Rematch

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**Rematch**

by [MsTrick](http://archiveofourown.org/users/MsTrick)

**Summary**

Gabriel clamped his molars down on his tongue, trying to squash the nonsensical impulse. Alphas didn’t claim other alphas, and they certainly didn’t mark them. But the want was powerful, physical, pricking over his skin. He couldn’t stop looking at the smooth curve of Jack’s neck, envisioning a bite there. His bite.

He sucked in a breath.

Sweat, smoke, mountain air.

Gabriel’s eyes widened as he realized what he was smelling. It was Jack’s heat, arousal pheromones rising from his skin in soft waves. That couldn’t be what it was. Barring the
incredibly rare exception, alphas couldn’t smell other alphas’ heat.

There was nothing else it could be though.
“23! My man!” Aziz called, holding out a fist.

Marcel bumped it half-heartedly as he approached the couch. The common room was lively, as it always was in the evenings, everyone giddy over free time despite being sapped from the day’s training.

“Marcel? What’s up?” Diana asked from Aziz’s side.

“Uh. 76 came by to yell at Reyes about their hand-to-hand spar this afternoon and Reyes, obviously, went from zero to aggro in less than ten seconds and was all ‘Fine. Let’s have a rematch.’ Then 76 was all ‘In your room?’ and Reyes was like ‘Unless you need the cushy gym training mats, boy scout.’ So, yeah, I fucked out of there real fast.”

“Ugh. Alphas,” Jiaming said, eyes glued to the basketball game on the holovid.

“I know, right?” Diana chimed.

An ominous thud, followed by a smash, came from the end of the hall. Marcel looked back in the direction of his room with wide-eyed despair.

“Hope you aren’t too attached to any of your stuff,” Aziz snickered.

“I just don’t get it,” Marcel whined. “The captain called the match a draw. Why can’t they just leave it?”

“Uh, for the same reason all alphas have non-alpha roommates?” Jiaming said. “Alphas just don’t ever get along with each other. Even if they do, the territorial instincts are usually too difficult to control forever. All it takes is like, one beta or omega that they’re both attracted to and bam, rivalry explodes. The best you can hope for is mutual respect.”

“But since that takes maturity and we’re talking about 24 and 76, who’ve been at each other’s throats since Hour 1 Day 1, don’t hold your breath,” Diana muttered.

“I should report this to the brass. Brawling in the dorms has got to be against regulations, right?” Marcel groused.
He stopped at the three horrified expressions on the other betas’ faces.

“Or... I should crash on the couch out here tonight?”

A crunch that sounded exactly like a wooden desk being dropkicked made them all flinch.

“If you treasure your spine and/or your asshole, yeah, 23, you crash out here tonight,” Aziz retorted.

Marcel flopped onto the couch miserably and Jiaming patted him on the shoulder. Diana cranked the volume up on the holovid.

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The basic desk had buckled in the center when Gabriel slammed Jack into it, fractured with a groan while they grappled, and flipped with a crash when Jack managed to hook a leg behind Gabriel’s ankle and topple them both to the floor. The landing was hard, but they were too busy trying to gain the advantage to take much notice.

Dropping his not inconsiderable weight onto Jack’s stomach, Gabriel finally winded him long enough to pin both his wrists to the floor.

Unsurprisingly, Jack snarled up at him, every instinct grated the wrong way by the submissive position. Rage was emanating from his entire body. Gabriel would have sworn he could smell it – a blend of sweat and smoke. He just barely pulled back in time to avoid a brutal headbutt. It took all his strength to hold Jack in place as he thrashed, their muscles flexing and tensing in response to each other.

After nearly a full minute, Jack stopped struggling. His chest was heaving, eyes dark and flashing wild, blond hair a mess. Bruises were already blossoming on his wrists, yellow and violet. On his bicep was a long scratch from the splintered edge of the desk, the thin red lines stark on his pale skin.

Gabriel’s own bruises and scrapes began to sting, almost like an echo of his opponent’s.

“Get off me,” Jack growled.

Sweat, gunsmoke, fresh mountain air.

Gabriel smirked down at him and watched those blue eyes narrow into a glare sharp as glass. Jack’s numb fingers squeezed into fists above Gabriel’s punishing grip.

“Yield,” Gabriel rumbled.

“Fuck you.”

“Yield.”

Jack clenched his jaw but didn’t look away. They both knew he was too tired to break the hold. Although Gabriel was equally exhausted, he had gravity on his side.

However, he barely had time to bask in the deep-seated satisfaction that came with besting another alpha when another instinct surged up like a fever.
Claim! Mark!

Gabriel’s heart thudded in surprise and his mind struggled to catch up.

Where the hell was this coming from? Alphas didn’t claim other alphas, and they certainly didn’t mark them. He shook his head, trying to clear it.

Jack frowned up at him in confusion.

Gabriel clamped his molars down on his tongue, trying to squash the nonsensical impulse. But the want was powerful, physical, prickling over his skin. He couldn’t stop looking at the smooth curve of Jack’s neck, envisioning a bite there. His bite.

His mouth watered.

He sucked in a breath.

Sweat, smoke, mountain air.

Gabriel’s eyes widened as he realized what he was smelling. It was Jack’s heat, arousal pheromones rising from his skin in soft waves.

That couldn’t be what it was.

There was nothing else it could be though.

“Are you doing that on purpose?” Gabriel asked, voice low.

Still frowning, Jack shook his head.

Jack could feel his own arousal at the base of his spine, no different from the times he’d felt it before. Except before he’d always been unequivocally in the dominant role. Hell, he still wanted to be in the dominant role. Badly. Every fiber of his being was quivering, aching to yank himself free from the powerless position he was locked in. If Gabriel gave him an opening, he’d take it without thinking. But the arousal was unexpectedly, undeniably there too.

Its presence wasn’t nearly as unsettling as the fact that Gabriel was picking up on it.

Because barring the incredibly rare exception, alphas couldn’t smell other alphas’ heat.

Without realizing it, Gabriel had started drawing in long breaths through his nose, trying to inhale more.

He was no stranger to the smell of a person in heat, the warm and citrusy tang of betas, the sugary fragrance of omegas. But this was something new, something rougher, something oddly enticing. The masculine smell of Jack’s sweat undercut with smoke on the wind or impending rain. The instinct to chase that scent was like a hook through Gabriel’s gut. It invaded his senses like a warm fog. He was blinking more rapidly, a sure sign his eyes were dilating.

Gabriel knew he needed to release the other man, to pull away, to stop whatever was happening before he got (rightfully) punched in the face.

But — and Gabriel thought he was imagining it at first — slowly, infinitesimally slowly, inch by inch, Jack let his head tip backwards. Still holding Gabriel’s intense stare, he began to tilt it to the side, baring the column of his pale throat. There was a tense moment. And then, Jack closed his eyes, relinquishing the contest of wills.
The yield signal shot through every nerve in Gabriel’s body. That should have been his cue to release his opponent but instead he lowered his face to the crook of Jack’s neck, where the scent was stronger. Gabriel could taste it in the air. It was clouding his mind, making it impossible to focus on thoughts like, How is this happening? This is a bad idea. We’ll kill each other.

He couldn’t breathe in enough of it. It was intoxicating, nearly overpowering. Without fully intending to, he found himself lapping at the skin, hungry for more.

Jack noisily exhaled, his body stiffening at another alpha’s teeth so near his throat. He needed to defend, retaliate, reclaim his space. His muscles flexed in preparation.

But then he inhaled.

Fresh earth. Summer breezes. The salty bite of the sea.

“Jesus Christ, you smell good,” Jack rasped in shock, pressing his forehead into the side of Gabriel’s face.

Gabriel shuddered at the admission that Jack could smell him too.

Adrenaline kept them hyper aware of the other’s closeness, attuned to the smallest movements to predict attacks, but now they were noticing how short the distance between their groins was, the temperature of their skin where it touched, how openings for jabs could be openings for more contact, how there were other things besides blood they could spill.

Gabriel’s toes curled in his boots and his cock twitched as Jack gave a slow, curious lick to the skin below his ear. Though in the back of his mind, Gabriel sensed the danger in the nearness.

Their instincts ricocheted between fight and fuck, as their predatory natures tangled with the powerful allure of each other’s heat, their two strongest primal impulses bombarding them with a confusing litany of resist submit claim retaliate mark challenge take yield.

The conflicting sensations should have been jarring, off-putting, but there was something addictive about the clash, like the blend of salt and sugar, sour and spicy. The contrast was heightened even as the flavors combined into something delicious.

It wasn’t in either of their natures to fuck passively. Jack wasn’t going to present his ass like a beta just because Gabriel had managed to pin him and for some reason they could smell each other’s heat. Even if they had been almost immediately triggered into a rut by it.

He twisted his wrists free and Gabriel felt nails dig into his shoulder blades: an assertion that the fight wasn’t over, even if the fight was evolving into an unexpected form. Gabriel ground his hips down and Jack pushed up into him with equal aggression.

While yanking Gabriel’s shirt over his head, Jack swiftly took the opportunity to reverse their positions.

Gabriel’s hackles rose, rage zinging down his spine as the urge to reassert dominance was met and butted back by the solid body on top of his. Jack returned his show of teeth with an arrogant grin that made his blood boil. Gabriel’s hands were back on Jack’s bruised wrists, this time clinging as Jack pinned him to the floor by his shoulders.

Jack pressed a knee into Gabriel’s solar plexus and bent forward, invading his space further. The possessiveness of the kiss was infuriating even as lust pooled hot in his groin. Gabriel bit Jack’s soft bottom lip hard enough to draw blood and Jack snarled vocally.
They breathed hard against each other’s mouths, bodies taut and unmoving.

Then, slowly, gently, Gabriel’s tongue emerged and licked over the cut, soothing it, tasting iron.

And this time when Jack kissed him, Gabriel met him with an open mouth and a moan.

*He tastes like Christmas,* Gabriel thought deliriously.

*He tastes like my birthday,* Jack thought giddily.

Jack slanted his head, deepening the kiss, sucking on Gabriel’s tongue. For a few seconds, Gabriel could only lie there, his senses flooded – smoke, thunderstorms, mountain air.

Jack was burning up, July sunshine rolling over his body in waves. The tiny taste of submission from the other alpha was like an injection of ecstasy straight into his veins and it was not even close to enough of what he wanted.

What he wanted was to make Gabriel *howl.* From pain or pleasure, either would satisfy.

As though sensing his intent, Gabriel growled into Jack’s mouth. Goosebumps rose on his arms when he got a growl in return.

Instincts urging him to take back some control of the situation, Gabriel stripped Jack of his shirt before undoing his button and fly. He palmed the bulge he found there, pulsing with body heat, and was rewarded with a sharp gasp. And another one when he gave it a rough squeeze. He unexpectedly withdrew, looking smug at the vexed noise Jack made in the back of his throat.

They glared at each other as they each dragged off their shoes and pants, because even that was a competition. And then Jack was back to sitting on Gabriel, nothing but thin briefs between their achingly hard cocks.

Both their mouths fell open at the contact.

Their rhythm didn’t settle, as it would have with a beta or omega. It was jerky, unpredictable, with one of them leading only until the other regained the upper hand. Neither could stop struggling to win even as their bodies warmed for each other. Neither could tell who was going to end up on top.

It was making Gabriel harder than he’d ever been in his life.

Judging from the rigid length now rubbing maddeningly against his, Jack was equally affected by the unforeseeable outcome and the warring sensations. *Fight. (Claim?) Fuck. Win. (Submit?)*

Jack’s knees scraped against the cheap carpet as he nipped and licked across Gabriel’s broad chest, inhaling long draws of his scent – earth, summer breezes, warm seawater. His mind was getting hazier by the second. He took his time with each dark nipple, teasing the hard nubs with the point of his tongue, blowing cool air over them and then sucking them into his hot mouth.

The breathy noises this pulled from the other alpha were incredibly gratifying.

Despite being in a lower position, Gabriel was fiercely gripping Jack’s hips with his large hands, adjusting the angle of their groins to what he wanted, holding Jack in place as he ground up into him, a reminder that the fight wasn’t over.

Jack moaned at the friction and brought their mouths together again, in part to avoid the alarming impulse to sink his teeth into Gabriel’s neck. *Fight. (Claim?) Fuck.* He couldn’t stop kissing Gabriel,
kept his callused hands on his face to prevent him from pulling away.

Gabriel blindly clawed at the contents of the desk drawer that had smashed to the floor earlier. As soon as the small bottle of lube was in his hand, he felt Jack’s fingers attempt to close around it. While their tongues fucked, their hands fought.

“Let me,” Gabriel snarled.

The hairs on the back of Jack’s neck rose at the commanding tone.

*Challenger, rival, resist,* his blood whispered. But his cock, needy and pressed against Gabriel’s and traitorous because of it, whined *(Submit?)*

Gabriel knew Jack would disobey before he even opened his mouth.

“Make me.”

This wasn’t the coy ‘Make me’ of a beta playing hard-to-get before inevitably surrendering. This was an actual challenge, one where Gabriel may or may not triumph. Intimidation and commands weren’t going to get him very far against an alpha whose strength so closely matched his own. But there were other tactics on the field now.

“My pleasure, 76,” he said with a toothy grin and a voice like honey.

Gabriel flipped them with one forceful shove and Jack’s shoulder blade stung with a rug burn. The lube hit the floor, free for the taking. But that didn’t matter because Gabriel hooked two thumbs into the waistband of his briefs and, with no warning, took Jack’s entire length in his wet, hot mouth.

Jack slammed a hand over his mouth to stifle a loud groan. His spine arched at the sudden pleasure. His adrenaline spiked at the vulnerability of his position but the potency of his scent spiked too, smoothing over Gabriel’s senses like catnip.

But even without that, it was evident Gabriel took satisfaction in being able to dominate others this way. He could bring people to their knees and keep them beneath him without even needing his impressive strength.

“Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck,” Jack chanted into his palm.

He felt his face and chest flush. Even though it was Gabriel sucking *him* off, even though Gabriel was moaning around *his* cock, Jack knew he was the one submitting. And it grated, sent cold fire up his spine, but it felt so damn good too. And maybe he wasn’t fully submitting? Because this wasn’t a perfunctory blow job. Gabriel was lavishing attention on him, noting every small movement with beautifully dilated eyes, tracking what Jack was most responsive to and doing more of it.

Gabriel swallowed down, and Jack barely stopped himself from flinging his head back and giving himself completely over to the velvety sensations.

Their combined heats saturated the room. Every breath was like a drug hitting their bloodstreams. They couldn’t stop things now even if they wanted to.

While a beta or omega would be wet and mewling by now, Gabriel could tell from his own physiology that an alpha wasn’t going to slick up enough for what he wanted to do. Keeping Jack distracted, he retrieved the small bottle. Their briefs ended up somewhere.

Two lubed fingers pressed up against Jack’s asshole and before he registered what he was doing, he
bolted up and slammed Gabriel backwards into the wall hard enough that he saw stars.

When Gabriel’s vision cleared, he found a very pissed off alpha in his lap, snarling into his face and squeezing his throat enough that his pulse picked up. There was nothing of Jack in the unwavering stare, just animalistic instinct.

Gabriel went completely still.

_Enemy, rival, resist_, his blood whispered, preparing to reroute his thoughts towards countertactics. But Jack’s cock, hard and wet from Gabriel’s mouth, was flush against his and pinned between their abs, and by the time _Submit?_ crossed his mind, he was already mimicking Jack’s earlier, infinitesimally slow yield.

Jack felt the other alpha’s muscles relax under his grip, and when Gabriel had fully tilted his head back and broken eye contact, he took a shuddering breath – fresh earth, June breezes, seashore – and seemed to come back to himself.

He stroked a callused thumb up the soft skin and Gabriel swallowed hard, his gaze flicking back to Jack’s. Gabriel felt a hand around his wrist and couldn’t stop the throaty groan that escaped him when Jack guided the lubed fingers back to his entrance.

Jack smirked at him and ground down.

Gabriel's mouth went dry at how slick and tight he was. The noises of satisfaction the blond made when he began moving his hips were as heady as his scent. The feeling of Jack’s inner muscles squeezing and fluttering around his fingers drew beads of pre-cum from Gabriel’s cock.

Jack’s heat was steadily climbing, fire under both their skin, as he fucked himself on the two fingers harder, faster.

“Add a third,” Jack growled.

“Make me.”

Jack grinned, spat in his hand and wrapped it around Gabriel’s neglected cock, making him choke on a gasp. He was glad he had the wall at his back to hold him up. His hips bucked up without his permission into the firm, wet, rough, perfect strokes.

Which then abruptly stopped.

“Add a third.”

Gabriel was panting into his face, eyes lidded, nearly drunk off Jack’s scent – sweat, gunsmoke, alpine air – and did as he was told. But he didn’t do it gently, and Jack grunted at the sudden stretch. He nipped at Jack’s bottom lip as he pumped his fingers in and out. When he adjusted his angle a fraction, Jack let out a gruff cry, a spasm of pleasure rippling through his entire body. Had Jack’s hand not compulsively squeezed around his cock at that moment, Gabriel would have chuckled.

Gabriel’s primal instincts crashed into each other. Was he winning at fucking but losing the fight? Was this dominance or submission? Jack’s thoughts were equally incoherent, boiled down to chasing the ecstasy building inside him. His breathing ran ragged and his head fell forward. He braced both hands on Gabriel’s strong shoulders, grinding himself down.

It took every ounce of willpower he had not to _keen_ when Gabriel pulled his hand away.
And then Jack’s breath flew out of him as Gabriel tugged him down and he found himself suddenly, deliciously, entirely filled.

For a moment, neither moved.

“Oh fuck,” Gabriel whispered, in awe at the way Jack’s face flushed as his body registered the intense sensation of having Gabriel seated inside him.

Those blue eyes, still fixed on his own, were nearly black. Jack was breathing hard, mouth open, instincts short-circuiting. Counterattack. Fuck. Rut. Fight. Jack himself wasn’t sure what he was about to do.

Rising up on his knees, Jack felt the hold on his hips falter, the only sign of uncertainty the other alpha had displayed this entire time.

He gripped Gabriel’s shoulders hard enough to bruise.

Inhaled.

Slid back down.

The unreal sensation of Jack, an alpha, impaling himself on his dick dragged a low, needy sound from Gabriel’s throat. His face felt hot under Jack’s unwavering gaze, piercing and hazy at the same time.

After a few more tortuously slow rolls of Jack’s hips, Gabriel surged up and Jack found himself on his back, a rug burn scraped across his other shoulder blade.

Jack let out a low hiss of irritation and once again, they were grappling for control, Jack launching himself up as Gabriel struggled to hold him down, their grips slipping on sweat-slicked skin, teeth bared, exhaling steam into each other’s faces, locked in another staring contest.

“Yield,” Gabriel panted.

“Fuck you,” Jack breathed.

Gabriel couldn’t help loving that answer.

And then fight was thoroughly drowned out by fuck.

Neither caught whose eyes closed first as their mouths met in another hungry, searing kiss. Christmas. Birthday. Infuriatingly possessive but they both were and that was balance enough for now.

Gabriel started to thrust, a slow pace that picked up speed as Jack rocked up into the movement, heels digging into Gabriel’s ass cheeks to pull him in deeper, desperate for more friction.

“That all you got?” Jack goaded, voice thick.

“Just don’t want to break that pretty ass of yours.”

Gabriel’s coarse palms pressed Jack’s thighs a bit higher and wider; Jack let him.

Jack gripped the sensitive scruff of Gabriel’s neck to keep him close; Gabriel let him.
A little territory lost, a little pleasure gained.

And then Gabriel started to pound into him.

Jack let out a hoarse cry, hating and loving Gabriel’s heavy weight on top of him, the feel of his body opening, being filled, over and over.

Gabriel was soon lost, rational brain buried beneath mind-numbing surges of pleasure, the haze of Jack’s heat, and the intense animalistic satisfaction of fucking into something hot and wet and tight and willing.

He bore down. The velvety slap of his balls against Jack’s ass grew louder.

Jack was gulping air into his lungs, drinking in Gabriel’s scent, beyond drunk off it, mind melted by the rigid heat glancing off his prostate with every powerful thrust. He was so deep. He was so big. It was so good. Jack clawed at Gabriel’s bare back and the coppery tang of blood spiced the air.

Between gravelly moans, his teeth left shallow imprints up the side of Gabriel’s neck. *Claim. Mark. (Mate?)* He grazed over the spot a mark would go.

Gabriel growled. His whole body shivered and he thrust up *hard.*

Jack’s eyes widened. Was that… permission? His heart pounded. He could taste the erratic pulse point against his tongue. Wanted it.

Gabriel whined deep in his throat, achingly close to orgasm, and Jack felt the approach of his own finish burning up his nerve endings.

Clinging to the very last threads of lucidity, Jack forced his mouth away, forced it higher to suck at the soft skin below the ear. His hand slid from the scruff of Gabriel’s neck into his dark hair.

Gabriel’s breaths shortened tellingly. His thrusts grew erratic. Jack tightened his hold.

And sank his teeth in.

Gabriel *howled* into the crook of Jack’s neck as ecstasy tore through him.

Those punishing final thrusts, the blood on his canines, the twitching of Gabriel’s dick as he shot thick semen inside him — Jack’s orgasm hit him like lightning, drawing him taut as a bowstring, whiting out his vision. His own ejaculate striped over his abs. Convulsions wracked his entire body, every muscle quaking from overstimulation.

They came back to their senses in bits and pieces as the reverberations slowly abated. Like an unsteady descent from the clouds, like water growing clear as the sand settled, like hot sun melting mist.

Gabriel pulled out on autopilot and practically collapsed onto his side, breathing harshly, indifferent to the scratchy carpet. Jack rolled over bonelessly and snagged a nearby towel with a clumsy hand.

Their scents were dissipating, the atmosphere between them becoming uncertain and tense. They lay with a few feet between them, waiting for their heart rates to come down, eyeballing each other warily. The *fight* instinct had returned to prowl in their veins, though they sensed the other was far too exhausted to be considered a threat.

The cuts and bruises made their presence known once again. Jack had a smear of blood at the corner
of his mouth. The long scrape on his bicep itched. The bruises braceleting his wrists darkened. Gabriel’s throat was raw. The back of his head throbbed from that slam into the wall. The bite below his ear oozed a slow trickle of blood.

He gingerly poked at it. They both knew it wasn’t a claim, that it would heal and fade. A few inches lower and they would have had a permanent situation to deal with. And if Jack *had* bitten to claim? Would he have offered his neck to Gabriel in return? Their very natures made the idea of another alpha’s mark on their body intolerable.

And yet.

Neither could deny they had wanted it. Badly.

It shouldn’t have been possible. But it was.

They became aware of the din from the common room, thankful it blanketed the sounds they’d been making, thankful Gabriel’s roommate probably told everyone they were fighting and kept them all away. They had no idea how to explain this to themselves, let alone others.

Fully aware neither had the answers, they didn’t voice the concerns and questions flying through their minds. Their breathing was the only sound for a few minutes.

“I won,” Jack said, voice husky.

“Like hell you did,” Gabriel coughed out. “My cum’s leaking out of your ass. *I* won.”

“Uh-huh. My bite’s in your neck. You *howled*. You would have done anything I wanted in that moment.”

“Except you couldn’t ask anything while you were too busy panting my name.”

“But you acknowledge that I could have asked.”

“A hypothetical victory is not a victory.”

“You wanna call it a draw?”

“Like a pair of omegas? You serious?”

“Just thought it would save your feelings from being hurt.”

“Asshole. Just admit that you lost.”

“Go to hell.”

“You realize if neither of us concedes, it’s technically a draw, right?” Gabriel drawled.

“Man, *fuck* draws.”

There was a pause.

“Guess we’ll need another rematch then.”
Chapter End Notes

Sometimes inspiration is like a filthy truck flying off a pornographic bridge, crashing through some fetishes, and landing in your kitchen while you’re trying to write the shit you’re supposed to write for a living.

Anyway.

Thanks for reading!

I really appreciate any kudos and comments!
Welp, flattery will get you anywhere. This was meant to be a one-off PWP but I've gotten so many wonderful, enthusiastic comments asking for more that I decided to keep going.

You guys are awesome. Thanks for the motivation! Hope you enjoy!

The thin blanket might as well have been a burial of hot sand in the midday sun.

Jack kicked it off and scowled into his pillow, tension turning his back muscles to steel. Squeezing his eyes shut, he started counting backwards from 100 in Spanish, trying to wring some sleep out of his frenetic brain.


His tongue curled behind his teeth.

*Noventa y siete. Noventa y seis.*

The smell of the seashore in summer.

*Noventa y cinco.*

Tasting salt on Gabriel's skin.

*Noventa y cuatro.*

He still couldn't believe how close he’d come to biting to claim.

*Noventa y tres.*

His teeth skidding over the place a mark would go.

*Noventa y dos.*

The way Gabriel had shuddered and thrust deeper inside him.

*Noventa y uno.*

The infuriating, intoxicating sensation of Gabriel on top of him.

*Noventa.*

Seriously, who did he think he was?

*Ochenta y nueve.*

The very real urge to punch Gabriel in the face.
Or pin him to the floor by his throat.

Heat prickled along his collarbone, down his chest, across his thighs.

Because goddammit, even though he was seething, he could feel himself slicking up, wanting it again, just as much as his dick was growing heavy at the thought of spreading Gabriel’s legs and fucking him into the mattress.

Ochenta y to hell with it.

He sat up and pulled on his sweatpants and boots. The pits of his t-shirt were damp. There was the fleeting worry that his roommate would pick up on his spiking pheromones and wake up, but the snores continued. Squinting in the low lights of the hall, Jack trudged to the staircase and jogged the two flights up to the roof.

The night air rushed over him.

It was the last week in February. The breeze was balmy, the threat of spring galloping towards them, but it was still cool enough to soothe his overheated skin. The sky seemed blank, nothing but a layer of clouds too thick for moonlight, reflecting the base’s floodlights. He leaned against the chilly chain-link fence that rimmed the entire rooftop, head on his forearm, staring out.

Patches of snow were clumped in corners of the grounds, melted and filthy. A lone figure was doing laps on the track on the other side of the compound, too distant for Jack to make out the number on their hoodie.

Gabriel’s dark hair in his grip. The rasp of a beard against his cheek. The electricity that shot through him when his teeth broke skin. The silky tang of blood. Gabriel’s howl of release.


Since growing out of the awkward teenage years, he’d never been unable to manage his heat. Had never once fallen into a rut that quickly. Had never lost himself so completely in it. It had been like falling down a well.

One he was still at the bottom of.

One he wasn’t sure he could escape.

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"Company, listen UP!" Boomed through the mess hall, slicing through breakfast.

Cutlery clattered. One or two soldiers lurched to their feet before realizing they didn’t have to. Chatter and giggles died off.
The Executive Officer, a mammoth black man with a mutilated ear, stood at the head of the room. He surveyed them in silence for a moment before proceeding.

“As you've no doubt noticed, due to the unseasonably early start to spring, a number of you have already entered your heat cycles. Blame global warming for that one. Unfortunately, Chief Medical Officer Singh has informed me that this prematurity means we will be unable to provide suppressants as originally planned.”

The tension ratcheted up instantly.

"What?!” Someone squeaked.

Unseen beneath the table, Gabriel dug his fingers into his thighs. Jack was like a light in the corner of his vision, 22 seats down at the long table parallel to his. Just far away enough.

A wave of worried comments washed through the room and the XO held up a large hand until the buzzing settled.

“According to Dr. Singh, at this point in the injection schedule, it is highly likely that the active ingredients found in all available heat suppressants will interfere with the regimen’s intended effects. So, due to this change in circumstances, for the next few weeks, all routine and special exercises will be conducted in your natural brackets.”

Gabriel and Jack’s eyes snapped to each other.

Oh shit.

Out of 140 soldiers, there were only 16 alphas in the program.

Which meant the wide berth they’d given each other since – Jack’s mouth falling open as Gabriel ground up into him – the incident three days ago was about to shrink exponentially.

Training squads for the morning routine had been grouped numerically, separating the two of them by default. They’d kept their distance at meals and during evening downtime, reflexively clocking one another’s position, a compass that up until now was used to hunt each other down for challenges. The only difficult moments had been during special exercises, the combat, tactical and infiltration training, when their high success rates threw them together more often than not.

The closer they got to one another physically, the hotter the air seemed to turn, embers trickling onto the skin between Gabriel’s shoulder blades, his hands curling into fists of their own accord. Jack’s agitation was even more obvious, that pale skin of his flushing delicious shades of pink and red.

Others noticed, of course. They took it to be rivalry and rage, retold the story of the brawl that trashed 23/24’s room, speculated the enmity was over an attractive beta.

What would they say if they knew what being within ten feet of each other actually did?

How Gabriel’s twitching fingers wanted to wrap around Jack’s dick as much as his throat. How he wanted to make Jack cry out in pleasure as much as pain. How he ached for Jack to sink his teeth into his neck again even more than he ached to get Jack to yield.

At least the thick material of their tactical pants did a decent job of camouflaging erections.

“Betas and omegas will each be split into two factions,” the XO was saying. “Your superiors will be using this as an opportunity to examine leadership, teamwork and adaptability in a controlled
environment where you can’t rely on the natural hierarchy.”

“Leadership? What'll the omegas do?” cracked a voice.

Laughter rippled through the alphas and betas.

Jack’s face remained impassive, his attention fixed on the XO, but Gabriel caught the slight twitch of anger.

And then Gabriel wondered, annoyed, when he'd developed a fluency in Jack's micro-expressions. Well, you couldn’t study a rival (potential mate?) for so long without picking up a few details.

Jack wasn’t the type of alpha to throw his weight around or remind people of his inherent dominance. He carried that power and responsibility with dignity. The omegas loved him for it. That he was subtly uncomfortable with the existence of a biological hierarchy drew respect from many of the betas as well. He rebutted more bellicose alphas with self-assurance, defending his own space when necessary but declining to impinge on others’ unless he had a good reason.

Come to think of it, Gabriel realized, the only times he'd seen Jack lose his temper and slip into alpha posturing was with him. Gabriel was the only one who could get – “oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck” – a reaction out of him. The thought was as gratifying as scratching an itch.

“I have faith you will all retain control over your heats during the day,” the XO said, more warning than expression of faith. “Consider this another component of your training. Omnic's do not have cycles. Omnic do not go into heat. You must be prepared, willing and able to go up against them at any time, no matter your hormonal state and no matter the state of your squadmates.”

The atmosphere of the mess hall sobered as the XO paused to let that sink in.

“After hours, you are permitted to satisfy your heats as you see fit, as long as all involved parties consent. However, you are required to sleep after lights out and to sleep in your own beds. Failure to do so will require in strict disciplinary action. Are we clear?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

---

Headache poking him between the eyes, Jack cracked open the door and glanced across the hall. The sock was still over the doorknob to his room. He huffed in irritation.

“Oh jeez, close it,” Jiaming said, wrinkling her nose. “It’s like a bomb went off at a perfume counter.”

Jack returned to pacing the short length of her room, a tiger in a cage.

The mess hall at dinner had been like a candy store and a flower shop and a fruit market, all baking in the summer sun, the smells cloying and competing. Gabriel and a few of the other alphas had been nowhere to be found. Jack had eaten alone and at a steady pace, blue eyes stony and fixed on his food so as not to be caught by someone’s hopeful gaze, lest they assumed he was signaling permission to approach.
“It’s high school all over again,” he grumbled.

“Yeah, high school doesn’t ever actually end,” Jiaming said, eyes on her tablet. “True story. My nana’s in a nursing home and it’s still all, ‘Sally and I used to be friends but now she won’t sit with me at lunch and I think she’s talking shit about me behind my back.’”

While Jack paced, all restless energy, she sat cross-legged on her bed, skimming the contents of an old magazine since they weren’t permitted internet connection. His attention was caught by the scar, pale pink and no longer glossy, peeking out from the collar of her t-shirt.

"How did you know when you’d found your mate?"

"Got someone on your mind?"

"Not... really."

"Right,” she drawled. “You're asking out of pure scientific curiosity.”

"Exactly."

"The usual ways, I guess. Her heat smelled so good I practically wanted to eat her. Seriously, her scent is like salted caramel vanilla. I can almost get triggered into a rut just thinking about it. And then, you know, you get obsessive about wanting to mark and when you learn they want to mark you back it’s like fireworks going off in your brain. But if the other person doesn't consider you mate material, then you’re just, like, this super creep. Relationship’s not gonna last long if you want to bite but the other person doesn’t. Doesn’t matter how good they smell.”

“That happen to you?”

Her eyes flicked up to him for a second and then returned to the tablet.

“Once. College crush. I was 18 and I thought I knew everything and this girl was definitely the one. Except, then, you know, she wasn’t. Not that you'd actually know anything about that. I mean, you're an attractive, male alpha. Like, chances are basically zero the person you want doesn't want you back."

"Except for you,” he laughed. "And all other lesbians."

"Is the person you're looking to nibble on a lesbian?"

"No, but--"

"Hah, there is a person.”

“It’s...complicated.”

“They’re already claimed?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Do they pick up your scent, too?”

*Gabriel burying his face in the crook of his neck, pulling in long breaths through his nose, hot tongue stroking up the sensitive skin when inhaling the scent was no longer enough.*

Jack was grateful Jiaming was glued to her screen and didn’t catch his blush.
“Uh, yeah.”

“Then talk to them. We’re not animals. You can have an adult discussion about what you want out of a relationship even if you’re a dumb, hothead alpha.”

“Gee, thanks, Jiaming,” Jack deadpanned.

“Any time. Just, you know, remember your hormones can be wrong.”

He stopped pacing, a trickle of ice water in his veins.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Like I said, sometimes you think you’ve found the love of your life, but it’s just your body trying to get your thirsty ass laid.” She shrugged. “Just trust me on having a conversation before trying to mark.”

A conversation.

Jack couldn’t think of a single interaction he’d had with Gabriel that hadn’t devolved into posturing or a competition. Gabriel had brushed by him too closely in the mess hall on the first day and Jack saw red, snarled into that handsome face on instinct. Since then, they’d taken every opportunity to antagonize each other, invade each other’s personal space, knock each other off balance.

The last time had been no different even if it had ended up – Gabriel with his back against a wall, panting and doe-eyed with lust, bucking up into his hand – somewhere unexpected.

Have a conversation.

How hard could that be?

---

“What the hell is wrong with you two?” Thundered their Commanding Officer from behind his desk.

He was silver-haired man in his late fifties who bore a surprising resemblance to Ronald Reagan.

Gabriel and Jack sat in his crosshairs, a pair of bloodied schoolkids sent to the principal’s office.

Gabriel held a balled-up rag to his face, steadily soaking it red. The nose was broken. Jack could tell from the swelling under his eyes. And from the crack his fist had made when it connected. A petty sort of satisfaction sat like a stone in his stomach, right beneath his throbbing ribs. Two were fractured. He could tell from the crack he’d heard when Gabriel’s knee connected. And from the agony that whipped through his torso every time he inhaled.

"And after trashing that room last week… This is your last warning. Either you two figure out how to work around your hormones and cooperate, or you will be removed from the Soldier Enhancement Program. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," they chorused, equally stricken.

The threat was enough to distract them from each other despite the smallness of the office.
The CO sighed in aggravation, like an overheated bull, and sat heavily in his chair.

“‘You don’t get a choice in this one. The United Nations requested we assess soldiers in pairs and lucky you, Reyes, you have the strongest record in close combat; Morrison, the highest long-range accuracy. Which means you’re going to be partners. You’ll train as a unit until the UN reps visit in 15 days to observe the highest performing 2-man squads. I suggest you give them a good showing.’”

Jack and Gabriel looked at each other in horror.

“Permission to speak freely, sir?” Jack wheezed.

“Denied. This last stunt has also earned you twenty laps on the track before breakfast and another twenty between the end of the day’s training and dinner. See if that clears the aggression out of your systems. And if it doesn’t, you will find something that goddamn does. Dis-missed.”

They slogged across the muddy base in the syrupy light of sunset, too furious to speak, distantly grateful their scalding injuries made it impossible to properly smell each other. As they lumbered into the barracks, a few omegas heading to the mess hall gave them curious looks.

The communal showers were still damp, soap gathered around the drains, but blessedly devoid of people.

Jack bypassed the lockers and flipped the switch to activate the biotic field. Buttery light shone down, gleaming off the tiles. Gritting his teeth, he slumped against the wall, not caring about the water seeping into his clothes, and waited. His fractured ribs glowed warm as they slowly re-solidified. The chafed skin on his knuckles smoothed over. The scratches washed away as easily as paint.

As soon as he could pull in full breaths, the scent of Gabriel flooded his lungs, overpowering, as though he was—

The shower next to him burst to life, spattering cool drops across Jack’s side, and his eyes flew open in irritation to find a very naked Gabriel ducking his head under the spray, wincing as the water trickled over his stinging nose.

Even as his hackles rose at the disrespectful proximity, Jack couldn’t stop himself from taking in the other alpha’s form, following the rivulets as they slinked down his throat, shoulders, pecs, abs, buttocks, thighs. Christ, he was good looking.

A ripple of heat rolled through Jack’s body, collecting in his groin. He yanked his gaze away and staggered out of the range of the splashing to undress himself, now that he could lift his arms over his head without being blinded by pain. He folded his clothes, placed them on the bench next to Gabriel’s neat albeit bloodied stack.

Without turning around, he knew Gabriel was watching him because—

Fresh earth. Summer breezes. The salty bite of the sea.

Jack wanted to follow that scent the way a starving man might trail the smells wafting from a bakery. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

Though Gabriel kept his gaze straight ahead as Jack cranked on the shower next to him, the other alpha’s presence was as tangible as a heat source at his side.

Gabriel’s limbs had already forgotten the recent pain, his instincts swimming away from fight as his
thoughts were invaded by the memory of Jack’s tongue slowly running up his neck to just under his ear. He tried to cling to the cloud of rage that had blanketed his senses during the brawl, the territorial spite that had driven his knee savagely into Jack’s diaphragm. But to no avail. The keen satisfaction of landing that blow was rapidly warping into greedy hunger for a different form of contact.

The water crept above lukewarm and by the time Gabriel rinsed all the blood off, the swelling in his nose had vanished along with the bruises under his eyes.

He drew in a shaky breath.

Smoke. Impending rain. Mountain air.

Gabriel’s heartbeat picked up as his fickle blood responded loud and clear: Take! Claim! Mark!

“Were we just... more or less commanded to fuck?” Jack asked.

Gabriel blinked at him in surprise for a second.

And then he laughed. A real laugh, not a jeer or a taunt. And oh if Jack’s stomach didn’t suddenly flip upside down.

“You’ve got such a mouth on you, boy scout. Thought Midwesterners were supposed to be polite.”

Jack smiled at him, an actual smile, not a smirk or a challenging grin. And Gabriel’s cheeks warmed. The pale yellow light made Jack look exasperatingly angelic. His gaze sank to the gentle curve of Jack’s neck as though pulled by a magnet.

Jack noticed.

Your hormones can be wrong.

“This makes no fucking sense.” His voice was already starting to rasp with want for something he wasn’t supposed to want.

He shook himself, as though that would stop his eyes from dilating, his skin from burning up, his dick from swelling.

“Nope,” Gabriel agreed distractedly.

The soap and the harsh sprays tempered the smell of sweat and washed away the blood but did absolutely nothing to dilute their scents.

Eyelids heavy, they slowly edged closer, encroaching on each other’s space. The air crackled as their natures cried act of aggression, resist, attack even as they tried to breathe in more of each other, as hungry for it as they had been the first time, but now with the unexpected added pleasure of it being familiar.

Jack felt embers between his shoulder blades.

Arousal unfurled in Gabriel’s gut, a pool of hot oil spreading through his muscles.

The biotic field automatically clicked off and they grabbed at each other, sinking into a kiss with vocal, visceral relief.

Christmas morning. Birthday parties. Coming home after a long day outside in winter. Falling into a soft bed after being awake for 24 hours. But then there was the thread of adrenaline, so it was also
the exhilarating terror-pleasure of the first drop on a roller coaster, the first crash of fireworks in the
night sky.

Gabriel cradled Jack’s head in his large hands, tilting it, deepening the kiss. Jack palmed his waist,
dragging him closer, pressing into him. Gabriel moaned at the rough slide of their cocks, wet from
the showers and already hard.

“What are the odds of you getting on your knees?” Jack rumbled.

Gabriel huffed and nipped Jack’s bottom lip in warning.

“Low.”

“Not zero though, huh?”

Gabriel kissed him, slow and hard and possessive. Jack surged up into it, tongue pushing back, as
pissed off by the show of dominance as he was turned on by it. Both hands coasted down to squeeze
Gabriel’s ass in retaliation.

“You want me to reduce you to a babbling mess again, you’re going to have to return the favor first,”
Gabriel panted as he ground forward.

Jack hummed thoughtfully. “Yeah, I don’t think I do.”

“What are you talking ab—”

Gabriel exhaled noisily as Jack took both their swollen cocks in one hand, solid grip holding them
flush. He started to stroke them both.

“I don’t think you actually need that much convincing,” Jack continued in a low, silky tone that
made Gabriel shiver.

**Threat**, his blood whispered. But threat of what?

Gabriel felt a wave of heat rise through him as the friction, combined with Jack’s scent, potent and
masculine, torpedoed his ability to think. Jack thumbed the leaking head of his dick and his hips
pushed into the tight grip.

“I think you liked the taste of my cock in your mouth more than you want to admit.”

Gabriel’s dark eyes widened at the pure **audacity** of that statement. Jack’s intense focus pinned him
in place, put him under a spotlight, sent fire and ice down his spine, anger splintering into arousal and
back again. His impulses were momentarily scrambled. Aggressively submit? Seductively attack?

“Fuck you,” was the only thing he managed to say, his voice breathy and unconvincing to his own
ears.

Jack chuckled, his lips quirking up into a smile that Gabriel wanted to **bite lick smack kiss** off his
face.

He fought through the haze of sensation to pry Jack’s fingers off his own cock and took it in his hand
instead. Gabriel’s grip around him sent rough sparks of ecstasy through Jack’s entire body. They
fucked into the tight tunnels of each other’s fists, pressed between their bodies, slick with pre-cum.

Eye contact finally broke as their heads bowed forward in pleasure, heated foreheads coming to
touch, heavy breaths searing each other’s lips. Soft, wet noises could be heard above the pounding
It was inevitable that their faces dropped into the crook of each other’s necks. Teeth lightly skated across needy skin. They both shivered at the nearness, the blatant hunger, their instincts screaming *danger defend yield claim bite mark bite fuck BITE*.

They were perched on the edge of a dangerous cliff. Their panting was the pushy wind. One sudden movement and that could be it. Abrupt blood. A plummet to an unknown end.

With that thought, Jack reluctantly dragged his unoccupied hand off Gabriel’s hip and slid it between his mouth and the painfully tempting place on the other alpha’s neck. Gabriel felt a prickle of displeasure even as he saw the wisdom in the action.

After a long second, as if punishing Jack for his caution, Gabriel shoved him against the shower wall and Jack let out a strangled noise as Gabriel jerked him hard, fast, wrist twisting, until he came in hot spurts over his taut stomach.

Gabriel didn’t want to admit that Jack gripping his chin and kissing him deeply was the reason he spilled himself so quickly into Jack’s hand afterwards. But from the languid way Jack’s tongue curled around his, Gabriel could tell he knew it.

The air cooled between them, a sharp dip in temperature. They relinquished each other, legs still trembling from the force their release, wariness of each other’s proximity returning to the forefront of their minds as they finished cleaning up.

*This makes no sense*, Jack thought for the second time. *You couldn’t find peace in this. Alphas couldn’t relax around each other, but mates were supposed to make you feel safe.*

“This can’t happen again,” Jack stated, snapping off the water.

“Because you’ve been so good at stopping it so far,” Gabriel shot back, annoyed at Jack’s attempt to take control of the situation, even if he had been thinking along the same lines.

Without the white noise of the showers, their voices seemed louder, harsher. Their situation seemed even more impossible.

“We’re getting way too close to claiming each other.”

“Well, if we don’t fuck, we fight. And since fighting is no longer an option—”

“And what the hell happens if one of us bites?” Jack hissed.

“It didn’t happen last time or this time.”

“It’s been damn close.”

“Got a better idea?”

“I don’t know. We could fuck other people, see if that helps.”

Gabriel immediately stepped back into his personal space. Jack glared but didn’t move, which put them face to face again, noses mere inches apart.

“You’d be okay with that, huh?” Gabriel rumbled. “Someone else touching me.”

Jack bared his teeth before he could stop himself, as though flinching from contact with a hot stove.
Gabriel tilted his head, giving him a look of triumph smudged with what Jack would swear was fondness.

“Didn’t think so.”

At least they were on the same page there.

“Asshole,” Jack groused.

So much for having a conversation.
The crescent moon hung in the center of the sky like the last sliver of winter ice. Gabriel couldn’t even see his breath anymore, spring had so belligerently settled in. He unzipped his hoodie as he rounded the north bend of the track again and tossed it to the side.

He ran faster, trying to leave behind the ghost of Jack outpacing him, as he always did during their extra 40 laps.

Trying to leave behind the lust.

*The perfect expression on his face when Gabriel was fully inside him, open mouth, flushed cheeks, blue eyes heated and dazed.*

Trying to leave behind the fury.

*The laser focus in that same gaze when the arrogant jackass asserted that Gabriel liked sucking his cock.*

Credit to whatever shit they were being injected with because in spite of the additional disciplinary cardio, the full dawn-to-dusk training and his terrible sleep habits lately, Gabriel barely felt tired.

Unfortunately, that meant his brain had plenty of energy to replay — *Jack’s muscular thighs around his hips, body opening around him, hot as a furnace and slick as silk — everything.*

The romantic in him was toying with ideas of crossed stars, impossible connections, the dark threads of fate tightening around their limbs. The taste of smoke on his tongue, fresh air filling his nostrils, blue-eyed danger curling affectionately into his bare throat.

But this wasn’t fate; it was a biological aberration, a dangerous ricocheting between *fight* and *fuck* that would wear them down, chunk by chunk.

His more ruthless pragmatism hissed at him in Jack’s voice. *What the hell happens if one of us bites?*

Jack didn’t want to bite to claim, didn’t want to mate. And it bothered Gabriel. And it shouldn’t have. It really shouldn’t have. Because Gabriel really shouldn’t want to fuck let alone mate with an alpha either.

Hierarchy was built into their biology. There was an intrinsic calm when you knew where you stood with everyone in the room. It was why alphas were always jostling each other, trying to establish who was stronger than who. It was why people almost always mated with someone from a different bracket. It was just…easier, to not have to think about who was leading things.

But still Gabriel woke from fiery dreams of broken skin, his jaw aching from clenching his teeth all night.

While his instincts were still rubber-banding between *fight* and *fuck*, it was like the transition was getting slower somehow, was no longer instantaneous, creating an in-between moment that hadn’t existed before.
A moment where Gabriel didn’t want to fight or fuck. A moment where he wanted more of – Jack’s smile, blue eyes playful, blond hair glowing under the biotic light – something he could never talk about.

Because vulnerability was necessary for (love?) to work.

And alphas couldn’t be vulnerable with each other.

Not wanting to fight was weakness, pure and simple.

Gabriel couldn’t blame biology for this one. You could be compatible with someone, even mated to them, without being in love. His parents came to mind, with their tired cohabitation. It was heresy to think it, but he was relieved they were no longer alive. How would he explain this to them?

He didn’t have answers.

Any answers.

So, he kept running.

---

“Soldiers 76 and 24 closing in on Objective B,” Jack stated quietly into the comms.

“You want to be more specific?” Gabriel groused at his side.

“You want to be less of a dick?”

Jack peered around the large tree they were using for cover, analyzing obstacles and the distance to the objective, while Gabriel scanned their surroundings over the barrel of his M16. The woods were dense with oaks, elms and underbrush, dark green and light brown, all twitching with birds and insects. The sun was sliding down the sky like an egg yolk, chopping the forest into pillars of shadow and light.

Jack’s proximity was like taking a shot of whiskey. It burned, acid at first, then settled into smoky warmth in his stomach. And then he’d either get pleasantly drunk or vomit it up. Or both.

Gabriel rolled his eyes, unimpressed with his simile, and noted:

“We have less than an hour of visibility left.”

“I can see the goddamn sky, 24,” Jack retorted without turning around.

“Well, if we’d been faster about capturing Objective A…”

“Look, the strat worked didn’t it?”

“We got lucky. You gonna tell me what we’re dealing with here or—?”

Irritation prickled hot up Jack’s spine. He let out a long, controlled exhale through his nostrils.

“We’re 13 meters away. Two targets patrolling in a clockwise direction around an area of about 14
“They’ll probably drop those the instant they sense our approach.”

“No shit.”

“We can’t drive them together or they’ll just bunker down,” Gabriel continued, eyes still sweeping the trees.

“Obviously. And we can’t separate them because one of us alone doesn’t have the firepower to take one down.”

“Obviously. Draw one of them away with a distraction and focus it down?”

“Let me guess,” Jack drawled. “You want me to be the distraction.”

“Your white ass will stand out more than mine in this environment. Also, you’re faster.”

Jack huffed.

“Fine. I’ll circle around the perimeter’s west side, wait for the targets to approach the northwest and southeast corners of their patrol, then set off a smoke grenade and make some human noises to draw the northwest target away from its route.”

Gabriel unhooked his smoke grenade from his kit and Jack took it without comment. It was highly unlikely Jack’s grenade would fail, but it was the crux of the maneuver, so a back-up was logical. They performed a quick check on the rest of their inventory, tightening straps and securing unneeded equipment.

“You’re ambidextrous,” Jack noticed, sounding surprised and… impressed?

Gabriel glanced up at him.

“I’m left-handed. In a right-handed world, you become ambidextrous by default.”

“So, you can shoot with both hands.”

“I can.”

“That’s… an unfair advantage;” Jack said, but he was smiling.

“All’s fair in…”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“After the target diverts, you engage from north/northeast, me from west/northwest,” Gabriel said.

“On your mark,” Jack affirmed.

Their every interaction was like cliff diving, Jack thought as he set off. Sometimes entering the water was smooth, effortless; sometimes it was like smacking concrete.
Gabriel watched his back until it disappeared into the forest, then steadily moved into position, crouching to stay hidden. Jack’s gravelly voice came over the comms to confirm his location and then the distraction billowed through the trees. The OR-14 lookalike paused to observe, then communicated something with its counterpart.

“Target’s on the move,” he said, beginning to approach.

“I’m in position.”

“Engage in 15 seconds.”

“Roger.”

It went surprisingly well.

Suspecting a trap, the bot wasn’t caught off-guard, but it couldn’t respond fast enough to the two-sided attack. Bullets tore open its flank and then its head. It collapsed onto the dead grass and Jack emptied the magazine of his rifle into it for good measure.

92.

Gabriel caught the number, wondered at it as they retreated into the cover of the trees, let it go.

“We can try to snowball this, take down the second target immediately,” Jack said, reloading as they ducked behind another oak.

“Yeah. Pincer movement again,” Gabriel agreed, crouching at his side. “Should reposition. Approach from the west and northeast this time.”

Their shoulders brushed.

Gabriel realized what the number was.

“Hey Jack, how many rounds do I have left?”

“106,” he responded immediately. Then he blinked. “Oh. Didn’t realize I was—”

“You have 92.”

“Yeah…”

Their gazes clicked together.

Jack’s combat uniform suddenly felt far too hot. The temperate forest may as well have been tropical jungle. Tension tied knots up his spine.

Take, claim, yours, fuck, his blood demanded, a low reverberation in Jack’s veins.

A drop of sweat escaped from Jack’s helmet to caress his neck. Gabriel’s eyes followed the drop, a flush of heat blooming below his ears as he remembered with perfect clarity Jack naked and writhing beneath him. His heart tripped, the next few beats landing as thuds.

Jack could already taste sea salt on the air, already sense the haze invading his mind, fogging up his reasoning.

*This can’t happen again,* Jack recited. *This can’t happen now.*
He adjusted his grip on his M16, swallowed around a tongue that felt too thick in his mouth, tried not to inhale too deeply.

“We need to move out,” he managed to say.

**Gabriel’s nipples hardening under the press of his tongue.**

Jack let out the breath he’d been holding and grabbed the other alpha’s shoulder. Before he could figure out if he wanted to drag him closer or push him away, Gabriel knocked his hand off, a rumble of anger in the back of his throat. He yanked Jack forward by the front of his jacket, inhaled the smoke and rain he loved as much as he hated.

“EXERCISE TERMINATED. SOLDIERS FALL IN,” echoed around them.

Jack shoved Gabriel away, panting like a drowning man flopping onto shore. Gabriel scowled but the forest flickered blue before he could retaliate.

All rounds that were expended during the exercise clattered to the warehouse floor as the hard-light targets they were fired into vanished. They jogged across the gargantuan indoor space, squinting as their dilated eyes adjusted to the abrupt fluorescent light, and lined up in front of the Commanding Officer.

He was *fuming*.

“All the unprofessional, inappropriate bullshit I’ve seen in my years, this is up there as one of the worst. What in goddamned hell was going through your thick skulls?”

It took Jack and Gabriel an icy heart-stopping second to realize he wasn’t referring to them.

“Turning firearms on one another in a simulation with live rounds? You’re *partners* for fuck’s sake! I could have you both court marshalled.”

Soldiers 34 and 52 glared straight ahead, aggression only barely kept in check by the CO’s presence and rank. They were very typical infantry alphas, men with more muscle than brains. Both were disheveled, like they’d spent the entire exercise brawling with each other.

*What did you expect?* Gabriel silently asked the CO.

Biology-enhancing injections plus no heat suppressants plus a program that emphasized aggression and leadership in its alphas, needing them to be superstars. Or monsters. Depending on how you looked at it.

Half-listening to the CO’s ranting, he wondered how much more antagonistic he and Jack would be towards each other without their… hormonal quirk. Their mutual attraction held some potential as an asset. But considering how close they came to fighting (fucking?) a few minutes ago, Gabriel doubted it was potential that could be capitalized on.

---

“Youhoo? I’m talking?” Jiaming said through a mouth full of food.

“Hm?” Diana asked vaguely. “Sorry. Reyes and Morrison just walked in.”
Aziz and Marcel rolled their eyes.

The mess hall was turning into a lek, alphas puffing up their chests and betas preening, omegas practically high off the pheromones permeating the air, the possibility of sex or violence underlining every interaction.

“Aloof bastards. Like all that disinterest is real,” Aziz grumbled, scarfing down mashed potatoes.

“It’s so hot, though,” Diana gushed.

“Mystery tends to be,” Jiaming muttered.

“It’s like a challenge,” Diana said, eyes glued to the two alphas eating at the end of another long table. “No one can get their attention so of course, everyone’s dying to.”

“I’m not,” Marcel said, craning around. “It looks like they’re about to fucking kill each other.”

“You know what it is? I bet they’re after the same beta,” Aziz asserted. “I mean, you’ve seen how they’ve been circling around each other, taking stock.”

“Maybe they’re both in heat!” Diana said brightly.

“Oh my God,” Jiaming moaned. “Can we talk about anything besides alpha gossip?”

“I’ll be right back,” Diana said, hopping out of her seat, scent trailing her like perfume.

Jiaming, Aziz and Marcel all looked at each other, and then swiveled to watch, dinner forgotten.

Hips swishing, Diana wove through the raucous canteen. Her nose tilted up tellingly as she got closer to the two alphas. They were in heat. At least, Morrison must be. He kept pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes, trying to stave off the headache that hits when your pupils won’t shrink back to normal.

And Diana just up and crawled into his lap.

“What the fuck is she doing?” Marcel spluttered. “She wasn’t given permission to approach.”

“The thirst is real with this one,” Jiaming snickered.

“Look how pissed off Reyes is,” Aziz noted, curious.

Fists clenched, Reyes was staring across the table with eyes of cold steel. Had Diana not been busy wiggling and fluttering her eyelashes at Morrison, her instincts would have been shrieking danger.

“Wow. They compete over everything, huh?” Aziz mused. “Like Reyes can’t even stand seeing Morrison get some? Because I seriously doubt it’s Diana they’re fighting over.”

It was too loud for the three betas to hear what Diana and Morrison were saying. He unwound her arms from his neck and firmly pushed her back onto her feet. Pouting, she coquettishly played with her hair as their brief dialogue ended. After she walked away, Reyes hissed something to Morrison and he glowered in response.

“What? Were you trying to get pregnant then and there?” Aziz cracked as Diana returned disappointed but not devastated.

“Can’t. SEP-issued birth control implants,” Jiaming deadpanned.
“Girl’s gotta try,” Diana retorted. “Besides, it was an information gathering mission.”

“Was it now?” Aziz laughed.

“What’d he say?” Marcel asked.

Diana smiled conspiratorially and paused for drama before announcing, “He’s got someone else.”

“So? He’s not mated,” Aziz said.

“That’s exactly what I said!” Diana gushed. “And I was like, ‘She must be one pushy beta to try and keep you all to yourself.’ And get this, he just says, ‘He.’”

“No!” Marcel said in disbelief.

“Uh, problem with same sex relationships?” Jiaming asked darkly.

“Of course not. Just… wouldn’t have pegged Morrison as gay.”

“He probably isn’t,” Aziz scoffed. “Alphas will fuck anything that smells good in the moment.”

“But anyway,” Diana continued. “Then I said, ‘Well, if you want babies someday, look me up.’ And he said he’d think about it!”

“Points for determination,” Aziz said flatly.

“The thirst is very real with this one,” Jiaming muttered.

Ten minutes later, Diana noted that Morrison was gone and wondered aloud whether she should give snuggling up to Reyes a try too. But he stood, permanent scowl on his face, snatched up his empty tray and left. The crowd parted for him, half in self-preservation, half in lustful respect.

“What are the odds he’s not going to go antagonize Morrison?” Aziz chuckled.

“Oh no,” Marcel moaned.

“Probably won’t be your room this time,” Diana said.

“Is 75 still in here?” Marcel asked, scouting along the tables. “This stupid rivalry’s made us frickin’ brothers-in-arms. I need to give him a heads-up.”

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Jack slammed the door to his room and yanked off his t-shirt before burying his stinging eyes in his hands. He was burning up, boiling in his own heat. Twenty laps had done nothing to cool him down. The icy shower afterwards had done nothing. The bland chicken at dinner had done nothing.

Sweat pricked on his skin. His mind was being coated in cotton. His erection strained painfully tight against his clothes and he undid his pants in search of relief.

But as soon as he touched himself, all he could think of was the cold shower tiles against his back, Gabriel’s hand wrapped around his shaft, milking an orgasm out of him.
This can’t happen again.

He rested his forehead against the plaster wall.

There were near silent footsteps in the hallway.

His gaze slid sideways.

This can’t happen.

Jack dragged in the wolf at his door, shoving him into it as soon as he was inside, kissing him hard, starving for that burning August beach, the musky smell of rich earth.

Gabriel clamped his teeth around Jack’s tongue, holding it still for a second as he pulled in a long breath.

Mountain air dense with smoke, thick with torrential rain.

“You want it bad,” Gabriel rumbled.

“Like you don’t. Get your fucking clothes off.”

“I’d say ‘Make me’ but I don’t want to have to explain why my shirt got torn in half,” Gabriel drawled, pulling the article over his head with arrogant slowness, sending needles into Jack’s back.

“Asshole.”

“That mouth’s going get you in trouble, boy scout,” Gabriel chuckled, undoing his belt.

Jack plunked onto his bed to undo the laces of his boots with fingers itching to send another fist into that handsome face, to grapple him to the ground and drag a yield out of him.

But there were other ways to play this game now.

Naked, Jack rolled his shoulders back and took a slow breath so the tension seeped out of his muscles. He looked up at Gabriel with a coy head tilt and said in a voice of honey spiked with rum:

“Then maybe you should give my mouth something else to do.”

“I— What?” Gabriel stuttered, nearly tripping out of his pants.

Sitting with the ease of a feline, Jack gave him a slow blink, as though curious. Above a gentle smirk, his eyes had never been so blue, so inviting, so pliant.

Gabriel knew exactly what he was doing.

But even as his rationality identified deceit and advised caution, his temperature was climbing by the second. Jack’s enticing body language set his primal instincts on fire, promising both the fuck and the fight victory they craved.

Gabriel caught a flash of pink as Jack’s tongue curled behind his teeth.

I am so fucked, Gabriel thought, approaching the blond like a magnet.

Jack leaned into the callused palm cupping his cheek, licked the thumb that stroked along his bottom lip. Desire scorchend through Gabriel’s entire body, a lit match to gasoline. He groaned loudly as Jack
ran a wet tongue around the sensitive tip of his dick and pressed into the already salty slit.

A small laugh escaped Jack – caution! Gabriel’s mind warned futilely – before he bobbed his head and wiped out Gabriel’s ability to focus.

Because there was an alpha sucking his dick.

Ultimate danger laced with ultimate pleasure.

Complete domination and complete submission at the same time.

Jack dragged his mouth along the length, sloppy and wet and enthusiastic.

“Shit—” Gabriel choked out.

He couldn’t stop his hips from canting forward as Jack gave a hard suck to the head. While gently palming Gabriel’s ball sack, Jack wrapped his other hand around the base to stop the thrusts from going too deep. He licked long, languid strokes up the entire shaft.

Gabriel’s legs were starting to shake. He steadied himself on Jack’s strong shoulders.

Jack glanced up, hooked his clouded gaze, and slowly pulled back, catching his breath.

There was still a dangerous clarity in those beguiling blue eyes.

“You look a bit unsteady,” Jack said, smoky and low.

He tugged the other alpha down to sit on the bed and retook the position between his legs. Remembering how responsive Gabriel’s nipples had been, Jack blew a long sweep of cool air over his damp cock. And then swallowed it into the sudden heat of his mouth. Gabriel gasped at the contrast and clutched at the blond head in his lap.

Jack tensed in annoyance and tipped Gabriel backwards to break his hold. Gabriel felt rough hands glide up the backs of his thighs.

Caution!

Gabriel didn’t understand the meaning of the word right now. His senses were being saturated, overloaded, concentrated down to the satiny feel of that mouth suckling along the length of his dick. Jack’s heat was in the air, on his tongue, caressing his skin.

When a finger slid into his asshole (embarrassingly easily – when had he gotten that slick?), his spine bowed with the pleasure even as he snarled in anger. He threw a punch, but Jack caught it and pressed his weight down, holding Gabriel in place and meeting his rage-spiked glare with bemusement.

“Don’t you want me to keep sucking your cock?” Jack asked, the picture of beta innocence.

His submissiveness was hitting Gabriel’s bloodstream like a shot of opium, and they both knew it.

“Oh fuck you,” Gabriel panted, heat washing through him.

Jack gave him the sweetest, meanest grin he had ever seen.

And slid a second finger in.
Gabriel white-knuckled the sheets, breaths growing sharp and ragged, and watched Jack lick stripes up his overstimulated cock with a rush of adrenaline and irritation and infuriating ecstasy.

Jack hummed happily as he sucked, high off Gabriel’s heat, the most delicious summer day at the beach. Each noise he wrung out of the man beneath him went straight to his increasingly impatient dick. He was achingly hard, beading at the tip, but for what he wanted, he’d wait a little longer.

Though he wouldn’t have to wait too long.

Even the third finger entered Gabriel easily, he was so slick, so keyed up. Had his mouth not been full, Jack would have laughed in giddy triumph. Eyes glittering, he synched the thrusts of his hand to the bobbing of his head. A slow pace at first. Then faster. Deeper.

“Fuck, you’re gonna make me—”

It was on purpose.

Jack. An alpha. Was actively trying. To make Gabriel cum in his mouth.

The realization snapped his mind in half and ripped a strangled sound out of him. Spasms of ecstasy blasted through his entire nervous system. A strong forearm pinned his hips down as he thrust up and up into that perfect heat, shooting semen into the back of Jack’s throat.

Just as the shockwaves of his orgasm began to subside, Jack pushed inside him with one smooth motion, rock hard and fire hot, unleashing a different set of sensations on his already short-circuiting mind.

He meant to put up a fight, kick Jack away, but his combative instincts lay confused and passive, convinced they’d already won.

Jack groaned as he watched his cock vanish into Gabriel’s ass. Bracing his feet on the floor, he rocked in and out, white-hot pleasure scraping along every nerve ending. He couldn’t tell if the taste of salt on his tongue was Gabriel’s scent or his cum. He didn’t care. All that mattered was that he was able to keep plunging into that blissfully tight, hot, slick hole. He leaned into his hold on Gabriel’s thighs to try and stay upright.

“You look a bit unsteady,” Gabriel chuckled breathlessly, reaching up to grip the scruff of Jack’s neck.

Jack was too far gone to respond, barely fought Gabriel off as he pulled him down and maneuvered them so Gabriel was sitting in his lap.

Mine, Jack’s instincts growled, gripping Gabriel’s hips, breathing him in.

Gabriel ground down, meeting his thrusts with soft squelches, burning up from the rough friction against his prostate, wanting more even as his cock twitched, drained and hypersensitive. He wrapped an arm around Jack’s neck, pinning their hard chests together. Their nipples grazed, small sparks of pleasure.

The proximity spiked their heart rates, muddled and distant echoes of danger and resist.

God, all Gabriel wanted to do was mark up as much of that feverish pale skin as he could get his mouth on. Jack all but whimpered as a hickey was sucked into the tender crook of his neck and angled his head to give Gabriel better access.
Jack would let him.

The thought ran in circles through Gabriel’s chaotic mind.

Jack would let him.

He licked over the dark hickey, left superficial teeth marks, red against the flushed skin, felt the electric shivers that ran through Jack’s body.

Jack would let him.

Gabriel’s lips parted, inhaling. Jack thrust in faster, deeper, chasing his orgasm along the sharp edge of the other alpha’s nearness.

Gabriel’s mouth watered and opened.

And he shoved his own hand into it, clamping down on instinct and breaking skin. A bolt of agony shot up his arm.

The sharp smell of blood sent Jack over the edge with a violent shudder. The rough finishing thrusts tripped Gabriel’s second orgasm, dry lightning up his spine, a wallop of pleasure on top of the pain. Jack gulped in air as Gabriel’s inner muscles reflexively clamped, milking every last drop from him.

They slowly spiraled back to earth, harsh breaths coasting down each other’s backs. Gabriel got his legs under him first, tracked down a hand towel to clean himself up before pulling his briefs and pants back on. Dazed, still trying to catch his breath, Jack mimicked his actions.

He snatched Gabriel’s wrist out of the air and Gabriel stiffened.

The bite was stark, in between the thumb and index finger, a stream of bright blood slinking down the wrist to drip off his elbow. Jack drew closer, examined it with a catlike intensity, and unthinkingly closed his soft lips over the wound.

Gabriel stared at him, trying not to flinch at the pain that even the gentle contact sent stabbing through his arm. Challenger, danger, resist. Gabriel’s shoulder muscles tightened, tense, but Jack’s eyelids were still heavy, his skin pink and scorched to the touch. He looked feverish, unfocused, as he lapped lovingly at the bitemark, licking it clean.

“Jack…” He said, pulling his hand away. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Hazy blue eyes settled on him through the heat that Gabriel could still smell. Charred mountain air. He watched, hypnotized, as Jack tilted his head to the side.

“Do it,” he said.

“You don’t really want me to.” He sounded more certain than he felt.

Gabriel freed his wrist with a sharp twist, but Jack grabbed his chin.

“This isn’t a request, Reyes.”

“Well, I don’t take orders from you, Morrison.”

Gabriel jerked his head out of the grip, but every time he created space, the other alpha invaded it.

“You want me to fucking beg?” Jack spat, cloudiness evaporating from his gaze, warm water to ice.
“I want you to fucking think. Because you’re going to snap out of this in five seconds and try to punch me in the face again.”

“Who needs five seconds?”

Gabriel parried the fist that flew towards his nose and returned with a right hook, but only met Jack’s quick block. This time, when Gabriel jerked a knee upwards, Jack spun, avoiding the blow that previously broke his ribs, and landed a sharp elbow into Gabriel’s solar plexus.

He’s been studying me, Gabriel realized with a blend of fury and pride.

He subtly realigned his footwork to favor his left side and easily slipped under Jack’s right cross, following it up with a mean tackle that sent them backwards into the wall. Jack slammed his elbow into Gabriel’s spine and managed a hit on the back of Gabriel’s knee, throwing off his balance just enough for Jack to reverse their positions.

Gabriel’s uppercut impacted solidly into Jack’s sternum, knocking the wind out of him, but that barely slowed Jack’s response. Gabriel tilted his head to dodge and grinned at the sound of Jack’s fist colliding with the plaster.

Knuckles bloody, Jack snarled, knocked aside Gabriel’s return strike, pinned him against the wall, pushed forward.

And sank his teeth into the crook of Gabriel’s neck.

Chapter End Notes

Mwahaha. Don’t ever say I don’t torture you.

I am having SO MUCH FUN writing this fic. ♡ Millions of thanks to everyone who urged me to continue!

And all the hugs to the people taking the time to comment and give kudos. It legit makes my whole week (◡‿◡)♡

P.S. It was clickclickBANG’s heart-stoppingly fantastic story 24x76: Force Multiplication that highlighted Gabriel was ambidextrous (and a la real life, most ambidextrous people are adaptable lefties). Instant head cannon for me because DUH Reaper wields twin shotguns.
Match Point

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It fucking hurt.

Alone, cold tiles cutting into his back, Gabriel watched with dull eyes as the golden light resealed the bite mark in his hand and wiped away the scrapes from the ensuing brawl. His neck, however, continued to throb and bleed under the press of his palm, soaking the collar of his t-shirt.

The emitter clicked off and he smacked it on again, even though he knew it was useless, had known it the instant Jack’s teeth had broken skin. Because the biotic field only healed wounds. And the body didn’t consider a claim mark a wound any more than it considered menstruation to be a woman dying.

Claim marks couldn’t be undone.

Warm nausea rippled through him and sweat gathered on his forehead. He sank to the damp shower floor, tried to breathe evenly, clutched his head with a shaking hand. His molars were locked together so tightly it felt like they’d crack.

Flames crawled over his skin. Humiliation twisted his organs. And Jack’s regret was acid on top of it all. Every time he replayed Jack reeling back from him, blue eyes wide with horror, hand over his mouth, Gabriel’s every vein vibrated with rage. He was so angry he was choking on it, could taste it in his saliva.

All those boy scout declarations about how this couldn’t happen. That pious concern that Gabriel would lose control and bite him. That sanctimonious abstinence from alpha posturing and harassing omegas, as though if he was nice enough then the hierarchy wouldn’t stand in anyone’s way and he could be Captain America without hurting anyone’s feelings.

He’d hit Jack hard enough to knock him to the floor, but it had done nothing to pacify the roiling sea of loathing that had bubbled up inside him. All he wanted to do was keep hitting that pretty face until it was bruised and bloody and unrecognizable.

But then there was this awful new sensation of not wanting to, of wanting instead to make sure his (mate?) was alright.

If it was the last thing Gabriel did, he would find a way to smash, yank, rip that urge out of himself.

But claim marks couldn’t be undone.

The hand pressing into the crook of his neck curled, nails digging in, tempted to claw across the bloody mark, widen the wound into something grisly and distorted. Instead, his other hand balled into a fist and slammed down, cracking both the slick tile and his skin.

A yell, frayed and furious, burst out between his gritted teeth. His eyes stung and his vision grew watery, and he slammed his fist down again.

The thought that someone might hear him and investigate finally prodded him to suck in a few shaky breaths and lumber to his feet. Dizziness rushed through his already pounding brain and he paused to steady himself before stumbling down the row of peeling lockers to the back-up first aid kit mounted
Humiliation rose like bile in his throat as he cleaned and bandaged the bite mark. Its existence was suffocating. And it was permanent.

The patch of gauze wasn’t visible with his hoodie zipped all the way up, but that was the tiniest of consolations.

Feverish, returning to his room was a blur. He replaced his sticky shirt with a clean one and collapsed on his bed, but it was impossible to get comfortable. Lying still made his skin itch. Whenever he tossed and turned, the mark pulsed hotly, a reminder of how low he’d been brought. His hand tingled where Jack had licked it clean, his hellish mind taunting him with visions of Jack soothing the bite in his neck the same way.

Blue eyes wide with remorse, charred mountain air, his fist connecting with Jack’s face – it all grated across his consciousness, needles pushed into his skull. He was so angry. He was so queasy. He was so tired. All he wanted was Jack’s arms around him, and he hated himself for it. Hated Jack for it.

“Um. Hey, 24? Reyes?” Wormed through the fog.

“I’m trying to sleep,” he growled, voice scratchy.

“Oh, yeah, bit late for that. You gotta get up. C’mon, man, it’s our last injection day.”

“Don’t have to get up til morning.”

“It… is morning.”

Gabriel’s eyes gradually heaved themselves into focus and processed that the blurred shape was his roommate, that dawn light was slicing pale rectangles into the ceiling.

“You doing okay?” Marcel asked.

“Do I look like I want your fucking mothering?”

“Je-sus. Fine. I’ll quote you on that when they ask me why I failed to get you to med bay.”

Marcel huffed away. Minutes passed like hours. The world slanted as Gabriel hauled himself upright. He clutched the edge of the bed until he was sure he could stand without vomiting. There was a stabbing in his neck and he reached up, confused for a minute, before remembering. His face burned. Every breath was frost eating into his lungs.

He checked the gauze was still hidden by his hoodie and lurched out of the room. A few soldiers in the hall gave him concerned looks but he glared at them and so was left alone. Daylight struck him like a blow, the February air chilling his sweat until he shivered. His legs felt like meat, but he managed to make it to the medical building.

Less than a minute after his number was called, the doctor clocked his temperature at 101°F, ordered him to a bed, hooked him up to an IV, and sank his consciousness into blissful oblivion.
“You look exhausted. Did you not sleep last night?” Dr. Singh demanded.

“It’s nothing,” Jack mumbled. “I’m running an extra 10 miles a day. Disciplinary action.”

“And that bruise?”

“Just scrapping with another alpha.”

“You need to keep yourself in good health or the enhancements are going to hit you harder than necessary. At least tell me you’ve eaten lunch.”

Jack nodded from his seat on the paper-covered examination table. Dr. Singh had an eternally disapproving frown on her face, as though she simply could not believe anyone would be stupid enough to ever get sick or injured. Like most over-accomplished medical professionals, she was an alpha.

Jack placed his left arm into her expectant hand.

“Hey doc, can I ask how Soldier 24 is doing? His roommate told me he was sick.”

“You can ask but I can’t answer,” she replied tartly, tapping for a vein.

Even though Jack had expected that response, an inexplicable burst of indignation barreled through him. He was being denied something he had an inherent right to, as though a stranger was barring him from entering his own house.

The possessiveness was breathtaking in its volatility and Jack was extremely unsettled at how quickly it had sprung up. His father was an overly territorial alpha and it had always embarrassed him, the way he’d growl and snap at anyone who even glanced at Jack’s mother.

Jack was determined that this was not an instinct he would give into. But what was his resolve worth anymore? His recent, monumental failure to control his instincts hung like a stone around his neck.

And yet, endorphins were still being carted into his bloodstream.

Despite being mortified and despite being slugger in the face, a profound sense of satisfaction had enveloped him the instant the metallic tang of blood on his teeth joined the bitterness of semen in the back of his throat. His primal brain was licking its chops and singing in happy victory. He’d won. He’d bested his rival, dominated him in sex and in battle. What more could an alpha possibly want?

Jack was miserable.

“Are you sure you’re just exhausted?” Dr. Singh prodded. “You’re not feeling nauseated or light-headed, are you?”

“No, I’m not. But… what’s the likelihood of injections affecting seasonal hormones?”

“Why? Something out of the ordinary?”

“Heat’s never been this intense.”

“That’s not unusual,” she said, snapping on latex gloves.

“And… I can smell another alpha’s heat.”

“You’re probably mistaken. There are a lot of scents flying around and we’re in a relatively enclosed
space. You’re likely tracing the scent to the wrong person.”

“I’m not mistaken,” he growled.

Dr. Singh’s full attention finally settled on Jack, her frown deepening. At this point, he was too emotionally and physically wrung out to care about her judgmental scrutiny.

“Well… It’s exceedingly rare, but it’s not entirely unheard of. I wouldn’t immediately blame the enhancements. While there’s always a risk of unintended side effects when a new chemical or entity is introduced to the body, it’s not impossible that your aberration is naturally occurring.”

Jack took measured breaths as Dr. Singh slipped the needle in, the word aberration echoing uncomfortably in his thoughts.

“Has this ever happened to you before?” She asked, eyes on the syringe.

“No.”

“Then this is likely a one-off occurrence. Probably won’t ever happen again. I recommend you do your utmost to avoid this other alpha until the end of spring,” she said, pressing a cotton pad into the needle’s entry point as she withdrew it. “Prevention is the best medicine. Wouldn’t want any incidents.”

“Incidents? Why? What would happen if an alpha bit another?”

“Well, nothing good, since unreciprocated claims are extremely mentally distressing. I’m sure you can imagine how unpleasant it would be to have an alpha’s mark on you.”

“Sure.”

“Actually, if I recall correctly, warriors of some ancient barbaric tribes bit to claim in battle as a way of psychological warfare. These days you can get a mark lasered off, of course, but that does render the individual incapable of forming a new bond. If you’re lucky, the unwanted mark can be overlaid with someone else’s but that’s not a sure thing, no matter what those celebrity new age health trends say.”

“I figured,” Jack said, trying to conceal the glacier of dread carving through his stomach.

“As I said, prevention is the best medicine. In this case, avoiding the problem is likely the best solution. Alright, 76, you’re done here. Go hit the showers, get that bruise healed up.”

“I will,” he lied.

His fingertips gingerly traced over the shiny red mark beneath his eye as he navigated back through the bright halls of the medical building. Mild queasiness brushed his gut. He dragged his feet, hoping for a glimpse of Gabriel even though Jack was clueless what he’d do if he found him.

Jiaming’s unheeded advice to have a conversation before claiming was an oily echo in his head.

Post-injection, soldiers were granted the rest of the day to relax and recover. Soldiers 01 through 75 had already visited the medical bay, and the boisterous crowd in the common room could be heard even outside the barracks.

Jack was exhausted by the idea of wading into that horde of people, but no way in hell was he returning to his bedroom, the scene of where he’d fucked up worse than he ever had before.
Where he’d ruined Gabriel’s life.

Jack clenched his teeth, reliving his fuck-up in technicolor memory.

He couldn’t undo this.

His breaths sharpened and he squeezed his eyes shut.

Fuck, he couldn’t undo this.

As he climbed to the roof, Jack thought about rich brown eyes glinting gold in the biotic field. How they’d unthinkingly counted each other’s bullets during the simulation. The feel of their chests pressed together, heartbeats clattering, connected. Mine.

Jack prodded the fading hickey on his neck, an affectionate bruise on the spot where a mark would go, the spot that Gabriel had had the self-control not to bite. He sank against the chain-link fence with a sigh, barely registering the cool air or the bleak afternoon light slinking through the soggy grounds.

Every cell in Jack’s body was being pulled in opposite directions. Even as shards of ice lodged in his lungs, his subconscious purred, sated with its victory.

He was euphoric that he had permanently triumphed over his rival; he was devastated that his (mate?) would suffer forever. Alphas claimed a person they wanted to take care of, to protect, to keep safe. But the act of claiming Gabriel had done the exact opposite of that. His mark would torture him if it went unrequited.

Jack ached for the person he’d marked to bite him back, the craving as physical and debilitating as hunger. However, away from the miasma of Gabriel’s heat, the thought of offering his neck to another alpha slopped disgust down his spine. It was wrong. Unnatural. He was as desperate for it to happen as he was frantic to avoid it. Attempting to appease both biological urges was like trying to force the north ends of two magnets together.

But whether Jack found a way to rectify these opposing impulses, whether he could deign to offer his own throat to soothe Gabriel’s distress, whether he wanted Gabriel to return his claim – none of that mattered.

Because there wasn’t a single doubt in Jack’s mind that Gabriel hated him.

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A full day and night of nearly-uninterrupted rest, continual intravenous fluids and a handful of acetaminophen was enough to douse Gabriel’s fever and clear the cotton from his mind. The doctors wrote it off as exhaustion. If they noticed the claim mark, they didn’t say anything. Plenty of soldiers had been popping up with bites lately, so it wouldn’t have been notable anyway.

Gabriel was sitting up in the hospital bed, scarfing down the tray of breakfast he was required to finish before they would discharge him, when the XO ducked his mammoth form into the sparse room to let Gabriel know he could dispense with the extra assigned laps.

Good, he thought. Less one-on-one time with 76.
It was easier not to refer to Jack by name, even in his own ruminations. In the privacy of the medical bay’s bathroom, he peeled back the gauze to examine the bite mark. Halfway healed thanks to his enhanced immune system, it was gruesome to look at, a crescent of scabs and discolored skin.

An ugly new reality for him to deal with.

But deal with it he would.

As he had to return to his room to change, he was the last to arrive to the gym, where the alphas were running through the usual morning routine of cardio, weights and flexibility training. Obnoxious techno remixes pounded out of the sound system. The CO clapped him on the back and yelled he was glad to see Gabriel was feeling better.

The leg press was the only machine free, so that was where Gabriel started the laundry list of exercises they all had two hours to complete.

Jack always began with the 500 push-ups, since he could get those out of the way fast. His rhythm faltered for a split second when Gabriel walked in. It didn’t surprise him that Gabriel barely glanced in his direction. Or that he rolled up the sleeves of his hoodie rather than strip down to his t-shirt as the rest of them had done. Jack tried not to stare at the place his mark was hidden.

He expected Gabriel to freeze him out, all icy silence and cold shoulders. Or to hurl fireballs at his face, scathing anger and molten eruptions of violence. But all through the morning routine and the afternoon marksmanship drills, Gabriel was terrifyingly civil.

Though the claim scrambled their fight impulse somewhat, like radio interference, Jack knew that that wasn’t the reason for Gabriel’s eerie demeanor. His every word and action was calm but carefully controlled. Anxiety ratcheted up Jack’s spine as he waited for the peace to shatter, for a punch or a hissed insult to fly out of nowhere.

For Gabriel, it was exhausting trying to keep up with which direction his anger would come from next. He’d caught 76 glancing at his neck several times. When it was with satisfaction, Gabriel wanted to kill him. When it was with remorse, Gabriel also wanted to kill him. He wanted to beat him to the ground and finally give in to the urge to bite that had plagued him since he’d first caught 76’s scent. He was so tempted to sink his teeth in out of revenge, to reassert dominance, to do something about this awful yearning to claim back the person who’d claimed him.

But the hours went by and the sun set without incident.

Gabriel had been ordered to return to the medical bay after training for a check-up and to receive his final injection, and he took advantage of the opportunity to shower there, avoiding the nosy swarm in the communal showers and the inevitable questions about his mark.

The mess hall was packed when he arrived. The twist in his stomach let him know 76 was still there, and he took his time piling his tray with food to give himself a few minutes to tamp down the fury he’d barely been keeping in check all day.

Usual scowl in place, he grabbed a seat at the end of one of the long tables. He scanned the crowded room as he methodically worked his way through the overcooked pasta, steadfastly avoiding the corner his inner compass had clocked as 76’s location. Despite Gabriel’s fatigue and foul mood, the barrage of scents swirling through the air prodded his own heat awake. Arousal crept over his skin, summoning unwanted memories of Jac—76’s blond head bobbing in his lap. The mark pulsed on his neck.
He knew a few noses and gazes had turned his way. Gabriel perused around before landing on Soldier 113, an omega of Latin American descent, who was looking at him with eyes like ink. They widened slightly at the permission to approach transmitted in Gabriel’s steady stare and slow blinks.

Jack watched, stomach full of gasoline, as 113 collected his tray and shyly took the empty seat across from Gabriel. They chatted for a few minutes, Gabriel the picture of confidence, 113 bashful but smiling at the attention. He was a good-looking looking guy, long eyelashes and golden skin.

Jack’s food turned to cardboard in his mouth and he had to force himself to swallow. Under the table, he gripped his own thigh hard enough to numb it, hoping the pain would divert the boiling possessiveness coursing through his veins. Was Gabriel doing this as a test? As punishment? As proof the claim had no sway?

Mine, his instincts growled. Jack couldn’t stop glaring. Sweat trickled down the back of his shirt.

He shook himself.

No. He was not going to make a scene. He was not his father. Any territorial actions he took would be an insult to Gabriel and degrading to him. And he’d never be able to live with himself if he fucked up Gabriel’s life any more than he already had.

Soldier 113 cautiously slid his foot up Gabriel’s calf and Gabriel cocked his head in interest.

And Jack knew he had to leave the mess hall now.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gabriel watched gratified (disgruntled) as Jack stalked out of the room, agitation palpable in his fisted hands and flushed face. Had Jack openly defended his claim, snarled as he kicked 113 out of his seat, Gabriel would have decked the other alpha without question. Merely imagining that scenario was enough to turn his breath to steam and spur his adrenaline.

Gabriel tried very hard to ignore the irrational kernel of disappointment at the evidence that Jack’s remorse over the claim outweighed his possessiveness.

“Let’s go to your bunk,” Gabriel said after a few more minutes of conversation.

His sultry tone spiked 113’s heat. He smelled like mangoes and sandalwood. Which was fine. Not terribly exciting but nice enough, Gabriel mused as they strolled across the floodlit base. The muddy paths were thrown into high contrast. Somewhere above them, stars were hidden. The breezeless night tasted stale.

As they neared the barracks, a familiar voice growled:

“24, a word?”

Gabriel’s heartbeat picked up, irritated (thrilled) at the bold intrusion. Jack was leaning against the building with his arms folded, casual pose belied by the tension in his neck and hands. And by the cold expression on his face. Gabriel had never seen him so angry – not when Gabriel fingered him for the first time, not when Gabriel had broken his ribs. This was a new level of fury.

“I’m busy at the moment,” Gabriel replied evenly.

Jack’s gaze settled on the omega like frost.

“I’m sure 113 can give me a few minutes.”
Soldier 113 wasn’t stupid enough to think that was a request.

“Yes, uh, no problem. I’ll just…” He turned to Gabriel, anxious not to antagonize either alpha. “I’ll be in my room whenever you’re done.”

Jack and Gabriel glared at each other, listening as the omega’s footsteps vanished inside. The presence of the bite mark was a beacon flashing on the cusp of their senses. *(Fight?)* skipped like a record, just as loud as before but inconsistent, a rhythm too jarring to really follow. That didn’t hinder the rage simmering beneath Gabriel’s skin.

“Territorial instincts getting out of hand, 76? Seems like you let a lot of things get out of hand. Maybe instead of interrupting my night, you should meditate and work on your self-control.”

Jack’s chilly stare froze to pure ice. He silently counted to ten in Spanish before permitting himself to unclench his jaw and respond. Each livid word was tightly leashed.

“I’d like to have a conversation in private.”

“Unfortunately, Soldier 23 requested the use of my room this evening.”

“Well, fortunately, Soldier 75 graciously agreed to linger in the common room after dinner.”

“Is there something we urgently need to talk about? I can’t recall.”

“You really want to do this out here?”

“I don’t want to do this at all. If you hadn’t noticed, I’m trying to get on with my life.”

“You that scared of a conversation?”

“More irritated that my scant personal time will be wasted.”

“Think of it as a chance to renegotiate a contract.”

Gabriel’s eyes narrowed. There was long pause before he gave a terse: “Fine.”

The only thing Jack could hear during the brief walk was the blood pounding in his ears. The violence of his feelings blurred into his instincts. He wanted to claw into the man next to him, devour him, strangle him, fuck him. It was all he could do to keep his head above the fast and blistering rapids of his desires.

Even after they closed Jack’s door, he still needed a few moments to just breathe, to try and calm himself enough to say what he wanted to say. What he needed to say.

“So, talk,” Gabriel intoned, arms crossed over his chest. His expression was hard and impassive.

Jack inhaled, exhaled, hesitated.

“You could always start with an apology,” Gabriel prompted in a flat voice.

“Do you want an apology?”

“Wouldn’t make any difference now, would it?”

“I can apologize for losing control,” Jack said slowly. “But I can’t give you an honest apology for the bite. It’s… difficult for me to regret it.”
“Sure, what better way to establish dominance?”

“That’s not what I meant. But regardless of what I… Dr. Singh mentioned that unrequited claims were mentally distressing—”

“You here to perform a psych eval?”

“I am trying to say I’ll let you bite me back.”

“You’ll let me bite you back?” Gabriel scoffed. “How noble and generous of you, boy scout.”

“Look, you don’t have to actually be my mate,” Jack snapped. “But at least you wouldn’t be left high and dry.”

“I don’t need your fucking pity.”

“That’s not—”

“And I’m not going to claim you just because your conscience is—”

“Maybe I want you to!”

The air rang with Jack’s abrupt admission. An awkward silence stood between them, thick as a concrete wall. Jack had to resist the urge to clap his hand over his mouth. He felt like he’d just leapt out of a plane without a parachute.

“And did you ever consider that I might not want to bite you back?” Gabriel asked, each word a weighted stone.

Jack blanched, pride flaring painfully. His chest constricted and his gaze slid sideways, unable to hold Gabriel’s stare. More deep breaths. He chewed the inside of his mouth. There was nothing else for him to say. Well, he supposed mirthlessly, that was what happened when you jumped without a parachute. Unless someone caught you, you smacked into the ground.

Gabriel studied him for a long minute, balancing the enormity of the crossroads they were at.

“Ask for it,” he said suddenly.

“What?”

“You actually want my mark? Ask for it. And none of the fake submissive shit.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“Yes.” Gabriel’s voice was wintry steel.

“You’ve got more to lose if this doesn’t happen.”

Gabriel stepped closer and their instincts crackled from the intrusive proximity. Jack was vividly reminded of when Gabriel invaded his space to call him out on his proposal that they fuck other people. Like then, Jack didn’t move, met Gabriel’s intense stare.

Slowly, infinitesimally slowly, Gabriel reached out. Jack stiffened.
And then Gabriel stroked the back of his fingers down the side of Jack’s neck, deliberate and gentle and devastating.

“You sure about that?” He asked softly.

Jack let out the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. He felt his pulse hammering in his ribs, in his clenched fists, at the base of his throat.

Half of him. Would do. Anything. To keep Gabriel touching him like that, looking at him like that. He’d get on his knees. He’d open his legs. He’d yield. He’d beg.

The other half of him was seething, lava boiling over, at the assault on his pride, on his status. The audacity of telling him to ask for something that was rightfully his. The impossibility of even considering requesting another alpha to bite him. Gabriel could just be toying with him, tricking him into a weak position, prepared to mock him as soon as he acquiesced.

There was the very real option of walking out of the room, of leaving Gabriel to figure out how to live the rest of his life under the yoke of an unrequited mark. War would sweep them into its arms soon enough, would separate them, one way or another. If Jack survived, he could find a proper mate, a beta or omega who wouldn’t hesitate to trade claims, and he’d never again have to put up with these constant challenges to his authority.

But.

But the image of Gabriel alone made him want to die. The thought of facing down hordes of omnics without that scowling presence at his side made the war seem like a suicide mission. The idea of sex, of a conversation, of a life with someone who would always inevitably succumb to his wishes – once a given – seemed colorless and repetitive and flat.

He thought of Diana’s scent when she sat in his lap, the fragrance pleasant but nothing next to the carnal mouthwatering that Gabriel’s heat induced in him. It was the difference between being offered a modest bowl of vanilla ice cream and a multi-tiered, candle-studded, buttercream-frosted chocolate birthday cake.

Jack knew what he wanted.

That he had to ask for it though…

His mouth went dry. His spine was a column of lead.

But for fuck’s sake. He was an alpha. He was a soldier. He was Jack Morrison.

Alphas rose to challenges. Soldiers rose to challenges. And Jack Morrison damn well rose to challenges.

Even if the challenge was to be more vulnerable than he’d ever been in his life.

“I…” He swallowed, wet his lips, pushed the words out. “Please, Gabriel.”

Something shifted in those brown eyes, the unforgiving earth of winter hinting it could soften to spring. Two fingers, achingly gentle, came to rest beneath Jack’s chin, lifting it slightly.

“Please what?” Gabriel breathed across Jack’s lips.

Hot coals dropped into Jack’s stomach, nervous desire. Heat prickled over his collarbone. His heart
leapt into his throat.

“Please claim me.”

The dark of Gabriel’s eyes warmed, the sun rising gold over the curve of the planet. Almost casually, his fingers trailed the ridge of Jack’s jaw, grazed beneath his ear, and slid onto the nape of his neck. The light but possessive grasp sent a tremor through Jack’s body. It should have sparked his fight instinct like a lit match to dry tinder, but the claim mark thumped between them, pacifying Jack’s need to assert his dominance. He already had, after all.

“What are the odds of you getting on your knees?” Gabriel drawled in a teasing lilt.

Jack smiled, the tightness in his chest unwinding.

“Make me,” he murmured.

Gabriel kissed him then, slow and deep, and Jack melted. He moaned, opened into it, met Gabriel’s tongue with his own. The roaring sea flooded his senses, the smell of sand and salt in his nose. Blazing summer breezes turned his head.

There was a giddy excitement in kissing the person he’d claimed, the bone-deep knowledge that this was his. His to keep. His to protect. Like every birthday gift he’d ever had rolled into one. Jack had to resist the impulse to run his thumb over the tender mark in Gabriel’s neck, as wisps of anxious anticipation stirred at the bottom of his stomach. Gabriel could still refuse to return the bite.

They broke off, panting, foreheads against one another’s. Jack had both hands fisted in the fabric of Gabriel’s shirt.

“Please make me,” he whispered.

Gabriel made a noise. His gaze clouded over. He jerked Jack back into another kiss, this one hungrier, less controlled, dangerous.

Jack’s t-shirt was yanked over his head and Gabriel took a firm hold of each of Jack’s biceps, eyes beginning to dilate as they raked over his bare chest. Jack’s breath hitched as open-mouthed kisses were planted along his collarbone, interspersed with playful nips and licks. Against his overheated skin, Gabriel’s facial hair was coarse, his lips were soft, his tongue scorching.

Jack went to pull Gabriel’s shirt off but exhaled in a surprised rush as Gabriel deftly spun him and buckled the backs of his knees. A hand returned to the scruff of his neck and launched him forward with a solid shove. He caught himself before his face hit the floor, baring his teeth as his hackles rose steeply.

And then there was the intoxicating, infuriating weight of Gabriel on top of him, solid thighs and large hands pinning him down. Jack’s hazy mind was under a flurry of impulses to buck the other man off, snap and snarl, fight back, but Gabriel’s rigid length pressed into the cleft of his ass through their clothes, reminding Jack’s body what else it wanted.

The slope of his neck felt bare, cold, empty in its unbroken state.

Gabriel’s heat rose like his fever was coming back as he caught the smell of gunsmoke. His instincts were a potent, deadly tsunami of FightClaimFuckTakeBiteWinRetaliateMarkMINE. He dragged their sweatpants and briefs out of the way, spat in his hand and brushed it over the head of his cock.

A hoarse yell flew out of Jack as the other alpha pushed inside him in one savage thrust. He hissed
through gritted teeth at the sudden stretch, the burn of being filled so quickly when he was just barely slick, the galling audacity of it.

Gabriel didn’t wait, started fucking him into the floor, hard and merciless, thick shaft driving in and out of him despite the tightness. Gasping in air, Jack dug his fingers into the carpet, desperate for purchase, desperate to fight the pulses of submit submit submit emanating from the rough grip on the back of his neck.

This was not like the first time. Jack had no control here, could do nothing but take it as Gabriel kneed his legs wider and thrust in deeper. He could feel Gabriel’s panting breath on the skin between his shoulder blades and it shot electricity up and down his spine, spilled heat through every muscle, pain edged with pleasure. It was too much, too fast, he was being split in half, his instincts screaming FIGHT BACK as loudly as they were screaming MORE.

Because this was his mate.

Thinking the word made his dick harder, the tip wetter. Gabriel felt him slick up around his cock, easing the glide, and growled fiercely into Jack’s exposed neck, sending goosebumps across his shoulders and violent shivers through his every limb.

Gabriel’s left hand moved to cover Jack’s open mouth, stifling the moans, the whines, the throaty noises he couldn’t stop making. His other hand, which had been pinning Jack’s forearm to the floor, slid up his wrist. Their fingers interlaced and Jack squeezed.

The natural lubrication let Gabriel fuck in faster, deeper, until his balls were slapping obscenely against Jack’s with every brutal thrust, until he was groaning wantonly, until Jack was involuntarily pushing up into him, needy, desperate, trembling, pleasure edged with pain. His oversensitive dick, painfully hard and trapped beneath him, was being rubbed tortuously in the confines of his clothing.

Gabriel’s mind was engulfed by an impending storm, smoke and rain on the wind, by the beautiful sounds and rapid breaths being poured into his palm, by the sweat glistening on the powerful muscles of the gorgeous man who was bucking up into him, starving for him, impaling himself further on his cock.

The claim mark glowed hot on his neck, whispering, demanding its counterpart.

Gabriel used the hand on Jack’s mouth to angle his head sideways, leaned into the smooth curve of his neck, didn’t hesitate.

Bit down.

Jack howled.

It tore up his throat, every nerve scorched raw, knife-like pain stabbing through the crook of his neck, blood dripping hot down his chest, as Gabriel continued to pound into him, moaning into his bite as he fully emptied himself inside Jack’s wrecked ass.

A hurricane of pleasure-pain wracking his body, warmth flooding into him, Jack rocked his hips into the floor as he came and came.
This chapter is my birthday present to myself ʕ(angepaag)ʔ

Do let me know if you enjoyed! Comments and kudos are the bubbles in my champagne!
Match Made

Chapter Notes

This chapter features the absolutely gorgeous art of Venti!!! I'm so in love with it, you have no idea 🌟 Go check out more of their stuff on Twitter at @ventiskull!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Betas, listen UP!” the XO boomed from the front of the seminar hall.

The deep timber of his voice echoed even though the amphitheater-style room was large enough to seat all 46 beta soldiers. Chatter cut off instantly.

“The special exercise you’ll be observing today was designed to test the highest performers in the entire SEP. As you can tell…” He gestured to a few empty seats. “Three of your cohorts qualified. I suggest you pay close attention and aim to emulate them in the future. For today, your official assignment is to assess the strategies deployed by the soldiers in the field, as well as to decipher the patterns and goals of the bots. Here’s what you need to know:

“There are six squads in total, each with two members, either two alphas or an alpha-beta pair. Early this morning they were transported to a nearby reservation, several hundred square miles of uninhabited forest. Each squad was provided a map of the terrain beforehand and tasked with customizing their kit accordingly, within set limits. You will judge the appropriateness or inappropriateness of their choices. Squads have eight hours to locate and take control of an objective, identify a payload of uncertain size, and escort said payload to a second objective, which will also need to be located and seized from enemy bots. Soldiers will use live rounds; the bots rubber bullets. Yes, Soldier 98?”

“Thank you, sir,” piped Diana, putting her hand down. “Should we be taking note of the number of enemies each squad fells?”

The XO gave an uncharacteristic grin.

“What fun would an exercise like this be if we weren’t keeping score?”

With a remote that looked comically small in his mammoth hands, he clicked on the gargantuan holovid screens behind him. There were eight in total, one of which was a scoreboard tracking Eliminations, Objective Kills, Objective Time, Damage Done, Healing Done and Objectives Complete. Six of the displays would be drone feeds of the squads, but for now only showed photos of squad members and their basic stats:

Squad 1 - Gabriel Reyes (A-24) & Jack Morrison (A-76)

Squad 2 - Ralph Zamora (A-34) & Felix Mendez (A-52)

Squad 3 - Caitlin Kelly (A-15) & Carlos Gutiérrez (B-103)

Squad 4 - Arseniy Barmin (B-30) & Thomas Weerakoon (A-61)

Squad 5 - Brett Leong (A-125) & Jordan Isherwood (A-129)
The last holovid display was an overhead map of the reservation.

“Let me be clear,” the XO boomed. “Eliminations will factor into their final score, but squads must prioritize and complete all objectives or they will be disqualified. Our feeds won’t have audio, but your tablets have additional information you can draw upon to make your assessments.”

There was a buzz of excitement and anticipation in the air as the soldiers prepped. The countdown clock beneath the scoreboard hit zero and the other displays shimmered to life. Avatars appeared on the map, unique markers for each squad, red dots for enemies, blue squares for objectives. Squads’ starting points were miles away from each other, but they were more or less equidistant from the smattering of objectives.

“This is like… high level stalking,” Diana giggled as the video drones trailed after each squad, hovering just below the treetops.

Jiaming nodded absently at her side, scrolling through the lists of gear each squad requested for their personalized kits.

“That is weird,” she said.

Marcel leaned in to peer at her screen, which showed the inventory of Squad 1: 24 & 76. The majority of it wasn’t surprising: water and rations, portable satellite computer and radar equipment, smoke grenades and flares, binoculars and scopes, biotic emitters, Kevlar body armor, bucketloads of ammo.

“You mean the two combat shotguns?” He asked.

“And the long-range pulse rifle. Almost every other team went with a standard weapon array: a carbine, a semi-automatic, a couple grenades and one or two pistols each. But besides the shotguns and the pulse rifle, Squad 1 have a token grenade each and a colt for close quarters. But that’s it.”

“What do you mean, that’s it?” Aziz asked from Diana’s other side. “How is that enough combat equipment to deal with an exercise like this? They’re going in blind to the number and type of targets.”

“They must have a lot of faith in their capabilities with these specific firearms,” Jiaming guessed.

“Or they’re arrogant show-offs,” Aziz scoffed. “I mean, look at the fucking leather duster Reyes is wearing.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m looking,” Diana said with a grin.

“I think it’s Kevlar, not leather,” Jiaming said.

The first hour wasn’t very eventful. Each squad made use of their tracking and navigational tools to determine the nearest objective, and began traversing the wooded terrain. It was an idyllic spring day, sunshine and blue skies and fluffy clouds, greenery retaking bare branches. Squad 4 were surprised by a pair of bots, but managed to take them down. A gold medal appeared on the scoreboard, putting them in first for Eliminations.

The observing soldiers languidly debated about the wisdom of Squad 2 allotting more inventory space to weaponry than biotic emitters, about how long the alpha duos could go before a fight broke out, about the reason Squad 6 was only just reaching their objective now.
And then the overhead map lit up.

“Holy shit!” Someone yelled.

The instant the last squad eliminated all the facsimile omnic guards and captured an objective, dozens of new enemies came online, inundating the map with triple the number of red dots as before.

The drone feeds showed all squads lingering at their first objectives, watching each other’s backs as they investigated their payloads, which appeared to be types of automobiles. Some were defunct and some were hovering fully-intact, some were the size of wheelbarrows and some were the size of small cars. Each had the coordinates of a second objective hidden in their systems.

The room collectively sighed in relief as the betas on Squads 3, 4 and 6 reflexively checked their radar equipment and immediately registered the increased threat. Squads 1 and 5 followed suit within minutes. Varying levels of panic set in as each squad hurried to extract the information they needed and determine how to most efficiently move their individual payloads.

“Okay, my heart is pounding. How are Reyes and Morrison so frickin’ calm?” Marcel asked with wide eyes.

Morrison was elbow deep in the machinery of the rusting automobile, picking through parts while the handheld satellite computer he’d plugged into its central processor downloaded the necessary data. Reyes stood with his back to him, calling out updates over his shoulder as he alternated between scrutinizing the radar and scanning the surrounding area.

Morrison waved him over to indicate something on the computer screen and a rapid discussion ensued. Reyes shrugged and nodded. Morrison tore the hood off the vehicle off like it was cardboard and tossed it aside. His partner raised an eyebrow in response.

Jiaming frowned at the holovid, baffled, as Morrison packed away the satellite computer but returned to pulling out and discarding parts of the payload.

“How is that going to help them move it?” Marcel wondered aloud.

Tense bickering broke out amongst the members of Squads 3 and 6, but they managed to activate the controls on their payloads and begin traveling in the direction of their second objectives. Squad 4 just barely finished repairs on their defunct vehicle and got it moving in time. Squad 5 opted to forgo extracting the info and just combined their strength to carry the heavy payload to a more defensible position.

The two male alphas of Squad 2, however, continued to argue hotly, oblivious to the enemies closing in around them.

“Oh my God, this is like watching a horror movie,” Diana moaned.

Crouching near Morrison, Reyes was still calmly observing the radar. They had minutes at most before they were overrun by bots. Finally, Morrison withdrew from the rusted hover-mobile with a smudge of motor oil on his cheek. He wore a triumphant grin and was holding up what looked like an old-fashioned hard-drive.

He tucked it into his rucksack and took the long-range rifle in hand, following as Reyes raced out of the clearing.

“Ohhh, the vehicles aren’t the actual payloads,” Jiaming realized, noting that the scoreboard had awarded Squad 1 a point under Objectives Complete.
“Uh, even weirder: Reyes has both shotguns,” Aziz noted.

“He’s left-handed,” Marcel supplied.

“That doesn’t automatically make you able to fire a combat shotgun in each hand.”

Reyes ran straight between a pair of omnics, blasting both their heads off before they could react. His gait barely broke.

“You were saying?” Diana quipped.

Squad 1 fought their way through several other factions of OR-14 style bots, Reyes leading the charge, Morrison covering his back. They left a trail of destroyed parts in their wake.

It was almost eerie how coordinated they were. They never needed to reload at the same time. They agreed on which targets to focus down with almost no outward signals. Reyes sensed when to dodge to give Morrison clearance to shoot. Morrison timed his shots exactly when Reyes needed cover fire to get close to targets, where his shotguns did the most damage.

While the roomful of betas murmured, the scoreboard awarded Squad 1 a string of gold and silver medals. The overhead map indicated they were 17 miles from their second objective.

Squad 2 was disqualified, to no one’s surprise. 45 minutes later, Squad 4 was overwhelmed by enemies as well. There was a noise of disappointment at that, as they were all not-so-surreptitiously rooting for the teams with a beta member. Then the excitement decreased somewhat, as the remaining squads methodically escorted their quarries through the woods. Though none went more than half an hour without encountering hostiles, the numbers weren’t as vast and the engagements didn’t last very long.

Around the time shrink-wrapped sandwiches were being handed around the seminar room, Morrison and Reyes came upon an enormous felled oak and used the natural cover as an opportunity to take a break from the swift pace they’d kept up all morning. Backs against the bark, rucksacks at their sides, they chugged water from large thermoses and chomped on protein bars.

“Is 24… laughing?” Someone asked in astonishment.

It must have been at something Morrison said, because he was grinning as Reyes laughed so hard, he choked on part of his ration. Half the room was glued to Squad 1’s drone feed. Soldier 24’s foul temper and permanent scowl were legendary. This was the first time most of them had seen him smile, let alone laugh.

“He’s so cute when he smiles,” Diana sighed. “It is so strange though, seeing them, like, work together.”

“He’s been less touchy since he got bitten,” Marcel commented between bites of his sandwich.

“Well, Morrison was never that bad.”

“What? No, I mean Reyes.”

“Wait, wait, what? 24 has a mark too? Are you sure?” Diana asked skeptically.

“Uh, I’m his roommate? Yes, I’m sure.”

“Since when?”
“A week ago ish.”

“Who’d Reyes trade marks with?” Jiaming asked.

“Um, that I don’t actually know,” Marcel confessed.

“Jack won’t tell me who his mate is either,” Jiaming said slowly, eyes narrowing in thought. “He got his mark about a week ago too.”

“So what? People have been pairing up like crazy these past few weeks,” Aziz said.

“After months of circling each other and butting heads, you don’t think it’s weird no one knows who they were fighting over or who they’re now mated to?” Jiaming asked.

“Can you skip the sarcasm and just spit out what you’re trying to say?” Aziz snapped.

“Technically, it’s rhetoric, not sarcasm,” she countered. She paused for a second. “I’m pretty sure they claimed each other.”

“What?!” Marcel blurted out.

“I mean… Sucks for the rest of us but I guess that’s not, like, super weird,” Diana said with a sigh. “It almost never happens, but if alphas do end up fucking, they want exclusive rights because duh, alphas don’t share well.”

“Sort of like my mom and dad – they’re both betas – they claimed but didn’t mark,” Aziz said.

“Oh my God, why would you not mark?” Diana asked, incredulous. “Isn’t that like basically saying ‘We don’t think our relationship will last’?”

“No,” Aziz huffed. “My dad’s family is super conservative. Everyone is hetero and cross-bracket, so my parents would basically be excommunicated if they bit.”

“I don’t mean Reyes and Morrison claimed each other like they’re just exclusive fuck buddies,” Jiaming asserted. “I mean they claimed like they marked each other.”

The other three stared at her with varying degrees of disbelief and confusion. A few of the betas seated nearby were also listening incredulously.

“As in… you think they’re… mates?” Marcel asked, perplexed.

“Wrong? That doesn’t happen,” Aziz said. “You said it yourself: alphas do not get along. They’re biologically opposed to sharing space with each other. Like, I’ll buy that they’ll fuck sometimes because people got weird kinks, but no way could two alphas mate.”

“Well, find me evidence to the contrary,” Jiaming said.

“The natural order of things?”

“Like your family thinking both your parents being betas is unnatural?” Jiaming shot back.

“That’s different. That’s not two alphas.”

“Alphas that happened to get shiny new bitemarks within a day of each other.”

“Coincidence.”
“You’re telling me that if someone in this company mated with an alpha as hot as that—” Jiaming pointed at the holovid. “That they wouldn’t tell everyone in earshot?”

Diana and Marcel shifted uncomfortably. Several people nearby frowned at overhearing Jiaming’s theory.

“That’s just, I don’t know, like… not really natural,” Diana muttered.

“Like homosexuals? Like same-bracket couples?” Jiaming countered.

Diana lowered her eyes to stare at her tablet. Aziz folded his arms.

“Well…” Marcel started, uncertain. “If it’s a biological impulse, it can’t be, uh, totally unnatural, I guess, right?”

“Would you guys shut up? Some of us are trying to work,” said the guy behind them.

Glad for an excuse to end the awkward conversation, they each returned to their notes.

The four squads in the field had finished their hasty lunches. The drones zipped along behind them, broadcasting their laborious treks. As the only duo to have discovered their true payload, Reyes and Morrison were the least burdened and they closed in on their next objective while the other squads were still at least an hour out.

Which meant they were the first to encounter the Bastion units.

Even though they were facsimile omnics firing rubber bullets, they were terrifying. Self-repairing sentient killing machines with titanium exteriors. Every soldier’s worst nightmare. The instant Reyes caught sight of the first one, he clapped a gloved hand to the back of Morrison’s neck and slammed them both to the ground.

The camera drone couldn’t catch the remark Morrison made but his glare and the tension in his shoulders said enough. Reyes sheepishly retracted his hand and said something in response. There was a taut moment, the roomful of betas wondering if Squad 1 would dissolve into a brawl despite the precarious situation. Touching the scruff of someone’s neck, especially an alpha’s, was pretty damn disrespectful.

But Morrison just rolled his eyes and reached over to pull the small radar device out of his partner’s rucksack.

Jiaming raised her eyebrows at Aziz and Diana, but they refused to look at her.

The betas’ attention turned to the overhead map, which showed six Bastion units and a trio of OR-14s in a loose ring around Squad 1’s second objective. Someone in one of the front rows voiced what they were all thinking:

“Jesus Christ, no one could get through all that.”

Frowning at the radar device, Reyes and Morrison appeared to come to a similar conclusion and retreated to a safer distance to debate their next steps. Meanwhile, Squad 6 got lost in the woods and Squad 3 reached their own armada-guarded objective. They too hunkered down to plan their attack.

Twenty minutes later, Squad 5, the other male alpha pair, arrived at theirs and promptly demonstrated why charging in headlong with all guns and grenades blazing was not going to win humans this war.
A chorus of “Ooooh”s went up, the betas collectively wincing as Squad 5 was utterly pummeled. Their video stream ended unceremoniously. The remaining holovid displays expanded to fill the empty space, though there wasn’t much happening on Squad 3 and Squad 6’s feeds.

The afternoon sun was layering shadows through the trees.

Squad 1 had seemingly decided on a plan and were performing their inventory checks, though Morrison’s lack of enthusiasm was evident. He held out one of his biotic emitters, but Reyes closed Morrison’s hand around it and gently pushed it back to him. A dispute followed but Morrison was eventually convinced to keep it. Reyes leaned his rucksack against a tree and made a quip that got Morrison to smile. He then took their little payload in one hand and a shotgun in the other, and vanished into the woods.

Their drone hesitated a second and then zipped off after him as he flanked around the defensive perimeter. He crouched behind leafy cover and waited. Several minutes later, a mass of smoke and flares erupted on the northern side of the omnics, but Reyes’ only reaction was to absently run his knuckles over the crook of his neck. The OR-14s deployed their shields and the Bastion units shifted out of turret mode to reposition themselves.

And that was when a volley of pulse rifle fire flew out of the east, striking a Bastion’s head and dropping it instantly. As the bots scrambled to orient themselves to now face the east as well as the north, Reyes took off like a shot, beelining from the south straight into the ring of enemies. Within mere feet of them, he flipped a switch on the payload and tossed it into the air.

The effect was instantaneous. The OR-14 shields flickered out of existence and the Bastions swiveled in confusion, their sensors scrambled.

The camera drone dropped like a rock. Despite being grounded, it was still streaming and had fortunately landed in such a way so that the roomful of enraptured betas could watch as Reyes pivoted in place, firing both shotguns with deadly accuracy, destroying four Bastion units in seconds.

“He’ll never reload in time to take out the rest,” Aziz remarked.

He didn’t have to. Two of the OR-14s and the final Bastion were demolished by more pulse rifle fire.

But that still left an OR-14.

A quick reboot had allowed it to recover from the EMP blast and it dropped a shield between it and where it deduced Morrison’s location was. Then it turned its automatic projectile cannon towards Reyes, who dove behind the husk of the bot’s fallen brethren. But not before a spray of gunfire caught his leg. Though rubber and technically non-lethal, the bullets still impacted hard enough to break skin and potentially fracture bones before bouncing off.

Reyes reloaded his shotguns, but a graviton charge yanked him out from cover. He instinctively turned to face away as the omnic unleashed another hail of automatic gunfire, the barrage sweeping a merciless stripe across his back.

And then the bot’s head exploded.

A biotic emitter flew over its smoking neck, landed at Reyes’ feet and opened in a spray of gold.

Morrison stepped around the bot’s now-still form, winded and panting. He must have sprinted at an insane pace in order to get behind the OR-14’s shield and land that pointblank shot. As soon as he got some of his breath back, he began yelling, the words You’re a fucking idiot clearly readable on
his lips.

Reyes stood in the biotic field with his hands on his knees and tossed off a comment that Morrison responded to by clenching his fists.

The camera drone flickered offline for a second and when it resumed, it was unsteadily retaking its place in the air. The scoreboard indicated that Squad 1 had completed all objectives, a fact which was evidently communicated to them, since their argument paused as they listened to their headsets. The news of their victory did little to quell Morrison’s irritation.

Although Squad 1 had nothing left to do but wait for the transport to collect them, since Squad 3 was still planning their attack and Squad 6 had gone from lost to hopelessly lost, the majority of the room’s attention remained on Morrison and Reyes, waiting for them to devolve into a fist fight.

Reyes straightened up as his wounds disappeared. Morrison, angrily gesturing to the OR-14’s crumpled form, invaded his personal space to finish delivering his harsh words.

Instead of baring his teeth or shoving him away as expected, the betas watched transfixed as Reyes murmured something and slowly brought his forehead to rest against Morrison’s.

Morrison closed his eyes at the contact and took several deep breaths. When he opened them again, they contained a very different emotion, one as heated as before but with another impetus. Fixed on his partner’s brown eyes, Morrison’s pupils were unquestionably starting to dilate.

Both men simultaneously tilted their heads to gaze straight at the drone and by extension the roomful of rapt betas. Reyes smirked and leveled his shotgun at it. The feed went black.

The entire seminar hall sat in unmoving silence, stunned.

After a few minutes, Jiaming’s voice broke the stillness.

“I should have bet money against all your asses.”
The hairs on Jack’s arms rose as he pushed through the roof door, his blood whispering Mate even before he caught sight of Gabriel in the far corner, looking out over the base. Despite the little curl of pleasure that unfolded inside him, he hesitated, wondering if Gabriel would prefer to be alone.

It turned out that euphoric bliss and psychic understanding of one another that was supposed to come with mating was only in the movies. Human beings’ brains were a shitshow of conflicting logic and emotions. There was still plenty of space to doubt their instincts and overthink things even if their bodies synced up alright.

Or maybe it was just because they were alphas.

As Jack approached, he took the opportunity to run his eyes over Gabriel’s body, lingering appreciatively on the curve of his ass, the tightness of his t-shirt across his shoulders and biceps, the pale scar on his beautiful neck. Jack had the no-longer-unusual urge to lick it.

Instead, he asked:

“Feeling sentimental before we ship out?”
Gabriel snorted.

“Not quite.”

Since their meeting with Gabrielle Adawe and the other UN representatives that morning, his thoughts had been swirling like a blizzard, processing and examining the possibilities of a small, capable strike team like Overwatch. There had been a tense debate over whether Gabriel and Jack’s unconventional mating was a liability or an asset, but the potential of their coordination was difficult to ignore.

They unconsciously tracked each other’s ammo and watched each other’s backs. They could read the subtlest of each other’s movements and adjust to accommodate. In the end, their track records and aptitudes outweighed any concerns that they would prioritize one another’s safety over the mission.

Gabriel and Jack’s synchronization also meant that, although their combative instincts still drove them to spar, it was nearly impossible to brawl in earnest. Even when they were too irate to think straight, every prospective finishing blow got redirected or softened at the last second. More than once, Gabriel had surfaced from the haze of his fight instincts to find himself lapping lovingly at the claim mark on Jack’s neck.

And it wasn’t just the stakes of their fights that had been lowered.

They each still vied to be on top every time they fucked, but because sex with each other was now a regular part of their lives, there was less fury and bitterness in the alpha who ended up in the more submissive position. Because there was always the next time. It became fun, competing to see how fast they could reduce each other to incoherent messes, how loud they could make each other howl, how many orgasms they could milk out of each other.

Gabriel glanced over at the glossy scar peeking out from the collar of Jack’s t-shirt with a now-familiar thrum of satisfaction. While Jack had bitten first — typically the act of the dominant partner — and would forever get credit for their union, Gabriel’s mark would show that Jack was bitten from behind, typically the position of a submissive partner.

They looked out over the base in easy silence, the sunset dyeing the clouds pink and orange, leaching the frail spring warmth from the air.

This was still new, the getting along, the ability to be quiet with one another. And while it grew easier every day, it would take some time for it to become ordinary and unconscious, since their impulses still tended to revert to fight or fuck when they were in each other’s presence.

But a new instinct had also surged up, clear and undeniable, an instinct particular to alphas after they’d claimed their mates, one even stronger than the thunderous urges of fight and fuck: Protect.

“What does my scent smell like?” Jack asked out of the blue.

“Sweat.”

Jack gave him a deadpan look. Gabriel considered for a moment.

“I don’t really know how to describe it. It’s like when you’re in the mountains and there’s a storm about to break and the wind is smoky but also pure… I’ve only smelled something like that once or twice, during survival training. I’d never been to real mountains before then.”
“That’s funny. You smell like summer and the seashore to me, salt and sand and everything. And I’ve only seen the beach once in my entire life.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, we went to Lake Michigan every year.”

“Yeah, lakes don’t count.”

“Oh shut up. We can’t all be from California.”

“What ocean did you go to?”

“Uh, I guess technically the Gulf of Mexico. We were in Tampa for a track championship.”

“Yeah, Florida doesn’t count either.”


“West coast, best coast,” Gabriel replied seriously.

“Nice scientific reasoning you got there.”

“The scienciest. So, does this mean we can’t go to any mountains or beaches without getting instant boners?”

“I’m going to hope that’s not how this works,” Jack replied with a grimace.

“I don’t know, might be a handy option when we’re old and can’t get it up.”

“Eh, keep your ass looking the way it does now and that’ll never be a problem for me.”

“Jack Morrison, that might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me,” Gabriel said with a grin.

“Does this mean I get something nice back?” Jack asked cheekily.

“Extortion!” Gabriel gasped in mock horror.

“I call it fair play.”

“Hm. I could tell you that you’re hot.”

“Oh, but I know that already.”

“And you’re so modest,” Gabriel deadpanned.

Jack laughed.

“How about this then?” Gabriel said, bringing his face close to Jack’s. “When you smile, it’s like the sun coming out. And even back when all I wanted to do was punch you in the face, it still made my day to see it.”

Jack’s eyes went wide.


“I am not,” Jack protested, though a smile was spreading across his face. “And if anything, it’s a
draw.”

“You’re saying you want a rematch?”

“As many as it takes.”

End of SEP Arc

Chapter End Notes

THANK YOU SO SO MUCH TO EVERYONE WHO READ, COMMENTED AND GAVE KUDOS!!!

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As I’ve said before, this story was a much more modest endeavor before all your amazing encouragement. And while I don’t have the time right now to continue it, I’m definitely not ruling out coming back to this universe and writing another arc in the future.

(I also just wanted to take a second to say that while these kinds of high-intensity relationships are fun and sexy in fiction, remember there’s zero place for intimidation or violence in a real life relationship. Unless y’all into BDSM and have explicit, specific consent from your partner.)
Overwatch Arc

Summer days in Zürich were long. Though it was past 9pm when the dropship began its descent, the first stars of the evening were just starting to crack open, hard and flinty in the cloudless sky.

Angela began to move across the sun-warmed tarmac before the dropship’s wheels fully touched down, her white coat and ponytail blasted back by the force of the engines. Her assistant trailed after her faithfully, but the aviation maintenance crew followed protocol, waiting until the ship was powered down to approach.

Jack observed their activity with a neutral expression on his face and a straight spine, hands resting at ease behind him out of habit. The tension knitting his shoulders together loosened as Gabriel stepped down the ramp, looking rougher than when he’d left nine weeks ago, but uninjured. Despite the floodlights in his eyes and the flurry of people on the landing pad, Gabriel spotted Jack in seconds. A small smile graced his lips. Jack nodded back at him.

Being mates was hardest at times like this, when all Jack wanted to do was run up and bury his face in Gabriel’s neck, breathe him in, confirm his continued existence. Instead, he had to play Strike Commander and watch from afar as Gabriel waved off the medics, chatted with Genji and affectionately ribbed McCree.

It was a no-brainer that their relationship had to be kept under the radar. It had been impossible to hide from Ana, Reinhardt and Torbjörn during the years spent together in trenches and temporary bases and transport ships. But the apocalypse looming over them made something like an unconventional relationship a laughably trivial concern in comparison.

It was peacetime that presented the real challenge.

In a small conference room, not even a week after the Crisis was declared over, Gabrielle Adawe had driven home that it wasn’t only that their image now mattered on an international scale, their security was also at stake. They’d chafed under the idea that they were supposed to be paragons of everything normal and virtuous, but it was hard to argue against the irresponsibility of announcing their largest vulnerability to the world. Their armored gear and military formalwear, the only two outfits they wore to meet the public, concealed their claim marks anyway.

Even in Gibraltar, where it never truly got cold, or during these sultry Swiss summers, Jack stuck to a high-necked shirt beneath his coat and Gabriel stuck to his black hoodie.

A low current of wariness — not tension per se, just awareness — hummed through the gathered engineers and agents as Gabriel strode towards Jack’s unmoving figure and stopped on the very cusp
of his personal space, the very edge of respect and disrespect. They were the only two alphas in the vicinity.

Though Gabriel smelled like the mission, fresh sweat and old blood and discharged plasma rounds, beneath it all was that familiar musk. Jack exhaled out of his nostrils with a huff in apparent rejection of it. A common power play that conveniently prevented him from catching too much of the scent that so effectively decimated his self-control.

“Commander Reyes.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Jack. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“You’re eleven days late. This mission was slated to take seven weeks at most.”

“I lost my watch somewhere over the Mediterranean. Miss me?”

“Desperately,” Jack deadpanned. “And despite being explicitly ordered to maintain daily updates, your team ceased all communications besides a few sporadic coded messages reporting that you, quote, ‘weren’t all dead yet.’”

“Next time, I’ll have Genji put it in a haiku.”

“Your absence was also noticed at the budget review. Nothing quite like having to prevaricate to members of the UN about your whereabouts. Again. That’s definitely not a court martial waiting to happen.”

“Sorry your pretty ass had to lie while we dodged bullets to bring down a terrorist organization’s leaders.”

A corner of Jack’s mouth tipped up into a smirk. “I take it you were successful.”

“We got ‘em good,” Jesse interjected, lighting up a cigar as he ambled towards them.

“Let’s hope it was enough to deter any would-be replacement leaders in the group.” Jack sighed. “That environment is ripe for more extremism.”

“Well, that’s your job, isn’t it? Swoop in in blue and coddle ‘em with aid, make sure the cameras catch the Overwatch logo?”

“Jesse,” Gabriel warned.

Jesse McCree was one of the mouthiest betas Jack had ever encountered. He couldn’t care less for the natural order and clearly took enjoyment in pushing people’s boundaries, particularly alphas. He seemed fascinated by Jack’s unwillingness to use his status, biological or professional, to put him in his place, but that only encouraged him to poke around more.

Jesse had an eye for details (couldn’t land six shots near-simultaneously if he didn’t) and he’d picked up on how Jack tensed whenever he implied Jack had robbed Gabriel of some glory.

“If you would prefer it be you who spends months in the Yemeni countryside installing medical clinics, schools and a waste management system, I’m sure Agent Dalton’s team could use the extra pair of hands,” Jack said evenly.

Jesse grimaced. “No, sir.”

“Bullets only solve so many problems. Commander Reyes, I suggest you remind your agents of
Blackwatch’s role in the grand scheme of things.”

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. They had to maintain a certain level of antagonism between them in public but if Jack was posturing this much, it meant he was actually upset at Gabriel over something. Likely the sparse communication.

“Why don’t you let me figure out how to handle my agents, Jack?” He drawled, playing his part.

“Why don’t we discuss this in my office after you debrief your team?” Jack shot back.

“How can I refuse such a charming invitation?”

“You can’t,” Jack said flatly.

“I’ll see you in an hour then.” As Gabriel turned to leave, he slung a friendly arm over Jesse’s shoulder, knowing full well that it would pour lava down the Jack's spine, before practically purring, "Let’s hit the showers first. Genji can catch up after Ziegler's done fussing over him.”

Jack grit his teeth and his fists clenched behind his back, bombarded by the ferocious sting of his territorial instincts. Infuriating visions of the two of them in the shower, Gabriel’s broad hands on Jesse’s toned body, buzzed like a swarm of bees. Jack knew Gabriel viewed the younger man as a protégé rather than anything sexual, but that didn’t eliminate the possibility of Gabriel biting him.

Although it was rarer in this day and age, when claiming had transformed from a practical, economic arrangement into a romantic, personal choice, it was still common enough for an alpha to claim more than one person, to form a pack. Elizabeth Ashe had done it, left imprints of her smart mouth in all human members of Deadlock. She hadn’t had to, could’ve claimed them without biting, but she’d been obsessed with loyalty and had wanted to ensure that anyone who abandoned the gang would pay for it.

Gabriel was fond of Jesse, possibly fond enough to offer to replace his former alpha’s mark with his own, not to start a pack but as an act of generosity, to alleviate the psychological burden.

Jack’s gut sloshed with acid. His rationality quivered and bent beneath the weight of his possessiveness.

But it didn’t break. He pulled in long, meditative breaths and consciously unwound the tension in his muscles. Over the years, it had become easier to manage the sudden, violent floods of his urges, to surf on top rather than be subsumed by them. At least for as long as it took to get Gabriel alone.

“You really shouldn’t let him get away with so much,” chided a Swiss voice. “His behavior will get you both in serious trouble someday.”

Like Jesse, Angela was a beta who was often mistaken for an alpha. Overwatch seemed to be full of them, to Jack’s pride. So many bright, capable people from different brackets and backgrounds and nationalities, all working together to make the world better.

“You’re suggesting I reprimand Gabe?” Jack chuckled.

“No. I’m not devoting any more resources into patching the two of you up after a brawl. Biotic fluid doesn’t rain from the sky, you know,” she huffed, marking a final note on her tablet before switching it off.

“How’s Shimada doing?”
A pleased sparkle came into her eyes. “Quite well. I was worried prolonged exposure to a desert setting would overwhelm his cooling system, but it seems to have held up without any major problems.”

“You’ve done well by him, doc.”

“Winston deserves plenty of credit, too. But don’t change the subject. Commander Reyes can’t just disobey protocol like that.”

“It’s just how he operates.”

Angela gave him a stern look. Despite her young age, she already wielded the wisdom and maturity of a veteran medical professional. She was respected, and with good reason.

“Thought you were passionate about innovation,” he joked.

“Hmph. There’s innovation and then there’s rule breaking.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Jack assured. “He’ll be grounded for the next few weeks anyway.”

“Right. I also wanted to speak with you about that, though for confidentiality’s sake, it would be best if we moved to your office.”

Angela gave parting instructions to her assistant in Swiss German and called out a goodnight to Genji, who responded with a congenial wave of his hand. Headquarters was quiet by this time, and they met only a handful of other people as they made their way from the rooftop hangar to Jack’s modest office on the seventh floor.

“I have some reservations about Dr. O’Deorain’s proposed genetic enhancements for you and Commander Reyes,” she said as soon as the door clicked shut. “I suppose, well, I would advise not proceeding.”

“Oh?” He asked, sitting behind his desk. “Have you found issues with her research?”

She sat as well, a serious expression on her face.

“It’s more her methods that take me aback. I’ll admit I don’t have much evidence, but it’s incredibly unlikely she could have achieved these results without breaking the UN’s Code of Ethics somewhere along the way.”

“I can understand your concerns, but Moira was vetted before we onboarded her.”

“Commander Reyes vetted her. Forgive me, it’s not that I doubt his judgement but it’s possible that he’s gotten used to performing ethically questionable actions.”

“That would be the nature of black ops, doc,” Jack said. “He takes a lot on his conscience for the greater good.”

“I have no doubts about that,” Angela sighed. “But to let someone as controversial as Dr. O’Deorain essentially experiment on you…”

“Nothing we’re not used to. The SEP wasn’t strictly ethical either.”

“That was wartime though.”

“The Crisis may be over, but Gabe and I are still in the line of fire often enough. What’s a few more
genetic alterations if it enables us to continue saving lives?"

“But your lives are valuable too. We don’t know the long term effects of any of these enhancements.”

“Do you have reason to believe they pose a risk to us? Or that they won’t do what Moira has stated they will?”

Angela appeared conflicted, but after a long moment, confessed: “No, there’s nothing to indicate an imminent health risk. I’m not a geneticist but from what I’ve seen, her discoveries are… scientifically sound. I just… It doesn’t sit well with me.”

“I trust your intuition, but I’m afraid I’ll need more solid evidence if you want us to launch a secondary investigation into her work.”

Angela sighed again and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Well, I had to try.”

“You should go home, get some sleep,” he said kindly.

She gave him a wan smile. “With Echo’s first full beta run tomorrow?”

“No rest for the weary, huh?”

“Winston wants to check all her nanobiotic systems for even the slightest possibility of integration error with the synthetic core.”

“Guess that’s what you get for being the world’s foremost expert on cyberization.”

“I should have listened to my mother and been a florist.”

Jack laughed and she stood with a tired stretch.

“See you at 3pm tomorrow, doc. I’m sure—"

“Don’t you dare curse us by saying ‘everything will be fine’.”

“Alright, I won’t say it.”

After she left, Jack pulled up the list of proposed budget reallocations on his touchscreen desk and stared at it blankly, unable to absorb a word or number.

He’d been on edge since Gabriel’s team had started truncating their communications and then he’d vaulted into active worrying when they didn’t return on schedule. Eleven days. He sank his head into his hands and gave himself a few minutes to just feel his relief. His mind was still reflexively reaching for dread, like stepping off a treadmill and thinking the floor was still moving.

Things were fine.

Well, things would be fine as soon as he figured out what to do about Jesse McCree.

The cowboy would also be grounded while Gabriel underwent Moira’s enhancements and when McCree was bored, he tended to hang around pestering Gabriel. Jack had little intention of letting McCree co-opt this rare window of time when neither he nor Gabriel had active away missions. And there were only so many times Jack could drag Gabriel into his office to "yell" at him until McCree would start to notice something was off.
Jack’s thoughts flickered to Angela and Echo, and like a lightbulb going off, it hit him how to keep McCree busy.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” Drawled a voice like raw silk.

Jack’s insides flipped. He flicked his gaze up, only to have his retort about Gabriel’s lateness die in his throat.

Gabriel was leaning against his doorframe with an arrogance that Jack wanted to eat. Freshly showered, his skin seemed to glow. He’d trimmed and neatened his beard. Black jeans and the standard-issue white Overwatch t-shirt clung sinfully tight to his frame, outlining every muscle. On his neck was the pinkish claim mark, naked and alluring. The brazen display of it was nothing short of scandalous.

“People will talk,” Jack said, unable to drag his eyes away from it.

“They already do.”

Jack knew he looked a mess in comparison. Worry had gnawed at him for days, depriving him of sleep. His hair was sticking out in all directions. He hadn’t shaved and was sporting a 5 o’clock shadow. Even so, Gabriel studied him with blatant hunger that sent heat rising like a tide inside him, spreading a warm flush up his neck.

The door slid shut and locked. Gabriel strolled towards him with the grace and power of a predator, the contours of his arousal already visible beneath the black denim. Though Jack’s dick thickened in response, he didn’t move.

Instead, he watched as Gabriel slowly, almost leisurely, walked around the desk, trailing the tips of his fingers over the polished surface and tracing the edge of a tablet. Sunshine and saltwater and rich earth rushed over Jack’s senses, muddling his vision.

Lightheaded, he almost didn’t notice his chair being swiveled until Gabriel was leaning over him, crowding into his space, face tantalizingly close to his, a hand on each armrest pinning him in.

It would have been infuriating if the smell of him wasn’t making Jack’s mouth water.

"Miss me?" Gabriel asked again, the question brushing Jack’s parted lips.

Jack stared into the liquid eyes holding him in place, brown flecked with gold and an increasing pool of black. He took hold of Gabriel’s left wrist and drew his palm down to the bulge between his legs, the pressure pulsing out immediate waves of pleasure, sweet and sharp.

"Desperately.”

Gabriel groaned and closed the short distance between their mouths, the kiss heavy and hot and insistent. Jack opened into it, and both men sighed in contentment. Heat skittered across their skin and lights flickered behind their eyelids. Birthday on a sultry seashore. Christmas in crisp mountains. Even after nearly two decades, kissing one another still splashed hot, liquid exhilaration into their bloodstreams, the lust and familiarity cut with the spice of danger, the threat of another alpha’s proximity blended with the bliss of a mate’s touch, champagne bubbles and bitter absinthe.

Unable to hold himself back, Jack surged up, craving more contact. Bodies fitting together, they stumbled into the wall, oblivious to anything but the smell and feel and taste of each other. Gabriel cupped Jack through his dark pants with more intent and rubbed hard enough to break his breaths
into gasps. His other hand landed on Jack’s waist, thumb caressing over his hipbone and dipping under his shirt.

Jack responded by greedily running his palms up over Gabriel’s chest, the muscles in his arms, his strong shoulders, relishing how warm and solid he was, how soft his lips were, how nothing else mattered now that he was here.

It didn’t take long for the aroma of Gabriel’s heat, keenly missed for two long months, to go to Jack’s head, the rich depths of the sea closing over him. He pulled in long breaths through his nose, flooding his lungs, an addict starving for a hit and soothed by the high.

The feeling of Jack pushing closer, starting to lose control just by being near him, lit a fierce burn of — *mine, protect, mate* — love in Gabriel’s core. Their kiss still heavy and simmering, his hand brushed upwards and settled in a sensual clasp on the nape of Jack’s neck. He’d missed him too.

Jack shuddered at the ownership in the hold, at the thumb grazing over the bite mark in his neck, at the soul-deep knowledge that he belonged to this man. It was tempting to give in, to just float along on that intoxicating scent and let Gabriel take care of everything. All it would take was a yielding tilt of his head.

But Gabriel belonged to him, too, and Jack had every intention of showing him that.

He broke away to sink an open-mouthed kiss into the sensitive spot below Gabriel’s ear, hungry for the taste of summer and salt. He wanted more. He always wanted more. He shamelessly lapped at the claim mark with firm, indulgent strokes of his tongue, before fitting his teeth over the scar and biting down, not hard enough to break skin but enough to send a bolt of — arousal, safety, home — *mine* charging through Gabriel’s body.

“Ja—nngh—” stuck in the back of Gabriel’s throat, his legs threatening to melt beneath him as his mind dissolved into a pleasant, blinding haze.

“You disobeyed protocol,” Jack rumbled into the tender skin, pulling back to look into Gabriel’s face.

“Got you riled up, huh?”

Lightning flashed in those blue eyes, an animalistic gleam that went straight to Gabriel’s groin. Jack caught his mouth again and the other alpha chuckled at the possessiveness of the kiss, tasting the icy edge of Jack’s territorial nature.

“You made me worry—”

There was a rasp of leather as Jack’s hands roughly tugged at Gabriel’s belt.

“—for eleven days straight—”

The buckle clinked as it glanced off the button.

“—of almost complete radio silence.”

“Ah—” broke out of Gabriel as warm fingers dove into the opened fly and stroked over his already rigid length.

“And then—”
Jack gripped him through his briefs and Gabriel swallowed back a moan, his hips snapping forward involuntarily. Both his hands clutched at Jack’s shoulders.

“—you flirted with McCree in front of me—”

Gabriel gasped as the grip on his dick tightened, pulsing hot and restrictive, the squeeze heightening the ache as much as relieving it.

“—almost like you’re asking me to remind you that you’re mine.”

A wave of heat shot through Gabriel’s bones, corkscrewed the desire pulling tight in his core.

Jack’s other hand glided up the hard muscles of Gabriel’s abs, nails raking lightly as he dragged the front of the t-shirt higher, the white fabric a delicious contrast against his dark skin. Jack gave him another forceful kiss, biting at his bottom lip, before pushing the hem of the shirt between Gabriel’s teeth.

“Stay,” Jack growled.

Gabriel’s stomach lurched, desire and fury, pride and lust, the emotions steaming as they slammed into each other. Fight. Resist. But Jack’s gaze was steady on his face, clouded blue eyes laden with promise that made him shiver.

Jack rarely let his territorial instincts off their leash; he disliked himself jealous. But every once in a while, Gabriel itched for Jack to give in to the volatility, for one of those sparks of jealousy to erupt into an inferno, for all that alpha possessiveness to rub him all the wrong ways and all the right.

He’d never say that out loud, but his lack of resistance was telling Jack all he needed to know.

He palmed one of Gabriel’s pecs, the pad of his thumb rubbing a slow swirl of pleasure into a sensitive nipple. Gabriel audibly swallowed and his teeth clenched on the t-shirt. Jack bowed his head to plant a wet kiss at the base of his sternum, then took his time licking and nipping a languid, reverent trail down to where Gabriel’s cock was straining with unrepentant want into his hand.

Gabriel squirmed as a tongue dipped into his bellybutton, fingernails digging into the shoulders of Jack’s coat. Jack tugged Gabriel’s briefs and black jeans just far enough down his thighs, finally freeing him. His dick bobbed heavily, fully swollen and beading wet at the tip.

All Jack wanted to do was fit it inside his mouth, feel it fuck into the back of his throat as Gabriel crumbled to pieces.

He dropped to a kneeling position in one fluid motion.

“Looks like you missed me too,” he murmured into the skin below Gabriel’s bellybutton.

The knuckles of his left hand grazed under Gabriel’s sac before he cupped it firmly. Short, shallow bolts of pleasure crackled up Gabriel’s spine. His instincts, though soporific from the cold smoke of his mate’s heat, still buzzed angrily at the control he was literally handing over.

However, a tongue ran over his cockhead, slow and wet, and fried the nascent urge to fight. Jack licked several long, messy stripes up the shaft’s underside and flattened his tongue against the slit, relishing the salt-bitter taste there.

Gabriel clawed through and tugged at pale hair, mumbling unintelligible encouragements and curses through the fabric.
Jack smiled, and pressed open-mouthed kisses along the velvety length before sliding it into his mouth. He bobbed forward, letting the weight of it drag over his tongue and caress the roof of his mouth before moving his head back with a firm, smooth suck. He did this a few more times, building a steady rhythm, sometimes with more pressure, sometimes with less.

Gabriel’s eyes closed in scalding bliss at the wet, soft, perfect heat enveloping him. The back of his head hit the wall with soft thump and he sighed through his nose.

Fuck, it still electrified his veins, the erotic impossibility of getting blown by an alpha.

And not just any alpha. One of the world’s most respected and idolized alphas.

Gabriel had never had much respect for authority and the recalcitrant brat in him was giddy and weak-kneed and burning up that Overwatch’s highest in command, its Strike Commander, was on his knees in his own office, sucking Gabriel’s dick with that globally-recognized trademark blue coat flared around him.

Jack, of course, knew this, had blown Gabriel in his office in just about all the Watchpoints by now. So he knew how quickly Gabriel would approach his finish. And he knew the precise moment when pulling back would drive him the most crazy.

An actual whimper clawed up Gabriel’s throat.

His hands drifted back to Jack’s shoulders as the blond rose to his feet. He felt a gentle tug and released the now-damp hem of the t-shirt, cracking open his eyes to find Jack looking at him with deadly seriousness.

“Unless it directly compromises your security…” Jack began in a low tone. “I want you to never go more than 48 hours on a mission without checking in.”

There was no coyness to the statement, no playful tilt of the head or a quirk of the lips.

Gabriel tried to haul his thoughts and his vision into focus.

“That’s…probably going to be difficult,” he panted.

“Oh? Alright then.” Eyes flashing, Jack stepped away. He wiped his mouth and adjusted the constriction of his pants over his visibly hard dick. “See you at home.”

Gabriel gave him an incredulous stare as his body reeled and his brain tried to make sense of what happening.

“Are you— Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Nope.” He stretched his arms languidly over his head as he moved towards the door. “I have drinks with Reinhardt and Torbjörn in 20 minutes, so…”


Jack felt goosebumps on the back of his neck, the command ruffling his instincts like flour puffed into the air. His blood pulled in two directions. Resist and retaliate against an aggressive alpha. Submit to and satisfy his mate.

Face carefully neutral, he turned to assess Gabriel who, Christ, looked like temptation itself, with his shirt rucked up, delicious heat emanating from his soft skin, thick cock jutting out, glistening with
Jack’s spit.

Like a cat casually prowling towards prey, Jack returned to stand in front of Gabriel, invading his personal space with a nonchalance that stuck pins into Gabriel’s nerves even as his cock twitched in anticipation.

Jack let Gabriel get a good look at his reddened lips, at how dilated his eyes were, at how badly he wanted to get back on his knees for him. All Gabriel had to do was agree. He waited expectantly, still as a statue.

Although Gabriel had often melted him down, unraveled him, fucked him until he was practically sobbing from pleasure, Jack’s icy control still had the power to make Gabriel stop dead in his tracks. He’d seen how unbreakable his mate’s conviction could be, a wall of cold steel, and he could tell he wasn’t going to be able to snarl and argue his way out of this one.

Furious, miserably hard and still reeling, Gabriel seriously considered just jerking himself to finish.

It was only hours ago that he was on a prolonged mission with a team that had followed his every order without question for months. To suddenly be expected to acquiesce to someone else’s rules — not even a rule, a whim — grated hard, set his every instinct hissing.

*But dear God, he wanted that mouth back on him.*

“Fine,” he grit out.

Jack licked his lips and ran a coy finger up the underside of Gabriel’s dick.

“Promise?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

The air had cooled his damp skin during their exchange, so the abrupt contrast of Jack swallowing *all of him* back into that slick, perfect heat punched a ragged gasp out of him.

Jack returned to the maddening rhythm of before, but this time, pushed closer. Every forward movement fit the blunt head snug into the back of his throat and brought his nose to the taut muscles of Gabriel’s lower abs.

With every motion, ecstasy bolted through Gabriel’s entire body, nerves lit like lightning, orgasm building like a storm. He rocked forward, balls clenching at how *good* it felt, how good Jack was at this, how he was the only one the Strike Commander dropped to his knees for. His breathing stuttered.

Jack splayed his hands over Gabriel’s hipbones. His tongue rippled along the smooth underside of the shaft as he drew backwards, slow and sloppy and sultry.

Gabriel felt hot breath sweeping over his cock, making him shudder.

“When do you belong to?” Jack rumbled.

“Oh— Oh fuck, please, Jackie,” Gabriel panted out, trying to thrust forward, agonized to feel himself slipping back from the peak for the second time that evening.

Jack tightened his grip on his hips, holding him prone against the wall.
Pinned under a gaze like blue fire, Gabriel watched with wide eyes as Jack stuck out his pink tongue and just barely grazed his overstimulated cockhead, the touch tantalizingly gentle and desperately not enough, the perfect tight heat of that mouth so close but out of reach.

“Who do you belong to?”

“…Jack Morrison.”

“Say it again.”

“Jack Morri—AH! Fuck—!”

Jack swallowed the entirety of him, the length sliding down his throat like a key into an oiled lock. His rhythm sped up, grew messier, harder, but what was burning up Gabriel’s spine and mind was that every time Jack pulled back, he tilted his head. That talented tongue swirled over the head of his cock like popsicle.

“Fuck, Jack— Jack, don’t stop, I’m gonna—“

Jack sucked him hard, humming at the feeling of Gabriel’s muscles going tense and taut, pleasure coiled tight, a trigger about to be pulled, a storm on the verge of breaking.

His movements stilled as Gabriel’s hips jerked forward, hands clutched his head, and he heard his mate moan, a guttural and ecstasy-sodden sound.

Liquid heat shot into the back of his throat in insistent spurts.

Eyes glazed, breathing hard, Gabriel was practically doubled over, leaning on Jack’s shoulders for support, which was the only reason he was able to remain on his feet. He shivered as Jack gently pulled off, the aftershocks of his orgasm jittering through him.

Jack felt a hand on the back of his neck and followed it up to the kiss Gabriel was tugging him into, careful and sensual, less frantic than their earlier ones. They lingered there, arms around each other, mouths sinking together.

“Missed you, sunshine,” Gabriel mumbled.

“I mean it. 48 hours.”

“Yessir,” he said with an affectionate chuckle, loving the raspiness he’d just fucked into Jack’s voice.

Despite the soreness in his throat, Jack knew he’d tipped the balance of power pretty hard in his own favor during that round. Once Gabriel surfaced from his sex-and-scent high, he would be seething, his instincts eager to reassert dominance.

In fact, Jack — his dick still achingly hard — was counting on it.
Because let's be honest, Jack Morrison being talented at giving head is practically canon by now.

Anyway, I'm back! And excited to explore this ABO world more, especially now that we've got other OW characters in play. Get thirsty. As you can see, the story will be 15 chapters total. I'm going to try and update every 2 weeks, but I apologize in advance if I'm unable to stick to that schedule.

As always, thank you to everyone who leaves kudos and comments because this story literally wouldn't exist if not for your encouragement.

<3
Jack felt blindly for the bio-scanner next to the entrance to his apartment but was having a difficult time remembering where it was. Gabriel had a thigh between his legs and was grinding him into the door, kissing him so hard Jack could barely breathe. And even when he did manage to gasp in air, it tasted like rich summer earth, plumes of heat blurring his senses.

They had to get inside before Jack lost it and let Gabriel fuck him in the hallway.

Although no one else was residing on this floor at the moment, it was the principle of the thing.

Overwatch maintained several tasteful apartments on two of the Headquarters highest floors for visiting scientists or high-profile dignitaries in need of the heightened security. Since they shuffled between Watchpoints and away missions too often to sign a lease anywhere, Jack and Gabriel each had one on reserve.

With a groan, Jack pushed the other man away and turned to properly flatten his hand on the bio-lock. His lips were tingling. By the time the scan had finished sweeping top to bottom, Gabriel had reached around Jack’s waist and undone his belt and fly. They tripped inside, kicking off their armored boots in the low light of the living room.

Jack started to shrug his coat off but before he could shed it past his elbows, he was shoved backwards onto the plush couch. He landed with a surprised grunt and scowled as Gabriel nimbly settled on top of him, thighs on either side of his.

“Off,” Jack growled.

His arms were trapped behind him in the tangle of his sleeves. He planted his feet and threw his shoulders forward, but Gabriel latched onto the back of the couch and rode him back down, grinding their hips together with clear intent, the contact sharp and delicious.

“I don’t think so,” Gabriel replied with a grin.

The feral glint in his dark eyes stirred something primal in Jack’s gut. It was the promise of his limits being pushed. A genuine challenge. The threat of blood, spilled hot in a fight or scalding in an act of ownership, reward and punishment both. It was almost mesmerizing, how it hooked into him, the tidal draw of the sea, caressing him and drowning him at the same time.

A hand clenched in Jack’s hair, sweet pinpricks of pain holding him in place, and Gabriel tugged the collar of his shirt down. Inhaling the smell of storm air, he took his time as he sucked and bit sumptuously sore hickeys into Jack’s neck, leaving tender red bruising around the sensitive claim mark. He put no pressure directly on the scar, however, merely skimmed it with his lips and let his facial hair brush over it as he tongued other areas, until Jack was panting and straining into his hold.

Jack was trying very hard not to beg, even though his cock was aching from neglect, even though his mark was prickling from the relentless teasing. If he didn’t get some relief soon, he’d be so worked up he wouldn’t be satisfied unless Gabriel broke skin.

Teeth pressed in just above the mark and sent a volley of shivers ricocheting down his back.
Alpha. Too close. Caution. His instincts reminded, even as they simultaneously hummed. Mate, mate, yes, please, mate.

Gabriel’s dick, hard again, throbbed against his through the layers of clothing, and he unconsciously pushed up into it.

Gabriel cupped Jack’s chin, the gesture fond but unmistakably controlling. Jack tipped his head backwards in a token effort to free himself, but to no avail. He bared his teeth without really thinking about it and Gabriel responded with another feral grin, eyes black and starry as galaxies.

The rough pad of his thumb swept lazy strokes over Jack’s swollen bottom lip.

“Stick your tongue out,” Gabriel ordered.

Jack canted his head back again, though it was obvious at this point he wasn’t going anywhere.

The thumb abruptly slid into his mouth and the grip on his chin turned merciless, holding his mouth open with just enough pressure to make Jack think he didn't have a choice here.

The fierce blue of his glare was undercut by inky dilation. His breaths panted out past the thumb pressing down on his molars.

Slowly, infinitesimally slowly, his gaze still fastened onto Gabriel’s, he slipped his tongue out.

It was worth it for the look of intense, unfiltered want that came over Gabriel’s face and the soft groan he emitted.

“Good boy.”

Gabriel rocked his hips forward, the friction between their rigid lengths mollifying the shared ache but also making them hungrier for more.

"There's a lot I could do to get you back for earlier,” Gabriel rumbled, every word smoldering.

He leaned forward and the tip of his nose traced the shell of Jack’s ear, the gentleness a disorientingly lush contrast to the possessive hand clamped on his jaw.

"I could demand you yield, make you beg for it.”

Gabriel nipped the hyper-sensitive claim mark, shooting electricity through Jack’s whole body and dragging a startled moan out of him. Gabriel smirked and soothed the sting with a few long licks.

"I could pound you into the floor so hard you'd feel it for a week.”

Jack shivered, felt Gabriel’s hardness pulse into his, wanted it. Contradictions wracked his body. His entrance slicked up in anticipation even as his blood chanted Defy Resist Defy Resist Defy Resist Defy Resist.

"But what I'm going to do…”

Gabriel gave him a molten look.

“…is fuck you slow and sweet and deep…”

He relinquished his hold on Jack’s jaw, thumb sliding out of his mouth.

“…until you can't think about anything but what I'm doing to you and how much you love it.”
Jack closed his eyes as his cheeks burned hot, the red flush betraying just how thoroughly Gabriel's words were dismantling his defenses.

Gabriel cupped his face with a tenderness that made Jack swallow anxiously. A sultry haze descended on his senses, the summer surf closing over his head. A quiet whine stole up his throat as he was kissed, just as slow and sweet and deep as promised, scattering his thoughts like a handful of sand released under the waves.

His arms were eased out from the restrictive sleeves and he forgot to take the opening to reassert control.

Gabriel tugged both their shirts off, breathing in the heady blur of gunsmoke and mountain rain, and rushed to recapture Jack’s mouth in another soul-stealing kiss. Jack sank into it, clutching at Gabriel’s shoulders like a drowning man.

Jack’s pulse thudded into Gabriel’s palms, a rainstorm rhythm that summoned a surge of affection in him. Gabriel treasured each heartbeat, quiet and strong and his. He left a trail of smoky, loving kisses along the ridge of Jack’s collarbone and down the center of his chest, tasting the salt of his skin, listening to Jack’s breaths grow short and shallow.

Jack vaguely remembered he was meant to react differently to an alpha pushing him onto his back and leaning over him. But broad hands stroked down the sides of his neck and scratched over the heated skin of his chest, caresses that drifted between playful and firm.

And Jack’s primal instincts had no response.

Because while they understood losing a fight and could even understand fucking an alpha, they were completely confounded by being so intensely loved by one.

Gabriel hummed and kissed the space below Jack’s bellybutton before he stood to strip off his now painfully tight jeans and underwear. Then he helped Jack drag off his, since he clearly had no intention of moving from his prone position.

“Lazy,” Gabriel chuckled.

“Feel drunk,” Jack said dreamily.

“Good.”

Hazy blue eyes raked upwards from Gabriel’s bobbing cock to his handsome face with a sensual hunger that made his stomach flutter.

He crawled back between Jack’s bent knees and Jack’s instincts mumbled sleepily about the disrespectful invasion of space. Gabriel leaned forward to plant an elbow by his blond head and kissed him again, heavy and hot. Jack groaned and wrapped his arms around him, grabbing him everywhere as their naked bodies fit together, bare skin soft and peppered with scars, muscles taut, scents burning through their senses.

Trapped between them, their dicks, stiff and demanding, smeared precum across their stomachs. For a few seconds, they just ground into each other, to give some relief to the fierce ache that had been building and churning inside them for nine uncertain weeks.

Gabriel smoothed his hand down over the V of Jack’s pelvis and took his satiny balls in a careful hold. He gently squeezed and rolled them in his palm, catching the blissful sighs Jack breathed against his lips.
He grazed two fingertips over Jack’s entrance, was pleased to find he could push them in with ease, that in spite of Jack’s intrinsic reluctance to submit, his body wanted it. Wanted him.

“Fuck, Jack, you’re tight,” Gabriel rasped, clinging to his control.

“Mm. You weren’t here,” Jack mumbled though a gasp.

His lidded gaze fixed on Gabriel’s intense expression as three fingers slowly, agonizingly slowly, began to plunge in and out of him. He felt himself stretching around the intrusion, getting used to it. Gabriel twisted his wrist and feverish desire pooled hot behind Jack’s cock, spread like wildfire up his spine.

Three fingers was not enough.

He was seconds away from begging, the words ‘Gabe, please’ on the tip of his tongue, when Gabriel finally withdrew his fingers and took hold of his thick shaft. He lined it up with the tight ring of muscle and nudged the blunt head in, inching forward into that perfect, slick pressure.

Jack choked back a needy sound, biceps flexing as he held onto the couch above his head, combatting the reckless urge to thrust up and just fully impale himself in one heave.

Gabriel took his time pushing in, relishing how his mate’s body opened for him. He felt Jack clenching around his shaft, erratic, as though Jack was still caught off-guard by his own desire, surprised by how completely he wanted Gabriel inside him.

Gabriel shuddered, his heart and his dick throbbing in love and lust, satisfaction and adoration. His eyes closed so he could concentrate on just feeling Jack surrounding him, heat squeezing and fluttering tight as all resistance gave way.

Jack’s heels slid over Gabriel’s ass and dug in, which was Gabriel’s go-ahead to start moving. So he did, hips canting forward, tortuously gentle. Pleasure billowed through them both, dense and rich. Gabriel slid a hand down the back of Jack’s thigh to find purchase on the rounded muscle of his ass, the grip allowing him to keep Jack’s pelvis at the angle Gabriel knew shredded his sanity.

Soft moans broke in Jack’s throat as Gabriel rocked into him at an indulgent pace, just brushing the place he needed it most, stoking the embers of pleasure, letting the intensity build and cool teasingly. Until Jack was almost furious, desperate for more, nearly going out of his mind with the feeling of Gabriel loving him.

He didn’t even realize he’d started murmuring a broken and breathy litany of, “—harder, more, please, Gabe, please—”

Each word burned into Gabriel, sweet and hot, drops of honey on a frying pan, as he fucked in and out of Jack’s slick and scalding heat.

It wasn’t long before Gabriel was driving into him, plunging in deep but no longer slow, and Jack’s every sensation boiled down to the feeling of that thick, silky hardness pushing in and filling him, striking sparks in his core and lightning bolts up his vertebrae.

“Nng— yeah, more, Gabe, fuck, please, please—”

He couldn’t think, not with Gabriel looking at him like that, not with Gabriel sheathed inside him like he belonged there, thrusting in deeper and harder, deeper still, harder still.

After decades, Jack should have been used to this, shouldn’t have been so completely dismantled by
this, but this was still not what alphas did, especially not alpha males. They didn’t melt beneath the pounding insistence of another alpha’s cock, didn’t gasp out pleas to be fucked harder, didn’t crave thick sticky heat shooting into and dripping out of them.

The intoxicating taboo of giving into this, of enjoying this, of wanting it, of Gabriel knowing he wanted it, saturated and amplified every shock of ecstasy. His fingertips clawed at Gabriel’s strong shoulders and back. His thighs locked around his waist, pulling him in.

The reflex that usually prevented him from baring his throat dissolved and Jack flung his head back with a guttural moan.

A spike of awe and melting desire twisted inside Gabriel, his cock jerking hard at the sight.

This was what he lived for, these moments when Jack lost himself, puddled in his hands, utterly unraveled, these moments that happened because Jack’s trust in him was strong enough to outweigh his alpha instincts.

“I got you, sunshine,” Gabriel rasped out, voice cracking at the edges.

He groaned loudly as Jack tightened up around him, velvet-soft heat clenching hard and wet. His finish sizzled white hot on the edge of his senses, rising like a fever, and he fucked in greedily, broad hands holding Jack in place.

“Fuck, you’re so deep,” Jack gasped.

He tucked his face into the side of Gabriel’s neck, breaths harsh and fast against his skin, and just held on. Jack felt like he was getting fucked out of his mind.

“Close?” Gabriel panted.

“Yeah, just keep—there, there, oh fuck, Gabe—”

The taut rope of pleasure coiled tight inside him, spiraling out from where Gabriel was thick and steady and solid, burying himself to the hilt over and over, every tense thrust electrifying him with a burst of pleasure.

Jack’s hand burrowed between them to fist his dick, aching and leaking, and jerked urgent strokes in time with Gabriel’s pounding thrusts.

His mouth fell open. So close. His teeth grazed the claim mark in Gabriel’s neck. So close so close so —

His breath caught. The thunderbolt of ecstasy crashed down through him, seizing and stunning his every muscle, stars swarming his vision, Gabriel’s name raw in his throat.

Jack spasmed and spilled hot, jagged spurts over their abs.

And as he did, he bit down.

A rough cry flew out of Gabriel at the honey-sweet sting of blood, at that perfect, scalding pressure squeezing tight, at Jack’s ecstasy storming through them both.

His hips slammed forward, once, twice, and he climaxed hard, fucking in deep enough to yank a stuttered gasp from Jack. His balls clenched as Gabriel’s cock throbbed and filled him full, wet and hot, and a second snap of ecstasy crashed through him.
Their bodies curled into each other’s, sweating and shaking, as waves of pleasure and contentment rolled over them, warm and sweet. Bones liquid, their souls melted together, that shimmery summer day beneath Gabriel’s skin blending with the cozy rainstorm under Jack’s, they leisurely rode their quieting heart rates back to earth.

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Sunrise slipped through the blinds in the bedroom.

Jack blinked awake. His instincts were vibrating in unease at another alpha’s face pressed into his jugular, but he blearily smiled at Gabriel, fast asleep in his arms, safe and home after over two months. He gazed at him until the agitation tickling the back of his neck got too annoying and he gently extracted himself.

Gabriel found him in his underwear at the kitchen table, hair damp from the shower, frowning at his tablet with a cup of coffee cooling in hand.

He paused for a fraction of a moment to bask in the almost ridiculous domesticity of all, a keen contrast to the tense military atmosphere and oil-drenched battlefields that formed the backdrop of their relationship for so long.

While Jack’s hair had paled, the blond color more watery than before, everything Gabriel loved about him had only grown more vivid over the years. His commitment to improving the lives of the people around him. The snarky sense of humor the public rarely got to see. The deftness with which he handled the political aspects of their work.

Their heats still hit each other like shockwaves every spring, their pheromones desperate and purring for the other’s. Had the season not already softened to summer, Gabriel doubted he’d be able to keep his hands off him right now.

“Have you read the specs on Echo?” Jack asked, voice still gruff from sleep.

“Skimmed ‘em,” Gabriel yawned, beelining for the coffee machine.

He filled a mug and sat at the table. Jack pushed the milk towards him without looking up.

“It’s Athena in a body, right?” Gabriel asked, stealing Jack’s spoon to stir the milk in.

“Yes and no, apparently,” he replied, lowering the tablet to take in the sight of his sleep-rumpled mate. “You know, someday you’re going to burn your dick, drinking hot coffee naked, and I’m going to be very upset with you.”

“I have faith you’d kiss it better.”

Jack reached out and gently tilted Gabriel’s head so he could examine the bite. Fresh teeth marks partially overlapped the original claim.

“Sorry. Broke skin.”

“Yes, please apologize for making me cum so hard I saw stars.”

Jack laughed.
“Besides, you look like a chew toy.” Gabriel trailed his eyes over the pattern of red and purple on Jack’s neck, appearing far too pleased with himself.

“Anyway, Echo will need to be trained in field operations. Was thinking McCree could do it.”

“You territorial bastard,” Gabriel chuckled.

“I’d deny it, but…”

“I see your point though. Ingrate needs something besides paperwork to keep him busy. And he’s running team lead on that mission in Dorado in three weeks. Could use the practice being in charge. Ana back today?”

“Didn’t you see her message?”

“Lost my phone over the Mediterranean, too.”

“I’ll have you fined for littering. She landed an hour ago. Wants to do dinner. When are you going to be done with Moira?”

“Hell if I know. Probably in time for dinner.”

“Mm.” Jack drained his mug and stood. “I need to get going. Meeting with the pilot selected to test the Slipstream. Kid from the RAF.”

“Should go like that,” Gabriel said with a rakish grin.

“Yeah?”

“Make a great first impression.”

“Not everyone’s as excited to see me without my clothes as you are.”

“Their loss.”

Jack pressed a lingering kiss into Gabriel’s smiling mouth and went to get dressed.

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“She’s of Athena but she isn’t Athena herself,” Winston explained. “Echo stands for External and Conscious Host Operating system.”

Jesse may have been starkly hungover and a bit baffled as to what he was doing in Winston’s lab with a technological fairy creature, but he knew his manners.

“Howdy, ma’am,” he said, removing his hat and pressing it to his chest in one smooth motion.

Jack nearly shook his head at the sight: a cowboy who wouldn’t look out of place in the 1800s politely greeting an AI in a synthetic body that was arguably the most advanced in the history of the world. Echo was a beautiful piece of work, sleek and powerful. Unique.

As Jack watched them exchange pleasantries, his thoughts drifted back to Jesse’s snide comment the
It had hit a nerve.

Though Gabriel had said often enough that he hadn’t wanted the Strike Commander position with all its politics and bureaucracy, Jack still in his heart of hearts wondered if it should have gone to Gabriel, if he’d somehow stolen it from him. Gabriel may not want the spotlight but he sure as hell deserved it.

Jack replayed the intense eroticism of Gabriel literally fucking him out of his senses until he crumbled and begged and bared his throat. It hadn’t been the first time. And Jack guiltily wondered if the reason he was alright with giving up power in bed was because he outranked Gabriel professionally.

He sighed, unwilling to unpack that thought right then, and refocused on his surroundings.

Couched by monitoring equipment and holographic screens, Angela and Torbjörn were closely observing Echo and murmuring to one another. They appeared tentatively pleased with themselves.

“Since Echo isn’t connected to the internet any more than any other omnic, we presume her personality will begin to deviate from Athena’s and she’ll evolve into her own person,” Winston was saying. “She’s, well, she’s hoping to be an asset on missions.”

“I certainly am,” Echo confirmed with a warm smile on her holographic face.

“But not yet,” Torbjörn insisted, approaching them. “Yer not going to be combat ready for months, missy.”

“Now I know how Brigitte must feel,” she laughed.

“That would be where you come in, Jesse,” Jack inserted. “In order to be cleared for field operations, Echo will need to be inducted like any other new agent.”

“Though with Athena’s databank in her head, she won’t need to be schooled in protocol,” Winston added. “What she does need to be trained in is how to physically execute all protocols and maneuvers.”

“You sure the boss signed off on this?” Jesse asked suspiciously.

“Gabriel verbally approved this assignment, yes,” Jack replied, tone curt.

“I’m sure he verbally approved a great many things last night,” Torbjörn cracked.

Jack shot him an incredulous glare. Most betas would have quailed, but Torbjörn responded with a shit-eating grin.

“What d’you mean by that?” Jesse asked with a frown.

“Just that their meeting went on long enough fer Jack to miss drinks, so I presume they musta reached an understanding or two.”

“Yes, the night ended on amicable terms,” Jack gritted out.

“That’s good. We all know what happens when you two start going at each other’s throats.”

“Careful, Lindholm,” Jack warned, but a smirk had overtaken his scowl.
Jesse looked between them curiously, taking note of the strange interaction. Not knowing what to make of it yet, he tucked it away to examine later.

He turned to Echo.

“So, reckon today’s your birthday then.”

“Oh, I… I suppose so,” she replied, surprised and flattered.

“Well then.” He held out a gentlemanly arm for her to take. “Let’s see if we can’t find somethin’ to make it special.”

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“How are you feeling, Commander?” Moira asked, though her attention was focused on a holographic screen hovering at face height.

“Alright. Weird,” Gabriel admitted, staring at his hands, unsure if it was his eyesight or his body that was blurring.

His stomach gave another lurch as his fingers dissolved into smoke and he was glad to be sitting on the examination table. This was going to take some getting used to. It felt like his skin was floating away.

“The nanites have completed the bonding process with your cells and nothing appears out of the ordinary.” She smiled faintly at the screen as she examined the complex charts of his vitals. “You should be able to fade into – what did you want to call it? – wraith form and reassemble yourself with no problems, however I advise you stay disassembled only for brief periods at first, as it can be disorienting. Though, as I mentioned, even if you can’t consciously return to your normal form, your body will resume its default state automatically after a certain amount of time.”

“Because the nanites have been encoded with my DNA. I remember.”

The shadows in her sterile office deepened, stretching into the room’s far corners.

“Give it a go,” she said, finally switching her attention to his half-naked body. “Leave the electrodes on, if you would.”

Gabriel’s blood simmered. The orders sounded just silky enough to be taken for suggestions, but she was an alpha and a coy arrogance lurked in her words. There always seemed to be an edge of deviousness beneath her lilting accent, as though she knew something you didn’t.

Gabriel wasn’t bullheaded enough to pick a fight with his doctor though.

He took a steadying breath and as he released a long exhale, he chased the feathery feeling of his skin wafting away, until his muscles and bones forgot they had to stay muscle and bone, until his eyes and his ears buzzed with the dark, until he was both dissolving and expanding.

He was weightless. His senses rearranged and reconfigured. He couldn’t see or hear per se, but the nanites accrued feedback, sketching an image in his mind and translating vibrations into sounds. Taste and smell were muted. Touching the table and floor felt like secondhand information, as
though texture and density were being described to him rather than felt physically.

Reforming himself was surprisingly easier than dissolving. He became aware of his weight and height. His senses clicked back into place, registering the afternoon light, the hum of Moira’s equipment, the tang of antiseptic air, the solid ground beneath his feet, the dryness of his mouth. And he was suddenly starving.

“I’m impressed, Gabriel.” And for once, Moira sounded it. “I half-expected you to reemerge naked. Glad to see you retained my blathering on about the inclusion of synthetic textile-producing nanites. Those will need to be replenished regularly.”

“I heal quicker in that state too, right?”

“You do, yes. The bruising you had earlier is gone,” she noted, poking a long finger into his lower back. “As is that cut that was on your neck.”

Gabriel reached up to where Jack had bitten him and froze.

His hand ran back and forth over his skin.

Oily, sick dread oozed through him. Pushing past a startled Moira, he launched himself at the mirror on the wall.

His heart leapt into his throat. He stared in disbelief and horror at the curve of his neck.

The claim mark had vanished.

Chapter End Notes

(*ducks* SORRY! The angst will make the happy ending that much sweeter, I promise! *hides*)

(Also, who knew there was so much plot hiding in my porn?)

As you can imagine, the holidays will likely delay the next chapter. But hey, at least I got ya this one early ish :D

And I’m on Twitter now: https://twitter.com/MsTrick16. \(^(^*\wedge\bigtriangledown\wedge*^)/\) Happy to chat.
“Well, really, Gabriel, you should have mentioned that you had a claim mark,” Moira chided, irritably waving a folder stamped with **Soldier ID: 24 - Classified** in large red letters. “I can only work with what I’m given.”

Gabriel dragged in panicky breaths, hand clamped over his disconcertingly bare neck.

The SEP hadn’t updated his or Jack’s medical records before handing them off to Gabrielle Adawe, and she’d seen no reason to include such a potentially incendiary detail. Half of the records’ contents had been redacted by the government anyway.

“Why…” Gabriel was staring at his forearm, still scored with old wounds. “Why didn’t my other scars disappear? Why was it just the…”

“I can’t say for certain,” Moira replied with maddening calmness.

She pulled up a second holographic screen with a long finger and enlarged various segments of collected data. The sun had set. Harsh fluorescents ruthlessly flooded the small office. Shivers ran down Gabriel’s back but pulling his shirt on didn’t make him feel any warmer.

“It could be in part because it was under a fresh wound at the time the nanites completed their sync. Or perhaps…” She trailed off as she studied a table dense with numbers.

“Perhaps what?” Gabriel snarled, patience fraying.

“The science behind the neurochemical shift caused by claim marks is still speculative and contentious, with multiple competing theories as to how and why the body differentiates this particular wound from other injuries. However, it is relatively agreed-upon that the human body can only go through this shift once or twice in a lifetime. Claim marks are meant to be permanent after all.”

“Get to the fucking point.”

Gabriel’s blood was pounding, his temper about to snap its leash at her clinical composure. While he sat here with his life and his reality in shreds, she had an excited glint in her eye. That she’d discovered a way to reverse the irreversible clearly captivated her more than the state of her patient.

“There’s a possibility that the act of shifting into wraith form may activate some of the same neural pathways as a claim mark, essentially overwriting it,” she hypothesized.

“You’re saying even if Jack bites me again, the mark will vanish every time I wraith?” He asked, chest tight.

“Oh? Commander Morrison was your mate?”

“Is my mate.”

“Slip of the tongue,” she said with a wan smile. “Yes, as of now, that seems to be the case.”

Nearly vibrating with rage, Gabriel took a slow step towards her.
“You will find a way to fix this,” he growled.

“Intimidation won’t get us a solution, Commander. You knew when you agreed to this that this process was irreversible,” she retorted, but there was a satisfying flicker of nervousness in her mismatched eyes.

His powerful figure loomed over her, his gaze as black and cold and unforgiving as the bottom of the sea.

“If I’m able to devise a way to edit the nanites to no longer impact this specific neural pathway, it will entail risks,” she continued, refusing to look away. “Chances of destabilization or even fatality will likely increase. I know you’re in an unexpected situation, and I will work to rectify it, but you’d be wise to consider all the implications before deciding whether to proceed.”

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Despite the grey that now threaded her dark hair, Ana looked younger when out of her uniform. You couldn’t tell from her simple blouse, jeans and boots that she could assassinate anyone in the room with minimal effort.

Across the table, Jack nursed a whiskey and ignored the rest of the bar patrons, who were surreptitiously trying not to stare. They attracted attention, as always, more so when Gabriel was with them. Either because they were three alphas (alphas who got along with each other no less), recognized as Overwatch’s leaders, or simply attractive. Jack sighed in irritation at having to restrict his gaze to his drink or Ana’s face.

Jiaming’s words came back to him: high school never actually ends.

Jack’s breath suddenly left him, as though he’d been punched in the gut. A cold rush of loss rippled over his skin, burying an ache in his muscles. His hand found its way to the claim mark hidden beneath his shirt and pressed on it like it was a wound that needed to be staunched.

“Jack? What’s wrong?” Ana lowered her voice. “Is it Gabriel?”

“I… I don’t know. I’ve never felt anything like that,” Jack admitted, deeply unsettled.

He plugged Gabriel’s number into his phone and chewed the inside of his cheek as he waited, each ring a lonely echo. Jack knew Gabriel’s claim to have lost his phone was banter, a way to jokingly rationalize why he hadn’t checked his messages; he’d responded to Jack’s texts earlier that afternoon after all.

Ana observed him, concern etched into her face. After two more attempts with no success, he tipped the remainder of his whiskey into his mouth and stood, his throat burning. She polished off her beer and followed him out of the trendy bar.

They were only a few blocks from Overwatch Headquarters and Jack was tempted to run full tilt through the streets, but they were bustling, locals and tourists enjoying the warm night, and he didn’t want to set off a panic. The last time a photographer snapped a shot of him looking openly worried in public, speculations online vaulted into hysteria within hours. He’d had to make an official statement assuring that there was no looming threat on the horizon.
But as soon as he was inside the lobby, he booked it towards the sciences wing. Ana huffed as she jogged behind him, her boot heels loud in the empty hallways. Moira’s office was dark and locked for the night, which was some consolation. She wouldn’t have simply clocked off if Gabriel had had to be rushed to the hospital. But he still wasn’t answering his phone.

Gabriel’s office was quiet as well. They checked Jack’s just to be sure and then headed towards the residential floors. Jack appreciated Ana’s silence in the elevator, that she didn’t badger him with questions or offer any hollow assurances that everything would be fine.

After a quick search of Gabriel’s apartment revealed it to be empty, Jack nearly cracked the bio-scanner hurrying to unlock his own. He skidded inside and his shoulders slumped in visible relief.

Gabriel was sitting at the kitchen table in a t-shirt and sweatpants, as though he’d been waiting for them. But the sight of Jack looking so happy to see him made Gabriel flinch.

“You had me worried,” Jack said, approaching the table.

Gabriel held up the flat of his palm, stopping Jack in his tracks.

On rare occasions, when one of them was suffering from a severe wound or a PTSD episode, their defensive instincts surged up hard enough to make the other’s touch unbearable. The last thing an alpha male wanted in their weakest moments was another alpha male’s hands on them.

“Are you in pain?” Jack asked.

But Gabriel shook his head.

Even though this was Jack – his Jack – hostility was bubbling up in his blood, conjured by just being in the same room as an alpha whose physical strength and social influence rivaled his own so closely. That fight instinct, mellowed from the years, roared in his veins, threatening to drown out everything else. He ignored it as best he could.

Jack frowned, waiting for him to explain. Gabriel appeared at a loss. At length, he sighed and stood. He selected his words carefully.

“There was…an unexpected side effect of the treatment. Your mark…”

He tugged down the collar of his t-shirt to reveal the blank crook of his neck.

“It’s…gone?” Ana asked in a horrified voice.

Disregarding personal space, Jack launched forward to inspect Gabriel’s neck. Gabriel grabbed his wrists on instinct, just barely suppressing the urge to bare his teeth.

“Wait, what?!” Jack barked. “I don’t understand. How the fuck did this happen?”

Gabriel numbly summarized Moira’s theories and watched as Jack’s disbelief gave way to fury.

“She doesn’t think a new bite would stick. It’ll vanish every time I enter wraith form. At least until she figures out a way to alter the nanites.”

“So just don’t enter wraith form until that happens,” Jack snapped, jerking out of Gabriel’s hold.

“That could be months,” Gabriel replied quietly.

“So?”
“If I don’t use these enhancements, then this whole mess will have been for nothing.”

“So what you’re saying is you’re not going to let me bite you again?”

“No, that’s… That’s not what I’m trying to say.” But he didn’t sound sure.

Tension congealed in the air.

Ana looked between the two men, scouring her mind for ways to help. In the end, she politely excused herself, knowing a third alpha’s presence was only going to make the situation worse.

“I’ll be at my place down the hall if you need me,” she said, her voice cautious and worried. “But if I don’t hear from you in an hour, I’m coming back to check on you.”

They listened to her leave.

The gaping maw of uncertainty over what would happen next sucked the air from the room. Nothing in their lives had prepared them for this scenario. It was literally unprecedented.

Gabriel’s proximity blasted hectic signals throughout Jack’s system. His claim mark burned, mourning the loss of its counterpart. Because for all intents and purposes, Jack’s body considered its mate to be dead. There was no other way to process a claim mark suddenly no longer existing. The warmth usually brought about by Gabriel’s presence was infected with confusion and disorientation.

However, Gabriel felt… okay. Even though his fight instincts were riled up, Jack still belonged to him, was still his to protect.

Gabriel drew nearer and, when Jack offered no resistance, placed a gentle hand on each of his taut shoulders.

“Look,” he sighed. “I love you. I respect you. You’re my partner in everything. Doesn’t matter if the mark’s there or not.”

“Of course it fucking matters,” Jack growled, though he didn’t pull away. “We went from being equals to me being in a less dominant position. How could that not matter?”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m still here for you.”

This was the wrong thing to say. Jack’s expression sharpened with incredulity and he stiffened in Gabriel’s hold.

“In case you’ve forgotten, I don’t need an alpha to ‘be here’ for me. I’m not some claim you need to protect.”

Gabriel fought down the pulsing urge to shoot back a retort, to win the argument, to demonstrate to someone carrying his mark that he was in control here.

“The issue is not me worrying about you leaving,” Jack continued. “The issue is that I can’t trust you to consider me equal.”

“What do you mean you can’t trust me?” Gabriel let Jack’s shoulders go, anger and hurt flaring in his chest. “We’ve been mated for over twenty years. Does that suddenly not count for anything?”

Jack wrestled with himself, unsure how much of his pain and doubt to expose, no longer sure Gabriel wouldn’t take advantage of a weakness. His next words were hollow and cracked.
“Did you really have a choice? Technically, you agreed to be my mate under duress. The alternative was far worse.”

Gabriel’s eyes widened. “…You really believe that?”

“‘Did you ever consider I might not want to bite back?’” Jack quoted, that moment frozen in his mind with visceral clarity. “‘You remember saying that to me?’”

“I was being an asshole. You’d claimed me and I felt weak and I wanted to make you feel bad about it,” Gabriel admitted.

“Always wondered what would have happened if you’d bitten first,” Jack said, voice flat. “Guess now we know. You’d have left me to suffer with an unrequited mark.”

“That’s not true.”

Jack gave a short, mirthless laugh. He gestured between them, the message clear: that’s what you’re doing right now. He shook his head, paced, clenched and unclenched his fists, resisting the part of him howling to re-claim his mate. As frantically as he wanted his bite back in Gabriel’s neck, Jack had already taken this choice away from him once. He owed it to him to give him a choice this time, even though it was killing him.

Gabriel watched him, remembering the merciless ache of an unrequited claim, the desperation to bite back, the way his entire being had writhed in agony and self-loathing beneath another alpha’s mark. He could see that same emotion dimming the light in Jack’s eyes now.

Fuck it, Gabriel thought.

As he stepped in close, Jack’s instincts crackled in defiance but were soothed by the kiss, by the faint scent of the seashore, by the familiar scratch of Gabriel’s facial hair on his skin.

Gabriel wanted to retaliate when Jack’s hands came up to cup his face, the aggressiveness exasperating, and he automatically moved to assert more control over the situation, his grip tightening around Jack’s waist and jerking their hips together.

Gabriel felt the brush of Jack’s erection and tensed in surprise. Jack was aroused, which meant his heat should have been permeating the air. Gabriel drew in long inhalations, searching for the smoky aroma of oncoming rain.

But he couldn’t smell anything.

His tongue swept over Jack’s soft bottom lip and dove into his mouth. Jack’s tongue met his and both curled hot around the other. Gabriel pressed closer, trying not to panic, trying in vain to locate that feeling of home.

Who were they to each other without the hormonal attraction?

Gabriel thought of the past two decades. They counted for something. They added up to something. They had to.

All he had to do was let Jack bite and it would all go back to normal. At least for now. He willed himself not to move as Jack began to trail kisses along his jawline, repeating to himself that everything would be fine. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

_Insubordination, resist, dominate_, his blood hissed.
Jack pressed a hungry kiss into the sensitive skin beneath his ear, as affected by Gabriel’s scent as ever.

Resist.

Gabriel gripped Jack’s waist hard enough to bruise. Teeth nipped downwards, grazed the crook of his neck.

RESIST.

Gabriel heard Jack’s breath fly out of him before it registered that his hand had slammed around Jack’s throat, that he was holding him at arm’s length.

And the awful thing was this was normal. This was how alphas responded to one another. This was, in theory, what should have happened that day in Gabriel and Marcel’s room at SEP.

The pain and betrayal in those blue eyes stabbed Gabriel like a ragged knife, emptied his organs onto the floor. A second later, Jack’s expression was blank, all emotion hidden behind a high wall. That was worse.

“I… ” Gabriel pulled his hand back.

A complex torrent of feelings rushed through him, yanking his heart and mind in a million directions.

Despair and guilt that he was hurting Jack worse than he’d ever hurt him before. Justification that he wouldn’t let Jack bite, but also intense regret. Discomfort that he was failing to protect someone carrying his mark. An ugly satisfaction in asserting his authority over another alpha, in reminding someone he claimed that he was in charge. Shame at the memories of his own vulnerability, the times Jack had made him beg (Who do you belong to?), the times he’d wanted Jack to make him beg.

Shame at feeling shame for those memories, which had been precious moments of intimacy until just a few hours ago.

“I… I’m sorry,” Gabriel rasped, meaning it. “It’s not that I don’t want to. I don’t think I can.”

Jack’s heart was cracking, each piece wrenched out of his chest like shrapnel, but his own prideful instincts flared up. Show no weakness. Defend. He would not break down in front of another alpha. Even Gabriel. His Gabriel. Though his eyes stung, Jack set his jaw and slammed a steel door over his soul.

“What are you waiting for?” He growled over the lump in his throat. “Get the fuck out of here then.”

“Jack…”

“You really think you have a right to stick around?”

Though Gabriel’s very nature insisted he did have the right, that he was the victor here, that he didn’t have to take orders from someone he’d claimed, he took a shaky breath and looked away.

“I love you. I’m sorry.”

The soft click of the front door closing was like an atomic bomb.

When Ana returned, letting herself into the apartment after her knocks went unanswered, she found Jack on the kitchen floor with his head buried in his arms and an empty bottle of whiskey at his feet, and she deduced what had happened.
If she’d had any idea how to soothe or solve or even talk about this, she would have done it. Instead, she retrieved the bottle of bourbon from her place and sat at Jack’s side in nonjudgmental silence, watching over him with a heavy heart as he drank himself into a blackout.

Chapter End Notes

Start the new year off with some horrifically depressing angst! Though fear not, I am a devotee of happy endings, so this story is 100% moseying towards one.

Thanks again to everyone who responded so enthusiastically to the last few chapters! Hopefully this one doesn't scare you off lol

<3
He was pinned face first against the wall, trying to look over his shoulder, desperate to see his lover’s face. But myriad things kept blocking his view: a billow of black smoke, a controlling hand on the back of his neck, his own pleasure unfocusing his eyes.

Pleasure from what? He hadn’t been touched yet.

The wall gave way and he was bent over something, breath crushed out of him. The hand on his neck sharpened into claws, softened into smoke. A raw silk voice chuckled into his ear, a harsh echo.

“You can have it if you beg.”

He wouldn’t.

“You want my mark? Ask for it.”

“I don’t understand. I have your mark.”

“Then you should be begging.”

He wouldn’t.

“Good answer.”

Then he was being filled, dense heat stretching him, taking him apart, perfect, so perfect.

Jack woke up with his heart and his body aching and empty. He reached for his mate and remembered. The sheets were cold. His entire being felt like one large bruise.

The mornings were the worst.

Sleep hadn’t come easily to him since that day. His frantic mind either kept him awake until dawn or he was drowned by vivid dreams that eviscerated him with the touch and weight and smell of what he’d lost. His body simply couldn’t rest. It didn’t understand on a visceral and primal level what had happened, because there was no accepting that a requited claim had been reversed.

The only reasons for a mated union to dissolve was if the other person died or if the claim had been overlaid by another’s. Since neither was the case, Jack’s body sling-shotted between bone-deep mourning for his mate and straining for him with every cell.

The hollowness was akin to losing a limb. He was constantly tripping over the phantom of what should be there.

Gabriel Reyes was a literal ghost haunting him.

Several weeks had turned into several months, until Jack found Christmas and all its monstrous loneliness bearing down on him. He’d spent it with Ana, on a mission hair-raising and fast-paced enough to take his mind off the bloody hole carved into his heart. His hair paled to silver-white. He knew he looked older. He felt older, tired.
Spring sunshine glinted through his windows, deceptively delicate considering all the chaos it threw the world into. Jack rubbed his itching eyes and vaulted out of bed before his grim thoughts sucked him in any deeper.

*Just keep going. Just get through brushing your teeth. Just get through the morning.*

He cracked two orange prescription bottles and chugged from the tap to swallow the pair of pills. He palmed the heat suppressants, mulling over the threat of spring. Would it be worth upping the dosage to counter the increasing intensity of his dreams? Or would that increase the chance of them mixing poorly with the antidepressants?

While the antidepressants didn’t quell the ache in his chest, they did give him a small amount of distance from it, so it didn’t swallow him whole. It had been Ana who prodded him onto them, after a harsh but fair denunciation of his drinking habits. Without them, he wouldn’t have been able to get out of bed let alone function as Strike Commander or be professional with Gabriel.

Friendship was out of the question. Trying to remain friends with him struck Jack as grotesque, like someone cutting off his arm at the dinner table but then expecting him to continue eating while staring at his dismembered limb.

Appetite evaporating, he skipped breakfast, instead gulped down an enormous cup of coffee. He descended the elevator and entered HQ with his shoulders set, his stride strong, his facial expression pleasant and relaxed. Alphas did not show weakness in public. And a great many people relied on the Strike Commander to appear as unshakable as his stupid statue. Especially in times like this.

But alone in his office, his shoulders sagged.

The fissures and dents in Overwatch’s reputation were laid out in his inbox, on the tessellation of screens on his wall, in his never-ending to-do list. The past year had been rough for the organization, their victories few and far between, overshadowed by blows like the loss of Gérard and Amélie, the disaster of The Slipstream, and the lingering PR mess of Blackwatch’s exposure.

Until the Venice incident, he had been doing so well around Gabriel. He had mastered being civil, sometimes amicable, even when they were alone. But the debriefing that followed Gabriel’s assassination of Antonio had turned heated, arguments and justifications and a lot of yelling. Jack stalked out of the room before the violence brewing in his veins leapt out of him, leaving Ana and Gérard to wrap things up.

As messed up as it was and as legitimately angry as Jack was, the abrupt uptick in tension between them was making him *crave* sex. Because for the last twenty years, the urge to defeat Gabriel in an argument had segued seamlessly into the urge to fuck him raw. Add in the April breezes, and Jack was growing desperate for something his damned pride would not let him have. His instincts curdled at the idea of having sex with someone who would consider him less dominant. Though Gabriel insisted that he still respected him as an equal, Jack found that impossible to believe as Gabriel continued to refuse to let him bite.

His mind replayed lurid snippets from his dreams. He caught himself staring at the spot where he’d knelt between Gabriel’s gorgeous thighs and made him beg, the day before his life crumbled from under him. The taste of sun-warmed seawater ghosted over his tongue.

He let out an aggravated sigh.

He’d given serious consideration to finding someone else to sleep with to survive the season, but he knew that once he started trying to fill the hollow Gabriel left behind, he’d never stop. He’d forever
be searching other people for a hint of his mate. Not just for the smell and taste of him, but for those small things he loved about him as well.

His insatiable sweet tooth. His giddy love of Hallowe’en. The arbitrary recitation of lines from Gothic literature, especially Edgar Allen Poe’s oeuvre. How he made a point of keeping his promises.

Gabriel still checked in every 48 hours on missions via their private channel.

Heart heavy and sore, Jack scrolled through the brief but loving messages, none of which he’d responded to.

It was going to be a long day.

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A rainbow of different scents wafted through the halls of headquarters, a stifling fog of ripening fruit, florally fragrances and musky spices. Even alone in his office, Gabriel kept huffing air out of his nose, trying to keep his head clear enough to focus on analyzing the Vishkar Corporation’s latest movements.

Spring hadn’t smelled so overwhelming since before Jack had sunk his teeth into his neck. A mate’s claim mark partially muted the scent of others’ heats, and with that barrier suddenly gone, Gabriel could barely concentrate. Pornographic pop-ups in his browser would have been less distracting.

Jesse stuck his head in to invite Gabriel out to lunch, but he declined. The cowboy shrugged and took his leave, though his scent continued to tickle Gabriel’s nose, a blend of dusty sand and desert sage that had thickened with the warmer weather. He had noticed it lingering conspicuously on a few of the betas and omegas who worked in the building, all of them attractive men with dark hair. Jesse was apparently letting his nose guide his dick with the mindlessness of someone who had nothing to lose. Or someone intent on defying his claim mark.

Gabriel wondered with no shortage of displeasure whether Jack would adopt the same approach.

Though he knew it was unfair of him to expect or demand continued fidelity from Jack, Gabriel’s primal mind was as possessive as ever. The image of someone else running their hands over Jack’s skin, under his clothes, was enough to prod Gabriel to his feet. He paced back and forth, restless. Since Blackwatch had been grounded, restricted to intel gathering and mission proposals, Gabriel had gallons of extra energy to dump into his days. It felt like he was back at SEP, unable to sleep, burning hours on the track, trying to outrun a situation he had no answer to.

Even though he still loved and respected Jack, there was a grim, mean satisfaction in having him at his mercy, in knowing he was still clearly marked as Gabriel’s, that Gabriel had an inarguable right to his body.

But Gabriel wouldn’t act on that right, wouldn’t take what was his, unless Jack gave him permission.

Their last altercation replayed on high volume in his head. It had been right before Christmas. Gabriel had tried to convince Jack to come with him to Los Angeles, to spend the holiday with Gabriel’s sister and her family.
“Can’t you get past the biology?” Gabriel had pleaded.

“Easy for you to say,” Jack had snapped.

“I still want to be with you.”

“So prove it.”

“Why can’t you just trust me?”

“I can’t trust you with things as they are.”

“I don’t think of you as any less.”

“I know you don’t think you do but your instincts spoke pretty loudly when I tried to bite before.”

He loved Jack. He’d loved him even before they’d claimed each other. Gabriel knew their bond wasn’t mere hormonal attraction, but it was impossible to convince Jack that that was true when Jack couldn’t see past the fact that Gabriel wouldn’t let him mark. And while Gabriel did feel guilty about that, he was also hurt that that was all Jack could focus on. As though Gabriel’s restraint meant nothing.

So, they’d constructed a professional working relationship that Gabriel thought of as a cheap, temporary façade in front of a burned down building.

It wasn’t helping his temper much.

Jesse, uppity beta that he was, had pointed out more than once that Gabriel’s fuse had shortened over the last year and though Gabriel had cuffed the back of his head each time, he knew it was true. The Venice incident was more than proof enough. It was hard for him to put into words how invincible he felt, the way his unexpected independence made his ego preen and glow, how it spurred him on even when his rational mind was waving red flags.

His instincts were itching for blood, for a brawl, for victory.

Dangerous thoughts surfaced in his mind, provoking him, reminding him of all the reasons to fight and of all the reasons to keep Jack below him. Gabriel suspected Jack had been more comfortable baring his throat in bed because of their difference in rank, and while that hadn’t bothered him before, these days it grated. And then the resentment over Jack being chosen for Strike Commander surged up, eager rage bounding back into play, even though Gabriel hadn’t wanted the job then and didn’t want the job now.

Gabriel groaned, exasperated, sorely tempted to stalk the hallways and hunt down someone to fight or fuck or both, a release valve for the combative, erotic, contradictory urges frying his concentration.

But it was spring.

While Gabriel had to navigate the billows of different heats clogging the halls, he knew Jack would only be craving him. Gabriel’s scent would stand out from all the others, bright and strong, a beacon plucking at Jack’s senses, tormenting him, chipping away at his resistance.

And even though the opportunity to tempt Jack back into his bed was delicious, even though his body was desperate for some form of relief, even though he was nearly clawing at the walls of his office, Gabriel knew the kindest thing he could do was stay inside it.
“Jesse, do you have a moment?”

Jesse glanced over his shoulder to see Angela Ziegler trotting up the hallway.

“I got a meetin’ with the Strike Commander I’d love to be late for,” he drawled.

“I don’t need more than a few minutes,” she said, already dragging him into an empty office by the elbow.

“Oh, I’m flattered, darlin’, but—”

“You like men, I know. I’m not hitting on you.”

“Wait, how did you—”

“Are you joking? You and my lab assistant reek of each other. I’ve never seen him so distracted.”

“I’m… sorry?” Jesse offered, the apology undercut by his self-satisfied grin.

“Ugh. That’s not what I wanted to talk about. Have you noticed the tension between Jack and Gabriel these past few weeks?”

“Weeks? Tch, try months.”

A startled look crossed her face.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t know how to explain it exactly. They’ve always been short with each other. Alphas bein’ alphas. But startin’ last summer, feels like one walks into a room, the other walks out. That sorta thing. You probably noticed they don’t smell like each other at all anymore, so I’d gamble they ain’t shootin’ the breeze outside of work either.”

“I’m worried, Jesse. Friendships between alpha males can be some of the strongest bonds on the planet, but when they fall apart, it’s nuclear.”

“I hear you, but they could have one good brawl tomorrow and get it all out of their systems.”

“And if that brawl takes us all down?”

He squeezed her narrow shoulder.

“Sometimes all you can do is stay out of the crossfire,” he said.

She sighed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“You should probably get going.”

“Eh, I’m running an experiment to see how late I’ve gotta be for Morrison to blow his top.”

To Jesse’s chagrin, however, Jack appeared to have completely forgotten about their meeting.
“You mentioned roundin’ out the assessment of Echo?” Jesse prompted, loitering in the doorway, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

“Right,” Jack said, shaking his head to clear it. “Have a seat.”

Jesse slouched into the chair with his arms folded, observing the Strike Commander from under the brim of his hat. He looked like he hadn’t slept in weeks. Jesse didn’t offer sympathy without a good reason though. Besides, an alpha was just as likely to snap at you for presuming weakness as he was to thank you for your concern.

At length, Jack spread several documents open across the surface of his desk and began to speak.

“I have Echo’s hard diagnostics from Torbjörn and Dr. Ziegler, plus all of Winston’s notes and your mission reports, but I wanted to hear your personal opinion on her performance these past few months.”

“She’s gold. Helpin’ little girls cross the street in Dorado and old ladies get their pet badgers out of trees in Shanghai and what have you. And I’m bein’ literal here. An actual goddamn badger.”

Jack peppered him with specific questions about Echo’s disposition, combat abilities, strengths, areas of improvement and so on, typing Jesse’s answers into the system. After the better part of an hour, Jack closed and saved the file.

“Thank you. I think that’s all I need. How about you, McCree? How are you doing?”

“Sides from the media paintin’ me and the rest of Blackwatch as trigger-happy murderers, just dandy.”

“I know that can’t be easy. I appreciate you taking on Overwatch missions until that all blows over.”

“Very optimistic,” Jesse sneered.

“It’s my job to be optimistic,” Jack said evenly, well-used to Jesse’s combative attitude towards him.

“And Gabriel?”

Jack’s expression hardened.

“…What about Gabriel?”

“You plannin’ on letting this little feud continue forever?”

“You’ll have to ask him that,” Jack replied with a shimmer of agitation.

Jesse huffed in disbelief and scratched at his claim mark, an unconscious tic that betrayed when he was annoyed. He noticed Jack’s attention lingering on the crook of his neck and his hackles rose.

“What?” He bit out.

“Not easy walking away from an alpha who’s claimed you. Takes a lot of determination.”

“What would you know about it?” Jesse snapped, tempted to just stalk out of the so-modest-it-was-pretententious office.

“Not much I guess,” Jack replied softly, a self-deprecating smile on his face. “Has it gotten easier these past few years?”
Jesse studied him with a curious frown, deciphering the layers in the question. He wasn’t second-in-command of the black ops division for nothing, and if it was one thing Jesse had learned, it was that when people asked questions about you, 99% of the time it was actually about them.

Disparate details and incidents knitted together in Jesse’s mind, forming a highly improbable (but not impossible) theory.

“Commander…” Jesse began, unsure if what he was about to ask would get him punched in the face. “Do you… have a claim mark?”

“I do."

“Is it… Gabriel’s?”

The question sounded absurd coming out of his mouth.

Jesse didn’t much like the arbitrary social dictates that said betas had to take second place and omegas had to be docile, but certain elements of biology were hard to argue against. Alphas didn’t claim other alphas. They just didn’t.

But Jack let out a heavy sigh.

“It is. He had my mark too, until Moira’s enhancements made it vanish.”

Taken aback, Jesse’s sullen rebellion drained from his posture. He sat up, straight and attentive, barely believing his ears, mind working furiously to process this.

“Always thought hirin’ her was a mistake,” he finally muttered.

“Your instincts have always been good,” Jack replied with a wry chuckle.

“Shit, Commander, I’m sorry,” Jesse said earnestly.

Jack gave him a quiet thank you and Jesse bit the inside of his cheek, suddenly feeling very childish for his constant attempts to provoke the Strike Commander’s temper.

“I never really got over Ashe, if I’m bein’ honest,” Jesse blurted out, hand returning to itch his neck. “Still wake up wishin’ she was nearby, never quite feelin’ home anywhere she’s not. The mark tugs, keeps tellin’ me to look for her.”

“Yeah,” Jack said wanly. “That’s the feeling, alright.”

“But I mean, she was my pack leader, not my mate. We never slept together or anything. So, I can only imagine how much tougher it’d be if… Fuck, and you gotta see Gabriel all the damn time. How are you even functionin’?”

“Poorly,” Jack deadpanned. “You never thought about asking Gabriel to overwrite Ashe’s claim?”

“Well, sure, I thought about it. But then s’like… I’m not ashamed of who I was. Of some of the things I did, sure, but not of who I was. Gettin’ the boss to bite just to ease a bit of discomfort reeked of tryin’ to pretend the past didn’t happen. I mean, yeah, every day you gotta decide whether you’re livin’ for them or you, but sometimes it’s a good way to remind yourself of why you do what you do.”

“You’re a lot wiser than your hat would imply,” Jack said with a smile.
“Naturally,” Jesse laughed. “‘Sides, call me a romantic fool, but I’m still hopin’ to find a mate that’ll replace the claim with something I want, as opposed to avoidin’ something I don’t want.”

“You’ll find someone,” Jack assured, a gleam in his eye. “From what I can smell, you’re very popular.”

“It’s a curse,” Jesse said seriously.

Jack burst into a genuine laugh. Jesse stood to go but paused when he reached the door.

“Hey, uh, I know it ain’t really my place, but if you ever want to, y’know, talk about things, I’m always glad to have someone buy me a drink.”

“Thanks, McCree,” Jack said, warmed by the offer. “I appreciate that.”

With a tip of his hat, Jesse left.

For the first time in months, Jack felt just a bit lighter. The task of getting through the rest of the day didn’t loom quite so dark and heavy. Funny how simply having someone relate to his experience made things more bearable somehow. For all his friends’ compassion and care, Ana nor Reinhardt had ever been bitten and Torbjörn remained in solid monogamous mateship with Ingrid, so none were able to truly empathize with his ordeal.

There was a knock.

Jack called out permission to enter without looking away from the mission reports he was reviewing, expecting Jesse to pop back in with something to add.

Instead, Moira swept into the office and took a seat without waiting for an invitation. Jack met her arrogance with a stony stare.

“Dr. O’Deorain.”

“I’ve been trying to set up a meeting with you for weeks, Commander,” she said with a shade of vexation.

“I know. I’ve been avoiding you for weeks.”

“I think you’ll want to hear what I have to say.”

“Oh? You’ve yet to uncover a way to prevent your genetic alterations from interfering with claim marks.”

“Scientific advancement moves at its own pace;” she stated without apology. “I’m close.”

“You’ve been saying that for months. You’ll forgive me if I don’t cheer.”

She scowled and Jack felt a petty satisfaction at being able to get under her skin.

“Believe it or not,” she went on. “I’m here to offer you an alternative. While your unwillingness to undergo the enhancements was… understandable in light of occurrences, I wonder if you’d reconsider. I can’t guarantee the nanites will ever completely cease to interfere with the claim mark’s neural pathways — science doesn’t work like that — but I am not heartless. I’m sure it’s been challenging operating under an unrequited mark. If I can’t re-enable your bond with Gabriel, at least I can offer you a clean break. If you underwent the enhancements as well, your mark would more than likely be overwritten in an equal fashion.”
“And you’d get another specimen to collect data from,” he said shrewdly. “Successfully obtaining the same result a second time would validate your discovery, prove it wasn’t a fluke.”

Moira’s lips quirked up into a pleased smirk.

“Just because I’m not heartless doesn’t mean I’m selfless either,” she answered smoothly. “Consider it.”

The possibility of what she was offering expanded and filled his mind.

To wake up feeling whole. To be free of this full-body ache for someone who couldn’t reciprocate. To be able to start fresh, a blank slate, with someone new. To no longer have any physical connection to Gabriel, their tie well and truly severed, not even severed, completely erased, as though it had never been there.

After a long minute of thought, Jack looked her dead in the eye and said in a voice of rough ice:

“Get the fuck out of my office.”

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Chapter End Notes

Mutual pining? Don't mind if I do! ■ → ⊕ → ■

So, that whole 'update every 2 weeks' plan is mutating into a 'every 3 or 4 weeks' situation. Story's still chugging along and getting done, but writing for a living means some of the energy I want to put into fanfic obvs has to go to other things sometimes.

Plus, I'm still playing around with a bunch of different ideas as to where to take this story. Always happy to hear what your guesses are ;)

All the hugs for everyone who's stuck with me so far, and thanks millions to everyone leaving kudos and comments! ◡ (°ω°*)ʃ
The months crawled by at a wounded pace, spring softening to summer which sharpened to autumn, and on the surface, things were going better.

Winston had succeeded in stabilizing Lena Oxton’s unique circumstances. Doomfist had been captured and detained. Their intervention in the Null Sector uprising in London, though unwarranted, earned them a slew of good press. The International Justice Commission even handed out a few gold medals for Overwatch’s contribution to global security.

True, the United Nations had launched an investigation of Overwatch and specifically Blackwatch, but it was a quiet audit as opposed to a public haranguing. Moira had discreetly absconded to Oasis, promising to continue her research into Gabriel’s condition there, which took a controversial individual off their payroll.

In spite of these positive developments, Jack and Gabriel felt more off-kilter than ever before, the floor beneath their feet alternatively giving way or freezing over.

To most, the loss of Captain Amari was tragic but not shocking, considering her line of work. For the original strike team, however, Ana’s death resonated, a blow they’d never recover from. The five of them hadn’t been an official pack (impossible with three alphas and two betas) but they’d treated each other like packmates, watching each other’s backs on and off the battlefield, comfortable with each other’s smells lingering in their clothes and hair.

Though Jack didn’t like the idea of coercing Reinhardt to retire, the Crusader was the oldest of them all and his grief was slowing him down. And the Strike Commander had to take the UN’s demands into consideration. Jack had broken it to him as gently as he could, but Reinhardt’s heart bruised easily. Torbjörn had been furious and submitted his resignation with a hefty amount of spite. Neither of them believed Jack’s argument that it would be good for Reinhardt to focus on his own health and wellbeing.

And all at once, Jack and Gabriel found themselves alone together, their workloads doubled, the weight of everything they’d built heavy on their shoulders, their fractured relationship a crumbling support. What else could they do but fight?

Angela suffocated them with sad concern and exhausted worrying. McCree spat accusations of paranoia at Gabriel. Fully stable physically, Genji took a leave of absence, seeking a way to now settle his mind and heart. Winston and Lena retreated to the lab and training rooms, staying out of the way unless directly summoned. Most agents followed their example.

Then, one afternoon, Gabriel’s nose twitched as it caught the scent of sand and sage clinging to Jack.

His heart pounded, indignant fury roaring in his ears, until his rational mind pointed out that the traces of McCree’s scent hadn’t been strong enough to indicate that he and Jack had slept together. They were likely just hanging out or collaborating on projects more.

Still. The possibility of it, that his mate and his second-in-command could grow close enough to go to bed, crept under Gabriel’s skin unlike anything ever had before. It had been torture enough imagining a faceless stranger touching Jack during the treacly drag of March, April, May.
They’d cleared spring and even summer without giving into their instincts. During every unavoidable meeting, Jack had subtly inhaled, trying to uncover someone else’s scent on Gabriel, and the micro-expression of relief that crossed his face, imperceptible to anyone else, had made Gabriel’s heart melt. See? Gabriel had wanted to say. I’m still committed to you.

It was excruciating to think that Jack might start to no longer care, might start to crave the smell of the desert instead of the beach. McCree and Jack had a lot in common. Not only their unrequited marks but their dogged determination to help people, their social grace and knack for details, the playfulness in their dispositions despite everything the world had done to them.

It was unlikely they’d get together. But it was possible. Gabriel’s brain worried over it like a dog with a bone. He just barely resisted the urge to badger Athena with questions about Jack’s whereabouts.

As though he wasn’t paranoid enough already. His hackles prickled at odd moments, convinced of a nearby threat. He’d turn around with his defenses raised only to find an empty hallway. Or freeze while typing on his desktop, certain he was being monitored. Athena patiently assured him again and again that there had been no recorded breaches of security, physical or otherwise, since his last barrage of queries.

Gabriel was stuck in a state of frenetic exhaustion. There was no alleviating it, but he could distract himself from it for brief blips.

Like most alphas, Gabriel considered omegas to be stress relievers, literally and figuratively. They took on menial roles that enabled betas and alphas to get on with more important work. They were almost always eager to please an alpha that expressed sexual interest. Gabriel had gotten as far as inviting one of the omegas in Angela’s lab to his apartment before realizing a quick fuck wasn’t going to relax him at all. It would be yet another task to run lead on, another situation to manage, another person to instruct.

What he really wanted was to tilt his head, relinquish dominance for a short time, let someone gently take control out of his hands before driving him to ecstasy.

He lay on the couch in his apartment, hand flung over his eyes, intensely aware that Jack was in the apartment across the hall. All he had to do was knock, let Jack bite, and he could have that again, that real struggle for power that had them both hard and panting, that challenge and visceral satisfaction, that ability to let go without fear, that space where status ceased to be a concern.

He missed Jack’s smile more than anything. And how foul his vocabulary got when they were alone. And the small, thoughtful gestures, like stocking Gabriel’s favorite brand of coffee in his kitchen.

It seemed so simple. Just let Jack bite again. But he couldn’t get off the couch. Not only his instincts but his doubts pinned him down. Who was to say Jack even wanted to bite him anymore?

Gabriel sighed as he scrolled through his phone contacts. The amount of people he could talk to about this had plummeted to nearly zero. One name caught his eye though and after a second of hesitation, he tapped it. He didn’t have to wait long.

“Jiaming speaking.”

She sounded the exact same as the last time he’d seen her, about five years ago, when he and Jack had flown to Santa Fe to spend a long weekend hiking with her and her mate, a willowy schoolteacher.
“Hey. It's Gabriel Reyes.”

“...Like, actually?”

“Yes,” he growled.

“The only reason you’d be calling instead of Jack would be if Jack’s incapacitated in some way. But I haven’t seen anything in the news and they’re all over him every time he has a cold, so, I’m presuming he’s not grievously wounded or dead. He is okay, right?”

“Physically, yes, he's alright.”

“But...?”

Gabriel explained their situation as though reporting mission parameters: in straightforward language with as little emotion as possible. There was a long pause when he’d finished.

“Jesus Christ, this woman found a way to remove claim marks? That… That could fuck up the whole world if people no longer considered them permanent.”

“Jiaming, I don't give a shit about the rest of the world right now. I care about me and Jack.”

“Nice to see that charming attitude of yours hasn’t changed. What do you want me to say?”

“You’re the trauma counselor! You tell me!”

“Do you want to continue being Jack’s mate?”

“Yes. No. I don't know. I can’t fucking tell. I still love the guy but being near him makes my blood boil.”

“Isn’t that how it’s always been?”

“No, I can’t smell his heat anymore. I don’t want to sleep with anyone else though.”

Jiaming thought for a minute.

“I think… you want me to tell you that you sound miserable and you’d be better off with Jack. Like, you want some sort of permission to let Jack bite you. Well, you do sound fucking miserable. But as for the permission to totally defy your alpha instincts again, I’m afraid you gotta find a way to give that to yourself.”

“Yeah,” Gabriel sighed.

“If it helps, you sound like shit. And Jack was always a really good influence on you. So, in my non-professional off-the-books opinion, I think you should fix things with him.”

A soft chuckle escaped Gabriel’s throat. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“No problem. Oh, um, hey, can I ask you something? I don’t know if it’s classified or not, but why was Overwatch in Deadlock Gorge last week? Kelly and I were hiking in the area and we spotted an operation with what looked like some pretty heavy artillery.”

Gabriel stiffened and sat upright, a frown on his face.

“I don’t expect you to tell me any details, but could you at least let me know if the Deadlock Gang is
resurgent or if there’s some other sort of threat? I don’t want to get caught in the middle of anything.”

“Are you sure that was Overwatch?”

“Well, I mean, yeah. That logo’s pretty hard to miss.”

“Right. Uh. You guys should be fine but maybe avoid that particular trail for a few weeks,” he said in a rush, before thanking her again and jumping off the call.

Something was very wrong.

Overwatch hadn’t officially executed a mission in Deadlock Gorge since the raid that netted them McCree. While they continued to monitor the region, they hadn’t seen evidence of gang activity for years. Investigating the network files on his tablet confirmed this.

It was possible Jack had authorized a highly classified operation, but even Blackwatch’s ugliest, most incriminating missions had some record on their network, albeit vague and coded and accessible only by those with the highest level of clearance. But there was nothing on file. It was also highly unlikely that Jack would have engaged any operation involving heavy artillery in Deadlock Gorge without at least consulting Gabriel or McCree, regardless of the state of their personal relationships.

He called out a command for Athena to pull up the satellite footage of the area but found nothing out of the ordinary. When he instructed her to switch to infrared however, the old portion of Route 66 lit up with activity. A lot of activity. Heat signatures of not only people but of armored vehicles and even missiles.

Gabriel’s blood turned to ice. They’d been infiltrated, compromised, almost certainly by Talon. Snakes were wearing the faces and insignia of their colleagues, trading on Overwatch’s reputation and apparently poised to strike at a moment’s notice. His mind raced as he thought through his options.

And then his tablet screen flickered purple. An almost cute picture of a skull appeared, and a girlish voice poured out of the built-in speakers.

“Hola, Gabe. You don’t mind if I call you Gabe, do you?”

“Who the fuck are you?” He snarled, wondering if he could instruct Athena to trace this without the hacker knowing.

“A friend.”

“You’re with Talon.”

“Some of the time. Don’t bother trying to get Athena to help. She’s been my friend for a while now.”

“What do you want?”

“You do get straight to the point, don’t you?” She chuckled. “Alright. Talon will dismantle the sad remains of Overwatch by the end of the year.”

The Overwatch logo appeared onscreen, then glitched to reveal the Talon crest.

“Tell me how stop them,” Gabriel barked.

“You won’t be able to. What you’re seeing on Route 66 is just one of dozens of operations around the world that Talon’s been running in your clothes. It’s impossible to stop what’s already been put
Curiously, an owl composed of glowing purple Greek letters landed on the Talon crest, which then flickered, glitching into pieces with deliberate flair. Gabriel’s quick mind started assembling the clues.

“But I’m playing a long game here, something I’m sure you can appreciate,” she continued, sounding almost bored. “Organizations fall the hardest when taken down from the inside, after all. How would you like to join Talon instead?”

“You’re recruiting me?”

Though he huffed out a laugh, Gabriel picked over her words, reading the layers.

Judging by her accent and the adorable sugar skull, she was from Mexico, a country that held owls up as harbingers of death and destruction, creatures that could move between the realms of the living and the dead. But in Greek mythology, the owl belonged to the goddess of wisdom and warfare, Athena.

Add that to the glitching Talon insignia and the whole tableau whispered two words to him: double agent.

Clever.

Whoever this girl was, she wanted to take down Talon in the future and she wanted his help to do it, but she was being extraordinarily careful not to say that directly, meaning they were being monitored. If her discretion and her technical skills were anything to go by, she could be a powerful ally in unraveling Talon. He’d never heard of anyone manipulating an AI as powerful as Athena before.

“The Council likes you, Gabe, especially your handling of Antonio,” she purred. “They think you could do great things. The only thing they’re not 100% sure of is whether you’ve truly broken your bond with Jack Morrison.”

“My bond? We’re friends on a good day and most days aren’t good days.”

“Cute. But I know you and Jack are mates, that the mark he gave you vanished with that scientist’s enhancements.”

“I haven’t let him bite me again. We can’t even talk to each other without devolving into a fight. Isn’t that enough for Talon to cop on that our bond is gone?”

“I’m doing my best to convince them it is. But you sounded awfully amenable to your friend’s advice just now.”

Gabriel let out a bone-deep sigh, tapped into the despair he’d been wallowing in earlier, and lied as honestly as possible: “Jack’s got his pride. He’s not going to want to bite me again after I’ve spent all this time refusing him.”

“…Good.”

“So. Don’t show up to my interview for Talon with the Strike Commander’s mark in my neck. Anything else? Shine my shoes and wear a tie? Grow out my mustache so I can twirl it?”

The girl laughed, the low jangle of chimes in the wind.
“See you around, Gabe.”

His tablet returned to normal. When he called out to Athena, he wasn’t surprised to find she had no record of his interaction with the hacker and no clue what he was talking about. The AI even went so far as to recommend he speak to Dr. Ziegler about possible sleep deprivation induced hallucinations.

Gabriel felt a burble of satisfaction that his paranoia had not been unjustified, but the path the hacker had laid out before him loomed cold and dark and lonely. The more he thought about it though, the fewer alternatives he could see. Overwatch was already rotting from the inside.

His heart pounded at the implications, what he would lose, what he could accomplish. It would be one of the biggest risks he’d ever taken, but if it worked, he could cripple – maybe even kill – Talon with their own poison.

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“Jesse!” Lena called happily.

He returned her smile as he entered the training center’s control room. Near the large observation windows, Lena sat cross-legged on one of the spinning chairs. Echo stood poised and still next to her.

“We’re re-watching a few sessions before we ship out,” Lena explained, pointing down into the chamber.

Holographs of Lena and Genji fighting flickered through the space. Slightly slower than real-time, Jesse noticed. Made sense. With the speeds at which Genji and Lena moved, it had always been a struggle to follow the beats of their spars.

“Bet you’re learnin’ plenty,” Jesse commented.

“You’re leaving today too, aren’t you?” Echo asked.

“After lunch, yeah.”

“Another attempt to find Captain Amari?” Lena asked, a sober expression on her face.

“Got it in one.”

A blue moment unfurled, at Ana’s absence, at Jack and Gabriel’s insistence that she wasn’t dead, which echoed like irrational grief to the rest of them.

“Rather odd, isn’t it?” Lena mused. “Almost all active agents have been assigned missions off elsewhere. Some of them seem quite rubbish. Go and check this or that sector is still safe. That sort of thing. Feels like we’re all being sent to aunts and uncles’ houses so the parents can sort out how to divorce.”

“I ain’t comin’ back,” Jesse blurted out, as though ripping off a band-aid.

Lena’s eyes turned sad but not surprised.

“What will you do?” Echo asked, concern on her gentle face.
“After this final stint in Poland, Genji’s invited me to join him at his old stompin’ grounds in Japan, see about some loose ends, so that’s the first stop. After that, well, I’ll figure somethin’ out.”

“Can’t say I blame you,” Lena said quietly. “I’ll miss you though.”

“Aw, c’mon now, we’ll be stayin’ in touch,” Jesse laughed, pulling her in for a long hug. “Can’t shake me off that easily.”

Lena gave him a watery smile but nodded.

“Echo, darlin’, it’s been a real honor.”

“The honor’s been mine, cowboy,” she said warmly. Her delicate fingers brushed her hip and a small triangular segment popped out with a soft click. “Will you hold onto this for me?”

“The key to your stasis pod?” He asked, baffled.

“Winston has the other one. It would be nice to know that if something happens and I need to be sealed away that I could trust one of you two to bring me back online.”

Touched, Jesse tucked it into his pocket and checked twice that it was secure.

“You can count on me.”

Despite the heavy sticky feeling of saying goodbye to the organization and people who had become his home, Jesse knew in his gut that leaving was the right decision. Overwatch’s heart had dimmed, its goals grown muddled. He didn’t know who he was in its ranks anymore.

He hadn’t told Gabriel about his plans yet, was going to send him his resignation after he completed his sweep in Poland. It was cowardly, he knew, but these days, he just couldn’t predict how the alpha would react to anything.

Mind meandering in circles, Jesse followed his empty stomach to the canteen on the tenth floor and piled his tray high with his favorites, staunchly avoiding the thought that this would be the last time he’d eat them. On the tail-end of lunch hour, the room was buzzing but not overwhelmingly busy. He spotted Jack alone at a circular table in the middle, tired gaze on his tablet as he mindlessly ate.

“I’d hate to interrupt what looks to be such a rivetin’ time, but—”

“Sit down, McCree,” Jack huffed.

“Romance novel?” Jesse asked, taking the chair opposite him.

“Yes, a salacious tale of a boy raised by Omnics who discovers he’s actually a duke and is betrothed to the handsome prince of a warring nation as a peace treaty. The problem is they hate each other. Insert conflict-that-isn’t-really-a-conflict here. Can they overcome their bitching and handsomeness to realize they’re perfect for each other? Insert sex scene that takes up the second half of the book.”

“Fuck’s sake, Commander,” Jesse laughed. “You got a solid back-up career as an erotica writer.”

“What do you think my retirement plan is?” Jack gave him a boyish grin. “Come here and take a look. It’s actually something that might help you in Poland.”

Jesse and his tray slid around the rim of the table to the Strike Commander’s right side. He took a bite of his burger and peered at the tablet. It was a news article with the headline Renowned Surgeon Accused of Assisting Rebels and a muted video clip of a weary woman at a press conference.
“Dr. Agnieszka Lee,” Jesse read aloud. “What about her?”

“Apparently, she not only helped dozens of injured high-profile freedom fighters medically, she also kept them off the hospital records.”

“Rebels or freedom fighters?”

“Depends if you’re asking the government or the people. Like in Paris, the Omnic Crisis left a power vacuum that gangs took the liberty to fill, but the Polish government’s recently been overreaching in its efforts to crack down.”

“And what’s this have to do with Ana?”

Jack tapped the tablet’s surface and brought up a map of an area Jesse recognized: the site of the Captain’s last mission and apparent death. Expanding the view, Jack pointed out a cluster of buildings less than 30 miles away.

“That’s the hospital where Dr. Lee was working when Ana disappeared.”

“You think the doc’s track record means she woulda been the prime person to patch Ana up and send her on her merry, anonymous way.”

“Exactly.” Jack gave him a warm smile. “Unfortunately, the unwanted press surrounding Dr. Lee right now is going to make it difficult to—”

The hairs on the back of his neck rose in sharp warning.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Gabriel barked, not bothering to keep his voice down. He was livid, dark eyes like boiling oil, arms folded. Though the table was between him and them, it seemed like a very feeble barrier in the face of Gabriel’s fury.

“Not sure that’s any of your business,” Jesse retorted, choosing the antagonistic route, as usual.

“Discussing his upcoming mission,” Jack replied evenly, taking a sip of water.

“And he needs to be giggling in your lap for that? My office. Now.”

“That command better have been for me,” Jesse snarled.

“Oh? And what if it wasn’t, Jesse? You gonna fight to defend Jack’s honor? Thought you loved it when alphas got riled up.”

“Rather give you my ma’s lecture on mate etiquette,” he muttered under his breath, only just loud enough for Gabriel to hear.

Gabriel shot Jack a poisonous glance.

“Telling everyone now?”

“Yes, asshole. Every single person I meet in the building,” Jack drawled, resisting the urge to palm the mark in his neck. “Are you seriously getting territorial? That’s new and ill-timed.”

“Well, when I see you two cuddling up after I learn we’re apparently getting our hands dirty with Deadlock again, what am I supposed to think?”
Jack tensed in confusion and surprise. As a concerned frown crossed his face, he noticed Gabriel relax by the tiniest of fractions.

“Oh, come on, boss,” Jesse groaned. “Can’t you hear how damned paranoid you sound? I told you twice when you asked me a week ago that Deadlock Gorge’s nothin’ but tumbleweeds.”

“Better to be paranoid than someone who doesn’t know what’s going on right under their nose,” Gabriel snapped.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jack asked.

“Act like an actual fucking leader and find out.”

Baring his teeth, Jack slammed his hands on the table as he stood, not caring that most of the canteen was staring at them.

“This is your idea of leadership? Brawling in public?”

“At least it makes something happen. Unlike your goddamn make-nice diplomacy, which is getting us stabbed in the back.”

“Yeah, well, you’d know all about stabbing people in the back, wouldn’t you? You planning on leading a damn coup against me, too?”

“If that’s what it takes, I damn well will,” Gabriel spat.

“I’d love to see you fucking try.”

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Something was very wrong.

That was the conclusion Jack came to hours after Angela and Jesse managed to drag him and Gabriel away from each other, and after he destroyed two punching bags in the training room.

He was still fuming, the intensity of his thoughts and feelings dialed up as high as they could go, but he tried to assess Gabriel’s outburst rationally. Because it had been genuine rage. But it hadn’t been entirely genuine rage. Part of it had been artifice.

The answer to that had to be in how Gabriel relaxed when Jack became bewildered by his mention of the Deadlock gang.

Which sent two screaming trains of thought through Jack’s mind. The first was that Gabriel had uncovered something shady and the second was that until that moment of confusion, he hadn’t been sure whether or not Jack was in on it.

“And that’s infuriating because you have spent months nursing a grudge over me not trusting you,” Jack snapped, jamming a finger into Gabriel’s chest.

“What did you expect?” Gabriel rejoined, more weary than angry, leaning on the edge of his desk.

Jack had, in the end, gone to Gabriel’s office, barging in without knocking while still in his sweat-
soaked gym gear. Headquarters was just beginning to wind down for the day, the sunset ripe and juicy on the horizon. Not that you could see it from Gabriel’s windowless workspace.

“I expect you to fucking believe I wouldn’t undermine this organization and I expect you to talk to me if there’s an issue, not go off like a volcano in the middle of lunch.”

“Yeah, like you listen to me anymore,” Gabriel retorted, trying not to notice the deliciously familiar smell of Jack’s sweat.

Even without the smoky scent of his heat, Jack smelled good. He smelled like home. He smelled like sex. The mark in Jack’s neck rang like a bell across Gabriel’s instincts, a murmured invitation. This is yours.

And there it was.

The tug to let Jack bite, to pair their marks again, that urge that had been strong enough to rewire his very nature all those years ago. It was a faint echo of itself, but it was there, pulsing in his chest for the first time since their relationship shattered to pieces on the floor of Jack’s apartment.

But it was too late.

If Gabriel let himself follow the tug back into Jack’s arms now, he’d lose his one chance to bring Talon down from the inside. Their hearts on one side of the scale. A better world on the other.

Gabriel suddenly felt very old.

“I’m here. I’m listening,” Jack said earnestly. “What is going on?”

Gabriel swallowed over the lump in his throat.

“I need you to leave, Jack,” he said, gaze and voice low.

“No. There’s something you’re not telling me and it’s killing you because you think you need to do everything alone.”

“Has the last year not sent you a clear enough message? The only thing I need is for you to fuck off.”

Jack blinked at the unfiltered nastiness of the remark.

Alarms screamed through the halls.

The room rocked, skewing sideways with a sickening lurch. Tremors strong enough to be an earthquake but too erratic to be natural.

Bombs.

Their eyes met in shock and they bolted for the door, the building shuddering as explosions broke its spine and snapped its supports. There was an unearthly roar. A flash of white.

Gabriel woke up on his back, at a loss as to when he’d been thrown. The electricity had gone, dropping them into darkness broken only by the flickering red emergency lights, the wounded wires spitting blue sparks, the orange flames eating the corner of the room. Smoke barreled through the air.

“JACK!” He yelled hoarsely.

He lurched upwards but his legs gave out. It took him a second to comprehend the piece of rebar
skewering his upper thigh, that the shinbone in his other leg was broken, that he couldn’t feel his right foot.

Gabriel looked around, frantic, blood and sweat dripping into his eyes, until he spotted a body half-buried by the collapsed wall.

“JACK!”

With concentration Gabriel managed to partially dissolve, crossing the crippled floor in a clumsy mess of smoke and limbs until he reformed, agony and all, by Jack’s side.

He was breathing. Of course, he was. Nothing could kill Jack.

Gabriel shoved his shoulder against the hunks of rubble, ignoring the pain chopping through him with every movement. Barely conscious, Jack began to help and together they succeeded in unearthing him. But he couldn’t sit up, lay panting on his side, his hips and ribs in pieces. Shock seized his limbs, pain and numbness blasting through his senses. His face was a mess, blue eyes bleary in between a vicious gash.

Gabriel wedged an arm beneath his blond head.

“Wraith out of here,” Jack coughed. “Go.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Gabriel barked, eyes stinging.

“C’mon,” Jack murmured, an unsteady hand reaching for Gabriel’s cheek. “Go.”

Gabriel didn’t bother responding, instead nuzzled in closer to Jack’s broken form. Jack pushed at him with a limp arm but at the look in Gabriel’s eyes, he stopped trying to make him leave. It was nice to feel Gabriel’s hands on him again, to be held by him, even just one last time.

“Stay awake,” Gabriel rasped out. “We’re going to get out of this. Stay awake, Jackie.”

“Hm?”

Gabriel cradled his head. Despite the stink of burnt metal, the faint smell the seashore curled around him, Gabriel’s scent. Jack blinked his left eye open; a river of blood blinded the right one. When he realized what Gabriel was doing, a sob caught in his chest, love slicing him open.

Shattered bodies pressed in close, Gabriel had leaned in and was gently bringing Jack’s bloodied face to the crook of his neck. Jack’s hand clutched weakly at his hip.

“But you don’t want…” He mumbled, focused on the feel of Gabriel’s hand supporting the back of his head.


Jack swallowed, Gabriel’s skin warm and ashy against his lips, the summer breeze pulsing through him, and he sank his teeth in.

Their souls clicked back together.

But it wasn’t clean. It was the jarring, painful correctness of an arm being popped back into its socket. Or two jagged edges jammed into each other, stitched closed with satisfied violence.

Gabriel spasmed in sudden agony, the claim in conflict with the wraith in his veins, fire spreading
outwards from the bite, peeling off his skin. But he gritted his teeth and forced himself to hold still. Everything was pain at this point anyway, their deaths creeping cold and close.

Jack’s mouth burned, acid slicking the back of his throat, as familiar blood turned to smoke on his tongue, in his nose, suffocating him. He finally let go, gasping for air, lips scalded.

The fresh mark in Gabriel’s neck bled black mist.

With an almighty groan, the ceiling gave way, dumping down a blast of heat and concrete, fracturing the floor beneath the two of them. And then they were plummeting into darkness.

End of Overwatch Arc

Chapter End Notes

DRAMATIC CLIFFHANGER EXCEPT NOT BECAUSE DUH THEY BOTH CANONICALLY LIVE

I'm always thanking you guys for the comments and kudos and support, and I ain't stopping now. ง(๑̀ ﾟД๑́)ง THANK YOU! AGAIN! ALL THE THANKS! It's really amazing how many people are coming with me on this story and how much warm feedback I've received. ง ง It honestly brightens my mood like nothing else.

Stay tuned for the next arc, which will take place post-Recall. I'm still sketching out details of the plot (beyond just 'give Jack and Gabriel a happy ending') and since I like to have a basic plan for each chapter before I start writing, the next update might take a bit longer. Come find me on Twitter in the interval if you want to chat. I'm at @MsTrick16. Mostly I just reblog R76 art lol

Happy Lunar New Year!
Resurrection

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Recall Arc

The strength of the afternoon sunlight was astonishing, almost like a physical weight on Jack’s shoulders. Cairo was sliced into strips by it, harsh light and deep shade cast by the market stalls. But if the heat slowed his pace, it tranquilized the rest of the city, leaving the route to Hakim’s opulent compound sparsely defended. Who would want to have a firefight in this weather?

Jack’s friendly purple ghost had suggested this time of day for a reason.

He didn’t trust her motivations one ounce but all her intel about Talon, specifically Reaper’s movements, had panned out, so he had no reason to doubt her now. Her clues landed like dull thuds in Jack’s soul, building an uncertain hurt and adding to the limbo of incomprehension he was suspended in.

What the hell are you doing, Gabe?

Gabriel had been cagey, planning something, that last day at headquarters. Jack couldn’t quite bring himself to believe it was to defect to Talon; Gabriel’s shock at the detonations had been authentic, Jack was sure of that. But he’d only needed to see one brief news clip of the feared terrorist Reaper to recognize his mate. Jack knew Gabriel’s movements on the battlefield as completely as he knew his body in bed.

Talon had far-reaching tendrils and deep pockets. They might have something Gabriel wanted or needed, something important enough that Gabriel would play mercenary on their behalf if it meant obtaining it. Jack didn’t know what that could be. After snatching the pulse rifle out of Watchpoint: Grand Mesa, he’d swung by Los Angeles to ascertain for himself that Gabriel’s sister and her family were safe. Though that didn’t preclude the possibility that Talon was holding their lives over Gabriel’s head.

It seemed most likely that Gabriel was operating as a double agent, but if that was the case, why keep Jack in the dark? Why leave him behind, broken and bleeding, in the rubble of headquarters? Why not reach out to him now?

Add in the fact that Ana was apparently alive and had also seen no reason to contact him and Jack was feeling pretty fucking pissed off.

His resolve sharpened into something heavy and lethal. He was tired of waiting, done with diplomatic approaches and complicated negotiations, and sick of the squalid mess of conspiracy. Talon was a cancer infecting everything it touched. The more he uncovered, the more there was to uncover. He was determined to draw both Gabriel and Ana out into the open, to get some answers,
and to plant his fist into the faces of a few assholes along the way.

He adjusted his grip on the pulse rifle and eyeballed the smooth border wall of Hakim’s inner compound.

Time to make some noise.

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If the oppressive heat and equally oppressive air conditioning to counter it weren’t enough to drive a headache through Gabriel’s skull, Hakim’s tacky interior decorating was. Actual purple velvet couches. That were shorter than the pale green end-tables. Upon which were lampshades in a strange, shiny mustard texture.

“No puede comprar buen gusto,” Sombra snickered from the holovid.

“You can hire a decorator though,” he growled, voice low and harsh through the mask.

Hakim and a few of his associates were lounging on the hideous furniture, all in full suits and gold jewelry and fake smiles. A few kept glancing nervously to where Gabriel leaned against the wall in full Reaper regalia with his arms folded. Stationed throughout the squat building was a gaggle of other personal bodyguards, as well as Talon grunts struggling to obey his orders or waiting anxiously for new ones.

The intense light pouring in from the window washed out the holographic screen hovering in front of him, but Gabriel could see Sombra’s attention wandering to one of the several other screens she probably had open. Her distinct hair had been fastened beneath a dark wig that swept down to her shoulders and Gabriel couldn’t help but find the symmetry odd on her. She sipped a drink through a curly straw in the plush train compartment, playing her role of little rich girl on vacation.

“Your squad figure out anything I can use to get past Helix’s security?” She asked.

“Of course not,” he scoffed. “This job would go a lot faster with your help.”

“Gosh. Such a shame I was needed for this mission instead.”

Under his mask, Gabriel smirked. “How far out from the Gorge are you?”

“Another hour, then I’m renting a motorcycle to cover the last forty miles on Route 66. I look forward to seeing what your boy can do, though I have to say his heist seems a little…”

“Off the cuff and open-ended, with high risk to himself?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s McCree. If the ingrate’s luck and aim weren’t so good, he’d be dead a few dozen times over.”

“And this is who you made your second-in-command?”

Reaper chuckled. “Judge him after you see him in action.”
“I should get there in plenty time for the fireworks. You sure this isn’t just some elaborate scheme for him to get back into his alpha’s good graces? A pack’s a pretty tough thing to break from.”

“I’m sure. Between Deadlock and Blackwatch, McCree knows perfectly well how not to leave a paper trail. If you uncovered that tip he sent to Ashe, it’s because he wanted there to be a record somewhere. If she takes the advice, which she likely will, knowing her history, then that message is solid incriminating evidence for a legal case.”

“The pendejo’s incriminating himself at the same time though. Does he figure his bounty’s already so high that a few more thousand credits won’t make a difference?”

“Probably.”

A beat passed in silence. Gabriel dug his fingers into his upper arms, breathing through the stabbing pain radiating out from the crook of his neck, the fizz of the nanites. At least it distracted him from thinking about Jesse, alone and hunted across America’s dry, broken heartlands.

“Still no sign of our ghost?” He asked.

Sombra glanced over at a different screen.

“Not yet. I’m scanning the area now. I’ll check the logs in case there are any large shipments due to arrive that could be used as cover for intruders. Wait… Moira’s scheduled to be dropped in this evening?” Her eyes clicked onto his face. “Aw. Pobrecito. Your mark bothering you that much?”

“None of your damn business,” he growled.

“You know she’s not going to fix anything. You’re an awfully ungrateful person, Gabe. Might run off as soon as you’re healthy.”

“You’re claiming to be the trustworthy one here?”

“You told your squad to monitor the perimeter, yeah?”

“Obviously.”

“Well, you should fire them because you were breached a minute ago.” She smirked at something he couldn’t see. “Looks like both the ghost and the soldier have come out to play. Oof. And the soldier’s not exactly playing nice. You ready to say hi?”

“Stick to your mission.”

He hung up and switched to his team’s comms to deliver a scathing rebuke for their oversight. That was one perk about working with such disreputable people. No one complained about his attitude problems here. Striding towards the stairs, he snapped out orders loudly enough that Hakim and his acquaintances paused to listen. Their eyes widened in disbelief and fury that their own guards hadn’t detected or alerted them to the danger.

Gabriel wraithed up the spiral staircase rather than take it step-by-step and emerged onto the building’s flat roof, shimmering with plumes of heat. The merciless sun slammed down. His mark bled, wet and sticky beneath the layers of heavy garments. The nanites pulled it open and stitched it back together, the pain chewing through him.

The noise of gunfire drew his attention to the sandy courtyard and he watched as Soldier: 76 didn’t even bother shooting back, instead cracked the barrel of his pulse rifle over his opponents’ skulls,
fluid and ruthless and, to Gabriel, entirely predictable.

Entirely Jack.

Alive. Out for blood. And recklessly running towards the deep end of the fight.

Gabriel vividly recalled that cobbled alley in Dorado, messy with the crumpled bodies of Los Muertos gangsters. The narrow street had been rich with the smells of garbage, dried blood, expended munition, electrocuted skin, and the nearby bakery, but his skin had prickled and heaved, nanites restless, because another scent kept brushing his senses: notes of clean mountain air laden with the threat of rain.

Gabriel thought he was losing his mind. The pain in his neck stabbed through to his core. He disintegrated and reformed, trying to numb the sensation, all the while wracked with the blistering agony that was hope.

Sombra, who missed nothing, studied him like a hawk while they conferred with the leaders of Los Muertos, assessing the threat posed by the vigilante and promising the gang new weapons to wreak their Doomfist-encouraged havoc.

“Looking for someone?” She asked with a sneer.

Though she hadn’t been part of Los Muertos for twelve years and only had connections with two or three current members, she was indignant at the unprecedented attack on their turf. These were her people once. She let Gabriel stew and pace and agonize for two days before she deigned to show him the grainy video from a security camera of a nearby shop.

And Gabriel’s heart stopped in his chest.

He had thought he’d lost everything and everyone. His friends, his former colleagues, his sister and the few other remaining family members all believed him dead. He accepted this isolation, this exclusion from life, and took it into himself, made armor from it, made himself ruthless with it. It had been hard enough when Sombra discovered the true identity of Shrike, but Ana he could keep at a respectful distance. Her quarrel was with Hakim anyway.

Jack though…

Jack being alive meant that Gabriel still had more to lose. A lot more.

Even though he recognized the lithe maneuvers and the adaptive combat style on his first viewing, Gabriel replayed the video clip over a dozen times. Sombra narrowed her eyes at the expression on his face. They were in her sparse quarters, but Talon’s bugs would only hear an innocuous conversation about the bar down the street. They’d recorded a few of these dummy dialogues for occasions like this, when they absolutely had to discuss something sensitive on one of the bases.

“You’re such an idiot,” she hissed, distress giving her voice an edge. “I told you. I told you a mark could ruin this for us. Why do you think no one highly ranked in Talon has a mate? They’re the worst kind of liability.”

He finally turned off the video and looked her dead in the eye. She glared back, nervousness disguised as anger. She didn’t have a claim mark, had never once caught a scent that triggered the urge to bite. And as she’d grown up in a gang too stuffed with competing alphas to be a real pack, without a pair of mated parents, she hadn’t exactly seen many positive examples of binding yourself to someone in such a profound way.
Sombra had spent so long staring at the big picture, considering people only as pieces on a chessboard, tallying up their uses and drawbacks, that she hadn’t really connected with many people on an individual level. But during their time working together, Gabriel had seen her defenses towards him eke down bit by bit. She’d never admit it, but Gabriel knew she had come to rely on him as much as he relied on her, for a sliver of trust and emotional understanding in the murky waters of Talon’s politics.

Cocooned in her concern that he would upend all they’d worked towards was the fear that Gabriel would fall victim to his instincts and abandon her. She was so young sometimes.

“This is not going to be a problem,” he assured her. “The mark’s not exactly stable, remember?”

“I’m going to have to tell the council who he is,” she said, tilting her chin up.

“I know.”

“They’ll expect you to deal with him.”

“I know. The only thing I need you to do is make sure it’s on my terms.”

For eight years, they’d carefully softened the foundations of Talon, undermined missions, misplaced resources. They wouldn’t avoid detection forever, even with Sombra’s masterful control of information, but they had yet to figure out which pins to pull out to bring down the whole structure. Talon was a cancer. If it couldn’t be completely nuked in a few concussive hits, it would return with twice the venom. They needed to know the exact angle from which to strike and they needed more time to figure it out.

So, Reaper rolled his shoulders beneath the desert sun, summoned a shotgun to each hand, and gave them all a monster.

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Jack stalked away from the necropolis, Ana’s own personal city of the dead. And she had the nerve to accuse him of being the one unable to move forward. She was literally inhabiting a tomb. Their argument replayed in his head, her insistence on fixing Cairo before the rest of the world. Wasn’t she supposed to be the one with a hawk’s eye on the big picture?

He huffed her scent out of his nostrils, suddenly irritated by it. As usual, alphas got along until they abruptly didn’t. And they’d been doing so well for a pair of old friends reconnecting after they’d both apparently died. Recounting his survival of the explosion to her was like picking open a scab he thought had healed but was in truth still raw and tender, but it was only fair to tell her, as she’d filled him in on what had happened after he lost her.

Lungs coated in ash, blood drying on his face, bones stinging with the strain of knitting back together, he’d stumbled away from the ruins of headquarters long after they stopped looking for survivors in the rubble. He’d been devastated that he couldn’t find Gabriel’s body, hollowed out with grief. He was sure they’d been together when the explosions went off but he couldn’t think. Mind addled, nightmarish fear clawing at the frayed ends of his consciousness, he’d yanked open a sewer grate and crept through the dark until he found a dry patch to collapse on. Hours or days later, he woke up aching and hungry enough to kill someone, stiff from healing, decorated with a host of new scars.
He was sure the pangs in his chest and the pulse in his neck had to mean that Gabriel was alive, but he kept getting conflicting signals from the mark. It would remain dormant for weeks, then flare up out of nowhere for seemingly no reason. Jack eventually convinced himself it was psychosomatic, that he was so desperate for Gabriel to have survived that his mark was reacting. But then he’d seen that news clip of Reaper.

The blaring lights peeking up behind one side of the craggy rock formation identified the direction of the city. The desert sprawled out like a silent sea below, silver in the moonlight. He plodded his way down to the sand. The cold night air nipped at him, but he left his ruined jacket open to avoid chafing the gashes in his lower back, aching from Gabriel’s gunshots and Ana’s stitches. Evidence of both their continued existence seared into his flesh.

Jack had thought drawing the two of them out would get him some answers, but their altercation two days ago had only planted more questions in his head.

He knew from very personal experience what it felt like to be on the other side of Gabriel in a real fight. His body remembered broken ribs and dislocated shoulders and bloody noses from their brawls in SEP. And although Reaper had fired toxin-laced bullets into his back, Jack just couldn’t convince himself that that was a real fight. Gabriel had had a free shot from pointblank range behind him. If Gabriel wanted him dead, he’d be dead.

Or had Gabriel just wanted to monologue before finishing him off? He did have a streak of drama in him a mile wide. What would have happened if Ana hadn’t interfered? Gabriel had to be working as a double agent. But then why let Jack think he was dead? Even if their bond was a shell of what it was, Gabriel had to know Jack would help him.

Questions upon questions.

Jack found himself on the outskirts of the city already, time and distance swallowed by his ruminations. He sharpened his focus. The streets were dead quiet, but he couldn’t let his guard down. A tortuous prickling began in his claim mark, an inconstant itch, and Jack found himself eyeballing the impenetrable shadows with distrust and weary yearning. He kept his pace casual, even as his skin rose in goosebumps. A few minutes later, the feeling dissipated.

The moon arced past midnight, locking the city into deeper slumber. The quarrel with Ana retook center stage in Jack’s thoughts. His allies were very few and very far between, and none of them came close to Ana’s battle prowess and strategic skills. He needed her to help him take down Talon. Which meant he’d probably be giving in to her demand that they deal with Hakim first. Losing their death grip on Cairo wouldn’t interrupt Talon’s machinations much, but it wouldn’t be nothing either.

The prickling kicked up again, a whisper against his soul, and against his better judgment, he changed directions, following it. The approach and retreat of his mate rose and sank, tickling his instincts, tormenting him. Suspecting a tactic to make him vulnerable, he remained tense, anticipating Gabriel’s appearance. At this point, he’d even welcome an attack, anything to put a stop to this undulating, nibbling sensation.

After ten more minutes, he deliberately turned to wander down an alley missed by the moonlight, a slip between two short buildings, empty except for several stacks of crates.

Almost immediately, the black shadows shifted, unfurled, and lunged for him. A harsh exhale escaped Jack as his back met a brick wall with force, pain zinging up his skin from the still-healing wounds. Smoke crowded into him, curled warm underneath his open jacket, until it was solid weight, steel-tipped claws resting on his shoulder blades, strong chest and thighs flush against his, a feverish forehead pressed into the side of his face, human breath uneven and panicky on his neck.
Gabriel wasn’t wearing the Reaper mask, just his hood. The Kevlar coat was distinctly the same as when he’d tackled Reaper during their fight. Except now the man wearing it was shivering.

Jack swallowed, at a loss, on the verge of throwing Gabriel off. But the irregular pulses from his claim mark had stopped completely, the peace sudden and soothing. He found himself bowled over by that completely unique cocktail of physical and mental responses that Gabriel never failed to spark in him.

Relief so sharp it was almost nauseating. Alpha wariness and mistrust. Hatred at himself for being so weak to this. Elation at his mate’s touch. *Fight. Fuck. Protect. Mine.*

He hesitantly gripped Gabriel’s shoulders, unsure whether to push him back or hold him in place.

Gabriel released a long exhale and Jack felt the solid form against him soften into mist, the weight in his arms lightening, the skin touching his dissolving. Jack’s heart sank as he prepared for Gabriel to once again vanish. But after a long moment, Gabriel reassembled in the same position.

And it hit Jack like a freight train.

Gabriel’s trembling was from *exertion*. It was a *struggle* for him to remain fully formed.

Jack didn’t think. Hands on either side of Gabriel’s head, the fabric of the hood cool under his palms, Jack pulled him into a kiss. He kept his eyes closed. It didn’t matter to him if Gabriel couldn’t sustain his appearance. The only thing that mattered, that could ever matter, was that Gabriel was kissing him back.

Their mouths opened into each other’s, remembering. Like it was the simplest thing in the world. Like this wasn’t the first time they’d kissed in eight excruciating years. Like they hadn’t fired heavy weaponry and thrown punches at each other two days before. Far-off echoes of old joy rippled through them both, indulgences that seemed childish now: birthdays and Christmases, walks on the beach, lungfuls of mountain air.

Still shaking, Gabriel’s claws bit through the fabric of Jack’s shirt as he clutched at the meat of his upper back. He pressed closer and sank his tongue into Jack’s mouth, hot and demanding and just as infuriating as it had always been. A low growl rumbled in the back of Jack’s throat and he kissed back with equal hunger, nipping at Gabriel’s bottom lip. Their instincts grumbled warnings in the back of their minds. *Alpha. Too close. Hostile.*

The drug of Gabriel’s scent was already seeping into Jack’s veins, making him burn. His hips tilted forward to rub his semi-hardness into Gabriel’s through the fabric of their pants, the friction sending a frisson of much-missed pleasure through them both.

Jack knocked his hood off and cupped Gabriel’s coarse jawline, slanting their mouths together, kissing him like he owned him. Gabriel’s snarl blurred into their lips. The knifepoints of his fingers trailed dangerously over Jack’s ribs, surfed down his waist and gripped his hips, holding him still as he ground forward.

Jack exhaled in a rush, chest tight with want. He hadn’t been touched like this in so long. His hands stroked reverently down the sides of Gabriel’s throat.

And that’s when he felt it. The open wound, messy-wet and blood-warm, in the crook of Gabriel’s neck. Jack seized up in icy shock. Gabriel jerked backwards, breathing hard, and turned away to hide his face.

Slumped against the wall, Jack couldn’t move. Horror and heartbreak splintered his bones, coated his
organs with poisonous and heavy lead, pushed glass shards beneath his skin. Now he was the one shivering. How could Gabriel kiss him like that if—

“You—You have a new claim mark?” Jack croaked out, sounding destroyed.

Gabriel stiffened, frozen for a moment, indecision in every line and angle of him. Then, without a word or a glance backwards, he rejoined the shadows, vanishing into them in one slick motion.

Jack was left alone in the quiet night, numb and lost, mouth tingling, thumb bloody from the gory bite in Gabriel’s neck. His body felt sick with desire. His heart felt sick with something entirely different.

Chapter End Notes

Eyyyyy, we’re back! Who’s ready for more miscommunication and biting kinks?

As always, your comments and kudos sustain my soul <3
Surmise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jack didn’t remember biting him.

Even now, two weeks later, Gabriel could barely get his head around it.

It didn’t even seem possible. Memory loss was the only explanation. If Jack remembered their last few moments together at headquarters, he would know Gabriel would never – could never – let someone else overwrite his mark.

The irony balled heavy in his gut. He almost wanted to laugh, it was so absurd. Karma was clearly having a field day with him.

“You’re unusually docile today,” Moira mused.

“Nothing to say,” he grunted.

Her proximity was setting his teeth on edge, the rusty metal smell of her, the disagreeable scent of an antagonistic alpha permeating the air near the place where he’d slept.

He sat on one of the room’s twin beds, digging his nails into the luxe sheet covering the mattress. Moira’s equipment dominated the other, the pillows shoved to the side to make way for the complicated machines catching his heart rate and measuring the ratio of nanites to white blood cells, spewing out data that Moira examined with interest but never seemed to do anything with.

As Sombra had predicted, nothing of value came out of their meeting in Cairo. Moira had simply left him with a bucket’s worth of painkillers and a vague promise that their next appointment would be very exciting.

So far, however, it had been more of the same. Him sitting shirtless, barely able to keep himself in one piece, while Moira coddled her equipment.

His mark dragged itself open, his skin splitting like ripe fruit. The pain of it left him momentarily breathless. And the worst part was he knew it was just the beginning. The problematic claim triggered a wave of decay. Already agony was rippling through his muscles, his cells pulling themselves to shreds, trying to obey the pull of both the biological claim and the synthetic nanites. Eventually, the tug-of-war would favor the other side, reverse the decay and rewind all the damage, before starting all over again.

“I’ve some good news,” Moira said, mildly watching the blood drizzle over Gabriel’s bare collarbone.

“One of your illegal experiments actually produced a result?”

“One of my legal ones, actually.”

She’d been collaborating with one of the enormous pharmaceutical companies that held the globe in its palm. It amused Gabriel to no end that she had to don contacts and a wig to report to a 9-to-5, since it was evidently immensely irritating to her. But Talon wanted an inside man and Moira wanted the pharma company’s resources, so they conjured a new identity for her, one with illustrious
references and zero ethics controversies.

Her work with this company was apparently the reason she was in Zürich at the time of the explosion, rather than in her labs in Oasis, which was where he’d woken up.

When he’d finally come to, baffled and in excruciating pain, he was in her operating theater at the university. As he lay like a corpse, she told him with no shortage of glee that his survival was thanks to her. However, she refused to divulge how she’d managed to not only find his unconscious body in the wreckage but abscond with it. She was by no means a petite woman, but she certainly wasn’t strong enough to carry him by herself.

Even Sombra didn’t have an answer to that one. It made him uneasy.

He didn’t believe for a second that it was a coincidence that she’d been in Zürich. However, his physical health was in her hands and the mercenary Reaper had no reason to care about the demise of Overwatch or Jack Morrison. So, as much as Gabriel wanted to rip Moira’s limbs off until she confessed to knowing in advance about the explosion, Reaper had never commented on it.

“The lab is in the final stages of producing a drug for Hendry-Worden Disease,” she was saying. “All that’s left to do is have the FDA and whatnot sign off on it.”

“The genetic disorder?”

“Yes. What do you know about it?”

“What is this, high school science class? It’s a disease that causes the body to heal claim marks like any other wound, so the poor suckers who are born with it can’t form claim bonds.”

“Correct. This drug is designed to stabilize the relationship between an affected person’s neurological and physical functions in order to induce the body to recognize and accept a mark.”

“But it’s not a cure.”

“We’re decades away from that.” Moira huffed irritably. “But we’ve made a previously untreatable condition manageable. Provided the person maintains the prescribed regimen.”

“And you think it’ll help with…” Gabriel gestured to his gory mark.

“I know it will,” she replied, pulling an orange medicine bottle from her pocket. “I used samples taken from you to develop it.”

“I didn’t give you permission to do that.”

“I didn’t ask,” she chuckled.

She held out the bottle with such smugness that Gabriel was tempted to smack it out of her hand. The pills rattled against the plastic as she wiggled it. He snatched it from her with a glare.

“Take two a day.”

He studied the bottle as she began powering machines down and packing her things away. At length, he cracked it open and swallowed his dose, washing it down with a chug of water.

“Not going to thank me?” She taunted.

“I don’t thank people for temporarily fixing problems they caused.”
“Mind yourself. You’ve only got one month’s worth of pills there. And you never know when the supply might run low.”

“You’re planning on sabotaging production?”

“Not in the near future but, yes. Though it’s hardly my idea. Akande wants people to rely on this drug and then cut them off. Thinks it’ll sow more chaos, all those mated couples and packs torn apart.”

Without quite meaning to, Gabriel found himself baring his teeth. She regarded him coolly.

“Oh, don’t fret. I’m sure the council will make sure you’re looked after.”

The threat was clear as water. She may have developed a way to ease Gabriel’s pain, but she’d also placed a collar around his neck and handed Talon the leash.

As soon as she departed with all her equipment, Gabriel yanked open a window, eager for her lingering scent to dissipate quickly. The fresh air coming in off the lake surrounding them was soothing and cool, but Gabriel instantly missed perpetually hot Cairo.

Because spring was back for another round and Gabriel knew it would be a bruising one.

Coming from Los Angeles and its temperate climate, Gabriel hadn’t really felt the full dizzying impact of spring before joining the military. Before that first year of training, in the mountains, he’d always assumed people were exaggerating the effects the season had on their hormones, using it as an excuse for stalkerish behavior or a trope to spice up movie plots. Even now, the unpredictability it sparked, not only in others but himself, fanned his anxiety.

He stalked through the large, empty rooms of Château Guillard, ostensibly supervising the team of Talon agents preparing for the upcoming mission. Crates of weapons and communications equipment were stacked on priceless pieces of furniture, staining the vintage upholstery. Not that the current owner cared.

Widowmaker was curled like a cat in one of the armchairs, staring into space as she sipped a glass of red wine as regularly as a screensaver. A mostly empty bottle of Merlot stood on the table next to her, dripping onto the old wood.

Gabriel had to compartmentalize a great deal to shelve the tornado of reactions he had to her presence, her familiar but corrupted scent. She was emblematic of everything that had gone wrong with Overwatch. A woman they had not only failed to save but had allowed a terrorist organization to turn into a living weapon. Who then murdered Gérard, a man Gabriel owed his life.

More than once, Reaper had imagined killing her. Out of revenge. Out of mercy.

He wondered what Gérard would want. He wondered what Amélie would want. Not as who she was now, but as who she used to be. Before Talon had disabled her mirror neurons and indoctrinated her with their ideology. Gabriel recalled a graceful and confident omega who listened more than she spoke. She was often mistaken as demure, but the times when she did choose to speak revealed an incisive sense of humor and sharp analytical mind.

Gabriel turned away from her before the past overwhelmed him and busied himself with the logistics of the mission, letting the afternoon dissolve into inventory assessments and strategy refinements and alternate approaches.

Despite his low expectations of Moira’s promises, he noticed the pain slowly draining from his
system. Within five hours, his claim mark had sealed closed and was holding steady. An unmoving scar once again. Unsurprisingly, Gabriel’s first impulse was to find Jack.

But Jack didn’t remember biting him.

With a leaden heart, Gabriel concluded it was best to leave it that way. It would be safer for both of them. If Jack still thought their bond was broken, he was less likely to seek out Gabriel again. Gabriel wished he could believe their last encounter would be enough to discourage him permanently, but Jack’s stubbornness was hard to dislodge.

Gabriel had slipped up badly by seeking him out in Cairo.

It had been like sleepwalking. His primal instincts had been going ballistic over the wounds he’d given Jack, but he’d managed to ignore the roar building in the back of his head for two days. Then he’d found himself slinking through the city’s shadows before his brain even registered leaving his bed, his claim mark a burning line tugging him towards his mate, who was suddenly nearby. The blinding need to ascertain Jack was okay flickered on and off like a light in his eyes as his mark opened and sealed and healed, and then reopened and resealed and re-healed.

And then there he was. The smell and heat and strength of him. So close. Alive.

The pain had stopped the instant his skin met Jack’s.

Gazing out of one of the Château’s enormous windows, Reaper felt the contours of the pill bottle in one of his inner pockets. A grim gratitude for Moira’s timing washed over him, oily and cold. While the relief her drug provided may be another leash chaining him to Talon, it would also allow him to resist the tempting peace offered by Jack’s presence.

It’s for the best, Gabriel repeated.

With time, he might even believe it.

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“What’re you lookin’ at?” Ashe snarled down at the dismembered head of her butler, knocking off his tiny hat with all the maturity of a child denied ice cream.

The exhaust and noise from her Harley faded as McCree took it around the bend and vanished into a tunnel. The fumes dissipated in the desert air, still shimmering with heat despite the lateness of the afternoon.

A frown creased her face. Beneath the stench of diesel oil and sweaty bodies was something else. Something that didn’t belong. She turned to examine the slow transport that she and the other gang members had been tied to, and found a woman lounging with complete nonchalance against the pile of BOB’s limbs.

Ashe was fairly certain she hadn’t been there a second ago. She scrutinized the stranger, taking in the machine pistol holstered on her thigh and the extensive cybernetics, leagues beyond her own enhanced retinas. There was an air of burnt sugar about her. And marigolds.

“Hola,” she said with a wave of her purple fingernails.
Ashe’s sulky mouth morphed into a smile that was pure predator.

“Well, don’t you smell like sugar, spice and everythin’ nice. You here to babysit us or bust us loose?”

“That depends.”

Ashe fit her hat back on her head with a practiced motion.

“Fuck off.”

For a hot second, Sombra was actually speechless.

“Que?”

“You think you’re just gonna rock up and get me under your thumb with some deal because I mighta seen better days? Not interested.”

“You’re assuming you actually have the power to bargain?”

“There’s nothin’ you can offer me I can’t get myself.”

“Ah, right.” With a single hand, Sombra opened several purple-edged holograms.

Ashe spotted her mug shot and police record among the files, most of which were summaries of her family’s assets, liquid and otherwise.

“Looks like you could buy anything with this amount of money.”

Sombra looked pointedly at the gold trimmings and fixtures on Ashe’s outfit and weaponry, all of which were in fact real gold. And this was her combat gear. Wondering what the blonde would wear to a formal event, Sombra envisioned her in something slinky, like red silk, with an asteroid field of diamonds dripping down her back.

“I’ve got some spare change lyin’ around, sure. More’n enough.”

“What would happen if it were all to vanish?”

For the second time in less than two minutes, Sombra got an answer she didn’t see coming.

“Wouldn’t give a shit,” Ashe said with a shrug.

“Being broke would make it a little hard to post bail for you and your pack,” Sombra said after taking a moment to recover her wits.

“Hm.” Ashe smirked. “Diggin’ up the details of my inheritance ain’t much of a magic trick. That’s hardly all there is in my pocket though. I don’t know if you’ve noticed that the Deadlock Gang has a minor kleptomania habit. Not exactly a challenge to replenish our funds. And I would be mighty surprised if you could tell me exactly how much the gang has to its name.”

This was a challenge that Sombra had been expecting. One of the reasons Deadlock was such a slippery target for law enforcement was that it was notoriously offline. McCree had only managed to create a record of the tip he sent to Ashe thanks to his specific insider knowledge and plenty of elbow grease. Otherwise, the gang didn’t even do business by email. Untraceable phone calls or in-person meetings only. They paid in cash.
Why else would Sombra be sweating on a metal transport vehicle traversing Route 66 at barely 20 miles an hour?

While she didn’t quite have an answer to Ashe’s challenge (yet) and money was clearly something Ashe had never concerned herself over, Sombra did have one last trump card in her back pocket. She closed all the holovids with a sweep of her hand and an overdramatic sigh.

“Well, if threatening you didn’t work, I was going to offer you revenge on McCree, but if you don’t want to cut a deal with me, I guess I’ll be going.”

That did indeed get Ashe’s attention. A soft mechanical noise let Sombra know that BOB’s gaze had fixed on her as well.

“And how exactly would the likes of you help me with that?” Ashe asked, eyes narrowed.

“Easy. I know where he’s going.” Sombra paused for effect. “And I know who his mate is.”

“What?!” Ashe shrieked, the ropes binding her hands the only thing stopping her from launching herself at the other woman. “That goddamn cheatin’ lowlife son of a bitch! I claimed him when he was 17! We’re his family! Who the hell does he think he is? He can’t just replace us like that! He can’t just replace me like that! Put a bullet in his head? Fuck that, I’m gonna strangle him with my own two hands! After I make him watch me strangle his mate! That ungrateful piece of shit!”

One of the unconscious triplets stirred at her shouts. Some crows scattered in fright from the rooftop of an abandoned gas station. Despite BOB’s limited facial expressions, there was no doubt he was wincing.

Sombra just smiled. Finally, a reaction she was hoping for.

“Tell me where that bastard’s going!”

“I’m going to need a favor then.”

Ashe’s perfectly red lips turned down into a sulky pout that had Sombra noticing how lush they were.

“Why do I get the feelin’ the devil just challenged me to a fiddle contest?”

Sombra snorted. “Your soul wouldn’t be much of a payment for anything.”

“What the hell is it you do want then?”

Sombra’s smile widened. She loved when conversations got to this part.

“You have connections. A lot of them.”

“The back alleys of the world are a crowded place these days.”

“And you’ve done very well there, but I’m more interested in these.”

Sombra tossed a purple holographic cube into the air between them and a list of names popped out of it.

“You see, contrary to popular belief, not everyone has skeletons hiding in their closet. The people in the back alleys? They’re easy. They practically blackmail themselves. You wouldn’t believe how many friends I have. These people though…”

“There were business ventures and investments all flourished thanks to your grandfather and father. If you put on a nice dress and knocked on their door, they’d invite you in for coffee even if Deadlock was accused of genocide.”

“Hah! You gotta be kiddin’ me. Here I am expectin’ you to cut an arms deal and instead you’re contractin’ me to make nice? Surely, whatever you’re after would be easier obtained in a stick-up.”

“Not quite, chica. I’m looking for influence. I can beat it out of people myself, but you have a rather large basket of carrots that’s not doing any good just sitting there.”

“And what exactly are you lookin’ to do with this influence?”

“That, we can talk about later.”

“It’s gonna take some time workin’ down that list.”

“Good thing I know that McCree will be staying put for a while.”

“Gonna take all my willpower to be sweet instead of sour to these people. You want me to be on my best behavior, you’re first gonna give me time to rebuild BOB, because where I go, he goes.” She glanced around at the unconscious bodies of the other Deadlock members, a flicker of something soft in her expression. “And you’re gonna help me get the rest of my pack back to the clubhouse.”

“That can be arranged.”

With a clawing motion, Sombra dragged a few hexagonal purple keys into existence and typed into them. The transport slowed, made a K turn and began trundling back the way they came.

Ashe’s thumb and forefinger hooked under Sombra’s chin and Sombra found herself pinned by eyes as red as blood. The blonde took a deep, deliberate breath and held it in her lungs.

An unexpected fluttering kicked up in Sombra’s gut at finally having the entirety of Ashe’s attention on her. Ashe’s scent was unlike anything Sombra had ever encountered before, something dangerous and feminine, red roses soaked in gasoline.

“What are you, girly?” Ashe asked in a low voice.

She wasn’t referring to Sombra’s hacking of the transport.

It had taken years of experimenting with some very specific cybernetic adjustments, but Sombra had figured out a way to cloak the pheromonal components that identified her place in the biological hierarchy. It was useful. Not knowing where they stood in relation to her made people nervous. And people made mistakes when they were nervous.

“You know, it’s always the alphas who are most bothered when they can’t tell.”

“Leadin’ me to believe you ain’t one.”

“Guess you’ll never know.”

Once again, Sombra’s expectations were confounded when, instead of scowling, a look of glittering fascination crossed Ashe’s face.
Blue sparks flickered in the dark. His face stung, warm and wet with his own blood. The broken pieces of his hipbones scraped together. Gabriel’s hand was on the back of his head, cradling him close. Ash and acid in his mouth.

Jack startled awake from his nap, sweating from fire that wasn’t there, panting from pain that had healed long ago. The imagined smoke billowing into the back of his throat vanished as he pulled in long breaths of the necropolis’s dry, cool air. Ana’s equipment, dismantled and prepared for storage, surrounded him.

He couldn’t wait to leave this place.

He always grew more restless the closer he got to a departure, no matter the destination. It was this restlessness to which he attributed the dream. Now that Hakim and his associates’ operations had been taken apart and strung up for the Egyptian government to deal with, his brain had free range to smash memories and fantasies together while he slept.

Gentle footsteps broke the ringing silence. The light from Ana’s electric lantern preceded her graceful entrance.

“You look as though you’ve seen a ghost,” she said, placing down two bags of food.

“That joke is going to get old at some point.”

Between bites of falafel, they packed up the rest of her things. Jack retrieved the framed photographs of Ana with Fareeha and she took them without a word, a conflicted expression on her face. Jack doubted the relationship between mother and daughter would have been smooth sailing even if Ana hadn’t faked her own death. As soon as Fareeha hit puberty and presented as an alpha, they’d been at odds with one another.

Jack watched Ana open the backs of the frames.

“You think we’re the only two people on the planet who still carry printed photos around?” He mused.

“Doubtful. There’s value in keeping what you love off the grid these days.”

“Yeah.”

He remembered as a kid how quickly a virtual file could vanish: a click of a button, an ill-timed spill of water, hardware decay. The stack of photographs in the inner pocket of his jacket had weight, texture, a smell. Evidence of his values and choices and memories that he could hold in his hand.

“I still can’t believe you have one of Vincent though,” Ana chuckled. “I thought he was just a bluff.”

“Reminds me of the normal way of life I’m trying to preserve, what I’m fighting for, I guess.”

“You did a pretty good job talking about him enough during the war to convince us he was your mate. Was quite funny when I stumbled in on you and Gabriel.”
“Well, I thought Vincent was going to be my mate. He didn’t want me to enlist though, which more or less ended us. I told him I’d come back to him after the war, if he still wanted to try, but then biology changed the game on me. Meeting Gabe was like getting hit with a missile.”

The conversation fell into a lull and Ana stored her photos into her pack.

“At the compound,” she began, uncertain. “After he’d taken you down, Gabriel said you ‘did this’ to him. Do you—What did he mean?”

Jack frowned.

“I honestly don’t know.” His tone turned bitter. “Maybe that my leadership led to a building being dropped on our heads, which could have destabilized his condition.”

“Are you sure the mark isn’t yours?”

“I told you, it was fresh,” he said, inwardly recoiling. “Unless I bit him while you had me knocked out, it’s pretty damn unlikely.”

“Why would he seek you out then?”

“I don’t know, Ana. Some new way for Talon to torture me? Look, it doesn’t matter. We still need to go after him.”

“What happened to taking down Talon?”

“Same thing.”

“It isn’t,” she insisted.

“Either he’s a double agent and we help him. Or he’s not, and we abduct him and convince him to stop being a fucking idiot. He’s one of their biggest assets.”

“You think they’ll let Gabriel go? No one leaves Talon. They’ll kill him before allowing him to be compromised.”

“I won’t let that happen,” he said fiercely, that protect instinct flaring hot.

“Even if he’s not your mate?” She shot back. “Even if he hasn’t been your mate for a decade? Even though he might damn well be someone else’s mate now?”

Jack’s breath froze in his lungs. The truth in her words cut straight through him. He felt like he’d been physically struck. In fact, he wished he had been physically struck because then at least he’d be able to hit back. His fists were clenched so hard, they were trembling.

“Jack, how much are you willing to let him hurt you?” She asked softly.

A terrible hollow cracked open below him, sinking him into that pit of rage and heartbreak and self-hatred he skated on every day, unable to look down even though the ice was splitting under his weight. His eyes burned. His claim mark felt like the scar it was. Pathetic. When at last he spoke, his voice was rough with emotion and exhaustion both.

“I can’t give up on him, Ana. I can’t. I’ve got nothing left if I do.”

The silence of the tomb crowded into them. Pity flooded into her sad gaze. Instincts itching at exposing weakness to another alpha, Jack returned to packing her surveillance equipment. She joined
him and sealed the last of her belongings away in a dusty corner.

“Has your research told you where he’ll be next?” She finally asked.

“No,” he admitted.

“Okay. Then why don’t we focus on dismantling other known Talon associates the way we took down Hakim? If we’re enough of a nuisance, Talon will send Reaper after us anyway. We’ll kill two birds with one stone.”

“Fine.”

“Pick your target.”

He thought for a minute.

“Talon have been bolstering the Omnic gangs in Paris, supplying them weapons and resources for undermining the police force. We should focus on attacking that network. I know it extends as far as Kraków, likely further.”

“That’ll bring us closer to Gibraltar,” Ana noted. “If we’re operating out of Europe, it’s pretty unlikely that Winston won’t notice us.”

“Europe’s a big place. We can decide later how close we want to get.”

“You really don’t want to regroup with them, do you?”

“What’s the point? Reintroducing Overwatch into the mix isn’t going to change anything for the better.”

“On that, at least, I completely agree with you.”

Jack zipped up his bag and grimaced in sudden realization.

“What?” She asked, slinging her duffel over her shoulder.

“Just... Paris in the spring. Ugh.”

Ana winced.

“We’ll buy nose-plugs on the way,” she said.

Chapter End Notes

I retconned Vincent in! Because my anxiety over correct lore details was whiny. I don’t think I’m going to be able to wedge Gabriel’s family in anywhere though lol Not that there are many details there anyway.
As always, thank you so much for your kind kudos and comments! It's really amazing. I never expected this fic to get so big <3
Angela tried not to grimace as a fifth (sixth?) elegant raspberry tart was placed in front of her. The first one had been heavenly, but now her stomach cramped in protest. Nevertheless, she dutifully picked up the delicate silver fork and took the smallest nibble she could manage.

Genji was in stitches.

“I could poison it, if you prefer,” he snickered, bravely taking a bite of his fifth or sixth croissant.

Their gluttony was the price of retaining a coveted outside table at Pâtisserie Galand. Tourists waded through the streets like bathing hippos, broad and glistening with sweat, pushing towards the riverfront for their photos in front of Paris’s most iconic structure. The Eiffel Tower loomed, an alien invader over the city.

But that wasn’t the view Angela and Genji were here for.

Sipping what felt like her hundredth cup of tea, Angela’s gaze nonchalantly landed on the police station.

“The shift change seems to have finished,” she murmured into the rim.

“Roger!” Tracer’s voice piped through their concealed earpieces.

The late afternoon sun was eyewatering. Angela had a wide-brimmed hat, but Genji just squinted through it. Experience had taught him that with his visor and face mask on, many people couldn’t differentiate him from an Omnic. While not usually an issue, in Paris it seemed that cyborgs were far more welcome. He’d even donned jeans and a polo shirt, since the less they were noticed the better.

Unfortunately, that also meant eschewing sunglasses.

Unattached alphas practically lived in sunglasses for the entirety of spring to avoid accidentally indicating permission to approach to hopefuls captivated by their pheromones. But the fraught emotion of the season drove some alphas to grow agitated when betas and omegas hid their eyes. They’d often take it as a challenge, a sign of impudence, as though ‘lower’ brackets were trying to avoid showing proper deference.

Genji felt a pang of nostalgia for his teenage days in Tokyo, when one of his favorite spring pastimes was to hit the town in gaudy high-fashion sunglasses, wait for some drunk alpha to pick a fight and then beat them into the ground. Not exactly the most mature of hobbies, but damn satisfying.

Several times during this stake-out, Genji had had to grit his teeth and force himself not to get involved. Once, when an aggressive alpha female kept grabbing an omega male’s ass despite his objections and then followed him down the whole street. Again, when a young female beta was slapped by her alpha husband for glancing at another alpha. A third time, when a rotund alpha male actually approached their table to snarl something about them both being betas and wouldn’t they prefer a real mate?

Genji hadn’t understood the man’s words, but Angela had shot back a tart retort in perfect French that had the alpha cursing at them over his shoulder as he walked away.
The worst of it was how much people excused this behavior as normal, natural, just alphas being alphas. But alphas with true power and real confidence didn’t need to harass others to demonstrate their dominant status. Genji recalled the quiet but fiercely respected presence of his mother, who never raised her voice but whose orders were obeyed without question.

“You seem to have something on your mind,” Genji commented, noticing the distance in Angela’s expression.

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s me, isn’t it? I’m simply too charming.”

“‘Charming’ is one way of putting it,” she said with a teasing smile. “No, I was sent a strange package from Paris recently and I’m wondering if there isn’t some way to trace the sender while we’re here.”

“It wasn’t anything dangerous, was it?”

“Quite the opposite. It was a bottle of medication designed to offset the effects of Hendry-Worden Disease, which Novena Pax Medical will soon be mass-producing for the public.”

“But you don’t have Hendry-Worden Disease,” Genji said, forehead crinkling in confusion.

“A note came with it explaining that Talon intends to sabotage production at some point and that the sender wanted a trusted medical source to be able to duplicate the chemical formula. And also, for some reason, that the bottle contained a number of placebos. The real pills do, indeed, appear to have the described effect however.”

“Very strange. Did you decipher the formula?”

“Well, sort of. I don’t have the materials to replicate it on my own, but I discovered we probably won’t have to. I just wish I knew who sent me that package so I could tell them not to worry.”

“What do you mean?”

“The body is so fascinating,” Angela said, enthusiasm lighting up her entire face. “It wants to belong on such a cellular level. You could call it a biological imperative. Social security is just as vital to human survival as food and water, and much like the body will adapt to need less food in times of starvation, it adapts in unexpected ways when unable to sustain a bond. What this medication does, the body should be able to do for itself.”

“Well, yeah,” Genji said, feeling enamored and outclassed, as he often did when talking to her about science. “Isn’t a disease when the body isn’t able to do what it’s supposed to?”

“Yes, but sometimes the body is its own worst enemy. Take diabetes, for example. Some people are born with it, yes, but some people develop it as a symptom of their lifestyle.”

“I thought Hendry-Worden’s was genetic.”

“It is, but I have a theory that some people suffering from it may be able to trigger the correct biological response to a claim without even needing medication, like how some people with diabetes can manage or even cure their condition by adjusting their eating and exercise habits.”

“…You’re telling me you just casually devised a way to naturally counter a terrifying genetic disorder.”
“Well, I haven’t had a chance to really test my theory yet, but—”

“You are the most attractive woman on the planet.”

“We’re on a mission,” she protested, smiling into her teacup.

“We’re on a fake-ish date in Paris in spring. You can’t expect me to be completely immune. The heart of a man still beats inside me,” he declared, striking a dramatic pose.

“You don’t have to tell me that.”

“Awwwwwwww,” Tracer squealed straight into their eardrums.

“I hate to interrupt,” coughed Winston. “But I believe Thibault and his gang are making his move.”

Genji resisted the urge to glance up at the gorilla’s position on the roof, tucked amongst the district’s ancient chimneys.

“Wait, you can see that from your vantage point?” Tracer said, a hint of worry in her voice.

“Because I’ve got eyes on a grumpy number of Omnic coming in from the south as well.”

“It’s not just his gang,” came Echo’s tinkling voice. “Many of the Omnic are sporting Fils de Logique colors.”


“They formed an alliance just this morning.”

“Echo, how do you know that?” Winston asked. “You haven’t been out all day.”

There was an odd pause. Genji and Angela looked at each other.

“I’m – I’m not sure,” Echo replied at length, sounding confused. “I’m sure I’m correct though. It’s probable that I reached that conclusion by processing all the data I gathered over the past week.”

Echo had been performing reconnaissance within the Parisian Omnic community, getting a feel for their grievances and gauging how likely they were to act upon them. Knowing Thibaut, an Omnic with a spiky mohawk and a spiker attitude, had planned a large protest for this afternoon, several members of the newly-revamped Overwatch had stationed themselves in easy reach. The Omnic gangs were well-armed, as were the police, and tensions were high enough that either side were liable to disregard civilian casualties in pursuit of a victory.

“Widowmaker on site!” Tracer cried. “She’ll be looking to cause a panic! We’ve got to stop her!”

“Which means Reaper could be in the area too,” Winston said grimly. “All agents switch from Delta to Gamma positions. If Talon’s here, this will probably get really messy really fast.”

Genji stood and stretched before offering Angela his arm. They casually picked up the instrument cases at their feet that concealed the disassembled Caduceus staff and Genji’s katana. Strolling to their new posts, they looked like any other mated couple basking in the romantic atmosphere.

Though Angela was tensely anticipating the impending conflict, part of her couldn’t help a tiny sigh of relief at the opportunity to abandon that fifth (or was it sixth?) raspberry tart.
This wasn’t the first time Sombra had stayed in a five-star luxury hotel (since most people’s bank accounts were easy pickings, she was rarely short on funds), but it was the first time she was staying in one legitimately. The credit card that Ashe had swiped at check-in was linked to a completely legal account. It made Sombra feel like an imposter in a way that paying with stolen funds never did.

Ashe had no such reservations and appeared to be as comfortable here as she was on dusty Route 66. Her clothes were strewn about the suite with as much carelessness as if it were the Deadlock clubhouse, which meant the rooms were drenched in her metallic, floral scent.

It was exceedingly distracting. More distracting than the rumblings of the riot picking up in intensity on the street below.

Sombra steepled her fingers, elbows resting on the desk she’d transformed into her workstation, annoyed to once again find her mind drifting. She’d always sneered at the way spring reduced people to animals, slaves to their biological imperatives. Gabriel’s expression when she showed him the blurred footage of his mate had unsettled her more than any of the gruesome executions he’d performed.

Was she really no better?

The door unlocked. Sombra stiffened and refocused on her monitors, hating the way her stomach flipped.

“Your French is terrible,” Sombra said by way of greeting, not bothering to turn around. “Didn’t you go through twelve years of private school?”

She didn’t ask how Ashe’s lunch with one of her contacts went and Ashe didn’t report that her wealthy acquaintance had agreed to assist them. BOB had transmitted every word of the conversation to Sombra in real time.

“Well, pardon-ay moi,” Ashe grumbled, unzipping the back of her dress.

It was a girlish, pale green number that made the blonde look – dare Sombra think it – pretty. Ashe tore it off like it was on fire and kicked it away, far preferring just her black bra and panties to that virginal, garden party get-up. Sombra typed faster and expanded the satellite feed of Paris, willing herself not to be affected by the sudden rise of the alpha’s scent.

The large Omnic butler carefully settled himself into an armchair, folded his hands and powered himself down to recharge. Ashe poured herself a glass of wine from the lavish minibar and stood behind Sombra, taking enormous un-ladylike sips.

Eyebrow twitching in annoyance, Sombra tapped her earpiece with a long fingernail.

“Overwatch members on the ground and the roofs,” she reported, sounding bored. “Ten cuidado.”

“How d’you know that?” Ashe asked. “I ain’t seein’ ‘em on your feeds.”

Sombra clawed at the air and dragged open a holographic screen that showed a first-person view of another hotel room with surveillance equipment. Though both the furnishings and the gadgetry were much dingier than theirs.
“What the— You hacked someone’s ocular cybernetics?”

Before Sombra could decide whether or not to answer, the person whose eyes they were seeing through turned to the window, offering a reflection of a pale blue face with an insignia on her forehead.

“An Omnic I hacked years ago when she sweetly helped a little Los Muertos girl cross the street in Dorado.”

“Wait!” Ashe barked, leaning over Sombra and slamming down the empty wineglass. “I know that symbol! It was on the backside of that crate McCree wanted! Is he here?!”

Ashe’s voice was usually smooth as hot coffee but it boiled over into something harsh just as fast. Sombra suddenly wished she’d left her coat on. She risked a glance at the milky breasts pressed into her shoulder before answering.

“No, McCree’s not in France.”

“Goddamnit, woman. You gonna string me along ‘til I hit every asshole on that list?”

“That’s the plan.”

Perfectly polished nails trailed up both sides of Sombra’s exposed neck, startling her and sending a flood of heat down her torso. Ashe breathed in deep, her breasts heaving gently into Sombra’s back, and let out a pleased chuckle.

“I’m awfully good at messin’ up others’ plans,” Ashe cooed. “Seems like we got a lot in common. Maybe we should get to know each other a bit better.”

“Aside from a taste for asymmetrical haircuts, we have nothing in common, believe me,” Sombra snapped and stood to glare at Ashe in the face. “Some of us were true orphans, rich girl. Not just lonely brats.”

Sombra was a little surprised at her own vitriol. But the other woman just fluttered her eyelashes.

“We also both like skulls,” Ashe provided helpfully, pointing to her silver earrings, as though Sombra could have failed to notice the Deadlock’s winged skull tattooed on her forearm.

An alert flared loud and bright on one of Sombra’s monitors.


“Keep me updated on his location,” he growled into her ear. “We can’t afford a repeat of Cairo right now.”

“Copy that.”

Sombra was relieved to hear the resolve in his voice. She muted her side and then let out a very undignified “Oof!” when Ashe tackled her backwards onto the bed.

“What the hell are you doing?” Sombra yelled, trying to shove the alpha off.

BOB opened one eye, observed his mistress was in control of the commotion, and returned to sleep mode.

“Just because you’re in heat doesn’t mean—”
Sombra stopped short at the expression on Ashe’s face. It wasn’t one of lust. Those blood-red eyes were cold with anger.

“You work for Talon,” she hissed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t lie to me. I know who Reaper is and I know who he works for. And I do find it mighty strange that the message you’ve had me hawkin’ to all the gentlefolk is about buildin’ up an empire to compete with Talon for resources.”

“What do you care?” Sombra spat.

“I can’t stand traitors. Loyalty is everythin’ in this world.”

Sombra laughed. “Loyalty? Dios, alphas really are blind sometimes. Loyalty is a one-way street in this world. Those with power demand it and those without power are forced to give it. Why would you think those without power would have any reason to value loyalty? They’re not being protected or rewarded for it.”

“You tell me what you’re up to or I’ll take you out right now, revenge on McCree be damned.”

“That’s all you care about, isn’t it?” Sombra sneered. “Chasing thrills and getting your way. The world is just something for you to play with. You don’t even see how much of a wasteland it is for everyone else.”

“So, what? Not my job to play nurse mother.”

“Not even to your pack?”

“That’s different,” Ashe scoffed. “They’re my pack.”

“Those triplets have kids, you going to look after them too?”

“Of course.”

“Think that’ll be easy in a world run by gangs and syndicates?”

“Depends on the strength of your gang.”

“Yeah? How long until that strength runs out? How long until one of your rivals has a good day and wipes half of your pack out? McCree betrayed you despite your claim mark. What if someone else in your pack decides their odds of survival are better without you?”

Ashe bared her teeth and snarled down at her, but Sombra knew the blonde had no real comeback.

“Listen, amiga,” Sombra continued. “The Crisis created 30 million war orphans, right? Where’d most of them end up? In gangs or criminal organizations that continue to tear each other and the world into shreds for their own gain. But most of those orphans are adults now, no longer reckless teenagers or angry twenty-somethings. A handful of them might be living profitable lives, but most are getting tired of the lack of stability and the everyone-out-for-themselves mentality. They’re old enough to have their own packs and their own children, and the thought of defending the people they love from a world like this is enough to make them want a change. If we can offer an alternative syndicate, one that can play Talon’s game but improve rather than destroy people’s lives, then Talon might be a less attractive option.”
Ashe frowned. It wasn’t the most illogical plan she’d ever heard. Sounded like a mighty tall uphill climb though.

“What in hell makes you think this will work? Talon’s everywhere. They already beat out Overwatch once.”

“Like I said, I have a lot of friends. And I know people in Talon who have defected. The council sneers at packs, bonds, mates – thinks they’re weaknesses. Doomfist is so obsessed with the idea that human strength comes from conflict that he’s dismissed even the possibility of strength coming from connections. And while there are sociopaths who agree with him, the average person just wants safety, to belong, to feel loved.”

“That what you want?”

Sombra held the other woman’s intense stare for as long as she could, then looked away with a blush before muttering: “Everybody needs a family.”

Ashe blinked in surprise, her heart clenching at the familiar sentiment. She took a long breath, tasting Sombra’s unusual scent on her tongue. It was so different from anything she’d ever encountered before, the odd cleanliness of it tangoing with the bite of burnt sugar and marigolds. She’d been writing off her urge to keep inhaling it as fascination with this scent scrubbed of hierarchy pheromones. But Ashe didn’t think she’d be able to keep pretending that that was the reason. Not when Sombra was pliant and soft beneath her.

This girl she’d been thinking of as an adversary, an enigmatic obstacle between her and her revenge, had been shaped by the same icy loneliness she had. And Ashe knew firsthand that all the acting out and grand schemes and manipulation of others was just the grown-up version of a child crying to be picked up and hugged.

In the uncertain silence, Sombra felt a quiver of panic. She’d said too much, revealed too much. How could she be so stupid? Ashe was still studying her with the single-mindedness of a predator. Sombra knew she had to meet the alpha’s eyes if she had any hope of maintaining their power equilibrium, but she was afraid of what she’d find if she did. She couldn’t trust herself, the way her body was responding to their physical closeness and to the miasma of spring. If she caught a glimpse of lust or kindness in Ashe’s gaze, Sombra couldn’t trust herself not to offer her neck or tell Ashe every last thing about herself.

Sombra let out a shaky breath when a gentle hand ran through her hair, brushing it away from her face.

“Yeah,” Ashe said quietly. “Everybody does.”

Another alert rang out from the computer. Soldier: 76 was nearing Reaper’s position.

Sombra meant to squirm out from under the other woman and notify Gabriel, but Ashe’s warm lips pressed a kiss into the corner of her mouth. Then, the other corner.

That dangerous, flowery scent Sombra had been steadfastly ignoring rushed over her senses like champagne bubbles. Those warm lips fully met hers, sweet and soft as they coaxed Sombra’s mouth to open into the kiss. Ashe’s fingers, with their gun calluses and French manicure, stroked over Sombra’s cheekbones in such a way that had Sombra tilting her face upwards, wanting more contact. *Needing* more contact.

Ashe’s tongue danced against hers, teasing her, light grazes that stoked the fire burning underneath
Sombra’s skin and the ache between her legs, until Sombra nearly whined in impatience. When Ashe finally deepened the kiss, sinuous tongue diving into Sombra’s heated mouth, Sombra arched into it with a moan, clutching at Ashe’s bare waist, unable to get enough.

The alert, like everything else on the planet, faded into the background.

---

“Duck!”

Jack obeyed before his brain fully registered Ana’s command. The limp body of an Omnic hurtled over his head and struck a police car with a sickening clang.

Panicked civilians stampeded in all directions, the smell of fear rising in a toxic mist. Tracer zipped around like a border collie, trying to shepherd them to safety. For a second, Jack was tempted to help her, to heed the call of protecting the innocent that he’d followed for so much of his life.

But his job right now wasn’t to babysit.

Using the mob as cover, he got behind two Talon grunts and slammed their heads together hard enough to crumple them to the ground.

“Trying to save ammo?” Ana asked through their comms. “Or is this your version of therapy?”

He could hear the smirk in her voice, but the tank of an Omnic lumbering towards him gave him an excuse not to answer. He rolled under the left hook aimed at his head.

The picturesque streets with their cobblestones and cafes had been reduced to chokepoints and cover. Ana pinned down the Talon operatives in the crowd through her rifle scope and Jack nullified them as quickly as possible. They may not have been in time to prevent this brawl from occurring, but they could at least make sure the conflict stayed between the local gangs and the police instead of morphing into the bloodbath Talon wanted. The agents of Overwatch seemed to have similar goals. He caught Tracer and Mercy throwing curious glances his way, but fortunately the fray kept them from getting too close.

He gave no outward sign of recognizing them.

Before the scuffle swallowed the streets, when Ana had noted Overwatch’s presence from her rooftop perch, they agreed that identifying themselves would just make this harder on everyone. But staying uninvolved was trickier than they’d anticipated. Jack couldn’t punch out the Talon gunman aiming a rocket launcher at Winston. Just like Ana couldn’t resist sleep-darting the police officers who had cornered Genji, clearly mistaking him in his battle gear for an Omnic.

Ana’s breath caught in alarm. It was barely a gasp, but it was enough to spike Jack’s heartrate. The sound of a gunshot came through his earpiece.

“Ana? Status?”

“I’m fine. Amélie’s here,” she reported, the faintest ripple of nervousness in her normally rock-steady voice. “Took a shot at me, but I got behind cover in time.”
Jack snarled out loud and his fist met a Talon agent’s face with far more force than necessary. Ana had been practically his packmate and was one of the most competent people Jack had ever met. That Talon could shake her confidence lit up his entire being with fury.

“Where is she?” He growled.

“Top floor balcony of the hotel on the river.”

“Copy. Sit tight, Ana.”

“She has a grappling hook. She’ll swing to another vantage point before you get halfway to her.”

“I know a few people who can move faster than me though.”

“No. Do not engage with Overwatch. We agreed, remember?”

“What do you propose then?” He growled.

“Stick to the plan. I’m going to relocate and…”

“And?”

She let out a short, incredulous laugh. “I just won this round of ‘Where’s Reaper?’ You owe me fifty credits. Head towards your 6 o’clock, away from the square, back towards that escargot restaurant.”

Eagerness propelled Jack in the indicated direction, his primal brain howling, wanting to give chase. But he wasn’t completely blinded by his instincts.

“Ana, get out of Amélie’s line of sight,” he ordered, spinning behind a corner to avoid a spray of gunfire. “I’m not losing you again.”

“I’m already on it,” she assured. “You’ll obviously need me around to bash some sense into Gabriel’s skull. He went into the apartment on your right.”

Jack slammed his way into the lobby, not even needing Ana to guide him as that deliciously familiar scent led him up a staircase to the third floor. He was just in time to see Reaper leap off the balcony, dissolving into smoke as he landed on the cobblestones and reforming as he took off, shoving through a huddle of panicked civilians.

“Damnit!” Jack swore, tearing back the way he came.

The jump was just high enough to be dangerous. It wouldn’t kill him, but he’d almost certainly fracture a few bones, which would slow him down far longer than taking the stairs. He flew out onto the street and waited a few agonizing seconds until Ana spotted a dark figure entering Cabaret Luna at the end of the lane.

All senses on high alert, Jack pushed his way through the cabaret’s polished doors. Usually half-empty at this time of day, the cabaret’s little stage was quiet and dimmed. The establishment was filling up fast though, the people who’d come here for an afternoon drink quickly becoming outnumbered by people looking for shelter from the riots. Lit by antique pink lanterns and modern red lights, they huddled together and eyeballed Jack with fear.

A few of them glanced to their right, where a small bar was located, and Jack moved in the direction with his pulse rifle raised. A staircase was blocked off with red velvet rope. Jack stepped over it.
“Following his scent upstairs,” he intoned, keeping his voice and his footfalls quiet.

“He should still be in the building. Several military vehicles just raced by. One of them had a giant EMP affixed to the roof. It might be large enough to knock out our comms.”

“Then I’ll meet you at the rendezvous point at the agreed time.” A door was kicked in. “Checking the dressing rooms.”

In the fading afternoon sunlight, Ana felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise.

On instinct, she dropped down to a lower roof, rolling to keep her momentum going, knowing danger was on her heels. Her blood pounded in her ears, drowning out the sounds of a scuffle coming through her earpiece. The corner of the brick chimney she dove behind exploded.

Jack’s voice growled: “You sure take to this villain thing easily, don’t you?”

Ana clattered down a fire escape, the metal structure shaking. The last thing she heard before a bullet buried itself like a hot poker in her shoulder was the sneer of Gabriel’s reply:

“And you sure know how to play boy scout.”

Chapter End Notes

#shamelessuseofvoicelines

Hope y’all are goddamned pumped for the next chapter because it’s gonna be a big one :D
Surrender

Chapter Notes

HOLY HELL YOU GUYS 10,000+ HITS WHAT ۶۶۶

I never expected this fic would get this big. THANK YOU!!! I’m so psychotically crazy happy that so many people have read and enjoyed this story <3 <3 <3

Very excited that we’ve finally arrived at this chapter! Thanks a million times to everyone who’s stuck with me all the way up to this point! Your comments and kudos have been so amazing. ۶۶۶

Ana hunkered down on the fire escape, trying to staunch the bleeding in her shoulder. Already lightheaded, she jammed the last of her biotic darts into her thigh, taking the edge off the pain. Despite the incapacitation of all Omnic in the area, panicked noise still rose from the streets below. No doubt Talon was keeping the fire going.

She needed to contact Jack, but static in her ear alerted her that she’d been right: the police EMP had been powerful enough to knock out their comms. The rendezvous point was a 20-minute walk, a journey she wouldn’t dare attempt until she ascertained Amélie’s position. Though Ana could still barely believe it was that quiet omega hunting her, her survival instincts only cared about extricating herself from this situation.

A glimpse of the sophisticated recon visor Amélie wore like a crown dissuaded Ana of the notion that the approaching evening would provide any cover. She decided to make her way down to the street and take her chances by getting lost in the crowd, but she’d barely staggered to her feet when an elegant motion caught her eye.

Swinging on her grappling hook, Amélie landed on the roof opposite with the grace of a ballerina and the menace of a spider. A dark smile on her face, she lined up her shot at a leisurely pace, and Ana knew there was no escaping her sights.

Dusk was settling over Paris, lavender and lovely and flush with spring breezes.

Ana stood as tall as she could, staring her own death in the eye.

I’m sorry, Fareeha.

"Got a thing for rooftops, ey, luv?"

Amélie spun, firing from the hip, but only hit a blink of blue energy where the chipper British voice had been.

"For being able to travel backwards in time, you’re not a very good learner,” Amélie said, her ladylike French accent twisting into a jeer.

Tracer’s giggle echoed as she again blinked out of the spray of bullets. The sound of her laugh summoned a lump of nostalgia into Ana’s throat.
“What makes you think this will go any differently than London, ma folle chérie?”

Tracer abruptly appeared in front of Amélie, only a few meters separating them.

“Brought a friend or two,” Tracer chirped.

Amélie snarled and fired again. Tracer blinked out of the way again. But this time, a katana sliced through the space she’d inhabited, the blade singing as it caught one of the bullets and deflected it back towards Amélie faster than the eye could follow. The sniper howled as the projectile buried itself in her chest, the force knocking her off her feet.

Ana watched, agape, wondering if Overwatch truly meant to end Amélie’s life.

Angela appeared like some holy creature, the Valkyrie suit’s wings glowing in the deepening dusk. She landed in a graceful kneeling position at Amélie’s side and got to work. Winston bounded over the rooftops towards them, carrying Echo in one large arm. He set her down and she too focused her attention on the bloodied sniper, crafting hard light restraints with her bare hands.

A few minutes passed. Then all at once, the tension drained from the Overwatch agents as Angela and Echo pronounced Amélie medically stable and securely bound. Winston lifted the struggling Frenchwoman, needing very little force to hold onto her thin frame.

Genji caught Angela around her slim waist. His visor retracted and he unabashedly nuzzled into her neck.

A faint smile graced Ana’s lips, remembering the wounded and angry young man he had been.

Burbling happily over their successful capture, the group appeared to have forgotten about Ana’s presence. If she was going to creep away, it would be best to do it now. Her shoulder pulsed and a shockwave of pain tore a harsh breath from her lungs. She wasn’t much of a medic, but she knew enough to know when blood loss tipped over into the critical stage.

Angela could patch her up in no time. All Ana had to do was call out to them, this youthful and terrifyingly hopeful iteration of Overwatch.

Ana felt her age, how her very bones ached for rest, the bleeding bullet wound. She wished she had the Bastet mask she’d worn in Cairo. Or any mask. After the visor she wore as Shrike broke, she hadn’t gotten around to obtaining a replacement. Foolish of her. She ought to have made it a top priority.

Still hesitating, Ana wryly wondered if she was actually going to let her own pride be the death of her.

She wouldn’t be the first alpha to do so.

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The old-fashioned dressing room didn’t stand a chance. Pulse fire shredded the fainting couch. Clawed gauntlets sent strips of wallpaper fluttering to the ground. A row of perfume bottles shattered, along with the full-length mirror. A fist went through a wall. A boot snapped a wooden chair leg like a toothpick.
They vaguely heard several cries of alarm from the hallway but neither Jack nor Gabriel cared, and pretty soon their heightened senses informed them the entire floor had cleared out.

Eschewing the arguments and demands each had shored up, arsenals with the other’s name on it, they grappled and hit and twisted and kicked, injuring each other in easier ways.

The weight of everything they weren’t saying clogged the air, a ticking bomb that went off when a particularly vicious backhand cracked Soldier: 76’s visor and tore it from his head, scratching his cheek and nearly taking his eye out.

Reaper faltered.

He hadn’t clearly seen Jack’s face up close since the day both their lives supposedly ended. The new scars and age lines and those fucking blue eyes sent a tremor through Gabriel’s self-control. His contradictory instincts strained on their leashes, snapping at each other, muddling his intentions. Though Gabriel had anticipated this, it was infuriating that Jack still had this effect on him.

God _damn_ Sombra for going AWOL and allowing this encounter to happen.

Jack took the tiny opening and tackled his opponent. Gabriel just barely managed to spin with the momentum, and he shoved Jack off of him with far less grace than usual. Jack crashed backwards into the vanity, smashing several light bulbs. The pulse rifle hit the ground. He immediately adjusted his stance and prepared to launch himself right back at Reaper.

“You just can’t let it go, can you?” Gabriel exploded, breaking their silence at last and making Jack pause. “You couldn’t stay dead and make my life easier. You just can’t accept that you lost in Cairo. There always has to be one more rematch, one more round to prove you can beat me even though —”

“You think this is about—”

“Just admit it. I’ve always been stronger.”

“And yet I got my teeth into your neck first.”

“Lucky for me, that turned out not to be a permanent problem.”

“C’mon, sweetheart, you can be meaner than that,” Jack goaded, his expression hard. “You’re a Talon grunt. Don’t they train you in mid-combat insults?”

“I don’t work for Talon. I’m a mercenary for hire. They hired,” Gabriel shot back, annoyed at himself for rising to the bait and defending himself.

“Must have been an easy transition from Blackwatch. No longer need to worry about those little ethical hang-ups when you decide murdering someone is the best solution.”

“Talon proved it was stronger organization and had the money to pay me for my skills. That’s all there is to it. Or are you still pretending the world doesn’t run on hierarchies?”

“I don’t think that’s the reason you’re doing all this. I think you’re saying that because it’s what you want me to believe.”

“You don’t know me anymore. You haven’t known me since the mark vanished. Really was pretty lucky. Wouldn’t have wanted to be swanning around a post-Overwatch world with its failed commander’s mark in my neck,” Reaper sneered, catching the left hook Jack aimed at his head.
“Glad you’re stuck with mine though. Makes you an awfully predictable opponent.”

“If I’m so predictable, why didn’t you finish me off in Cairo?” Jack bit out, twisting out of the grip. His knee caught Gabriel in the solar plexus.

“Maybe because I wanted an actual fight,” Gabriel coughed, sidestepping the next attack to catch his breath.

"Thought you were stronger than me and didn’t care for a rematch?”

Beyond irritated, Gabriel slammed Jack backwards into the wall and snarled into his face.

Jack laughed. This, at least, he understood – how he and Gabriel collided like a pair of stars, the weight and muscle and force, emotions boiling over, the taste of each other’s sweat and blood, their entwined scents spiked with adrenaline.

The claim mark in Gabriel’s neck chose that moment to split open, snapping agony through his bones and chewing through his already shaking muscles. Blood began seeping into his shirt. He cursed Moira for planting placebos in the bottle of medication she gave him, forcing him to send every pill to Mercy to guarantee she received some real ones.

He fought to stay solid and steady, leaning his weight into the forearm pinning Jack by his throat. He couldn’t keep this up much longer. This fight had to end. It had to end soon. And it had to end with Jack out of his hair. One way or another.

Gabriel summoned a shotgun into his other hand.

“How’s this for a conclusive rematch, then?”

The muzzle kissed Jack’s temple. Gabriel pressed harder into the hold as Jack struggled, cutting off his oxygen. When Jack bared his teeth, Gabriel didn’t know if it was a grin or a warning, a final taunt or a show of defiance. Their harsh breaths cut through the air. Jack’s eyes were cold fire.

“I win,” Gabriel stated.

"Not unless you kill me,” Jack spat.

In the pit of his stomach, Gabriel knew it was true.

Since Cairo, Doomfist had harbored dangerous doubts about Reaper’s loyalty to Talon. If Jack walked away alive from this encounter as well, those suspicions would be confirmed. And Jack would always reappear. He’d never let Gabriel go, no matter how terribly Gabriel wounded him. Killing him was the only way to safeguard everything he and Sombra had worked for, the only way Gabriel could continue playing double agent, the only way he could ultimately bring down Talon.

Gabriel’s instincts roared in his ears.

"You’re right.”

He pulled the trigger.

The shotgun blast was shockingly loud in the cramped dressing room.

The silence that followed stung like a wasp.

Gabriel stared at the hole in the wall next to Jack’s head.
Jack stared at him, his left ear ringing with a shot Gabriel couldn’t possibly have missed. A shot Gabriel had unquestionably intended to end his life with.

Jack’s gaze glittered, sharpened in realization and sank like a hook into the dark patch in the crook of Gabriel’s neck. A flash of memory crashed through Jack’s thoughts, the images familiar but hazy, like they belonged in a dream.

*His face, warm and wet with his own blood. The smell of sunlit seawater laced with death. The jagged pieces of his hipbones. Gabriel cradling him close, Jack’s wounded mouth pressed into bare skin. Ash and acid.*

"It’s mine," Jack breathed, hardly daring to believe it. "It’s mine, isn’t it? I bit you. Right at the end. Why didn’t you just fucking tell me?"

Gabriel shoved away from him with a vocal snarl and hurled the shotgun to the ground before stalking to the other side of the room.

Jack’s heart threatened to beat right out of his chest.

The claim mark in Gabriel’s neck was *his*. Gabriel was his. Gabriel had been his all this time, their bond resurrected as Overwatch crumbled to ashes around them, the bite somehow as broken as they were.

"You fucking asshole. Why didn’t you—"

"Do you just not get it?" Gabriel yelled. "You make me feel things I can’t afford to feel right now!"

In his agitation, he partially dissolved and reformed, the shape of him blurring to smoke and refocusing.

"Can’t afford to because Talon would use such a weakness against you or because they’d realize what you’re really doing?" Jack asked slowly.

"And what is it you think I’m really doing?"

"Taking them down from the inside."

Gabriel growled low in his throat. Glass crunched under his boots as he paced.

"Say that is what I’m doing. Why the hell would you think showing up and fucking with my plans would be a good idea?"

"Because you are going to get yourself killed."

"I’m flattered you think so highly of my capabilities."

"The odds are against you and you know it. I’m not going to just walk away. The only way you can stop me from helping you is to kill me and as you’ve demonstrated twice now, you can’t do that."

A vicious snarl tore out of Gabriel’s raw throat and Jack again found a shotgun leveled at his head. Jack didn’t even glance at it. His attention remained locked on his mate’s masked face.

"Let me help you."

"You are not an asset anymore, Morrison."
“You’re lying.”

“Your ego just keeps getting bigger, huh?”

“No, you’re just shit at lying to me. Let me help you. You don’t have to do this alone.”

Gabriel meant to retort that he had plenty of allies, but Jack sounded dreadfully genuine. The loneliness of the past decade broke over Gabriel’s head in a ragged avalanche. As much as he trusted and liked Sombra, she wasn’t his mate. She wasn’t hooked into his blood. She wasn’t who his body ached for night after night.

Gabriel’s shoulders sank. Hesitation held him hostage. He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know if letting Jack in would help or harm his mission. He was exhausted and wary, hopeful but mistrusting of that hope.

His instincts were, as expected, a garbled mess of resist mine fight take submit attack protect fuck and no help at all.

He was grateful the mask concealed the indecision no doubt plastered across his not-entirely formed face.

“It’s a bad idea,” Gabriel finally said.

Jack advanced closer. “We’ve always been a bad idea.”

The huskiness of his voice poured through Gabriel, hot wax over his soul.

When Gabriel didn’t retreat, Jack pulled off his gloves, dropped them to the floor and took another step forward. A bare hand reached out to hover over Gabriel’s shoulder.

"Gabe… Let me see?"

Gabriel clenched his fists, the chemical burn of anxiety and anger turning his veins to ice. He loathed Jack’s audacious invasion of space, his pushing too close, the infuriatingly few inches between them. And he was terrified that Jack would see the truth of what he was, pull away and never invade his space again.

After a long minute, Gabriel gave Jack what he wanted. He lowered his hood and took off the mask. He let Jack see how he had to wearily assemble his own face, the tissue filling in his cheeks and forehead, the recreation of his scars and his grey beard, the struggle to shift his eyes from solid black back to their original color.

He waited for Jack to recoil.

If Jack was honest with himself, it was a far more gruesome exhibition than he’d been expecting. But it was still Gabriel. And Jack wasn’t going anywhere.

Gabriel allowed the nanites forming his black body armor to recede, the turtleneck morphing into a standard shirt and exposing the crook of his neck.

Like most alphas, Jack wasn’t very good at waiting for permission to approach and immediately moved in to better inspect the gory red mark.

Gabriel willed himself not to move as his instincts picked up a chant of hostile fight mate submit fuck retaliate. He knew how bad it looked, bleeding freely over his ashen skin, which was a far cry from
the healthy bronze complexion he’d once had.

Gabriel choked in surprise when a hot tongue lathed over the mark, careful and slow.

An almost-forgotten feeling of peace rippled through him, quiet and silvery and stunning. The pain began to drain from Gabriel’s limbs as his cells stabilized, the biological claim holding easy court over the nanites thanks to the close proximity of his mate.

The loving strokes cleaned the wound, soothing it as it healed closed. And Gabriel remembered how he’d craved this the first time Jack bit him, how in his fury and mortification he’d denied himself this aftercare, how he’d hated himself for even wanting it.

Had Jack been thinking rationally at the moment, he probably would’ve remembered that time too, but a primal urge had blanked out his mind, narrowing his entire focus down to caring for this most precious of wounds and keeping the person wearing it safe. He wouldn’t have been able to pull away from Gabriel even if the room was on fire.

The smoky winter scent of Jack’s heat rolled over Gabriel in a sudden rush, as though someone had flung open the oven door while his favorite meal was cooking, blasting him with the full power of its aroma. Gabriel’s mouth watered. Lights began glowing just that bit brighter, a cue that his eyes were dilating. He shouldn’t let this happen. He really shouldn’t. And yet he leaned into Jack like a starving man.

He felt whole again, unbroken for the first time in years.

As the claim mark returned to being an unmoving scar, Jack’s lapping slowed.

"Mine,” he rumbled in satisfaction.

Gabriel froze, the magnitude of what he was allowing to happen resounding through his mind, loud as a gong.

He couldn’t do this. Talon would hunt them down and kill them both.

But… Talon had tried before and failed. And this time, they only had their own lives to gamble with. Could they…?

Jack saw the desire and uncertainty both, and his mouth twisted into a familiar smile, rendered seductive and savage by the scars bisecting his face. He dragged down the zipper on his jacket and slowly tilted his head, blue eyes soft and heated.

Jack let them drift shut.

The yield signal was a burning hook behind Gabriel’s groin, tugging him closer still. His head bowed, the tip of his nose grazing Jack’s hairline, every breath sinking him deeper past the point of no return. This was his. This belonged to him. And he wanted it. Badly.

The claim mark he’d planted in Jack’s neck all those years ago was inviting him to taste it.

So, he did.

As his lips met the faded scar, a harsh whine caught in Jack’s throat. His jacket dropped to the floor, giving Gabriel more access and he gladly took it, pulling the fabric of the shirt aside. Neither cared that it ripped. Gabriel felt Jack’s pulse throb beneath his tongue. His hands wrapped around Jack’s slim waist, holding fast as he nipped and sucked.

Hungry for the summer seashore, Jack filled his lungs. It wasn’t enough.

Gabriel found himself hauled into a kiss that liquidated the remainder of his hesitation. Jack tasted the same, winter and whiskey and something unnameable. Their tongues curled around one another’s like greedy flames, devouring each other, pouring moans and emotion into each other’s lips.

They kissed for several long, aching minutes, desperate and deep, lost in each other.

Jack clutched at Gabriel’s shoulders, dragging Gabriel with him as he staggered back. His ass met the edge of the vanity table and his legs opened, letting Gabriel in, letting Gabriel pull them together.

Lust crackled between them like lightning as their erections met, hard and undeniable, through the fabric of their pants.

Mouths still fused, they rocked into each other, the coarse friction both a promise of what was to come and a fierce reminder of everything they’d been through together, everything they’d done to each other, every joy and agony they’d inflicted on one another.

The need for more rose up like a forest fire. Gabriel’s coat was dragged off as they panted into each other’s mouths, and began clawing at each other’s belts and flies and zippers.

Jack surged into Gabriel, almost attacking him, backing him into the wall, burying his hands between armor and skin, craving the contact, terrified this wasn’t real, that Gabriel would vanish. His heart slammed against his ribs. He needed to get closer. He needed Gabriel to be his again.

Gabriel’s hackles rose when Jack grabbed his shoulder and turned him. He automatically resisted, jerking an elbow into the body pressed into his backside, but his arm was caught and twisted behind his back. He began to wraith when—

"Yield," Jack growled, voice fraying at the edges.

The command rippled over Gabriel’s senses like cold silk, as seductive as it was jarring. Even as he clenched his jaw in vexation, desire was licking over his insides, flames pushing into every corner of him.

A long-ignored chamber of Gabriel’s heart fluttered. This had always been their song, their dance, and Gabriel knew the next line.

“Fuck you.”

Jack grinned, setting his teeth into the scruff of Gabriel’s neck and grinding his erection into the cleft of his ass. Gabriel’s knees actually went a bit weak.

Once again, Jack was tempting Gabriel’s body into acting against its very nature.

Gabriel had missed this.

For the decades they’d lived together as mates, Gabriel had gotten regular breaks from the exhausting biological impulse to always fight to be in the dominant role. He hadn’t realized how much he’d taken those chances for respite for granted until several months into collaborating with Talon, where

And now here was Jack, reaching straight past every damn layer of armor to pluck Gabriel’s heart from his chest and hold it in his strong hand with every intention of keeping it safe. For the first time in eight years, Gabriel could just… let go.

The trust and safety were as heady as anything.

Face flushed with want, Gabriel flattened his palms against the wall to signal his yield. Jack sensed his mate’s fight instinct go temporarily dormant and planted a lingering kiss on the re-healed claim mark. Goosebumps raced over Gabriel’s skin as calloused hands slid over his waist and into his clothes, dragging them down until cool air brushed his ass cheeks.

“You’re practically dripping for me,” Jack purred into his ear.

“Shut up,” Gabriel panted.

‘Dripping’ was a bit of an exaggeration. Alphas didn’t usually slick up enough to go in raw and they had usually supplemented with lube. There were exceptions. Like when one of them returned from a lengthy mission and their bodies were desperate to reconnect. Or if one of their heats hit like a tsunami in the dead of spring, when the drive to rut deleted every counter-impulse.

This was one of those times.

Gabriel swallowed in anticipation as the head of Jack’s cock notched into his slick hole, just barely nudging past the tight rim.

A breath.

And Jack pushed forward, sheathing himself in one smooth motion that had Gabriel’s back arching, mouth opening, shivers racing up his spine.

Jesus Christ. How could this feel so good?

Jack groaned through his teeth, every part of him singing at the sensation of being inside his mate again. It was like regaining the ability to taste after tasting nothing for a decade. Overwhelmed, he buried his face into the side of Gabriel’s head, losing himself in the closeness, the smell of him, the visceral beat of their pulses. Their connection was as scalding as ever, an ember clutched to his chest.

Gabriel made an impatient noise.

Jack pulled out, pushed in, slowly picking up the immortal rhythm of thrust and retreat. He moaned as he slid in and out of Gabriel’s tight heat, fitting in deeper the more Gabriel relaxed. Gabriel’s breathing shortened. He was stretched and filled, stretched and filled, until testicles brushed his perineum, soft and heavy and perfect. Strong arms caged him against the wall as Jack buried himself to the hilt on each thrust.

Gabriel hated it. He told himself he hated it. A part of him did hate it. Thanks to that relentless need to be in control that, as an alpha, he couldn’t get away from. Unless it was taken from him by another alpha. And fuck, could Jack take it from him. Every thrust drove it out of him, overrunning his instincts with boiling pleasure, until the only thing he was aware of was the thick weight of Jack’s cock fucking in and out of him.

Jack pressed kiss after kiss into his neck, gentle, even as his hips moved so gorgeously rough. He knew Gabriel’s body so well, what he wanted, what he needed, and he was aiming his thrusts just
Gabriel’s entire sense of self was drowning in the terrifying freefall of being taken care of, being protected, being loved. He canted his hips, pulling Jack in even more, as deep as possible, and Jack moaned, a raw, deep sound that Gabriel felt roll right through him.

Gabriel’s fingers dug into the wallpaper as the thrum of ecstasy began to build at the base of his spine. A warm hand wrapped around his cock, thumb smearing pre-cum over the sensitive crown before rubbing down the length.

Lights went off behind Gabriel’s eyelids and he hurriedly clamped his hand over Jack’s, stilling its movements and staving off his finish.

Chasing his own ecstasy, Jack relented and shifted to grip the top of Gabriel’s solid thigh. He pounded up into him harder, faster, until Gabriel was panting, trembling, eyes screwed shut as the sensations blasted sparks along his every nerve. Jack’s breaths were wild and fast against the nape of his neck, until that beautiful hitch, when Jack hit his peak and his entire body went rigid.

The euphoria of being filled with his mate’s climax was very nearly enough to shove Gabriel over the edge. Delicious frissons of pleasure zagged up his spine. He tightened his hold on the base of his dick even as he relished the sloppy heat spilling inside of him.

Jack juddered, overly sensitive, as Gabriel pulled off of him, cum trickling free. Gabriel turned in his mate’s arms to bring their mouths back together, kissing him slow and sweet and deep, drinking him in.

Clumsy on his feet in the aftermath of his orgasm, Jack stumbled when Gabriel nudged him sideways. He caught the edge of the vanity table, let himself be bent over it. One of Gabriel’s broad hands splayed on his lower back, while the other dug into the waist of his combat pants and briefs.

The smell of him was irresistible. It called to every cell in Gabriel’s body. Gabriel flattened his tongue against the base of Jack’s spent dick and licked a messy, torturous stripe up over his ball sack, smooth perineum and the pucker of his asshole.

Jack let out a ragged moan and tried to push back into the sensation, eager for more contact. His back muscles flexed and tensed beneath the hot palm holding him down. He was burning up, sated from before but aching still, the contradicting impulses of submit and resist almost painful.

"Fuck me," he growled, raspy and low.

He was slick but not as much as Gabriel had been, so Gabriel swiped at some of the warm liquid dripping down his own thighs. He rubbed some into Jack’s hole with two fingers and coated his cock with the rest.

They both groaned in heavy satisfaction when Gabriel breached him, connecting them again, continuing their dance with their roles exchanged. Pleasure erupted inside Jack’s body, the intensity whiting out his thoughts.

Gabriel was already so hard, so keyed up, he couldn’t hold back. He fucked in, slamming home over and over, bliss spreading into every part of him at the feeling of being inside Jack while he was still full of Jack’s climax. His vision blurred. He panted his mate’s name with every thrust, and Jack bucked up into him, uncaring of the soreness of being stretched so quickly. Soft, wet sounds filled the air.

Ecstasy roared through Gabriel with no warning and he came with a full-body spasm, clinging to right.
Jack’s hips as he pumped into him. Jack twitched and shivered at the scorching sensation of being filled.

Finally, finally, he was able to put aside all doubt that Gabriel was here and Gabriel was his.

Aftershocks sizzled through them, slow-to-fade ripples like sunlight on water.

Satisfied, drained and loose, they stayed tangled up with each other, even as Gabriel softened and semen drizzled warm out of Jack’s hole, an intimate mess to match the one he’d left in Gabriel.

Trembling slightly, Gabriel nuzzled into the space between Jack’s shoulder blades. Jack’s chest went tight with emotion. He nudged Gabriel backwards so he could sit up and turn to sink properly into his mate’s strong arms.

Gabriel hugged him close, a lump in his throat.

He knew he’d never be able to let Jack go again.

The way Jack was holding him, it was obvious he felt the same.

Though really, Jack had never let him go in the first place. Gabriel gripped the back of Jack’s neck and squeezed him tightly enough to hurt, trying to apologize without words, hoping it would be enough for now. They’d have to have a long, difficult talk later.

Night filled the room, wrapping the two of them in cozy dark. They eventually eased apart to fasten themselves back into their pants. No sooner was their outerwear back on than they returned to curl into each other, immersing themselves in each other’s scent and body heat.

Flecks of streetlight on the ceiling illuminated the trashed dressing room. A wooden chair lay in three pieces. They caught one another looking at it and exchanged small smiles, knowing they were both remembering the damage they’d done to Gabriel’s room at SEP the first time they fell into each other’s arms.

They knew they needed to leave, they needed to figure out their next move, but pressed into each other after so many years apart, it was impossible to resist stealing just one more minute.

The soft moment snapped as Gabriel suddenly clutched his head with both hands, forehead creased in a deep frown.

“What’s wrong?” Jack asked.

"I don’t know. I haven’t felt this bef—"

Jack caught Gabriel’s alarmed expression just before he dissolved into wraith form, smoke pooling on the floor.

“Gabe!”

Jack felt a presence behind him and whirled around with his fists up.

The shadow darted around him and the prick of a needle stung his neck. A toxin hit his bloodstream like sewage, festering and fiery, tilting the ground beneath him. He stumbled, falling to his knees, his vision sliding out of focus.

“A pleasure to see you again, Commander,” drawled a familiar Irish accent.
Just out of his reach, Moira stood like a vampire in the dim room, a poisonous smile on her face and a large steel case by her feet. It was emanating a high-pitched noise so high that Jack sensed more than heard it.

Struggling against his constricting esophagus, he could only shoot her a look of pure hate.

"A little experiment. This toxin is fatal for most, but I’m still calculating the exact dose required to finish off an enhanced soldier.” She gave a pointed look at the cloud of smoke. “You can guess why I’m interested in what it would take to fully incapacitate one of you. Especially now that it seems Gabriel will need some… retraining.”

Jack forced his stiffening, agonized limbs to move and dragged himself in between Moira and Gabriel. Every breath stabbed into his lungs like a knife, but he would die before he let her pass him.

Moira cocked her head, bemused at the token challenge. She snapped open the clips of the case, revealing two charged canisters, one glowing sickly yellow and the other a toxic purple. She flipped a switch with a slender finger and the canisters drew Gabriel’s nanites like a magnet.

Though he knew it was futile, Jack tried to grab at the silky flow of smoke. It slipped through his desperate fingers.

"Handy, isn’t it? A certain frequency will induce the nanites to return to their disassembled state and then, easy as you please…”

When the entirety of Gabriel was contained in the portable stasis field, Moira snapped the case shut and hefted it up with both hands.

Jack made another attempt to stop her, fueled by rage and love and violent despair. But darkness began swallowing his vision. His shoulder collided with the floor.

"Do look me up if you don’t die. I’d be fascinated to see how much the toxin damages you.” Her heeled boots clicked across the floorboards. “Farewell, Commander.”
Survivability

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The mess hall quivered with a nervous energy, everyone eyeballing each other. The SEP could have served them wax food for this first breakfast and none of them would have noticed.

As Jack crossed the room, his nose parsed through the sea of beta and omega pheromones to identify a total of fifteen alphas he’d have to settle with. Until they sized one another up and, if necessary, scrapped to determine who was stronger than who, the whole company would be slightly on edge.

— “Threatening me isn’t helping! Hand me that. I need to set up another infusion.” —

Jack had been low-key dreading this. He was here to become a weapon against the Omnic forces tearing holes in their country, not to get pulled into unnecessary hierarchy drama. Soldier 97, an alpha called Tartt, had already tried to bait him into a brawl and had subsequently blown his top when he failed to rile Jack up.

Before Jack could locate an open seat, another male alpha’s scent curled around him like a desert wind. A sudden fist of heat balled in Jack’s gut and he nearly stumbled at the flare of territorial rage. The intensity of it was like nothing he’d ever felt before. His gaze snapped up and locked with a pair of brown eyes flecked with gold.

— “His heart rate’s up again. Jack, can you hear me?” —

Jack wasn’t sure what he was more taken aback by: how immediately infuriating this alpha’s presence was or how utterly gorgeous he was.

“Gonna get out of my way, blondie?” The alpha sneered, already edging into Jack’s space.

Normally, Jack would have given the challenger a bemused smile and graciously stepped aside, a power play in and of itself implying that the challenge was beneath him. But before Jack had a chance to think, he found himself baring his teeth into the other man’s face.

“No,” he replied.

“Was hoping you’d say that,” the alpha said with a grin.

— “The toxin’s out of his system. There’s nothing else we can do except wait and see if he wakes up.” —

They spent the rest of the day getting in each other’s way, provoking each other, brawling with each other on and off the training mats. Neither of them could manage to establish dominance for more than one round. They traded victories back and forth, over and over, so they came back to badger each other, over and over. Though he wouldn’t show it, Jack was mortified at how quickly he’d devolved into posturing and insults. More than once, he’d even slipped into alpha headspace, surfacing from a fog of combative instincts only after the fight ended.

But, as annoying as it was to fend off Soldier 24’s challenges and to have his own challenges rebutted, there was something undeniably flattering about being singled out by such a powerful alpha. As Jack lay in his bunk that evening, eager fire coursed through his veins. Because they
hadn’t settled which of them was stronger. Because Jack had never had a real rival before. Because if Gabriel Reyes had been a beta, Jack might have claimed him right then and there.

The SEP barracks dissolved behind Jack’s eyelids.

His vision swam as he creaked them open and slammed them shut again, his head throbbing. Sandpaper coated his throat. His bones were water. Every one of his organs ached as though they had been individually punched. Flexing his fingers made them shake with exhaustion. Still, he could already feel his strength trickling back in, as his augmented body patiently rectified whatever had been done to him.

…What had been done to him?

His memory fluttered, trying to recall events in order, to pin down where he was and what had happened to—

“GABE!”

Every muscle screamed as he launched himself upwards. Needles stung his skin as the IV lines caught and snapped. The tang of antiseptics and blood. Blurs of white and gray rushed by. Orchids. A female beta cried out. Cold. The floor was ice under his soles.


“I got you, sunshine.”

Relief crashed down on Jack in buckets, but before he could figure out exactly why, sleep stole him back into its arms.

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The next time Jack woke up, it was with less fanfare.

Primarily because the first thing his brain registered was Gabriel curled into his side.

Jack swallowed a hard knot of gratitude even as his instincts began their quiet buzz of discomfort at another alpha’s nearness. He blinked several times, his eyesight and his memory clicking back into place. The poisoned ache that had wracked him before had faded to a lingering soreness. The cheap blanket scratched at his naked skin.

Sitting in a foldable chair, Gabriel was hunched over his forearms on Jack’s bed and sleeping with the crown of his head pressed into Jack’s waist. He wore a black hoodie that looked painfully similar to the ones he always wore in the old days. Only now, Gabriel’s hair and beard were the color of iron. And cuffs were clamped on each of his wrists, chunky metal with blinking red lights.

Jack frowned and turned his head to examine his surroundings.

He was propped up in a hospital bed and hooked up to several medical devices, but he wasn’t in a hospital. The dark room was too quiet. From the window, he estimated it to be an hour or so before sunrise. Bags of liquid glowed in the dim footlights. Jack’s impulse to yank out the narrow tubes
connecting him to them was stymied only by Gabriel’s unguarded rest. Though his mate was unkempt and in restraints, he was whole, in one piece, his skin a healthier shade than it had been in the cabaret.

There was a crisp, orchid-like scent in the air and Jack realized he recognized it.

Angela Ziegler.

They were in Overwatch custody.

Jack’s brain was too exhausted to determine whether or not this was a good turn of events. The only thing he did conclude was that that faint shushing sound was likely the Mediterranean crashing into the cliffs of Gibraltar.

“Gabe,” he rasped.

Gabriel jerked awake, bleary and ready for the worst. Worry was evident in the bags under his eyes. But when he registered that Jack was conscious, the tension melted out of his shoulders.

“Do we need to go?” Jack asked.

Gabriel stared at him wonderingly, a desperate and undeserved joy filling his lungs.

For days, the drive to protect his mate had flared hot with demands and cold with despair as he waited, helpless. Gabriel knew between Angela’s expertise and Jack’s bolstered immune system, the odds of Jack recovering were good. But he also knew how insidious Moira was. With a pang, he recalled the bullets he’d fired into Jack’s back, coated in one of her toxins, poisonous enough to significantly delay their advanced healing.

It had crossed Gabriel’s mind that this would be suitable retribution, to lose Jack now, to have to watch him die after denying their bond for so long.

But Jack was alive. Alert, even.

“*Gabe. Do we need to go?”*

And he was already thinking of them as a single unit again. Even after years of neglect from Gabriel, even though Jack was minutes after returning from the brink of death, he was already taking it for granted that their next step would be together. Gabriel’s throat tightened, his emotions bright and sharp.

“Go?” Gabriel repeated.

“Do we need to get out of here before Overwatch wakes up?”

It took a moment for Gabriel’s frenetic mind to comprehend the question.

“We can if you want to,” he replied slowly. “No need to rush though.”

Jack relaxed, posture sagging as he canceled all preparations to flee or fight. Though Gabriel knew he didn’t deserve to, he stroked his hand up Jack’s neck to cup the side of his head. His heart constricted at the way Jack leaned into the touch in spite of how possessive the gesture was.

“Why are you cuffed?”

“Because I’m the bad guy,” Gabriel said, a glint in his eye.
Jack gave him an unimpressed look.

“They stop me from going into wraith form. Winston took no shortage of pleasure in reverse-engineering Moira’s tech to make them. She’s been gifted a pair, too.”

“Moira’s here?”

“And Widowmaker. Honestly, I don’t think Winston’s little band know what to do with themselves. Or more specifically, what to do with three Talon agents in their custody. They have some vague rehabilitation plans for Amélie, but they didn’t seem to like my proposition of gouging Moira’s eyes out.”

“Shame.”

“Only reason I’m not also in a holding cell is because you’re a terrible patient and couldn’t get it through your thick skull that you were the one who needed to be rescued, not me.”

“What happened?”

The playfulness drained out of Gabriel’s demeanor. His fingers, threaded into Jack’s hair, shook a little. The chair squeaked as he stood to press a long, sweet kiss into Jack’s mouth. The low beeps of the heart monitor quickened.

“Ana,” Gabriel said at last, sitting back. “She got Overwatch to go after us. Mercy stabilized you, kept you alive. The rest of the strike team managed to overwhelm and subdue Moira. By the time they figured out how to operate her portable stasis field and let me out, Tracer had already flown us all here and they’d crafted some insurance for themselves.” Gabriel held up his wrist with a faint smirk, but it also faded. “You were out for nearly a week after Mercy leached the toxin from your system.”

“Which brings the number of times she’s saved my life up to what? An even dozen?”

“Thirteen,” came a voice. “But who’s counting?”

Angela widened the sliding door with a tired smile on her face. Experience and fatigue hung about her thin frame, the past ten years sitting just as heavily on her shoulders as theirs.

A slew of emotions churned inside Jack, nostalgic fondness cut with newer resentment, the kindhearted woman he remembered marred by the statements she’d made to the U.N. after Overwatch’s fall. This had been a large part of the reason Jack and Ana had decided not to answer Winston’s recall. Too much history between them all. Too many apologies they’d have to make. Too many apologies they felt they were owed. So much doubt and expectation, fair and unfair.

But Gabriel had said there was no rush.

“Hey doc,” Jack rumbled.

“You’re an ass,” she said, examining the monitoring equipment. “Is it an alpha thing? Pretending to be dead so you can take on the whole world by yourselves?”

“Might be.”

“It’s stupid.”

Neither man put up a defense. Angela ran through a list of questions about how Jack was feeling and
withdrew the intravenous tubes, knowing how fast they became unnecessary for the SEP enhanced soldiers. When she finished, the conversation broke off into an unsure silence.

“And you, Gabriel? Your condition is still stable?” She asked.

“Condition?” Jack echoed.

His grip on Gabriel’s hand grew tighter and tighter as Gabriel summed up the situation. How Jack’s bite had reestablished their bond but come into direct conflict with the nanites woven into Gabriel’s DNA. How his neural pathways couldn’t sustain both at the same time, sending his cells into a perpetual cycle of decay and rebirth. How the mark would heal and reopen. The agony. How Moira developed a drug for Hendry-Worden’s that managed the symptoms. Talon’s subsequent plans for halting production, leading him to send his pills to Mercy.

“But you said that if Jack lived, I might not even need the medication Moira developed. Why?”

Angela sighed, her gaze on the pre-dawn sky out the window.

“I have a theory,” she finally said. “I’d hardly want to promise anything. Claim marks are an inexact science and much of how our brains process them is still a mystery. Besides, Moira’s work is an enormous x-factor. But, Gabriel, you noted that your condition stabilizes when in close proximity to Jack, which suggests to me that your body does instinctively favor the biological claim. I hypothesize that, if we can further strengthen the presence of the natural claim, the nanites will defer to it rather than challenge it.”

“Which would involve…?” Gabriel prompted.

“We might be able to trigger this more permanent solution if Jack marks your other claim point as well,” Angela said, pointing to the unbroken side of Gabriel’s neck.

“Just…bite him again?” Jack asked with a frown. “That’s it?”

Neither alpha had ever heard of anyone laying two claims on the same person. It was as redundant as getting a piercing twice in the same place. There was simply no point.

“Again, this is all theoretical,” Angela emphasized. “We’re working under a very unique set of conditions here. You’re both alphas. You’ve been genetically altered by the SEP and, for Gabriel, by Moira as well. And you have a reinstated bond created after the first one ceased to exist. Even one of those factors would make the outcome challenging to predict. We have zero precedent to operate from. I can only tell you all the possible outcomes and then advise you to consider carefully before proceeding.”

“Well, that’s a refreshing change from being treated as Moira’s guinea pig, at least,” Gabriel said. “Skip ahead. What would the absolute worst outcome be?”

“…This might nullify Jack’s claim entirely, the second mark cancelling out the first, as it were.”

Jack and Gabriel went dead still.

A regretful expression stole over Angela’s face as she continued to explain.

“If that did happen, it would likely still result in Gabriel’s condition stabilizing, as it would put him back where he was just after Moira first altered you and the claim vanished. But it would also likely prevent Gabriel’s body from ever accepting another claim mark. The human body is only meant to be able to process one or two in a lifetime. The fact that Jack’s second bite stuck, even in part, is
astounding. Though as I said, just about everything about this case is unprecedented. I can’t guarantee anything.”

“So…” Jack started, heart beating cold in his throat. “What you’re saying is, if I give Gabe a second mark, his health will probably stabilize, but my claim might cease to exist again.”

“It’s a distinct possibility.”

“Forget it,” Gabriel snapped out.

“It’s your health, Gabe.”

“It’s completely manageable if I’m near you.”

“And what if something happens to me?” Jack insisted, gesturing to the hospital equipment he was surrounded by. “I’m not a young man anymore. One of these days, I’m not getting back up. And you can’t tell me you think we’d be able to stay within a few feet of each other at all times without killing each other.”

Gabriel lurched to his feet and began pacing in the small space, growling in soul-deep frustration.

The sound prickled Angela’s primal brain, her beta instincts warning her to get out of harm’s way. She’d treated enough grouchy alpha patients that she’d learned to ignore such impulses, but in this case, she agreed with them.

“Please talk it over and consider everything carefully,” she urged. “I’ll get someone to bring you breakfast.”

Silence followed her exit. The viscous stillness of early morning lay dense around them.

“She said before that she could recreate the medication that Moira developed,” Gabriel said. “I’ll just stick to taking that when we have to be physically separated.”

“And if Talon sabotages the resources required for production?”

“We’ll deal with that when it happens.”

“Gabe, Talon knows you’ll be relying on these pills. I’m not letting them have any more control over you.”

“And I’m not letting you suffer under an unrequited mark again. I nearly— You almost— I’m not losing you now.”

“What? You were trying to kill me until a few days ago. You almost did.”

“I only tried because I knew I couldn’t. But I needed to convince you and lot of other people that I could. I played the hand I was dealt. I did what I had to do.”

Jack rolled his eyes, unsure how much either of them believed that.

“And I’m sorry! Okay?” Gabriel bit out. “I…”

Unable to articulate it all, he sat down on the edge of Jack’s bed, fists clenched on his thighs as he glared a hole through the floor. He felt nauseous, the unfairness of it all knocking him off-balance. Gabriel took a few hard breaths before speaking again.
“You’ve always been braver than me. With all this. You bit me first. And when I demanded you ask me to bite you back, you did it. And then, the mark vanished and I didn’t let you fix it. I let you down and shoved you away. But you stuck by our bond anyway. Even as I…” Gabriel swallowed. “Just, let me be brave this time. Let me actually prioritize us over me. For once.”

Jack scooted his stiff muscles forward, shoving the scratchy blanket aside, until he could loop his arms around Gabriel’s torso and sit with his bare chest pressed to his mate’s back. The contact soothed them both.

“I was only brave because it was you,” Jack rumbled. “And, no.”

“No?”

“I don’t exactly have a habit of letting you win. You want to stop me from giving you a second bite, you’re going to have to actually stop me.”

Despite the challenge in Jack’s words, his tone was soft and loving, his body language serene as he ran his lips over Gabriel’s ear. Gabriel clasped the forearm across his chest, combative instincts worn and ragged. They’d been fighting for so long. The last thing Gabriel wanted was another brawl.

“You might as well let me bite you now,” Jack continued, pausing to kiss an earlobe. “Otherwise, you’re going to have to be on guard every single minute you’re with me. Or you’re going to have to leave me.”

Gabriel’s eyes closed, that last sentence sending a sour twinge through him.

“You would make being self-sacrificing into a competition,” he said, beyond tired.

“Anything I’m winning is a competition,” Jack said, planting another kiss in the tender junction just below Gabriel’s ear. “Besides, you tried to kill me. You owe me one.”

Gabriel abruptly stood, breaking free from Jack’s hold, and stalked over to the window. He leaned against the frame to stare out. The faintest hint of the sun gilded the horizon.

Jack examined the rigid outline of his lover’s back, at a loss as to what to do. He didn’t want to fight Gabriel to land his bite, like the first time. But there was no way in hell he was letting Gabriel suffer that agony if he had the power to stop it. While the possibility of losing their bond again was an icicle through the center of him, it was nothing compared to the thought of Gabriel in perpetual pain.

A few minutes passed, hollow and echoing. Gabriel spun back around.

“I’m giving you another mark too, then,” he said. “So that we’re equal. Whatever happens to me happens to both of us.”

Jack paused. He liked the sound of that but was reminded of Moira’s arrogant offer to put him through her enhancements. A shortcut to free him from his broken bond with Gabriel. He’d turned her down flat because he couldn’t stomach the idea of eradicating all evidence of their relationship, had still treasured it despite the heartbreak. But this was different. This wasn’t a cheat code to undo what had been done. It was a chance to move forward with the past and their marks intact.

Plus, Gabriel would never let him bite unless he agreed. Their eyes locked and Jack nodded.

Gabriel approached him again and caught his mouth, pouring everything into that kiss, tipping Jack’s head back with the force of it, stealing the breath from them both. He flowed into Jack’s arms like the seawater he’d always smelled like. Jack moaned, his voice pure gravel and gunsmoke.
“Wait!” Jack said, pointing to the end of the bed. “Sit. We are going to do something we should have done thirty years ago.”

Gabriel gave him a curious frown, tempted to disregard the order and kiss Jack into being pliant, but he complied, sitting cross-legged on the mattress. Jack sat up straight and squared his shoulders in what was no doubt meant to be a serious gesture, but only really directed Gabriel’s attention to the delicious lines and hard scars of Jack’s torso. His gaze trailed down the ridges of his abs to the penis Gabriel knew as well as his own, soft and plush against a thatch of pale gold hair.

Jack cleared his throat and Gabriel refocused.

“Gabriel Reyes, what are your plans and expectations for this mateship?”

“…Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“Well, my plan is to fuck you raw and my expectation is that you’ll enjoy it immensely even though your instincts tell you not to.”

“You’re a dick. We are having this pre-bite conversation whether you like it or not.”

“You first, then.”

Jack scowled in irritation as he considered.

“I want to spend the rest of my life, however short it’s going to be, at your side, destroying Talon and whoever else was behind the fall of Overwatch. I’m expecting you’ll watch my six while I watch yours. That you’ll do your best not to die. That you’ll actually talk to me honestly instead of concocting ridiculous lone ranger double agent schemes. That you won’t lie to me or hide things from me. That you won’t leave again. Even if our bond does biologically break down.”

Gabriel slid his fingers through Jack’s.

“See? Braver.”

“Your turn,” Jack insisted.

“I can’t just say I second that?”

“No.”

Gabriel spent a few moments organizing his thoughts, rubbing a thumb back and forth over the back of Jack’s hand.

“Well, I do more or less second everything you said, about tearing down Talon and watching each other’s backs and preferably not dying. I would like a chance to rebuild what we had, but it’s hard for me to lay out my expectations that you’ll stay with me if our bond is severed again. I want you to, but you…deserve to leave if you want.”

A suspicious stinging began in Gabriel’s eyes. He turned away, afraid of what might erupt out of him. The last time their bond broke, Jack had been unable to see past the faulty biology, unable to believe that Gabriel could love him without their pheromones stitching them together. Gabriel wasn’t sure he could handle that again.
“I’d just like you to at least acknowledge that I love you even without the bond,” he said. “I’ve loved
you from the first week I met you. Nothing’s ever changed that. Though I know I didn’t exactly do a
good job of proving that after the mark disappeared.”

“I didn’t exactly do a good job of listening,” Jack admitted quietly, drawing Gabriel’s attention back
to him. “I can’t guarantee how I’m going to feel, but I’ll try to believe what you tell me.”

Jack brought their joined hands to his mouth and sank a reverent kiss into Gabriel’s knuckles.

“I’m sticking by you no matter what this second bite does,” Gabriel said, force behind his words.
“Even if it does something weird like turn you into an omega.”

Jack let out a laugh. “Bet you’d like that.”

“Eh, not as much as you’d think.”

“Oh no?”

Jack relaxed the muscles in his face and widened his eyes, giving himself an air of innocence in spite
of the white hair and scars. Tilting his head and blinking, he slinked forward, spine arched to show
off his ass. He flicked a glance up through his eyelashes, as though hoping for permission.

Gabriel gave him a dark, hungry look. Jack crawled into his personal space with the silky
movements of a cat and nosed up beneath his rough jawline. He peppered it with shy, supplicating
licks that made Gabriel’s dominance-wired brain preen.

As he nuzzled the tender skin, Jack could feel Gabriel’s pulse rushing, could smell the sharp uptick
of his arousal, could hear the breath stuttering in his lungs.

“Please, alpha,” Jack whined, keeping his voice as breathy as possible.

Gabriel shuddered. Greedy desire snapped inside him, a hot clench in his groin. His instincts purred.
He ran his hands over Jack’s shoulders and down his sides, smiling, because he knew that as soon as
he hauled Jack into his lap, a perfectly normal expression of dominance an alpha would show their
omega—

Jack seized up with a snarl and the press of bare teeth threatened Gabriel’s jugular.

—that adorable submissive act would evaporate into something far more alluring.

Even as he froze at the danger, Gabriel’s heat spiked with twice as much force as before, setting off
hot sparks of want inside them both. This had always been the fun part. The challenge and
uncertainty. The whip of the unknown. The blend of threat and mate.

He groaned as Jack’s tongue ran a long, wet stripe up the vulnerable column of his throat.

“Bad omega,” Gabriel huffed. “Challenging your alpha like that.”

“Bad alpha, getting turned on by it,” Jack countered, smirking.

Energy drained from Jack’s limbs all at once and his eyes slid out of focus. Closing them, he leaned
his forehead against Gabriel’s shoulder.

“Jack?”

“Just woozy. Need to crash for another few hours at least. And then eat something.”
Warmth flooded Gabriel’s chest. Unlike the coy, needy pet Jack could play as, this exhaustion was real vulnerability. And Jack trusted him with it. Gabriel wouldn’t trade that for all the obedient omegas in the world.

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Chapter End Notes

Stay tuned, folks. It's a double episode! I'll have the epilogue up in an hour ;)

Hanzo had pictured this reunion with Genji an infinite number of times. He’d recited the unworthy apologies and feeble promises he could make. He’d imagined every demand for retribution, every accusation and insult that could leave Genji’s mouth. On some level, he’d hoped Genji’s sword would finish the arc it had made towards his throat in Hanamura.

Genji had been laughing for four minutes straight.

Hanzo was counting. It was all he could do to keep his facial expression neutral as his miraculously alive younger brother doubled over, wheezing. The hangar echoed with his guffaws. Leaning against the still-warm transport ship, Agent Tracer observed with raised eyebrows.

“Hey now, it ain’t that funny,” Jesse grumbled.

“You’re going to strain your vents,” Dr. Ziegler warned.

An amused smile nevertheless graced her lips. Though Hanzo knew he had long forfeited the right to approve or disapprove of anything in Genji’s life, he was impressed by Angela Ziegler. She carried herself with the type of self-assurance Hanzo usually attributed to alphas. Intelligent and attractive, she would be an outstanding match for anyone.

Genji had now been laughing for five minutes straight. Tears streamed from his eyes and dripped off his carbon fiber chin, but at long last, he calmed down enough to listen.

“I know I will never be able to redeem myself,” Hanzo said in Japanese. “My apologies will never be enough. But please believe it was never my intention to seek any form of contentment. I know I don’t deserve—”

The giggles started again.


“I will understand if you insist I forfeit the pleasure of a mate’s presence. However, for Jesse’s sake, I implore you do not ask such a thing. I will accept any other punishment, but it is my burden to bear, not his. I can only apologize that I allowed my instincts to drag me into such a sordid situation. I was not in my right mind when I—”

“This is amazing!” Genji blurted out, reverting to English.

Hanzo stared at him, flabbergasted. Jesse gave him a thousand-watt grin.

Genji had, of course, been informed of the situation prior to their arrival at Watchpoint: Gibraltar. But it was one thing to read about the mateship in an overly formal, tediously long letter from his brother, and another thing to actually smell Jesse McCree all over him.
After the ambiguous note their last encounter ended on, Genji had been wary of the power dynamics involved with seeing his brother again. As much as Genji believed Hanzo wanted redemption, Hanzo was an alpha who had never had to check his natural tendencies. You deferred to the heir of the Shimada-gumi or you died. Those were hard habits to unlearn. Even now, Hanzo was subtly trying to control the situation, to guide the conversation in a direction he felt it ought to go.

But Hanzo had taken Jesse McCree as a mate. Jesse, who had zero respect for hierarchy, natural or otherwise. A beta who took specific joy in pissing off alphas. A man who put justice ahead of his own life, again and again.

Maybe there was hope for Hanzo yet.

Genji squashed another wave of laughter, even as he marveled at the feeling of being on completely even footing with his elder brother.

“Well, I’ll let you two do your own catchin’ up,” Jesse said, cracking his stiff back. “Lena, you gonna show me what’s what?”

The brunette beamed at him. In a blink of blue energy, she was at his side, sliding her arm through his.

“C’mon!”

Jesse felt Hanzo’s eyes follow them to the staircase and turned to give him a wink before stepping through the door. Safely out of sight, Lena pawed at Jesse’s serape.

“You’re a damned pest,” he laughed, trying to hold it in place.

“Show me! Show me!”

He let her tug aside the fabric and pulled his collar down to reveal the half-healed crescent, placed with absurd precision over the older claim scar.

“Oooh, Jesse’s got himself a new alpha,” Lena teased. “Bet you obey this one better than your last.”

“Hush your mouth. Jesse McCree obeys no one.”

Lena giggled and blinked up several steps. Jesse began climbing after her.

“Heard Amélie Lacroix was on base,” he said in a more sober tone.

“Yeah,” she replied softly. “Angela and Zenyatta have been trying loads to get her back to herself but no luck so far. It’s got to work eventually though, right?”

“If anyone could do it, Angie could. And our resident zombies?”

“Captain Amari’s the same as ever. I’m feeling for poor Fareeha, though. They’ve not talked much despite being within a few meters of each other every day.”

They emerged onto the third-floor catwalk and entered an office in need of dire dusting. Jesse paused, staring through the wide windows at the second hangar bay below. Lena blinked back to him and followed the line of his gaze to where a figure in black clothes was elbow-deep repairing the engine of a small shuttle.

“Wish every reunion was gonna be as easy as seein’ you again, pumpkin,” Jesse said, slinging an arm around Lena’s thin shoulders and squeezing.
She hugged him tight. They watched in silence as Gabriel continued tinkering with the shuttle’s left thruster. A holographic window hovered at his side. A video call.

“Probably having a chat with Sombra,” Lena supplied. “Bloody brilliant, she is. She’s been a right help these last few weeks. Talon think we’ve Reyes hostage, same as Moira and Amélie. We sort of are, in a way, with those cuffs restricting his movements.”

“Talon’s really buyin’ that?”

“Sombra’s been feeding them lines about how Reyes is trying to gain our favor to play double agent for them.”

“Can we trust either of them? Seems to me we could be handin’ Talon exactly what they want.”

“I know it’s tricky. But I really do believe they’re on our side.”

“And Jack? Are him and Gabriel…?”

Lena hesitated.

“That… might take more time to explain than we’ve got right now. Winston’s waiting.”

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“You’re not much of a mechanic,” Sombra commented. “Says a lot about the state of Overwatch that they’ve put you on this task. Dios mío, empty the goddamn combustion chamber.”

Gabriel chuckled and followed her instructions. Despite her exasperation, she was clearly enjoying the opportunity to boss him around.

“The council is buying it,” she said smugly. “If they start getting suspicious, you might need to break Widowmaker out to reassure them of your loyalty, but we’ll burn that bridge if we come to it. Pictures of their star mercenary cuffed and forced into miserable manual labor should keep them convinced for now.”

Gabriel snorted. “Ashe still hellbent on getting revenge on McCree? He’s arriving today. I’m wondering if I need to warn him.”

“Not so much. She’s…a little distracted these days.”

“Is she, now?” Gabriel asked with a grin.

“Cállate,” she muttered.

Gabriel refrained from teasing her further.

He’d fully expected her to hate him when he chose Jack and Overwatch over their plot to take down Talon from the inside. But her newfound feelings for Ashe had softened her criticisms. She got it now, how one person could mean that much, how the world could pale in comparison, how your every blood cell could scream for every one of theirs.

It helped that the reincarnated Overwatch had proved to be an adept ally. Gabriel was reminded of
the strike team during the Omnic Crisis, a ragtag group jerry-rigging their eclectic talents together into a surprisingly effective force. Between their peacekeeping and Ashe’s sweet-talking of the moneyed gentry, Sombra’s plan to build a benevolent rival to Talon was gradually starting to take shape.

The shuttle’s thruster back online, their conversation wound down. Gabriel wiped his hands of propulsion fluid and they said their goodbyes before he returned to the barracks for a proper shower. Dressed in fresh clothes and no longer reeking of engine oil, he checked his communicator. Jack hadn’t responded to his last message.

He scowled, but then noticed the time.

The rain that had fallen during the day had dwindled to a few surly clouds, but the metal staircase affixed to the exterior of the Watchpoint’s lookout was still cool and slippery. As he neared the top, Gabriel squinted into the salty breeze whipping over the lip of the roof.

Jack stood alone, gazing out over the white-capped waves, a dark figure in the honeyed light of sunset.

Once, Jack’s instincts would have alerted him to Gabriel’s approach, but now he didn’t notice him until they were practically shoulder to shoulder.

“Hey,” Jack rumbled.

It was still bizarre, appraising and engaging with each other without the bombardment of primal impulses.

It was just the two of them, no biological forces driving them together or apart. The attraction remained, that feeling of connection anchored in their blood, the faint pull of their scents. But it was quieter. As was the persistent tinny of alpha aggression they nursed towards one another. The urge to fight or fuck was no longer mindless. They could pursue the impulse or not.

The territorial compulsion to protect each other and fend off interlopers had also hushed from a demand to a suggestion. They could let each other go. Gabriel could choose to return to Talon, to continue his undercover operation with Sombra. Jack could choose to walk away from the man who had dominated his life for the past thirty-odd years.

They’d left their marks on each other, ragged scars, two old, two new. Now, they had to choose what those marks meant.

Gabriel closed his eyes and focused until he could feel the low thrum at the base of his skull that signified his mate’s presence. The newly peaceful resonance of it.

A moment passed.

Jack held out his hand.

Gabriel took it.
Ahhhhh, it's over T___T I'm all emotions right now.

This universe is a lot of fun to play around with though, so even though "Rematch" is finally done, I'm not eliminating the possibility of writing side stories, not only about Jack and Gabriel but the other couples as well. I'm already seeing visions of McCree torturing Hanzo. And Ashe and Sombra are awfully fun to bounce off each other, in all senses of the word.

But I seriously, wholeheartedly mean it when I say THANK YOU to everyone who's left comments and kudos. This fic was a one-chapter PWP, but kind comments urged me to keep going with it until it became this 69,000 word behemoth. So, never be afraid to leave comments on your favorite stories <3 It means the world to writers and you might just get more of what you enjoy ;)

Thank you for coming along on this ride with me! (万欧元 £)

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