Project Bloodhound

by DeskGirl

Summary

(Werewolf McCree AU—mostly canon)

Mere months after the collapse of Overwatch, Jesse McCree is captured by Talon. Held in an unknown location, he becomes the unwilling participant of a radical new experiment devised by Moira. Two years later he escapes, a changed man—both figuratively and literally. By happenstance, he finds a safe place with estranged family, and attempts to heal from the ordeal. But what, exactly, happened to him during those missing years?

(Additional tags and specific warnings included at the start of chapters.)
Albuquerque, New Mexico, 3 years ago

Ruth pulled out her phone and hit the home button. The time lit up along with a couple messages. She leaned up against the wall out of the way of the other nurses and doctors walking down the hall as she took the time to read them. One was from the neighbor, Maxine, letting her know she’d picked Annie up from school. The other two were video messages from Annie. Ruth tilted the phone away and opened one. A holographic image of her daughter appeared, standing on top of the phone screen.

Annie had her hair in two messy braids, and she held a paper up in her hand. “Hi Mom! I know you’re working, but I couldn’t wait for you to come home and see. I got an A on my test! I woulda gotten a hundred percent, but I forgot to show my work on the last problem.” Annie looked put out, but the smile came back quickly. “Max says to call us when you’re coming home. She’s gonna order pizza for us to celebrate. See you soon!”

The second message appeared to be sent only seconds after the first. Annie was still holding her paper. “I forgot to tell you I love you. Okay, bye Mom!”

Ruth smiled and opened a new message. She drew a heart on the screen with her finger, then sent the doodle to Annie.

“Nurse Bearpaw to the ICU,” the intercom overhead announced.

Ruth slid her phone into her back pocket and headed down the hall.

The problem was one of the patients who’d come in a week ago, pulled out of the rubble of an apartment building that exploded in the middle of the night. It definitely hadn’t been an accident, but the investigators had yet to say who was to blame or why. There were six casualties on site, and a dozen patients had been checked in at Red Ridge General Hospital. While most of them could be released after just a few hours with stitches and medical prescriptions, one had died of her injuries, and three more were checked into intensive care after a grueling night of surgery.

The troublemaker was Mr. John Doe, who had no identification and refused to give anyone a straight answer when they tried to fill out forms. What he did have, though, was a bank account attached to some unspecified sort of business with enough money to pay his bill up front. It seemed rather suspect, but everything checked out, so they’d admitted him after they were done providing emergency treatment. He wouldn’t be the first person to come into the ER who was paranoid about his identity and the government. And besides, no one wanted to turn the man out on the street after he’d just lost an arm.
John—or “Joe” as Ruth had started calling him—was an odd sort of man, rough but gentlemanly at times, with wild hair and a thick accent. He hated IVs, complained about the lights and the beeping of the monitors, and he was more than a little sore about not being able to smoke. But he never said a mean word to the nurses, and he ate every bite of food put in front of him.

Joe was sitting up in bed with his legs thrown over the side and was trying to get his shirt on one-handed. He’d gotten the healing stump of his left arm into a sleeve, but was having trouble getting the other on. Ruth could see that his busted knee was healing well: the bruises were already fading, and the skin around the stitches was pink and healthy. His ribs would take a while to recover. The same for his hip. He was supposed to go in a couple days ago to have screws put into his femur to stabilize the fracture, but when they did an MRI scan in preparation, they found that what had been classified as an unstable break was only a partial fracture that could be left to heal on its own, provided Joe didn’t go trying to run a marathon any time soon.

Joe’s hip wasn’t the only unusual thing about him. All of his injuries seemed less severe than the paperwork claimed when he was brought in. Third degree burns were only first degree. Cuts were smaller and shallower than listed, requiring less stitches. Ruth had seen his eye when he was rolled in that night; she was sure he was going to lose it, but it was fine the next day.

Apparently Joe thought he was healed enough, because he’d insisted to the nurse on duty that he was leaving now, thanks for everything. He most certainly was not ready to be discharged, but they couldn’t stop him, so the other nurses called Ruth in. She’d already talked him out of leaving once, and they hoped she could do it again.

It had been easier last time. Last time he hadn’t been able to sit up on his own, and he couldn’t walk without help.

Ruth stood in front of Joe with her arms crossed. He ducked his head, refusing to make eye contact, and kept struggling with his shirt. “I know, I know. It’s not healthy to leave before y’all say I’m ready. But I can’t stick around any longer,” Joe said. He gave up on his shirt and let his hand fall into his lap. “I’d only cause ya trouble, believe me.”

Ruth reached out and took hold of the shirt. She gently guided Joe’s hand through the sleeve, then straightened the shirt across his chest. She turned to grab his pants off the chair nearby. “You’re so worried about causing us trouble? What sort of trouble do you think you make walking out like this?” Ruth handed the pants over, then set her fists against her hips. “You leave against medical advice, and we gotta list it as an “incident.” Gotta fill out paperwork and a report, go through an investigation, and we still need to contact you later for a followup. Not that we can since we don’t even have your name.”

Joe looked surprised, and then his expression turned guilty. Maybe a little wary, too: he’d perked up when she mentioned an investigation. “I had no clue.”

“Most people don’t. Of course, I’d rather you stay because you’re hurt, not because I hate paperwork. Why do you want to leave anyway? Worried we won’t let you go?” Ruth teased.

Joe looked uneasy. “Just got stir-crazy I guess. It—it was a silly notion. I’ll stay. ’m sorry, ma’am.”

“It’s fine. But until you’re actually cleared to leave, let’s get you back in the medical gown, okay?” Joe curled his fingers in the front of his plaid shirt before nodding and letting Ruth help him change. She gave him a hand laying back onto the bed again and tucked the blankets in around him. He was having an easier time moving than yesterday, she noted.
“When did someone check all your stitches last? You remember?” Ruth asked.

“Couple hours ago.” Around the time he decided to leave, probably. Joe got restless when the nurses had to poke and prod at him.

“You need anything? Pain meds? We’ve been keeping your doses low since you complained about them making you dizzy, but I don’t want you in pain either.”

Joe shook his head, then hesitantly asked, “Could I get something to eat?”

Ruth remembered the time on her phone. The patients already had dinner half an hour ago, but Joe always seemed to be hungry. “Sure thing. Just don’t leave while my back’s turned.”

“Yes ma’am,” Joe said with a soft laugh. He’d been quiet and somber the first couple days after the explosion, which was understandable considering he’d just lost a limb. But as soon as his ribs healed enough for him to breathe easy, Joe had taken to smiling and short, soft laughs that sometimes ended in winces if he pushed himself too hard. Some people just had a knack for bouncing back like that, Ruth supposed. Well, after he was discharged properly, there was a whole therapy program for him to enter to help with all that. That wasn’t Ruth’s division. Her job was here, making sure he stayed in bed long enough to heal physically.

Ruth stopped at the nurse’s station to relay what happened to Laurie.

“I’ll get his food,” Laurie offered. “You run on home to your girl, Ruth. Go on; I’ll take it from here.”

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It was springtime in Albuquerque. The windows were open to let the cool air into the house. Ruth could smell the pizza from where she stood on the doorstep. Annie stayed over at Max’s place when Ruth had to work late, but they were waiting at Ruth’s when she finally pulled her pickup truck into the gravel driveway.

The door swung open before Ruth could unlock it, and little arms wrapped around her middle. Dark brown eyes and a wide smile beamed up at her. “Welcome back, Mom!” Annie took hold of Ruth’s work bag and hurried into the house. Ruth locked the door behind her.

The table was set with brightly colored woven placemats and glasses of iced tea. Two large pizza boxes sat on the counter. “Hungry, were we?” Ruth asked.

“We couldn’t decide what kind we wanted,” Max explained. “Don’t worry, it’s my treat.”

Annie pulled out a chair for her mom, and Ruth sank into it gratefully. “Thank you, sweetheart. Mind getting me a slice of pizza?”

Annie nodded. Her dark braids swung around her shoulders. “Which kind? I got the one with veggies and sausage, and the one with chicken and barbecue sauce.”

“Either? Actually, both,” Ruth decided. She sipped at her iced tea while everyone dished up.

“I saw your messages,” Ruth told Annie. “I’m so happy for you. I know you studied real hard for that test.”

Annie bounced in her seat. “I did. It’s a lot easier when you think about the numbers like puzzle pieces, you know? You stick ‘em in different places, and they do different things. It’s just sometimes
I mix them up, or I forget what to do with a number. But I got them all this time. And the teacher says I can do extra credit to make up for the last question.”

“That’s great, pumpkin. I wanna hear about your other classes. Did you learn anything neat in history?”

“Oh! Yeah, I got a new project to work on.” Annie got down from the table and ran off. She was back a minute later with some worksheets. “I’m supposed to fill this out and find some pictures online. Then Ms. Griffin will show us how to make presentations with them.”

Ruth took the paper and read it over. The assignment was world-changing events. Annie had chosen the Omnic Crisis. The sheet Ms. Griffin made for her had sections asking how it started and what ended it, how the different countries responded, and a section asking for examples of three major battles. Annie had already started filling out the section about Overwatch.

“Do I need to take you to the library to print out your pictures?” Ruth asked.

“No, it’s better if they’re on a drive,” Annie said. “I already picked some and saved them to the computer. I just need something to put them on.”

“I have a drive you can use. I’ll move the pictures for you later,” Ruth promised. “Come sit back down and finish your dinner. You haven’t told me about science class yet.”

“Ooh! Yeah, we’re making seeds grow.”

“Tell me all about it.”

After Maxine went home, Ruth got Annie washed up, double checked her homework, and watched a cartoon with her before sending her to bed. She prayed quietly to her phone that no one from work would call, and some merciful being must have heard her because it didn’t ring or ping or beep once.

Ruth sat down at the computer and pulled out a drive from a drawer in the desk. She plugged it in, and the computer came to life. The desktop was covered in icons. Ruth opened up the drive’s folder and started moving pictures over. Out of curiosity, she opened a few to look at them. They were mostly promotional photos and front page newspaper clippings about Overwatch.

Sometimes Ruth missed having superheroes. She didn’t approve of some international agency running around exerting questionable power wherever they pleased. But watching Annie grow up, she was a little sorry she’d missed out on the days of people like Tracer and Reinhardt and Winston. Annie would have loved that one cyborg ninja. Oh but the one her little Annie Oakley would have liked best was—

Ruth opened a photo, and there was Jesse McCree. It was an older photo from almost two decades ago; he was kind of scrawny and baby-faced still. She reached up and touched the screen without thinking. She missed Jesse most of all. Not in the way she missed the others. Jesse had been family.

Jesse was two years older than Ruth. She’d first met her half-brother when they were both little. It was in the park. Her dad had wanted her to meet Sarah and her son Jesse. He explained he had lived with them once, before he met Ruth’s mamá. Ruth didn’t understand at the time, but she liked Jesse well enough. He complimented her light-up shoes, and in minutes they were both hanging by their knees from the monkey bars laughing.

They met a few more times after that. Each time Jesse seemed more upset. More distant from their
father. It was a little harder to get him to laugh and smile, though he always did by the time he had to leave again. Then, for a few years, there was nothing. No visits or phone calls or cards.

Ruth saw Jesse again at her father’s funeral when she was twelve. He stood beside the pews awkwardly, looking like he wanted to be anywhere else. He had a chewed up toothpick in his mouth, and he was wearing a denim jacket over a faded gray shirt. He’d come with his mother, who wore a proper black dress and a necklace with a single pearl on it. She nudged Jesse along to their seats, then came over to offer her sympathies. She looked exhausted, but she smiled for Ruth and her mamá anyways.

Jesse and his mother sat on the other side of the room, a row back. His mother got up when it was time for volunteers to speak. She gave a lovely speech about how she and David might have ended up on different paths in life, but she never regretted the time they spent together. He was a good man, and she was glad his path had led to happiness before he passed away. She made sure that Ruth and her mamá knew her door was always open to them.

She went back to her seat, and Ruth glanced back in time to catch an awkward moment between her and Jesse where she whispered to him and gestured back over her shoulder to the speaker’s podium. Jesse stuck out his chin defiantly and muttered something, then stood up and walked out of the church. His mother slumped into her seat and rubbed her temple.

Jesse didn’t come to the cemetery. He sat in the car with the windows rolled down and a country station playing on the radio. Ruth saw him look up once or twice at the crowd, then turn his head away sharply.

Ruth honestly didn’t expect Jesse to show up to the barbecue at her house afterwards. Maybe his mother forced him. She showed up a little after it started, and quietly slipped into the kitchen alongside Ruth’s mamá without being asked. She tied on an apron, pulled back her hair, and began assembling tostadas. Ruth spotted Jesse hiding out in the farthest corner of the yard by the chain link fence and brought him a root beer.

“I’m glad you came,” Ruth said.

Jesse glanced up, then ducked his head. Ruth could see the bags under his eyes now. She watched him use his own belt buckle to pop the lid off the root beer. Which seemed like a bad idea if he happened to spill, but it looked cool. Except.

“That’s a twist top, you know,” Ruth said.

Jesse’s face went red. “Oh, well…” He shrugged and took a sip. “Thanks for the drink. Um. Sorry I didn’t say hi earlier.” Jesse’s voice was rough sounding, and he pitched it down to make it deeper.

“Nah, I understand,” Ruth said. “No one wants to be at a funeral.”

“Yeah… Still, that was mighty rude of me.”

“Yeah it was.”

Jesse snorted and then coughed as the root beer tickled his nose.

Ruth tapped her fingers against her thighs. “Mamá made tamales. You want one, or no?”

“I can’t turn down good food. Lead the way.”
That day had been hard. Jesse made it easier. They’d sat in the living room playing racing games on the TV, and Ruth found out Jesse had developed a deep and unapologetic love of Western films. Eventually everyone else left. Their mothers sat on the porch talking, and Jesse and Ruth climbed up onto the roof to watch the sun set and the stars come out.

After that day, Jesse drifted away again, but his mother visited more and more. She was worried. Jesse was hanging around with folks she didn’t like, but when she told him to be careful, he assured her he had it under control. He came and went at odd hours, and he spoke to her less. He’d started smoking, too. Ruth suspected he already had been for some time, but now he’d stopped hiding it. The further he drew away from his mother, the more she turned to Ruth’s mamá.

Ruth remembered the first time she noticed them sitting on the couch holding hands. And the night they kissed, quick and chaste, before Jesse’s mother left the house to drive home. Eventually she stopped being “Jesse’s mother” and became “Sarah.” Sarah who got freckled in the sun and liked to tuck Mamá’s hair behind her ear. Sarah who brought cookies in the afternoon and went home with leftovers from dinner. Sarah who said her mamá’s name like “Gabriela” was the title of her favorite song.

The last time Ruth saw Jesse was at the wedding. They were older then. She couldn’t remember his face very well, but she remembered he had broad shoulders and big hands, and he stood holding his hat in front of himself awkwardly. He wore a nice button-down and a bolo tie, and he’d tried to brush his hair, but it still looked like he’d been caught up in a windstorm. He’d stood on one side of the altar while Ruth stood on the other, and they watched their mothers walk down the aisle together.

At the party afterwards, Ruth hadn’t managed to catch Jesse alone, and it was too noisy to really talk anyways. She wanted to know how he liked being in Overwatch now. Wanted to know how he ended up joining in the first place. She was curious if he’d visit more often—his mother missed him. Instead she settled for loudly shouting something to him about cake from the other end of the table and dragging him into a line dance later. She remembered he’d wanted to stay an extra day, but when the reception was winding down, he got a call. His mouth went hard, and he gave the person on the other end a short “yes sir,” then went to tell his mother he had to leave in an hour. Something in Paraguay. He tried to apologize, but she stopped him short and told him saving the world was more important.

Ruth came back to herself, still staring at the old photo of Jesse. She closed it and moved it to the drive. She noticed another picture file. It was titled Paraguay_012_headline. She opened it. The man in the photo was the one from the wedding. She remembered now. He’d started growing facial hair, and his jaw was more defined. She could see more of her father in him now that he’d grown up. In the photo he was wearing combat fatigues and a chest plate and a black cowboy hat.

Ruth remembered that face from the wedding, but she recognized it from somewhere else, too. She could feel her heart slam in her chest as the recognition hit her all at once. Why hadn’t she figured it out sooner? She jumped out of her chair and grabbed her phone. She stopped with her finger hovering over the hospital contact.

It was the middle of the night. What was she going to do, leave her daughter alone and drive all the way back into the city to confront some ghost of a man sitting in a bed in the ICU? And if she did, what would she even say? Ruth stared down at her phone. No, she could wait. She’d drive Annie to school in the morning and then go into work early. It wasn’t like “Joe” was going anywhere.

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“What do you mean he was discharged?”
Ruth leaned over the counter to look at Greg’s screen. He held his hands up helplessly. “Stephanie cleared him. Said he looked good. His stitches are out, no infections, the fractures are healing nicely. She couldn’t give him a prescription without ID, but she went over his aftercare with him, gave him contact information for the therapy center, and he signed out. I didn’t know you wanted to say goodbye.”

Ruth reached over and tapped at the keyboard a few times. Checkout was only an hour ago. Maybe he hadn’t gone too far. “Do you know where he went? Did he give us a number to schedule a followup? Anything?”

“I know he left on foot. No number, though. Sorry, Ruth. But he’ll be in contact with the therapy center eventually. Maybe you can call them and have them let you know when he comes back in.”

Ruth gave Greg a look. “You really think he’s going to take our advice and go to therapy?”

Greg shrugged, but he looked uncertain.

Ruth checked the clock on the wall. She’d come in an hour early. That gave her an hour to drive around and see if she could find him. It was stupid, and it probably wouldn’t pan out, but she couldn’t think of anything else to do.

Ruth spent the next hour driving down streets, stopping at places he might have gone. He had money, so he wouldn’t be at any of the nearby shelters. But he hadn’t taken a taxi, which meant wherever he was going, it was in walking distance. She checked the park, then all the pharmacies she could think of, and then suddenly she was out of time. She had to go start her shift. The man from the ICU was gone, and there would be no finding him again now.

“Damnit,” Ruth muttered softly. She considered skipping her shift to keep looking, but deep down she knew it had already been a long shot, and now he was two hours away. The longer she looked for him, the smaller her chances got.

Maybe it hadn’t even been him. That picture of Jesse had been old. Maybe Ruth just saw what she wanted to see.

Ruth turned the car around and drove back to the hospital. She parked, and instead of going in the staff entrance, she decided to take her sweet time going around front. She wasn’t ready to accept her defeat just yet.

A familiar man with broad shoulders and shaggy hair was sitting on a bench by the front entrance. He had a plastic bag in his lap, and a phone in his hand that he was frowning at.

“You’re back!” Ruth said, startling him.

“Oh, uh, yeah.” He waved the phone. “I went down to the corner store. Got myself a prepaid phone. I came back to give you good folks the number so I could schedule that appointment next week like the doctor asked.” He turned the phone off and tucked it into his breast pocket.

Ruth wavered for a moment before darting forward and throwing her arms around the man. He smelled like someone who’d been laying in bed for a week, but she didn’t care. It was Jesse. It was his nose and his mouth and his eyes.

“I’m so glad you came back. I was looking everywhere for you.”

The shoulders trapped under Ruth’s arms were tense. The man barely breathed. “Er—uh. That’s right kind of you, ma’am, but I don’t think they woulda discharged me if it wasn’t safe for me to go.
Didn’t mean to scare you, but I’m fine.”

Ruth pulled back and looked him in the face. “I know it’s you, Jesse.”

The man’s eyes lit up with a sort of panic, and he started to pull away. “I think you’re confused, ma’am.” He yanked free of Ruth’s arms.

“Jesse, Jesse!” Ruth leapt to her feet and snatched his wrist quick as lightning. She saw his whole body tense up like he was going to fight her, and for a moment he looked like a cornered animal. She let go. “Jesse, you idiot, it’s me, Ruth.” She saw his eyes flicker to her name tag, but there was no recognition. She threw her arms out to her sides. “Your sister?”

Finally he grasped what she was saying, and his expression changed to one of absolute delight. “Ruth?” He laughed and ran his hand through his hair, making it look even messier. “I haven’t seen you since the wedding. How’d you end up here?”

Jesse stepped forward, then hesitated. Ruth closed the distance, throwing her arms around him again. He laid his hand on her back. She felt him relax against her. She wanted to squeeze the breath from him she was so happy, but she remembered his ribs.

“I came out here for work,” Ruth said eventually as she pulled back to give Jesse a little breathing room. “Got married. Settled down. I thought about moving back to Santa Fe, but…” She shrugged. “Didn’t want to uproot Annie and make her go to a new school.”

“Annie?”

“My daughter.”

Jesse let out a low whistle. “I’ve missed quite a bit.”

“That’s what happens when you don’t call your mom on a regular basis.”

Jesse ducked his head. Ruth remembered suddenly and with a pang of guilt that the last few years probably hadn’t been kind to Jesse. Overwatch fell apart. Everyone in it vanished. Jesse must have thought he was protecting his mother from all that. Still, it had been cruel to cut them off. It was cruel that her own brother could end up in her ER and be such a stranger that neither of them had recognized the other.

Ruth sighed through her nose. “You’re here now. That’s what matters. Listen, my shift is about to start. I know the last thing you want is to sit around in the hospital all day after you spent a week doing just that, but if you stick around, we can have lunch together, and after my shift is done, you can come home with me.”

Jesse looked like he was going to try to turn her down. But his hand, which had drifted to her arm, squeezed gently, and his chin quivered the way Annie’s did when she was tired to the point of tears. He nodded. “All right. I can do that.”

“The ICU has a waiting room where you can rest. Come on.” Ruth took Jesse’s hand and led him back into the hospital. She hadn’t planned for this. She had no idea what she was going to do. But wasn’t that just the way of life sometimes?
I'm excited to start posting this story. I've been sitting around with my jaw wired shut for nearly a month now with nothing to do but sit and write. This will actually be the first in a series of two to three stories, so if you end up liking this AU, keep an eye out for a sequel once it's finished.

First, credit where it's due. I drew a lot of inspiration from the fandom in general in devising this AU fic. While I did my best to be original, I want to credit Via Purifico in particular for inspiring and motivating me. I also want to give props to padalickingood on tumblr because although I only saw their art after I was several chapters into this story (yes I have multiple chapters waiting for revision at the moment), their idea is very similar to mine and their art is fantastic.

Things are going to pick up after this. Next chapter will focus on Reaper and Jesse, and will start to explore just what happened to him 5 years ago, for those of you who want to know what to look forward to.
What Success Looks Like

Chapter Notes

Additional Chapter 2 tags: Imprisonment, Human experimentation, Distress, Non-sexual bondage, Transformation, Chemical gas chamber, Sedation, Masks/muzzles, Psychological manipulation

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Talon Laboratory, Location Unknown, 5 years ago

The door opened and shut with a hush as Reaper let himself into the lab. Most of the staff seemed surprised to see him, but went back to work diligently. The room was large and pristine with stations dedicated to large humming machines processing samples for study.

A man came over with a data pad in hand. “May I help you, sir?”

Reaper regarded him a moment. The security card clipped to the man’s lab coat pocket identified him as Dr. Pyeong. “Where’s Dr. O’Deorain? I need to speak with her.”

“She’s in a conference call with a couple of geneticists right now. She’ll be done soon. Can I help you in the meantime?”

The man’s eyes drifted down to Reaper’s clenched fists, but he stood firm with a passive expression, waiting for a response. They both knew he was only doing his job.

“I’ve just been informed,” Reaper growled out, “that we have Overwatch agent Jesse McCree in detainment.”

“Yes sir.”

Trails of fog drifted up from Reaper’s shoulders as he destabilized. “Apparently we’ve had him for the past three months now without anyone seeing fit to tell me.”

“Oh.” Dr. Pyeong began to look a little nervous. He tapped at his pad, bringing up some file or other. “Dr. O’Deorain gave me a list of personnel to inform about our acquisition. She didn’t include you on the list. I’m sorry, sir. If it’s any consolation, it looks like this list only contains people directly connected with that particular project, so I doubt Dr. O’Deorain was keeping it from you on purpose. She probably didn’t think it was worth bothering you about.”

Reaper looked away. He doubted that; she probably thought he’d interfere. Wait. “What project?”

Dr. Pyeong pulled up another file. “Agent McCree was going to be put through interrogation, but it was decided he might be more valuable if we could recondition him into an asset for Talon. Dr. O’Deorain had just recently finalized a program to test a new method of enhancement, and it was decided after running diagnostics on McCree that he was a prime candidate, so we admitted him into…” Pyeong scrolled down. “Project Bloodhound.” He turned the tablet around so Reaper could see the data for himself.

Reaper leaned in slightly to see, then straightened. “What does the project entail?”
Pyeong flipped the datapad towards himself again and scrolled back up. “Let’s see. It’s not one of mine, so I don’t know off the top of my head. Looks like the project focuses on genetic enhancement. Cross-species hybridization specifically… Improvement to speed, strength, endurance, pain tolerance… Enhancement of sight, smell, and hearing… I’d have to ask the head technician in charge on level 3 to find out anything more detailed.”

Reaper was quiet for an uncomfortably long time before he finally spoke. “Show me.”

The technician on level 3 was far jumpier than Dr. Pyeong. He wrung his hands and hunched his shoulders around his ears when Reaper demanded an update on Project Bloodhound.

“Dr. O’Deorain really should be present for this,” he said.

Pyeong shook his head. “No need. I’ve messaged her, and she gave us clearance.”

Reaper let out a hum, pleased with the man’s foresight. He focused his attention on the technician. “Start talking.”

The technician ducked his head and started opening up files on his computer; the screen filled the whole wall. Some of the files contained photos and video. A dozen different faces appeared on the screen beside pages of data, including McCree’s. He looked furious.

“We started with fifteen subjects. I would have liked a larger pool, but it’s difficult to find subjects that meet the physical requirements. Dr. O’Deorain proposed five different ways of genetically modifying the subjects to achieve the desired results. We based most of the methods on retracted documents recovered from super soldier programs during the Omnic Crisis.” Once the man started speaking, his shoulders relaxed, and his voice grew more confident. He clearly liked data more than people. “Of the fifteen, ten died. Four failed to take to the experiments and showed no signs of improvement. But Subject Fifteen was a success, so for the past month we’ve focused on him.”

“What exactly does “success” look like?” Reaper asked.

The technician glanced over to Pyeong, who nodded. Then he pulled up a video.

The video was being filmed from behind a protective window. In the other room, Jesse McCree stood naked and manacled. His teeth were set in a snarl. Fading needle marks dotted his arms.

Someone beside the camera spoke. It was Moira’s voice. “Other subjects have displayed no change in physiology. However Subject Fifteen shows signs of successful alteration. White cell count has risen in response to treatment. Heart rate remains steady when under duress. Reflexive muscle contraction has improved. I am still waiting on results from the team in charge of tracking changes to DNA sequencing, but in light of all the evidence, we are moving forward to phase two. Ready subject for introduction of catalytic gas.”

A beep was heard, and the cuffs fell from McCree’s wrists. He rubbed at his arms, looking confused and wary now. He eyed the door that he must know he couldn’t open.

“Release the catalytic gas and begin the timer.”

There was a hiss. McCree went very still for a moment, then his head whipped up toward the ceiling. The gas was barely visible except for a faint yellow hue near the vents overhead where it was thickest.

Reaper watched McCree’s mouth move as he swore, then he clapped his hands over his mouth and ran to the door. He threw his shoulder against it.
“100 ppm,” someone announced to Moira.

McCree threw his shoulder into the door again. A third time. Then a fourth. His hand tightened over his mouth and his brows drew together as he struggled not to breathe in too much.

“500 ppm.”

McCree was slowing down. He hit the door a fifth time and stayed there, his body pressed to the unyielding metal. He sucked in a deep breath of air, and his back went taut.

“700 ppm.”

McCree whipped around suddenly and approached the glass. There was panic in his eyes. He slammed his fist into the glass.

“900 ppm.”

McCree banged on the glass a few more times, then braced himself, palm flat, and pressed his forehead to the glass. His eyes were squeezed shut. The muscles jumped in his neck and along his shoulders. He pulled his other hand away from his mouth and slammed his fist into the glass. His teeth were grit, and drool dripped from the corner of his mouth. When he finally opened his eyes, the pupils were blown.

“1,300 ppm.”

“Threshold has been reached,” Moira announced as McCree reeled back.

McCree let out a guttural cry loud enough to hear through the thick glass. He grasped at his hair and then his arms. He dug his fingers into his shoulders until his nails drew blood. His body convulsed, and the violent jerking threw him to the ground. He curled up.

“1,800 ppm.”

“Hold at 2,000,” Moira ordered. “Note that the change begins internally as gas invades the lungs and moves along the blood stream. If we can design a different form of administering the catalyst for fieldwork, the process may be different.”

McCree’s body was beginning to shift. Limbs bent and stretched unnaturally. His hair darkened and grew thick, traveling down his body. McCree kept his face hidden in his arms. His fingers twisted into claws that clutched at the sides of his head.

“Holding at 2,000 ppm. Time is now 1134 hours.”

The figure in the other room lurched to its hands and feet suddenly. It was massive and covered in thick, brown fur. It swayed, disoriented and possibly in pain. Then it turned toward the window. The creature’s muzzle hung open as it panted, revealing a set of unnaturally large fangs. Its ears pricked forward. Dark eyes focused on the camera, as if it could see inside. Then its gaze shifted to two different distinct spots beside the camera—the scientists. A rumble built up in the creature’s throat until it let loose a furious roar, and then it charged the window. It slammed into the window with a bang, and the transparent shield groaned threateningly.

“We have what we need for now,” Moira said calmly. “Vent the room and introduce the sleep agent.”

“The reverse catalyst?”
“Can wait until he’s sedated.”

Vents in the floor whirred to life, and faint streams of yellow gas were pulled down and out of the room.

The monster looked away, distracted, then turned its attention on the viewing room again. It bared its fangs at the people inside, then dragged a hand down the window, claws squealing against the material. Not a scratch. The room was designed for experiments like this. That didn’t deter the creature as it hauled back and punched the glass.

“Room vented. Introducing sleep agent.”

“Don’t forget to account for his increased muscle density.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

The beast continued to pound and scratch at the window for another half a minute as invisible gas poured down into the room. The creature’s movements became sluggish. Its ears drooped. It pressed itself up against the glass and let out a rumbling sound that pitched up into a whine, then slowly slid to the floor in a heap.

“Wait another thirty seconds before venting the room and administering the reverse catalyst. We don’t want him to wake up and injure one of the technicians,” Moira advised. “This concludes phase two, test one. Results positive. The change was far more extreme than anticipated, but may have unforeseen benefits. To reduce stress to the subject, catalyst should be introduced at a higher concentration in future trials. All in all, a stunning success.”

The video ended.

Reaper let a hand drift up to his mask unconsciously, as if to rub at the bridge of his nose. “You made a werewolf,” he said in a flat tone.

“Hardly,” the technician said, forgetting who he was speaking to. A growl from Reaper set him straight. “That is,” he clarified, “the more accurate term might be shapeshifter. We drew on a number of groups within the canoidea subgenus, including canidae, ursidae, and trace DNA from two extinct families to help bridge the gap. The genetic modification was only supposed to enhance certain traits, but DNA is a tricky thing. There were bound to be side effects.”

Reaper looked up at the paused video. The creature was slumped under the window, only the fur of its back visible. Minutes ago, that thing had been Jesse McCree.

Reaper turned away. The technician began closing files, and Dr. Pyeong opened the door.

“I want to see him,” Reaper said, startling both men.

“Sir?”

“You heard me. I want to see him.”

Pyeong thought it over for a moment, then pulled something up on his tablet. “I’ll notify Dr. O’Deorain. I can’t imagine she’ll turn you down. According to recent notes by the data collection team, it looks like the project has lost steam recently; the subject has been resistant to testing. A fresh perspective might be just what we need.”

Reaper made a noncommittal sound as he allowed Pyeong and the technician to lead him down
Reaper wasn’t sure what he expected to see when they let him into the detainment cell. When he thought of Jesse McCree, he remembered a defiant young man fresh out of Deadlock with a hard set to his mouth and a sharp tongue. Yes, perhaps something like that. Not the man crouched against the farthest wall, naked and restrained. His arms were cuffed behind his back, his ankles manacled with only a short length between them, and a black leather muzzle covered most of his face, save for the burning eyes that watched him with undisguised fury. McCree’s body was mottled with bruising. A gash was healing over his left eye. Resistant, Dr. Pyeong had said. An understatement, clearly.

“Why is he restrained like this?” Reaper asked. He kept his voice low so it wouldn’t carry.

The technician cleared his throat. “We’ve had… several incidents.” Reaper waved a hand for him to elaborate. “For the last month now, Subject Fifteen has attempted to hurt himself and others at every opportunity. It wasn’t an issue when we started, but now his strength and resistance to drugs fluctuates unpredictably. He’s broken knees, snapped fingers, and even tried to bash his own head against the wall at one point. The restraints are necessary until he becomes less volatile.”

“What tests are you trying to perform on him?”

“We need to make sure the genetic changes are permanent and stable, which requires repeated transformation. He resists every time. It tears his body apart on the inside, but luckily he heals quickly. After we’re certain he won’t deteriorate, we need to see his new limits and capabilities, but again, it’s difficult to make him cooperate. After we have a good data set to work with, we can bring in a fresh batch of subjects and move him on to reconditioning.”

“That’s the wrong way to do it,” Reaper said. “You should have convinced him to work with us before performing the experiments. You lost his trust before you ever had a chance to gain it.”

“You’re saying the psychological phase should have come first,” Pyeong said speculatively, somewhat missing Reaper’s point. He hummed in thought. “I can see the benefits. We rushed into experimentation because we didn’t want to waste time training assets that wouldn’t survive. But your way might have spared Dr. Tyrell that concussion. It’s too late now, though. What do you propose we do?”

Reaper considered the huddled man on the other side of the room. He took a step forward and watched McCree recoil with a glimmer of fear in his eyes. That wouldn’t do.

“Let me think on it. Put your tests on hold until I’ve spoken with O’Deorain. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Pyeong turned on his data pad and quickly tapped something out. “All data collection and tests are postponed until you give your approval. Hm. Dr. O’Deorain just messaged me: she’s done with her conference call and is ready to speak with you.”

“Good. Is she in her office?”

“She is.”

Reaper dissolved, and the dark fog that marked his presence swirled past the two scientists. It rolled up the stairwell and vanished.

***

“You could have killed him.”
“My experiments could have killed you, too. That’s the cost of progress.”

The room was dark except for the illumination of the hard light display of Moira’s computer. It cast her face in stark shadows. Reaper stood on the other side of the screen, watching her through slowly scrolling displays of data.

Moira continued, “The important thing is he didn’t die. He was the only one strong enough to survive, in fact; I was fairly certain if anyone could do it, it would be him. McCree has always been resilient, and his training and experience have proved useful.”

Experience. Reaper remembered clandestine missions. Moira sitting across from him in a jet while Jesse relaxed beside him with a book in hand, unlit cigarillo between his teeth just for the feeling. The ringing in his ears as explosions went off all around, and he let himself trust that his teammates were in place covering his back. Dust on his tongue as he crouched behind a crumbling wall with Jesse, pinned down by enemy fire while they waited for Moira and Genji to back them up.

“It’s so easy for you,” Reaper said, “to take someone you used to work beside and turn him into an experiment?” He held his hand up when Moira began to answer. “I volunteered for this. He didn’t. You did this to him against his will.”

“He never would have agreed on his own,” Moira said. “People are loathe to change, even when it’s for the better. I hate the idea of wasting such potential.” She tapped her nails on the desk thoughtfully before speaking again. “You think I did it because I don’t care. I’d argue that I gave him this opportunity because of our past, not in spite of it. I know what Agent McCree is capable of. What I’ve done to him is a gift, even if he can’t see it yet. He’s stronger, more capable, more aware of his surroundings. He’s a step above now: more than a mere human. And think about how this data can be used in other projects. McCree has launched my research ahead by decades.” She held her hands out as if holding something up for Reaper to see, trying to make real for him the sheer value of what she’d accomplished.

“Of course,” she said as she lowered her hands, “now McCree is digging his heels in, as I suspected he would. He always was stubborn. I can’t have the project stalling now. Something needs to be done.”

Reaper let out a noise of unhappy agreement. “I had some thoughts about that.”

***

Jesse didn’t know what he hated more: when the door of his cell opened, or the long periods of nothing in between. When the door opened, it meant pain and prodding and humiliation. Scientists came to draw blood samples, or forced him to take in nutrients through an IV (since he refused to eat and had bitten several people when they tried to force tubes in his mouth). Sometimes he was dragged off to another location: testing rooms where they studied his body’s limits, lab rooms with cold tables and trays of medical instruments, or the room with the gas vents.

But sitting alone in his cell was maddening. He had to endure long hours of silence so complete that Jesse found his ears ringing from the strain to hear anything at all. The lights never dimmed, making it nearly impossible to sleep, and Jesse couldn’t tell the time of day.

Based on that, it had been nearly a week since Reaper visited unexpectedly. Since then, the tests
had stopped. Jesse wished more and more that he’d been able to hear what Reaper and those two lab coats had been saying to each other that day. It hadn’t sat right with him then, and especially not now. He was getting nervous. Something was coming, but he didn’t know what.

Jesse had managed to close his eyes for a few minutes when he heard the door open. He was awake in an instant, trying to use his elbow to lever himself back into a sitting position. He looked to the door. He was pretty sure it was too soon for feeding, which meant only one thing in Jesse’s mind: testing was back on.

Reaper stepped into the cell. The other man looked like a black hole against the stark white walls, as if he drew the harsh overhead light into himself, absorbing it. Jesse had seen the reports about him. Never had gotten to go up against him in a fight, though—never even got this close before. Jesse couldn’t see his eyes behind the mask, but he felt them boring into him. He pressed his back up against the wall and fixed Reaper with a defiant stare. Whatever he wanted, Jesse wasn’t going to give it to him. Not without a fight anyways.

Reaper approached slowly with his hands clearly visible at his sides. He wasn’t armed, but that didn’t mean he was any less dangerous. Jesse curled up, his body tense as a spring, waiting to see what would happen.

Reaper stopped a couple feet short of Jesse, then suddenly crouched down to his level. Jesse tilted his head back until it hit the wall.

As Jesse waited for Reaper’s next move, he listened to his breathing and Reaper’s, thunderous in the silence.

Finally Reaper moved. He extended a hand, a finger pointed at Jesse. “You’re not going to last much longer, you know.” Jesse glared. Reaper rested his arms on his knees and continued, “If you want to survive this, you need to start cooperating. You don’t do anyone any good if you’re dead.”

Jesse tipped his head and shrugged his shoulders, trying to convey to Reaper that maybe that was the idea. He couldn’t beat Talon, but he could sure as hell make their lives difficult.

Reaper gave his head a small shake. “You’re fighting the wrong battle here, Agent McCree. The fight isn’t against us. It’s a fight for your life and your sanity. Think of it this way if it helps any: stay alive, and there’s always the chance that you’ll win eventually. But if you die, you’ve lost, and that’s it. It’s over.” Reaper’s hand cut through the air with sharp finality.

Jesse looked down, then tilted his head away. He didn’t want to hear this. Any advice from a Talon agent wasn’t for his benefit; this was deliberate manipulation. He knew this tactic. His captor wanted him to think he was sympathetic to his situation.

“Don’t think that I don’t know who you are, McCree.” Jesse glanced back at Reaper curiously. “I know your sort. You latch on, and you don’t let go. The harder they hit you, the harder you bite. That’s the reason you’ve lasted this long, but it’ll only carry you so far.”

Reaper wrapped a hand around Jesse’s ankle. The sudden contact set Jesse’s heart racing. He lashed out with his feet, but Reaper saw it coming from a mile away. He held Jesse’s foot down and let the chain stop the other one short. When Jesse threw himself forward to try and shake Reaper’s grip, a clawed hand pressed to his chest, pushing him back against the wall.

Jesse snarled through the muzzle and struggled against Reaper’s hands uselessly.

“What’d I just say about fighting us, McCree? Save your strength.”
Jesse went still as he heard a quiet click and the pressure around his ankle vanished. Both Reaper’s grip and the restraint. He stared at Reaper with wide eyes, trying to figure out what he was doing as Reaper took hold of his other ankle and freed it. Then Reaper was on his feet, the restraints dangling from his hand.

Jesse just sat there, so confused he didn’t know what to do. Distantly he recognized what was happening: his captor was offering him a small bit of freedom to trick him into feeling grateful. He couldn’t trust this. He couldn’t trust Reaper.

Reaper began to walk away, then stopped like he remembered something. “They’re going to start testing you again tomorrow. Try to cooperate this time, and I’ll make it worth your while.”

Jesse made a noncommittal noise.

“Can’t say I didn’t try. At least keep my offer in mind.” And with that Reaper was gone.

Jesse let out a long, slow sigh and leaned back. He looked down at his feet. He would have preferred to have the muzzle off or his hands free, but at least he wasn’t hobbled anymore. He was thankful for even that much, and he hated it. He was tired and mentally fatigued; a part of him was ready to stop fighting. But he knew what it could mean if he did, and he kept that fear close to his heart. Whatever happened, he couldn’t let them break him.

Chapter End Notes

I was going to wait longer to post this next chapter, but I’m just too excited to start getting into the meat of the story. Plus I know as well as anyone how hard it can be to get into a story that opens with OCs, and I wanted to give readers the Overwatch characters and drama they came for.

I have to say, it’s really encouraging to see several dozen hits after just a couple days. And the kudos, comments, and bookmarks mean so much. Thank you all for giving Project Bloodhound a chance. I promise, it’s only going to get better from here <3
Chapter Notes

Additional Chapter 3 tags: Distress, Extreme pain, Chemical gas chamber, Transformation, Electricity, Sedation, Non-sexual bondage, Masks/muzzles

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Talon Laboratory, 5 years ago

Jesse was in the testing room again—the one with the gas vents. He hated this place. He hated being studied like he was some sort of lab animal while he endured the pain of his body practically ripping itself apart against his will. And he hated the way his mind slipped through his fingers like sand when it happened. When the guards and technicians showed up to move him, Jesse had quietly hoped they would drag him somewhere else. Before they’d started experimenting on him, they’d tested his limits in all kinds of ways. There were rooms designed to make him endure extreme heat and cold, the pressure of different water levels, even artificially increased gravity. He would have taken any of them over this.

By now Jesse knew the drill. He waited for the cuffs to deactivate, then yanked the muzzle off his face and threw it at the one-way mirror. The mirror was still pristine—not a scratch on it despite hazy memories Jesse had of repeatedly trying to smash through after transforming.

Jesse stood there defiantly, his fists clenched and his jaw tight. Normally this was the time to throw insults while he was still in his right mind, but he’d exhausted just about every creative curse he could think of by now, leaving him with such cunning zingers as “go to hell” and “fuck you” in his dwindling arsenal. Today he decided not to waste his breath. He wasn’t even sure they could hear him, to be honest.

Jesse’s stomach flipped as he heard the vents hiss. He knew this part, too. The way the air began to weigh heavy in his lungs and tingle. The pain of his bones reshaping and his muscles twisting around the new structures. Jesse shut his eyes and took one last deep breath of fresh air, then held it for as long as he could. This accomplished two things: it made him feel like he was a little more in control, resisting until the last second, and when he did finally have to breathe, the air would be heavily saturated, and the change would hit him faster so he didn’t have to endure it as long.

“Don’t fight the change, McCree.” Now that was new. Jesse’s head snapped up at the voice—Reaper, if he had to take a guess. No one was in the room, so there must be an intercom system. No one had ever tried to use it before.

Jesse rolled his eyes at the man hidden behind the mirrored window. He couldn’t last much longer. His lungs were aching. Finally he gasped and choked at the initial shock of the gas. He coughed and gasped again, sucking in another lungful. He felt the burning in his chest settle through his body as his nerves began to light up like sparklers. His skin prickled, and a deep ache settled in his bones as the change began.

“Just let it happen,” Reaper said over the intercom. “You’re tearing yourself apart, McCree. Relax and let the catalyst do its job; it’ll be a lot easier.”
Jesse bared his teeth at the mirror, watching his own reflection as the muscles twitched under his skin. Then the aching blossomed into throbbing pain. Jesse grimaced and threw his arms around his middle.

“This is a part of you now, McCree. Stop resisting it. Trust me.”

Like hell he was going to trust anyone who worked for Talon.

Jesse’s legs shook and then gave out under him. The pain washed over him, threatening to drown him in a way that was becoming far too familiar. Jesse struggled not to scream, because once he started, he wouldn’t stop. He pressed his forehead to the floor as the wave crashed over him again, and he felt his thoughts begin to slip away. Fear and desperation rose up in Jesse’s throat, nearly choking him. The pain flared again, and his mind went white for a moment. Finally, he relented.

As Jesse knelt on the floor, he tried to slow his breathing and let his body relax. It was hard, like trying to stop his teeth from chattering after being out in the snow. Eventually the pain began to ease. The burning faded to an uncomfortable prickling like his whole body had fallen asleep. His limbs twisted and ached, but it didn’t feel like they were being hit with sledgehammers this time around. Jesse watched his hands as fur grew in thick and dark and his nails thickened into claws. In his peripheral he could see his face changing shape, and his teeth ground against each other as they sharpened to points that didn’t quite fit his mouth. Jesse closed his eyes so he didn’t have to watch anymore.

When the transformation finished, Jesse slumped to the floor to catch his breath, exhausted. It was hard to think. His thoughts were fleeting and simple, more instinct than reason. Still, he felt more in control than he ever had before. Normally he couldn’t string two thoughts together; he was in so much pain that he just blindly lashed out, looking for any sort of relief. Jesse still hurt, and he was still plenty mad, but for once he felt like himself.

Jesse waited and listened as the room was vented out, and the gas dissipated. His nose was pressed to the floor; he could pick up faint traces of bleach and something else underneath it in spite of the cleaning. Blood probably. Jesse groaned and laid his head on his arm to get away from the smell. Any minute now they would flush the room with sedatives. He waited quietly.

When the gas poured in, it was thick and green. Jesse frowned and lifted his head. That wasn’t right; the usual stuff didn’t have a color. This stuff was pungent; the smell reminded Jesse of kerosene. He turned to look at the window anxiously. Why was this part of the test different?

“Stay calm,” Reaper reassured over the intercom. “This is normal; You’re usually unconscious when it happens.”

Jesse looked up at the vents dubiously, but stayed on the ground and waited while he counted out slow, even breaths. His nose wrinkled at the smell. The stuff tickled the back of his palate as he breathed it in. As it filled his lungs, Jesse felt a chill settle in his skin. It quickly gnawed its way down to the bone. While it wasn’t pleasant, it soothed the throbbing of his temples at least. Jesse shuddered as he felt his body begin to transform again. So that’s what it was: this was the stuff that made him change back.

Jesse didn’t fight the change. He closed his eyes and let his body go as limp as possible. It took longer for this chemical to do its job. Jesse supposed undoing something always took more work than doing it. Like trying to rub the crease out of a folded piece of paper or heal a broken bone. He felt his own bones shrinking and shifting back into place where they belonged—slowly, like they’d forgotten what they used to look like.
By the time it was over, Jesse felt drained. He pressed his ear to the floor and listened to the air vents hum as they cleaned the room for the technicians to enter safely.

Then the door slid open. There were two men waiting, both on the burlier side. One approached Jesse with a set of maglock restraints.

“Hands behind your back,” the man ordered in a calm but firm voice. Jesse just snorted and lay there. He was sore, tired, and uninterested in doing his captors any favors. The man approached and grabbed his arm while his partner covered him with a stun baton.

“Cuff his hands in front of him,” the intercom announced. The two men looked at each other, then the mirror. Jesse was honestly a little surprised, too. The intercom buzzed to life again. “He was promised a reward if he cooperated. He did a good job today.”

The man shrugged and pulled Jesse’s arms forward, then clapped a maglock on one wrist.

Jesse surged up suddenly and slammed the restraint into the guard’s nose. The man’s hands flew to his face in pain, and in that moment, Jesse brought his elbow down on the back of his neck. The other guard’s baton jabbed into Jesse’s gut, and he recoiled with a shout as several thousand volts of electricity coursed through his body.

Jesse wasn’t done yet—not by a long shot. He backed up to get a little distance from the two guards. He put the injured one between himself and the armed man, then charged and slammed one into the other. His forearm dug into the injured man’s neck, pinning him as well as his partner up against the mirror. Jesse hauled back and delivered several punches to the second man’s ribs while he struggled to get free. The baton slipped from the guard’s hand. Jesse grabbed hold of their heads and slammed them together.

Jesse wasn’t quite sure what his plan had been. He certainly had one, he just hadn’t had time to figure out all the details first. He reasoned he’d get to them when they became relevant. There had to be some kind of failsafe to open the cell from the inside, after all. Maybe one of the two guards had a remote device or a keycard. If not, then reinforcements would come in soon to recover them, and maybe Jesse could overpower someone and slip past.

His plan hadn’t accounted for the sedative they pumped into the room the moment they realized the guards were outmatched. Jesse sank to his knees with a groan as the gas took effect. He’d gotten ahead of himself. It was a good plan, but he should have waited for a better opportunity. He’d never be able to pull a move like that again; they’d be ready for it now. Genji would have scolded him for being impatient.

Jesse tried to stay upright, but his vision was going in and out. Then he was on the floor with no memory of how he got there, and everything faded to black.

Jesse woke up in his cell. The light pierced his closed eyelids like daggers until he couldn’t ignore it anymore, and he finally opened his eyes. He wasn’t sure how long it’d been. He was wearing the muzzle again, and he was back in restraints. But oddly enough, his arms were in front of him. Jesse twisted his hands in the cuffs, surprised by the discovery.

Then Jesse realized he wasn’t alone. From his position on the floor, he had a good view of a set of combat boots. He tilted his head up and looked at Reaper.

“Glad to see you’re awake. The scientists were worried that in the rush they’d used too much sedative.” Reaper glanced away, then back down at Jesse. “That was a stupid thing you did, but I don’t blame you for trying.”
Jesse grunted. He knew it was reckless, but when had that ever stopped him before? He slowly lifted himself up into a sitting position and waited for the lightheadedness to pass. He stared down at his hands, then made a questioning sound and held the cuffs up towards Reaper. Why wasn’t he back in full restraints?

Reaper seemed to understand. “I told you, McCree, I’m not looking to fight you. You earned that.” He gestured to Jesse’s cuffed wrists. “As for your little stunt, I’m going to let it slide just this once. Don’t take my kindness for granted; next time there will be consequences.

“As of today, I’m going to be personally involved in this project. I don’t expect you to like me or the things I tell you to do, but if you want to make it through this, following my orders is your best option. There’s another round of testing tomorrow; you can show me the decision you’ve made then.”

Reaper turned on his heel and left the cell.

Jesse stared down at his hands. He was supposed to make a decision, but did he really have a choice? Now that he knew he could ease his own suffering, could he really choose to continue torturing himself? He didn’t want to give up, but he could only resist for so long.

Jesse curled up and pressed his palms to his face. He ran his fingers over the stitching of the muzzle’s leather straps, then reached up over his head to feel for the buckle. A lock had been added. He hadn’t earned that freedom yet. Jesse dug his fingers under the seams of the mask and let out a whine. He couldn’t keep this up anymore. If he didn’t start bending soon, he was liable to snap. And wasn’t that just the same as being broken by someone else?

The next day was another round of forced transformation, but with a range of weights displayed at one end of the room. Jesse was informed over the intercom that the research team wanted to test the upper limits of his new form’s strength. He’d start at the low end of the weights and work his way up systematically while they tracked his vitals. Reaper asked if he understood what was being asked of him.


Chapter End Notes

I think it’s worth mentioning that while I don’t have a set schedule, I do intend to aim for a weekly update, or as close to that as possible. I’m balancing out revising the next chapter(s) with writing up rough drafts of new chapters to balance out the workload. I’m wrapping up Ch. 11 right now.

Here’s what to look forward to: Next chapter continues where this one leaves off. Things are going to ramp up fast as Reaper takes control of Jesse’s reconditioning. Once Jesse was willing to follow him into hell and back. Now, putting him through hell is the only way to protect him. Reaper might have trained him, but he didn’t teach Jesse all of his tricks.
Talon Laboratory, 5 years ago

When Jesse first started to cooperate, he was rewarded with scraps of his dignity back. The wrist restraints stayed on, but the muzzle was removed. He was given pants. A mat was provided to sleep on. And they’d begun bringing him food instead of using IV infusions.

At first Jesse had eaten with fervor. The IVs had provided his body with everything it needed, but it left his stomach empty; he’d spent a month feeling like he was starving to death. But after several days, Jesse noticed the flavor. Maybe it was his new senses, or maybe the scientists didn’t care if he figured it out, but Jesse could tell they were adding things to the food.

So Jesse stopped eating.

Maybe it was vitamins, he tried to reason. Or extra calories or protein or other nutrients. Jesse’s body was different now and seemed to need more of everything, so it made sense. Even if that wasn’t the case, did it matter? He needed to eat. And the scientists would just find other ways to force their drugs and chemicals into him. But eating meant being complicit in his own experimentation, and he just couldn’t abide that. Besides, a part of Jesse clamored for some form of rebellion—some way to make his captors’ lives more difficult by even the smallest fraction in return for what they were doing to him.

After a few days of Jesse stubbornly refusing to eat, a couple of bruisers who normally escorted him to the testing room showed up to force-feed him. Jesse knew better than to bite or kick—that might mean more restraints again—but he certainly didn’t make it easy for them. When they took their leave, Jesse grinned at them, all teeth, delighting in the struggle even if he’d lost. He sported the fingerprint-shaped bruises on his body with pride. When the next meal came, Jesse refused that, too, and got another fight for his trouble. He knew he wouldn’t win, but every curse, every drop of sweat, every time one of them stumbled and lost their grip on him, it was a small victory.

The next day Reaper came to see him.

Jesse stood up from where he’d been sitting on his mat and watched as Reaper quietly studied the tray of untouched food sitting by the door. He tipped his head in Jesse’s direction, his posture clearly broadcasting a sense of unsurprised disappointment.

“You need to eat, McCree.”

“You need me to eat, you mean.”

“I thought we were past this,” Reaper said. Jesse could hear the exasperation in his voice. There
was a dark edge to it. “Starving yourself won’t accomplish anything. It’ll just leave you weak.”

Jesse squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. “If it pisses you off, then I’d say it accomplishes something. Ya’ll stop tryin’ ta slip stuff in the food like I’m some dumb animal, an’ maybe I’ll change my tune.”

There was a beat of silence.

Reaper let out a sigh. “Have it your way.” He picked up the tray, turned, and left. The quiet hush of the door sealing shut sucked the air right out of Jesse’s lungs. Something in him knew he’d made a grave error.

For the next ten days—or as close as Jesse could figure—the meals stopped. Someone would bring a tray in once in a while, but the only thing on it was a cup of water. Jesse stubbornly ignored the tray for two days before he finally gave in. He expected some sort of smell or aftertaste that would hint at additives, but it seemed to be ordinary water.

Choosing not to eat and being denied food were two very different things: when Jesse had been the one in control, it’d been empowering, but now he could only wait and wonder when he would be allowed to eat again. Maybe being starved wouldn’t have been so bad normally, except Jesse didn’t have a normal metabolism anymore. He sat on his mat for hours at a time, doing his best to ignore his hunger while reminding himself that he was already familiar with the sensation from the IVs. The ache in his stomach wasn’t nearly as bad as the lightheadedness and exhaustion of real starvation, though. Jesse wished he’d gotten into that meditation stuff Genji recommended, but he was just too restless to be any good at it. It would have been useful about now.

On the eleventh day, Reaper showed up again. By then Jesse’s legs felt weak, and no matter how long he managed to sleep, it felt like he hadn’t gotten any rest at all. He was slow to stand when the door opened.

Reaper stood in the doorway. “Follow me,” he ordered. He waited until Jesse started moving before he turned and walked down the hall, trusting Jesse to obey. Jesse stopped outside the cell door and glanced down the opposite hall. After a moment he banished the thought of escape; there was no way he’d make it like this. He turned and followed Reaper.

They went to one of the rooms with gym equipment and banks of computers along the walls. Jesse let a guard remove his manacles—he caught their eye in an unwavering stare until they backed off. A technician came over and began applying sensors to track his vitals. When they were done, Reaper picked up a tray of nodes that looked like another set of sensors but in red instead of white and handed it over to the technician.

“What’re these for?” Jesse asked as the technician applied them over major muscle groups on his body.

“They’re electrodes,” Reaper said as he picked up a small control. “They’re designed to send electrical impulses through your body. Think of it as incentive: we need to know the upper limits of your speed and stamina, and I don’t want you to hold back. Get on the treadmill.”

Jesse hesitantly climbed onto the treadmill at the far end of the room. The belt was cool and textured under his bare feet.

Reaper stood to the side out of the way of the technicians. He lifted the control. “You’re going to run until I say you can stop. If you falter or get off, you’ll be shocked. I’m not going to ease you into this: this thing only has one setting, and you don’t want to feel it, so don’t mess up.”
“No pressure then,” Jesse said dryly. The treadmill began to move and picked up speed until Jesse was running. It held that speed for several minutes before the speed increased suddenly, nearly catching Jesse off-guard. It held there for several more minutes, then sped up until Jesse was nearly sprinting. Despite the hard pace, it held at that speed for twice as long before dropping back down to a jog. After a short rest, it jumped back up again. Normally Jesse would have no trouble keeping up, but his legs had already been shaky before he started running. Now they quaked and threatened to give out under him.

Jesse realized, with a sharp twist in his empty gut, what was really going on. He glanced over at Reaper, who was watching him like a hawk. Jesse clenched his jaw and hissed out a breath through his teeth.

“This ain’t really testing, is it?” Jesse said accusingly. “Yer doin’ this because I wouldn’t eat.”

“Does it matter?” Reaper asked. “The research team will get something useful out of it either way.”

Jesse felt his left foot drag, but recovered without tripping. “How long we gonna do this?”

“For as long as I feel like.”

“You—!” Jesse stumbled. Several thousand volts of electricity surged through his body, making his muscles spasm. He cried out in surprise and threw his hands out to catch the front of the treadmill so he wouldn’t fall. “Sonuvabitch!” he hissed.

Reaper gestured with a hand to one of the scientists, and they lowered the speed a little—just enough for Jesse to get his feet back under himself properly.

Jesse gave up on talking to Reaper. It was a waste of energy. He focused on his form and breathing technique, recalling with a bittersweet pang the laps he used to run when he was first recruited into Overwatch and put through training. He’d had raw skill, which got him in the door, but that wasn’t enough to become an agent. He was expected to keep up with any team he was put in, to know their tactics and radio shorthand and chain of command, to be able to hold his own against an equally trained enemy, and to have discipline. That last part had been especially hard. It had been good for him, though. Character-building. Even running laps in the morning when the sky was still dark, and the grass was wet with dew, and Jesse’s lungs burned as he came up on the back half of his last mile.

The testing went on for hours. Occasionally Jesse tripped, and a short burst of electricity danced between the electrodes. The electrical impulses caused his muscles to lock up, making it harder to recover. A few times he fell; the electricity didn’t stop until he got back on the treadmill. He started getting lightheaded and dizzy. The bottoms of his feet throbbed with each step. His lungs burned. Finally Jesse collapsed. He hit the treadmill and rolled. Electricity coursed through his body as he lay crumpled on the floor, but he just couldn’t pick himself back up; his arms and legs wouldn’t listen to him. He could only lie there convulsing until the pain stopped.

Someone came and took the sensors off. Two other people lifted Jesse onto a gurney and quickly checked his vitals. He lay there quietly and let them work, too sore to do anything else.Then Reaper was at his side. Jesse turned his head away so he wouldn’t have to look at that blank mask.

“Th’ fuck you want now?” Jesse asked hoarsely.

Reaper let out a low, unhappy noise. “This didn’t have to happen, McCree. You did it to yourself.
Remember that.

Jesse tilted his head back towards Reaper, and his lip twisted. “Funny, I’m pretty sure the switch was in your hand, not mine.”

“If you’d eaten, you wouldn’t be exhausted right now. You wouldn’t have fallen, and I wouldn’t have to punish you. Any time I hurt you, McCree, it’ll be because you made me. I promise you that.”

***

Reaper was true to his word. He never hurt Jesse unless he stepped out of line. But when he did, he made sure it counted. Which, in a sick way, provided quite a bit of data for the scientists about just how much Jesse could endure and how quickly he healed. Over the next few months they learned how long he could hold his breath underwater. How quickly his bones knit back together. How many days Jesse could go without sleep. It wore at him in ways he didn’t expect. The monotony was mind-numbing, broken up with unpredictable testing sessions that left Jesse drained. And not just physically.

Reaper showed up to more and more of the tests—or rather, training sessions. The tests had shifted in focus recently from just studying the extent of Jesse’s abilities to making him perform combat and military exercises. Under Reaper’s seemingly omnipotent eye, Jesse became hyper-vigilant to every mistake he made. Sometimes Reaper’s disapproval meant the session went longer or started over again. Or it might mean a beating then and there. Sometimes the rules of the exercise would change, such as the amount of force permitted, but Jesse wasn’t necessarily warned. Worse still, sometimes Jesse thought he’d done all right only to find that the punishment had just been delayed until later.

Knowing what was happening didn’t make it any easier for Jesse to endure. He knew the signs of psychological abuse. He understood that Reaper was feeding on his insecurity and fear to train the behavior he wanted into Jesse. But Jesse’s goal had long since shifted from defiance to self-preservation, and that meant giving in to Talon’s demands little by little even if it left him sick to his stomach when he was alone in his cell.

The worst part was sometimes Jesse had to remind himself he was being tortured. Alongside the punishments were rewards for performing well. The last of his manacles had been removed: Reaper trusted him not to fight the technicians anymore. Sometimes meals included small treats, like fresh fruit. And over time Jesse’s cell had slowly changed from a sterile white box into a room. His sleeping mat was on a frame now with sheets and a pillow. Instead of being hosed down against his will, Jesse had been provided a water basin, soap, and hand towels to clean himself. He had two sets of sweat pants and shirts now and was expected to change each day and set the soiled clothes beside his breakfast tray after eating.

One day, Reaper presented Jesse with a book. *Metamorphoses* by Ovid. Hardly the sort of reading material Jesse normally went for, and more than a little cruel considering its theme, but it provided him an escape from the hours of mindless boredom in a silent room with lights that never dimmed. The translation was antiquated, but Jesse patiently worked his way through the metered verses as they told stories of women turning into trees, men turning into beasts, dragons’ teeth turning into armies, and suffering turning into bitter vengeance.

Jesse was in the middle of reading Perseus’s battle in the palace of Cepheus when a guard came to retrieve him. He folded down the corner of the page and shoved the book under his pillow, then followed the guard. Jesse had begun to learn the layout of the building. They turned left, passed two halls, turned left again, and Jesse knew before they were halfway there that he was headed to one of the combat rooms.
He was right. He’d been in this room several times before. It was decent-sized and occasionally sported large cement blocks to simulate the cover of urban terrain. Today the room was empty except for the four Talon agents waiting inside. Jesse looked them over. He took in the night-vision goggles, kevlar armor, and batons.

Jesse smiled, but there was no warmth to the gesture. “Wish someone had told me this was a formal affair. Here I am in nothing but my sweats while all you fine folk are dressed for a dance. So, who’s leadin’ and who’s followin’? I’m fine either way: I’m a flexible man.”

The door shut as the guard left, and then the lights went out.

“So that’s how it’s gonna be,” Jesse said. His eyes strained in the dark, but there was nothing to see. The world was pitch black. Jesse let out a harsh breath through his nose and closed his eyes. He stayed still as he listened to shuffling around him. The hard, blunt end of a baton jabbed into his ribs, and Jesse sidestepped away. From the other side someone reached out and hit him across the shoulder. Jesse grunted and swung in the direction of the blow, but his arm connected with nothing but air.

Jesse had been in unfair fights before, but this was hardly even a fight. A fight implied blows being exchanged, but Jesse couldn’t lay a finger on his attackers. They dodged his swings easily as he tracked their footsteps and tried to engage. Batons landed across his back and arms, but when he turned to engage, the assailant was gone.

A blow struck the back of Jesse’s knee. It wasn’t a hard hit, but Jesse took advantage of the opportunity. He dropped to his hands and knees with a shout and stayed there, listening for sounds with his head ducked down. He could smell them, too, now that he paid attention. At first he just smelled sweat. But as he focused in on it, he could pick out four distinct scents. One had more deodorant on. Another had brushed their teeth recently. The one wearing aftershave came up behind him, footsteps nearly silent.

Jesse threw a hand out and grabbed hold of someone’s ankle. He bared his teeth in a grin and yanked. The agent dropped to the ground, then kicked at Jesse’s hand with their free foot. Jesse yanked the agent in and climbed on top. He couldn’t see to block the baton or the agent’s fist; he ignored them in favor of ripping the agent’s night-vision goggles off. He threw the goggles away, then began punching the agent in the face.

An arm wrapped around Jesse’s neck, and he was hauled off his opponent. He swung an elbow as hard as he could and felt it connect with his attacker’s ribs. The kevlar protected them some, but he still heard the air rush out of their lungs. Jesse took hold of the arm around his neck, shifted his grip to the wrist and hand, then twisted until the agent let go. Still holding on, Jesse let reflex move him into a pin as he twisted the agent’s hand. They dropped to their knees to keep him from breaking their arm.

A baton struck Jesse across the shoulders. He growled and twisted the arm in his hands harder until the agent on their knees cried out. The baton hit him across the arms next, forcing him to let go. Jesse shook off the numbness with a hiss as the Talon agents regrouped. Jesse could hear them circling him well out of reach. They were rattled now. They weren’t as in control as they’d thought.

“Come on,” Jesse taunted, his voice low.

It was getting easier to figure out where the agents were. Jesse recognized the pattern of footfalls. He figured out in his head how close they had to get before they could hit him and guarded accordingly. If two of them tried to approach from opposite directions, Jesse would suddenly surge towards one of the others, breaking the maneuver and forcing them all to defend. He could hear them...
breathing now as they became winded. He wasn’t even out of breath.

Then suddenly the rules changed. Something sharp dragged across Jesse’s arm, cutting deep. He yelped and jumped back. He clapped a hand over his arm in shock. The scent of his own blood filled his nose, sending a chill through him. He felt it hot and wet under his fingers. The torn flesh burned. Jesse caught the sound of a boot scuffing to his right and pulled away, but not fast enough. Again a knife bit into him, catching him across his upper arm. Another knife dragged down his other arm again as Jesse accidentally dodged into range of one of the agents.

Jesse retreated until he hit a wall, then put it to his back and threw his hands up in a defensive stance. He heard the agents approaching. Something shifted inside of Jesse. He wasn’t sure what it was, but it felt a bit like a spring coiling in his chest, hot and familiar. A pricking sensation rolled across his skin. The tang of blood was so strong in his nose that he could taste it.

One of the agents advanced on Jesse. The smell of mint toothpaste and sweat combined with the soft rustle of fatigues, and suddenly Jesse knew exactly where they were. He caught the wrist holding the knife and twisted. He felt something crunch under his fingers, and the agent screamed. Jesse should have stopped there, but he didn’t. Whatever had been curling in his chest snapped free and washed over him in a violent surge of white-hot fury. It made him pull the agent in, their feet dragging across the concrete as they struggled to pull away. He swung the agent around and slammed them into the wall. He yanked them close with a growl, then slammed them forward again with all his strength. His hands found their neck, and he squeezed, cutting off their pained cry.


Jesse snarled. The sound was foreign—inhuman—in his ears. His hands tightened. He felt boots kicking his shins. A hand scratching at his face. The baton struck again and again, but he hardly noticed. Then the body in his hands went limp, and Jesse realized he’d gone too far.

A cold terror settled in as Jesse dropped the agent to the ground and backed up. Someone shouted for the exercise to end, and the lights came on, blinding Jesse. He shut his eyes against the piercing light, but not before he saw the crumpled body on the ground. He couldn’t lie to himself: he didn’t feel a lick of guilt over killing a Talon agent. What scared him was the punishment that would surely follow.

Jesse didn’t resist as rough hands forced him to his knees and pulled his hands behind his back. Restraints clamped down over his wrists. He kept his eyes closed as medics rushed in; he heard them moving around the fallen Talon agent, checking for vitals and attempting to perform CPR.

“Move the subject to holding. Get him out of here now,” someone ordered. “And someone notify Reaper.”

Jesse had a right to be afraid of the consequences of what he’d done. In holding he was forced to strip down before being secured with a full set of maglock restraints. He didn’t fight it until the muzzle was brought in. They held him down and forced it over his head, then locked it in place. He was dragged back to his cell, which had been emptied in his absence. He was back to square one again. But it didn’t end there.

Jesse was left alone for several hours in total silence. Then, from somewhere in the ceiling, a noise started up. Jesse twisted his head to look, but he couldn’t find where the speaker was located. The noise began as a soft static, then rose in pitch and volume until it became unbearable. There was a piercing undertone hidden inside the static that made Jesse’s ears ring. The noise was so overwhelming that he couldn’t think. He tried to scream through the muzzle, but he couldn’t hear his
own muffled voice over the white noise. With his arms behind his back, Jesse couldn’t cover his ears either. He pressed the side of his head against the cold cement, desperate to block out even a little of the noise.

When Jesse had joined Blackwatch, he went through interrogation survival training. However, while the course had covered music torture among the other methods that might be used, going through it was a different beast entirely. Jesse’s brain struggled to find any sort of pattern in the hissing and buzzing, but there was none. It flooded his ears and overloaded his senses. It obliterated every thought in his head except the one that begged over and over for this to end.

Technicians came in at times, wearing protective earmuffs—two people to hold Jesse still while a third administered IV fluids. Jesse thought that maybe each visit marked a day, but he couldn’t be sure. They might be visiting more often to make him think more time had passed, or they might be stringing him out for longer than he realized. He wasn’t sure which was worse.

Then all at once the noise stopped. The silence was nearly as deafening as the white noise had been. The ghost of it echoed in Jesse’s ears.

The lights of the cell dimmed. They’d never done that before; Jesse didn’t even know they could. He heard the door open, and Reaper stepped inside.

Jesse’s stomach lurched. It wasn’t over yet. He watched in quiet dread as Reaper approached and knelt down beside him. Reaper reached out, and Jesse squeezed his eyes shut. The hand rested against the side of his head. He felt the gloved palm against his temple and the fingers in his hair, the touch strangely intimate. Jesse looked up at Reaper from the corner of his eye and made a questioning sound.

“I know you didn’t mean to kill my agent,” Reaper said. “I’m not mad. I know that even after all the training, you don’t have perfect control. Accidents happen. But you still killed him, so I had to punish you.”

Jesse felt the hand stroke through his hair, and a lump formed in his throat. Reaper continued, “I want to be able to take you out in the field, but I can’t have you making mistakes like the one you made last week.” God, had it been a week? “This can’t happen again, McCree. Do you understand?” The words were spoken gently, as one might speak to a child. The sharp metal caps of Reaper’s gloves grazed lightly along Jesse’s scalp.

Jesse tried to answer. Instead, a sob tore its way out of his throat. It was a mistake. He hadn’t meant to do it. He was so tired. Against his will, Jesse began to cry, shame flooding him at not being able to hold back any longer.

With surprising ease, Reaper lifted Jesse up into a sitting position and cradled him against his chest. Jesse didn’t want to be held like this. But he didn’t want to be alone either. The arm around his shoulders was an anchor holding him secure in a storm as Jesse broke down and cried.

Jesse felt the muzzle slip off his face. Then the maglock restraints disengaged from his ankles. And then his hands were free. Jesse let his arms go limp at his sides as he sobbed and gasped for air. His shoulders ached. He felt tears streaking his cheeks, tracing lines down into his unkempt beard and catching in the corners of his mouth. He let Reaper press his head to his chest and listened as Reaper’s heart beat an unnaturally slow pattern.

“It’s okay now, Jesse, I’ve got you,” Reaper said. The use of his first name made Jesse jump a little. The arms held him tighter. “You’re going to have to earn my trust again. Do you think you can do that?”
Jesse swallowed thickly and nodded. He lifted a weak arm to wipe at his nose with the back of his hand, then swiped his fingers over the cold tear tracks on his face.

“Good. Sit up for me now.”

Jesse shifted his weight off of Reaper and watched him stand up. Reaper went back to the door and returned with a blanket and a tray. He set the food tray down beside Jesse before wrapping the blanket around his shoulders.

“We’ll start simple. Eat and rest. Tomorrow you’ll run a combat simulation in the catalyst room, and I expect you to follow my orders to the letter.” Jesse was quiet, his gaze turned down so he wouldn’t have to make eye contact. Reaper reached out and lifted his chin. “Show me you understand.”

Jesse hesitated. His throat was tight. He swallowed to clear it before answering, “I understand. Sir.”

Satisfied, Reaper stood up again and left.

Jesse stayed curled up, unmoving, for a long time. Long enough for the steam of the hot meal on the tray to fade. He waited for the lights overhead to brighten or the noise to come back, but they didn’t. Finally, with a shaking hand, Jesse started picking up bits of food and forcing them into his mouth. He hardly tasted it. He ate everything off the tray, then crawled to the corner of the darkened room and curled up to rest.

Sleep didn’t come immediately. Jesse was left to his thoughts, which swirled madly in his head now that he could actually think. He felt hollow inside; he knew that he’d lost something important that he couldn’t quite name—a battle he couldn’t afford to lose, or maybe a part of himself, which explained the empty feeling in his chest. He laid his palms flat over his sternum and felt the faint, fluttering pulse of his heartbeat. He thought about the sluggish rhythm of Reaper’s heart when he’d held Jesse. The man really was more dead than alive.

Would that be his fate, too? Jesse was becoming something—had already become something. He didn’t know what it was, but it scared him.

Chapter End Notes

I think it's safe to say that this is the darkest chapter the story will have, for those of you who had a hard time getting through it. For those of you who delighted in Jesse's torture, though, know that there's still quite a bit more to come—albeit a more subtle slow-burn—as Jesse struggles with his identity and mental state at the hands of Talon.

I picked the book *Metamorphoses* by Ovid for a reason. Largely because nearly every famous novel that exists deals with resistance, justice, revenge, survival, and triumph. Not ideas any captor would want to foster in someone they’re reconditioning. By contrast, *Metamorphoses*, for those of you who don't know, is a collection of Greek poetry describing stories of transformation, which is something Jesse would rather not think about. Most of these stories end in tragedy and suffering: sexual assault, punishment for hubris, cruel destiny, gods lying and manipulating and using humans to their own ends, etc. There's a few kind gems, like Pygmalion, but they're few and far between. (Jesse has one story in particular he likes, which will be brought up
eventually.) And so, for thematic purposes, in-character practicality, and that one story, I chose *Metamorphoses*.

Finally, this detail might not have been obvious, so I think it's worth pointing out: as far as Jesse or Talon know, Jesse's transformations require a chemical catalyst. He's enhanced, but he *should not* be able to transform without the gas. Clearly, they were wrong, although they don't quite realize it yet...

Next chapter, we will return to a modest suburban home in Albuquerque where Jesse has somehow managed to find himself safe and among family. But how safe can he really be, knowing the people that are pursuing him and the lengths they're willing to go to?
Albuquerque, 3 years ago

Jesse sat on a floral print couch, bent over with his arm resting on his knee. Ruth was upstairs digging through the linen closet for clean sheets to put on the guest bed, having left Jesse to wait in the living room. The windows were cracked open to the night air, and the curtains billowed softly in the breeze, lacy white against warm orange walls.

On a mantle at the far side of the room, a few candles with the faces of saints on them glowed with faint, flickering lights. Jesse had watched them for long enough now that he’d found a distinct pattern in the dancing light: they were electric, but very convincing. There was one of a Roman soldier pouring water over a fire and one of an angel in battle with a devil. Nearly all of them had their eyes closed or their gaze turned down. The one labeled Santa Barbara, though, seemed to stare at Jesse. She wore a crown like the battlements of a castle and held a sword and cup in her hands. Jesse got the distinct feeling she disapproved of his being there.

Jesse could hear low talking in the dining room. Ruth’s little girl Annie and their neighbor—Maxine, was it?—were in the other room finishing up Annie’s homework. Ruth had introduced him briefly before she vanished to set up for her unexpected guest. Annie was nice enough, but she clearly didn’t know how to feel about her new uncle who had seemingly appeared out of thin air. Jesse was in the same boat, if he had to be honest.

The news was playing on TV. A sharply dressed black man sitting behind a desk had just shared the updated mortality and injury statistics of last week’s explosion. The authorities had gathered information on what caused the explosion and were optimistic about their leads, but no specifics could be given. The reason the apartment building had been targeted had yet to be determined, but inquiries were being made.

Jesse stared at the news ticker running along the bottom of the screen without reading it. Guilt curled in his gut. He knew what had happened that night: it was his fault. He’d been careless.

It had been several months since Jesse escaped Talon and went into hiding. He put his considerable Blackwatch training to work covering his tracks: he changed his patterns and his habits, picked destinations at random, and threw Talon red herrings like he was selling fish at Pike Street Market. At one point he accessed some old bank accounts he’d used for undercover work and never closed out properly (he never had been good about post-mission paperwork) and spent the money on tickets for three different buses, then walked five days to the nearest town and hitchhiked from there. He was particularly proud of that little trick.

Jesse thought he was in the clear, but somewhere along the way he’d slipped up, he knew that now. Maybe he’d accidentally looked up at a security camera, or maybe someone recognized him from Overwatch and mentioned him online. When he got the feeling someone might be watching
him, he didn’t take it as seriously as he should have: his instincts screamed at him all the time nowadays about little things that might or might not be threats, making him paranoid over nothing. He brushed it off as nerves. Too bad that time his instincts had been right.

They broke into the apartment in the dead of night: a detail of six armed Talon agents in state of the art gear with camouflaging and night-vision enabled ballistic masks—real pros outfitted to take down a target with super human strength quickly and quietly. Which made it all the more embarrassing that, for all their precaution getting the door open, they still managed to trip the alarm on the door Jesse had fashioned out of a chip bag clip, a battery, and a buzzer.

The first two agents rushed the bedroom, hoping to get the drop on Jesse still, but the bed was empty. Then from behind the slatted closet door a burst of bullets ripped through the room, tearing into them. Jesse kicked the door open as he swung the revolver’s cylinder open and reloaded.

The other four agents started firing through the open doorway. Jesse ducked out of sight, then grabbed one of the downed agents by the leg and pulled the body over. On their belt was a set of smoke canisters and flash bangs. Jesse unhooked the smoke canister, pulled the pin, and then leaned around the door to throw it. It rolled to a stop at his attackers’ feet, spinning and releasing thick gray smoke.

Jesse heard scattered footsteps as two of the agents retreated back to the kitchenette while the other two advanced out of the smoke towards the bedroom. Still kneeling, Jesse leveled his revolver and shot out the first agent’s legs as they stepped through. They dropped with a shout, twisted towards Jesse as they stumbled, and squeezed off a round that clipped Jesse’s shoulder. He grit his teeth and fired a bullet into the agent’s neck between the ballistic mask and vest.

Jumping to his feet, Jesse threw his shoulder into the open bedroom door, slamming it into the fourth agent. He grabbed hold of their rifle. The agent surged forward, trying to break his hold. There was a sharp retort from the rifle, and Jesse felt his knee explode with pain. A choked scream tore from his throat, and he lost his grip on the gun, but he grabbed the agent by the shoulders and pulled them down as he fell. He rolled them both and climbed on top despite the pain of his shattered knee. The agent shoved their rifle in front of themselves like a shield and tried to push Jesse off, but they couldn’t budge him. He put his weight down on the rifle so it cut across their throat, choking them, then yanked the combat knife from their belt and buried it in their chest between the armor plating.

Four down. Two to go.

Jesse pulled the knife out and picked up his revolver with his free hand, then crawled over to the cover of the dresser. The sleeve of a shirt dangled from on top of the dresser. Jesse pulled it down, twisted the shirt up into a bandage, and hastily tied it over his bleeding leg. The pressure made the pain worse, but at least he wouldn’t die. His gun belt was on the floor next to his boots. He pulled them over and put them on hurriedly, then slipped his revolver in its holster.

Jesse closed his eyes and listened for the two assailants in the main room. With his genetic enhancements, Jesse could hear a pin drop if he wanted to right now. What he heard was the soft hiss and crackle of the radio earpieces on the dead bodies.

Jesse reached over and pulled the wire from the stabbed agent’s ear. A voice whispered over the line: “Status report… I need a status report now.”

Jesse smirked and unclipped the tactical throat mic from around the agent’s neck. He pressed the mic to his throat and rumbled, “Got yer buddies right here. Why don’t you come join ‘em?” The apartment was small enough he could just shout, but where was the fun in that?
There was silence over the line. Then: “TOE has changed. QRF move in.” Jesse recognized the acronyms. Terms of engagement have changed. Quick reactionary force move in. The kid gloves were off and a second team was being called in for assistance. Jesse wasn’t looking for a second round—one was plenty, thanks. He needed to take these agents out fast and find an exit before their backup arrived.

Jesse made an educated guess at where the two agents might be standing for the most cover from the bedroom door. Then he picked up one of the Talon agents’ rifles and fired blindly through the wall. He emptied the clip, then jumped to his feet and lunged through the doorway. He tugged and rolled to the cover of the coffee table, which he hurriedly flipped over.

The smoke hanging in the air might have obscured Jesse’s exact position, but the agents’ bullets ripped through the sofa like tissue and bored holes through the coffee table. With enough ammunition, they didn’t really need to aim. That was fine: Jesse didn’t plan on staying put long.

Jesse focused on the pounding of his heart, the blood rushing in his ears, and the adrenaline singing in his veins. He pictured a licking flame in his chest and reached out to stoke the fire. The heat spread through his body with practiced ease, the pricking in his muscles familiar. Jesse held it there. Unchecked, the fire would burn through him down to the bones, and there’d be no stopping a full transformation.

The bullets sounded like grenades in Jesse’s ears as they left the rifle barrels and zipped past him. The air was acrid from the smoke. Jesse could taste it on his tongue as he licked his lips. Show time.

The agents shouted and dropped to the ground as the coffee table flew in their direction. Jesse followed it a second later, vaulting over the couch and rushing the agent closest to him. He threw him into the kitchen counter, grabbed his rifle, and looped the shoulder strap around the agent’s neck. The agent shoved him away, but Jesse held tight to the strap and used his own momentum to swing the agent around in a wide arc. The Talon agent went crashing into the dining table and chairs. He didn’t get back up again.

Jesse spun to face the last agent—her rifle was trained on his chest. She was just far enough away that Jesse didn’t think he could close the distance in time.

“Surrender or I kill you,” the agent ordered.

Jesse gave her a slow, easy smile as his hands lowered to his sides. “Surrender’s still on the table, huh? Mighty kind of you, but how ‘bout option C where you just let me go an’ no one else gets hurt?”

“Stop moving!” the agent snapped. Jesse froze, his hand hovering close to his gun.

Jesse leveled a dark look at the agent. “You don’t want to go toe to toe with me, partner. You may have me in your crosshairs, but I’m still faster than you.”

To her credit, the agent didn’t waver. “Go for that gun and I’ll drop you.”

Something moving in the corner of Jesse’s eye caught his attention. Against his better judgment, he looked.

There was someone standing on the roof of the building across the street holding some sort of launcher on their shoulder. Blue-gray smoke drifted in the night air behind them. And flying across the street towards Jesse’s apartment window was an RPG.

With less than a second to act, Jesse let instinct carry him as he leapt toward the agent in front of
him, knocked her gun aside, and wrapped his arms around her. He twisted to put her between himself and the rocket. Glass shattered as the RPG breached the window, and then the world was nothing but light and sound as Jesse was thrown backwards.

A hand tapped Jesse’s knee. He was back in Ruth’s living room. The bright-eyed little girl Ruth had introduced as Annie stood next to Jesse, her expression one of concern.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Fine, darlin’. Why do you ask?”

Annie shrugged. “You’ve been real quiet, and you seemed sad.” She looked at the TV. The news had switched to talking about sports. She looked back up at Jesse. “Are you hungry? We have pizza in the fridge still.”

Jesse started to decline, but then he remembered he hadn’t eaten dinner. Neither had Ruth. He stood up and headed for the kitchen. “Sure, let’s heat some of that up. You eat already?”

“Yeah, but I can always eat pizza.”

“Alright. Some for you an’ me an’ yer mama then. What about your neighbor?”

“She left,” Annie said. “You didn’t notice?”

“I guess not,” Jesse said as he ran his hand through his hair. “Got lost in thought.”

“I do that a lot, too.”

Jesse started the oven and laid the leftover pizza on a greased pan while Annie sat at the computer one room over working on her school project. Jesse took a moment to look around. the kitchen reminded him of Gabriela’s place. The walls were yellow, the tiles of the backsplash were blue, and there was a tortilla press in the corner next to the coffee maker. Next to the stove was a jar full of wooden spoons and spatulas. Ruth kept a bowl for fruit in the middle of the breakfast counter; it was filled with fresh apricots that let off a faint, ripe aroma.

The oven beeped as it finished preheating, and Jesse slid the pan in. “Annie, you should go get yer mom and tell her to come eat,” Jesse called. “Pizza’ll only take a few minutes.”

Annie didn’t respond right away, so Jesse crossed the kitchen and stepped into the little office in back. Annie had some pictures open on the computer screen, and she was scrutinizing them with a face that was far too serious for someone her age. She turned in the chair to face Jesse.

“Uncle Jesse?”

“Uh, yeah?”

Annie looked a little unsure. “Are you the Jesse?”

“I don’t quite follow, sugar.”

Annie glanced at whatever was on her screen, then back to Jesse. She seemed more determined now. “Are you Jesse McCree the superhero? From Overwatch?”

“I, uh.” Jesse leaned over to look at the computer screen. Annie had a picture open from an award ceremony. Jesse was farthest from the camera, hat in hand. Gabe had made him shave for the photo. Jesse rocked back on his heels and rubbed at his neck. “I wouldn’t say I’m any sorta superhero,” he
finally said.

Annie lit up and bounced in her chair. “But you were in Overwatch! That’s so cool. I’m learning about you guys right now for history class.”

“Are ya now?”

“Yeah. Do you think you could tell me about it? It’d really help. I gotta write about the Omnic Crisis, but there’s just so much, it’s hard to know where to start.”

“Honey, I ain’t that old. The Omnic Crisis was over well before I joined Overwatch.”

“You still know more about it than me. Please, I can’t figure all of this out on my own,” Annie begged.

Jesse considered his options. “I’ll make you a deal, darlin’. I’ll help you with your paper, but you can’t say I told you.”

“I gotta cite my sources, though,” Annie protested.

“You can make up a name fer me. The teacher won’t know the difference. But—look, this is important, Annie.” Jesse knelt down beside the chair. “There’s some bad folks who’re lookin’ for me, and I don’t want them coming here.”

Annie pursed her lips and furrowed her brow. “Are they mad cuz you were in Overwatch? Are you undercover?”

“Something like that,” Jesse said with a nod. “You go tellin’ people I’m here, and it could put you and your mama in danger. That’s the last thing I want. So, can this stay between us?”

Annie nodded. “I can keep a secret. So that means you’ll help me with my paper?”

“It’s a deal, partner.” Jesse stuck out his hand, and Annie shook it excitedly.

The oven timer went off.

“There’s food. Go get your mama and come eat,” Jesse said, shooing Annie along with a wave of his hand. His attention was drawn back to the photo on the computer screen. It’d only been a few years since it was taken, but he looked so young in that picture. The world had been a different place then: he could see it in his own eyes. Looking at the faces of the people he once called his friends, Jesse felt an ache in his chest.

The oven timer rang again, and Jesse tore himself away from the image to go pull out the tray.

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Ruth and Jesse stood on one side of the kitchen counter with pizza in hand while Annie sat on a bar stool on the other side sipping a glass of milk; she’d practically inhaled her own pizza.

“Paper plates were a good idea,” Ruth said approvingly.

“Seemed silly to get dishes dirty so late at night,” Jesse said with a shrug. “I’ll take care of that pan, by the way.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” Ruth picked up a stray slice of bell pepper from her plate and ate it. “In the morning we’ll have to talk about your plans.”
“For what?”

“How long you’re staying, what you need to get from your place, where you want to start therapy for your arm,” Ruth listed off.

“Oh.” Jesse set his pizza down on the plate. “I don’t reckon I got much stuff to get after the explosion an’ all.” He probably wouldn’t be able to recover much of it anyways without drawing attention from the investigators.

Ruth looked surprised and then sad as she ducked her head. “Right. I suppose not. Your apartment was pretty close then?”

“Smack dab in the middle.” Jesse’s tone was light, as if he weren’t talking about nearly being blown up.

Ruth grimaced. “You’re lucky to be alive.”

“Don’t I know it. Anyways, I suppose I’ll need a ride to the store to buy some essentials. Clothes, too.”

“I don’t work until the afternoon tomorrow. We can get that done. I need to pick up more groceries anyways if you’re staying with us long.”

Jesse scratched at his beard and didn’t make eye contact with his sister. “I think the sooner I roll out the better, to be honest. Not that I don’t want to spend time with you, but it’s for the best.”

“As a nurse, I really don’t advise that,” Ruth said. “You need time to heal—and to come to terms with what happened.” She looked purposefully at Jesse’s left side. He looked purposefully anywhere else. The less he thought about it the better. He felt off-balance and vulnerable. When he looked at it, the empty space where his arm should be didn’t quite make sense in his head.

“I’ve healed plenty. An’ the rest can wait ’til later.”

“Jesse—”

“No. Listen, Ruth, I can’t give you all the details, but surely you can piece enough of ‘em together to figure this out for yerself. You know what I used to do and the kinda enemies I made. That explosion was in my apartment. It was intended for me. Maybe they think I’m dead, maybe not, but they’re gonna look for me either way. They know that a smart man would put as much distance ’tween himself an’ here as possible, so staying with you a few days is a smart move, but the longer I stay here, the more I put you at risk.”

Ruth was silent. She looked at her plate, then set it down on the counter with Jesse’s. She rubbed at the corners of her eyes. “They might not show up. Like you said, they might think you’re dead.”

“That’s not a gamble I’m willing to take,” Jesse said. “Not when it comes to you and your little girl.”

“But what about you?” Ruth looked up at Jesse. She looked sad and tired, but her shoulders were squared for a fight. “Your life matters, too. You’re trying to protect us, but who’s protecting you? Stay with us, just for a while.”

Jesse shook his head. “That ain’t—”

Ruth stomped her foot. “Damnit Jesse, you’re so stubborn! I haven’t seen you in years, but you’re
the same damn mule-headed man you’ve always been.” Ruth’s hands were balled into fists at her sides. “You can’t do this on your own. Not anymore. Just let me help!”

Jesse flinched and started to say something about doing fine on his own, but the words died on his tongue. He rubbed at the side of his face.

Annie set her glass down with a clink and wiped the milk off her mouth with the back of her hand. “We’ll keep you safe, Uncle Jesse. It’ll be okay.”

Jesse sighed and turned to Ruth. “I’m not gonna win this one, am I?” Ruth fixed him with a steady look. Jesse felt his resolve crumbling as she stared him down. “… All right, fine.” Jesse threw his hand up, then reached for his pizza. “But just a few weeks, until I figure something out. Okay?”

“Okay,” Ruth agreed, her tone and her expression softening.

This was a bad idea, and Jesse knew it, but he was just so damn tired. It wasn’t too much to ask for somewhere quiet to lay his head for a bit, was it? A place where he could pretend he might be safe, just for a little while? No one could fault him that. And he’d only stay a week or two. Then he’d be gone.

Chapter End Notes

A note about the candles: Ruth’s candles include Saint Florian (patron saint of firefighters), Saint Michael (protector of homes and loved ones), and Saint Barbara (patron of those in dangerous lines of work, especially dealing with fire and explosives such as artillerymen, miners, and firemen). Some candles of St. Barbara include prayers that she “confuse and keep away those wicked, miserable people seeking to do harm” and to act as a protector.

Fun fact: the tripwire alarm is something you can actually look up online and make if you’re so inclined.

As far as Terms of Engagement, the agents were sent in to capture Jesse alive if possible. When TOE changed, the second team was given permission to use any force necessary. In case anyone thought it weird that a Talon agent would fire a rocket into a room with another agent still active inside.

It’s enjoyable to be several chapters ahead and then look back on these first ones as I edit them for posting, and to see how the characters have developed. Ruth is beginning to show—and will continue to develop into—a figure that, while practical, will also dig in her heels and take risks for the sake of others. She’s stubborn and loud when she wants to be: an excellent foil to Jesse who’s lost a bit of that spark and needs someone else to be strong while he recovers.

Next Chapter: We return again to the depths of the lab where Reaper sought to break and recondition Jesse into a field asset for Talon, to a moment in time where they both learned something new—and dangerous—about Jesse.
Talon Lab, 5 years ago

It had been several weeks since the incident in the combat room. Jesse had assumed Talon wouldn’t trust him to be alone with another one of their agents again for a while, but it turned out he was wrong. Nearly every day someone came to get him for combat training. The sessions were harder and longer, and the normal exercises quickly escalated into small-scale war games. Jesse found himself being put through his paces as he hunted down targets in a maze of metal paneling, held off agents with plasma pulse weapons, and even ran a building breach simulation where he was teamed up with a handler against a squad of eight.

The training was discomforting, not because it was hard, but because Jesse recognized Talon’s training methods from his time in Overwatch. While more intense than he remembered, Jesse knew he’d done all of these same exercises when he was in recruit training. Alone in his cell, Jesse had too much time to think about it: team-building games of capture-the-flag, marching while wearing a 50 pound pack, obstacle courses in the late August heat—Talon’s training was just similar enough to make Jesse remember and just different enough to make the similarity hurt.

One day Reaper came to get Jesse after a medical checkup. Jesse had just spent the last hour sitting on a medical table letting doctors take his vitals, do blood-work, and administer testosterone—they’d kept him off it at first, but now that he was out of the experimentation phase, they needed to keep his hormones regulated. His health was important to them now.

When Reaper walked in, Jesse straightened up. Reaper had been personally handling Jesse’s training more and more lately, but it was still unusual that he’d show up just to take Jesse back to his cell.

“Is he cleared to leave yet?” Reaper asked the doctor in charge.

The doctor pursed her lips and glanced over at Jesse. “If you need him right now, then you can take him. He’s scheduled for a bone density test, but it can wait until tomorrow.”

“Good.” Reaper picked up Jesse’s discarded shirt from the nearby counter and threw it at him. “Let’s go, McCree. You’ve got a solo sparring match scheduled.”

Jesse tugged his shirt over his head and hopped off the table. He fell into step behind Reaper as they walked.

The halls were empty. The sound of Jesse’s bare feet and Reaper’s boots echoed softly. Jesse chewed at his lip until it stung, then decided to risk speaking up. “Been a while since you had me go up against someone one-on-one. Who ’m I fighting?”
“Me.”

“You, sir?” Now that was something new. He’d never gone up against Reaper before.

“I want to see your progress, so who better to test you?” Reaper stopped at a door and unlocked it. He ushered Jesse into the small room with a wave of his hand.

The floor of the room was covered in a red mat with a white circle marked on it for wrestling. One wall was taken up by a floor-to-ceiling mirror that was most likely shatterproof. A freestanding punching bag was shoved in the corner.

“I’ll give you a few minutes to stretch,” Reaper said. “Let me know when you’re ready.”

When they began fighting, Jesse was struck by the similarity between Reaper’s style and those rare times when he’d sparred with his commander in Blackwatch. If Jesse was slow to learn a technique, or couldn’t figure out for himself how to counter a move, Reyes liked to step in to practice with him personally. He used an altered military combat form that favored going on the offensive, forcing his opponent into a series of counter moves until they made a mistake or wore down. It was effective. Reaper was similar in that respect, but he wasn’t nearly as kind as Jesse now realized Reyes had been. Reaper came at him hard and fast, ruthless in his onslaught, constantly pushing him back and forcing him to defend. His blows, when he landed them, were devastating.

A punch to Jesse’s arm left it numb, and he had to scramble for distance as he defended with one hand. A kick to the ribs brought him to his knees, and only quick reflexes kept him from taking a knee to the chin. A fist connected with the side of his head, and he saw stars. Jesse stumbled, his world reeling and his chest aching as he sucked in lungfuls of air. Reaper was past his weak guard in an instant, his hands clasped together as he brought them down on Jesse’s head in a strike that knocked him senseless. Jesse dropped to his hands and knees as his world exploded.

Jesse’s ears rang. He couldn’t see straight. He’d bit his cheek, and he could taste the blood on his tongue. For a moment he couldn’t think, and then something primal inside him screamed that he was in danger. He needed to get up and fight. But he was too small, too weak, too vulnerable. He had to stop holding back!

The heat was there again, at Jesse’s core, raging against the prison of his ribs. The moment Jesse acknowledged it, it spread and engulfed him. The fire ate at him like kindling. It contorted his limbs and popped his joints. It tore him apart and knit him together again in an instant. Jesse’s mouth dropped open as he let out a startled shout—the noise turned guttural. He was left shaking. He struggled to gather his thoughts as he tried to understand what had just happened.

Jesse heard Reaper’s boots shuffle quietly on the mat as he backed up. A sudden thrill shot through Jesse as he lifted his head to track the movement. The tang of blood and sweat filled his nose. His heart beat a quick tempo in his chest.

“McCree,” Reaper called. His voice was calm and commanding. Jesse ignored it. He drew himself up to his full height as he watched Reaper intently, looking down on him. Reaper stepped back.

Something in Jesse snapped. He was on top of Reaper in an instant. He slammed his weight into Reaper, knocking him down. Reaper dissipated into smoke and reformed in the far corner. Jesse spun on him. He let a growl rumble through his chest as he felt his hackles rise. Then he launched himself forward again. Reaper threw a punch, but Jesse was too fast. He pulled back, then swung an
open hand at Reaper, catching him in the chest and throwing him several feet to the side. Reaper rolled to his feet in time to leap back—teeth snapped shut around empty air inches from his face. This time Reaper threw a jab, and it connected with Jesse’s muzzle, making him yelp and stumble back a step.

“That’s enough, McCree,” Reaper ordered as he put space between them.

Jesse’s lip curled back. A snarl filled his mouth, and he snapped his teeth. He was furious and scared at the same time. Reaper had been hurting him for months now; he was a threat—and Jesse was trapped in this small space with him.

Reaper reached for the door panel. Before he could touch it, fourteen hundred pounds of raging fur and claws hit him, throwing him against the door with a bang. Reaper caught Jesse’s jaws in his hands and held them off as they strained to close around his head. Jesse yanked back and shook his head with a snarl, then dug his claws into the thick kevlar of Reaper’s armor and lifted him off the ground.

Something pricked Jesse’s arm. He almost didn’t feel it. But he saw the flash of a small metal object in Reaper’s hand, and he knew something had happened. Reaper seemed to grow heavier in his hands, and he was forced to let him down. The growl rumbling in his throat slowly pitched up into a whine as Jesse’s limbs gave out and he collapsed at Reaper’s feet. He heard the intercom buzz as if it were a hundred miles away, asking if Reaper was safe and the subject had been neutralized. He didn’t hear Reaper’s reply. Unconsciousness overtook him.

Jesse woke up in his cell. He knew by now, after being drugged so many times, that he needed to take his time and try not to move too much at first. He took stock of himself. He was unbound, dressed in fresh sweats and a shirt, lying on top of the sheets on his cot. The memory of his sparring session was fuzzy and slow to reform. He remembered changing. Jesse laid a hand over his chest as if he could touch the—whatever it was that he’d felt inside himself. It was there. He could sense it, barely warm, like a smoldering ember.

Then Jesse remembered attacking Reaper. His gut twisted, and his breathing turned shallow. He hadn’t been punished yet, but it would come, he was sure.

Jesse hauled himself up into a sitting position and swung his legs over the side of the cot. Beside the bed was a tray of food. Hesitantly Jesse picked it up and began eating because he knew he needed to, but the food was like ash in his mouth.

Reaper let himself in a while later. A scientist trailed behind him, talking excitedly in the doorway.

“—new possibilities.”

“What about the second batch of subjects?”

“No successful trials yet, but with more time I’m sure we’ll figure out how to replicate our methods. In the meantime, I want to focus on this new development.”

Reaper nodded. “Has Dr. O’Deorain been notified?”

“I brought her the test results before I came to speak with you. I’ve never seen her so pleased with a project from our division before. She wants daily updates from now on.”

“I’ll leave that to you. If you don’t mind?”
“Of course, yes.” The scientist backed up and closed the door.

Reaper turned to Jesse, who was still sitting on his bed, having been caught up in the strangeness of the conversation he’d just overheard. Jesse jumped to his feet and stood at attention.

Reaper nodded slightly to himself. “How are you doing, McCree?”

“Fine, sir,” Jesse answered uncertainly.

“You don’t have to act like I’m going to hit you. You’re not in trouble. What you did today was impressive, McCree.”

“Sir?” Jesse felt like the world had been flipped upside down. How was attacking Reaper not a bad thing?

Reaper elaborated. “Until today, you’ve shown enhancement, but you’ve never changed without the catalytic gas. We didn’t think it was possible for you to trigger the transformation on your own. After all, you’ve been through worse than a fist fight before.” The sense memory of water filling his lungs hit Jesse unbidden, and he shoved it down quickly. Reaper had a point: they’d pushed him to the brink a few times now, and nothing had ever come of it. “Do you know what was different today?”

Jesse shook his head slowly. “Maybe it’s something new? Or maybe…” Maybe he just hadn’t tried before. It could have been there with him the whole time, whispering to him, and he hadn’t heard or understood it until now.

Jesse shook his head, his brow furrowed. “Dunno. I can’t say what’s changed exactly.”

Reaper crossed his arms over his chest as he tipped his head in thought. “We’ll worry about that later. The real question is: do you think you can do it again?”

Jesse thought about the ember of warmth. There was a sort of voice to it, for lack of a better word. It sounded a bit like his own thoughts, but not quite. More like his instincts in the heat of combat, drawing on his unconscious senses to detect threats he hadn’t recognized yet and activating reflexes that had saved his life more than once. The energy was easy to grasp once he focused on it, now that he knew what to feel for.

“I think I can,” Jesse finally answered.

“Good. Rest for today. We’ll test that theory tomorrow. You did good, kid.”

Reaper had already turned away; he didn’t see the look on Jesse’s face, like he’d seen a ghost. The words buried themselves in Jesse’s chest like a knife and twisted. You did good, kid, a voice echoed from his past. Jesse was glad that Gabe couldn’t see him like this.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t have much to say this week. I want to thank everyone who’s read this far. I’m having a lot of fun, and I love getting to share it with all of you.

Next chapter will be another flashback. Jesse’s showing more and more potential as a field asset. It’s time to see what happens when Talon puts a gun in his hand again.
Talon Lab, 5 years ago

Jesse followed Reaper down an unfamiliar hallway. While he’d been doing his best to map out the building in his head, he’d never been brought this way before. The new area left Jesse feeling uneasy. A change to his routine wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it was rarely good either.

Reaper stopped at an elevator, and, unbidden, the doors opened. Jesse looked around and spotted a security camera; rather than keycards or codes, the lab had a security guard in another room remotely controlling the elevators. Smart.

Jesse stepped inside when Reaper gestured. Reaper pressed the button for another floor, then took up position behind Jesse.

The doors of the elevator were polished to a mirror shine. The man reflected back at Jesse looked a lot like him but not quite, the same way a stone didn’t look quite the same after lying at the bottom of a river for years. The man in the reflection was worn around the edges. His eyes were dark and tired behind long bangs, and what little of his face that could be seen behind his wild beard looked gaunt.

Jesse held his own gaze for a moment longer before looking away, unable to stomach the uncanny feeling anymore. That wasn’t his face.

Jesse focused on Reaper’s reflection instead. “We goin’ on a field trip?” Jesse asked conversationally, his tone deceptively light.

“Quiet.”

The word was like a hand clamped around the back of Jesse’s neck. He went quiet.

The door slid open, and Reaper pushed Jesse out into the hall. “To the right. Go.”

Jesse fell into step beside Reaper as they walked. This floor had more scientists and agents walking around than the one Jesse was kept on. A few looked in their direction, but quickly went back to their own business.

“Here, on the left,” Reaper said, and they turned towards a heavy looking door. He pressed his thumb against a pad that lit up purple, and leaned in towards a box above the print reader. “Two to use the weapons range.”

The door slid open, and Reaper waved a hand for Jesse to enter ahead of him.

In front of Jesse was a set of half a dozen shooting booths, and beyond them, a shooting range with walls that bore the pock marks of old bullets. To Jesse’s immediate right was a recessed wall.
Behind a thick, clear door a range of weapons were displayed on a rack, and ammo was laid out neatly along a shelf underneath.

“Wait here,” Reaper said before walking over to the case. Another fingerprint reader let him open the door, and he picked out a pistol and ammo box before sliding it shut again.

“Booth in the middle. Gear up.”

Jesse stepped forward to the indicated stall. He grabbed the ear protection and visor laid out for him and slipped them on. He waited as Reaper loaded a magazine and slid it into the pistol. He handed it over to Jesse when he was done.

Jesse turned the gun over in his hands thoughtfully. A Glock 68 Neo, capable of taking both standard and plasma-propelled 9mm bullets. The weight was familiar even if the grip wasn’t.

“I’m better with a revolver,” Jesse said mostly to himself.

Reaper didn’t look up; he was busy loading more magazines for Jesse to use. He lined them up on the counter of the stall. “I’m sure you are. But today you get a standard issue semi-automatic. When you’re ready for the field, this is what I expect you to use.”

Jesse stared down at the gun in his hand. Not a pulse pistol—which used charged plasma and could be set to do nonlethal damage—but a semi-automatic with live ammunition. Jesse ran his tongue over dry lips. He looked up at Reaper through his lashes as he adjusted his grip on the gun. He watched Reaper stiffen slightly; he must have guessed at the thought Jesse was entertaining.

Whatever Reaper might have thought to do, he didn’t have the time. Jesse was too fast. The pistol was between them, safety off, gun cocked, Jesse’s finger featherlight on the trigger.

There was silence. And then Reaper’s shoulders relaxed, and he held his arms open at his sides. “Go on then,” he said. “If you think you can do it, then do it. Others have already tried and failed, but maybe you’ll get lucky.”

Jesse breathed slow and steady through his nose. He was balanced on a knife’s edge, his mind racing. Jesse knew the truth of the matter: there was a good chance that even if he fired every last bullet he had right into Reaper’s chest, it might not do a damn thing. And supposing it did, then he’d have to navigate a section of the building he didn’t know, evading guards who would come rushing in as soon as he exited the range without Reaper at his side. How many doors stood between him and his freedom? How many locks that he didn’t have the keys to? If he got out of the building, how far could he run before they inevitably tracked him down and dragged him back?

That burning, living thing in Jesse’s chest flared up at the thought of freedom and perhaps revenge, but as Jesse went over the facts of the situation it died down, doused by painful reality.

Jesse let out a shaky breath, and his finger slid out of the trigger guard as he lowered his arm. The safety clicked on.

“I’m not feelin’ that lucky today. Can’t blame a guy for thinking about it, though. No hard feelings?”

“None,” Reaper said, although he sure didn’t sound like he meant that.

Jesse stepped up to the stall and put his back to Reaper.

“What’s the exercise for today, boss?” Jesse asked nonchalantly.
There was a pause. Jesse thought he heard a harsh breath or a cough. “Hard light targets,” Reaper finally answered. He walked over to the wall and tapped away at a control pad. “Because of your enhancements, I’m turning up the speed and randomization factor. Shoot anything that isn’t a Talon agent. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Jesse sighted down the gun and waited.

The targets appeared in flashes of bright color. Small, glowing circles shot across the top of the room, jumped up from the floor, and materialized and vanished at random. Despite the long months that Jesse had been unable to practice, every bullet struck dead center. Jesse reveled in the simple feeling of the gun recoiling in his hand and the neat hole that appeared in each hard light target before it vanished a moment later with a shattering animation.

Jesse unloaded his second spent clip and inserted a new one as the targets changed. Now photorealistic holograms of real people were projected over the targets. Talon agents appeared at times, interspersed with enemies that looked like mercenaries, paramilitary, government agents, and plainclothes targets. Years of experience had trained Jesse to read a person at a glance: he spotted the Talon agents with ease. Not shooting them out of habit was a little harder, but Jesse quickly adjusted and began lighting up the correct targets as ordered.

When Jesse swapped his fourth empty magazine out for a fresh one, Reaper tapped on the control panel, and a new set of targets appeared. They were all Overwatch agents.

Jesse froze as he found himself looking at perfect, life-size images of his friends. In his moment of hesitation, the target that looked like Ana Amari vanished with a flash of light, and a buzzer rang. One target missed.

Jesse shook his head and leveled his gun. They were just pictures. They weren’t real people. He’d never hurt his friends if it actually came down to it, and he knew that. But he had to power through this if he didn’t want to face some kind of punishment. And he couldn’t half-ass it either—not after missing one target already.

A bullet tore through Lena Oxton’s chronal accelerator. Another went through Dr. Ziegler’s heart. Jesse took out Genji with three bullets so fast the target didn’t have time to shatter before two holes appeared in the knees and one in the neck. Two bullets went through Winston’s head because only a fool would trust one to be enough. Jesse took out the Reinhardt target with a bullet in his good eye; the image showed him without a helmet, but assuming he had one on, the visor was just about the only weak point in his armor. The final target was his strike commander Gabriel Reyes. Jesse faltered, then fired his last bullet into Reyes’s heart.

Jesse’s hands shook slightly as he lowered his gun and switched the safety back on. That was his last magazine. He was out of ammo.

A hand settled on Jesse’s shoulder. He didn’t move.

“It’ll get easier with time,” Reaper said. “Trust me.”

Jesse didn’t want it to get easier. Shooting a good person should never be easy. He prayed that even the idea of doing it would always leave this wrenching feeling in his gut. It was the only way he knew, deep down, that he was still a good person himself.

Reaper held out a hand. Jesse’s movements were wooden as he cleared the gun. He put on the safety, removed the magazine, pulled the slide back and locked it in place, and ran his finger inside the chamber to be sure it was empty; then he handed the gun over to Reaper to lock up again.
Jesse leaned his hip against the counter as he waited. “Your targets are outta date,” Jesse said as the thought occurred to him. “Amari an’ Reyes are dead. No point having them up there.”

Reaper’s hands stilled for a moment before he shut the door of the gun locker. “I picked an older program for you on purpose. I know how attached you were to those two. Sometimes it’s the ghosts we have the hardest time killing.”

The word ‘we’ didn’t escape Jesse’s notice.

Reaper waved a hand, and Jesse pushed away from the counter to follow him out of the range.

Chapter End Notes

I want you guys to know I really appreciate the views and kudos. Compared to other things I’ve written, the ratio of kudos to views is staggering, especially since this is a gen fic. It really is encouraging to know there’s people excited to see where this story is going.

Speaking of which, next chapter will be a mix of the past and present as we see Jesse’s transition to field asset alongside his current transition into the loving home of his sister and niece. (for those of you who love Jesse loving cheesy western stuff, you'll enjoy the next update.)
Changes

Chapter Notes

Additional Chapter 8 tags: Slice of life, Razor blades and shaving, Shopping, Shirts with funny sayings on them, Planes, Restraints (collars and cuffs), Heights, Family bonding, Television, Westerns, Censorship and intolerance (only briefly discussed), Two cowboys standing in the desert five feet apart cuz they’re not gay (except they might be)

These tags seem nonsensical, but they’re accurate I assure you.

Take note of the time/location stamps. The scenes skip back and forth in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Talon Laboratory, 4 years ago

Jesse leaned back in the barber’s chair, eyes shut, as a razor was slowly drawn down his jaw.

Even with his eyes closed, Jesse was keenly aware of every person in the room. The man who had cut his hair and was now shaving away months of unkempt beard was wearing a particular aftershave—the smell of it wafted over Jesse as the barber moved around the chair. He was mindful to lay a hand on Jesse’s shoulder before each pass of the razor so he wouldn’t flinch. To the right, two guards stood. Jesse could hear the creaking of shoes as one shifted his weight restlessly. The other kept sniffing and clearing his throat like he was getting over a cold. On the other side of the room a third guard stood silently. When the barber swept past, stirring the air in his wake, the faintest scent of boot shine and sweat reached Jesse.

While he couldn’t sense Reaper at all, Jesse knew just where he was standing, leaning against the barber’s table watching to make sure Jesse didn’t try anything. Just because Jesse had fallen into line over the last couple months didn’t mean Reaper trusted him. Especially not in a room where he could get hold of a possible weapon. Jesse felt the razor blade run over his throat. He wondered, idly, what kind of damage he could do if he got hold of that razor, provided Reaper wasn’t there. Three guards with tranq guns were a deterrent, but not the biggest challenge Jesse had ever gone up against. The room wasn’t reinforced like his cell or the testing rooms were. He wasn’t even sure the door was locked. But Reaper was there. And even if he wasn’t, the idea of what would happen if Jesse failed to escape made his skin prickle and his pulse jump. Failure meant punishment. The thought was like a set of cold, metal claws digging into Jesse’s gut.

The barber stepped away. Jesse listened as he ran hot water over the razor to clean it. Jesse opened his eyes when he felt the chair lift and return to an upright position. The barber handed him a warm, damp towel to clean up with. Jesse could see his reflection in the mirror over the barber’s table. The gaunt man from the elevator looked back at Jesse from the mirror, hair trimmed up around his ears and his face freshly shaven. Jesse disliked the look immensely, but he thanked the barber all the same as he swiped the towel over his face.

Reaper made an approving noise. “I wasn’t entirely sure there was still a man under all that hair. Nice to see your face again, McCree.”

Jesse threw him a dirty look. Reaper chuckled, the sound hollow. He waved a hand for Jesse to
Jesse hopped out of the chair and threw the towel over the back. The guards all shifted, and Jesse could practically taste the tension in the room. He’d gotten up too fast for their liking. Reaper was unbothered. He tilted his head towards the door and began walking. Jesse trailed behind him.

Jesse had already run a payload escort simulation that morning, so he could only figure Reaper was taking him back to his cell. Which was why when Reaper made a left turn instead of a right where he was supposed to, Jesse came to a halt.

Reaper must have heard him falter. He stopped to look back at Jesse. “Something wrong?”

Jesse gestured with his head down the other hallway, back towards the elevator that would take them down to Level 3. “Ain’t we goin’ back? Or do they need to run a check-up on me?” Level 2 had a medical wing where they sometimes did physicals.

“You’re not going back to your cell,” Reaper said. “Cells are for prisoners and test subjects.”

Jesse’s brow furrowed in confusion, but Reaper didn’t elaborate. When Reaper began to walk away, he hurried to catch up.

Second left, first right, down and around the corner. Counting his steps, Jesse realized he was being led to the far end of the compound, near the medical wing but not quite. They came to a hall with a dozen doors on each side. Talon agents milled about wearing partial gear. Someone came out in plainclothes and carrying a shower caddy. Two people talked in an open doorway. They went quiet as Reaper and Jesse walked by, and through one of the doors, Jesse could see a bunk. These were living quarters for permanently stationed operatives.

Reaper didn’t stop until they were around the corner. This corridor was quieter. Reaper walked up to the second door on the right and pressed his finger to the control pad. It lit up, and the door slid open. Lights blinked on automatically.

With a nod from Reaper, Jesse stepped inside. The room was simple, with a small lavatory and a bed. There were fresh sheets folded on top of the white mattress. Several sets of clothes lay on top of a dresser—no way would they give Jesse a closet with metal hangers. Lying on the bedside table was Jesse’s copy of *Metamorphoses*. It wasn’t much different from the cell, yet it felt entirely different. Jesse took in the dark walls, the basic furniture, the light and heat controls, the pair of boots by the door; and then he looked at Reaper quizzically.

“What’re you playin’ at? You’re just gonna let me have the run of the place all of a sudden?”

“I’m not an idiot. The door locks from the outside,” Reaper said. “We both know you’re not here of your own free will, and I’m not going to pretend otherwise. But I’ve just had you cleared for fieldwork, and so long as you’re working alongside my agents, you sleep and eat with them, too.”

Jesse gave Reaper a flat look.

“What, no thank you? You can go back to your cell if you miss it so much,” Reaper said.

Jesse dropped his gaze. “No, this is—thank you. Sir.”

Reaper set a hand on his shoulder. Jesse tensed, but he didn’t pull away. “You’ve come a long way, McCree. Keep it up, and I’ll keep looking out for you, just like I promised. I haven’t broken my promises to you yet, have I?”
It was a reassurance and a threat at the same time. Jesse shook his head. “No sir.” The hand patted his shoulder before pulling away.

“I’ll let you get settled in,” Reaper said. “Someone will be by in a few hours to escort you to the mess hall.” Then he left, and the door shut behind him.

Jesse listened to the lock engage. He let his shoulders slump and carded his fingers through his short hair. The first thing he did was lower the light and turn up the heat in the room: something he hadn’t had control over in perhaps a year. Then he grabbed the sheets to make his bed. In the back of his mind, Jesse wondered what his captors would demand from him in return for all of this. His humanity didn’t come without a price—not in this place.

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Albuquerque, 3 years ago

“What do you think?” Jesse asked as he stepped out of the dressing room.

“It’s awful,” Ruth said with a laugh. “Get it.”

They were at a thrift store; Jesse had money, but he didn’t want to touch the card in his wallet in case one of Talon’s techies managed to pick up on the transaction, so they’d gone somewhere they could buy him a few outfits in cash for cheap. At first he and Ruth had been practical: jeans, button-downs and T-shirts, socks, and underwear. Then Ruth found a belt with a buckle that read “BAMF” and Jesse found a shirt with a cowboy riding a T-Rex, and it quickly devolved from there.

Currently Jesse was sporting a tank top that read, “Settle down, cowboy, I was looking at your horse,” which had him and Ruth in stitches.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, why not? You can wear it as a sleep shirt if you’re shy,” Ruth teased. “It's only a couple bucks. Come on, do it.”

Jesse waved his hand placatingly as he chuckled. “All right, guess I can’t argue with yer logic. Think we can find sleep pants to match?”

“I'm pretty sure I saw a pair with horses on them. If they don’t fit, then plaid should work.”

“Oh, it’s settled then. Lemme change.”

Jesse ducked back into the changing room and pulled the curtain shut. He pulled the tank top off and slipped back into his own shirt. It was slow going doing the buttons up one-handed, but he was sure he’d get better with practice. He tried tucking his shirt in, but it looked so bad that he pulled it back out again. It wasn’t like he was going anywhere fancy today.

“Jesse, I got something for you,” Ruth called in a sing-song voice from the other side of the curtain.

“Ruth, I’m about to hit the wall,” Jesse protested. “I’m not tryin’ on anything else.”

“Just look.”

Jesse sighed and pushed the curtain aside. Ruth stood there, smile wide and dimples showing as she held up a cowboy hat. It was light brown with bullets around the band and a buckle in front. It
looked like it had blown off the set of some B-rate Western movie and tumbled into the thrift store by accident.

A smile spread across Jesse’s face as he took it from Ruth. Realistically he knew he shouldn’t wear anything that might make him more recognizable, but he couldn’t resist. It was old and well-worn, faded in some places from the sun and darkened in others from rain. The brim was chewed up here and there. He didn’t know whether the last owner had loved it or hated it, but it had clearly seen its fair share just like Jesse.

Jesse flipped the hat around in his hand, then set it on his head and tilted the brim. “Well what d’ya know: a perfect fit.”

“It looks like it was made for you,” Ruth said. “And by that I mean you look silly.”

“Yer face looks silly. Come on, we’ve been dragging our feet for long enough. You gotta get to work soon,” Jesse said. He took the hat off and set it in Ruth’s cart.

5,000 feet above Siem Reap, Cambodia, 4 years ago

Jesse sat with his back to the wall of the aircraft, his hands wrapped around the safety straps of his seat. Reaper sat beside him, arms folded over his chest. On the bench lining the other wall a team of four Talon agents sat waiting. Reaper and Jesse would be dropped off first at Site A, then the other team at Site B one klick away. At 2200 hours, they would all move north towards the target compound simultaneously.

Jesse wore ear protection against the roar of the aircraft’s engines. It annoyed him that he needed them now when he’d flown for years without any trouble. Heightened senses had their drawbacks. Although to be fair, this MV-317 Corvid was smaller and less insulated than the personnel carriers Overwatch preferred to use, but Jesse couldn’t blame the aircraft entirely. Reaper’s voice came through on the mic system crystal clear. “I hope you’re ready to get to work, McCree.”

“Don’t you worry about me. This ain’t my first rodeo,” Jesse said dryly. He felt the press of the throat mic against his neck, and just below that, the shock restraint collar flush against his skin. His new accessory came with a matching set of wristbands, skin tight and smooth with flexible circuitry running through them, visible by the faint red glow that indicated they were active. The long sleeves and high neckline of Jesse’s shirt hid the light so it wouldn’t give him away. He’d tried to get a finger under one discreetly to see if he could break it, but no luck. The stuff shifted and stretched with his body, but it clung like it was painted on. Nanotech probably.

Reaper tilted his head towards the front of the aircraft as he received a message over his comms from the pilot. Jesse felt the angle and velocity of the aircraft change. Reaper confirmed a moment later: “We’re coming up on the drop zone. Descending to 200 feet.”

“We’re not landing?”

“Site A was compromised. The aircraft can’t land at the new site because of the tree cover, so we’re rappelling in. Will that be a problem?”

“No sir.”

When the Corvid reached the new drop site, it slowed and came to a stop, the engines rotating downwards with a mechanical whir that set Jesse’s teeth on edge. Reaper unbuckled and stood up, and Jesse quickly followed. He was handed a rappelling harness, which he slipped on with practiced
“You go first. I’ll follow,” Reaper told him. He activated a control on the wall, and a side door slid open. The air equalized with a rush. It tore at Jesse’s clothes and stole the breath from his lungs.

Jesse grabbed a rappelling line from the wall, hooked it to the floor, and attached his harness with a snap link. He leaned backwards out the aircraft door, one hand in front and one behind on the rope, and glanced down. He hung above two hundred feet of open air that ended in a blanket of darkness. In the distance, he could see the canopy of trees thin and give way to civilization where the city of Siem Reap lay, its lights twinkling. The peaks of the temple complex of Angkor Wat stood like a crown against a velvet-blue evening sky.

Jesse kicked backwards, throwing himself out and away from the aircraft. The rope slid through his gloves, and he began to descend.

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Albuquerque, 3 years ago

Jesse sat with Annie on the couch. She had a tablet on her lap and a stylus that she absentmindedly rolled between her palms as she read through her worksheet.

“Okay, last question,” Annie said. “I have to say whether I think the Omnic Crisis is really over or not. Seems like kind of a silly question. You guys won, didn’t you?”

Jesse gave a noncommittal shrug of his shoulders as he scooped salsa up with a tortilla chip. “The war is over, sure, but it had a lotta lastin’ effects that you an’ I just talked about.” He quickly ate his chip before it could get soggy, then continued, “An’ there’s the fact that Overwatch shut down the omniums an’ quarantined the God Programs they couldn’t destroy, but they still exist. And,” he added as Annie started scribbling, “none’a the omnics can say for sure who or what made them start attackin’ us.”

Annie looked up. “Didn’t you say the God Programs made ‘em do it?”

“Sure, they had a hand in it, but all of ‘em deciding on their own all at the same time that they were gonna overthrow humanity?” Jesse made a face. “Never sat right with me. Never sat right with my bosses neither. My point is the Omnic Crisis might have ended, but the danger’s still there.”

“If that’s true, then why did Overwatch get shut down?” Annie asked. “Don’t we still need them?”

Jesse stared down at his salsa bowl, then set it on the side table by his elbow; he wasn’t hungry anymore. “That’s kind of a difficult thing to explain.” He rubbed at his left knee idly as he tried to come up with an answer for Annie. He worried that his knee hadn’t healed quite right; two weeks had passed—more than enough time for Jesse’s accelerated healing to knit the shattered bone back together—yet he still woke up sometimes to his knee locked up and stiff, and it felt tender all the time. Ruth had gotten him a knee brace, but he forgot to put it on today.

“I guess,” Jesse started haltingly, “we were so busy tryin’ to do good in the world that we didn’t realize we’d started doin’ bad, too. Sometimes you gotta do a little bad to make things right in the world, but we crossed lines we shouldn’t’ve. Made folks scared. Started… started fightin’ ‘mongst ourselves, too. I saw the way things were goin’, and I just couldn’t be a part of it anymore.” He didn’t tell her the rest. The investigations. The exposés in the papers. The way he’d seen the dissent building among the ranks around him and stubbornly ignored it until it was too late, and then it was
all he could do to pull up roots and get out while he still could. He didn’t tell her about the Swiss base either.

Annie twisted the stylus in her fingers, her expression downcast. “Sorry, Uncle Jesse.”

“Hey, it ain’t your fault, sugar.” Jesse held his arm out. Annie turned off her tablet and set it on the arm of the couch before scooting over for a hug. “You done for the day?”

“Yeah, I got enough for my report. Wanna watch TV?”

“Sure thing.” Jesse grabbed the remote and turned on the television.

The first thing that came on was the news: Ruth had wanted to check the weather before going to bed last night, because there was talk of storm fronts and the like. The smartly dressed black man was back, sitting beside a latina woman with her hair cut in a fashionable bob. They were discussing the implications of what had been dubbed the Silver Street Terror Attack. The police had finally released certain details including the fact that four of the individuals found dead at the scene were wearing body armor, and high power weaponry had been found on site. A man who’d been in critical condition and had just recently passed away was also identified as one of the possible perpetrators. The police refused to say if they suspected these individuals were part of a larger organization, and no one had taken credit.

Jesse switched to a cooking channel. A woman was decorating a cake and talking about how she hoped the coffee flavor in the filling wouldn’t be too overpowering.

“What d’ya wanna watch?” Jesse asked.

“Ummm. I don’t know. Whatever you wanna watch?” Annie tugged at the bottom of her shirt in thought. “I like shows where they teach you how to make things. And cartoons. And anything with cowgirls or horses.”

Jesse smiled warmly. “Is that so? Lemme check the Western channels. Maybe I can find something we’ll both like.”

He flipped through the channel guide on screen, scrolling past dozens of sports listings and shows about antiques and weird mysteries. Jesse recognized the movie titles playing on the Western channels; they were all too mature for someone Annie’s age. On a whim, he scrolled down a little farther to the Spanish channels. A familiar title caught his eye, and he selected it.

A sharply dressed vaquero appeared on screen, wearing a dark gray hat with a wide brim and a black mask over his eyes. He was dressed in dark blue clothes with black chaps. A black and gray patterned serape was draped over his shoulders. Three men approached him threateningly, but the masked man seemed untroubled as he smiled easily and spun a lasso in his hands.

As he spoke, subtitles appeared at the bottom of the screen. Jesse didn’t have to read them: he knew the words by heart in English and Spanish. The vaquero was taunting his opponents. “[Surely the three of you are a match against a man with no gun?]” He laughed, his voice light in the face of danger.

Annie sat up. “What’s this?”

“It’s La leyenda del vigilante,” Jesse told her. “That’s the Vigilante. He’s a rancher named Hector Corazón who moonlights as a hero and protects the people of Paraíso Valley. I grew up watching this show. Wanted to be just like him when I was little.”
Annie and Jesse watched as the Vigilante quickly dispatched his attackers, then tied the three of them to a hitching post, gagged with their own bandannas. He recovered his pistol and approached the villains’ hideout. Rather than go in through the door, he sneakily scaled the outside of the building and slipped in through an upper window. He soon appeared again with a full saddlebag thrown over his shoulder and climbed down the building with ease. He set the bag on the back of a horse, then climbed up to the window again. Jesse remembered this episode. The town’s new bank was run by a corrupt man who staged the robbery of his own vault so he could collect the insurance and keep the stolen money for himself. He would wake up in the morning to find all the money back in the vault to the embarrassment of his lackeys sitting inside the hideout. The bank owner, furious at Vigilante’s trick, would become a recurring villain later in the series, bent on killing him or revealing his identity. Of course, retro-westerns from the 2030s were all about nostalgia and classic storylines, so Hector always beat him in the end.

Another man appeared on screen, sneaking around the back of the building. He wore dark brown clothes and a red bandanna over his mouth. His eyes glittered from under his dark, messy hair.

“Another bad guy?” Annie asked, her voice barely above a whisper as she watched with rapt attention.

“Wait ’n see,” Jesse said.

The man untied Vigilante’s horse from the post and began to lead it away when he was suddenly jerked back. The camera panned down to the loop of a lasso tight around his wrist.

“I’m afraid I need that horse,” Vigilante declared, standing behind the thief with a second saddlebag over his shoulder. He twisted the rope between his hands with ease as he drew it taut.

The other man looked back over his shoulder at Vigilante. “I’m afraid I need it more, friend.” He spun and drew a revolver, but Vigilante was faster. There was a bang, and the gun flew from the thief’s hand. He clutched his fist to his chest with a hiss.

“If we’re friends, then there’s no need to fight,” Vigilante said pleasantly. “Walk away, and we won’t have any trouble. Fight me, and I’ll leave you in the bank vault along with this money. I’m sure the sheriff would love to meet you—especially after all the trouble you’ve been causing recently. It is you that’s been stealing cattle, isn’t it? Lucas Camerado?”

The man in brown stiffened, then spread his arms out placatingly. “I see my reputation precedes me. And you must be the famous Vigilante I’ve heard so much about. They say no one has faster hands.” He reached up to pull his bandanna down from his face. He gave Vigilante a crafty smile. “But perhaps mine are more nimble, eh?”

There was a hiss, and Vigilante looked down in time to see the small clay ball at his feet, fuse burning down to the base. Then smoke burst from the clay ball, obscuring the screen.

When Vigilante emerged from the smoke, coughing into his hands, the thief was gone. However he had left the horse.

“So that,” Jesse explained, “was Ladrón. He’s an outlaw who’s been botherin’ the folks around the area. After this, he starts showin’ up more an’ more, helping Vigilante when the odds are against him. At first he pretends he’s got his own reasons for hangin’ around, but soon they become partners.”

“Partners like they work together? Or like they’re dating?” Annie asked.
Jesse chuckled. “Y’know, for the longest time I thought they were together. When they’re alone, Vigilante sometimes calls Ladrón “Gallito” as a nickname. An’ Ladrón’s always bemoanin’ how Vigilante’s too nice for his own good. I was convinced they were flirting.”

“Sounds like they were flirting,” Annie agreed. “You’re sure they don’t fall in love?”

“Nah. This show’s old. They made it during the Censorship Era in the 30s: a few rich jerks got control of the big studios and told ‘em they couldn’t have things like smoking or drinking or sex or gay folk.” Jesse’s brow wrinkled, and his mouth twisted into a frown. After a moment his expression smoothed. “You know, they let the cowboys have cigs in La leyenda, but they couldn’t light ‘em. And they could have drinks, but they couldn’t show the bottles cuz then people might know they were drinkin’ booze. Pretty silly if you think about it. D’you wanna keep watching? If not, I’ll put on something else.”

“No, this is good.” Annie settled against Jesse’s side as they watched the sun rise on the fictional town of San Fidencio. When Ruth returned from work, she would find them still curled up together, the chips and salsa eaten and Annie asleep with her head on Jesse’s lap.

Chapter End Notes

I have a lot to say this week, fair warning!

First things first, thank you to Bluandorange for the shoutout post on tumblr that made my stats jump wildly last week, which had me convinced AO3 was broken because I didn’t know you’d done that. That was amazing and kind of hilarious.

Credit where it’s due for the first scene in this chapter: I’ve seen Krabat2’s painting of Jesse getting a shave, and it’d be remiss of me not to acknowledge it. I love the idea of this anachronism—a barber working with a razor—existing in a lab dedicated to innovation and technology in a time where everyone has electric razors or better, perhaps because in this case a man with an old-fashioned blade has more skill than any machine could match. And there’s little that screams casual (in this case forced) vulnerability more than letting a man drag a blade over your neck.

Credit to the entire fandom for the second scene! One of the most wonderful and endearing things about McCree fans is the habit of putting him and his friends into ridiculous cowboy shirts, so I intend to keep that headcanon going.

It was an exercise in creativity deciding how Jesse will slowly gain all of his personal effects. Anything he had on him when he left Overwatch was taken by Talon, and anything he had while in hiding was lost in the explosion, so all his stuff either has to be new or wasn’t on his person at those times. Some items deserve more history and emotional value than “I found it in a thrift store,” and they’ll slowly trickle into Jesse’s life later, but what’s a cowboy without his hat? And I like the idea of a man who’s trying to piece his life back together stumbling across this worn, beat up thing with its own history, and feeling a connection.

You guys have no idea how delighted I am to finally be able to share my original western created specifically for this story. I enjoyed making up La leyenda almost as much as Project Bloodhound itself, and yes, there will be more of it. I like the idea of Jesse growing up admiring both a heroic vaquero and an outlaw. The story would have
shaped a lot of his “bend the rules for the sake of justice” mentality. It also helped him understand who he was in a lot of ways.

Oh yeah, and for those of you curious, *gallito* is commonly used as slang for “tough guy.” But it also translates to cocky, rowdy, or troublemaker. All of which suit Vigilante’s banter with Ladrón.

A note on the worldbuilding in that last scene. I’m operating under the opinion (or hope) that in the 2070s society and media are more progressive. I’m not going to write people being intolerant. I’m sure a lot of my readers deal with that enough as it is, and they deserve a story where they don’t have to be reminded of it. Besides, it’s not my place to write about the experience of societal oppression. The only times you’ll see intolerance are in past tense, like here. It’s 60 years in the future, and the landscape of media has had a lot of time to change: classic westerns with omnics are an example. So as part of that I wrote about a brief period of time where a small group of men with money tried to bring conservative values back into media (censorship of film, at least in America, has historical precedent), which coincided with the retro western genre unfortunately. I imagined, in writing it, that the actors and writers themselves were frustrated by their restrictions, and found every way possible to push the envelope without getting canceled. It’s important to know because that’s going to come up again eventually.

Thanks for letting me get a little behind the scenes there. Now for the preview.

Actually, let me just tell you the title of chapter nine. Anything more might spoil it for you all.

Next week look forward to: Chapter 9 “White Noise Storm”
White Noise Storm

Chapter Notes

Additional Chapter 9 tags: Panic attacks, PTSD, Characters being triggered, Hospitals, Fire/Firefighters, Loss of loved ones referenced, Transformation, Family, Hurt/Comfort

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Albuquerque, 3 years ago

The storm front that the news stations had been talking about all week turned out to be a dry thunderstorm. The rain evaporated before it could hit the ground, but the lightning had no trouble reaching as it struck cars, satellite dishes, radio towers, and dead trees. In the late evening a stray bolt hit a shed full of trash and flammable material, and it erupted into a raging fire. It spread through a suburban residential district with terrifying speed before the fire department could get it under control.

Fires meant burn victims and cases of smoke inhalation. At Red Ridge General Hospital, the staff prepared for the rush of incoming patients. Ruth called the house to tell Annie and Jesse that she’d be late getting home, and not to wait up for her. She said good night to her daughter as the first ambulance pulled up.

Ruth’s shift went well into the night. The work was physically and mentally exhausting. One firefighter came in badly burned, and Ruth had to excuse herself to the break room while someone else admitted him to ICU. The man was young and pale with short hair. He looked nothing like her husband Nathan. But the uniform, the ash on his face, and the smell of char made the blood rush in Ruth’s ears. Her heart pounded in her chest like it might give out. Ruth grabbed a paper towel and soaked it in the sink, then wiped down her face and neck. She couldn’t afford to break down; the ICU needed every available nurse. She got herself a glass of water, then headed back out.

When it was time to go home Ruth nearly called a taxi, but then she’d need a ride back to work the next day, and she didn’t want to leave her truck downtown overnight. She picked a classic rock station on the radio and cranked the volume up, both to stay awake as she drove home and to chase away the ghosts that tried to follow her from the hospital.

It was nearly four in the morning. Ruth opened the door as quietly as she could, her set of keys clutched tightly in her hand to keep them from jingling. She found that her brother was a light sleeper, and she didn’t want to wake him.

Jesse was sprawled across the couch in the front room, one leg dangling off the side and the other hitched over the armrest because the couch was too small. The television was on. Whatever show Jesse had been watching, it was long since over; the screen was nothing but static, and a soft hiss emanated from the speakers.

A flash of light flickered through the closed blinds, and a moment later a peal of thunder rumbled overhead. In the quiet that came after, Ruth heard a ragged, pained gasp. It came from Jesse. In the faint light of the TV, Ruth could see his face was drawn tight with a tortured expression, his eyes still shut. His whole body twitched like he was being needled, and his hand clenched and unclenched fitfully. Distressed sounds escaped his mouth as he fought off some invisible night terror.
Ruth set her purse down on the table by the door and walked over. “Jesse? Jesse, wake up,” she called. No response. Ruth listened to Jesse’s uneven breathing, wondering if she should try again. His breath hitched like he was holding back a sob, and that decided it. “You can’t sleep out here, Jesse: it’s gonna kill your back. Come on, wake up.” Ruth reached out and touched his shoulder.

Jesse’s eyes flew open, wild and unseeing. Then something slammed into Ruth’s chest, sending her tumbling backwards across the living room. She landed on her back, and her head hit the ground. She let out a belated cry as the pain washed over her. She clapped her hands over the back of her head with a hiss, then held them in front of her to see if she was bleeding.

Ruth froze as she looked past her hands across the room. Jesse had rolled off the couch to his knees, and his body was… it was transforming.

Ruth pressed her hands to her mouth as she watched Jesse’s body twist and heave and then begin to grow. His clothes strained, then ripped at the seams, giving way to thick, fur-covered limbs and a barrel chest. Jesse—was it still Jesse?—lifted his head. But in his place some sort of wolf-like animal stared at Ruth. Its dark mouth hung open to reveal a set of sharp teeth with menacing canines. The light of the TV caught in its eyes, turning them into gleaming silver discs. It snarled at Ruth, and the rumbling sounded like thunder.

Ruth screamed.

The beast went still. Its curled lip relaxed down over its teeth. Its ears flicked then pinned back. It turned its muzzle this way and that as it looked around, and then it curled up, trying to make itself small. It let out a whine. Ruth watched warily as she tried to understand what was happening. It was scared, she realized belatedly.

“Mom?”

The quiet voice from behind made Ruth’s heart jump into her throat. She looked over her shoulder towards the staircase. Annie stood halfway up the stairwell, her hands tight on the banister as she stared down at the monster in the living room.

“Stay there, baby,” Ruth said in a weak voice. “Don’t move.”

When she turned her attention back to the creature across from her, Ruth realized it was shaking. It panted hard, then whined again. As Ruth watched, it began to shrink. The dark fur faded, the limbs drew in and became smaller, and the elongated face became more and more recognizably human.

And then there was just Jesse, naked and curled up in a ball on the hardwood floor, his face tucked down against his knees and his arm thrown over his head as shudders wracked his frame.

Ruth didn’t dare move. She heard Annie come down the stairs, and then small hands gripped her shoulder as Annie crouched beside her. Ruth laid a hand over hers and squeezed. They should get out of here. She had Annie, her purse was on the table, and the truck was in the driveway with the engine still warm. Or she could run to Max’s house. Max used to be in the army: she had a gun and a phone to call for help. There was also a gun up in the safe in Ruth’s room, too, if she could reach it. The door was closer, though.

“I’m sorry. ‘m so sorry.”

Jesse’s words cut through Ruth’s panic. They were rasping and thick like he was trying not to cry. It reminded Ruth of the boy from her father’s funeral who stood in the corner of her backyard with bags under his eyes, his voice rough from crying over a man he’d barely known. Jesse sounded
just as lost now.

In that moment, Ruth made a reckless decision.

Slowly Ruth got to her knees. She wordlessly gestured for Annie to stay put, then shuffled forward a few inches towards Jesse. Her knees brushed the edge of the living room rug. Her mother-in-law had made it as a house warming gift. The bands of black, cream, and warm red reminded Ruth of the desert. At the far end, a world away, was Jesse’s hunched form, sweat-soaked and shaking.

Whatever had just happened didn’t make much sense to Ruth, but this situation right here she knew how to handle. Right now Jesse was no different than any confused or dissociating patient in the ER. She’d handled people strung out on drugs, men in so much shock they couldn’t think or feel pain, children in hysterics and unable to answer simple questions—she’d been trained for this.

Ruth assessed the situation. Jesse was sucking in fast, shallow breaths. “Jesse,” she said softly, “you’re going to hyperventilate. Listen to me: just focus on doing what I tell you to do, okay? I need you to take a deep breath and hold it, then breathe out slow. Now breathe in.” She listened as he gasped then breathed in deep. “Hold it.” She counted the beats out in her head. “Now breathe out nice and slow.” Despite her instructions, Jesse let his breath out in a rush, the sound harsh with the hint of a whine at the end. But the next breath he took was a little more controlled.

Ruth walked Jesse through the steps again and again, listening as the choked, sobbing sounds evened out. “That’s good, Jesse. That’s real good. Is there anything I can do to help you? What do you need?”

Jesse swallowed thickly. “Th’ TV.”

“You want it off?”

Jesse grunted.

The remote was on the ground beside Jesse. Ruth crawled over to the TV screen instead and hit the power button. The room went dark and silent. Ruth was halfway across the rug now. As her eyes adjusted to the dark, she saw the muscles of Jesse’s back relax, and he let go of the death grip he’d had on the back of his head. Then he tucked his arm in against his chest and pressed his hand over his face.

“I didn’ mean t’ do it, ‘m so sorry, Ruth,” Jesse whispered, his voice cracking as he spoke.

Ruth glanced back at Annie. She hadn’t moved. She was looking between Jesse and her mother, her face a mix of fear and concern. She mouthed the words ‘Is he okay?’

Ruth gave a little shrug of her shoulders.

“Is it okay if I come over, Jesse?” Ruth asked.

At first Jesse shook his head. He sniffed and wiped at his face with the back of his hand. A few shuddering breaths shook his frame. He pressed his hand over his eyes, then nodded.

Ruth crawled over on hands and knees to sit beside Jesse. Her heart pounded in her chest, but she did her best to ignore it.

“Is it all right if I touch you?”
Jesse nodded again.

Ruth laid a hand on Jesse’s shoulder, feeling the tense muscles under her palm. She started rubbing circles across his back. Slowly he relaxed, his shoulders drooping and his head hanging limp. The room fell into silence, and outside, the storm moved away, the thunder softer and more distant.

Ruth leaned into Jesse’s side as she rubbed his back. “I’ve got you, Jesse,” she murmured.

Annie approached with a blanket in her hands. She’d brought it down from her bedroom. Ruth took it from her and draped it over Jesse’s back. Then she laid an arm over his shoulders. Jesse grabbed the corner of the blanket and wiped his eyes with it.

Annie sat down on Jesse’s other side, unafraid now that the danger had passed. “You gonna be all right, Uncle Jesse?”

He nodded, his face still turned down and hidden by his messy hair. “Sorry I scared ya, Annie.”

“We all get scared sometimes.” Annie patted his shoulder. “So… Are you a werewolf?”

The question startled a rough laugh out of Jesse, the noise sharp and choked. “Kinda?”

“Are you allergic to silver?”

He shook his head. “Nah.”

“Does the moon make you change?”

Jesse shook his head again.

“Can you talk to animals?”

“Don’ think so.”

Annie made a disappointed noise. Ruth looked askance at her. Annie lifted her shoulders and the corners of her mouth pulled down comically. “What? I’m curious. Plus aren’t you supposed to distract people when they’re upset?”

Ruth huffed, brushing off Annie’s question. “Do you need anything, Jesse?”

Jesse tilted his head to the side, and Ruth finally got a look at him. His face was ruddy from crying, his cheeks still damp and his eyes puffy. “How can you be so calm?”

Ruth brushed Jesse’s hair away from his face and tucked it behind his ear. “Trust me, I’m terrified, but panicking isn’t gonna do us any good. And you’re my brother: I know you won’t hurt us.” It was a lie, but one they both needed to hear. In reality Ruth had no idea what Jesse was capable of.

Ruth wanted to rage at her brother for keeping this a secret from her, especially when she’d trusted him to be alone with her daughter while she worked, but at the same time she understood how scared he must have been. If she turned into a monster at random, she wouldn’t go around advertising it either.

“Let me get you some tissues and water,” Ruth said. She patted Jesse’s back and stood up. “And some pants.” Jesse let out a thin, humorless laugh.
“You got him, Annie?”

Annie nodded. She put her arm over Jesse’s shoulders the way Ruth had, holding him tight.

Ruth went into the kitchen and grabbed a glass out of the cupboard. There were questions that needed to be answered. How much control did Jesse have over whatever this was? Was this the real reason he hadn’t wanted to stay long? Was this the reason he was being chased? What had happened to him?

Ruth came back in with a box of tissues tucked under one arm and a glass of water in hand. She set them next to Jesse, then went to grab some sleep pants from the guest room.

Ruth turned on the light. The bed was neatly made. On the floor at the foot of the bed was a gym bag she’d given Jesse. It looked full. Ruth frowned at it suspiciously. She went to the dresser and pulled a drawer open. It was empty. So was every other drawer. The closet, too. Ruth set the duffel bag on the bed and unzipped it to find all of Jesse’s belongings folded inside. She wondered how long he’d been packed to leave.

Jesse was sitting on the couch with Annie when Ruth came back. She tossed Jesse the sleep pants she’d picked—the ones decorated with horses that she’d found for him to go with that silly shirt of his.

“Thanks.” Jesse awkwardly pulled the pants on while trying to keep the blanket around his shoulders. He picked his water glass up and sipped at it. Thunder from the fading storm rumbled in the distance.

“I’ll head out in the morning,” Jesse said without preamble.

Ruth crossed her arms. “You’ll do no such thing, Jesse McCree.”

Jesse looked up, surprise clear on his face. “Ruth…”

Ruth held up a hand and shook her head. “I knew you were in trouble when I asked you to stay. I didn’t know how much trouble, but I’m not backing down now.”

“Don’t be stubborn. You got Annie to think about.” Jesse said, gesturing to the little girl sitting cross-legged beside him. “It ain’t safe to have me around. Hell, I shouldn’t’ve stayed long as I have. Tonight never shoulda happened.”

Ruth looked away. “Yeah, well. Better for you to be here where you’ve got family than have you homeless on the streets with no one to look after you. And besides, tonight was an accident, right?” Jesse didn’t answer right away, but Ruth plowed ahead. “Whatever’s going on with you, we’ll figure it out. For now we just need to establish some rules.”

“Rules?”

“Like you sleep in your room from now on, and if your door is shut, no one goes in. That way we don’t have anything like this happen again. And for my part, I won’t touch you when you’re sleeping; I should’ve known better. If we’re out somewhere, and you start to feel bad, you promise to get away where it’s quiet and no one’s around. We’ll figure out a code: some way you can tell us if you’re having a hard time, so we can be discreet about it, like numbers or colors so I know how bad it is. And lastly you and I are gonna have a serious talk later about what the hell just happened. I need to know what set you off so it doesn’t happen again.”

Jesse set his glass down on the side table. Ruth didn’t miss how his eyes flicked to the television.
Jesse scratched at his chin. “It ain’t gonna be that simple, you know.”

“It never is. But at least you won’t have to go it alone.”

Quiet fell over the living room. Ruth was glad: she was too tired to keep arguing with Jesse much longer.

Annie leaned against Jesse’s side and yawned.

Jesse’s pensive expression softened. “You should hit the hay, darlin’,” Jesse said. “You got school in a few hours.”

“But I wanna stay up with you.”

Jesse looked up at Ruth helplessly. She lifted a brow, but said nothing. Jesse sighed. “Guess I oughta turn in, too, then. On yer feet, come on.”

“You go on up, Annie. I’m gonna help Uncle Jesse, and then I’ll come tuck you in.”

“Kay,” Annie said sleepily as she headed for the stairs.

Jesse didn’t protest when Ruth helped him stand and kept an arm around him as they walked slowly to his room. If he felt anything like she did, he must be bone tired. Ruth’s hand rubbed at his back through the blanket.

Jesse shouldered the door open and let out a weak chuckle. Ruth had already unpacked his duffel bag. It sat empty on top of the dresser. Jesse’s shirts hung in the open closet. His hat was on the bedside table next to the stack of western paperbacks he’d picked out for himself. Ruth saw the first hints of a smile appear on Jesse’s face.

“You were so sure you could make me stay, huh?”

“Well I wasn’t going to make it easy for you.”

The blanket fell away, and Jesse’s arm wrapped around Ruth. He leaned down to rest his head on her shoulder. “Thanks. I… I’ve been fightin’ for so long. It’s nice t’ have someone fightin’ fer me.”

Ruth ran a hand through her brother’s hair. “You don’t have to fight anymore.”

Jesse’s shoulders shook, and he huffed a breath. She wasn’t sure if he was laughing or crying again. He straightened up, and his eyes were gleaming with tears, but he smiled at her. “Look at me, gettin’ myself all worked up.” He swiped his hand over his eyes. “I think I’m okay now. You go on to bed. You’ve been on your feet all day, an’ then you came home to this mess. You must be exhausted.” Jesse ducked down and picked up the blanket he’d dropped. “Annie can have this back, too.” Jesse handed the blanket over hesitantly. “She’s a good girl.”

“She is,” Ruth agreed. “And she adores you already. So don’t go vanishing on us, okay? It’d break her heart.”

“I won’t go anywhere,” Jesse promised, his voice quavering. “Couldn’t possibly do that t’ y’all. I’ll see you in the morning, Ruth.”

“Good night, Jesse.”

Ruth shut the door behind her as she left, the blanket draped over her arm. She stopped in the dark living room. It looked like it always did, as if nothing strange had happened at all. The whole
thing felt surreal; she still didn’t quite believe it.

Annie was in bed when Ruth checked on her. The touch lamp by the bed cast everything in warm light and stark shadow. Plastic stars on ceiling glowed green in the corners farthest from the lamp. On the desk a holographic solar system model slowly spun. The shelves were full of chapter books and toys and boxes of puzzles. On the bedside table, beside the lamp, was a small projector disc displaying a picture of Annie and her father Nathan. He was in his firefighting uniform, and Annie was wearing his helmet. She smiled wide, showing off the gap of her first missing baby tooth.

Ruth laid the blanket in her arms across the foot of Annie’s bed, then sat down beside her.

“How’re you doing, sweetheart?”

“I’m okay,” Annie promised. “So has Uncle Jesse always been a werewolf? Or is it new? Do you think I might turn into a werewolf?”

“No, I’m pretty sure your uncle hasn’t always been a werewolf,” Ruth said with a shake of her head. The word felt strange in her mouth. “And I’m pretty sure you aren’t one either. Even if you do eat like an animal.”

“If God wanted me to eat with a fork, he wouldn’t’ve given me fingers,” Annie said.

“God gave you fingers so you could hold a fork,” Ruth replied.

“God also gave me tortillas so I don’t need a fork,” Annie said with a hint of triumph.

“You can’t eat everything on a tortilla.”

“I can if I try hard enough.”

Ruth gave up with a shake of her head and leaned down to kiss Annie good night. She stood up and touched the lamp so the room fell into darkness.

“Hey Mom?” Annie sat up.

“Yeah, baby?”

“Uncle Jesse’s gonna stay, right?”

“Yeah. He’s gonna stay.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed that emotional roller coaster. It was a lot of fun to write. If I recall, actually, it was after typing up this chapter that I finally started posting the story online, because there was no way I was keeping this to myself, and I knew this was a project I was going to see through to the end.

As always, thank you all for your support. I can't put into words just how much it means getting to share this story with you.

Next chapter: A man appears at the hospital asking questions about the Silver Street
Terror Attack, and Ruth realizes there's more dangerous people out there than the werewolf staying in her guest room.
Albuquerque, 3 years ago

Ruth sat at a table in the break room, idly spinning her fork in her container of leftover chicken spaghetti with one hand while she checked her phone messages with the other.

It was the weekend, so Annie was home. Ruth had asked Maxine to go over and watch her for the day. She hoped Jesse didn’t take it too hard, but it had only been a few days since… since the thunderstorm. She couldn’t afford to be worried about Annie’s safety while trying to take care of patients. Jesse seemed like he was fine with it when Ruth mentioned Max would be babysitting, but Jesse had recently proven he was good at keeping things to himself.

Max had sent Ruth several photos of Annie that morning. Some of them were of Annie in the branches of the lone oak tree growing in the backyard, and one showed Annie hanging a spoon on her nose and crossing her eyes. There was also a sneaky picture Max had taken of Annie and Jesse sitting at the kitchen table playing a board game. Ruth decided to save that one to her phone. As her finger hovered over the icon, she was interrupted by someone opening the door. It was her coworker Ash. They spotted her and hurried over.

“Hey Ruth, there’s a guy asking about patients from the Silver Street apartment explosion.”

“Oh sf? Is he looking for family?”

“Actually, he’s investigating. He wants to know about the people we had in our ICU, and you were on shift a lot that week. Maybe you can tell the detective a little more than me or Laurie can. You free to talk, or no?”

Ruth turned her phone off and snapped the lid on her spaghetti. She could reheat it when she was done; it’d already gone cold anyways.

“Sure. Where’s he waiting?”

“ICU front desk.” Ash led the way.

Ruth spotted the detective well before she reached the front desk. The man leaning on the counter wore a gray suit, his hair was neatly trimmed, and he was tapping away at a tablet. A badge hung from his belt. Laurie was manning the desk. Ruth heard her saying something about not being able to give more information.

“That’s fine,” the man reassured. “I can talk to the local coroner’s office about it. They should be able to tell me more.”

“Hello,” Ruth greeted, “I’m Nurse Bearpaw. I understand you’re looking for someone?”
The man smiled politely. “Yes. I’m Detective Thompson, and I’m investigating the Silver Street explosion from last month. It seems you had an unidentified individual check in around then.”

There was something about Detective Thompson that sat funny with Ruth. Nothing was wrong, per se. It was just that, for lack of a better word, he was too normal. Nice suit, nice smile, a forgettable name. And although he hadn’t said it in as many words, he was clearly asking about Jesse. Ruth figured there was a subtle way to test her theory.

“Sure, yeah. There was that woman that came in. She was conscious when the paramedics got to her, but by the time she reached us, she was too far gone. She must have been close to where the explosion started. No ID and no relatives asking about her. Real shame.” Ruth shook her head. “You think maybe she was involved or something?”

“No, Ruth,” Laurie piped up, “he’s talking about our John Doe. The one who left a week after the explosion.”

“Oh right,” Ruth said, lightly smacking her hand to her forehead. She was a little annoyed Laurie had jumped in, but she’d still gotten what she wanted. She’d seen the man’s face shift minutely. He didn’t care about the woman. More than that, he looked somewhat guarded, like he didn’t want Ruth talking about the woman at all.

“Yes, your John Doe,” the man said a little too emphatically. “You don’t happen to have a way for me to reach him, do you? An address for where he’s staying now maybe? The phone number helps a lot, but I’d prefer to interview him in person. Any information you can provide would be helpful.”

The phone number. Jesse had given them the number to that prepaid phone he bought. Did prepaid phones have tracking? Hell, it was the 21st century: everything had tracking nowadays.

Ruth looked away and tapped a finger to her mouth thoughtfully to hide her hesitation. “I mean,” she said slowly, “he was real paranoid about the government. Didn’t want to give us any information really. I just called him Joe the whole time. He stayed with us a week before we cleared him, and he left on foot. We told him to contact the therapy center and to do a followup with us, but he never did.” Ruth had handled the followup at home. And she’d nagged Jesse about scheduling his therapy, but he hadn’t gotten around to it yet. She was thankful for it now.

The detective seemed unhappy, but he heaved a sigh and gave the nurses an understanding look. “Well, what can you do? I appreciate the help. I don’t suppose you could provide any photo identification of your John Doe? We have a good description, but a photo would go a long way. Or a more specific list of identifying marks or traits—maybe his injuries. Might help me find him.”

“I’m afraid not,” Ruth said, taking on a professional tone. “All photos we took were part of the patient’s medical treatment and record, and that can’t be released to you without a warrant. Once you get one, you come back and we can help you out. Sorry for the inconvenience, Detective.”

“No no, I was the one inconveniencing you. Thank you for your time, Nurse Bearpaw,” the man said with a cooler degree of politeness before seeing himself out.

Laurie raised an eyebrow at Ruth. Ruth responded in kind. “Something wrong?”

Laurie pursed her lips before speaking. “He’s investigating a terrorist attack. Shouldn’t we be trying to help in any way we can?”

“Not at the cost of our patients’ rights,” Ruth said. “Besides, just handing him private information
could mean lawsuits for the hospital. He can have the photos when he brings us a warrant. Now I need to go take the rest of my lunch break.”

Ruth headed towards the break room, but stopped short and ducked into a custodian closet down the hall. She pulled out her phone. She opened her contacts and scrolled down to Jesse’s name. Was it better to call or message him? Someone might hear her through the door. Messaging it was then. Actually, maybe not Jesse’s phone; it’d look bad if she texted the number of a missing man minutes after law enforcement stopped by to ask about him. She’d text Annie’s phone instead.

Ruth struggled to think of what to write. That man, Thompson, had not been a detective. Ruth was no spy or whatever like Jesse, but she knew a little from movies and the news. Like if she just wrote “Jesse’s been compromised. He needs to ditch his phone,” then someone could get hold of her phone’s history and see that. Or something. Ruth didn’t know how it worked. She was way out of her depth here. What could she write that would tip Jesse off without making her look suspicious?

Ruth tapped the phone against her chin as she wracked her brain. Then she remembered that Jesse and Annie had been marathoning *La leyenda del vigilante* lately. She’d sat in on a few of the episodes. There was one where Ladrón had been shot, and Hector had brought him back to his ranch house despite the risk of him discovering he was Vigilante. When the villain of the week, Montero, showed up all smiles to visit with Hector about a business opportunity, Ladrón snuck out the back, but he accidentally left behind his bloody shirt (he’d changed into Hector’s, which both Ruth and Jesse agreed had been very unnecessary and totally on purpose). Thankfully Hector managed to snatch the shirt up, hide it from Montero, and then shove it into the kitchen stove before he saw.

Ruth typed out her message to Annie: [Hey. Montero’s dropping by tonight. Tell your uncle to handle the laundry. Gracias]

That should do the trick. Ruth closed the conversation and spotted the messages from Maxine. The photos. Right. *Shit.* She didn’t know what to do about that except to delete her conversation history. She’d tell Jesse when she got home. Mr. International Secret Agent ought to have a solution.

Ruth stood in the pitch darkness of the closet with her phone beaming up into her face like a flashlight as the weight of the situation finally bore down on her: the people hunting Jesse—people willing to blow up an apartment building in the middle of a city—had just waltzed into her hospital wing impersonating the police. Ruth’s family was in danger. Just like Jesse had tried to tell her.

Ruth pressed her phone to her chest and squeezed her eyes shut. Jesse had wanted to leave, but she’d made him stay. She was sure that if she called the house right now and explained to him that he had to go, he’d do it. He’d agree right away that it was better for her to protect her daughter than try to defend a grown man who could handle himself. She’d get home, and he’d be gone like he’d never been there at all. Because he loved his family enough to do just about anything to keep them safe.

And that was why she couldn’t let him go.

***

When Ruth got home, she found Jesse waiting. He was sitting in a chair he’d positioned so he could watch the door and the living room windows. There was a moment where Ruth locked eyes with Jesse, and she saw a whisper of something dangerous. The next moment it was gone, and Jesse’s hand shifted to his thigh—away from the pistol lying in his lap. Ruth’s stomach lurched as she recognized it: that was the gun from the locked safe in her bedroom.

Ruth slowly shut the door behind herself, her eyes on the gun. “Where’s Annie?”
Jesse gestured with his head. “She’s at the neighbor’s. What happened at the hospital? You okay?” He leaned forward, bracing his elbow on his knee.

Ruth wrapped both hands around the shoulder strap of her bag. Jesse seemed at ease now, whereas she felt like a string pulled taut to the point of snapping.

“Someone claiming he was a detective came in and asked about you. He said he was investigating the explosion. I—don’t believe him. There was something about him that wasn’t right. He asked me for your address, and he wanted photos of you. Asked about your injuries, too, even though any detective should know that falls under doctor-patient confidentiality. I guess he was hoping he could slip it by us. He got your number, though.”

Jesse nodded as he listened. “Good instincts. How soon did you text Annie after he left?”

“Right away. A couple of minutes. Five tops.”

Ruth watched the tension ease out of Jesse’s shoulders and realized he hadn’t been relaxed at all. There was relief and weariness in his face. “I wasn’t sure how long it took you. I destroyed my phone as fast as I could, but that weren’t no guarantee they hadn’t already figured out my location. I told Annie and Max I had a migraine so they’d leave. Figured it was best to get them out of the way just in case.”

Just in case. Images sprang to Ruth’s mind, unbidden, of her house with the door kicked in and the walls full of bullet holes. She felt a little sick.

Jesse picked up the handgun and held it out to Ruth. “Sorry about gettin’ in your stuff. You can have this back now.”

Ruth stared down at the gun. Jesse had been prepared to use it. Was she?

“It’s… It’s been a long time since I practiced,” Ruth said. “Went to the range a couple times after Nathan died to brush up on safety courses, but other than that I haven’t really had the time.” She twisted her purse strap in her hands before taking her bag off and setting it on the table by the door. She took the gun from Jesse. “I don’t suppose you’d mind going out and practicing with me?”

“That’s a good idea,” Jesse said. “In the meantime, you oughta put that away before Annie comes home.”

“Right.” Ruth headed up the stairs, then froze halfway. She’d just remembered the pictures of Annie that Maxine had sent her.

Ruth leaned over the banister. “Jesse! My phone.”

“Huh? What about it?” Jesse’s voice came from the kitchen where he was putting the chair back.

“Max sent me photos today of Annie on my phone. One of the pictures had you in it. I deleted the conversation, but that data’s still in my phone right? Like how you can’t completely delete things off of computers?”

Jesse came back into the living room, his expression concerned. He nodded slowly. “Backwards as it may sound, just deletin’ things doesn’t completely erase ‘em, yeah. Common mistake criminals make when they try t’ hide evidence. Plus it’s still on Maxine’s phone.”

Ruth grimaced. “I can’t just tell her to delete the photo. That’d be weird.”
“And again, it wouldn’t do much good.” Jesse grabbed Ruth’s purse and pulled out her phone. He waved it at her. “I’ll handle this, but you’re gonna need a new phone after I’m done, hate to tell ya. I’ll make you a backup of anything important.”

“Okay. Okay yeah.” Ruth hurried to her room. She locked the gun in her safe, marveling for a moment at the fact that Jesse had gotten into it in the first place, then ran back downstairs just as Annie let herself in the house.

“Mom, you forgot to lock the door,” Annie chastised. Then in a quieter voice, she asked, “Is Uncle Jesse feeling better?” Her tone implied she thought he’d been suffering from something other than a migraine. They hadn’t settled on a code for Jesse to use when he “didn’t feel well” yet.

“He’s doing fine now. Did you behave for Max?”

“Mhm. I always do.”

“Guess I’ll have to take your word for it.” Ruth pulled Annie into a hug. “You wash up, and I’ll get dinner started.”

Ruth urged Annie up the stairs, then went to find Jesse. He was sitting at the computer. Ruth noticed a couple new programs on the desktop, and Jesse was running something in a browser she didn’t recognize.

“Can I ask what you’re doing?”

“Mm.” Jesse was focused as he alternated between reading prompts and typing in commands. “Overwatch is gone, but a lot of its resources are still available if ya know how to access ‘em. No one bothered cleaning up the mess after we were disbanded. I’m seein’ if I can’t access a Blackwatch drop site. See, we’d use these specific, secure locations online to leave pre-coded programs and data packages.” Jesse stopped typing to illustrate his words with his hand. “Say you gotta hack into a dirty diplomat’s computer, but you don’t got the tech skills, right? So you have someone package the programming you need and leave it on a drop site. You get to your hotel, load whatever-it-is onto a communicator or a drive, slip it into the target’s office, then load it onto his computer and let it do all the work. Safer than trying to get a whole technician in and out safely.”

Ruth nodded, feeling a little out of her depth. One word Jesse had said held her attention above everything else: Blackwatch. She remembered the news when it came to light that it existed. The world had been up in arms over the scandal of a possible black ops team within Overwatch, kept secret even from the international powers that were meant to monitor the peace-keeping force. Blackwatch represented everything Ruth had disliked about the idea of Overwatch—it was the very thing she’d feared most.

Now that he was done explaining, Jesse had gone back to work, selecting file names and entering passwords into text boxes. Finally he grabbed Ruth’s phone and linked it to the computer, then downloaded a file onto it. Ruth watched as he pulled up Maxine’s contact and sent the file to her phone.

Jesse turned in his chair. “Maxine’s probably gonna ask you what you sent her tomorrow. You lie and say it was a kitten video or something, alright?”

“What’d you really send her?”

Jesse looked somewhat abashed. “A virus. It’ll eat everything on her phone when she opens it, then delete itself. We tend t’ use it to destroy our own tech in case we’re compromised.” Ruth
must’ve made a face, because Jesse grimaced guiltily. “Sorry, Ruth. If I were already gone, or that so-called detective hadn’t shown up, I’d say she could keep the photo. But that ain’t the case, so this is the only way t’ keep her safe.”

Jesse pulled up the file on Ruth’s phone and opened it. She watched the screen flicker black for a moment, then colors danced on the screen. Her apps asked if she wanted to delete them, then vanished without confirmation. The settings jumped to default, the screen went white, and then the phone powered down on its own. Jesse tested the power button to be safe. It didn’t turn back on.

“There. I saved your old photos and contacts for ya,” Jesse promised. “Got ‘em on the computer here. When you get a new phone, you can transfer them.” He set the now useless brick of metal, plastic, and glass on the desk, then started systematically deleting the programs he’d downloaded.

Ruth picked up the phone. Jesse looked over curiously.

“It’ll look suspicious if my phone and Max’s die the same way. I’m gonna go drop it in the kitchen sink and run some water over it,” Ruth said.

“Smart thinking.”

Ruth looked at the computer screen. The drop site was still open. She saw the words “Access Authorized: Agent Jesse McCree” near the top of the page. Something about knowing her brother had been in Blackwatch left a bad taste in her mouth.

Ruth looked away. “I just don’t want Max getting mad at me for fucking up her phone. If she hears mine somehow mysteriously died, too, she’ll know it was my fault.”

“Don’t wanna piss off yer neighbor,” Jesse agreed. “Specially if you want her to watch Annie tomorrow so I can take you shooting.”

***

Without an ID, Jesse couldn’t use any of the local gun ranges, but Ruth had a good idea where they could go.

The sun had been up for an hour by the time Ruth and Jesse left. Annie jumped the low wall between their house and Maxine’s; Maxine was standing on the porch waiting with a mug of coffee in hand. She waved to the truck as the engine reluctantly turned over and hummed to life, and the repulsors kicked on. Ruth took the highway north until they were outside of the city, then doubled back along a dirt road towards the Sandia Mountains. Soon the road pulled up alongside a dry stream bed and followed it south. Ruth slowed the truck and finally pulled over.

“This seems like a good place.” Ruth put the car in park and turned on the windows’ solar shielding. A blue hexagon pattern flashed across the windshield and side windows before the glass turned dark. “We’re far enough from the road that no one will see, and down in the riverbed, we’ve got the high banks to stop our bullets.”

“Nice scouting,” Jesse said approvingly as he swung his door open.

Jesse climbed up into the bed of the truck and passed down a couple crates to Ruth. He’d filled them with odd supplies from around the house and garage that he thought would make good targets. He also slid a cooler over. It was a big, dirty, red-and-white monstrosity on wheels that Ruth used for drinks and snacks during trips—practically an heirloom it was so old. Ruth took the crates so Jesse could pull the lunch cooler along as they climbed down into the stream bed.
“What did you grab, anyways?” Ruth asked as she looked into the crate on top. She saw a couple lemon juice bottles from the recycling bin, a bunch of tin cans, and a tube of tennis balls. Ruth wasn’t sure why she had those; she didn’t even play tennis.

“Just junk,” Jesse said. “I got some painted wood boards to start you on, plus the tin cans. Stuff I used t’ use for homemade targets when I was a kid. Hey, you didn’t mention how long you’ve been shootin’ for.”

“Nathan got me into it when we first got married, so over ten years now,” Ruth said. “I took to it fast, though I haven’t done it in a few years. Once I shake the rust off, I think you’ll be impressed.”

Impressed was an understatement.

Jesse let out a low whistle as Ruth’s bullet tore through the lemon juice bottle he’d set on an overturned crate a hundred meters away. The bottle flipped in the air before tumbling to the ground. Jesse pulled his earmuffs down around his neck. “Maybe you shoulda been the one Overwatch recruited.”

Ruth scoffed. “It was a good shot, but you don’t need to stroke my ego.”

Jesse had started her on the wooden boards at five, ten, and fifteen meters. He explained that in her own home, attackers would all be close range, and just to worry about hitting center mass. Besides, accuracy with a semi-automatic went downhill after thirty meters, even if it could still kill a man. But when Jesse saw how tight Ruth’s grouping was, he got curious. He set up cans and tennis balls on top of rocks farther and farther out to see just what Ruth could do. Then he’d grabbed a laser measure, one of the crates, and the lemon juice bottle—the smallest object left in the pile of junk he’d brought. He’d had a feeling about Ruth, and it turned out he was right.

Jesse shook his head at Ruth’s comment. “You’re firin’ an old 9mm. Most folks can’t hit a plate-sized target at a hundred meters with that caliber. Not consistently anyways.”

Ruth considered that. Nathan had applauded her accuracy, too, but then he’d never had a bad word to say about her when it came to anything. She’d kind of assumed he was just being nice because she was his wife.

“You could make a shot like that, right?” Ruth asked. “Consistently I mean. With this gun.”

Jesse ducked his head to hide his face under the brim of his hat—that silly thing with the bullets that he’d taken a shine to. “That ain’t really a fair comparison. My entire career was spent bein’ a marksman. If I couldn’t make a shot like that every time, I’d be dead right now.” He looked at the gun in Ruth’s hands, then gave his head a shake and smiled at her. “You wanna see what I can do?”

There was a flash of mischief in that smile. Ruth couldn’t help mirroring it. “Show me what you got, cowboy.”

Jesse reached into his pocket and rummaged around. He pulled out a handful of change. “Hold out your hand for me, would ya?” Jesse requested. He used his thumb to sort through the change. He dropped six quarters into Ruth’s palm before dumping the rest of the coins back into his pocket. Then he took the quarters and walked out to where the crate was. Ruth watched as he crouched in front of the crate for a solid minute before he slowly backed away and then returned to her side. He’d managed to balance all six quarters on edge on top of the crate.

“All right, how many bullets you got in that magazine?”

Ruth checked. “Five plus one in the chamber.”
Jesse nodded. “That’s what I thought, but it’s always good to check.” He pulled his earmuffs back on. “Okay, hand it over.”

Ruth watched as Jesse took the gun, adjusted his stance, and lined up the sights. His expression smoothed out, and he went nearly still except for the rise and fall of his chest.

“Nice that we’re down in the riverbed,” Jesse said in a soft, conversational voice. “Don’t gotta worry ‘bout kentucky windage. Still, I ain’t warmed up yet, so first shot’s gonna be a little sloppy. Don’t judge me too harshly.”

Jesse squeezed the trigger, and the quarter on the far left flashed and then vanished in the blink of an eye. Ruth sucked in a breath. Jesse made a small noise in the back of his throat and lined up the next shot.

Five seconds, five bullets, five quarters there one moment and then gone the next. When Jesse was done, he flipped the safety back on and passed the gun to Ruth. “Clear that for me, would ya? I’m gonna go get my targets.”

“Good luck finding them.”

Jesse lifted an eyebrow and smirked. “I kept track.”

Ruth watched him lope off towards the crate as she slid the magazine out, then checked the chamber. All clear. She set the gun aside, then opened up the cooler to pull out a water bottle. It was soaked from the ice. She pressed it to her neck for a few seconds before finally opening it to take a drink.

When Jesse came back, Ruth grabbed another bottle and cracked it open for him.

“I’ll trade ya,” Jesse said, holding out his hand. He dumped six quarters in Ruth’s palm before taking the water bottle.

Ruth turned the coins over in her hands. Five of them had near perfect holes in the centers. The last one had half a circle taken out of the side. She picked it up.

“First one. Told ya it’d be sloppy,” Jesse said. “It’d be cleaner if I’d had my revolver.” He tipped his water bottle back and drank half of it in one go.

Ruth glanced over at Jesse. If she hadn’t watched it happen, she’s not sure she would’ve believed he’d done it. People only made trick shots like that in the movies. But then she supposed he had to be pretty outstanding to get picked up by Overwatch.

“So were you just always this ridiculously good, or did someone train you?” Ruth asked. She tucked the quarters into her pocket to save.

“Not to brag, but I’d say it’s natural talent for the most part. I’ve always been fast, and I got a knack for calculatin’ angles. Long distance, quick-draw, trick shots—I can do it all. But I got a few tips from the pros in Overwatch.”

Ruth saw something pass over Jesse’s face: a moment of happy reflection that faded as fast as it appeared, replaced with a sort of hardness that pulled back the corner of Jesse’s mouth. He stared down at the ground.

“You think you could teach me to shoot like that?” Ruth asked to try and distract him.
“Hm. Dunno if I could do as fine a job as Captain Amari,” Jesse said, “but I can try if ya want.”

“I’d like that, yeah. I forgot how much fun this is. And it’s nice having something to do with you,” Ruth confessed. “I mean, you’ve been staying with us for a month now, but we haven’t really gotten to know each other at all. I like having something we can do together.”

“Yeah, this is nice,” Jesse said, his expression relaxing. “Some folks’d tell you I like the sound of my own voice a little too much, and maybe they’re right, but…. well sometimes I just don’t know what to say. Ain’t got the words. Or the ones I wanna say won’t come.” He wiped the back of his hand across his furrowed brow, suddenly looking vulnerable. He glanced over at Ruth. “This is easy, though, you know?”

“I know,” Ruth said. She sat down on one end of the cooler and patted the bit of space that was left. Jesse sat down on the other half, his back to hers. Ruth leaned back with a sigh, then froze and lurched forward.

“Oh gross, you’re all sweaty.”

Jesse barked out a laugh. “Pot callin’ th’ kettle black.”

Ruth stuck out her tongue even though Jesse couldn’t see it. “I think it’s about time we get back in the nice air-conditioned truck and return to civilization.”

“I s’ppose so,” Jesse said. Then he leaned back against Ruth again, earning a shout and a rough shove.

Chapter End Notes

A quick note: I did my best to do some research on handguns since I don't have experience. Terminology made it difficult. The "maximum" range of a gun, its "effective" range, and its "accurate" range are all different. It seems the max range of most handguns is 1800 meters, but the effective lethal range is usually 50-150 meters, and the accurate range of a pistol is about 30 meters. Specifically semi-automatics that don't have fixed barrels like a revolver does. Jesse's comment about hitting a plate-sized target comes from a demonstration video I watched.

Kentucky windage is a phrase that comes from the use of kentucky long rifles (18th to 20th century). It refers to an adjustment a rifleman makes by aiming to the side of their target rather than adjusting their gun's sights.

I love fics that detail Jesse's deadeye ability and exactly how it works, and I like fics where it's just this uncanny thing people notice about him now and then when he's in a shootout. For this fic, though, I'm aiming more for realism, and Jesse's "deadeye aim" is all natural skill and hard-earned experience (plus his new genetic modifications, when he lets them come to the forefront).

I also love that Ruth has only an approximate knowledge of what Jesse's job is (at least until she saw that computer screen). Unreliable narrators are fun.

Next chapter: A Talon mission in Belarus four years ago.
Belarus

Chapter Notes

Additional Chapter 11 tags: Violence, Minor character death, Guns, Knives, Threats of abuse, Doctors/Medics

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Minsk, Belarus, 4 years ago

Under the light of a nearly full moon there were few places to hide. Especially on top of a building.

Jesse climbed up the last few steps of the fire escape, then made his way over to the emergency door. He tested it and found it unlocked. Jesse set down the long, black bag he’d been carrying over his shoulder. After rummaging in one of the outer pockets, he pulled out a rolled up strip of material, white on one side and orange on the other, about one inch wide. He cut a foot of it off the roll with the combat knife from his belt. He pulled the white paper off one side and pressed it to the seam of the door. Then he peeled off the orange side. The reactive metal underneath sparked and hissed to life as the air hit it, letting off blinding white light. Jesse averted his eyes for the few seconds it took for the volatile stuff to burn out, leaving the door soldered shut to the frame. Jesse crumpled the trash and shoved it in his pocket.

“Exit B is sealed,” Jesse murmured.

“Acknowledged,” the reply sounded in Jesse’s earpiece. “Move into position and prepare to cover me.”

The Belarus Department of Developing Technology Center was a long wedge of a building. It, along with five other newly constructed buildings on either side, pointed like arrows to a small, stunning gem of a park below. Jesse had seen the courtyard space just before the sun set; a light show had displayed on massive pillars of water that shot out of a fountain in the center. Now that night had fallen the fountain bubbled quietly, hidden LEDs making the water glow blue. All around the fountain were concentric rings of benches; elevated garden beds of soft, pastel flowers; and state-of-the-art solar panel towers designed to look like trees and provide shade in the day. The lamp posts that made up the outermost circle shone softly, powered by the energy the solar towers had collected. They cast pools of light down on the colorful mosaic tiles that paved the entire park.

Down in the courtyard, a few people still walked or sat and enjoyed after-dinner coffee. One of those people was a minor politician named Andrej Kovaleva who had contacted Talon about trading valuable and time-sensitive information. That same person likely intended to betray them, which was why Jesse was there. The Technology Center had the best angle on the meeting place out of all six buildings. Jesse was expected to set up and wait. If signaled, he had clear instructions to kill the other party.

The plan didn’t account for a sniper already there when Jesse rounded the HVAC system. That explained the unlocked door.

Everything happened in a few brief seconds. The sniper turned, having heard Jesse’s footsteps. It
was an omnic sporting a matte black paint job and reinforced armor plating. It lifted an arm back
towards Jesse, and he realized in that moment that it was also sporting a pulse pistol as its hand
flipped back and the barrel extended from its wrist. Jesse was caught off-balance. Falling back to
cover simply wasn’t an option. Jesse shifted his weight forward and rushed the omnic.

There was a flash from the barrel and the retort of a plasma pulse. Jesse’s body twisted as the
pulse hit his left shoulder. Then he was on top of the omnic, combat knife in hand, the blade shoved
up under the omnic’s chin and into its central processor all the way to the hilt. Coolant dripped down
over Jesse’s fingers.

“I heard a shot. Report,” a voice in Jesse’s ear demanded.

Jesse wiped his hands off on his pants. “All clear now. Kovaleva brought his own backup. Had to
politely tell ‘em they were in my spot. Does it look like anyone in the park heard?”

There was silence. Then the response: “No. Here’s hoping you didn’t spook Kovaleva. Reaper
wants this intel.” If Kovaleva did call off the meeting, and Reaper heard that it was Jesse’s fault…

Jesse’s heart pounded, and his skin tingled. He wiped his hands off on his pants again, this time
because they’d suddenly gone clammy. Just adrenaline from the fight, that was all.

Jesse pulled the omnic’s unresponsive body out of the way, favoring his left shoulder as he
worked, then laid down prone alongside the abandoned sniper rifle. He’d planned to use the gun
he’d brought with him, but this was much nicer, and he wouldn’t have to waste time assembling his
own weapon. Jesse took a second to check and make sure the omnic had already chambered a round
before settling in. His shoulder had finally begun to throb as the pain of the pulse blast settled in. He
rubbed at it. With a little time it’d heal.

Glancing down the sights of the rifle and then the spotter’s scope that was set up alongside it,
Jesse could see the omnic had already made all the necessary adjustments. The gun was focused in
on the meeting point: a bench that faced away, towards the fountain. As he looked through the
scope, a man sat down just to the right of his crosshairs. A few moments later another man—Jesse’s
teammate—sat down on the other side of the bench, his head dead center of the crosshairs. A few moments later another man—Jesse’s
teammate—sat down on the other side of the bench, his head dead center of the crosshairs.

Practiced hands made minute adjustments to the rifle until Jesse had the right target in his scope.
He could see the Talon agent speaking. Then Kovaleva. He seemed at ease. At times he lifted his
chin imperiously and waved his hands to emphasize his words. The Talon agent shook his head, then
moved to stand. Kovaleva reached for him with a look of dismay and coaxed the agent into sitting
back down. There was more talking, this time subdued, before Kovaleva unhappily nodded and held
out a hand. Jesse could see a data drive tucked between his thumb and palm. The Talon agent shook
hands, and whatever he’d passed into Kovaleva’s hand was quickly pocketed.

As the Talon agent put away the drive, looking down for the briefest moment, Jesse saw
Kovaleva slip his hand up his chest and into his coat.

“Abort, abort,” Jesse hissed. He squeezed the trigger of the rifle. He felt the recoil of the gun, but
nothing happened. The round in the rifle had been a blank: it was a trap.

There was sudden movement down in the courtyard. The agent had stood up in response to
Jesse’s signal at the same time that Kovaleva withdrew a pistol. Kovaleva fired, and screaming
erupted from people the park. Jesse sat up. He watched his partner dive for the cover of the flower
beds as Kovaleva stood and started backing away. People were fleeing in all directions.

“McCree, cover me!” the agent said over the comms, his voice thin.
Jesse looked around, but there was no additional ammo for the sniper rifle. His own was a different caliber, and it would take too long to assemble the rifle he’d brought. Jesse turned to check the omnic’s body for extra rounds, but with no success. Down in the courtyard Jesse’s mission partner and Kovaleva began exchanging shots.

The rooftop access door at the far end of the building exploded outward with a bang. Jesse heard orders being given and heavy boots as people rushed towards his position—mercenaries or perhaps Belarusian police who’d been tipped off.

Jesse grit his teeth. He’d been set up in the past, and he didn’t take kindly to having it happen again. But this wasn’t Rialto. He could still pull this off.

Jesse drew the semi-automatic from its holster on his hip, stood, and braced a foot on the low wall ringing the roof. He could just barely see Kovaleva hiding behind one of the solar tower trees. It was a hell of a distance and not a shot Jesse would normally gamble on even if he had the luxury of time—which he didn’t.

The sound of footsteps was drawing closer.

In his head, Jesse quickly took stock of the distance, elevation, resulting angle, and windage. He could all but see the bullet’s trajectory in his mind as he pointed his pistol and sighted down the barrel. He sucked in a breath, then let it out slow through barely parted lips.

Someone at Jesse’s back shouted an order in another language. Police. Mercenaries would have already lit into him.

Then Kovaleva leaned a little too far to the left, and Jesse fired.

Kovaleva’s head snapped back, and Jesse saw his body collapse.

Shots rang out behind Jesse as the police opened fire. He felt the impact of several bullets hitting his body armor with enough force to raise welts.

Jesse shoved his gun in his holster as he stepped up onto the ledge—and then over. He twisted on his heel as he pushed away, and let himself fall off the roof. There was a windowsill just below him. Jesse reached out to grab it, but his left arm didn’t respond quickly enough. He caught the sill with the tips of his fingers and slipped. His stomach lurched as he fell. He caught the next window down and felt his left shoulder throb as he stopped falling with a hard jerk and slammed into the wall.

Jesse hissed in pain, but clung tight to the narrow ledge. He reached inside himself for that smoldering fire in his chest and let it trickle through his veins. His fingers twisted and his nails hardened. He felt his teeth grinding. A metallic tang filled his nose, familiar and exciting, but also sending up red flags: Kovaleva’s body was down in the courtyard, so where was the smell of blood coming from?

There wasn’t time to think. Jesse shifted his weight to his right arm, shattered the glass with a couple of solid punches, and hauled himself through.

He was in a conference room. Jesse pulled up the floor plans of the building in his head. The police must have seen which window he’d gone through, so he didn’t have much time.

“McCree, status update,” the Talon agent asked over the comms. “Are you alive?”

“Jus’ barely,” Jesse said. The back of his arm felt wet. He frowned. “I’m in the Tech Center. Two down from the roof.” He reached across with his right hand and touched the back of his arm.
curiously. It came away coated in blood. He reached back around and ran his fingers up his arm to his shoulder. There was a tear in his shirt and a small hole that stung when his fingers brushed it. He’d thought he was just feeling residual pain from the pulse blast, but apparently he was wrong. “I’ve been shot.”

“Shit. Okay, I’ve pulled back to Masiuk Street. The police have the Tech Center surrounded. What do you have?”

“Pistol short one round and a couple smokes.”

“No flash grenades?”

“Nah. They do me more harm than the folks I’m fightin’,” Jesse said. He headed towards the door on the right side of the room. He eased it open and listened. The stairwell was on the far end of the floor, but in the silent building it was easy to hear the police running down to his level.

“I’ve got something,” the Talon agent said over the comm. “The legal building north of your position has an open window on the third floor. I have a flash grenade to cover you if you can make the jump.”

Jesse knew the building he was talking about. He also knew the distance between the two buildings. A normal person couldn’t make that jump, and it would certainly test the upper limits of Jesse’s own abilities, but better to try than to end up in a shootout with the police.

“I’ll let ya know when I’m ready,” Jesse said.

Now for a game of hide-and-seek. Jesse pulled off his boots, tied the laces together, then hung them on the back of his belt. He could move more quietly in socks. He snuck along the hall, listening as the stairwell door opened. There was a janitor’s closet coming up. He stopped in front of it and tried the handle. Locked. He didn’t have time to pick it. He dragged a little more of that beast in him up to the surface and bore down on the handle with all his weight. The metal groaned, then the lock snapped, and the door swung open. Jesse slipped inside and shut the door behind himself.

The odor of cleaners lining the shelves assailed Jesse’s senses. He wrinkled his nose. He could hear several people approaching. Doors down the hall banged open as they were kicked in.

Jesse grabbed hold of the inner door handle and leaned back. Someone tested the door. The handle jiggled a little in Jesse’s hand. They tried pulling. Jesse bared his teeth and braced himself. He felt the unnatural heat at his core crackling; his skin prickled, and the reek of chemicals and blood nearly choked him. When the door didn’t budge, the officer moved on.

Jesse waited until the sound of footsteps faded, then released his death grip on the handle. It creaked in protest; he’d left faint indents in the metal.

The hall was clear when Jesse eased the door open. He crept to the stairs, keeping an ear out for the police searching the rooms behind him.

There was an officer covering the stairwell door. He spotted Jesse and let out a surprised shout as he lifted his gun, but Jesse was faster. He had his pistol out of his holster so fast it was more reflex than thought, and two bullets tore through the officer’s upper arms, causing him to drop his gun as his hands went slack.

Jesse rushed the officer and threw his shoulder into him. They stumbled through the stairwell door together. The officer hit the rail, and Jesse saw the look of terror in his eyes as he tipped over the side. He let out a short scream as he fell. Then his body jerked to a sudden stop as Jesse caught his
ankle.

Jesse grunted as he was nearly dragged over the rail himself, and his shoulder exploded with pain. The pain was answered by the echoing crackle of fire in Jesse’s bones as his body tried to transform. He saw the veins jump along his arms, and his back knotted up as the muscles strained.

With a burst of superhuman strength, Jesse hauled the officer up and then threw him into the wall. The officer dropped to the ground and went still.

There was no time to see if the man was still breathing: the other police had turned back and were converging on the source of the noise. Jesse ran down the stairs, hugging the wall to avoid being shot from above. The transformation died down, leaving Jesse feeling weak. The blood loss probably wasn’t helping. His foot slipped, and he barely caught himself before he could go tumbling down the stairs.

Jesse reached the door for the fourth floor just as he heard movement below. A second team had been sent into the building to cut off his escape. Jesse shoved the door open and ran for the north side of the building.

The fourth floor was largely open space, divided into work stations and a few collaborative spaces for teams. Jesse spotted a control panel on a pillar and paused briefly to see what it offered. Anything to give him an advantage.

A few taps, a swipe, and another tap to confirm—suddenly the room lit up blue. All of the work stations were outfitted with hard light dividers and sound dampeners to provide privacy, and Jesse had just activated every single one of them. He ducked down into the maze of glowing, opaque walls as the stairwell door swung open and officers poured out onto the fourth floor.

Jesse crept to the windows and peered out. He could see the law building across the street. A floor below him and a ways to the left, he spotted the open window his partner had described. It was easy to see it by the flashing red and blue lights of the police cars cordoning off the Tech Center.

“I’m here,” Jesse whispered as he snuck over to the right window. He heard someone approach and retreated to the nearest cubicle, keeping the window in sight.

“Give me a signal when you’re ready,” the agent responded.

He’d give him a signal all right. Jesse tucked himself under the cubicle desk and hurriedly tied his boots back on. Then he unhooked a smoke grenade from his belt. He pulled the pin, reached around the wall, and threw it underhand so that it bounced across the floor. It hissed like a snake as smoke poured out.

Jesse listened to the police call to one another as they moved towards the smoke. He wished he knew what they were saying, but he could guess based on experience. He grabbed the other smoke grenade, pulled the pin, and tossed it in another direction. Thick smoke quickly filled the maze of cubicles. The sounds from the police became confused and panicked.

“Get ready,” Jesse whispered. He stepped out of his hiding place and opened fire on the windows, emptying the entire magazine. The windows were designed to stop jumpers, not bullets. Six of them spiderwebbed—Jesse didn’t want the cops outside to guess which one he was jumping from. The police caught in the smoke all around Jesse shouted in alarm. They couldn’t fire blindly without risking hitting each other, though.

“Three, two, one,” Jesse counted as he backed up and then sprinted forward. He hit the window,
and it shattered. His foot made contact with the windowsill for a brief moment, and he kicked off, launching himself as hard as he could across the street.

Jesse’s stomach flipped as he fell towards the open window of the next building. At the same time there was a sudden flash of brilliant white light and a noise so loud that it swallowed up even the wailing police sirens below. Then Jesse’s feet hit the ground, his ankle twisted, and he rolled. His back slammed into something solid, knocking the air out of him.

Jesse laid still as he tried to gather his senses. He couldn’t hear anything save for the painful ringing in his ears, and brilliant spots filled his vision. What little he could see past the spots was dark and blurry. His shoulder, his back, and his right ankle were all killing him. That wasn’t a stunt he planned on repeating any time soon.

Jesse felt thin, scratchy carpet under his palms. Reaching back, he touched wood. He must have hit a desk.

There was garbled noise in Jesse’s ear. Jesse realized belatedly that it was his earpiece. “Can’t hear you.” His own voice sounded muffled. There was a response over the comms, but again, he couldn’t make it out. “Don’t think I can move.” The other agent gave some sort of confirmation, and Jesse thought he heard the words “hold on” at the tail end of it.

Slowly Jesse’s vision came back. The spots were still there every time he blinked, but now he could see the room around him. Most of it was empty. Just his luck that the one open window happened to be right in front of a heavy wooden desk.

Jesse tried and failed twice to sit up before finally managing to haul himself upright. He stopped to rest, breathing heavily from exertion and pain.

The door of the office opened. Jesse barely heard it. He had his pistol out before he remembered he’d emptied the entire clip into the windows. He held it up anyways until he saw that the man in the doorway was his teammate.

“It’s just me, relax.”

Jesse lowered his gun. He slid it into the holster again, his hand shaky. “Got an exit plan?” he asked.

“Service elevator down to the underground parking level. I’ve got a vehicle waiting right by the staff doors. Come on.”

The agent held out his hand. Jesse shook his head. “Rolled my ankle or somethin’. I’ll need help walking.”

The agent looked down at Jesse’s feet with concern. “How fast will that heal?”

Jesse snorted. “Longer’n a couple minutes. Speakin’ a which, you got anything t’ stabilize this bullet wound in my back?”

“Yeah, hold on.”

The agent knelt beside Jesse and coaxed him into leaning forward. Jesse felt him rip the hole in his shirt open wider so he could get at his shoulder. The agent pulled a tin from a pouch on his belt and opened it on the floor between them. A syringe full of some kind of antihemorrhagic was injected around the wound, and then he taped a bandage over the top. Jesse grimaced as the area tingled unpleasantly, but it quickly died down along with the pain.
“That should stop the bleeding. Now we need to move.”

The agent crossed over to Jesse’s other side. He pulled Jesse’s arm over his shoulder, and together they stood up. Jesse leaned his weight on the other man as they made their way to the service elevator.

The basement parking area was empty. Thanks to the flash grenade, the police hadn’t seen Jesse jump, or they hadn’t seen where he landed. The agent helped Jesse into the backseat, instructing him to lay down so the traffic cameras wouldn’t see him since the police knew what he looked like.

Jesse stretched out on his side with his left shoulder above his heart and his forehead pressed into the leather back of the seat. It wasn’t a comfortable fit: the car wasn’t exactly big, and Jesse wasn’t exactly small. Still, he found himself drifting in and out of sleep half-curling up across the backseat. He woke now and then when the car pulled up to a stop and a streetlamp shined down through the window. He kept his eyes shut against the fluorescent light.

Eventually they reached a small airfield.

“Time to get up,” the Talon agent said as he parked the car. He opened the back door and helped ease Jesse out.

There were other people waiting outside: two medics along with an armed agent who watched the road behind the car to make sure they hadn’t been followed. Jesse’s teammate helped him onto the stretcher beside the medics and began describing Jesse’s injuries to them as they wheeled the stretcher towards a hangar.

A Corvid Mark 2 sat in the hangar with the doors open. It was slightly bigger than the standard, with better accommodations for passengers. The medics pushed the stretcher straight up into it and locked it down near an emergency aid station that had been prepared.

Jesse was made to sit up and turn so his shoulder and his ankle could be examined. One medic unclasped his chest armor while the other worked his boot off. Jesse’s ankle had swollen.

“Can you take your shirt off, or do I need to cut it?” the medic behind Jesse asked.

“Go ahead an’ cut it,” Jesse said. “Got a hole in it anyway.”

The medic grabbed a pair of scissors and cut the shirt away. “Your back is a mess,” the medic said as she peeled off the bandage over the bullet wound.

“Yeah?” Jesse craned his head, trying to get a glimpse. The movement tweaked his shoulder, and he flinched.

“Don’t move like that.” The medic pressed something to Jesse’s shoulder—gauze soaked in something cool. “The bullet entered at an angle; it must have deflected off your armor into your shoulder. There’s no way I’m about to go digging around in there for it. I’m just going to stitch you up and let you keep the bullet as a souvenir. If it becomes a problem for you later, we can operate. Meanwhile the rest of your back is one massive bruise. I’m curious how you managed that.”

“Jumped out a window.”

A rasping voice chuckled from the other side of the plane. “Exactly what I’d expect from you, McCree.”

Jesse’s heart stuttered in his chest. He watched warily as Reaper stepped into the harsh light of the
medical station. Reaper was supposed to meet them at the lab, not here at the evac point.

Jesse licked his lips, his mouth suddenly dry. “Weren’t part of my plan, believe me. We had to improvise after Kovaleva double-crossed us.”

Reaper stopped a few paces away, his arms crossed. “I heard. What went wrong?”

“They set us up. Knew I’d be on the roof, an’ planted a sniper there. I killed ‘em an’ took their rifle. Turned out it was loaded with a blank.”

“A trap easily avoided if you’d used your own rifle,” Reaper pointed out casually.

A lump formed in Jesse’s throat. He looked down at the floor of the aircraft, unable to meet Reaper’s gaze. “S’ppose so,” he agreed quietly. He was right: Jesse had made a mistake. If he’d used his own rifle, he would have shot Kovaleva before he could draw his own gun, his partner would have been able to slip away, and he would’ve had time to avoid the police entirely. There was no point offering up excuses: it’d only make things worse for him.

Reaper turned away. “Suttner. You have something of mine.”

Jesse’s mission partner walked over and pulled a black box from his belt. Jesse watched it exchange hands, intimately familiar with the device. Under the hard case cover was a set of remote controls to Jesse’s shock restraints. Suttner backed up, threw a glance at Jesse that he thought might be pity or something close to it, then walked away.

Jesse felt his breath catch as Reaper handled the device. Jesse had botched the mission, and he knew what that meant. He waited for Reaper to thumb the control box open and activate the restraints that would send paralyzing levels of electricity through his body.

Instead Reaper merely hooked the box onto his own belt. “The important thing is you cleaned up your mess, McCree. Kovaleva’s been dealt with, and I have computer specialists scrubbing out all traces of your presence here tonight. The police saw you, and they might get lucky and identify you, but there’s no way to tie it back to Talon.”

Reaper closed the distance between himself and Jesse. He leaned in to examine the medics’ work as they wrapped Jesse’s ankle and sutured his bullet wound. For a regular agent they might have spared a biotic emitter, but Jesse healed too quickly to make it worth the trouble.

Jesse heard Reaper hum thoughtfully. “We both know you screwed up,” Reaper said quietly, still in Jesse’s space, “but I think we can also both agree you’ve suffered enough for your mistakes today. I look forward to reading your mission report, though. That was some quick thinking slipping Kovaleva’s trap. And I saw security footage of that shot you took on him. Impressive work.”

Reaper pressed a gloved hand to the back of Jesse’s head. Jesse let his head tip forward slightly, his jaw clenching as he submitted to the touch.

“It’s a long flight back. Get some rest, McCree. That’s an order.”

Jesse grunted his acknowledgment, then quickly corrected himself and said, “Yes sir.”

When the medics were done with Jesse, he laid back on the stretcher. One of them offered him painkillers, but he turned them down. The stronger the stuff, the foggier his mind got, and he couldn’t handle that at the moment. He’d just sleep the pain off.

“Hey.”
Jesse opened an eye and tilted his head to the side. Agent Suttner was leaning against the counter of the first aid station. “Hey,” Jesse answered.

“I just wanted to, uh.” Suttner hooked his thumbs in his pockets and huffed a breath through his nose. “I wanted to say thanks for not leaving me to die.”

Jesse had run a few missions with handlers now. None of them had talked to him like this. Suttner refused to look him in the eye. “Yeah, same. Thanks for coming t’ get me. I was boxed in there. I don’t think anyone woulda blamed ya for pulling up stakes and leaving me behind.”

Suttner shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe. But I didn’t.”

“No, you didn’t,” Jesse agreed.

Chapter End Notes

Not too much to say this week. I love the conflict of Jesse struggling with the fact that he's a prisoner while working with agents and having to acknowledge that they're people, not just enemies, and trying to keep himself detached in spite of bonding experiences.

I do have Jesse's transformation and resulting strain figured out, and this might be a good time to explain since there's a small example of it in this chapter. Jesse's cells contain a lot of potential energy that he stores up. He draws on this to transform, converting the energy into chemical reactions and mass. He doesn't feel any strain once in werewolf form; it's a static state like his human form. However upon transforming back, the mass doesn't convert back and that energy is simply released as a byproduct, which means less energy to activate the changes in his cells, which drains on his reserves. So transforming back will always take longer and be tiring, even if it wasn't a complete shift. Not great in a situation like this one.

With shop talk out of the way, here's what to look forward to: next chapter will focus on Jesse's continued attempts to heal and gather the pieces of his life back together as his newly found family seeks to make a place for him in their lives.
Albuquerque, 3 years ago

The voice of Juan Luis Guerra singing *Frío, Frío* drifted from the stereo speakers as Ruth finished rolling an enchilada and added it to the glass pan beside the stove. The kitchen was filled with the smell of simmering tomato sauce, melted cheese, garlic, onions, and chile peppers. Ruth smiled. Vintage music, family recipes, fresh spices—the only thing missing from the kitchen right now was her mamá humming to the stereo while she cooked.

A groan came from behind Ruth. Annie sat at the breakfast counter, face down in her science textbook, dark hair fanned out around her.

Ruth rolled her eyes. “The food’s almost done. Have a little patience.”

“But it smells so good, and I’m so hungry. How am I supposed to do my homework like this?” Annie complained, lifting her head to look at her mother.

“You could have done it in your room.”

“Nuh-uh. The whole house smells like food. It’s just as bad upstairs.”

“Well then go outside.”

“But Uncle Jesse’s grilling outside so it smells like food out there, too.”

“Then you’re just going to have to hold your breath,” Ruth teased. Annie pouted at her. “Hey, if you can’t focus on your homework, you might as well keep Uncle Jesse company. Go on, go bother him. And tell him the enchiladas are nearly done.” Ruth set another corn tortilla into the pan of sizzling oil.

“Kay.” Annie shut her book, turned off her tablet, and slipped out the back door.

Jesse, it turned out, wasn’t much for cooking or baking. He could feed himself, but neither the Deadlock Gang nor Overwatch had been particularly concerned with developing his culinary skills, and he’d never paid much attention when his mom tried to teach him. Give him a campfire or a grill, though, he’d told Ruth, and he could manage just fine. So when Ruth suggested making one of her abuelita’s recipes, Jesse had offered to grill corn for her to go with it.
Ruth had always preferred stovetop cooking to grilling so she didn’t have a grill, but Max did. Ruth had invited her over to share dinner with them in return for letting Jesse use it. Jesse was in Max’s backyard turning corn cobs on the grill with tongs while the two of them chatted. It was the first time they’d been alone together.

Annie hopped the wall that divided their yard from their neighbor’s. Maxine was leaned back in a patio chair by the grill, one foot up on the seat so she could point out the deep, pitted scar that ran down the side of her calf. Annie caught the tail end of the conversation.

“—sent me to Fort Ord to recuperate. Served a couple more years before I finally retired.”

“See, I figured you’d tussled with them omnics in Detroit. Never woulda guessed you were stationed out in the Philippines,” Jesse said.

“We weren’t supposed to be there long,” Max said. “Just shoring up the country’s defenses while they waited on aid from some of their other allies. Next thing you know Manila’s being overrun, and it’s all hands on deck. And there I am, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed fresh out of basic training, never been in a real battle in my life.”


Annie leaned back against the wall. “Mom said I had to come bother you. And the enchiladas are almost done.”

“Well what a coincidence. I’m just about done here, too. You wanna help?” Jesse waved to the patio table. There were bowls of ingredients. Annie spotted chopped cilantro, halved limes, a bottle of chile powder, crumbly cotija cheese, and a jar of crema mexicana.

“Can I eat some of the cheese?”

“So long as you leave enough for the corn.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Jesse turned a corn cob with the tongs to examine it, then started pulling the ears off the grill. “Hey, I need another plate over here. Anyone care t’ help a man out?”

Max hauled herself out of her chair. “I’ll get that.” She grabbed the plate and carried it over to Annie, who was nibbling cheese crumbs. She picked the other plate up and presented it to Jesse. “You really outdid yourself,” Max told him. “No way the four of us can eat all of this plus Ruth’s enchiladas.”

“I, uh. You’d be surprised how much I eat,” Jesse said, his cheeks dark.

Max clapped him on the back. “Hey, I can appreciate people who appreciate food. Speaking of food, I’ve got a watermelon in the fridge. How about I go cut that up? Be right back.”

Jesse loaded up the second plate and turned off the grill. He carried the plate over to Annie’s workstation where she was hard at work spreading crema over the corn cobs with a spoon. She finished up and handed the jar over to Jesse.

“What do you want on your corn, Uncle Jesse?” Annie asked as she grabbed the cotija cheese.

“Oh I’ll eat just ‘bout anything, sugar. You go ahead an’ make it how you like it.”
"I like it spicy," Annie warned.

"That a challenge? Bring it on, partner."

***

Spring turned into summer. Pools opened. School ended. And Jesse McCree found himself slowly falling into a routine.

Jesse had given up on having a normal sleep schedule long ago thanks to his years in Blackwatch, but he soon learned to wake up in the mornings with Ruth and Annie. At first he’d startled awake whenever he heard movement from the rooms overhead, but now he came to expect the noises and easily rolled out of bed to join them at breakfast.

Sometimes the afternoon meant quiet study time as Annie did schoolwork. Sometimes it meant going over to Max’s and drinking iced tea in her backyard. One time while over at Max’s place, she and Jesse had taught Annie how to play cards. Max even broke out her old card pack from her army days with the silhouettes of omnis on them, meant to train soldiers to identify enemies at a distance. Annie ended up liking Blackjack more than Poker, however she informed them Uno was still the best hands down.

Evenings were Jesse’s favorite part of his new routine. It didn’t matter if the food was homemade or heated in a microwave, or if Ruth showed up at eight o’clock at night with take-out. He just liked that dinners were always a family affair. He and Annie would set the table, Ruth would ask Annie what she learned that day, they’d fall into comfortable silence or chat off and on as they ate, and when dinner was done, they all pitched in to clean up.

If Ruth happened to get home early, they’d have movie night or play a game of Annie’s choosing. Because Annie was ten this usually meant animated movies meant for children and board games that lit up and played music. Jesse wasn’t picky. Sure, he’d prefer to watch something more his speed, like Six-Gun Killer, but the cartoons were bright and fun, and Annie thought it was funny when her Uncle Jesse tried to sing along to the musical bits. Not that he sang poorly, but it was hard not to laugh when Princess Valeria’s heartfelt song about family was suddenly drowned out by a deep voice with a thick southern accent.

Jesse couldn’t exactly get a job without creating a paper trail, so aside from watching Annie, Jesse earned his keep by doing chores around the house during the day. Cleaning and laundry used to be his least favorite chores growing up, but if that was all he could do to repay Ruth for her kindness, he was glad to take the work off her hands. Plus it kept Jesse from sitting around with nothing to do but think.

Years of hard living had trained Jesse to think a certain way: plan ahead, review known intel, reflect on what went wrong so it didn’t happen again, prepare for the worst possible scenarios to come. Thinking like that had gotten him far in Deadlock, and it did him good in Overwatch, too. As a prisoner in that Talon lab, it’d kept him from losing his mind, and after he escaped, it was that kind of thinking that let him stay a step ahead of his pursuers. But there was no place for it in the quiet safety of Ruth’s home.

Now the very thinking that had kept Jesse alive had become something toxic that bled into the quiet moments when he found himself alone. Jesse often didn’t realize it was happening until he was already deep in thought pondering strategies for skipping town or trying to figure out what he could have done differently the day that Talon snatched him. No one else had come looking for Jesse since that so-called detective had shown up at the hospital, but he found himself plagued by possible scenarios of attacks in the middle of the night, or his face plastered on the news as Talon tried to
smoke him out. He knew what they were capable of, but he had no idea how far they were actually willing to go. The words, “I shouldn’t have come here,” had become a mantra frequently whispered in his ears by his own demons.

Once he started down that road, it was hard for Jesse to shake himself free of his thoughts. Ruth and Annie tended to draw him out of his own head, but there were times he closed himself up in his room and let himself hurt. He knew it wasn’t healthy. Ruth certainly wouldn’t approve if she had any clue. It was just so easy to let it happen.

Jesse felt weighted down and fragile at the same time, and he blamed himself for not being stronger. If he’d been stronger, none of this would have happened. He was free now. Shouldn’t he feel like it? Some days the walls seemed like they were closing in around him, suffocating him—and he let it happen. Maybe if the walls pressed in on him with enough force, it’d push all of the pieces of him back together, and he’d be all right again. But every single time the pressure just left him aching instead.

Jesse was quietly thankful that he couldn’t smoke or drink. In the past it’d been a hobby, but he knew he’d abuse it if he had access to either now. Ruth wouldn’t allow it in her house, and he didn’t have the money to go indulge elsewhere. He’d been forced to go cold turkey the last couple of years anyways. True, Jesse had bought a pack of smokes here and there while he was in hiding, but he’d been careful to space them out, vary his brands, and avoid his preferred cigarillos entirely just to be safe. And Jesse hadn’t allowed himself any alcohol at all: the fear of being caught off-guard had been stronger than his need to take the edge off his nerves.

Self-harm came in other forms, though. It came in hours of quietly sitting on the floor, back to the wall, going over memories of torment and experimentation in painful detail. It came in scalding hot showers that always ended cold because Jesse would lose track of time. It came in passive neglect. Jesse let his hair grow wild until Ruth coaxed him into letting her trim his hair and beard. He skipped exercise that he knew he needed. He stayed up late. He left his clean clothes in a pile on the chair in the corner of the room instead of putting them away. He’d had to start keeping a bottle of water on his bed stand because otherwise he let himself get dehydrated to the point of painful headaches.

And then there was his arm. Ruth had shown Jesse how to massage it. She wasn’t a physical therapist, but she’d done the research for him. She explained that it would help with phantom pains and prepare him for a prosthesis if he decided he wanted one. Jesse wasn’t sure he did. He didn’t even like to think about his arm. Didn’t like to look at it or touch it either, which meant he frequently forgot to massage it like he was supposed to.

Ruth caught Jesse grimacing in pain now and then. At first she used to ask if he was all right, and he’d brush the question off with a smile. Now, instead, she simply took his arm and rubbed at the limb herself until he relaxed. It was an unspoken act of kindness that Jesse had come to appreciate. The first time Ruth had done it, she’d asked permission. Jesse hadn’t answered her, but when she laid a hand on his arm, he hadn’t pulled away or told her to stop. It was the closest he could get to asking for her help, because he couldn’t bring himself to say the words. Thankfully she’d understood.

Some days Jesse didn’t eat. It wasn’t deliberate. It never was. He just forgot, or his stomach wouldn’t settle that day, or he couldn’t find the energy to leave his room. Which, with his metabolism, wasn’t the best thing for him. Often he wouldn’t do anything about it until he was shaky with hunger. When he finally wandered into the kitchen after a bad day to get crackers or a glass of milk, he tried to make sure he was alone. He didn’t like the looks he got from Ruth and Annie. Ruth, who recognized what was happening to him even if she didn’t know exactly why, and handled him like he was made of glass. Annie, who couldn’t possibly grasp what was going on, but knew he was
hurting, and tried to take care of him like he was sick. Knowing they could see that he was hurting made it worse, somehow. But he supposed if they didn’t notice, that’d hurt, too. There was just no winning.

At least Jesse had the “closed door rule” to fall back on. For better or for worse, if his door was closed, no one disturbed him. Sometimes he’d purposefully leave it cracked open when he couldn’t bring himself to socialize but secretly wanted someone to check on him. Ruth might tap on the door and ask if he wanted to come watch TV, or she came to tell him she’d just cut up an apple and she wanted to know if Jesse would like half. Other times Annie would slip in, climb up on the bed with Jesse, and quietly read. They’d begun listening to audiobooks together recently.

It was a good compromise to shutting the world out: letting just a little of it sneak in through that cracked door like sunlight through the window blinds.

Today Jesse’s door was shut.

For the last several days as it got close to July Fourth, people had been setting off firecrackers randomly in the evenings. It frayed Jesse’s nerves and left him jumpy. He was intimately familiar with the whistling of rockets through the air and the explosive bang of black powder. Newer firecrackers that projected light displays after exploding had their own unique sound, electric and sizzling, that set Jesse’s teeth on edge. He found himself keyed up all night, but he couldn’t bring himself to sleep in or nap during the day, which left him exhausted.

Jesse jumped when someone knocked on his door. It was a break from routine. Jesse was so surprised that he sat in silence until there was a second knock.

“Jesse?” Ruth called softly from the other side of the door. “Gotta talk to you about something important, hun.”

Jesse threw his legs over the side of the bed and sat upright, then went to open the door. His knee twinged. He ought to put his brace on.

Ruth stood in the doorway with her thumbs hooked in her pockets. She gave Jesse a quick, appraising look before smiling at him like she hadn’t noticed his appearance. He was dressed, but his clothes were rumpled, and he’d only bothered to finger-comb the knots out of his hair. Jesse smoothed his hand over his hair self-consciously.

“So,” Ruth said, “you know me ’n Annie are staying over at my mother-in-law’s place tonight.”

Jesse nodded. “Yeah?” It was apparently a tradition rooted in practicality. Annie didn’t do well with fireworks: they tended to overwhelm her. So Ruth and her husband Nathan had taken to driving all the way out to the Pueblo of Zuni to visit Nathan’s mother during the Fourth of July and New Year’s Eve. Her place was on the edge of town where it was quiet, and she loved having the company. Ruth had spent all yesterday packing in preparation for the trip.

“Well, I know you already said you’d stay here, but I’m packing the truck right now, so I figured I’d ask one more time.” Ruth clasped her hands in front of her loosely, wringing her fingers as she continued. “To be honest, Jesse, I don’t like the idea of leaving you here alone.”

Jesse’s mouth hung open for a moment before he gathered himself. He shook his head. “I told you I’d be fine, Ruth. You don’t gotta worry about me.”

“Yeah, well, I’d have an easier time believing you if you weren’t acting like a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs these last few days,” Ruth said bluntly. “I get that this is a family thing,
and you don’t want to intrude, but you haven’t been faring well this week, and I just know I’ll be sick to my stomach all night thinking about you here by yourself. So maybe you could come with us? Just for my sake?”

Jesse didn’t answer right away. He looked off to the side, brows drawn together, hand shoved down into his pocket. He shrugged his shoulders and opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but then he didn’t. He glanced over his shoulder back at his room. He knew he’d end up sitting there all day doing nothing in a house that was completely—horribly—quiet. And then there were the fireworks. Not that anyone was supposed to set them off within the city limits, but that hadn’t stopped people the last few nights, so why would it stop them tonight?

“Emilia’s got a spare cot,” Ruth added. “And she always cooks too much when we visit… And Annie’d sure like it if you came.”

A hint of a smile pulled at the corner of Jesse’s mouth. “Now that’s just not fair.”

“I don’t play fair. I play to win. So is that a yes?”

Jesse heaved an overdramatic sigh. “I don’t see how I can say no. I’ll be packed in ten minutes.”

“You hear that, Annie? Uncle Jesse’s coming with us,” Ruth called towards the kitchen. “Why don’t you throw some extra snacks in the cooler?”

They could both hear Annie jump up and down, her little hiking boots thudding on the linoleum. “Yes! Roadtrip!”

Jesse snorted and muttered something about them twisting his arm as he went to grab his duffel bag. He had it packed in five minutes and spent the other five grooming himself so he’d be more presentable when he met Ruth’s mother-in-law. Just because he hadn’t planned on going didn’t mean he could show up looking like he’d slept in a pile of dirty laundry. A comb, a toothbrush, and a fresh shirt, and Jesse looked a hundred times better. He had to admit he felt better for it, too.

Jesse helped Ruth load up the truck. Then he and Annie played a quick round of Rock, Paper, Scissors to see who’d sit shotgun. He won, but he promised Annie they’d switch places on the way back.

Jesse climbed into the truck and buckled in. The truck took a couple turns of the key before the engine turned over.

Soft, new-country music drifted out of the speakers. A low, rich voice sang a chorus line about finding love in surprising places. Jesse recognized the song. It was about a woman falling in love with an omnic, and the two of them leaving everything behind to find a place they could be together. It was both popular and controversial, which was exactly why just about every country radio station was playing the song. Jesse was of the opinion that it captured something the genre had lost a long time ago: that feeling of putting the sun to one’s back and driving on towards a promise of hope and freedom.

Jesse raised the volume a notch and settled back. “All right, let’s get this cattle drive movin’.”

“Just a sec,” Ruth said. “Annie, could you pop the lid on one of those Balance drinks and pass it up here?”

Annie reached into the cooler on the floor beside her and pulled out a bottle of something that looked like chocolate milk. She twisted the lid off, then passed it up to Jesse. He held it out to Ruth.
“That’s for you, Jesse,” Ruth said.

“What?”

Ruth gestured at the bottle. “Meal replacement nutrition drink. I stocked the fridge for you. Different brands and flavors. Don’t think that I haven’t noticed how you’ve been eating. You need more calories than most folks, Jesse, and then you go and skip out on meals. I figured rather than nag you, I’d start buying stuff you can have when you don’t want to eat. Just try it, please.”

“We gonna sit here until I do?” Jesse asked wryly.

Ruth huffed and put the truck in reverse.

Jesse settled back in his seat with a sigh. He waited until Ruth had pulled out of the neighborhood before taking a sip of his drink.

***

Annie kicked her feet as she walked down the street with Jesse, scattering red and yellow leaves in her wake. Autumn had arrived. The sparse trees that dotted neighbors’ yards and lined the nearby golf courses had changed color seemingly overnight, and now a brisk October wind had swept in to shake the trees bare. The whole world had turned a pleasant, burnished gold.

Today had started as one of those door-cracked-open days. An hour or so after Jesse shuffled out of his room to get breakfast and then vanished again, Ruth knocked on the doorframe.

Jesse sat up and tucked a bookmark in the paperback he was reading. “Howdy, Ruth. You need something?”

“I’m sorry to do this to you, Jesse, but I just got a call from work,” Ruth said. “It’s the weekend, and we’re understaffed, and Greg called in sick last minute. Are you good to watch Annie until I get back?”

“Sure, yeah.”

“Okay. I’ve got to leave right away. I’ll be back late, so you’ll have to figure out dinner. You two behave yourselves.”

“What’s that? Feed Annie sugar and teach her swear words? All right, if you insist,” Jesse said with a toothy grin.

Ruth wagged a finger while trying to frown at him, but failed miserably. “Don’t you dare.”

Jesse held his hand up in a scout salute. “We’ll be perfect angels, I swear. We’ll stay in, do a puzzle, watch a movie—it’ll be fine.”

That had been the plan. But Annie had a piggy bank full of quarters and puppy dog eyes that could charm the meanest bull in the pasture, so the new plan was to spend the day at the nearby arcade and eat junkfood. At least Jesse wasn’t teaching her swear words.

The arcade was a new building designed to look old-fashioned. The outside was decorated with bright murals of video game characters fighting monsters. A holographic wizard stood on the roof of the building waving his staff dramatically. Waist-high machines lined either side of the doors, offering children handfuls of candy and temporary tattoos in exchange for their quarters. Jesse steered Annie past them when she tried to stop and look.
“Come on. When we leave you can have your pick, provided you got any change left.”

Inside, the building was dimly lit, and the arcade machine screens glowed. Children laughed and occasionally screamed as they ran through the aisles. Groups of teens huddled around the most popular games, taking turns playing the winner. The smell of pizza and deep-fried food drifted from the back where parents sat at tables chatting.

Jesse started to walk towards the back, planning to let Annie have a little freedom, but she clung to his hand.

“You wanna play with me?” Annie asked. There were those puppy dog eyes again.

Jesse gave Annie an easy smile. “Sure thing, little bear. What’chu wanna play?”

Annie bounced on her heels. “They got the best two-player games over there,” she said as she pointed. She guided Jesse through the busy building towards a few larger machines.

Annie let go of Jesse’s hand to run up to a colorful fighting game. Two platforms faced each other, connected in the middle with a display that showed boxing round numbers and points and a preview of two little omnis throwing punches at each other. Annie climbed up onto the neon pink platform. Immediately a holographic display of a cheering crowd materialized around the entire machine, and one of the omnis appeared behind Annie, glowing pink with magenta boxing gloves.

“This one is fun! You put on the visor and you grab the controls like this,” she said as she demonstrated. She slid the visor over her eyes and adjusted the headband to fit herself, then grabbed two controls that looked like sleek, plastic knuckledusters. Suddenly the omnic began mimicking Annie, fists shadowing hers as she swung her hands around.

Jesse stepped up onto the green platform. A neon green omnic with blue gloves appeared behind him. He picked up one of the controllers and examined it dubiously. He glanced over at the other controller, and his expression fell.

Jesse didn’t say what he was thinking, but Annie figured it out anyways. Her mouth dropped open, and her brows drew together in dismay. “Oh no that’s right. I’m sorry, Uncle Jesse. We don’t have to play this.” She dropped her controllers and pulled off her visor. “There’s a dancing game we can do. It’s back over there.” She climbed down off her platform, and her omnic vanished.

“Where’re you going?” Jesse asked.

Annie looked back, her expression still guilty, and gestured towards a machine playing music.

“Yeah, we can play that afterwards. Thought you wanted to play this first.”

“But…”

“But nothin’. Get back up here.” Jesse set the controller down and slid the visor onto his face. It was adjusted for a child and looked comical on him until he fixed the headband so it fit correctly. Annie still stood there, a hand on the rail that ringed the pink platform. “Come on,” Jesse encouraged as he picked up the right-hand controller. He swung it experimentally, and his omnic threw a haymaker.

Annie still looked unsure.

“Annie, darlin’,” Jesse said in a gentler tone, “it’s okay. And anyways, you’re dreamin’ if you think you got a chance of beating me, even one-handed. Now let’s pop some quarters in this thing,
and you show me what you got.”

Annie nodded and climbed back up onto the platform. She put her visor on, then dropped her quarters into the machine. A cheer went up from the holographic audience, signaling the start of the game.

Jesse was right when he said Annie didn’t stand a chance. There was a learning curve since Jesse had never played before, but he quickly learned that the game was tracking the visor as well as his hand, so he could duck and lean out of the way of punches while keeping his fist up to block. He kept on the defensive mostly, letting Annie wear herself out. He waited until she was panting for air and couldn’t keep her hands up before he started punching back, easily taking the victory. Annie insisted on best two out of three, and she lasted a little longer the second round, but even holding back, Jesse won again.

Annie stuck her tongue out at Jesse as she pulled her visor off. “You coulda let me win one.”

“We can play again if you want,” Jesse offered. “Maybe you’ll have better luck next time around.”

Annie sighed and shook her head. “Nah, that’s okay. I wanna play something else with you anyways. Ooh! I know!”

Jesse laughed as Annie ran down the aisle to another game and waved her hands wildly for him to hurry up.

“Okay so what’s this?” Jesse asked as he walked over.

“Wild Space,” Annie said as she pointed at the title printed across the top of the arcade game. The screen played a short video of a cowboy being beamed up into a space ship. “You’re a famous gunman who gets abducted by aliens. They’re good guys, though. They need your help to defeat the evil alien emperor that’s taking over the galaxy!”

“Oh really?”

There were two plastic guns designed to look like 19th century revolvers that rested in slots in the control panel beside a couple of buttons. Annie pulled the blue gun, leaving the red gun on the left for Jesse.

“You have six bullets, and to reload, you gotta fire offscreen,” Annie explained. “The red button is a stun grenade if there’s too many bad guys. The blue button is a shield. You get more of them by shooting orbs that appear sometimes.”

“D’you think you could be in charge of those for me?” Jesse asked as he pulled the red gun.

“Sure. I’m good at timing the stuns and shields. I’ll protect you.”

“Thank you kindly.”

Annie dropped her quarters in. The game played a little western jingle like two men were about to duel. It was interrupted by the sounds of lasers and gunfire. The screen asked how many people were playing, and Annie shot the box for two players with her plastic revolver.

There was a brief clip of two cowboys being sucked up into a space ship, some text appeared telling the story of the evil Emperor Zygan and the players being the galaxy’s last hope, and then the word “BEGIN” flashed across the screen.
Jesse would be lying if he said he didn’t enjoy himself, even though the first round went horribly. Jesse kept shooting the same little aliens that Annie did, which wasted time and ammo. Sometimes Annie forgot to reload altogether. Apparently Jesse wasn’t supposed to shoot the purple aliens because they were friendly. And the red barrels were explosive and hurt everyone including the players. Who knew?

By round two, though, Jesse had it figured out.

“Annie, reload.”

“Right, okay.”

“I got the guy in back.”

“There’s too many!”

“Stun ‘em, then. Use my grenade.”

“Look out!”

“Quick, shield!”

“Got it! Hit the red barrel while the shield’s up.”

They made it to level four before the hordes of alien invaders overwhelmed them. Jesse was ready to try something else, but Annie talked him into a third round. It wasn’t that difficult for her to do.

The third time around Jesse spotted a funny-looking door that he tried shooting, and they found themselves in a bonus level with a tentacle-wielding miniboss. Annie shot at its eyes—of which there were many—while Jesse kept the tentacles at bay. The hidden level rewarded them with stronger shields and stun grenades that did damage, then threw them right back into the rush of alien invaders.

Annie and Jesse wrapped up Level 6, and the words “Level 7: Zygan’s Mothership” flashed across the screen. The game allowed them a moment of reprieve as it played a cutscene of the cowboys sneaking from the space station they’d been fighting on into the mothership. The camera panned through the massive ship and up to the blast door that marked the helm where Zygan waited.

“I’ve never gotten this far,” Annie said, sounding both excited and nervous. More the latter than the former. She wiped her palms on her pants before picking her gun back up.

Jesse bumped his niece lightly with his hip. He grinned wide and laid his accent on thick as he told her, “Don’t go gettin’ cold feet on me now, partner. We gotta take this no-good no-count varmint down.”

Annie giggled. “What? Why’re you talking like that?”

Jesse kept the bit up. “Talking like what? Yer quakin’ in yer boots, greenhorn. Don’t you copper yer bets just yet. We got the bulge on this devil, an’ by hook or by crook I mean to bring him to justice. You with me?”

Annie doubled over laughing, her plastic gun clutched to her chest. “What does any of that mean? You made some of that up.”

“Nope. I’ve just watched a lot of westerns. Least you aren’t nervous anymore, right? Now straighten up before they start shooting at us,” Jesse said, nudging Annie with his elbow.
They made it to the helm with most of their health. The door slid open to reveal a massive, armored figure in a cape who was clearly Emperor Zygan. He yelled something alien at them while pointing, then the boss battle began.

The boss had his own shield, and he had minions who would appear at random around the screen. One got Annie, and her side of the screen flashed a “Game Over.”

Annie slumped.

“Hey, don’t quit on me now,” Jesse said. “You still gotta hit the buttons for me.”

“Oh right!” Annie holstered her gun in the control panel and moved to hover her hands over the red and blue buttons in front of Jesse.

Jesse picked off the smaller aliens to cut down on the damage he took, then went after Zygan. He figured out that the boss had an attack pattern, and took shameless advantage of it until Zygan hit half health and changed forms. The boss yanked his cape off to reveal he had four arms and two extra laser blasters. Taken by surprise, Jesse struggled to figure out the new pattern, but Zygan quickly gunned him down.

“Game Over” flashed across the screen. Jesse laid his gun over his heart dramatically and let out a death groan that had Annie giggling. He started to holster the gun, but then a high score screen appeared, prompting him to enter his initials. They’d gotten third place.

Jesse handed the gun over to Annie. “You go ahead an’ punch your name in, sugar.”

Annie held up the gun and shot the letter A, then paused, then shot the letters A and J.

“How’s that stand for?” Jesse asked.

“AAJ. Annie and Jesse.” Annie looked pleased with herself.

Jesse smiled.

The screen went dark as the game reset, reflecting Annie’s and Jesse’s faces back at them, illuminated by the neon lights of the nearby machines—and over Jesse’s shoulder, a pale mask with hollow eyes appeared.

A cold dagger of fear buried itself in Jesse’s chest. He spun on his heel. His back hit the arcade machine, and he groped behind himself blindly for support.

Across the aisle the game Skullcrushers played its demo sequence. A digital skeleton pressed its face to the screen and let out a cackle as industrial rock music played in the background.

Jesse’s heart jackhammered in his chest. It was just a game. Reaper wasn’t there. He couldn’t be there. Jesse reminded himself that he was safe, but he couldn’t seem to slow his breathing. Something wild stirred in his chest.

Arms wrapped around Jesse’s waist. “Uncle Jesse, are you all right?” Annie asked. When Jesse didn’t answer right away, she asked, “How bad is it?”

Jesse glanced down at her. He laid his suddenly clammy hand on her arm as he tried to think. They’d all agreed on a number scale from one to ten in case something like this happened. The higher the number, the worse off Jesse was. It was hard to think of a number. Colors were easier. Yellow. Jesse was at a yellow. But that wasn’t descriptive enough.
“Ff.. five?” Jesse finally managed as he tried to calm down and take deep breaths. He felt horribly vulnerable having to tell a ten year old girl that he was panicking.

Annie hugged Jesse a little tighter. “Do you want to sit down and get a drink, or should we go outside?”

Jesse looked around helplessly. The arcade was suddenly very loud, and the game screens in the dim light were like blazing stars in his eyes. The smell of pizza and people packed into a small building was quickly becoming unpleasant.

“Outside,” Jesse said. He let Annie take his hand as they walked out of the building.

It was bright out, and the air was fresh and cool on Jesse’s face. He sat down on the curb outside the arcade. He already felt better. He brought his sleeve up to wipe at his forehead, then hunched over his knees with a sigh.

Small hands rubbed at Jesse’s shoulders, making him stiffen. He looked back over his shoulder at Annie who was standing behind him. “What’re you up to, little bear?”

Annie leaned on Jesse’s shoulders. “Sometimes when Mom comes home from work and she’s tired, she asks me to rub her shoulders. I thought it’d help.”

Jesse patted one of her hands. “That’s real thoughtful of you, but why don’t you go get your candy? I promised after all, and I’ll need a few minutes before I’m ready to go back in.”

The hands left Jesse’s shoulders. He closed his eyes and listened as Annie went to pick out her candy. A few cars drove by, their engines humming. There were pigeons cooing to each other in the parking lot next door. The arcade door opened and closed as someone left, and for a brief moment, Jesse could hear the pings and zaps and retro music of children playing games.

Annie sat down next to Jesse, then she bumped his knee with hers. He opened his eyes to find a handful of candy-coated chocolate drops being held under his nose. Annie’s fingers were already stained rainbow colors.

“You want some?” Annie asked. She had more in her other hand. She tipped her head back and poured half of it in her mouth.

Jesse smiled softly and picked out a blue chocolate drop off the top. “Just one,” he said before popping it in his mouth. He sucked on it while Annie crunched away at her candy. Across the street was a cafe. Jesse watched as little brown birds hopped around looking for crumbs, totally fearless as they flitted onto abandoned tables to help themselves to plates and dirty napkins.

Annie licked at her fingers, trying to get the sugar off. Her hands and her tongue were both stained.

“You finished?” Jesse asked as he hauled himself back to his feet. “We’ll have to get you cleaned up before you can play any more games.”

“Actually, can we go home?” Annie asked. “I think I’m done.”

“You sure?” Jesse asked, feeling guilty. “I’ll be all right. I just had a scare, that’s all.”

Annie shook her head. Her ponytail swung around to smack her in the face, and stray hairs caught on the sticky corners of her mouth. “I’m ready to go home now,” she said as she pulled her hair free.
“Okay.” Jesse slipped his hand under Annie’s arm and helped her stand up. “Tell you what: we’ll come back next weekend with your mama. You still got plenty of change, and I never did get you that pizza. Sound like a plan?”

“Yeah, that sounds fun. Plus I didn’t get to make you play the dancing game.”

“I’m afraid I’m not nearly as good on my feet as I am with a gun,” Jesse said.

“Yeah, that’s why I wanna make you play.”

“You wanna embarrass me? Is that it?”

“Kinda.”

Jesse laughed. “There’s a lil bit of wickedness to ya, you know that?”

They walked back towards the house, passing shops with window fronts decorated for Halloween. Pumpkins, hay bales, and scarecrows were stacked by the entrances. Pictures of witches and ghosts were taped up in the windows. The decorations only got more elaborate as they entered the neighborhoods. Yards had been turned into graveyards with skeleton hands sticking out of the dirt. One house had a witch’s legs poking up out of a shrub like she’d crash-landed there. Another had light projections of ghosts flitting around.

Jesse tapped Annie’s shoulder. “You got a costume figured out? End of the month’s coming up fast.”

Annie had her fingers in her mouth, still trying to clean them. She pulled them out with a gross pop. “A witch maybe? Or a ninja? I was a ninja last year, though…”

“What about an alien? We could paint ya green and get you a headband with antennae.”

Annie stuck her tongue out.

“Okay, how about a zombie?”

“Zombies are gross. Unless they’re Frankenstein. He’s cool,” Annie said. “Ooh, what about a mummy?”

“I’m all for wrapping you in toilet paper.”

Annie laughed. “Okay maybe not a mummy. What about a princess? Or an astronaut? Or a—” Annie gasped. “A cowgirl! I gotta be a cowgirl, and you can dress like me.”

“Like a cowgirl?”

“No, silly, like a cowboy. No wait I got it: Vigilante!” Annie pressed her sticky fingers to her mouth as her eyes went wide. “I’m gonna be Vigilante, and you can be Ladrón!” She flapped her hands excitedly now. “Please please please, we gotta. And Mom could dress like the sheriff or something. It’ll be so cool!”

“Well,” Jesse conceded, “I do already have the hat.”

Annie’s face lit up.

“We’ll have to figure out what you need for your costume. Maybe we should watch an episode to refresh our memories?”
Annie nodded her head vigorously. “And snacks. We gotta have snacks.”

“I oughta make you dinner, actually.”

“Can we still have popcorn?” Annie looked up at Jesse, her expression begging.

Jesse rolled his eyes. “You could weaponize that face, you know that? Fine, we can make popcorn, too.”

Annie gave Jesse a hug, then pulled back and made a face. “Oops.”

Jesse looked down to see rainbow colors smeared across his shirt. He lifted an eyebrow at Annie. Then he scooped her up in his arm and slung her over his shoulder. She squealed.

“Put me down,” Annie laughed.

Jesse spun around. “Who said that?” He spun again, and Annie let out a delighted scream. “I must be hearing things. Coulda sworn someone was talkin’ to me.”

“I did!” Annie smacked at his back, no doubt leaving more rainbow prints on his shirt.

Jesse spun again. “Huh, no one there.” He turned back around. “Must be ghosts.”

Annie hit his back again, giggling too hard to talk.

“Now listen here, ghosts,” Jesse declared to the empty street. “You just leave me be, an’ we won’t have no trouble, ya hear?”

“I’m not a ghost,” Annie said as she tried to wiggle free. Jesse’s arm held her in place like a steel bar.

“Well if you ain’t a ghost, then what are ya?”

“I’m Annie!” She smacked Jesse’s back again.

Jesse looked over his shoulder and feigned surprise. “Goodness gracious, Annie, what’re you doing up there?”

Jesse set Annie down. They’d reached the house. Jesse unlocked the door and flicked on the lights. He set a hand on top of Annie’s head as she tried to slip by. “You go wash up now while I change my shirt. Then we’ll see about making that popcorn, all right?”

“Kay!”

“And start thinking about which episode we should watch.”

Annie sucked her bottom lip between her teeth as she cast glances between Jesse and the TV.

“And “all of them” is not an answer,” Jesse added.

Annie tossed her head back and groaned. “Yeah okay.”
I had my jaw wired shut still when I was writing this chapter, and I want you all to know what a fool I was sitting there googling how to make enchiladas while I myself was stuck drinking my meals through a straw. It was *awful*. Also, my busted jaw is where I got the idea for the nutrition drinks. They kept me going through that whole ordeal.

I wanted to say, I know the song at the start of the chapter isn’t that old, but by the 2070s I figure that’s the equivalent of playing ragtime or swing, so Ruth thinks of it as vintage. That’s also why I added the bit about there being a new movement in country music post-Crisis. Music during the Crisis was probably very reactionary; twenty years later it’s become a medium for people to reflect on how they feel in this new world of theirs.

Max’s card pack is based on the fact that my dad has ground-to-air defense plane identification playing cards.

This chapter was a lot of fun. It was a good combination of world building, developing side characters, looking at how Jesse’s dealing with his trauma, and how his family is helping him through it in little ways.

Next chapter: Another Talon mission, this time in Egypt. Look forward to some good old-fashioned action as Jesse struggles to toe the blurred line between unwilling prisoner and field agent.
Alexandria

Chapter Notes

Additional Chapter 13 tags: Transformation, Violence, Mild transformation-based body horror, Car Wrecks, Minor character death, Guns, Omnis, High speed chase

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alexandria, Egypt, 4 years ago

Jesse sat in the passenger seat of a cargo truck with a tablet in his lap. A three-dimensional depiction of the Alexandria Governorate floated above the device. The convoy’s path was marked out in dark blue as it cut its way out of the city of Alexandria along the coast, then turned away from the ocean and followed Alexandria Desert Road southeast towards Giza. A set of five red dots marked the convoy as it traveled along the route. This was the last in a set of moving trucks that had been discreetly shifting Talon’s Egypt operations from Alexandria to the Giza plateau for several weeks now.

The agent driving the truck punched the scan button on the radio a couple times. He’d been playing with the radio for the last fifteen minutes. Jesse had yet to hear a single song in its entirety. It was starting to get on his nerves.

“You keep playin’ with that, yer gonna go blind,” Jesse said dryly.

The agent grunted and hit the scan button again anyways, as if to make a point. “Don’t they have any stations in English?”

“If you don’t like Arabic music, then turn the radio off,” Jesse said.

The agent rolled his eyes and stopped the radio on a pop station, then turned the volume down so it was background noise. “Where are we now?”

“Does it matter? Just keep followin’ the other two trucks,” Jesse said. He looked up from the map to watch tan buildings and palm trees drift past his window.

“I asked where we are,” the agent said in a more authoritative voice. He wasn’t the same person Jesse had ridden with during the last few convoys; he seemed to think he needed to establish a pecking order or something. Jesse wasn’t impressed, but he wasn’t about to push the man who was carrying the controller to his shock restraints.

Jesse looked down at the map. “We’re comin’ up on Wadi El-Kamar. It’ll be about a quarter hour ‘fore we hit Om Zegheo and turn south. Then it’s practically a straight shot to Cairo an’ Giza. Just don’t take any exits, and you’ll be fine. Can’t mess that up, right?” Jesse emphasized the end of the sentence, making it less rhetorical and more doubtful. He felt a small thrill of victory as he saw the corner of the other agent’s mouth twitch down.

Then Jesse saw the other agent’s brow wrinkle in confusion, and he looked forward in time to see a pulse of blue light shoot down out of the sky and slam into the hood of the first convoy truck. It bounced as the force of the blast stopped the vehicle in its tracks. The second truck swerved sharply
to the left, clipped the first truck, and flipped onto its side.

The agent beside Jesse turned the steering wheel hard to the right, swinging over into the other lane as he just barely avoided wrecking. “Fuck!” he shouted belatedly. “What was that?”

Jesse rolled down the window and turned the side view mirror to watch as the fourth and fifth trucks changed lanes to follow them. Then he spotted the threat: a half dozen aerial drones in the sky overhead. They didn’t pursue the escaping vehicles, but instead hovered over the two trucks that had wrecked, peppering them with blasts. They reminded Jesse of vultures—if vultures had pulse cannons, that is.

“Reaper was in the second truck,” the agent said, sounding lost. “I don’t know what the protocol for something like this is. What do we do?”

Jesse looked over at him, then back to the mirror, watching the drones as he thought. He felt the truck begin to decelerate. “Don’t fuckin’ stop!” Jesse snapped. “We’re headin’ the convoy now.”

The other agent jumped, but put his foot back on the gas. “But… Shit, there’s no way we can make it to Giza like this. Whoever attacked us, they’re not going to just stop, right?”

Jesse hated to agree with him, but he had a point. Their assailant’s strategy was obvious: a quick hit to scare the convoy and split them up, then a second attack later after they’ve panicked and rushed ahead.

Jesse took a calming breath to clear his head. Then he unbuckled.

“What are you doing?”

“Listen, remember I mentioned Om Zegheo? Here on the map.” Jesse pointed. The agent glanced over, his face a mix of panic and confusion that only increased as he watched Jesse begin to slip his belt and holster off.

“Now, I said to stay on Alexandria Desert Road, but forget that. You get here, you take the exit. The other trucks will follow you. You get on Route 40, you follow it down the coast to the Marina El Alamein. Lots of places to safely stow a few cargo trucks by the docks, and it ain’t on our planned route, so no one’s gonna be waiting for you. You an’ the others lie low until we contact you, got it?”

“We?” the agent asked. Jesse pulled his boots off. “What are you doing?”

“Something stupid,” Jesse said. He twisted to set the tablet down in his seat, then swung the passenger door open. The wind snatched at Jesse’s clothes as he leaned out the door. “Remember: Marina El Alamein. Stay put. I’ll find you.” Then to the other agent’s obvious horror he let go of the doorframe.

Jesse was halfway through his transformation before he hit the ground. The change was quick, violent, and painful.

Claws scraped against asphalt as Jesse rolled and came to a sudden stop. He shook his head and rolled his shoulders, then reached up to rip away the last shreds of the clothes he’d burst out of. The bands of his restraints clung tight, cutting odd shapes into his fur as they expanded to accommodate his new form while staying skintight.

Jesse’s ears pricked at the sound of a pained cry in the distance. Back down the road he could see someone trying to pull themselves out of the first convoy truck. The drones swooped down to shoot at them. The driver made it a few feet before collapsing. A drone hovered by the open door and fired
two blasts into the cabin of the truck. Whoever was still in there, they were dead now. But there was still the other truck.

Jesse sprinted on all fours, closing the distance in no time. He leapt and caught one of the drones in his jaws. It crumpled like an empty can, the innards sparking and hissing. He dropped the pile of junk, then clambered on top of the flipped cargo truck.

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Reaper had been communicating with the lead convoy truck when the drones hit. One moment they’d been discussing where to stop at midday, and the next moment the other end of the comm line was swallowed by a concussive roar and the sound of squealing metal. The truck in front stopped like it had hit a wall, Reaper’s truck veered left, and then the whole world flipped on its side.

It took a while for Reaper to regain his senses. His driver, Agent Quraishi, hung limply by her seat belt, suspended above him. Outside of the cabin the high-pitched whir of drone propellers could be heard overhead. They opened fire on someone, and Reaper heard a scream.

Reaper unbuckled himself. His chest ached, but it would heal soon enough. He reached over to tear the false ceiling away from the top of the cabin. He pulled his shotguns from the concealed mountings and holstered them. Then he reached up and unhooked Quraishi.

Agent Quraishi was still breathing, but she was dead weight at the moment. Reaper looked out the front windshield. There was a restaurant nearby. People stood on the patio outside watching from the cover of the low wall that surrounded the outdoor seating area. Too many civilians: they’d get in the way. There was a business office of some kind a little farther down the road. That would be better, but it would mean precious seconds exposed to the attack drones overhead.

Reaper shifted the unconscious agent into a fireman’s hold over his shoulders as he crouched. He pulled a shotgun and leveled it at the windshield.

The truck heaved as something large jumped on top. Reaper heard a snarl, and the truck creaked as whatever had climbed on top shifted and bounced. The drones opened fire on it.

A massive paw smashed down onto the driver side door, trapping a drone against the glass. Reaper watched the drone and the window both crack. Claws dug into the drone until it shattered into pieces. Then the window gave way, raining down glass on the cabin’s occupants.

A muzzle poked into the opening and then shifted to reveal a dark brown eye. McCree. He pulled away, then reached a paw in, scrambling at the lock of the door. Failing to find it, McCree took hold of the door, and with a growl, he ripped it off its hinges. Then he reached down into the cabin. Reaper let himself and Quraishi be lifted up out of the truck.

Four drones remained. They flew in a tight circle out of McCree’s reach, humming like mosquitoes. They began to fire down pulse after pulse, but McCree blocked them with his body as he shielded the others. Reaper set the agent down on the crumpled metal of the truck’s side.

“McCree, cover Quraishi,” Reaper ordered as he pulled his weapons. The drones might be out of McCree’s range, but not his. He fired and brought down three of them. The fourth swerved erratically, dodging two blasts from the shotguns, then dove at Reaper. A paw shot out and struck it down. McCree snarled and slammed his hand down on it once more. It went still.

Reaper was mildly surprised. He’d been perfectly capable of handling that drone. He hadn’t expected McCree to intervene, especially not to protect him. He watched smoke drift off McCree’s
back from the singe of dozens of plasma pulse blasts. Blasts meant for Reaper.

McCree carefully lifted Quraishi’s unconscious form into his arms. He tilted his head towards Reaper expectantly.

Reaper looked around, assessing the situation. “The drones are downed. Reinforcements will have to come pick us off now. We need a working vehicle. McCree, flip this thing upright, and let’s see if it still runs.”

Several people over at the restaurant were on their phones. There wouldn’t be any way to keep this out of the news, but thankfully operations had already been moved to Giza, so Hakim, their Egypt contact, wouldn’t be compromised.

Reaper picked up one of the more intact drones and pried the plastic covering off. He looked for identifying marks on the flight controller and power distribution boards. He pulled the boards out and pocketed them to examine later—he wanted to know who’d shot at him.

With some effort McCree was able to get the truck upright again. It thudded down hard, sparks flying up from the dormant thrusters as they hit the ground. McCree winced, his lips pulling back to bare his teeth and his ears pinned flat against his skull. Inside the equipment shifted noisily. That didn’t sound great, but it was likely all damaged from the wreck anyways. Hakim would just have to be grateful to get his shipment at all, even if some reassembly was required.

McCree set Quraishi into the passenger seat up front while Reaper slid the back door of the cargo truck open to see the damage. It looked even worse than it’d sounded: the pile of black and silver rubbish had once been several computer banks designed for satellite hacking and surveillance. The floor of the truck was littered with bits and pieces of hard plastic. Reaper’s shoulders dropped as he sighed. It would take time and money to repair it all, and he’d have to listen to Hakim complain about it.

Reaper heard several people approaching. He let himself diffuse into smoke. A bullet tore through his wraith-like form before ricocheting off the inside of the truck.

Reaper pulled his shotgun and fired a round before he even bothered to look in the direction of his attacker. The mercenary that collapsed to his knees choking on his own blood was dressed in nondescript armor, as were the rest of the squad that had their guns drawn on Reaper. They slowed their approach as they opened fire.

Reaper pulled his other shotgun, preparing to engage, when McCree’s massive form barreled into the midst of the mercenaries. They scattered in a panic. They tried to recover and encircle him, but McCree kept them scrambling. He had more than enough practice against armed Talon agents to know what to do.

McCree targeted the apparent leader of the group first. He snapped the man’s arm in his jaws, then tossed him to the ground and threw his weight on top of him. The man went still. McCree lashed out at anyone else who tried to give orders, sowing discord in the group as they struggled to coordinate. He knocked guns aside or smashed them to bits and kept the mercenaries moving so they couldn’t regroup.

Reaper shot down one of the mercs as they split off from the fight.

McCree snarled sharply. He gestured with a paw between Reaper and the truck. The intent was clear: he couldn’t drive, and Quraishi was unconscious, so Reaper needed to take the wheel and gain some distance.
“Don’t waste too much time on them,” Reaper ordered before holstering his shotguns and running to the front of the truck. The vehicle started, which was lucky, but Reaper didn’t hold out hope that it would last. The engine had made a somewhat concerning noise when Reaper turned it on. But for now the truck would drive, which was all they needed.

Reaper swung the truck around the wreckage of the other vehicle and onto the road. He floored the gas pedal at first. He could see McCree fighting in the side view mirror. Once the truck was out of rifle range, Reaper slowed down to 35 miles per hour and hit cruise control. He remembered all the testing McCree had undergone: his sprint clocked in at 50 mph. For longer distances, he could easily maintain the speed the truck was going, and he could hold that speed for hours at a time.

A couple minutes later the truck lurched violently. Its thrusters protested, and it scraped the ground briefly as the vehicle’s weight unexpectedly increased. Reaper twisted to look over his shoulder in time to see McCree pulling himself into the back of the truck. McCree shoved a couple larger pieces of equipment aside to make room for himself, then pulled the door down until it latched.

McCree collapsed with a grunt against the door.

Reaper turned his attention back to the road as he sped up. He heard McCree panting hard and the repeated sound of metal hitting the floor of the truck bed: bullets being pushed out of shallow wounds by twisting muscle as McCree’s body shrank back down to human form.

McCree would need to be checked later for deeper wounds. Talon had learned from the failed Belarus mission that while it was typically better to just leave a bullet in, McCree was an exception to most rules: bullets and shrapnel left in McCree’s body were caught up in volatile tissues that changed radically at will, causing him immense pain if the bits of metal shifted into the wrong place during a transformation. The bullet in McCree’s left shoulder had to be cut out a week after he was returned to the lab when, during an exercise, he’d shifted and suddenly lost feeling in his left arm as the bullet pressed directly on a nerve.

Reaper glanced back. McCree was human again. He leaned against the door, head tilted back and eyes closed, his naked body mottled with streaks of blood and reddening welts from pulse blasts.

“Any serious injuries, McCree?”

“Nah, I’ll live,” McCree assured without moving. His voice was strained. “I sent the convoy on to Marina El Alamein. Get off at Om Zegheo.”

“Quick thinking.”

“I was in Blackwatch. What, you think they recruited me fer my good looks?”

Reaper shook his head. There was a tightness in his chest—a mix of fondness and bitter pain. He did his best to ignore it.

In the passenger seat, Quraishi shifted. Her face scrunched, and her hands flew to her chest as she took her first deep breath. Bruised ribs, most likely.

“Try not to move,” Reaper said.

“What happened?”

“Someone dropped in uninvited. We don’t know who yet, but they had drones and hired guns.”

Quraishi lifted her head to look around. “Your door’s gone.”
“Least of my problems right now,” Reaper said gruffly.

Quraishi turned to look in the back at the truck’s cargo. Her face twisted with pain, and she straightened again. Definitely bruised ribs. “Shit. That’s a lot of expensive trash.”

“Excuse me?” McCree quipped. “What you callin’ me now?”

Quraishi let out a puff of laughter and craned her head to get a look at him again. “When did we pick your ass up? And are you naked?”

“Hey, I saved your hide. You should be thanking me,” McCree said.

Something hit the top of the truck with a bang. The vehicle groaned, and the thrusters nearly gave out.

“What was that?” Quraishi asked.

Reaper didn’t answer. He unholstered his shotgun.

The weight of the truck shifted to the left, making the thrusters whine with the strain, and then the upper half of an omnic appeared on Reaper’s side of the truck cabin. Its optics flashed from blue to red as it identified its target. Two hands like clamps gripped the doorframe, then a third limb extended down to point some sort of laser at Reaper.

Reaper put his shotgun up against the omnic’s head and fired. The recoil nearly knocked the gun from his hand. The omnic reared back with an electronic wail and retreated to the top of the truck out of Reaper’s line of sight.

“Fuck.”

The weight of the truck shifted again. Reaper tried to keep an eye on the windows. Where was it going to come from next?

McCree let out a shout. “Back here!”

Reaper glanced back. The omnic was cutting through the roof of the truck with its laser. The laser’s path was marked by glowing, superheated metal and the occasional white-hot spark as the laser pierced through the metal.

“McCree, can you handle things back there?”

“I’ll do my best.”

McCree sounded uncertain. They both knew he’d never successfully transformed twice in a twenty-four hour period. Jesse had transformed just minutes ago. Still, he tried. Reaper heard him huff and then grunt in pain. A fist banged against the back door, and McCree let out a strangled sound.

Quraishi turned around to look. She sucked in a breath. “Ya allah. I don’t think his body’s supposed to do that.”

Reaper swerved around an eighteen-wheeler before he risked looking back. McCree was hunched over on the floor. He was covered in a sheen of sweat. His body shook with exertion as one arm dislocated, twisted, grew, then suddenly shrank and snapped back into place again, making McCree shout.
“Okay, that’s enough, McCree,” Reaper said sharply. “You’re doing more harm than good.”

McCree lifted his head. His mouth hung slack, and his brows were drawn together in pain. He nodded his head as he breathed raggedly.

“Quraishi, get over here and take the wheel.”

“Uh, yes sir.” She sounded confused, but there was no time to answer questions.

Reaper stood and leaned out of the cabin as the other Talon agent shifted from her seat to his. Her hand tapped his, letting him know she had hold of the wheel. Reaper hooked his claws into the cabin’s roof, then hauled himself up.

The omnic on top of the truck was an industrial model, humanoid but larger than normal with a boxy, inelegant form meant purely for function. It was leaned over, feet and upper hands braced on the roof while a second set of arms worked to cut a hole with two glowing red lasers.

Reaper drew his guns. He pulled the triggers only to realize he hadn’t reloaded since getting in the truck: they were empty. The omnic’s head turned in his direction. It simultaneously reached down to begin peeling open the roof as it turned one of its lasers in Reaper’s direction.

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Jesse watched Reaper stand up and climb onto the top of the truck. Through the window, he saw a sign. He couldn’t read Arabic to save his life, but he did see a number and an arrow pointing to the right.

Jesse crawled over the toppled computer banks to stick his head between the driver and passenger seats. “Quraishi, what’d that sign say?”

“There’s an exit coming up. Don’t worry about it.”

“What’s it called?”

“Om Zegheo.” Quraishi pointed up ahead to an exit lane.

“Quick, take it,” Jesse urged.

“That’s not where we’re headed.”

“It is now; convoy diverted when we got attacked.”

“Why didn’t anyone tell me?” Quraishi griped as she changed lanes.

“I did, actually, but you were out cold.”

The windshield was suddenly obscured as Reaper slid down onto the hood of the truck, and a beam of red light passed overhead, cutting through the off-ramp speed limit sign. The exit took a sharp right, and Reaper slid sideways. Claws scraped over metal and glass as Reaper struggled to gain purchase before he fell off.

Quraishi threw out a hand, and Reaper caught it, his other hand tight on the doorframe. He got his boot up on the edge of the driver’s seat and hauled himself back onto the hood of the truck as the vehicle straightened out.

The creak of bending metal could be heard as the omnic on the roof opened the truck up like a
tuna can.

“We got any other weapons?” Jesse asked.

Quraishi reached under her seat and pulled out a pistol. Jesse took it from her and checked the magazine. “Perfect.” He climbed back over the pile of destroyed computer banks.

The omnic had pulled back a foot-wide opening in the ceiling. Not big enough for it to get through—yet. It tilted its head when it noticed Jesse through the hole, lights flickering as it decided if it should bother with him. Then a shotgun blast hit it. The omnic staggered before it recovered its footing. Its attention returned to Reaper on the roof, who had managed to reload his guns.

Jesse heard the whine of the omnic’s cutting lasers warming up. He pointed his pistol up through the hole at the omnic. It was outfitted with protective paneling, but from Jesse’s angle he had a clear view of its more delicate inner wiring. He spotted two points on the omnic—boxy, glowing parts that were probably very important, one flashing yellow and the other red.

Jesse hoped Lady Luck was on his side as he picked the box on the left with the red, blinking light. His bullet pierced it, and the omnic’s secondary laser arms went limp.

The omnic let out a distressed noise, then peered down through the hole again, the sensors of its face glowing maliciously. It shoved an arm down through the hole and caught hold of Jesse’s hands. His fingers were crushed against the handle of the gun as he was lifted off the ground.

Jesse shouted and kicked his legs as he was hauled up. His arms scraped hot, jagged metal. Then Reaper’s shotgun rang out again, and Jesse hit the ground. The omnic’s arm came with him. It landed across his chest, knocking the air out of him.

Reaper’s shotguns rang out twice more before the omnic tumbled off the roof. The truck pitched upwards several inches before compensating for the lost weight.

Quraishi punched the air, then quickly yanked her arm back in to her side with a hiss as she remembered her bruised ribs. Jesse let out a breathy chuckle as he shoved the robotic arm off, forgetting for a moment just where he was and who he was working for. His smile twisted and shrank. Still, he clung to the fleeting feeling of victory.

Reaper swung his body down from the top of the truck into the open doorframe of the cabin. He turned to smoke as he leaned in, ghosting over to the passenger side and reforming in the seat there.

“Are you good to drive, Agent Quraishi?”

“Sure. At least until we get where we’re going. Which would be great to know, by the way.”

Reaper turned around to look in back. Jesse sat on the floor of the truck. He picked up the omnic’s arm and waved it at Reaper with a wry smirk on his face.

Reaper shook his head and asked, “Where did you say you sent the other convoys? A marina?”

“Marina El Alamein. Told ’em to find someplace by the docks to lie low ’til we contacted them.”

Reaper tested the comms. “Looks like we’re out of range at the moment, but that shouldn’t be a problem once we arrive at the marina.”

Jesse laid down on his back with a sigh. “Speaking a’ which, what’s th’ range on these restraints? Purely outta curiosity.” He lifted an arm and twisted his wrist to show off the glowing restraint.
Reaper stared. When he spoke, it was with incredulity. “You split off from your handler without knowing how far you could go before your restraints shocked you? Really, McCree?”

“In my defense, I didn’t have a lotta time to think it over. Would you’ve rather I left ya behind?”

“I would rather you think before you act, McCree. You’re just lucky you’re on a leash longer than our comms, or you’d be convulsing and drooling out the side of your mouth right now.”

“And how long a leash is that exactly?”

“… I would have thought Blackwatch taught you to be subtler about gathering information, McCree.”

Jesse huffed softly, but didn’t deny Reaper’s accusation.

“Let’s just say that after this mission I’m going to shorten it quite a bit. From now on, you stick with your assigned team. While your stunt worked out for us today, I won’t tolerate you breaking rank like this again. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir,” Jesse said flatly. He knew he shouldn’t have pushed, but he’d been hoping that in the relief of the moment when everyone was grateful to be alive, Reaper might let a little information slip. He’d miscalculated, clearly.

“McCree.”

“Hm?”

“Cover up.”

Jesse jumped as something warm and heavy landed on top of him. Jesse grabbed it—it was leather—and held it up so he could see. Reaper had thrown his jacket back to Jesse.

Jesse wasn’t sure what to make of the gesture. He sat up. Reaper had turned away to look out the front windshield.

Hands brushed over leather unthinkingly as Jesse stared down at the coat.

He didn’t want it.

Jesse’s fingers clenched. He was a prisoner—an attack dog for Talon—and no amount of kindness or peace offerings would change that. These little gestures weren’t kindness anyways; this was no different than the clothes or the room or the book. He had to remember that. These people were not friends or teammates. They were his captors.

Jesse left the coat in a pile on the floor and scooted back to his spot against the door as far away from Reaper as possible. He pulled his knees up to his chest, folded his arms on top, and rested his head on his arms.

The restraint collar cut across Jesse’s throat. He ignored it for as long as he could before he finally lifted his head and tipped it back against the door. He could feel the hum of the repulsors vibrating through the metal. It reminded Jesse of long flights back to Watchpoint Gibraltar after a hard mission. He closed his eyes and tried to pretend that’s where he was.

The memory was blurred from so many trips, but Jesse could pull up particular details if he focused. Reyes making his way back from the cockpit and dropping into a seat with a huff. Moira
reading off a data pad as she went over some project she was working on. Genji, when he first
joined, sitting across from Jesse, his back stiff and his eyes closed or focused on some faraway point
in the distance. Once they became friends he started sitting beside Jesse instead, and while he didn’t
like to speak much right after a mission, he seemed happy to listen to Jesse ramble. Jesse could
always think of something to talk about. Usually a movie he’d seen or a personal anecdote. On rare
occasions Reyes would join in and tell them one of the more lighthearted stories about his time as a
soldier.

Jesse remembered the feeling of unlit cigarillos rolled between his fingers. He wasn’t allowed to
light them in the airship, but sometimes he’d put one in his mouth anyways. And sometimes Reyes
would share a sip off the flask he technically wasn’t supposed to have (because Overwatch agents
shouldn’t drink on duty, especially commanders). It wasn’t like any of them were going to snitch on
him. Although Moira once quipped about the irony of Jesse killing himself slowly with booze and
tobacco when there were plenty of people who’d be happy to do the job quicker. He remembered he
used to kind of like her black humor, even if the barbs were meant for him. Back when he’d trusted
her. Back when he thought they were friends.

Jesse frowned and let his eyes slit open just barely. The harsh light of the Egyptian sun through
the windows banished the memory like a bad dream.

Through his lashes Jesse saw that Reaper was looking back between the seats. Jesse held still and
kept his breathing slow. He watched as Reaper looked from Jesse to the coat. The white mask tilted
and dipped in some unreadable gesture before Reaper turned back around, his shoulders stiff.

Chapter End Notes

My goal when I decided to write this chapter was to have a scene where Jesse
transforms to physically shield Reaper despite not being ordered to do so. As a bonus it
turned into a high speed car chase with people fighting on the roof of a truck because
who doesn't love that? I remember I was going to end the chapter with Jesse making it
into the truck, but it felt unfinished. I thought "what would all those writing advice
books tell me to do right now?" The logical answer was to drop a new threat literally on
top of the characters, and voila!

I hope the hours staring at Google maps added enough realism without bogging the
story down. I wanted readers to feel grounded in the setting.

One last thing: I want to clarify that at this time I don't have intentions of making the
attacker a plot point. They're simply a local militaristic group that wanted Talon's tech
and saw an opportunity. I realize I set it up like a future reveal. I don't want to lead
anyone on, but I also knew that Reaper would want to know who did it. Who knows,
maybe I can find a use for that detail later. I do have three more "books" I want to write,
after all.

Next week: Winter has come to New Mexico. Jesse and Ruth go Christmas shopping at
a local bookstore, and reminisce as memories bubble to the surface. Some are happier
than others...
Hang Fire

Chapter Notes

Additional Chapter 14 tags: Dissociation, Characters being triggered, Christmas/holidays, Reminiscing, Jesse being a history nerd, Trans characters in literature and transitioning, Other literary characters dying graphically, Trauma, Family bonding

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Albuquerque, 3 years ago

Almost two months ago Jesse had managed to swing a job with a construction company. Not a proper job, since he didn’t have picture ID or insurance, but Jesse was no stranger to discretion and a little under-the-table pay. He’d offered to split his earnings with Ruth to pay her back for his room and board, but she’d refused. She’d told him to save his money for when he finally decided to leave. But now Christmas was fast approaching, and nothing Ruth could say would stop Jesse from buying presents for her and Annie.

Holiday music, faint and tinny, mixed with the quiet chatter of customers milling around the combination book-and-game store where Ruth and Jesse were currently shopping. A giant fake pine tree dominated the center of the store. All of its ornaments were made from recycled book pages and red ribbon. The tree was topped with a glimmering holographic star. Fanciful displays had been set up on tables all around the store to give shoppers ideas for gifts.

Jesse leaned in to examine one of the tables. It was stocked with children’s chapter books about dragons and unicorns. “Hey Ruth, what does Annie like anyways?”

“Depends on the week,” Ruth said unhelpfully as she flipped through a new bestseller novel.

“Well then use yer psychic powers, an’ help me guess what she’ll like next week when she opens her presents.”

“Something she can make with her hands is always a good bet. She likes to build and learn.”

Jesse moved to a science-themed table. There were crystal-growing kits, terrariums, solar-powered robots, and 3D printer pens. He picked up a box and turned it around to read the back.

“You find a good one?” Ruth asked. She’d added a kids’ book on the Old West to her basket. Annie had been on a kick lately. She and Jesse had finished watching La leyenda del vigilante, and the next day she’d come home from school with a copy of Little House on the Prairie and a biography about Bass Reeves.

Jesse held out the box he was looking at. It showed a plastic model of a T-Rex skeleton that could be put into a mold and then chipped out using paleontology tools. “It’s a kit about digging up dinosaurs. Every kid likes dinosaurs, right?” He said it with equal measures of hope and uncertainty. “I remember when me an’ my pal Mac were little, we used to go digging out in the hills all the time hoping to find dinosaur bones.”
“I bet Sarah was thrilled,” Ruth said sarcastically. “I can picture you coming home at dinnertime, covered head to toe in dirt.”

Jesse waved his hand dismissively. “That’s how I looked when I came home every day. She was used to that. Nah, only reason she didn’t like us doin’ it was because of the rattlesnakes. I almost got bit once. I remember shaking like a leaf the whole way home. Didn’t think not to tell her. That was the closest my ma ever came to tanning my hide.” Jesse hooked his thumb in his belt loop and ducked his head a little, looking sheepish. “Didn’t stop me; I went right back up into those hills first chance I got. Me and Mac were always getting into trouble.”

Ruth shook her head and smiled. “I was the same way. Only it was Mamá telling me not to ride my bike down the steep roads on the hills near our house. I’d come home all scraped up, and she’d turn her face up to the ceiling and ask God why I was so set on worrying her to death.” Ruth held up her hands. “I didn’t learn my lesson until I fell and broke both my arms.

“Dad always joked that it was a family curse. That when he was younger, his mom told him she hoped he had kids who were just as reckless as him so he’d know what he put her through.” Ruth smiled wide at the memory before she remembered who she was talking to. Her smile faded as she waited to see Jesse’s reaction.

Jesse’s expression was blank, but when he caught Ruth’s eye, he graced her with a soft, warm look. “Look at the two of us. Guess that curse must’ve been real after all, huh?”

“Guess so.” Ruth held the kit back out to Jesse. He took it, and after a moment’s consideration, he set it in Ruth’s basket.

“Anything else we gotta get?”

Ruth pointed towards a display by the window. “I need something to send to our moms. I always order them one of those gift towers with the cookies and things inside, but I also like to send them something a little more personal. I was thinking maybe some stationary this year. I’m not sure about Mom, but Mamá loves writing letters. Want to help me pick?”

“Sure.”

Technology may have evolved, but there would always be people who wrote letters by hand. A lot of people, Jesse figured, if the size of the stationary section was anything to go by. There were box sets with holiday cards and envelopes, thank you cards for after the holidays, racks of pens in every color, paper, postcards, and even antiquated wax seal sets for the diehard letter writers. Ruth spent a good ten minutes hemming and hawing over whether her mother would prefer the cards with flowers on them or the stationary with pink trim. Jesse leaned up against a shelf and waited patiently.

“She likes both,” Ruth said, conflicted, “and I can’t remember what I sent her last time.”

Jesse held up a finger. “Hang fire for a minute.” Jesse pushed away from the shelf and walked back down the aisle a few feet.

Ruth watched Jesse scour the shelf for something. “What’s hang fire mean?” she asked.

Jesse pulled something from one of the bins and moved down the aisle a little. “Hang fire. It’s what happens when you pull the trigger on a gun, and it doesn’t fire right away,” Jesse said distractedly. “ Doesn’t happen much with modern firearms, but back when guns had external flashpans an’ primer powder, it could be a real issue. If your powder was bad, the gun might not fire
right away. Could be it won’t go off at all, but there’s also a chance the powder’s just burning slow, and you gotta give it a minute. After a while it came to mean any time something’s delayed or goes slowly. Fun fact: that’s the same place we get the phrase “flash in the pan” from. People think it comes from the Gold Rush, but it’s actually talkin’ about flintlock muskets that fail to fire.”

Jesse grabbed something from a rack and walked back over to Ruth. He showed her a pen decorated with little pink birds and a sheet of wildflower stickers. “Mom likes wildflowers,” Jesse said as he set the stickers on top of the flower cards. “You get those for her and the pink set for Gabriela, and I’ll go in for half.”

Ruth didn’t answer right away. She was smiling up at Jesse. He quirked an eyebrow. “What?”

Ruth shook her head. “You do such a good job of acting like a laid-back country boy, I forget sometimes that you’re actually a huge nerd in a cowboy hat.” Her teeth flashed as her smile broke into a full-on grin.

Jesse put on a mock look of disdain. “If you’re gonna be mean to me, I’ll go home right now.”

“I’ve got the keys to the truck.”

“T’ll walk.”

Ruth laughed and took hold of Jesse’s arm. “No need to be so dramatic. I’m sorry.”

Jesse made a noncommittal noise and nudged Ruth with his shoulder.

Ruth didn’t let go of Jesse’s arm just yet. She lowered her voice as she looked down at the stationary in her basket. “You should write to Sarah. Or call her or something.” Jesse didn’t respond. Ruth kept going, “It’s been years since our moms heard from you. We all figured you had a good reason, but you’re safe now, and they deserve to know you’re not lying dead in a ditch somewhere.”

Jesse turned and pulled his arm back in one motion. His expression was dark. “You got any idea the kinda danger that’d put you all in?” His voice was low, rumbling in his chest. “When a man’s being hunted, the first thing you do is track down his kin and keep tabs on them: bug their phones, check their mail, track ‘em to see if they go on any unusual trips. I guarantee you Talon’s got eyes and ears on that house. I send one letter, and they’ll show up raining unholy hell down on your quaint lil suburban neighborhood.”

Ruth frowned, her hands gripping the handles of her basket tight. They both knew that Jesse was right, but Jesse could see it in the twist of Ruth’s mouth that she didn’t want to agree with him. Jesse had learned over time that Ruth didn’t like losing or admitting she was wrong. She was stubborn, just like him. He supposed being a nurse and a single mother might have a little something to do with it.

Letting out a harsh sigh, Jesse relented: “Let me give it some thought.” Ruth blinked up at him in surprise. He held up his hand. “I ain’t saying it’s a sure thing, but maybe I can come up with somethin’. Will that satisfy you?”

Ruth nodded quickly, clearly happy to get even a maybe out of Jesse. “Just think about it, that’s all I’m asking.” She pointed back over her shoulder. “Let’s get in line so we can buy our stuff and go home.”

Ruth led the way. Jesse trailed behind as he tried to think over the logistics of reaching out to his mother without it being traced back to him. He couldn’t contact her using her phone or cell, emails could be traced back to ISP addresses, and letters, even without a return address, tended to leave behind a trail. Jesse could always show up in person, but there were almost certainly cameras or even
agents staking out the house, and he had no idea how quickly Talon would show up once he was spotted.

Ruth and Jesse circled around the back of the Christmas tree to avoid the pressing crowd of shoppers. Jesse’s eyes skimmed over a large display of literary classics. He’d always meant to read Sherlock Holmes. Never got around to it. Maybe he could get the audiobook to listen to with Annie. She was reading well above her age range, at least compared to what Jesse remembered reading when he was that young, though maybe he wasn’t the best example. Even before he dropped out of high school, he hadn’t liked reading. Getting teased by his pals in Deadlock hadn’t helped. It wasn’t until after Overwatch pushed him to earn his GED that he bothered to give books a second chance.

Jesse lingered by the classics display, letting Ruth go on ahead. He smiled at the memory of being caught reading in the middle of the night by his drill sergeant back at the training base barracks. It was his first Western novel—a gift from Reyes for earning his degree. It had come in the mail from Geneva wrapped in plain, brown paper with a note telling Jesse he’d done a good job and wishing him luck on the upcoming final assessment exam. Jesse hadn’t known until that book the kind of power words had. The way they could transport him and make his chest swell with emotions that he himself didn’t quite have the words for.

A splash of red in the display caught Jesse’s eye. He stared at the book, uncomprehending for a moment as his eyes scanned the title again and again. The font was different and so was the cover, but there was no mistaking the title. The word *Metamorphoses* stood out like a brand in Jesse’s mind. His hand moved without his meaning to as he picked the book up off the table.

The noise of the shop and the music overhead blended into a soft hum as Jesse studied the book in his hands. A sensation came over him that he couldn’t quite place, like he’d been dreaming for a while now, and he’d only just realized it, but he couldn’t wake up. The world felt surreal and distant. Jesse set the book on the table and opened it to a random page.

The death of Hercules. Jesse skimmed the lines, knowing the scene by heart. He remembered how Hercules struggled to free himself from the poisoned robes seeping venom into his skin, and how he tore at the cloth and his own flesh alike as the poison boiled in his veins like white-hot metal. Jesse remembered the ache of his own body when he’d first read the story, how he’d understood too well the licking of flames in his bones and the melting of his marrow because only hours before he’d lived that exact pain in the catalyst room.

The words in this book were different. It was jarring. The dialect was more antiquated, and it was structured in flowing, rhyming verse unlike the translation Jesse had read. Despite the different style, certain words rang familiar. But Jesse had opened the book expecting a particular voice—one that called up to him from a deep, dark hole in the ground with sharply cut square walls like a grave—and this was not that voice.

This new voice was more melodic as it sang the tragedy of Hercules: the way the red iron of his blood hissed with heat and the flame greedily devoured his guts, the crackling of burning nerves and Hercules’s mind swimming as the venom ate him alive. When he threw his hands up to the skies, he did not cry out to Juno as he did in Jesse’s old book but to a dread empress as he offered up his suffering to her like a sacrifice on the altar.

Jesse pulled his hand back, and the book flipped shut. He swallowed painfully, his throat dry. He wasn’t sure what he’d hoped for when he looked in that book. He’d known before he picked it up that whatever comfort it might have provided him once, it would only hurt him now; all of the stories in that book were inextricably tied to moments of pain or punishment. But that hadn’t stopped him from looking.
There had been one story, though. One that Jesse had held close to his heart and would read only in the quiet, peaceful moments when he struggled with the ache of loneliness. The memory tugged at Jesse. It made him slide his fingers into the pages of the book again and flip through past the story of Hercules to another story at the end of Book IX. Iphis and Ianthe. The story of a child born female and concealed as a son, who would eventually become a man and share wedding vows with the adoring woman betrothed to him.

Jesse skimmed over the opening paragraphs about Lygdus dooming his unborn child to death should it be a girl, Telethusa praying to the goddess Isis for aid, and the appearance of an ethereal procession of gods and beasts telling her to disguise her baby and lie to her husband if she must. Jesse lingered on the lines about the newborn babe being “of the beauteous kind” and Lygdus, unaware of his wife’s deception, choosing to name his son Iphis, a name without deceit as it suited either son or daughter. Like the name Jesse.

The next lines spoke of Iphis having a face with manly fierceness mixed with feminine grace. Jesse liked that better than the dry, unpoetic language he remembered. Fierceness and grace—there was power in those two words together. A balance.

Jesse skipped to the end; past the betrothal of Iphis to Ianthe, their shared love, Iphis’s despair over how they couldn’t be together (or rather, how their families would unknowingly allow it, but Iphis himself could not), and Telethusa’s plea to Isis once again for aid.

Jesse slowed when he reached the last paragraph where Telethusa and Iphis left the temple, and as their feet carried them home, the goddess Isis worked her power, and Iphis transformed. His gait lengthened, his skin grew dark, his features became strong, his eyes sparkled with vigor, and his voice deepened and grew bold.

Jesse found himself enraptured by one of the last lines and murmured it aloud to himself: “The latent parts, at length reveal’d, began—To shoot, and spread, and burnish into man.”

The experience of reading the transformation scene now felt entirely different than when Jesse first came across it. Jesse remembered it’d been one of those particularly lonely and terrible days where he had too much time to himself and too much energy to let exhaustion chase away his darker thoughts. The room felt cavernous and suffocating by turns. Jesse had opened up *Metamorphoses* for some kind of escape. Then, suddenly, there was Iphis, and he wasn’t quite so alone anymore.

Now, reading the story held a combination of melancholy and nostalgia. It left Jesse feeling tender like he’d bruised himself but couldn’t quite remember how he’d done it. He wasn’t sure if it was good or bad. But he enjoyed how the new translation’s poetic stanzas turned the transformation into something romantic and lovely, as if the book itself felt the same way Jesse did. As if it too had complicated, painful—but fond—memories.

“Jesse?”

“Hm?” Jesse let the book close reluctantly as he turned to Ruth. The world still felt dreamlike. The hum of noise all around was indistinct, and Jesse felt strangely detached from his own body.

“You fell behind. I thought we were getting in line.”

“Oh,” Jesse said after a pause.

Ruth studied Jesse’s face. “How do you feel?”

“Um. Not bad,” Jesse said as he took stock of himself and tried to think of a number for Ruth.
Two? Maybe three? He definitely didn’t feel right, but it wasn’t the same as when his heart raced and his instincts screamed at him, so he didn’t really have the words for it. He looked over at the book he’d been reading.

Ruth’s gaze followed his. She picked it up. “Metamorphoses?”

“I read it before,” Jesse explained. “Back at the uh…” He let out a frustrated huff when the end of the sentence caught in his throat. “Back there. They let me have that book to read.”

Ruth knew a little of what had happened. Just enough to keep her safe, but not much more. Jesse had explained about being captured and changed, how Talon made him work for them, and his escape. Some of Ruth’s questions Jesse had answered, but many of them had been met with a silent grimace or the reassurance of: “Ain’t nothing for you to worry your head over.”

Jesse wasn’t sure why he was telling Ruth about the book when he couldn’t bring himself to tell her about the rest of it. Maybe because the book was safer to talk about than why the sound of static made Jesse’s heart race, or how he couldn’t stomach certain tastes and textures, or how the hiss of air made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. The book was a painful reminder of what he’d gone through, but at the same time it was like a shield: something to put between himself and the gnashing teeth of his memory. He couldn’t put his torture into words, but he maybe he could talk about this.

At Jesse’s words, Ruth’s expression shifted from surprise to concern to sympathy. Jesse watched her with a hint of distant shame. He wasn’t sure he liked that: it looked a lot like pity.

“Bad memory?” Ruth asked, still holding the book.

“They’re all bad memories, Ruth,” Jesse said bluntly, his words coming out harsher than he’d intended. “How’m I supposed to feel about it?” He knew his tone wasn’t justified, but he let himself hold onto the flicker of frustration as he tried to chase away the numbness that had settled over him.

Ruth went tight-lipped at Jesse’s tone. Her expression sent a jolt through Jesse’s body. Not a feeling so much as an instinctive reaction. He’d overstepped. She was mad at him. He broke eye contact as his shoulders hunched up. The muscles of his back tensed painfully.

Then Ruth sighed, and she held the book out to Jesse. “I can’t tell you how to feel. Only you get to decide that.”

That wasn’t the reaction Jesse had expected. He was taken aback for a moment.

Jesse licked his lips and cast his eyes down to the floor. “It helped sometimes,” he admitted. “When I was hurting, it helped me. But now I’m…” He ran his hand through his hair and tugged at it lightly. “I’m here, and I don’t need it anymore. I want to feel the same way about it that I used to, but it hurts as much as it helps, like all the pain I poured into it is still in there.” He bit his lip. He wasn’t sure what to do with his hand, so he laid it on his left shoulder, his arm a protective shield across his chest.

Ruth turned the book over to look at the cover. Then she held it up to Jesse. “It’s okay to feel that way. Maybe it’d be best if you let it go: let the book keep all that pain for you.”

“Or?” Because there was an unspoken “or” to Ruth’s words.

“Or,” Ruth said, “maybe it’d be better if you faced that pain little by little at your own pace. If you really like the stories, and they mean something to you, maybe they’re worth reclaiming. But like I said, you get to decide how you feel about it. That includes deciding how you cope.”
Ruth waved the book in Jesse’s direction, indicating that he should take it from her.

Jesse took the book and started to set it back on the display table, but he didn’t put it down. He hovered indecisively before making a noise in the back of his throat and pulling the book back to himself. “I don’t know what I wanna do,” he said.

“How about you try it out, and if you think it’s making you feel worse, we’ll get rid of it,” Ruth suggested. “I’ll even buy it for you.”

“No,” Jesse said quickly. “No, I’ll buy it. But thank you.” If he bought it, then it was his. Not a gift or a reward from someone else with all the connotations that came with it. Then he wouldn’t feel like he owed anyone.

Ruth gestured with her head. “All right then, let’s wrap up and go home.” She turned and headed for the back of the check-out line.

Jesse tucked the book under the stump of his left arm and laid his hand on Ruth’s shoulder. She stopped.

“I’m not bad off, but I’m not doing great,” Jesse said. He wasn’t sure how to describe the surreal feeling that clung to the edges of the world and curled around his limbs. It’d faded as they talked, but it still hung over Jesse like a sort of fog. “If y’don’t mind, I’ll just hold on to you.”

Ruth reached up to lay her hand over his. “You go right ahead. I’ll handle everything at the register, and you can pay me back when we get home.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Jesse let Ruth guide them into the line. Just standing around doing nothing seemed to make the fog worse, so Jesse distracted himself by scouring the bookmark rack for something he might like. He grabbed one with a picture of running horses and a black tassel on the end.

“Y’know, I’ve never actually seen a horse in person,” Jesse told Ruth as he showed her the bookmark.

“Some cowboy you are.”

“I know, right?” Jesse said with a weak laugh. “You should see me on a hovercycle, though.” He tucked the bookmark into the book under his arm, then leaned against Ruth. He felt her hand press between his shoulder blades and rub small circles there. He didn’t realize his back was still tight with tension until he felt her fingers dig into the muscle. Jesse let out a calming breath and focused on relaxing. His shoulders slowly dropped, and the pain in his back eased.

“Better?” Ruth asked.

“Getting there.” Physically anyways. Now that Jesse didn’t feel so detached, he was already thinking back on the things he’d admitted to Ruth, and the guilt and shame he’d been numb to before twisted in his chest as a palpable ache.

“That’s good,” Ruth said, unaware. She snaked her arm around Jesse’s waist and gave him a squeeze before letting go. The cashier was waving them over. “When we’re done here, I’ll take you to get hot chocolate.”

Jesse snorted. “You sound like my mother. I haven’t had cocoa since I was little.”
“That’s so sad,” Ruth said. “So do you want whipped cream or not?”

“Of course I want whipped cream.” The ache in his chest ebbed a little.

Chapter End Notes

First things first, some useful links:
The online copy of Metamorphoses that is referenced in this chapter. The older book is based on the copy I own, which is by another translator. (Fair warning: it’s Ancient Roman. The concepts of gender and sexuality expressed in the story are, understandably, very dated.)
Bass Reeves for people who don’t know him
the term Hang Fire
the term Flash in the Pan

I promised I’d eventually bring up Jesse’s favorite story. I actually picked it because it was my favorite story when I had to read Metamorphoses in college. Iphis and Ianthe were so in love, and I’m a hopeless romantic. I also thought it’d be nice to give Jesse a story and character to grow attached to that doesn’t necessarily help him define himself so much as reaffirm himself and give him some small comfort and a sense of companionship. I wanted him to experience something that many of us do.

I also wanted the book to act as a touchstone and a lens through which to draw out his traumatic experiences because otherwise he’d happily try to ignore what happened. It won’t be resolved easily. And it won’t be resolved in one story. But here at least is a step in the right direction.

The next chapter is Christmas Day! Things to look forward to: sugar cookies, more of Max (who finally gets a little well-deserved development), the origin of a certain blogger, Sarah and Gabriela celebrating their holiday, and at least one new cheesy t-shirt. Oh, and an unexpected present.
Albuquerque, New Mexico, 3 years ago

It was Christmas morning. During the night a frost had crept through the city of Albuquerque, turning it into a shimmering, silver wonderland.

Annie was first to wake up followed almost immediately by Jesse. She’d done her best to sneak down the stairs without making any of the steps creak, but he heard her all the same. She was tiptoeing into the living room when Jesse swung his door open.

Annie smiled sheepishly at him. “Morning, Uncle Jesse.”

“Mornin’, sweet pea.” Jesse paused to let out a yawn. He scratched at his beard and neck. “I think your ma planned on making cinnamon rolls for breakfast. Maybe we should surprise her and get those started. You wanna help me?”

Annie looked over to where three stockings full of candy and knick-knacks sat lined up on the couch. Hers was blue with pink snowflakes and silver buttons. A pouch of chocolate coins and a fresh orange were visible at the top of the stocking.

“Don’t you worry ‘bout that,” Jesse said when he noticed where she was looking. “You can dig through your stocking while the rolls bake. Come on, lend me a hand. Goodness knows I could use it.”

Annie stared up at Jesse. He tried to keep a straight face, but he didn’t last long. Annie scrunched her nose. “That’s a terrible joke, Uncle Jesse.”

“I know, but if someone’s gonna make it then it might as well be me.”

By the time Ruth rolled out of bed the cinnamon rolls were cooling on the counter. Annie and Jesse sat at the kitchen table. Jesse was nursing a mug of coffee, and Annie was surrounded by bits of chocolate coin foil like some kind of trash dragon lounging in its horde. She was wearing a dozen glittery, plastic bracelets that clacked with every movement, and had several vibrant hair clips in her hair: all gifts from her stocking. Jesse was wearing a couple of the clips, too, stuck haphazardly into his hair to pull his bangs back on one side.

Jesse and Annie each had about half a deck of cards in front of them. Jesse set down his mug and laid a hand over the top of his deck. Annie perked up and grabbed the top card from her pile.

“Ready?” Jesse asked. Annie squinted at him like they were dueling in the streets. Jesse squinted back. “Draw!”
Annie and Jesse slapped down two cards. Both threes. Annie and Jesse pulled two more cards.

“Draw.”

Both sevens.

“Okay,” Annie said, “I call it this time. Ready? Draw!”

Annie grinned at her queen of hearts and Jesse’s four of spades. She grabbed all the cards in the middle of the table and pulled them in.

“Morning, Ruth,” Jesse greeted before picking up his mug to sip at his coffee again.

Annie hopped out of her seat to give Ruth a hug. “Morning, Mom! We made breakfast!”

“I see that. Let’s eat, and then we can open presents. Jesse, I hope you made enough coffee for me, too.”

Jesse made a so-so gesture with his hand. “I’ve seen how you drink coffee, Ruth. Not sure there is such a thing as enough when it comes to you. But there’s a couple cups in the pot if that’s what you’re gettin’ at.”

“Smart aleck. Nice hair by the way.”

“Thank you kindly,” Jesse said with a shameless grin. “I told Annie how pretty they looked on her, and she kindly shared with me.”

“You can have one, too, Mom,” Annie said.

“Oh you don’t need to do that, sweetheart,” Ruth said, but Annie was already blindly groping at the clips in her hair. She unsnapped one of the baby blue ones.

Ruth relented and leaned down so Annie could stick the clip in.

“Okay, now that we’re all fashionable, how about I make some bacon to go with those rolls?”

“Yeah!” Annie bounced on the balls of her feet.

Jesse glanced out the kitchen window while sipping at his mug. “D’you think Maxine’s awake yet? Maybe she’d like to have breakfast with us,” he suggested.

“I’m sure she has her own plans. I don’t wanna bother her,” Ruth said.

Jesse hummed thoughtfully before telling her, “The way she cares for you and Annie, I’m not sure she’s really got anyone else. Plus it seems to me if she had other plans, she’d be gone seein’ family this week. Ain’t gonna hurt none if I go ring her doorbell, right?”

Ruth pursed her lips, then gave in with a shrug. “The bacon won’t take long, so if you’re going over then make it quick. And don’t pester her if she says no, got it?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Can I come?” Annie asked. “I got a present for her. We learned to make paper circuit cards at school. It lights up!”

“You gotta wear your coat if you come with me,” Jesse said. “That is, if your ma says it’s okay.”
“Fine, just hurry up.” Ruth made a shooing gesture at the both of them.

Jesse headed for the front room, then doubled back to grab a cellphone off the table. Ruth looked at him curiously as he slipped it into his pocket, but said nothing. She must have noticed it wasn’t his usual phone—the one he’d loaded up with bits of scavenged Blackwatch programming so he could safely message her in an emergency. He threw her a smile and a wink that answered nothing, then went to grab his coat.

Annie ran ahead and hurriedly yanked on her snow boots. She pulled her coat on while Jesse sat at the foot of the stairs and slipped into his shoes.

“Gloves, too, kiddo,” Jesse said as he grabbed a jacket. “And you might want to bring that card of yours in case Max doesn’t come back with us.”

“Right!” Annie ran up the stairs. By the time she came back down with the card clutched in her hands, Jesse had his coat and hat on.

Annie slipped past Jesse when he opened the door, and ran the few yards down the sidewalk to Max’s house.

“Slow down,” Jesse called. “Everything’s frosted over. You’re gonna fall and hurt yourself.”

Annie waited for Jesse on the stoop. She pressed her gloved hand to her mouth, then pulled it away and let out puffs of frosted air that hung in front of her face before fading. She repeated the motion as she pretended to smoke.

“I reckon this porch ain’t big enough for the both of us,” Annie told Jesse when he caught up.

Jesse’s mouth quirked into a smile before he copied her, pretending to take a drag on a cigarette. His frosted breath drifted up and away from him. Jesse wished he had a real cig, but he could just imagine the look Ruth would give him if he walked into her house smelling like tobacco.

“Well then, sheriff,” Jesse said, “I suggest you knock on that door, or I’m gonna come up there and do it for ya.”

Annie squared up across from Jesse, a hand hovering by her hip like she was going to draw a gun. Jesse narrowed his eyes at her before reaching for the door. He was a tall man; he didn’t need to be on the stoop to reach.

Annie spun on her heel and slammed her fist against the door before Jesse could do it. She stuck her tongue out at him.

“Coming,” Max called from inside.

The door swung open, and Max shivered as the cold air hit her. She was wearing slippers and a matching bathrobe over red plaid pajamas. Her graying hair—freshly buzzed into her usual crew cut—was still damp from a morning shower, and she had a steaming mug in hand. The cup read “write drunk; edit sober. —Ernest Hemingway.”

“Howdy, Maxine,” Jesse said with a tip of his hat.

“Merry Christmas!” Annie chimed in.

“Well a Merry Christmas to you, too, Annie. To what do I owe the pleasure?” Max asked.
Jesse nodded back towards Ruth’s place with his head. “We thought that if you haven’t had breakfast yet, you might like to join us. Maybe stick around a while; Ruth said something about decorating sugar cookies later.”

Max looked uncertain. She held her mug in both hands and half-turned as if to go back inside. “That’s a nice offer and all, but it’s Christmas; I wouldn’t want to intrude on your family time. And I have plenty to keep me busy today.”

“What, you’re working on Christmas?”

Max shrugged. “I’ve got an article to wrap up and revise. It’s due in a week, which is plenty of time, but it’d be nice to have it done and out of the way.”

“But you can do that later! Please come eat with us,” Annie begged.

Jesse set his hand on top of Annie’s head. “We promised your ma that we wouldn’t pester Max if she said no. Gotta respect her decision. Sometimes folks just wanna have a little time to themselves.” He could sympathize.

“I really do appreciate the offer,” Max said again.

“Don’t worry about it. If you change your mind, you come on over anytime,” Jesse said. “Anyways, Annie’s got something for ya.” He nudged Annie.

Annie held out the card. Jesse hadn’t gotten a good look at it until now. It was made of construction paper. The outside had a holiday greeting, and the inside had a picture of a reindeer wearing a harness covered in bells. His nose was a tiny light bulb.

“Fold the corner,” Annie said, pointing. A corner of the card was marked, and from where he stood, Jesse could see that folding it back connected a small battery to a drawn copper circuit. When Max did as told, the little light bulb nose glowed bright red.

Max let out a laugh. “Look at that. That’s real clever, Annie. You made this for me all by yourself?”

“Ms. Griffin helped a little, but I did most of it.”

Max pinched the circuit closed a few times so that the reindeer’s nose blinked on and off. She looked down at Annie, then up at Jesse. He could see in her eyes that she’d made a decision.

“Let me get changed, and I’ll come over.”

The bacon had gone cold by the time Jesse, Annie, and Max made it back. Ruth scolded Jesse, but he just laughed and told her that’s what microwaves were for. He got a fresh pot of coffee brewing while everyone plated up. At Annie’s insistence they all moved to the living room so she could start opening presents.

Jesse pulled his phone out of his pocket and set it on the side table beside his coffee mug. He balanced his plate on the arm of the couch. “Okay so what do we open up first?”

“Ooh, I know.” Annie dug under the branches of the fake Christmas tree before pulling out a lumpy package tied with a ridiculous amount of ribbon. Annie set it on Jesse’s lap. “Open my present to you first.”

Jesse slid the ribbons off without untying them, then ripped the paper open. Inside was a shirt. He
pulled it out and laid it flat across his legs, then laughed.

The shirt was rust red with white text. On it was the silhouette of a cowboy riding a bull and the words, “Take life eight seconds at a time.” In small font on the back, it said, “San Miguel Spring Rodeo 2067.” A thrift store find, then, and a real gem at that.

Jesse held the shirt up against his chest. “I love this. I’m gonna go put it on right now.”

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Santa Fe, New Mexico

In Santa Fe a light dusting of snow had managed to fall overnight. Sarah McCree had dragged her wife out into the snow early that morning with a camera drone so they could take a picture together. Gabriela, shivering in her coat and pressed against Sarah’s side, had complained that she wasn’t dressed for a photo, but Sarah insisted. The house looked like it was made of gingerbread and powdered sugar, and if they waited too long, then the snow would melt. Besides, Sarah had said, Gabriela always looked pretty as a picture—a comment which earned her Gabriela’s usual eye roll. The camera took a photo just then, and Gabriela demanded that Sarah delete it.

Back inside Sarah and Gabriela warmed up with coffee and muffins, then began trading presents.

Sarah held her hair up as Gabriela helped her with the necklace she’d gotten Sarah for Christmas. “There,” Gabriela said. She leaned in to lightly kiss the back of Sarah’s neck, and Sarah scrunched up with a snort. “Aww, so ticklish.” Gabriela brushed her fingers across the side of Sarah’s neck, making her shoulders bunch up around her ears.

“Stop it, you.” Sarah batted the hand away. She reached up to touch the silver sunflower pendant with a smile.

“How do I look?” she asked, turning so Gabriela could see.

“You look beautiful like always, cariño,” Gabriela said. “Even in those silly pajamas.”

“You love them.”

“No I don’t,” Gabriela said with a laugh.

Sarah’s pajamas were decorated with cartoonish snowmen, reindeer, and christmas sweets all swirling together in a tornado of garish holiday colors. Her explanation for owning them was “When I saw them, I couldn’t not get them.”

“Fine then,” Sarah said, “I’ll go change into some of your pjs.”

“You’re too tall. They won’t fit you.”

“I’m not that tall. You’re just tiny.” Sarah was, in fact, very tall.

Gabriela snorted. “You love that I’m tiny.”

“Got me there.” Sarah wrapped an arm around Gabriela’s waist.

Sarah took a moment to admire Gabriela, brushing the hair away from her eyes. She insisted on dyeing it black; Sarah wondered what she’d look like when she finally let it go gray. She teased Gabriela sometimes about how she was making Sarah look old by comparison. Gabriela would
always make a tutting noise and reach up to run her fingers through her wife’s hair while telling her how much she liked the way Sarah looked with laugh lines and gray streaking her brown hair. In all honesty Sarah complained sometimes just to hear what sweet things Gabriela would say to defend her honor.

“How’d I get so lucky finding a woman like you?” she wondered aloud.

The corner of Gabriela’s mouth quirked up, and she leaned in to kiss Sarah. “I ask myself the same question sometimes.”

Sarah scooted over to close the last inch between them, their hips and shoulders brushing. Gabriela let out a sigh and rested her head against Sarah’s chest; Sarah thought her heart just might give out with how it swelled.

They stayed that way for several minutes, simply enjoying the early morning light from the window warming their backs. But there were still presents to open, and Gabriela wanted to go to Christmas Mass later. Sarah had never been one for church, but she’d do just about anything to make Gabriela happy. And for her part, Gabriela only asked Sarah to come along during holidays.

Eventually Gabriela straightened up, and Sarah pulled back, but they didn’t let go of each other.

“What should we open next?” Sarah asked.

“How about the presents from Ruth and Annie?” Gabriela suggested. “Then we can call and thank them.” She got up off the couch and pulled over the large box that had arrived just a couple days ago—barely arriving in time for Christmas. Gabriela pulled the tape off and opened the flaps. Packing peanuts scattered across the rug as she reached in.

The first thing Gabriela pulled out was Ruth’s traditional treat-box tower. It was made of shiny blue boxes tied in a pyramid with silver ribbon. There were guaranteed to be chocolates, cookies, and caramels inside. Gabriela set it on the couch. Next were two thin packages wrapped with striped paper, one addressed to each of them. Gabriela set hers at her side and the other in Sarah’s lap. Then she stuck her arm back down into the box.

Gabriela pulled out two stuffed animals: a purple gorilla and a pink frog, both stuffed with styrofoam beads. She gave Sarah a puzzled look.

Sarah pointed. “The monkey’s got a note.” There was a card tied around the gorilla’s neck. Gabriela passed the note over, and Sarah read it aloud: “Dear Grandma and Abuelita, I won these at the fair for you playing ring toss. I hope you like them. Love Annie.”

“Aww, mi chiquita. That’s so nice.” Gabriela looked down at the dolls before hugging the frog to her chest and holding the gorilla out to Sarah.

“What if I wanted the frog?” Sarah asked as she took the gorilla.

Gabriela stuck out her tongue. She looked like she was six instead of sixty. “Too bad. Lucille is mine.”

“You already named it, huh? I guess that settles it then,” Sarah said with a laugh. She balanced the gorilla doll on the back of the couch, then she picked up the package in her lap and opened it. She smiled at the floral stationary. Ruth really knew what she liked. What a sweetheart.

Gabriela lifted the box to set it aside, then frowned and set it back down. She stuck her hand in the box and rummaged around, knocking more packing peanuts out.
“What, is there more in there? Those girls are spoiling us,” Sarah said.

Gabriela lifted out one final package: a thick rectangle wrapped with more striped paper. There was no note. She turned it over in her hands.

“I think it’s a book,” Gabriela guessed as she passed it over.

Sarah felt the corners. “I think so, too. Guess that’s why there’s just the one: they expect us t’ share.”

Sarah peeled away the paper. It was a hardcover copy of the collected works of Louis L’Amour, the famous Western author. She preferred historical romance over traditional western stories, but the thought was nice.

There was a bittersweetness to the gift. Sarah remembered how Jesse used to mail books of his to her when he was in Overwatch. He always sent her copies that he’d read, worn and wrinkled and sometimes water-stained. She thought about what kinds of adventures he’d been on when he read them.

Jesse always included a letter in the front of each book. He’d turned out to be a wonderful writer once he put his mind to it, but he was terrible about sitting down to write Sarah letters. He always remembered to put a note in the books he sent her, though, talking about little things like what part of the book he liked best or the new friends he’d made recently or just how pretty the view was where he was staying.

Sarah flipped the Louis L’Amour book open, some small, silly part of her hoping to find a note.

She didn’t expect to actually find one.

She also didn’t expect the inside of the book to be hollowed out with a cellphone set snugly inside.

_Don’t say anything_, the note read at the top in large letters. _Don’t use the phone until you’ve read through and followed the instructions below carefully._

The instructions told Sarah to wait a few hours, then comment that she needed to go shopping. She should then drive to a grocery store she frequents to avoid suspicion. Once there, she must leave everything but her keys and the phone in her car and walk to a semi-populated area like a nearby park. There might be a chance someone will still tail her, so she should sit near someone who is on their phone as well, preferably having a conversation, to confuse any potential long-range listening or tapping devices. Then call the contact in the phone.

Sarah almost said something. She skimmed over the instructions without really reading them as a vague panic gripped her chest. There was no name, and this wasn’t Ruth’s handwriting, but it was eerily familiar. Why was this in Ruth’s box of presents?

Gabriela looked at the note and phone, too. Her confused expression mirrored Sarah’s. “A prank?” she whispered under her breath.

Sarah shrugged uncertainly. If it was a prank, it wasn’t funny. She picked up the phone and turned it on. It wasn’t locked. It appeared to be brand new, with no special apps or features. She tapped the address book and found a single phone number already listed. If the instructions hadn’t told her not to, she would have tried calling it right then.

“It’s an… interesting book,” Gabriela said. She looked concerned. “Is it from Ruth or Annie?”
Did Sarah know who it was from, is what she actually meant.

“Dunno.” The message was startling and strange, but Sarah felt like she ought to know who this was from. She read the instructions again, paying attention this time. The last line read:

*Once you’re ready, call the number. Make sure the first thing you say is The Password.*

There wasn’t any password. Sarah turned the book over in her hands, checked inside the dust cover, checked the wrapping paper, and even dumped out the cardboard box and looked inside.

“What are you doing?” Gabriela asked as she watched Sarah shake packing peanuts all over the floor.

“Just looking for something I dropped.” Sarah pointed at the last sentence of the instructions. When Gabriela opened her mouth, Sarah pressed a finger to her own lips. Gabriela nodded.

Sarah picked up the note again. She frowned when she noticed a detail she’d missed. It didn’t tell her to say “the password.” It told her to say “The Password.” Why capitalize it?

Something tickled at the back of Sarah’s mind. What passwords did she know? She had a whole book of them for her online accounts. There was her computer, her phone, and the garage door. What else?

And then the memory flooded back, vibrant and clear as if it had happened yesterday. Sarah was standing with Jesse beside the car. It was his first day of grade school, and he looked nervous. He was wearing his favorite red shirt, his knees were scraped up (like always), and there was a smudge of grape jelly on his cheek. His hair was wild despite Sarah having just brushed it. If only it were a tad longer she could have tied it back out of his face, but Jesse had taken scissors to his hair just a couple weeks ago when Sarah wasn’t looking, and she’d had to cut it even shorter to even the mess out. Instead he’d have to go to class looking like a little tumbleweed.

Sarah knelt down in front of Jesse and used a wet wipe to clean his face. “Now you remember to wait by the school doors for me, all right? You don’t get on the bus, and you don’t go with any strangers.”

“I know,” Jesse whined as he tried to lean away from the wipe.

“I know you know,” Sarah said patiently. “But I’ve never had you go away for a whole day before, and I’m nervous.” She took his tiny hand in both of hers. “So you promise you’ll be right over there by the door when I come to get you. I’ll come to pick you up every day. If I ever can’t get you, I’ll call the school. And if I send someone, it’ll be a neighbor or a friend, and they’ll know the password.”

Jesse bobbed his head up and down.

“Can you tell me what the password is?” Sarah asked.

Jesse fidgeted, his hand still held in Sarah’s.

“Humor me, honeybee. Tell me what the password is.”

Jesse looked down at his shoes. “Angelfish,” he finally said.

Sarah let go of his hand. “Good. And after school where are you gonna wait for me?”
“By the door.”

“That’s right.” Sarah pressed a kiss to Jesse’s forehead. He clapped a hand over the spot and giggled. “Okay, you get going before you’re late.” She stood up, and Jesse took his chance to bolt, backpack slung over his shoulders and lunchbox swinging in one hand. “And don’t run!” she called after him, knowing that he wouldn’t listen. He never did.

Sarah stared at the note, a hand pressed hard over her mouth. She felt shocked, elated, and even a little mad at herself. How had she not recognized Jesse’s sloppy, rushed handwriting the moment she saw it? She prided herself on having more common sense than that, but the book had been such a shock that she hadn’t thought about it.

Sarah made a strange noise through her fingers. Gabriela’s brows furrowed, and she reached out a hand, but Sarah jumped to her feet and stepped away before she could reach her. She rushed over to the entertainment center and grabbed an old digital picture frame. It was set on a timer to change pictures once a day. Sarah swiped her finger across the screen to manually override the timer. Pictures of herself and Gabriela, Ruth, Annie, her grandparents, Gabriela’s abuelito, and other relatives flitted past. She stopped on one picture and held the frame out to Gabriela.

It was a photo of Jesse holding up a certificate for passing Overwatch’s training course. He was surrounded by a group of people around his age all elbowing each other or with their arms over one another’s shoulders. Some of them were in uniform, and others were in boot camp fatigues like Jesse. Three other recruits held similar letters. Jesse’d had a growth spurt in the year or so that he’d been away, making him look particularly lanky compared to nearly everyone else in the photo, but he also looked so much healthier than he had before Overwatch took him under their wing. And he looked happier, too. Sarah always quietly blamed herself for letting Jesse drift away from her like he had, until he was so deep in that gang that there was nothing Sarah could do about it. But she was grateful his path had led him where it did.

At least, until Jesse cut contact two years ago and vanished off the face of the earth.

Gabriela licked her lips and glanced up through her lashes at Sarah. She mouthed the words ‘Are you sure?’

Sarah nodded.

Gabriela hummed softly in her throat. She handed the frame back. “So after you go to Mass with me, are you still going to the grocery store?”

Sarah caught on after a moment of confusion. “Gotta. I need confectioner’s sugar for the drizzle on my raspberry ribbons. You said you wanted me to make cookies today, right?”

“Yes. Just remember the traffic will be awful. Be careful.”

“I will, I promise.”

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Albuquerque, New Mexico

To everyone’s delight, Max agreed to stay the afternoon. The kitchen transformed into a messy cookie-making workshop with frosting and sprinkles at the table and wire racks full of freshly decorated cookies lining the kitchen counter.

Jesse and Annie worked together, taking turns holding cookies still while the other frosted and
then debating which sprinkles would look best.

Jesse used a bottle to squeeze red ribbons of frosting over a green Christmas tree cookie. “So Max,” he said, “you mentioned something about writing an article. What’s that about? I thought you were retired.”

“From the military, sure, but I run a blog to make a little extra money, and I write pieces for a few online publications besides. They like having my perspective on current events.”

Jesse shook out some flat, round sprinkles onto his Christmas tree cookie for ornaments. “What’s this new one about?”

“I’ve been asked to give an opinion on recent omnic legislation. There’s some opposing politicians arguing that for omnics to have the same rights as humans, they should be on the same level as humans, but even though they say they have souls, we can’t be sure that’s true.”

Jesse made a thoughtful noise, his brows drawn together. “Tough topic.”

“It’s gonna net me some nasty comments no matter what I say,” Max said with a nod, “but the controversy is what draws in readers, isn’t it? And nothing’s more controversial than an Omnic Crisis veteran talking about omnic rights.”

“Yeah, that’s part of it, but I mean that’s kind of a tough thing to weigh in on when the argument don’t really hold water.”

“What do you mean?”

Jesse shrugged his shoulders. “I mean, these politicians are usin’ some phony logic to defend their opinions. We’ve decided which kinds of people get rights based on their souls in the past. Do women have souls? Do black people have souls? And I think we all agree now that it was a load of bull meant to oppress folks. And for that matter maybe you can’t prove omnics have souls, but you can’t prove humans have ‘em either. We just believe we do. It makes more sense to base rights on sentience or consciousness if we gotta draw a line in the sand. It’s more definitive.”

Max looked surprised. “I guess that would solve the whole “if we let omnics have rights, we gotta let our cars have rights” nonsense. I always hated that argument.”

“Exactly. But don’t let folks distract you from the real issue here. They wanna debate with you about whether or not omnics are people, but this is about the law, which omnics already gotta live by same as us. Laws are there to make sure folks have their freedoms, but not at the cost of other folks’ freedoms. If passing a law doesn’t hurt anyone, but not having it means people get hurt, then the right choice should be obvious. I tell you what, though: at the end of the day how we treat omnics is gonna say a lot more about our humanity than theirs.”

Jesse ended his statement with a finger pointed in Max’s direction, his elbow propped on the table. He noticed everyone else in the room had gone still while he talked, and he self-consciously pressed his fist against his mouth before sitting back in his chair and picking up the cookie he’d just finished decorating. “Anyways, it’s just a thought,” he said before biting into his cookie.

Max leaned forward. “Write the article with me.”

“Pardon?”

“You heard me: co-write this article with me. I’ll pay you.”
“I’m not much for writing,” Jesse said. Well, that wasn’t quite true. He was terrible when it came to paperwork, but he liked writing if it was about something he was interested in. “And besides I’ve never written an article before,” he added.

“That’s why I’d help. You’ve got things to say that’re worth listening to, Jesse. It won’t hurt you to try.”

“I—I really can’t.” Jesse tapped his cookie against the plate as he tried to think of what to say. This was less about him and more about Talon. The more noise he made, the quicker they’d find him. Best to lay low. “I just don’t have the confidence to go puttin’ something online with my name on it,” he said.

“You can use your fake name,” Annie said.

Jesse’s face went blank, and he turned to Annie. “Now what do you mean by that?” He hadn’t mentioned a single undercover op to her, and while there were allusions to it in the news that she’d researched for school, an eleven-year-old shouldn’t know any of his aliases.

Annie set down her frosting knife. “Remember the report you helped me with? You told me not to put your name on it, so I made one up like you said.”

“Oh,” Jesse said, surprised. “What’d you pick?” He noticed Max giving him a look and shrugged at her awkwardly.

“… I don’t remember. Hold on.” Annie licked her fingers clean, then got down from the table and ran off to retrieve her report.

Jesse sat in awkward silence across from Max while he waited. He listened as Ruth pulled out a tray of fresh cookies.

Max watched him, her expression unreadable. “So do you want to explain, or no?”

Jesse had hoped she would just let that slide. “I like my privacy,” he said lamely.

“Hmm.” Max was quiet, and Jesse figured that was enough to satisfy her. Until she spoke up again: “I suppose I wouldn’t go spreading my name around if I was an ex-agent of Overwatch either.”

There was a clatter as Ruth dropped a tray of raw dough on the open oven door. She cursed and grabbed a spatula to clean the dough up without burning herself.

Jesse stared at Max.

Max gave him an amused look. “Come on, give me more credit than that. I might not have recognized you right away, but you’ve spent almost a year here: I’ve had time to figure it out. You got too many scars to be a civilian, but you were never in the military or you would’ve mentioned it by now. Even so, you’ve mentioned a couple times now that you’re pals with some Crisis veterans. Plus I’ve gotten Ruth’s mail by accident a couple times. The letters she gets from her mamas are all labeled Sarah and Gabriela McCree. I might not be a hard-hitting journalist, but I’d have to be completely oblivious to not connect that with Ruth’s mysterious brother Jesse.”

Jesse didn’t realize he’d been biting his lip until he let go; it stung like he’d been struck across the mouth. He studied Max’s face as he tried to figure out how to respond.

“Listen, I can’t have anyone knowing I’m here.”
“Trust me, I ain’t gonna tell a soul,” Max promised. “I can just imagine all the people who’d love to hurt you, or, more importantly, your family. Lotta people out there who’d like to get even with Overwatch.”

“Even more of them who’d like to get even with me,” Jesse agreed. “So we’re on the same page here?”

Max nodded. “For better or worse, Ruth wants you here, and I’d do anything to protect her and her little girl, so your secret’s safe with me. And I’d be lying if I said you weren’t growing on me, too.” She gave him a wink. Just like that the tension in the room eased.

Annie came running in with her school tablet in hand. “Got it!” she said while waving the tablet over her head.

“Yeah? So what’d you name me?” Jesse asked, leaning back in his chair.

“Billy Hicks!”

Jesse covered his mouth with his hand to stifle a laugh. Billy Hicks. Wild Bill Hickok. Of course.

“That’s a good one, but I think maybe I oughta come up with something else.”

“So you’re gonna write the article with me?” Max asked.

“I’m willing to try it this once,” Jesse said. “But I’m not promising anything more’n that.”

The cell phone beside Jesse’s elbow rang. He went stiff, then snatched it up and checked the number. The phone rang a second time. He glanced around the room at everyone, then at the clock. The phone rang again.

Jesse answered and held the phone up to his ear.

The kitchen was absolutely silent for a moment. Then Jesse let out a soft sigh.

“Hi Mom.”

Ruth’s face lit up. “Is that Sarah?” she whispered. Jesse made a face at her and waved her off. As if he had some other, secret mother tucked away somewhere. Of course it was Sarah. Though he could understand her excitement: he hadn’t told Ruth his plan when he added the book in with the other presents because he’d been on the fence about it himself right up until Ruth was about to tape the box shut. Afterwards he’d avoided telling her so she couldn’t act smug about it. And because, admittedly, he was a little nervous.

“It’s good t’ hear your voice… Yeah, I’m safe…” Jesse was quiet as he listened to Sarah on the other end of the line. He laughed awkwardly. “I don’t know what to talk about either. I didn’t really think about it much.”

Jesse wordlessly pointed to the office room, and Ruth nodded.

“Listen, I can’t talk long,” Jesse said as he stood up from the table. “And after this you gotta ditch that phone I sent you. I know it ain’t fair, but calling you like this is pretty risky for the both of us… Okay. Hey, I’m sure there’s lotsa things you wanna ask me, but maybe we could talk about you for a bit, huh?”

Jesse tucked the phone between his cheek and shoulder so he could grab the door. Ruth gave him
a thumbs up, and he made a face at her. “I know, Ma. Trust me, I know. I’ve missed you something awful, too.” He pulled the door shut behind himself.

Chapter End Notes

Sarah and Gabriela are so cute I want to die. I just needed everyone to know writing their scene nearly made my heart explode I adore them so much.

Also apologies to the character Max for taking 15 chapters to finally describe her and get into her character more.

(Headcanon that Jesse is unfortunately ticklish like his mom)

I didn't intend it, but somehow the characters in this chapter kept mirroring each other: Scrunched noses and silly faces and hand flapping. And Jesse sounding just like his mother when he tells Annie to be careful. Considering the family theme of the chapter, it's a wonderful happy accident.

Thank you guys for your patience! My work shifts were a bit erratic this week, and chapter 19's being difficult, so I took my time to work on that instead of my usual editing. It's important that I keep a buffer so I have time away from chapters before I edit them. I'll likely post next week's chapter a couple days late, too, because I'm going on a trip the last weekend of the month, and I want to space the chapters out instead of just skipping an update suddenly.

That said, here's what to look forward to: Next chapter Annie teaches Jesse something interesting she learned about cowboys and their favorite Western TV show, La leyenda del vigilante. And a package arrives from Santa Fe.
Song of the Open Road by Walt Whitman

Chapter Notes

Additional Chapter 16 tags: LGBT+ history, American history, Queer coding and representation, A little PTSD, Family bonding, Presents, Nostalgia

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Albuquerque, 2 years ago

*Now maybe my review so far seems harsh. But Hal-Fred Glitchbot needs to accept that he’s not creating high art here. I can appreciate the need for confidence, but there’s a fine line between being confident and being completely full of yourself, and he jumped that line like he was playing hopscotch. The sooner he stops preening, the sooner he can start to put some real love into the movies he’s making, and when that day comes, I’ll be the first to sing his praises. Until then, go ahead and see his new movie, Mechanibeast, but don’t set your standards too high. It’s a B-movie, plain and simple, and if that’s what you go in expecting, then you’ll enjoy it a hell of a lot more.

Written by Joel Morricone*

Jesse leaned back in the computer chair and reread the last paragraph of his movie review article. He wasn’t satisfied with it, but he was quickly proving to be his own worst critic. He’d get a second opinion from Max. He could revise it in the evening and get it posted before tomorrow. It might not end up as polished as he liked, but the movie had come out a couple days ago; he needed to upload the review to his blog while it was still relevant.

Maxine had helped Jesse set up his blog a couple months ago. After talking him into helping her write two more opinion pieces, she insisted he should at least create an “about” page so her readers could find out a little bit more about him. Or rather, Joel Morricone. He’d grudgingly agreed, but told her he didn’t intend to do anything with the blog beyond that. At least it was useful for a quick cover if he needed it later.

One day Jesse had read about an ex-Overwatch agent being denied work as an emergency helicopter pilot because the job aligned with Overwatch’s mission and therefore violated the Petras Act. Jesse took about five seconds to weigh the pros and cons of writing about something that hit so close to home before he decided to hell with it. He wrote a scathing piece about the world turning on the people who’d once fought to save it. These were trained and experienced people who’d dedicated most of their lives to doing good. If they weren’t allowed to integrate into society and use their skills to benefit their communities as everyday heroes, then it was society’s loss.

Looking back on it, that was one of Jesse’s favorite pieces. He’d poured years of frustration into that article. It was exhilarating finally getting to speak up rather than sitting there listening to the whispers and gossip, unable to fight back without making himself or his colleagues look bad. As a faceless blogger he didn’t have to apologize for his opinion. One spontaneous article became two, then five, then ten. It wasn’t supposed to go so far, but Jesse found he was enjoying writing too much. And the wild thing was, people were actually reading his articles. People wanted to hear what “Joel” had to say.

Maxine helped Jesse decide who Joel the blogger should be. He couldn’t be like Jesse, but he had
to reasonably know all the things Jesse did. Joel was a couple years older, had lived in several states around the Midwest and Pacific Northwest, and he was the sort to try everything at least once. He had a degree in English from an unspecified online college, and he liked the idea of writing books one day, but opinion pieces suited him better at the moment. He enjoyed good coffee, bad jokes, and visits to the museum.

Jesse had a bit of a laugh when he made the blog header and described Joel as a “white hat” type. Jesse would never say that about himself. Sure, when he’d gone into the field he’d done so with good intentions, but that black hat he’d requested as part of his uniform had always been a little symbolic. Oh, but Joel would fancy himself the folk hero sort for sure. He needed to have a bit of an ego if he was going to go voicing his opinions on a blog for a living. Joel was also a little naive. A little kinder. Not the sort to shy away from an argument, but a bleeding heart underneath the bravado. The sort of man Jesse imagined he’d be if he’d never picked up a gun.

“I’m home!” Annie announced from the front of the house.

“Welcome back,” Jesse called as he saved and closed his file. “I’m back here. Your mom’s upstairs taking a shower before work.”

Annie appeared in the doorway, her backpack still slung over her shoulder. She was grinning ear to ear. “Uncle Jesse, guess what.”

“Uh, aliens’re invading.”

Annie snorted and shook her head.

“The sky’s gone purple… Dogs rule the world now… You managed t’ lick your elbow.”

Annie’s braids swung around wildly as she whipped her head back and forth with a laugh. “Nooo.”

“Well then what is it? Don’t leave me hangin’.”

Annie dropped her backpack and unzipped it. She fished out a new library book she’d gotten hold of. “You know how I gotta write a history paper before spring break? It can be about anything so long as it’s not in my school textbook. That was the rule.” Annie paused as she thought about that. “I think the teacher’s trying to make us do her job and teach each other. But that’s fine I guess because this is really cool stuff. So anyways I’ve been checking out books on Westward Expansion, and you won’t believe what I found.”

Jesse smiled and waited as Annie flipped through the library book. This special interest of hers was quickly becoming an obsession, and it was always a delight finding out what new thing she’d tell him. He knew most of it already, but she was just so excited to tell him that he always acted like he’d never heard any of it before.

Annie found the page she wanted. “So there’s a whole chapter in this book about how frontiersmen lived. And here it talks about how you’d have these mining camps and ranches, and it’s practically all men out there, so they didn’t care as much about gender roles. Like for example the book says they still had dances and stuff because that’s what you did back then, but there weren’t any women to dance with, so some of the men would dance the woman’s part, and no one thought anything about it.” Annie turned the book so Jesse could see the photos on the page.

Jesse nodded along.

Annie ran her finger down the page. “They dated, too, and no one cared. Though back then it
was called courting. They even got married to each other. Did you know that?"

Jesse knew, but he put on a thoughtful face. “I know sometimes women who were in love would live together, and no one said much about it,” he offered.

“Oh yeah, there’s a bit in here about that, too. They started calling them Boston marriages in the 1880s, cuz of some book called *The Bostonians,*” Annie said.

“I definitely didn’t know about that.”

Annie’s face lit up, and she continued. “When miners or ranchers got married, it was called a bachelor marriage.”

“I see.”

“Okay but I found out something really cool that you’re gonna like. Get this.” Annie flapped a hand at Jesse to pay attention. She smiled conspiratorially, her nose scrunched and her teeth pressed into her lip. “Gay cowboys had their own secret code.”

Now that was entirely new to Jesse. “Oh really?”

“Yeah, okay so.” Annie found her spot in the book and read aloud: “If someone wanted to let others know that they preferred men, they would make references to Walt Whitman, the famous American poet, to signal that they shared his preference.”

Annie closed the book and set it on the computer desk, then reached into her bag. “But here’s the best part. I wanted to know who Walt Whitman was, right?” Annie said as she pulled out her school tablet. She turned it on and flicked her finger across the screen, then tapped an icon. From the other side of the transparent screen Jesse could see a file open up. The sentences were short and metered. A poem?

Annie turned the tablet around and held it up. She pointed at the final verse of what was indeed a poem. “See here? The last bit. Look.”

“Camerado, I give you my hand,” Jesse read aloud, “I give you my love more precious than money, I give you myself before preaching or law; Will you give me yourself, will you come travel with me? Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?”

Jesse’s eyes flicked back over the verse a second time as dots slowly connected in his head.

Annie reached around to tap the screen. “Ladrón’s name is Lucas Camerado,” she said. “Uncle Jesse, he made it up; Walt Whitman made up the word camerado. It doesn’t exist anywhere else.”

“It’s a Whitman reference,” Jesse said blankly.

Annie bounced on the balls of her feet. “It’s a Whitman reference! *La leyenda del vigilante* used the secret code. You were right about Vigilante and Ladrón.”

“Guess I was.”

Jesse wanted to be excited—and he was—but there was something a little bit heartbreaking to the discovery as well.

Jesse had grown up watching that show, wanting to be like the main characters and wanting the relationship he imagined they had. But there’d never been any real romance between them, and some
part of Jesse slowly came to accept that for men like Hector and Lucas—and himself—love just wasn’t in the cards. Cowboys saved the day and then rode off into the sunset to fight some other battle; they didn’t get to settle down with a special someone. Especially not other men. That was for other people who were good and gentle. People who didn’t carry guns and have rough hands and blood under their nails.

But here was the evidence of a love that should have been, hidden in plain sight as a last act of defiance by a frustrated writer: a secret love letter for anyone to find if they only searched hard enough.

Jesse’s thoughts strayed to a faded memory of a stretching dirt road in Mexico, steering wheel hot from the midday sun under his hands, the wind whipping his hair into his eyes. The tattoo on his forearm, no more than a week old, was still startlingly new to him. He twisted his arm now and then to glance at the winged skull. Macintosh Dawson, his childhood friend, sat in the passenger seat with an unloaded shotgun resting across his thighs as he sang (poorly) to the radio. He had a hand on top of his worn, dark brown hat to keep it from flying away as they drove east towards the Sierra de los Lamentos and the abandoned mining town at its base that had been turned into a Deadlock hideout.

Jesse pushed the memory down. The things he’d failed to say all those years ago didn’t matter now, and there was no point bellyaching over it.

“Well doesn’t that just beat all,” Jesse said, gracing Annie with a smile. “You’re one hell of a detective. Is this what you’re gonna do your paper on?”

“Maybe,” Annie said as she put her tablet back in her bag. “I’m gonna read the whole book first, and then I’ll decide. There’s also a chapter about black cowboys. I peeked ahead, and it looks really good.” Annie picked her book back up and clutched it to her chest. “I just really wanted you to know about Ladrón.”

“That’s sweet of you, darlin’. I appreciate it.”

Jesse stilled as he heard a vehicle pull up and stop outside the house, the sound muffled yet distinct. Then footsteps on the stoop. Ruth hadn’t told Jesse she was expecting anyone.

Jesse stood up and waited as the back of his neck prickled. Without really thinking about it he positioned himself in front of Annie. He knew he was being irrational, but part of him waited for the door to be blown off its hinges and the hiss of gas canisters.

The doorbell rang.

“Coming!” Annie called as she darted around Jesse and ran for the front of the house.

“Wait—Annie don’t you open that door ’til I’m over there,” Jesse ordered.

Detouring to the breakfast counter, Jesse pulled one of the long, thin knives from the chopping block. His fear was unfounded, and he knew it. Still he slipped the knife through the back belt loop of his pants.

“It’s the mailman,” Annie called from the other room. Annie was leaning over the back of the couch when Jesse came into the living room. She was holding the curtain with one hand and waving with the other to keep the mailman from leaving.

Jesse peeked out the window. He took the man in for a second; he noted the signs of wear and tear in the uniform, the practical shoes, the bags under the mailman’s eyes, and the nonchalance of his posture.
Jesse pulled the door open.

“Howdy. Got somethin’ for us?” Jesse asked.

The man held out a sizable box. “I think so, though you don’t look much like a Ruth to me.” He smiled at his own joke and nodded with his head towards the shipping label. Ruth’s name was written in swooping letters on the package above the address. The box had come from Santa Fe. “I’ll need a signature.”

“Oh, uh, I’m just a guest. I can’t really sign for it,” Jesse said apologetically.

Annie leaned in. “I can do it!” She reached for the tablet in the man’s hands.

“How old are you?” the mailman asked.

“Eleven.”

The mailman pursed his lips. “That’s pretty old, but I think I need an adult to do it. Is your mom here?”

“Yeah, hold on.” Annie raced up the stairs, leaving Jesse to stand awkwardly in the doorway with the mailman.

Annie came racing back down and jumped the last three steps.

“What have I told you about doing that?” Ruth chided as she came down the stairs. She had a towel thrown over her shoulders to keep her dripping wet hair from soaking her clothes.

Jesse turned to press his back against the door and give her room. Ruth took the stylus from the mailman, signed her name, and accepted the box from him.

“Gracias. Thank you so much. You have a good day.”

“You, too,” the mailman said brightly before heading back to his van.

Jesse stepped to the side and swung the door closed. “So, a package from Ma and Gabriela. Is there a special occasion?” he asked lightly. He noticed Ruth giving him the stink eye. “What?”

“My boning knife is not a weapon. You wash that off and put it back.”

Jesse gave her a wide, apologetic smile. Irrational. Foolish. Stupid. He shouldn’t have done it.

“You saw that, huh?”

Ruth just let out a huff through her nose and gave her head a small shake before heading to the kitchen with the box, Annie trailing behind her. “If you want a knife, I still have a few of Nathan’s. I’m willing to let you have one, but I use that knife for cooking, Jesse.”

The offer took Jesse by surprise. He didn’t know much about Ruth’s husband, but he imagined parting with anything of his must be hard. And maybe it was just him, but a knife seemed kind of personal.

“You’d trust me with that?” he asked.

“You’ve got more experience with a knife than me, and I know you’d only use it to keep yourself safe. I trust you.”
“That’s…” Not what he meant. “That’s awful kind of you, Ruth.”

Jesse rinsed off the boning knife, wiped it on a kitchen towel, and returned it to the knife block. Then he leaned up against the breakfast bar to watch as Ruth opened her package. Annie got on her knees on one of the dining chairs to get a better look.

Ruth poked around inside before pulling a note out.

“Well? What’d they send ya?” Jesse asked. It was too late for Valentine’s presents, but maybe the box was for Easter.

Jesse watched a soft expression steal across Ruth’s face. She held the note out to Jesse. “The box isn’t for me.”

Confused, Jesse took the note from her and read it.

Thank you so much for the wonderful Christmas presents. Especially the book. I know we already sent you gifts for the holidays, but we wanted to surprise you with something special. Love you, honeybee. —Sarah and Gabriela

Jesse reread the note a couple times. The nickname settled warm and comforting in his chest.

“So,” Ruth said, “You gonna come see what’s in here or what? I’ll keep it if you don’t want it.”

“Hold your horses, I’m coming,” Jesse said. He folded the note up and stuck it in his back pocket as he walked over.

Ruth moved to the other side of the table and held the box flaps open so Jesse could reach in.

The first thing Jesse saw was richly dyed red cloth. There were other things laid on top of it, including something that smelled like incense, but Jesse took a moment to brush his fingers over the fabric first. It was sturdy stuff, thick and somewhat rough under his fingers, which told him it was wool or some sort of blend. That’d be just like his mother to worry about him getting cold.

Nestled on top of the blanket was a freezer bag full of candy, a projector disc, a set of cotton handkerchiefs, and a bar of soap. Jesse picked the soap up. It was a brick of local farmer’s market soap wrapped in waxed paper with a label that proudly declared it was made with goat’s milk and frankincense. That explained the rich, earthy scent Jesse had noticed.

Next, Jesse picked up the projector disc and activated it. It displayed a picture of Sarah and Gabriela standing outside their house, which was covered in a layer of snow. Jesse hadn’t seen his mom since the wedding, and the pictures Ruth kept out were all several years old. The gray in Sarah’s hair was striking now, where before it had been only a whisper of things yet to come. She was smiling wide in the picture, which accentuated the lines around her mouth. Gabriela leaned against her, her arms folded tight against her chest as she tried to stay warm and her head resting on Sarah’s shoulder.

The plastic bag was full of penny candies. Jesse used his teeth to pull the bag open so he could sift through and see what was inside. There were bite-size taffy rolls, red hot candies, a box of bubblegum cigarettes, hard candies in various flavors, a couple sour balls, and caramel squares. There were also a half dozen honey sticks. Jesse fanned them out in his hand; the light from the window made them glow like amber.

Jesse could almost taste the honey. He remembered muggy evenings sitting on the curb, the texture of the plastic tube between his teeth as he bit a hole into one end, and the first pop of flavor as
the honey hit his tongue. Sometimes Mac sat with him, and he’d share after a little arguing over who got the red-tinted raspberry honey and who got the dark honey stick.

When Jesse took that plea deal to join Overwatch years later, he’d been allowed to call his mom to explain, and he let her know he might not be able to talk to her again for a long time. A few months into bootcamp, a box arrived for Jesse. It was full of necessities and toiletries—like his mom thought he was living in the wild or something. She’d also included honey sticks tied together with a bit of ribbon and a note reminding him to take care of himself.

“I’d almost forgotten,” Jesse said, mostly to himself. “Mom sent me care packages like this a few times back when I was in Overwatch. Boxes were always beat to hell by the time they reached whatever watchpoint I was stayin’ at. Was a miracle they made it at all, honestly.”

“What kinda stuff did she send?” Ruth asked.

“Oh, the usual. Embarrassin’ things like tissues and extra socks and deodorant.” Jesse picked up the handkerchiefs in demonstration. “The other guys got a kick out of it. I used to trade stuff around with ‘em. Reema would always share a couple pieces of her gaz with me if I’d give her my gum.”

“What’s gaz?” Annie piped up.

“It’s this nougat candy filled with pistachios that comes from Iran. Reema’s mama sent her tins full of sweets all the time. My mama worried about me running out of socks and underwear while Reema’s mama worried about her goin’ hungry.”

“Would you trade with me?” Annie asked. “I got a sucker at school today you can have.”

Jesse chuckled. “Trade fer what?”

“Um.” Annie eyed his bag of candy. “I don’t know.”

Jesse set the bag down in front of her. “Well you go ahead and dig around. See if there’s anything you like in there. A lot of it’s small stuff, so pick a few.”

Jesse left Annie to rummage around in the candy bag while he pulled out the red blanket at the bottom of the box. It was lovely. The weave was fine and tight, and Jesse suspected it was handmade. He turned the folded bundle around in his hand to get a look at the other side. There was a vibrant yellow geometric pattern around the border. The smell of frankincense lingered faintly.

Jesse set the blanket on the table, then unfolded it only to discover it wasn’t a blanket. It was a serape. Jesse pushed the box aside to make more room so he could spread the serape out.

“Old school,” Ruth said. “Good color for you, too. Wonder if it was Sarah’s or Mamá’s idea.”

“Don’t got an answer for ya. Quite the gift either way.” Jesse picked it up and slipped it over his head. He twisted it so that it hung over his left side at an angle, and threw the other end over his shoulder. “Well?” Jesse hooked his thumb behind his belt buckle and posed, unable to help the goofy grin that spread across his face.


“Sounds like you have Annie’s approval, and we both know that’s all that matters,” Ruth said. “Here, let me just—” She reached over to fix the collar of Jesse’s plaid shirt, then took the end of the serape that was thrown over his shoulder and tucked it around the back of his neck. She smoothed
the fabric out here and there before stepping back. She folded her arms across her chest and nodded to herself. “Now you look ready to ride, cowboy.”

Jesse snorted. He ran his hand over the serape. It was striking, and the weight of it over his shoulders was an unexpected comfort. “Just need to get myself a horse.”

“I’d pay good money to see you on the back of a horse,” Ruth said, “but I think having you in my ICU once is enough.”

“I’ll agree with you there,” Jesse conceded.

Ruth lifted her head and gestured with her chin. “You should go look in the mirror. It’s nice on you.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

Jesse excused himself to go look in the bathroom mirror. He paused in the doorway and doubled back to his room to grab his hat. He felt a little silly about it, but he put his hat on before stepping into the bathroom to look at himself. Might as well go for the full effect, right?

In the months after Jesse had escaped from Talon—before the explosion—he had avoided mirrors whenever he could unless he was using them to look over his shoulder. He disliked the man he saw in his reflection. He couldn’t put his finger on what it was exactly that bothered him. Perhaps something in his own eyes or the set of his mouth or the tension in his shoulders. He looked like a beaten animal waiting for the next threat. The gaunt man had followed Jesse from seedy motels to rundown bathrooms in bars by the highway to ramshackle rooms that dared to call themselves apartments. He was a ghost of what Jesse had endured that refused to stop haunting him.

Jesse wasn’t sure when it had happened, but that man was gone now.

This person was new. He still had Jesse’s face—his prominent nose, his wide mouth, his thick brows—but he wasn’t the man from the lab and he wasn’t the Blackwatch agent that Jesse used to be. The serape made his shoulders broader, and the hat cast shade down over his eyes, changing the shape of his face. With better eating and less hard exercise he’d begun to fill out in a pleasant way, and his short beard added a softness to the otherwise hard lines of his jaw. Jesse rolled his shoulders back and tilted his head to get a better look, noting the way his age had begun to show in the lines of his face. He removed his hat and pressed it to his chest, then leaned in towards the mirror.

“Hm.”

He decided he liked this new Jesse McCree.

Chapter End Notes

Shoutout to silverhorse123 who was looking forward to Jesse getting his serape. ;)
I absolutely love the fact that I accidentally made Jesse's serape the equivalent of Superman's costume (“Thanks my mom made it/picked it for me”).

For your personal research and enjoyment:
Homosexuality in the Old West article
I used bits of information from a few other websites, but this was my main reference this
Now to something a little more serious. I hope I did a good job with the nuance of Jesse's experiences growing up watching *La leyenda del vigilante*. Still, I want to clarify that I think in the future there's more LGBT+ media and easier access to it. Jesse would have grown up seeing it; but the Western genre is so steeped in misogyny, racism, homophobia, and toxic masculinity that even in the future there's no easy way around it, and Jesse's childhood show was made during an era of censorship. So I think while he knows it's okay to be himself, he also grew up with a skewed perception of what "himself" is allowed to be. He believed that if he wanted to be like Vigilante, that meant giving up certain things. Now he's found out that Vigilante's story was supposed to be very different. So what does that mean for Jesse?

Speaking of my made-up Western, I just want everyone to know this chapter came about purely so I could share with you all the incredibly, ridiculously obscure reference I made when I picked Ladrón's name.

I hope you guys enjoyed the flashbacks, nostalgia, and world building. I'm going on my trip this weekend, and you can look forward to a new chapter on schedule next Monday.

Next chapter: A return once more to the past and the Talon lab where Jesse is being held. Things have been bad, but they could always be worse. So far Jesse's done everything Reaper asked of him. What happens when he disobeys a direct order?
Talon Lab, 4 years ago

Reaper skimmed through the contents of the data dump his team had managed to pull on their last mission. It would seem the carefully hidden Janus god program that Talon wanted was being kept in Savona, Italy inside the Priamar Fortress. It dated back to the 16th century, and more recently, it’d functioned as a military prison until 1903. Apparently the government had updated and outfitted the structure to serve as a new kind of prison.

Reaper remembered fighting Janus’s forces in the streets of Rome during the Omnic Crisis. Janus cared less about the kinds of omnics it sent into battle and more about numbers. Swarms poured through the streets, overwhelmed checkpoints and barriers, and eventually laid claim to the entirety of Italy’s capital. It held the city as its base of operations for nearly the entirety of the war and repulsed Overwatch’s forces several times before they finally captured it. Since the Italian government couldn’t simply destroy Janus, they’d been exhaustive in ensuring its containment. The people who’d locked it away remembered with painful clarity the destruction it had wrought on their home. The countryside was still scarred from the counter-bombings, and more than a few anti-Bastion tanks stood idle in farmers’ fields quietly rusting away.

For now there wasn’t enough information to act on, and Talon didn’t have the right players in place, but now they knew what they were up against. It would take time to find the weaknesses in the security systems and guard schedules, but Janus wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon.

Someone knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

It was Mendes. He’d been one of the squad leaders during the Italy mission. His expression was grim as he walked over to Reaper’s desk.

“What is it, Mendes?”

“There was a witness,” Mendes said.

“Are you sure? How do you know?”

Mendes held up a tablet. “He’s on the news right now being interviewed.”

The tablet displayed the frozen image of a silver-haired security guard with a bristly mustache.
With a tap of Mendes’s finger, the video played. The man spoke in Italian, so Reaper didn’t know what he was saying, but he didn’t need to. He recognized him from a recon photo. He’d ordered that man killed.

Reaper stood and shoved his chair away hard enough to topple it.

“Where’s McCree?”

***

Reaper pushed through the doors of the mess hall. The massive room thrummed with the noise of agents and staff taking their midday break. Reaper scanned the crowd until he spotted McCree at a table by the wall, sitting with an escort guard and a couple of agents he’d been paired with in the past. Reaper recognized Suttner from the Belarus mission and Kardoff from the Cambodia job.

Leave it to McCree to gravitate towards people even when he shouldn’t. That soft heart of his might have been valuable back in Overwatch, but now it was a liability.

McCree looked up from his tray to make eye contact with Reaper. His posture shifted subtly, and his expression went blank. As soon as Reaper began to walk towards him, McCree swung his legs over the bench seat he was sitting on to stand at attention.

The mess hall fell into a hush as Reaper crossed the room to confront McCree. He clenched his fists, feeling the claws dig through the palms of his gloves.

McCree’s eyes were carefully trained down somewhere around Reaper’s mouth. He kept his hands clasped behind his back as he continued to stand at attention. There was a tension to his shoulders that told Reaper McCree knew exactly why he was there.

“Explain,” Reaper growled.

A beat of silence. “I don’t understand, sir,” McCree said. Anyone who didn’t know McCree might have believed him, but Reaper could tell he was lying, and it made his blood boil.

“I just saw the man that I ordered you to kill talking on the news. Explain why he isn’t dead,” Reaper said, his voice dripping venom.

McCree swallowed and squared his jaw. His eyes flicked up before returning to Reaper’s mouth. “You told me to neutralize him. Not kill him. I followed orders—”

McCree’s head snapped to the side. The sound of the slap echoed sharply in the otherwise silent mess hall. Droplets of blood welled up along the thin lines that Reaper’s claws had cut into McCree’s cheek. McCree stared blankly into the distance, unmoving, his breathing shallow and uneven.

Reaper took hold of McCree’s chin and wrenched his face back around to look him in the eye. “You knew what I meant,” Reaper hissed.

In a different life—a different time—the reddening skin of McCree’s cheek would have made Reyes feel sick. He didn’t lay hands on his subordinates. He didn’t blame them for having a conscience. Reyes would have understood why McCree couldn’t kill an innocent man even when ordered to. He never would have given that order in the first place.

Reaper didn’t have the luxury of such kindness. McCree had stepped out of line, and if Reaper didn’t do something about that right here and now, it would happen again.
Reaper pointed to the escort guard. “Restrain him.”

The guard looked a bit surprised, but brushed off her shock. She stood, grabbed McCree’s arms, and clapped on the maglock restraints she’d been carrying. The muscles of McCree’s arms jumped, and his teeth clicked as his jaw snapped shut. He was likely trying to resist the urge to break free of the cuffs. He could if he wanted to, after all. But that would only make all of this so much worse for him.

Reaper turned sharply and walked towards the door. “Bring him to interrogation room three. Now.”

The order was as unnecessary as the restraints; McCree would have followed Reaper willingly. All it took nowadays was a nod of Reaper’s head or the snap of his fingers to bring McCree to heel. McCree had learned to anticipate what was desired of him. But this was part of McCree’s punishment: a stark reminder to him and everyone else in the room quietly watching that McCree was not one of them.

The interrogation rooms were on a different level. Reaper moved to the back of the elevator as soon as the doors opened. McCree’s escort pushed him in with a guiding hand and turned him around to face the doors. McCree kept his head down.

Reaper watched as McCree’s hands idly flexed and twisted against the cuffs. Now that he had a moment to think clearly, he realized he wasn’t sure how to punish McCree’s behavior. Beatings seemed less effective lately. McCree had grown used to them, and with his increased control over his powers, he seemed to shake them off more easily. Electric shocks worked best when used immediately to dissuade certain behavior. Using that now wouldn’t have the right impact. Sleep deprivation and similar tactics were too drawn out and lacked the right emphasis.

This had never been an issue before. McCree’s reconditioning had proven thorough and effective—until now. Reaper should have known killing the security guard would prove to be too much. McCree was willing to do a lot, but he had his limits. He’d weighed his own torture against taking the life of an innocent, and he’d made his decision.

Reaper knew what to do by the time the elevator stopped. He needed to come at McCree’s disobedience from a different angle was all. He couldn’t stop McCree from questioning orders in the field, but he could change the stakes.

“Take him to the interrogation room. I’ll be along shortly. I need to get something.”

Reaper caught the flicker of McCree’s gaze, but when he looked at him, McCree had ducked his head again. McCree didn’t know what was about to happen, but Reaper could tell he was desperately trying to prepare himself for it.

Reaper detoured to the security office nearby. Every floor had an office outfitted with a cache of weapons, meant for subduing break-outs and fighting off invading forces. The staff inside seemed confused by the odd request Reaper made, but allowed him access to the emergency tactical gear they kept on hand.

Reaper stepped out of the weapons room with a box under one arm. He pointed a finger at the cameras for the interrogation rooms. “I need remote access to those feeds.”

“Which ones, sir?”

Reaper watched as, on one of the monitors, a door opened. McCree was led inside and made to
sit at the metal table. His maglocks were disengaged and reconnected to the table in front of him.

Reaper remembered a similar scene. Back when they—when Overwatch had picked McCree up along with his gang buddies, he’d been all spit and venom, teeth and sharp elbows, slumped in the chair as far as the cuffs would allow with his legs kicked out wide, the picture of disrespect. It was hard to believe he’d grown into the man who sat alone in the interrogation room now with his back ramrod straight and his feet planted on the ground, steeling himself for whatever was about to come next.

Reaper tapped a claw against the screen. “That one.”

McCree looked up when the door opened, catching Reaper’s gaze and holding it. Reaper could see the change in him immediately. McCree always came at this one of two ways. He usually tried to minimize his pain by going quiet and taking up as little space as possible nowadays, doing whatever was asked of him with yes sirs and no sirs, as if he could make up for his failure after he’d already failed. Reaper always felt slightly disappointed by the display despite being the one who purposefully trained it into McCree. But if McCree was in too deep, he changed tactics. He got quiet in a different way. He drew into himself and presented an impenetrable wall to his abusers. His expression was cold, daring them to do their worst, confident that he could endure it. This was much more troublesome when Reaper needed to discipline him. It almost always meant the punishment would have to go on longer or be made more intense to get through to him, and the lesson didn’t always stick as well.

Reaper felt confident he had a solution this time around. He set the box on the table, letting it thud ominously. McCree’s eyes flitted to the box, then back to Reaper. Reaper leaned in, bracing his arm on the box.

“Do you know what you’re being punished for?”

McCree let out a short grunt.

Reaper hissed out a sigh. “The punishment doesn’t mean anything if you don’t know why you deserve it.”

McCree tilted his head ever so slightly. “Do I deserve it?”

Reaper pulled back, a bit surprised by the comment. McCree hadn’t questioned him like that in a while. It seemed Reaper had been lax in his discipline lately.

Reaper straightened up and grabbed the tablet he’d been given by the security staff. He pulled up the news footage and let McCree see the security guard’s interview. “The entire point of the Italy mission was to figure out Janus’s location without the authorities knowing. I told you to neutralize the target at his apartment because I didn’t want his death connected to his job. It needed to look like a regular break-in gone wrong. Now, because he’s alive and able to describe your attack, the authorities will investigate. They’ll realize we were after information on Janus, and they’ll relocate the AI.”

Reaper waved the tablet in front of McCree’s nose. “Everything we gathered is useless now. Garbage. A waste of resources. Months of hard work all for nothing because you didn’t follow my orders. Ask me again if you deserve this.”

McCree’s mouth twisted like he wanted to argue, but he didn’t respond, and after a moment, he broke eye contact.
Reaper set the tablet down before leaning across the table. His clawed fingers clicked against the metal. “I can’t use an asset that doesn’t follow orders, McCree. I’d sooner carry a faulty firearm. And if I can’t use you in the field, then you’re only valuable to O’Deorain as a lab subject.”

Reaper waited a few seconds to make sure the subtle threat sank in before continuing. “I can’t keep cleaning up your messes. You’ve got to start taking some responsibility for your actions. You made the choice to let that man live knowing full well what it’d mean for us—and for you, once I found out. So I think it’s only fitting that you be the one to punish yourself.”

McCree’s brow furrowed. His eyes flicked to the side and back as he took in what Reaper said. “What’s that mean exactly?”

Reaper opened the box he’d brought in and started pulling out flashbangs. He lined them up in front of McCree in a neat row, then tossed the empty box on the ground.


“You have one hour to pull the pin on all ten of these flashbangs. That gives you six minutes for each if you choose to space them out. Or you can try to set several of them off at once, though with your heightened senses it’s probably not a great idea. I don’t care how you do it so long as it gets done.”

With his other hand Reaper tapped at the tablet, and one of McCree’s cuffs detached from the table. Reaper pressed the flash grenade into his hand.

Reaper watched McCree’s expression transform to one of cold dread as he realized he was being ordered to participate in his own torture. Reaper had hurt him plenty of times, but he’d never made McCree take an active role before. He’d never had to hurt himself.

McCree ran his tongue over his dry lips. “What… What happens if I don’t?”

Reaper picked up the tablet. He pulled up the camera feed of the room and showed it to McCree. He opened a control panel to the side and dragged a slider up.

The room filled with the hiss of static overlaid with a soft, high-pitched whine. The effect was instant. McCree curled in on himself with a gasp, pressing his arms to his ears to try to block out the noise. He struggled to pull his arm free from the table, and the maglock cuff lifted a centimeter before clacking back down onto the metal surface. The grenades wobbled.

Reaper pulled the slider back down, and the room went quiet. He watched McCree slowly sit up straight again. McCree’s hands quaked faintly, and his breath was labored.

“I trust I’ve made myself clear. Finish your task by the time I come back, or I’ll leave you here with the white noise.”

“For how long?”

McCree’s voice strained with a mix of emotions Reaper didn’t want to think about. Anger, fear, hurt, desperation. Something dark and resentful in Reaper echoed back.

“For as long as I feel like,” Reaper said, his tone sharp. “Until you’ve made up for disappointing me.”

Reaper set down a projector disc and turned it on. It displayed a timer with sixty minutes on it.
His finger hovered over the start/stop button.

Smoke lifted off of Reaper’s shoulders, moving unnaturally as it curled around him in a restless fashion. It was important for him to remain detached from McCree’s conditioning, but Reaper found himself suddenly and inexplicably angry. Reaper clenched his hand and pulled it back to his side, then rounded the table suddenly. He leaned in towards McCree who tried to pull away, but he was still attached to the table; there was nowhere to go.

“I don’t enjoy doing these things to you, you know,” Reaper growled, his voice low and grating. The smoke drifted in tendrils over McCree as Reaper invaded his space. “You just had to push me. You had to go and disobey my orders. You’ve always been reckless—selfish. You never think about how your actions are going to affect others.”

The light in the room seemed to dim as Reaper bore down on McCree. “Where were you when I needed you?!” The words were painfully raw like Reaper had dug them up out of his chest with his own two hands.

Too far. He’d gone too far. Reaper pulled back so sharply that he nearly lost control of his form for a moment, smoke wisps trailing in his wake. He watched as uncomprehending fear danced across McCree’s face. Reaper let out a hiss as he struggled to cover up his slip. “I trusted you on that mission, and you failed me. What’s happening to you now is your own fault, McCree. You made me do this. Don’t forget that.”

Reaper hit the button on the timer and let himself out of the interrogation room. He pulled up the security feed on the tablet. McCree hadn’t moved. The camera was in the wrong position for him to see his face, but his body language was stiff and defensive.

Suddenly Reaper didn’t want to look at McCree anymore. He handed the tablet over to a guard standing beside the door. “Keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn’t try anything funny. I’ll be back in an hour. In the meantime I’ve got to go make a call to the council about salvaging this whole Janus debacle.”

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Overwatch Headquarters, Switzerland, 6 years ago

People jumped out of the way as Gabriel Reyes stormed down the hall, looking for all the world like he intended to murder someone—which he just might. He held a tablet in one hand, his grip white-knuckled.

Gabe spotted a familiar figure. “Lindholm!”

Torbjörn turned and gave Gabe a friendly wave. His expression fell when he saw how riled Gabe was. “Were you looking for me?” he asked.

“No, I need Morrison,” Gabe said, his tone cold. “Do you know where he is?”

“In his office. I needed him to sign off on some paperwork, but he’s talking to someone right now.” Torbjörn shrugged. “You can wait with me if you’d like. He should be done soon.”

Gabe let his lip curl as he scowled. “He’s done now as far as I’m concerned.”

He brushed past Torbjörn without another word. He didn’t have time or patience to waste on pleasantries. He had something important to discuss with Jack.
Gabe stopped in front of Morrison’s office door. He touched the control panel, but the door didn’t budge, which meant Morrison was still in his meeting.

“Override lock. Authorization: Commander Gabriel Reyes. Echo-Sierra-Red-One.”

A light flashed green on the control panel, and the door slid open. It was flagrant abuse of the emergency safety override, but Gabe didn’t care at the moment.

“—see about writing you a letter of recommendation.” Morrison stopped talking as his door slid open, and he looked up. There was a flash of surprise in his eyes that quickly hardened into resolve. It was obvious that Gabe was looking for a fight, and he could see Morrison was already prepared to face him head-on.

The young man sitting opposite Morrison wasn’t so prepared. Jesse looked over his shoulder, caught sight of Gabe, and ducked his head, suddenly looking like a cornered animal.

Gabe glared at the back of Jesse’s head before walking past him and slamming a hand down on Morrison’s desk. “We need to talk.”

“Commander Reyes,” Morrison said evenly. “Funny, I seem to recall locking my office door.” He normally wouldn’t throw in Gabe’s rank, but he must’ve thought reminding Gabe that he was a respected officer in Overwatch and should act like one would somehow temper his growing rage. He was wrong.

“Have you seen this?” Gabe demanded as he held up the tablet displaying Jesse’s resignation request. Then he remembered what Morrison was saying when he walked in. He sneered. “Of course you have. You already approved it, didn’t you?”

“Agent McCree was only obligated by law to serve seven years,” Morrison said calmly. “He’s worked for us twice that long. While I’m disappointed by the request, he’s allowed to leave if he wants.”

“If he wants? You think this is what he really wants? Blackwatch is suspended; we’re all chafing under the collar. I don’t blame him for wanting a little freedom, but you can’t seriously let him throw everything away like this. The problem is those investigators breathing down our necks, making it impossible for us to do our job. Bunch of vultures circling us, second-guessing every move we make. And you let them do it. We were managing just fine before.”

Morrison’s brow furrowed, the first visible sign of his irritation. “I can’t just tell the United Nations to mind their own business, Reyes. They’re supposed to oversee us. It’s their job to make sure we’re doing our job.” He squeezed his eyes shut and held up a hand. “No, we’re not getting into that again. Not now. This is about Agent McCree.”

Gabe threw a glance back over his shoulder at Jesse. Jesse had sunk down in his chair with a grimace on his face, looking rather small despite his build. He held his hat in his lap, fingers gripped tight on the brim. He risked a glance up at Gabe. When their eyes met, Jesse's expression crumpled with shame.

Gabe put his back to Jesse and did his best to ignore that kicked dog look that always seemed to hit him right in the gut. “I’m not approving the request,” Gabe said. He leaned over Morrison’s desk, taking a little pleasure in how Morrison had to lean back and look up at him. “He needs both of us to sign off on this, and I’m not doing it.”

Morrison tried to suppress an eye roll, but only partially succeeded. “You can only deny his
request with good reason. If he wants out, then we have to let him go.”

“This isn’t what he wants!”

“Why don’t you ask him?” Morrison said curtly as he waved a hand at Jesse.

Gabe grit his teeth and let out a hard breath through his nose. He turned so that Morrison and Jesse were on either side of him, not wanting to look at either of them directly. He didn’t want to fight Jesse. It was easier to be mad at Morrison than Jesse. “Well?” he growled.

Jesse pressed his lips together in a thin line and turned his hat around in his hands. He seemed to have trouble deciding what to say, but eventually he spoke. “I wouldn’t’ve filled out the paperwork if I didn’t mean it. You know how I hate paperwork.” He gave Gabe a bleak smile.

Gabe clenched his fists. “You didn’t give a proper reason for leaving on the form.”

“Sure I did.” Jesse let out a huff of air that was, perhaps, meant to be a laugh, but he didn’t have the strength for it. “I already served my debt t’ society. I stayed with the program cuz I was good at it, and I liked helpin’ folks, but I’m ready to try something new. I got my whole life to live and the whole world to explore. But hey, if it doesn’t work out or I get bored, maybe I’ll sign back up. I don’t even mind starting at the bottom again if—”

“Don’t bother.”

Jesse stopped short as Gabe turned on him with a snarl. He must be quite the sight to make Jesse McCree shrink back the way he did.

“Boss—”

“No.” Gabe’s next words burned in his chest and on his tongue as he said them: “If you leave, you leave for good. I don’t want to see you come crawling back here, you understand?” The look on Jesse’s face was a knife twisting in Gabe’s heart. But he couldn’t take back what he’d said. Not least of all because the moment he said it, he knew he meant it.

“Does that mean you’ll sign off on his request?” Morrison asked.

Gabe spun and leveled him with a glare. Morrison didn’t flinch. “Doesn’t seem like I have much choice, does it?” Gabe snapped. Oh yes, it was much easier to be mad at Morrison. “You know, you could at least put on a show of trying to fight for us instead of just letting everything fall down around your ears.”

“Overwatch isn’t falling apart,” Morrison said.

“Blackwatch is!”

“Well maybe it should.”

Gabe stiffened.

Morrison stood and continued, “I’m not saying I want to get rid of anyone, Reyes. But I gave Blackwatch free rein to do anything you thought necessary, and it went too far. I let it go too far. That’s on me.”

“So you’re going to let it die then.” They’d been dancing around this for months now, but Morrison had never taken a hard stance on the matter, preferring to keep his options open. The
suspension, meant to safeguard Blackwatch until the investigations were over, was almost worse
than being disbanded outright.

Morrison shook his head as he struggled to find the middle ground again. He held out his hands
placatingly. “You’re looking at this the wrong way, Reyes. I’m doing everything I can here to
protect you and your agents. There’ve been talks about overhauling the division. The U.N. wants
transparency and limitations to prevent Overwatch from abusing its power.”

“You mean they want to keep us on a shorter leash.” Reyes practically spat the words. “And you
wonder why my agents are jumping ship.”

Jesse stood up. “That’s not—Commander, listen.”

“Shut it, McCree,” Gabe snapped without looking.

“Commander Reyes, that is enough,” Morrison said sharply, his voice cracking like a whip.
“You’re done here.”

“You’re damn right I’m done here. I’m done with both of you.” Gabe turned on his heel and left.

Gabe took long strides, trying to put as much distance between himself and the office as possible.
His mind swam. He wasn’t sure what to focus on. Jesse was leaving, and he hadn’t known about it
until the paperwork crossed his desk mere minutes ago. Morrison was going to let it happen, too.
How long had he known? And what was all that garbage about negotiations and overhauling
Blackwatch? Gabe should have been part of that discussion. He couldn’t tell if Morrison was
keeping him in the dark as a power move or to keep control of him or to protect him like he claimed,
but Gabe had no doubt it was intentional. What else was going on that he didn’t know about?

“Commander, wait up.”

Jesse’s voice jolted Gabe from his thoughts. He hesitated before ducking down a hall to his left,
hoping Jesse would just leave him be.

“Commander!”

The jangle of spurs followed him, and Gabe turned around to face Jesse with a frown. The hall
was empty aside from the two of them. Gabe wasn’t sure if he was thankful for that or not.

“What is it? I already agreed to sign the paperwork.”

Jesse still held his hat. He pressed it to his stomach with one hand as he ran his other hand
through his hair. “I…” He sighed and tried again. “You’re right, y’know. I don’t want to leave. Not
really.”

Gabe felt his anger slipping. For a Blackwatch agent, Jesse was far too honest at times. “Then
why resign?” he asked.

“Because—” Jesse frowned to himself as he thought it over. “Because I just have to.”

“You don’t have to,” Gabe said. “I’ll make things right, just be patient. I’ll figure this out. You
know I look after my own.”

Jesse’s brow furrowed, and his mouth pulled to the side. “You ain’t seein’ what I’m seein’,
Reyes. The whole world’s against us right now, but instead of circling the wagons and preparing for
a fight, you and Morrison are at each others’ throats. Sooner or later one of you is gonna ask me to
pick a side, and I can’t do that.”

Gabe fell quiet. He realized his hands were clenched, and he forced them to relax. He’d dug his nails in hard, and now his palms stung. “Can’t or won’t?” Gabe finally asked. Because he couldn’t deny that eventually, yes, it might come to that.

Jesse shrugged his shoulders. “Does it matter?” He shifted his weight to his other leg restlessly. “I shouldn’t have to make that kinda choice in the first place. My commander or the strike commander—Overwatch or Blackwatch? That ain’t a choice. We’re all on the same side here. I’m a Blackwatch agent and an Overwatch agent.”

“Not anymore.”

The words fell heavy between them. Gabe was a little surprised he’d said it. Jesse seemed surprised, too. It brought the argument to a faltering stop.

Gabe continued, “What happens in Overwatch isn’t your concern anymore. As soon as I sign off on the request, you’ll have twenty-four hours to get your affairs in order before your clearance expires.” The words held no emotion. Gabe wished it wasn’t so easy for him to say. But not feeling hurt less, and he was tired. He just wanted this over with now. “Make sure you’re packed by 1800 hours tomorrow and be sure to turn over all of your Overwatch gear to the armory. Nothing leaves this base that isn’t yours, and you don’t come back. I don’t want to see you again. Do you understand?”

Jesse’s mouth hung slack. He let out a rattling sigh and nodded before reaching down to his gun belt. Gabe didn’t understand what he was doing until Jesse had pulled his revolver and spun it around in his hand so that the handle faced Gabe. He offered it with an unspoken apology in his eyes.

“Here. I ain’t handing my gun over to just anybody. You take it. It’s, uh, it’s been an honor serving under you, Commander Reyes.”

Gabe stared down at the revolver. He’d commissioned it special for Jesse when he finally got Morrison to okay Jesse’s transfer into Blackwatch. He’d kept an eye on the kid as he served out his commuted sentence. He noticed how Jesse showed no real interest in rising through the ranks, instead preferring to volunteer for any kind of work that let him break a sweat or get his hands dirty, especially any mission that came with the chance to put his sharpshooting skills to use. Jesse wasn’t interested in giving orders; he liked carrying them out. He liked to be useful and make a difference in the world with his own two hands. Exactly the sort of man Gabe had needed for Blackwatch.

The gun was like Jesse. It was a little old-fashioned, a little flashy, but practical and versatile. It was sturdy, reliable, and fine-tuned to match Jesse’s combat style. There wasn’t another gun like it, and there wasn’t another agent like Jesse.

Gabe reached out and pushed the gun back towards Jesse. “That’s yours, McCree. You take that with you. God knows you’ll probably need it with the enemies you’ve made. You won’t have anyone watching your back out there, so be careful.”

“That an order, Commander?”

Gabe looked Jesse in the eye. Jesse wore a thin, wry smile that Gabe couldn’t help mirroring even as his heart broke.

“Yeah, consider it your last order. Keep your head down and try to stay out of trouble, McCree.”
“Yes sir… Thank you, sir.”

Jesse set his hat on his head, adjusted it, and turned to leave, but he hesitated.

“Oh.”

Gabe didn’t want to hear what else he had to say. He wasn’t sure he could take it. “You’re dismissed, agent.”

“Right.” Jesse ducked his head and walked back the way he’d come. He stopped again to glance over his shoulder before disappearing around the corner.

Gabe considered tracking Jesse down the next day to say goodbye properly, but in the end he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Can’t or won’t? His own words echoed back at him as he sat in his office trying to distract himself with work. Does it matter? Jesse’s words repeated. He supposed, in the end, that Jesse was right. All that mattered in the end was that he hadn’t.

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Talon Lab, 4 years ago

Reaper turned the revolver around in his hands. Bare fingers ghosted over the cold, black metal, tracing the hard lines of the gun. Reaper had taken it from the lab’s armory shortly after he put himself in charge of Project Bloodhound. He was somewhat surprised the lab had kept it. Everything else of McCree’s had been disposed of, but the revolver was just useful enough to hold on to.

Even after so many years of service, the gun was in incredible condition. It bore a few faint scrapes and dings, which Reaper was sure McCree had lamented over. Otherwise it was symmetrical and tight in every way, all the separate pieces moved smoothly and looked as good as new, and there wasn’t a gap to be found anywhere. It had been carefully cleaned down to the smallest parts, which meant McCree made a habit of taking it apart completely to perform maintenance. The finish was a little worn at the very end of the muzzle from being carried in a holster so long. The gunmaker’s initials inscribed on the bottom of the grip had nearly been rubbed away completely, but Reaper could still see the faint letters A. F.

Reaper pressed the pad of his finger against one of the sharp spikes of the spur decorating the handle. A thin curl of black smoke drifted up from his finger before it stitched itself closed again. He’d thought the spur was a useless decoration and a poor decision on the gunmaker’s part until he saw McCree turn his gun around and pistol whip someone in a fight.

That’d been back when they broke up a smuggling ring headquartered in the ruins of old Detroit. He and McCree got separated from the rest of the team and pinned down by turret gunfire. McCree quickly found himself down to his last bullet. He told Reyes to cover him, then dove out into the open. Reyes watched McCree roll across the broken ground and jump to his feet in time to fire his last bullet into the feed tray of the machine gun, instantly jamming it. Then he rushed the surprised turret controller while he was still scrambling for his sidearm. The stunt could have gotten McCree killed, but he hadn’t even hesitated. His trust in his gun and in his commander was just that strong.

“You were supposed to protect him,” Reaper said, his tone soft but accusing. His chest felt hollow. “You were supposed to keep him safe.”

The clock on the corner of Reaper’s desk chimed an alarm. He needed to be down in Interrogation in five minutes.

Reaper put the gun back into the secure weapons rack on the wall, then pulled his gloves on. He
didn’t have to check on McCree himself, technically. He could have the guards do it. But Reaper had never been one to let others do his job for him, even when it came to distasteful things like this. Besides, he’d told McCree he would come back. Even the little promises needed to be kept if he wanted McCree to trust his word. And he owed it to McCree to see this through.

The guards straightened when they saw Reaper approach. The one with the tablet held the device out to Reaper.

“Subject Fifteen detonated all ten flashbangs as instructed, sir,” the man said stiffly.

Reaper detected a trace of discomfort in the man’s voice. He ignored it as he took the tablet. The camera feed was open. He could see McCree slumped over the table, his face hidden in his free arm. He turned the tablet off and tucked it away, then opened the door to the cell.

Reaper’s boot nudged a dead flashbang canister, sending it rolling a few feet across the floor. He looked around. All ten of the grenades lay strewn on the ground, the pins missing and the indicator lights dead.

McCree, face still hidden in his arm, didn’t move at the sound of Reaper entering the room. Now and then his shoulders hitched as a shudder ran through him.

“McCree.”

No answer.

Reaper walked up to the table. “McCree.”

McCree didn’t respond. Reaper rapped hard on the table’s surface.

McCree jolted and pulled back sharply enough that the maglock cuff scraped across the table a couple inches before the electromagnet gained traction again. The table bore a number of new scratches: evidence that McCree had struggled and overpowered the restraint several times. Which meant he’d drawn on his unnatural strength unintentionally, and in turn, meant he’d accidentally triggered his heightened senses in the middle of setting off the flashbangs. If Reaper had to guess, he’d say it was McCree’s self-preservation instincts kicking in. Bad time for it.

Reaper took stock of McCree. He was sweaty and trembling. His eyes were unfocused and bloodshot, his face was flushed, and dry tear tracks traced down his cheeks. The skin around his cuffed wrist was chafed. His free hand had minor burns from a flashbang he hadn’t tossed away from himself quickly enough.

“Can you hear me, McCree?”

McCree looked in Reaper’s general direction, but not directly at him. He blinked and rubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand, mindful of the burns on his palm. “’s it over?” he asked.

Reaper nodded, then leaned in and pointed at his own ear.

McCree was slow to understand, but eventually he caught on. “Can’t… Can’t hear anythin’. ’s just… ringing.” His words were hesitant and slurred. He pressed his hand to his eyes again.

Reaper pulled out the tablet and deactivated the maglock restraints. He took hold of McCree’s arm.

McCree pulled back and tried to stand up only to topple to the ground with a grunt. The
concussive force of the stun grenades had upset his inner ear.

Reaper walked over and held out a hand. McCree ignored it as he struggled to get to his feet, but he was clearly exhausted, and his movements were clumsy. Reaper knelt beside him, threw McCree’s arm over his shoulders, and lifted him up. McCree tried to pull away, but an arm around his waist held him tight against Reaper’s side.

“You can’t see and you can’t stand, idiot. Just cooperate.”

McCree grunted. He might not be able to tell what Reaper was saying, but he seemed to know he was being chastised. He gave in and let Reaper lead him out of the cell.

The walk back to McCree’s quarters was slow. Agents standing in the hall quickly found reasons to get out of Reaper’s line of sight as he and McCree made their way past, but he felt curious eyes on his back. Reaper wondered how many of them had been in the mess hall when he reprimanded McCree, and how many of them had only heard secondhand rumors. Surely most of them knew by now if not everyone.

Reaper brushed off the staring as he guided McCree into his room. The door slid shut behind him, giving them a moment of privacy. He walked McCree over to the bed and watched him collapse on the mattress with a groan.

McCree reached down and fumbled with the laces of his boots. Rather than help, Reaper wandered the room. There wasn’t exactly anything to look at. It was still as plain as the day McCree moved in, with only those possessions he’d been permitted to keep. He kept it cleaner than his old barracks in Overwatch—most likely to avoid reprimand.

Metamorphoses sat on the stand beside the bed. Reaper slipped a finger in between the pages where McCree had folded the corner down, and opened it just enough to peek. The death of Polyxena. A quick scan of the page told him more than he cared to know. Having betrayed Achilles and divulged his weakness, Polyxena proudly agreed to be a sacrifice to his angry ghost rather than live out her remaining days as a slave. She chose death over servitude. Reaper let the book fall shut again with a frown.

McCree threw his boots at the wall, then rested his elbows on his knees and let his head hang down.

“McCree.”

McCree lifted his head up reluctantly.

“You can hear me now?”

He nodded. “Yeah. For the most part.”

Reaper took hold of McCree’s chin and tilted his face so he could see him better. McCree tensed, but he let it happen. His eyes were still bloodshot, but the pupils seemed to dilate properly in response to the light overhead, and McCree didn’t look like he was staring into empty space anymore. The cuts on his cheek had already scabbed and started healing. By tomorrow they’d be gone without a trace.

Reaper let go, and McCree pulled his chin in defensively.

“I want a medical team to examine you first thing tomorrow morning and make sure there’s no permanent damage. Then you’re slated for another mission at 1100 hours. Get some rest.”
“Another mission?”

Reaper had started to walk away, but he turned to face McCree. “Yes, another mission. I’m not going to coddle you. I trust that this time you’ll do as you’re told.”

“Where’m I going?”

“Back to Italy,” Reaper said. “You’re going to clean up your mess.”

McCree’s head snapped up, alarm painted clearly across his face.

Reaper scoffed. “I’m not making you kill the security guard. You’re going with a stakeout team to find where the Janus program is being relocated to. If there’s an opportunity to intercept and steal it, then do so. If not, gather all the information you can so we can retrieve it later. You can handle that, can’t you?”

“Yessir.”

“Good. As for the security guard, I’ll handle him myself.”

“What?”

Reaper remained silent.

McCree struggled to his feet, swaying slightly before he could recover. “That’s not—there’s no point killin’ him now.” His voice was strained.

Reaper shifted, his head tilting like a bird getting a better angle on its prey. “Are you questioning me?”

McCree’s posture shrank. His gaze dropped to Reaper’s chest instead of his face, and he clenched and unclenched his hands at his sides. After a moment he responded, “No sir.”

“That’s what I thought. But since I’m feeling charitable, I’ll answer you anyways. I’m going to kill him because you didn’t. It’s just that simple. Either you follow orders or someone else will. The only decision you get to make is whether or not you get hurt in the process.” Reaper waited a beat before continuing, “Do you understand?”

There was a lost look on McCree’s face. The flashbangs. The humiliation. Reaper’s anger. He’d endured it all for nothing. Reaper could see it clearly in his defeated posture and the dull look in his eyes. “I understand. Sir.”

“Good. Get some rest. I’ll see you again for debriefing after your mission.” Reaper let his voice go cold. “Don’t disappoint me again.”

Reaper left and locked the door behind himself. Around the corner and down the hall a few agents still lingered in the doorways of their own quarters.

“What are you all looking at?” Reaper growled. “Last I checked, Talon didn’t hire you to stand around.” He swept past as doors shut and agents hurried out of sight. He could guess what most of them were thinking. Half of them probably thought he was favoring McCree while the other half thought he was a sadistic monster. Let them wonder. Let them gossip. He didn’t care if every last person in this base hated his guts or their reasons for it. Reaper had long since moved past caring what people thought of him.
Reaper thought about the look of shock on McCree’s face when he’d struck him. The way McCree’s voice sometimes wavered when he was at the end of his rope. The subtle, defensive posture he took on that made him look like a beaten animal whenever Reaper was in the same room. The way he’d cried in Reaper’s arms after a week of white noise torture.

Reaper shoved it down. He didn’t care. He couldn’t care.

Chapter End Notes

Shoutout this week to TheGayestBean who commented about how they "love how Reaper treats Jesse. He's semi-nice but also a dick XD" Nothing brought me more joy than getting to throw vague and ominous comments your way about this upcoming chapter.

If it wasn't obvious, the Priamar Fortress is a real place. I love opportunities to work things like that into the story.

It was a lot of fun writing this chapter. I knew with McCree growing complacent that I'd need to push him to his limits to create tension again. When we flashback to the next mission, we'll see him struggle with the difficult lesson he was just taught.

Reaper wasn't supposed to be the focus, but I like that that's how it turned out. I do think it's funny that I didn't intend him to fight with Morrison as much as he did, but really, it was unavoidable. It's interesting to see Reaper's conflicts of interest, his fractured bonds with people that never healed right, the ways he struggles with remaining detached when he's someone who takes things so personally. He can't help being invested. And in a lot of ways it makes the things he does so much worse.

I also think I might have written my favorite line in the whole story in this chapter, when Reaper says "You were supposed to protect him. You were supposed to keep him safe." He's talking to the gun in his hands, but at the same time you can tell he's talking to himself, and I hope that's how it came across.

I laid out some groundwork in this chapter. Look forward to more history about Janus. More about Jesse's time in Overwatch, too. And more about the mysterious gunsmith A.F. On a side note about the gun, there seems to be some debate about whether or not a person should completely dismantle their revolver to clean it, and the consensus seems to be do it only if you're properly trained and have special tools to do so. I wanted people to know I didn't throw that in carelessly to make Jesse seem cool. Jesse's been trained to clean that gun, which will come up briefly later in the story.

What to look forward to next: After a year of healing and learning to function with his disability, Jesse decides he's ready to get a prosthesis. And he plans to call in a favor from a rather interesting contact: a friend from his days in Deadlock.
Albuquerque, 2 years ago

Jesse leaned over the engine of Ruth’s truck. The open hood provided him only a little shade from the midday sun. He’d sweated through his shirt hours ago. It hardly mattered: he’d already gotten coolant and oil all over himself while trying to figure out why Ruth’s truck wasn’t starting.

“You figure out which one it is?” Ruth asked from the driver’s seat. She sat sideways with her legs hanging out the open door.

“Yes, I think so. It’s this coil back near the water filter.” Jesse slid the protective goggles that’d been perched on his head down over his eyes. He reached in to shift the magnetic coil back where it belonged, then grabbed the welding torch and secured the coil in place.

“Okay, give it a minute to cool, then start the engine. You’ll need to pump the pedal. It’ll push air into the engine and build friction in the reactor. It’ll need a little heat energy t’ get it going since the charge line is dry.”

After a couple of false starts, the engine hummed to life, and the truck’s repulsors lit up. The truck lifted off the ground.

Ruth put her hands in the air. “Yes!”

Jesse smiled. “Yeah, that’s what I figured. Coil was out of alignment, so the magnetic field wasn’t holdin’. The reactor was producing plenty of electrons, but they kept escapin’ before they could collide with the ions in the outer ring. Can’t believe you’re still driving this old clunker. Fusion engines are only useful if you’re driving something that’s gotta do a lotta heavy lifting. You really need to look into a new car.”

“I’ll trade my truck in when it dies and not a moment before,” Ruth said. “I’ve had my baby for fifteen years now.”

“I don’t think you can call it a baby after fifteen years.”

“I don’t care. It’ll always be my baby.” Ruth lowered the truck back to the ground before switching the engine off. “Thanks for the help, Jesse.”

“My pleasure.”

Jesse grabbed a towel to clean up with while Ruth closed the hood for him and locked up the truck. Ruth made an ‘oh!’ sound and unlocked the truck again to reach into the backseat. Jesse raised an eyebrow as Ruth emerged with a box in hand.
“I forgot I bought this for you!” Ruth said as she presented the box to Jesse. It was a plain white box about the size of a hardback book.

Jesse looked down at his filthy hand. “I don’t think you want me handling that.”

“Oh, right. Here.” Ruth pulled open a flap at one end and reached into the box. What she pulled out appeared to be half a keyboard. It was oddly curved with a wrist support at the base. “It’s a one-handed keyboard. I have this friend, Aaliyah, who works at the therapy center. She’s the one who helped me research amputation therapy for you. You’ve been writing a lot lately, and I noticed it’s kind of slow going having to use my keyboard, so I asked Aaliyah about alternatives. There’s also a glove that works with augmented reality glasses. Aaliyah had me try it out, and it’s pretty neat, but there’s a learning curve. That’d be a bit harder to get hold of if you want it, but keep it in mind, huh?”

Ruth set the keyboard on top of the box and laid her hand on it so Jesse could see how the board cradled her hand and the keys lined up with her fingers. “So what do you think? Good idea?”

“That’s… You didn’t have to go to all that trouble for me, Ruth,” Jesse said, looking abashed.

“You just fixed my truck. I’d say we’re even. You wanna test it out?”

Jesse made a point of looking down at himself.

“After you’ve cleaned up,” Ruth said, giving Jesse’s shoulder a light shove. She stuck the keyboard back in the box and headed for the house with Jesse on her heels.

“I’ve been thinking,” Jesse said casually. When he didn’t continue, Ruth waved a hand for him to keep going. “Well, it’s been a year since I got hurt, and I think it’s been good for me taking my time to heal and learn to do things one-handed. But… maybe it’d be a good idea to get a prosthesis. Guess I’m lookin’ for a second opinion.”

“Really? All right, if you think you’re ready for it, then I’ll make it happen,” Ruth said. “I can talk to Aaliyah. I’m pretty sure she can’t just sell me an arm, but she should know someone who can help us—”

“Don’t worry about that,” Jesse said. “There’s too many hoops to jump through that way.” The legal way. “I got some favors I think I can call in. I just wanted to know if you thought it was a good idea.”

“Why wouldn’t it be a good idea?”

Jesse shrugged, looking awkward and uncomfortable. “It’s just that I’m doin’ fine as is. I don’t really need it, and it wouldn’t be the same as my old arm anyhow.”

“Jesse, there’s nothing wrong with wanting a prosthesis. It doesn’t say anything about you,” Ruth promised. “You don’t have to earn the right to a disability aid.”

“It’s not like I’d die without it, though,” Jesse said. “It’d just make things easier.”

“If it helps you, then that’s all that matters.”

Jesse nodded as he thought that over. Ruth had touched on something that he had to admit had crossed his mind. He wanted to say more—to confide in her all the concerns he had—but it was hard enough just telling her he was getting the prosthesis. Because telling her meant going through with it.
Really, the biggest issue Jesse had was the idea of attaching a hunk of machinery into the place where his arm ought to be. What would it feel like? Would it be clumsy and difficult to use? Would the ghost sensations be better or worse for it? He didn’t want some substitute—he wanted his arm back.

Jesse didn’t have a lot of things that he took pride in, but his physical skill was one of them. He should be chomping at the bit to get a prosthesis so he could have his independence back and feel useful again, but at the same time it felt like acknowledging he was too weak to manage without it.

Jesse couldn’t ignore the practicality of a prosthetic arm, though. His ability to fight was hampered: reloading a gun took far too long, and Jesse didn’t have experience fighting and grappling one-handed. He was going to have to leave the quiet safety of Ruth’s home eventually, and once he did, Talon would be on his heels in no time. He needed every advantage he could get. Plus it would help him keep Ruth and Annie safe.

“You make a good point,” Jesse said.

“Glad I could help. You sure you don’t want me to talk to Aaliyah for you?”

“No need. I got a guy.”

His name was Martín Valencia, and he was an old pal of Jesse’s from Deadlock. Martín had vanished years ago after escaping prison, but Jesse knew which rock to look under. After all, he’d been the one to suggest it to him.

Jesse made sure there was nothing identifying in the background behind him before making his secure video call to El Pescador, a bar and grill down in Acapulco, Mexico. A gruff older man with a neck tattoo appeared on the computer screen.

“Buenas tardes,” the man said. “¿En qué le puedo ayudar?”

“Hola,” Jesse said with a wide smile. The man frowned at the casual hello. Jesse brushed it off. “¿Habla inglés? It’s been a while; I’m a lil rusty with my Spanish. Lo siento.” The perfect combination of careless yet apologetic—the “tourist act” was Jesse’s favorite quick cover. It could open doors, make him new friends, and trick people into underestimating him depending on how he used it.

The man’s frown deepened. “Un turista,” he muttered under his breath before speaking up: “A little. How can I help you?” he asked again, this time in English.

“You can help me by putting Valencia on the line. I need t’ talk with him.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Martín Valencia. I’m a friend of his. Is he there?”

“There is no Martín Valencia here.” The man delivered the statement flawlessly, but Jesse had a knack for reading faces. It was basically a necessity in his line of work. The bar owner knew who Jesse was talking about.

“Hn. Well, you tell Martín that his pal Jesse called about an opportunity to pay off a favor he owes. He can call me back at this number.”

The bar owner’s lip pulled back in a sneer, then the call ended.
“Coulda said goodbye at least,” Jesse said to himself.

He trusted that Martín would get back to him soon. If he were dead or gone, the man on the other end of the line wouldn’t have acted so defensive. And Martín was a decent guy, at least compared to the company he sometimes kept. He looked after his own and liked keeping his books balanced. He’d probably be relieved to pay Jesse back. After all, the favor he owed Jesse was quite substantial: he’d be dead or in prison right now if it weren’t for Jesse.

Jesse and Martín used to run in Deadlock together. Martín had a silver tongue and a hundred connections, and Jesse had always been fascinated by the way Martín could compliment or cut a man down with a smart phrase. The other members of Deadlock either loved him or hated him, but they all knew they needed him.

When Martín had to handle negotiations, he often picked Jesse to be his backup. Maybe Jesse was just a kid, but his skill with a gun was nearly unparalleled, and Martín found it useful how unassuming Jesse looked: it suited his style. Some of Jesse’s strongest memories from those days involved Martín. The man had taught him how to throw darts, had bought him his first shot of tequila, and once he’d taken the heat for a deal gone bad when they both knew it’d been Jesse’s fault. That last one had cost Martín a black eye and a cut of his paycheck, but he’d told Jesse he didn’t mind. Jesse had his back, so he had Jesse’s.

Martín had been there, at the hideout, when the Overwatch raid happened. He got picked up with Jesse and all the rest. Overwatch had been careful not to let any of them slip past; there’d been a simultaneous raid on a weapons depot where the boss was visiting, and they couldn’t risk anyone from the hideout warning him. Very smooth planning, all things considered. Jesse could admire the strategy looking back on it now.

About five years later Jesse got called in for an Overwatch mission briefing. He remembered how startled he’d been to see Martín’s face projected in the middle of the table. Escaped prisoner. Specific whereabouts unknown. High risk target based on his association with the Deadlock Gang. Overwatch squads were being dispatched to assist local law enforcement in sweeping the area.

“You callin’ me in to test my loyalty, Strike Commander?” Jesse had asked Morrison dryly.

Even after five years Jesse was still waiting for that other shoe to drop. They all knew he was only there because he had to be, but Jesse had been working hard to prove that until his commuted sentence was up, he was their man, and they could rely on him. He didn’t understand why at the time, but it’d been important to him that his teammates trusted him. It would be another two years before Jesse finally understood—when Morrison told him he was a free man, and he suddenly realized he didn’t want to leave.

“That’s not why you’re here, Agent McCree,” Morrison said. “I’m relying on your experience in Deadlock, not judging you for it. You know Valencia better than anyone else here. I’m hoping that’ll give us the edge.”

Jesse made a noise that showed he understood. “So whose team am I on? Kinerk’s or Maya’s?”

“Mine,” a man at Jesse’s back said. He turned on his heel to face the agent who’d just walked into the room.

“Commander Reyes,” Jesse said, surprised.

Jesse knew Gabriel Reyes first and foremost as the man who’d talked Jesse into taking the deal with Overwatch. The man who’d changed his life. And when he failed the recruit training final
assessment his first time around, it was Reyes who came by and talked him into trying again instead of just taking the prison time. He’d also let slip that Morrison had said something about not being surprised if Jesse gave up, which was probably more motivation than anything else Reyes had said that day. The surest way to push Jesse to do something back then was to tell him that he couldn’t. It didn’t occur to him until much later that Morrison might’ve said it on purpose.

Jesse had thought he’d be getting to work with Commander Reyes when he first joined, but it turned out handling rookies fell to a different division. Besides, Reyes had his hands full with some other branch of Overwatch, not that anyone would ever give Jesse a straight answer about what it was. He’d seen him around the base plenty since joining Overwatch, though. He got to work with him during an earthquake relief mission, too. He liked Reyes’s style of command. He was gruff and strict, but he also trusted his people to know what they were doing, and he was flexible when things didn’t go according to plan.

Reyes flashed Jesse a crooked smile that showed he’d noticed the awed way Jesse had said his name. “I appreciate the introduction, kid, but I think everyone here knows who I am.”

If Jesse hadn’t been so excited about the mission all of a sudden, he might’ve taken offense at the nickname. Instead he eagerly followed Reyes as the commander approached the table. Morrison wordlessly handed a tablet over to him, and Reyes pulled up a map that projected onto the table.

“Martín Valencia escaped from prison fourteen hours ago,” Reyes said. “Local law enforcement tried to track him down on their own, but their leads have gone cold, and they’re worried that if we don’t find him soon then we never will. He was an influential member of the Deadlock Rebels. Right now Deadlock is divided and breathing its last breath, but with someone like Valencia back in play, that could change.”

Jesse nodded along. He had to agree with the assessment. Martín wasn’t the sort to want power for himself, but he’d have no qualms about backing someone else who wanted to be leader and providing Deadlock with the resources it needed to build itself up again. Martín could be the solution to the power vacuum that was slowly turning the remnants of Jesse’s old gang against itself.

Reyes highlighted a portion of the map. “We have roadblocks in place, and we’re fairly certain Valencia is still in the county. Kinerk, your team will be sweeping the northwestern portion. Maya, you’ll handle the eastern section here. My team has the southern portion of the county. Your teams will be outfitted with tactical drones from my division. They’ve got thermal imaging, live feed, and they can triangulate radio frequencies. I recommend regular sweeps by a dedicated controller while the rest of the team hits suspected locations. You’ll check in with me every two hours with status updates.”

Kinerk and Maya were quick to agree.

“You’ll also all have hovercycles and a dropship for your squads,” Morrison added. “They’re ready and waiting as we speak. Try to bring everything back in one piece.” He threw a particular look at Reyes who responded with a sly smile and a shrug of his shoulders. There was a story to that shared look.

Once all three teams were on the ground, Reyes ordered his people spread out like a net over their assigned sector. Jesse had taken a look at the map on the ride over and pinpointed several locations that struck him as excellent places for a man on the lamb to hide. He’d told Reyes about them, and when they first landed, the team conducted a sweep of all the locations. Nothing had turned up, so Reyes told them to start taking their marching orders from the drone controller.

Just waiting around hadn’t sat right with Jesse. The longer they waited, the more chances
Valencia had to slip past them. And he’d had a feeling about one of the places they checked: the old farmhouse and barn sitting by the side of the highway. It wasn’t any one thing that’d jumped out at him. Rather, it was a hundred tiny details that didn’t matter on their own, but together they tugged at his subconscious, demanding his attention.

Jesse had decided that rather than sit around twiddling his thumbs and waiting for the controller to give him a lead, he ought to check that farm again.

Jesse parked out front of the house. The door was locked, and the windows were still secured. No sign of forced entry. Dirty footprints marked the white porch, but they could belong to anyone. Wide fields of wheat stretched away to the south; there was one rambling, broken path through the field—could’ve been a deer. The barn was open. An old clunker of a pickup truck sat with its nose poking out. Had that been there before?

On closer inspection Jesse found the truck unlocked with keys in the ignition. The thing was a couple decades old at least. Jesse gave the key a turn to see what would happen. The truck’s engine let out a hair-raising electric whine as it tried to start up, and the repulsors kicked on for about half a second before the truck went dead again.

In the silence afterward Jesse caught the sound of his hovercycle’s engine coming to life. He ran out to the front of the farmhouse to see none other than Martín Valencia kicking his bike into drive and racing down the dirt driveway to the main road.

“Bad move, partner,” Jesse said. He pulled a remote from his belt and hit a switch. He’d figured if his old pal Martín were hiding nearby, he might make a play for the hovercycle. So Jesse had left a live EMP sitting in the back compartment of the bike.

The EMP went off, and a flood of blue light rushed over the surrounding area. Jesse couldn’t feel it, but there was a crackling sound in the air for a moment. The bike’s repulsors flickered, then went out. Sheer velocity carried the bike forward as it crashed, sending it flipping end over end. Martín flew over the handlebars and rolled several times before going still.

“Shit,” Jesse muttered. He hadn’t factored in the bike’s speed. He ran down the road to Martín’s still form and dropped to his knees beside him. He pulled off a glove, held his hand in front of Martín’s mouth, and waited until he felt his breath on his palm.

Jesse let out a sigh. “You’re one lucky bastard. I coulda killed you.”

Jesse quickly checked Martín over for any serious injuries. Miss Ziegler—that is, Dr. Ziegler, Jesse corrected himself, because she’d worked hard for that title—had taught him how to check for broken bones and signs of internal bleeding. She’d been appalled when she found out he hadn’t learned any emergency first aid, and took it upon herself to educate him. Fact of the matter was they’d tried to teach him in boot camp, but Jesse didn’t want to learn at the time. He fell in line for Dr. Ziegler, though.

No serious injuries aside from a few nasty scrapes. Martín had some fading bruises littering his body, though. They were a few days old at least. And he had a cut on the back of his forearm—a defensive wound?—that’d been stitched up, but two of the stitches had popped when he went tumbling. It bled sluggishly.

“Rough time of it, eh, Martín?” Jesse mused. They had a medic who could clean Martín up once he was on the dropship. Jesse wondered how it had happened, but that wasn’t his business.

Jesse pulled out his communicator. “This is Agent McCree. I got Valencia, but my bike’s busted.
Someone come pick us up.”

There was no response. Jesse examined the device. It was dead. The EMP must’ve had a wider range than Jesse realized. He checked the rest of his gear. It was all useless. Even the plasma-propelled bullets in his gun were drained. Jesse hadn’t known that was a thing that could happen. Would’ve been nice to know: he would’ve packed a backup pistol that took powder rounds.

When Jesse didn’t report in on time, the rest of his squad would start checking his last known coordinates, so it wouldn’t be long until help arrived. Jesse just needed to secure his target and wait patiently.

A couple hours passed before Martín came to with a groan.

“Morning, sunshine,” Jesse said. “How ya feelin’, amigo?”

“Fuck you,” Martín said. “Don’t talk like we’re friends.”

Jesse sat on the open tailgate of the old truck smoking a cigarillo as he watched Martín straighten up. He’d tied him to one of the support beams in the middle of the barn while he waited for his ride. His maglock cuffs were hit by the EMP along with everything else, but there’d been plenty of rope on hand.

Martín glared up at Jesse from the ground. Jesse flashed him a grin. “Now what’chu mean we ain’t friends? Gonna go and hurt my feelings, Martín.”

Martín frowned as he studied Jesse’s face. Jesse would be lying if he said he wasn’t pleased by how much five years had clearly changed him if Martín Valencia couldn’t place a face. The man prided himself on knowing people. Eventually, though, recognition flashed in his widening eyes.

“Little Jesse McCree?” he laughed. “Look at you all grown up.” Jesse noticed a hint of apprehension come over Martín even as he smiled. “What’s going on? There’s no reason to go treating me like we’re enemies, now is there? Ah, sorry about your bike. I didn’t know it was you, obviously.” He tried to roll his shoulders nonchalantly, but the rope and the beam at his back kept him from pulling it off.

“Actually,” Jesse said as he tipped his hat back, “we kind of are. Enemies, that is. Not that I take it personal or anything.” He saw Martín swallow thickly and his brow furrow like he was in pain. He let his head hang down. Jesse understood that the man didn’t want to go back to prison, and maybe having Jesse be the one to bring him in smacked of betrayal, but even so, his reaction seemed a little over the top.

“So that’s it then, huh?” Martín said. He smiled up at Jesse again, but it’d become more of a grimace. “I guess if it’s gotta be someone, at least you’ll be kind about it. Wouldn’t’ve gotten the same consideration from someone like Kent or Waylon.”

“Kind about—? Martín, do you think I’m here t’ kill you?” Jesse asked incredulously.

The look of surprise on Martín’s face said everything.

Jesse balked. “I’m here with Overwatch to take you back to prison. You escaped, remember? That’s kind of illegal.”

Martín let out a shaky, disbelieving laugh and stared at his own feet. “Overwatch? The State sent Overwatch after me? Wait.” He looked back up at Jesse. “You joined Overwatch?”
Jesse held up his hands and shrugged. “They were gonna try me as an adult for weapons smuggling with enhanced mandatory sentence for gang affiliation.” The threat had been thrown around so much he had it memorized. “That’s seven to life, not even adding in the folks I injured during the raid on the base. Assault of a peacekeeping officer wasn’t gonna look good in court.”

“So they offered you an alternative, and you took it.”

“You woulda done the same. Actually, I’m surprised you didn’t flip on Deadlock and go into witness protection yourself.”

“I thought about it, but I have family,” Martín said. “Thought if I kept my mouth shut and did my time that they’d stay safe.” He frowned at the ground. “Booker seems to think I talked anyway.”

Jesse froze with his cigarillo caught between his lips. He only knew one Booker. Noah Booker, the boss man himself. Overwatch had caught him during the raids along with everyone else, so technically he was behind bars, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t still the boss. It was one of the reasons Deadlock was still limping along refusing to die, but also one of the reasons the different chapters were vying with each other for power and tearing Deadlock apart in the process. Booker had strings to pull, but anyone who could gain enough support might be able to cut those strings and claim his title.

Jesse pulled the cigarillo away from his mouth. “Why would Booker think you talked?”

“Probably has to do with my sentence. Everyone knows I’m high up in the gang, but the prosecuting attorneys couldn’t tie me to much, so I got a shorter sentence than most. Probably looked suspicious to the others, but I’m just good at keeping my hands clean. You know, with good behavior I would’ve been out next year.” Martín looked wretched. “Either Booker decided that I turned on him, or someone who wants me out of the way convinced Booker of it. Either way he’s had other prisoners gunning for me for a few months now. Last week it was a guard. I knew I wasn’t gonna survive much longer if I didn’t get out of there; there was no way Booker was letting me leave that prison unless it was in a body bag.”

Jesse took a drag on his cigarillo. The mission brief hadn’t mentioned Martín’s upcoming release date or the attempts on his life. He supposed he wasn’t too surprised about that second bit: it wasn’t mission-relevant, and the prison probably didn’t want anyone knowing. It explained Martín’s injuries. But hadn’t anyone questioned why Martín broke out when he was so close to the end of his sentence? And all of this begged the question: what would happen to him when they sent him back to prison?

“Honestly,” Martín said, suddenly breaking the silence, “I sort of wish… I wish you were here to kill me.” His voice rang hollow. “I’m gonna die anyways. It’d make this all a lot easier, and you’d do a clean job of it.”

“I’m not that sort of man,” Jesse said. He didn’t like the way this conversation was going.

“No,” Martín agreed with a wry smile, “you never were. You were a good kid, no matter how tough you tried to act. If I weren’t such a terrible person myself, I would have tried to talk you into leaving Deadlock sooner.”

“Like you coulda made me… Hey, Martín. Tell me about your family.”

“What, really?” Martín looked surprised.

“Sure. We got time to kill before our ride gets here.”
“Aren’t you supposed to discourage talking? It’ll only make you care more.”

Jesse breathed out a puff of smoke and waved his cigarillo. “So make me care.”

Martín blinked, then nodded slowly. “My parents died back during the Crisis, and my abuelita passed away a year ago, but I got a brother still. He married this nice girl, Clarita, from Puerto Rico. They live there now. They got three girls who all look like their mamá. I know because they sent me a card for Christmas so I could see how big they’ve all gotten. The youngest one, Amanda, she’s three now. I’ve never met her. Probably never will.”

Jesse’s cigarillo had burned down too far, so he snuffed it out on the tailgate. “You met the other two?”

“Sure, right before we were all arrested. Ricky brought his family up to see me, and I took them to a waterpark. Roslyn and Eva’d never been to a waterpark before. They were terrified of the slides, but once we got them to try, we couldn’t get them off.

“You’d like them, Jesse. Ricky’s family—they’re nothing like us. Ricky knows what I do, but he pretends he doesn’t, and he keeps saying I should move down to Puerto Rico and stay with him and Clarita. They have a family restaurant, and he always talks about how nice it’d be to have me around to help run the place. I love him too much to take him up on the offer. Wouldn’t be safe having a guy like me around, you know?”

“Yeah, I get ya. So if you weren’t going to hide with them, where were you going?”

Martín flashed him a pained sort of smile. “I’m not sure, honestly. Most of my connections are burned now that Booker’s after me. No one wants him for an enemy. I figured I’d get south of the border and then find somewhere small and out of the way. Someplace no one would know me.”

“What about Acapulco?”

“What about it?”

Jesse rolled the stub of the cigarillo between his thumb and forefinger as he weighed his words. “It’s a nice place. Not small. You don’t want too small or you’ll stand out. They get people passing through all the time so no one’d notice you. It’s right on the ocean. Great view. I heard through the grapevine about this bar and grill that’s perfect if you’re looking to get away and leave all your cares behind, called El Pescador.”

“Where’d you hear about it?”

“You know, I can’t quite remember. Completely forgot about the place myself ’til you mentioned heading south. Funny how things like that slip my mind sometimes.” Jesse casually scratched at the stubble on the side of his jaw as he let Martín connect the dots. He saw comprehension dawn slowly but surely.

“Sounds like a nice place to visit.”

“Nice place to stay, even. You should go sometime.”

Martín hummed thoughtfully. “I’m not really in a position to go anywhere right now.”

Jesse pulled out his combat knife and tapped the flat of the blade on his knee. It clanked dully against his body armor. “That could change, dependin’.”
“Depending on what?”

“Whether or not you know how to drive something that runs on a fusion reactor.” Jesse patted the bed of the truck.

Martín looked incredulous. “That thing won’t run.”

“It will now. The EMP didn’t reach this far: starter battery’s still good, and the core’s stable. I got bored waiting for my squad to find us, so I played around with the engine and figured out how it works. Turned out it was an easy fix.”

Martín chuckled. “You always did pick things up fast. So why are we still sitting here then? You could have handed me over to the authorities a while ago.”

Jesse pressed his lips together in thought before answering. “I knew once I handed you over that we wouldn’t have a chance to talk. I remember you were a decent sorta villain back when we were on the same side. Guess I wanted to see if it was all just nostalgia. I miss it sometimes: the old gang.”

Martín gave Jesse a serious look. “There’s nothing about Deadlock worth missing, Jesse. It’s a pit of vipers.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t. Because guys like me and your friend Mac kept you safe from most of it.” Jesse stiffened at the mention of his childhood friend. Martín kept going. “You saw some pretty terrible stuff, but that was just the tip of the iceberg. You never saw the way the others fought for power—the bodies in the streets. The bad deals and double-crossings. You didn’t see what people did with the guns we sold them. You were just a kid; we all knew you’d have to get blood on your hands eventually, but the few of us who cared did our best to keep you from it as long as we could.”

“Maybe I didn’t see it, but I knew it was happening,” Jesse said. “I don’t miss any of that, believe me. I just… miss being around you guys, I guess. I know you were lookin’ out for me. Meant more to me than I can say.”

Jesse hopped down off the truck and walked over. “Which is why I’m gonna let you go.”

Martín craned his neck to watch as Jesse knelt behind him and started cutting his bonds. “You’re serious,” he said, sounding more than a little shocked. “They’ll lock you up, Jesse, deal or no deal. I don’t want you getting in trouble because of me.”

Jesse huffed out a dry laugh. “I’ll only get in trouble if they catch us.” He cut through the last of the rope, sheathed his knife, and helped Martín to stand. “Which won’t happen if you get a move on.”

“What’ll you tell Overwatch? They’re coming to pick us up, aren’t they?”

“Technically they’re coming to pick me up: my EMP knocked out my communicator, so I didn’t report in when I was supposed to. They got no clue I caught you. They’ll have figured out where I am by now, though, so we need to get you out of here.”

Martín moved stiffly after sitting on the ground so long, and he favored his left ankle, but luckily he only needed his right foot to work the pedals. Jesse supported him as he climbed into the truck.

“Hold on,” Martín said, “how are you gonna explain the EMP knocking out your comms and your bike?”
“I’ll lie and tell them the EMP malfunctioned and went off on me by accident. Musta been the heat, or it bounced around too much. If they poke holes in my story, I’ll “confess” that I sat on the remote by accident. Clumsy me.” Jesse feigned sheepishness. “Wouldn’t be the first time my gear went sideways on me. Anyways, why don’t you go ahead and see if you can start this junker up?”

The engine whined for a moment, then rumbled to life just like Jesse said it would. Martín pulled the truck out of the barn slowly. Jesse kept pace beside him as he spoke: “The cops are cordoning off the county limits, and they got checkpoints set up on all the major roads. Keep an eye out for our drones in the sky and stick to the road as long as you can to avoid drawing attention.”

Martín nodded along. “Got it. Don’t worry: I have a good idea what to do from here. I just needed a ride.” The car stopped at the beginning of the driveway in front of the farmhouse. Martín squeezed the steering wheel in his hands. “I know what a risk this is for you. Overwatch—that’s a big deal, Jesse. You could make something of yourself working for them. You’re putting everything on the line to help a man escape from prison, and for what? Nostalgia’s sake?”

“What can I say? I like you. You’ve done a lotta awful things, but you did right by me.” Jesse leaned on the door, arms folded on the open window. “Not to mention the way I figure it, you owe me one now. If I call you needin’ help, I expect you to do as much for me as I’ve done for you. I got your back. I trust you to have mine.”

Martín seemed a bit surprised, but he quickly plastered on one of those slick smiles he always pulled out when he’d successfully brokered a deal with someone. “All right. You ever need me, you call. I’ll take care of you, cowboy.” He pulled down on the brim of Jesse’s hat.

Jesse laughed and backed off as he fixed his hat. The smile slid off his face as he and Martín exchanged one last glance. “Here’s hopin’ we never see each other again,” Jesse said. What he meant was ‘Here’s hoping you don’t get caught. Here’s hoping the both of us don’t end up in prison. Here’s hoping I don’t turn on the news one day and see a grisly headline with your name in it.’

“Here’s hoping,” Martín agreed before he drove the car down the driveway, past the wrecked hovercycle, and out onto the road.

That felt like a lifetime ago now.

Jesse sat in Ruth’s little home office and waited for Martín to call him back. After three hours Jesse considered going to get something to eat. Clearly Martín planned on making him sweat it out a bit, or maybe the bar owner was being overly cautious. Maybe he hadn’t told Martín at all.

A chime sounded and a message flashed across the computer screen. Jesse double-checked that the Blackwatch program he’d downloaded to mask the call was running before he answered.

Martín appeared on screen. It’d been years since Jesse last saw him, and it showed: his hair was fading from black to gray, and he’d traded out his thin mustache for a short, well-groomed beard.

“Howdy,” Jesse said.

A smile bloomed across Martín’s face. “It really is you. I was half-convinced the call was a trick, but there you are. You’re looking good, cowboy. Are you staying out of trouble?”

“As best I can, but it has a knack for finding me. I didn’t call to share pleasantries, though.”

“So you were serious about wanting that favor, huh? I’ll be honest: I didn’t actually think you’d call.”
“I didn’t plan to, believe me. But I could use the help, and I don’t have a lot of safe connections anymore.”

Martín made a sympathetic sound. “I heard you and your Overwatch buddies are basically illegal now. Lady Luck’s a cruel mistress.”

“Luck had nothin’ to do with it,” Jesse scoffed, not bothering to correct Martín. If it was just the government that was after him, this would be a lot easier. “But back to that favor. You happen to know someone who works in prosthetics? I’ll need a hacker, too. I got money to pay, but it’s in an account I can’t touch without raising alarms.”

“Sure, sure. Prosthetics, you said?”

“Yeah. Like I told ya: trouble has a knack for finding me. This last go-around it cost me an arm.”

Martín winced, then clucked his tongue. “So the prosthetist is for you. I didn’t want to assume. Sorry.”

“Not like it was your fault,” Jesse joked.

“Which one?”

“Hmm? Oh, my left arm.”

“Least it wasn’t your gun hand, then. Small favors, eh?” Martín was scribbling something down now, his brow knit as he thought. “You’re lucky: I happen to know the perfect person. She’s an artist with metal. And while I don’t know any hackers—not anymore—my friend does a lot of charitable and not-quite-legal work that’s netted her some valuable friends of her own. She should know someone who can access the account. How much is in there?”

Jesse gave Martín an estimate, and he whistled appreciatively.

“Overwatch paid you good.”

“They did. Some of that money’s from merc work, too. First few months after I left Overwatch, I took on some high-risk-high-rewards jobs that shook out nice for me. In retrospect I really shoulda played it safe and laid low for a while.” If he hadn’t been so desperate for the thrill of a dangerous gig like the ones he did back in Blackwatch, he wouldn’t’ve walked into that Talon ambush. The red flags had been there if only he’d paid closer attention.

Jesse couldn’t go down that rabbit hole right now. He dug his fingers into his thigh and focused on the computer screen.

Martín tapped his writing stylus on his desk. “Okay then, I’ll talk to my friend. Can you come down here, or…?”

“Hmm, not sure that’d be a good idea. The more I move around, the more attention I’ll draw to myself.”

“So she’ll have to go to you. Which means I need to know where you are.”

Jesse rubbed at the back of his neck as he weighed his next words. Now wasn’t the time to start being distrustful. He was putting Martín in just as much danger as himself by calling in this favor. “I’m in Albuquerque, New Mexico.”
Martín let out a soft snort. “Like hiding a needle in a pile of needles. That’s slick, Jesse. I wouldn’t go looking for you there. Okay, I’ll call my friend and see if she’s willing to take on the job. The money’s good, and I’m vouching for you, so it’s pretty much guaranteed.” He spun the stylus between his fingers, then dropped it back into his palm as he thought of something. “Hey, by the way she’s an omnic. Is that gonna be a problem?”

“No, I got nothin’ against omnics.”

“Great, okay. Glad that’s out of the way. In that case I just need a clean contact number. I figure we probably shouldn’t do this again,” Martín said as he gestured between himself and his screen.

Jesse gave him a phone number that he hurriedly wrote down. “Perfect.”

“Thanks for all the help,” Jesse said.

“Hey, I owed you. And it was nice hearing from you, even if it was mostly business. If you ever end up down in Acapulco maybe we can have a proper reunion.” Martín gave Jesse a heartfelt smile. “Glad to know you’re still alive at least.”

“Same here.” The conversation felt strange and stilted now, with business concluded. Jesse wasn’t sure how to end it. “I should let you get goin’.”

“Yeah, we’ve probably talked too long as it is. No idea who might be trying to listen in. But before I go, I want you to know you can call me again if you need me. You’ll owe me one, though.”

“I suppose there’s worse devils to make a deal with.”

“Not many better either.”

“I think you’re a little biased,” Jesse said with a smirk.

“How many times have I told you, Jesse? It’s called being confident. Anyways, I’ll message you if the deal’s on. You take care.”

“You, too, Martín.”

The call ended. Jesse hauled himself up out of the office chair with a grunt. His heart pounded in his chest now that the call was over. He’d spent so long laying low, he’d gotten comfortable playing it safe. With one short video call he’d gone and risked everything, but it was a risk that had to be taken. He needed to take control of his life, and this was the first step to making that happen.
I want to take a second to point back to the spot where I mentioned Jesse having to take the final assessment for Overwatch twice, and to remind everyone of the picture Sarah has in her living room of Jesse after he passed recruit training. I mentioned he was surrounded by people in both uniforms and boot camp fatigues. They’re the recruits from both rounds of training Jesse went through. The ones who’d already passed showed up for Jesse’s second assessment to support him. It’s a small detail I worked in, but I really like it. I’m hoping to bring it up again in the next story if all goes according to plan.

I’m using a lot of ideas in this story that aren’t my personal headcanons, but I worked in one today that I feel strongly about: that Jesse didn’t start out in Blackwatch. It doesn’t make sense to me that a 17-year-old with no field experience as an agent who is also a criminal would be brought in on one of Overwatch’s biggest secrets and be trusted to run dangerous and sensitive operations. Especially based on canon photos. Furthermore, the second most powerful person in Overwatch shouldn’t be training new recruits. I think Jesse served his sentence as a regular agent, and when he chose to stay afterwards of his own will, that’s when they brought him into Blackwatch. Because then Gabe knew he could trust Jesse, and he was trained enough for the work.

I enjoyed all the development for Jesse I was able to pack into this chapter. I got to expand on his knowledge of vehicles, which he picked up in Deadlock. I got to reveal a bit more of Deadlock and Overwatch from his perspective. I got to show his conflict over his prosthesis (which was important to me since I didn’t want to write off his disability and trauma by slapping a robot arm on him like nothing happened). And I got to show off that gray area morality that defined Jesse when he was younger.

Next chapter: Jesse meets the prosthetist.
Albuquerque, 2 years ago

Jesse double-checked the address that had been texted to him. It looked like the kind of place Jesse might pick for a clandestine meeting: he stood in front of a combination car repair shop and gas station that had gone out of business decades ago when cars stopped using petrol. The gas pumps had been torn out, and the garage doors were littered with graffiti. A chain link fence wrapped around the building, but it’d been pulled down in places, and the gate hung wide open.

Great place for an unlicensed prosthetist to set up shop.

Jesse walked up to the door. It bore an old coat of peeling red paint and a sign reading “Closed” in blocky letters. Someone had installed a rather high-tech looking security camera overhead. It was small and unassuming, hidden by the eave of the building, but Jesse had spotted it right away.

Jesse knocked. The camera let out a soft whir as it turned from its vigil of the empty street to the door where Jesse stood.

“Howdy,” Jesse told the camera and tipped his hat to it. It whirred again as it focused on him.

Then Jesse heard the soft beep of what was likely a security system being disarmed followed by the metal rasp of a lock.

The omnic that opened the door looked strikingly out of place in the doorway of the decrepit building. The sun at Jesse’s back gleamed across her nearly white faceplate. She looked to be a semi-standard model. Her face bore three vertical light sensors and gracefully swooping eye slits that contrasted with the sturdy jaw of a factory omnic. The machinery that made up her hands was intricate—meant to perform complicated and detailed work. Work like the beautiful, curling flowers and leaves engraved into her chest plates. They reminded Jesse of traditional leather tooling.

Jesse pulled his hat off and held it to his chest as he ducked his head politely. “Ma’am. Martín didn’t mention you’d be such a lovely individual. Coulda given a man some warning.”

The omnic tilted her head gracefully, the pistons in her neck letting out a soft hiss. “A charmer, I see.” Her voice suited her, low and smooth with a hint of an electronic echo to it. “Why don’t you come in, Mr…?”

“Morricone,” Jesse said. They were both friends of Martín, but if she didn’t know who he was, then maybe it was safer for them both if he stuck to a cover name.

The omnic waved Jesse through and locked up behind him. Down the short hall past the shop’s business office was the garage. It’d already been converted into a workspace. Jesse recognized the
3D printer that dominated a table nearby. Farther back, though, were some rather large machines that he could hazard a guess weren’t meant for cars.

“What’re those for, if you don’t mind my asking?” Jesse pointed to the thing that resembled a cement mixer and the metal box that looked like a small oven.

The omnic waved her arm. “An arc smelter and a forge. I find that I make my best work with a mix of new and old techniques.”

“Sometimes the old ways work best,” Jesse said. “So, uh, I think some proper introductions are in order.” Jesse held out his hand. “The name’s Joel Morricone. Not sure how much Martín told you.”

The omnic took his hand. “I’m Dezzi. Martín wouldn’t give me your name, but he vouched for you. It seems he thinks quite highly of you. Enough to cover the costs of my travel and set-up himself in order to make this happen.”

Jesse let out a soft whistle. “That’s mighty kind of him. So then what’s first?”

“First we talk about payment. I’m told you’re good for it, but I’d like to see for myself.”

“Well that’s the thing, isn’t it?” Jesse saw the light sensors on Dezzi’s face flicker and dim. He hurriedly explained, “There’s some pretty dangerous people looking for me, and accessing the account through normal means’ll bring ‘em right to me. They already tracked me down once to the hospital I stayed at. That’s why we need your hacker.”

“Ah.” Dezzi lifted her head, and the sensors lit up. “In that case, you can leave any information you have on the account with me, and I’ll see what my friend can do about that. I’ll do the consultation and scans in the meantime.”

“Yeah? You’re not one for wasting time.”

“No I am not.”

Jesse let out a soft chuckle. “So what do I do?”

“For starters I need you to take off your shirt,” Dezzi said as she swept past him to her workbench.

Jesse set his hat aside. “So direct. Normally I like a little flirting first. Or a drink at the very least.”

Jesse saw the lights on Dezzi’s face flash and flicker; he got the distinct impression she was laughing. “You’re a little too organic for my tastes, no offense,” Dezzi said. “Now hurry up. Or are you shy?”

Jesse snorted as he started to unbutton his shirt. “Don’t know the meaning of the word.” He threw his shirt on a stool. “What’s next?”

Dezzi waved to one end of the garage. Jesse hadn’t noticed before, but there was a portable hologram mat laid out with four tall, thin poles at the corners all connected to each other with a mess of wires. Dezzi tapped on the tablet she’d picked up off her workbench, and the poles projected a holo-field over the mat. The field cast a soft blue light over everything in the garage. It felt like being underwater.

“Step in,” Dezzi said. “I need you to stand on that X in the middle, feet in line with your shoulders and your back straight. Keep your arms loose at your sides.”
Jesse did as told. He watched, fascinated, as a grid pattern of light appeared over his right arm. Dezzi tapped away at her tablet. The holographic copy of Jesse’s arm pulled away, then a mirrored copy of the arm appeared and the first vanished. The new outline moved to Jesse’s other side where it was carefully laid over the remaining stump of his left arm. A light grid appeared over the stump, mapping where the prosthesis would end. It looked eerie, like the ghost of his arm was still there. Jesse tried flexing his fingers, but they didn’t respond. Of course they wouldn’t. They weren’t real. Jesse felt the muscles in his upper arm twinge painfully and grimaced.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Jesse reassured. “Happens sometimes.”

Dezzi hummed. It sounded a bit like a fan running. “Try something for me. Clench your right hand, then focus on relaxing all the muscles in your arms.”

Jesse made a fist. The holographic arm copied him. Oh. Jesse let his arms slowly go limp as he watched the hologram.

“Again. Tense all the muscles in your arms and relax.”

Jesse repeated the exercise a few more times. The ache didn’t go away completely, but eventually it faded to something Jesse could ignore again. “That’s a neat little trick.”

Dezzi nodded in agreement. “The jury’s still out on virtual feedback therapy, but I’ve had enough clients insist it helps that I thought I’d try. Now hold your arms out to either side for me.”

Jesse lifted his arms. “Feels like I’m goin’ through airport security,” he joked.

“My scans are less invasive,” Dezzi said as her sensors flickered with amusement. “Arms out in front of yourself now.”

The scans went on for several minutes. As she worked, Dezzi explained that it was important to get the right proportions, and that every client’s scans helped her build better prosthetic limbs in the future. She’d been doing this for a few years now, apparently. She’d started by helping other omnis who couldn’t afford repairs, then advanced to prosthetic limbs for humans. There’d been a steep learning curve moving from omnic patients to organic ones (along with some legal complications), but apparently Dezzi had loved the challenge nearly as much as she loved helping people. Jesse could understand that well enough.

Eventually Dezzi gave Jesse the go-ahead to put his shirt back on.

“Now let’s talk about the design,” Dezzi said. “Is there anything that you need?”

“It’s gotta be sturdy,” Jesse said. “Something that can take some punishment. Fast reaction time, too. I doubt it’ll move like my old arm, so I’ll have to adapt to it, but the faster the reflexes the better. I need to be able to do the maintenance myself, too.”

“Don’t worry: I design my prostheses to be user-friendly, and I’ll teach you how to take care of your new arm.”

“Great. Let’s see, what else?” Jesse thought it over. It occurred to him for the first time that it might be more than a little inconvenient to transform into a werewolf-thing while wearing a prosthetic arm. “Actually, the most important thing is I need it to detach. I know advanced prostheses tend to be permanent, but is that something you can manage? I’m willin’ to go with a simpler design if that’ll help.”
Dezzi’s head tipped to the side, then tilted down as she thought, her fingers tapping at her chin. “Not simpler, no… It’ll need to be more advanced. The prosthesis connects to what’s left of the bone for support. And my pieces come with advanced sensors based on omnic detection systems; they have to connect directly to your nerves to function.”

“So it’s not possible.”

“I didn’t say that. I’m just saying it won’t be easy. I’ve never done it myself, but there’s a prosthetist in Japan I know who pulled it off a few years back for a client. I’ll contact him about his research. Maybe I can get him to share his schematics with me. It’ll take longer, though, if you really want that feature.”

“I can wait.”

“Then I’ll see what I can do. I think I have everything I need from you for now, Mr. Morricone. Don’t forget to give me the information on that bank account.”

“Sure thing. I’ll write it down for ya right now. Hey, you think your hacker friend can set up a new, secure account for me? If there’s any money left once you’re both done,” Jesse joked.

“I’m sure they can manage it if I ask nicely.” Dezzi waited for Jesse to write down the information as promised before she walked Jesse back to the door. “I’ll keep you posted on my progress. It was nice meeting you, Mr. Morricone.”

“Joel’s fine.” Jesse spun on his heel and held up his hand as Dezzi started to close the door. “Can I just say: I really appreciate everything you’re doin’ for me.”

“You’re paying me for it.”

“I know, but still. This—all of this… it’s…” He floundered as he struggled to express what he was feeling.

“It’s hard?” Dezzi said, startling Jesse. That wasn’t quite what he’d wanted to say, but she wasn’t wrong either. She continued, “Going through all of this, even with other people there to help, is a lot to deal with. And it has to be frustrating to need help in the first place. I’ve worked with enough clients by now to understand. You don’t need to explain yourself.”

Jesse ducked his head, letting his hat brim hide his face. “Right. Well, thanks.”

“My pleasure, Joel. I’ll call you in sometime next week hopefully. Keep your phone on hand.”

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The prosthetist in Japan ended up agreeing to share his specs on detachable prostheses so long as Dezzi was willing to trade some of her own research. She told Jesse about it when he came back in.

“I’ve already printed up some prototype pieces to see how they function,” Dezzi said. “It’ll be a while before they’re ready for testing and installation, though.”

“So how’s it work?” Jesse asked. He hooked his thumb in his belt loop and shifted his weight as he studied the bits and pieces scattered across the workbench. None of it looked like it belonged to an arm.

Dezzi started arranging the pieces across the workbench, and while it still didn’t look quite like an arm, Jesse could see how they’d all eventually connect. He noticed some wicked-looking spikes at
one end. “Are those supposed to be fingers?”

Dezzi picked one up, then inclined her head towards Jesse, her sensors dimming. “Actually,” she said slowly, “these are anchor points for the prosthesis.”

Jesse narrowed his eyes. He didn’t like the sound of that. “Which means?”

“These are what attaches to what’s left of your arm. They anchor into the bone to give the prosthesis stability. The heads of the anchor spikes are connectors. They’ll be flush against your skin and look like any other cybernetic mod node.”

Jesse’s stomach twisted. “You’re kidding.”

Dezzi let out a harsh whirring noise—a frustrated huff. “I know it looks like a medieval torture device, but it’s actually less invasive than a permanent prosthesis. You have to have known surgery would be a part of this.”

“I guess.” He hadn’t thought about it that much. Hadn’t wanted to. “So we do that here then?”

Dezzi somehow managed to look exasperated. “Of course not. That would be incredibly unsanitary. I have an apartment rented out for the month that I’m prepping for your surgery.”

“And when’ll that happen?”

“In a couple weeks once I’m finished with the anchor spikes. The arm will take longer, but that’ll give you time to heal.”

“No eating the previous night and no liquids an hour before surgery?” Jesse guessed. He’d had to go under the knife a few times now; he knew the drill.

Dezzi nodded. “And like I said, I own the apartment for the moment, so you can stay there until you’ve recovered enough to go home. That’ll let me keep an eye on you to make sure you’re healing properly.”

“Didn’t know you were a surgeon, too.”

“I’ve learned what I need to in order to help my clients. I’ll have someone on call during the operation if you’re nervous.”

“I trust you’ll do right by me.”

“Good. Then let’s move on to why you’re here,” Dezzi said.

“What, it wasn’t to show me this?”

“I could have sent you pictures if that’s all I wanted.” Dezzi activated the holo-field. She seemed to stop and regard Jesse. She’d done that a few times since he arrived. At first Jesse thought it was his shirt. He hadn’t expected her to call him over so suddenly, and he forgot to change before he left the house, so he was sporting one of his infamous thrift store finds that read: “If you climb into the saddle, be ready for the ride.” It didn’t seem to be the shirt that held her interest, though. Jesse didn’t know whether he should be relieved or not.

Jesse tipped his hat back. “Let me guess: take off my shirt and step in?”

“Not unless you feel like it,” Dezzi said wryly. “I’m just getting motion-capture of your hand today.”
“Oh yeah?”

“You said you wanted the prosthesis to be fast.” Dezzi waved towards the holo-field. “This will help me understand how you move and use your hands so I can tailor it to you.”

Jesse stepped in.

Dezzi set up a folding table in front of Jesse and placed a peg board and pegs on it. “This is a dexterity test. I want you to place the pegs as quickly as you can. After this I’ll run you through a set of exercises to record speed, reflexes, and flexibility. Go ahead when you’re ready.”

The test reminded Jesse a bit of loading magazines or speed loaders for his revolver. Dezzi requested he run through the test five separate times. She seemed interested in which fingers he used more dominantly and how he tended to keep his wrist straight. She mused on whether or not Jesse did the same thing with the other hand. They would have to compare when he started testing the prototype arm, she told him.

They ran through the exercises next. They were familiar motions, like the peg board, that Jesse recalled being walked through by Angela a few times after taking injuries to his hands or his head. He could almost hear the little hems and tuts she made when running through a check-up.

“Everything looks good,” Dezzi said. “I just have one final test.”

“I’m ready for it. Go ahead and shoot.”

“Interesting choice of words.”

Jesse watched as Dezzi pulled the sheet off something on her workbench. It was a revolver and a gun holster. Jesse went very still.

Dezzi picked the belt up and offered it to Jesse. “I want you to go through your usual motions with this for me. Work the cylinder, holster the gun, draw, fire, and clear.”

“Usual motions,” Jesse repeated with an easy smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’m not quite sure I follow. I know I tend to dress like a cowboy, but—”

“Please don’t treat me like I’m stupid.”

Jesse’s mouth snapped shut. Dezzi gave him that look again, and Jesse finally understood why: she was analyzing him. She knew who he was, and now she was sizing him up and comparing him to whatever information she’d found. Was she upset with him? Was she mad? Had she invited him back and drawn out this meeting just to tell him she wasn’t going to work for a man who’d lied to her? At least when Reaper was upset about something Jesse could anticipate it, but he couldn’t read Dezzi’s body language.

The silence drew out until it was almost physically painful. With his heart in his throat Jesse opened his mouth to make some sort of excuse and begin to repair the damage when Dezzi cut him off.

“I don’t blame you,” she said, catching Jesse off-guard. “I’m not exactly a licensed medical professional, and you’re not the first client I’ve had who didn’t want their name spread around. I knew you were lying from the start, but I assumed you had a good reason, so I didn’t pry. Unfortunately for you, your fingerprints were all over that account you gave me.”

“Your hacker friend told you who I was.”
Dezzi nodded. “After that I got curious. Your name was familiar, but I didn’t know who Jesse McCree was, so I did a little research. It seemed prudent, especially considering we met through Martín: he doesn’t have the best record when it comes to friends.”

“And what d’you think of my record?”

Dezzi drew out her answer: “I think that we all have our histories, and it’d be hypocritical of me to judge you for the things you did in the past or the way you choose to live now. You should have told me you were a marksman sooner, though. I had to overhaul quite a bit of my original design when I found out.”

“Apologies.” Jesse tipped his hat. “I wasn’t aware it’d make a difference.”

“Well it does. So let’s see what I’m working with.” Dezzi buckled the gun belt around Jesse’s waist and stepped back to pick up her tablet.

Jesse looked around. “What exactly am I firing at?”

“You aren’t. The gun’s empty. I just need you to go through the motions.”

Jesse made a noise of understanding and moved to the X in the middle of the mat. He pulled the gun and took note almost instantly of its weight and grip and the simple elegance of the design. It was clearly new since antique revolvers didn’t sport safety notches, but the design was vintage with the firing pin integrated into the hammer, and it was meant for black powder ammunition alone. Jesse had only ever seen guns like this in show rooms or in his old Western movies.

Jesse opened the cylinder, swung it shut, and holstered it. He drew the revolver a couple times to get a feel for it. “Okay, give me a countdown.”

“Three, two, one. Now.”

Jesse drew, pulled back the hammer, and squeezed the trigger. He’d been practicing shooting on the weekends with Ruth, and it showed. His movements were smooth and so quick that they seemed to happen all at once even without his left hand to work the hammer.

Dezzi made a noise as the sensors on her face lit up. “I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“But you are,” Jesse pointed out, unable to help preening a little. “Y’know, Overwatch got an invite to the American National Shooting Competition of ’67, on account of their service during the Omnic Crisis. Commander Morrison had me sent down to give a demonstration ’cause Captain Amari wasn’t on hand. I fired six bullets in just under a second using a six-shot revolver. Mighta been able to do seven or eight if I’d used an eight-shot revolver, but I stuck with my service pistol since I was more familiar with it.”

Jesse glanced over at Dezzi, expecting her to be bored but politely listening. Most people got that way when he started talking about gun models or records for marksmanship. In Blackwatch he could make a teammate roll their eyes just by mentioning champion shooter Jerry Miculek.

Dezzi was typing something into her tablet. Then she looked up at Jesse, the lights on her face bright. “Would you say you’re still that fast? We can use that as a baseline for the prosthetic arm. What about reloading?”

“What about it? You mean how fast am I? I’ve managed to fire six rounds, reload, and fire another six in three seconds, give or take a few hundredths of a second. Just a hair over the current world record.”
“Using a speed loader, I assume,” Dezzi said.

Jesse snorted. “Naturally. Tracer could probably load a revolver by hand and fire it in three seconds, but I think that’d be cheating.”

Dezzi tapped her fingers rhythmically against her chin. “I read some of the things you’ve pulled off in the field. But they were all about your precision, not your speed. I focused on making sure the arm would be steady and could perform minute movements. I might have to redesign it again for your quickdraw.”

“Now you got me curious. Just what did you read about me?”

“Aside from the gossip that came out during the U.N. investigations about your involvement in Blackwatch?” Jesse glanced away, expression guarded. Dezzi continued, reciting from her perfect memory, “I read about one incident. January of 2060. A large-scale construction omnic in Philadelphia was hacked. The omnic destroyed three city blocks in an uncontrolled rampage that eventually led out onto the Tacony-Palmyra Bridge. You disabled the omnic by targeting their hydraulic lines with a rifle. It looked to me like a Winchester bolt-action.”


“Not standard issue for an Overwatch agent.”

“It was a gift from Captain Ana Amari. She made sure I could handle any weapon, but she knew that it’s important to play to your strengths, and for long range, I always work best with bolt-action and lever-action rifles.”

“Really? Because I also remember reading a news article from 2066 where you pulled off a thousand yard shot with a revolver,” Dezzi said.

Jesse smirked. “Like I said, I’m best with bolt-action and lever-action. Doesn’t mean I can’t improvise. Remind me, which mission was that?”

“The hostage situation at the French Consulate in Belgium, where the attempted theft of some sensitive documents went sideways, and the thief locked down the building and took fourteen employees and diplomats hostage. Overwatch arrived an hour later at the request of the involved nations. The standoff lasted three hours, then suddenly escalated when the gunman came out with a hostage held at gunpoint. He tried to use them as a shield. Apparently you took down the gunman from a building eleven blocks away.”

“Oh right! I remember now. I was at nerve center. Safety protocol required us to set up at a certain distance from the consulate. Me and a couple other Blackwatch agents were staged there waiting for a signal to move in. That was before we got suspended, mind you. Anyways, I’m sitting pretty, waiting for them to call us in, when the communication controllers start to panic. No one was expectin’ the gunman to come out of the building like he did. There wasn’t time to mobilize, and no one close to the gunman could fire on him without him seeing and killing the hostage.

“I figured the situation was already just about as bad as it could get, so there weren’t much harm in my trying. I found a window with a line of sight, braced myself, and fired. To be fair, the first bullet missed. I overcompensated for the distance when I aimed. Got him on the second try, before he could figure out what that funny little noise a couple feet over his head had been.”

“Were you using a scope?”

“Red dot. Not that it did much good with me having to aim my gun at the sky to make up for the
hundred-fifty-some feet of drop. Didn’t factor in my being on the second floor when I made that first shot.”

Again, Jesse expected Dezzi to show some sign of disinterest, but she appeared to be riveted.

“What caliber revolver was it?”

“9mm. Plasma-propelled.”

“Standard issue?”

“No, custom. Standard issue is a semi-automatic Glock Hybrid. Mine was a Flores.”

Most people didn’t know what a “Flores” was, but judging by how Dezzi straightened up like she’d been shocked, Jesse was willing to hazard a guess that she did.

“How did you get your hands on a Flores piece?” Dezzi asked.

“My commander.” Jesse hesitated before continuing, “He commissioned it for me. But before I answer any more of your questions, why don’t you tell me how in the Sam Hill you know about Amado Flores.”

“Oh.” Dezzi looked away, her hand covering the lower half of her face.

Jesse waited patiently. Amado Flores wasn’t a man who was famous per se, but among sharpshooters and gun collectors he was a legend who had more than earned the title of master gunsmith. He’d run a gun repair shop that had been in his family for generations—trained by his own father just like his father before him. He could handle anything from a muzzle loader to a plasma pistol, and his work was unparalleled.

It was more than a little strange for a prosthetist to recognize his name.

Eventually Dezzi seemed to come to a decision. “I’m a firearms engineer. Or rather, I was built to be one during the Omnic Crisis.”

“You were in the war?”

Dezzi looked down and splayed a hand over the golden central plate of her chest. “My relationship with my past and my programming is complicated. I was aware at the time, but I had no autonomy; I was conscious but unable to think beyond what I was told to do. I never questioned my actions. I’m glad for the life I have now, but I wish it’d been my choice to fight for it. I have to live knowing what my weapons did. It’s…”

“Hard?” Jesse supplied, echoing Dezzi’s words.

The lights on Dezzi’s face flickered faintly. She looked up at him. “Yes.” She tapped two fingers to the side of her head. “The God Program is gone now, but I still have everything I was programmed with. Including thousands of designs for weapons. I turned away from all that after the war, though. I repurposed myself to repair people instead.”

“So what’s all this got to do with Amado Flores? You got his designs in there or something?”

“Nothing I didn’t learn on my own. My blueprints are factory instructions. What Flores does is an artform.” Dezzi brightened, both figuratively and literally. “Over the last few years I’ve been trying to reconcile with my original purpose by exploring the art of gunsmithing. I like trying to make new,
original designs—guns that are like nothing in my database.”

“Why?”

“I suppose… to prove that I can. Fixing omnics and helping humans requires compassion. Art requires creativity. Both are things a machine shouldn’t be able to express. They make me feel like I’m more than just my programming.”

Jesse looked down at the revolver in his hand. He held it closer and began to turn it back and forth in his hand as he examined it. He pulled the hammer back to look at the pin again. He turned it around and flipped the cylinder open, then made a noise in the back of his throat. “You made this,” he guessed.

“I did. How did you know?”

“The style’s classic Americana, but with some newer features. Has to be custom. And the engraving on the frame looks a lot like yer own.” Jesse glanced over at Dezzi, then turned his attention back to what he’d found in the inner workings of the gun. “But there was one other thing that caught my attention. When I pulled the trigger I felt the hammer land a hair too soon, like something’s blockin’ the firing pin.”

Jesse tilted the gun to get better light, even though he already knew what he was looking at. “There’s no hole for the firing pin to reach into the chamber. The gun doesn’t work. You made it that way. Which doesn’t make a heck of a lot of sense except a minute ago you mentioned guns bein’ an artform. I can’t imagine any point to a gun that don’t fire unless it’s not meant to be a gun at all. Mind if I ask you why?”

Dezzi looked away, shoulders hunched. She stayed still for so long that Jesse thought he might not get an answer, but eventually she turned towards him. When she spoke, it was like she was sharing a secret. “I guess I was curious: is a gun still a gun if it’s designed not to fire? Does it still have a purpose? What are we if we can’t do what we were made for?”

Jesse considered that as he closed the cylinder. He’d asked himself that same question after leaving Overwatch. What was he supposed to do with himself—who was he—if he wasn’t useful to someone else? He’d spent his whole life trying to prove himself to other people one way or another.

“I’d argue that things’re never that simple in real life. We’re still us, whether we’re useful or not. People got value just for existing. And so does this gun if you think about it. You gave it a purpose when you made it to answer your question. Sometimes just existing’s gotta be enough.”

“That’s surprisingly philosophical.”

Jesse huffed a laugh. “I’ve had a lotta time to think on it. And what do you mean by surprisingly? I can be a man of action and intellect.” He slipped his finger into the guard of the revolver and performed a complicated series of spins before holstering it.

Dezzi perked up. “I don’t think I was recording. Do that for me again.”

“Sure thing.”

Jesse ran through his usual tricks. He’d learned nearly all of them by copying movies that he paused and rewound over and over, practicing for long hours until he figured out the choreography, and then practicing longer until he knew them by heart. Mac had teased him about it, but assured him it looked cool. The guys in Deadlock and his fellow Overwatch agents called it showing off. The exceptions had been Reinhardt, who had been delighted by Jesse’s tricks, and Genji, who
immediately wanted to try it himself.

Dezzi seemed impressed. Jesse supposed it had more to do with the data she was getting through the holo-field than his skill with a gun. The spins used his full range of motion and required a combination of dexterous fingers and a good feel for the balance of the gun.

“You know,” Jesse said as he tossed the revolver and caught it, “I could use a new gun eventually, if you’d be willin’. The work you did on this pistol is some of the best I’ve ever seen.”

Dezzi tilted her head to the side. “What happened to yours?”

Jesse gave her a pained look. “Lost it in a fight.” Best to keep the lie simple. “I know the man who has it now, and I’d rather avoid him if I can. Trust me, I ain’t happy about it.” Jesse stopped and holstered the gun, then laid his hand on top. “Maybe it’s for the best, though. I’m not so sure I’m fond of the person I used to be when I carried that gun.” He looked over at Dezzi. “I imagine you can understand that, right?”

“I can, yes. But I don’t know about making you a new gun.”

“Ah.” Jesse looked down at the X between his feet on the holo-field mat. “Because of what I’d do with it?”

“Because I don’t know you very well. And because my guns aren’t for sale.” Dezzi inclined her head towards Jesse. “I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize. I get it.” Jesse gave her a reassuring smile. “There’s meaner ways of turning a man down; you ain’t hurt my feelings none. So are we done with scans for today?”

“I think so. I’ll let you know if I need you again before the surgery, but otherwise expect me to set up the operation within the month.”

“Great.” Jesse un buckled the holster and handed it over to Dezzi. “Gotta say, Dezzi, whether it works or not, this really is a beautiful gun. I think if Flores were still around he’d be impressed.”

“That’s quite the compliment. Thank you.”

“It’s a compliment well deserved. If I had any doubts about my new arm—and I’m not saying I did—they’re certainly put to rest now.”

That wasn’t the whole truth. Jesse had plenty of doubts—but not about what Dezzi would build for him. Getting the prosthesis would be a big change. A needed change. Jesse wasn’t sure he was as ready as he claimed to be, but waiting wasn’t going to make it any easier. So he pushed his reservations to the back of his mind and firmly told himself the butterflies in his stomach were just anticipation.

Chapter End Notes

Notes:

Dezzi’s name comes from her designation: FDE-107. Firearms Design Engineer (First generation, Seventh model). She thought it was clever.
I want to talk a bit about Overwatch lore. When I joined the fandom, I was under the impression that during the Crisis omnis were either puppeted by corrupt god programs or only gained sentience at the end of the Crisis, which helped bring around its end. I think there’s still something to that thought since we’ve seen how bastions are programmed and take orders. But now looking at the lore, I can’t be sure that the omnis weren’t sentient and fighting for their freedom as much as the god programs were. It’s a little muddied. I decided for this particular storyline to go with a compromise: the idea that omnis were capable of sentient thought during the Crisis and did truly want freedom and rights, but at the same time lacked a certain level of self-awareness and capacity to question their actions and motives. Once the god programs lost control over their forces, a lot of omnis were left to try and determine new objectives. Suddenly they had free will, and nothing to guide them. As a side note, I imagine there’s some dissonance between older omnis and ones created at the very end of and right after the war, the same as with our own generations during times of change.

While I’m talking about Overwatch lore, apparently the visual source book says that Jesse’s (current) gun was crafted by a legendary gunsmith. Just in case anyone was curious what it is I’m up to—

On the subject of mirror therapy, no one can say with absolute certainty whether or not it actually works. It is a technique sometimes used in combination with other therapies that people do claim is helpful, but it’s difficult to test. However it seems to me that it imitates biofeedback therapy, in which patients are provided with realtime data on their blood pressure, heart rate, etc. and once aware of it are able to more consciously control involuntary functions and muscles. I think the awareness of his own muscles alone would help Jesse control and relax them, at least this once.

Jerry Miculek is a professional speed and competition shooter who holds several world records. I used him as the gold standard for shooting in this story since I assume even after fifty years he’d still hold some of those records. Jesse has brushed close to those records, but he’s always been just a hair shy or right at Miculek’s level. This includes the thousand yard shot, which Miculek has demonstrated. It’s well outside of accurate range, but just at the edge of a revolver’s effective range.

Videos of Miculek:
World record 8 shots in 1 second, and 12 shot reload in 3 seconds
World record 1000 yard shot with 9mm hand gun

Random side note: the gun Dezzi made has the pin integrated into the hammer. Most modern revolvers including Jesse’s old gun would have a transfer bar with the pin integrated into the frame, which is much safer. Here’s a video in case anyone wants to see just for the fun of it.

Next chapter you can look forward to more of Dezzi as we pick up right where we left off with Jesse getting his prosthesis.
Albuquerque, 2 years ago

Jesse woke feeling groggy. His movements were sluggish, and while he had become used to the ghost sensations of his left arm, it felt wrong in a distinctly different way. The end of the stump felt numb except when it tingled unpleasantly.

It took Jesse a moment to remember where he was as he looked around at the sterile medical curtain that boxed him in on all sides. Something stirred in his chest at the thought that flitted through his mind: that he was back in the lab. But then he remembered he was at Dezzi’s apartment. He’d come in for the operation; this was exactly where he was supposed to be.

Memories drifted up to the surface of Jesse’s mind like the silver flash of curious fish. He’d met Dezzi at her workshop, and she’d driven him to the studio apartment from there. She told him she’d stocked the apartment for his use. She couldn’t stay to take care of him, but she had instructions for him to follow, and she’d check in on him each day until he was ready to go home. The studio was sparsely decorated, but clean and bright. The center of the room was dominated by a curtained-off space with a medical bed and machinery.

Jesse might’ve bolted out the door if his body hadn’t locked up when he saw the operating space. It looked nothing like the medical wing of the lab where Talon’s scientists had given him his check-ups, but that didn’t calm Jesse’s pounding heart.

Dezzi had asked Jesse if he needed a little time before they began, but he turned her down and quickly changed into the medical gown she provided. The sooner they started, the sooner they’d finish.

Jesse remembered the awkward pressure of the nitrous oxide mask over his nose. The soft hiss of the air through the hose had made him want to jump out of his skin at first, but the more he breathed, the easier it was to ignore and the more his body relaxed.

With a grimace Jesse now remembered Dezzi putting the IV in his arm. It was just a quick sting to the inside of his elbow. He shouldn’t have been bothered by it; he used needles all the time. But something about feeling it there, under his skin, had set him off. He’d thrashed before he could think about it, knocking Dezzi away like she weighed next to nothing.

Jesse couldn’t reach to pull the IV out of his arm, and that was the only thing that gave him pause enough to realize what he was doing. He pressed himself into the mattress with a groan that bordered on a whimper and dug his fingers into the bedding. The room had begun to spin thanks to the nitrous oxide, and Jesse felt tears slipping from the corners of his eyes. He chastised himself for it, which only made it worse. Now, with a clear head, he realized that it was the nitrous making him too relaxed to control himself, but at the time he couldn’t think that far.
Dezzi had been at his side a moment later, asking Jesse what was wrong. Jesse had slurred something or other about the IV—about feeling it. He also remembered mumbling the words “Let me go, please,” but it’d been too garbled for even him to understand, for which he was thankful.

Dezzi had told Jesse that he was hyperventilating. He was breathing in through his nose, but every exhale escaped as a stuttering gasp. Dezzi guided his mouth closed and instructed him to breathe in and out through his nose so that the gas could begin to work. Her voice, the spinning room, and the cool metal of her hand against his chin were the last things Jesse recalled before everything faded to fog and darkness.

Jesse awkwardly pulled himself upright in the medical bed.

The machines were gone now, and a night stand had been placed beside the bed with water and a couple of pills on a napkin. Jesse reached over to gingerly touch his left arm. It was bandaged and wrapped snugly against his side to limit movement. At his touch, his whole arm up to the shoulder began to tingle unpleasantly. Jesse grimaced and pulled his hand back. He waited until the pins-and-needles sensation faded before helping himself to the painkillers.

Dezzi had left a note on the stand. She’d be back in a few hours to check on Jesse and wanted him to know that if he woke up before then to leave the bandaged area alone, keep it dry, and stay hydrated. It was kind of funny: that was almost exactly what Ruth had lectured Jesse about before he left that morning.

Jesse obediently drank the glass of water on the night stand before carrying it to the kitchen to refill it. His legs felt weak. Hopefully that would wear off soon.

Jesse set a fresh glass of water and a cup of applesauce on the night stand before making his way to the bathroom to relieve himself and clean up. The shower was enticing, but Jesse didn’t think he could stay standing that long, and he had no way to keep his bandages dry. He did grab a washcloth and run it over his face and body. The cool water raised goosebumps across his skin.

Jesse gently scrubbed around the top of the bandages where orange disinfectant peeked out, staining his skin. Needle sensations flickered down his arm. Dezzi had said it would take at least a few weeks for the nerves to heal completely—possibly months. Jesse knew from experience that for him it would only take a few days.

Maybe it was just his imagination, but Jesse thought he could see the faint blue glow of the implants through the bandages. He very carefully ran a finger over one spot and felt unrelenting metal. He pressed just a little harder as he tried to find the edges, and it sent a bone-deep ache racing up his arm. Jesse flinched. Dumb. That was dumb.

“Let’s not do that anymore,” Jesse told himself.

Walking back to bed was more difficult than leaving it had been; the room swam. Jesse sat down hard on the bed and waited for everything to go still again. Had he been standing for too long? Jesse reached for the glass of water and noticed the napkin still sitting there. Of course: the pain meds were making him woozy. He’d have to cut down on the dosage unless he really needed it. There was no way Jesse was going to be able to handle the next few days if he felt disoriented and weak the whole time. Just the thought made his stomach churn.

There wasn’t much to be had in the way of entertainment, but Jesse’d had the foresight to pack a tablet along with his one-handed keyboard so he could work on his next article and do a little reading. He’d just published an overview on the history of gay marriage after being inspired by his niece’s school project, and it seemed to be a hit. A couple people even offered him reading
suggestions if he was curious to dig deeper into the topic. Right now, though, Jesse was working on a current news piece. He’d been contacted by a reader who was curious to know what he thought of the power company LumériCo, and the more Jesse looked into it, the shadier it proved to be.

Jesse couldn’t get hold of anything solid without hiring a hacker or going down to Mexico to investigate the old-fashioned way, but the “coincidences” were piled high: unlisted company positions with vague descriptions, news articles discussing LumériCo’s shareholders and their undisclosed annual bonuses that were quickly buried or taken down (but not before a few readers managed to save copies), politicians who were perhaps a little too friendly with CEO Guillermo Portero, and some recent government policies that just happened to benefit LumériCo while leaving smaller energy companies to scrape by.

Jesse couldn’t call the corporation dirty without discrediting himself, but there was nothing stopping him from laying out the evidence and making some rather blunt insinuations. Jesse opened up his research files and a fresh document, then started typing.

If you think LumériCo’s got your best interests at heart, you may be in for a nasty surprise. The Mexican energy company, which took part in the post-Crisis reconstruction of the country’s infrastructure, may have had good intentions when it began erecting its power plants, but even the best intentions can become twisted when government power and money get involved. As our good friend John Dalberg-Acton once said: “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

LumériCo is not a government agency created by and for the people. It’s a business. Worse, it’s mega-corporation with a near monopoly on the entire nation’s energy sector. Not only does it have the money to influence anyone it wants, but it has the ability to threaten the livelihood and even lives of the citizens of Mexico simply by cutting off their power. So long as that possibility hangs over the heads of Mexico’s politicians like a sword suspended by a string, any policy made which affects LumériCo is a conflict of interest. And just what kinds of policies are we talking about here? That’s what I wanted to know, so I did a little digging, and you’ll be amazed what I found…

At some point either the need for rest or the painkillers snuck up on Jesse, and he drifted off. He woke to the faint beeping of the front door keypad. His tablet was powered down in his lap, and he’d gotten a crick in his neck from sleeping upright. The door swung open to let Dezzi into the apartment.

Jesse stretched and groaned, then turned his tablet on to see where he’d left off. He’d passed out halfway through his rough draft. He turned it off again and set it on the night stand before grabbing his water.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” Dezzi apologized. “How are you feeling?”

“I could be worse,” Jesse said lightly.

“Do you know when you took your pain meds?”

“No, sorry, but I’ll wait a while all the same.” Jesse swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up properly. The room didn’t spin like before. That alone was worth putting up with the discomfort of his arm. His stomach growled. Jesse grabbed the applesauce cup he’d forgotten to eat earlier.

“I’ll heat you up some soup,” Dezzi offered. “You should eat light, simple foods for the first day or so until the anesthesia wears off completely.”
Jesse was pretty sure his metabolism had already burned through that, but he decided to stick to doctor’s orders anyway. “I’ll take you up on that offer. So what’s with the box?” Jesse gestured with his applesauce cup in hand. Dezzi had come in carrying a long, rectangular metal case.

Dezzi hefted the case up higher. “This? I wanted to show you how your new arm is progressing. It’s not done yet, and it’s just the prototype, not the finished product, but I thought you might like to see all the same.” She set it on the dining table. “Go ahead and take a look while I get you some food. Try not to get applesauce on it.”

Jesse walked over. There was a lock on the case—omnicode, not biometric—that glowed green. Jesse flicked the latches up and opened the lid. Inside the case, cushioned on shaped foam, was a 3D model of a prosthetic arm. The edges had been buffed, but Jesse could still see the distinct parallel lines left behind by the printer. Dezzi had given Jesse a rough explanation of the process. The plastic plates were only temporary until Dezzi was satisfied with the design. Then she’d use them to make molds for the metal pieces. She planned to use a strong, lightweight alloy preferred by her omnic clients. It should give Jesse both the ease of movement and durability he was hoping for.

Underneath the plastic plates Jesse could see a metal framework, like bones, which supported a complicated network of wires. The elbow should contain the power source and microprocessor if Jesse remembered correctly, and a tube ran up the side of the arm, connecting directly to the delicate machinery in the palm that would mimic tendons.

With a pot set on the burner to heat, Dezzi came over. “You can touch it. It won’t break,” she said. She lifted the arm out of the case and turned it over for Jesse to inspect.

Some of the outer plating was still missing, but Dezzi had gone ahead and attached the armor piece that would lay over the back of the forearm. She’d etched a stylized skull into it. Jesse couldn’t help being amused. “Already planning out the engraving, huh? Why a skull?”

“I thought it suited you, but I’ll change it if you want. Maybe something more classic Western for the cowboy? I could do some of my signature tooling.”

“No no, I like this.” It reminded Jesse of his old tattoo in a way. “So tell me about the arm. How’s it work?”

Dezzi’s lights flashed up and down. “Let’s see, where to start?” She turned the prosthesis around so Jesse could see the socket. “This is where the arm attaches. The nodes latch on automatically when aligned; putting the prosthesis on will become easier as you get a feel for it. It has safety features including a quick release in case of an emergency. You can see that inside it has a breathable foam lining that won’t block the attachment ports. You can take it out and wash it. I’ll provide a few so you can trade them out to keep them clean. Your arm’s musculature is going to change over time, that’s just a given, so if the prosthesis ever starts to fit loose or cause discomfort, you can have a medical professional take scans of your arm, and I’ll fashion new inserts for you.”

“Good to know. I hadn’t thought about that.”

“It’s not something that patients with permanent prostheses have to worry about, but yours is different. The upside is you can regularly remove it and wear a compression sock to aid circulation and cut down on residual pain. That’s a problem for a lot of my clients.”

Dezzi laid the arm down on the table. She manipulated something at the elbow that Jesse couldn’t see, and the skull-etched plate came free from the arm. Dezzi set it aside. With a little more work the casing that ran down the back of the forearm retracted, each plate laying neatly under the next as it slid up to the elbow to reveal the wiring inside. “I’ll show you how to do this once the prototype’s
complete,” Dezzi said. “This is how you’ll open the casing to perform maintenance.”

She pointed to a black box nestled in the wiring of the arm. “Here’s where the dual battery is housed. It’s waterproof. Most of the arm is, although you should avoid submerging it if you can. Water will make the prosthesis sluggish and can cause damage over time.

“When the main battery dies, the backup kicks in and signals you to recharge. The backup lasts twenty four hours. I put my own spin on it, though: the battery actually charges using the kinetic energy you generate. You keep the battery powered simply by moving your arm around, so it’ll last weeks at a time instead of days before you have to plug it in.”

“Clever,” Jesse said. “That’ll come in real handy when I’m on the road.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Dezzi manually slid the plates back over the arm until they clicked into place, then moved on to the hand. She unhooked the palm plate so Jesse could get a better look at the inside.

“That’s an awful lot of wires. It needs all that just to move?” Jesse asked.

“No, just the orange hydraulic lines that run along the fingers here,” Dezzi said as she reached in and pointed. She ran her finger over the thin red wires that wove between the orange lines and attached to the various surfaces inside the robotic hand. “These are the sensors. They’ll work like nerves, detecting pressure against the plates of your hand. You won’t be able to feel things like pain or heat, but you should be able to tell when you’re touching something and how hard you’re gripping it. There’ll still be a learning curve, so don’t expect to start doing things like you used to right away.”

“Is that how things feel for omnics?”

Dezzi’s head tipped to the side, and Jesse wondered if maybe it’d been impolite of him to ask. “You and I are wired differently,” Dezzi said after some thought. “I can make prostheses mimic my detection systems, but your brain just can’t handle the information the way my processor does. For instance I might not feel pain, but I can sense damage, and my processor sends back warnings in response and causes involuntary reactions to stop the damage—which is nearly the same as being in pain. And my sensors are fine-tuned enough to detect things like temperature, air flow, and even humidity.”

Jesse listened intently, brows drawn together. “Sounds like you feel things almost exactly th’ same way as humans.”

Dezzi bobbed her head. “Almost, but not quite. Perhaps to the same degree but in a different way; it’s more data than sensation. I tried building my earliest human prostheses the same way I built new limbs for other omnics, but humans just don’t feel robotic limbs the way we do. Your brains don’t interpret the signals from the detection system quite the same way as you do your own nerves. Feeling basic pressure is a good first step, though. Maybe with time I’ll find a solution, or my research will help someone else figure it out. Building your arm has already set my work ahead by leaps and bounds. I have a few clients who deal with chronic pain who might be interested in switching to a removable prosthesis even with all of the surgery it’d require.”

Jesse chewed at his lower lip thoughtfully. “Hey, Dezzi, how would you feel about me writin’ an article about your work? Obviously I’d respect your privacy and keep your name out of the article, but I bet a lotta people would be interested in hearin’ about your scientific advances.”

“Writing…? You mean for that blog I found when I looked up your cover name?” Dezzi asked.
Jesse looked bashful. He’d forgotten he gave her Joel’s full name. Still, he didn’t back down. “Yeah. What’cha say? It’s a great way to get your research out there if that’s what you want.”

Dezzi busied herself with putting the arm back into the case. The lights on her face pulsed up and down rhythmically. Finally she turned back to Jesse. “I’ll let you write about me, but only if I get something in return.”

“I can’t imagine I have much to give, but I’ll bite: what do you want?”

“Schematics for the Flores revolver.”

“I don’t have that on me,” Jesse said, a little disheartened.

“Then I’ll take whatever you can give me. Write down everything you know about your gun’s specs. No detail is too small. Sketch it for me, too, if you can. Give me everything you have, and I’ll let you write your article.”

It was Jesse’s turn to look thoughtful. Dezzi had a point: he knew that gun like it was a part of him. And it’d be a shame for Amado Flores’s work to fade into obscurity.

Jesse had met Amado Flores just once when Reyes took him down to Xalapa, Mexico. Jesse’s revolver had taken fire damage, and he was worried that he’d cracked the frame, too. He himself was sporting a sprained wrist, but he felt far worse about having to present his damaged gun to the man who’d been kind enough to make it for him.

Amado Flores was an unassuming older man with a gray mustache and spectacles. He was short, portly, and nicely dressed. He’d looked stony-faced while talking with Gabriel about what happened to the gun, but when Jesse apologized to him, Amado had broken into a smile that made his cheeks round and rosy, and reassured Jesse that the gun was sturdier than he gave it credit for.

Amado told them he’d only need a few days, and to take in the sights while he worked. Jesse tried to stay away, but he couldn’t fight down his curiosity. He asked if he could visit the shop while Amado worked, and the gunsmith agreed so long as Jesse made sure to stay out of the way. Jesse found himself a stool in the corner and promised to stay put. He didn’t try to chat with Amado like he would have normally; the man was completely engrossed in his work and likely wouldn’t have responded to Jesse anyways. Amado only stopped to eat lunch, which he always sent Jesse out to buy for the both of them with a handful of crumpled pesos. It was a pleasant way to pass the time, and it kept Jesse out of trouble.

The fire damage turned out to be almost entirely superficial. Still, Amado told them it was smart to have him handle the cleaning. He knew best how to take the gun apart, clean every piece thoroughly, and put it all back together. He even took the time to show Jesse how to do it himself and had him practice a few times. He’d been impressed how quickly Jesse picked it up.

The grip needed to be refashioned; the composite material hadn’t handled the fire well. Jesse watched as Amado proceeded to handcraft a new grip for the pistol—from raw materials no less—over the course of just a couple days.

Jesse hadn’t understood until then just how much work had gone into the revolver. Amado had laughed at him when he took it back, handling it like it was made of glass. It was a gun. A tool. It was designed to look and be practical, nothing more. But under Amado’s hands, for a brief moment, it had been something else. Jesse had seen dedication, experience, and passion in Amado’s careful ministrations.
Jesse thought about the gun Dezzi had let him borrow. He remembered its perfect balance; the proportions of the barrel, frame, and cylinder; the checkered rosewood grips; the smooth action of the hammer and trigger. A pistol that rivaled the guns he’d seen laid out on Amado Flores’s work table all those years ago. Decades of programming, practice, and skill poured into creating a work of art in the shape of a revolver.

Dezzi was still waiting for an answer.

“I’m not sure it’d be right to trade you those specs, Dezzi,” Jesse said after some thought. “As much as I wanna write about you.”

Dezzi turned away, sensors dimming.

Jesse held up a hand. “Hold on now, let me speak my piece. I wasn’t finished. I’m not gonna trade the specs for the article because I wanna give ‘em to you as a gift. No strings attached.”

The surprise was evident in Dezzi’s voice when she asked, “Really?”

Jesse nodded. “I’ll write down everything I know. I can’t think of anyone better to share Flores’s work with. I’m sure you’ll make something amazing.”

“That’s very charitable of you,” Dezzi said warmly.

The pot on the stove had begun to bubble. Jesse walked over to pull it off the burner. “I’m a charitable sort of man,” he said.

Dezzi passed him a bowl. “A charitable man with no head for business, or you would’ve taken the trade.”

Jesse smiled good-naturedly as he dished up. “I could have worse qualities. So how soon can I expect my arm to be done?”

Dezzi tapped her fingers against her thumb as she calculated the numbers in her head. “I can have the basic structure complete and ready for you to practice with by the end of the week if you’re healed enough by then. I’ll need a month to complete everything else, though, and another month for troubleshooting to work the kinks out.”

“I’ll be good to go by the end of the week,” Jesse said confidently.

Dezzi let out a short, harsh whir. “I’ll be the judge of that, not you.”

“End of the week. I’ll be ready to test that arm,” Jesse said, undeterred.

Chapter End Notes

Amado Flores and his shop are based on this article, The Last Gunsmith.

Jesse’s experience at the start of the operation might not be entirely accurate, but I did my best to make it feel real. As a reminder, I started this story while sitting around the house with my jaw wired shut, so I decided to put my unfortunate experience to use writing this scene. FIY that spinning sensation is the worst. Also hydrocodone will take the legs right out from under you if you’re a lightweight like me.
A lot of this chapter was about establishing details for myself about how the prosthesis works, and what it can and can’t do. Some “rules” to operate by as I continue the story.

There’s another purpose to this chapter, which I suspect many of you can already guess at. Humor me, though, and pretend to be surprised when it finally comes to fruition.

IMPORTANT: I want to let you all know, because you’ve been such lovely readers, that there won’t be an update for a few weeks. I have one buffer chapter left, but I think this is a good place for a quick pause. I don’t want to rush and compromise the quality of the story. This story will be finished, don’t worry. I have a solid outline, the next chapter, two unfinished chapters after that, and a rather ambitious plan to make this a series, so this isn’t going to sit dead for a year. When I say a few weeks, I mean just a few weeks, I promise.

Since there won’t be a chapter next week, enjoy this short preview of Chapter 21: “Nepal”

_Reaper let himself drift as fog, noiseless, between the shadows of the monastery’s courtyard. Red petals blanketing the ground were sent rolling in his wake as if touched by a light breeze. Soft voices reached him, and Reaper ducked down behind the base of a golden statue. The moon shone, indistinct, through a veil of clouds. Hopefully it would be enough to obscure Reaper’s presence if he’d miscalculated where the voices were coming from._

_If he’d had his way, Reaper would have taken a few more weeks to send in an undercover recon team to scope out the monastery. The Shambali Order welcomed omnic and human pilgrims alike, so it would have been easy to send in two or three people, staggered over time, to get a look at the inner rooms and passages of the ancient structure. Unfortunately their target, Master Mondatta, wouldn’t be there in a few weeks._
Chapter Notes

Additional Chapter 21 tags: Additional canon characters, Omnics, Blink and you'll miss it omnic body horror, Guns, Comfort in unexpected places

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shambali Monastery, Nepal, 4 years ago

Reaper let himself drift as fog, noiseless, between the shadows of the monastery’s courtyard. Red petals blanketing the ground were sent rolling in his wake as if touched by a light breeze. Hearing the sound of distant voices, Reaper ducked behind the base of a golden statue and waited for them to pass. The moon shone, indistinct, through a veil of clouds. Hopefully it would be enough to obscure Reaper’s presence if he’d miscalculated where the voices were coming from.

If he’d had his way, Reaper would have taken a few more weeks to send in an undercover recon team to scope out the monastery. The Shambali Order welcomed omnic and human pilgrims, so it would have been easy to send in two or three people, staggered over time, to get a look at the inner rooms and passages of the ancient structure. Unfortunately Talon’s target, Master Mondatta, wouldn’t be there in a few weeks.

Mondatta had decided just a few days ago that he wanted to go on a trek around the world. Something about reconnecting with the Order’s principle of compassion. Word of the trip reached Talon’s ears mere hours before it hit the news. Damned inconvenient. But in some ways it worked in Reaper’s favor.

Just a month ago Reaper had sent a team back to Italy—along with McCree—to learn where the Janus AI was being moved. In an unexpected turn of good luck, McCree had managed to slip into the low-security areas as a custodian, pickpocketed one of the guards for their keycard, and made off with a daughterboard. It was an extension of Janus’s motherboard, removed and isolated to prevent Janus’s access to the information it contained.

The daughterboard contained Janus’s unique Crisis-era invention: a viral program that let Janus take over any machine or omnic. Rather than relying on remote signals, the virus spread through data transferral and could remain dormant for an indefinite period of time until activated. Janus didn’t just puppet these omnics like some other god programs: it transferred a copy of itself into the infected machine. Because of this, Janus proved to be a devastating opponent. It knew where all of its soldiers were at any given time and could coordinate them almost simultaneously; and thanks to its multitude of copies, it refused to die even after the omnium housing the original program was destroyed.

It was hell trying to track down every infected omnic. Eventually Janus was isolated down to a single supercomputer, its virus halted in its tracks through quarantine and a specially designed antivirus program. The Italian government would have happily destroyed what was left of Janus if it hadn’t revealed that it’d designed a failsafe that would ensure its global broadcast if the computer was damaged in any way. That wasn’t a risk anyone could afford to take, so Janus had been secured instead.

The daughterboard didn’t carry any part of Janus, but it did contain the base coding for the virus,
which would transfer any AI or programming paired with it, and had proven 100% effective in overshadowing pre-existing AIs in controlled trials. Talon’s best computer programmers had designed a sleeper agent AI loyal to Talon to be used on omnics. Now with the virus in hand, they only needed a target. And who better than Tekhartha Mondatta, who had worldwide connections and the trust of millions of people? Besides, his talk of peace and unity had started to become a thorn in Talon’s side.

It would have been difficult to get to Mondatta normally, but right now the monastery’s usual schedule was in upheaval thanks to Mondatta’s sudden travel plans. The monks and visitors came and went at odd hours in unusual patterns—difficult to predict, but also easy to take advantage of. The best part was Mondatta’s own daily routine had been thrown into chaos by his plans. Where before he was constantly involved in the activities of the monks, now he had his own matters to attend to. Reaper held out hope that one of his teams would manage to catch Mondatta alone.

The voices Reaper had heard drifted down a path away from him now and eventually faded.

“Status report,” Reaper said quietly into the comms. “I’m at 3C.”

“Mendes, Anderson, and Blind,” a voice responded. “Sector 4E. Moving in on the monastery. A group of five monks passed us going down into the village. We need to be careful to avoid them on our way back.”

“Olsson and Koval. Sector 3B. We’re moving towards your position now. All quiet.”

“Careful,” Reaper warned. “At least two civilians, unidentified, headed in your direction.”

There was a double tap across the comms, signaling Olsson or Koval had spotted the people Reaper was talking about and couldn’t respond verbally.

“This is Suttner and McCree. Sector 2B. McCree and I had to split up. I think someone’s coming my way. Going silent.”

“McCree reporting. Sector 1C. Permission to move ahead to target?”

McCree was close to the sanctum now—and any number of monks who might be going about their business studying or meditating. “Hold position. Wait for Suttner to join you before you move in,” Reaper ordered.

Reaper needed to hurry. He should have already reached Mondatta’s personal chambers by now. And the other two teams, who were supposed to be positioned at the library and shrine where Mondatta spent a large portion of his time, were even further behind schedule. They were lucky to have avoided detection so far, but that wouldn’t count for much if their target slipped through their fingers, and there was no way they’d have an opportunity like this again any time soon.

There was no one in sight. Reaper pushed on, sneaking across the courtyard and into the portion of the monastery that, based on repeated aerial scans, he believed to be the living quarters for the monks. Many of the doors stood open, and none of them had locks. The rooms were small and sparse. Larger buildings looked to be communal.

Reaper moved more cautiously now, aware that so late at night most of the monks should be here, hopefully resting, but there was no guarantee. The risk of being spotted was high. There was a reason Reaper had chosen to cover Mondatta’s chambers himself: he stood the best chance of getting there and out again undetected.

The light of a lamp appeared around the corner and grew steadily brighter. Without thinking,
Reaper turned to smoke and retreated to the nearest cover he could find. The long, open hall he found himself in appeared to be a kitchen for human guests. He ducked into the corner beside the door frame and waited for whoever it was to pass by.

“Will you be joining Master Mondatta on his journey then?”

“I was the one who proposed the idea. It would be silly of me to stay behind now.”

Reaper’s brow furrowed. English? Not Nepali or one of the other local languages? Maybe English was the only language they had in common. Both voices were accented along with being heavily synthesized.

“In that case, Master Zenyatta, I would like to come as well.”

That voice was familiar. Reaper knew it, but from where?

“If that’s what you want. It would be nice to have your company.”

“I think it would be good for me. As much as I have enjoyed my time here, I would like to start putting your lessons to practical use. Harmony, compassion, mindfulness—these are easier to practice around other people.”

“My feelings on the matter exactly. Compassion is not some school subject to be taught. It must be performed. And one cannot perform compassion from a distance. It will be good for all of us to connect with the world again and feel its harmony firsthand. Perhaps then things here can begin to change.”

“… And if nothing changes? What then?”

“Then… perhaps the change must come from me.”

“I don’t understand.”

There was a pause. Metallic feet clicked on the cobblestone outside. “I have just been thinking: rather than trying to convince the other monks to change how we spread our message, perhaps I should be acting as an example.”

“You’re talking about leaving.”

“That’s not quite what I—”

“I’ll come with you.”

“Genji—”

Reaper’s breath caught in his throat. No. He risked a glance out through a partially shuttered window.

“You said yourself that it would be nice to have company. And I can learn anywhere,” Genji said as he waved an arm out around himself in demonstration. The green accents of his body glowed like fireflies in the dark, dimmed somewhat by the warm light of the lamp held by the omnic monk he was speaking to.

Reaper pressed himself up against the wall. Genji shouldn’t be here. This was all wrong. What was Genji doing in Nepal of all places? Reaper knew Genji had been in turmoil and looking to do some soul searching when he left Blackwatch, but for his wandering to lead him here, and for
Reaper to only learn of it now—

Reaper should have insisted on the recon. He never would have signed off on this mission if he’d known. Genji wasn’t one of his agents anymore, which made him unpredictable and dangerous. If Talon tripped any kind of alarm, then Genji would be on them in a heartbeat with blade drawn and every ounce of his training and deadly power brought to bear. Reaper knew firsthand the threat he posed.

Then there was McCree. McCree might stand a chance in a fight against Genji, but Reaper knew there was no way he’d raise a hand against his old teammate. He might have been willing to shoot at holographic targets of his friends, but that didn’t mean a thing out in the field. In fact, if McCree found out Genji was here, it might spur him to do something stupid like warn the monastery or even attack the infiltration team. The shock restraints wouldn’t matter; McCree would rather die than let anything happen to Genji.

Reaper listened to Genji and his monk friend outside.

“I suppose I can’t argue your logic. It’s just that there’s so much more you could learn here.”

“You said yourself that you aren’t sure this is the right way to teach the path of enlightenment. Let’s find out together if your way is the better one. Besides: you’ve never gone very far from the monastery, have you?”

“Are you saying I can’t handle myself?” the omnic said with a chuckle.

“I’m just saying it wouldn’t hurt to have someone who is… street smart.”

“Hm. You may have a point. And what will you do if I turn down your offer?”

“Then I will go my own way, I suppose.” Genji’s voice took on a playful tone. “You’ve said yourself that life is mysterious. We are all connected; perhaps our paths will cross again in the future.”

“Oh will it? I imagine sooner rather than later. You are not very subtle, Genji.”

“So I have been told,” Genji replied with a soft laugh.

The two of them walked away, vanishing into the maze of paths that made up the lower monastery.

Reaper strained to hear any more noise, but there was only silence.

“The mission’s been compromised,” Reaper hissed into the comms. “Pull back to the extraction point immediately.”

“What?” someone asked, sounding incredulous.

“Did I stutter? I said pull out and head for the extraction point. Now.”

Reaper didn’t wait for confirmation. He slipped out the door and began to make his way back to the base of the mountain and the stealth transport parked outside the village.

***

“—pull out and head for the extraction point. Now.” Jesse twitched at the sharp tone of Reaper’s voice. Something had gone wrong. He was glad it wasn’t his fault, but still, he wished he’d gotten
that order about five minutes ago—because he was currently holding Tekhartha Mondatta at
gunpoint.

Mondatta stood perfectly still with his back to Jesse, his hands held at either side of his head as he
waited for Jesse to do something.

Jesse hadn’t expected Mondatta to walk into the room he was hiding in. Reflexes had his gun in
his hand before the door finished closing. His hand shot up to switch his throat mic off.

“Don’t. Move.” Jesse spoke in a low voice that he hoped sounded threatening, but even he could
hear the underlying tension of a man who wasn’t prepared to be in the situation he’d found himself
in. He suddenly wished he was wearing one of those night-vision ballistics masks the rest of the team
was wearing, if only so Mondatta couldn’t read his expression. “Real slow now get your hands up
where I can see them, and step away from that door. Don’t try to call for help; I’m a lot faster’n you
are.”

“...I understand,” Mondatta had said calmly as he complied.

Jesse ran his tongue over his dry lips. He opened a pouch on his belt with his free hand and pulled
out the data stick he’d been given. It was small and fragile, but with what it contained it might as well
have been a bullet.

Jesse watched Mondatta’s posture shift, his head tip up a hair, his shoulders drop back, and a half
dozen other nonverbal tics that acted as omnic micro-expressions. Jesse had been trained to recognize
them for undercover work, so he could tell what the monk was probably thinking. Mondatta couldn’t
possibly know what the data stick held, but he seemed to have come up with some ideas based on his
reaction. It couldn’t be any good considering it was in the hands of a man wearing Talon tactical gear
and pointing a gun at him anyway.

In the blink of an eye Jesse saw tension flare up into panic and fear only to quickly melt into
acceptance. Jesse had seen that same body language before, albeit slower, in dying men. Was it that
the omnic could process emotions quicker than a human? Or simply that Mondatta was already at
peace with the idea of dying?

Killing him might’ve been kinder.

Jesse knew what the data stick would do; he’d been briefed on it. The virus would lie dormant in
Mondatta’s systems until activated, and he himself would have no memory of this encounter thanks
to a subroutine the techs had added in. Once triggered, it would completely suppress Mondatta’s
mind and replace him with the Talon AI. He would become a prisoner in his own body and a
weapon against all those he once loved.

In his periphery, Jesse saw the red glow of the restraint around his right wrist peeking out from
under his sleeve.

“Turn around and open up the access panel to your central processor.”

Mondatta didn’t move. Jesse saw something akin to consideration in the tilt of his head. He
needed to put a stop to whatever Mondatta was thinking, and fast, before he did something stupid.

“How many monks would you say are in the sanctum right now?” Jesse asked, his voice as
neutral as he could manage.

Mondatta seemed surprised by the question. His head ducked as he drew on his memory banks,
then lifted to meet Jesse’s gaze again. “Fourteen.”
Jesse steeled himself as he said his next words, “My pistol’s magazine holds fifteen cartridges. That’s one bullet for each of you, and you best believe me when I say I won’t miss.” He let that sink in before continuing. “Or you can do what I say, and they live.”

Mondatta looked to the door. The sensors of his face glowed brightly for a moment. “All right, all right,” he said placatingly.

Jesse watched as Mondatta turned around. The bolts rotated on the sides of his head, his face plate lifted and drew away, then the plate at the back of his head slid down, revealing the ports of his processor.

Jesse took a step forward, then stopped. He couldn’t afford to freeze up. Not right now. He let out a harsh breath through his nose, his teeth gritted.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” Mondatta said. “Right now, in this moment, you’ve done nothing wrong. You can still turn back. I promise I won’t tell anyone you were here.” His voice gave Jesse pause more than his words. He wasn’t begging. He spoke softly like he was trying to comfort Jesse, which was the most ridiculous thing imaginable. “You still have a choice,” Mondatta reassured.

Something gripped Jesse’s heart in his chest and squeezed it tight. He’d let his gun drop a few inches off target, but now he lifted it again. “That’s not true.”

“But it is.”

“No, it isn’t. I don’t expect you to understand.” Jesse swallowed, then kept going, “It’s either me or you. And even if I don’t do this, Talon’s gonna get what it wants one way or another, I can promise you that.”

“In that case,” Mondatta said quietly, “go ahead. And know that I forgive you for what you’re about to do.”

Jesse might have shrugged those words off as the simple doctrine of someone who preached love so often that it’d become reflex, except that Mondatta spoke with such tenderness and such conviction that Jesse really did believe him. Why did he have to go and say a thing like that?

Maybe Mondatta could forgive him, but Jesse wasn’t so sure he’d be able to do the same.

Jesse slid his finger out of the trigger guard. He needed a second to think.

Then the order came over the comms to retreat.

It should have been a relief, but now Jesse was in a new kind of bind. He’d engaged the target, which meant Mondatta knew about him and about Talon’s attack on the monastery. Reaper didn’t want witnesses under any circumstances, and if Reaper found out how close Jesse had gotten to infecting Mondatta with the virus only to retreat, well, he’d like that even less.

The solution, of course, was simple. If Jesse infected Mondatta with the virus, it would solve both of his problems. He’d have completed his mission, and Mondatta wouldn’t remember a thing. All it would cost was one omnic’s life.

Jesse stuffed the data stick back into the pouch on his belt. “Tell me how to get out of here.”

“What?” Mondatta tilted his head to the side. Jesse caught a glimpse behind the open faceplate of glowing, blue sensor cables and an internal frame that looked eerily skull-like.
Jesse didn’t react. It was a little disturbing, but nothing he hadn’t seen before in his line of work. “I just got orders to retreat. If you’re serious about not wantin’ anyone to get hurt, then tell me how to get out of here without runnin’ into any of the other monks.”

Mondatta’s faceplate closed up as he turned around. “I can do better than that.” He held out a hand, and a panel in his palm slid open. A three-dimensional holographic map appeared over Mondatta’s hand. A red line trailed from the sanctum down through the lesser-used halls of the monastery, skirted the training grounds, and rounded the outer shrine before descending down the mountain by a service path that eventually connected with the main road to the village.

Jesse hurriedly committed the route to memory. “All right, got it. Now listen, you gotta keep what happened tonight a secret, you understand? For your sake and mine. If Talon ever gets wind that you saw me, they’ll come down hard on the both of us.”

Mondatta nodded.

“Talon probably won’t be able to make a move on the monastery again,” Jesse reasoned. “Whatever has my commander calling a retreat has to be something serious. Still, prepare for the worst. You should increase security, but you gotta be subtle about it, and you need to draw it out over a period of time so it won’t look suspicious. Y’might want to consider canceling that trip of yours, too. Stay on the lookout: you know they want you now, so you need to be careful.”

“You as well,” Mondatta said. “I wish I could do something to repay you. What you are doing is very brave.”

Jesse scoffed. That wasn’t what it felt like to him. Jesse didn’t know what he would have done if the order hadn’t come in when it did. He and Mondatta just got lucky this time around, that’s all.

Someone knocked on the door.

Jesse went rigid, and his gun shifted from Mondatta to the door on instinct. He threw a look at Mondatta.

“Brother, are you going to join us?” the monk outside called.

The doorknob began to turn.

“Don’t!” Mondatta called out. Whether or not it was intentional, he shifted to place himself between Jesse and the door. Jesse wasn’t sure whether he was trying to shield the other monk or hide Jesse. “I’m in the middle of a private conversation with someone. I will be happy to join you as soon as I’m done here,” Mondatta said.

The doorknob jumped back into place. “My apologies. We will wait for you to join us before we begin meditation.”

Mondatta turned to Jesse. He stretched out a hand as if to lay it on Jesse’s shoulder, but it merely hovered for a moment before Mondatta clasped his hands together. The gun pointed at him was probably a deterrent. “As you said, I don’t understand what you’re going through, but I wish you the strength to endure it. This suffering can only last so long. Nothing will change the fact that you have suffered, but one day you will leave it behind you. You have a good heart. Do not let them take it from you.”

Jesse gave Mondatta an incredulous look. He’d nearly brainwashed the monk, and his response was to start spouting motivational proverbs at Jesse. “You got no idea the sort of man I am.”
“I think I do, actually. Do you want to know why?”

“No really.”

Mondatta laughed. “You said if I complied then you would let the other monks live. Cruel men do not think of omnis as living.”

“It’s just a turn of phrase. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Then why was it so hard for you to choose between my life and yours?”

Jesse couldn’t come up with a retort. He floundered as he tried to think of something to say when he heard a voice over his comms again: “This is Blind. Our group is at the evac point.”

“I have to go,” Jesse said brusquely. He retreated to the door he’d entered by, careful not to turn his back on Mondatta even now. He eased the door open and checked to make sure no one would see him leaving. He looked over at Mondatta. “Remember. Not a word.”

Mondatta bowed his head. “I promise. Peace and blessings be upon you, stranger.”

Jesse didn’t respond. He hesitated a moment in the door, then stepped through and shut it behind him.

Jesse waited until he’d reached the training grounds before turning his throat mic back on.

“McCree reporting. I’m at sector 2E. Suttner, where are you?”

“I pulled back to 3B. How’d you end up all the way over there?”

“Exit route wasn’t clear. This way’s better anyhow. Meet you at 4E, and we can head for the evac point.”

The Corvid was prepped and ready for lift-off when Jesse and Suttner finally made it. They’d had some difficulty getting around a group of monks that were headed home late, but they’d managed to avoid them.

Reaper stood at the bottom of the ramp. “Anything to report?”

Suttner shook his head. “I got pinned down for a while. Couldn’t get any farther.” He pulled out his data stick and handed it over to Reaper.

“And you, McCree?”

Jesse willed his heart to stop pounding against his ribs. He wanted to squirm under Reaper’s gaze, but he held firm. “I saw Mondatta.”

Reaper stiffened. “And?”

“There were other monks around. I couldn’t do it.”

Reaper made a displeased noise as he looked away. The sound was like a gun cocking in Jesse’s ears. He waited for Reaper to begin questioning him and picking his story apart. Jesse’d used the whole climb down the mountain to figure out the simplest narrative to avoid that happening, but Reaper had a knack for sussing out the truth when he suspected he was being lied to. Jesse had learned that the hard way. He wondered sometimes what line of work Reaper was in before he joined Talon.
Reaper turned his attention back to Jesse and held out his hand.

“Uh…?”

“The data stick, McCree.”

“Oh.” Jesse pulled it out of his pouch and handed it over.

“Get on the ship.”

“Yes sir.”

Jesse climbed the ramp, dropped into an empty seat, and slumped back against the wall with a sigh. His heart pounded violently in his chest, and he felt lightheaded. He’d gotten away with it.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome back, and thank you guys for your patience and lovely words.

While I didn’t get as much written as I would have liked, the break has been nice. The holidays were busy, I had presents to cross-stitch, and I wrote and uploaded a separate McHanzo story in the meantime (plus a sequel I am working on right now). Sadly I haven’t managed to write enough for this story to start comfortably posting every week again. There’s a little three-chapter mini arc coming up next; I’m going to wrap it up plus an extra chapter, and then I’ll start editing and posting an update after each new chapter I finish. That means I won’t have a set schedule, but it’ll guarantee you guys get quality chapters to read.

In the meantime I’m still on tumblr as well as pillowfort now, and to tide you over, here’s your preview for the next chapter:

Ruth and Jesse sat at the breakfast counter facing each other. A tablet on the counter projected hovering images of women wearing sugar skull makeup. Jesse had his new prosthetic hand propped under Ruth’s chin to hold her still as he finished painting her face. She kept twitching each time the brush got too close to her closed eyes.

Jesse clucked his tongue at her. “Yer gonna be uneven if you keep moving on me like that. You wanna be a lopsided skeleton?” He guided her head to one side, then the other. “Okay, looks good. Considering I don’t have an artistic bone in my body, anyway.”
Día de Muertos

Chapter Notes

Additional Chapter 22 tags: Family bonding, McCree family tree, minor original characters, mentions of death, dissociation, holidays, food, overstimulation, smoking.

Some background music for those of you who like to use it:
- Xochipitzahuatl “Flor Menudita” Día de Muertos, Mostly instrumental
- La llorona, All instrumental
- Viene la Muerte Enchando Rasero by Lila Downs

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Albuquerque, 2 years ago

Ruth and Jesse sat at the breakfast counter facing each other. A tablet on the counter projected hovering images of women wearing sugar skull makeup. Jesse had his new prosthetic hand propped under Ruth’s chin to hold her still as he finished painting her face. She kept twitching each time the brush got too close to her closed eyes.

Jesse clucked his tongue at her. “Yer gonna be uneven if you keep moving on me like that. You wanna be a lopsided skeleton?” He guided her head to one side, then the other. “Okay, looks good. Considering I don’t have an artistic bone in my body anyway.”

“I’m sure it looks fine,” Ruth said.

“How do you know? You can’t see it.”

“Well I know you didn’t write anything on my forehead, so there’s that.”

“Now why didn’t I think of that?” Jesse heaved a fake sigh of disappointment. “Too late now.” He grabbed a different brush and began adding red dots around the turquoise eye sockets he’d just finished painting. He’d used the same red to paint a flower on Ruth’s forehead. Orange curls like marigold petals swept over her cheeks. The ones on the right side were a bit smaller than the left, but Jesse was afraid he’d only make it worse if he tried to fix it. Ruth had done a much better job painting Annie’s face.

“I think I’m done,” Jesse finally declared. When Ruth opened her eyes, he passed her a mirror then took the brushes to the sink to wash them.

“Hm. Not bad.” Ruth said. She set down the mirror. “We’d best get going. We can’t stay out too late since it’s a school night.”

Ruth stood up and fixed her skirt. She was wearing a traditional dress she’d inherited from her mother. Annie had shot up several inches since last year, so she’d paired her own dress with skeleton leggings to keep warm.

Ruth turned to grab a skull mask off the dining table and handed it to Jesse. “I’m glad you’re coming with us this year. After all, tonight’s about family.”
“Right,” Jesse said as he took the mask.

The skull had a mustache and blue roses painted on it. It smiled up at him, all teeth. It looked a bit like one of the pictures on the ofrenda in the living room—the one of his and Ruth’s grandfather, Samuel. Ruth had told Jesse a little about him; she’d never met him, but her dad had told her things. Samuel McCree had owned an orchard over in Arizona full of peaches, plums, and nectarines. There was a bowl of them sitting beside the picture of him and his wife, Denise, who had taught Diné at a Navajo immersion grade school. In the photo, Samuel sported a finely groomed mustache, and he wore a plaid shirt the exact color of the sky. Denise, standing to his left with her fingers entwined in his, was dressed in black with gleaming silver jewelry, the night sky to his day. Samuel had tried to look serious in the photo. Denise smiled wide, her mouth crooked to the side, her cheeks full, the corners of her gleaming eyes crinkled with crow’s feet.

Samuel and Denise had both passed away long before either Ruth or Jesse were born, but Ruth had been to the orchard once. Grandma Denise’s family had inherited it. It was nestled in the foothills near a river that rushed with water each spring and went dry by late summer. David had taken Ruth and her mamá in the fall when it was time to harvest pears. Ruth was too small to climb the ladders and help her cousins pick fruit, but they gave her little baskets of pears to carry to make her feel like she was helping. She probably ate more than she carried. She told Jesse that ever since, the smell of pears always reminded her of the orchard.

The colorful ofrenda was full of faces that Jesse didn’t know. Annie had been over the moon to tell Jesse about them when he asked. She pointed out photos of Ruth’s abuelito and abuelita. There was also one of Nathan’s father dressed in an air force uniform. He’d been a pararescueman during the Crisis, saving injured soldiers on the front lines. He was the reason Nathan decided to become a firefighter.

Jesse was a little more interested in his own side of the family. There were faded photos of Grandpa Samuel’s parents: bisabuela Josefina and Great Grandpa Frank who’d started the orchard. Ruth had also inherited a locket of Josefina’s brother, Federico Valiente Rosero, who’d been an artist. There was a portrait of a young girl in a woman’s lap, the both of them covered in a gorgeous quilt. Annie explained that that was Denise and her mother, Annie. Apparently she was who Annie was actually named after, not the famous gunslinger.

As fun as it was listening to Annie tell stories about her family, it was painful at the same time. If Jesse’s father had only tried a little harder to stay in touch, maybe Jesse would have grown up knowing who all of these people were. Maybe then he’d recognize some of the strangers on the ofrenda that he was supposed to call family.

Jesse stifled the bitter feeling that flared up. David had tried. Maybe he could have done a better job, but he’d tried. Jesse had to take a little of the blame for not knowing or wanting to know about David’s side of the family—or David, for that matter. His picture was up there, too, surrounded by marigolds and fresh-baked pan de muerto and a bottle of his favorite beer. Jesse wondered if he might’ve liked David if he’d given him a chance.

A hologram of Nathan Bearpaw held a special place of honor in the center of the ofrenda. The Saint Florian candle flickered cheerfully beside his image. Medals for his service were laid out in front of the picture along with candy, a poem Annie had written, and homemade tamales. Ruth had used blue corn flour so that when she untied the corn husk wrapping, the tamales were revealed to be a striking purple. It was something she made special for Nathan during holidays, even now.

Jesse could put a little of the blame on his father for not knowing all the other people on the ofrenda, but it was his own fault he never got to know Nathan. Overwatch never forbid Jesse from
staying in contact with his family. That’d been on him. He was the one who never reconnected with Ruth. He’d missed her wedding, her baby shower, Annie’s first birthday, Christmas cards from her and her daughter and her husband. He could have been there for her when she lost Nathan, but he wasn’t.

Jesse didn’t have a good reason. It wasn’t like he was trying to protect anyone, and it wouldn’t have been hard to contact Ruth. He just… hadn’t. At least he’d written to his mother. He hadn’t even tried to have a relationship with Ruth’s family.

Despite all of that, here he was in Ruth’s house being invited to go to the local cemetery to celebrate Día de Muertos. This was Ruth’s and Annie’s time to remember their family. Despite the celebratory nature of the holiday, Jesse had always seen it as something private and personal, and he felt like he was intruding, yet the two of them insisted on including him as if he’d always belonged. Ruth had even left Jesse a space on the ofrenda in case he wanted to put out anything of his own.

The only thing was, Jesse didn’t have any pictures. After some debate, Jesse had gotten on the computer and looked for photos of fallen Overwatch agents he’d known. They weren’t family, but it was the only thing he could think of. He’d spent almost half his life fighting alongside them. That counted, right?

Jesse realized his mistake too late: he’d made the parameters of the search too broad. The first thing to come up was an article about the death of Strike Commander John Morrison and Commander Gabriel Reyes. It was paired with a photo of them in dress uniform from a formal event. Captain Amari and Lieutenant Wilhelm flanked them.

Numbness crept up on Jesse as he looked at the faces of the people who had shaped his life. They all looked so happy. The Crisis was over, Overwatch was still new and full of hope, things were good, and none of them knew what the future had in store for them.

Jesse was torn between staring at Reyes and not wanting to look at him at all. The last time Jesse had seen him—

Jesse closed the article and tried searching for specific names. He had to watch his hands as he typed; he was still getting used to the prosthesis, and it proved harder to use with fog creeping in at the edges of his mind, clouding his thoughts and making him feel disconnected from his own body.

He really should have stopped after that first article.

Most of the pictures Jesse found were group shots. Reyes was in half of them. In one photo, he had an arm around Jesse’s shoulders as they posed in front of a half-destroyed OR-14 alongside Aiden Crews, the Blackwatch agent Jesse had been looking for so he could add them to the ofrenda. Jesse remembered that mission. The omnic nearly killed all three of them before they disabled it. Jesse still sported the knife-thin burn scar from where the OR-14 tried to gut him, the skin faded and pale. He remembered he was bruised all over by the end of the fight, and the burn hurt like hell, but he’d been riding high on endorphins and couldn’t stop laughing. He insisted on taking the photo before federal agents showed up to secure the site. Somehow it had ended up in Overwatch’s public records (with all traces of the Blackwatch emblem edited out).

Jesse was shaking by the time he convinced himself to stop looking up names. He couldn’t ignore the pattern. Sure, everyone who’d worked for Overwatch needed to keep their heads down nowadays, and many of them were still drawn to dangerous professions that led to accidents, and terrible things could happen to anyone. But with a list of dead and missing that long, Jesse would’ve been a fool to call it coincidence.

There were a few names he’d checked that hadn’t yielded any results, for which he was deeply thankful. Nothing about Genji. Nothing about Reinhardt or Winston. Jesse did find a couple blurry fan sightings of Lena and an article about Dr. Angela Ziegler’s recent advances in the medical field along with her charity work. No obituaries. No articles about arrests being made. No missing persons reports. It eased the tight ache in Jesse’s chest to know that some of his friends were safe at least.

When Jesse finally stepped away from the computer, the shaking had stopped, but he felt detached from himself and the world around him. It was disorienting. The feeling clung to him the rest of the day and well into the next. He disliked when that happened, and he hated it with a passion once it was over. It happened too frequently nowadays for his liking. He hadn’t found the right time to talk to Ruth about it. He probably should. He also probably wouldn’t.

“Ready to go?” Ruth asked. Jesse came back to himself. Ruth was wearing a backpack and carrying a bouquet of flowers.

“Sure, just give me a minute.” Jesse grabbed his serape and threw it over his shoulders. He didn’t have many occasions to wear it, but tonight, surrounded by all the people in colorful costumes and face paint, he’d fit right in. If anything, his outfit was understated.

Jesse pulled on the mask and grabbed his hat. “All right, let’s hit the road.”

The cemetery was visible from several blocks away, lit up by thousands of candles. There was almost nowhere to park when Ruth pulled in. A stage had been set up at the far end of the parking lot, and a band was playing requests. Nearby, a charity table was selling fresh marigolds. People walked among the graves, which had become beacons of light and color for the holiday. Children with flashlights ran around, occasionally letting out unexpected screams of delight in the dark.

“Stick close,” Ruth said as she grabbed her backpack and climbed out of the car. She handed Jesse the bouquet before leading the way.

Nathan’s grave was marked with a red, knee-high stone engraved with his name, date of birth and death, and the message: “Our hero. We miss you.” Beneath it, a bronze St. Florian’s cross was set into the stone.

A family had decorated the grave off to the right; the electric candles they left behind gave Ruth, Jesse, and Annie a little light to see by as they set up. Annie was tasked with cleaning the headstone using a washcloth and a bottle of water. Ruth had Jesse hold a flashlight while she checked for any weeds growing around the grave. Once Ruth was satisfied, she laid out a blanket and began pulling things from her backpack. She handed a box of candles over to Jesse. Then she pulled out a folded stack of intricately cut paper in purples, pinks, oranges, and greens. Ruth and Annie laid the papel picado down on the grave, then Ruth emptied the rest of her backpack. She had brought multicolored corn cobs and small gourds, sugar skulls, pan de muerto, and something Jesse didn’t recognize that looked like a goblet. This she set at the foot of the headstone along with the bouquet. She pulled out a plastic bag labeled ‘copal’ and emptied it into the cup before lighting it with a match. The smell hit Jesse’s nose instantly: incense. It blended with the pungent scent of marigolds that filled the cemetery, making him feel lightheaded.

“Jesse, the candles.”
Jesse gave his head a shake, then knelt down to help Ruth and Annie set the candles up safely. Once they were all lit, Ruth settled on the far end of the blanket and pulled out a tupperware container full of conchas: fluffy sweet rolls with a crackled, sugary crust on top in different colors. She’d baked them fresh that morning. She handed a pink one over to Annie.

“Put that with the flowers, please,” Ruth instructed. She turned to Jesse. “Nathan always liked strawberry. It’s not traditional, but I like making my conchas different flavors. They’re only for holidays, so why not?”

Annie returned and settled with a flare of her skirt. She stole a chocolate concha out of the container and tore into it like she hadn’t eaten all day. With her mouth full, she gave her mom a thumbs up.

Ruth offered an orange concha to Jesse. “This one’s a new recipe. I figured I could use you as a guinea pig. Tell me what you think.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Jesse pulled his hat off and tipped the mask up so he could take a bite. He hummed approvingly. Ruth had used her mamá’s recipe, so it was perfectly soft and buttery with a crisp crust. But on top of that, he could taste cinnamon and citrus.

“Orange?”

Ruth bobbed her head. “Orange zest, cinnamon, and a little cardamom. I saw that I had an orange in the fridge, and I decided to go for it.” She pulled one out for herself. “I’m glad this recipe worked out. I’ve tried to experiment in the past, and it doesn’t always go the way I want.”

“Like that pie,” Annie prompted.

Jesse raised a brow at Ruth, who sputtered.

“I absolutely need t’ know about the pie.”

Annie grinned gleefully. “Mom tried to make this weird berry pie for Dad one Christmas. I was old enough that I remember. It was like a giant fruit chew. Just. Solid fruit. Dad tried to cut it, and the knife got stuck, and he almost couldn’t get it back out.”

“I still don’t know what happened,” Ruth said with a grimace. “I misread something in the recipe, I guess. What’s worse, it made my oven smell like fruit leather for days.”

“It was amazing,” Annie said. “Dad still tried to eat a slice. He took one bite, called it “an experience,” then threw it away.”

Jesse smiled. “As awful as that sounds, I reckon it was still better than anything I could bake.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Ruth said. “Just because you’ve never baked, that doesn’t mean you can’t.”

“Trust me, I’ve tried.”

Ruth didn’t look convinced. “You didn’t have me helping you. Besides, no one’s good at it right away. It takes practice. We’ll make a pie together, and I’ll show you it’s not as bad as you think. You can even write about it: ‘My First Attempt at Baking’ by Joel Morricone.” Ruth swept a hand out in front of herself to highlight the imaginary headline.
Annie brushed crumbs off her hands. “How about ‘Joel Morricone Versus the Abominable Apple Pie’?”

Jesse laughed. “I like that one.”

A woman dressed as a Catrina in a ballgown and a wide-brimmed hat walked over. She was followed by a drone with a cheerful LED face. It cast a warm glow like a lantern that lit up everything around it. “Buenas noches,” the woman greeted. She held up a camera. It looked like it belonged in an antique store with its rounded, pastel, plastic case and lightbulb flash. “Would any of you like a photo? I’m offering them for five dollars each.”

Ruth began to shake her head, but Jesse piped up, “What kinda camera is that?”

The woman smiled and held it out for Jesse to get a better look. “It’s an old polaroid camera—over fifty years old, but it still works beautifully. The photos are instant and one-of-a-kind. I have some examples if you want to see.” She started to dig in a purse slung over her shoulder.

Jesse waved a hand. “No need for that. I’ll buy one.”

“Are you sure?” Ruth whispered.

Jesse leaned in. “There’s no digital trail and no negatives. It’d be nice to have a keepsake, don’t you think?” Something he could take with him when he finally left. He didn’t say that part, though.

Jesse dug out his wallet, pulled out a five, then changed his mind and traded it for a ten. “On second thought, I’ll buy two.”

The photographer directed her drone until she was happy with the lighting while Jesse, Annie, and Ruth scooted together at the foot of the blanket. The photographer gave them a quick count, then snapped a photo. She plucked it from the top of the camera and held it delicately between two fingers as she hurriedly took the second picture.

“Here we are.” She handed the two photos over. They were still blank, though the first one was beginning to show a ghostly outline as the chemicals worked their magic. “It’ll take just a few minutes for them to develop, and then they’ll be ready. Be gentle with them until they’re done.”

Ruth laid the photos down beside Nathan’s headstone.

Jesse tipped his hat. “Gracias.”

“De nada.” The photographer waved before heading towards another family celebrating some distance away. Her drone bobbed along behind her like a will-o-wisp.

Annie grabbed Ruth’s arm and pointed off towards the parking lot. “What’s going on over there?”

People appeared to be gathering near the band stage. It was difficult to pick out details in the dark from that distance. Jesse closed his eyes. It’d been a while since he’d used his heightened senses. He hadn’t needed them. When he reached down inside himself for that spark, he assumed it would take some time, the same way his body was slow to remember things if he didn’t practice regularly. The lick of flame jumped to life readily, however, as if no time had passed at all, as natural and sudden as waking.

Jesse opened his eyes. Before, the world had been a sea of darkness staved off by the faint light of the candles decorating Nathan’s grave. Now everything stood out clearly. Jesse could see couples
passing arm in arm, women wrapped in blankets holding vigil beside their loved ones’ graves, and families sitting together passing around drinks. The pungent, musky odor of marigolds and the richness of the burning incense nearby mingled overwhelmingly. Jesse’s ears rang with discordant noise and chatter as his sense of hearing heightened; there were no less than seven different families around the cemetery all playing music.

Jesse closed his eyes again and breathed through his mouth for a few seconds. This wasn’t the worst he’d experienced. He just hadn’t been prepared. He tried again and found it a little easier the second time.

In the parking lot, a crowd of people in festive costume and makeup was forming. There were distinct silhouettes of top hats and umbrellas and hoop skirts. Jesse could hear the soft hum of talking as people tried to speak over one another. They milled around, passing things to each other in the dark. As Jesse tried to figure out what they were doing, the crowd shifted and formed into rows. Pinpoints of orange light spread from hand to hand as candles were lit. Out of the crowd, a number of neon skeleton puppets, larger than life, rose up on poles. Their long limbs bounced and danced as the puppeteers underneath tested them. The band descended from the stage. They moved to the front of the procession, then began to walk as they struck up a tune, and the crowd fell into step with them. The music was a cheerful, old-fashioned song that struck Jesse as familiar even though he couldn’t name it.

“It’s a parade.” Jesse watched as the procession walked along the perimeter of the fence line. He saw people drifting over to join them. The rows stretched out, and just behind the band, a group of women began to dance. It didn’t look rehearsed. He caught snatches of laughter as they spun and nearly bumped into each other.

Annie jumped up. “Can we go be in the parade? Please, Mom?”

“I don’t see why not.” Ruth stood up and brushed off the back of her dress.

Jesse grabbed the backpack before Ruth could. “I’ll carry that for ya.” He slung it over his shoulder and started walking.

“Jesse,” Ruth called.

“Yeah?” Jesse spun around to find he’d left Ruth and Annie behind.

“You just gonna stumble your way over in the dark?” Ruth asked. She flicked on the flashlight, accidentally shining it right in Jesse’s face.

Jesse squeezed his eyes shut with a sucking hiss through his teeth.

“Sorry!”

“It’s all right,” Jesse said. He blinked away the stars in his eyes, then gave Ruth a reassuring smile. She looked oddly tense. “Honest, I’m fine.” He gestured for her to lead the way. They fell into step with each other, and Jesse leaned in to tell her under his breath, “I forgot you two couldn’t see as well as me in the dark. Sorry about that.” He forced a laugh.

Ruth made a small noise of acknowledgment.

Jesse bumped his arm against Ruth’s. “You okay?”

Ruth sucked in a small breath before looking over at Jesse. “Yeah…? Yeah, I’m fine. I just.” She pursed her lips. Her steps faltered, but only for a moment before she kept walking. “I guess I forgot,
too. When I turned on the flashlight, I saw your eyes, and”—she waved her hand in front of her face as she tried to convey what she’d seen—“they reflected the light. It spooked me a bit.”

“Oh.” Jesse glanced down at the mask in his hand.

Ruth winced. “Hey, don’t—don’t get the wrong idea. You’re fine. It doesn’t bother me. I just wasn’t expecting it, you know?” She reached over to squeeze Jesse’s arm. “I’ve only ever seen you change once, and you don’t really talk about it. It’s easy to forget sometimes.”

Jesse wished he could say the same. It wasn’t like he hated what his body could do. It was plenty useful. But he couldn’t forget that someone had reached inside him and changed him against his will. Moira’s experiments were burned into every cell of his body—written into his DNA. If he kept busy, he could put the thought to the back of his mind for a while, but sooner or later his thoughts always drifted back, drawn to it like restless fingers to a scab.

Ruth’s hand rubbed up and down Jesse’s arm. “You mad at me?” Ruth asked.

Jesse started and looked over in confusion. “What? No, of course not.”

“Okay. You were real quiet for a minute there. I thought I upset you.”

Jesse laid his hand over Ruth’s. “I just got caught up in my own head. It’s nothin’ you did.”

The music grew louder as they approached the parade. Remembering himself, Jesse quickly slipped his mask on and adjusted his hat.

“Annie, make sure to stay close,” Ruth said. “I don’t want to lose sight of you.”

“I’ll keep track of her,” Jesse said.

Despite her promise, Annie drifted towards the front where people danced to the band music. Jesse politely but firmly pushed his way through after her with Ruth right behind him, her hand on his back so they wouldn’t get separated.

“I can’t see her,” Ruth said. “Where’d she go?”

“Don’t worry, I got eyes on her.”

Annie was trying to copy one of the older women that was dancing. She spun so that her skirt flared out around her. The candle in her hand sputtered and then went out.

Jesse waved Annie over. “Want me to relight that for you?” Annie nodded and held out her candle, then seemed to rethink. “Actually, could you hold on to it for me?”

“You can’t see anythin’ hiding behind me like that. Don’t worry, I got eyes on her.”

Annie bounced, then ran back over to where she’d been dancing behind the band.

“You want to join in?” Ruth asked teasingly. “I’ll hold your stuff for you.”
Jesse let out a huff of laughter. “I’m more of a line dance sorta guy, to be honest. Anything more complicated than that, and I start to trip over my own feet.”

“Then I guess you’ll just have to keep me company.”

The walk was a pleasant one. The parade slowed to a stop by a memorial wall dedicated to victims of the Omnic Crisis that ran along the back of the cemetery. People paid their respects for several minutes before the band struck up a new song, gentle and easy, that drew the crowd on around to the front gates.

Finally, the procession reached the parking lot again. The crowd fell into noisy chaos as the band returned to the stage to begin playing more modern music. Most of the parade-goers joined them. Jesse snuffed his candle between his metal fingers. The smoke tickled his nose. Normally he loved that smell, but now it was just more stimulus on top of everything else: the flowers and candles and sweat, the shouting, the music, the near constant touch of careless people around him trying to make their way past. Feeling drained, Jesse cast around for someplace a little less hectic that he could stand.

Annie had gravitated towards the party, and Ruth was trying to call her back.

“Annie? Annie, wait for us. Jesse, where are you?”

“Here,” Jesse said as he laid a hand on Ruth’s shoulder.

Ruth patted his hand, then began to walk away, but when Jesse’s hand didn’t move from her shoulder, she stopped and turned. Even through the makeup, Jesse could pick up the hint of concern that creased her forehead. He’d wanted her attention, but now he wasn’t so sure.

“How’re you doing, Jesse?” Ruth asked.

“I’m… I’ll manage.” He tried to smile reassuringly, then remembered he was wearing his mask.

“Yeah? Like a two, or…?”

Jesse took his time pulling off his hat and then his mask. He held the mask up like a shield against the lights of the performance stage, plunging his face into shadow. He looked away for a moment. Ruth waited. “Like a three. Maybe a four, I guess,” Jesse said. If he was being honest with himself, the number was probably higher, but he figured he’d feel better once he escaped the swirling mass of people.

“What do you need?”

Jesse worried his bottom lip between his teeth before deciding: “I think I might call it a night and head home.”

“Okay, I’ll go get Annie, and we can pack up.”

“Now there’s no need to go ruining Annie’s fun. You two stay. I’ll head back by myself.”

“I have the car keys, though. You need me to drive you.”

“I’ll walk,” Jesse said. “It’s no trouble for me, and the night air should do me some good.”

“Are you sure?”

Jesse held the mask up to his face, feigning playfulness to hide whatever expression he was
actually making. “You betcha. Go enjoy yourselves.”

Jesse handed over the backpack and exchanged a quick one-armed hug with Ruth before heading for the cemetery gate.

The tension fell away from Jesse’s shoulders once he was out of the milling crowd of people and away from the noise. When he glanced back through the bars of the fence, he could see someone had started up a hologram projector, and now butterflies made of light flitted over the heads of the dancers. Someone was puppeteering one of the massive neon skeletons again. Easily ten feet tall, it dwarfed the rest of the audience as it danced to the energetic music of the band.

Jesse let out a slow breath and turned his back to the noise and light. He made his way down the sidewalk, taking the time to tip his hat at an old man leaning against the fence. “Buenas noches, friend.”

“Buenas noches, vaquero,” the old man said with a chuckle. “You got a light?”

Jesse was already walking away, but he stopped and turned around. He patted his pockets and found both his and Annie’s candles along with the lighter from earlier.

Jesse tossed the lighter over.

“Gracias,” the man said gratefully as he lit up a cigarette. He held the lighter out. “You want one, too? I can share.”

Jesse pursed his lips. Ruth wouldn’t like him coming back smelling like cigarette smoke, but it’d been well over a year since he’d had one, and it would certainly help his nerves. “Just one,” he said, relenting. He put his back to the fence, stuck his mask under his arm, and took his lighter and the cigarette offered to him. He lit up and took a drag.

The man chuckled at the sigh Jesse let out. “You needed that, huh?”

Jesse hummed and slipped the cigarette between his lips. He nodded his head back towards the gates. “Why aren’t you in there?”

“Ah, my wife—she hated that I smoked, so I don’t smoke around her even now. Don’t want her haunting me.” The man grinned at his own joke. “I’ll go back in once I’m done. You going back in, too? We can keep each other company.”

“Nah, I think I’ll take a walk.” Jesse gestured with his cigarette in the direction he’d been headed.

“Be careful,” the old man warned. “It’s late; there’s dangerous people out on the streets this time of night.”

Jesse flashed an easy smile. He was willing to bet he was the most dangerous person walking the streets tonight. “I’ll keep my eyes open. Thanks for the smoke.” He tipped his hat, stuck the cig back in his mouth, and walked away.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone, look who’s back (with my longass author notes)! I have one last chapter to write out, so I’m starting in on editing and posting again. I can’t say how fast updates
This chapter really took on a life of its own, and I’m so glad for it. I learned quite a lot. Still, my apologies for any cultural discrepancies. I did my best to capture the experience of a real, modern family celebrating Día de Muertos rather than some timeless, unchanging tradition pulled from a wikipedia page. That includes little things like Annie wearing a traditional dress probably gifted to her by her abuelita, but combining it with halloween stockings; Ruth honoring her husband through her traditions, but using things like blue corn flour to pay tribute to his own heritage; electric and wax candles; modern polaroids treated as vintage mementos; holograms on the ofrenda beside faded color photographs; etc.

I worried when I wrote the section about the ofrenda that it might be overwhelming, but I realized that’s exactly the sensation I wanted to convey. It’s an experience that resonates with me and perhaps some of you, too: growing up disconnected from one’s extended family, unlike one’s parents who were part of that large but close-knit group. Suddenly being an adult, looking at photos of all these beloved aunts and uncles and grandparents that should be familiar but aren’t. Wanting to carry those stories and love those people, but having no personal attachment. The sense of loss for something one never had. For most of his life, this version of McCree has been unmoored except for the relationships he built himself, and he was fine with that, but there’s a strange sort of pain that comes with learning about something you could have had but never did.

Next chapter picks up where this one ended. Here’s a small excerpt:

The moon was a gleaming silver sickle hanging low in the night sky. Jesse savored his cigarette as he looked skyward, picking out the few constellations he could identify. There was the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper sitting near the horizon but never touching it, always bigger than he expected even though he’d seen them a million times. And high overhead was Orion the archer. That one was Jesse’s favorite, though he couldn’t say why exactly. It was always easy to find the belt made of stars, and, beneath it, the sword that pointed south.

A memory, more bitter than sweet, crept up on Jesse as he ground the spent cigarette out on his metal palm. Talon had sent him on a week-long mission in Tunisia. He’d risked bringing his book with him even though it took up valuable space in his bag, and he knew if Reaper noticed that it would cost him dearly. The safehouse was cramped, and he couldn’t sleep, so he’d snuck up to the roof where Agent Quraishi was keeping watch.
There Would Always Be Stars

Chapter Notes

Additional Chapter 23 tags: stargazing, flashbacks, bonding, emotional/mental abuse, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Jesse being a literature nerd

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Albuquerque, 2 years ago

Jesse let himself wander, not putting much thought into which direction he was going. It was getting late, and the streets were quiet; everyone was either asleep right now because of work or school in the morning, or they were still at the local cemeteries celebrating Día de Muertos.

The moon was a gleaming silver sickle hanging low in the night sky. Jesse savored his cigarette as he looked skyward, picking out the few constellations he could identify. Cassiopeia and Andromeda sat high overhead. By contrast, the Big Dipper was just starting to peek over the northern horizon; Jesse might have missed it if not for the Little Dipper set in the sky above it. To the east, Orion had started his climb toward the heavens. That one was Jesse’s favorite, though he couldn’t say exactly why. It was always easy to find the belt made of stars, and, hanging from it, the sword that pointed south.

A memory, more bitter than sweet, crept up on Jesse as he ground the spent cigarette out on his metal palm. It’d been a two-week mission in Tunisia. Someone in Talon’s ranks had started leaking intel, and a team was tracking down everyone he might’ve spoken with. They’d requested additional resources. They got three drones, an extra surveillance vehicle, an IT specialist, Reaper, and Jesse.

Jesse had risked packing his book with him even though it took up valuable space in his bag. If Reaper noticed, it would cost him dearly. He shouldn’t have done it; it’d been a last minute decision while he sat on his bed waiting for a handler to escort him to the launch pad.

Jesse couldn’t sleep one night, so with his book in hand, he’d snuck up to the roof where Agent Quraishi was keeping watch.

“Should you be up here, McCree?” Quraishi asked, sparing him only a glance before lifting the night-vision binoculars up to her face again.

“So long as I don’t get outta range of my handler, it’s fine.”

“Reaper’ll want you rested. You sure he won’t be upset?”

Jesse looked over his shoulder towards the door. For one irrational second, he expected Reaper to appear at the mere mention of his name, but when Jesse focused, he heard only the soft breathing of a half-dozen sleeping agents below and the electric hum of the surveillance cameras Reaper was monitoring.

“I just need a little fresh air,” Jesse said, his tone not quite begging but close.

“Mm. Come sit with me then.”
Jesse settled on the ground beside Quraishi and opened his book in his lap. The pages rustled as he flipped through to where he’d left off.

“Can you read like that?”

Jesse lifted his head to find Quraishi looking at him curiously.

“What’cha mean?”

“I mean it’s dark out here.”

“Oh! Yeah, it’s no trouble for me: night vision’s built in.” Jesse tapped a finger to his temple and gave a weak smile.

“Right. Forgot.”

Quraishi pulled out a tablet and busied herself with checking the perimeter sensors, then switched back to binoculars. She didn’t stay silent for long. “What are you reading anyway?”

“Metamorphoses by Ovid.”

“What’s it about?”

“It’s a collection of Greek and Roman stories, usually about people turning into trees and flowers or dying tragically.”

“Light reading, huh?”

“I didn’t pick it.”

Quraishi looked over, binoculars in her lap. Jesse watched her eyes dance over his face, unsure what she was looking for. He pressed his lips into a thin line and waited.

Eventually, Quraishi’s attention turned to the book. “What part are you reading right now?”

“Ajax and Ulysses and the Armor of Achilles.” Jesse slipped his thumb in between the pages so he wouldn’t lose his place. “It’s the Trojan War, and the Greeks’ greatest warrior, Achilles, just died. Now Ajax and Ulysses are debating who’s got the strongest claim to his armor.”

“Really? They’re fighting over a dead man’s armor?”

“The god Hephaestus made it for him. Plus, everyone thought Achilles was the greatest of all the Greeks, so it’s a big deal to ‘em. It’s a matter of honor.” Jesse shrugged. When Quraishi didn’t ask any more questions, he flipped the book back open and started to read.

Quraishi turned and lifted her binoculars again. Distant headlights flared and vanished between the dark silhouettes of the surrounding buildings. With Jesse’s heightened senses, he could just barely hear the thrum of the cars.

“Hey, Jesse.”

Jesse stilled. The agents didn’t call him that. Reaper didn’t call him that. He was a prisoner and an asset, not a teammate.

“Yeah?” Jesse said slowly.
“Read it to me.”

Jesse’s brows furrowed. “Uh, sure.” He flipped back a page to the beginning and started to read aloud.

Jesse kept his voice low and even. The antiquated words fell clumsily from his mouth, tinged with his accent, sounding far different than they had in his head. He’d never recited anything from the book out loud before. It felt strange, sharing the words that’d kept him company for over a year now with another person. Quraishi only stopped Jesse once or twice to have him explain something she didn’t understand. Otherwise, she politely left him to pick his way through the oddly metered lines and names he’d never had to learn how to pronounce before.

Out of all the stories in *Metamorphoses*, the one Jesse had picked wasn’t exactly the most riveting, but it was entertaining for the simple fact that the entire story was just Ajax and Ulysses insulting each other. Ajax went on and on about Ulysses being a sneak thief and a coward who relied on his words, unlike Ajax who was apparently a brave man of godly heritage. Ulysses responded in kind by tearing his argument apart piece by piece until he didn’t have a leg to stand on, and then he called him stupid for good measure.

“*Why, he knows nothing of the scenes embossed*  
*Upon the shield, the ocean and the lands,*  
*The constellations in the height of heaven,*  
*The Pleiads and the Hyads and the Bear,*  
*Banned from the sea, Orion’s shining sword,*  
*The cities set apart. He claims to win*  
*Arms that his brain’s too stupid to take in!*”

“No way did he say that. You’re messing with me.”

“I’m flattered you think I could make this stuff up,” Jesse said, “but that’s what the book says.”

Quraishi snorted softly.

“Want me to keep going?”

“Does Ulysses call him stupid again?”

“At least a couple more times.”

“Then yeah, but since I already interrupted you, I have a question. That bit you just read about Achilles’s shield: what was all that? Where it talks about the sea and bears and swords and stuff?”

“Achilles’s shield depicts Greece and Troy and all the world around them,” Jesse explained. “Ulysses was describin’ the constellations on the shield.” Jesse found the paragraph and marked it with one finger, then pointed up to the sky overhead. “You see Taurus up there? That lil V-shape makes up the head, and there’s the horns. According to the index, that’s where the Pleiads and the Hyads are. Below it is Orion.” Jesse traced the constellation with his finger. “That little cluster of stars just to the right of his belt is the Orion Nebula—his sword.”

“Oh yeah, there it is: Al-Jabbar,” Quraishi said, pointing along with Jesse. “I see what you’re talking about. Okay, and then Ulysses was talking about the Great Bear over there, right?”

“Yeah, the Big Dipper. Once upon a time she was Callisto, a nymph who was turned into a bear by Hera. Zeus set her and her son in the sky as stars. Naturally, his wife took it real personal, so she went to her foster parents, Oceanus and Tethys, and told ‘em all about it. They promised her that
Callisto would never bathe in their waters again, so supposedly the Big Dipper never touches the horizon. She’s gotta stay up there with her son forever.” Jesse waved towards Ursus Major. Contrary to what he’d just said, the Great Bear was barely visible beyond the cityscape as it dipped its paws in the Tyrrhenian Sea to the north. “Obviously that’s not true anymore. The stars must’ve been in different places back when Ovid wrote this. Anyways, that’s why in the story, Ulysses says she’s banned from the sea.”

“You remember all of that?”

“I’ve read the book a few times,” Jesse said with a shrug. He leaned back, turning his face up to the sky. “It’s been a while…”

“Since you read the book?” Quraishi asked, sounding confused.

“Since I looked at the stars,” Jesse said. “I’ve been out on missions at night, but I never have time t’ just appreciate it. I forget how pretty the stars are sometimes.”

Quraishi didn’t say anything else. Jesse was grateful. He probably shouldn’t have said what he had. It’d been too personal, and he already regretted it. He should know better by now than to show weakness around Talon agents. It was just so easy to slip back into old habits, especially around the ones like Quraishi who reminded Jesse of his old Blackwatch teammates.

The sound of creaking floorboards below caught Jesse’s attention. He froze, heart pounding in his chest as he listened to the noise. He tracked the movement from one end of the small building to the other, then he heard the footsteps become deliberate as they headed for the stairwell. Reaper was looking for him. He wasn’t where he was supposed to be.

Jesse shut his book and pressed it to his chest as he glanced around. He couldn’t hide the fact that he wasn’t in bed, but maybe he could hide the book at least.

“What’s wrong?” Quraishi asked, her voice low.

Jesse mouthed the word: “Reaper.”

Quraishi held out a hand and made a grabbing motion. “Pass it here, quick.”

Jesse didn’t have time to think. He passed his book over to Quraishi. She crossed her legs before nestling the book in her lap and setting the binoculars on top to hide it. Then she hunched forward and laid her arms across her lap for good measure.

“So you see,” Quraishi said, raising her voice a little, “that’s why I think Egypt’s got a real chance at the FIFA World Cup this year, so long as Dina Hassan is coaching. She’s got a knack for balancing out the players’ strengths and weaknesses. Her record speaks for itself.”

The roof access door swung open, and Reaper stepped through, backlit by the dim bulb of the stairwell. The light played across the back of his jacket, making it gleam like an oil slick, and his mask was cast in shadow.

Jesse held his breath and waited.

Reaper tilted his head as he took in the scene. “Couldn’t sleep, McCree?”

“’Fraid not.”

“Then you won’t mind staying up a few more hours.”
“No sir.”

Reaper turned his attention to Quraishi. “Looks like your shift is over early, Agent Quraishi. Go get some rest.”

“Thank you, sir.”

There was a pause as Quraishi and Jesse waited for Reaper to leave before it became obvious he was waiting for Quraishi to follow him.

“Oh, I’ll come down in a minute. I just want to finish my chat with McCree.” Quraishi jabbed a thumb at Jesse. “He thinks Brazil’s gonna win the World Cup this year. I’m educating him on the matter.”

Reaper looked at Jesse. “Is that so?” There was an odd tone to his voice. Skepticism. Knowing.

To his credit, Jesse didn’t flinch. “Don’t they always win?” Jesse asked. “Frankly, that’s all I know about soccer.”

“Football,” Quraishi corrected.

“Right, yeah. That.” Jesse nodded towards Quraishi. “So I know two things: everyone else calls soccer football, and Brazil usually wins.”

Reaper didn’t react at first. Jesse worried that he hadn’t bought it. Then Reaper gave a slight shake of his head. “Fine. Just wrap it up. If you’re talking, you’re not keeping watch.” Then he turned and vanished through the door.

Jesse let out a slow breath and tried to will his body to unclench. He felt like he was caught in a vice grip.

“Thanks,” he told Quraishi under his breath.

“No problem. If I were up here with contraband, I’d expect you to do the same for me,” Quraishi said as she pulled the book out. “Are you not supposed to have this or something?”

Jesse faltered, unable to think of a way to explain the complicated and often unspoken rules he had to navigate every day. No one had told him he couldn’t bring his book, and he was certain he wouldn’t be punished for it directly, but there would be consequences. If he wasn’t explicitly told he could do something, it usually meant he couldn’t, and Reaper didn’t like it when Jesse “tested” him.

“It’s supposed to stay in my room,” Jesse explained awkwardly. “It’s not necessary to the mission. Don’t know why I did it, to be honest.”

Quraishi regarded the book in her hands. “Well then, I’ll see if I can’t sneak it down into your bag for you, because there’s no way you’re getting it past Reaper yourself.”

“Mendes is in my room. If he wakes up, he’ll wonder what you’re doin’ in there.”

“You always carry those nutrient bars, don’t you? I’ll grab you one for your shift. Perfect excuse.”

Jesse allowed himself a thin smile. “You sure?”

“Yeah. Like I said, I’d expect you to do the same for me.” Quraishi used Jesse’s shoulder as leverage to stand up. She groaned and made a face as she stretched. “Gah, my whole right side is
asleep. I hate that. Happens every time I’m up here on lookout. I really should bring a chair up with me.”

“Least it’s only for a few more days, right?” Jesse said. “Once this surveillance job is done, we’re outta here.”

“Right,” Quraishi said with a smile. “We’ve already figured out which reporter our little mole’s been leaking Talon’s secrets to, and we know most of his routine. Now we just need to find a good window in his schedule so we can send in one of our assassins to deal with him.”

“I, uh.” Jesse faltered. “I thought we were gonna try an’ bribe him first.”

“Apparently a few different government officials have tried in the past. He’s got a record of turning them down, and he doesn’t give in to intimidation tactics, which leaves us with Plan C,” Quraishi said. “I don’t mind, honestly. It’s quicker and cleaner this way. If you try to bribe or scare them, there’s always a chance they’ll grow a conscience later and do something stupid. Plus, this means you and I get to go home a lot sooner.”

Jesse felt Quraishi pat his shoulder, but he didn’t respond.

“I’ll be back in a minute. Sit tight,” Quraishi said. She tucked the book under her arm and headed for the stairs.

Jesse let out a shaky breath and pushed himself to his feet to take Quraishi’s position on the roof. He picked up the night-vision binoculars and set them aside. For anyone else, the city was indistinct darkness broken up by the sharp geometric outlines of the buildings and the orange glow of street lights that made the city look like it was burning. For Jesse, a dim light permeated everything, banishing the deepest shadows while washing out the warmth of the city lights. Jesse’s night vision faded the stars overhead, too. Gleaming diamonds were reduced to faint pinpricks that he could only recognize because he knew where to look. Even like that, though, Jesse thought they were beautiful. No matter how much time passed, no matter how things might change, there would always be stars.

By the time Jesse came back to himself, he was on the outskirts of Albuquerque following a paved road with no sidewalks or lampposts. The road wound its way out of the suburbs and up into the nearby hills, leaving people and cars behind in favor of the quiet rustle of dry brush stirred by a light breeze. Occasionally a house, hidden by the curve of the road, would appear out of the gloom, its windows dark.

Jesse paused and turned in the middle of the road to look back. Albuquerque lay at the feet of the rolling hills Jesse now found himself climbing: neat rows of square buildings spread across an otherwise flat landscape. The buildings were decorated with countless pinpricks of light. It reminded Jesse of the night sky. If he stared long enough, he could imagine entirely new constellations made from street lamps and stop lights and Día de Muertos altars. Cars passing in the night became shooting stars. Blinked radio towers were lonely space stations contacting their counterparts back on Earth far far away. The desert beyond stretched endlessly into the distance, dark and unknown.

It was probably time to head home. Ruth and Annie would be back soon; they’d wonder where he was.

Home.

Jesse thought of Ruth’s house as he looked down on the city, and suddenly it seemed too small in his mind’s eye. The ceiling was low, and the hall was narrow, and his room was just a bed and a dresser and a closet and a night stand. Technically, it was the guest room. He’d made it into his room
with books and clothes, and Ruth had picked one of her favorite blankets from the linen closet for him to use so it’d feel a little more lived in, but it was still the guest room. Temporary. At times, the walls felt too close, like they were trying to push Jesse out or keep him trapped inside, and he wasn’t sure which thought unnerved him more. At his lowest, he embraced the feeling, but other times, like now, it left him feeling spooked, and all he wanted was to avoid it.

A cool breeze swept around Jesse, nipping at his exposed skin and rushing past his ears, whispering wordlessly to him. The air was so fresh that Jesse could taste it. It caught at the edges of his serape with invisible fingers, tugging playfully at the heavy fabric.

Moved by a feeling he couldn’t quite put a name to, Jesse turned his back on the city and kept walking. There was a fork in the road coming up. The left would take him towards more houses and eventually the main road back into town. The right path disappeared up into the mountains that now rose over Jesse’s head.

The Sandia Mountains formed a protective wall around the eastern border of the city. From a distance, it looked majestic. Up close, it was a craggy and unwelcoming fortress—a tumble of sharp angles, rocky outcroppings, and cacti. Despite the arid climate, the ridge of the mountains was dark with verdant woods. They promised wilderness and solitude.

Jesse turned right.

***

Ruth pulled the truck up to the house. She could see a faint glow from the living room windows cast by the ofrenda, but otherwise, the house was dark. Jesse must have gone to bed already. Which was exactly Ruth’s plan as soon as she got Annie tucked in.

Ruth reached over to rub Annie’s shoulder. Worn out from dancing, she’d laid her head against the window as soon as Ruth got the truck warmed up, and she hadn’t moved since.

Annie groaned at Ruth’s touch, but didn’t move.

“Come on, sweetheart. You’re too big for me to carry,” Ruth said.

Annie groaned again in response, but this time she sat up straight.

Ruth smiled. “You head inside and throw yourself in the shower. Get all that makeup off. I’ll put everything away.”

“Mhm.” Annie rubbed at her face, then realized her mistake and held her hands out in front of her. Her hands and her lap were covered in flaking white paint. “Oops.”

Ruth reached across and opened the door for Annie. “There you go. Let’s get you inside before you make a bigger mess of yourself.”

While Annie shuffled her way to the front door looking more like a zombie than a Catrina, Ruth grabbed her backpack. There was still a whole container of conchas and a couple of sugar skulls inside. Ruth had packed them with Jesse’s appetite in mind, but he hadn’t stuck around long enough to eat them. He could have them in the morning with his coffee.

Annie waited at the front door for Ruth to catch up as she shifted from foot to foot and shivered. It’d grown colder as the night progressed, and she hadn’t listened to Ruth about taking a jacket.

Ruth fumbled with the keys a moment before throwing the door open. Annie rushed past and up
the stairs to wash.

“Make sure to get around your ears and your hairline,” Ruth called. She would have kept her voice down, but she had no doubt Jesse had heard them the moment they came in. His unnatural hearing notwithstanding, she’d found that he was sensitive to the sound of the door opening in particular.

Ruth pulled her shoes off. She noticed Jesse hadn’t left his boots by the door, but sometimes he kept them in his room or threw them in the coat closet.

Dropping her backpack on the couch, Ruth walked over to the ofrenda. She’d put new batteries in all of the candles, but she’d left them on for three days now, and she wanted to make sure they were still on. Holographic flames danced and flickered like little sprites. All but one of them, that is.

Ruth reached for the dead candle on the back corner of the ofrenda, tutting softly at it. “You had one job to do,” she scolded. When she picked it up, a piece of paper that’d been set underneath it fluttered off the table. Now what had that been?

Ruth stooped down to retrieve the paper from under the ofrenda and unfolded it.

To those who gave their lives in the service of Overwatch: there are too many faces to display here. But know that you are not—and never will be—forgotten. I will continue to carry you in my heart and honor your memory by my actions. —J.M.

Ruth caught her lip between her teeth. She’d been a little saddened when she noticed Jesse hadn’t added anything to the ofrenda like she’d suggested, but it seemed he had. Ruth carefully folded the paper before putting it back where it belonged. She took a step back with the dead candle in hand. Then she pulled down the Saint George candle from on top of her mantle and set that on Jesse’s letter instead. Saint George was patron of soldiers and chivalry—far more appropriate than a generic tea light.

Ruth turned to the hologram of Nathan glowing amid all the candles. She ran her fingers over the medals. Then she cupped her hand around the hologram so that she held the tiny image of Nathan in her palm. She would give just about anything for this space on the ofrenda to be empty.

“Good night, Nathan… I miss you.” Ruth felt her throat close up. She swallowed hard and fought to gather herself. She refused to cry on Día de Muertos; Nathan wouldn’t want that. Plus, she might wake Jesse up.

Ruth took a steadying breath and headed for the stairs.

The next morning, Ruth woke up first, but Annie beat her down to the kitchen. Annie was dropping frozen waffles into the toaster when Ruth came in.

“Morning, Mom.”

“Morning, honey.” Ruth pulled a mug out of the cupboard before realizing the coffee machine wasn’t on. Usually, Jesse turned it on in the morning and had it brewing long before Ruth came downstairs. Jesse changed things up sometimes, but he seemed to like having a consistent morning routine.

“Annie, have you seen Uncle Jesse yet?”

Annie frowned and tapped her fingers on the counter. “Nooo? He came home early last night, didn’t he? Maybe he’s still having a bad day today.”
“I’ll go see if he wants me to bring him breakfast,” Ruth said. “He can stay in there if he wants, but he should eat something.” She got out a mug for Jesse and set it beside her own. Then she pulled one of the meal replacement drinks out of the fridge as a peace offering and went to check on Jesse.

The bedroom door was cracked open. Through the thin gap, Ruth saw only darkness. She knocked on the doorframe, but there was no answer. She waited a few seconds. Maybe Jesse was asleep still, or he didn’t want to answer. He’d left the door open, though.

Ruth’s desire to respect Jesse’s boundaries warred with her concern for his health. It’d be one thing if she had the day off, because she could check on him again later, but Jesse would be in the house alone today. She wanted to make sure he ate something before she left.

Ruth rapped her knuckles on the doorframe a second time. “Jesse?” Ruth called. She listened. Again, nothing. “Jesse, are you up?”

The absolute silence beyond the door was beginning to make Ruth feel uneasy. This wasn’t normal for Jesse. Even if he didn’t want to talk, he wouldn’t ignore her like this.

“I’m really sorry for this, but I’m coming in,” Ruth said as she pushed the door open.

Everything was where Jesse had left it last night. The sheets were pulled up and hastily straightened. There was a paperback book opened facedown on the bedside table to mark Jesse’s place. Two different shirts hung on the open door of the closet from when Jesse was trying to decide what to wear. His travel bag sat empty on the floor of the closet. His shoes were gone. So was his hat.

Jesse wasn’t there.

Ruth stood in the doorway and looked around, as if there was someplace Jesse could possibly be hiding. It didn’t make sense. He wasn’t anywhere else in the house, so he had to be here. Except he wasn’t.

Jesse hadn’t come home last night.

Chapter End Notes

Quote from “Ajax and Ulysses,” Book XIII, Metamorphoses, Ovid, Translation by A. D. Melville.

Guess who has a bad habit of getting hung up on very specific details and actually looked up the moon phase for November 2, 2073 and also night sky maps of New Mexico and Tunisia (set to the appropriate months and time of night, though timeanddate only lets you go ten years into the future)? If you guessed me, you win. And your prize is several more chapters of my inordinate amounts of research.

I know a few of my readers are probably panicking over where this is going. I want to clarify what I’m up to. A man like McCree is bound to get stir-crazy after enough time, and right now he’s stuck hiding in the suburbs for three years. This whole fic is about letting McCree heal after something traumatic and how he could reasonably go through all these things and come out the other end as the man we know and love in the game, but I hated that I was robbing him of the wandering spirit of his canon backstory, so I
had the idea to do a short side arc to let him get away—just for a little bit.

What was supposed to be one chapter turned into four, and this is part two. Next update, you can look forward to the story picking up right where it left off in Chapter 24: “The Sandias.”
Albuquerque, 2 years ago

Jesse pulled himself over a tumble of rocks, mindful of the little cacti that sprung up here and there. They certainly wouldn’t be mindful of him. At least there were less of them now that Jesse was in the mountains proper. As he’d climbed, the scrub and cacti had given way to grasses, hardy brush with yellowing leaves, and the occasional fir tree.

Jesse’s breath fogged in front of his face. He’d climbed high enough now that the temperature had dropped just below freezing and would stay that way until the sun finally rose. The blush of pre-dawn light was hidden behind the crest of the mountains, but Jesse could tell the sky had lightened considerably in the last hour or so.

Now was as good a time as any to take stock of his situation. Jesse hauled himself up onto the outcropping he’d been making his way towards and sat with his feet hanging over the edge. He patted his pockets and began pulling things out, lining them up beside him on the rock. He had a protein bar, two candles, a lighter, and the knife Ruth had given him. She’d let him have his pick of a half dozen pocket knives—except for the one with the antler handle, which she’d decided to keep for Annie when she was old enough. Jesse had picked the folding knife with the dark wood handle and steel bolsters. It had a blade designed to handle just about any task and a classic charm to it that suited his style.

Jesse also had his mask and his wallet, for all the good those would do him out in the wild. His phone would’ve been useful, but he’d left it at the house. Jesse ran his hand over his face and scratched at his beard. He hadn’t exactly packed for a camping trip, but he was loathe to give up on his plan. Too bad he’d given Ruth back her backpack; the half a bottle of water in there would’ve gone a long way.

It was fine. Overwatch had drilled the skills Jesse needed into his head so thoroughly that he couldn’t forget them if he tried. He knew what to do. In fact, there was a sort of thrill to the idea of going in unprepared. Jesse had the knowledge, he had the training, and there were no enemies out here. All he had to concern himself with was survival.

The most important thing in an arid climate like New Mexico was conserving water. That meant finding shelter during the hottest part of the day, even this late in the year. It also meant looking for
signs of animals: rodents and insects that would need fresh water. And finally, it meant not eating unless necessary. Jesse wasn’t keen on the idea, but digesting food used more water and energy than it gave back, so until he found a reliable source of water, he’d need to hold off.

Sweating would be a problem, thus the need to stay out of the sun and limit movement. Unlike Jesse himself, the animals around here were adapted to the climate. The reptiles had it easiest, but even the mammals and birds had their tricks. Rodents burrowed underground to stay cool. Jackrabbits had their big ears to help them dissipate heat quickly. Some animals got their water purely from what they ate, like vultures for example. Jesse had learned about them in high school (before he dropped out) when he had to do a presentation for science class. He’d thought the vulture rather clever for all the ways it’d adapted to survive. His classmates had only cared that they were ugly. Partly out of vindictiveness, Jesse’d had a soft spot for vultures ever since.

Particular adaptations aside, most mammals and birds had a few shared traits such as lighter coloring to reflect sunlight and heat, they didn’t sweat, and a lot of them were nocturnal. They were also insulated against the cold nights. Jesse didn’t have fur or feathers like them; he would need to set up a camp fire tomorrow evening.

Jesse’s thoughts skittered to a halt as he realized that he did, in fact, have fur—or he would if he transformed. He immediately balked at the idea. He knew he needed to be rational, though, and the more he considered it, the more sense it made. In his other form, he’d be perfectly warm, and he wouldn’t have to worry about possible sunburn, which was a risk even now. He wouldn’t sweat either. He’d be larger and require more energy, but he’d have an easier time tracking down food and water with his enhanced senses. Or he assumed so, at least. He’d never had to use his powers for that before, but it made sense that if he could track a fleeing target across a crowded city, then he could figure out hunting.

Now that he thought about it, had he ever turned into that wolf creature when it wasn’t on Talon’s orders?

Jesse wracked his brain as he tried to remember. There’d been a couple incidents in the lab where he’d triggered his powers, and he’d gotten in a scuffle or two with Talon agents in the early days after his escape where they’d nearly caught him again.

Jesse had transformed that night in Ruth’s living room, but that didn’t really count. Jesse had been half-awake and operating on pure survival instinct as his nightmare-addled brain struggled to recognize his surroundings.

And then there was the night he’d escaped.

Each and every time, his hand had been forced—by his captors, by his need to survive, or by pure desperation. Something painful roiled in Jesse’s chest. He had no problem relying on his enhancements now and then, but he never transformed if he could help it. It felt wrong to dig too deep into that power and let himself change. Like it was off-limits. Like it was tied to Something Else he didn’t want to touch—or wasn’t allowed to.

Jesse pressed his hand to his forehead and grimaced. How had he never realized? He’d tried so hard to keep Talon from messing with his head. He couldn’t stop the physical changes, but he’d thought he could resist their mind games. True, they’d worn him down until he was willing to take orders, but that wasn’t the same thing as whatever this was.

He’d been fighting so hard just to survive, he hadn’t noticed what was happening to him or how he was being hurt. Then again, maybe he had. Maybe he just hadn’t wanted to acknowledge it because that would mean thinking about how deep the wound actually ran. They’d slipped past his
defenses without him knowing and laid claim to parts of who he was, invading not just his body but his thoughts, too.

Jesse pulled his hand away to look at it. His fingers were bright red and stung from the cold. He focused on the pain to ground himself. Jesse had thought he’d made his way up into the mountains on a whim, but now he wondered if some part of him had wanted this. The open wilderness had always appealed to Jesse. It had no walls, no ceiling, no boundaries. There was life everywhere, even in the dry soil that coated his boots and dusted his palms.

The Sandia Mountains felt more real right now than the house that Jesse had been living in for more than a year. He appreciated the quiet, domestic atmosphere of his sister’s home, but he’d transitioned from living on the lamb to being part of a civilian family so fast that at times he worried he might be dreaming. He felt disconnected from the world he was trying to live in. He didn’t quite fit. His trauma didn’t quite fit.

Out here in the mountains, maybe Jesse could find the space and solitude he needed to finally acknowledge just how hurt he was. And it started with separating this whole werewolf thing from the circumstances that’d created it. This was a part of Jesse now, and no one had a right to any part of him, whether he’d asked for it or not.

Spurred by that thought, Jesse hurriedly pushed himself to his feet. If he was going to do this, he needed to do it now before he changed his mind.

Jesse climbed down off the rock where he’d been resting and began to set his possessions aside. He stripped, quickly and messily folding his clothes on top of his spread serape as he went. The cold sank into every inch of bared skin. The ground was freezing under his feet. The sooner he changed, the better.

Jesse paused with his hand on the connection of his prosthesis. The cold metal bit at his fingers, and Jesse thought he could feel the chill in his arm where the anchor spikes ran through the muscle. He deactivated the arm. It came free with a soft click. Jesse laid it on top of his clothes, set his hat on top of that, and wrapped everything up in the serape.

A fresh gust of cold air swept over Jesse, making every muscle in his back seize up, and he wrapped his arm around himself as if that would somehow help. He squeezed his eyes shut. He was already drawing on his powers, so it was easy to follow the thread of warmth trickling through his veins down into his core. The crackling heat answered.

Jesse remembered the first time he’d transformed. Or rather, he remembered the moments just before, the pain that flooded his body, and waking up after. Later, in the quiet of his cell, Jesse noticed the gentle intrusion of new, foreign thoughts. At the time he’d thought it was some other thing taking up residence in the back of his mind—some kind of creature. It’d scared him. It called out to him at times, not with words but with emotions, sometimes so powerful it was overwhelming. He imagined a wild animal inside of him, pacing its cage, trapped in his body the same way he was trapped in his cell.

Jesse knew better by now. It was raw and instinctual, but undeniably his own voice. It craved freedom as he craved it; fought tooth and nail as he fought; burned and struggled and hungered; and when he found safety, it rested, content. The only person he was sharing his mind with was himself.

Despite all that, sometimes Jesse still got the sense that something primal had settled in his bones and made itself a home there. The way the spark at his core flared to life so readily, Jesse couldn’t help thinking it was… excited to be free.
The change stole Jesse’s breath away as it washed over him. He waited for the ache and burn of stretching limbs, but the transformation came gently this time. It pushed and pulled like the tide, urging Jesse to drop his head, to slope his back, to lean forward and sink his fingers into the dark earth.

Surprised by the gentleness, Jesse let it move him. Claws dug into the dirt, cool against thick pads. The chill of the night air faded. Sound and sight and scent blossomed to life like the desert after a rainstorm.

Jesse wondered at the difference in the transformation. Why had this time been different from all the times before? He couldn’t bring himself to linger on it for long; he was too preoccupied with the present.

Jesse’s attention was drawn in a hundred directions at once. His thoughts weren’t fleeting so much as they were driven by simple, practical instinct. He took in his surroundings as if they were brand new. He noted the scent of animals, but lacked the experience to distinguish them. He heard the occasional skitter and hiss of lizards darting over rocks. He reveled in the earth under his paws. The wind ruffled his fur and tickled at the insides of his ears as they swiveled to catch the faintest sounds. The smell of fir trees was stronger in one direction, which hopefully meant water, or at least shelter from the elements.

Jesse scooped up his belongings and began to walk, but quickly found it awkward and tiring. He wasn’t quite built to stay on his back legs, and he preferred to have his good arm free. He cast around thoughtfully before returning to the rock outcropping. There was a shallow space under it where Jesse could stash his bundle of clothes. He tucked them away, taking care to hide them with dry brush.

Following the scent of animals, Jesse found himself on a game trail. His thoughts drifted as he walked. The climb reminded him of boot camp and the first time he and the recruits from his platoon went on a field retreat. They’d just wrapped up marksmanship, and Jesse had been feeling pretty cocky. Then the drill sergeant declared it was time for survival training, and what better way to learn than with a four-day ruck march?

Jesse’d never heard of a ruck march, but he figured out what it was pretty quick when the drill sergeant shoved a rucksack into his arms, the weight nearly bowling him over.

“The hell? This thing weighs half as much as I do!” Jesse complained.

The drill sergeant gave him an amused look. “It’s only 25 pounds. You’re just scrawny. By the time you take your final assessment, you’ll be expected to carry twice that plus a weapon and armor. You should be thanking me: you all get a full set of camping gear for your first time. Next retreat, you’ll have an empty bag, a canteen, and a knife. Still want to complain?”

Jesse grimaced. “No, Sergeant.”

In the end, he was thankful for the lessons—not that he was willing to admit it at the time. Jesse’d picked up a lot of interesting skills in Deadlock, but cooking on a hot car engine, sleeping in a truck, and helping to pull cactus spines out of another guy’s leg didn’t really qualify as survival training in Overwatch’s book. Over the course of four painful days, Jesse learned how to orient himself using a watch and the sun, how to build several different temporary shelters, how to work with a team to get over rock formations and across rivers, and how to clean and cook the food he caught. He was taught which locations made the best campsites, how to set snares, fishing, safe plants to eat, and how to start a fire.
Jesse had also been shown the signs of a well-used game trail, and he was taught to avoid those paths unless he wanted to run into wild animals. In this form, Jesse didn’t think he’d need to worry about that. If anything, the local animals would notice him first and give him a wide berth.

Soon enough, Jesse came across a copse of scraggly trees nestled into the side of the mountain. The rocks sloped sharply on either side, shielding the little oasis. Around the base of the trees, the brush grew in thick: evidence that water pooled and collected there and was slow to evaporate. The rocks were uneven with deep crags where the sun hadn’t managed to reach. Jesse’s ears flicked towards the sounds of small creatures in the nearby brush and fir trees. A few flies buzzed around. All signs that there was water nearby. This should be a good place to stay a while.

The scent of damp earth led Jesse to a crevice worn into the stone, partially hidden under the roots of a fir with a crooked trunk. Jesse laid down on the ground and hooked his massive paw in the crack. He could feel the change in temperature under the pads of his fingers. Reaching a little farther in, he felt moisture. Delighted with himself, he pressed his muzzle down into the hole only to startle back when he misjudged how deep it was and snorted water. Graceful.

Jesse huffed and rubbed his face with his forearm before trying again. He reached down into the crevice and lapped at the water. It tasted a bit like dirt, but he wasn’t about to complain.

Jesse looked around himself, water dripping down his chin and soaking into the fur. He’d stumbled onto a pretty nice little spot. He’d seen the tracks: there were jackrabbits around here and rattlesnakes if he didn’t mind the bones. He’d have to decide if he wanted to try eating raw meat or change back and build himself a campfire to cook his catch. Transforming would necessitate going back for his belongings, since he’d be stuck in human form for a day or so after.

Changing back wasn’t such a bad idea: this spot would provide plenty of cover from wind during the night, material for a fire, and Jesse had seen some prickly pear growing nearby that he could eat if he burned the spines off. The only downside was a lot of other animals in these mountains probably liked this spot, too, including predators. That wasn’t necessarily a dealbreaker. Jesse knew how to make rudimentary perimeter alarms, and it wasn’t like he couldn’t defend himself. Besides, he’d come out here for a challenge.

Jesse’s ears pricked as a haunting sound reached him, coming from the foothills below. It was a high-pitched, wavering howl: a coyote. It was answered by other coyotes in the distance. The tuneless noise turned harsh and cacophonous as the howling broke down into yelps and barking. It sounded like manic laughter as it bounced off the rocks and amplified.

Back in Santa Fe, the coyotes came down into the suburbs sometimes. They’d survived hunters and housing development and the Omnic Crisis same as everyone else, and if that hadn’t killed them, nothing would, so why should they be afraid? Jesse had woken up more than once to them howling in the streets. The sound had scared him when he was little. Even now, he knew the sound meant danger, but Jesse felt a fondness, too. They were a piece of home.

Jesse howled back.

Mac had taught him how to mimic a coyote’s call: the way to cup his hands and pitch his voice and start the call with short, staccato sounds, then quickly roll into a drawn out howl.

Jesse remembered sitting with Mac in a lookout tower that night. He couldn’t recall what the moon looked like, but it must’ve been close to full because the whole world was doused in its pale, dreamlike light, transforming the vast desert into the floor of a spectral ocean.

Jesse and Mac were watching one of the only roads that led to the warehouse they’d been tasked
with guarding, a thermos of coffee and a pack of cigs shared between them. It was the early days of Deadlock, after Jesse’d been initiated into the gang, but before Booker had figured out what he could do with a six-shooter. He hated always being put on lookout and the like, but at least that time around, he’d had Mac along with him.

Mac had pulled out a hip flask and let Jesse steal a few sips. What his mama didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her. Jesse’d choked on the first gulp, and Mac reached over to slap his back with a laugh. The whiskey wasn’t particularly good, and neither was the coffee, but they did their job.

Somewhere in the distance, coyotes started up their noisy chatter. Mac had chuckled before cupping his hands in front of his mouth and howling at them. They responded immediately, sounding rather upset with Mac. The raucous yips and barks left the two boys holding their stomachs laughing. They spent the rest of the night howling and laughing and drinking and definitely not doing their jobs.

He was so caught up in his memories, Jesse forgot he didn’t have a human mouth to make the right sounds. When he tried to howl, a deep, gravelly noise rolled out of Jesse’s throat instead. It was strange and unnatural, like a bear pretending to be a man pretending to be a wolf.

Jesse snapped his jaw shut. In the distance, the coyotes fell silent.

The coyotes weren’t the only ones. There had been other noises a moment ago: shuffling and rooting, the scrape of lizard claws, an owl hooting softly, the pre-dawn chatter of birds. Jesse’s ears swiveled as he tried to listen for them. He was met with nothing but oppressive silence.

The seconds ticked by, and the silence stretched. Jesse felt a growing hollowness in his chest as he settled between the exposed roots of the crooked fir tree. The other animals hadn’t been bothered by the coyotes’ racket; the coyotes belonged here. They’d gone silent because they didn’t know what Jesse was.

Then a coyote howl echoed up from the foothills—three short barks followed by a drawn-out cry. One voice turned into a half dozen, still far below but closer than before. Unafraid.

The coyotes didn’t care what Jesse was.

Resting his head on the ground, Jesse listened as the world came to life again. He heard the rustle of dry brush, the scrabbling of tiny paws just inches under the ground, and the buzz of the flies. Some brave little bird landed in the branches overhead and began to sing sweetly as the first fingers of sunlight stole over the ridge of the mountains.

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Once Annie was on the bus and headed to school, Ruth started looking for Jesse.

She’d tried to call him that morning only to find he’d left his phone on his bed stand. Ruth tried not to panic. There were only so many places she could think of that Jesse might have gone.

Max’s place was first. Ruth secretly hoped Jesse had just forgotten his house key and stayed the night there. Unfortunately, Max hadn’t seen him since yesterday morning.

Next, Ruth drove out to the construction site Jesse was currently working at and spoke with the supervisor. He’d been suspicious of Ruth until she explained that she was family and showed that she had Jesse as a contact in her phone. While he still didn’t seem entirely trusting, he told Ruth that Jesse hadn’t come in and he wasn’t scheduled to work that week.
A nagging fear had Ruth heading to the cemetery. From there, she drove around the neighborhoods all the way back to her house. She couldn’t imagine anyone managing to mug Jesse on his way home, but she needed to know for sure that he wasn’t lying unconscious in a back alley somewhere—or worse. All she managed to find were a couple teenagers playing basketball and a stray dog. She didn’t know if she was relieved or not.

Ruth wasn’t sure where to look next. At Max’s suggestion, she spent the rest of the afternoon checking every bar in reasonable walking distance of the cemetery.

“The holidays can be hard on some people,” Max had said. “He’s mentioned drinking a few times; he might’ve fallen back on old habits. Could still be there if he got too deep in his bottle.” Ruth wasn’t inclined to agree. Jesse had seemed pretty happy up until he said he had to leave. But then, as a vet, Max was in a better position to understand what Jesse might’ve been thinking.

Ruth didn’t like the thought of finding Jesse drunk, passed out, or hungover and on his way to drunk again in some seedy bar. As she crossed more and more pubs and bars off her list, though, she began to hope fervently for exactly that. Finding Jesse in any state was better than not finding him at all. Not finding him could mean any number of things, including one terrifying possibility: Talon.

Ruth came home late with Chinese takeout and resigned herself to waiting. She had to trust that Jesse would eventually come home or call from a public phone at least.

“Maybe I should call in sick to work,” Ruth said in between bites of lukewarm chow mein. “I didn’t check the nearby motels. Jesse could be there.”

Max shook her head. “If he went to a motel, he would’ve used a fake name, and the motel isn’t gonna tell you if he’s there anyway.”

“Okay, fine, you have a point, but—”

“But nothin’. Jesse’s a grown man. He can handle himself. You go to work and focus on something else for a bit. If he doesn’t show up tomorrow, then we’ll bring in the search party and the bloodhounds.” Max gave a thin, wry smile. When Ruth didn’t smile back, she tried again: “He’ll be fine, Ruth. You don’t need to worry like this. It’s only been a day.”

Ruth frowned. She glanced to the side. Annie was watching them with concern, her food practically untouched. Ruth didn’t want to have this conversation in front of her daughter, but she knew Annie was a smart girl who was probably thinking the same thing she was.

“Here’s the thing, Max: there’s some people who’re after Jesse. They already hurt him once, and they’re trying to get their hands on him again. And… and I’m scared because what if that’s exactly what happened?”

Ruth watched as momentary surprise crossed Max’s face only to be replaced with a seriousness she rarely saw in her friend. “In that case I’ll tell you what: I’ll go look for Jesse tomorrow. I’ll message you right away if I find anything. How’s that sound?”

“Really?” Ruth let herself slump in her seat. “That’d help a lot,” she admitted. “Are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t offer if I wasn’t.”

“I can help,” Annie said.

“You’re going to help by staying right here,” Ruth said sternly.
“No way. He’s my family, too. I want to help look for him,” Annie protested. “I’m not a little kid.”

“You’re eleven.”

“I’ll be twelve in like a month!”

“This isn’t a debate. You’re not going anywhere.”

“You don’t get it, Annie,” Max said. “Your mom and I will both be out of the house. Who’s gonna answer the phone if Jesse calls? Or what if he shows up, and he needs help? Your job is to hold down the fort. We need you here.”

Annie’s expression fell, and eventually she gave a reluctant nod. “I guess I can do that, then.”

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Ruth said. She leaned over to wrap an arm around Annie’s shoulders while giving Max a grateful look. “Having you here helps me more than you know.”

The next day, Ruth headed to the hospital. She’d missed the usual post-holiday madness, but her ICU was still full of plenty of patients who’d hurt themselves after getting drunk or through carelessness, so there was more than enough work to keep her distracted.

Still, Ruth found her thoughts drifting to Jesse whenever she didn’t have her hands busy. If he was hurt, surely he would have found a way to contact her by now. And if he wasn’t hurt, then what the hell was he thinking?

Max kept Ruth updated throughout the day, but by the time she had to pack it in, she’d come up empty-handed. She promised she’d go looking for Jesse again, though; there were still a few places she wanted to check.

The next day proved just as fruitless. Max offered to keep looking, but this time Ruth turned her down with a heavy heart.

“It’s been three days. If Jesse doesn’t want to be found, he won’t be,” Ruth said regretfully. “We just have to wait for him to contact us.”

Annie jumped to her feet and smacked her hands on the table. “No! We can’t stop.”

A sharp reproach sat on the tip of Ruth’s tongue, but she swallowed the words down. Snapping at Annie for her behavior wouldn’t fix anything. She was scared for Jesse, too. Ruth pressed her lips together, then finally spoke. “There’s only so much we can do, and it’s not fair to ask Max to keep running all over town for us. I’m not giving up on Jesse. I’m just trying to be practical.”

“But…” Annie’s face twisted up, and her lip quivered. “How’re we gonna protect him if we don’t know where he is?”

“Oh sweetheart, come here.” Ruth held out her arms. Annie’s expression crumbled as she leaned into her embrace.

By the end of the seventh day, Ruth found herself torn between single-minded focus and all-consuming distraction. She threw herself into her work with a fervor. She would forget everything else for an hour or two, but the moment she had any downtime, her thoughts immediately jumped back to Jesse. Annie had taken to sleeping on the couch in case he showed up in the middle of the night and needed someone to let him in. Max had gone looking around town a couple days ago despite Ruth’s protests. Ruth imagined her phone buzzing even when she wasn’t wearing it. This
waiting game was beginning to drive them all up the wall.

The end of Ruth’s shift couldn’t come soon enough. She signed out and was headed for the staff room to grab her things when the hallway exploded into chaos. Ruth pressed herself against the wall as a gurney flew past surrounded by several people. She heard one of the nurses who was performing triage say something about fractured ribs as they ran to keep up with the gurney. She caught a glimpse of the patient, his face coated in dirt and obscured by messy brown hair. Then they were gone, and the hallway was quiet again.

Ruth drifted back into the middle of the hall, her heart stuttering in her chest. She remembered “John Doe” being wheeled in the day of the apartment explosion, covered in dust and blood, the side of his face a mess and his arm mangled. The person she saw just now—that wasn’t Jesse. It couldn’t have been Jesse.

What if that was Jesse?

Behind Ruth, two people were talking. The words caught her attention before she could go running down the hallway after the ER staff.

“You need to sit down, sir.”

“But he—”

“Your friend is in good hands now; we have some of the best surgeons in the state. Can you tell me what happened?”

“There was—it was a bear.”

Ruth frowned and turned to look back. Albuquerque wasn’t exactly known for its bears, except up in the Sandia Mountains.

A young man had been guided down onto a bench by one of the nurses. He looked terrible. Ruth noted the dark, sunken eyes; his cracked lips; the way he winced now and then at noises or the lights overhead. Signs of dehydration. He had dirt on his palms and his clothes, and he’d scraped his forehead. His filthy pants were torn at the knees. His hands shook.

Ruth slowly made her way over. She caught the eye of the other nurse, Jolene, and gave her a little half-smile that said she was there to help.

“So the bear attacked your friend? Is that what happened to his chest?” Jolene asked.

“Yeah—I mean, no—it was—we were out hiking. We were up on a ridge following a game trail, and suddenly this big—this huge bear was right up on us. We—we ran. I slipped.” The man began to shake in earnest, and his face flushed red. “I grabbed Matt’s arm. I didn’t mean to—we both went down the hill. When I looked over, I saw Matt on top of this big rock, and there was blood…”

The young man covered his face with his hands and doubled over. Ruth’s eyes went wide when she saw how the back of his shirt was torn up, dirt and bits of rock embedded in skin that’d been scraped raw. She silently pointed it out to Jolene.

Jolene nodded and stepped away to get supplies to clean the patient up. Ruth knelt down beside him.

“What’s your name?” she asked.
“Ah, Anthony.”

“Anthony, the doctors are taking care of your friend right now, but I’m worried about you. How do you feel?”

“I hurt,” the man said shakily. “My… my back’s pretty bad, I know that. And my head hurts. The EMTs gave me water when they picked us up. Checked me for a concussion, too.”

“Good. All right.”

Jolene came back with a loaded hover tray. Ruth helped Anthony stand so they could guide him to an examination table. “We’re going to get you cleaned up now. You may need a few stitches. Once we’re done, you can rest in the waiting room. I want you to stay here a while in case your injuries are more severe than we thought.”

Anthony nodded. He was still shaking as Ruth sat him down. “Shouldn’t we— I mean, don’t the cops need to know about the bear?”

Ruth didn’t roll her eyes, but it was a close thing. “That’s not really their division, and besides, it sounds like you were in the bear’s backyard, not the other way around. Unless the bear is a threat, it’s best to leave it be.”

“Yeah, but…” Anthony licked his lips and glanced at Jolene before lowering his voice to tell Ruth: “I’m not sure it was a regular bear.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was—it was huge. Monstrous. Black bears don’t get that big; it was more like a grizzly maybe, I don’t know.”

Ruth and Jolene exchanged looks. “We don’t get grizzly bears in the Sandias,” Jolene said.

Anthony threw up his hands, agitated. “I don’t know what to tell you. I saw what I saw. It was all fur and teeth and claws, and it was twice as big as I am! It wasn’t a black bear!”

“Okay, okay, I believe you,” Ruth said soothingly. “We’ll deal with it after we get you cleaned up; you need those lacerations disinfected. Can you take your shirt off by yourself, or do we need to help you?”

“I can do it,” Anthony said, tone still faintly biting. It turned out he couldn’t. Ruth had to cut it off of him in the end. She stepped out of the way to give Jolene room to work as she started cleaning out the abrasions and applying antiseptic.

Finally, Anthony’s words registered, and when they did, Ruth wanted to kick herself. A giant predator that resembled a bear, running around the nearby mountains? And Jesse, missing now for a week without a trace. Coincidence? Maybe. But it’d be a stretch.

Ruth grabbed a tablet from a nearby counter, opened a browser, and pulled up a map of the area.

“Anthony, can you show me where you and Matt were hiking when you were attacked?”

“I think so. Why do you need to know?”

Ruth ignored Jolene’s questioning look and subtly gestured at her to continue cleaning. Jolene shrugged and went back to work, most likely under the assumption that Ruth was just keeping the
patient distracted.

Ruth replied, “There’s no point contacting the police, but I can tell the Department of Fish and Game what you saw. I bet they’d like to keep an eye on the bear population out there, and if it really is a threat, they can handle it.” She held out the tablet to Anthony. “Go ahead and circle the area where you two were hiking. I’ll take care of the rest for you.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry there's not a lot of drama or action, but I felt this chapter was necessary to let McCree finally have the time and space to reflect on how he's healing and how far he still needs to go. I can't remember if I've mentioned this before, but while unintentional, this story has developed an important theme: change. Power to change, forced change, growth, transition, transformation, trauma, healing, the hero's journey, etc. This is one of those moments where McCree has to face change that was done to him against his will and take that back for himself. McCree is defined by two things, I think: the power to reflect and change himself for the better, and the ability to remain true to who he is despite change. They may seem at odds with each other, but I would argue they're just different aspects of the same trait.

Frankly, McCree's barely scraping the surface of his trauma, but this is a step in the right direction.

I also wanted an excuse to write more of McCree as a werewolf. I don't think anyone's gonna fault me for that.

Look forward to the next update. Come hell or high water, Ruth's going to track her brother down.

***

A question from reader Flaria:
Exciting chapter! I can understand why Jesse might feel the need to be alone, but he's certainly piled a lot of worry onto his extended family. And I do wonder why he'd go out of his way to attack a pair of hikers, unless they aren't what they claim to be? Or he's lost himself somehow. :c I hope he's okay. Ruth's gonna kick his ass for not telling her where he was headed when she finds him, I'd bet.

My response:
Why would Jesse do that? You’re right, it’s odd. I will point out, the hiker never said the “bear” attacked them. It was just suddenly there, very close, and he slipped and grabbed his friend and, well, we have to remember he’s in shock and not a reliable narrator. But maybe there is something else going on, too...
Don't Scream and Don't Run

Chapter Notes

Additional Chapter 25 tags: Nature, Wild animals, Dead animals (briefly mentioned), Fighting, Arguing, Comfort, Communication

Update (8/2/19): An additional scene has been added to the end after some feedback and consideration.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Albuquerque, 2 years ago

“We meet here at the truck by two, no exceptions,” Max said. “Make sure to give yourself enough time to get back.”

“I know. I have our starting point marked on my map.” Ruth gestured to the holographic model of the Sandia Mountains projecting from her phone. So long as she didn’t end up in a dead zone, the map would be able to track her progress and predict the time and distance it would take her to return. The map also displayed the general area where the hikers had spotted their “bear.” The only problem was they’d been a little lost themselves when it happened, so the circle encompassed several miles.

“Remember, you’ll be going downhill on the way back. It’ll be easier and faster, but a lot more dangerous, too, so take your time. And keep your eye out for wild animals, especially snakes. The hiking paths are gonna get warm real quick once the sun’s high enough, and snakes love that.” Max adjusted the straps on her backpack yet again. She worried her lip with her teeth. “I’m still not sure we should split up.”

Ruth shrugged her shoulders. “It’s the best way to cover a lot of ground at once. And we both have phones, so we can call for help if we need it.”

“I’m just thinking, what if it really was a bear?”

“The hiker didn’t think it was a normal animal. He was pretty shaken up, I’ll admit, but no native animals match his description. It’s gotta be Jesse.”

“So he really is some kinda werewolf then,” Max said, sounding just as uncertain as the night before, when Ruth told her. “Hell of a thing.”

Ruth gave a short nod. “He’s still Jesse, though. There’s nothing to be afraid of.” She pocketed her phone. “I’ll see you in six hours.”

Max took a path that meandered through the lower hills northward while Ruth took a trail up and to the east, in the direction of Sandia Crest. The sharp November wind bit at Ruth’s exposed face while the sun baked her inside her coat at the same time. Despite that, the hike might’ve been pleasant under different circumstances. The view was incredible.

An hour in, and Ruth hadn’t found much of anything. It came as no surprise; she hadn’t even reached the circled search area yet. There’d been some footprints in the dirt here and there, but hikers came up these trails all the time, so it wasn’t much of a lead.
Ruth stopped to rest her feet and drink some water. She unwrapped a breakfast bar and made to shove the wrapper in her pocket, but missed. The wind caught the wrapper, sending it fluttering down the path and into the brush. Ruth chased after it. She reached her arm into the brittle shrub, got a hand on the wrapper, and pulled back. The whole bush came away with a soft snap. Ruth swore and struggled with the bush before she managed to extract her arm.

“Stupid tumbleweeds.” Ruth tossed the bush down.

Something stark white caught Ruth’s eye as she started back up the path. She would’ve mistaken it for bone, but the shape was all wrong. She knelt and picked the object up.

It was Jesse’s Día de Muertos mask. “So you did come up here,” she murmured.

Ruth pulled out her phone, snapped a picture, then sent it to Max. Max was quick to text her back.

Max: Is it his?
Ruth: Yes.
Max: I’ll head your way.
Ruth: K. I’m going to keep going. Just follow the trail.

The trail ahead was rough and steep, but Ruth threw herself into the climb with renewed energy. Jesse was here somewhere—and she was going to give him a piece of her mind when she found him.

The hiking path eventually ended, but a game trail branched off deeper into the mountains, snaking its way around boulders; patches of late-blooming, yellow wildflowers; and sparse trees that hardly reached the top of Ruth’s head. The air was cold and dry in her lungs. It bit at her fingers through her gloves, so any time she wasn’t climbing, she had her hands tucked up under her arms to keep them warm. Her feet scuffed across the ground as the ache of the climb settled in her legs, making them throb.

Ruth’s phone buzzed in her pocket. She fumbled to pull it out. It was the timer she’d set for herself; she’d been walking for three hours. That meant she had three hours to get to the truck like she’d agreed on.

Ruth pulled up her map. She was well within the search area now. Jesse had to be close. She couldn’t turn back now. Max had said it’d be faster going down the mountain, so she could afford to go a little farther. And besides, Max would understand if she was late.

The path ahead evened out, then dove to the right, deep into a copse of trees in the crook of the mountain’s arms where ancient glaciers and centuries of water runoff had carved away at the stone.

Something fluttered in the trees, a vibrant red.

Ruth willed her aching legs to move faster as she jogged up the path. The brush was thicker here, green leaves still clinging stubbornly to their branches. Ruth struggled to pick her way through, eyes on the ground to keep her footing. She very nearly walked face first into Jesse’s serape, which dangled from a tree branch.

Ruth came up short, breathing hard. She grabbed hold of the serape and lifted it off the branch before bringing it to her chest and pressing her face down into it. The weight and scratch of the wool
was more comforting than she’d expected. With her heart thrumming in her ears, Ruth looked around properly, finally taking in her surroundings.

Underneath a crooked fir tree, someone—Jesse—had cleared the ground of plants and rocks. A lean-to had been built up against the trunk using green conifer branches stripped from the trees nearby. In front of it, he’d constructed a fire pit. Ruth knelt down, pulled off a glove, and felt tentatively at the ashes. There was still a hint of warmth deep in the center of the burnt out fire; it’d been lit just that morning.

Ruth brushed her hand off on her pant leg before pulling her glove back on. Crouched by the ring of stones, Ruth did another sweep of the area. She noticed something at the back of the shelter. Crawling inside, she found a pile of clothes, Jesse’s hat, his wallet, and his prosthetic arm.

Ruth: *Found a campsite. Jesse’s clothes are here.*

Max: *He’s running around naked?*

Ruth: *werewolf*

Max: *That’s right. I forgot.*

Max: *What do you want to do? Leave a note? Wait for him?*

Max: *Someone has to be at the house when Annie comes home.*

Turning her phone over in her hands, Ruth thought hard about what to do. Jesse was nearby. But if Ruth didn’t head back soon, Annie would come home to an empty house, and even if she insisted she was old enough to be alone, Ruth didn’t like that idea.

Ruth: *I need a little more time. I’m gonna look for him.*

After a minute, Max’s reply came.

Max: *I’ll head for the truck. See if I can park it closer. The EMTs got to those hikers so maybe there’s a service road.*

Max: *If you don’t find him leave him your phone and pass # so he can call*

Ruth: *That’s genius.*

Ruth: *I won’t look too long. Just a few minutes promise*

A rough trail—if it could be called that—left the trees and headed north as it hugged the mountainside. It was littered with dry brush and large, rounded stones, and it climbed steeply before twisting out of sight. Ruth scanned the ground as she picked her way along the trail: this was exactly the sort of place a rattlesnake would love to hide.

Ruth was grateful to find that the path leveled out after the turn. From here, she had a good view of the hills below: hardy ground cover and boulders as big as cars, everything brown and gray stretching on for miles. The trail twisted away to the right, vanishing into waist-high undergrowth and stunted fir trees. Ruth couldn’t see any signs of movement in the heath below, so she kept to the trail.

Ruth’s phone buzzed. It was a text from Max: she’d found a path up the mountain a ways. She sent Ruth her location, the beacon appearing on her map.
Ruth shoved her phone back in her pocket and looked up just in time to spot a form lying prone on the side of the path, obscured by the brush. It was large with brown fur, and it wasn’t moving. Even from a distance, she could see rust red blood matting the fur. She froze, the air caught in her lungs, then she threw herself forward into a flat run.

Ruth pulled up short when she got a good look. It was a deer—a stag, dead for the better part of a day going by the smell. Ruth pressed her hand to her mouth and sighed. She scolded herself. It didn’t look anything like Jesse. She’d been worried over nothing.

Something behind Ruth let out a heavy huff. She turned.

Standing in the middle of the game trail was a massive form. Black fur. Legs like tree trunks ending in wide paws. A brown muzzle that scented the air. Dark eyes focused on Ruth.

A black bear.

Ruth’s breath caught in her throat. On instinct, she put her hands up in front of herself. The sharp motion seemed to catch the bear’s attention. Its mouth opened, lips protruding as it scented the air.

Don’t run. That was the only thing going through Ruth’s mind. It was something she’d learned in school—a lesson she never thought she’d need. Don’t run. Back up slowly. Climb a tree if possible. There were a few trees nearby, but none that she could reach in time, and they were all too short.

Ruth shuffled back a few steps. The bear followed. It moved to put itself between her and the deer. Then it let out several huffing barks, rose up, and slapped its paws on the ground.

Ruth stumbled, then caught herself. Don’t scream. Don’t scream, and don’t run. She backed up some more.

The bear watched her, its head slung low. Then suddenly it charged forward. Ruth scrambled away, hands up to protect her face. The bear stopped short. It slammed its paws on the ground again and let out a roar.

A roar answered it.

Something monstrously large barreled through the undergrowth, wide shoulders bending the bushes and saplings back sharply. It burst out onto the path behind the bear and skidded to a halt, sending dirt and dust flying.

“Jesse,” Ruth gasped.

Despite having only seen Jesse change once, there was no mistaking him. Although, out in the open in the bright light of day, Ruth had a new appreciation for exactly what he was. He easily dwarfed the black bear with his hulking form, yet he cut a lean, sharp figure with his wolf-like muzzle and long limbs. His chest heaved as he panted, his whole body shifting restlessly with a dangerous energy. If a creature like this had ever existed before Jesse, it had been a predator from another age—a world of mammoths and megafauna, strange plants and giant insects, where men did not belong.

Jesse let out a growl that rumbled through his chest like a coming storm. The bear whipped around to face him with a huff of its own.

Jesse’s lips pulled back to reveal wicked teeth that he clicked threateningly. He stood on his hind legs for a moment, then lowered himself down, front paw digging into the dirt, tail straight back, ear pricked forward.
The bear bluff charged him, stopped short of his reach when he didn’t flinch, then backed away as it tried to assess the strange and much larger predator.

Jesse circled the bear, his gaze never leaving it. He stopped when he was between the bear and Ruth, then let out a snarl.

Ruth held perfectly still, save for the tremors that ran up and down her body against her will. She wanted to call out to Jesse, but she knew better than to distract him. Even though the bear was smaller, it was still a dangerous wild animal.

The bear huffed, stomped, and feinted again as if to prove Ruth’s point.

Ruth watched as the muscles in Jesse’s shoulders shifted, his legs tensed, then suddenly he sprang forward. He swept in from the right side and slammed his shoulder into the bear, knocking it sideways. It lost its balance and rolled across the ground.

The bear was on its feet in an instant, and Ruth waited for it to attack, but instead it let out a plaintive kind of sound and backed away. Jesse lifted up and slammed his paw into the ground like the bear had done. A roar, discordant and thunderous, poured from his jaws. With that, the bear turned and ran.

Jesse relaxed, watching calmly as the bear retreated up the path until it was out of sight. Ruth saw his nose twitch and his ears swivel. After a minute or so, Jesse turned to Ruth. His ears drooped, then pulled back loosely. His tail relaxed, and the fur along his spine smoothed. Warm brown eyes like river stones watched Ruth as Jesse loped over.

Rather than stopping short, Jesse pressed right up into Ruth’s personal space, nose shoving against her ribs, then up and down her limbs, then Huffing wetly against her cheek. He was making sure she was okay, Ruth realized. With the adrenaline draining out of her, she began to shake in earnest. Jesse let out a soft whine, and without thinking, Ruth threw her arms around his neck.

Ruth’s hands nearly vanished into the fur of Jesse’s ruff as she pressed herself close. He was warm and solid and, most importantly, safe.

Jesse dropped his head over Ruth’s shoulder and nudged her closer.

Then Ruth remembered why she was there, and the wave of fear and anger she’d been holding at bay overtook her. She pulled back sharply, hands fisted in Jesse’s fur. “No!” She shoved at Jesse as hard as she could. He was too big for her to budge, but he pulled back all the same. His eyes were wide as he tilted his head at her. Ruth clenched and unclenched her jaw to stop her lip from quivering. “No, I’m mad at you! You don’t get to come in and save the day, then act like you haven’t had me scared to death for the last week!”

Jesse’s ears pinned back, and he looked away from Ruth.

Ruth felt a twinge of guilt, but she was too angry to stop. “You just up and vanished without leaving a note or anything! You could’ve at least called! Nothing was stopping you. Me and Max have been running all over the city looking for you while you were out here playing boy scout. How could you just run off like that? You had me so scared,” Ruth said, chest aching, her voice weakening. “Me and Max and especially Annie. You promised. You said you wouldn’t leave without saying anything.”

Jesse swung his head towards Ruth and let out a huff like he wanted to argue.

Ruth shook her head sharply. “Don’t you get it? I thought you were in danger. Why else would
you just vanish?” She wrung her hands in front of herself and felt tears prick at her eyes. She tried to hold them back, but the more she tried, the harder it became. “I thought… I thought maybe Talon got you again.” Her voice cracked.

Jesse whined, low and plaintive, and pressed his face into Ruth’s chest. Her arms went around him without thinking, and then she was crying.

They stayed that way for a while, until the buzzing of Ruth’s phone finally made her let go of Jesse.

Ruth used the back of her glove to dry her face before pulling her phone out to reassure Max that she was safe and she’d found Jesse.

“Annie’s gonna be home soon,” Ruth said, her voice tight. “The truck’s down at the base of the trail. Come on.”

Jesse seemed contemplative, watching Ruth for a moment. Then he stepped around her and headed down the path, picking his way between the rocks with ease.

Ruth followed Jesse back to his campsite. He paused to sniff at the branch where his serape had been hanging. He ducked his head into the shelter, then pulled back with a bob of his head, having found it among his things where Ruth left it.

As Ruth watched, Jesse transformed. The shifting of his body was so strange that she couldn’t help staring. It was quicker and more fluid than she remembered, though it still seemed to leave Jesse weak-kneed and breathing hard.

Jesse wrapped his arm tight to his chest and hissed out a breath through his teeth. Even at a distance, Ruth could see the goosebumps rise instantly across his skin and every hair on his body stand on end in the cold. “Gimme a sec,” he said before ducking into the shelter to dress.

Ruth leaned against a tree while she waited. Aborted conversations ran through her mind. She’d said everything she wanted to already, but she felt like there was still more they had to talk about. Like why Jesse had come out here in the first place, for starters.

Ruth straightened up when Jesse came out. He had everything on but his hat, which he held between his hands. He fiddled with the brim, turning and twisting it restlessly.

“All right,” Ruth said. “You ready to go?”

Jesse glanced over at her, then frowned down at his hands. “Well, see….” He faltered. “That’s kinda what I wanted to talk about.”

Ruth frowned, but didn’t interrupt.

Jesse’s next words were spoken more to his hat than to Ruth. “I don’t think I’m ready yet.”

“What does that mean?”

“Means what I said. I’m not ready to go back yet.” Jesse rubbed at the bridge of his nose, his brow furrowed. “I came out here for a reason. Don’t know if I can explain it, but I needed this. Needed the space and the fresh air. Needed things to be simple for a while. And I needed to be alone —get to know myself again, you know?

“Th’ night I left, I just sorta let my feet take me, and this is where I ended up. I was gonna head
back to the house, but even the thought...” He looked pensively at Ruth. “The idea of goin’ back was suffocating. I couldn’t do it.”

Ruth started to speak, but Jesse cut her off with a raised hand. “I wanna come home,” he said. “Don’t get me wrong here. I miss you and Annie something awful.”

“It’s just the house,” Ruth guessed.

Jesse shook his head. “It’s not that. I like your house fine. I like that there’s a place for me there.” He struggled for the words he wanted. “It’s just me,” he said lamely.

Jesse went quiet after that, apparently unable to explain any better. His mouth twisted, and the furrow of his brow deepened. He spun his hat between his fingers like the wheel of an unmanned boat.

Jesse’s hands stilled when Ruth took hold of his forearms. She squeezed them, feeling muscle and steel under her fingers. “Okay, Jesse.” She stared at his chest instead of his face; she was worried if she looked him in the eye, she might tear up again. “I might not understand exactly what you’re thinking, but I get it. You need more time. I can give you that. The important thing is I know you’re okay now.”

“Sorry I scared you,” Jesse said quietly.

“Just warn me next time you do something like this,” Ruth said. “That’s all I ask. You need to remember you have people who care about you. You’ve got to take a little responsibility for that. I mean, how would you feel if I left without a word?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“But what if I did?”

“I’d find you.”

Ruth looked up and found Jesse’s face serious, his eyes dark.

“I’d track you down no matter what. I wouldn’t let anything happen to you.”

Ruth squeezed Jesse’s arms again. “And that’s exactly what I did.”

Jesse’s expression softened. “That you did.” A wry smile twisted the corner of his mouth. “Rather impressive, actually. You’ll have to tell me how you managed that.”

“Let’s make a deal. I’ll tell you about it if you come down to the truck with me.”

“Now hold on—”

“You don’t have to come with me,” Ruth said quickly, “but I’ve got an emergency kit in my truck you’re gonna take. It’s got water, a blanket, a flashlight—all kinds of stuff. Plus, I want you to take my phone so you can call when you’re ready to come back. It’d be a load off my mind if you let me do that for you. Please.”

Jesse turned his hat around and set it on his head. “All right then. Lead the way, mama bear.”

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Three weeks passed. Jesse didn’t call, but he texted Ruth every few days to let her know he was
all right. In return, she respected his need for solitude. It was difficult to resist, knowing he had her phone and she could call or message him any time, but it was the only thing he’d asked her for.

Ruth watched the morning news while cradling a cup of coffee. The weatherman was talking about how this was the coldest December 1st that Albuquerque had experienced in a century, and Ruth was entertaining the thought of bringing thermal blankets and a tent up to Jesse when her phone rang.


“G’morning to you, too. How’s my favorite little sister?”

“Warmer than you, I’m guessing.”

Ruth heard a chuckle over the phone. “Good guess. Everything’s frosted over up here. Finally got the fire going, but it took me a while.”

“It’s only going to get colder.”

“True enough.”

“Do you need anything?”

There was quiet rustling on the other end of the line and the sound of Jesse breathing on his hand to warm his fingers up. Ruth waited patiently, her coffee all but forgotten.

“I, uh. I could use a ride, if it’s not too much trouble,” Jesse finally said. “Miss you guys something fierce… Miss coffee, too.”

“I’ll be right over.”

“You don’t have to rush on my account. Any time today would do fine, or tomorrow if you got plans.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m already putting on my boots,” Ruth said, getting up off the couch. “I’ll be there in an hour.”

True to her word, Ruth was parked at the base of the trail an hour later. The sun had finally risen over the crest of the mountains, making their frosted peaks glitter.

Annie—who had insisted on coming when Ruth woke her up to tell her where she was going—sat in the passenger seat, coat thrown over her pajamas and her hair finger-combed but still wild from sleep. She was too short to ride up front, but as soon as Ruth had parked, she’d switched seats so she could look for Jesse.

Ruth was still admiring the mountains when Annie leaned forward, slapped both hands on the dashboard, and let out an excited shout: “Uncle Jesse!”

At the top of the trail, a flash of red had appeared and was making its way down towards them. Before Ruth could react, Annie had thrown open the door and jumped out, letting a gust of cold air into the cabin in her wake.

Annie jogged up the path, slowed down by the loose rocks and her winter boots. Halfway up, she ran into the red figure, which had resolved itself into a particularly shaggy-looking Jesse McCree, and threw her arms around him. Ruth watched her feet leave the ground as Jesse lifted her into a bear
They came back to the truck with Annie in the lead holding Jesse’s hand. If Ruth didn’t know how strong Jesse was, she’d say he was being dragged.

Annie pulled the back door open. “Uncle Jesse’s sitting with me,” she declared as she crawled across the seats to the far side.

“Both of you in back? What am I, a chauffeur?”

“Pleease?”

Ruth waved a hand. “Fine, fine.” She waited for Jesse to climb in and close the door before turning to look at him. “Hey there, mountain man. You’re looking like you could use a bath and a shave.”

Jesse smiled, the side of his mouth going crooked. He ran a hand over his wild beard. “I don’t have a mirror, so I’ll have to take yer word for it.”

“No, she’s right, you do,” Annie chimed in.

Jesse laughed.

Ruth grabbed a thermos from her cupholder and passed it back to Jesse.

“What’s this?”

“Coffee. Don’t burn yourself; it’s still hot. There should be a blanket back there for you, too.”

“You’re a saint.”

Ruth heard the click of the thermos lid and then a muffled, distressed noise. “You burned yourself, didn’t you?”

“No. ‘m good,” Jesse said a little too quickly.

Ruth smiled to herself even as she rolled her eyes. She looked over her shoulder. Jesse had thrown the blanket over his legs, and he was clutching the thermos with both hands. His fingers and his nose had started turning red as they warmed up. Dirt clung to every inch of him, and exhaustion lingered around his eyes. He looked relaxed, though. Happier, maybe, or just more at ease than he had been in a while. Whatever he’d been searching for, it seemed like he’d found it. “You ready to go home, cowboy?”

Jesse smiled softly, and his eyes took on a faraway look. “Reckon I am.”

Chapter End Notes

Real quick, before I say anything else:
Now! With the surprise is out of the way, I want to clarify in regards to the hikers from last chapter: I had readers concerned that Jesse attacked them. They had, in actuality, encountered the black bear. Anthony was an unreliable narrator who was in shock and only saw the creature for a split second before he panicked and slipped. Thus the wild proportions.

I also want to clarify that the bear didn’t attack the hikers. Assuming it even realized they were there, it would have been just as startled. Furthermore, when it attacked Ruth, its behavior was territorial. It was defending its food. Thus the bluff charges. By contrast, while Jesse didn’t realize it, the way he circled and then charged at an angle and made contact is something done only by bears intending to actually fight and kill, which is why it was so effective in scaring the bear off.

This chapter really took an interesting turn when I finally got to it. I hadn’t anticipated the consequences of Jesse’s actions until I started to get into how the other characters should react (I also extended the time it took Ruth to find him, which upped the tension). It was all supposed to be about him becoming more comfortable with his werewolf form and also getting a cool fight scene, but it turned into something more, I got to write him being fallible and human. By extension, I think his relationship with his family feels more real. Seeing how much his loved ones care and the impact he had on them by not communicating is a really good lesson for someone like Jesse, who has lived a life of open secrets, unspoken permissions, and more recently, isolation and abuse. A peek behind the curtain here, but I hope to bring this lesson up in future stories (cross your fingers) so we can see how he learned and grew from this.

Next chapter is going to jump forward a few months. Keep an eye out for Chapter 26: An Ode to Unbending Steel.

“Don’t think. Don’t hesitate. Just do what has to be done.”

“Patience, McCree. You have all the time in the world.”
**PLEASE READ:** If you have not read it yet, an additional scene was added to the end of the last chapter, in which Jesse finally returns from the mountains. If you were looking forward to that, now’s the time to hit that “Previous Chapter” button. The start of the new scene is marked with line break asterisks: ***

Additional Chapter 26 tags: Guns, Violence, Fighting, Physical abuse/torture, Electricity, Mental abuse, Emotional abuse, Verbal abuse, Victim blaming, Flashbacks, Possibly inaccurate firearms information, Fake science, The actual physics of McCree’s gun will drive you insane, Sharpshooting, Additional canon characters, Mentors, Friendship

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico, 4 years ago

Jesse ducked behind a broken-down Chevrolet Halcón as a spray of bullets peppered the passenger side of the vehicle. His choice of cover had its pros and cons. The Halcón was built just a few years before the metal shortages created by the Omnic Crisis, so it was solid as a brick house. But again, it was built before the Omnic Crisis, which meant the rusty, old compact car probably had a rusty, old fusion engine to match. Jesse prayed to whoever was listening that someone had scavenged the reactor core. If that wasn’t the case, the friction from one of those bullets in just the right place would cause one hell of a bang.

Jesse checked the magazine of his handgun. Empty. Checking the chamber revealed one last cartridge, though. He should’ve kept better track of his ammo.

The shooting stopped. Jesse didn’t trust it. Whoever had opened fire on him was likely just conserving bullets until he popped his head out; he couldn’t stay behind the Halcón forever, after all.

“It’ll be a quick mission, McCree. Just gotta make a point. A lil cleanup, that’s all,” Jesse muttered, mocking Reaper’s words. He sneered. “Hell of a mess to clean up.”

He tried his comms again, but they were still jammed. Mendes probably wouldn’t back him up anyways: he was still pissed about the whole Janus operation. If Mendes had gotten his way, Jesse wouldn’t be here at all, but Reaper had wanted to handle this job personally, and he kept Jesse around more and more lately. Besides, Jesse’s time in Deadlock was invaluable here.

Deadlock had dealt with the López Castillo brothers before. They’d been four brothers—now three—who basically owned Mérida along with the whole state of Yucatán. Jesse had accompanied Martín to both of Deadlock’s dealings with them, selling high-grade military equipment to the brothers. Martín had warned Jesse before they went in that the López Castillos had men everywhere, and they took what they wanted without fear of retaliation. They learned firsthand what retaliation was when they tried to double-cross Deadlock, and Jesse McCree put a bullet in their baby brother Miguel.

Jesse could’ve told Talon it was a bad idea to go into business with the López Castillos. They
were bad before, but after losing their brother? They’d increased their presence, built up their forces, bought out or killed every other competitor for miles, put their boot on the neck of the local police department, and there were stories about how brutal they’d become to their enemies over the last few years.

Overwatch would have stepped in if Mexico’s government had allowed them, but the López brothers controlled local politicians, too. Morrison nearly sent Blackwatch in anyways; he’d already had agents in Yucatán doing recon for it (all strictly off-the-books), but then Rialto had happened.

Now, completely unchecked, Mérida had become the López brothers’ personal kingdom. They no longer hid in the shadows. The city was theirs, and everyone knew it: something Talon had failed to take into account when the López Castillos finally burned them and Talon decided to return the favor.

If they’d been smart about it, they would have targeted the gang’s supply lines and allies. Better to attack them indirectly. Safer, too. But Talon wanted the brothers’ heads, so here they were in the middle of López Castillo territory with a dozen men, no heavy artillery, backup several hours out, and no exit strategy. Meanwhile, the whole city was trying to hunt them down. Jesse couldn’t think of many ways it could get worse at this point, except maybe if it rained.

Jesse slowed his breathing and listened for movement at the far end of the car park. He tried to draw on his powers to sharpen his senses, but there was no change; he’d used up everything he had. Earlier, Talon had pressed an attack on the brothers’ compound, but it went south, and the brothers escaped to a secondary location. Reaper had ordered Jesse to track them down when Talon’s drones failed to locate them. Jesse’s nose had led them here, to several blocks of abandoned construction projects and Crisis-era ruins set in the very heart of the city like a jagged scar. The trail went cold before he could narrow the location down any further, but fortunately—or unfortunately—the brothers had sent out a welcoming committee armed with assault rifles to greet Talon.

Stone skittered. It’d sounded like someone’s foot dragging through rubble, but it might’ve been a thrown rock. Jesse shifted position and looked around to make sure he wasn’t being flanked. Another sound from the same general area drew him back. Amateur, Jesse thought to himself. This would be quick.

Jesse leapt to his feet and aimed at the source of the noise over the hood of the car, sighting down the barrel of his Glock Neo. He had the safety off and the trigger half-squeezed before he registered what he was aiming at.

It was a kid. Seventeen at most, but probably younger, wearing a jacket a size too big for him and scuffed red sneakers and holding a submachine gun. He was scrawny. The jacket hid it a bit, but it showed in the thinness of his forearms where he’d pushed the sleeves up and in the hollow of his cheeks. He looked startled.

Jesse found himself frozen as the boy shouted and raised his gun. He waited for the bullets to tear into him.

Suddenly, the kid’s arms dropped to his sides, gun dangling from its shoulder strap. His back arched sharply. Black smoke curled around his neck and limbs, red energy pulsing faintly inside the tendrils. Reaper formed a half second later with one clawed hand clamped down on the kid’s shoulder.

The kid gasped for air, his eyes rolled up in his head, then his whole body went slack. Jesse had only seen Reaper drain someone of energy twice before. Both times had been in brutal firefights, and both times had been fatal.
“Stop!” Jesse shouted. “You don’t have to kill him! Let ‘im go!”

Reaper stiffened. Then his free hand drifted to his belt, and he thumbed something open.

Jesse had the presence of mind to flick his gun safety on before his restraints activated. He hit the ground hard as waves of electricity coursed through his body. His head bounced off the concrete, and his vision exploded for a few seconds. His muscles spasmed uncontrollably, his limbs twitched, and his skin crawled. There was a sort of building pressure at the back of his neck where the collar pressed tight, then the world went blinding white.

Just as suddenly as it began, it was over. Jesse sucked in lungfuls of air as he quickly and quietly assessed his fall injuries. It’d been a while since he gave one of his handlers a reason to shock him. His head throbbed, but at least he’d fallen backwards instead of forwards onto his face. He’d twisted his arm under himself when he landed, but it was only sore. He’d be good as new within the hour.

A boot pressed into Jesse’s side. Reaper spoke in that hollow voice of his: “You don’t give me orders. Understand?”

Jesse nodded.

The boot dug in sharper.

Jesse grimaced. “Yessir.”

The boot retreated. “Get up.”

Jesse rolled onto his hands and knees before dragging himself to his feet with a groan. His vision swam for a moment. Feeling at the back of his head, Jesse winced when he found the tender spot. His glove came away wet with blood. Jesse sighed. Make that two hours to heal.

Jesse picked up his gun, holstered it, then turned his attention to Reaper.

Reaper was standing over the kid’s body, combat knife in hand. The kid was still breathing, chest rising and falling shallowly. Jesse’s heart stuttered then sped up as Reaper reached for the kid. He was going to kill him.

Jesse’s gun cleared leather before he realized what he was doing. It wasn’t worth it, he thought. He’d be punished for this, and it wouldn’t make a difference. This was a mistake.

Jesse thumbed the safety off.

The sound of the hammer being cocked drew Reaper’s attention. He stilled. Then he twisted so that his mask pinned Jesse with an unblinking stare as his hand closed around the boy’s submachine gun. Reaper sliced through the shoulder strap, then he straightened with the gun in hand, his movements slow and smooth like a predator.

Next thing Jesse knew, Reaper was a foot away, his chest nearly brushing the muzzle of Jesse’s Glock. Wisps of smoke drifted around them and dissipated.

“Surprised you didn’t shoot me. Out of bullets, McCree?” Reaper asked. He dropped the submachine gun on the hood of the car. Then he wrapped a hand tightly around Jesse’s wrist, squeezing like a vice as he pulled the handgun out of his grip. Jesse relinquished the gun without a fight.

Reaper checked the magazine, made a small noise, then pushed back the slide just far enough for
them both to see the bronze gleam of a cartridge. “One left,” Reaper said. His head bobbed in a thoughtful nod. “Hold out your arm.”

Jesse knew what was about to happen. He knew there was no way out of it, and he knew he deserved it for what he’d done.

“Which one?” he asked.

“Your left.”

Made sense. They were still on a mission in enemy territory, and Reaper needed him combat-capable.

Jesse ignored the roiling in his stomach as he extended his left arm out to Reaper. He fought the urge to flinch as Reaper wrapped a hand around his wrist to hold him firm and pressed the sun-warmed barrel of his own gun against his forearm. He kept his eyes locked on Reaper’s trigger finger; it’d hurt more if he didn’t see it coming.

Jesse felt suspended in the moment, his breath caught in his throat. He waited for the searing pain, but it didn’t come. Then Reaper pulled the gun away.

“I shouldn’t have to do this to you,” Reaper said, his tone indecipherable. He turned the gun around with the grip towards Jesse. “You do it.”

The words were ice in Jesse’s veins—sharp and biting at first, but as they ran their course through his body, he felt himself becoming numb. He took the gun with mechanical motions. He dragged it out, but he knew better than to stop or even hesitate.

Jesse pressed the muzzle to his forearm just under his tattoo. Firing point blank would cause burns, but he wanted total control over the bullet’s trajectory, and he didn’t trust his hand not to shake. He willed himself to relax. Tensing up would only make this worse.

Jesse slid his finger over the trigger and squeezed.

The sound of the gun discharging and the bullet simultaneously tearing through flesh blended together into loud—bright—piercing—searing—agonizing—unbearable pain.

Jesse choked on nothing. He struggled to breathe for a moment. Then a hoarse scream surged up out of his chest, and he dropped to his knees cradling his arm. The gun clattered to the pavement.

Jesse sucked in shuddering breaths through his clenched teeth as he tried to apply pressure to the wound. He held his arm tight against his chest plate while he pressed his palm to the other side of the hole. He could feel blood dripping down and soaking into his clothes.

Once the shock wore off, Jesse became aware that Reaper was crouching in front of him, balanced on the balls of his feet, arms braced on his knees and Jesse’s empty gun held loosely in one hand. He was saying something. Jesse silently swore as he struggled to catch up.

“Did you hear what I said?” Reaper asked. “Answer me.”

“N—no sir,” Jesse ground out.

Reaper glanced away, gave his head a little shake, then looked back at Jesse. “I said don’t you ever point a gun at me again. I let you off the hook the first time it happened. You were stupid. You didn’t know any better. Clearly, I should’ve put you in your place the first time. That’s on me.”
Jesse huffed, his gaze fixed on Reaper’s boots. His arm throbbed. The pain radiated down to the
tips of his fingers and up to his shoulder.

A gloved hand fisted in Jesse’s hair and yanked his head up until he was looking at Reaper’s
mask.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you,” Reaper snapped. “I’m starting to think I’ve been too soft
on you. You should know better than to pull a stunt like that by now.” Reaper paused to let out a
slow breath, sounding very much like a put-upon parent. “But maybe I overestimated you. Tell me,
McCree: are you stupid?”

Jesse bared his teeth against the pain and the words. “No sir.”

“I’m not sure I believe you.”

“I’m not stupid,” Jesse hissed.

Reaper’s grip loosened. Claws scratched lightly across Jesse’s scalp as Reaper laid his palm flat
against the side of Jesse’s head. Then he leaned in close to speak in Jesse’s ear.

“If you’d just do what you’re told, you wouldn’t keep getting hurt. I can’t deal with this little
rebellious streak of yours much longer. Even I have my limits. Do you want me to hand you back
over to O’Deorain?”

Jesse barely moved—just a twitch of his head to the side, away from Reaper’s face and
consequently into his hand.

Reaper’s touch was almost affectionate, and he spoke with a strange sort of concern. Jesse never
quite knew how to react when Reaper did this. It felt… unfair. Cruel in a way Jesse couldn’t
articulate. He was coated in his own blood. The bullet wound in his arm burned and pulsed under his
hand like someone had shoved a hot poker through it. Meanwhile Reaper acted like he cared about
him, as if he hadn’t put the gun in his hand and made him do this to himself.

Reaper murmured something else to Jesse—words that bounced around in his skull without really
registering. He nodded mindlessly, pretending he understood. He couldn’t afford to be punished
again.

Reaper stood, cold and distant once more. “I think we’ve wasted enough time. Now. Are you
ready to follow orders?”

Jesse swallowed thickly, squeezed his eyes tight against the pain, then dragged himself to his feet.
“Yes sir.”

“All right then.” Reaper dropped the empty Glock on the car hood beside the submachine gun.
Then he grabbed something off his belt.

Jesse half-expected to be electrocuted again. Instead, Reaper set a biotic emitter on the car hood
beside the guns.

“Looks like you’re still bleeding pretty heavily.”

“Just changed back,” Jesse reminded him, his voice rough. “Healing factor’s sapped. Everything
else, too.” He was beginning to shake a little. Shock maybe, or just the pain. He wasn’t sure.

Reaper tapped a claw on the emitter. “Heal up. Don’t use more than you need to. As soon as
you’re stable, take the submachine gun and move to the southwest corner compound. I’m passing
you off to Blind; you’re going to help her and her squad to clear the building.”

“Yes sir.”

Jesse waited until Reaper was gone before activating the emitter.

***

“You’ve got to stop fighting me. Can’t you see that I’m trying to protect you?

“Don’t think. Don’t hesitate. Just do what has to be done.”

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Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1 year ago

Jesse’s phone rang, dragging him up out of a deep and troubled sleep. He was sweating,
overheated, and his arm throbbed with phantom pain. The dream that had plagued him was already
fading to nothing, but he struggled to reorient himself. He was in his bed in Ruth’s guest room,
blankets tangled around his legs and the side of his face mashed into his pillow.

Jesse tried to reach for his phone, then realized he was using the wrong arm: he’d taken off his
prosthesis to charge it the night before. He groaned, rolled, and sat up. By the time he picked up the
phone, he’d missed the call, but he had a voice message waiting.

“Jesse, this is Dezzi. I’m in your neck of the woods on business, and I thought I’d check to see
how your arm is holding up.” There was a beat of silence, and then: “I’ve also just finished
something that I’d like to show you. Do you know anywhere we can meet? I need a place that’s
open and out of the way where we won’t be bothered. Call me back.”

Jesse chuckled. Dezzi was more or less describing half of New Mexico, but he had a place in
mind.

A few days later, Jesse sat in the cool cabin of Ruth’s truck watching the telltale dust cloud that
marked a hovercar coming his way up the dirt road. He switched the truck off and climbed out. The
sun sat high overhead, glaringly bright in a pristine, blue sky. Luckily, it was still early in the spring,
so the sun’s gaze wasn’t as merciless as it could’ve been. Still, Jesse grabbed his hat from the
passenger seat and put it on.

The hovercar—a sleek, steel blue coupe that thrummed with the promise of more horsepower
than it ought to have—parked nearby, and Dezzi climbed out.

Jesse tipped his hat. “Miss Dezzi. Nice to see you again. You been staying out of trouble?”

Dezzi rested a hand on the top of her car. “Something tells me you’re usually the one on the
receiving end of that question.” She tilted her head, and the lights on her face gleamed brightly. She
didn’t answer Jesse’s question. “I almost didn’t find this place,” she said. “It’s a good thing you gave
me those instructions. The exit off the highway wasn’t even marked.”

“You said you didn’t wanna be bothered,” Jesse said. “I can’t exactly walk into a gun range, so
this is where me an’ Ruth come to practice shooting.”

“So you figured out what I wanted to show you?”
Jesse smiled, mouth pulling faintly to the side. “I made an educated guess. You built me a gunslinger’s arm, after all. What better way to test it?”

Dezzi scoffed even as her sensor lights flickered. “I only said I wanted to show you. Who says I’m going to let you use it?”

“Aw, come on now, Dezzi. Don’t tease me like that.” Jesse pouted for good measure, the same way he used to when Angela pulled late nights in the medical wing and he wanted to convince her to clock out and have a little fun in the break room with him and some of the other agents. It worked nine times out of ten.

Dezzi laughed. “Okay, okay.” She waved a hand at Jesse. “Just stop making that face.”

Success. Jesse leaned against the side of the truck and waited while Dezzi pulled a case out of the back seat of her car. She set it on the trunk and flipped the lid open.

Jesse let out a soft whistle. Even from a distance, he could see the familiar silhouette of a revolver, shiny and new, sitting in black foam cut to its exact shape.

Jesse pushed away from the truck and moved to stand at Dezzi’s elbow.

The revolver Dezzi had crafted looked more like an art piece than a weapon. It was all strong shapes and sweeping lines, classic yet almost fantastical in its design.

The upper frame drew back into a flourish over the cylinder and then up to an integrated rear sight. The grip was a dark wood—walnut, probably. The trigger guard had been strangely shaped. It’d been rounded to discourage a two-handed grip (Jesse had never taken to the weaver stance anyhow), and the whole guard was oddly concave and extended, which meant an unfamiliar hand might miss during a quick draw. For someone truly skilled, though, it was perfectly designed to guide the shooter’s finger to the trigger every time.

Jesse could see how Flores’s original design had been integrated both in silhouette and function. The yoke, the cylinder, the subframe laser sight, and the grooved hammer were reminiscent of Jesse’s old gun. All of the mechanical workings and most practical features had been preserved in Dezzi’s design, and the strong geometric shapes gave her classical style a modern touch.

Jesse did a double-take. “Did you give it a reciprocating barrel?”

Revolvers were never meant to have moving barrels. It was a hallmark of Amado Flores’s skill that he’d figured out how to integrate such a feature into Jesse’s gun when he made his Blackwatch revolver, but it came with drawbacks and bulky modifications to the frame. Jesse hadn’t expected Dezzi to replicate such a complex and finicky feature. And he certainly didn’t expect to see it without the safety housing that kept the whole thing stable.

Dezzi nodded, unaware of his concern. “Same as your other gun. Assistive recoil operation to advance the cylinder and cock the hammer. Great for one-handed use, which I think you can appreciate. However, if you have both hands free and need to fire multiple rounds quickly, you can hold the trigger and fan the hammer just like you would with a single-action.”

Jesse opened and closed his mouth a few times, then squeezed his eyes shut. “That’s not my point.”

“What is your point?”

Jesse held out both hands in front of himself and gestured to the gun, hands bracketing it. “You
can’t put a reciprocating barrel on a revolver without the proper housing. The frame can’t take the force of the barrel sliding back. It’ll warp. That’s why my old gun had front housing.”

“This gun can take the force. I fixed it.”

“You… fixed it?” Jesse looked at Dezzi like she’d grown a second head. “You fixed the laws of physics?”

Dezzi crossed her arms. “Don’t be so dramatic. It wasn’t nearly as difficult as you make it sound. Your notes were detailed enough for me to determine how Flores managed the reciprocating barrel. From there, it was just a matter of tweaking the design to compensate for the force. Flores was already incredibly close. The subframe he designed was ingenious. He didn’t even really need the housing; it was just a precaution, likely because he knew the dangerous conditions you’d be using it in.

“I’ve run all the simulations and live tests. The energy from the recoil disperses evenly throughout the gun thanks to Flores’s design and my modifications. You’ll still have muzzle rise since the barrel sits over your hand, but it won’t be as severe, and when the barrel slides forward again, it’ll help counteract it. Combined with the cylinder and hammer action, it cuts a good fraction of a second off the time it takes to line up the next shot and fire. My gun is faster than any other revolver out there, hands down.”

“You’d bet money on that?”

“I’d bet my life on that. The only thing is, you can’t go swinging her around. Without the housing, it’s easier to damage the frame or misalign the barrel, so don’t go smacking her against things like a club.”

“Her?” Jesse repeated.

Dezzi laid a hand over the revolver almost protectively. “Yes, her. So, aside from your obvious concern, what do you think?”

Jesse held out his hands towards the gun and quirked a brow. When Dezzi nodded, he picked the gun up to inspect it. The grip fit into his hand snugly. When he tested them, the cylinder and hammer moved smooth as silk. The cylinder didn’t catch or hang up when opened, and when Jesse twisted the ejector rod over the palm of his hand, he could see it spun true without any wobble.

Jesse held the gun like he was firing it. The weight—it was lighter than its predecessor, though still hefty—was distributed well in and over his hand. The sights were centered, and the trigger required just the right amount of pressure. All in all, Jesse could honestly say he’d never held a more lovingly crafted weapon. Not that he’d expected anything less from someone with Dezzi’s skill.

“She might just be the prettiest thing I’ve ever laid eyes on. You name ‘er yet?”

“Yes. Peacekeeper.”

Jesse hummed quietly to himself. “Suits her.”

“She’s not just a pretty face. Try her out.” Dezzi offered Jesse a box of ammunition.

Jesse flipped the cylinder open and chambered six rounds. The motion came easily—a combination of muscle memory and practice loading the magazine of Ruth’s handgun with his new prosthesis.
Earlier that morning, Jesse had set up targets at the far end of the dry river bed: fifty, one hundred, and a hundred-fifty meters.

Jesse took a stance behind the line he’d scratched into the dirt and held the revolver at his hip like it was holstered. He glanced over at Dezzi. “You gonna record this?”

“I already am,” she said, tapping a finger to the side of her head. “This is the first time someone other than myself has handled Peacekeeper. A human at that. I’m curious to see the difference.”

Jesse was curious to know the difference himself. Was she faster? More accurate? She could run the numbers faster than him and adjust her limbs by calculated hundredths of degrees to compensate, but Jesse liked to think that his years of training and field experience added up to something. A low thrill ran through his veins at Dezzi’s unintended challenge.

Jesse cocked the hammer, lined up the first target, and squeezed the trigger.

The barrel recoiled as light erupted from the muzzle, then the hammer cocked and the cylinder advanced all in one fluid motion. The kick of the revolver in Jesse’s hand was so painfully familiar that he had to look down at it to be sure it wasn’t his old Blackwatch revolver. Peacekeeper gleamed up at him like it was winking, the light of the midday sun dancing along its steel frame.

Jesse’s bullet had hit the first target’s bullseye a little low. Jesse licked his lips, lined up his sights again and adjusted, then squeezed off another round. This one landed a hair to the right of dead center. He pulled a Robin Hood with the third bullet; it tore the hole a little wider on the right side. At fifty meters, it was a fantastic shot, but Jesse wasn’t happy with it.

“I’m used to compensatin’ for Ruth’s semi-automatic,” Jesse said by way of explanation. “Same caliber, different propulsion, pulls to the left a touch.”

“Hm. I might have to fix that for her before I leave,” Dezzi said. “Please, keep going.”

Jesse switched to the hundred meter target. He pictured his old Flores piece in his hand, how he held his arm to compensate for his chest plate, the way he tended to distribute his weight over his feet. He shifted his stance until it felt more natural. As he slipped into his old form, something clicked into place. Jesse dropped the revolver back to his side, then snapped up, aimed, and fired.

A perfect bullseye. Jesse’s fifth and sixth bullets tore through the target just to the right and left of the bullseye, creating a neat line of tightly grouped holes.

Jesse smiled. “There we go. It’s comin’ back to me now.”

Dezzi offered up a speedloader. Jesse flicked the spent cartridges out and reloaded the cylinder as he eyed his target. He fired all six bullets in quick succession, obliterating the center of the circle.

Jesse picked the hundred-fifty meter target next. He took his time reloading. The corner of his mouth ticked up as he decided on his next trick, competition forgotten in the rush of excitement. Jesse changed stances and laid his prosthetic hand over the hammer. He felt the press of metal against metal, sensors telling him where his hand was. Muscle memory guided him as he squeezed the trigger and fanned the hammer with the edge of his palm.

The revolver kicked in Jesse’s hand, the sounds echoing and melding into a single, sustained roar as he put six holes in the target.

Dezzi tipped her head to the side as they both observed the perfect ring Jesse had made around the bullseye, every bullet barely grazing the red. “I’m beginning to think you’re a bit of a show-off,”
Dezzi said lightly.

Jesse chuckled. “Just can’t help myself with such a pretty lady for company.”

“I can’t tell if you’re talking about me or the gun,” Dezzi said.

Jesse winked.

Dezzi shook her head disapprovingly, but her sensor lights flickered with amusement. “Do you have any other targets? I can set up new ones if you’d like.”

“I got one more. we gotta climb up outta this ditch first.”

Jesse pocketed a few cartridges before he climbed up the right embankment. Once on higher ground, he offered his hand to Dezzi to help her up.

Jesse pointed to the east. “Got a target set up out there. You see it?” In the distance, barely visible to the naked eye, were two balloons, one red and one green.

A soft whirring noise emanated from Dezzi’s face; the sound reminded Jesse of black ops binoculars. “I assume you mean the balloons,” Dezzi said. “I see them. How far out is that?”

“Nine hundred meters. Just shy of a thousand yards. Like the Belgian mission,” Jesse said.

“Like the— ah, the hostage situation.”

“Mhm. Look again. Got two targets, one in front of the other and off to the side by a couple inches. Bit of wind kicking them around to make it interestin’. I’m level with the targets this time, but I can adjust for that.”

“What brought this on?”

Jesse shrugged. “Pride, I suppose. I wanna see if I still got it in me. Aren’t you the least bit curious if Peacekeeper can manage it?”

“Of course she can,” Dezzi said sharply. “If you miss, it’s entirely on you.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence.” Jesse turned away to face the targets in the distance.

Maybe this idea had been a little brash, in hindsight. Jesse loaded the revolver in silence as he eyed the red balloon bobbing in the faint breeze behind its green counterpart. They were so far away that he might not be able to see them if not for the vibrant colors and movement. This shot had seemed a lot easier ten years ago even with him hanging out a second-story window and gambling someone’s life. Maybe because of the adrenaline. Or, more likely, because he’d been reckless back then and hadn’t considered for a moment that he might fail.

The only thing on the line now was Jesse’s pride. Still, the idea of missing stuck in his craw. If he could make that shot once, he should be able to make it again. He should be able to make it every time; one day someone’s life might depend on it.

The solution, of course, was simply not to fail.

As Jesse took his position, he considered for the third or fourth time that day if he should lean on his new powers a bit to sharpen his vision. It wasn’t cheating, per se, just taking advantage of all his options. But he hadn’t had powers back in Belgium, and he might not be able to rely on them the next time. Besides, it’d throw Dezzi’s data off. Couldn’t have that. No, he’d do this the honest way.
Jesse lined up his front sight where he needed it, then started dropping the back to get the right angle. He squinted down the barrel, adjusted, tilted his head to the side a bit, adjusted again, then lowered the gun with a disapproving noise. His position and angle felt wrong, but he couldn’t put his finger on how.

“Patience, McCree.” Ana Amari’s words sprang to mind, the memory as fresh as the day she’d said them. “You have all the time in the world.”

At the time, Jesse’d been stretched out on his stomach at the outdoor range, dust on his tongue and his goggles and earmuffs digging into the sides of his face. The butt of the pulse rifle was nestled in the spot just below his collar bone and inside his shoulder, and he had his cheek pressed to the top of the stock. It was his fifth week of advanced marksmanship training under Captain Amari. That day had stuck with him because it was the first time he ever made her laugh.

Amari hadn’t been sure at first about Reyes’s decision when they recruited Jesse. She never said as much, but Jesse had seen it in her reserve and the flat tone of her voice when she agreed to train him. To be fair, he’d had some opinions about her as well. To Jesse, she was a larger than life war hero who held her own standing beside super soldiers and men the size of mountains. Ana Amari was unbending steel molded into gentle curves and sharp angles. The gleam of her eye served as a warning. A single word from her lips was the crack of a firing pin against primer.

Jesse had gone into his first training session unsure if he should expect a fight or the cold shoulder, but he was positive it’d be one or the other. What he’d gotten instead was a calm, levelheaded teacher with a firm grip. Amari ran Jesse through drills like he was back in boot camp. She made him do the same exercises over and over again until she was satisfied. Not a single detail seemed to escape her notice, and she expected nothing short of excellence.

Deadlock hadn’t cared about proper training—why should they, when Jesse was already such a good shot? Everything Jesse had learned in the gang, he’d taught himself or convinced someone else to teach him personally. While Overwatch was more formal, their expectations were set for the average agent, not a crack shot like Jesse who sailed through the training without breaking a sweat. Everything else about boot camp had been hard, but marksmanship came easy.

Captain Amari was different. She didn’t abide slacking, cutting corners, or “good enough.” If she saw that Jesse was adept at something, she raised the bar until it was actually a challenge. And then she raised it a little more.

Jesse complained, loudly and frequently. Amari paid his whining no heed. If he raised a legitimate question, though, she was happy to explain in depth until he felt he understood. She also wasn’t afraid to compliment him when he followed instructions or did a particularly good job, which was honestly the last thing Jesse had expected.

Amari’s teaching style left Jesse feeling disarmed and a little vulnerable. He didn’t necessarily fall in line right away, but a tenuous peace formed between them: they respected that in the range, Jesse was just another agent, and Amari was just his teacher.

The first two weeks, they were polite to each other but distant. Jesse tried not to run his mouth and say anything that’d get him in trouble, and he suspected Amari had similar reasons for avoiding small talk.

Their dynamic shifted soon enough. Amari tended to leave her office door ajar, and one morning, Jesse spied her talking to a girl on a holo-screen who called her “Mom.” A few days later, after training, Amari bought him a can of soda. It was hot out that day, but Jesse didn’t think anything of it. It was nothing compared to what he was used to, after all. He’d been distracted recording his
range scores on a tablet when Amari pressed the ice-cold can to his shoulder. He’d jumped with a yelp and thrown her baleful look that had no real heat to it before taking the soda. She’d had a hand over her mouth, but the corners of her eyes crinkled in amusement. Jesse packed two apples for his next session and offered to share during his break. He joked about how he couldn’t possibly eat both of them all by himself. In retrospect, offering to split one apple would have been subtler; there was no mistaking his intent in “accidentally” packing two of them. That was the first time Amari genuinely smiled at Jesse.

After that, things thawed between them quickly. They shared lessons, snacks, sometimes stories, and a few bad jokes on Jesse’s part that earned him a groan or an indulgent smile.

By the fifth week, Jesse had moved from pistols to rifles. This was Amari’s specialty. Jesse knew that, and he took every word to heart as she advised him on the set of his shoulders, the placement of his hands, his cheek weld, his breathing—anything and everything she was willing to share with him.

When Jesse squeezed off another round several inches to the left of his target, he swore under his breath. “I swear I adjusted. I’m lined up.” He gestured down the length of the rifle, frustrated that he was having so much trouble.

“Patience, McCree. You have all the time in the world.” Amari crouched beside him with a spotter’s scope in hand.

“Okay, but what if I don’t? I can’t always take my time out in the field. Sometimes you gotta shoot from the hip.”

Amari laid her hand on Jesse’s shoulder. “Even when you don’t have time, act like you do. Never rush. Each bullet carries the weight of a life; you have to be sure of yourself when you pull that trigger.”

Jesse grumbled. “That’s all well and good, but it doesn’t change the fact that I’m off.”

“So take the time to figure out what’s wrong. Run down the list.”

“Fine. I’m in line with the rifle, shoulders square. Legs in position, feet turned out. Butt’s in the shoulder pocket. Cheek weld…” Jesse glanced over at Amari out of the corner of his eye. She nodded. “Cheek weld’s good. Finger position’s good. I’m firing at the end of my exhales. So what am I doing wrong?”

“You tell me,” Amari said. “You’ve already adjusted twice now, and you’re still off-center. What could cause it?”

Jesse frowned, brows knit and his mouth screwed up. Stance, grip, head position, angle, sight—

Jesse closed his left eye, blinked a few times, then closed his right eye. He opened both and sighted down the barrel.

“Fuck.”

“Don’t swear,” Amari admonished.

“Sorry, ma’am.”

“What did you realize?”
Jesse risked lifting his head up and losing his positioning. He probably needed to readjust anyways now that he’d figured out the problem. “I’m sightin’ with the wrong eye. Drill sergeant told me once that I got low eye dominance. Never thought much of it. I’m used to focusin’ on the target in the distance when I use a handgun, so it doesn’t make much difference, but with this rifle, I keep lookin’ at the sights, and my left eye’s throwin’ me off.”

Amari smiled. “Good. I wondered how long it would take you.”

“You knew already?”

“I have access to your files. Besides, it was obvious: your precision dropped as soon as I switched you to the rifle.” Amari held up a finger. “Wait here.”

“Like I’m going anywhere.”

Amari clucked her tongue admonishingly. She stood up and walked over to the bench where their things had been set.

Jesse sighed and went about repositioning his head, cheek snug to the stock. He squeezed his left eye shut and saw instantly how his rifle was pointed off-target. He made an aggravated noise in the back of his throat.

Something soft dropped onto Jesse’s head. He started and grabbed at it. It was his hat. Jesse settled it on his head before glancing up at Amari. “What’s this for?”

“It’s a hat, Agent McCree. It keeps the sun off of your face.”

“Ha ha, very funny. How’s it supposed to help?”

“By doing exactly what it was made for.” Amari leaned over to pull down the left side of Jesse’s hat. “Try again. Squint or close your left eye if you must, but don’t make it a habit; you’ll want both eyes open when you use a red dot.”

With his left eye cast in shadow, Jesse lined up his sights once more. He quickly ran through his checklist again: posture, grip, rifle, head, sights.

Amari knelt at Jesse’s side. “Remember—”

“I know: I got all the time in the world.”

Jesse exhaled slowly, then fired. For a moment he forgot to breathe as he lifted his head and squinted down the lane at the target. “Did I—?”

Amari laid a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “You hit the mark.”

Jesse dropped his forehead to the ground, goggles pressing hard into his brow and his hat knocked askew. “Thank fuck.”

Amari let out a snort that turned into an outright laugh. She hit Jesse’s shoulder lightly. “Language.”

“Sorry.”

“Come on, head up. Now that you know you can do it, I want to see you make that same shot again but cleaner.”
“Yes’m.”

In a different time and a different place, Jesse tilted his hat against the glare of the New Mexico sun, then lifted Peacekeeper again. “All the time in the world,” he murmured under his breath. He lined up his shot, angled the revolver like he was aiming for the mountains in the distance, and once he was sure of himself, he squeezed the trigger.

There was nothing for the length of two heartbeats. Then the speck of red that marked his target vanished. Jesse relaxed and audibly sighed.

“You hit it!” Dezzi said. She clapped her hands together. “And the green target’s still there. Congratulations: you saved the ‘hostage’.”

“You sound surprised,” Jesse said, feigning hurt.

“A little,” Dezzi admitted.

“You should have more faith.”

“In my work or in you?”

Jesse made a tsking noise. “Can’t you spare a bit for both?”

“I suppose you’ve earned it,” Dezzi agreed.

Jesse smiled widely. “Thank you kindly. Now, unless you’ve got some other tests to run, I think we’re done here. You were right, Dezzi: she’s as deadly as she is pretty. My apologies for ever doubtin’ you. Your little lady outclasses every gun I’ve ever handled—my Flores piece included.”

“You can’t mean that.”

Jesse held up a hand like he was taking an oath and made an overly solemn face. “May the powers that be strike me dead if I’m lyin’.” He waited a beat before glancing up, tipping his hat back as he did so to get a better look. “Hm. Still standing.”

Dezzi let out one of those staticky chuckles of hers, and Jesse threw her a wink.

“I do mean it, though,” Jesse said, his expression shifting seamlessly from humor to seriousness. “You really made something unique. You oughta be proud of yourself.”

“… Thank you, Jesse.”

“Any time. All right, let’s pack it in,” Jesse said. He checked the revolver cylinder, pocketed the spent cartridge casings, and held the gun out to Dezzi with the grip towards her.

Dezzi laid her hands over both the gun and Jesse’s hand, then gently pushed the gun back towards him.

“Somethin’ wrong? You need me to run another test?”

“She’s yours. I made her for you.”

Dezzi spoke casually, but Jesse felt the weight of her words settle heavy over him as he looked between her and the revolver in his hand. It clicked, now, how the grip and weight of the gun seemed so perfectly tailored to him—of course they would be, with all the specs Dezzi had taken for her prosthetics work.
“Are you sure? Thought you said you weren’t gonna make me a gun.”

“I never said I wouldn’t. I told you my guns aren’t for sale, and that I didn’t know you well enough.” Dezzi crossed her arms. “I’d say I know you pretty well by now. I’d like to think we’re friends, even.”

“O’ course we are,” Jesse hurried to reassure.

“So you’ll accept?”

Jesse floundered a moment, then ducked his head so that his hat brim hid his eyes. “How could I say no?” He turned the gun back over in his hand, cradling the wood grip in his palm and the barrel with his prosthesis. The corner of his mouth quirked up. She’d used the same treated alloys for his arm and the revolver so that they matched. The detail had eluded him earlier.

“Not sure how I can begin to repay you,” Jesse said.

“It’s a gift. You don’t have to do anything. Just promise that when you use her, it’ll be for the right reasons.”

“I wouldn’t dream of doing otherwise.”

“Good. In that case, I have something else for you.”

“Oh?” Jesse followed Dezzi back to the cars, Peacekeeper held at his side.

Dezzi rummaged in the backseat before pulling out a tool box. “You’ll need a proper cleaning kit,” she said, hefting the box. “And I plan to stay in town a few days to teach you how to properly disassemble and reassemble Peacekeeper. She’s similar to her predecessor, but there’s still differences.” Dezzi set the box on top of the car trunk. “I’ll see about fixing that other gun you mentioned: the one for Ruth. Simple enough adjustment. I won’t even charge you.”

“That’s mighty generous of you.”

Dezzi waved his words off. “I just don’t want you manhandling my magnum opus. I expect you to treat her right. Speaking of which—” Dezzi ducked and reached into the backseat again. When she came back out, she had a gun holster in hand. She tossed it to Jesse. “Can’t have you sticking your gun in the back of your pants and accidentally shooting yourself, now can we?”

Jesse looked offended. “I would never.”

Peacekeeper fit snug into the holster, which had clearly been formed to fit her specifically. Jesse slipped the holster onto his belt and buckled it in place. He laid his hand over the leather. The weight on his hip was a welcome one, like the reassuring press of another agent’s back against his. It was a feeling he was intimately familiar with. It reminded him of clandestine Blackwatch missions—the hard ones where only two of them went in with no backup against unfair odds guaranteed to only get worse. The only things he could count on during those missions were his weapon and the skill of his partner, but it was enough.

Jesse distinctly recalled that one rough mission in Albania with Genji, the two of them racing through the dark streets of Tirana after an omnic trafficking sting went sideways. Jesse’d taken a bullet. Lady Luck wasn’t with him that night, but Genji had been. It wasn’t a pleasant memory, but it was one he held dear.

Unprompted, his thoughts drifted to another mission: the wind coming off Lake Superior, an
ominous blanket of clouds blotting out the moon and stars, a hand on his shoulder and a discordant voice in his ear: “Watch my back.”

Jesse shook himself and pushed the thoughts down before they could go any further. He wasn’t there. He got away. It was over.

Dezzi hadn’t noticed Jesse wasn’t paying attention. She was talking about which solvents and gun oils she preferred. With calculated casualness, Jesse leaned against her car, hooked his thumbs in his belt, and crossed one ankle over the other as he focused on listening to her instructions.

***

“Don’t think.”

“Patience, McCree.”

“Don’t hesitate.”

“Never rush.”

“Do what has to be done.”

“Be sure of yourself when you pull that trigger.”

“She might just be the prettiest thing I’ve ever laid eyes on. You name ‘er yet?”

“Yes. Peacekeeper.”

“Suits her.”

“She’s yours. I made her for you.”

Chapter End Notes

Before anything else, I really need you all to see the madness that is McCree's gun animation:

First example
Second example
(For anyone curious, semi-automatic revolvers do exist, but it's very different. The entire upper frame slides along a rail on the lower half of the frame, rotating the cylinder. It does not, like McCree's gun, involve the barrel nonsensically recoiling into the cylinder. Rather than have McCree and Dezzi address something that can't possibly exist, I let them talk shop about its benefits and drawbacks to suspend disbelief and make it seem like that's just a thing guns can do in the future.)

With regards to the first scene, we are nearing the end of the story, making this one of the last flashbacks. I wanted a scene where McCree is rescued by Reaper, further complicating their prisoner/captor relationship. It expanded in ways I didn't intend, but I think it suits the theme of this chapter, which is "unbending steel," showing how even at his lowest and most conflicted, McCree continued to hold on to certain values. It also gave me a chance to show one of the subtler tactics used to abuse McCree: you may have caught it once or twice now, but sometimes he will scold and berate himself
(in one chapter, he specifically called himself stupid, contradicting this earlier conflict with Reaper). He's not aware he's internalized his abuser's voice. We've seen McCree go through a lot of healing, but there are some things that will take more time and effort to overcome.

The main purpose of this chapter was to outfit McCree with his famous gun. Little did I know what I was asking for in attempting to apply any kind of real and practical knowledge of firearms to a video game weapon designed by Blizzard. There are a lot of things about that gun that are actually terrible ideas in a real weapon. Hubris, thy name is Peacekeeper.

But on the plus side, I hadn't planned that flashback with Ana, and I'm so glad it happened. Let's face it: I have an addiction to writing flashbacks. But it's so interesting to explore all the small interactions McCree has had with everyone and the bonds he's formed, don't you agree?

That little thing at the end there was a bit avant garde, but I just really liked the idea of closing out this chapter with something visually mimicking poetry.

I am very very excited for the next chapter, though it may take some time to publish. It's pretty long because I got carried away with it, and I want it to be shiny and polished when I share it with you all. It'll be worth the wait. Next chapter: *El último viaje del vigilante.*
Albuquerque, 1 year ago

If Annie were asked to list her top five favorite places, she’d pick the arcade first every time. But coming in at a close second was Juan Tabo Public Library, a large, tan building with a gorgeous mural made of colorful tiles spanning its entrance.

A couple years ago, Bernalillo County had started up a community revival program, and while plenty of people in the media argued about how the county was spending taxpayer dollars, everyone had supported the library renovations. A lot of people owed Albuquerque Public Library a debt for its service throughout the Omnic Crisis and in the early years afterwards.

Libraries all over the country became last bastions of hope and meeting places for resources after the war. They hosted job fairs and food drives, reconnected families, stayed open even when the government struggled to ensure their payrolls—there were stories of small-town branches that kept going for months on volunteer manpower alone.

Annie’s mom had told her about being a kid during the Crisis and the days she got to go to the library to pick out new books. The whole world was chaos outside: military vehicles thundering down the highway, evacuation drills in school, empty grocery stores and homemade water purifiers, and daily news reports that talked about the shifting front lines of combat as calmly as they reported the weather.

“Sixty percent chance of rain this weekend. The Detroit Omnic forces have been stymied along the western front; the Arkansas and Colorado Rivers have provided a natural barrier, and Overwatch is currently holding Denver. However, the Cristóbal Omnics have forced Mexico’s troops to retreat west, and Bastion units are being reported near the border of Texas. Stay tuned for more at ten.”

For Ruth, who’d been around Annie’s age at the time, it was a lot to process. Day-to-day life was a strange mix of anxiety over the unknown and adults smiling and pretending nothing was wrong. But at least there’d been books. Books made it a bit easier to ignore the things that couldn’t be controlled, and when reading was too much, there were movies and audiobooks to mindlessly listen to.

Ruth had started taking Annie to the library before she was even old enough to remember. They’d sat together and listened to story times, sang songs about spiders and rain and watermelons down by the bay, and as soon as Ruth decided she could trust Annie with one, she’d gotten her her first library card.
Juan Tabo had always been a nice branch, but now it was the gem of northeast Albuquerque. It offered an incredible selection of books, music, movies, and educational programs for all ages; but on top of that, it now sported new study rooms, VR spaces, an expanded garden to show off specimens from its seed library, and a hologram programming station.

Annie had convinced her mom to drop her off for the day so she could work on her hologram-based presentation for school, but she’d finished that about two hours ago. Now she was caught up in a VR mini-game competition with five other kids from school that she’d run into. Two of them sat off to the side watching the display screen and waiting for their turn.

“Paddle harder, Freddie!”

“Lucy’s gonna win!”

“Annie, the ramp!”

Annie couldn’t see anything beyond the headset showing her the 3D whitewater rapids game she was playing, but she heard the telltale knock on the wall of a librarian who’d just walked by. They’d gotten loud enough to be heard past the transparent walls of the VR room. That was their second warning. A third time, and they’d have to leave the booth.

“Who’s she knocking at, huh?”

“You, stupid.”

“Guys, she’s looking at us again. Shush!”

Annie crossed the finish line in second place just as she felt her phone buzz in her pocket. She pulled off her headset and offered it up. “I think my ride’s here. Who’s up next?”

Annie handed over the headset to Lisa from American History class before slipping out the door. She rubbed at her eyes as they readjusted, then pulled out her phone.

Mom: Ten minutes away. Pack up and check out any books you’ve got.

Annie tapped her phone against her palm. Ten minutes. She was already packed, and she had a book back home that she was reading. Not enough time to get in another VR game with her friends. Maybe she should grab a couple movies.

Annie wandered over to a wall of computer screens and waited for one to become available. She fed her library card into the reader just below the terminal, and the blue screen brightened.

“Hello, I’m Lapis,” the screen said. “What movie can I help you find?”

A search box and buttons listing genres appeared on the screen. Annie sucked on her bottom lip as she thought it over.

Technically, Annie couldn’t rent anything PG-13 or above until her next birthday. The library system had her age on record and blocked her card from seeing anything she shouldn’t. Dumb child filters. The foreign films didn’t get rated like the American movies did, though. If she was willing to put up with subtitles, she might be able to find something good.

Annie tapped the Foreign icon and scrolled through the list. She recognized a few of the titles and tapped one to add to her account to watch a second time. There was also some sort of Italian fantasy movie that caught her eye: something about a teenage witch and her neighbor, the aspiring
photographer. She decided to try it out.

Annie kept scrolling, but the list was a lot longer than she’d expected, and nothing seemed particularly interesting.

“Lapis, I could use a suggestion.”

“I’d love to help. What kind of movie are you looking for?” the AI asked.

Annie made a so-so gesture. “Um. Maybe something for me and Uncle Jesse. We like Westerns. Are there any foreign films that are kinda like La leyenda del vigilante?”

“I have”—a moment of silence as Lapis searched—“one suggestion.”

Just one? Annie sighed. “All right, show me.”

The screen darkened, then lit up again. It displayed the cover of a Western movie. Gold text in vintage font spelled out the title against a blood-red sunset. Beneath it were the portraits of two very familiar faces. They were older, but Annie recognized them. One wore leather, several days’ worth of stubble, and a grin that promised trouble. The other was dressed in dark blues and a gray hat, a serape wrapped around his shoulders. His thin, well-groomed mustache was salt-and-peppered now. They wore matching domino masks.

“No way.” Annie set her hands on top of her head. “No way. Oh man, Uncle Jesse’s gonna freak.”

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Annie squirmed in her seat at the dinner table. She ate her fries three at a time, and whenever she thought Jesse wasn’t looking, she glanced over at him as she tried (and failed) to wait patiently for him to finish his meal.

After Jesse caught her a third time, he set down his glass and leaned towards her with his elbow on the table. “All right, you’re up to something. What is it?”

Annie made an innocent face, eyes wide and brows flying comically high. “I don’t know what you mean,” she said before hurriedly shoving the last bite of her hotdog in her mouth.

Jesse squinted. “You’re a terrible liar, and we both know it. You’re lucky we’re not playin’ cards. Y’ might as well fess up now.”

Annie gestured at her mouth, cheeks bulging like a chipmunk, and made an insistent noise.

Ruth laughed. “She’s got a point. You know the rules: no talking with your mouth full.”

Jesse pointed a finger at Ruth. “You know what she’s up to, don’t you?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Ruth said slightly more convincingly. She sipped at her drink. “You done eating?”

Jesse made a noise in the back of his throat. “I suppose.”

“Okay then. Let’s get the plates in the dishwasher, and then we can watch a movie.”

Annie practically vaulted out of her seat and shoved her plate and glass haphazardly into the dishwasher. She darted around Jesse, who lifted his own plate up over his head to avoid having it
knocked out of his hand.

“Where’s the fire?” he asked.

There was no answer; Annie was already out the door. She grabbed her school bag, dug around until she found her library card, and rushed over to the TV.

Albuquerque Public Library had updated its cards and checkout machines in addition to all the renovations. The cards acted as personal digital libraries now, saving rented content on computer chips that could synchronize with any compatible device—which nearly every computer, tablet, and TV was nowadays.

Annie turned on the TV, set her card on the black sync pad built into its base, and switched channels. Her rented library appeared: a handful of comics and an audiobook copy of *Treasure Island*, which she still needed to finish. She used the remote to navigate her collection until she found the movies at the bottom and selected the one she wanted.

There was a twang of a guitar. “Crap!” Annie hissed. She hit the mute button in a panic as the main menu loaded. She glanced over at the kitchen, lip caught between her teeth as she barely breathed. When no one appeared, she sighed a little and hit play. She paused as soon as the screen went dark. Perfect.

Annie set the remote down. “Okay. Good. Okay.” She ran over to the door. “You guys coming or what?”

“In a minute, hold your horses,” Jesse said. He was heating something in the microwave. Annie could hear it beginning to pop.

Popcorn. Annie groaned. She knew it’d only take a couple minutes, but that was still too long.

Jesse raised an eyebrow. “Y’know, I was planning to share with you, but if you’re gonna act like that, I can eat this whole bag all by my lonesome.”

“No, no, make your popcorn,” Annie said, shoulders slumping. “It’s just…”

“It’s just what?”

Annie flapped her hands. “Nothing, nothing,” she said. “Just hurry up.”

Ruth snorted softly, her back to them as she quickly hand-washed a baking pan and set it aside.

By the time Ruth and Jesse sat down on the couch on either side of Annie, she felt like she might explode. She sat with her hands clasped together and pressed to her mouth pensively, which would have looked quite serious if not for her wildly bouncing leg.

Jesse laughed softly. “Sorry for the wait. We’re here now. Go on and start your movie. I’m guessing this is why you’ve been so squirrelly all through dinner?”

Annie grabbed the remote. “Kinda, yeah.”

Jesse laughed again, probably because of how tense she sounded. “Must be something good.”

“You’ll see.”

Annie hit play. The screen stayed dark for a moment. Then it lightened, and a horizon became evident. Soft instrumentals began to play. Pre-dawn rapidly gave way to a vibrant sunrise over a vast
desert, and the music swelled. Gunshots shattered the peaceful melody, followed by a guitar playing a dramatic version of a theme song that everyone on the sofa knew by heart. Gold lettering streaked across the screen, written by an invisible pen: *El último viaje del vigilante*. The last ride of the vigilante.

Jesse froze, his hand still shoved in his bag of popcorn. “What?”

Annie clapped her hands together as she grinned ear to ear. “They made a movie! It’s the original writers and actors and everything!”

Jesse’s mouth hung agape before it pulled up into a lopsided smile. “Well I’ll be.” He shook his head before looking over at Annie. “So this is what you were up to.”

“Surprise!”

Jesse regarded the screen as the opening credits played. His smile faded to something nervous. “This movie’s got some big boots to fill. Might not measure up.”

It struck Annie in that moment that the Vigilante series had become a part of her childhood, but it was Uncle Jesse’s childhood first. Once, Jesse had been a little kid watching *La leyenda del vigilante* for the very first time. Vigilante and Ladrón had been his heroes. He’d explained to Annie how Hector Corazón helped him figure out he was trans. He’d joked about how he wanted to be Hector but grew up to be Lucas the reformed horse thief instead. Maybe that wasn’t a bad thing, though, he’d reasoned; in the end they were both good men.

That TV series was a part of who Uncle Jesse was. What if the movie ruined it?

“I don’t think anything can be as good as the show,” Annie allowed. “But I mean, it’s Vigilante and Ladrón! I’m sure it’ll be fun no matter what. After all, the people who made the show made the movie, too, and they loved it just as much as we do.”

Jesse grunted in begrudging agreement.

The shout of a stagecoach driver and the thundering of hooves from the TV brought the conversation to an end.

Jesse had nothing to fear: it became clear within minutes that the movie was a labor of love. It held all the nostalgic beauty of a 2030s retro-western and all the quality of a 2050s film with a decent budget. Most of the original cast had been brought back, and careful attention had been paid to the costumes and setting to imply the passage of time as everyone was twenty years older.

Vigilante and Ladrón had aged well—a comment made by Jesse under his breath when they appeared on screen. In the opening scene, they were caught up in a brief shootout with nameless villains, and Vigilante caught a bullet in the arm. He and his partner retreated to the home of the good doctor of San Fidencio, who had secretly helped them for years now.

While patching Vigilante up, the doctor pointed out that he wasn’t a young man anymore: he needed to decide if he was ready for a quiet life or if he wanted to die in the saddle. The camera shifted to Ladrón sitting outside the door listening, an unlit cigarillo dangling from his lips and his eyes downcast.

The dark, narrow hallway of the doctor’s house was replaced with the view of a grand hacienda, the open halls lit with dozens of lamps and the rooms richly furnished. The nameless bandits had returned to their leader to give their report. Their boss, doña Elena, was a young woman clearly raised in high society but with a hard mouth and a dark look in her eye that belied her graceful
manner. They reported that despite being attacked, they had the information she’d sent them to retrieve. She smiled thinly and commented that she had a train to catch.

The next few scenes were like puzzle pieces, definitely related but without revealing the overarching plot. Two men, obviously politicians, stood at podiums and debated while hundreds of people looked on. Afterwards, one of doña Elena’s men, dressed in nicer clothes, approached one of the politicians with a sealed letter. They spoke in hushed tones before the bandit took his leave. Cut to late evening in the streets of San Fidencio. The sheriff walked up to the jailhouse, opened the door, and then his eyes went wide. There was no sound save for his soft gasp. A shadow slipped past him out the door and around the back of the building as he slowly crumpled to the ground with his hands pressed to his bleeding stomach. He was found a few minutes later by Lucas Camerado stumbling drunkenly down the street from the nearest bar. Back in his home, Hector sat at his dining table. The light of the low-burning lamp caught on the amber whiskey in the tumbler he was idly swirling. He regarded the mask he held in his other hand. His thumb ran over the black fabric as his face twisted with indecision.

A week passed. A stagecoach pulled into town, and two people stepped out: a young black man with a cautious smile and doña Elena. They went their separate ways, Elena towards the bank and the young man towards the jailhouse.

The camera followed the young man. A questionable figure blocked him on the steps of the jailhouse: a rough-looking fellow with a mouth that twisted down at the corners and thick hands that he kept fisted in his coat close to his gun belt. The young man introduced himself in overly formal Spanish as Benjamin Larson. He said he’d been hired by the sheriff to train under him; he was expected to take over the position by the end of next month. The other man sneered before telling him the sheriff was dead, and he was in charge now.

At this, Annie and Jesse exchanged knowing looks. That man was dirty, no doubt about it. A bit obvious, but that was part of a retro-western’s charm.

Without any work prospects, Ben might have been out of luck if it weren’t for the charitable Hector Corazón who happened to walk by. He offered Ben a place to stay, and they chatted about how Ben was formally educated—in law, no less. Unfortunately, he had little skill with a gun. Hector offered to help him find work, and if he had his heart set on being a lawman, Hector would teach him how to shoot. It clearly troubled them both, though, that a new sheriff had been hired when Ben was due to show up so soon. Surely someone must have known.

The scene shifted to the bank where Elena had just entered. The manager seemed familiar with her as he graciously greeted her. He welcomed her into his office in back, and while he set about pouring her a drink, she made herself at home behind his desk.

“[Everything is set up just as you requested,]” the manager said as he offered up a glass of red wine. “[It’s a pleasure to have you here, Miss Maderas. Do you know how long you’ll be staying?]”

Annie let out a squeak and looked over at Jesse as she pointed animatedly at the TV. Maderas had been the bank owner: one of the earliest and most determined of Vigilante’s enemies. He’d died near the end of the series in one of the most dramatic episodes of the whole show. Maderas had finally discovered Vigilante’s identity. He showed up at Hector’s ranch, talked him into a leisurely ride to the farthest borders of his property, then stuck him with a venom-coated barb and left him there to die.

Maderas might’ve gotten away with it if Lucas hadn’t dropped by.

The show never explained why Lucas was there exactly, although he’d looked pensive like he
wanted to speak with Hector about something important. His friendship with Hector was complicated and rocky, nothing like the easy camaraderie he shared with Vigilante. Lucas generally gave him a wide berth unless circumstance threw them together—although any time he ran into Hector, their banter betrayed an undercurrent of familiarity.

Lucas had called out to Maderas when he saw him rushing away from the property. Maderas panicked and fumbled to draw his pistol. Lucas shot him down in the blink of an eye. The villain’s death was surprisingly sudden and anticlimactic given the show’s usual style.

Only a moment was spared to stare at Maderas’s body, then Lucas raced towards the house to find Hector. Hector’s wandering, riderless horse led Lucas to its fallen master. He found him prone in the tall grass; ashen, sweating, and barely drawing breath. In a desperate race against time, Lucas had put Hector on his own horse and rushed him to the doctor.

The first time she watched, Annie had been absolutely convinced it was too late and this was the end of Vigilante. She’d been close to tears as Jesse assured her the show would never do that. Naturally, he’d been right.

This time around, though, the threat was real. The title of the movie took on a somewhat more ominous tone as doña Elena put her plan into action.

By day, señorita Maderas visited the local establishments. She spoke with the new sheriff, then the train station master. Soon after, she stopped by the post office to send a telegram.

While there, Elena ran into Lucas, who made it clear very quickly that he didn’t trust her. It’d always been one of his weaknesses that when Lucas ran into antagonists, he just had to, well, antagonize them. He and Elena were both quick-witted and sharp of tongue as they made passes at each other about her reasons for visiting and why it was any of Lucas’s business. When they parted ways, it was with an exchange of thinly veiled threats.

At Hector’s ranch, meanwhile, he and Ben were hard at work figuring out what Ben was good at. He wasn’t much of a shot with a pistol or a rifle, but he took to the whip with alacrity and surprising skill for a beginner. He wasn’t bad with a lasso either, and he rode like he’d done it all his life. Hector joked that he might need to hire him on as a foreman. Ben insisted he was far more interested in upholding the law.

For all Ben’s words, he apparently had nothing against sneaking around in the dead of night like a thief, though his intentions were good. It obviously hadn’t sat well with him, the way the sheriff had been murdered and the man who took over his job hadn’t investigated his death. Shadowing the sheriff led Ben to a ramshackle drinking establishment on the edge of town where he happened to run into Vigilante and Ladrón.

A clandestine meeting between the sheriff and the bandits from the beginning of the movie quickly turned into an all-out bar brawl when someone spotted the three heroes sneaking around outside. The sheriff slipped out in the chaos.

Vigilante, Ladrón, and Ben eventually managed to overpower their attackers and escape. Ben headed for the ranch along the main road while Vigilante took a shortcut. Ladrón headed back to the one-room house outside of town that Lucas Camerado called home. As soon as he stepped inside, he was ambushed. The screen went dark.

Ruth paused the movie. “Intermission time.”

“Hey!” Annie squawked. “We can’t pause here!”
“This is the perfect place for it. We’ve still got, what, an hour to go?” Ruth pointed at the run time at the bottom of the paused screen. “Have mercy on me. You might have a bladder like a camel, but I don’t. Give me ten minutes. Maybe go put on some pj’s while you wait, huh?” She patted Annie’s knee as she stood up and left.

Annie looked down at her clothes before shrugging and burrowing into the cushion. She watched Uncle Jesse crumple up his empty popcorn bag.

“You scared?”

“Hm? Why would I be scared?” Jesse asked.

Annie pulled her feet up onto the sofa and wrapped her arms around her legs. “The movie title: Last Ride of the Vigilante. Sounds like he might die, you know? You think they’re gonna do it?”

Jesse paused before shaking his head. “Nah, not their style.”

“Maybe not the TV show, but that was made during the Thirties when they censored stuff. No smoking, no drinking, no gore.” Annie waved at the screen. “This got made twenty years later: different rules. Aaand I kinda got the movie outta the foreign film section, so it’s not rated,” she admitted, as if the sheriff dying on screen weren’t evidence enough.

Jesse regarded her with a look that made her squirm. It wasn’t accusing so much as scrutinizing, like she was in interrogation, and he was trying to figure out how much she knew.

“Would I be right in assumin’ that’s why you were in the foreigns in the first place?”

Annie stared at her knees, shoulders hunched up. “Maybe?”

“Even though your mama’s made it real clear how she feels about you watchin’ gory stuff?”

“I plead the fifth.”

“You already admitted to the crime.”

“…I want my phone call.”

“Phone calls are a privilege, not a right. Trust me on that one.”

Annie dropped her feet back to the ground and crossed her arms. “Well, I’m not answering any more questions until my lawyer gets here.”

“What’d you do this time?” Ruth asked as she came back in. She’d taken her own advice and slipped into a pair of sleep pants and a baggy t-shirt.

“Nothing!”

“Uh-huh.” Ruth sounded unconvinced.

Jesse gestured for Ruth to sit down. “She didn’t do nothing. I was just teasing her. She’s worried they might kill off Vigilante, but I told her they wouldn’t do that.”

“Oh.” Ruth dropped into her spot on the couch. “Yeah, I can’t see them killing him off.” She wagged a finger at the TV. “Ladrón, though, he’s fair game.”

“Mom!”
“Ruth!”

“What? The show’s done, and this is the only movie. They can do whatever they want,” Ruth said. She smiled in response to Annie and Jesse’s looks of betrayal before she hit the play button.

The next day, Ben shadowed the sheriff, hoping to learn who he was working for. Unfortunately, he lost him somewhere around the train station as he passed through a throng of people. The group turned out to be a committee preparing for the arrival of an important visitor. A band was warming up in the shade of the building while women in fine dresses unfurled a banner and held it up as they discussed where to hang it.

The camera lingered on the banner: “[Welcome to San Fidencio, Candidate Benavides.]”

Spotting the sheriff farther down the road, Ben hurried past and returned to his task.

That evening, Hector donned his mask once more and rode out to Lucas’s house. There was a light on inside. Lucas’s horse grazed quietly in the paddock out back.

Vigilante tied his horse’s reins to the paddock fence before knocking on the door. It swung open a few inches at his touch. Vigilante froze for a moment before drawing his pistol. He drew the hammer back as quietly as he could before nudging the door open.

Inside, seated at Lucas’s bare table with her chair turned to face the door, was Elena Maderas. She held her pistol at the ready: a richly-engraved Remington double-barrel derringer with a pearl handle.

“[Vigilante, I’ve been expecting you. Come sit down,]” Elena said, gesturing with a white-gloved hand to the only other chair.

“[Where is Lucas Camerado?]”

Elena wagged a finger. “[Do be civil, Vigilante. Sit down first, and then we can talk.]”

Tension hung in the air as the camera focused in on Vigilante’s gun hand. His grip tightened, then relaxed. He eased the hammer forward as he lowered his weapon. He took his time holstering his revolver, then he crossed the room to sit at the table with Elena.

Elena smiled sweetly. “[There we are.]” She settled her hand delicately on the table, still aiming the derringer at Vigilante’s chest. “[Was that so hard?]”

Vigilante’s posture was rigid as he regarded señorita Maderas. “[Can I assume Mr. Camerado is still alive?]” he asked evenly.

Elena let out a soft snort. “[Forgive me. I commend your attempt to protect him, but we both know how close you are to “Mr. Camerado.” Or rather, your partner, Ladrón.]” She laughed at Vigilante, whose mouth had twitched down at the name. “[It was easy enough to find out who he was. The real mystery here is you.]”

“[I questioned your dear friend at length about your identity. Imagine my surprise when I realized even he doesn’t know the man behind the mask.]”

“[Is he alive?]” Vigilante repeated, his tone sharp.

Elena rolled her eyes. “[He wouldn’t be much use to me dead. His safety ensures my safety. After all, that’s the only reason I’m still alive right now, isn’t it?]” Elena’s expression was calculating.
“[I’ve heard what you can do with a gun. I have no illusions that the only reason you haven’t tried to shoot me yet is because you need me to tell you where Ladrón is.]”

The faintest tilt of Vigilante’s head and the hard press of his lips were answer enough.

Elena relaxed back in her seat. “[Go on, then. Ask me what I want.]”

Vigilante’s upper lip twitched in a repressed snarl. “[What do you want?]”

“[I want you to stay out of my business. It’s as simple as that. You lie low for the next twenty-four hours and don’t cause me any trouble, and then I’ll let Ladrón go.]”

“[Unharmed?]”

“[Nothing further will be done to him.]” Vigilante tensed at Elena’s words. She continued as if she hadn’t noticed. “[Once my business here is concluded, I intend to sell off my father’s properties and wash my hands of this place. You’ll never hear from me again.]”

“[That’s all?]” Vigilante asked, suspicious.

“[That’s all.]”

“[You didn’t come here to kill me in revenge then? For what happened to your father?]”

“[You mean for the years he wasted trying to destroy you, only to be shot down like a dog by your partner?]” Elena said with a sneer. “[I have very few memories of my father. He was always gone, always working. He did have ambitions for me, though; he didn’t want his precious daughter relegated to being a rich man’s wife. ‘No one should ever own a Maderas,’ he liked to say. He had my mother and me kept in a fine home and provided me with tutors so I would grow up with a good head on my shoulders. He left everything to us in his will, and his business went to me. He loved us in his own way. It saddens me that he wasted his years here, obsessed with you. By all rights, I should kill the both of you and be done with it, but I’m not going to.]”

Elena stood, derringer still trained on Vigilante as she adjusted her skirts with her other hand. Then she fixed him with an unreadable look. “[I’m going to let you live, but my reasons are purely practical. You see, tomorrow Congressman Benavides is arriving by train as part of his campaign for governor. I invested a great deal in his opponent, Quiroz. It pays to have powerful friends, after all. Unfortunately, the public likes Benavides more. It’ll take a miracle for Quiroz to win. That, or an assassination.]”

“[Tomorrow evening, just after the train pulls away from the San Fidencio station, Vigilante is going to sneak aboard and kill Congressman Benavides. My plan doesn’t work if you’re running around the town showing your face, and it certainly doesn’t work if Vigilante is found dead before Benavides,]” Elena said. “[With this, I’ll get what I want, and the image of Vigilante as the people’s hero will be ruined forever. You’ll never be able to wear the mask again. This is my revenge. Why kill the man when I can destroy the legend?]”

“[I won’t let you—]”

“[You will, or Ladrón dies.]”

Silence fell over the room. Elena lifted her chin imperiously as she made a point of lowering her pistol’s hammer and pocketing the gun. They both knew Vigilante couldn’t make a move against her. She swept out of the room, closing the door behind her and leaving Vigilante to mull over his hopeless situation.
“She’s not gonna keep her word,” Jesse said under his breath.

“Huh?” Annie looked over.

“She can’t let ‘em live,” Jesse said. “There’s no point in keeping her promise. They’d just come after her. She can’t risk it.”

The movie switched to Ben Larson’s ongoing investigation the next morning. The sheriff, either feeling particularly sure of himself or getting careless, led Ben straight to the Maderas estate.

Maderas had always been a smart businessman, but he had expensive tastes and loved to flaunt his wealth. The villa he’d had built when he first moved to Paraíso Valley reflected that. It was a gaudy hybrid of southwest techniques and eastern aesthetics. The house sported a porch, wood front columns, scoring on the earthen walls to mimic cut stone, and a second floor that made the house more impressive-looking at the cost of air flow, which was a necessity in the hot, dry climate of the southwest. Compared to the practical design of nearly every other building in San Fidencio, the villa screamed excess.

Ben crept to the kitchen in back where he spotted the same bandits he’d fought just a couple days prior. He lay in wait near a window as two of them talked.

“[I don’t like it.]”

“[The boss doesn’t pay you to like your job.]”

“[That’s not—I don’t have a problem doing dirty work. I wouldn’t be here if I did.]”

“[Then what’s your problem?]”

“My problem is we’re letting those two bastards live. If the boss knew what was good for her, she’d have us slit their throats now.” The visibly upset man jabbed his finger at the other who brushed his hand aside.

“I’ve served the boss ever since she took charge. She’s a smart woman—smarter than you. She knows what she’s doing. The next time you want to question her, I suggest you keep it to yourself.”

A third bandit came tromping down the stairs. “[Everything’s set up.]”

“[Ladrón?]”

“[Taken care of. He’s not going anywhere. Hey, do you think Vigilante’s going to come?]”

“[Not if he’s smart. But the boss wants us to be prepared either way.]”

The conversation died down as the bandits settled in for a game of cards.

Careful to stay quiet and out of sight, Ben slipped around to the side of the house where he managed to find a place to climb up. He scaled the wall to the second floor only to find the window bolted tight. The room beyond the glass was dark. Ben peered in past the gauzy curtains. Inside, bound to a chair and seemingly unconscious, was Ladrón.

Ben knocked on the glass, but he got no reaction. He was about to break the window in when he was interrupted by a peal of laughter and an angry shout from the kitchen below. He looked from the source of the noise to the window, conflicted, before climbing back down.

There were several horses saddled and ready in a paddock nearby—one for the sheriff and each
of the bandits. Ben snuck in and stole one. He waited until he’d gotten a fair distance away before spurring his horse into a gallop in the direction of San Fidencio.

“What is he doing?” Annie hissed. “He’s gotta help Ladrón.”

“He can’t,” Jesse said quietly. “There’s no way into that house without those thugs hearin’. Plus Ben’s unarmed, and Ladrón’s out cold. He needs to get help.”

Help arrived in the form of Vigilante riding hard in the opposite direction. Upon seeing Ben, he pulled up short and waved him over.

“[Vigilante, thank God you’re here. It’s Ladrón—]”

“[He’s at the Maderas estate, isn’t he?]”

Ben looked surprised. “[He is.]”

“I thought so. Miss Maderas is practical, and she likes to be in control. She has the advantage on her own property; there’s no better place for her to keep him.]”

“So Miss Maderas really is behind this? Why?]”

“There isn’t much time to explain.]”

“[Fine. Then tell me what I can do.]”

“[You should stay out of the way; I don’t want to see you get hurt.]”

“[Not happening.]” Ben said defiantly.

“[Then... Then ride into town and try to warn the station master: someone is going to try to kill Congressman Benavides on the train. Someone dressed like me.]”

Ben’s eyes went wide. “[But—there’s nothing the station master can do against an assassin. I need to get—]” Ben cut himself off, then laughed humorlessly. “[I don’t suppose the sheriff will be much help.]”

“[Benavides may have friends or bodyguards. Tell them. Tell anyone who’ll listen. I won’t ask you to do more than that.]”

Vigilante urged his horse forward.

Ben turned in the saddle. “[Vigilante, wait!]” he shouted. “[They know you’re coming.]”

Vigilante slowed his horse momentarily so he could shout back: “[I assumed as much.]”

The movie jumped to Vigilante arriving at the Maderas Estate. He left his horse a distance away and approached by foot. Nothing seemed to be noticeably out of place.

With his gun in hand, Vigilante snuck around to the kitchen door. He moved slowly and deliberately while keeping an eye on the windows.

Annie felt Jesse shift on the couch beside her and suck in a small breath. She glanced at him questioningly.

“The horses are gone,” he said, his voice low.
Sure enough, the paddock stood empty with the gate open. Which meant the bandits were gone, but why—“It’s a trap,” Annie gasped. She looked over to Jesse. “He’s gonna notice, right? He’s gotta know.”

Jesse gave a slight shrug, his brow furrowed as he watched.

The background music died down as Vigilante eased the door open, leaving him to search the house in pure, unnerving silence. He held his gun at the ready as he cleared each room. When he failed to find anyone on the first floor, Vigilante made his way to the stairs.

A thumping sound from above made Vigilante freeze. He waited until he heard another thud along with a muffled voice. The noise sent him racing up the stairs, heedless of danger. He threw open the door to a grand office to find Ladrón gagged and bound to an overly ornate chair in the center of the room.

Ladrón looked up, startled, then slouched in relief for a moment before pulling at his bonds with renewed fervor. Vigilante rushed to his side.

The scene cut suddenly to an outside view of the estate. The music returned, tense and foreboding, as the camera pulled back to a view of one of the bandits crouched in a ditch some distance away with his hand on top of a detonator. He depressed the plunger. The electric generator inside the box whirred, short and sharp. Then the house exploded with a thunderous bang.

Annie sucked in a breath as her heart pounded in her chest. They had to be alive. They couldn’t just die. Right?

The camera focused on the ruined skeleton of the once impressive villa. The entire second floor was gone, collapsed into the center of the house. The roofing lay in broken sections all around. The stairs had crashed down through the ground floor and into the cellar hidden beneath. Very little was left of the first floor except chunks of adobe and snapped wood boards. Half of the eastern wall remained along with a single window frame missing its glass. Then, with a crack, the wall finally collapsed.

The screen went dark. Slowly, light began to filter in again, revealing the wine cellar. The light shone down weakly through gaps in the wood overhead. First, the outline of the stairs became visible, lying sideways and snapped in two. The remains of a rug spilled over the broken railing. Wine racks lay across the floor, all of their contents now shattered on the ground. Heavy timber beams from the second and first floor skewered the room, and what was left of the ceiling creaked threateningly overhead.

A cough sounded from somewhere under the stairs. A chunk of adobe shifted, then fell over. A hand emerged, the top of a head, and then finally Vigilante’s dirt-streaked face. He struggled to pull himself free of the wreckage. Once he’d wriggled out from under the stairs, he sat and took stock of himself. He pressed a hand to his face—improbably, his mask had stayed on—and then down his chest, checking for injuries.

A moan drew Vigilante’s attention. He turned around and started digging, shoving debris aside until he finally found Ladrón. “[Rise and shine,]” Vigilante said. “[No time to sleep in, I’m afraid.]” He hooked his hands under Ladrón’s arms and dragged him free of the rubble. As Ladrón struggled to collect himself, Vigilante looked him over. He fingered a couple places where his clothes had been torn and skated his fingers over a massive bruise forming along Ladrón’s cheekbone.

Ladrón struggled to sit up. Vigilante helped him. When Ladrón began to list sideways, he slipped an arm around him to keep him upright. “[We’re not dead, are we? I hurt too much to be dead.]”
“[Doesn’t seem like it.]”

Ladrón groaned and let his head droop forward. “[It was stupid of you to come rescue me. You must have known this was a trap.]”

Vigilante shrugged. “[Of course I knew. But I also knew once Miss Maderas didn’t have a use for you anymore, she’d kill you. She had no reason to let you live.]”

He stood up slowly and looked around at their surroundings. The entrance into the wine cellar was blocked off. The hole made by the collapse of the main stairs looked viable, but it’d be a difficult climb.

Vigilante looked down at Ladrón. “[Anyways, what was I supposed to do? Abandon my favorite troublemaker?]”

Ladrón chuckled darkly. “[You’re telling me that dying with me is better than leaving me to die on my own?]”

“[No. I’m saying leaving you to die alone was never an option.]”

Ladrón let out another laugh. “[That’s so like you, Hector.]”

They both realized Ladrón’s mistake at the same time as Vigilante stared at him and Ladrón’s face crumpled with guilt.

“[How long have you known?]”

Ladrón looked away. “[For years now,]” he admitted.

“[How?]”

“[The night Montero set that fire on your ranch, and I came to help. Do you remember? It was the way you rode. I’ve never known anyone to handle a horse the way you do. I thought I was imagining it at first, but when we spoke after, standing in the dark and covered in soot, I recognized your voice.]”

Vigilante knelt on the ground in front of Ladrón. “[Why didn’t you tell me?]”

“[I… I knew if I told you, I wouldn’t be able to stay away. A horse thief hanging around wouldn’t be good for your reputation.]”

It was Vigilante’s turn to laugh. “[Since when did you start caring about my reputation?]”

Ladrón hesitantly lifted a hand to cup the side of Vigilante’s face. “[For as long as I’ve known you—as Vigilante—as Hector—it’s been so long, I can’t remember who I fell for first.]” He hesitated at the way Vigilante’s eyes widened, then pushed onward determinedly.

“[I wanted you, but I knew I couldn’t have you, so I chose the next best thing and fought beside you.]” Ladrón paused before adding, more to himself than to Vigilante, “[I always seem to want what I can’t have.]” His face twisted with shame as he quickly pulled his hand back. He ducked his head. “[I’m sorry.]”

“[You’re a fool.]”

Ladrón flinched. Vigilante caught his chin and lifted his face.
“[You’ve known who I am all this time, but you never figured out that I’m in love with you?]”

“[What?]”

Vigilante slipped his hand to the back of Ladrón’s head as he pulled him into a kiss. Ladrón looked shocked before he relaxed, and his hands found Vigilante’s shoulders. The kiss was chaste but lingering—gentle touches trying to make up for years of words never said and feelings never expressed.

Vigilante pulled away eventually, although it was clear he was reluctant to do so. His fingers stayed tangled in Ladrón’s hair.

“[I really am a fool,]” Ladrón said, drawing a laugh from his partner.

Annie turned towards Jesse, a grin plastered across her face. She was excited to see if he was just as happy as she was about the confession.

Jesse had one arm wrapped around his middle and his hand pressed over his mouth. His chest moved haltingly as he struggled to breathe, and Annie could see that his face was flushed and there were the beginnings of tears at the corners of his eyes.

Annie quickly turned back towards the TV. She tried to pay attention, but it was hard to focus on the movie now. All she could think about was Jesse McCree—one of the heroes of Overwatch, the famed gunslinger, the outlaw with a heart of gold, and her uncle—sitting beside her trying not to cry.

She heard a soft noise; she glanced over in time to see Jesse rubbing at his eyes.

Moving slowly, Annie reached out to pat Jesse’s knee. When he looked over, she turned her palm up to him. He smiled shakily and set his prosthetic hand in hers, giving it a squeeze. “I’m fine, darlin’,” he said in a strained voice.

“Okay.” Annie kept hold of his hand anyways.

Back in San Fidencio, Ben had failed to get Benavides’s men to believe him about the assassin, so he’d snuck aboard the train. The Vigilante-look-alike was already on board and had managed to gun down Benavides’s guards, but Ben attacked him just in time to save the congressman himself. Unfortunately, the assassin was far more adept at fighting than Ben and soon overpowered him. He would have killed him if Vigilante and Ladrón hadn’t shown up, having taken a shortcut and intercepted the train in motion.

The assassin tried to escape, but Vigilante pursued him, leading to a good, old-fashioned, top-of-the-speeding-train brawl. Back inside, Ladrón suddenly found himself facing off against more of doña Elena’s men whom she’d had the foresight to plant among the passengers in case her plan didn’t work out.

Ladrón ordered Ben to take Benavides and go to the front of the train to convince the conductor to stop. He held the thugs back long enough for the two of them to escape to the next car.

Somewhere in the middle of the action, Jesse had eased his hand out of Annie’s and now sat forward with his elbows braced on his knees as he watched the climactic fight.

The movie cut to Vigilante as he fought hand-to-hand with the assassin as the wind whipped around them. Just when it looked like Vigilante was about to win, his look-alike drew a bowie knife and advanced on him. Vigilante struggled to evade the swipes of the heavy blade while guarding his face and chest with his arms. Finally, he got lucky: the assassin swung too wildly, and Vigilante
caught hold of his arm and twisted sideways, letting momentum carry the other man straight off the roof of the train.

Back in the car, Ladrón had taken to swinging hat boxes and suitcases like weapons at the bandits trying to grab him. Suddenly, Vigilante’s face appeared upside down in one of the windows. He gestured at Ladrón and mouthed a question.

“[I’m fine!]” Ladrón called. “[Go stop the train.]”

Vigilante shook his head and pointed at his ear as he mouthed another question, clearly confused.

Ladrón snatched up a woman’s parasol and jabbed it into a man’s ribs before hitting him upside the head with a briefcase. He dropped the parasol to point emphatically at the front of the train.

Vigilante seemed to get the gist of his message this time around. He nodded before lifting himself back up onto the roof out of sight.

During Ladrón’s scene, the music had been an almost cheerful song reminiscent of what played during bar fights in classic westerns. Now it darkened and grew tense. When Ben reached the last coach before the coal-car, he was greeted by the business end of a Remington derringer. Doña Elena had come along to personally ensure her plan was a success.

Ben silently put himself between Elena’s gun and the congressman.

“[You don’t have to—]” Benavides started, but Ben hushed him.

Elena laughed darkly. “[I applaud your bravery, but it’s pointless to try and protect him. My derringer has two shots, which is plenty for both of you. Though, I suppose I’ll have to shoot you even if you step aside: I can’t leave a witness.]”

“[I suppose so,]” Ben said grimly.

Elena made a show of thinking it over. “[It’s a shame, though. I remember speaking with you on the ride into town. You’re an intelligent man. And skilled, too, considering how much trouble you’ve caused my people over the last few days. I could use someone like you in my employ. What do you say, Mr. Larson? You can either die pointlessly, or you can work for me.]”

“Typical villain,” Annie muttered. It would make much more sense to simply kill Ben, even if Annie was rooting for him to win. But of course, instead of being practical, doña Elena was going to risk losing her advantage to try to cut a deal.

The camera focused on Ben. He glanced somewhere over Elena’s shoulder. His eyes widened.

“[You killed the train conductor.]”

Elena tilted her head to the side slightly to regard the body behind her while keeping Ben in her sights. A man in uniform lay sprawled on his back at the front of the car. The blood didn’t show on the black of his vest, but it had soaked into his white shirt and pooled on the ground beneath him.

“[I did.]”

A thin, wry smile graced Ben’s face. “[You only have one shot left.]”

Annie gasped and nearly bruised her own hand trying to smack Jesse’s arm in excitement.

“[Or I reloaded after killing him,]” Elena said.
“[Maybe you did. Maybe you didn’t.]”

“[Are you willing to take that risk?]” Elena’s voice was confident, but she’d become visibly tense.

Ben took a step forward, causing Elena to back up with her gun trained on his chest. “[You know, I think I am.]”

Elena frowned as she adjusted her grip on her derringer. “[Fine then.]”

The door behind Ben slid open, and Ladrón rushed in. Startled, Elena turned her gun on him. At the same time, Ben reached for the back of his belt.

A sharp crack and a bang resounded through the train car. Elena let out a pained gasp as the gun was struck from her hand by the biting end of a whip. Ladrón stumbled back and hit the doorframe with his hand pressed to his shoulder. Blood seeped out from under his palm.

Elena reached for the hem of her basque bodice. Whatever she was reaching for, she wasn’t fast enough; Ben’s whip snapped out again and wrapped around her wrist to stop her. He hauled her in and wrestled her to the ground, pinned her arms behind her back, and bound her with the whip. He felt around the bottom hem of her bodice. When he withdrew his hand, he was holding a wicked-looking little knife with a short, broad blade and a distinctive T-shaped handle. Annie remembered reading about them: they were called push daggers, developed in the 1800s and favored by riverboat gamblers.

Elena bared her teeth, her face obscured by the curls of her hair. “[What are you going to do? Send me to prison? Good luck,]” she spat. “[I’m going to enjoy destroying you.]”

“[Funny enough, that doesn’t make me any more inclined to let you go.]”

From the front of the train, the horn let out one short, ear-piercing whistle. The train began to slow down.

The front door of the coach slid open. The camera panned up from dark boots and soot-covered pants to a torn and bloodied shirt and finally to Vigilante’s triumphant smile.

“[I was coming back to help, but it seems you don’t need me.]” Vigilante said. His smile dropped, and his eyes went wide. “[Ladrón!]” He rushed to the back of the car where his partner was slumped against the wall.

Ladrón let Vigilante ease him over into one of the seats. “[Don’t go treating me like I’m made of glass now.]” he scoffed.

“[You’ve been shot.]”

Ladrón grit his teeth as pressure was put on his bullet wound. He covered Vigilante’s hand with his own. “[Not the first time it’s happened.]”

Vigilante looked over his shoulder. They’d been given some space, so they had the back of the coach to themselves. He leaned in close and lowered his voice: “[If I have anything to say about it, it’ll be the last.]”

“[And what does that mean? You can’t stop people from shooting at me.]” Ladrón smiled roguishly at Vigilante, but faced with his partner’s intent, unwavering expression, Ladrón frowned. “[What are you—? No. I’m not quitting. I don’t care what you tell me.]”
“[What if I told you I’m retiring?]”

“[What?]”

“I’m getting too old for this. We both are. We’ve been lucky to survive as long as we have, and our odds are only getting worse. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to give all of this up, but… circumstances have changed. I have a reason to look forward to growing old; I have someone I want to spend that time with.]”

Ladrón’s expression softened. “[Well then. What do we do now?]”

“[I’ve been thinking I might sell my ranch. I want to go see the world while I’m still able.]”

Vigilante hesitated. “[Would you come with me?]”

“[You couldn’t get rid of me if you tried.]”

The movie ended soon after with Elena Maderas being loaded into a stagecoach in chains, Benjamin Larson being appointed the new sheriff, and Hector and Lucas riding slowly into the sunset together. A cover of the original theme song played while credits rolled.

The credits cut off halfway through to show a quick epilogue scene of the stagecoach from moments before, now overturned in the open desert, the driver slumped unmoving in the foreground. In the distance, a posse of horses rode away, the sound of shouting and hoofbeats fading to nothing. Then the credits returned, accompanied by a reprisal of doña Elena’s theme.

The credits ended eventually, and the music faded away only to be replaced by the sound of a crackling fire. Stars blinked into existence across the black screen, and then the camera panned down to a small campfire and two men bathed in its flickering, orange light. Hector lay on his back with his head in Lucas’s lap while Lucas ran his fingers through his graying hair.

Hector read aloud from a small book bound in brick-red fabric, but his voice was too soft to make out the words. In sweeping font across the top of the screen, the lines of an English poem appeared and faded while a Spanish translation was provided at the bottom of the screen:

O camerado close! O you and me at last, and us two only.
O a word to clear one's path ahead endlessly!
O something ecstatic and undemonstrable! O music wild!
O now I triumph—and you shall also;
O hand in hand—O wholesome pleasure—O one more desirer and lover!
O to haste firm holding—to haste, haste on with me.

—Walt Whitman

Then, finally, the screen went dark, and the movie ended.

Annie started clapping, and Ruth joined her. “That was so good! Oh man, and you were worried,” Annie teased, twisting to look at her uncle.

Jesse wasn’t clapping. He’d dug out one of those cloth handkerchiefs of his, and he was discreetly wiping at his face. His cheeks and his nose were still ruddy, and his eyes looked strained and bloodshot.

Annie clasped her hands together in her lap. “It was good, right?” she asked, suddenly unsure.
Jesse nodded and gave her a shaky smile. “Yeah, it was good,” he agreed, his voice rough. “They just surprised me there at the end is all.” He sucked in a deep breath, stretched, and drew himself to his feet. He tried to look casual, but even Annie could tell he was being too deliberate.

Jesse cleared his throat and sniffed. “I’m gonna go get ready for bed. Night, you two.” Without looking, he reached over and set his hand on Annie’s head. Then he vanished down the hall to his bedroom.

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That night, a message broadcast around the world. Satellites that had been dormant for years came online for a few minutes—just long enough to transmit a signal sent from Watchpoint Gibraltar. Three decommissioned watchpoints located in Bolivia, Quebec, and China all came online and began automated Recall procedures. Dozens of communicators in dozens of countries lit up. Some were carried in pockets by people who refused to forget they had once been heroes. Others sat secure in safes or tucked away in storage units. Lena Oxton, the first to answer the call, had kept hers on her bedside table every night since she left Overwatch. Just in case.

A few miles outside of Memphis, Tennessee, a decrepit warehouse sat slowly rotting away. It had endured time, weather, and the unbridled firepower of a squadron of Bastion units. The roof was gone, and nearly all the paint advertising a fruit company had been stripped from the corrugated steel.

Dirt and creeping plant growth covered the floor inside. There, among the ivy and the decomposing wooden crates, lay an abandoned stetson. It’d been black once, but the sun had bleached it and a fine layer of dust had settled across it over the years, leaving it gray. Scattered nearby were rusty cartridge casings—9mm, plasma-propelled.

Beside the stetson were the remains of what had once been an Overwatch communicator. The housing had been shattered, and the screen was cracked. The device had been exposed to rain, frost, and scorching summer heat. Still, it flickered on. The Overwatch logo appeared, shaky and glitching, across the half of the screen that still worked. The communicator glowed weakly up to the night sky, and the stars winked back at it. It let out a single, garbled chime to indicate a message.

Then, slowly, the light faded and died.

Chapter End Notes

Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman
The quote is from Book II, Verse 19
The imagery is based on "As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado," Book XXI (which I recommend you read! It's short and moving and powerful)
I was incredibly torn over which to quote, so I worked them in together.

I've been wanting to share this chapter for a very long time, and I'm so happy to finally get to post it. It wasn't supposed to be so long or involved, but, well, it's fanfiction. Fanfiction is supposed to be about having fun and indulging our own desires first and foremost, right? Turns out what I desired was a full-length, delightfully cliche, romantic western movie. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did.

Here's what to look forward to in the next chapter: It's been nearly six years since Overwatch fell. Time creeps ever onward, cruel forces continue their work in the
shadows, and heroes have begun to rise from the ashes. Whether he's ready for it or not, the world's about to catch up with Jesse McCree in Chapter 28: *Breaking News*.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!