These heavy metals and shattered stars

by Thighz

Summary

Some days he wishes he had help. Human help. Human contact. He’s been out on this farm for so long, with only a few trips to town to get food and only a Titan for company.

Jack is a farmer on the Frontier just trying to get by and hide his broken-down Titan from the world. The world does not cooperate.

It sends him a war and Gabriel Reyes.

Notes

I have absolutely zero chill when it comes to the Titanfall universe. So I’ve decided to meld it with my Overwatch content.

You can check out the Titan classes: here

Enjoy
See the end of the work for more notes.
Jack Morrison was a simple man, with simple dreams. He grew up in the grassy plains of the planet Reserve right smack dab at the edge of the Frontier. His grandfather was a farmer, his father was a farmer, and now he was following in their footsteps.

The only difference between Jack and his predecessors was the giant, hulking mass of metal standing outside his barn.

There were no Titan’s on Reserve, except for this one. The militia hadn’t seen a need to equip such a small, unassuming planet with a protection force. Rightfully so, because most of Reserve was crops, large oceans, and wildlife. With a population of 102. Well, 103 if you count the new addition at the hospital.

Jack makes his way across the space between his small, two bedroom farmhouse and the looming mass towering above his blue barn.

“Ready, SD?” He calls out.

The Titan turns, mechanics whirling and green optic zeroing in on Jack’s approaching form. SD is nothing more than a Tone-class knock-off; with chipped red and white paint and repaired parts Jack found scattered around after the planet was cleared of debris. His designation number was nearly indecipherable on his chest plate - but Jack could still read it.

SD-2476

Left behind in the remains of a barn.

Left to rot and rust alone after he failed in the battle for Reserve so long ago.

Jack had never felt more connected to anything in his life and judging by the way SD responded to
him once he was up and running; Jack had a feeling the Titan felt the same.

“I am functioning optimally and ready to start the day.” SD replies, “I will begin in the eastern fields. The wheat is ready for processing.”

Jack grins, “Strawberries are in too. I’ll head over there. Shout if you need anything.”

“Affirmative.”

He listens to the heavy footfalls heading in the opposite direction. SD is always mindful of the crops and irrigation channels and Jack doesn’t even have to correct him anymore.

It had taken quite a bit of time to teach him, SD’s AI core had been severely damaged and Jack knew fuck all about repairing malfunctioning computers. Putting a bunch of limbs together and welding metal was one thing, teaching a giant-ass robot how to function from scratch was a whole other ballgame.

They made do.

SD was smart, eager to learn and after a full year of a neural-link with Jack, was back to using his own code to adapt. He no longer needed Jack’s mind to assess situations and make his own choices. Though, Jack doubts he’ll be able to function in direct combat again.

They spend the day picking strawberries and tying wheat up for the evening truck. By the time a honk draws Jack’s attention from the crates full of red berries, SD is already loading the wheat bushel by bushel into the back.

“Quite the harvest, Morrison.” Reinhardt beams from where he stands at SD’s feet.

“Wish I could have saved the blueberries.” Jack glances mournfully in the direction of a line of dried up bushes.

Rein waves a hand, “Not all planets are suited to earth bounty.” He slaps Jack on the back of the shoulder with that same hand, “But look at you. Only farmer on Reserve with a helper!”

“Only by sheer luck.” Jack mutters.

“Luck, my friend.” Rein squeezes his shoulder, “Is only half of it.”

“Bounty loaded.” SD chips in from above, “Shall I retire?”

Jack glances up at him, “Meet me by the house, SD. I want to do a check in.”

“Oh course.”

Jack watches him walk towards his house, huge and metal and blocking out the sunset. He can feel Rein’s gaze.

“What?”

“There are -.” Rein swallows, “Whispers that having a Titan on our small planet is dangerous.”

Jack crosses his arms over his chest, protective and firm, “Tell them to fuck off.”

“Oh I have.” Rein assures with a lopsided grin, “They are persistent. Rude.” He taps a large finger to the base of his chin, “Though I have a sneaking suspicion it is because you provide the majority of
“Jealousy is petty.” Jack rubs at the bridge of his nose, “I don’t have time for it.”

He’s too old. Too tired.

At 40, he doesn’t want to start a war with young famers just because he has a little muscle to speed his process up.

“They will come around.” Rein provides, “In time. SD has been a blessing to us all. Otherwise we would be a tiny, nowhere planet unable to help with the militias efforts.”

_We already are a nowhere planet_, Jack thinks.

And he’d like to keep it that way.

Rein leaves with a cheery wave after he hands Jack his payment. Jack heads back to his house, where SD is waiting on one knee by the front door. He dips in to grab the notebook he uses to catalog SD’s diagnostics and walks back out.

SD puts out a palm, metal creaking, and Jack steps into the center. As he’s lifted towards the head, he takes a seat in the center of the hand and posies his pen.

“Well log. Go.” He says.

“Day 389.” SD begins, “Designation SD-2476 linked to Civilian John Morrison. All systems functioning at 100 percent. No hull damage.”

“Season.” Jack scribbles the last stuff down.

“Spring.” SD replies without hesitation, “Is this necessary, Jack?”

Jack nods, head of graying hair bent over his notebook, “I have no way to repair your AI core if something goes wrong and I just need to monitor your memory.”

“My memory is functioning.” SD assures.

“I can see that.” Jack looks up at him.

The green of his ocular core is bright in the waning daylight. If SD were human, Jack’s sure he would look frustrated or curious at this entire ‘log’ bullshit Jack keeps making them do.

“You are worried I will revert to old protocols.” SD blinks.

Jack hesitates, “You already know that.”

“Correct, but you are worried now due to my length of service.” SD shifts, blinks again, “I have been in service for 1526 days. My last pilot linked 896 days ago and was KIA during the battle for Reserve.”

Jack’s throat tightens, “Name.”

“Memory damaged.” SD pauses, “Unable to recall pilot identification, neural link wiped 896 days ago.”

“Class.” Jack’s hand shakes as he writes down the exact answer SD’s given for a year.
“Tone.” SD replies, “Vanguard.”

“Did you serve with a unit?”

“Affirmative.” SD nods, “Unit codename: Horsemen.”

“Good job.” Jack closes the notebook.

“You were hoping I would remember my former pilot.” SD’s body seems to sag, “The neural link was wiped when my AI core was damaged.

“Can AI’s get amnesia?” Jack asks, leaning back against SD’s fingers.

“In a way.” SD supplies, “But only a hardwire connection to a home base would restore any damaged files.”

Jack scoffs, “No bases here.”

SD is quiet for a long while, “I do not wish for use to leave the planet.”

Jack’s fingers drift over the cover of the notebook, “Why not?”

“I was designed to fight for the frontier.” SD replies, “I do not wish to fight any longer.”

Jack nods, “I won’t let anyone take you. Promise.”

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The coming months are long and grueling. As crop season fades into nothing and Jack’s paychecks go into hibernation, he spends all of his time repairing SD’s chassis.

They sit quietly in the barn, a heater keeping the chill of the planets winter out. Jack’s old welding machine hums at his workbench as he repairs a rusted part of SD’s hull. The elements were not kind if you didn’t have the appropriate material to coat a Titan in. So Jack spent most of the winter months doing damage control on the rusting bolts and metal on SD’s body.

Some days he wishes he had help. Human help. Human contact. He’s been out on this farm for so long, with only a few trips to town to get food and a Titan for company.

But then he’d be lying to himself.

Jack’s never been married. Been in love. Been on a date. His entire life has been this goddamn farm.

He turns off the gun and lifts the helmet up to examine the slip of metal closer.

“It does not need to be perfect.” SD chimes in.
“If you want it to last into the next season it does.”

He sets to work welding the piece to the back of SD’s chassis. It takes a while and a few modifications in size before the area is done. He unplugs the welder and sets his faceplate on the table before dropping down against SD’s bent leg.

“You are fatigued.” SD notes.

Jack chuckles, turning his head to face SD’s eye, “I’m 40. Getting out of bed makes me tired.”

“You are in excellent shape.” SD looks as taken aback as a robot can, “And in good health.”

“Tell that to my bones.” Jack quips, dropping his head back against the cool metal and closing his eyes.

They sit like that; Jack half-asleep and SD’s mechanics humming a steady vibration through his body. He can hear the howling of the wild dogs and the quiet chirp chirp of the planets nocturnal insects. It’s a symphony that would surely put him into a deep, comfortable sleep.

If the explosion hadn’t woken him up.

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“Reaper, Titanfall in ten !”

Gabriel Reyes glances up, sandwich half-way into his mouth. He’s still dressed in his suit, helmet at his left elbow. Ana is munching on a bag of chips beside him, eyebrows high on her forehead after the intercom on the ship fizzles closed.

“I just got here.” Gabe hisses.

“REYES.”

Gabe’s mouth drops into a frown and he turns to face the captain of their current ship.

Akande Ogundimu stands at the entrance to the mess hall in worn dress blues, large hands wrapped around the frame of the door. He swallows the door whole, massive as he is.

Gabe sets his food down with a reluctant sigh and stands up. He puts his helmet under his arm, pats Ana on the shoulder as he passes her up, and meets Akande at the door.

“What’s up?” He groused as Akande whips around and marches down the metal hallway.

“Distress call from Reserve.” Akande snaps, “Titanfall in 8 minutes. Low level IMC forces and a rogue Titan spotted.”
Gabe frowns, “Rogue Titan? On Reserve?”

Akande shoots him a scowl over his shoulder, “You heard me the first time, Pilot.”

“It’s a tiny-ass planet. What are the IMC doing there?” He picks up the pace and falls into stride with his commanding officer, “Is the Titan IMC?”

“We don’t know. The call was made from a town in the northern hemisphere. We are the closest Militia ship.”

“Got it.” Gabe pulls his helmet on as they enter the Hangar. MRVN bots are scattered in various Titan bays and a group of engineers hovers on some scaffolding above a disassembled frame.

He follows Akande past all of it and comes face to face with his own Titan.

“Reap. Ready to roll out?” Gabe puts a boot at the base of RE-AP24’s kneecap and loops his elbow over the Titan’s offered arm.

“Affirmative, Pilot.” REAP lifts him up and into his open chest plate.

Akande stands at attention down below, “I want a full report on my desk after you’ve returned. Leave no stone unturned. I want to know what the hell the IMC are doing on a neutral planet.”

Gabe gives him a two fingered salute and REAP closes the door.

He settles into the seat, checking all of REAP’s signals and the screen that monitors their neural link.

“Titanfall in sixty seconds.”

Gabe curls his fingers around the end of his armrests, stomach swooping in anticipation for the drop. No matter how many times he’s done this, it’s just as thrilling the first time.

“Dropping down.” The metallic voice warns, “Standby for Titanfall.”

And the world goes out from under him.

It’s quicker than it feels, because one second he’s soaring feet-first and the next his Titan is absorbing the impact of the fall.

“Ocular functions restored.” REAP informs as the link lights up behind his eyes and shows him the fire and ash covered surface of Reserve. It’s night on the planet, but the grassy fields that held harvest for the rest of the frontier is nothing but fire and remnants of -

Titans. Soldiers.

Gabe takes a step forward, over the shell of a downed rounin class, and looks at the absolute hellstorm around him. A few lingering soldiers are running for their lives towards a shuttle behind a collapsed farm house.

“What the hell -.” Gabe starts.

A crash and scream of machinery erupts from his right. REAP turns and a giant, blue barn explodes into splinters as two Titans dive through the other side. One of them is a Scorch class wearing IMC tags and colors. The other one is nothing but origami scraps that used to be a Tone.

The two Titan’s begin to wrestle.
“Can you intercept channel?” Gabe asks.

“Patching into IMC open channel.” REAP confirms.

A side screen pops up on the left showing a visual of the IMC uniformed Pilot fighting the controls inside his Titan as the scrap-bot wrestles him to the ground. Gabe lifts an eyebrow and flicks his gaze back down to the two giants throwing up dirt.

“What about the rogue?”

“Negative.” REAP says, “Although the Titan is a Vanguard for the Militia. Recommend we intervene.”

Gabe shakes his head, “No. Wait them out.” They step closer, wandering the perimeter of the fight as the scrap-Titan beats the ever-loving crap out of the IMC.

It’s over relatively soon, with the scrap shoving a mismatched hand through the front of the chassis and yanking the pilot out of the seat. The enemy Titan sparks and falls in a heap at scraps feet. The scrap stands slowly and tosses the dead pilot to the ground.

Gabe holds his breath as the winning Titan turns to face him, illuminated in shadows and firelight. He’s seen a lot of victors, but never like this.

“Open channel.”

A beep is his reply.

“Identify yourself.” Gabe orders.

The Titan stumbles forward, parts sparking and a few plates hitting the ground. Gabe holds his position, “Identify yourself.” He repeats.

“Titan D-D-Designation SD-2476.” Male AI voice, sputtering like the joints of its body.

“Identify your pilot.”

“Vitals of Pilot are in distress.” REAP notes, “Elevated heart rate, internal bleeding, external injuries.”


Blonde hair nearly white with age, blue eyes half-open, bleeding from the right one. He’s wearing blue pajamas, ripped in several places.

“Scanning.” REAP informs, “Two broken ribs. Punctured lung. Estimated life expectancy: four hours to internal hemorrhage.”

“Fucking christ.” Gabe hisses, chest tight.

The green light of the Titan’s AI core blinks sluggishly at Gabe, as though it can see through the thick metal barrier between them.

“Shit.” Gabe slaps a hand against the emergency beacon, “SHIT.”

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“Yep.” Torbjorn confirms, shoving the faceplate of his helmet up and squinting at the pile of scrap metal in the middle of Gabe’s hangar, “That’s one of mine.”

Gabriel feels Akande relax a fraction beside him, “Good. Good. How badly damaged is the core?”

“Barely.” He raps his knuckles against the closed eye, “Missing a few memories though. Which explains the neural link with the civilian. Pilot dead. Damaged core.” Torb huffs, “I’d like to meet the person who fixed him up. He’s been running for over a year.”

“Impressive.” Akande murmurs.

Gabe walks around the Titan, running his hands over the amateur weld marks. His fingers skim the mismatched plates and pictures the beat up man in their medical bay bent over a bench putting this Titan back together. For farmwork. Not for war. Not to fight.

He spots a worn, chipped number on the chest plate and climbs up.

“Hey!” Torb snaps.

Gabe waves a hand at him, rubbing at the number and smearing black, wet ash away from the white code.

“Mother fu-.” Gabe slaps it, “I thought he was lying about his ID. It is SD.”

A sharp intake of breath, “Zaryanova.”

Gabe drops his face in his hands.

“I thought she was MIA.” An engineer whispers sadly.

“So did we.” Akande’s voice hardens, “Plug him in. Give him a new body. I want to know what happened to one of our best Pilots.” When no one moves he grits his teeth, “Now.”

Gabe slides down the Titan’s arm and lands beside Torb.

“Reyes, with me. I want to see if our civilian is awake.” Akande orders.

Gabe sends one last look at the pile of Titan before following Akande out of the hangar.

Angela is frowning at a datapad when they step into the infirmary. Her hair is sticking out of the bun at the base of her skull and she hasn’t even bothered putting the white coat back on. It smells like coffee and antiseptic and Gabe wrinkles his nose as the door shuts behind them.
“Update?” Akande asks.

She nods to a curtain, “He’s awake. Demanding to know where his Titan is.” A delicate hand slaps against Akande’s chest as they step forward together, “He just had surgery. He just single handedly fought an entire IMC unit in a Titan that hasn’t seen combat in a year. Do not agitate him.”

“Of course.” Akande nods.

Gabe pulls the curtain to the side and Akande walks in first. It’s a tight space, with limited lighting.

The man in the bed looks irritated with his right arm in a sling and chest patched and stitched together. White blankets are pulled up to his naked waistline, and it’s slimmer than Gabe figured, considering how broad the rest of him is. He looks like a giant in their small hospital bed.

He’s also very, very angry.

“Where is SD?”

“John Morrison.” Akande speaks in a clipped tone, “I’m Commander Ogundimu of the 8th militia fleet.”

Morrison grits his teeth, “Where. Is. SD.”

“In the hangar.” Gabe confirms, “He’s being reinitialized as we speak.”

Blue eyes close slowly, “Are you going to make him fight?”

Akande blinks and Gabe frowns, “He’s a Titan.” Akande says.

“He doesn’t want to fight.” Morrison snaps, eyes opening into a scowl.

“It’s not his choice.” Akande waves a hand dismissively, “I want to know where his pilot is. What happened.”

“I don’t know.” Morrison shakes his head, “I found him in my barn.”

“And you put him back together?” Gabe asks in wonder, “Just like that? How did you repair his core?”

Morrison lifts an eyebrow, “I didn’t. I had a notebook to keep track of his memory. To make sure he didn’t lose count of days.”

“Torb’s going to love that.” Angela mutters from behind the curtain.

“They are artificial intelligence.” Gabe offers, “They’re designed to adapt to anything. To learn.”

“Impressive as it is -.” Akande begins, “We will have you fixed up and dropped on Harmony within a fortnight.” He parts the curtain.

“Wait!” Morrison’s eyes widen, “What about SD?”

Akande doesn’t even spare him a glance, “SD-2476 will be assigned a new pilot. Angela, wipe the neural link.”

Gabe jerks forward to stop the blonde as he tries to chase after Akande’s back. He puts a hand on his shoulder and shoves him back into the pillows, “Calm down.”
“No.” Morrison heaves, “Don’t wipe me.”

Angela steps through, “Easy.” She sets the pad on the bed and puts a hand to his forehead, checking his temperature.

Gabe doesn’t move his own hand, watching, waiting.

“Don’t wipe me.” Morrison begs.

Gabe stares down at Morrison, injured in a battle he shouldn’t have survived in. Manning a Titan without any weapons or shields.

“Don’t wipe him.” Gabe whispers to her.

Angela’s smile is small, “I don’t plan to. Had our esteemed commander stayed to listen to the rest of my report -.” She motions to the pad, “Their combat efficiency link exceeds yours .”

Gabe fumbles for the pad with one hand, eyes wide as he stares down at the numbers and stats across the tiny screen, “They fought for five hours tops.” He breathes.

Angela shakes her head, still soothing Morrison back into the pillows, “They’ve been linked for over a year.”

“Farming.” Gabe reminds her, “This man is a farmer .”

“And?” She pats Morrison’s arm, “The link doesn’t just thrive in combat. You of all people should know that.” She takes the pad from him and slips through the curtains again.

Gabe turns to Morrison, who’s staring up at the ceiling with a wrinkled brow and a frown. A year together. Just a year to Gabe’s three . To Ana’s five . With a 94.5% link.

He rubs a hand over the beanie on his head and collapses into a seat. It’s hard to even imagine what kind of toll it would take on his body, erasing a link that strong. Fuck, it could damage Morrison and SD permanently.

“Who are you?” Morrison’s voice is nothing more than cracked asphalt and ash.

“Gabriel.” He replies easily, folding his hands over his stomach, still wearing his stupid suit even after six hours, “Gabriel Reyes.”

Morrison nods, “Nice to meet you, Gabriel.”

Gabe tilts his chin forward, examining the injured man on the bed, “Call me Gabe. Got a feeling you’ll be sticking with us for a while.”

A smile ticks at the corner of Morrison’s mouth and liquid eyes slide over to look at him, “Don’t think your commander will like that much.”

Gabe smirks, “He’ll get over it. Akande’s a hardass, but once he gets a look at those stats, he’s going to be begging you join us.”

A frown now, Morrison shakes his head, “No. No fighting.”

Gabe sits up and leans forward, “Do you realize what you could do with that kind of link in combat?”
"I already know, don’t I?"

And yea, Gabe winces, that’s fair.

He’s not wondering if he should just leave Morrison be. The man is clearly angry at being separated from his Titan, which, again fair. Gabe remembers that last time he was away from Reap after an injury. There’s always that endless, empty void in the silence between links. Even though Reap is there at the edge of his consciousness, it’s still uncomfortable to be so far apart.

"Are you a pilot?" Morrison asks.

"Yea." Gabe replies, "Three years."

"You close to your Titan?"

"Exceedingly so." Gabe affirms.

Morrison meets his gaze again, "You ever make them a promise and then fail?"

More times than I’d like to admit, Gabe’s throat tightens, "Yea."

"I told him I wouldn’t let anyone take him." Morrison whispers, "I promised him he wouldn’t have to fight again."

Gabe wants to say, ‘He’s just a machine’ and ‘it’s not a real person. They’re not going to care’. Except he knows better. All pilots do.

"I hate to break it to you, but we’re going to need him in this war." Gabe insists, "And that means where he goes, you go."

"And what if I want to go home?"

"They won’t let you." Gabe curls his hands together, "But I can promise that you won’t go into this blind."

It’s going to take a hell of a lot of convincing, though.

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Jack isn’t sure what to make of the man at his bedside.

When he pictured the pilot in the cockpit of the sleek, blood-red and coal Titan on Reserve, this was not what he pictured.

Shorn black hair, dark skin, narrowed brown eyes. He’s built leaner than Jack, but only just. Built like a pilot should be, Jack’s brain informs him. Athletic and designed for speed and agility.
All of the things Jack is not.

Jack takes stock of Gabe’s relaxed posture, skin-tight suit fit to every curve of muscle. There are small white scars on his face and forearms, where the suit is rolled up to his elbows. He’s seen years of combat and Jack’s seen more fights between wolves than humans.

“ You going to train me?” Jack scoffs, rolling his eyes back to the ceiling.

“Don’t see why not.” Gabe replies easily and the creak of his chair tells Jack he’s leaning back into a more comfortable position, “Me and a few others are on stand-by till the head lady gives us the go orders.”

“Stand-by pilots usually check in on small planets?” Jack asks.

“Stand-by in millita speak means ‘you handle the small shit until the big shit blows up.’” Gabe chuckles and a yawn follows, “God I’m tired.”

“You can go.” Jack mutters, “Didn’t mean to keep you.”

“Mmm.” Gabe hums sleepily, “I’m here all on my own. Had to see the man who single-handedly took down five Titans and half an IMC unit.”

“Was it five?” Jack doesn’t remember much. Just screams and bombs and fire. He remembers SD scooping him out of thin air and encompassing him within the cockpit. After that, just bright green light and the magnificent Titan SD kneeled before in the aftermath.

“The combat link gets better with practice.” Gabe assures him, “We’ll help you with that too. Ana’s a better teacher than me.” A snicker, “I’m good with close-quarters, but she’s the mastermind on links. Angela too.”

Jack’s eyes grow heavy with every word. The events bearing down on him. He kinda wishes he could see SD, make sure everything is going okay.

“Torb will probably come up and give you updates.” Gabe’s voice is a hazy, honeyed thing, “Will want to know how you patched SD up too.”

Jack huffs a laugh, “Sheer luck.”

“Ha.” Gabe scoffs, “Luck is only half of it.”

Jack turns his head again to look at the Pilot beside his bed, “If I had a dollar for everytime I’ve heard that.” Gabe meets his eyes, “I’d have two dollars.”

Gabe’s mouth twitches, “Might want to take that advice to heart then.”

“Noted.” Jack sighs, “Thanks. For keeping me company.”

“No problem.” Gabe doesn’t look like he’s going to move anytime soon, “Had a hunch when your Titan begged me to save you that you’d be sticking around.” He puts out a hand in a half-hearted attempt at a hand shake, “Welcome to the 8th fleet, Morrison.”

Jack takes the hand with his left. It’s warm and solid, if a little limp from exhaustion. He relaxes into the bed, the handshake, squeezes Gabe’s fingers, “Call me Jack.”
TBC
“No.” Akande’s tone is clipped, with no room for argument.

That doesn’t mean Gabriel isn’t going to keep arguing.

“Did you listen to a word Angela said?” He hisses, throwing out an arm in the direction of the med bay where Angela stands, “Combat efficiency ratings are never that high.”

“Exactly.” Akande whirls on him, “He is too close. It is easier to wipe the neural link and start the Titan over with a new pilot.”

“You risk damaging Jack.” Angela’s voice is soft, she rolls her hands between them, “We don’t know what wiping a link this strong could do. It could damage SD as well.”

Akande rubs the bridge of his nose and lets out a hiss of air.

Sure, Gabe will be the first to admit that throwing a green pilot out into this war is a bad fucking idea. It was bad enough they were down Zarya and SD for as long as they have been. A year without a teammate in a four-man unit was not the best way to take ground.

Gabe was willing to take a gamble on Jack.
“Akande.” He insists, “You didn’t see him fighting down there.”

Akande glances up slowly, hand dropping away, “I didn’t need to. SD showed us while we were resetting his AI core. Reyes -” He rubs at his throat, “We can not put a civilian on the front lines.”

“Why the fuck not?” Gabe snaps, “We do it every day with riflemen. With signing teenagers up to fight this war.”

“Being a pilot is not the same as being a soldier.” Akande says.

“No. At least pilots are guaranteed an extra layer of protection.” Gabe sneers.

Angela winces and casts a glance back to her med bay, “I need to check on Jack.” She squeezes Gabe’s bicep, “If you or Ana can come in and explain the link to him from a pilots perspective later, that would be greatly appreciated.”

Gabe doesn’t look at her, but he nods, “Got it.”

Her hand falls away and a door clicks closed in the distance.

Akande’s gaze is still meeting his own head on, “You don’t know what will happen if we put an untrained pilot on the battlefield.”

“Look me in the eye and tell me SD will take another pilot.” Gabe leans forward. Akande towers over him, but size and rank doesn’t mean shit right now.

Akande grits his teeth and Gabe knows he’s won, “Of course he won’t.”

“Are you going to force a giant hunk of metal into another neural link?” Gabe asks, “Meanwhile damaging his current pilots cerebral cortex and turning that Titan into a raging machine? You willing to risk the life of every person on this ship just so you have a trained pilot in SD’s cockpit?”

Akande looks like he wants to punch something. At the moment, Gabe mirrors that sentiment, but he can’t let it cloud his goal.

“Fine.” Akande hisses and he shoves a finger in the center of Gabe’s chest, “But you are in charge of him. You will train him. You will answer if he fucks up.”

Gabe nods sharply, “Yes sir.”

Akande straightens, “Carry on.” He turns on his heel and heads down the hall in direction of the main control room.

Gabe relaxes slightly and rubs a hand down his face.

“You sure this is a good idea?”

Ana’s voice is a welcome interruption, even with the seriously judgmental tone she carries in her heavily accented vocals.

He turns to stare at her. She’s dressed down for the evening, hair tied in a braid over her shoulder and holding a steaming cup of tea between her palms.

“Have you met him yet?” Gabe asks.

She shakes her head, eyes glancing at the med bay door, “I was planning to drop in and introduce
myself."

“Do that. I’ll go let Jesse know.” Gabe drops his head back, “This is going to be a long trip.”

“You volunteered.” She reminds him lightly.

“I did.” He glances back over at her, “Wait till you meet him. SD picks his pilots well.”

She chuckles and sips at her tea, “Now that I did not doubt for a second.”

Gabe bids her good night and makes his way through the labyrinth of metal walls and doors and passageways of the ship. Most of the grunts are turning in for the evening, some are exiting their quarters and heading for the night shift. A few salute him, others just nod sleepily and mutter ‘Commander Reyes’ as he passes.

At this point in the war, he only requests rank in the field. Here, in their not-so-private rooms, shoved in like sardines, he gives the men and women their leeway.

It doesn’t take him long to reach the pilots section of the barracks. They’re awarded slightly bigger rooms within close range of their Titans.

Just in case.

He raps two times on a metal door with the number 4 on it.

“You two decent?”

“Yes, come on in.” Jesse McCree’s voice is a slur, meaning he’s taken to the whiskey again tonight. Not that Gabe can blame him.

He pushes open the hulking metal door and leans into the frame.

McCree is laid out in his bunk, wearing nothing but a pair of evening slacks and one Genji Shimada as a chest ornament. Genji’s only in a t-shirt, but it’s at least long enough to cover anything Gabe does not want to see.

“I said decent.” He grumbles.

Jesse thumbs at Genji’s lower lip, “Cut us some slack, boss. He just got back.”

“He was gone one day, Jesse.” Gabe holds up a finger, “One.”

“And you are interrupting our welcome back routine.” Genji sighs, “Is it something very important?”

“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t.” Gabe reminds them, “I found SD.”

That gets their attention. Jesse sits up and Genji slides down onto his thighs, mouth open.

“Are you fucking with us?” Jesse scowls.

Gabe grits his teeth, “You think I have so much time on my hands that I can prank you, McCree?”

“No.” Jesse relents, “He -” A wave of his hand.

“He’s in the hangar.” Gabe replies, relaxing slightly, “AI core was pretty much trash, he didn’t even remember Zarya.”
“That’s -.” Genji frowns, “Unusual.”

“He linked with a civilian.”

Jesse blinks, shakes his head, “I’m sorry, he linked with a what?”

“Also unusual.” Genji drops his head back and sighs, “I have to get dressed, don’t I?”

Gabe waves his hand frantically, “No. No. No. Stay there.” Genji smirks, “Akande’ll want a meeting with all the pilots in the AM. Ana’s in there talking to the guy now.”

“Who’s going to be SD’s new pilot?” Jesse asks, “We don’t have any one on the ship who’s even ready.”

Gabe clicks his tongue.

Genji raises an eyebrow, “You are not. We can not send a civilian into battle!”

“And Akande agreed to this?” Jesse peers over at him.

“More like he didn’t have much of a choice.” Gabe supplies, “Their link pretty much blows all of ours out of the water.”

“How far out of the water are we talkin’?” Jesse questions.

“90 plus.”

“Holy shit.” Both pilots echo.

“I do want to meet him.” Genji grins, “What did he do for a living?”

Gabe chuckles, “He owned a farm on Reserve.”

“A farm.” Jesse drops his head on Genji’s shoulder, “A farm.”

“You were not a cowboy at one point in your life?” Genji teases.

“Dressin’ like one doesn’t mean I was one!”

“Coulda fooled us.” Gabe smirks and pushes off the frame, “You two get some shut eye. War room 0700. Do not be late.”

“Gotcha boss.” Jesse throws him a sloppy salute and curls both arms, one metal, one flesh around Genji’s waist, “Now, doll. Where were we?”

Gabe rolls his eyes and shuts the door behind him.

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Jack manages to sneak out of the med bay when Angela disappears into her office for the evening. He could hear the three of them talking outside and even though he couldn’t hear anything besides the muffled argument, it didn’t take a genius to know they were arguing about what to do with him.

So he follows the buzz in the back of his skull, which he assumes is the link, all the way to a hangar.

There are Titans in every bay, all massive and intimidating as he walks past them. Most are dormant, the lights of their ocular core closed.

He recognizes the slim Northstar that belonged to Gabe in a left bay. It’s red core is open and staring down at him.

Jack pauses in his steps, “Uh. Hi.”

“Hello, pilot.” The Titan inclines its ocular core, “SD-2476 is in bay 7.” One of its hands motions further down the stretch of hangar.

“Thank you -.” Jack squints, trying to see the numbers in muted light.

“RE-AP24.” It supplies, “Reyes refers to me as REAP.”

“REAP.” Jack mutters, “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

Jack follows REAP’s direction and counts the bays as he passes. Most are empty, he can only see four other Titans in the hangar beside his own. Two Rounin, an Ion, and REAP.

“Jack.” SD’s voice turns his head around and Jack realizes he’s reached bay 7.

“Hey SD.” Jack’s entire body relaxes, “They fix you up?”

SD puts a hand out and Jack steps into it and settles cross legged in the palm, “I am no longer experiencing amnesia.”

Jack’s stomach twists, “That’s great, buddy.”

“Do you wish to perform a test?” SD asks.

Jack doesn’t have his notebook. It went up in flames along with his house and his farm and his entire planet.


“Day 462.” SD begins, “Titan Designation SD-2476 linked to pilot John Morrison. All systems functioning at 100%. Hull damage repaired.”

Jack frowns up at him, “Pilot? SD, I’m not a -.”

“The logical assumption given our circumstances and the death of one Aleksandra Zaryanova, is that you will continue to pilot me.” SD’s ocular device tilts.

“You remember your last pilot?” Jack croaks.
“Aleksandra Zaryanova. Pilot Class Assault. Unit: Horseman. Designation: War.” SD replies automatically, “She was an outstanding pilot.”

Jack doesn’t doubt that. She’ll have had years of experience. She probably knew SD inside and out and part of Jack mourns for SD’s loss. No one, not even a machine, should have to face death so swift and sudden.

But such is the life of a pilot in this war.

“I thought I’d find you here.”

Jack tenses up. The voice is female and not Angela.

“Pilot Amari.” SD says, “It is good to see you again.”

“You too SD. Feeling better?” The woman replies, a smile in her tone.

“I am functioning at 100 percent, pilot.”

“Excellent. You must be Jack.”

Jack peers over the edge of SD’s fingers. A woman stands at SD’s feet, tall and lean, dark hair braided over a shoulder and dressed in a blue evening robe. She’s grinning up at them, black tattoo under one eye and watching him curiously.

“I am.” Jack clears his throat, “And you are?”

“Ana Amari.” She replies, “Gabriel sent me to talk to you, but you escaped the medical bay. You have poor Angela in a tizzy.”

“Sorry.” Jack winces.

She waves a hand with a throaty laugh, “Ha. You are not the first of us to escape to our Titans after a battle as rough as the one you fought.”

Jack relaxes slightly and leans back into the crook of SD’s palm, “Which one is yours?”

She brightens visibly and points to a tall Rounin painted in blues and silvers, “Beautiful, isn’t she?”

Jack nods.

“Gabriel wishes for me to explain our links in further depth.” Ana offers, “Would you like some tea and perhaps we can sneak a meal from the kitchens?”

SD shifts, “Have you not eaten?”

“I’ve been unconscious.” Jack makes a face, “Didn’t really think about it until now.”

“Ana Amari is well versed in the Pilot-Titan link.” SD says, “I recommend her expertise as this is all new to you.”

Jack nods again, “Okay.” He stands as SD lowers the hand back to the ground.

Ana is wearing a knowing, serene smile as he walks over, “I hope you like cold sandwiches and stale chips.”
Jack manages a half-smile, “Sounds delicious.” He turns his gaze back to SD, “Later.”

“I will be here.” SD rises to his full height and the blue light of his core goes offline.

Jack crosses his arms over his chest and follows Ana’s form back to the human entrance of the hangar.

“Look, strong link or not -.” Jesse leans on the war room table with his elbows, “We can’t just give this guy a how-de-do welcome and allow him into our ranks.”

“I have to agree.” Hanzo is at the head of the table with Akande, a frown creasing his brow as he stares at the data pad with Morrison’s information on it.

Gabe puts his face in his hands and takes a slow, calming breath, “So we just leave a perfectly good Titan in the hangar bay?”

“No.” Hanzo glances up, “We find a way to wipe the link.”

“And I said no.” Angela pips up from her side of the table, “I refuse to wipe that kind of link and I do not have the time to do research on a damaged brain and take care of an entire fleet of pilots.”

“Unfortunately -.” Akande sets a palm at the base of Hanzo’s back, “I have already given Commander Reyes permission to train Morrison in whatever combat simulators needed to ready him for field use.”

Hanzo whips his head around, “Without consulting me?”

“I had little choice.” Akande lowers the intense volume of his voice, “We are not pilots, Hanzo. Even as commanding officers, we do not have the final say.”

“When it comes to links -.” Angela raises her chin, “I have the final say.”

“Is anyone going to listen to me?” Jesse waves a hand irritably.

“I think the more the merrier.” Genji shrugs a shoulder.

“Have any of you actually gone and spoken to Jack?” Ana finally speaks up from Gabriel’s left side. Her voice is quiet and powerful in its own way.

There’s a guilty silence from everyone but Angela and Gabe.

“I found him in the hangar last night with SD.” She swirls a tiny metal spoon within the confines of
her tea mug, “Then I took him to the mess hall for some interesting conversation. Did you know he’s a fourth generation of farmer? All the way from earth?”

Gabe lifts an eyebrow, “And that’s a very important conversation topic - how?”

Ana glances over at him, “Did you not want me to perform a psych eval on him? Was that not the point of sending me to him?”

“No.” Gabe hisses.

She chuckles, “Hm. Well. I did it anyway. He’s of sound mind. A little quick on the trigger and protective of himself and SD, but he’ll make a fine pilot.” She waves a hand towards Hanzo and Akande, “Given the higher powers allow us to train him.”

“I will not go back on my word.” Akande bows his head at her.

Jesse rubs both hands down his face, “This won’t end well.”

“You are so very optimistic today.” Genji elbows him playfully, “Give the farm boy a chance, Jesse.”

Jesse grumbles, “Maybe after I’ve seen him in simulation.”

“I’ll handle everything.” Gabe spread his fingers across the hard wood, “I found him.”

“Actually -.” Hanzo looks thoughtful for a moment, “There is a chance that he may not take to any one set of skills.” He waves the pad at the lot of them, “Each of you will accompany him in the simulations. We shall see what type of pilot he is.”

“Now there’s an idea.” Genji brightens, “We don’t even know what kind of fighter he’ll be.”

“Or if he even is one.” Jesse gets a pinch on the thigh from Genji for that one.

Gabe nods, “I’ll agree to that, but you know who we should ask first?”

A chorus of low laughter from the entire room, “SD.”

----------

“SD doesn’t want to fight.” Jack mutters darkly as Gabe shows him how to strap into the simulation chamber.

Gabe points at the straps to the left of his hip, “Your resistance has been noted.”

Jack huffs and watches the other pilot name different parts of the machine and explain each function.
It’s tedious and slightly annoying, because Jack spent the better part of the morning getting the lesson from Ana and Jesse and Genji.

“You know you’re the last one to do this with me?” Jack asks.

“Yep.” Gabe frowns and checks a metal switch. He’s too close to Jack’s space. He smells like metal and woodsy cologne.

“So I don’t need the same safety lecture for a fourth time.”

Gabe smirks and grips the frame of the makeshift cockpit, “Too bad. We all command different classes. You won’t just be fighting inside your Titan. You’ll be on the ground with us too. Sometimes alone.”

“Genji and Jesse are both flanking classes.” Jack squints suspiciously, “Why have both of them do a run with me?”

Gabe nods, “True, but they fight differently. Genji is death from above. You’ll never see him coming. Jesse’s petty enough to tap you on the shoulder and watch your face when he shoots you.”

Jack tries to bite back a laugh, but part of it manages to escape. It gets a half-smile out of Gabriel.

“I’m not cut out for flanking.” Jack fidgets with one of the controls on the arm rest, “I’m quick with support, but I’m still -.”

“You’ll be assault class.” Gabe sounds so goddamn sure. It’s in his voice and written all over his face, “Just like me. Just like Zarya.”

The pit of Jack’s stomach is a mess of emotion and anxiety, “How can you be sure? I’m not a soldier, Gabriel.”

Gabe sets a heavy hand on Jack’s shoulder and squeezes, “Because your Titan knows you better than we do. Better than you do.”

Jack swallows harshly, “He told me he didn’t want to fight.”

The hand flexes and Gabe’s brown gaze is warm, understanding, “Jack, when he asked that of you, he was broken. He didn’t want to fight because he was missing a huge chunk of his memories and his protocols were wiped.”

“What if he wanted it that way?” Jack croaks. *What if Zarya wanted it that way?*

At that, Gabe seems to falter. The hand on Jack’s shoulder falls down his arm and away to clutch the outer lip of the simulator. Jack can see the hesitation on his face and the way his fingers tighten and color at the knuckles.

“We can’t win this war without Titans.” Gabe murmurs, “Losing Zarya was a huge blow to our ranks.”

Jack shakes his head, “Then I’m not a good enough replacement for her.”

“We’re not asking you to be.” Gabe presses, “We need you to be something else. Your relationship with SD is too powerful to let rust on a shelf in the hangar.”

Jack glances down at his booted feet, “Okay.” He takes a steadying breath, “Okay.”
“I’m going to be with you every step of the way, Jack.” Gabe puts out a hand, “I swear it.”

Jack slaps their palms together and tries to ease the swirling abyss in his stomach, “I’ll hold you to that.”

Gabe feels a kinship with Jack that he hasn’t felt with anyone except Ana. It only seems to grow when Jack takes to the assault class like a natural.

Even Jack, who so vehemently protested every simulation, was beaming when he exited the pit.

Ana congratulated him at dinner and suggested he coordinate a link with SD as soon as he was able. So Gabe lead Jack back to the hangar, watching from the foot of his own Titan as SD re-established a link with a classed pilot. If a robot could preen, then SD was doing a damn good imitation of it.

“You are proud.” REAP speaks from above.

“Like a mama bird.” Gabe pats the metal of his leg, “He’ll be with us the first couple of missions on the ground.”

“Might I suggest a trial run?” REAP offers, “On a neutral planet. SD-2476 has not fought with a friendly Titan in 469 days.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea.” Gabe nods, “I’ll run it by the big guys.”

Jack rejoins him after about an hour, looking worn down from the days activities. He makes a mental note to get Jack in the gym soon to work on endurance.

For now, he leads Jack to the barracks and points out every room along the way. “Ana is in one. I’m in two. Jesse is in four.” A pause, “Jesse and Genji are in four.”

Jack gives him a dubious look from the corner of his eye, “Together?”

“Genji isn’t part of a unit, just a freelancer, but when Hanzo is on the ship, so is Genji and he’s usually attached to Jesse.” Gabe jerks a thumb back in the direction of the hangar, “The other Rounin, the green one? That’s Genji’s.”

Jack nods thoughtfully, “I’ll be in three then? ”

Gabe pushes the door open to reveal an empty room, save for a freshly sheeted bunk and a few shelves. They’d had Zarya’s stuff removed after a week. In fact, there hadn’t been much of it to move because -

“Zarya didn’t really sleep in here.” The smile doesn’t feel right on his face. It feels tight and wrong.
Jack’s browns knit together, “Why?”

“She spent most of her time in Angela’s rooms.” Gabe mutters softly, “So all of her things were moved there after she disappeared.”

Jack grimances, “Can’t be easy for her to see SD without the original pilot.”

Gabe sets a hand between Jack’s shoulder blades, “Angela came to terms with it a long time ago. It’s part of the war.” Jack turns his head to look at him and those blue eyes are too much for Gabe’s lonely heart, “We all take what we can get from one another. We aren’t promised tomorrow.”

Jack nods, “I don’t agree with any of this.” A sigh, heavy and worn, “But I guess I signed on for it the moment I let SD link with me.”

Gabe chuckles and lets his hand slide away, “It’s a bond unlike any other.” He waves into the room, “Get some sleep, Jack. Tomorrow, we find out how well you and SD handle teamwork.”

End Notes

and you're thinking 'but Thighz. You have a million other things to do. Why are you doing this?'

I dunno. Depressions a bitch and sometimes I just gotta write to get it all out.

Thank you for all the continued support, comments, and kudos!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!