm to offer up a small, almost bead-like carved piece.

“Jesus, is that ivory?” Jesse asked.

“Yes. This is a netsuke passed down in my family. They were used to hold small boxes called sagemono as part of one’s clothing. It is over three hundred years old, and the only thing from Hanamura I have kept since I fled. Well...the only thing that...matters to me,” Hanzo explained.

“Then what--”

“Take it. Keep it.”

Jesse plucked it up and turned it round in his thumb and forefinger. It was intricately carved to allow light through, and was the image of – naturally – a dragon, undulating amongst a background of clouds. Intricate, stunning, and almost certainly priceless.

“Hanzo, I can’t possibly--”

“I will come back for it,” Hanzo added abruptly.

Jesse worried his lip and continued to turn the netsuke over in his palm without really seeing it.

“When I gave you the drives, I wasn’t tryin’ to make it an insurance policy, y’know. You don’t gotta...”

“I want to. This is not out of fear.”

Hanzo didn’t look scared. Rather confident, in fact. Jesse wished he could feel the same; was that why Hanzo was doing this? For him and his peace of mind? To give Jesse such a treasured piece of himself, so closely kept in secret… It wouldn’t do to let Hanzo hand that over unanswered. Jesse wracked his brain for something to suit, and his answer made his heart seize in his chest. He took so long considering it, Hanzo grew a little apprehensive.

“If...if this was too...forward,” Hanzo opened with a stutter. Jesse closed his hand around the trinket when Hanzo reached in suggestion to take it back.

“No. No, just let me...” Jesse mumbled more to himself and strode off to his room.

Deep and almost painful fear threatened to overtake Jesse as he dug for his belt in a pile of clothes. On it was a small pouch he scratched along the bottom of, searching. As he pulled his objective free, his fear involuntarily peaked more severely to actually look at it – it’d been years since it’d seen daylight, and for damn good reason. To the casual observer, it was a rather incongruous item for a man like Jesse to keep on-hand: a small, weatherbeaten toy car.

His fight-or-flight instinct kicked in and he compulsively rushed back to Hanzo. In his hurry, he pressed the toy into Hanzo’s hand with more force than was strictly necessary, and Hanzo could see how pale he’d suddenly become. The surprise was so complete, Hanzo didn’t even look at what Jesse had given him in favor of reaching for Jesse’s shoulder to automatically comfort his very obvious distress.

“Jesse, what--”

“I-I got one for you, too. Take that. Put it away before I change my mind.”
“You do not--”

“Please, just...do it.”

Hanzo paused long enough to give his gift a confused look and absorb what it was before hastily stashing it away in his still-open bag. Once it was out of sight, Jesse visibly relaxed.

“Sorry, sorry.” Jesse said, rubbing anxiously at his chest and still a bit wild-eyed. “I just...wanted to...give something back. That you can hang onto ‘til I...I see you again.”

“I appreciate that, but I do not understand your...” Hanzo gesticulated at Jesse’s whole strained countenance, unable to articulate just what he was looking at that was so concerning.

“Yeah, it’s...it’s somethin’ I’ve held onto for a real long time and I...I can’t...tell you about it. Right now,” Jesse explained, voice a little pitched. He was already beginning to regret his impulsive choice. Why bring it up if he wasn’t ready? Well...he’d never been ready, had he? That made his breath draw faster and harsher still. “Shit, that ain’t fair, is it?”

Hanzo pondered the rhetorical question with a back and forth bob of his head, but he didn’t take a watchful eye off Jesse in his current state. He’d never seen Jesse...quite this unsettled, even in talking about Reyes. Even without any clue as to what the toy meant, Hanzo immediately knew that backdated its importance further than anything to do with Overwatch.

“Perhaps. But it is enough that you have made it clear how important it is to you. Our agreement from the beginning still holds – speak when you want to. When you’re ready.”

“Real gracious of you,” Jesse sighed in defeat. “It...it is...significant, I think, is the better description.” If anything happened to it, Jesse didn’t know how he would react. No, Hanzo would keep it safe. And anyway, Jesse...shouldn’t have kept it all these years. He was coming down from his panicked bout, but slowly. He took a minute to take a deep breath and steady himself – mostly because Hanzo was staring and clearly worried. “Thank you, Hanzo. I’m just tryin’ to...to...”

“I know. It...means a lot to me that you are.”

Uncomfortable personal exchange now past, both men knew the moment had arrived, though they searched for something, anything to delay it further. Hanzo’s cool exterior cracked as his usual, faint frown grew more patent.

“Are you absolutely certain--”

“No,” Jesse replied. “But go. I said what I said, and I meant the hell out of it.”

The past thirty-six hours had been all about impulse, so one last indulgence couldn’t hurt. Jesse reached to hug Hanzo and was surprised when he responded with far more enthusiasm than the last time. It wasn’t ascetic, either; the two of them came chest to chest, arms totally encircled and tight.

“I will stay in touch,” Hanzo murmured.

“Every day,” Jesse added. Separation increased their individual risk, even if they’d gotten away scot free.

“Yes.”

They relinquished the embrace, but Hanzo let a hand rest at Jesse’s collarbone and he pat it there as emphasis.
“If anything, anything changes--”

“Yeah,” Jesse replied hastily.

“No, I am serious. Call me, and I will return. I do not care why. Especially if something comes up in your investigation.”

Jesse shrugged and chewed the inside of his cheek.

“Knowin’ my shitty timing, that’ll be right in the middle of your big...fuckin’ vision quest or somethin’,” he mumbled. It was a terribly-planned, half-assed joke borne of high-octane anxiety, but it got Hanzo to smile nonetheless.

Belatedly, they realized they had not fully parted from their embrace, Jesse holding Hanzo by the elbows while Hanzo kept his hands up Jesse’s chest. They stepped apart in the same moment, hemming and hawing.

“I’ll...see you,” Jesse rasped.

“Soon,” Hanzo added quietly. “Be careful.”

Jesse let out an amused little huff and shook his head.

“You too. You’re not real good at it, so practice.”

“As thoroughly as I can muster.”

Hitching up his bag physically pained Hanzo. No actual goodbyes; that would only make this worse. They let themselves share one last look – but not too long. That would have consequences. In lieu of words, they settled on a handshake, but even as Hanzo backed out the door, their grip on each other lingered, arms stretched to full reach and palms sliding part only at the last possible moment before the door clicked shut again.

Hanzo took off at a determined powerwalk and traveled a purposefully-circuitous route towards the train station at Oasis’ city center until the poisonous impulse to never stop moving dimmed enough that he wouldn’t try breaking out a window the second the train pulled out of station.

Jesse stayed until the next day. Someone had to properly clean up the safehouse before quitting the fuck out of Iraq. That whole afternoon once Hanzo left was a blur Jesse wouldn’t ever be able to recall later. He’d cleaned and packed everything up as an out-of-body experience, occasionally interrupted by periods of empty staring into space. After that had been a utilitarian dinner and one long night laying face up, absent-mindedly tilling his hair until he passed out for a serviceable nap. At dawn he dressed, threw everything in the Bentley, and bolted. He did the whole drive back to Amman in one go, and with the aid of reckless speeding on the mostly-empty desert highway, cut two hours off the trip for his sanity.

Without anything better to consider and nowhere near enough willpower left to try thinking about it, Jesse returned to the States, back through Atlanta the same way he and Hanzo had left twelve days previous. He could return to Kentucky, he’d considered on the torturously-slow overseas flight. Then he imagined Sadie’s expression, coming back alone. How he’d have to explain himself. The pity.

No, he needed to fuck off from everybody and everything.

Even after springing the extra money for a rapaciously-priced first class seat back to the US, Jesse was restless the whole flight. On landing, he nearly put a businessman in a sleeper hold for blocking
the path too long for his gossamer-thin patience. Being cooped up in a metal tube for hours on end ran his nerves a little ragged on his best day; under his current circumstances, the flight crew was lucky he didn’t leave claw marks like a cat locked in a crate. He couldn’t get off the plane and directly into a stolen truck fast enough. Any movement to burn off the worst of this shit. When he made it to I-10 and floored it, it helped, but only to take the edge off. Everywhere he went, his reason why naturally followed, eternally-present in a new and enduring silence.

Retreading his path in reverse towards Santa Fe felt like a cruel reversal of everything he’d achieved since January. Every mile peeling by seemed to take another piece of his confidence and purpose like he was literally going back in time against his will. It didn’t show too much on his face to the passing on-looker, but if anyone were to pause a beat longer, they’d see the evidence of it in his torn-up cuticles and nails of his good hand.

The numbness he’d been treading all the first day Hanzo left had plateaued by the time he’d gotten on the plane, but now, stuck in a claustrophonic truck cab forced to recall every joke, every conversation, every soft snore from Hanzo as he’d napped and Jesse drove bore down on his loneliness with oppressive force. He had nothing to do and nowhere to be without Hanzo. Solitude didn’t bring clarity of mind at all, only hyperawareness of the pile of mistakes he sat astride, growing every hour that he was left to contemplate himself.

The greatest of those mistakes did not land until Jesse pulled up in front of his ranch home and clomped onto the porch. He’d come here by unexamined compulsion. This had been his place of solace after leaving Overwatch, cozy and removed from everything. But now, he realized in simply surveying the porch, he’d stripped the house of that quality and tore down his last bulwark against the world by soiling it with a different kind of complication. Hanzo was everywhere, here. The crate of beers still remained on the porch from that night, just brushed from above by the wool blanket Hanzo had wrapped up in and had been left draped over the chair. Jesse had shared all of this with almost blithe casualness. Or maybe just simple comfort. Or…

_I didn’t have to tell you a word of that_, he recalled telling Hanzo during their conversation about the desert.

Or maybe he _had_ needed to.

He stalked inside and dumped his hat and serape on the kitchen table. He’d been driving for two days, slept fitfully in the truck the night before, and had arrived home late tonight. Exhaustion made his joints feel rusty and as if his tendons shifted against sandpaper with every movement. As he trod into his room, he dropped his layers of shirts behind him in the common room, uncaring of the mess. The boots, chaps, and pants were all kicked off without ceremony next to the door before slumping face-first into bed. A pathetic groan cut the dusty quiet.

_Shit_, he missed Hanzo.

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Was he missing Jesse, too? _Stupid fucking question_, Jesse admonished himself. Of course Hanzo was. But...the same way? As much? What was gonna stop him from getting to China, burning off his
little fit of sentimentalism, and moving on? No, stop, jackass. There was nothing to panic about like that. He would calm down in a couple days, Jesse reasoned. Time would ease everything and let his rationality float back to the top.

Just as soon as he got used to this unending, aggravating, all-consuming fucking vacuum of a silence.

Splitting had been a mistake. But what other choice had been reasonable? What else could he have done? Stayed in Oasis and demanded Hanzo do the same? He sure as shit wouldn’t have been able to manage another goddamn day there, Hanzo or no Hanzo. And god fucking help him, he’d meant it telling Hanzo he didn’t want to get in the way. It would be a betrayal of everything Jesse had ever told him to hold his friend back from self-actualization now.

Anything before that long and agonizing conversation offered no reasonable deviation, either. All Jesse could have done was...stopped Hanzo from getting up and leaving him on the couch. To whatever end. Would that have been so bad? Just a kiss, his under-slept and bedraggled mind bargained as the shittiest possible devil’s advocate. That would have been all right, yeah? One miniscule bump would’ve been enough to tip Hanzo over the falls of indulgence, had Jesse had even an iota of his shit together at the time. Hanzo admitted it himself – his irresponsible road not taken. What would that have looked like?

Somewhere, Jesse’s self-preservation tried to warn him off his train of thought. Too late.

Hanzo had been so tightly wound by his situation – at even the slightest invitation, he’d have likely sprung like a trap, all grasping and wordless demands. Mixed with the alcohol, clumsy as hell, too. Jesse could imagine the rough scrape of the coffee table on the floor as it would have been shoved back by Hanzo’s enthusiasm. All five-seven, buck-eighty of desperate, chiseled man in Jesse lap was...very acceptable. Hanzo might be smaller, but hardly diminutive; he would definitely be in charge.

Jesse’s next breath came as a conscious, sharp hiss.

They’d have managed maybe five minutes of restless, sloppy makeout before one of them hauled the other up in aggressive suggestion to take it to bed, tripping over each other and nothing at all. Both would have been distracted by how stupid and funny it was, too. Jesse pictured them clutching each other closer by their clothes, rough chuckles and smiles abound. Hanzo’s room had been marginally closer; that would have been the bed they tumbled into.

In reality, Hanzo probably would have balked and had second thoughts had they gotten that far, but here, in the relative safety of Jesse’s imagination, five thousand miles apart from any real resolution of his emotional turmoil, Hanzo could pour over Jesse in a second wave of need, pulling Jesse on top by his hips and scrabbling at his dress slacks to open them up. Ten minutes in Hanzo’s presence told even the most profound dumbass on earth that he was a man who knew exactly what he wanted and pursued it with corresponding tactical exactitude to get it. No doubt that extended to getting laid as well.

Idly, Jesse wondered what part of him Hanzo would want most as he finally gave up useless pretense and nudged his hand under the elastic of his briefs. It was difficult to guess; every appealing feature Jesse had and could brag about was something Hanzo had in more ideal condition. That didn’t matter now, he supposed. For himself? Jesse had always been an enthusiast for anybody who looked like they could put him through plaster with less than a thought. Hanzo’s sculpted traps in particular begged for somebody to dig into them for leverage as they sat on his dick.

Jesse hastily peeled off each sock with his toes so his feet would have better traction flat on the sheets as his knees came up and spread. God, it’d been fucking forever since he’d ridden cock hard and
fast. He stroked up his dick once, squeezing as his thumb pointed up in eager reach for the head. It was easy to imagine Hanzo wanting it so bad he’d just about ruin Jesse’s formalwear to get to skin, fingernails nicking a bit here and there in his hurry before raking down the freshly-opened plains of Jesse’s back.

As the minutes stretched on and Jesse teased himself, it became less and less about what Hanzo would do to him in favor of thinking about Hanzo himself. Jesse had certainly seen enough in their time together to know how much heat he was packing, but he found more interest in picturing his friend...friend? with his hair down and ragged. What it’d feel like slipping between Jesse’s fingers. What the hollow of his neck tasted like. How hard those wide hands with thick, almost stubby fingers would grip him. Those gigantic arms holding Jesse tight, strapped around him or under him – wherever, it didn’t matter when they looked like they could do it all fucking day and never tire. And the sound of Hanzo again, over and over, calling his name, his name, his name--

“Ha-anzo.”

His orgasm rolled slow and heavy up from hips to chest, ending in a little body wave as he arched in place. The warm ease brought by climax didn’t last, however, as Jesse remembered far, far too late that he had not been the last one to sleep in his bed weeks ago. A cold needle of painful and thorough awareness shot through his gut, spoiling the entire moment and soured all of it into potent regret.

Just as Hanzo had anticipated would happen.

One embittered swipe using the sheets took care of the most of his self-made mess before Jesse launched out of bed. He’d never felt so stupid, tucking his dick away and stomping across his own damn house in just his underwear to snatch the blanket off the chair on the porch. He escaped to his couch, folding himself in the soft wool, and was grateful the blanket had spent enough time out in the elements that it smelled only of dirt and baking heat. None of Hanzo remained.

Chapter End Notes

a selection from Jesse's playlist: Back For Me, by Electric Guest - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WiXZsjnzrNE
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

hewwo fwiends!! >:3c

thank you for bearing with me on my short break!

of course, in that short time since posting chapter 17 and now, tumblr has, uh.........................well. I haven't deleted my account as of yet, but that is purely out of laziness. I do not intend to keep it, given Their Choices, so I will no longer be contactable there. I will still be readily available on twitter @midgetnazgul, and have always been much more consistently active there. It is not a 100% fandom account because I am nowhere near organized to separate the facets of my life between multiple accounts, but I do talk about McHanzo in general as well as the fic and post updates there, if you want to see more of me in my natural internet habitat for whatever reason. And, of course, you can send me messages here. I have not acquired a pillowfort because of the crushing stampede to move there in the wake of tumblr's collapse, but I may in the future.

that said, down to brass tacks: this chapter contains explicit sexual content, trigger warnings for discussion of suicidal ideation and brief discussion of PTSD-based panic attacks. there is also some description of graphic violence in the final scene.

just in case you were wondering: I am resuming regular monthly posting, as I have made very good progress (after some, uh...struggle) on chapter 19.

hope u enjoy~~~~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

One train ride, a ten hour direct flight, and a commuter hover train later, Hanzo kicked open the door to his dark, cavernous flat in Shanghai. Where just about anyone else would normally dump their luggage at the door and collapse into bed after two straight days of travel, Hanzo immediately took his time unpacking. He’d been gone for months when usually he’d be away a few weeks at most, and it showed – the air was stale and every surface was dulled with accumulated dust. His jet lag would be intense, he told himself. He wouldn’t sleep for hours, so he might as well push through and busy himself with cleaning to adjust to local time.

It certainly had nothing to do with the uncomfortable, splintery wedge of unanswered anticipation lodged in his chest. The hovering expectation of the door opening, or a throaty laugh, or a phone call. Anything.

As he tidied, he actively avoided the coffee table where the half-finished bottle of whiskey he’d procured for Jesse had sat in silence since February. A symbol of change; a symbol of how much had painfully stayed the same. After exhausting that task, Hanzo threw on a compression shirt and track pants for a long run all over the city. It was the perfect mindless activity to burn all his nervous energy off. Nothing could replace Hanamura, but Shanghai was familiar enough to him now to give a pleasant, facsimile sense of home and comfort. So much so that passing the noodle shop where he and Jesse had first eaten together fostered a sense of happy nostalgia, rather than dread.
Jesse had listened to him. *Understood* him. Given him the time and space he needed to contemplate himself, uninterrupted. Neither of them had made any promises or demanded expectations of the other beyond meeting up again. No pressure, no grudges.

Maybe this was okay. Maybe he really *could* make something of himself for the future. He had to try, at least.

When he returned to his flat, he collapsed into bed, purposefully exhausted but surprisingly lighthearted. Even better, he was pleased to realize upon waking that he’d gotten a full eight hours of mercifully-dreamless sleep. The muted din of the city hummed in his bedroom, comfortably filling the empty space. But he was alone, and he felt that as a tiny restraint in his chest. No matter how good he had begun to feel about what he was doing, he *did* undeniably miss Jesse.

What would Jesse be up to? Was he faring well? He hadn’t been terribly confident about letting Hanzo walk away. *Oh, shit.* He rolled over and slapped at his nightstand for his mobile computer and checked his messages.

*Back in the States. Hope the jet lag isn’t fucking you up as bad as it is me. Let me know when you get home.*

The message had arrived almost twelve hours ago, while Hanzo had been out running. Oops. Admittedly, Hanzo wasn’t...*used* to anybody asking after him.

*I am home, yes. Apologies for the delay.*

Should he leave it at that – simple status messages? A little cold, but Hanzo *had* never been chatty. Jesse knew that. But...this was about being *different,* wasn’t it.

*It is raining interminably here. I almost forgot what it sounded like, not to besmirch your native climate.*

That was good, right? People talked about the weather when they didn’t know what else to say and yet wanted to appear personable. Hanzo smeared his hand over his face in frustration.

“*Why am I ever permitted to talk to anyone,*” he grumbled at himself, but sent the message before his feet could grow any colder. That’s enough. Jesse only wanted to know he was alive, and it would probably be hours before he replied. But Hanzo’s terminal awkwardness aside, this did provide a good method to relearn how to talk to Jesse again. Everything felt unnecessarily complicated now. Distance would make it easier to let Hanzo conceive of his circumstances as an idea, in an environment sterilized of expectation and anticipation and...*attention.* That had been Hanzo’s intent and hope in leaving. Even if he trusted Jesse with his life and felt...*passion* for him, that did not necessarily translate to a willingness to let anyone witness him trying to find purchase on the metaphorical club feet his emotions had hobbled on for decades.

Unbidden, he heard Genji laughing in condescension as a distant echo in his head. Hanzo doubted any *hope* Genji had for him extended to anything like this. How did *anyone* put up with him? His insufferable nature was oppressive even to *him.*

“*Stop,*” Hanzo muttered at himself, hands folded over his face. *None* of this would help, and it wasn’t something he had to solve today. He’d been incredibly stressed for weeks, and even *he* could only put up with so much in abusing himself. Relax.

*I could stand to live a little if it doesn’t outright kill me.*

A winking light on his computer still sat on his chest drew his attention – a message,
surprisingly, had come in from Jesse.

_You’re all right, good. Was starting to wonder. Don’t worry, I’ll keep all the sand I can in my boots and dump it on you first chance I get._

A fond smile eased the nigh-permanent creases in Hanzo’s face. What time was it there? Afternoon. Well into Jesse’s day. He was probably driving, metal arm glinting in the sun as he cut the air rushing by with his prosthetic. He’d liked to do that for hours during their trip together. There’d be a distant, happy curl in his lip, or at least Hanzo hoped. Warm and peaceful. Jesse deserved the simple quietude same as Hanzo.

Hanzo slid his mobile console back onto the nightstand, but one finger lingered atop it a beat longer wistfully. He was getting caught up in sentimentality; but here, it felt safe enough. Hanzo had been playing a dangerous game of emotional keepaway with himself the past couple weeks. He could never let himself think too far or deeply lately, for his own sanity.

But Jesse was an idea, now. _Ideas_ could be indulged in. Low stakes. Zero risk of a witness. Just for...fun.

Hanzo grimaced. _Still awkward._

He slogged out of bed, but the train of thought nonetheless followed. Shirt, track pants, briefs – each layer was shed and abandoned on his path to the shower. By the time he’d begun soaking under unnecessarily-hot water, the temptation that had followed him overpowered his usual sense of tact and he wrapped a hand around his dick. Even before his epiphany, Hanzo had been struck by Jesse’s bright, honey-colored eyes. When stuck in a car for hours on end with nothing to do but talk, it was inevitable for anyone to be drawn to the way searing desert sunlight made Jesse’s eyes seem to reflect gold. With that came charming crow’s feet fostered by decades of an easy laugh, deep concentration, and struggle in equal measure, all hard-earned.

Every square inch would look good painted over by the soft strain of sex. Hanzo rolled aside of the water to lean back into the tile wall. His hand took a slow pace to match his still-hesitant imagination. Jesse _would_ be stunning, though. For a man decorated head to toe in an impressive array of scars – Hanzo had seen many of them in their time traveling, and Jesse had even been proud and tipsy enough in a few all-night roadside diners to show some off and explain them in earnest – and Hanzo suspected Jesse just might be the type to put aside his take-charge badass attitude in favor of being topped to hell and back.

Hanzo imagined the same metal hand he’d seen put through walls and crush men’s throats grasping in desperation. All those nicks and bumps from a hundred last-second dodges out from under Death’s scythe now under Hanzo’s fingers, twisting and stretching as Jesse undulated on him. _Around_ him. Hanzo’s knees went a little weak and his little gasp melded completely with the hiss of the shower head. _Goddamn_ it, he wanted. Jesse was every dichotomy: soft as the hand-woven blankets in his cabin, rough as roadrash; warm and lazy as a Sunday afternoon and sharp as the flick of a switchblade. Compelling unto irresistibility; Hanzo could sink into it like so much quicksand and never once ask for rescue, eager to be consumed and never come out.

He pulled harder and faster now, getting carried away imagining Jesse’s hot, pitched breaths and quiver of slick skin as he was led to ruin on Hanzo’s cock. No doubt lingered in Hanzo’s mind that Jesse was just as capable of flipping him around and making him forget his own damn name – the little episode of Jesse facing down Arazi briefly came to mind and made Hanzo give a long moan – but for now, Hanzo’s craving insisted on analyzing the indescribable quality Jesse had that just _screamed_ he was ready and eager at all times to be put under demanding, firm hands and reamed until his throat bobbed with his silent, ecstatic sobs. Until the arch in his back threatened to make him
pull an oblique muscle.

Hanzo spat out an aborted curse in Japanese as he came. The fingernails of his free hand bit into his chest hard where he’d been teasing a nipple and released, leaving mild little crescents that would quickly fade. A long, relaxing note to even his breathing out slipped from between his teeth. That...had helped. A lot. It was something of a confession to himself: yes, I like Jesse very much, and yes, I rather intensely want to know what fucking him would be like. His creeping appreciation had of course weighed constantly on his mind in some measure, but it had been examined obliquely, with a mental mirror around dark corners. Now, he felt like he was seeing with clear eyes for the first time since...fuck, March. He shook his head at himself and rinsed off. The tiny point of pain at the base of his skull that always threatened his tension headaches retreated as he smoothed shampoo into his hair and followed through with a proper shower.

Time to focus on himself.

~

Hanzo spent the balance of the first week home gathering the materials he needed to adapt the disk drives from Jesse with his quantum computer, scouring the ass-end of Shanghai’s underground tech markets for recycled parts to work with. It’d been quite a while since he had taken on such a substantial computing project, so he dove building the hardware and writing the scripts for the task with true fervor. He spent endless hours sat on the finely-polished floor of his flat, plastic and old silicon boards and wires set out around him in neat piles when he wasn’t researching as needed online. The only cloud over his mind the entire time had been the single, intrusive thought that he hadn’t been this happy since the depths of his road trip with Jesse.

In the long run, it would be drastically faster to perform only part of the necessary decompression and recompilation of the data on his ramshackle silicon computer before transferring and modifying it for quantum computing and actually searching for what he wanted. Even tightly compacted on antique media, there was probably close to a petabyte of information no silicon computer could handle in a timely fashion, so he would just have to live with some minor data loss. The videos might get a little rough to look at, but Jesse wasn’t really interested in them anyway.

On Saturday, he began the transfer. As he finished making dinner Sunday night (“making” as a loose definition – reheating leftover stir-fried tofu he’d previously brought home), his computer chimed announcing it had finished recompiling the data in modern format. He trotted over with his plate and took a seat, propped his feet up on his desk and poked them through the holographic display. He opened a secure text chat relay to Jesse.

I need search terms to query.

Oh, shit.

Hanzo picked up on the knee-jerk surprised tone in the message’s immediacy of reply despite the hour in America, and frowned at himself. Tact, Hanzo.

That was blunt. I apologize.

Don’t worry about it. I’m not sure. Try ‘wraith’, maybe.

Enough of a belated pause followed to make Hanzo fret at the beveled edge of his desk as he read the next message.

Try ‘reaper’, I guess, too.
The failed attempt at passivity was so obvious Hanzo could hear exactly what it would sound like as if they were in the same room.

I will try that to start. I will impose on you about it as little as necessary. I understand the difficulty.

That’s the job.

But that was the sticking point, and Hanzo knew it. Another ping from Jesse arrived.

Check his medical file. He never told me much about the condition he was being treated for, but...that’s what it was. What O’Deorain was originally brought on for. Maybe. That’s what I was told. Didn’t believe it then, and even less now.

Condition?

The floating shit I told you about. It’s been a thing for years. Old side effect of...we’ll just say it was because of The Crisis, to keep a long story short. They were trying to control it.

For weaponization?

To save his fucking life, Hanzo.

Hanzo’s hands retreated from the holographic keyboard in repentant fists.

That was presumptuous. Sorry.

Yeah, well considering, it’s a fair presumption to make. No need for me to be so testy about it. That’s on me.

No offense taken. This is plenty to work with. It is very late where you are. Get some sleep, and I will let you know everything I find later.

No answer came, so Hanzo had picked up his dinner and gotten a couple bites in when another message arrived.

Not everything.

Hanzo’s eyes narrowed in confusion, but the reply he started was cut off by another ping.

If you find tech specs and schematics, great. But I know how she kept notes. She was like a fucking coroner. I don’t need to see anything she put down about him. What it did to him. None of it.

Sympathetic grief drove Hanzo to sit back for a moment, brow furrowed and hand fretting his goatee. The automatic inclination Hanzo had was to offer comfort, but that might be too much for either of them right now. And anyway, it would just be words. That wasn’t enough for people as cynical as them. Only something in-person would hold any weight, where it could be seen and tangibly felt.

Of course. I will pass on only what is materially necessary, you have my word.

Thank you, Hanzo. Goodnight.

Sleep well.

Hanzo’s eye kept sheepishly darting up to the screen for five or so minutes after in half-
expectation of a reassuring reply that never came. No promises. Understandable – Jesse had already been up at an ungodly hour, and Hanzo’s imposition had not helped. He could certainly empathize with a sleepless night chased by unwanted memories. As he closed the chat window at last, the directory for the Blackwatch files was revealed.

Speaking of.

Hanzo meekly set aside his dinner as he gave into the distressing compulsion. Each key, pressed in irregular, halting succession, lit up with a sudden expository glare almost too much for Hanzo to handle. It judged him in harsher degrees for every count of seven letters. S. H. I--

And that was just the surname. Hanzo didn’t get past G when he began the given name, gave up, and pressed enter. Dozens of files were returned, but the obvious standout on the bare-bones directory was a file named 2741_62-BWpersonnel. He opened it; his heart stopped for a moment as he realized too late it would come with a picture, but thankfully the photo featured Genji with his visor on. Well, a different one than Hanzo had seen those scant months ago. His hair was visible, black once more rather than the electric green of his twenties, still short and ruffled as it had been as far back as Hanzo’s memory could reach. But his eyes. They were different, too. Red and narrowed. Seething. Even during that terrible night he and Genji had fought, that look had never been in Genji’s eyes. Anger, yes, but not...bone-deep acrimony. Empty, flailing wrath. But it wouldn’t have been there during their confrontation, though, would it? Naturally not.

Hanzo hadn’t put it there just yet.

He seized up in his chair, fists pulled so tight as to tremble. Breaths came harsh and thin, and his vision grew blurry, turning Genji’s face into a mottled distortion of gray and red. I’m a murderer. Who dares to kill their kin? Failure. Disgrace. Monster. Weak. A horrifying and familiar refrain. Just as he felt himself about to tip over the cliff of a real and complete panic attack, he recalled Genji’s eyes during their reunion. They had been brown; no rage had been there, either. Disappointment, anguish, worry, but no anger. Genji could have slaughtered him several times over that night. He’d come close. Hanzo had told him to. Instead, he’d forgiven Hanzo. Genji had chosen to do that. It wasn’t an accident, and his brother – his brother – had had his reasons for doing it, even if Hanzo didn’t know them...much less understand them.

For several, painful seconds, he repeated those facts to himself until his hands finally released and spread open on the arms of his chair. The screen came back into focus and he managed to scan the basic profile description for Genji. More detailed psych analysis and summary of service sat just below as half-obscured letters Hanzo merely needed to scroll down to read. He could. That had been his poorly-considered plan, after all.

But in the past several weeks, he’d lost enough sleep, berated himself, and accidentally dropped himself off a building because of the same general impulse he was feeling now. This particular bit of self-harm he was threatening himself with had to be rebuked. Yes, this time was supposed to be about drilling down into the stubborn bedrock of his worst anxieties in hopes of loosening it, but reading Genji’s personnel file wasn’t constructive. Conceiving of the medical files alone made him clutch his chest and need to put deliberate effort into breathing until the spike of stone-cold terror passed. He’d left Genji where he lay that night; he had no idea what he’d done to him, medically speaking. Not anything beyond horrific as a description, at least. Hanzo remembered little of the event in his waking hours. He didn’t trust his dreams’ detail either, even before he’d learned Genji had survived. Maybe the reality was better. Maybe it was worse.

The only thing he ever could recall with crystal-clear acuity was the fear he’d seen in Genji upon making his first successful, mortal cut.
He smashed a few hot keys and shut the console down completely. Get out. Go for a run.

But for fuck’s sake, no scaling walls this time.

~

Upon the third morning after that little disaster, when Hanzo greeted his console with the same deep sense of dread he had the two previous days, he grew disgusted with himself. His cowardice felt immutable and overwhelming, even in the face of all his self-loathing trying to berate it away. Despite the fact he had walked across the open floor to the kitchen and never once looked at his computer, he felt it looking at him as if it had the sentience of an omnic, judging him. A quiet, grinding utterance of frustration slipped out from behind his grit teeth.

Try. Be something closer to what he fucking wished he could be. Even pretending would be progress. He knew how monumentally stupid his stagnation was, so why didn’t he change already? What third-party expectation existed for him to fear anymore? None, of course – he hadn’t had one for years. All he was trying to outrun now was himself. He hadn’t ever done a very good job of that, either. What would Jesse tell him? Probably that his head was straight up his ass. Something snappy enough to get a rise out of Hanzo, then smooth it over with encouragement. Hanzo could imagine Jesse’s face, see the smile all at once hopeful and teasing, but couldn’t quite read the lips as they moved in his imagination to know just what he would say. The pantomimed support wasn’t working; Hanzo’s sudden and violent impulse to throw something got as far as a strangled grip around one of his highball glasses before he stopped himself.

No. It is not working for a reason. You are not Jesse. Make it yourself.

What did he even want to be? Bad question. Too frighteningly broad, too insurmountable. He caught a glance of his reflection in the glass on the microwave and sneered at it, just as he had in the mirror in Oasis. What was there to like even looking at him? He hated his face, his hair, his age, his visible wasted time. A ragged growl rent itself from his throat and he pressed his forehead into the countertop, hands raking at the back of his head.

I don’t want to waste any more.

But that was hard to stick to when he had to look at the evidence of it every day. Something so small, but a perfect summary of how he had lived.

His mind abruptly cleared. Why keep it, then? His appearance was maintenance. Coasting on existential autopilot. There was nothing to make of it when he never had plans, or even people to attempt plans with. It was just enough to shellac over the hermitage he doomed himself to. He wasn’t so far gone as to adopt the look of a hermit, no matter the depression. Hanzo still had taste.

The enormity of a life couldn’t change in one day. However, a small token, a simple visage staring back at him as something new, could. It didn’t have to be about this whole month, or even today. Just right now. A good impulse, for once. Very, very old but quietly insistent wishes tugged at his heart.

I am thirty-eight. Thirty-nine in a matter of months. It would be childish. Patently obvious as a mid-life crisis, he seethed at himself.

But he’d ostensibly been living a mid-life crisis since the age of twenty-nine, so.

Do it anyway, something else within him countered. Choosing not to at this point isn’t just waste. It’s death.
Hanzo raked his teeth over his lower lip, upsetting himself with the profundity of the truth in the thought. He’d never really needed to actually kill himself, no matter his lowest lows. He’d been dead for years. *Dying,* more accurately. A conscious action; continuous and purposeful.

*No dying today. Maybe not tomorrow, either. Find out.*

Hanzo moved again, feet stomping for his haste, to get properly dressed. Enthusiasm didn’t drive him so much as desperation. This impetus had a short shelf life – if he ever wanted to overcome anything and repeat it, he had to follow it through right now. Once he was presentable enough, he snapped up his keys with the same aggressive determination, but paused when the whiskey bottle, still on the table, still dusty and unmoved as the day he came home, demanded his attention from the furthest periphery of his vision.

Fuck it. He’d done more drinking earlier in the morning for worse reasons. *Less* reasons. One shot, then out the door he went. The whiskey’s heat sat at the back of his throat longer than it seemed it should, working to make sure Hanzo’s constantly-encroaching internalized shame was stayed for a couple hours. It was only mid-morning, but a barber would be open. And after that – as well as maybe one more dip into liquid courage – a piercing parlor. He *wanted* it, had for fifteen years, and never was allowed before. The gilded first sons of the Shimada clan had an *image* to maintain. Not their neon-haired siblings, or the nameless, pompadoured flunkies he was slated to rule over. A prince was a prince before he was even himself.

If Hanzo had ever *had* a self. He certainly hadn’t met him.

Maybe it was time to fucking find him the hard way. Like a target, or an objective. To hunt and drive and *run him down* until he had him, wriggling, in two hands. Perhaps then, he’d know what he was supposed to fucking look like.

When he returned three hours later with shaved temples and aching nose and ears, he made a beeline for his room and the bathroom beyond. The barber had started when Hanzo launched himself from the chair the second he’d finished and couldn’t turn the chair to the mirror. The woman at the piercing parlor had been equally stymied by the post-session refusal to survey her work. He wouldn’t be seen *seeing* it for the first time. This was too big to permit an audience.

The bathroom was dim, lit only by the filtered gray afternoon light through the curtained window on the other side of his bed. Hanzo centered himself before the mirror, took a very deep breath, and turned the lightswitch on. The bar in the bridge of his nose took up initial focus, but he reached up to pet at the peachfuzz at the sides and back of his head for the thousandth time since he’d left the barber shop. As he did, he turned his head left and right to eye the new rings in his ears, one apiece.

He didn’t hate it.

The constant, yawning abyss in his chest shrank almost imperceptibly. But it had; his shoulders and jaw slackened. He avoided his own gaze in the mirror, but still could see the wild *relief* sitting within his eyes, soft almost to the point of glassy. Today...was okay. It meant something a lot of days before it hadn’t. He’d given himself something he wanted just because he could. A tiny, superficial thing, seemingly inconsequential.

But tomorrow, Hanzo wouldn’t have to face down *waste* in the mirror again. He’d slowed the pace of dying today. Maybe, at some point, he’d make it to living.

His phone buzzed in his pocket – Jesse. Did he *know,* somehow?
Today was the first real hot day here. Felt good. Might invest in a tan. Well...more. How’re you?

I am well. I did something drastic today. Positive, don’t worry. Feels good.

What’d you do?

Let it be until you see me again. Better that way.

Okay. Looking forward to it. :)

Hanzo put his phone away and surveyed himself once more. He hoped...yes, he hoped Jesse would like it, too.

~

Over the next couple days, Hanzo continued his little makeover by shopping for new clothes. He might as well commit to the aesthetic change; up until now, he’d lived a pretty spartan lifestyle sartorially-speaking. When he wasn’t in his silk gi, he stuck to a lot of dime-a-dozen black t-shirts and athletic pants. Jesse had teased him once or twice for his Sunday hungover frat boy look, as if his own seemingly-endless stash of novelty tourism t-shirts wasn’t extremely hammy. So he had bought a pair of jeans, which was unheard of for him. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d even worn denim, but...they’d had a dragon on them, and he was weak. Along with other new clothes, he bought a backpack to retrofit as a quiver and a heavy-beaded bracelet to accessorize. A new coat, waxed canvas for the subtropical rain, helped complete his new look.

The trip had a secondary purpose, too – an extra ego boost before returning to work on the data cache. When he sat down at his console that evening, the stinging edge of reluctance had dulled enough to be tolerable. This wasn’t supposed to be for him, anyway. Genji had nothing to do with any of this.

Hanzo decided to start with Jesse’s suggestion – Reyes’ personnel and medical files. A cursory glance of it once found revealed multiple, major disciplinary marks. The one labeled Rialto Incident stood out – Hanzo recalled Jesse’s nightmare and their discussion of it back at the end of February.

Commander Reyes displayed an extraordinary lack of professionalism and indeed even rationality in his actions. Lieutenant McCree described the event as “cold-blooded murder”. Further notable reactions from the lieutenant in debrief: “completely out of character”, “unhinged”, “really distressing”, and that it had irreparably shaken his faith in Commander Reyes’ ability to lead responsibly.

The summary included hotlinks to full video interview, but Hanzo managed to temper his wild curiosity in favor of scrolling on to find Reyes’ included medical summary. It revealed nothing – that might have much to do with the fact that the signator on all of it was not a name Hanzo immediately recognized – a Dr. Angela Ziegler. The name nagged at him as he continued his basic speed-read, until belatedly, he recalled Jesse and Sadie discussing a woman by that name. Jesse had been a little put out to be asked about her. Sadie’s partner and Dr. Ziegler were colleagues and friends and had been at a symposium. However, he wasn’t about to potentially ruin his friend’s day again with questions he could probably answer himself one way or another.

He scrolled back up for another, more detailed pass; Jesse had mentioned a condition Reyes had been treated for. On a deeper read, he found an acronym – CCOD, which had a hotlink. Clicking it revealed a new document by Dr. Zeigler chronicling her treatment, starting in 2065. The full title was Chronic Cellular Oscillating Desynchronization, which was a term of her invention, apparently. No
wonder the woman was keynote speaker at medical symposiums. Hanzo read enough to grasp the gist as well as he could, despite the medical jargon. The end result he’d seen was illustrative enough. He skipped to the final post, dated late 2068.

Patient has requested permanent transfer of care to Dr. O’Deorain.

Hanzo could feel the passive aggression in the singular, blunt sentence. Dead end, then.

He opened the query window again, but he hesitated anew. He’d been dancing around the obvious temptation to read Jesse’s personnel file essentially from the day he’d retrieved them from Arazy’s vault. But his niggling interest was a distraction. Invasive. Jesse had said there was nothing Hanzo could not read. He had meant that, and likely preemptively understood that Hanzo would be curious. At least this investigative foray wasn’t outright self-destructive. He pulled up Jesse’s file. One piece of information immediately stood out, making Hanzo snap open a chat window.

March 10 \textsuperscript{th}. You never said a word.

Ain’t nothing special. But we went out to that high-end speakeasy place in Albuquerque for a reason. You snooping?

A little.

That’s why I said you could. You wouldn’t be able to resist, and I don’t mind, so there’s no reason to leave you feeling guilty about it. Tit for tat, though. What’s yours?

August 23 \textsuperscript{rd}.

Well, we won’t let yours pass on by, then. I doubt you’ve put much effort into it for a spell.

I have not.

That’s a plan, then.

Hanzo’s expression flickered with a brief smile and went back to reading. He skipped over the opening paragraphs of Jesse’s service – he already knew the most important parts, anyway.

Though the psych evals, Hanzo learned as he began scanning them, were a different story.

\begin{quote}
Ensign McCree displays signs of Antisocial Personality Disorder. He consistently lies in evaluations with obvious disdain, sometimes bordering on open hostility. Ensign is secretive of even basic facts about himself. Commanders Reyes and Morrison as well as Captain Amari all report contrary explanations from Ensign McCree about his background. Different birth dates/places, surnames, family history. This appears to be a game for him, and possibly a method to measure empathetic response for future manipulation. He frequently states deep cynicism of Overwatch’s mission and validity of his being part of it. This seems to be the only topic he is willing to discuss honestly.
\end{quote}

Field service is not recommended in the near term, or possibly ever, until certain baseline appreciation of teammates’ humanity and value can be established.

The brief went on to list a number of infractions in the course of Jesse’s first year and a half in Overwatch. Gambling, petty theft, breaking curfew. Lying to officers. Contraband, which on further reading was revealed to be hard liquor snuck on base. And one major charge for simple assault – some kind of fight with an older recruit. None of this made sense. Jesse certainly had a temper, but Hanzo had never seen anything so...willful and indiscriminate. Hanzo tabbed over to the chat
window again, but he had no idea where to even begin. Maybe keep it simple.

I have a question.

Got to the psych eval, huh?

Clever man.

Yes.

I told you it wasn’t magic.

True. And I didn’t take you at your word.

But words on a page ain’t a whole story, either.

Maybe Hanzo didn’t really have a question anymore. Jesse hadn’t been explicit, but he’d certainly still told Hanzo in his own way. He combed back his loose undercut with his fingers and ground his teeth. His respect for Jesse had been born of his willingness to try, and he’d mistaken that as a reflection of his innate moral character, temporarily waylaid by his difficult circumstances, rather than a continuing pattern he’d learned to repeat since childhood. Practiced, not a natural gift. No official title or diagnosis could encapsulate a life, especially one as challenging as Jesse’s. Even knowing what little Hanzo did, of course Jesse had been angry. Suspicious unto jagged cynicism. Slippery in the face of unexpected generosity. Hanzo would have himself, in Jesse’s position.

Another message from Jesse arrived.

Got any regrets?

Hanzo’s lashes fluttered with surprise. Was that a real question? Well, without being able to see Hanzo in his contemplation, one might grow anxious wondering, he supposed.

No.

It didn’t matter how far Jesse’s question extended. Hanzo got himself a little wrapped up in the depth of that truth when another message arrived.

I didn’t know how to explain it, so I wasn’t real honest about it.

You do not owe these explanations to me, Jesse.

I do, when you look to me as a moral compass.

Then I have put undue burden on you.

No, never. It’s worth it. But I feel like a hypocrite for not being up-front about it.

Nothing I have read negates what you have told me previously. I only wanted to understand the disparity.

You think it’s that different?

Yes. Drastically so. But understandable, knowing what you’ve told me about your background.

Listen, I done what I done for a lot of reasons. Valid ones and horseshit excuses. I’ll be first in line to say I’m fucked up because of it, and it took a long time and a shitload of effort to stop. But
that dickhead that did my intake wanted to put my ass in a box to suit his tastes. I got a heart, goddamn it.

I know that. I have always known that.

Hanzo hesitated for a long ten seconds before tapping enter. An equally-grating gap of time followed before Jesse’s reply, just long enough to begin to actually sting.

Thanks. I shouldn’t be treating that like it’s a surprise to hear. Sorry.

No need for contrition. I sympathize with that particular paranoia. I have quite a laundry list of reasons to suggest I am utterly morally bankrupt.

You have a heart, too. I see it. You’re using it right now, aren’t you?

The aforementioned organ stuttered a bit in his chest. Saccharine.

I suppose.

Hanzo insisted on a distasteful frown at himself, but only just.

Thank you for your willingness to tell me all of this. I will get back to the actual work I should be doing and avoid troubling you further.

Can’t trouble a man who keeps it as a middle name. Talk to you later, Hanzo.

Hanzo closed the chat window, but didn’t part himself from Jesse’s page just yet. His gaze lingered on the profile photo, taken in what looked like his late twenties. Just a goatee and mutton chops filled his jaw, rather than the almost-full beard he kept now...and Hanzo was secretly grateful for the change. Frightening as it was that Jesse almost made the look genuinely sexy, it was still just almost. Beyond that, Jesse’s eyes in the staff photo seemed wider and brighter, with a little less wear in them. His characteristic lopsided smirk, bent from years of holding a cigar in his teeth, painted his face.

Hanzo tipped back into his chair and anxiously played with his cuticles. How different would it have been, had he known Jesse then? They probably would have hated each other. Hanzo knew he’d have found Jesse’s...well, everything aggravating back then, and Jesse likely would have detested Hanzo’s aloofness and obvious trappings of his privilege and wealth. The playful dig at Hanzo’s lack of domestic cooking skill back in New Mexico was illustrative enough.

But had Hanzo ever entertained abdicating to Overwatch or Blackwatch, Jesse probably would have opened the door for him – after a thorough vetting process, naturally. Hanzo had certainly been aware of them and their surveillance. Their attempts to infiltrate the clan, and their intentions in doing so. He would have been a valuable asset for them, much like Genji had been. Moreso. If Hanzo had been willing then to really evaluate his circumstances and recognize the futility in staying. Analyzed his own faults and shortcomings. Maybe Genji...

But Hanzo hadn’t.

Which also fostered a question: if Hanzo would have found Jesse so wholly distasteful back then, what would Genji have thought of him? And Jesse, Genji? Hanzo and Genji had disagreed on many, many, many things, but even after all this time, Hanzo could not conceive of Genji – as he had been, and even beyond their separation, because what Hanzo had done to him had certainly not been good or healthy for Genji – having tolerated Jesse much better. Since Hanzo put all effort possible into avoiding any contemplation about his brother, he only realized now that he had zero clue how
Jesse and Genji had interacted as former comrades.

The profile photo Hanzo had seen of his brother previously came to mind, and the obvious, barely-contained rage. If Genji hadn’t been able to put all that emotion away for a simple picture, working with him had to have been...a challenge, to say the least. The only substantive mention Jesse had ever made of Genji, back in New Mexico when Hanzo had explained their reunion, had been to comment on remembering him as a less-than-forgiving individual. Maybe...maybe Jesse wasn’t too keen to discuss it himself, because it meant recalling yet more bad memories. Maybe Jesse’s perspective on Genji was an unintended, secondary casualty of Hanzo’s choices. Holy shit, what a deep and terrifying new well of possibility that was.

Despair fret at the corners of his mind like restless fingers separating warp and weft of a frayed blanket, so Hanzo abruptly stood and abandoned the computer. He didn’t have anywhere to go or anything to do, however, so he stood in the center of his living room, purposeless and head bowed. It could have been different. He wanted it to be, desperately. But...he wouldn’t have what he did right now. Was he...allowed that? To find something worthwhile at the price he had exacted?

You have a heart.

I told you it wasn’t magic.

Neither was Hanzo.

As if in response, his left arm tingled like sparks bursting just under the skin. He pulled the hand into a fist so tight, his fingernails bit into the palm. One existential panic attack at a time.

He strode over to where his gi hung in his bedroom on a display stand, and plucked up his tool belt. From it, he retrieved the toy car Jesse had given him and returned to his desk chair. He’d learned a little more about Jesse’s once-upon-a-time today, which prompted remembering the toy’s presence...and made for an excellent contemplative distraction over anything about Genji. Hanzo turned it over in his fingers and inspected it; a lot of the paint had chipped and scraped off the metal body along every edge. The car model wasn’t familiar to Hanzo, but it was probably an old-fashioned gas engine one. On the little flip-up trunk lid, an R had been drawn on in presumably permanent marker, though it was heavily faded and a victim of all the chipping paint underneath it.

Hanzo’s eyes narrowed. Jesse had told him his first name was the genuine article, so whose car had this been? Maybe it didn’t matter, but Hanzo’s gut told him that its importance was more complicated than a simple childhood token. Jesse had been so...frightened to pass it over. As he rubbed the pad of his thumb in thoughtful circles on the roof of the little car, Hanzo had to confront the unsettling matter that, for all he and Jesse had shared, two things were true.

One, it wasn’t very much information, all things considered. Hanzo understood some of what Jesse was dealing with contemporarily, but precious little about the greater context of his whole life.

And two: as of this moment, they’d only known each other a scant four and a half months.

Granted, that had been every day of those months. Many people made strong and lasting friendships in more sporadic time. And...even romantic relationships. Less damaged people, though. Normal people. Jesse’s existence in Hanzo’s life was unprecedented in every way, and Hanzo wasn’t sure what to make of it. He wanted to keep it, he knew that much. And he understood that how he felt was not wholly attached to simple friendship. But none of that added up to partnership – a scary prospect, in all truth.

What if he took the chance on it...and failed? Or even worse, found something deep and
permanent, only to learn Jesse did not feel the same, though he, too, may have tried valiantly? Men like them did not date. However, Hanzo couldn’t preternaturally understand his feelings and their place in context of Jesse’s just like that. Nor could he demand it of Jesse. What did giving it a try look like for them? Was it wise? Safe?

All the one-off wanks in a shower and titillating what-ifs while raking eyes over Jesse’s alluring profile didn’t substitute reality, and Hanzo was rapidly sobering up to that. He could wake up tomorrow morning cured of every emotional and mental ailment he’d ever had and still have a heap of prospective issues to confront in...seeing? dating? partnering with? Jesse. Each term felt far too thorough and threatened a kind of commitment Hanzo instinctively balked at. Jesse likely would, too, and Hanzo wouldn’t blame him for it.

And he had to admit that this easily could all be flight of fancy. Just an awkward and unpracticed expression of gratitude in response to being shown affection of any kind in a very, very, very long time. Couldn’t he just have a friend? Did he have to make it more complicated? The gentle ache in his chest recalling Jesse’s laugh and the way his heart had skipped beats to read Jesse’s kind words made an efficient rebuttal to his attempt at more sterile logic.

Hanzo tapped the car against his goatee. Again, he reminded himself: he didn’t have to have all these answers now. Jesse had been correct in Oasis – they both needed time to contemplate what their particular kind of togetherness meant. At least now it wasn’t a secret tearing him to pieces, and for the time being, he had no reason to regret it the way he had most choices in his life. And he was only one half of the thing, though admitting it made him give a long, discomfited sigh. When it was just his imagination, Hanzo didn’t have to hand over any control. Certainly not responsible, but assuredly more comfortable. Perhaps it was for the best that his hand was forced. Keeping such a profound secret for much longer very easily could have ruined their friendship.

Their circumstances still could.

I don’t wanna be out the best thing to happen to me in ten years.

Hanzo had to hold onto that. And commit to it for Jesse’s sake, too. None of tonight’s train of thought made for a complete solution, but for the first time, that felt okay. He’d never been permitted to...doubt, reflect, let something go and let something be until new information revealed itself in his old life. So many decisions had been made for him – he had known and understood that in some measure growing up, but after leaving, the sheer proportionality had laid itself out before him over time.

But that, too, was changing, and for the better.

~

Try as Hanzo might, two further weeks on, no clever search queries were netting him much success. Dr. O’Deorain may have kept her notes in code, or buried in unrelated directories. Hanzo was basically playing Russian roulette with a single bullet in the dark, hoping to strike a moving target. Perhaps with an AI assisting, he might have more help creating more substantive metadata associations and narrow the field down, but that wasn’t available to him. When he reluctantly reported this failure to Jesse, Hanzo was sent reassuring but vague responses. Might have a guy, Jesse had said when Hanzo suggested artificial intelligence. That didn’t inspire confidence – it almost certainly meant Overwatch connections, and Hanzo was loath to make Jesse dip into them, knowing his extreme reticence. Maybe it was unavoidable.

After another late night of fruitless search, Hanzo begrudgingly went to bed. Though he was distracted by his simmering frustration, something felt...off to him. Close, and observing him.
Whenever his well-practiced sense of danger was this insistent, he knew well to listen to it, even if its...almost preternatural anticipation dimly bothered him very deep down inside. It was worth living with, because at four AM, when his eyes snapped open and his fist wrapped around the tantou he kept unsheathed under his pillow, he was grateful for it.

Pre-summer humidity made the unnatural silence sit so close, it seemed to coat his skin. The tiniest stir landed like a wrinkle in that coating, setting Hanzo further on-edge where he lay facedown. He’d been complacent and too wrapped up in himself since coming back to China – of course this would happen. This was the only chance the family had had all year so far, and he’d likely incensed at least one faction of the clan anew with his and Jesse’s little stunt in February. Perhaps this was Takeru’s patient vengeance, despite his bloviating about not needing to kill Hanzo. Or maybe it was just an avatar of the elders’ continued wrath. It didn’t really matter.

He let the enemy come in close – it was a standard strategy to come up on a target seemingly asleep and vulnerable, but Hanzo was hardly a standard target. They should have figured out by now that something in their tactics should change. Hanzo didn’t understand it, but he’d given up the half-assed chess game a long time ago.

A preparatory breath drew quieter than a whisper, but to Hanzo’s trained ears, it landed with the cacophony of a tidal crash. He exploded into motion, tantou slashing backhand to meet another blade as it fell towards him. The screeching steel made Hanzo wince more than the strength of the lethal intent in the opponent’s attack. Initial blow having been redirected, Hanzo rolled back off the bed and crouched on the floor. His assailant immediately loped across the bed to follow; awfully aggressive and impulsive of them. He parried another strike as they came at him, and landed a kick in the chest hard enough to send his attacker tumbling back across the mattress. This person was particularly small and light, and realizing it made Hanzo’s countenance pinch more deeply with distaste. Already, Hanzo knew how this confrontation was going to end. The previous three attempts had all been so alike, they’d become almost rote, and this newest encounter suggested the same pattern yet again. His stomach turned; did tonight have to end the same way? Could he convince just one of them to walk away? The last time had been...overwhelming in the aftermath.

“Kore wa anata ni muriteki desu,” Hanzo spat, knowing perfectly well that words would do no good. “Yameru.”

To his attacker’s credit, they didn’t boast back in puffed-up refutation. Hanzo could see them in full, now, but it revealed little – they were dressed head-to-toe, only eyes visible, in the typical clandestine all-black garb that lesser-branch members wore for assassination. They stood again, now separated from Hanzo by the bed and their shoulders squared with...resignation, Hanzo realized suddenly. That was new. Did someone warn them? Or was this one smarter than the rest? The stranger sauntered backwards, eyes never leaving Hanzo, to disappear back into the living room. Hanzo gave a heavy sigh; their honor was at stake, he supposed, so whatever reservations his attacker may or may not have, they were ultimately irrelevant. He could no longer recall what that felt like in context of familial pride. His definition of honor had changed far too radically to compare.

“Have it your way,” he muttered to himself.

He trod to the threshold and found the stranger standing in the middle of the open floor, in stance and prepared to fight. Hanzo took one step, then two, slow and delicate as a dancer. When his opponent charged, Hanzo’s bare foot squeaked harsh and sharp on the wood floor as he twisted aside. The other foot slammed into the floor hard enough to make his darkened computer console tremble several feet away as he ended his pirouette and used the leverage to round fist-first on the enemy, who flipped backward on one hand just out of range. Undeterred, Hanzo pressed his forward momentum. He switched his tantou to hold it backhand as he thundered up, grabbed his still-
rebounding opponent by the shoulders, and pulled down to make them meet his brutal upward knee attack directly into their solar plexus. They instantly dropped to the floor with a pitched wheeze, their dagger clattering on the wood.

Hanzo bowed to flick aside the dagger from reach with the point of his own weapon, but paused to assess the prone, struggling form on the floor. He’d been halfway to the decision from the moment they’d met in combat, but now he finalized it with a single, severe nod before bringing his fist down on their masked face, rendering them instantly unconscious. Somewhere, he knew he still kept a length of rappelling rope.

By the time the stranger awoke, Hanzo was halfway through his second glass of bourbon. He’d tied them to his computer chair and glowered at them from where he sat on the sofa across the room. The would-be assassin made a few empty attempts at escape before falling still and dour. Hunched. Hanzo couldn’t help an amused huff at that as he rose and crossed the room to whip off the balaclava, though it held no surprises.

It had been all the body language to be expected of a teenager, even one bred to be a killer.

Of the past three attempts before tonight, each had been under twenty, and seemed to be getting younger and smaller all the time. For years, it had been well-practiced, if under-qualified adults sent to track him. Younger than him, but Hanzo had always supposed the family thought they might be able to outclass him as he aged. A couple had even gotten the drop on him and put him in serious trouble, but Hanzo cut his way out eventually every time.

The first of the teenagers, however, had been a complete shock to unmask. Hanzo had fought him and found him, curiously, a bit too small and a bit too lacking. After leaving him broken and bloody on the asphalt of a nameless backstreet in Jakarta, Hanzo had ripped off the balaclava and just as quickly let it slip from his numb fingers and fall into the growing puddle of rainwater and blood aside his head. The second one had sounded an unwelcome and deeply unsettling confirmation of a trend after gutting her atop a building in Mumbai. Even as he had traded savage blows with her, he recalled the creeping worry of what lay hiding within the disguise. The third one, the autumn before Hanzo had met Jesse, had never given Hanzo a chance to try and pull his punches for all his wild and undisciplined fury. He’d had to put an arrow in the...the boy at extremely close range, putting him down like a rabid dog. Afterward, Hanzo had taken the time and effort to rob a nearby empty home in Kiev for a blanket to wrap the body in and secret away to allow him time to burn incense and pray over him.

There was no denying it now – the family was clearly bleeding itself out in conquest of each other. This had very little to do with Hanzo. The fact they kept coming after him anyway when they so obviously lacked resources for such a high-profile target only more thoroughly underlined their doomed mindset. No matter what minor branch tried to seize control, they were sending their firstborns to the slaughter in vain attempt to gain credence from whatever was left of the elder council.

Now, bitter enmity met his placid, dispassionate gaze. There was no fear. Respectable enough, but also foolish. She had much to fear and was ignorant of the wisdom in embracing it. But that had been Hanzo once, too. Unafraid to die for The Cause, The Clan. A surprisingly-thin strawman, but when you were raised knowing nothing else, you were easy to fool.

“Passable,” Hanzo opened as he stared her down where she sat – all of her seventeen years at best. “With time, perhaps even decent.”

“You can’t taunt me in Japanese?” she sneered.
“I will taunt you in whatever tongue I fucking please,” Hanzo replied smoothly, theatrically observing his bourbon glass lifted to his eyes rather than his captive. “I am certain it was quite an honor to be chosen for this task. What did they tell you? That I am a monster, unrelenting and ruthless, and must be done away with a swiftly and savagely as possible? Or that I am a weak and avoidant coward fleeing from the family because I could not shoulder our incredible legacy, and deserve to be dragged back for the ultimate suffering?”

“The latter,” she seethed.

Hanzo shrugged and took an idle sip of his drink.

“I am the first daughter o--” she tried.

“I do not care,” Hanzo cut in with a sigh. “They all want to waste the gift of their children alike. Whichever second or third cousin you are does not matter.” As he looked over, he caught her telling glance down to the floorboards. “And you recognize that as readily as I do.”

She didn’t speak again, but she didn’t need to as Hanzo watched her brow wilt a little.

“Yet, you come. Why?”

Still no answer, but her eyes grew defeated and soft, showing her true, few years so completely that Hanzo had to admit feeling moved. And with that, he understood.

“Someone else would have. Someone much more ignorant of the truth,” he murmured.

“Ototou,” she rasped to herself, overcome in the moment.

The single word struck like a lash. Hanzo turned on a heel and marched to the window; the girl didn’t have to know what it’d done to him. She likely had no idea why Hanzo left. She would have been so young when it happened. So small.

He felt he was at an impasse; a death felt inescapable. She had a mission, but Hanzo still had a few shreds of a soul left. At this point, finishing the job would be...difficult. Logistically and mentally.

Sometimes, it’s the life you don’t take.

But did Jesse’s words count here, too? Could Hanzo stop thinking that way as his friend had so wisely spoken in that bar all those months ago? Jesse had been punished for his mercy then.

The point is me, Jesse had said. The same as it was for the girl behind him, tied down so someone she loved did not have to be, in the face of a death so unjustly brutal and soon. The very thing Hanzo did not do when he had been in her place.

The point is me.

Hanzo paced back to the girl. A single tear track marred her furious gaze; brave and strong, much more than Hanzo had ever been at her age, and to an extent, even now. Good. She would need to be.

“You have a choice,” Hanzo said, flat and cold as fresh ice on a lake. “I will release you, and you can leave. Choose otherwise, and you will die.”

She continued to be silent, but couldn’t hide her surprise. As it faded, her eyes narrowed again,
measuring Hanzo from the surface of his countenance all the way through to the soul. Minutes passed, and her face slackened.

“Where will I go?”

“I do not care. But you cannot stay here, and you certainly cannot return to Shimada Castle. What you might find beyond here and there is unknowable, but it is not imminent death. I suggest denying it the chance.” He swept up his tantou from the coffee table, circled the chair, and cut the rope. “I have.”

She was on her feet in the space of a breath and turned to stare Hanzo up and down once more. He didn’t move, one hand holding his highball still thinly-laden with bourbon, and the tantou in the other. That was all the convincing she needed, as she disappeared like a bullet, wrenching open the front door she’d left ajar for a hasty escape just in case, feet pounding out of earshot without any veneer of stealth.

The rift inside Hanzo grew a little narrower still.

He returned his tantou to its scabbard and found his phone back in his bedroom. Instinct told him to message Jesse, but how on Earth was he supposed to explain this? Despite the positive ending, lingering paranoia drove Hanzo towards needing euphemism even for a secure communication, but he didn’t want to scare Jesse, either.

Number sixteen occurred tonight. I am fine, do not worry.

He dumped his phone back on the sidetable and flopped back into bed.

Chapter End Notes

a selection from Hanzo’s playlist -- Do It Anyway, by Ben Folds Five:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFsRX7rj2jY
Jesse lay low in a patch of mingled brittle-brush and palo verde trees, scoping a flat brick of a building half-mummified by too many decades desiccating in abandonment. It was a former shooting range set outside an equally-former suburb of Santa Fe left to grind back to the dust from whence it came. Not much, but it had retained enough of its bunkeresque stability to make for an excellent clandestine meeting house.

After his...misadventure returning home, Jesse had left immediately the following morning. He just couldn’t stay there and maintain his last, feeble threads of rationality, much less hope to knot them back together to recover real sanity. He’d retreated to Santa Fe – big, noisy, a known quantity. Normally, of course, he preferred the contemplative quietude of the desert, but right now, it had no answers and only scathing rebuke to offer. He had to be a special kind of lost to need escaping to the city.

So he’d left, found his favorite watering hole-slash-commission post, and had made the bartender
go a little ashen when Jesse had bluntly asked *what needs killin’* as greeting over his first sip of shitty well bourbon. He hadn’t had the time or humor for niceties *then*, and even less so now that he’d arrived. In taking the job, he’d simply been told “some guys” had been “fucking around in the barrios” and local Latinx population had been looking for help dealing with it. Jesse had noted the bartender’s avoidant eyes and anxious grip on a tap as he’d spoken, and now Jesse understood better: *some guys* had been a roving band of M iracle W hip country boys, and *fucking around* had been robbing homes, painting them in slurs, and occasionally even setting residents’ stoops on fire. It had recently escalated to an attempted kidnapping, thwarted by a young man who had ended up in the hospital from his efforts rescuing the victim. More than enough excuse for Jesse’s particular flavor of vigilantism.

It was mid-morning – Jesse had come out early to settle in for hours of surveillance before the heat kicked in for the day. They clearly spent most of the previous evening cavorting, given the evidence of Coors Light cans in amongst cigarette boxes and various types of guns strewn across cheap folding plastic tables alongside shooting stations. So far, Jesse had only caught glimpses, as they had largely retreated inside for actual work and planning...whatever fuckery that manifested in one or another of their blighted minds.

They looked infuriatingly like him...well, in dress and accent, at least. Jesse would have needed a daddy that could have passed the brown-bag test to *truly* match. But just similar enough to add personal insult to the thing. Nobody just *got* to put on a ten-gallon hat and strut over the vulnerable on his watch. His look wasn’t really about aesthetic for him – it was a lived principle. Nobody really understood that, even those who loved Jesse most. The thing was for him, and no one else. When he’d been a teenager and had adopted the look he was so well-known for, he’d thought it was supposed to be about looking like a slick badass, too. Many years, mistakes, traumas, and deeper learning later, he understood much better, but kept that close to his heart. He had enough healthy self-deprecation in him to not simply bear, but enjoy the ribbing he got from the ignorant for his anachronous look. It kept him humble.

In short, saying it put a chip on Jesse’s shoulder was putting it mildly, to watch a bunch of rednecks in Stetsons and chaps they probably strut around in on Sunday mornings also use them for weeknights terrorizing others. But on the upside, it put a nice cherry on top of his intent in coming out here at all. Aggression sat constantly in his temples and jaw, sometimes just as tension, others as an all-encompassing headache. He hadn’t slept any better since leaving the ranch house, and had switched off from slow-burning cigars to cigarettes to have a more reliable (and trashy and unhealthy) vector to cut his stress, but only just. He was anxious, exhausted, and consumed with indescribable self-doubt.

Something needed to die, and a clutch of shitheads like these was a convenience Jesse was frankly grateful for.

He extracted himself from cover and began a circuitous patrol around the far side of the building; the barrel of Peacekeeper led the way as he crept along the stucco wall. Since the building was an indoor range, it was well-insulated from noise and only had one entrance. That was more challenging and dangerous, but Jesse revealed in that fact right now.

The front door was ajar by virtue of it being nearly offits hinges from years of disuse. Jesse paused, back to the wall just aside of the door, to listen carefully. Voices were audible, but heavily muffled – good. A surreptitious eye through the cracked threshold revealed an open storefront inside, littered with rusting displays for guns with semi-intact plastic casings. When he shifted his angle of observation through the slit, he caught sight of a door on the far side with two men leaning into the next room. An office, presumably. He was also confronted with a new disdainful token strapped to the far wall: the armed stars-and-bars.
In America during the Crisis, the ugly token of the Confederacy had made a major resurgence, but had been added to with an emblem of crossed, flexing human arms to include organic supremacy. Nowadays, it was strictly illegal to fly in several countries (and often displayed in countries with deep anti-omnic sentiments, like England), hence the clandestine display in this ruined complex. It wasn’t a surprise to see, given the acts that had brought Jesse out here. They were racists to the core: if they denied the humanity of their fellow organic kin, there was little chance they’d find any empathy for omnics, either. The only people they recognized fit on a four-item acronymous list: WASP.

Jesse toed the door open just enough to dip inside, and found cover behind a set of shelves. The chatter was still muted, but enough to be understandable now.

“So we come down Chaparral to Capitan and hit one of the houses on that stretch. Plenty of quick outs for us. It’ll spook them motherfuckers like hell to hit that close to the school.”

“You don’t think that’ll be too hot?”

“Nah, long as we don’t do it twice and get the fuck out in five or less. Mark stays in the car with the doors open, and y’all keep hands on your goddamn bats, should be a clean getaway. It was stupid to try and take one – if we’re gonna kill ‘em anyway, might as well do it right there.”

Shit.

“Man, I just got a shiny new nine for myself, though.”

“You wanna leave ballistics for somebody to trace, do it on your own fucking time, Chad.”

Imminent plans meant Jesse needed to take imminent action. He drew random shapes into the threadbare, dusty industrial carpet between his feet with the barrel of his gun as he considered his options. Bust back out the door, drawing attention outside? Or an old-fashioned blitz, right here and now? The enemy would be given opportunity to flee in one of the assorted trucks parked nearby if he took it outside, but it was drastically higher risk for him five-on-one in close quarters.

Eh, fuck it. This wasn’t Rialto, and these weren’t exactly trained killers. Hardly long odds.

He stood, body and gun rising in one movement, almost carelessly trained on the head of the man on the left side of the door and shot. The explosion seemed to rend spacetime – life suspended for the slimmest of moments, freezing the spatter mid-air and leaving the four other men in place as they tried to absorb what had just happened. Even Jesse was stayed by it, somehow surprised by the gunshot in the muted, dusty air despite hearing it thousands of times before.

But it didn’t last. The shout and flinch from the other man bloomed as time reasserted itself, his jaw agape and eyes bugging at his assassinated compatriot. It took him several beats to fully appreciate Jesse’s presence. A natural response, and one Jesse was intimately familiar with. So he let it linger, let acknowledgment soak in with capillary effect: watching it pool, sit, then slip under the surface as his enemy’s eyebrows tilted towards fury.

And that’s when Jesse pulled the trigger again.

The man had stepped forward enough for the spatter to make a more spectacular show for Jesse, making a crown of viscera propel back to imprint on the wall behind. He crumpled, calves folded under him and torso wedged awkwardly against the wall. That was all the attention he paid the show, however, as the rest of the men still stunned inside the office itself jockeyed to rush out after their comrades. A flash of silver told Jesse one of them had procured a pistol.
Rather than duck for cover, Jesse charged directly at the office door and met the first one coming out. Unarmed; fucking idiot. Jesse reached with his left hand, catching the snub-nosed Chicken-in-a-Bisket motherfucker by his face Jesse pulled, then squeezed. All he felt was the minor reverberation up the metal chassis of his arm from the force of the bones and cartilage being crushed.

Throwing the flailing wounded man aside distracted Jesse a heartbeat long enough to be tackled by another unarmed attacker, sending them both to the floor. Two hands got hold of and pinned his metal arm in a surprising fit of wisdom, stalling long enough for the gun-wielding man to storm out of the office and advance on Jesse pistol-first. But his stock-parts right arm was still plenty capable, so he punched his enemy's throat to free himself. Ensuing choked wheezes gave ambiance to Jesse’s rough grunts as he got back on his feet, only to need to roll out of range of a pistol whip. Next came boots aimed for his head; Jesse got his mechanical fist around the toe of one of them and put enough pressure on the steel toe to make the man cry out in pain...and fall right on top of Jesse. Not his finest combative hour, but it got the man to drop his gun, which tumbled across the floor out of immediate reach.

Winded but otherwise unblemished, Jesse tried yet again to wrest himself free, but the man on top of him recovered and straddled Jesse quick enough to get a couple solid punches in. However, bar-room ingenuity was absolutely no match for Jesse’s twenty years of training; as the man raised a fist for what he believed would be a finishing punch, far too huge and slow of a windup, Jesse struck. He wedged his enemy’s arm in the grip of both hands, locked his left ankle with his foot, and flipped him with one almost-effortless throw of his hips to reverse their positions. He spared only a single, ruthless slam of his left fist down and through his head before getting up, flicking his hand of the worst of the blood while soothing his sore jaw with his right hand. Nothing worse than a shiner, probably.

That only left the one man still gasping and clutching his throat on the floor. He’d obviously lost his nerve, cowed by the effortless show of power and had pitifully slid away far as he could on the ragged carpet. Jesse cracked his neck, yawned his jaw wide to make it pop back into what felt like correct position, and leveled Peacekeeper at the last man’s head.

“Is there anything left?”

“What?” the man croaked.

Jesse cocked the hammer – mechanically unnecessary, but psychologically effective.

“Did you fence everything?”

“N-no.”

“Address. I want it.”

“Fuck--”

Jesse shot him dead. He could figure it out the hard way. He let out a long, relaxing sigh and holstered his weapon. Though it’d lasted all of seconds, he did feel better. Purposeful. Yes that purpose was violence, but Jesse had learned a long time ago that that didn’t matter if you knew where to put it, and ensured no one who didn’t deserve it felt it. Some lucky people got a life lived without ever needing to learn how to do that.

Jesse had never been lucky.

He regarded the body at his feet, and it linked with the memory of the last racist he’d seen like this
– Flinch. That had been a good day, despite the hiccups. Jesse recalled Hanzo’s self-satisfied expression and couldn’t help a smile. As he continued to recall the moment, however…

_Don’t make a mess._

_Have you ever known me to be anything other than fastidious?_

Jesus, the way Hanzo had satirized himself, face lit with a cut of a smirk as if sharing a secret. And Jesse had dragged the body off with barely a complaint, dimly realizing the fact that Hanzo had put on a show purely to cheer him up. He remembered how…_warm_ he had felt to realize it.

Had…had that been _flirting_? Jesse hadn’t meant to, and there was no way Hanzo would have done it intentionally, because he’d been so determined to keep it to himself. Could you do that on accident _mutually_? His self-doubt brutally reasserted itself.

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ, can’t I get ten minutes of peace,” he grumbled at himself as he removed his hat to rub at his brow in frustration. That had been the _point_ of the whole fucking excursion – just a job to clear his head. _Fuck._ He couldn’t even kill a random son of a bitch anymore without a _reminder_. What the fuck did it _say_ about him that this was even a train of thought?

Raspy, wet gasps interrupted his brooding – the man with the crushed face wasn’t _quite_ dead. Without even sparing a glance, Jesse casually flicked Peacekeeper to his right, shot, and re-holstered it. If he was gonna be stuck thinking about Hanzo, it might as fucking well be _quiet_. He yanked out a cigarette and lit it with a rueful shake of his head.

There was no outrunning the feeling, was there? Even to put off time until they linked back up again. He _should_ be doing exactly what Hanzo was – getting his shit together. That had never felt less appealing or more unobtainable. He’d barely been keeping it together these past few months, and this turn of events made the creaky-ass balance beam he was weaving on threaten to fall apart under him. Not that that was _Hanzo’s_ fault, no, never. The interpersonal disaster Jesse called his life was wholly and uniquely his. Hanzo…knew about it, but didn’t. Not really. If only he knew how poorly Jesse had managed with one Shimada already.

But then again, Jesse had never brought himself to come while thinking about getting railed by Genji. Perhaps that was a good sign. He sure didn’t have a fucking clue one way or another anymore.

Jesse spent the next few hours going over the materials the men had been using for their plans. A hard-copy map of Santa Fe had listed targets as well as safehouses to escape to – those safehouses likely were their loot stashes, too. He’d look into that later and recover what he could. They’d also had a battered holo terminal, and after a bit of perusing, he found correspondence suggesting the men had had an inside man in the local precinct who was stonewalling investigations on their behalf. Few things infuriated Jesse as much as a dirty cop, but even he couldn’t just run one down and walk away clean, especially when he was expected somewhere overseas in a few weeks. _Those_ kinds of warrants didn’t just drop to the bottom of a pile in a couple weeks’ time.

But all these emails _would_ make a great bit of guerrilla investigative journalism. He began downloading as much as he could onto a spare mobile drive. The map and flag would come, too, and he’d take pictures of them for the blog – somewhere far away from the crime scene and sterilized of any geographical token, naturally. This was turning into a fine bit of work, indeed.

After gathering everything that felt useful, Jesse began dragging the bodies outside to pile up and burn when he caught one of the LEDs on his arm blinking – a priority message. He finished hauling Dickhead Number Three out into the dirt before opening the message. Oh, Hanzo, good. He’d
finally let Jesse know he’d gotten back to China. Previously-unnoticed tension in his shoulders released. A crooked half-smile broke through at least part of his stormy mood to read Hanzo’s message.

_It is raining interminably here. I almost forgot what it sounded like, not to besmirch your native climate._

“Lookit you, tryin’ to be personable,” Jesse muttered to himself. Sweet, perhaps even… approaching adorable.

A limp arm flopped from a dead man’s chest, knocking Jesse in the shin and rudely reminding him of his place and circumstances. He let out a frustrated huff at himself as his mood clouded again with half-understood what-ifs and creeping doubts.

But Hanzo didn’t need to know any of that. Jesse sent a sunny-enough response, shut down the holo, and went back to what he was doing, all the while trying to ignore how much heavier the last two bodies seemed in his hands.

~

As he slogged toward and through the weekend, Jesse ran a barrage of background checks on the men he’d killed and begun trying to link them with Santa Fe’s PD to find the corrupt officer. This had meant very long hours cross-checking public records and social media accounts on public wifi, and after giving himself a headache from all the reading, he spent several hours sitting on the last safehouse on the map until it was clear no one was there or would come by to interrupt Jesse’s search for more stolen property.

He oozed into his hotel room – a fairly nice one downtown that he’d decided to burn a few extra bucks on in the hopes of easing at least a bit of his stress (hint: it didn’t work) – just after three in the morning. No relief came in collapsing into bed, boots and all, and after a half-hour, he gave up hope of just passing out and he begrudgingly expended the effort to dress down properly. He was so, so tired, but his insomnia had persisted as it had all week. As he slid back under the covers, fully prepared to spend the next four or so hours staring at the ceiling, his arm LED began blinking once more, harsh and obvious in the dark. No doubt who it was.

But opening and reading the message prompted an overpowering and unexpected wave of dread. _I need search terms to query._

The immediate, searing thought Jesse had was _I am not ready for this._ No more so than he had been the day he and Hanzo had gotten in the car and left Portland months earlier. Hanzo was expecting an answer now, and Jesse was at a complete loss. Might as well just reply with complete honesty.

_Oh, shit._

As he struggled to gather his thoughts and at least _attempt_ to be helpful, all Jesse’s continuing angst surrounding his relationship with Hanzo was joined by the deeper and older emotional struggle that Gabe represented. He fielded a couple shitty options to Hanzo on complete autopilot when real inspiration struck; Gabe’s condition. Maybe his medical file would lead to a clue. Angie had been taking care of him until O’Deorain had come on. There was probably an official _and_ not-so-official record tucked away, but there had to be crossover somewhere. So he made the suggestion, and naturally, Hanzo needed context. Uncomfortable to describe, yes, but not insurmountably so. But Hanzo’s response…
The message touched off an irrational storm of anger. As if Jesse ever would have condoned that for someone he respected. That he cared about. Overwatch had done a lot of fucked up shit, but for real goddamn reasons, and well-intentioned ones. For the betterment and safety of others, not empty-ass violence. Hanzo’s fucking brother was alive because of those difficult choices.

But when Hanzo replied to Jesse’s vicious retort – to save his fucking life, Hanzo – with contrition, Jesse’s perspective righted itself and he felt guilty. Shit, Hanzo didn’t know any fucking better. That’s why he asked the goddamn question. He’d never make a personal attack out of it, either. When was Jesse going to stop being such a cagey asshole talking about...any of this? He owed Hanzo an apology.

No need for me to be so testy about it. That’s on me.

Of all the people he knew, Hanzo was the least touched by that portion of Jesse’s life. He had never known Gabe, or seen the slow deterioration, or interacted with anyone else connected to it, contemporarily or presently. That made for a complete tabula rasa for Jesse to indulge in; he could reveal what he wanted, when he felt the need. But that wasn’t happening, at least not in any substantive way. No material discussion of Gabe had occurred since Jesse’s night terror months ago, and he had been perfectly happy to keep it that way. There had been plenty other things to distract them both in the meantime. Hanzo wasn’t going to push the issue, and Jesse was taking active advantage of that. Again. He’d lied to his friend in the leadup to Los Angeles, and that had been a mistake – and easily could have been a fatal one. And while Jesse was trying to do what he was, it still could be.

And now... now. Things had changed, were still changing. The tactical argument hadn’t been the best one to begin with, and continuing to be obstinate now made it feel even more callous. Hanzo promised to let Jesse speak his mind in his own time, but that didn’t create an excuse for Jesse to hide in. Not in any way he could act on and continue thinking of himself as an honest man and genuine friend to Hanzo, anyway. If...something more was in the cards, did Jesse owe that depth of admission to Hanzo?

No, it probably wasn’t owed, but Jesse thought he should feel like he wanted to more than he did. Wasn’t that how it was supposed to work: that one, special person you could give anything up to? A place of release and respite? A reply from Hanzo arrived, drawing his attention once more.

Get some sleep, and I will let you know everything I find later.

Goddamn it, Hanzo was trying. Searching for that sweet spot that would let Jesse know he was there, would meet him halfway, and yet do his best to keep himself between Jesse and the long shadow he was afraid to acknowledge, lest it swallow him whole. Jesse chewed the inside of his cheek; he wished it was so easy to could just tell Hanzo how, but he didn’t have much of a clue, either. That said, Hanzo had such a way of making Jesse see himself from angles he’d missed or forgotten, all from pieces Jesse unknowingly dropped and Hanzo had the presence of mind to notice. Jesse had noted it during their talk in Oasis – you remind me what I’m supposed to be. Rough fingers tousled his hair where he lay, staring up helplessly. He was flaking. Stop. Stop.

Yet he remained at an invisible threshold, terrified of what was beyond the opaque veil so close it seemed it should actually brush his nose. It wasn’t any greater commitment to allow Hanzo witness to this particular vulnerability, he told himself. Nor was it necessarily linked to any furtive bit of...personal carnal interest or entertainment. Either he trusted Hanzo, or he didn’t. He pulled his hands away from their anxious wringing to type again.
Kicking this tendency to distance himself had to become a bigger priority. *Others* walked out and were pulled from Jesse’s life; it’d be a terrible defeat indeed for Jesse to have a day when he parted first. But *shit*, it hurt, raking his fingertips and splitting his nails as he scrabbled at the handholds seemingly forever shifting under his desperate grasp. Even if Hanzo so evidently wanted to be different, it wasn’t necessarily up to him or Jesse. The sources of fear stacked and compounded themselves: Gabe, life, death, Hanzo, *himself*.

Every keystroke stung confessing his discomfort and weakness. Hanzo’s response, seemingly stern and cool to an untrained ear, was exactly what Jesse needed to hear – a simple promise to be mindful. No second-guesses, no questions, no hand-wringing.

*Thank you, Hanzo. Goodnight.*

Jesse rolled over and buried his face in crossed arms on the mattress. In four short months, Hanzo really *had* caught on to a lot, hadn’t he? What would another six months bring between them?

He drifted off into a fitful sleep with a hot coal searing and heavy in his chest.

~

Jesse’s investigation continued on into the next week. He’d wrangled the suspected identity of his mystery cop by tracing the email address IP and cross-referencing the name with officers’ names in his public records search. Corroborating his circle of friends back to the men he’d killed, however, was proving difficult. Not like he could just waltz up and interview neighbors and fellow cops, after all, and he hadn’t gotten a lucky break in one of the dead men being a blood relative. That was probably best in the long run – Jesse had enough vendettas to avoid, even if a cheap-ass cop’s would just be an inconvenience.

That left him with only one semi-efficient method: stakeouts. One week removed from the murders, the cop *had* to begin wondering why he was being left on read, even if they did not seem to be in daily contact as the correspondence suggested. Jesse stuck to early mornings and late nights, since the officer – Scott as he’d since learned – worked pretty normal hours in property crimes. Burglaries fell under that umbrella, which was how he’d been able to get inside information and feed it to his friends. The attempted kidnapping, however, would have brought an entirely new squad into the equation, and Scott the Racist Sympathizer was probably starting to feel the heat on behalf of his shitty buddies; enough heat to start rising early or wandering out late, trying to contact one of them.

His theory paid off early Wednesday morning. After arriving at 2 AM and sitting in his truck a block down, Scott appeared and got in his car. Relief and anticipation equally stirred Jesse from his insomnia-fueled daze. He dropped low in the cab to avoid being seen and opened a window in his arm’s holo interface once the car passed him its way out. It would be exceptionally difficult to tail a car, and a police officer’s car at that, this early with so little traffic, so Jesse had taken the liberty to slap a tracer on the undercarriage. He could maintain a good distance and still be able to respond in good time if necessary once his target arrived at his destination.

Within five minutes, Jesse had a hopeful inkling of where the target was going, and in ten minutes, he was positively giddy. Good ol’ Scott was making a beeline for one of the safehouses Jesse had found and already searched. Knowing that, Jesse sped up in his pursuit and turned off a couple blocks away from the safehouse’s street, parked, and slunk his way between abandoned buildings and decrepit homes. At last, he found a patch of prickly pear left to grow wild on a lot, and *very* carefully laid aside it in the dirt to surveil the target home. Scott had already arrived and was inside, but Jesse used the opportunity to rustle in his tool belt for his one-eye visor to take pictures of
the car’s license plate as well as wider-angle shots of the car in front of the house.

It wasn’t long before Scott re-emerged, looking deeply anxious; Jesse snapped a few more pictures of him walking back to his car for good measure. A sinister grin lit Jesse’s face; he was going to have the motherfucker dead to rights. This would be his best blog post in a long while, possibly ever. The public loved a good rotten-cop-getting-his-story.

Jesse gave it a solid ten minutes hidden in the brush after the car took off again in order to ensure his target wouldn’t double back. Once that passed, he zipped across the street and around the back of the house. He thanked his own presence of mind to leave a window slightly open in case he needed to stop by again. Continuing to pick the lock would leave evidence eventually, no matter how good Jesse was at it (and he was *exceptional*, thank you very much). On his first visit, he had been focused on recovering stolen property, but had been drawn to a large corkboard used for posting messages. All six men apparently came and went on their own time between major meetings, occasionally leaving updates, ideas, or banter on the board as they did. When Jesse approached it again, he found a new sheet of paper tacked on: a whole letter.

*Some bitch in personal crimes caught the kidnapping you guys fucked up. She’s starting to put the pieces together. She’s been in and out visiting the burglary squad assigned to your shit. I can’t keep it on lockdown if they figure out who you are. Maybe you already figured that out, since you aren’t checking your goddamn email and skipped town. Get a hold of me – NOT ON THE PHONE – and I can tell you more. Keep your noses clean for a while and I think it’ll cool off on its own. Take a few weekends out to the range or something.*

*Sco**t*

Fucking *perfect*. Part of Jesse wanted to take the letter and keep it, but that would be a mistake. It was far too much of a risk that would tip his hand and reveal the surveillance, so instead, he snapped a quick picture. A minor bit of cropping would do away with the revealing background. The whole event got Jesse so upbeat that when he returned to his hotel room just before seven, he was able to take an extended and truly refreshing nap until noon. With his head blessedly clear, he spent the rest of the afternoon beginning a draft of his blog post, first with assembling bios and rap sheets of the dead men before digging into the nitty-gritty of the crimes they had died for.

Simply writing, getting lost in craft and collation and concentration, was soothing. He hadn’t had material like this in an exceptionally-long while. Putting his academic brain to work gave him the traction and progress he’d been craving for weeks. Each word to phrase to paragraph reminded him not all was lost. In five years, his world had shrunk significantly, but he, his ability, and his hard-fought wisdom had pulled him through, and he was doing it again now in halting steps. Work kept him functioning, in reality, and away from the all-consuming, suffocating miasma that choked his mind when he let himself get locked inside his own head. His path wasn’t visible beyond the next step, and Jesse had largely given up on trying to divine it any further while on this break, but today, for now, that was acceptable.

Six o’clock arrived as a mighty hunger pang and made Jesse resurface from his work. He wandered out in search of dinner and found a suitable food truck selling empanadas – perfect for snacking during an evening stroll. The sun was beginning to set, and Jesse felt compelled to visit Cross of the Martyrs Park to enjoy the view. The path curled around and up the hill as Jesse took his time towards the summit and finished his simple meal. More and more of the city became visible on the ascent – Santa Fe largely appeared much the same as it had for decades when looking across the landscape, save for the modern glimmer of downtown in the southwest. Smears of flat cloud cover spread here and there in spots across the purple-red-orange endless sky, adding texture and a glowing effect like it was intended to be a performance.
Jesse had intended to bring Hanzo to this park when they’d stopped in Santa Fe on their road trip. They’d come here early in their travels – right after the day spent at The Thing, as a matter of fact – since Jesse knew the city so well. After spending the day visiting museums (“Real ones?” Hanzo had teased when they arrived) they naturally had ended up at a bar and became so engrossed in drinks and talking that they missed sunset. Despite being three bourbons deep at the time, Jesse could recall feeling disappointment when he’d glanced out the dusty window to find the sun had set, and had n’t understood why he’d cared that much. The park wasn’t terribly novel, in scope of Santa Fe’s other attractions.

Now, sat up on a retaining wall months later watching the light fade, Jesse could confess this was...a romantic place to be. A place you took someone you cared about and simply enjoyed their presence. To talk: maybe about nothing, maybe have a genuine and soulful discussion. He hadn’t known then what the impulse might mean, and never had an inkling to interrogate it.

But perhaps Jesse had gotten what he wanted that night anyhow.

After a final nightcap, Jesse and Hanzo had left the bar just after midnight and began making their way back to the cheap motel they’d rented. On their walk, Jesse had been taken by a bit of precocious spirit and had run up on a fire escape ladder, jumping to pull the retracting stairs down. He’d had a difficult time hauling himself up, as he’d begun giggling to himself.

“What are you doing,” Hanzo had asked, snickering.

“Whatever the fuck I want!”

“You have nowhere to go, idiot.”

“Maybe I just felt like a little climbin’, dickweed,” Jesse shot back and flipped Hanzo the bird, laughing stupidly all the while.

“Climbing, you say?” Hanzo murmured, haughty and head tilted in mock condescension. Jesse immediately cottoned on and leant over the banister.

“Oh no you don’t, you son of a--”

Too late – Hanzo took off, scaling straight up the stucco edifice and completely unperturbed by Jesse’s follow-up, bellowed FUCK YOU over his clattering footsteps as he tried in vain to catch up on the metal stairs. More laughter greeted him when he got to the roof; Hanzo had been sitting on an air conditioning unit, probably intent on perching there in fake meditation to taunt Jesse, but at the last possible moment, Jesse had caught his foot on the final ladder rung and fallen ass-over-head onto the stainless paneling.

Jesse took a few beats to try and scrape his dignity together again, face-down and utterly embarrassed, when the chuckling grew closer and a hand hauled him over. Hanzo’s face hung over him, unusually bright and lit with a smile (was it that unusual anymore, when Jesse was there?) to double-check his friend hadn’t actually hurt himself.

“I told you those stupid fucking boots would keep you from climbing effectively,” Hanzo had said past rumbling laughter as he offered a hand to help Jesse up. “But only you would be so incompetent as to fuck up ladders as well.”

“I been drinkin’,” Jesse replied, hands up in mock surrender before throwing in a jocular nudge for good measure. “But y ou ain’t seen me dance. If you had, you’d respect what these boots can do a lot more.”

“Why do I doubt that?” Hanzo mused rhetorically. He threw an arm around Jesse’s shoulder...
and they walked to the street-side wall of the roof to sit. Jesse weaved his arm behind Hanzo’s neck in return and briefly tugged them together in a half-embrace.

“You’ll see someday, chucklefuck.”

They’d stayed up on that roof for ages, joking and talking – about nothing, appreciating each other’s presence. Jesse treasured that night like he did every other one during all those weeks traipsing around together. Should he have known, then, that Hanzo was so different? What would have changed? He reconsidered Hanzo’s insight during their last conversation – why he hadn’t slept with Jesse when he very much could have. That Jesse would have found a way to make himself feel guilty about it one way or another...and had been right. Hanzo could see the stress Jesse was under right now, how grief and struggle were intersecting to overwhelm him on a daily basis as he tried to resolve it, no matter how many smiles and jokes and good times they had together. And because of that, Hanzo could also see that expanding the capacity of their relationship might bring too much to bear. But he still wanted to help and care, and Jesse...

Well, he wasn’t happy sitting here alone on a soft spring desert evening. He wasn’t happy being left in silence with his weighty thoughts. He wasn’t happy every time he came up with a good zinger for his blog draft and felt, for half a second, the impulse to tell Hanzo about it like he was still in the room, just outside his periphery. Going without him sure as shit wasn’t helping, but the entire idea of...of opening up the way Jesse knew he would need to was...exhausting. Terrifying. Jesse was pretty good at a few things: cooking, writing, smooth-talking, killing. But feelings – real feelings, with people – was not one of them. The last time he’d committed to people and things...to say he’d lost would be a massive understatement. He didn’t want to make that Hanzo’s problem. He didn’t want that to be a frame around his life with Hanzo, irrespective of the calibre of relationship.

It was probably too late on both counts. If he couldn’t pull up from that disastrous tailspin of a perspective, he would ruin what he had at all. He took off his hat and pulled at the hair on top of his head in a fist. Hanzo was so close to making something real for himself, while each day made Jesse feel like he’d lost yet another shred of a slowly-dissolving whole. He genuinely feared all he could do was bring Hanzo down – at least as long as he was working on finding Gabe. He knew and had even committed to Hanzo several times that he could not follow through on his personal mission without him.

Damned if he did, damned if he didn’t.

He drew his feet up onto the wall where he sat so he could press his forehead into his bent knees, uncaring of any potential witness to his threatening breakdown.

I’m not okay enough to keep him, and I can’t make myself that way without finishing the thing I told him I can’t do without him.

His fuckup was complete and immeasurable in magnitude. Shit, he should just find a brass rail somewhere to put his foot on and ultimately pass out under. Nothing could be done to fucking fix any of it. He stood to leave in a violent rush when he paused in sudden realization – Hanzo had yet to message him today. He should have realized fucking sooner, if he’d been spending hours thinking about him anyway. Most days, it was just a passing greeting or trivial update. Just enough to let the other know status was green.

He opened a chat relay on his arm’s holo. His status sure wasn’t fucking green right now, but...he hadn’t heard from his friend, and it was only wise to check in. They’d promised each other: every day. And he could really use a few words, even random bullshit, right now. Enough to remind him more threads were there keeping them together than it felt like right now. Scouring his brain for anything coherent to say took far longer than it should have, but after a few minutes, he came up
with something. The weather – always, the weather. And a dash of humor. Everyone believed Jesse was okay when he was funny.

_Today was the first real hot day here. Felt good. Might invest in a tan. Well...more. How’re you?_

Another lie. They were piling up, weren’t they? However well-intentioned the emotional shield was, Jesse questioned the wisdom of doing it.

_I am well. I did something drastic today. Positive, don’t worry. Feels good._

The response generated enough pride and relief to make Jesse need to take a long, steadying breath. Hanzo was getting done what he needed to do. Jesse was as grateful for that as he lambasted himself for falling short. But for now, Hanzo was all right, and that was the only victory to be had. Fine.

_Looking forward to it. :)_

Or something. He closed the holo and headed out – no bar tonight after all. There was too much to do for his article. Work. _Work._

~

Jesse stirred a few days later with an achy groan just past nine – he hadn’t dozed off until five, so waking now after the universe’s shittiest nap hurt in a way that ranked in the middle of the pack with his more unpleasant hangovers. He lay on his stomach for a while, half-aware and stewing in his haggard discomfort when blinking once again caught his eyes. Oddly enough, no dread immediately came as it had of late in their correspondence, but it...didn’t feel correct, either. It was the kind of want like when you hurt yourself, and the antiseptic would certainly string, but also would bring its own kind of relief. He opened the message.

March 10th? You never said a word.

Ah yes, _there_ was the dread. He’d forgotten to consider that little fact in giving Hanzo permission to read up on him. Jesse wasn’t particularly fond of his birthday. Most of them had been terrible, and as such, he kept rabid celebration of it at arm’s length. But this year...he had felt okay about it, what with the companionship and good times he’d been having then.

_Ain’t nothing special, but we went out to that high-end speakeasy place for a reason._

Jesse inwardly chastised himself. _This was the point in handing over the drives._ He struggled to speak it, so maybe Hanzo could read it instead. Still, the reluctance, the worry, the fear. It wasn’t any anticipation of rejection in Hanzo’s hands – it was much more nebulous than that. The end result was almost irrelevant when the problem was _his_ act of handing it over. The loss of control. He was better than this. He _was_. Everything he’d ever told Hanzo to replicate in his own journey to be better said so. He _had_ to be, though it felt for all the world like he was poorly churning rough water and doomed to disappear underneath the cresting waves forever. Make it collaborative, he told himself – so he asked for Hanzo’s birthday. Jesse _had_ been curious for some time, but too reticent to offer the recompense he knew Hanzo would innocently ask for.

An exasperated growl slipped from him and he dropped his head to plant his face into the mattress. He was so, so bad at this. But Hanzo _did_ reply, and Jesse got a teeny flicker of unreserved joy to know his birthday hadn’t passed yet. That...that could be nice. In several months, when – if – Jesse stopped panicking about existing in his boots. A small, undetailed promise for the future felt not only appropriate, but good. He had plenty of time to think about a gift. Maybe...something
particularly special. What that might be, however, Jesse wasn’t sure at the moment.

He coasted on that bit of warmth for a pleasantly-drowsy fifteen minutes or so before he stirred again and saw a new message had come in.

*I have a question.*

And just like that, Jesse was instantly ready to dash out to his truck, skid out and drive until he went right off the most direct cliff of the continental United States and into the Pacific Ocean. Hanzo was being far too careful. *Delicate.* And considering the previous context…Jesse’s fingers trembled a hair as he gathered his wits to respond with a rationality wholly eluding him.

*Got to the psych eval, huh?*

Maybe rejection *did* matter.

This had been a terrible mistake. He knew what was in there – Gabe had let him read it years ago, long after Jesse’s loyalty and indeed even friendship had been cemented. They’d had a good laugh about it, too, he recalled. Another token of Gabe’s storied and creative interpretation of “official channels” and “supervisory classification”. Once upon a time. His gut twisted and grew uncomfortably weighty to add *that* memory on top of everything else he was feeling. What would Gabe think about *any* of this? Or rather, *would have thought,* that particular Gabe in that particular time, since he sure wouldn’t give a shit now.

Too much; far too much.

*Yes.*

Oof. Hanzo’s typical bluntness landed with a spear’s pointed lethality right now.

*I told you it wasn’t magic.*

Did that sound as hopelessly desperate as it seemed? Jesse certainly remembered that time in his life, how raw and defensive and *frightened* he’d been. Just because Gabe had given him the loosely-defined *choice* to avoid going away to a supermax prison somewhere in the godforsaken soybean desert of the midwest didn’t mean he *had* to be grateful about it. It had been survival defining the choice that day, and for many, *many,* *many* months afterward. Gabe had known that, though, and had told Jesse as much himself, confirming Jesse’s own suspicions as he had grown older and wiser under his tutelage. And Jesse still had his… *quibbles* about the entire idea of plucking a teenager up from organized-crime obscurity to clandestine counterintelligence agent after leveling *life in prison* at him. But all of this was a decade and a half of context Hanzo did not have.

*True. And I did not take you at your word.*

Goddamn it, that answer was *just* measured enough to send Jesse’s hasty paranoia into a tailspin. There was a reason he didn’t talk about this. Why he tried as hard as he did to Do Right. Why that little toy car never saw light of day outside his tool belt – why, *why* had he given it to Hanzo?

*But words on a page ain’t a story, either.*

Definitely, patently desperate of him to reply like that, but Jesse couldn’t not say it. But…Hanzo had to understand that, right? Maybe it wasn’t a surprise; Jesse *could not* figure out if that made it better or worse. He’d been through… *a lot* in his life and changed many times over. He was not the Jesse he had been five, seven, *ten, fifteen* years ago in almost every way. His stress, already high, mixed with his lingering saltiness over the report Hanzo was reading. Granted, Jesse *had* in part done
it to himself by purposefully running interference on them and being such a shithead, but that fucker hadn’t tried, either.

Time ground on. And on. And on. No response. Jesse hadn’t exactly left his message open to discussion, but without any reassurance he’d expected-slash-hoped for, his despair was rapidly growing darker. One question sat low and heavy in his beleaguered mind like noxious fog, itching constantly inside his skull until he couldn’t stand it anymore, and at last he asked it of the void his little holographic screen projected off his arm represented. He wished to god he could see Hanzo’s face, yet knew perfectly well he would never be courageous enough to have started this conversation at all in person, much less get this far.

Got any regrets?

If time had seemed to stretch into an infinite point after his first message, this one made it snap back into place in a blink of the eye. Jesse couldn’t say if Hanzo’s reply came in five seconds or fifteen minutes, but its arrival triggered relief so complete, he experienced a touch of vertigo where he lay.

No.

Simple and all-encompassing. Unqualified. Exactly what Jesse needed to hear, and badly. He...actually rather hated how badly. Whatever he wished he had a handle on – his expectations, his feelings, his rationality – he didn’t, at all. He could say he didn’t want Hanzo to know any of this until he was blue in the face, that it didn’t matter, now or ever, but--

But.

But Hanzo’s companionship. But his patient comfort. But his prescience, knowing when and where their experiences were complementary and could offer material help, and where they did not, and he simply listened. Jesse had never lied when he’d told Hanzo how he needed him around – he simply hadn’t appreciated what that meant and how profound that was. He wanted to find joy in that desperately, but he couldn’t – let ? – himself see how it could possibly end well. Nothing else ever had. And now, he felt guilty for not being honest, too. Or competent enough to say it himself and making Hanzo figure it out instead. Hanzo still knew so little, goddamn it, because Jesse wasn’t explaining how much he was struggling right now.

They kept talking, and each further word from Hanzo was just as gentle, kind, and understanding. The emotional release compounded within Jesse and he felt free enough to explain at least a little bit more of his long, difficult journey to becoming a better person in contrast to that fucking psych evaluation, because he did have a heart, motherfucker, and--

I know that. I have always known that, Hanzo replied blink of text displayed far too dispassionately on his holo for its weight.

Jesse stilled to the bone. What the fuck was he supposed to do with that?

This had gotten very emotional very quickly. Jesse had been so emphatic in reassuring Hanzo he wasn’t a lost cause, and Hanzo had acted in kind explaining he definitely didn’t hold Jesse’s past against him. All their conversations had been very careful since their departure; maybe both of them were feeling a little desperate. Neither had been brave enough to call the other, but the sterility of text appeared to be wearing on them mutually.

It was stupid to be so thrown by Hanzo’s gentility – this was only the latest in a long list of examples. Hardly new. Sure, Jesse understood Hanzo’s internal conflict a little better, now, but it’s
not like Hanzo was...was saying this just to get in Jesse’s pants. The intent hadn’t changed – Hanzo gave a real shit. And he was putting a lot on the line letting Jesse see even a smidgen of it at all. Jesse knew Hanzo, how much he could get locked up in his own head. There was a zero percent chance Hanzo wasn’t feeling at least a little bit the same. He deserved a reward for that kind of effort. Jesse might be scared to death, but he wasn’t about to leave Hanzo hanging. Their separation was letting Jesse get away with a kind of dodginess that would be outright cruel if done face-to-face, and the very last thing on Earth Jesse ever wanted to do was hurt someone so important to him.

Because Hanzo was that important, and that was what made it so hard for Jesse to deal with. That was Jesse’s angst, though. And for now, again he reminded himself, that shouldn’t be Hanzo’s problem. Or maybe Jesse was just trying to rationalize his skittishness and silence.

Thanks. I shouldn’t be treating that like it’s a surprise to hear. Sorry.

Ugh. A shitty and half-measured reply. Come on, Jesse. But as one might anticipate – and Jesse should after having been around it so long – Hanzo came back with his characteristic self-dismissal and damnation. Jesse’s chest drew tight to read it, but in one lightning strike of inspiration, words came to Jesse the easiest they had all these long weeks.

You got a heart, too. I see it. You’re using it right now, aren’t you?

I suppose.

A sweet, sleepy smile lit Jesse’s face; he could picture the exact face Hanzo was pulling right now. He...wished he could see it, to be distressingly honest. Everything, lately, would have been better if Hanzo had been right there with him. Was...was it a good time to tell Hanzo that? Or should he wait until their reunion? They still had at least a couple weeks to go before they even entertained discussing that, and he didn’t really know what his friend was up to. Could be anything, and easily could be very stressful for him.

But just a simple statement, maybe a little veiled? I miss you? Nooooo, no way, not that, Jesse immediately recanted to himself, shimmying with nervous distress on the mattress. This month has been rough for me. How about that? Hmm. Seemed fine. Neutral, blameless towards any one person or thing. Deep hesitance kept Jesse from lifting his hand once again to reply for several borderline painful beats, and just as Jesse managed to tap out the word this to begin his thought, Hanzo responded.

Thank you for your willingness to tell me all of this. I will get back to the actual work I should be doing and avoid troubling you further.

Jesse’s anxiety briefly constricted, making him pull both hands into fists, then dissipated. That was a sign, he was sure of it. No, best keep it all to himself for now. Speaking up right this second would add unnecessary weight and complication that would be too much while so far apart. He and Hanzo would have plenty to talk about when they met again.

Can’t trouble a man who keeps it as a middle name. Talk to you later, Hanzo.

~

All the following week, Jesse continued shoring up his blog post, since it was the only thing that seemed to stabilize his continuing mood swings. It also provided enough of an excuse for his stubborn insomnia, too. No need to sleep when he had so much work to do. Yep. With nothing better or more valuable to fill his time, his article had bloomed into quite the expansive work of art after endless hours combing the internet. He had detailed timelines of all four men’s criminal
histories, matched with as many juicy postings Jesse could kick up from their activity on major white supremacist message boards. The four dead men had been longtime friends and become acquainted with the corrupt police officer through one of those sites, and had first discussed the acts of violence that had eventually become reality. All tied up with a neat little bow for mass consumption, if Jesse did say so himself.

He decided that, after posting, he would send a heavily-encrypted message to Sadie with instructions to bump the story specifically around New Mexico for maximum likelihood of it getting picked up by traditional, local news media. If he was lucky, it would make national news, but that wasn’t terribly important to him. The PD needed a come-to-Jesus exposure, and that would only come from localized interest and pressure. Jesse didn’t want to tip a journalist off directly – that would require a long-term association he did not have the time or energy for, especially now. This article would be enough to cause real change by getting the ball rolling for more proper channels in Santa Fe, or it wouldn’t, and Jesse just had to be at peace with that fact. He had stumbled upon it purely by accident; the likelihood this ever would have been discovered by anyone else was nil.

During that time, Scott the Cop had since learned his buddies had been found dead and burned outside the city. Official identifications by the coroner were still pending – Jesse had been thorough and any ID was going to require dental comparison at the very least – but Jesse had taken great delight in watching Scott panic in response anyway. The night after the initial broadcast report, Jesse had gone out to sit on the safehouse that he’d followed Scott to just for fun, and got a fantastic show watching the corrupt officer show up again, check the house for signs of life, and leave again looking utterly terrified. His social media, as well, was alight with panic, as Scott checked in on their common online hangouts trying to contact any of the men in the vain hope they weren’t all dead and someone was laying low somewhere.

That became the main entertainment of Jesse’s current evening, almost five weeks out from his separation from Hanzo. He chuckled to himself as he kicked back with a particularly slutty box of orange chicken to have a night of watching conversation between Scott and other racist chuds tick by on his mobile console. He’d learned about the server from his initial search of the dead men’s computer at the shooting range, so he’d concocted a believable-enough persona run through a proxy so he could listen in. Despite being a cop, Scott felt enough hubris fostered by the secrecy of the chatroom to speak pretty freely about his concerns, and this had netted Jesse a lot of extra avenues to pursue more damning evidence.

A flicker on his screen drew Jesse’s eyes up from eating more chicken – a window had popped open over where the chatroom was running. The simple message led with coordinates, then, in all caps:

THURSDAY. 23:45 GMT+2. ALONE.

Jesse’s heart stopped. His encryption was beyond government grade; it was Sadie’s. Nobody but nobody should be able to ping him an untraceable message with these kinds of instructions. Talon, Overwatch, fucking god himself shouldn’t be able to just hit his ass up. Precious few people or reasons existed for this. More than one cause was possible, but all were equally-frightening. Jesse could be burned from the heist at Arazi’s home. Just as likely, it could be about Gabe, somehow. Not Gabe himself – he would choose…other ways to reach out than this. It could even be general intel about Talon. After all, Akande motherfucking Ogundimu being out of prison meant they were particularly topical again. Or it could be something else entirely, but it would have to be Second Omnic Crisis-calibre intelligence to necessitate this. Fear pulled hard at his gut and made him need to concentrate to take his next, full breath.

ALONE.
And, of course, it could be a trap. He recalled Hanzo’s emphatic request when they parted.

*If anything, anything changes, Jesse...*

This was...definitely a change. But.

**ALONE.**

Why make the demand unless you believed Jesse *wasn’t* alone? Or was he reading too far into it and overreacting, as he had been with virtually everything else for weeks on end? It was a pretty standard demand, after all. *What if Jesse was burned, though? Hanzo may or may not be as well; Jesse had tried to be exceptionally careful about when, where, and how his allegiance with his friend might bubble to the observable surface. Bringing or even mentioning this to Hanzo could kill him.*

Or save his life. And very little had been given to Jesse to tell the difference.

The basest fact of the thing was that Jesse didn’t know what this was about, and he wouldn’t know unless he went. And *not* going symbolized more risk, because he was sacrificing an opportunity, good or bad. The conservative choice was a) to go, and b) alone, as asked. Spooking an unknown target by acting against explicit instructions, nine point nine times out of ten, didn’t end well for you. He could call Hanzo right now, and he would meet him, no questions asked. Jesse *knew* that, like he knew his name and old Overwatch personnel number and blood type in case of capture and interrogation.

And very deep down, he was terrified someone else did, too.

This was just a meeting. Overthinking it was a fool’s fucking errand and would create disaster all on its own. The only real remaining question was...giving Hanzo notice. No easy answers for that, either. The messenger *clearly* knew how to monitor Jesse’s digital presence without his knowledge. Tipping Hanzo off was *vastly* more likely to be fatal than not, without any other evidence. But if something happened to Jesse...

No, thinking like that only made for bad omens. He’d done this a thousand times – in, debrief, out. A cakewalk. He *knew* how to case and make exit vectors and fight like hell out of the worst possible circumstances when shit went FUBAR, and he *had* the motivation to see his next sunrise in a way he...hadn’t for a while. Hanzo *definitely* would be furious with him for this, but Jesse genuinely could not trust to correspond securely in time. It was...impossible, frankly.

*Perfectly* impossible.

Anxiety wracked his aching shoulders. He looked up the coordinates: Ilios, Greece. He’d been there a few times; an old city, with tight avenues. Plenty of places to hide, but not necessarily escape. At least he wasn’t going in cold. He’d purchase a plane ticket in the morning and still have thirty-six hours to hop the pond, get to the city, and make a reasonable game plan out of it.

It would be fine. He would *make* it fine.

As he shut down his console and decided to try and sleep, however, he couldn’t shake Hanzo’s voice telling him the same lie in March, before the disastrous Seattle trip.

*I will make it good.*

And...well...

It would be fine.
A shitty night’s sleep ended early, but despite lifting off from New Mexico at nine in the morning on as direct a set of flights as he could manage, sixteen hours’ travel time and nine time zones crossed mean Jesse didn’t even have twelve hours to set foot and reconnoiter Ilios at the precise coordinates given to him. It hadn’t changed much since he had last been there – it was a simple, sleepy village, just a sleepover stop for most tourists on journeys to enjoy the high, rocky coast and incredible vistas of the sea. The exact location ended up being a small veranda overlooking the bay, where massive cruise liners constantly seemed to be coming and going from the mainland and outlying islands, decorated with a few deck chairs and cafe tables for lazy afternoon siestas.

Jesse, dressed down from his usual Western flair and in more casual civvies, scanned the offerings from a small enclosed observation point slightly uphill from the target; he had east and west exit vectors, but little else. It being sunken compared to the surrounding streets wasn’t great either. All around, it was pretty exposed, but that could make for an equalizer, too, so that actually gave Jesse a bit of confidence. Whoever was reaching out had understood the importance of relatively neutral ground, so it would feel less like a trap.

That done, he retreated to his hastily-booked hotel room and took the time to finalize and post the article he’d worked so hard on to his blog. To be honest, it was a bit of serendipity that brought him out here – posting from a European IP, if someone ever managed to track him back through all his proxies, would give him excellent cover from any possible retribution in New Mexico. He eventually drifted off while assessing satellite footage of the city out of sheer exhaustion and didn’t wake until his just-in-case alarm went off at nine. After a shower turned up so hot it hurt, he dolled up, armor and all, hitched up his go-bag, and slipped out the little hotel’s receiving door to a quintessential old-European alleyway. It would be almost criminally easy to navigate to his chosen surveillance point unseen. He probably should have grabbed something to eat, but his appetite was never going to make an appearance anyway between the mission nerves, exhaustion, and more long-term stress chewing away at him.

By ten, he was properly sequestered, Peacekeeper holstered but constantly-fretted by Jesse’s anxious hand. Eleven came, and Jesse began hawking the narrow horizon, sharp for even the slightest movement on the almost-deserted streets. Quarter past. Half past. Jesse’s neck grew stiff for his anticipation. Finally, quarter to the hour. He gripped his gun’s pommel and flexed his fingers around it.

Nothing.

Midnight, nothing. The salty breeze filtering in from the Mediterranean felt like it might dry Jesse from the inside out. Twelve-fifteen, nothing. Maybe this was an empty red herring to get a read on him and his status for somebody’s intel. Enough people held enough interest out there in bagging him up. A trap should have revealed itself by now...unless they were waiting for him to emerge and spring it. Could be a long fucking night, but that’s why the go-bag had come with him. He’d wait it out until dawn if he had to, and fuck all the way off fast as he could.

Jesse’s eye was drawn to his prosthetic arm abruptly. Blinking. Jesus, what time was it in China? He only got to puzzle over it for a moment when a shadow, upsettingly-familiar even in periphery, slipped across his field of vision. His gut dropped so fast he had to brace on the wall, lest he tip over where he crouched in the alley.

It was him. No wonder Jesse had heard no footfalls.

The Reaper was about thirty feet off, stood right at the retaining wall penning the veranda and staring out at the sea. Like Philly and Los Angeles, Jesse’s vision tunneled and all background hiss
of the distant water below faded from his notice. Reaper was completely still in his contemplation, apparently unaware of any witness, much less one of such significance. It was much more akin to a...a late-night stroll than any planned clandestine meeting.

This could not be. Gabe wouldn’t try at this point, and if he did...it wouldn’t be like this. He would come to Jesse, or use particular words and phrases agreed by them a decade ago. Something to identify himself. He knew how to pin Jesse down and corner him for a talk...or to murder him. The speculation was a non-starter anyway, because of course. The Reaper did not care about Jesse. He just didn’t.

Jesse stood.

He didn’t.

Jesse slid along towards the open area, gloved hand trailing along the wall with numb fingers.

Didn’t he?

Another step fell, and with it came the smallest tap of his spur – a cacophony on the flagstone beneath their feet, which made Reaper wheel in alarm and thrust one clawed hand into his coat. Jesse was just visible at the threshold of the alley, lit now by an intrusive, narrow beam of moonlight. Recognition struck, and Reaper’s hand stilled, but did not emerge from under the heavy leather. Time and space’s usual rules evaporated, and the whole world stilled around them.

“Gabe,” fell out of Jesse’s mouth.

Reaper’s gauntleted hand pulled free of the coat, still empty of a weapon, and fell slack at his side. No attack was coming, just as before. And yet, there was no...resignation in his stance. Or anger. Or even enmity. He might as well have been a mannequin, unmoving towards and unmoved by his tiny audience. And that was what made Jesse’s latent, desperate rage finally break itself free of the many-layered prison he strained each day to keep it in. He shook head to toe for the force of it, and a single word was all that could tear past the embittered, ratchet-tight grit of his jaw.

“Why.”

A thousand-fold questions in so little. But no answers came for any of them, and Reaper was just as still, flat and...empty. Jesse’s rage responded to that dispassion with all the ferocity of backdraft, intensifying and wounding him more fully in one beat of his frustrated, anguished, lonely heart. His hands balled into trembling fists and his teeth parted to loose his acid tongue once more.

Until he weaved in place, startled by a sudden and sharp peal of thunder. The sky, however, was cloudless, bright stars easily on display. His chest stung as though struck with the force of a professionally-pitched baseball; it left a wide, hot patch, stealing his breath. Odd. His armor was on, and Gabe’s – Reaper, right – Reaper’s hands remained where they had been at his sides, and why would he have a baseball, anyway? He was a Lakers fan and loathed the slow pace of baseball. Wait, that didn’t matter either, you stupid shit.

Pressure built, built, built under his armor, then loosed all at once down his torso. Jesse pressed along his right side and lifted his gloved hand to see glistening red coat his fingers, unmistakable in the bright moonlight. A further glance lower revealed a single aberration in his armor: a sizeable-calibre hole punched through his breastplate as if it were made of plaster. Time’s paralysis shook free, and life began moving again to match his suddenly-erratic pulse: Gabe recoiled, ducked, and turned to look behind him, all involuntarily and a seeming eternity after Jesse had felt the strike.
“Gabe,” slipped from Jesse again, softer and weaker and wetter than the first time. Iron sat in between his teeth. Familiar in taste, but not volume. Probably not good.

He didn’t fall so much as melt. Yeah, definitely bad. Numbness was kicking in; he’d been warned about that years ago from Gabe, too. Long as you’re hurtin’, you got a chance. To think this was it. Shitty as hell, but he’d come close in worse places, so this was almost preferable, all things considered. Hopefully whatever was coming could answer his question – his why – that Gabe refused him. That still mattered, even now. Still bothered. Still hurt.

But besides that, this was okay. His number was finally here, and had arrived fast and mercilessly, the way he’d always hoped. Much, much better than the last time, pinned, panicked, and choking on dust in Switzerland. There would be no fight, no wasting, no long silence. Just a sliding away, like a dive into waist-deep water. Easy. He’d like to know what easy felt like.

Hands touched him and bore him up. Or maybe down? Whatever, direction didn’t matter wherever he was going. Voices echoed around him. One, rusty with age and rich with an Egyptian accent, but still sharp and commanding. The other, low and warm with vowels still flattened by the natural tones of his native state; a rumble that could soothe like a comforting blanket or instill all the terror of a summer’s thunderstorm directly overhead. Jesse’s final resistance dropped. If they were coming to meet him, he must have done something right – he’d never been sure if he’d done enough to earn the same blessing he was sure they had received in death. Rest and reprieve were coming, and a reunion he had craved more desperately than he ever could admit aloud. Everything was gonna be just fine.

But...Hanzo.

All the serenity evaporated. Wait. The sense, the need to escape, to scrabble up from the gap into which he was fading, consumed him.

But Hanzo.

And that was it.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't pick, so you get two selections from Jesse's playlist:

I Go Through Phases, by Electric Six - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qliTvFJWLSM

I Think I'm Going to Hell, by My Morning Jacket - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9DMpDSWtQo
henlo frondos! I'm sure you're, uh...........eager to see a partial resolution, yeah?

just a couple boxes to check, here: content and trigger warnings for graphic descriptions of blood and injuries are in this chapter! I would also include a specific mention of graphic description of treatment for said wounds!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Seriously?”

“What?”

“Tea? Here?”

“You aren’t about to judge *my* stakeout preferences, are you? Which of us became so engrossed by his first strike team mission he completely forgot his rations before being embedded for four days behind enemy lines?”

“That was over twenty years ago.”

“Who did it, Jack?”

Jack gave a long-suffering sigh.

“I did.”

“You’re damned right you did. So I will bring a thermos with me for any mission I please.”

“Still needs some goddamn sugar in it,” Jack grumbled, but otherwise let it go.

Ana rolled her eyes. *Americans.*

The former Overwatch brass were posted on a rooftop in Ilios, hidden under a solar panel array as they waited for the sun to fully set. Thanks to an eleventh-hour tip, Jack and Ana had landed well out of town and snuck in under cover of darkness the previous night. Word had it that Talon was holding high-level negotiations with major Athenian *nonoi tis nychtas* – godfathers – to secure a particularly rare prize: oil.

The Crisis, like all wars, had forced humanity through a number of quantum leaps in technology, not the least of which being the super-efficient repulsor technology that powered the antigrav in everything from cars to baby carriages. On top of the degradation of global infrastructure limiting the trade of fossil fuels, by 2050, it was essentially obsolete as a fuel source. As specialists of the illegal fossil fuel trade even before The Crisis and indeed even the 21st century, the Grecian mafia was the very best (and most expensive) group on Earth to secure any amount en masse out of Katya Volskaya’s Russia, where she hoarded it with a miser’s grip. It still had it uses three-quarters through the 21st century – it just stretched a lot further when you didn’t need it for *fuel.*
They hadn’t been told exactly who would be in attendance, but as they’d hoped, Gabriel had been part of the entourage. With him came Amélie Lacroix, The Widowmaker, as additional security, and...insurance that the godfathers or their associated made men did not try a double-cross or ripoff. Ana had also caught a wisp of a blip on her visor’s HUD at the end of their watch the previous night. A potential unknown third party put them on even greater edge with the memory of their time in Egypt, though it had been weeks ago, was still fresh in their minds.

Despite the complications, Ana had still managed to slip a single microphone in on the proceedings thanks to a bit of ancient, crumbling plaster on an exterior wall. Since they had arrived late to the three-day meeting, bug sweeps had already been done and they could harvest what information there was easily enough, though with less complete context. It wasn’t like Gabriel was going to offer up a whole lot to what was, essentially, a subcontractor, but as long as they could keep a fingertip on his day-to-day pulse, it was better than nothing.

When the sun set, Jack and Ana left their makeshift daytime hideout and hopped roofs to get in range of the microphone. The meeting began at nine – no need for a true dead-of-night rendezvous in an insulated little town like this – and ended two and a half hours later. Talon was being careful and almost all discussion was centered around compensation, not actual transport of material. That would be handled by middlemen later. In all, it was kind of a bust for Jack and Ana, even for their paltry interest in Gabriel’s personal movements rather than Talon’s greater-scale malfeasance. They hadn’t ever succeeded in destroying Talon as an organization when they had the entire force of Overwatch at hand; no way they were going to do it all on their own now. Jack wanted his answers about Overwatch’s destruction via the Petras Act, and Ana cared enough about Jack and the individual citizens at risk because of that destruction to help. Gabriel sat at the heart of the issue, so tracking his movements and attempting to divine his motivations compared and contrasted against the rest of Talon would help them understand what had happened.

A piece of each of them also reserved an unspoken but mutually-acknowledged...not hope, but consideration for where Gabriel’s allegiance may truly lie. Nothing could absolve him of the betrayal, no matter the intent, but...it would help settle any final decision they would have to make vis-a-vis Gabriel’s life. The likelihood anyone else on Earth would have either the resources or the balls to try and eliminate him was slim to none. And, to both Ana and Jack’s minds, no one had more of a right to him than them, if that need came to pass. All their former friends, comrades, and subordinates certainly had a grudge to bear, but Ana and Jack had, through a number of faltering late-night conversations, agreed it came down to an outright responsibility as the erstwhile commanding officers, and that came before even their broken dreams and friendship attached to the man they had known for decades.

At least they had each other, now. That would make the task easier.

“Do you want to try following him tonight?” Ana asked, carefully neutral and somewhat tinny-sounding behind her visor. Jack only returned a sharp nod.

And truthfully, Jack needed the minding for his own good.

Just before midnight, Reaper emerged from the small restaurant used for the meeting. Jack and Ana kept a very long tail on him, given the knowledge Lacroix was somewhere out there. As long as Jack and Ana didn’t give her a reason to scan for threats on what was otherwise probably a very boring protection detail, they should be fine. It was safest to stay low with the sniper coverage, so the two of them slunk along tight alleyways and crossed main paths only where the building-to-building pedestrian skyways provided effective cover. It made for a serpentine journey, but they could still easily tell they were headed roughly towards the sea, and immediately understood the rationale.
“He’s brooding,” Jack mumbled.

“Definitely,” Ana agreed.

Gabriel had a very old tendency to be drawn to water. Many, many years ago he’d confessed to them that going to visit the ocean was a rare treat in his family, despite being raised in Los Angeles. The city was so dense, and his family of few means. They didn’t have much time or discretionary income to get away to the beach, so it represented a special kind of respite for him. Back in Overwatch’s time, he’d liked to end his work days trolling the shore of Lake Zurich. *Helps me keep my shit straight,* he used to say.

He’d stopped going out to the lake after Rialto.

Jack and Ana nestled together, shaded in some thick landscaping a healthy one-hundred-or-so feet off from a wide veranda. On the previous night, they had watched him leave in the same general direction they followed him now – this must be a little ritual for him on this trip. For a few minutes he was very still, looking out into the bay, but suddenly pivoted and wound up in presumption of an attack. Jack and Ana’s hackles were instantly up; he snapped up his sidearm from the holster on his leg, and she likewise readied her sleep dart. A silhouette became visible, stark against the moonlight as a shadow, but unmistakable – the swagger was uniquely characteristic, even after years of absence.

“Oh my god,” Jack murmured.

“Jesse,” Ana whispered right on top of her friend’s equal surprise.

Jack, assisted by his physical enhancements, could catch Jesse’s single spoken word – *why* – before a thunderous CRACK shattered the salty damp air. Jesse wavered, then crumpled. In a flash, Jack and Ana vaulted into the open, Ana leading the way and scope already tracking in the direction of the long, red tracer she knew all too fucking well. She even got off a few shots, tiny *snips* of darts disappearing into the night.

“She’s gone,” Ana sneered.

Jack was only half-listening, having already crouched beside Jesse to rip off his serape and begin cutting free the chest armor at the shoulderstraps with his bowie knife. Despite having descended into triage mode, he spared a glance up in time to see Reaper, apparently still stricken by what had happened in the space of seconds. His mask of course obscured his face, but it was obviously fixed on Jesse’s struggling form on the ground, where his feet sluggishly tilted and slid this way and that in a weak attempt to find purchase, and his chest strained mightily for breath through sodden, empty gasps. That didn’t seem to phase Reaper any more deeply, however, as he began to fade to wisps and slide away.

“You bastard,” Jack howled after him as he fled. “*NOT EVEN FOR JESSE?*”

“Jack,” Ana cut in, as she always had for so many years. The practiced refrain did as it should, pulling Jack back to Earth, to what he could control. He shook it off with a furious growl and refocused on Jesse, who had lost consciousness. With a vicious jerk, he finished the work of removing the destroyed armor and passed it off to Ana.

“I can’t fix this,” Jack said, immediately understanding from a cursory glance. Though it was on Jesse’s *right* side, thank god, it was still a through-and-through thoracic injury, clearly through the lung. All he would be able to do is stabilize for evac.
“How long can we buy?” Ana asked, voice newly clear since she removed her visor. Jack slit open Jesse’s shirt and began digging in one of his belt packs.

“Fuck, a couple hours?” Jack responded. He waved Ana back so he could roll Jesse onto his side and seal the entry and exit wounds with semi-occlusive bandages. It was another, if fucked-up, blessing that Lacroix still used full metal jacket ammo, or Jesse would already be dead. “My biotic fields and your rifle can’t make up enough of the damage, but we can keep him from going into shock and bleeding out for a little while. There’s probably microscopic pieces of his armor in the wound, too. He needs surgery. Give me one of your rounds and hold him up.”

Ana immediately handed it over, their hands making the trade with practiced, almost casual calm. Jack promptly snapped off the back half of it, uncaring that the fluid inside smeared his blood-slickened gloves. He had been friend-or-foe tagged for her specialized healing/poisoning biotic rifle rounds almost a decade ago when her rifle was first prototyped, and Jesse still would be, too. He suddenly recalled Jesse’s voice in vivid tones all those years ago, bemoaning his hesitation to let them goddamn nanites be injected in his bloodstream. A distant hurt pierced Jack’s heart to remember it, like striking him with a bat through padded armor. All the possible distraction in and practice with handling personal casualties never quite took that pain away.

Ana braced Jesse from behind, trying her best to ignore the hard, lifeless angle his head hung from his neck at while Jack counted ribs and measured a few fingers’ width across with expert precision. He pressed the needle on the rifle round into Jesse’s chest well above the bullet wound, deeper, deeper – until a soft hiss came and they both relaxed a little. Step one – making sure Jesse’s undamaged internal organs didn’t collapse in pneumothorax – complete.

“Another round,” Jack requested gruffly. Blood from both their hands smeared across the vial, turning its cast of bright yellow light an upsetting shade of orange. Jack found a vein in Jesse’s right arm – what had happened to the left one – and fed the needle there. Another quiet hiss, this time the round’s micro-hydraulics, emptied the round’s biotic solution into Jesse’s system. Little more than a crude jump to stave off internal bleeding and keep his blood pressure afloat, but enough for now.

“I have my grenades,” Ana offered.

“That’s a last resort for resuscitation. It’s not controllable the way Caduceus is,” Jack replied.

“You are thinking what I’m thinking, then.”

“We don’t have any other choice, and this one ain’t all that great, either. Who’s she gonna be less pissed at?”

“It doesn’t matter. She will show up for Jesse. I’ll call.”

“Still got the number, huh?” Jack couldn’t help feeling a tiny bit amused. Planning for every eventuality: Ana’s life-long MO.

“Of course.”

“Then get her on the horn. Beg if you have to.”

Jack cleaned up best he could, taking the trashed end of the rifle round, Jesse’s ruined button-up and compression turtleneck, and detritus from the bandages before pitching them over the retaining wall into the ocean. The armor would come with them; any old Overwatch-proprietary tech, even light armor, shouldn’t fall into just anybody’s hands. Nothing to be done about the blood on the flagstone, though. Oh well. That done, he began carefully folding Jesse up into his arms. His head
hung limp off Jack’s forearm, ragged brown hair lank and straggled across his face, until Jack couldn’t stand it anymore and he shifted Jesse in place to get his head propped up against his shoulder.

“Get the rest of his shit for me. I’m taking off.” Even carrying Jesse, he could run a lot faster than her, get the ship running, and pick her up on the way out.

“Go,” Ana urged and turned away, hand pressed to her temple to bring her visor back over her face and make the call.

“Gibraltar?” Jack double-checked.

“Yes,” Ana replied, voice masked once more. They always understood each other. Jack left, feet pounding at an unearthly tempo and clearly unbothered by two-hundred-plus pounds of six-foot-one man cradled between his arms. Ana snatched up the hat – Jesse would be so angry if he didn’t get his hat back when he woke up, and he would wake up – and gave the area a final scan while the dial tone pinged. There, a bag, in an adjacent alleyway. Must be Jesse’s. She rushed to it and pulled the shoulder sling over her head when the call connected.

“Doctor Ziegler. Who is this?” Her voice was wrinkled from sleep. Ana was set back by a brief flicker of incongruous fondness; this was certainly not the first time she had ruined a night of Angela’s sleep, but she had thought the last instance had been years ago.

“Angela, it’s me. Don’t hang up.”

First, a sharp gasp. Then, a long silence, but no disconnection. Finally, a long and vicious string of swearing in Swiss German. Ana waited it all out.

“Yes,” she said. “Understandable reaction.”

“The nerve of you. Do you know what happened? What we went through? What your daughter and Jesse--”

“This is about Jesse.”

More silence. Coiling rage – Ana could tell from Angela’s breathing on the other end.

“What have you made him do now?”

“I don’t have time for playing the blame game. He is going to die.”

More swearing.


“Gibraltar. One hour. Sooner if you can make it.”

“You are very fucking lucky I returned to Tunisia yesterday.”

“I will be sure to remember that in my du’a,” Ana replied smoothly.

Angela hung up with a snap.

Fifteen minutes later Ana had made it to the outskirts of the city when a hover carrier swept overhead, banked, and floated right above the road to let her hop through the open hatch. As soon as she was in, the craft took off and the hatch shut behind her.
“Let me get over the Mediterranean before I put it on autopilot. Watch his blood pressure,” Jack called back from the cockpit. He made ascent at such an extreme angle that Ana had to brace on the handlebar aside the hatch to keep from falling. Jesse lay on a slab pulled out from and attached to a paneled wall, securely strapped down for the harried flight. Wedged between Jesse’s left arm and chest was one of Jack’s biotic field generators, giving the whole of Jesse’s body a soft, golden glow. Once Jack leveled the ship out, she took long enough to dump the bag, serape, armor, and hat on the communal table before going to Jesse’s side. The field operated on a timer that determined its strength – the shorter the timer, the stronger the field. Jack had set it low so he’d get a half-hour of continuous, stabilizing effect out of it. Hopefully that would keep Jesse from slipping into shock, or worse, a coma.

She took a moment to eye the vitals displayed on a holo beside his head – satisfactory, but still worrying – before letting her gaze drop to his left arm, mysteriously replaced with a prosthetic.

“You know anything about that?” Jack’s rough voice asked quietly as he came up behind her.

“No,” Ana shook her head. “I was hoping you would.”

“I don’t.”

They sat in discomfiting silence, stewing in that fact for a minute or two. Neither knew; both should. The choice each had independently made to walk away now lay its consequences bare before them in the form of their…

None of them, Jesse included, had ever used formal titles in their personal moments: not commander, captain, lieutenant; nor mother, father, son. But the collective noun had been family. The specific words hadn’t mattered, then. They did now, realizing they’d left someone they loved to a fate they would have, in the past, given up any price to ensure it would never come to pass. Maybe it hadn’t been the wiser choice to leave. Maybe they hadn’t been justified. Maybe...it hadn’t been worth it.

Jack held up a hand, and Ana wordlessly passed off another rifle round. He went to work transfusing it into Jesse, and Ana decided to cave to her insistent impulse and comb aside Jesse’s bangs stuck to his ashen forehead. There were more lines in his face than it seemed six years should add. He had a fuller beard, now, too. It suited him; she used to tease him over his stupid soul patch and muttonchops.

“He’ll make it. You know how tough he is,” Jack offered as he watched the biotic serum disappear into Jesse’s arm.

“Yes. I just wish I knew what the hell he was thinking, doing what he was,” Ana sighed.

“He has to know about Gabe. He wouldn’t be this stupid otherwise.”

They shared a look. Another fate they’d left him to deal with alone.

“But he definitely wasn’t there to kill him,” Jack added stiffly. “Why?”

“Neither were we, Jack.”

“I...yeah. Fair point.”

“Gabriel didn’t shoot him, either. Or asked for him to be shot, it seems.”

“Yeah, I don’t get it. That came out of the blue for him, too, you could tell. That was her, right?”
“Oh yes. No doubt in my mind that was Amélie.”

“No doubt in my mind that was Amélie.”

“Then what the hell,” Jack grumbled, mindlessly fretting at a little chip in the plating on Jesse’s prosthetic arm with his thumb.

~

Back in Illios, Reaper swept furiously down a backstreet, trying to put as much distance between him and the site of the...incident as possible. As he settled back into solid form, a dark corner watched him with eight seething-red eyes.

“Cute,” Reaper opened, coating the single word in acid.

“You’re not going to fool me,” Amélie replied sedately as she emerged from the shadows, utterly devoid of any affect.

“What did you think you were doing? What did you plan?”

“Plan? Nothing at all. As if I would be seen speaking with that tasteless...cowboy,” she seethed distastefully. “I didn’t bring him here, and I don’t know why he would be. This is hardly a gracious way to thank me for a favor.”

“A favor?”

Amélie advanced on him, obviously tense with anticipation, but expression still smooth as glass.

“You forgot yourself. Who you are. I reminded you.”

That put Reaper a bit back on his heels, but he met her stare soon enough. Eye-to-eye, unfortunately. Her fucking stilettos prevented towering over her the way he would others.

“You’re questioning my loyalty?”

Amélie rolled her eyes.

“Non. Your identity.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Don’t insult my intelligence. You know perfectly well what I mean.”

Reaper kept his chin up and defiant a few beats longer, but ultimately let a heavy sigh go along with the facade. He did understand.

“I know what I am.”

“And yet, you fooled yourself into thinking the door you shut behind you can be opened again. That option doesn’t exist for people like us. What we chose is permanent.”

Naturally, Reaper’s face was not visible, but Amelie could nonetheless sense the blow she’d dealt.

“You’re assuming far too much,” Reaper spit back. “There’s nothing left to want. If you think otherwise, why didn’t you kill him? Don’t even suggest that wasn’t possible. You make kills possible.”

Amélie’s expression unexpectedly softened a hair. It wasn’t anything so simple as sadness; she
didn’t work that way. More like the first sign of give from metal under extreme pressure: it didn’t feel, but it did crack.

“I’m not suggesting you want anything. You know better. But that doesn’t stop remembering. And remembering makes you forget. It doesn’t do any good to finish him. That doesn’t remind you. It’s your business to do what you want with the past, not mine. But if you forget again, I will make it my business.”

Curiously insightful of her.

“What do you know about anything like that? Remembering, forgetting?”

Amélie grew mysteriously quiet, and Reaper gave a huff of knowing, sardonic laughter. Caught her.

“Awfully gracious of you to offer me a reprieve. Suggestive of... personal loyalty, Lacroix. That requires investment. Emotion.”

The threat of exposure was half-assed at best. He knew Amélie wasn’t about to be cowed or even believe for a moment that Reaper was terribly invested in the sentiment at all, since he knew what would happen if he followed through on the threat. He could take this entire conversation to Akande tomorrow and tell him that Amélie’s emotional suppression was perhaps not as thorough as was thought, but she had just as much retaliatory ammunition, and would be more readily believed. The advantage of willful belief in the effects of Amelie’s physical and emotional manipulations all but guaranteed that. Talon would not have any mercy for Reaper behaving the way he had tonight, no matter how much he might try to reassure the council it was only a moment’s bewildered hesitation. Not after killing as many other, less personal former Overwatch comrades as Reaper had. Amélie might not be questioning his loyalty, but the council would.

And neither of them...really wanted to tip any kind of hand to Akande. There was nothing to gain, and everything to lose. He was far too cunning to reveal an iota of information to. It would be used to their ultimate detriment in one way or another, because he was exceptional at not just appreciating explicit intelligence, but its negative space. What each truth implicitly proved and disproved, and eerily good at deduction from those facts. No one was better at the political dog-eat-dog game than Akande was. He’d slaughtered his way to the top, and neither Reaper nor Amélie had any interest in unseating him. They didn’t want the job, even if he was a bitch of a boss.

Amélie smiled, the expression wan, unnatural, and didn’t reach her eyes. None of her smiles did.

“Seems we have a secret to share. What a thrill,” she purred. “It’s been a long time since I had the pleasure.”

Fair. No one else in Talon would have such a... nuanced perspective on tonight. He didn’t need the complication brought on by the moment of public weakness, and she didn’t need any questions about her status. Maintenance of the status quo was mutually desired. Strange, but he shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Why bother paying me a favor at all?”

But he’d never been terribly good at avoiding temptation of fate, had he? The previously-made cracks in Amélie’s eternal stoicism grew and widened.

“I used we for a reason,” she replied, unusually soft. “Just because I chose to remind you the way I did doesn’t mean I do not...” she fell off and looked away to glare at a wall.
“Sympathize?” Reaper finished, deliberately prompting. Sympathy wasn’t supposed to be on her list of abilities. Amélie’s expression pinched with mild revulsion.

“As I said: mutual secrets. Regret is wasted in our position. What has been done, you did to yourself because of what you are. Same as me. Nothing will change that.”

“Murdering Gérard was the result of something done to you.”

“Did Overwatch not do something to you, Gabriel? Broke you? Took what once was you away and made something else? Again, the how no longer matters. We are what we are.”

She was, of course, correct. Admittedly, he was impressed by her insight. Moira’s scientific expertise was easy to buy into, even to the point of hubris. He should know better at this point, given the imperfections she’d wreaked in the experimentation on him. He had, indeed, been caught looking into the past tonight, but through a porthole. The threshold he’d passed through years ago had sealed and disappeared behind him. At the time, he’d wanted it that way.

Now, he wanted nothing.

“Akande will want to know why it wasn’t a headshot,” he said. “To quote: I don’t miss.”

Amélie reached for the small pack she kept on her thigh and produced a single round from Ana’s rifle. She must have had the presence of mind to snag one of the rounds that had been shot in her direction before absconding completely. Without warning, she upended the round and rammed it into her upper left arm, hissing with pain as it emptied into her, but expression eerily numb.

“I was grazed by enemy fire,” she huffed. “If he’s suspicious enough to have me tested, he will see what he wishes to see.”

Acceptable. Reasonable, even.

“Make a final sweep,” he rumbled. “Wheels up in twenty. Have you seen Sombra?”

Amélie nodded off to the west as she put her visor back on, making the moonlight’s glare on the many red eyes of it shift.

“Hasn’t even left the ship.”

“Good. Even she would have come running if she’d heard that shot.”

Amélie gave a dubious and disaffected huff before launching her grappling hook and disappeared onto a roof to do her scouting.

~

“We’ll be there in fifteen,” Jack said, tramping down the stairs from the cockpit after checking their heading. The timer on his biotic field generator had begun to chirp, signaling the end of the cycle. He detached his second, spare generator from his belt and turned that one on. A quick glance at Jesse’s vitals made him frown, and he didn’t set the second generator at as low a level as the last one.

“Jack?” Ana asked hesitantly from the table.

“Just being careful,” Jack replied, completely unconvincing. When Ana returned a furious glare, he shook his head with a sigh. He should know better than to think he could lie to her. “It’ll be close.
His heart might stall out, but...long as Angela’s there to meet us, it’ll be fine.”

“And if she’s not?”

“There’s nothing we can do, or could have done,” Jack answered, resigned.

That made for a very uncomfortable ten minutes, until the comm pinged from the cockpit.

“Tango aught seven charlie, do you read?”

Ana and Jack started and looked up toward the front of the ship. That was Ana’s former callsign for landing permissions. She leapt up the stairs to answer.

“Tango aught seven charlie reads. Winston?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“I suppose Angela called you.”

“She...sure did, ma’am,” Winston answered, clearly unnerved. That must have been a phone call.

“You let me worry about that. Are we clear to land on the satellite launchpad?”

“Yes, ma’am. Angela touched down a few minutes ago and is prepping medbay.”

A pitched weeee behind Ana made her turn to see Jack hurriedly bend over Jesse. She took cockpit and released the craft from autopilot – no gentle, easy drop-in arrival this time.

“I need her to meet me, Winston. Jack has barely kept Jesse’s heart beating.”

“Jack? What?”

“Focus, Winston.”

“Y-yes ma’am. She’s been tapped into us on the overhead the whole time.”

“I’m coming in hot,” Ana said, both for Winston and Jack’s edification as she dove hard for the cliff runway. Angela was visible running from the outbuildings, growing larger every second. Ana banked – Jack swore loudly behind her – into a last-minute landing and pulled to open the hatch all at once. The weeee siren had carried on the whole way; when Ana rose from the pilot seat, she found Jack had climbed onto the stretcher over Jesse to perform chest compressions. No wonder he had shouted; she’d likely almost flung him into the wall.

“He’s in vfib. Decouple us from the wall,” Jack barked as he continued working. Ana complied fast as she could, poking the holo interface to turn on the hovering mechanism underneath and detach the stretcher for transport. Angela, carrying Caduceus but not in her Valkyrie suit, rushed on-board and connected her specialized staff to Jesse with a thick rope of golden light. Under his hands, Jack could feel Jesse’s chest suddenly rise of its own accord, and he slackened with relief. He looked over to Angela; her fists were in an iron grip around the staff, staring at him.

“Jesus Christ,” she spat. Jack hopped off the stretcher and waved at Jesse.

“Yell at me later. Take him.”

“I will. If you so much as consider leaving before I have him stabilized, I will hunt you two down myself,” she seethed as she slammed Caduceus on the stretcher aside Jesse and wheeled it around to
leave the ship.

“We will be here, Angela,” Ana tried.

“I’ll believe it when I fucking see it.”

She stormed off, the heels of her boots clicking at a rapid staccato pace with Jesse floating in front of her. That left Jack and Ana alone on the ship – it didn’t seem wise to follow her, and there was nothing they could materially do to help, anyway. Jack’s shoulders slumped with another, more distraught sigh.

“I thought I was done doing this,” he said ruefully, turning aside to begin gathering up Jesse’s things.

“Would you prefer what would have happened had we not been there?” Ana asked, tone flat as a board.

“Don’t fucking start. Of course not. You’re not the only one that got tired, y’know,” he snapped back.

A fair rebuke. Jack had picked up Jesse’s hat and stared at the badge on it with a pained frown. Ana came up alongside him and reached to hold his forearm.

“Sorry,” she said.

“It’s all right.”

“No, it’s not. This is the easiest it’s going to be, today and the next few days. We will need each other.”

Jack really didn’t like that train of thought, but she was right. Always was. He lifted a hand to rub at his face, but stopped just in time, realizing how soiled his gloves were. That only upset him more; he yanked them off and slapped them onto the table before following through with what he wanted to and buried his face in a hand. For three decades of experience in trauma management, this was catching up to him awfully fast. But then, he hadn’t had to deal with this in the five years he’d been on his own. Of course his return to it would be someone particularly close to him – or had been.

Shit.

He pulled his hand away, only to realize his sleeves were a mess as well, and looked down to see yet more blood streaked across his chest. The jacket was torn off and forcefully abandoned as well.

“Goddamn it.”

“I’ll clean all this up,” Ana offered.

“If you could,” Jack replied softly. He’d let himself have the luxury if she was willing. But he wasn’t the only upset one, he knew. “Sure you’re okay?”

“I will worry about that after Angela is finished.”

There was her masterful talent for compartmentalization, hard at work. God, he wished he could do it that way. Could have spared both of them a lot of unnecessary grief over the years. In looking at her, however, he could see her long, empty stare. The creases in her mouth, bent with stress. Part of the reason it was extra-hard was how spontaneous it had been. After two faked deaths and five
years, it would have been hard enough to walk up on Jesse on a random street in Greece on a normal day; walking up on Jesse bleeding out on a random street in Greece was infinitely worse. Ana had made an entire career of war and taking care of two men beyond any measure of fairness, both as a second-in-command and a friend to them. He owed her more than a little recompense.

“Hey,” he opened. “Come here.”

Ana had just enough time to give Jack a nonplussed blink before she met his embrace. Comforting, but also its own kind of upsetting – Jack only did this on their worst days. It felt like a poor omen.

“I said I was fine,” she mumbled, but it was the weakest possible resistance, obvious in her hesitant tone. She couldn’t be anything else right now, when they had so many hours of doubt to muddle through. Something had to be sure and steady, so it would have to be herself; Jack was ruining that with his gentility. She shut her eyes against Jack’s broad shoulder, and Jack held her tighter still.

A familiar, heavy pat of footfalls made them both start. Winston arrived just outside the hatch, staring plaintively. Ana and Jack parted, but Jack kept an arm around her.

“Both of you,” Winston said, aghast and clearly near a breakdown.

“There’s a queue for shouting at us. I don’t think Angela will be feeling gracious enough to let you pass her up,” Ana said, reaching for her characteristic sarcasm.

Winston didn’t immediately reply and continued to stare, but no anger colored his face – only relief.

“It’s really good to see you,” he finally choked out.

Jack’s arm around Ana tightened a bit involuntarily. Everyone was feeling tender right now, and recognized it in each other, so what was the point of a stiff upper lip? Their war had never ended, even when they had wanted it to and tried to make it so, but perhaps in this reunion, they could budget for a little more gentility after all. Ana stepped out first to offer a hug, which Winston eagerly accepted. Jack hitched up Jesse’s stuff and followed on after.

“It’s...good to see you, too, Winston,” he said, but passed on an embrace of his own in favor of a reassuring clap on Winston’s massive shoulder. Winston returned a shy smile, but abruptly balked as he realized everything Jack carried was bloodstained.

“He...he’s gonna make it, right?”

“Angie’s got it. She isn’t about to let Jesse down,” Jack said.

“Yes. He’s made it this far,” Ana added. “Let’s head inside, hm?”

“Yeah, okay,” Winston acquiesced, but his eyes bounced between Jack and Ana with uncertainty. They had a long, long history of softening the truth for others’ sakes, and especially his. He had had a very sheltered existence when Overwatch was operating. Now, with nothing to do but act on his own passing scientific research fancies, he’d had a lot more opportunity to read about the outside world and, very occasionally, explore it, but he had to be careful because...well.

Each managed to distract themselves for an hour by getting settled and cleaning up before gathering again to properly begin the waiting game in almost complete silence. Another hour passed. Two. Four hours after their messy arrival, Jack gently nudged Ana awake when Angela opened the
door with a soft hiss. Her usual ponytail was bushy and ragged, as if she had tried to loosen it and had run out of energy after a single half-hearted tug. Her audience of three sat up at nervous attention despite their own exhaustion.

“He has pulled through. Surgery to repair internal damage was a success, but I have induced a coma to minimize stress on his heart and lungs. It will be a long recovery, but a whole one, I think.”

All three instantly relaxed and shared tight smiles with each other. Ana moved to speak, but Angela cut her off with a savage swipe of her hand.

“I am taking a room to pass out in. He will need further surgery to remove the armor shrapnel from the entry and exit wounds. The door is unlocked, if you care enough to check in on him.”

She pivoted and marched right back out the door, which hissed shut behind her. A beat of uncomfortable silence passed before Jack let out a stressed huff and smeared a hand across his face.

“Well, she hasn’t murdered one of us. I suppose that’s a positive outcome,” he grumbled.

“Maybe after some sleep, she’ll calm down,” Winston suggested. “I’ll talk to her.”

“Gracious, Winston, but we have earned our welcome wagon,” Ana cut in. She was trying to maintain her calm, but her exhaustion coupled with Angela’s sheer ruthlessness had evidently stung, and deeply.

“I’ll talk to her anyway. You, however, should get some rest. I keep a couple rooms prepped all the time in the barracks. Take them.”

“People come and go?” Jack asked, surprised. Winston didn’t reply immediately and looked Jack up and down, searching. So Jack didn’t know, hadn’t received the video he’d made months ago. He must be using an entirely new comm channel and hadn’t bothered to even monitor the old one. Not that he would have come, anyway. That was probably a good thing, and even the responsible thing to do in Jack’s place, but Winston still felt a phantom hurt to recognize it.

“It’s aspirational,” he finally replied. “But I try. Not many come around.”

“Jesse?” Ana prompted, and Winston shook his head.

“Last time I saw him was the day we installed his prosthetic. He did two weeks of physical therapy before disappearing. That was five years ago.”

“So you know what happened to his arm,” Jack added.

“I do,” Winston said with a nod, and for the first time, a little bit of blame and judgment laced his tone. “It was crushed in the explosion.”

Jack openly recoiled and turned a little gray. He didn’t need to be told which explosion.

“Oh my god.”

“I can see you regret it, commander, but...you’re going to have a lot to explain to McCree.” Winston’s eyes dipped to and lingered on Ana. “Both of you. And I’m not sure he’ll be as gentle as Angela, to be honest.”

Jack and Ana stared a look – they knew what Jesse’s anger looked like, and how it had felt when turned on them in the past. This was not the first mistake they’d made to cross him, but this was, by
far, the worst.

“I want to see him,” Ana finally spoke again to end the uncomfortable moment of mutual contemplation.

“Okay. Let’s go,” Jack said, offering a hand for her to stand. He eyed her closely; she looked more than simply exhausted. Worry made his mouth crease. After reaching out to Fareeha and receiving no response, facing another pointed rejection – this time face-to-face – might be too much for her to bear. Perhaps it would be best for Jack to take point on this if they could get away with it. If someone deserved a round of being shouted at, Jack had earned it well above and beyond anything Ana had done. They left Winston and trudged off together for the medbay, which was a separate outbuilding from Winston’s lab.

“Don’t,” Ana said suddenly.

“What?” Jack asked, but intrinsically understood there was no fooling her. They simply knew each other too well.

“You’ve spent half your life taking bullets of all kinds for someone else. Let me feel my failure. I made a choice, Jack. No one forced me. We can call it a moment of weakness, but after six years I have little excuse.”

“Do you think he’ll even talk to us?”

Ana’s expression wrinkled with suppressed anguish.

“I don’t know. We abandoned an orphan,” she replied grimly.

“Fuck, don’t say it like that.”

“It’s the truth. Just because he is an adult doesn’t make that truth go away.”

The medbay was in sight, but Jack stopped mid-step, visibly distraught. Jack had never married, never raised a family like Ana. Once upon a time, if he and Gabe could have made a clean break from The Crisis…But that was an era very, very long past. That fact had already weighed heavily on him in his self-imposed exile, and become magnified since reuniting with Ana. True, he treasured Fareeha as if she was his own, but it was closer to being an uncle more than anything else. The closest thing he had ever been able to claim as someone he’d genuinely helped mold as they had grown was Jesse. Long ago, there had been a few, joyous years where he had been sought out by Jesse as eagerly as Gabe. That had meant the world to him then, but now, with his self-imposed absence looming so heavily over him, he chastised his hubris in taking it for granted. His kneejerk bitterness and self-consumption in the final days of Overwatch were backhanding him now with karma’s judicious gauntlet.

Many people had lived and died by his choices, but very few ever counted on him. Ana. The old Overwatch strike team. Gabe. And Jesse, in so many ways, so many times, had needed him – not just to keep him alive, but to give him a place, especially as Gabe drifted away from all of them. And in return, Jesse had done his damnedest to show his loyalty to both Gabe and Jack. Probably to his detriment, in fact. In those final years, Jesse had been second only to Ana in his personal priorities until she had been presumed killed in action. For years, he’d told himself over and over and over that his selfish days had ended, but after losing Ana, he’d forsaken that truth in favor of…whatever the hell he had now. Not a whole fucking lot.

Jesse should have come first, then. Nothing would have changed in macro (fuck Overwatch), but it
could have been so different for them.

A touch stirred him from reflection. He glanced aside to see Ana holding his bicep tight.

“Do you care enough to try anyway?” she asked.

Jack grit his jaw and returned a weak nod.

“Then that is the best and only thing you can do.”

“Is it enough for you, after Fareeha?”

“No. But it is all I can get, and may be all I deserve. Time will have to tell for each of us. We love them, but that isn’t a guarantee of anything in return. That is the way it is supposed to work, even in the very best of times.”

“He isn’t even mine, Ana. Or yours.”

“Then whose is he? No one’s. I won’t allow that, even if he will not have me,” Ana rebuked, her voice at last cracking under pressure. “That’s what it means to love your children.”

Jack reached across his chest to hold Ana’s hand on him, and they took a moment together to steel themselves before finally entering the medbay. A familiar sight greeted them: a bed, one soft-white diffused light over it, a holo display tracking vitals. The pressurized hiss of a ventilator. And Jesse, center of it all, lay there, his normally warm and brown skin unpleasantly pallid and gray. Ana came up aside his bed first and watched the ventilator work for a bit before she reached to smooth her hand down Jesse’s good arm, elbow to wrist. There was no point in facade anymore – Jack would understand, even if no one else did.

“What the hell was he thinking,” she muttered again, voice a little rough with emotion.

The question was rhetorical, naturally; neither of them could possibly know. She spoke it as if brandishing a zealot’s scourge, all intent on self-harm as atonement. She could have known. Should have. Why didn’t she? No extended reprieve, no night of warm silence and dreamless sleep held up against this kind of revelation. She’d put up a great front for Angela on the comm, but the doctor’s abortive attempt at shaming returned to Ana’s mind now, raking down her throat and gut with a searing bite.

Do you have any idea what your daughter and Jesse went through?

She had been so tired. Felt so weak and useless once she had remembered herself and what she had been doing while in recovery. Surely, everything would have been better off without her, she thought then. Everything had slowly been falling apart anyway.

Excuses. Bodies had piled up irrespective of her participation; ergo, it was a dereliction of duty to refuse the task as she had. The door to peaceful quietude had sealed itself behind her decades ago. You could tell yourself death visited all, and the statistics had no biased curve in doing it, but that perspective carelessly assumed people did not include a list of individual names you knew. The masses could be pushed off semi-indefinitely...until hubris dumped a loved one at your feet and reminded you payment came due for you just as soon as it had for the friends, family, and loves of the other endless hordes of people lost while ignoring responsibility.

Death may not have bias, but everyone on Earth certainly did.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered down to Jesse’s still form.
There may never come an opportunity to speak it to his face. And in truth, even if it did, she was not completely self-assured she would have the courage to do it, no matter the necessity. Pride had always been her vice, silencing her when she should own up and admit a failing. Better to live and be blamed than admit fault, even as it tore her to pieces inside – that had been her way for decades, and a significant part of the weight that had pulled her so low after her near-death experience.

Writing the letter to Fareeha had been excruciating enough. The logistics to actually speak it to her would have been a challenge, to say the least, but...Ana hadn’t tried, either. Her ultimate choice in reaching out had been a relative (and probably unearned) comfort. For all she had tried to explain in that letter, about her work and duty and exhaustion, she realized she had never actually apologized for disappearing. Perhaps that was why Fareeha had not reached out to her. It had been months, now. There was no fooling herself that Fareeha simply hadn’t found the time or opportunity to try and speak to her. The thought to add an explicit apology in the letter had never occurred to her, even in corresponding with her child; perhaps she had earned a responding, cold silence more thoroughly than she had already believed she did.

Jack sidled up behind her and reached up to put a comforting hand tight at the joint of her neck and shoulder.

“Take the next bed over and get some sleep,” he suggested. She was never going to make it back to the rooms Winston set aside for them. Jack could muddle through for now thanks to his enhancements. It wasn’t like Jesse would be awake anytime soon, but he wanted to sit for a watch all the same. Ana acquiesced to the suggestion wordlessly, but allowed herself to be guided by Jack around Jesse’s bed, past it, and to another hoverbed a few feet away.

“Nobody’s going anywhere and nothing is going to happen anytime soon,” he urged.

“Yes, fine,” she rasped back, and began removing her overcoat, boots and finally unwrapped her headscarf, stowing the pins for it through the lapel of her overcoat. Every joint protested as she slid onto the mattress. She lay facing Jesse, and within just a few minutes, the soft, steady beep of Jesse’s vitals ticking by lulled her to sleep.

That left Jack sitting slouched in a chair he’d claimed from along the wall and set on the other side of Jesse’s bed so he could monitor both Jesse and Ana. He held up longer, but at some point after a period of nebulous, stressed half-contemplation, he must have nodded off, because the pneumatic hiss of the door behind him made him start. When he turned in the chair to look, he froze.

“Oh my god,” a wisp of a woman with high, spiked hair brokenly whispered. “Winston told me, but...”

Jack stood to meet her and continued on, urging her back out to the hall so they could talk without disturbing Ana.

“Lena, what--”

“Winston sent me a message around five my time. I’m usually up around then anyway, old habits die hard, y’know, but it still took me a bit to fly here from London. When I arrived he told me...he told me...” Lena tried to explain, growing more emotional by the second as she stared at Jack with a mix of wonder and anguish.

Shit. Jack really had not needed another extremely trying reunion today. He hung his head and rumpled his short hair for what felt like the hundredth time in seven hours.

“I--"
“You don’t have to say anything,” Lena interrupted in a rush, waving both hands before her in gesture to stop. “I’m not angry. Really... surprised a-and overwhelmed, but...I’m way over getting mad. It would have killed me to hang onto it after the act was passed. You couldn’t have stopped it. And I mean, that’s probably part of why you did what you did, and I get that. Even if I were mad, you have so much on your hands right now. I-I...I don’t know McCree real well, but I know how much he means to you. Just... just let me say... it’s so amazing to see you,” she continued, now visibly tearing up. “And I’m glad McCree is gonna pull through. You look like you need some good news.”

Jack was speechless. Lena was glad to see him, as a person, not her mentor or benefactor or even superior officer. He was a hero to her, he knew, but it didn’t color her relief now. And though he had been a loss from her life, it had not been as the icon eulogized by heads of state. He had been real to her, and someone she genuinely cared about. No organization other than Overwatch would have taken her after her accident and worked so hard not just to save her, but give her a new place to be. Jack had watched her bust her ass after her accident, putting in hours and hours of effort and training to turn her one-in-a-trillion temporal injury into something to help others with. Watched her recover and grow in a way Genji had never been able to, though the two of them sparred frequently as part of their individual recoveries. The difference had been... stark. That had led him to believe in her enough to put her on the strike team for the King’s Row Uprising not simply because of her nascent ability, but because she still had faith in what Overwatch could do.

She wasn’t looking to be saved by a Hero of The Crisis, nor did she seek him for citation as The Absent Commander. Now, it was her turn to have a little faith when it was needed most. Jack could not remember the last time he had been blessed to experience that kind of emotional investment beyond Ana. It hurt like lancing a blister, a stinging but necessary release. Lena had said he didn’t need to speak, so for once in the past twenty goddamn years, he didn’t, save for a grateful, exhausted sigh.

Lena could see all of his struggle tip to toe, and watched it unfold with a tilted head and deeply sympathetic expression. As soon as she had arrived, Winston had seemed so tense and upset; when he revealed the complete truth that could not possibly be conveyed in a text message, she could hardly believe it. Taking the time with her friend then to absorb at least some of the shock had been the wise choice. She didn’t need to add to Jack’s list of burdens right now.

The time of rank and role had passed. Yes, she and Winston were trying to make something of the attempted recall, but it was as intentionally casual as it was... somewhat embarrassingly disorganized. No one else yet had come to call after Winston’s emphatic video appeal, though he had received some promises of back-door support from former allies, like Angela. He and Lena were operating on a very part-time basis, as they had to be careful in choosing their battles. And, of course, Lena’s girlfriend was in London, and until others showed up and the recall began to gel, she was hesitant to make Emily leave the city behind unless their hand was forced by dangerous circumstances. Hence why she had flown in – Winston had fixed up a small personal craft from the hangar and given it to her to use.

So now, overcome by reunion and the sight of Jack’s obviously-tortured countenance, she abandoned decorum entirely and stretched her arms wide in suggestion of a hug.

“If you want,” she said quietly. “You rather look like you need it.”

Jack hesitated only a moment in surprise before meeting the embrace, however gingerly. Out of practice he may be, he did need it. Everything about this reunion was reminding him why he’d taken the chance he had on her: the vivaciousness and utter humility that came together to make her so dedicated not just to a cause, but the people around her. His cynicism made him feel it was wasted on Overwatch, but it was just more proof of Lena’s graciousness that she persevered anyway, through
her accident, the wholly-unique injury she’d suffered, and threw herself so completely into a new career to make the best of her circumstances. He respected the hell out of her for every inch of it.

“I didn’t have a reason for leaving,” he confessed, a surprise even to himself. But he was tired. At the natural end of the circumstantial rope he’d knotted together over a number of years and was on the verge of hanging himself with.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” she replied easily, though she gave a heavy sniff. “It’s enough you’re not dead.”

That respect only grew – his departure hadn’t exactly made her life easier. She’d lost her livelihood and some of her purpose with it. Her graciousness despite that was a unique balm for one of his lowest moments in a decade.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

They parted, and Jack did in fact feel a bit lighter. No way it would last, knowing what awaited him when Jesse woke up, but he’d been living second to second for years. This could be at least a little okay for this particular second.

Lena could see Jack had heartened; it was in his newly-straightened shoulders and relaxed brow. Good. Winston had told her that Angela was angry, but Lena didn’t have time for it – they all needed each other in times like these. Every new or rekindled ally and friend was a gift she would never be so foolish as to waste something as empty as anger on. It was the truth when she said Jack hadn’t needed a reason; trying to make one was impossible and uncharitable. None ever existed from someone in his position, and the fact he knew and owned up to that granted him a lot of credit.

“Do you want to go back in?” Lena asked, gesturing back towards the medbay. “We can talk more later.”

Jack thought it over, mouth pursed with stress. There wasn’t much value, and just gave him a reason to go back to beating himself up. Surely, something more constructive could be done.

“Actually, I think...I want to go through Jesse’s things. We don’t know what he was doing in Greece.”

“Do you know who shot him?”

“Yes,” Jack answered grimly. “But he could have been set up by anybody to walk into that. His presence there makes no sense, especially considering Ana and I both were there, too. It feels...too convenient, even if Jesse was looking for--”

Jack stopped himself. Reaper’s true identity wasn’t exactly classified, but it could still be upsetting.

“For?” Lena prompted gently, leaning back in a hesitant wince.

“For The Reaper,” Jack finished. That was plenty. But Lena’s hesitation only deepened, and she stared down at the ground.

“Winston thinks it’s Commander Reyes. Is...is that true?” she asked. If both Jack and Jesse were looking, it couldn’t be just coincidence.

Jack’s eyebrows shot up, but he wasn’t about to just give it up like that.
“What makes Winston think so?”

“He came here a few months ago and tried to steal Athena’s records and locations of Overwatch agents. They fought.”

If Lena had reserved any personal doubts over The Reaper’s identity herself, they evaporated upon seeing Jack’s pupils shrink and his expression grow crestfallen.

“Winston’s not a hundred percent sure, but—” Lena continued.

“It is,” Jack interrupted urgently. “Did he get anything?”

Lena shook her head no as her eyes fluttered shut with disappointment. She never interacted with Gabriel the way she had Jack, but it was a professional betrayal, and of course, it had hurt people she knew much more personally.

“Why?” she asked helplessly.

Jack pulled a small grimace, recalling Jesse saying the exact same thing seconds before he was shot.

“I wanna know that as bad as you, kiddo,” Jack replied with uncharacteristic gentility. “But for now, we have more important things to worry about. Everything’s back in the lab, and I don’t want to wake Ana. She needs the sleep.”

“Don’t you?”

“Hmm. Yes and no. I’ll manage.”

Lena didn’t argue the point and offered Jack go ahead of her with an outstretched arm. When they re-entered Winston’s lab, the gorilla peeked over the upstairs railing and offered a small smile to greet them.

“Jesse’s stuff still there?” Jack asked.

“Yes, right here,” Winston said.

Jack and Lena mounted the stairs to meet Winston, who had begun separately setting out each item Jack had removed during the evac flight: hat, serape, tool belt, gun, and his go-bag. Lena was drawn to the serape, gingerly testing the soft wool unblemished by blood – most of the staining was on the back, while Jesse had been laying down. Jack lifted the gun and gave it a look. The revolver was entirely different from Jesse’s service weapon in Overwatch. A check of the cylinder confirmed it was still fully-loaded. That had nothing to offer, so Jack moved onto the tool belt. Again, as he emptied each pouch, he found what he expected: folding knife, a small repair kit, flint, Jesse’s one-eye visor--

“The hell is this?” Jack mumbled as he pulled out a...bead?

Winston and Lena both turned to look, and Winston in particular showed interest. He adjusted his glasses and leant in with a studious look.

“My goodness, is that a netsuke? Looks like one.”

“You know what it is?” Lena asked excitedly. Jack dropped it into Winston’s palm, where it looked comically tiny in his massive hand, but he rolled it deftly enough between his thick fingers as
he assessed it more closely.

“Yes. It’s a traditional ornamentation from Japan. Some are sculptures, some are more like beads for obi. This is probably the latter. Stunning. It’s ivory and everything. Very rare and old.”

“Not something easily come by,” Jack murmured, and Winston cottoned on immediately to the implication in his voice.

“Absolutely. It we can figure out where it came from, it may provide a lead on what he’s been up to.”

“The faster we can do that, the better. I just want to be sure we’re not putting him in more danger somehow. Until we understand why he was in Greece, we have to assume he is being watched, and that is what brought him there. Angela won’t bring him up for a few days, and it’ll be even longer before he’s lucid enough to even try and talk about what happened.”

Lena and Winston nodded dutifully. They went through the go-bag together, but the only possibly-helpful item was the mobile desktop they found inside. Given the fact that Jesse was out of immediate mortal danger, it felt like too thorough an invasion of privacy to try breaking into the console for more information right now. Between the five humans (loosely-described) plus Athena on the base, Jesse was safe enough from any direct threat for the moment. With little else to go on, the three of them decided to let any further investigation go so Jack and Winston could get some rest, while Lena kept an eye on proximity monitoring, having already had a decent enough night’s sleep. Winston retired to his personal quarters, and Jack returned to the chair in Jesse’s room where Ana still slept.

As the only one left awake, Lena sat in silence with her own thoughts, trying to process what she’d learned in a scant handful of hours. Jack and Ana were alive, Reaper was indeed Reyes, and McCree had gotten hurt on a mystery mission after being on complete radio silence for five long years. A lot to take in, to say the least. But she remained firm in counting her blessings, rather than hold a grudge over the past. She hadn’t had a chance yet to discreetly ask Winston if either Jack or Ana knew what he had done, initiating recall. Probably not – it was a big enough deal that, had they known, would have asked at least a few questions. Shouted a bit, maybe. She had no illusions about what their reaction would probably be: poor.

This time in her life was going to be about maximizing the good she could make in the world, with Emily as her anchor away from the worst of the mental fallout that came with it. She and her girlfriend had talked it over several times after Mondatta’s death. Lena knew her gift needed to be used, but had worried about Emily’s safety as well as the strain it would put on her, but Emily had been steadfast and reassuring. She had been the one to help Lena manage her grief after her failure to save Mondatta, too. Emily had told her she would be the very last person on Earth to keep her from her purpose, and was willing to do whatever it took to help Lena act on it.

Whatever negative response Morrison might have didn’t matter to her – she’d made the decision to answer Winston’s call automatically, driven both by her years-long frustration and Mondatta’s recent murder at the time. She had needed to do it to feel useful again. The choice had been for her, and any consideration of Overwatch’s or her mentor’s legacy had been a distant second. Having believed him dead at the time, any contemplation had largely been an intellectual exercise. The result of that exercise had been knowing Jack would never really approve of her breaking international law, because she had a whole potential career to invest in, and it put her in a lot of danger no one could protect her from the way an organization could if things went bad. But she was never going to go back to the RAF, however; she had found too much relative freedom in Overwatch. Returning to the British military now, even with her accidental powers from her first tour of service, would just mean
limiting herself. The presumptive ghost of Jack Morrison would just have to deal with it in whatever afterlife he had presumably been enjoying.

Now...well. It wasn’t quite an intellectual exercise anymore. Hopefully the very real and living Jack Morrison would understand their decision, but she was hardly going to be held back now.

Several hours toddled on by, and Lena spent it alternately reading international news and texting with Emily. She’d been trying to craft a good pun playing on the word *crumpet* when Athena abruptly opened a window on the holo display.

“Lena, I have detected an approaching unknown vehicle. Single passenger, most likely a motorcycle. Coming in fast. Shall I sound an alarm?”

“How far out is it?”

“Ten minutes at most.”

“Yeah, wake everybody. Not too harsh, though,” Lena replied, standing to fetch her goggles and pistols. Winston came clambering in almost immediately, being closest at hand, but minutes later, Jack and Ana came striding in, fully dressed for combat and in their masks. Angela followed after them, clearly bedraggled from sleeping in her scrubs, but pistol in hand.


“I’m afraid my external forward-line cameras are malfunctioning and have for some time, Commander.”

“Someone will notice if new cameras appear on the access road,” Winston confessed with a sigh. “And there wasn’t a need until six months ago.”

“What happened?” Ana asked sharply.

“Reaper did,” Jack answered for Winston. “Lena told me.”

“What?” Ana and Angela blurted in chorus.

“It’s fine,” Winston tried as a completely-ineffective attempt at reassurance. “I’ll explain later. The point is, someone is coming now.”

“I’ll go out. Ana can take a high point from the roof and spot me. Both our faces are obscured, and I think that’s safest for everyone. Just being seen here could ruin your lives,” Jack suggested.

“What happens if you’re overpowered?” Angela challenged, arms crossed.

“Well, I’ll retreat, and all of you get the hell out of here fast as you can, because nothing short of a tank-class omnic is going to accomplish that one-on-one with me, and you goddamn know it,” Jack drawled back. “I get it. You’re pissed.”

The tendons of Angela’s jaw grew prominent for her repressed anger, but she kept silent. He was right. Debate over, Jack pulled his sidearm from its thigh holster and looked to Ana, who gave him an affirmative nod. She turned and left to head for roof access. Jack eyed his three remaining compatriots.

“If anything goes even a little sideways, you promise me you’re on my dropship fucking off from here with Jesse in tow without a second goddamn thought about me. Got it?”
They all nodded, if a little nervously.

“Good. Lock the door until you hear otherwise from me.”

“Two minutes out, Commander,” Athena broke in smoothly.

“I ain’t commander of a goddamn thing anymore, Athena,” Jack sighed.

“Noted, Commander.”

Jack stomped off for the main access door with an exasperated shake of his head. For a chained artificial intelligence, she still had her own kind of sass. Within a minute, Jack was outside and the blast door creaked shut behind him, but as he made his way through the ruined entrance and tall grass, he nearly ate shit tripping over a root, ending in an ungraceful stumble to keep himself upright. Laughter came over his visor’s comm.

“All those genetic enhancements, come to that,” Ana teased.

“Fuck you,” Jack mumbled, trying to recenter himself and put his imposing persona back on to greet whoever was coming with a heavy shrug of his shoulders. Belatedly, he realized his jacket and gloves were still crusty with now-dried blood, but he supposed that would just add to his intimidating look anyway. He strode up to the exterior fence, festooned in KEEP OUT/RESTRICTED AREA signs in various languages, and tore off the loose security chain as if it were made of gossamer. The high-pitched whine of a motorcycle engine was easily audible from down the access road. Whoever was driving was coming in hot; he could tell it was in a high gear. At least he wouldn’t be left waiting long.

Indeed, he wasn’t – as he stepped past the chain-link threshold, a black-helmeted person on a slick and expensive-looking hoverbike zipped in, banked, and drifted to a sliding stop a safe distance away. Jack kept his pistol out but at his side, trigger finger along the body of the gun rather than ready to fire. They glowered at each other in silence for several beats, measuring each other up. The person on the bike was in jeans, a black canvas jacket, and had, strangely enough, a bow strapped across his torso. Arrow fletching was visible peeking out from a backpack as well.

The stranger blinked first; his shoulders dropped their squared aggression, and he reached up to remove his helmet. Though he didn’t show it (mostly thanks to the visor), Jack was genuinely floored to realize who it was. The hair had radically changed and he had piercings now, but he had stared at too many intelligence photos of him for too many years to not recognize him as readily as he would have a longtime friend.

“Shimada,” he greeted as a single, gruff word.

Chapter End Notes

two selections from Jesse’s playlist!

Air, by Ben Folds Five - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8_Jqy9dpv0

The Plains / Bitter Dancer (for Ana and Jack), by Fleet Foxes - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_jbXOz7PXEG
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

henlo frondos~

no major outstanding trigger warnings for this chapter! ^w^ 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After collapsing into bed the night he was attacked, Hanzo dozed for a useless handful of hours and woke up again as the sun made its full arrival on the horizon. His dry, bleary eyes cracked open, wincing to see the yellow-orange light signaling the morning, and he let out an achy groan. He slowly sat up and flipped his long undercut back over his skull from where it had fallen across his face before turning to check his mobile desktop where he’d left it on his nightstand.

It was dark. No blinking notifications. That couldn’t be right.

He swung an uncoordinated hand over to slap the top of his computer and bring it closer. Upon opening his messaging window, he found there was no mistake – Jesse hadn’t responded to his message. In fact, it hadn’t even been seen, judging from the lack of the usual read receipt on his text bubble. Something twisted ominously deep inside Hanzo, and all at once he was very awake and...not upset, but at attention. A message as serious as Hanzo’s, even using oblique phrasing – or even because of the euphemism – would have driven Jesse to respond. Number sixteen occurred tonight. Do not worry, I am fine.

But Jesse hadn’t even read it? A small spike of hurt thrust through Hanzo’s chest more intensely than it normally would. He did his best to ignore it and counted back the time difference between them. When had he sent his message?...Three AM? That would have been mid-morning in America. Now, it would be afternoon.

Dread embedded all the deeper within him.

Hanzo went back to reading his chat log, but up a bit higher to find the timestamp for Jesse’s last message. Yesterday evening Hanzo’s time, apparently. Gorgeous, hot afternoon. Loving the sun, the message said. A tiny alarm rang inexplicably in the back of Hanzo’s head, until he sat through the time zone math again.

It shouldn’t have even been dawn yet in New Mexico. Or... anywhere in the contiguous United States.

Now, wait. Wait. Just because Jesse was somewhere Hanzo did not expect did not necessarily mean there was reason to worry. But Hanzo was nonetheless going to call him right now. The ping of the dial tone buzzed and buzzed and buzzed, each iteration digging further into Hanzo’s hasty bulwark against panic. Nothing. His breathing began to grow shallow as once more, he tried to estimate what time his message to Jesse may actually have arrived at, based on the passing mention of the afternoon – it would have been well after sunset. Nine, ten PM? Now, it would be very early morning. Jesse should be alone and...and safe. He called again, sat through ten excruciating rounds of buzzing. Still nothing. Jesse was not that hard of a sleeper.
It had, theoretically, only been eight-to-twelve hours since Hanzo and Jesse had last spoken, and yet it all felt inescapably and terribly wrong. Jesse didn’t need to hide any travel from Hanzo, much less any off the continent. Theirs was a secure channel, and on top of that no one nefarious – to their knowledge, Hanzo realized with a sickening jolt – knew the two of them had allied with each other. So why not give Hanzo a heads-up? Jesse would never be so callous as to leave Hanzo hanging like this. Not after he had been so angry in Pennsylvania over Hanzo’s own stupidity baiting the Bastion unit without telling Jesse ahead of time. Something was wrong, wrong, wrong.

And Hanzo had no way to know how or why or when. The thread between them had been snipped by a cruel blade of circumstance, and for the first time since...since meeting Jesse, he felt the complete encapsulation of being alone. Were their situations reversed, Jesse would still have resources to tap, people to reach out to. Hanzo...did not, and never had. Panic began igniting in a firestorm through his chest and gut. There was no one else to turn to. It had only been them. Once, that had been a blessing and given solace. Now, it filled Hanzo with a particular and unrelievable kind of terror he couldn’t recall ever having felt...in his life, frankly. He sat for what felt like an interminable age, struggling to decide what to do, until he remembered in a flash that he wasn’t completely alone.

He opened a new window on his messaging software, paused, then closed it with an aggressive swipe at the holo in favor of calling directly. Mercifully, within a couple of rings, the call connected and a welcome voice spoke.

“Hanzo?” Sadie’s voice filled his bedroom just enough to make it feel less oppressively empty.

“Yes,” he replied, voice weak and creaky with exhaustion and worry.

“Oh, I don’t like the sound of that. What’s wrong, hon?”

“I cannot get a hold of Jesse,” he confessed after a too-long beat of silence.

“You...you can’t? You’re not...”

“No.” Hanzo hated how pathetic he felt to tell her. A sad little sigh came over the line, and Hanzo’s shame consumed him more fully in a thick black cloud of despair. She had understood what Hanzo had been dealing with while in Kentucky, so of course she would recognize the same emotional helplessness now. He’d been managing his feelings well on this break, but this one turn of fate threatened not simply to destroy that progress, but put him back a long, long way.

“What happened, Hanzo?” she asked very gently. It still seared him anyway.

“I know what you are thinking. We did not part on bad terms. I...I asked to go,” he finished, unable to suppress his bitter self-hatred. Too fucking weak to stay when he should have. When Jesse had so clearly wanted him to. Fool.

“Does he know?” she pressed. Logical question, if extremely painful to admit.

“...Yes.”

“And?”

“It was fine. I thought...I wanted some time to myself, after we talked about it. Jesse...did not want me to go. He...he is...” Hanzo was going to die before he found the ability to articulate what had happened. “Jesse did not...he doesn’t...”

“He feels the same, I know.”
Strike that. He was going to drop dead right this second.

“When did he tell you?” Hanzo asked, voice cracking a bit for the surprise.

“He didn’t. Not in words,” Sadie replied. “You don’t know how different he is, now. Because of you. That says everything, even though I don’t think he understood that himself.”

Hanzo didn’t know the words in English or Japanese to respond to that.

“I see,” was all he managed to cough up.

“Anyway,” Sadie began again, obviously a little contrite for being that honest when Hanzo was already upset. “So you haven’t had a fight?”

“No, nothing like that. We have been in regular contact since parting a month ago. We agreed to text every day.”

“Until now. When was the last you heard from him?”

“I…am not sure. The last message came around eight last night, but he…he mentions it being afternoon. It cannot possibly have been afternoon where I understood him to have been. He would have told me if he left the United States.”

“Hanzo, I…I don’t know how to tell you this, but he did,” Sadie opened cautiously.

“What? How do you know?”

“Jesse posted to his blog yesterday. A brand new, long article about corruption in the Santa Fe police department. I don’t know if you remember me telling you, but I handle all the online visibility for that for him. He sent a secure message asking me to bump it in and around New Mexico-based social media. But the message and blog post IP were somewhere in Europe. He was definitely in New Mexico at some point and...left. I just…assumed you were with him. Helping him.”

“I wasn’t,” Hanzo murmured, stricken.

“Listen, I only know that because I set up his encryption for him and it is very similar to mine, so when I receive messages from him, I see the direct source without proxies. He probably wasn’t thinking about that.”

Probably not. Hanzo was still devastated.

“Why didn’t he tell me?”

“The only reason he wouldn’t is because he thought he couldn’t, Hanzo, you have to believe that.”

“He has time and relative safety to make a blog post, but not send one message?” Hanzo barked.

“It takes one key press on the run, you know that. Even the message was one-way and automated. Whatever might have happened may have been after.”

Might have. Yes, she was right. Panic was dictating far too much for him. He took a deep breath.

“I…sent Jesse a…a very important message last night that I expected him to respond to, and he has not even read it. If he had, he would have reached out, I am absolutely certain. I know it hasn’t been twenty-four hours, but...this is not right.”
“I believe you,” Sadie replied sympathetically. “I don’t feel right about this, either. Jesse wouldn’t do this unless he had to, and that would only be if he expected trouble. Maybe not even for himself, but someone else. Maybe you.”

“I can take care of myself. Nothing is worth this, even for my supposed benefit,” Hanzo sighed, before his anxiety peaked anew. “Shit, what if the message he sent me was an SOS? Shit!”

“No, I don’t think so. He wouldn’t be that oblique about it. He told me more than once that if anything ever happened to him, or if he sent an SOS to me, I would know it. That wouldn’t change for you.”

“What would he do?”

“I’ve never had to find out, and he never told me.”

Hanzo raked at his hair and pulled it into a tight fist against the back of his skull. That did not help.

“Can you track him?”

“No, I can’t. I can ping him same as you, but if nothing comes back...”

“Hack his system, then. Maybe we can learn more that way. You set up his encryption,” Hanzo bit impatiently.

“That could just put him in even more danger. Even if I knew his credentials – and I don’t – if he is being monitored and I compromise his security remotely...no, I won’t do that,” she answered carefully. “Not until we have more information.”

“Then what the fuck am I supposed to do?” Hanzo shouted, frantic. Too late, he remembered himself and buried his head in his hands. “Sorry.” At least this was only an audio call and Sadie couldn’t see him in his pathetic state right now.

“It’s okay, I promise,” Sadie reassured emphatically. “You have time, Hanzo. It can be solved. I do have an idea.”

Hanzo stayed silent for a bit longer, trying to shake his overpowering sense of failure so he could focus. He rubbed at his aching leg – the stress was aggravating his old injury – and let out a long sigh.

“I am listening.”

“Jesse told me years ago if anything ever happened to me and I had to bug out and go underground, that I should go to one of Overwatch’s old watchpoints. Someone would know how to find him and verify we were friends, and they would take care of me.”

“Overwatch is dead, Sadie,” Hanzo murmured. Though based on what Jesse told him, that wasn’t quite true, it was true enough for what she was suggesting, and it was far too dangerous to suggest otherwise to her.

“It is, but I check up on that watchpoint every six months. It’s pretty much a ruin looking at satellite footage, but someone, something is there at that base, laying low. There’s a power draw and an internet connection.”

“...Where is it?”
“Gibraltar.”

That did give him a flicker of actionable hope. But she didn’t know where he came from. The history. The...former animosity.

“Sadie, I cannot--”

“Yes, you can. It’s the only lead we’ve got.”

“No, you must understand, at one time I was wanted by Overwatch.”

“So was I, hon, remember? Worked out okay for me.”

True. Not... really the same, but true. And there was no other option right now. His malaise lifted a little bit more.

“All right. Yes, I will go.”

“Any one of his old Overwatch comrades can do a lot more than I ever could. You’ll just have to make them understand you’re...” she faltered, and Hanzo felt it as a nasty sting up under his gut. “...friends now.”

Hanzo nodded distractedly, though Sadie obviously could not see it. Doubt still held him by the throat, and speaking it made his fingers tremble a little, so he forsook soothing his leg to begin wringing his hands in his lap.

“What if I am too late?”

“You would know if you were,” Sadie replied without missing a beat, and with warm empathy Hanzo could feel despite his worry.

“I did not know my brother was alive for a decade, so your faith may be somewhat misplaced,” he nonetheless rebutted, eking out a weak and bitter spit of laughter at himself.

“Then trust me. If he were gone he’d have sent something to me or you. He’s smart, he knows to set up a posthumous package for situations like that.”

Hanzo recalled their consequential night in Oasis, when Jesse had told him he did not have a designated survivor, and they had traded their respective credentials with each other. Sadie was right. He’d be clever and tie any posthumous intelligence package to the cybernetics in his arm – if he clinically died, there would be a message.

“Yes, we would. I...suppose I should go, then. Fast as I can.”

“All right, good.”

Hanzo stared at his lap. He shouldn’t just leave it at that, especially after shouting at her.

“I am sorry. I-I did not know who else to turn to.”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous, apologizing. We’re friends, Hanzo. That’s what you’re supposed to do.”

“I am not terribly practiced in friendship,” Hanzo confessed, thinking back further to that night in Portland. I cannot recall ever having had a friend. “So allow me to say that I am very lucky to know you.”
“Same here, Hanzo. I don’t know where you come from, but I can see what a good man you are.”

Hanzo’s wringing hands tightened around each other to hear her speak. She had no idea. She would never believe that if she understood the real truth, he told himself. Maybe he could be decent, but certainly not a good man. Not like…

He scrubbed at his face and shook his head at himself – he was in no shape to be thinking about this. If he couldn’t make himself feel better, he had to at least stop beating himself up. Keep it a net neutral, not so much for himself as the people around him. Perhaps another day would come when he could listen to that the way he knew he was supposed to. He did want to believe it. Jesse had given him that motivation to find it, if not hold the belief itself.

Sadie realized Hanzo probably wasn’t going to scrape together a reply, so she spoke again, weighting every syllable with compassion.

“It’s gonna be okay. You’ll find Jesse. And if you need to call me again before then, just to talk, I’ll be here. In the meantime, I’ll do what I can. There’s a few sources I can check in with, but I don’t expect a whole lot. Jesse keeps most of his work from me on purpose.”

“That you try at all is enough,” Hanzo replied. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, really. I know how much trust it takes to reach out like this, and that means a lot.”

“You have earned it. When we were visiting, you did not have to do what you did, keeping my secret. I...appreciate that more than my paltry words can say.”

“It was the right thing to do for both of you. And I hope...after you find Jesse, you two can…”

Hanzo understood what she was trying to do, but he cut her already-hesitant words off, gesticulating at the empty air.

“Please, Sadie, I...cannot think about that right now.”

“Shit, yeah, of course. I’m sorry.”

“No, you do not need to apologize. I...I understand. I will call you when I find him.”

“Yes, please. Be careful,” Sadie stressed.

“I will.”

He hung up and, for a few minutes, stared emptily towards the edge of the bed, stymied by doubt and fear and feeling. At length, he pulled himself back together with a deep breath, arching his neck up and back in a stretch to face the ceiling. Enough. There was no time for this kind of carrying on – he had a job to do. Jesse’s life depended on it.

He packed only the barest essentials and a single change of clothes, but on his way out, he caught himself. A glance back to the drives they’d taken, stacked atop each other, made him pause. Though he’d uploaded the data to his console and it would be safe and encrypted there, the physical storage...was perhaps not as safe. Taking them potentially put a target on Hanzo’s back, but at least he would know exactly where they were. He couldn’t be sure the drives were not linked to… whatever had happened to Jesse.

He swept them up and buried them in the bottom of his backpack before finally storming out the
To expedite his search, Hanzo dropped a serious amount of cash on a supersonic flight to Madrid. It was a relatively common form of transportation now after being waylaid by technology problems earlier in the century, but was still incredibly costly. Though Jesse and Hanzo both kept a comfortable living as independent contractors, they had stuck to more conventional commercial flights when previously traveling together because of the expense. Money was no longer a concern for Hanzo, however. Not until he had what he wanted.

Even at supersonic speed, the flight had still been about four hours, during which time Hanzo caved to injurious compulsion and looked up Jesse’s blog post to read. This must have been what Jesse was working on in their time apart. Reading it made for an emotionally-polarized task; all Jesse’s wit and humor came shining through in every line, which would always end in reminding Hanzo why he was on the goddamn plane at all. If he had been so absorbed in this work – and it had to have been a lot of work to write, even before Hanzo considered reading between the lines of what Jesse definitely had to have done to acquire the information – why had he left America just before posting it? There was no reason but a bad one, just a question of how bad. Despite it being genuinely upsetting to read, he pushed through to the finish, and suffered through the last two hours of the trip fighting off a meltdown fed by doubt and made worse for the fact he didn’t allow himself to drown any of it in an ounce of the alcohol available to him. *Deeply* tempting as it was, he needed his mind clear every moment until he had an answer.

Within an hour of touching down, Hanzo tore out of Madrid on a racing hoverbike, hastily purchased in cash despite fish-like gawking from the salesman. In less than ten hours, he’d put a sizeable dent in his nest egg and couldn’t even be bothered to care. He headed south towards the coast of the Mediterranean. When Overwatch had patriated it, Gibraltar ceased to exist as semi-sovereign and operated as military-secured territory owned by the organization. Now that that was all gone, however, it was simply open space left to rot; the events leading to the collapse of Overwatch had made anything related to it politically radioactive, so neither Great Britain (which had technically governed it up until Overwatch took over) nor any other European state had stepped into fill the gap despite its massive historically-strategic significance. The Spanish government kept a pitifully-sparse detail along the DMZ that marked the border and nothing more. And presently, the threat of a second Omnic Crisis put any question of its governance far down the UN’s list of priorities.

But this way, Hanzo wouldn’t have to worry about a border crossing at nearly 200 kilometers an hour. Little victories. There were a few small towns on the highways, but save Granada and Málaga, they were passed in a flash, and Hanzo didn’t spare a single thought for any simpleton of a local or federal officer who might see him weaving through the sparse country traffic at unholy speed. He could outrun them – and did.

Once he turned to follow the coast west towards Gibraltar proper and neared former Overwatch territory, it grew visibly abandoned very quickly. Though it had only been a scant five years since the organization’s implosion, Hanzo zipped through a few small towns that had evidently helped serve the base and local tourism at one time, but were now wholly abandoned. Signs directing eviction per the Petras Act began springing up in greater amounts the closer he drew. It put an odd ache in Hanzo’s chest to see; Jesse had left before the Petras Act had been signed, but not by much. How would he feel to see this as it was now? Considering the wrathful fit he’d had at the ranch house months earlier after learning about Ogundimu...probably not great, despite the anger and bitterness that had driven him away. Hanzo had never done work like Jesse’s, but he certainly understood the unique pain in witnessing the destruction of your own legacy.
Eight and a half hours after hanging up with Sadie, Hanzo came up a final, steep rise towards the entrance of the former base. His building anxiety for the past hour, wondering and hoping Sadie’s hunch was right was immediately replaced by alarm when he saw someone standing before the chain link fence bordering the complex, obviously waiting for him. Somewhere along the line, he’d been noticed and anticipated. Foolish of him not to consider that since he had evidence someone was present, but...he wasn’t thinking all that clearly right now. Hanzo parked the bike in a smooth fishtail and gave his greeter a long, hard stare.

The stranger was an imposing combination of height and muscle mass, 6’2” and easily a hundred kilograms, with scraggly, short white hair. A visor obscured his face from the eyes down, masking the entirety of his jaw. More striking was the custom leather jacket heavily smeared with dried blood across the torso and arms, particularly vivid in contrast to the angular white leather panels exchanging with blue and red strips. The stranger, however, appeared perfectly whole. Distressing. The pistol held aside the leg was almost immaterial in making him intimidating, compared to the rest of the look. When Hanzo noted that the trigger finger was off, he decided that if he was going to be attacked, it would have happened by now, so he went ahead and removed his helmet. The cool ocean air was refreshing after a shitty night’s sleep and endless hours of anxious travel.

The stranger balked a bit to see Hanzo reveal himself, and when he spoke, he was surprisingly intelligible despite the mask and voice akin to ground glass.

“Shimada.”

Oh. That was a surprise, but a welcome one. Hanzo hung the helmet on a handle bar and dismounted.

“So you know who I am. Good. That will make this significantly easier,” he opened dryly. Easy as it was going to fucking get. He got a few feet closer before the man’s pistol came up to point directly at him, though it was trained rather casually, more a warning than any real threat.

“That fucking right, huh? Hate to see what you thought harder looked like,” the man said.

“You would not have lived to find out,” Hanzo replied, and his face immediately pinched with irritation when responding laughter mocked his thinly-veiled threat.

“You’re good – exceptional, even, I’ll grant you that – but you ain’t that fucking good. You have thirty seconds to explain yourself.”

“I am looking for Jesse McCree.”

The hand wrapped around the pistol instantly tightened, making the leather gloves the man wore creak a little.

“Oh yeah? And what makes you so sure you can find him here?”

“I do not expect to. But I have heard there may be old Overwatch infrastructure here to locate him.”

“The prodigal son of the Shimada clan wants to track down a former Overwatch operative. Are you fucking kidding me, thinking I’ll just let you do that?”

“I have not heard from him in...” Hanzo made a conscious effort to check his phone for the time just to point out how unintimidated by the gun he was. “About sixteen hours. I am concerned.”

“You talk to Jesse McCree.”
“I have spent the last five months working with him, so yes, I talk to him. Fairly regularly.”

Hanzo could sense the man’s confusion and just see his brow furrow around the mask, marring the line of a scar running down his forehead and between his eyes. His head tilted off to the left – an obvious tell someone was talking to him on a closed comm. At last, he shook his head at seemingly nothing.

“No, let’s expedite the thing,” he replied to his unseen companion, and reached up to snap open his mask. When he peeled it aside, Hanzo couldn’t have tried to hide his shock – he hadn’t recognized the voice, but he definitely knew the face from hundreds of intel photos alone, not to mention years of public television appearances.

“He is going to fucking kill you,” Hanzo spat out despite himself.

“Yeah, you definitely know Jesse,” Jack said, sounding resigned. “But I have questions.”

“Ask, but there is little time. I am behind as it is.”

Jack gestured with his gun hand to hold up before holstering the weapon.

“You’ve got plenty of time. He’s here.”

“What?” Hanzo asked, aghast. Jesse wouldn’t be anywhere near an Overwatch venture by choice right now, much less casually share space with Jack fucking Morrison and not let Hanzo know about it. His puzzled gaze fell back on Jack’s leather-clad chest, flaking with red-brown blood streaks. Realization made him blanch, and Jack noticed, as his now-empty hand came up again, this time in attempted placation.

“He’s gonna be okay,” Jack said carefully.

Hanzo fought with himself. His lifelong instinct for repression coupled with his being in the presence of a stranger locked horns with his immediate and deep reactionary terror. What happened. Where is he. I have to see him. No wonder Jesse hadn’t been in touch. The worst had come to pass as Hanzo had feared it might, but it had also been resolved in one fell swoop without him ever knowing. Sure, it was great and all that Jesse was alive, but...Hanzo should have been there. It never should have happened. And it felt even worse to know the entire event had passed him by.

Jack watched Hanzo’s muted reaction with sharp eyes trained by nearly three decades’ time squaring with some of the most powerful people on Earth. He was trying hard to hide how upset he was – and that, conversely enough, was encouraging. People like Hanzo, inclusive of Jack himself, were going to lie and misrepresent truths. You had to, to survive. But what you chose to lie about also said a lot. If Hanzo felt the need to hide how much he cared about Jesse’s safety, that meant it was less likely he had much to do with whatever had brought Jesse to Greece.

“I meant it when I said I had questions.”

“Ask,” Hanzo repeated at a rasp, barely listening.

“Not here, come on.”

Hanzo followed the former commander’s lead toward the blast doors, but every step cracked his veneer more deeply. Jack got to the door and pounded on the steel, each thump echoing hollowly in the yard around them to match the emptiness in Hanzo’s chest. He could no longer help himself.

“May I see him?”
Jack turned to look, but Hanzo was staring resolutely at the ground. So he understood his fate was no longer up to him. Another point in his favor. Risk still had to be hedged, however.

“Not by yourself.”

“Understood.”

The door began to squeal open, and a shadow dropped behind both of them; Hanzo had to work very hard to reel in his reflex to make a preemptive strike. The figure stood from the crouch they landed in, all the while staring at Hanzo. They wore a black visor lit with three soft blue lights set in a triangle formation and a long grey-and-blue duster. A rifle of strange construction was held along their side; the soft yellow glow of liquid rounds was visible from within the bolt-action chamber. At a guess, it was probably whoever Jack had been talking to. Wise indeed to keep a sniper in his back pocket for meeting an unknown possible threat. A soft pneumatic sound announced the visor’s retraction to reveal another unexpectedly-familiar face. Hanzo had no witty rejoinder for this revelation, however – only stone-cold shock that eventually thawed into real anger he couldn’t conceal. Not after everything he’d seen in Jesse even brushing the topic of Ana’s death. His reticence, sadness, wistfulness.

“You, too?” Hanzo said, allowing himself the sneer he felt appropriate despite his tenuous situation. “Incredible.”

Ana’s eyes drifted up and down Hanzo in narrowed assessment, but she said nothing. The walk stayed silent, so Hanzo took extra care absorbing his surroundings. Now that they were inside, Hanzo was surprised that the interior was in relatively good repair. Some stainless steel panels were pulled out of the walls and ceiling, but it appeared to have simply been laziness not to put them back in place after regular maintenance. The hallway eventually opened up to a large space with a massive hologram satellite map. Carts and work tables with assorted bits of tools, wiring, and unidentifiable steel carapaces in various stages of assembly were scattered about the room. And finally, a massive tire swing was suspended from the ceiling; Hanzo had just long enough to consciously register a what-the-fuck reaction when footsteps above announced more people.

“Jack, I swear to god, you have lost your mind,” a woman with blonde hair hitched high on her head in a ponytail spat from a balcony. She was flanked left and right by a diminutive woman with brown hair, and…


“You’ve met?” Ana asked, surprised and glanced between the two of them.

“Uh, no ma’am, I’ve never met this man,” Winston replied, shuffling nervously. He wasn’t used to being recognized.

“He told me about you,” Hanzo explained. “McCree.”

“McCree...talks about me?” Winston said. A little flattered smile spread on his face.

“Yes. When he told me about your message, it prompted a few questions, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

Everyone turned to stare at Winston, who instantly looked ready to melt into the floor, and the smaller brunette woman in particular looked a little panicked. Hanzo’s head spun on his neck, trying to understand what was going on.

“You told me you haven’t seen Jesse for years,” Jack challenged.
“I-I haven’t. It was...the message was...”

Hanzo’s blood ran cold. Did Morrison not know about the video? All of them were obviously former Overwatch, so Hanzo had...assumed. His gaze bounced across all five gathered around him. It was clear between Ana and Jack’s suspicious expressions versus the other three’s spectrum of knowing anxiety that Hanzo had set off a very nasty land mine, indeed. Shit. Way to fuck up a first impression, giving away such a massive secret.

“Winston?” Ana prompted again. Hanzo was surprised how low and warm Ana’s voice was despite it being steely with reserved anger.

“No one is doing anything,” the shorter woman piped up from the balcony, bristling with raw emotional energy.

“Lena--” her blonde companion tried.

“No! I understand why you said no, Angela, but we’re doing what we think we have to. We told you that before. That hasn’t changed, and it’s not going to,” the woman – Lena, apparently – continued.


“I did,” Winston said, summoning his courage and stood up straighter. “Something had to be done.”

Hanzo had forgotten what the specific anxiety of witnessing a family argument felt like. Good lord, he hated it. How had he ever survived the dozens, if not hundreds he had witnessed in the first twenty-nine years of his life between his father, Genji, and the elders? Five minutes in and this was already so much more than he ever would have bargained on. For fuck’s sake, he’d been so inept at handling it in his own family he’d committed murder and absconded rather than deal with it.

“Commander Reyes came here and tried to steal information on agent locations! We can’t just let that go!” Lena cried.

“And get yourselves thrown in prison,” Ana rebuked. “That’s the good outcome. When Overwatch was at its peak--”

“You hardly have the moral standing to question them,” Angela(?) said. Oh. That Angela, Hanzo realized, recalling the medical files he’d read and pairing it with the scrubs she was dressed in now. To be honest, if they had to have it out like this, they could have been courteous and let Hanzo figure out all their fucking names first.

“I don’t think it’s a wise choice,” she continued, “But for Christ’s sake, they’re allowed to act on their own prerogative. You are supposed to be dead!” She was shouting and red-faced, pointing aggressively at Ana and Jack below.

“Too fucking bad for you it ain’t the way you want!” Jack shot back. Hanzo physically reeled, aghast at how thoroughly and quickly Jack had lost his cool. Granted, this had probably been simmering for... however long they had all been here together, but still, he expected a little better from a man who had won a Nobel Peace Prize.

“Her point is that none of this is up to you,” Winston added, not quite shouting, but uncharacteristically aggressive.

“Obviously not, because this is asinine,” Ana replied, swiping her hand dismissively.
“Accomplished as you are, Winston, you are not qualified--”

“Qualified? What the hell do you have to show f--” Angela seethed.

“Where is Jesse?” Hanzo boomed over everyone. He had had three hours of sleep in thirty-six hours, Jesse had nearly died and he had only just found out, and now he was waist-deep in an argument that vividly illustrated why Jesse had chosen to take off. He thought he had understood before by seeing how hurt Jesse had appeared explaining it; now, he felt it. This was unbearably awkward because he didn’t know a single one of them, but if he did, this would be... excruciating to witness and be unable to control.

The yelling stopped and all eyes turned to Hanzo, arms folded at his chest and jaw grit so tight it visibly set off the goatee lining his jaw. Angela’s eyes in particular went very wide. She leant back, arms also crossed and every inch of her radiating aggression.

“Jesse?” she asked, wielding the word as a weapon. “Since when did you get to call him by his first name?”

Fuck. Hanzo’s eyes fluttered shut with regret. You fucking idiot. But he still had his pride, and goddamn it, he was Jesse’s friend.

“None of your fucking business,” he spat back, every syllable razor-edged with equal viciousness.

“Ana and I will take you to him,” Jack said, clearly trying to leave as fast as humanly possible, but it was already far too late. Angela descended the stairs, each stomp of her boots landing with an emperor’s latent power.

“The hell he will. It is my goddamn business, because he is my patient. You know who this is and what he is capable of, Jack. If you think I am letting him within ten feet of that med bay, you have another thing coming.”

Numbness frosted over all Hanzo’s previous anger. So she knew him. Where he came from. Wait...she was a doctor. Overwatch’s head physician, as a matter of fact. And if she had treated the likes of Gabriel Reyes…

Perhaps her preemptive wrath was justified.

“You...know my brother,” he said quietly.

Angela got to the bottom of the stairs and got right up in Hanzo’s face. With her boots, she was actually a bit taller than him and he had to inwardly admit feeling a little cowed by her blistering glare. Her head tilted and one eyebrow sat up in a withering, judgmental arch.

“Yes, I fucking do.”

Hanzo abruptly lifted his hands, wrists up in token of submission. Her eyes shot down to look as her whole countenance eased in surprise.

“You are welcome to restrain me until you are satisfied I mean no harm,” he offered smoothly, though he struggled to keep his burgeoning nausea at bay after being confronted so suddenly by Genji’s savior. “Whatever it takes so I may see him.”

Everyone grew very still, stricken by Hanzo’s unexpected and casual surrender. It was clear no one quite knew what to make of it, but eventually, Ana broke the silence.
“You’re being unreasonable, Angela. Between the three of us, Jesse is hardly in any danger.”

Angela and Hanzo had continued to stare each other down. At Ana’s words, however, Angela relented and took a step back. She softened a little, but still did not look terribly happy or enthusiastic.

“Surrender all your weapons to me.”

Without hesitation, Hanzo shrugged his backpack off first to remove his arrows, then unwrapped the bow from his torso, all without taking his eyes off her. Finally, he reached into his jacket for his dagger and gently laid it in her outstretched hand.

“I suppose I can forgo any handcuffs,” Angela sneered. “Winston, put these in lockup. Athena, my credentials to unlock only.”

“Understood, Doctor Ziegler,” a placid synthetic voice replied to her. An artificial intelligence. Might know a guy, Jesse had told Hanzo just a few days ago, when he had suggested finding one for scouring the archives. Little doubt this Athena had been it. Encountering Overwatch had been inevitable, but it made Hanzo’s heart sink even lower for it to have happened so far outside Jesse’s control. Thank god Jesse was going to be lucky enough to wake up, but when he did… Hanzo had no idea what was going to happen. Not beyond something fucking awful.

“Let’s go,” Jack said. He took up post behind Hanzo, grasped him by the shoulder, and led him towards a set of stairs on the opposite end of the room. Hanzo bit back the impulse to passive-aggressively shrug off the touch. Together in silence they marched outside, Hanzo leading the way and flanked by Ana and Angela beside Jack. Winston and Lena only went as far as the door, watching the other four make their way across the loading zone towards the medbay.

“So that’s Genji’s brother,” Winston said thoughtfully. “Should have realized. They look pretty alike.”

“Yeah,” Lena replied, distracted. Genji had largely been a serious man in the time she’d known him – he did give up a joke or a laugh, far more for Angela than Lena or anyone else – but his brother was downright grave. Perhaps that was only because he had learned McCree was injured, however...there was a quiet sadness just in looking at him that felt... endemic to her. She wasn’t sure what to think of that. Did he regret what he did? And the attachment to McCree only presented more questions. He had been in intelligence and had probably made his fair share of acquaintances with shady or even out-and-out terrible people, but she knew well enough that neither was McCree given to working closely with someone he did not trust, nor did Hanzo seem to present their connection as simply professional acquaintance. He clearly cared about McCree’s health and safety, and that...didn’t jive with the way Genji had (very sparingly) described his brother, or even the general assumptions of character anyone would make of Hanzo based on basic factual knowledge of what he’d done.

In a word, it was all... curious.

“What’re you thinking in there?” Winston asked knowingly.

“Dunno yet,” Lena answered honestly. “It’s all just...a bit weird, don’t you think?”

“I suppose, but...you and I never really knew a lot of what McCree got up to. Hard to account for change when we don’t know what square one is. And Genji almost never talked about...all that.”

“True,” Lena conceded with a sigh. “If Angie doesn’t skin him, I think I’d like to talk to him.”
Winston chuckled, utterly unsurprised.

“Of course you do. He doesn’t much look like the chatty type, though.”

“Then I’ll talk at him until my ineffable charm changes his mind,” she replied with a wink.

“He’ll see an interrogation coming, you know.”

“No, no, that’s not...I just wanna talk. He’s not what I imagined.”

Winston glanced back over at Lena and smiled to himself. Only Lena would want just a chat with a stranger and confessed murderer.

Hanzo et al made entry to the medbay, and he could sense the distinct intent to keep him moving without reprieve into the room where Jesse lay. To keep him unsettled and less able to map out where he was and exit vectors, just in case. Angela and Ana’s footsteps fell off, but Jack kept up right behind, urging him right up to Jesse’s bedside. The room felt like a too-sterile cavern, filled only by the aggravating beep of the display tracking vitals. A tube protruded unnaturally from Jesse’s chest, though the opening was heavily dressed in bandages. A wide, deep black-and-purple bruise pooled out from under the drainage tube and bandages. Angry swelling accompanied it, making the whole right side of his chest grotesquely misshapen compared to the left. What skin that wasn’t damaged was clammy-looking and off-color.

At least one question had been answered – Jesse had clearly been shot. Hanzo involuntarily overlaid every instance of bullet injuries he’d witnessed in his suddenly achingly-long, violent life over Jesse as a horrific transparency. Jolting bodies, hands searching frantically, numb fear impressed into faces with all the suddenness of vacuum molding. The collapse, like the demolition implosion of a single, thin human skyscraper to the uncaring earth. His regret swept over him again much more violently, compounding the nausea that discussing Genji had begun. Wasn’t he supposed to be better, now? More conscientious and self-aware? What the fuck did that add up to, if he hadn’t been able to keep his shit together well enough to make sure the one person he cared about most in the whole fucking world didn’t end up where he was now?

Jack’s hand holding him in place gripped tight, rousing Hanzo. It wasn’t gentle or comforting by any stretch, but definitely understanding of how stricken he was. And just hard enough to be uncomfortable.

“Why weren’t you with him?”

Ah, yes. The interrogation, naturally. Exposure to an immediate and external shock to evoke maximum (and possibly involuntary) honesty. Textbook. No wonder Jack had insisted to Angela that Hanzo be allowed to see Jesse. Though it wasn’t a surprise, it should have been more actively anticipated. The anguished hole in Hanzo’s chest frosted over, rime sealing – if not filling – the void for the moment in the name of professional necessity and practicality. No time for emotions now, no matter how...savage in their insistence. Once released from containment, the delayed detonation would be all the more extreme, but that was a problem for another particular minute.

“We had finished a task, and I requested some personal time on my own.”

“Convenient,” Jack murmured.

“I agree.”

“You said you’re in regular contact?”
“Every day since I left. It was necessary due to preexisting risk.”

“How long have you been split up?”

“A month.”

“What have both of you been up to?”

“Acquiring intelligence.”

“Don’t even *try* that kind of horseshit.”

In Hanzo’s defense, it was worth a try.

“It is Reyes,” Hanzo surrendered with a sigh. It wasn’t exactly a shocking secret. Anyone who knew Jesse by any true measure would be able to guess.

“Better. We suspected so. The hell do you care?”

Hanzo’s brow knit together. There were many and increasingly-uncomfortable answers to that question, but the surface-level one could suffice as summary.

“It is the right thing to do.”

“Suddenly, you’re consumed with a need for performative morality,” Angela snapped from behind. Hanzo’s last nerve split, and he reeled on the spot, though Jack took Hanzo by his upper arm wholesale and yanked in forceful suggestion to *stay put*.

“I perform for no one. I am. I do. And I do it as I feel I must,” Hanzo snarled back. “Whatever I am, it has never been anything but genuine. If I had ever known how to *perform*--”

Hanzo cut himself off with a click of his teeth and glared at the floor. He’d have to have known how to anticipate others’ unspoken needs, desires, and expectations in order to perform for anybody in contrast to his nature. *Ha.* Hanzo relaxed and drew back, squaring his shoulders.

“Call me a killer. I am. So is he. So is she,” he said, nodding sharply to Jack and Ana in turn. “You find a space in your mind to *condone* that for the sake of a better something or other in this world, and I am very certain that not everyone *they* have slaughtered weren’t the devil in the flesh.”

Angela’s eyes went side as saucers as the pupils shrank to pinpoints of rage. Ana preempted any further explosion by stepping in front of Angela, hands out in placation.

“*Enough*, Angela. Please, come with me.”

Though her mouth had knotted up with barely-contained wrath and she visibly shook, she pivoted on her heel and let Ana lead her out with a hand at her shoulder. Ana looked back to give Jack a significant look on her way out, to which Jack gave a nod. The door’s closing hiss felt harsh and damning after such an outburst, driving Hanzo’s repentant gaze to the floor. That hadn’t solved a fucking thing.

“The hell with performance, you don’t have a diplomatic bone in your body, do you?” Jack couldn’t help snarking.

Hanzo curbed his knee-jerk *fuck you*, but it was probably evident on his face anyway because Jack’s face lightened a tad with a wry smirk.
“Look, Angela’s had a rough twenty-four hours. She’ll come down. Most of it isn’t because of you,” he continued patiently. “You don’t help, that’s for goddamn sure, but...she’s a lot more pissed off at me and Ana.”

“So you have no...opinion of your own of me?” Hanzo asked, eyes narrowed.

“Oh, you’re a fucking monster for what you’ve done, absolutely. But you’re right: I am, too. We see it in each other. I’m not too proud for that mutual recognition. Not anymore. And Genji...well. Sympathy only extends so far.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means your brother was a pain in my ass that having been chopped to hell can’t completely excuse. I’ve been put through a meat grinder or two in my life, too. But I made what I could out of shitty circumstances. I’ve seen shit the two of you are privileged not to have lived through because of what I made out of that shittiness. And Overwatch specifically sunk a lot into him he could have been a little more grateful for, but...he wanted to be what he was, and that was a bitter, angry, self-isolating dickhead for most of his service. You can’t put a price on saving a life, but you can put a price on a shitload of bleeding-edge medical prosthesis tech to not just save a life, but reverse the worst of the damage, and that was to the tune of half a billion dollars.”

“Is that not my fault?” Hanzo asked before he could stop himself.

Jack stalled for a moment, surprised by the candor, but mulled the question with crossed arms as he peered contemplatively at the ceiling. Interesting that Hanzo would ask at this point in the day and, in fact, his life.

“Was your brother a selfless saint before what happened? Limitlessly kind and generous?”

“No,” Hanzo answered automatically with a sardonic huff of laughter.

“Then all you did is make something he already is worse. Not that that’s a whole lot better, but. That’s shit we all have inside. Nobody makes evil in someone else, only exacerbates a capacity within all of us. You two fought, right? He’d have gutted you in a second, too, don’t you realize that? That’s incredibly fucked up and your whole family is for encouraging it, but it’s a two-way street, Shimada. We don’t always necessarily get to choose what we are in some moments, but it’s a lot fewer than you or Genji think.”

Jack watched Hanzo’s reaction carefully. His shoulders hunched, and his stare at the floor grew flat and unfocused. Looks like Hanzo hadn’t ever really thought about it that way.

“I’m not your therapist, but...I guess I gave you something to think about.”

“You have,” Hanzo admitted quietly.

~

Angela and Ana didn’t return to the lab where Winston and Lena still remained, but rather continued on down the lit runway further, down the hill and under the bridge. They didn’t walk side-by-side, however; Angela led the way a good ten paces ahead with stomping feet while Ana trailed behind, semi-herding her ex-colleague. It was obvious Angela both needed and wanted the companionship, but at a nice healthy and supportive distance for now.

“That son of a bitch,” Angela spat.
“Yes,” Ana agreed readily.

“As if war is the same as murdering family. That he is excused.”

That hadn’t been how Ana had heard it, but this was not the time to quibble.

“Indeed,” she answered instead.

“I have every right to distrust his intent. And yours. And Jack’s. Everyone in Jesse’s life has decided the first place he should be put since he was a teenager is on a front fucking line of fire, so as far as I am concerned, I am the only one who has ever acted in his best interest! God fucking forbid I believe Jesse deserves a normal life not on either end of a gun!” she shrieked, now visibly and deeply upset.

“You’re completely right, Angela,” Ana replied sincerely.

“Don’t. Patronize me,” Angela rounded on her, advancing to point directly in her face. “Almost every other month like clockwork for the past three years, I have had reports coming in two, three at a time, ex-Overwatch agents dying because of the fallout you chose to abdicate from. And now you have the audacity to come back and dump Jesse at my feet, thank you kindly Doctor Ziegler? I am not your fixer!”

Ana remained completely cool but for downcast, worried eyebrows. She had certainly been excoriated a time or two by Angela in their time working together, but it had never been quite this emotional.

“You aren’t. You’re the only person we could trust, and we...we didn’t even know Jesse would be there, please believe me, Angela. I understand how unfair it is. I left to never be heard from again, and I wished I could have kept it that way. For everyone’s sake, not just my own.”

“Is that supposed to comfort me?” Angela retorted with a mix of continued anger and a new, shuddering weakness as she began giving in to tears. “It still means you’re gone. It still means I stay up at night wondering what I could have done. It still means I think of you every time I have to make coffee for myself after an all-night triage and remember how you would always have it ready for me.” Frustrated tears slipped out, one at a time on each side.

Ana’s entire countenance pinched with grief.

“Would you really just leave us all behind like that? Is it that easy?” Angela asked, voice ragged.

It had been that easy at the time. Hanzo had been correct – monster, indeed. A torture of a different kind to family, in the long run.

“It was,” she whispered, teasing the puffy end of her braided hair with numb fingers. “It was.” On the repeat, her voice broke at last under the colossal weight.

Angela clapped a hand over her mouth watching Ana and began to quietly sob into it. Terrible as it was to hear, it was probably the most honest thing she had heard from the former captain for a very long time. And that truth didn’t actually hurt like the revelation she wasn’t dead had – Angela knew exactly what Ana was. What they all were. Liars, spies, warriors, saboteurs. Tears signaled the end of any further rage; this was release. Nobody was trying to save face anymore. Pretending, politics, and decorum were all over. The ruin had sat amongst them for years, crumbling inch by inch and they had all chosen to live their lives as if this was function. Numb operation around detritus and they called it mild inconvenience, when anyone else would have given way under loneliness and
isolation. Angela swept aside tear tracks with the heels of her hands and again approached Ana.

“Overwatch was shut down for a reason, and maybe it should stay that way, but there has never been a moment I did not miss you and everyone else, and what that life gave me. Never, Ana. I wouldn’t be angry if it didn’t matter.”

Ana didn’t reply but hid her face in her hands. One long, shaky sigh escaped from between her fingers. Such a proud woman.

“’ana el-mas’ul,” Ana murmured, fingers trembling in front of her face. Angela reached up to pull her hands away and held them tight. It was telling that Ana was so upset as to reach for her native tongue first, but Angela understood perfectly well.

“I know you do. You’re always willing to take responsibility for your actions, but do you regret it?” she pressed. She hoped she knew the answer, but she couldn’t be sure, and that, beyond anything else, as what kept her where she was, simmering in disgust and fury.

“I do,” Ana replied thickly. “Every day.”

Overcome, Angela relinquished their hands so she could pull Ana into a fierce hug instead.

“Shall I check your pulse? Admitting a mistake might well fucking kill you,” Angela muttered into Ana’s headscarf, and Ana let out a wet giggle mostly driven by relief. But she hugged back just as tight, even a bit desperately. She didn’t speak again right away for more threatening sobs she worked hard to choke back down.

“Jesse will not be as gracious,” she finally said weakly.

Angela’s mouth drew into a thin line. Any knee-jerk attempted reassurance would be a lie. He wasn’t going to be, and that was inescapable.

“He’ll want the same thing I do. To know you regret it. We all know what it feels like to do something we can’t take back. Time will have to take care of the rest.”

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of,” Ana replied.

~

Despite all the carrying on, Jack seemed relatively at ease and perhaps even open to questions. Good, because Hanzo wanted to escape any possible continued discussion about Genji as fast as he could.

“Who shot him?” he asked, and was unable to deny the compulsion to watch Jesse where he lay. “And do they still live?”

Jack scoffed and rolled his eyes at the tough-guy show.

“Do you know who Amelie Lacroix is?”

Hanzo turned to stare, eyes wide. Obviously, yes.

“The Widowmaker? Talon did this?”

“The fuck are you so surprised for? You think Talon is just going to pass up an opportunity as good as the one they got? I’ve seen Jesse do a lot of stupid shit, but this took the cake, even if it was a set-up.”
“You cannot just say that and not explain.”

“Yeah, I fucking can.”

“I had nothing to do with this,” Hanzo asked. “He is my friend.”

“And how the hell does that happen? People from backgrounds like yours don’t tend to have anything I’d call—”

“Because he needed one just as fucking much as I did!” Hanzo snapped. He was beyond done today. “Who are you to ask? I’m the only fucking person he’s been able to trust for months. Where were you?”

“Wow. Passionate,” Jack drawled. Hanzo didn’t have to know how much that stung; it had, and deeply. “That would mean a whole lot more if I hadn’t spent a couple of hours making sure your so-called friend didn’t drown in his own blood after walking into an obvious trap with Reyes as bait.”


“I don’t fuckin’ know. Reyes seemed pretty surprised to see him, but Jesse was definitely expecting him.”

Hanzo walked off towards the far wall and folded his arms tight across his anxiously-heaving chest. Why? Why? Sadie’s voice in his head reminded him that Jesse would only go radio silent because he expected trouble and was worried for someone else, but that didn’t help as much as he wanted it to. Even if to spare Hanzo difficulties, this had not ended in a net benefit for anybody.

“I told him. I fucking told him.”

“Told him what?” Jack asked urgently.

“To call me if anything about Reyes came up. He...” Hanzo shook his head in frustration. “He promised me.”

“When exactly did you lose contact? You said sixteen hours?”

“Sometime between yesterday and this morning, Shanghai time. However, I realized he was...not being completely honest about his location before that, either. So I am not sure.”

“Okay, but that’s not even a day. Why do all this so quickly?”

“I was attacked by an emissary of my clan last night, and I sent a message to Jesse about it. He did not respond, and I am certain he would have.”

“You were attacked? Why didn’t you lead with that?”

Hanzo shrugged dispassionately.

“It is part of my life, now. I would not consider the events linked, if you are worried. Jesse has not had any issue in the past being stalked the way I have. My leaving Jesse’s side is the best opportunity the clan has had all year to reach me. It was a chief reason we agreed to be in contact every day. The attack was simply happenstance, as far as I can guess.”

“How long has this been the case? With the clan, I mean.”

“Since the day I left almost a decade ago.”
“Jesse know that?”

“Of course. We have...encountered my family as part of our investigation.”

Jack had been relatively sure from the outset Hanzo hadn’t anything to do with the shooting, but every bit more he was learning about Hanzo’s circumstances reassured him. Hanzo was displaying far more emotion than Jack ever could have anticipated, and to his obvious detriment, being as he was at the mercy of others. A relief that may be, but it also didn’t really help in understanding what had happened. He shrugged off his jacket, folded it to minimize the visible leftover blood, and set it on the spare bed.

“So you didn’t know he was there to meet Reyes at all? What did you think he was doing?”

“He had returned to New Mexico, and I believe he took contract work out there like he had been doing before we met. He...had nothing else to do while waiting for me.”

“And you left because?” Jack tried once more.

The question of all questions. Hanzo chewed the inside of his cheek and stared emptily at Jesse where he lay.

“I told you. Personal reasons. I would like to leave it at that.”

“That’s a bit much to ask in your position, don’t you think?”

“Jesse is going to live. He will validate what I have said when he wakes. Lock me up until then if you must,” Hanzo replied in defeat.

No use. Hanzo was correct, after all. Not to mention revealing to Jesse that they’d put Hanzo in the brig when he woke up would almost certainly worsen whatever bad reception they were already destined to receive. Jack shook his head.

“Well, then, tell me why Jesse is--”

“No.”

“I didn’t finish the question,” Jack bristled.

“You want to know Jesse’s intention for Reyes. I am not going to explain an ounce of it to you.”

“Pair of balls on you, slick.”

“You have no right to that information. Jesse is not in imminent danger here. It is his secret to keep. And I reiterate: you’re welcome to do to me whatever you please, short of throwing me out, until Jesse wakes.”

“It isn’t his alone if you know about it. The hell kind of right do you get?”

Hanzo pulled a nasty frown and shook his head. Not one ounce, he’d said. What the hell had these two been through to be this loyal towards each other in less than a year? Jack sucked angrily on his teeth and squared his shoulders.

“What if I throw you out?” he asked, throwing in a healthy measure of belligerence for his own satisfaction.

Hanzo’s head tilted to the side, chin up in defiance as he squared his shoulders and puffed his
“Try.”

Christ. Smugness must be genetic in that fucking family.

“Fuck off,” Jack drawled.

Hanzo shrugged in mocking passive-aggression. Jack wasn’t going to try, of course, and they both knew it. But the point had to be made. Nothing short of a fistfight was going to keep Hanzo away. He turned once more to Jesse on the bed, but didn’t approach again; though he wasn’t going into any detail, he certainly wasn’t hiding how invested he was in Jesse and his situation. That chafed his lifelong tutelage in espionage. Give up as little as possible, and obfuscate when confronted: that was the basic refrain. Instead, he’d screamed at a stranger about his goddamn moral identity issues. Outstanding, Hanzo.

Doing so was probably a good idea right now, because honesty fostered its own kind of trust, but it was also inevitably going to foster...questions. Curiosity. Gossip, even if they were wise enough not to speak any of it in his presence. He wasn’t sure how much he would care if confronted with it – he definitely fucking didn’t right now – but it wasn’t just him. Jesse was a very private person, and being too textual about any feelings could be seen as divulging truths Jesse would find invasive. However, it wasn’t like there was anything to...confirm. As of this precise moment, they were friends and nothing more.

Everyone here was Jesse’s friend, too. Even accounting for interpersonal strain, at the very, very least, they still counted as comrades and people Jesse genuinely respected. Hanzo didn’t have to cough up any personal information, but he could stand to be a little more generous. They’d only saved his... no, shake it off...his best friend’s fucking life, right? He slid his backpack off and set it on the floor to open it.

Jack watched carefully, but felt a little inwardly regretful when his hand dropped out of reflex to reach for his pistol. At least Hanzo didn’t notice. A hand emerged from the backpack holding...a plastic box and Hanzo extended it towards him.

“Thank you for saving his life. These...belong to you.”

“What is it?”

“Overwatch’s archives. A copy, but the entire thing, unredacted.”

Jack knees almost gave out under him.

“H-how?”

“I told you. We were acquiring intelligence.”

Jack came up to Hanzo and took the offered drive to turn it over in his hands. Hanzo dug in his bag to reveal several more drives just like it.

“Physical disks? Jesus, I haven’t seen these since high school,” Jack mused in awe. “Shimada, I...”

Hanzo, curiously enough, had grown very reticent, fretting at a seam on his backpack rather than address Jack directly.
“Do not thank me. It was Jesse’s plan.”

“Still, thank you. However...these don’t belong to me. Overwatch isn’t mine or anybody’s anymore. But Athena and Winston can use them, I’m sure. I’ll see he gets these and restores the database – they’ll be glad to have it back.”

Hanzo nodded, discomfited by the sudden and genuine appreciation. The refusal of ownership made sense enough, but it raised a loaded question.

“What do you intend to do about the recall?”

Jack didn’t look up from where he stared at the drive in his hand, expression mostly neutral but for a single upset crease aside his mouth.

“Nothing. Not a fucking thing.”

A beat of silence passed as they each absorbed the answer. Surprise startled Hanzo from half-contemplation when Jack looked up to meet his eyes with no small amount of hesitance. Almost... concerned.

“What about Jesse? Is he gonna do anything with the recall?”

Ah. Fair question.

“Not a fucking thing,” Hanzo repeated just as gravely.

The bothered wrinkle in Jack’s expression didn’t ease.

Chapter End Notes

for this chapter, a selection from Hanzo's playlist!

Everything to Everyone, by Everclear -- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1vQJFF2TKQ
Chapter Notes

howdy howdy!

just gonna throw on a minor trigger warning for a moment's reference to Hanzo's suicidal ideation, and a more major trigger warning for description and discussion of a panic attack

one last note: I talked about this on my twitter account (@midgetnazgul), but I intend to take a two-month hiatus in September and October. There are two reasons for this:

- I need to build up some buffer chapters because turning out 10k on a monthly dime is.............Exhausting
- the fic will be entering a new major arc that I need to spend some more time considering exact timing and sequence of events

do not worry -- I know where I want to go, but the exact timing needs some concentrated thought, and I want this entire arc (which will end in the mid-point climax) to play through just how I have wanted for over a year. I just don't want to rush, u feel

so there will be a chapter post next month (July) and the one after (August), and will resume posting in November.

feel free to reach out to me here or on twitter with questions!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Pa-ta-tum. Pa-ta-tum.

Winston needlessly adjusted his glasses for the fifth time in a half-hour. Lena’s anxious drumming fingers – pa-ta-tum, pa-ta-tum – were giving him a headache.

“Lena, please.”

“Eh? Oh, sorry mate. I’m about ready to blink up the wall.”

“I get it. I’m pretty stressed out, too. Everything’s going to change because of this, I can tell.”

Lena felt that, too, but before she could reply, the door out to the loading zone hissed open. In walked Ana and Angela, both obviously upset and arm-in-arm. Lena could not recall ever having seen Ana so visibly shaken, so she stood and approached them in concern.

“What happened? Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes. Perfectly fine, dear,” Ana replied, though her ragged voice betrayed her.

Lena looked to Angela, who shook her head.

“It’s fine. Just a bit of a fit on my part,” Angela explained.
“You needed it,” Ana reassured. She herself had, too. Someone to tell her she was wrong and still respect her when she finally sucked it up to agree. Upset as she was, she was also grateful.

“Okay, if you’re sure,” Lena said hesitantly, but reached to hold each woman’s arm in offered comfort. Ana smiled and let go of Angela to pat Lena’s hand on her.

“So sweet. I’m glad the world hasn’t ruined that empathy,” she murmured, and Lena could only sputter in response. A sedate wave of Ana’s hand dismissed her own words and Lena’s speechlessness.

“Sorry, don’t mind an old woman.”

With a long, shaky sigh, Ana drew back her hood and began undoing her braid, which had grown quite frayed from a very long thirty-six hours and an insufficient nap in the medbay earlier. All she wanted now was a real, hot shower and a whole night’s sleep. Her and Angela’s eyes met, and both grew glassy-eyed anew.

“Ana?” Jack’s voice urgently called from behind, making everyone jump. They turned to look as both he and Hanzo stepped across the threshold and into the rocky cave entrance, unnoticed because the blast doors to the runway were still open. There wasn’t enough time to put her stoic affect back on for him – he saw immediately how unsettled she was and jogged up to meet her, one hand leading to reach out. Despite the company, he couldn’t be kept from fretting over his friend, hands on her shoulders and watching her closely.

“You need rest,” Jack said.

“Please--” Ana sighed.

“I agree,” Angela chimed in gently. She and Jack shared a look; that was the first they the two of them had organically agreed on since reuniting.

“Doc’s orders, then,” Jack continued. In an extraordinary token borne from thirty years of friendship, Jack combed back her loosened hair with tender fingers. Ana began blinking furiously in vain to contain herself. “Come on.” He wove an arm behind her neck and led them back out towards the runway and for the barracks on the other end of the complex. They were about to pass up Hanzo when Jack paused and looked at him.

“Winston. Shimada has something for you,” Jack called back over his shoulder. “Consider it a peace offering.”

Hanzo’s mouth twitched up in brief amusement.

“For...for me?” Winston asked.

“Yeah. And make sure you put up a cot for him. He’s welcome to stay as long as he needs in my book.”

“O-okay.”

Hanzo watched Jack falter, then nod to himself. When Jack fully turned around to face Winston directly looking resigned and even a little anxious, he understood immediately what that meant. Jack wasn’t in charge of any of this, anymore, and he didn’t want to be. That had been made clear by their conversation in Jesse’s room. But letting go was still hard. It was a reflex to command at this point. Hanzo understood exactly how that felt.
“If that’s all right with you,” Jack finally added. Winston and Lena’s eyes both popped open wide.

“Your word still matters to me,” Winston replied sincerely. “I trust you both.”

Hanzo wedged past Lena and Angela to hand over the drives he’d been carrying under his arm. Jack and Ana linked up again and slowly made their way out.

“Jesse and I tracked down a verified copy of Overwatch’s archives. Consider them yours.”

“The...the data the UN took?” Lena asked, aghast.

“And was subsequently stolen and sold, correct. I do have the data downloaded and stored elsewhere, but if you wish, I will delete it. I was not able to find what Jesse wanted in them. Any assistance you could offer with your AI would be appreciated once Jesse is well enough.”

“A-Absolutely, of course,” Winston said emphatically as Hanzo stacked the drives in his huge outstretched hand. “It’s the least I can do.”

“Thank Jesse,” Hanzo said, and heel turned to slip outside as well. With no idea where else to go, and no idea where he was even permitted to be, he climbed atop a stack of cartons just outside the blast doors and sat to look out at the loading zone and communication tower. He desperately wanted to be alone. Though his conversation with Jack had been quite fruitful, he hadn’t had much opportunity to be with Jesse. Now that everyone was scattering, he likely wouldn’t have another opportunity the rest of the day, since Angela insisted he be accompanied and had likely made arrangements with Athena to keep everything locked out to Hanzo. That might be better, because all Hanzo was going to do was punish himself if he was left to mull in Jesse’s unconscious presence. Nonetheless, despite being the closest to Jesse he had been in weeks, Hanzo had never missed him more, and it was shredding what little mental and emotional stamina he had left.

Just wait until he wakes up. Be patient. Getting lost in yourself fucked everything up in Oasis. He will need you.

God, Jesse would. Hanzo buried his face in his hands.

Back in Winston’s workshop, Lena, Winston, and Angela stood there in awkward silence, unsure how to broach... anything that had just happened. At length, Angela rubbed at the last vestiges of redness in her face from her outburst and gave a heavy sigh.

“I should properly check on Jesse. I will perform the microsurgery for the shrapnel tomorrow. Trying now will just give me a migraine.”

“I need to upload all of this to Athena,” Winston said, lifting the drives. “But...what about... our guest,” he finished lowly and pointed towards the loading zone, though Hanzo was all the way outside and would likely never have heard Winston mention him to begin with.

“I got it,” Lena said. The perfect opportunity, at last. She found Hanzo sitting cross-legged on some crates, head down and shoulders hunched in exhaustion. A pang of sympathy stung her gut. He’d had a very long day-and-a-half, too. Someone needed to look out for him.

“You look dead on your feet,” Lena opened, making Hanzo physically jump in alarm. “Sorry! Sorry. I just...if you want me to show you the barracks...”

“I am not tired,” Hanzo said, obviously lying. His words were slurring together and his eyes appeared to be having trouble focusing.
“Begging your pardon, but that’s the worst lie I ever heard.”

Hanzo scraped his teeth across his lips and gave a sluggish nod.

“You’re probably right. But I am not ready to turn in.”

“Well...” Lena drifted off, but before she could cook up some new idea, Angela came striding out, presumably to follow through on her promise to check on Jesse. She and Hanzo met eyes, but it didn’t last – her once again scathing glare drove Hanzo to stare down at his lap until she passed, boot heels the only sound echoing amongst the enclosed loading zone, until she disappeared into the medbay.

“Just...just give her a little time. She really is very kind,” Lena suggested.

“I do not doubt that,” Hanzo replied grimly. “But only to people who deserve it.”

Whew, he wasn’t making this easy, was he? Her head spun this way and that nervously on her neck and appeared mildly frustrated with herself before coming to some kind of realization that made her whole body bounce a bit. “How about I make you a cuppa?”

“Of... tea? I...” Hanzo’s eyes squinted with deep confusion. “You do not need--”

“Actually, being quite honest with you, I really do,” Lena continued, real anxiety beginning to bleed into her voice. “You see, I’m British. If you couldn’t tell, I try to keep it on the down-low,” she added with a cheeky wink. “After all this shouting, if someone doesn’t let me make some tea for them, I might genuinely explode.”

“You...do not want any for yourself?” Hanzo asked, growing more puzzled by the second. What an... odd woman. Cheerful enough, though. Perhaps even too much for his currently strained sensibilities. Was this a poor attempt at good-cop interrogation?

“I mean yes, but no. Doesn’t work that way. If I do it for somebody, that means they’re not as upset, yeah? Tea is the panacea for interpersonal strife. Look, no one’s ever going to congratulate my countrymen for their coping mechanisms, but they’re the only ones I have, so. Humor me?” she finished, offering a nervous smile and self-effacing shrug.

“Very well,” Hanzo acquiesced and stood, joints complaining their exhaustion. Maybe this was genuine, maybe not, but he figured either way they were going to want to babysit him. He was too tired to give a shit. “Lead the way.”

Lena guided Hanzo around the corner and down under the bridge to the next building over – a large, deserted mess hall. At some point, the station must have housed at least several dozen people, and Lena appeared very familiar with all of it.

“Have a seat, it’ll be up in a jiffy. Are you hungry?” Lena asked.

“No, thank you,” Hanzo replied as he eased himself into the bench seat closest to the counter where Lena began pulling out all the amenities for making tea.

“Right. And just so you know, this is the proper stuff. I left it up to Winston the first time to get and keep tea around for me and he brought in Lipton. Can you believe?” she continued, theatrically outraged. “All that peanut butter killed his palate. How d’you take it?”

“White. Sugar.”
Lena stalled in surprise, mug in one hand and box of teabags in the other, both hovering over the counter. She turned to face Hanzo, clearly a little bewildered.

“Really? I was ready to bet half my life savings you’d insist on me pitching both into the ocean to avoid it.”

This woman...perhaps it was because Hanzo was so tired, but...she was charming, and he was letting himself fall for it a little. And this was a harmless enough thing to discuss.

“Green tea, I will drink as it is. But black tea is...” Hanzo pulled a frown shaped as severely as a staple. “Bitter.”

“So, coffee?” Lena prodded further.

Hanzo chewed the inside of his cheek and contemplated his answer. Even Jesse didn’t know this.

“It is necessary for working long hours, but I take no pleasure from it. I drink it black as a pragmatic choice when I have it. But...I will, occasionally, enjoy a pumpkin spice latte.”

A smile took up a good forty percent of Lena’s tiny, round face, and Hanzo stared at the table with a self-conscious flush dusting his high cheekbones.

“Sweet tooth. Got it,” Lena replied and returned to preparing the kettle. Her hunch was paying off – he really wasn’t what he appeared at first blush. There was some fun in there under a very ascetic exterior.

What was he doing, Hanzo asked himself. Why not just tell her to fuck off and leave him be, if he was so concerned this was less than genuine? Nothing he had done since arriving here had made much sense to him. So open and emotional and... weak. Grasping for any crumb of connection he could perceive, damn any sense of self-preservation. All because he couldn’t handle his own, pitiful stress over what had happened to Jesse. Put your head up, set the jaw, pull yourself together. He didn’t have to be mean, but he didn’t have to be a goddamn mat for people to tread on for their own curiosity, either.

The rest of the tea-making process finished without interruption until Lena turned, steeping mug in-hand to see Hanzo’s expression flat and affectless. He slid the mug towards himself when she set it down and began mechanically flavoring it to taste.

“Now, you obviously have questions for me. Ask them,” he said, tone suddenly cold, but his less-than-ideal state also let slip a bit of anticipatory anxiety in his frowning mouth. He was trying to head off another expected interrogation, like Winston had suggested he might. She couldn’t help but feel a little sad that it was his most natural reflex.

“No, I really don’t...I just want to understand.”

“Understand what?” Hanzo asked aggressively over a tentative sip of tea. Admittedly, it was good. His clenching stomach eased a little for it.

“You,” Lena answered simply.

“Me?” Hanzo sniffed, indulging in a bit more tea before setting it aside to weave his fingers together on the table. “I am not interesting. The only reason to ask anything is because you are personally not satisfied with Morrison’s sudden endorsement, which is fair, and I respect that. However, I do not appreciate being patronized, however well-made the tea is to perpetrate it.”
Lena’s long eyelashes fluttered.

“Blimey, you really are just like your brother, wow.”

“Wh--” Hanzo began, but his self-preservation finally kicked in to ratchet his jaw back shut. Of course she knew him, too. “We are nothing alike,” he added through his teeth.

Lena, meanwhile, felt like a completely jackass. This was not how she had wanted any of this to go. Hanzo was already obviously stressed, and she had worsened it with her insatiable curiosity. She combed anxiously at her long fringe and fixed Hanzo with guilty eyes.

“I’m really sorry. It’s not my business, is it?”

“It is not,” Hanzo replied sourly. He glanced up in time to see Lena grit her teeth in a repentant wince and worry at her flaking neon-green nail polish.

“Sorry,” she repeated again much more quietly.

She was hurt, he could tell. He had...been mean. Did he really only have two speeds: desperately overwhelmed and complete bastard? How did Jesse handle... this, everything Hanzo was, so well? The disparity was so clear right now. This woman didn’t seem to have a duplicitous bone in her body and had been relatively up-front with Hanzo. His own born-and-bred instincts coupled with his exhaustion and stress had dictated his confrontational attitude more than anything else. And if he could recognize all this right now, he should do something about it. The goal remained even now, especially now, when it was harder than usual: do better, be better.

“No...” Hanzo opened, voice little more than a harsh rasp. “Don’t...it is fine.”

“It really doesn’t feel like it,” Lena countered gently.

“You are not...not trying to do what Doctor Ziegler or Morrison did, before. Blame, or interrogate. I shouldn’t take you to task over such a simple thing. I...am very tired, as you have noticed, and I am...not as well as I normally would be, because of...of everything today. Forgive my…” *Everything I am.* “...my unnecessary aggression.”

Lena pressed her lips together hard and nodded.

“Don’t worry about it. I came on pretty strong, even if I didn’t intend to be unkind. It’s... nosy, really. I do mean it when I say I just want to know about you, though. That’s, like, attached to Genji and stuff, but...”

“Why do you care?” Hanzo asked, but upon seeing Lena balk again, he gestured to slow down. “I only mean...why care about *me*. Considering.”

“Well I mean, Genji didn’t talk about you a whole lot. I’m sure that’s not a surprise. We all know generally what happened. Most everything he ever mentioned about you was in passing. Like he was talking to himself.”

“How do you mean?”

“Once, we were on a combat mission together. I remember him zipping in to finish somebody off, and when he put his, uh...the...dagger-thing.”

“His tantou.”
“Yeah! That one. He put it away and said I learned that one from my brother. It was just kind of-
,”

Hanzo instantly locked up where he sat, hands in trembling fists and panting like he’d run a mile. He remembered that. It was somewhere, just out of conscious reach to replay the memory, but he knew it was there, a towering shadow waiting to strike--

“Whoa, now. Easy. Come on and look at me.”

A hand had covered his fist – Lena’s. But she had been sitting across the long table from him. How…

“I’m quick, yeah,” Lena explained gently. “How about you try taking a deep breath for me?”

Hanzo found he couldn’t oblige, though he tried. Panic dug further into his gut. He jerked his hands away and up to clutch to his chest as if her touch burned. Lena didn’t seem terribly bothered and also put her hands up in token of submission. She spoke again, calm and slow.

“How about you try taking a deep breath for me?”

Hanzo’s hands trembled as he wrestled it in stiff fingers, but as he began to draw his thumb along the woven threads, the little bit of sensational feedback did indeed help keep a toe on the ground. Lena told him to focus on it, so he did; it looked rather old, with noticeable color fade and fraying. Beads woven into the center spelled BEST. Spinning them in place felt like a good distraction.

“Wanna try again with that deep breath?” Lena asked again.

From anyone else on the planet, Hanzo would find her words deeply condescending, but Lena’s pure authenticity made the help feel the way it was supposed to: as earnest kindness. Though his diaphragm protested, he managed a longer, fuller breath. His hands shook less.

“Good! Keep at it. You and I are gonna stay here until you’re ready. I’ll make you another cuppa if it gets cold, no charge,” she said, bright and cheery as a perfect summer day.

He was so tired. Physically, mentally, spiritually. Clamping at his throat threatened an impermissible sob; he bit it back down and took another breath. This was humiliating enough. Crying would just make it pathetic, especially over something as stupid as being shown human kindness. Surely, his existence wasn’t so useless as to crumble utterly before a stranger’s generosity.

Then again, considering what had happened between him and Jesse…

Lena watched Hanzo’s face pinch so severely she was certain he was going to burst into tears, but at the last moment, his adam’s apple dipped in a long, conscious swallow and his expression smoothed out again with eerie and detached calm.

“Who has the other half?” Hanzo asked, voice noticeably ragged.

“Oh, my girlfriend. Her name’s Emily,” Lena replied. She had no idea what to do about Hanzo’s previously-threatening breakdown, but if it had passed, it had passed, she supposed. For good or ill.
“Girlfriend?” Hanzo said.

“Mm-hm. Oh, capital-G version, yeah,” Lena explained, noting Hanzo’s muted confusion. “We met in secondary. That’s where the bracelet came from. I fancied her the second I met her, but back then, I didn’t think she...y’know. But we were very close until we graduated. I joined the RAF to try and make a clean break for myself.” Lena suddenly remembered herself and shook her head. “Shit, sorry, you don’t--”

“No. Continue,” Hanzo urged. “Tell me what happened.” Something that looked upsettingly like desperation knit Hanzo’s brow, so she hastily cleared her throat and continued.

“So I joined the air force. Everything was great, until...” she tapped the glowing machine on her chest. “I suppose you don’t know. It was an accident on an experimental temporal craft. It took me out of linear time and I started disappearing and reappearing out of control. Went all over my own life timeline. Once, back to my literal birthday. That was weird. Anyway, that’s how I ended up in Overwatch. They fixed me.”

“Incredible,” Hanzo murmured, finally turning to look at Lena.

“Incredibly shitty, more like,” she giggled, reassured that Hanzo seemed to be recovering a little. “After I got back on my temporal feet, so to speak, I ran into her when I was home on leave. We caught up, spent more and more time together, and...turned out she had kept her half, too.”

“And...you have been together since?”

Lena frowned almost imperceptibly at Hanzo’s growing and patent... investment in her story. He had unconsciously leant in a little, and though he was still too frayed to hold eye contact, his gaze kept flitting back and forth between her and the bracelet he held.

“Yes. Almost seven years, now. As you can imagine, I was and still am away a lot, so that comes with me everywhere.”

Hanzo was irrepressibly drawn to the memory of his and Jesse’s exchange of trinkets. The little car was in his jacket pocket, suddenly heavier where it sat. Lena’s story was a sweet one, and encouraging to Hanzo in a particularly dark hour. Between the current shock from Jesse’s near-mortal injury and the unintentional salt that Genji represented having been poured into emotional wounds, Hanzo was on his last leg.

“But you make it work,” he mumbled more to himself than Lena.

“Uh, yeah. We do,” Lena replied. What was he on about? Hanzo continued to fret the bracelet a while longer, but despite the odd behavior, he did slowly relax and seem to regain actual control of himself. Since she’d met him all of an hour ago, she decided to let him have it and keep it wholly to himself without even passing comment. The tea grew cold in their continued silence.

“Thank you,” Hanzo finally broke open the quiet, and handed the bracelet back. “That was extraordinarily gracious of you.”

“I mucked it up from the start,” Lena confessed. “I’m really sorry. If I had known that would upset you--”

Hanzo waved off her apology, shaking his head.

“I didn’t know it would either, so do not chastise yourself too harshly. Discussion of my brother is difficult, but I understand you are not trying to mock me or add to the guilt I already feel. I only
learned he still lived late last year. I am...still adjusting to all the truths that come with that fact. There is so much I do not know, but...want to.”

“Have you spoken?” Lena asked carefully.

“Yes, once. Briefly. More action than words,” Hanzo explained, though he had become fascinated with his jeans rather than Lena.

“That’s...good?” she added, face scrunching in a preemptive wince.

“It isn’t bad. That is all I am confident enough to say. He could have killed me – and came very close – but chose not to. He said he forgave me, and that...that I must forgive myself. Now, he has left me to figure out what that means on my own.”

“Wow. That’s...a change,” Lena said thoughtfully.

Hanzo’s head tilted with interest. Jesse had said much the same in New Mexico, and Jack just a little while before suggested an entirely different personality as well. Somewhere and somehow since leaving Overwatch, things had changed drastically for Genji, but none of them had any idea what may have transpired. Though it tore him apart inside, it felt correct to learn at least some of the Genji these people had known, even if it was no longer the same man. Whatever Genji had been, then, Hanzo had helped make. Maybe only change, like Jack had suggested, but it was a toxic mutation of personality all the same.

“Perhaps...we try again with the tea?” he offered.

“Yeah, okay!” Lena agreed, brightening. The barely-touched mug came with her, and it felt appropriate to make some for herself, too. The previous tension had lifted; now, two new friends (she hoped) were having a chat. Warmth pooled in her chest and made a happy little smile curl on her face as she began setting the kettle again.

Lena jumped up and circled the table in a long trailer of blue light; this must have been how she’d come around to sit next to Hanzo so quickly. He had seen her stand, but not her movement. His astonished eyes blinked at Lena’s back. What a remarkable woman.

“So...you described Genji as having changed. How...how did you know him?” Hanzo asked. He scratched at nothing on the table with an anxious thumbnail.

“I met Genji pretty quick after coming into Overwatch. My chronal accelerator took a couple iterations to get it totally right, but once that was done, I wanted to make it – and me – into something useful for them,” Lena explained as she set the kettle once again.

“As a weapon? You chose that?” Hanzo asked, surprised. She was so slight and gentle.

Lena turned to face Hanzo and leant back into the counter, gesticulating vaguely with a hand.

“You make it sound like I gave myself up to something. I’m sure Overwatch was keen to weaponize the tech one way or another, but the tech isn’t the point. I am. I joined the military for a reason, y’know. Serve and protect and all that. But it comes with a whole lot of good and bad things. I’m not stupid. I believe in serving a greater good and repaying generosity. And to be honest, between the legacies of serving the crown and serving Overwatch, the latter has the better one by a landslide. I was exceptional and respected in the RAF, but still just a soldier. Everyone I encountered in Overwatch that helped fix me saw me as a person. You have no idea how important that was to me at that time. Nothing felt real anymore.”
“All true. I apologize for the presumption.”

The kettle pinged and Lena waved off Hanzo’s concern before turning to pour new mugs.

“Aw, don’t fret it. I’m sure you saw more questionable sides of Overwatch on your end of things. So yeah, I started training to work as an agent. I couldn’t train on holos forever, though, and not just anybody was up to snuff to keep up with me,” she said, and punctuated the thought by blinking around the table again to set their freshly-steeping mugs down. She winked and took a seat next to Hanzo.

“Enter Genji,” Hanzo said through a small, wry smile.

“Right.”

“And?” Hanzo prompted as he fixed his tea to taste once again. A high, arched eyebrow teased her.

“He’s good, but I got my licks in,” Lena replied and nudged Hanzo next to her with a friendly elbow. She got Hanzo to give up a little bit of low, soft laughter.

“I cannot imagine that having gone over well. He’s always been very proud of his skill.”

“Mm, no. But I didn’t much care, and I was hardly looking for permission,” Lena replied over the edge of her mug with mischievous eyes.

Cheeky. No doubt about it – Hanzo found himself growing rather fond indeed of her. He’d never met anybody so impossible to not like. Charm and charisma exploded from her in a halo of good cheer. He must look like the grayest, most mundane winter day in comparison. She made her story so playful, he almost forgot the contextual circumstances Lena and Genji’s casual relationship represented. That truth reasserted itself over him quickly enough, but more distantly than it usually did. A hovering miasma of regret and memory just overhead rather than the usual suffocating hotbox. It still felt safe enough to sate his curiosity despite the threat, so he kept up his line of inquiry.

“What...was that like?” Hanzo continued hesitantly. “Rather, what was he like?”

“If I can be totally honest with you,” Lena opened, obviously a little uncomfortable.

“Please. I want nothing less.”

Lena nodded while pulling a contemplative frown into her mug.

“On meeting Genji the first time...” she shrugged, hands aside her head, “I thought he was a real tosser.”

The bit of slang eluded Hanzo.

“A...?” he drifted off, eyes narrowed.

“An arsehole.”

“Oh.”

Lena couldn’t help a slip of a giggle looking at Hanzo’s reaction – she might as well have slapped him with a cold fish.

“Now at the time, I didn’t know anything about him. We were introduced by Winston the first
time we were set up to train. When I held out my hand to shake, he gave it a nasty glare and walked away. Angie explained a lot about him and where he came from to me later, and of course, I felt bad that I might have judged him too quick. But...we trained together for months. Now, you’ve only just met me, but I doubt it’s a shock to learn I tried very hard to be friendly with him. He wasn’t having it; if anything, he fought me harder after that when we would spar. Bitter is an understatement.”

“Morrison described him similarly.”

“Yeah. Jack watched the occasional match between us. Genji didn’t spare anybody of his attitude; he softened it a bit for Jack ‘cause of his rank, but it was definitely still there. Back then, he was still in Blackwatch, too, and I don’t think he was very happy there. After the disaster in Rialto, he had himself reassigned.”

Hanzo balked a bit in his seat and pulled at his goatee in thought.

“Jesse told me about that. He never mentioned Genji had been on that mission.”

“There probably wasn’t a whole lot to tell. Genji didn’t talk unless he had to, and even then, he sometimes just...refused to. Winston used to call it weaponized silence.”

“I have to admit it is...very strange to hear how... disliked he was,” Hanzo confessed. He had, of course, grown to detest Genji in the years leading up to their confrontation, but since Hanzo had abandoned the clan, he’d been so consumed in blaming himself that it never really occurred to him that the things Hanzo had once criticized most of Genji – his selfishness, lack of maturity, and plain laziness – might indeed be noticed and acknowledged by others. An odd sort of relief did ease a nameless and confused tension within him. Despite an outpouring of attempted kindness, Genji had rebuffed much of it. Gifts of companionship, denied.

Ten years had separated them in body but not, apparently, in spirit. The twisted release that had taken flight in his chest soured.

“I wouldn’t...quite go that far,” Lena continued thankfully pulling Hanzo from his toxic train of thought. “I never told him off, and he never took any cheap shots when we trained together. He just...made himself purposefully unrelatable. Was he always like that?”

“No.” Hanzo’s mouth pursed and he shook his head. “Well, he was to me. And the elder council. Father... understood him better than I ever will. I am the last person to ask about Genji’s true nature. But in our previous lives, he...was the more sociable one, certainly. Safe to say he liked attention. Vain. A carouser with a neverending parade of questionable girlfriends.”

“So you never got along, huh?”

Hanzo grew even more skittish, shuffling his feet in place under the table and fretting the hem of a jacket sleeve.

“Not since...since we entered our teenage years. Before that...”

It had been different, decades ago. There had been a time, a handful of quiet, peaceful years which were faded memory now. More of a lingering emotion than any easily-retrievable mental recollection. Though the image wasn’t sharp, the emotional imprint was just as keen as the day they’d been experienced. The indescribable understanding of being a... big brother to someone younger and impressionable fostered no pride, only crippling despair. Those feelings, Hanzo rarely acknowledged, much less actively pondered. Who could confront them with hands so coated in fraternal blood?
“When...when we were children, we...”

His tongue felt leaden. Forget whether he could, the more pertinent question was should he. Recollection of anything innocent implied Hanzo could ever achieve anything like it ever again. Or had any right to claim old joy from someone he’d murdered. Folly to think he could on either count.

“You don’t have to say any more.” Lena gently patted his arm. “I understand.”

Hanzo nodded too aggressively and for far too long down at the table.

This was so sad for Lena to witness. Whatever had happened, it was as much a tragedy as it was an atrocity. And with both men still living, the tragedy felt all the more profound, because resolution was right there, just out of their grasp. Hanzo had committed a terrible act, but he clearly suffered for it, and Lena had long believed any suffering by anybody of good faith didn’t deserve to live in it forever. It was a waste, just like any bitterness about Overwatch was. Would, could it ever be made right? There must be a way because she refused to believe that the dual misery she could see in Hanzo and Genji alike was the best it could ever be.

“I hope you can talk to him again soon,” she offered. That was the simplest, most careful summary she could give of her feelings.

“I...” Hanzo’s undercooked thought drifted off into silence for a while. “I wouldn’t know what to say. Or if I deserve to say anything at all. So much has happened. We are...so different. Each different individually since we...we parted, and compared to each other.”

“Different sounds like a good thing, considering. And I mean...I haven’t seen Genji since he left, but his last year serving was...pretty good.”

“Was it?”

“Yeah. Getting out of Blackwatch helped, I think. He was reassigned with me leading a strike team dedicated to tracking and undermining Talon. Jack...decided Commander Reyes and Blackwatch couldn’t do it anymore. I guess after Rialto, everything on that side got...” Lena’s teeth showed in an awkward wince. “Ugly.”

Curious. If Blackwatch had been so awful for Genji, what had Jesse’s interactions with him been like? Hanzo had previously worried that the damage he’d done to Genji had unduly colored Jesse’s perspective of his brother – perhaps to some extent, yes, but...

“You don’t know exactly what happened?”

“As I understand it, Jack and Commander Reyes made a deal after Jack was given his Strike Commander commendation. Blackwatch was Reyes’ to do with as he wished with very little oversight, as long as he reported directly to Jack and Ana. It worked that way for years just fine. He and the others went to Rialto with permission, but...”

“Not to murder a high-profile Italian businessman with no compunction.”

“All that discussion was way above my pay grade, but I remember a lot of muffled shouting. And the rumors: Reyes was being sacked, Blackwatch decommissioned. Even Genji disavowed himself of it when I asked about it once. Blackwatch held together long enough to help during the King’s Row Uprising, but not much longer after that. My first mission. It’s the only time I ever saw McCree in action, too.”

“Oh?”
“Barely. He went in ahead of us behind enemy lines for recon.”

“By himself?” Hanzo recalled the uprising well, though he had been far afield of the United Kingdom at the time. Taking a strike team in under that kind of fire was in itself borderline suicide; sending one man was insanity.

“Had to. Overwatch’s entire operation was illegal on British soil. He reported on the ground situation – it was the only way we could even know what was going on. I talked Jack into officially going. But we never would have had an LZ without McCree making one for us. Risky as it was for us, at least if we were arrested, we could be acknowledged as ranked servicemen. McCree would have been disavowed as an intelligence agent acting rogue, and god only knows what my shit government would have done with him after that. I can’t overstate how dangerous it was.”

This was a lot to take in. Hanzo knew Jesse had participated in a lot of clandestine intelligence work, but that usually meant a lot of long, boring hours skulking for a meeting. Some close-quarters individual combat, and occasionally even something like Rialto had been: a coordinated team effort for an objective, but with minimal combat (ideally) to maintain secrecy. Not... single-handed acts of valor in an active war zone. With a pistol.

Jesse’s bitterness – and more specifically, its virulence – made increasing sense as Hanzo spent time here. He’d described Overwatch as family, true, but this illustrated how completely his skin was in the game. Not just anybody put their life that thoroughly on the line for anyone or any thing.

To come to nothing. Death, abandonment, regret.

“He...never told me any of this,” Hanzo murmured.

“We never talked much, but one thing I know about him is he isn’t much for bragging. It surprised me; all that exhausting machismo swagger, you’d assume he would. And valor notwithstanding, I doubt it was a really great day for him, you know?”

Hanzo couldn’t feeling a little miffed on Jesse’s behalf (of course, because Hanzo certainly had no personal bias or anything) for the mild critique of his... swagger.

“Exhausting?” Hanzo prompted as nonchalantly as he could muster.

“That’s probably a bit unfair. Just...I’m a lesbian, okay? I’m literally not made to appreciate...his whole thing.”

“Fair.” Lena’s story also prompted another impressive question, and all the better Hanzo eject himself out of any further discussion of Jesse’s quote-unquote swagger and aesthetic before it got him into real trouble. “So you convinced Jack Morrison to break sovereign law?”

“I did. That was my home that was overrun and on fire, and operations like that are exactly was Overwatch was meant for, sod the parliament.”

Now that Hanzo was seeing the fire alight in Lena’s eyes and hear her words spoken with such sharp passion, he could picture it. She cared, and she wanted everyone around her to know it and feel it. Everything a natural leader should be. Quite a compliment to her character to be so regarded by a man like Jack Morrison.

“That mission went so well, I was promoted right quick and given point on the Talon strike team I mentioned earlier. I was a little apprehensive about working with Genji at first, because of how he’d been in the past. But our first meeting he was all dolled up in new armor, face covered. He participated in planning and tried to be helpful. And he got better over time. Not as much attitude.
“It speaks very well of you to foster all that in him,” Hanzo said.

“Me? Noooo. Only one person can take really take credit for pulling his head out of his arse.” Lena replied, snickering fondly to herself as she got wrapped up in memory. “That was all Angie.”

Hanzo’s eyes squinted. The way she said that…and the coy smile fixed on her face, staring at her knees in recollection. Nobody explained simple friendship like that. A chill racked Hanzo head to toe and stress took him violently by the throat. He sat back in shock, vaguely shaking his head in disbelief. All Angela’s pure rage suddenly made a whole new kind of sense. His gut drew tight with new and more intense remorse. Lena realized the impact of her words too late and gestured frantically at Hanzo.

“I mean, you see…look, I don’t know for--”

“You seem to have understood enough.”

Lena conceded the point with a stressed sigh and conciliatory nod.

“I asked Angie at the time. She said nothing was going on. We just talk were her exact words.”

“But?”

“But… talking was a second-best for both of them. You could tell. Especially for Genji. It was…pretty obvious. I don’t know what kept them from anything more. I don’t think our commanding officer, Sojourn, would have cared all that much, to be honest. She saw it, too. We gossiped about it a bit.”

Since confronting Genji the previous fall in Hanamura, Hanzo had needed to periodically remind himself the event had actually happened. If felt alien and intangible, like just another nightmare joining the hundreds of others he’d had since fleeing Japan. Even the blade that had sat just under Hanzo’s carotid must have been an illusion. Coming here had made Genji feel more real to him in a few hours than an in-the-flesh meeting and six months in the presence of one of Genji’s former colleagues could manage.

To realize that Genji had put himself back together enough to hold a romantic interest (if not quite pursue it) drove a massive spike of agonizing awareness through Hanzo. The time, the sheer amount of time he had let slip by now threatened to drown him for the weight it saddled him with. Genji wasn’t simply alive – he had been living, and living without so much as a scintilla of Hanzo’s knowledge. Hanzo, instead…had rotted. All his effort to change over the past months, inside and out, felt cheap.

If Genji could accomplish all that from such a terrible place as a victim, what the fuck could Hanzo ever hope to achieve?

“You’ve gone quiet pale, Hanzo, are you all right?” Lena asked.

“No,” slipped out of Hanzo’s mouth before he could collect himself.

“Should we stop talking about all this?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore,” Hanzo replied in dejection and put his elbows up on the table to rest his head in his hands.
Lena reached to put a very hesitant hand at Hanzo’s shoulder.

“You know McCree’s going to be okay. You know that you and he are both safe here. A- and...you should know I’m here for you, too. I don’t want you to feel like you’re all alone here until McCree comes to. Alone is the worst way to be after learning your friend has been hospitalized. I think that’s enough for today, at least.”

Today, yes. The same today that had driven him to cut his hair and get his still-new piercings. He’d forgotten the utility of that mental life preserver, and someone had been gracious enough to beat him over the head with it to remind him.

“You’re correct. But I wish this today would fucking end already.” Hanzo rubbed a firm thumb along his aching brow back to the temple.

“If you don’t want to sleep yet, what do you want?”


“What I want is inconvenient.”

“You want to see him, don’t you? By yourself.”

“...as I said, inconvenient.”

“Not at all. I’ll let you in.”

Hanzo sat up straight, fixing Lena with wide eyes.

“Doctor Ziegler will be very cross with you.”

“Yep.” Lena shrugged.

“I do not want to--”

“You need time to yourself. You’re also the only one of us that’s been around him recently. It’s more than a little bold of her to act like she has any idea anymore what McCree’s best interest is. Angie can deal with it and come shout at me all she likes. I’ll be delighted to set her straight if she does.”

“Set her straight about what? Me? What could you possibly say to convince her? She sees me correctly.”

“Maybe a part. But she treats it like that’s the whole of you. She’s better than that, and could use the reminder. Even Genji is giving you a chance, right? She can step off.”

Tired as he was, that meant he was particularly vulnerable, too, and Lena’s explanation of her perspective touched, warmed, and upset him more profoundly than it normally would have. He showed it more, too, as he frowned deeply with barely-repressed emotion. His jaw trembled and his eyes grew very soft.

“You hardly know me.”

“It’s enough,” Lena replied, soft but bright. She could see Hanzo’s jaw grit tight by the resulting strained tendons in his neck. “It’s enough, and I know there’s plenty more to appreciate. When you’re ready to show it, though.”
“You...you are far too kind.”

Lena stood from the table and extended a hand.

“I’m only kind to people who deserve it.”

Hanzo accepted the offered hand and got to his feet as well.

“Thank you.”

“Of course. Now, come on.”

They left the mess hall and crossed the runway one last time to return to the medbay. Lena punched the control panel for the outer door and got a disagreeable, low beep in response. She frowned at it.

“Athena.”

“Yes, Lena,” came Athena’s smooth, omnic-like voice from a speaker on the control panel.

“Don’t be coy, you know what I’m getting at.”

“Doctor Ziegler seemed quite explicit about her wishes.”

“I don’t recall her setting any lockout protocols besides Hanzo’s weapons. Certainly not for me,” Lena said and gave the wall aside the panel a chummy knock of the fist, like she was inviting a fist bump.

“That is a semantic argument, Lena.”

“Point to where I’m wrong, though.”

Silence. Lena gave an exasperated sigh.

“Come on. Weren’t you listening to us talk in the mess?”


“I am always listening,” Athena replied firmly.

“She what?” Hanzo repeated.

“Exactly,” Lena continued smoothly over Hanzo’s feeble injunction. “So you should understand the same way I do. I told Hanzo to let me worry about Angie, didn’t I? Same for you. What’s she gonna do to you, anyway?”

“You have clearly never been made to defragment all personnel medical records for her,” Athena replied with a hint of synthetic sass.

“Oh, that takes you all of ten minutes. It’s not like she’s gonna make you clean and disinfect the medbay with a toothbrush.”

Athena didn’t answer. Lena gave a long, frustrated whine, crossed her arms, and stomped her tiny foot in place. She looked back to Hanzo; he was staring at the tarmac looking ashamed. Bollocks. This wasn’t fair. She gesticulated pleadingly.
“He just wants to see his friend, Athena. Please.”

Still no response. Hanzo grabbed Lena’s shoulder to get her attention once more. A no was a no. Fighting it any longer was just going to make him feel worse.

“Lena--”

The door hissed open and they both jumped in surprise.

“I reviewed your conversation along with other footage, and find I agree with you, Lena. There is ample evidence to believe in Mr. Shimada’s good will. You may pass.”

“Brilliant! Thanks, Athena.” When Hanzo didn’t chime in, she nudged an elbow back into Hanzo’s ribs. “We’re just chuffed you’re being so gracious,” she added, speaking deliberately and staring Hanzo down very intensely as a less-than-subtle cue.


“You’re welcome. Please do not betray this trust.”

“I-I will not.”

They headed inside, and Athena also automatically opened the door to Jesse’s suite, too; Lena stood just aside it and gestured for Hanzo to go on ahead.

“I’ll leave you be, unless you want me to stay.”

“I...I would prefer to be alone, yes. But I appreciate the offer, truly.”

“No worries, I understand. If you need anything, just shout at Athena, and she’ll come get me, okay?”

“Understood.”

Lena caught Hanzo by the arm as he made to cross the threshold.

“I really do mean that, y’know. Anything,” she stressed.

Hanzo gave her a wan but grateful smile.

“I know.”

“Right, good. I’ll see you later, then. Don’t...don’t drag yourself through it much longer, yeah? Get some rest.”

Hanzo nodded and waved off her concern as he stepped inside. Lena gave him a last knowing look before shutting it. Sudden quiet bore down on him, which conversely caught his notice first. Whenever Angela had come in, she must have muted the vitals display, because there was no irritating beep anymore. A chair stood awkwardly aside of the bed, probably swept aside by Angela as well. He must have missed it on his first visit – someone else had apparently posted watch over Jesse earlier. Perhaps Jack. Rather than take the chair, he passed it up and carefully sat on the edge of the hoverbed. It briefly dipped and rose again to accommodate the extra weight, pulling Hanzo’s feet off the floor a few inches.

Jesse’s chest rose and fell with machined timing marked by a soft hiss from the ventilator on each
pass. Now that he had the time and space to really absorb Jesse’s condition, the intense swelling and tube protruding unnaturally from his chest intensified the exhaustion-borne nausea he felt.

“Why didn’t you call me,” Hanzo mumbled despondently. “I would have come. I don’t care how dangerous it might have been.”

He should be angry. Jesse had been told explicitly to call, no matter the reason. But Hanzo couldn’t summon anger, no matter the justification. He could only swap between a bottomless, harmful numbness and abject despair. To not simply ask, but borderline beg Jesse to reach out when needed and have things end like this felt like a kind of brutal rejection. Some consideration had to be made for the possibility Jesse was trying to protect Hanzo, but still. Their odds were better together, every time. Hanzo had learned that lesson and had thought – until now – that Jesse had, too. More and better answers would come when Jesse woke up, but that couldn’t give any relief from the terrible storm of doubt consuming Hanzo right now.

A few inches away lay Jesse’s hand; Hanzo had sat on Jesse’s right side, so it was the good one, too. He stared at it, conflicted. What an impasse. It was right there to reach out and touch, but… What did it mean to do so? A bit of grounding touch might feel better. Friends...could do that, right? Hanzo hated how genuine and unanswerable that question was in his mind. Did it matter if Hanzo was being a little selfish? They had parted without any real resolution of feelings between them – if Jesse were conscious, perhaps he’d find that kind of forwardness untoward. Probably. The shooting may have changed nothing, or... everything. The things Jesse still had yet to learn – Ana and Jack and what had happened with Gabriel – had further potential to change things, too. Nothing had been settled, and wouldn’t be for some time, Hanzo could tell already.

Looking at Jesse where he lay now, battered and prone, Hanzo couldn’t pretend that how he felt was wholly inspired by friendship. It ached to witness. For him, time and distance had changed nothing, only magnified it. Were they alone, that might matter more, but...they were not, and the situation had been complicated by magnitudes. If felt more appropriate to put all those feelings on a back burner for now, to be the friend he knew Jesse would eventually need.

That excellent, responsible, and rational argument didn’t stop the impulse to hold Jesse’s hand, however. Hanzo slid off the bed and removed his jacket more to distract himself than any real need. He circled Jesse’s bed and folded the jacket to lay at the foot of an empty bed next to his. Judging from the lightly-rumpled sheets, yet another someone else had sat or slept here, too. Not a bad idea. He had no interest in taking a cot in the barracks where everyone else was. Better to remain here as long as possible and just deal with Angela potentially throwing his ass out later.

But Jesse caught his eye once again and held it. Couldn’t he just... wake up, now? Just long enough to see him crack a tired smile and a slurred joke? Five minutes at most. Hanzo could use it. He was drawn back to the bed and stood over Jesse. His pale, expressionless face upset Hanzo more deeply – if there couldn’t be a smile, at least his characteristic narrow-eyed stare, constantly searching and analyzing, should be there.

The emotional demand to touch still lingered. Hanzo considered his options. Chest: obviously not. Hair: no, far too intimate. However, he was on Jesse’s left side, now. The prosthetic wouldn’t feel or react. There was no bare skin. That seemed...fine. He placed a hesitant palm over the forearm guard. It was cool as expected, and the paint comprising the worn skull insignia interrupted the galvanized steel’s smooth texture with mild friction. He slid his hand up the forearm to the elbow, fingertips tracing the edge of the guard. This certainly wasn’t the first time he’d touched Jesse, prosthetic or otherwise, but it was certainly the first time doing it consciously. Deliberately. Slow enough to take in the whole sensation. A blink against the blanket where Jesse’s arm rested made Hanzo carefully roll the prosthetic to show the underside. One of the little blue running lights was flashing; Jesse had
explained once it was notifications for messages.

Like the one Hanzo had sent the previous night and had never been read.

The twin traumas of his own attack and Jesse’s injury brutally rushed Hanzo. To think they had happened near-simultaneously… His grip on Jesse’s arm squeezed tight. He had let that girl live because of the good Jesse had brought to his life, and now, he understood that while he had, Jesse had been bleeding out and nearly lost. Properly acknowledging the fact put Hanzo on such a fine edge, his free hand shot up to cover his mouth and his breathing grew very shallow and harsh.

He had lived up to Jesse’s legacy when it mattered most, and more thoroughly than he ever could have realized at the time. He could carry it without him. Was worthy of it. He had achieved at least some of the objective he’d hoped to in leaving Jesse’s side. And if at some point anything did ever happen to Jesse, Hanzo would be able to keep his memory and cause alive.

He just didn’t want to do it alone.

Hanzo stayed frozen in place until the worst of the overwhelming fit passed, too afraid that changing any one thing would make his trembling house of cards crumble under him. The hand at his face eventually fell away as he recomposed himself, but the hand holding Jesse remained, still tight as desperate in its grip. Emotion washed out and was replaced with a heavy tide of new and more potent exhaustion that made his knees feel weak. Time, at last, to give in to his body’s demand and sleep. He stroked his thumb in place along Jesse’s arm one last time.

“I have much to tell you. You could at least be polite and show some urgency in waking the hell up.”

Jesse, of course, did not answer, but Hanzo heard his laughter as sense memory anyway. He relinquished his grip, turned, and climbed into the empty spare hoverbed to pass out.

Chapter End Notes

a selection from Hanzo's playlist: No Response, by MUTEMATH --
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzF1Ayb7XaA
Chapter 23

Angela woke late the next morning. She’d joined Jack and Ana down in the barracks underneath the Orca hangar, but upon waking she wasn’t surprised to find they had already risen and left, cots immaculately made as if no one had ever been there. Never a day off, even in forced retirement. Sometimes she couldn’t help but wonder how Ana, at least, wasn’t dead yet from the sheer single-minded and unceasing drive. Jack may have the benefit of the SEP enhancements, but all bodies could only take so much. At least when Angela kept herself running on ten thousand cups of coffee strong enough to buoy a cruise ship, she fully understood (and ignored) the biological risk. Then again, no arbitrary disagreeable statistic had ever stopped Jack or Ana before. Angela was just cursed with knowledge and provided very good advice that would never be heeded.

“How’s Jesse, Athena?”

“Vitals green. Bacterial activity nominal. I have already mapped locations for microsurgery.”

“Excellent. Let me have a look at him.”

Angela stood and stretched, but when she relaxed, no holographic visual opened for her. No response, either. Odd.

“Athena?” she prompted again.

“Yes, Doctor Ziegler.”

“Can...I have a visual to the medbay?”

“Yes,” Athena responded a shade too late. And still, nothing. “But there is something you should know, first.”

“And what would that be?” Angela’s eyes narrowed with suspicion.

“McCree is not alone.”

Ah. Her jaw set and she sucked hard on her teeth.

“Who let – no, I know the answer to that. Lena?”

“Yes, doctor. You... didn’t expressly set any lockdown--”

“Yes, yes, you can have your damned technicality. What is he doing?”
“Sleeping, currently.”

Athena finally opened a live feed of the medbay. On the right, almost out of frame, was Hanzo curled up on the spare hoverbed, sleeping as described.

“He has neither said nor done anything untoward,” Athena added.

“All fucking well and good, but it’s still proof nobody listens to me. Where is Lena?”

“With Winston in the workshop.”

“Good, Thank you.”

Angela bent to dig in her go-bag and retrieve a fresh set of clothes when Athena spoke again, startling her.

“Are you angry, Doctor?”

A sigh escaped Angela and she dropped into a squat. No doubt Athena was monitoring her heart rate and other bodily response in concern. No, after a shitty day’s worth of shouting and a good night’s sleep, she wasn’t *angry*, per se.

“*Miffed* is the best word. I’m not going to hunt Lena down and lambaste her, if that is your concern.”

“Understood.”

After a quick shower, Angela made her way back up to Winston’s main workshop. He and Lena were still there, quietly chatting while Winston tinkered with his Tesla Cannon. They turned to look upon hearing Angela’s approaching footsteps, and almost instantly, Lena blanched.

“You know,” she said.

“How can you *tell*?” Angela asked.

“You get a very specific dimple in your face when you’re pissed.”

Angela pinched the bridge of her nose.

“I’m not... *pissed*. I’m tired of being angry. But I don’t appreciate being undermined.”

“It’s fine, Angie. *He* is fine.”

“He’s a *murderer*.”

“I’ve only known him a day and I can already tell nobody understands that more completely than *he* does. If Genji is giving him a chance, why can’t you?”

Angela’s head shot up and her eyes went wide. Oh dear, did she not know? That brought Lena up short.

“What?” Angela asked.

“I...Don’t you two talk? I thought...”

“We do. We write. He hasn’t mentioned *anything* about his brother. What happened and when?”
“He didn’t tell me when, but they talked. He said Genji forgave him.”

Shocked blinks were Angela’s only response. She pivoted on a heel and walked out of the workshop in a beeline for the medbay. There must be some misunderstanding. Genji would have told her something that important. Asked for advice. Something.

Without an ounce of ceremony, Angela entered Jesse’s room and swiped at the control panel aggressively to turn the lights on at their brightest. Hanzo woke with a startled bark and sat up in alarm. One arm was across his chest in an obvious defensive reflex, as if he anticipated an attack. The first place he looked, however, was to Jesse. Checking to make sure he wasn’t in danger. Regret licked the edge of Angela’s mind – maybe that had been a little too much.

“When did you see Genji?” she asked anyway.

Hanzo’s gaze shot up to see Angela at the door. What? How did she...ah, of course. Lena probably told her, as she had mentioned yesterday. He rubbed at his sleep-sticky eyes.


“What happened?”

Incredulity filled Hanzo’s countenance despite the sudden awakening.

“I don’t owe you any fucking explanation of that. At all. Ever.”

True. Angela hung her head. Even for disliking this man, her demand was callous. She just hated the possibility she had to acknowledge Lena’s revelation – if Genji was giving his brother a chance, she needed to put up and shut the fuck up.

“He would have told me if he’d decided to do something...like that.”

Hanzo looked up from where he’d been glaring at the bedspread to regard Angela. She seemed...hurt. Let down. If Lena’s supposition about Angela and Genji’s relationship was to be believed, it would indeed wound to learn something like this secondhand. Not that Genji dodging such a loaded conversation was terribly surprising to Hanzo.

“So you are in contact.”

Angela recollected herself and stood up straight, chin up defiantly.

“Yes. We write.”

“Quaint.”

“Fuck you.”

Hanzo held up a hand in reluctant apology and surrender.

“Sorry. I did have a point in saying.”

“Do tell.”

“Genji is infamous for his inability to take much of anything seriously.”

Angela’s jaw wrenched open to talk back, but Hanzo held her up by exchanging the palm he’d raised before with a single finger in gesture to wait.
“But when he does take something seriously, it is usually a very secretive time for him. That was always his tell, back home; he would lock himself away in his room or live out of a training dojo at the palace when normally he would do anything in his power to not be home.”

“So?”

“So my point is: do not take it personally that he did not tell you beforehand. You likely understand how he was raised. It cannot be that much of a surprise to consider he may feel compelled to hide personal decisions from others. In addition to that, returning to Hanamura to confront me on the one day he knew where I would be was tremendously dangerous. He would be sure not to risk tipping anyone off he did not want to.”

“Why were you even in Hanamura? I thought you left permanently.”

Hanzo’s face twisted in bitter grimace as he restrained the instinct to grind his molars to dust.

“I did. It is none of your goddamn business.”

This was so surreal to discuss. How did he recall so much after so long and such deliberate effort to forget? And to describe it so...so casually to a stranger. Was he just getting better at this? Did these people not matter enough? He struggled to discuss any of this with Jesse. But he did get to cherry-pick his responses with these people he did not trust or like as much. With Jesse, he couldn’t obfuscate, lie, or drop a satisfying fuck you, fuck off. That was probably the difference.

But Angela was also different. A tenuous link between two brothers so very, very far apart. Whatever Genji may be today, touchstones still existed that Hanzo knew and understood that Angela did not. Well-worn markers of a personality he could follow by feel. With time and a fair amount of reaching, Hanzo might find the next waypoint. Then, another. And someday, arrive to see the contemporary Genji as a whole. Perhaps even as Angela saw him.

Nothing frightened Hanzo more than that.

Angela, meanwhile, felt more deeply chastened than she had by anyone else the past two days. She had no right to any of the explanation. But Hanzo gave some anyway, for Angela’s benefit more than any of his own. Genji did have a habit of growing suddenly and astonishingly quiet, or impossible to pin down and spend time with. They had grown so close, she had never stopped to consider why that might be. Genji had told her so many things – what would he need to hide?

“Bitter though I may be to admit it, you have known him longer than me,” Angela confessed.

Hanzo shook his head and leant forward, elbows planted on his crossed legs.

“I have never known Genji.”

They sat in distressed silence, Jesse marking the demilitarized zone between them. At length, Hanzo leant back, hands behind him holding him up, and legs stretched to anxious, pointed toes.

“We fought. I did not recognize him. He pinned me at swordpoint. I asked to die.”

Angela could not help a swamping wave of empathy to watch Hanzo’s expression melt with helplessness.

“He did not grant my request, and then revealed himself to me. I distinctly recall wishing he had killed me.”
He wasn’t being trite; Angela could tell how serious the sentiment was.

“He forgave me, told me to find it within me to forgive myself, and left. There is little else to say.”

“My god. I knew Genji had been doing very well in Nepal, but...”

Hanzo’s head popped back up at attention. He slid off the hoverbed and came around to speak more directly to Angela. Anxiety drove his hands into his pockets and sent his gaze to the floor.

“Is that where he has been since Overwatch?”

“Just the past couple years. He was traveling for a long time, trying to understand who and what he was. He found that in Nepal.”

Hanzo pulled another wounded grimace. What have you...become, he’d asked Genji. I have accepted what I am. What Hanzo had done may not have killed, but it certainly had destroyed.

“What...what is that?”

“In technical terms, a hybridized biomechanical prosthesis with both amplifying as well as medically-necessary sustaining utility.”

“In...In simple--” Hanzo began, eyes narrowed in confusion.

“A cyborg.”

“Oh.”

“There is nothing on Earth like him. He is not omnic, but he’s very much separated from you and I now, too. He can see in wider spectrum. Perform physical feats you can only dream of. No longer needs to eat, necessarily. Where he ends and machine begins is a philosophical question. And that is the loneliest possible place to be. It’s why he left Overwatch to travel.”

“Left you,” Hanzo added in a hysterical fit of boldness.

Angela’s head tilted slowly to the side and her lips flattened in coiled anger.

“Whatever anyone may have gossiped to you is a distortion of truth, I assure you.”

“I did not intend judgment. You hardly need or want my approval of whatever doesn’t exist, but I think it is valuable to you to understand that any action Genji takes regarding me is a sign he is clearing his mental slate. You said he has been well as of late. Putting his life together. To what end, we can only guess.”

Snide, but only because she had been insulting his intelligence, Angela supposed. Fair. And it was... gratifying... to know that Hanzo understood. Even, perhaps... appreciated?

“If anything of what you’re suggesting was true, how would that make you feel?”


“My feelings are immaterial,” Hanzo replied smoothly.

“This is all very presumptuous on your part.”

“True, but it is encouraging to know Genji’s type has expanded into responsible blonde women
that are both taller and more intelligent than him, as opposed to swapping out barely-literate Ganguro girls living out of a rented room in Roppongi every week.”

Angela compulsively spat out a single bleat of real and unflattering laughter before covering her mouth.

“I’m only taller because of the heels, you know.”

Hanzo’s still-tired and stern expression softened in a small smile. The continuing and profound discomfort Hanzo felt over everything about their potential relationship was his issue. No fault existed on Angela or Genji’s parts. Perhaps if Hanzo worked hard enough at doing what he knew he was supposed to do, it would eventually stop hurting. Not that that should matter to anyone else. His suffering was self-induced, and as such, justly remained at the rock bottom of anyone’s priority list.

Angela watched Hanzo’s silence with scrying eyes. It was clear to her now that Hanzo’s repentance was genuine. Overwrought, but genuine. It wasn’t empty theatrics, it was just the same inherent dramatization she sometimes saw in Genji – almost certainly just a family thing. Cloth-rending, teeth-gnashing carrying on. Lena had been correct in calling out her blind spot. Though it still stung that Genji had not brought it up to her, she could also appreciate Hanzo’s perspective in describing his brother’s motivation. He understood Genji more than maybe he realized – or maybe time had corrected former erroneous opinions. No way was she ready to call Hanzo a friend or even comrade, but this...could be okay. Better. Peaceable.

She extended a hand to him.

“Start over?”

Hanzo’s expression abruptly cleared with surprise and he hesitantly reached to meet her in a handshake.

“Please.”

“All right. I do need to finish surgery on Jesse today, but if you have questions before I do, go ahead and ask.”

Relief rushed Hanzo. Finally. After all this melodrama, he still barely had a fucking clue about his foremost concern.

“Morrison told me only a little of what happened. He will make a full recovery, yes?”

“With time. Even twenty years ago, the circumstances in which he was injured would have been fatal. He never would have survived evac and transport as long as he did.”

“How long will that recovery be?”

“For the worst of it, several weeks. True and complete recovery will be months, as he will weaken substantially during the healing process. He won’t be able to be on his feet and work as much as he’s used to for a long while. Good news is maybe he’ll finally be forced to quit fucking smoking now he’s had a hole put in his lung.”

“Months? That cannot be accelerated?”

“Not in any way that is materially better than letting the body take care of itself. All the best technology is better-used for saving him from death, not reinventing the wheel of the immune system. Trying to outpace what nature gives you is how you get someone like Jack – and a seventy
percent mortality rate in making him.”

“I...suppose. Jesse will certainly not be happy about any of it.”

“Not at all, which is why I will be quick to remind him what the alternative was, and that I didn’t sleep for thirty-six hours making sure that didn’t come to pass,” Angela replied, half-sweet, half-acid. At least Hanzo could comfort himself a little knowing that just about anyone could be put under that withering look in the right – or wrong – circumstances.

“Good to know I am not the only one who feels he needs the occasional humbling.”

Angela cracked a real and wide smile.

“Oh no, not by any measure. Jesse doesn’t keep a friend that doesn’t feel the need to strangle him every once and again. He knows he needs the reminder, too.”

They shared a mild bit of quiet laughter. Hanzo felt the first true release of his seemingly-innumerable stresses in days.

“I will leave you to your work.” This was probably the best possible beat to leave on between them. Better capitalize.

“If you don’t mind. Just so you’re aware, even after I’m done, I won’t bring him back up for a couple of days. His body needs the head start.”

“Understood.” Hanzo offered a nod of his head – not a bow, but far deeper and more deliberate than he usually reserved for relative strangers – and took his leave.

~

Over the next two days, Hanzo eased into his new surroundings best he could. Most of the time, he preferred to keep his own company, but Lena occasionally sought him out for friendly chats over a meal, or looking out over the Mediterranean. He even managed a real conversation with Angela one afternoon about her medical background. Winston remained standoffish, but Hanzo was assured by Lena that this was the gorilla’s own considerable shyness than any personal distaste for Hanzo. He and Winston maintained a mutually-awkward streak of palm-up salutes paired with a blurted hey coming and going with Lena, and that seemed to be as good as it would get for now. Jack and Ana avoided everyone and kept their own counsel. No one was angry anymore, but the entire situation was still tangibly sensitive for all parties. Even Hanzo; he had to plan for the fallout when Jesse woke, too.

After their truce, Angela had released Hanzo’s weapon from lockup. Each morning since, Hanzo had taken to occupying the small range on-base just to bide time. It was a simple multi-lane 10 meter range, but the easy, almost mindless concentration of drawing and shooting bullseye after bullseye helped him keep himself together. If left to his own devices too long, he was scared he would begin spiraling all over again. Until Jesse was up and Hanzo could see he was all right, nothing would put him completely at ease. Meditation at dawn out on the cliff face wasn’t cutting it, so mechanical archery practice it was. Zero challenge, but a comforting rotation: ten arrows, retrieve, ten arrows, retrieve.

One his sixth iteration of this cycle the third morning after arriving, he let fly the last in his quiver and paused. He never turned away from the berm where his arrows stuck out, but spoke knowing he wasn’t alone.

“You have had enough of surveillance, I take it.”
“Yes,” Ana’s voice replied behind him. “How many times did you notice?”

Hanzo snuck under the barrier out to the firing lane to retrieve his arrows.

“Six.”

“Mm, good. As to be expected. No one’s perfect.”

Now Hanzo turned to look at her – she was leaning against the back wall in her single change of civilian clothes, rather than the hooded slicker he had first seen her in.

“Did I miss one?” Hanzo asked as passively as his ego could muster.

“Yes. And took too long to realize another. You had no idea I was twenty paces off your first morning meditating.”

“Forgive me for having the audacity to believe I have sanctuary here,” he groused and turned his back on her to follow through on his original intent. Ana didn’t give his grumpiness so much as a word of recognition; he got his arrows, walked back, and began again, picking out remnants of the berm’s high-density foam from his arrowheads as if she didn’t exist.

“Aren’t you curious about what I’ve observed?” Ana prompted.

“No.”

“Of course I am. I know how much you matter to Jesse.”

Ana only replied with an amused, dubious hum. Hanzo pulled an arrow, set, and drew. Sat for a long breath. Released. A soft peuffit followed the arrow’s flight into yet another perfect bullseye through the holographic target. Thock. Steps announced Ana coming around to Hanzo’s left, watching him and his shooting form closely.

“You are singularly-minded. Lasers are jealous of your focus,” Ana began patiently.

Thock. Another arrow.

“But watching you speak with Lena reveals a strange quality. You ground her flightiness, even as you feel vulnerable. She finds something comforting in you even though her intent is to be the comforting one.”

Thock.

“You’re serious as the grave and clearly melancholic, yet desperate to escape from both traits. It’s like watching a one-man game of tug-of-war, trying to decide if you’re capable of lightening up and having fun, even though you seem to think that would make you less, somehow.”

Thock.

“You like people. You’ve been taught not to. Or rather, automatically enter into unequal relationships with them defined by your being superior as a matter of course.”

Thock.

“But you’re funny. Much funnier than I ever would have expected. In a dry and nihilistic way, of
course, but that’s only reasonable in our similar lines of work. Insightful, too. Everything that has ever happened to you is remembered as present tense – good and bad. You try. Earnestly.”

_Thock._

“No wonder Jesse likes you so much.”

_There_ it was. Every previous draw had been rock solid. Now, his hand twisted in the finest, most minute flaw, and the resulting shot hit the inner edge of the first concentric circle outside the bullseye. A mistake so small, only another veteran sniper’s trained eye could pick it up. Confirmed, it would seem.

She and Jack had spent considerable time discussing the _extremely_ unexpected turn of events Hanzo’s arrival presented. Anything so out of left field invited severe analysis and questions – they weren’t naïve, even if they were willing to credit him some good faith so far. Were Hanzo and Jesse indeed friends, as Hanzo claimed? Perhaps. Even most likely. But Jack had been first to question just how much someone with Hanzo’s background should – and, in fact, _could_ – care. What they had seen out of Hanzo thus far exceeded any of their expectations. It was patent, and deep. _Too_ much so to be responsible in his situation, which left... _irresponsible_ explanations. _Beyond_ , perhaps, friendship.

But Hanzo didn’t rise to the bait, and instead set another arrow. He wasn’t to be cowed, Ana could tell. Maybe he hadn’t even noticed the momentary slip – he drew again. Fired. _Thock._ The tremor was gone just as abruptly as it had appeared. Either he wasn’t particularly concerned about what Jesse regaining consciousness might reveal because Jesse would be discreet...or whatever _else_ going on between them was still a secret. In summation: he wasn’t going to say a fucking _thing_ unless forced to, and would operate under plausible deniability about his motivations as long as humanly possible. Time to move on, then.

“Would it change anything for you to know that I regret leaving Overwatch – and Jesse – to their fates?”

“That would depend on _why_ you regret it,” Hanzo finally spoke, never once looking at her as he set once again. Fired. _Thock._ The tremor was gone just as abruptly as it had appeared. Either he wasn’t particularly concerned about what Jesse regaining consciousness might reveal because Jesse would be discreet...or whatever _else_ going on between them was still a secret. In summation: he wasn’t going to say a fucking _thing_ unless forced to, and would operate under plausible deniability about his motivations as long as humanly possible. Time to move on, then.

“I think that should be obvious.”

_Thock._

“Hmph. That is a mistake, but an understandable one. I made it, too. I thought the source of _my_ regret was obvious and simple, too.”

“Then _enlighten_ me.” Ana crossed her arms and waited. “Dickhead,” she added at a low mutter.

Hanzo drew and held. His jaw grit, though not from any physical strain.

“Of course you regret. You knew you would regret the day you chose to do it, but you did not _feel_ it. It followed you everywhere, but did not _meet_ you. Eventually, it became an intellectual companion. Something to ponder as a distant philosophical question, as if puzzling over it would delay its inevitable true arrival, or make it easier to manage when its judgment finally came. Now, it has come to you and revealed itself here as _consequence_. At last, you _feel_ it. But the consequences will pour out before you in greater volume, and you will not just feel, but be consumed. You regret for having been _caught_ right now. You will learn to regret more _correctly_ later.”

_Thock._
Hanzo slung his bow across his body. Fuck the arrows. They weren’t going anywhere.

“Live in that for a little while, and then come back to me and see if I am still angry with you as you claim.” He gave Ana a long, uncharacteristically sympathetic look, and turned to leave.

His dramatic stage-left departure was cut short, however – before he could even make the door, Athena pinged over the intercom.

“Captain Amari, Mr. Shimada. Doctor Ziegler requests both of you in the medbay.”

“Is Jesse all right?” Ana asked.

“Just fine, ma’am. I don’t know what Doctor Ziegler wants.”

Hanzo and Ana shared an apprehensive look and departed together in silence. The walk back up the runway was surprisingly less awkward than both expected, though they were careful to be several feet apart from each other. Jack, Winston, Lena, and Angela were already assembled by the time they arrived in the medbay – not in Jesse’s room itself, but the working area outside it. Angela sat at a desk, a holo terminal lit behind her with Hanzo assumed was Jesse’s charts.

“Good, that’s everyone. We have a few things to discuss.”

“You waking him up?” Jack asked bluntly.

“I am, yes.”

Jack’s stubbled jaw shifted back and forth in anxiety, but he nodded.

“But it’s not that simple. Firstly, I need to recruit some assistance,” Angela continued.

Hanzo scanned the faces. Winston and Lena appeared vaguely confused, while both Jack and Ana’s expressions flit from surprise, to realization, to ultimately...some kind of resigned concern.

“Yeah, makes sense. I can--” Jack began, but was halted by a swipe of the hand from Angela.

“No. That could be catastrophic, Jack. Think how he would react. I think Hanzo should.”

“Excuse me?” Hanzo asked, eyes darting between Jack and Angela.

“Good idea. Winston is strong enough, but Jesse hasn’t seen him in years, either. Hanzo will be familiar,” Ana added.

“Precisely,” Angela agreed.

“What exactly do you need me to do?” Hanzo repeated.

Angela’s mouth pressed into a firm line for a moment, and she swiveled the chair she sat in a bit left to right before answering.

“Assist me for precautionary reasons. Basically, I would like you to pin him. Well, just the prosthetic. Possibly talk him down.”

Hanzo’s arms fell away from where they had been crosses on his chest in shock.

“Why?”
Angela, Jack, and Ana all shared a look.

“Since he came on as kid, he’s had a...” Jack stared off into space, searching for an acceptable word to describe and came up empty. “A thing.”

“A thing,” Hanzo drawled condescendingly.

“Yeah. He’s a fighter. Wakes up swinging,” Jack continued.

“The first winter he spent in Overwatch, he caught the flu,” Ana chimed in, her voice, tinged with reminiscence. “He was found unconscious tucked away on base. He’d been hiding out with his fever.”


“He did it a lot the first year or so. Kept away as much as he could in general, but when he’d get hurt especially. Just little stuff, nothing serious, but he’d turn up with a self-doctored bandage and no explanation. Even gave himself stitches, once. Crude, but effective. He refused to see doctors on base for a long time,” Jack explained.

“Until he came down sick,” Ana continued. “He was brought to the medbay – not here, this was in Zurich – and put under standard care. Given IV fluids, nothing strange at all. When he came to, he physically fought me and the nurse monitoring him. All impulse. His eyes opened, his fists started swinging, just like that. Tore out his IV and tried to run; not that he was going anywhere with a fever and dehydrated, but he tried, very hard. Soon as he got his bearings, however, he stopped. Jack and I have certainly seen our share of PTSD-induced impulse behavior, but his...is a little extreme.”

“Happens every time, no matter how old he gets. This is his worst injury to date, but even if he’s weak, he’s gonna try,” Jack added. “We had to talk Angie through it when she first came on.”

“And the steel-crushing prosthetic poses a new danger I have to account for,” Angela said. “He is going to be weak, but it takes very little since his prosthetic will not feel the exhaustion the same way.”

“He’s very apologetic once he recovers,” Ana added conversationally.

“Fine, but again, I have to ask... why?” Hanzo repeated, and only kind of regretted the small amount of desperation coloring his voice. Jesse was so disciplined. Gentle, most times. Unless he chose not to be. Jesse’s ability to control himself was one of the things Hanzo respected about him most. And nothing to date in their time together had ever suggested something like this.

But then, Jesse was a survivor in the purest sense. He did fight, and he fought desperately. Control...was learned. Jesse would probably even describe it as earned. The man Hanzo knew freely described himself as a work in progress, and the progress Hanzo had seen thus far was deliberate and enlightened work. Philosophical and intellectual. It never started that way. Hanzo constantly felt as though he himself was stuck in the ugliest, most rudimentary stages of self-improvement. He in the muck, struggling in vain to reach Jesse up on the hill. It seemed only natural and correct Jesse be there because he was by every measure the better man, but...perhaps that was just a pedestal Hanzo imposed upon Jesse.

“We don’t know,” Jack replied with a heavy sigh.

“He refuses to discuss much of anything from his childhood,” Ana said. “Could be anything. Or just as easily, there is no one answer. Children orphaned by the Crisis don’t join gangs like Deadlock for fun. They do it for protection.”
Dread swamped Hanzo. *The toy car.* Jesse had been so... *scared* to give it to Hanzo. And he’d said that he couldn’t explain anything then, but promised to eventually. Jesse had no obvious reason to keep a toy. Unless…

“*Something* just clicked in your head,” Ana broke in.

Hanzo shoved down his embarrassment at being so textual and shook his head.

“I do not know anything more about his childhood than you, I assure you. However, this makes...a lot of sense. The reluctance, that is. When he clams up, he does it completely.”

“Anything we *do* know are small, random facts. The most I’ve ever been able to get out of him is that this mother’s first name was Lauren,” Ana said. “We have no idea if his surname is accurate. If his first name is accurate. He has never given any indication he would even consider opening up about it, and was content to be as he described himself. We couldn’t *force* him.”

*Jesse’s my birth name, yeah,* Hanzo had been told back in New Mexico. *McCree is what I am, because I made it.*

*Nobody’s ever asked me that.*

Hanzo said nothing, and the hot lance in his chest twisted. How little he knew. How little anyone knew.

“Really? Lauren? You never told me that,” Jack asked, impressed. That quickly faded as he, too, grew reflective. “We watched *The Magnificent Seven* together once when he was, I don’t know, twenty, twenty-one. He came out of nowhere and told me it had been his dad’s favorite movie. He wouldn’t say anything else.”

Jack shifted his feet in place as he stared at them. That was...a particularly treasured memory with Jesse. He hadn’t thought about it in a long time, because...well, *because.* No doubt that was probably the closest they’d ever been. He could recall the look on Jesse’s face – he’d been tense that whole time watching the movie, and after he’d blurted out his random fact Jack remembered that Jesse had gone a little pale and seemed to stare past, rather than *at* the holo screen before them. After a single spoken *is that right* to try and get more out of Jesse ended in failure, he’d reached over to put a reassuring arm around the young man. Jesse had watched it happen out of the corner of his wary eye; they didn’t speak again for the rest of the movie, but Jack didn’t let him go, and Jesse didn’t pull away either.

And they never spoke of it again. Wistfulness and regret left Jack feeling hollow. Gabe...probably knew even more. They’d spent so much time together, after all. Gabe had privately told Jack a few stories. Didn’t that...matter anymore? Jack had seen Gabriel’s hesitation in Greece, but still, he’d fled and left Jesse to his fate. What did *any* of that mean?

No, this was a waste of time and mental health to think about, and Jack knew it. No answer existed that he would ever know or understand.

“That’s...” Lena blurted, but came up with nothing profound to say. “Really sad,” she finished, defeated.

“Jesse would tell you *it is what it is,*” Ana replied.

“Yes. I envy his pragmatism,” Hanzo agreed.

Angela frowned to herself. *Pragmatic* it may be, but she had never found it particularly healthy.
Not that Jack, Ana, or Hanzo were exactly qualified to appreciate that truth. But she wasn’t a PsyD, thank god. Bodies, at least, she could heal and feel accomplished.

“Now that you understand, Hanzo, are you willing to help?” she asked, eager to move on from this upsetting topic.

“Yes, I am. I appreciate the explanation.”

“Good. But that isn’t all I wanted to go over. “ Angela took to swiveling again in place as she weighed her exact words. “Once Jesse wakes, I am limiting access to me, Hanzo, Winston, and Lena. And until I say otherwise, we all will operate as though Jack and Ana are not here, and did not bring Jesse here.”

Hanzo immediately bristled.

“Lie to him? He is going to ask. What if he remembers seeing them?”

“I don’t think he will,” Jack cut in, shaking his head. “Ana and I got there just before he lost consciousness. He had no idea we were there beforehand.”

“He may not even remember seeing Gabriel. At least, not at first. Don’t underestimate what near-death trauma can erase,” Ana said gravely. She certainly had.

“And as far as Jesse asking is concerned – you’re correct, he will. And you’ll tell him that you are on medical orders not to say. Simple as that,” Angela finished.

“Simple?” Hanzo mocked.

“Yes. I thought, of everyone here, you might understand most immediately why,” Angela shot back, words licking wickedly as a razor edge. “I think you’re familiar enough with the extreme shock brought by the revelation someone close to you that you believed dead was alive and had been all along.”

Hanzo took the hit gracefully as he could. His mouth bent in a frustrated frown and he glared at the floor. She certainly wasn’t wrong, and she knew it as she pressed her advantage.

“Imagine if you have learned that little fact when your pulmonary system was near-fatally compromised. How would you fare?”

“Terribly,” Hanzo grunted after several awkward beats.

Angela sighed and rubbed at her forehead. No more arguments, remember? At least none with cheap kidney shots for shock value.

“I don’t expect to get away with this more than a few days before Jesse puts his foot down. But he is fragile, Hanzo. I wouldn’t ask this if I didn’t think it medically necessary.”

“No, you would not. I apologize. You are the professional.”

“Apology accepted.” They both had to try if this was going to work. She let her gaze pass over the others, especially Winston and Lena. “Can you do this?”

“Of course, Angela,” Winston said. “Until you’re satisfied he’s stable.”

“You got it,” Lena said firmly.
“Shall we take our leave, then?” Ana asked.

“Yes, I suppose. Only Hanzo needs to stay.” Angela said as she stood. “And when Jesse starts insisting...we’ll meet up again and reevaluate. Understood?”

Everyone nodded their acquiescence. Four filed back out to the runway, leaving Hanzo and Angela alone. Hanzo, in turn, lifted an arm in gestured invitation for Angela to lead the way.

“Tell me what would be best to do.”

“Get along his left side. Bring his arm up and over his head. And for god’s sake, don’t get in the way of that hand if you ever want to use your bow again.”

“Can his arm not be...removed? Or at least deactivated?”

“It can, but it requires biometric credentials programmed by Jesse. Not just anybody should be able to take it off, and Torbjorn planned for that when he designed it. I believe it uses a fingerprint scanner of one or a combination of fingers from his right hand, and there is only one allowed attempt. If failed, it will initiate destruction of all internal memory and shut down.”

“Wow.” Thorough but necessary, considering Jesse’s line of work. Hanzo did as he was asked, carefully pulling Jesse’s arm up and over before fixing it in place with both hands pinning the forearm. “Ready when you are.”

“I’m going to push a couple of meds through his IV. He will wake up very soon after the second. You need to be vigilant.”

“Understood.”

Angela pulled a hovering table up alongside Jesse’s bed. Two filled syringes were on it; she picked one up, fed it into the special joint in the IV line, and waited. She opened a separate holo window on the wall behind Jesse’s head for what Hanzo guessed was Jesse’s brain activity. At length, she looked away to assess the whole of Jesse one last time: she fiddled with his canula, checked for any loose items, and made sure the blankets weren’t too tight around him. Finally, she picked up the second syringe and held Hanzo’s gaze.

“Ana was correct. Jesse may not remember what happened to him right away, especially now. All you need to do is reassure him he is safe. Even if he is too weak to lash out, he may be frightened. I know you have been apart for a while, but he will still expect you more than any of us, including me, so I think it best you talk to him until he calms down or falls unconscious again.”

“You do not expect him to remain awake for long?”

“Probably not. The stress coupled with the medications for managing his pain will likely put him back out again in a more natural sleep. It’s still early in the day, though – he may wake later on his own time, and we’ll see then if he’s in any shape to talk. I’m allowing Winston and Lena in here, but in all honesty, he doesn’t know them as well as you or me, so if and when that happens, I will make sure to prioritize any interaction time he is feeling up to for you.”

“All right. And...thank you, Doctor Ziegler,” Hanzo offered with a grateful bow of his head.

“I...” Angela worried her thumb along the length of the syringe in her hand. “I have not even spoken to Jesse in so long. I would like to be the kind of friend I believe he will need, even without knowing about Jack and Ana, but...that is clearly you, more than any of us. So please...he is incredibly obstinate when he needs help. Take care of him. He needs it.”
Hanzo nodded. Looking Jesse in the face was too hard at the moment, so he settled for staring at the slow rise and fall of his chest instead. He might indeed never fully understand, but Hanzo felt he definitely understood more than he did a week ago, and it had been keeping him from sleeping more than a couple hours each night since he had arrived. But Angela didn’t need to add that to her list of worries.

“You can take some comfort knowing he cannot be more obstinate or impossible than I am,” Hanzo replied with a nervous smile easing the furrow in his brow. “And as such, I will not tolerate being outdone.”

Angela chuckled back quietly. She would never have believed a week ago that she could be here now and feel as she did. Hopeful. Forgiving. Even a little... excited for the future. With so many people she never would have imagined spending time with. But she had learned many years ago to take these moments as they came and hold fast to them. That was where sanity lived in an unstable and dangerous life like hers.

“Humble him, right?” Angela gave him a little wink.

“Indeed.” Hanzo’s nerves eased and his smile widened.

Their amusement had to be cut short given the moment at hand, however. Angela set the needle in the injection valve.

“It won’t be more than a few minutes.”

Hanzo gave her a decisive nod. Angela pushed the plunger and kept rapt eyes on Jesse’s face for signs of waking.

The first tell was the delicate sound of servos in the close, sterile silence – Hanzo glanced up to see Jesse’s metal fingers flexing. Potent relief almost made Hanzo forsake his grip on Jesse until the fingers clamped tight in a fist, metal on metal clinking for the sudden effort. Upward resistance fought Hanzo’s downward force on Jesse’s forearm. Once, just a little; a second time, with more deliberate effort. Certainly not enough to overpower Hanzo’s considerable strength, but he did have to admit that he couldn’t be careless about it, either. Jesse groaned and his head lazily drifted left and right as he continued to wriggle.

“Good, just like that,” Angela encouraged softly. Hanzo looked to her and she gave him a significant look down to Jesse and back to him as directive to talk.

“Jesse?” Hanzo tried. “It’s Hanzo.”

Hearing Hanzo speak seemed to set Jesse off; his eyes abruptly opened and his breathing grew sharp and hasty. His whole body jerked in effort to escape, weak but deliberate. Bleary, searching hazel eyes darted this way and that trying to understand. Hanzo also belatedly noticed that at some point, Angela had taken to pinning Jesse’s right arm herself, though due to his injury being on that side, it was unlikely to be any threat at all. It would be far too painful, even with medication.

“Jesse, please, calm down, you’re safe,” Hanzo tried again and did his best to lean more fully into Jesse and back to him as directive to talk.


“Yes, Jesse, it’s me,” Angela replied, slow and deliberate.

“Where’m I?”
“Gibraltar. Safe and sound,” Hanzo said.

But Jesse didn’t relax. In fact, he grew openly panicked.

“Wh-what happened?” His shallow breathing was upsettingly wheezy and strained by the combined effect of the injury and his distress. Reassured that at least Jesse wasn’t going to fight him off anymore, Hanzo leant in close to really meet Jesse’s eyes.

“You were hurt,” he explained as evenly as he could. “And I came looking for you.”

“I-I don’t.” Jesse was really struggling to speak around his labored breathing. “I don’t remember. Why’s it so...hard to...” His eyes darted away, searching for nothing.

“No, Jesse, look at me. There is nothing to be afraid of.”

“But I can’t--”

“You do not have to remember right now. You only just woke up. Rest. Doctor Ziegler and I will look after you. Everything is fine.”

Jesse’s eyebrows dipped in hysterical repentance and his eyes grew soft. Everything was not fine. He felt it, but the reason was too far away to reach. Only a terrible sense of foreboding lurked in his hazy, bewildered head. Whatever had happened, it was a fuck up, because this was not how he was supposed to meet Hanzo again. The sense that it should be anything but this subsumed and terrified him.

“I’m sorry. I think...I’m sorry,” he sputtered. “I fucked up.”

Hanzo only just managed to school the heartbreak he felt from showing on his face.

“There’s nothing to apologize for, Jesse. The most important thing is you are here, and I caught up with you. All I need is for my best friend to rest and heal. We can talk later.”

Jesse’s breaths at last began to quiet and lengthen into a steadier cycle. With that, the adrenaline washed out and his eyelids began to droop.

“M’kay. I wanna...do that.”

“We will. For now, sleep. I am not going anywhere.”

“Promise?” Jesse muttered, eyes already shut.

“Yes,” Hanzo choked past grit teeth.

Just as quick as his awakening, Jesse drifted off again. Hanzo stood up as if someone ratcheted his spine into place. Pure instinct kept him propped up; he felt as though he should crumple in a pile of empty skin on the floor for the hollowness. Promise? Jesse had never wanted Hanzo to go at all. What had he done. What had he done?

“Thank you, Hanzo,” Angela spoke, shattering Hanzo’s internalized crisis.

“Of course,” he replied, though even to him his voice sounded odd, as though he were performing some awful pantomime of himself.

“You did well. I’m sorry I had to put you through this. Go on, take some time for yourself.” She was so patient and compassionate; her voice was full to the brim with it, more than he could ever
recall having heard directed at him from her before.

“Yes, thank you.” He was barely paying attention, much less looking at her in any way that would register in his consciousness. Too shaken by the experience to offer any further pleasantry, he jerked away and left at top speed without another word.

It was all for the best he wasn’t able to summon the attention span to really see Angela, because she was openly gobsmacked. She’d watched the entire conversation as an almost out-of-body experience, floored by both Hanzo and Jesse’s sheer emotionality.

But more than that, or anything else, the fact that halfway through their... charged interaction, Jesse’s prosthetic hand had met and twined desperate fingers with Hanzo’s where it had laid over his head, entirely unnoticed by either of them. Even after parting, Hanzo didn’t seem to notice that Jesse’s grip had left angry red marks on his hand.

“Angie?”

Angela nearly jumped out of her skin. How long had she been standing there, silent and awkward? Lena had come in, and looking at her now, she had cottoned onto the odd behavior, because she appeared deeply concerned.

“Yes, Lena?”

“Good lord, you too. What happened? Is McCree all right?” she asked, craning her head to look past Angela at Jesse in bed.

“Yes. Yes, of course he is. Why do you ask?”

“Hanzo marched out five minutes ago white as a sheet. So what happened?”

Angela numbly shook her head.

“I’m not really sure.”

~

Hanzo left the medbay and kept right on walking; down the runway, under the bridge, through the hangar and out the other side. From there, he spied a nice, high spot to sit on a catwalk and scaled a nearby wall to reach it. He perched there and stared out past the satellite launch pad at the ocean beyond. A shaky sigh escaped him as he uneasily settled in.

He had not been prepared for any of that. It was very different to see Jesse moving, talking, living after so long. Merely knowing he was present but unconscious hadn’t primed him well enough for actually interacting with him again. Hanzo could imagine whatever rosy fiction he wanted when Jesse wasn’t up and about. Pretend there was no fear, or complication, or struggle. Time always corrected that hubris.

Hanzo put his head in his hands. He should have been there. None of this should ever have happened. Jesse should never feel that kind of guilt. Or fear, for that matter. What had the rest of their month apart been like for him? Had...had he felt that helpless the entire time?

Promise?

How could one word hurt so much?
“Hanzo?”

Hanzo bolted upright and frantically looked around to find Lena standing nearby on his right.

“You...how? You can climb?”

“There’s stairs, love,” Lena corrected gently. She turned a bit to point behind her at the far end of the catwalk, where there were indeed some stairs. “I just do time travel, no vertical scaling.”

The humor didn’t reach him. Magnificent, yes; just what Hanzo needed, to reveal even more thoroughly what a fucking moron he was. He bitterly shook his head at himself and appeared all the more haunted.

Lena’s heart wrenched to see Hanzo in such a state. She took a seat next to him, feet dangling carelessly off the edge, while Hanzo sat cross-legged and hunched over.

“You have...come to check on me?” Hanzo mumbled.

“Mm-hm. You looked pretty upset when you left the medbay. But if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine. Do you want to be alone? Should I leave?”

Hanzo watched the ocean glitter with contrarian cheer under the mid-morning sun. Was it trying to spite him and his terrible mood? It certainly felt like a personal offense. That...was probably a sign he shouldn’t be left alone.

“Please, stay,” he finally replied.

“Aye-aye,” Lena said, but otherwise left it at that for now. Hanzo just wanted some peace, she could tell. Rather than talk, Lena reflected on what she already knew and had learned. Angela had been all out of sorts when Lena had found her, and after a bit of prodding, she’d gotten the doctor to give up the thing that had so surprised her: Jesse and Hanzo’s instantaneous chemistry, and the fact they’d held hands without any mutual acknowledgment.

Well, they seem pretty close, Lena had carefully reminded her. And they’ve been through a lot. What’s so weird about them getting emotional?

No, this was...different, Angela had rebutted. Hanzo did call Jesse his best friend, I suppose, but I don’t know. They are both so contained, normally. The world might as well have stopped turning the moment they looked at each other.

So Lena had reassured Angela that she would go keep an eye on Hanzo. As she’d taken her time following the general direction she’d seen him leave and searched for him, she’d mulled Angela’s explanation. Surely Angela wouldn’t be so uncharitable as to assume two men – even men as stalwart as Jesse and Hanzo – were incapable of casual intimacy with each other, especially after a near-death experience? Now she was sat next to Hanzo, however, Lena reconsidered. If this was some of what Angela had seen, Lena had to agree it was...intense. Hanzo was dejected, which didn’t immediately make sense. Any doubt should be over now with Jesse awake, even for a short time. That, however, assumed the source of any doubt came from Jesse’s physical health.

In a flash, Lena recognized the pinched, anguish frown marring Hanzo’s face – she’d seen it before, during their first conversation the other day. During her explanation of her relationship with Emily. He had been so invested in her story, and had wanted to hear it as...an inexplicable reassurance. At the time, she had been so caught up in the whole situation, she hadn’t stopped to interrogate the incongruent fascination with a woman he had never met and a relationship context that – seemingly – had nothing to do with his own.
But you make it work, he’d muttered to himself. Lena and Emily did indeed. Despite doubt. Distance. Danger.

Oh.

“Hanzo, may I ask you something?” she prompted as lightly as she could manage.

It didn’t help; Hanzo was immediately put on alert, but he didn’t look up from his lap. Though she was trying to be careful, it was the trying that gave her away. She apparently didn’t want to upset him further, and that would most likely be because she intended a rhetorical question. An answer to something she already knew, or at least preemptively suspected. He wilted further, shoulders slumped low and head huddled in the wide cowl of his canvas jacket. Nothing could be hidden anymore. It must be pathetic to witness – he was more than a decade older than her, after all. Incompetent didn’t even begin to describe him.

He summoned the courage to glance over at Lena – his friend, he reminded himself – and looked over her face, patient and placid. She was waiting for a response, but not necessarily an answer. No expectation colored her features. The question might be rhetorical, but because of that, she didn’t necessarily need an explicit answer, either. Not if Hanzo didn’t want to. She would understand well enough. She wasn’t acting for herself first and foremost – it was for him, if he wanted to get any feelings off his chest. Whatever he chose, his space would be respected.

Because, again, she was his friend.

“Not...not right now. Perhaps another time,” he finally replied so softly, the distant crash of waves almost overpowered his voice.

“Okay.”

A long, relieved breath slid from Hanzo and he sat up a bit straighter. Lena took it upon herself to scooch over a bit more so they were immediately side-by-side, and at last, slid a tiny hand over his knee.

“It’s going to be all right.”

When was he going to begin believing that? What sign did Lena see that he did not? What will did she have to feel it, if there was nothing to see? Hanzo envied her so much.

“Sometimes I wonder if I will live to see that happen,” he confessed. The stupidity of his ability to discuss his darker ideations rather than his... feelings was not lost on him.

“You will,” Lena replied emphatically.

“Bold of you to be so confident.” Though he felt awful, he could managed to shoehorn a bit of humor in, black though it may be. Just for her.

Lena’s face strained a bit with emotion, and not of any mutual appreciation of gallows humor.

“Well, that’s what I want. And then you can tell me all about it. That would make me happy.”

Hanzo balked at her candor. Shit, he had upset her. He should have been more conscientious. Jesse would share his humor, but Lena wasn’t like them, thank god for that. Her particular brand of sunshine should never be spoiled by his and Jesse’s twisted coping mechanisms. But just as well, she was making a point, too. Try. For someone else, if not yourself. He took her hand resting on his knee and squeezed it as a small apology. Edgy, ironic disaffection did wear itself out.
“I would enjoy that, too. Very well, I shall.”

“Good.”

The first thing Jesse recognized when he awoke was pain. Not anything severe – more of a persistent, deep ache, really – but familiar to him. Masked, medicated pain. It parted the curtains of drowsiness faster than if he were left to his own devices on a lazy morning. After that came the dread. Bits came back: Gabe, the blood on his hand, the fall…and then waking, fear, and faces.

Wait, *faces.*

“Angie?” Jesus, he sounded like a raccoon run through a blender.

“Yes, Jesse,” Angela called from just outside an open door. She strode in to meet him.

“Aw, *fuck.*”

She leant over him with a wide, relieved smile. Another too-familiar sight.

“That’s what I like to hear. Hello.”

“Howdy. Can you bring me up?”

“Certainly. Ready for the drill?” Angela asked as she brought the bed up to a reclining position.

Jesse rolled his eyes.

“2076. New Mexico. Thirty-seven. Three-nine-four-five-four-five.”

“And who is President?”

“Don’t know, don’t care. A son-of-a-bitch, I’m sure.”

“Wonderful.” Angela watched him with big, warm eyes. “I have missed you.”

“Shit, Angie,” Jesse muttered, but he cracked a smile. “Been a spell, yeah. I should call more.”

“You’re not the type, I understand,” she teased, but her amusement quickly faded to muted concern. “How much do you remember?”

“Um...” Jesse’s face scrunched with concentration and discomfort as he wiggled in bed to try and settle in better – which was a mistake. The ache in his chest flared to a hot spike, cutting his breath short. Angela reached to hold Jesse’s arm with an exasperated look on her face – he *never* sat still. Ever.

“I...I do remember *that,*” he continued, gesturing weakly to his chest with his left hand. “But I don’t know who. And...” His eyes narrowed. Wait a minute. He hadn’t fought Angela, and hadn’t been surprised by his surroundings. He *knew* himself, and as such, knew that had to have happened at some point. “I woke up before.”

“Yes, correct. This morning. It’s six PM now.”

Jesse’s squint didn’t ease. He licked his bone-dry lips in thought. That’s right, Angie had talked to him, he could *just remember.* Not the words, just the familiar lilt of her voice. And...
“Yes, he’s here,” Angela preempted, having watched Jesse concentrate and recall what he could to try and put the pieces together. “Arrived four days ago.”

“Hanzo?” Jesse sputtered. A curious expression shifted on Angela’s face. Jesse couldn’t place it. Fucking painkillers. “He was here when I woke up. He talked to me.”

“Correct. I enlisted his help for...” Angela’s eyes looked up and away as she mulled a euphemism. “Managing you and your usual instinct.”

Why wasn’t Hanzo still here, then? Seems he should be. Jesse paled. Oh shit.

“Did I hurt him?”

“Oh, Jesse--”

“Did I hurt him, Angela.”

Angela balked at his severity, but recovered quickly enough.

“No,” she finished emphatically. “You hardly had the strength for it. We just had to take the precaution. No need to worry.”

“Okay,” Jesse wheezed and relaxed. Thank god for that, but he was still confused. “How...how did he know where to go or what to do? How did you know?”

“From what I understand, Hanzo sent you a message and you didn’t reply in a timely fashion. You...had some agreement,” Angela explained, hoping against hope that that was a nuanced-enough pirouette around Jesse’s question regarding her involvement.

Jesus Christ. Jesse slogged his left arm across his body (shit, it felt heavier than usual) to be in range of his right hand without lifting his arm. Just flexing his fingers was uncomfortable, but he managed to open the holo interface. Indeed, a light was blinking on the underside of his arm as it had all those weeks apart. In shaky, faltering gestures, Jesse opened and read the text.

Number sixteen occurred tonight. I am fine, do not worry.

Sixteen? Sixteen of wh--

“Jesse?” Angela broke in and reached down to check his pulse, as he’d gone unexpectedly pale.

“Fuck. Where’s Hanzo?”

“I-I don’t--”

“Athena, where’s Hanzo?”

“In the workshop with Lena and Winston,” Athena calmly responded.

“Get him. Now.”

“Jesse, for god’s sake, you can barely put a sentence together in one breath,” Angela pleaded. Most days, she admired Jesse’s indomitable drive. But most days, Jesse was not directly under her care, either. Stupid, stubborn bastard.

“This is too important, Angie. Sorry.”
It did, however, keep him from...more difficult lines of inquiry right now.

“I just told you he has been here for days. What could be so desperately important?”

Jesse chewed the inside of his cheek. It would be easier to list the things he could safely talk about. One: the weather. Two: his health. That was about it.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you. It’s just…” He caught himself mid-sentence as he fully realized just who he was talking to. “Wait a goddamn second. You looked Hanzo in the whites of his eyes and let him live?”

“Yes, but only just,” Hanzo called from the door.

Jesse’s heart stuttered to hear that gritty, warm baritone, making his chest ache twice over. Angela turned to look, which let Jesse see Hanzo in full as he approached the bed.

Holy shit. Holy shit.

“Haircut,” Jesse blurted stupidly. Piercings, too. Hanzo had...been busy. The look took a few years off him, and added...a lot of...style? Edginess? … Sex appeal? Jesse was way too high on opiates for this.

“Astute,” Hanzo shot back with a wide, soft smile. The obvious relief on his face was marred by deep, dark circles under his eyes. “Yes. Do you recall me telling you I had done something drastic?”

Jesse did. He never expected this when he had texted Hanzo asking about it. Oh, right. Texts. Yep. Shit.

“Angie, can you give us the room?”

Angela’s gaze darted between Jesse and Hanzo in several cycles.

“Of course.” She gave Hanzo a cheeky, raised eyebrow. “Don’t encourage him too much. He needs rest, not work.”

“I’m certain one solid threat of coming to get you will cure him of any attempt at premature stress.”

They shared a smile before she finally stepped away. Before she slipped out the door, however, she lingered at the threshold…staring at Hanzo’s back. It wasn’t her usual professional assessment Jesse expected, either. She was...searching for something. Until she noticed Jesse watching; she composed herself and left, shutting the door behind her. Whatever. Jesse could figure that out later.

“Your message,” Jesse croaked.

“Oh…” Hanzo said, confused. Wow, he’d nearly forgotten. “Oh. Yes.”

“Oh? What the fuck happened? Are you okay?”

“Quite an impressive question to ask when you’re the one in the hospital bed,” Hanzo chided with a smirk. “Yes, fine. It was…” His mirth faded. “Well, I cannot call it a non-event, but I wasn’t hurt. I believe I told you that in the message, did I not?

“You’d tell me you were fine if you had a hole in--”

Hanzo abruptly shied and avoided Jesse’s gaze. Whoops. Maybe don’t make backhanded jokes
about bullet wounds for a while.

“Sorry. Just...just because you’re not hurt don’t mean you’re fine.”

Jesse had been conscious for all of twenty minutes and was having to pause for breath every four words, and still he was worrying about *Hanzo* first. This...this man.

“I was fine. Relatively. Until no reply came when I told you about it.”

Jesse faltered.

“I-I...”

“No, wait,” Hanzo butted in hastily. “That is not what...I am not angry, Jesse. I’m not.”

Jesse. Another flutter wracked his beleaguered chest. Had...had Hanzo been using his first name with Angela, too? The hits just kept coming, didn’t they? He stared out at the opposite wall rather than look at his friend.

“You’re not?”

“No. That...that I even have the opportunity to shout at you is something I am grateful for. But.”

“But?”

Jesse heard Hanzo’s hand tighten on the edge of the bed, making the plastic creak.

“Why didn’t you call me?”

Jesse didn’t immediately answer. For one, he was double-checking the sequence of events in his head – time and drugs had made memory fuzzy. When that was done, caution and worry kept him silent. How safe was he?

“You owe me--” Hanzo began, and the mix of hurt and growing anger made Jesse’s mind up for him.

“I do. I know I do. And I want to tell you. But first, I need your help.”

“Name it,” Hanzo replied without hesitation. All the rising fury in his voice had evaporated. *Whew.* No time for thinking too hard about what *that* meant right now. Jesse hauled his left arm back across him again, hissing with pain for making literally *anything* in his torso work. Alarmed, Hanzo gripped Jesse by his upper arm, just above the edge of his prosthetic, trying to stop him.

“What are you doing.”

“I gotta take my arm off. I’ll need your help.”

“Uh...all right.”

A second attempt for Jesse to use his right hand proved more difficult. Moving once had been uncomfortable; now, he was pushing it, and it was rapidly becoming excruciating. One never understood what little unnameable muscle groups worked in seemingly unrelated places until they were put out of action. The fingerprint scanned on the underside required his ring and middle fingers to be read at the same time; between his shit coordination and the odd position, his hand shook hike hell for the effort and resulting pain.
Normally, he loathed going without his arm, but right now it was exhausting just to move it. He was eager to spare himself the extra weight for a while – hopefully the painkillers would stave off any resurgence of phantom limb syndrome until he felt strong enough to wear it again. A beep followed by a soft pneumatic hiss announced his success scanning his fingerprints.

“The locks,” Hanzo murmured thoughtfully.

“You know about that?”

“Angela explained it to me. When...when you woke up before, I asked why we could not just deactivate your arm.”

Jesse did not like that... haunted look on Hanzo’s face as he recalled the previous event.

“Ah, yeah. She been spilling all my secrets?”

It had admittedly been a feeble attempt at a joke, but Hanzo seemed to trip further on Jesse’s words by turning a little grey and even withdrew his hold on Jesse’s arm in an involuntary act to put space between them. Uh oh.

“So, the locks,” Jesse said, rather than push the issue. They had time, he told himself. All the time in the world. Inch by inch.

Hanzo rallied and nodded.

“How does it work?”

“All you gotta do is turn it in towards me and pull it away.”

Careful hands took Jesse by the arm, one from underneath and by the elbow, and the other by his wrist, overhand. When he twisted the chassis as instructed, the whole arm went dead with a tiny whirr. The hand flopped lifelessly as Hanzo pulled it away.

“This is... heavy.”

“Yeah, it fuckin’ is.”

Without the prosthetic, Jesse’s arm ended at the steel dock grafted into the tissue, though a metal peg stuck out a bit where it was supposed to lock in with the arm itself.

“Athena,” Jesse called. “Let Winston known that I want a quarantined diagnostic done on my arm.”

“Understood. Is it malfunctioning?” Athena asked.

“No. I think it’s been hacked.”

Hanzo nearly dropped Jesse’s arm in shock.

“What?”

“I wanted it shut down before I said anything, sorry. At the very least, I need a look at my encryption vulnerabilities and have anything exploitable patched.”

“If there is anything to find, Winston and I will discover it,” Athena affirmed.
“Thanks, sugar.”

Hanzo put the prosthetic aside on a long table against the far wall. Worry pinched his face.

“So...you see,” Jesse opened hesitantly.

“I see?” Hanzo grunted.

“Why I didn’t call.”

Yes, Hanzo did. Still hated it, though.

“You messaged Sadie,” he countered. It was petty, but he’d had a hell of a week trying to keep his shit together. He had earned a moment or two of bitchiness. Jesse’s eyes went wide.

“Wh...How’d you know--”

“Who else was I going to reach out to when you didn’t answer?” Hanzo bit. Okay, maybe now that everything had panned out relatively well, he was a little angry.

There was ire in Hanzo’s voice, but what really bothered Jesse was the hurt in his expression he was trying not to show. However relieved he might be – and was, Jesse was certain – Hanzo had still needed to live through it first, and with no guarantee of...literally anything. Jesse might be confused, but in all honesty, Hanzo probably had more questions than he did, considering the full context. For all Jesse had been through and still didn’t understand, at least he knew where he was, and all the people around him. Hanzo would have come out here with no plan, no reasonable expectations, no nothing.

All for Jesse.

“Come here, and I’ll explain,” Jesse said. There was no need for Hanzo to do that; it wasn’t that far and Jesse would easily be heard, but…

Hanzo shuffled back over and, after a quick, nervous glance as permission, hopped up to sit on the edge of Jesse’s hoverbed.

“I almost did,” Jesse continued, voice rougher as it dropped in volume. “I came real close to calling. But I...I couldn’t be sure it was safe. You never would have had enough time to meet me, anyway.”

“Why did Reyes reach out to you?”

“He didn’t.”

Hanzo’s head tilted in confusion.

“Then...who did?”

“I don’t know. The message was never about Gabe. Just coordinates and a time, and I got the message out of nowhere.”

“And you went?” Hanzo pressed, newly irritated. What Jesse was describing wasn’t just dangerous, it was downright stupid.

“Tell me what the safest option was, Hanzo,” Jesse wheezed back and immediately lurched in pain where he lay – he’d tried to raise his voice and failed miserably. His now-handless arm
involuntarily came up as if to clutch his chest. The sight curbed all Hanzo’s burgeoning anger instantly; he reached so abruptly to grip Jesse’s forearm, the beads of his bracelet clacked sharply against each other in the otherwise tense silence. He shook his head apologetically.

“There was none,” he confessed.

“Nope,” Jesse gasped. It sucked not being able to take a very deep breath to steady himself. “But not going was worse.” He could tell from the look on Hanzo’s face as if he had bit wholesale into a lemon that his friend didn’t necessarily agree, but was willing to concede the point. “I mean. Based on what I knew at the time.”

“Which was nothing.”

“Right. Nothing.”

They grew quiet, each staring at an empty bit of blanket on the bed rather than each other. Shouldn’t this be going better than it was? Jesse had made it. Hanzo was okay. They were...together again.

“I was,” Jesse began again at a scratchy husk. Hanzo’s gaze swept up to show he was listening, but his head didn’t rise. “I...you...what I did, I did because it meant keeping you out of it. Safe.”

“Jesse,” Hanzo replied in a despondent sigh and pinched his brow. “I believe you. And I think, had I been in your place, I would have done the same. I also think that is a mistake borne of our common hubris. You and...and I...we’re...”

“A team,” Jesse finished for him, little more than a croak. He worried his lip and recalled what he’d left unsaid weeks ago, certain he’d have plenty of time later when they met up again and could say it in person to Hanzo. Luckily enough for him – extraordinarily so – he’d lived to do it. Hubris indeed, huh. “I...I had a rough time.”

“I would say so,” Hanzo replied, clearly aiming for a touch of humor.

“No, not...not this. I mean...”

Hanzo’s tepid amusement crumbled.

“While I was...”

“Yeah.”

The dissolution was so quick and complete, Jesse paid the tear of pain little mind when he sat up a bit in alarm. Hanzo seemed to melt in place, shoulders low and round with regret and shame. Nope, nope, Jesse would haul the bastard right back up from whatever mental quagmire he was sinking into.

“Don’t you fuckin’ dare.”

“You just said--”

“I did, and it fucking sucked, but I’d do it all over again because I can see what it meant for you. Shit, you look...”

Gorgeous. Once again, Jesse felt as though he were a mere degree from tipping over into an unseen pit, only to catch himself at the very last second.
“I have not slept well for a week, and I know I look like it.” Hanzo’s whole upper body jolted in a single, silent bop of laughter.

“You dumb bastard, you know what I mean.” Yes, sophomoric insults. Better than accidental observations of beauty. Hanzo finally seemed to let himself have the compliment, as his smile grew softer and more self-conscious.

“It wasn’t without my own struggles, but...yes. I have found some of what I was looking for, though this week has meant...reminding myself of it all over again.”

“Just gotta look in a mirror to remember now, huh?” Jesse teased with a wink, but was surprised when Hanzo grew more deeply self-conscious.

“Yes. That had...been the point.”

“Oh.” Now Jesse felt a little callous for being...thirsty about it. It was so much more serious than just a new look. “I see how you mean. You...did good. It suits you.” *Come on, dipshit, put a real-ass sentence together.* “I mean that. You’re...more you. At least, the way I see it.”

Hanzo thought he was having a heart attack. Is... *that* what Jesse saw? He needed to crawl into some deep, dark cave and be left to consider and recover from such a revelation for *at least* a week.

“You...think so?”

“Yep.”

“That...that’s good.”

Well, at least they were dipshits alike.

“Somethin’ positive had to come out of this mess,” Jesse mumbled. “And it’s only right that should be you.”

Hanzo nodded distractedly. Was it worth it? Hmm. The better perspective was probably to *make it worth it*. That sounded like something Jesse would say, and something Hanzo felt he could hang onto.

“I know there is much we still have to go over, but there is something I want to do now that takes precedence.”

“All right,” Jesse said, but inwardly was apprehensive. What was so important? *Them*? He wasn’t ready for that talk, and he didn’t know how *Hanzo* could be, either, after a week like his. Hanzo reached into his jacked and pulled out his mobile console.

“I want to call Sadie.”

“Hell. Yes, absolutely.” Relief largely poured over Jesse, but...there had been a little regret, conversely enough, too. God, he had to tell himself to fuck off – he *just* woke the fuck up. They had time. Plenty of it. For *real*.

“When I arrived, I sent a message telling her...well, that you weren’t dead. Not much else. She said when you came around to call.”

Worry itched inexplicably in the back of Jesse’s head at the explanation, until he caught sight of any Overwatch emblem on the far wall, reminding him where he was and what it all meant. Hanzo
was fiddling with his computer; Jesse reached to grab at Hanzo and get his attention before remembering too late that he no longer had his hand. Hanzo noticed the movement anyway, but Jesse still felt like an idiot, waving around half a limb.

“What is it?” Hanzo asked.

“How much did you tell her about Overwatch? Did you mention it by name?”

“I did not. She was the one to bring it up. You told her some years ago that if she ever needed, she could come here and someone would help her. All this time, she has kept checking in on Gibraltar, and is aware someone lives and works here, but not who. I did not have any other lead to pursue, so...that is why I originally came here.”

“She’s got a hell of a memory,” Jesse muttered. “We can’t breathe a word of any recall to her, though, okay?”

“I know. I told her Overwatch was defunct when she first suggested the idea. I have no intention of saying anything different now.”


“Do you think...” Hanzo said, and glanced down in suggestion at his mobile console. Could he be compromised, too? Jesse’s jaw opened as if to speak, but he gave up with a frustrated sigh. What if he was? There was nothing to suggest so, but nothing to disprove it, either.

“I don’t know, Hanzo. I don’t. If...if it has...”

Hanzo’s eyes narrowed as he reflected on the past five days.

“It is already far too late,” he finished grimly. “I will run my own diagnostics anyway to be sure. Are you still comfortable calling Sadie?”

“If...if it’s too late, it’s too late. We can’t be sure, and you made a promise. We should warn her, though. She’s quick, clever, and can take care of herself. She just needs a heads-up.”

Jesse was talking a good game, but he felt terrible. Once upon a time, this was supposed to be his task alone. Every new person he folded into his personal mess was being visited by calamity that seemed to deepen by magnitudes. Leaving Overwatch had at least partially been about reducing a body count he felt responsible for, and now...it was happening again. A death felt inevitable. Shit, he’d nearly had his own.

“Yes,” Hanzo murmured thoughtfully. Jesse could tell he was consumed with recalling some memory. Jesus, he had to have been scared when Jesse didn’t get back to him. Felt alone. Thank god for Sadie being there, but this only meant more consequences for Jesse. More fuckups. More people he was responsible for, and now utterly incapable of properly looking after for the foreseeable future.

“Go ahead,” Jesse urged. That shook Hanzo free of reminiscing.

“Yes. Is...video okay?”

“Yeah. She’s used to my ugly mug. A canula ain’t gonna make it measurably worse.”

Ugly mug. Sure. Was Jesse begging for Hanzo’s compliment?
“All right, then. Is it...may I...” Hanzo pointed in suggestion to sit right next to Jesse on his bed.

“Yeah, ‘course,” Jesse replied a little too hastily and began carefully shuffling himself to the right to make more room. Hanzo tried to stop him with a concerned sputter, but it was too late, so he gave up and pivoted around to sit side-by-side with Jesse, though he did his best not to jostle him further and possibly make him hurt more.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Hanzo said quietly as he watched Jesse ride out his discomfort.

“Nah, go ‘head,” Jesse reassured as if the strain in his voice wasn’t terribly obvious. Hanzo gave Jesse a look, though a tiny amused smile blunted any real, scathing judgment. “I’m fine,” Jesse insisted with manufactured carelessness clearly intended to lampoon himself. Hanzo rolled his eyes and shook his head with warmed-over exasperation as he opened his messaging software to start a video call. It would be mid-morning in Kentucky, so she should be up and about.

“Hanzo? Jesse!” Sadie gasped when she answered. “Oh my god.”

“Wow, I must really look like shit for that kind of reply,” Jesse teased.

“Fuck off, you stupid bastard,” Sadie shot back, her voice very thick. “I’m so glad you’re in...mostly one piece.”

“It’s nothin’ time and some bourbon won’t fix.”

“Maybe you’ll finally quit smoking this way.”

“Fuck that. All I’ve wanted for a half an hour is a cigarette.”

“You have a hole in your lung, Jesse,” Hanzo said flatly and gave Jesse a long side-eye.

“Right, so the tar won’t stick that way.”

Hanzo burst out laughing in loud, hearty barks despite himself. Sadie giggled, too, though it was rapidly growing teary. Jesse frowned at her.

“Shit, Sadie, I--”

“No, no, shut up, don’t worry about it,” she reassured and swept at her eyes. “It’s just really good to see you.”

“Same here, even in shitty circumstances. Never meant to worry anybody.”

“I know.” Sadie’s holographic face turned to Hanzo. “You...look better.”

“I am. Mostly,” Hanzo replied warmly.

Jesse watched him speak. Any repression of Hanzo’s feelings for Jesse’s sake was only so good when he knew him so well. Had Jesse been in Hanzo’s place, he...would have been frantic. Inconsolably anxious. Frozen by anticipatory terror of yet another person he cared about being lost.

And now, Hanzo was... mostly okay. God damn it.

“I told you, didn’t I?” Sadie added, sympathy softening the usual edge of sarcastic humor in her tone.

“You did. Thank you.”
Shit, on top of everything else...Sadie couldn’t have known they split up beforehand, Jesse realized. Hanzo couldn’t *not* explain their separation. The constant, hot ache in Jesse’s chest intensified, making him grimace with pain.

“Jes, you okay?” Sadie noticed, and Hanzo finally looked over in alarm.

“Good as I can be, just a threatening hiccup,” Jesse joked, though it was a pained grunt more than anything else.

“How long are you gonna be down and out?” Sadie asked.

“Doctor Ziegler says several months,” Hanzo said matter-of-factly.

“Fuck that, too,” Jesse grumbled. “Month, tops.”

“Do *not* argue,” Hanzo shot back with whiplike severity. “It is what it must be, unless you want to incapacitate yourself more thoroughly.”

“We got *shit* to do, Hanzo.”

“Yes, we do. Just as soon as you are combat-ready.”

Jesse’s expression soured. *Nobody* was gonna tell him what to fucking do or keep him locked up in a bed a *second* longer than he felt was necessary. This wasn’t his first goddamn injury rodeo, and he had *never* been made out of spun glass. It was an insult to suggest as much.

“You’re gonna be a bigger bitch about this than Angie, aren’t you,” Jesse mumbled, and he wasn’t *really* kidding, either.

“I absolutely fucking am, and I have *earned* that,” Hanzo snapped.

Oh, right. The anger flickered and died. Jesse conceded the point by hanging his head.


Everybody fell uncomfortably silent. Hanzo eventually let out a long sigh and his face set with gentle determination.

“After all, I am ten times the bitch Doctor Ziegler could ever strive to be. It is my only other superlative skill.”

Hanzo and Jesse glanced up at each other and shared mutually-hesitant smiles.

“And I always need some puttin’ in my place. You and Angie got *that* skill in common, too.”

Quiet settled in again more easily. Sadie grew thoughtful, and her mouth abruptly scrunched to one side. Whatever she was about to say, she knew how loaded it was.

“You two gonna be okay?”

Loaded, indeed; there were cross-Atlantic tanker ships less weighty than that question. Jesse felt after that minor explosion, more onus was on him than Hanzo.

“It’s been a week, Sadie, that’s all. We’ll pull through. It ain’t what we expected, but...”

“It is a gift that will not be forgotten,” Hanzo filled in as a peace offering where Jesse faltered.
“That’s more like it. Okay then, I should...” Sadie sighed heavily.

“Sadie, no, you do not--” Hanzo tried.

“I think I do, and that’s okay. Just...call me again sometime when it isn’t an emergency, huh?” She offered a little wink to lighten the situation up.

“Very well.”

“Thank you, Sadie,” Jesse added emphatically. *For looking after him. For reminding me what’s most important.*

“Anytime. Always.”

And with that, Sadie disconnected the call. Now it was too quiet and exposed. Jesse’s brow knotted as he shut his eyes tight in repentance.

“I’m so fuckin’ sorry, Hanzo,” he whispered.

A cautious and mindful hand slid behind Jesse’s shoulder until the arm encircled his back and gently gripped the opposite arm. When Jesse’s eye shot back open, he saw Hanzo staring at his knees with a noticeable flush and an anxious frown straining his face.

“This is enough,” Hanzo blurted. “This is what matters.”

It was. Jesse let his head lean and rest against Hanzo’s shoulder. After a beat of tense surprise, Hanzo relaxed and let his head flop against Jesse’s.

An hour later, Angela peeked in and found them both asleep, Hanzo’s arm still securely around Jesse to keep them together.

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