Civic Duty

by Liquid_Lyrium

Summary

When Jesse McCree pulls jury duty—twice—for his writing personas, Hanzo will do whatever it takes to save the reputation of one of his favorite romance/erotica authors. Especially if it means that his favorite series on hiatus will return. The fact that he has feelings for McCree has nothing to do with his equations. Jesse and Hanzo will need to sort out fact and fiction between their accumulated identities.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Hanzo and McCree find out more about each other than they ever expected to.

Chapter Notes

It is here! It's time to post my Big Bang story! I had so much fun and Asticou and Metmarfil were both joys to work with! They really captured the spirit of the story well, and please make sure you look at their amazing art that they did (once it's posted)! I hope you all enjoy this ridiculous little story. I love Joel Morricone and novelist!McCree stories, and my trademark seems to be Treating a Dumb Idea Seriously. This story fits all of that perfectly.

Also if you want to see the artwork for where Jesse's other pen name comes from here is a link. You will have to decide if mid-20th century homoerotic fetish art is NSFW or not. (Hint: It probably is.) I was 100% remiss in not originally crediting my beautiful internet wife Frankenmouse with this particular idea since she threw that idea at me ages and ages ago.

HERE is the first of Metmarfil's illustrations for the fic

And HERE is Asticou's amazing work!! (Twitter version is HERE for you Tweeters).

Hanzo had been hoping that the mail bin would be abandoned by now. Even though the packaging was discreet, Hanzo preferred not to collect either of his subscriptions with witnesses about. One was a confectionery package stuffed full of timeless classics and new iterations on the sweets and candies he'd grown up with. The nearest Asian specialty market of any substantial size (or worth) was in Spain three hours away. It was a decent size store, but the selection of Japanese brands and products paled in comparison to the Chinese-based labels and offerings; a reflection of the local expat population the store primarily served. (No matter how much Dr. Zhou insisted, huangdou jiang and doubanjiang were simply no substitute for miso. He could forgive her this flawed opinion on the basis of her experience in Antarctica) There were several smaller stores within that radius, of course, but their stocks were even more limited.

While Hanzo was no longer the spoiled brat who had a trained and certified fugu chef on retainer, he still had preferences and certain labels he wouldn’t touch, even now. In practice it meant that some of his favorite brands simply weren’t available, and the distance to the store meant Hanzo couldn’t reasonably request them to stock certain items as he didn’t frequent it enough to merit such consideration. So while his favorite brand of white miso might be out of reach in a three mile radius, he could at least have his favorite sweets and junk food delivered to his door. Eventually. (The junk food subscription didn’t require refrigeration. It was an entirely practical decision on his part.)

His other subscription was a small data chip, chock full of fiction. It was an ingenious and dynamic
service. For a reasonable fee, an enterprising consumer could have stories sent to them in the form of a data chip. The data chips were a means of attempting to forestall piracy, and the company regularly changed the security and encoding features. Sometimes it took pirates two to three months to upload the data. Paying the fee for instant access was a good bargain as far as Hanzo saw it. More importantly, there would be nothing in his access logs that he had so much as looked at this material, and he could transfer the data to a screen reader that was completely separate from Athena’s networks.

That was worth any price.

Once downloaded, a subscriber could then browse the catalogue and rate the stories, and even subscribe to certain authors, publishers, or series. The service was constantly adjusting and curating the new offerings sent based on the reviews and ratings determined by a series of complex and—so far—incredibly accurate algorithms. Hanzo tried not to think about how, over the better part of a year, the tales he received had become more romantic, explicit, and had started featuring courageous cowboys and rugged ranchers far more regularly alongside the slice of life and costume dramas. He knew there was no way for his present company to know what was contained on the chip tucked snugly into the small package Hanzo saw in the corner of the bin, but it was enough to make Hanzo feel self-conscious.

McCree was holding two letters, one in each hand. Both prised open in unfurled, unremarkable trifolds, but from what Hanzo could see of the stamps, each one had taken a different path through different forwarding services and international stops before ending up in the anonymous drop box their mail was finally forwarded to.

McCree's wide mouth was pulled into a frown that made him look more like the gangster he was in his youth. Nothing like the warm smiles and disarming, self-deprecating grins that melted through even the steeliest defenses. The curve of Jesse's mouth that could trick the tightest of lips into revealing their secrets. This haunted look was a stony reminder of the man that used to inhabit his bones, the man who lived on the wanted posters, and it gave Hanzo pause.

“Something the matter?”

McCree looked up, startled. "Oh. Hey Hanzo. Didn't hear you, as usual,” he slapped the two letters together and folded them quickly.

“Bad news?” Hanzo delicately ventured a guess. The clumsiest of invitations. He was not like McCree who seemed to draw people in and spoke his mind—often without prompting. Some of it was partially due to culture and language certainly, but part of it was also having grown up making deals and being groomed to be a crime lord. Conversation was meant to be carried out in the most indirect manner possible with everything inferred. He had been taught how to use the fewest words possible and get the most in return—sometimes without saying anything at all. Everything had a veneer of deniability and promises were to be avoided at all costs. Had his family been more conventional he might have pursued politics. Being forthright was an invitation for disaster and death. Conversations without transaction held no value.

McCree’s expression soured further into a grimace, as if he didn’t wish to be having this conversation, but he sighed and unfolded the letters. “You could say that. Pretty bad. Time to get into crisis mode over here.” His mouth pressed into a line, which was a slight improvement over the frown, but not by much. Hanzo felt his stomach sink, and he wondered what terrible pronouncement McCree was about to utter. He didn’t think he’d ever seen the man so serious before. And, despite how wholly unconnected their lives had been prior to the recall and his brother’s extension of forgiveness, Hanzo felt full of dread; like McCree was about to declare
someone dead or missing in action.

“I pulled jury duty. Twice.”

Hanzo couldn’t quite believe what he had just heard. Not with the grim expression still on McCree’s face.

“No way?” he was fairly certain he could feel his blood pressure rising.

“Well, not me, my… personas I guess. Two of ‘em been called fer jury duty.” McCree scratched the back of his neck.

“This is a crisis?” Hanzo was enraged by this trivial—no, frivolous—concern McCree had him so worked up over!

McCree looked at both doorways into the storage room before rubbing his brow. “Hey now, keep it down, and believe me, it is. It’s Joel Morricone and Jorge Quaintance.” Hanzo felt a terrible twist in his stomach as he realized he had already downloaded and consumed Quaintance’s full body of work including (most recently) a sixteen-volume fantasy-western fusion series Riders of the Storm which had suddenly stopped receiving updates six months ago. This had kicked off rumors that the series had been abandoned by the author, but had never been confirmed to be such. Leaving readers such as Hanzo with hope that it might be picked up again in the future. He was still diligently subscribed to Quaintance’s work and had all of his prior series still downloaded onto his reader.

The irritation at the unresolved cliffhanger between Justice and his love interest for the past four installments, Ernesto, may have contributed to the charged anger that was simmering beneath Hanzo’s skin.

“It is jury duty. Don’t go. Crisis solved,” Hanzo crossed his arms to cope with the urge to rip open his package and dig into the konpeito included with every order.

“I’ll be sure to hire you on as my lawyer then, Shimada-san,” McCree frowned at him, and folded the letters up again, shoving them into a back pocket.

Hanzo rolled his eyes, “I have seen enough movies and news stories to know that it is trivial to get out of jury duty.”

“Yeah, a few times,” McCree rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. “Both these dudes have put it off enough that they’ve gotta show up at the courthouse. Ain’t gonna accept a call from me to get me out of it this time, not even a vid-call.”

“You are out of the country, surely they cannot insist.”

“They can,” McCree tightened his jaw. “Already paid the fines for Quaintance in the past, but I guess Morricone’s district don’t take half measures like that before rolling out the big guns.”

“The big guns?”

“If these guys don’t show up to at least explain why they can’t do their civic duty, bench warrants go out for ‘em,” McCree was pacing; it set Hanzo on edge. He felt like matching pace, covering the other half of the room. He crossed his arms instead, settling his weight further onto his feet, as if trying to root himself to the spot.

A pointless and personal act of resistance.
“That hardly seems like a disaster. I find it unlikely that two fictional men will be picked up by the police for questioning,” Hanzo lifted a brow, but McCree only seemed more upset. This was the closest Hanzo had ever come to seeing the easy-going man lose his composure.

“That ain’t the point! Alright fine maybe I gotta ditch Jorge, but Morricone… Morricone’s sacred he’s gotta stay clean! He can’t get in trouble ever,” McCree stopped and slammed his hands on the table in frustration. The ringing of his metal hand connecting with the table echoed through the room. “Not even a parking ticket, man’s gotta be pristine. He’s my—” McCree stopped short, and Hanzo felt his anger and annoyance uncoil at the truly wretched look of despair that crossed the man’s face after the seething anger slid away. McCree shook his head and spoke so softly Hanzo had to step in closer to hear him, “Morricone’s about the closest thing I got to a son. I need him… intact.”

The twist of McCree’s lips told Hanzo he didn’t need to comment on the poor choice of words. “To be frank, I am surprised the deadline for these summons have not passed, considering the route they took to get here.”

McCree laughed, bitter and without joy, “It’s coming on pretty fast. God. Same day, different states. The fucking odds.” The man pinched his brow.

“I am also shocked they haven’t pegged Jorge Quaintance as a fake name.” Hanzo was madder that he hadn’t figured out that Quaintance was another of McCree’s pen names, but Morricone and Quaintance were so… different. Not just in content but stylistically. He should have suspected at the very least. When McCree had one of the most… audacious prints by George Quaintance proudly on display over his bed. Where anyone could see it when the man opened the door to his room.

He and McCree had argued about it on several occasions. What terms were used generally depended on how much alcohol was involved. The most charitable thing Hanzo could say about the print was that it was obvious, gauche, crass, repellant, tasteless, a guest-deterrent, and tacky. Like most of Quaintance’s paintings. They were all the same, and the fact that a recurring theme in the man’s work were the nubile, muscled bodies of young men and cowboys—often lounging on serapes… How could I have been so stupid? Of course McCree would take the man’s name and publish gay romance and erotica under it.

Very good gay romance and erotica, unlike the trashy mid-20th Century fetish art the original produced.

“Hey, that ain’t fake. He changed it legal. There’s a paper trail and everything.”

Hanzo sighed, “Of course he did.”

McCree laughed, “Damn… I miss the old days. When Overwatch was legit these kinds of petty problems just would… Disappear.”

Hanzo leveled his gaze at McCree. “Why is this bothering you so much? The amount of risk involved by inaction seems tiny compared to your… reaction.” McCree considered his answer, seeming to roll it around on his tongue the same way he would roll a cigarillo between those lips. It certainly wasn’t an image that plagued Hanzo when he was alone. Or drunk. Or both.

“I might need to be them someday. And I don’t wanna be fuckin’ tripped up by something so stupid and amateur and anticlimactic as neglecting jury duty if that day comes,” McCree’s mouth twisted in disgust. “Rather go out guns blazing, but…” The heaviness of his sigh made Hanzo feel
sympathetically exhausted. “Morricone… he’s like.. I can’t really call it an escape route anymore, I don’t think. He used to be. But he’s a nice fantasy. Of a normal-ish life, but maybe… just maybe if push came to shove… I could still live out the rest of my days as him. If I absolutely needed to.”

Hanzo swallowed thickly, not sure what he wanted the answer to his question to be, “And Quaintance?”

McCree let out a single chuckle, shrugging once, “A nice source of income I guess, but I can live without him.”

Hanzo felt his throat tighten with the absolutely irrational fear that Justice and Ernesto would never resolve their misunderstanding before the typhoon wiped out their burgeoning settlement on the edges of the uncharted Illyan Expanse, and that they would never discover the source of the unnatural storms. “But… you would prefer to keep writing as Quaintance, yes?”

McCree slowly tilted his head at Hanzo, and he realized he’d made a fatal error. This is why one should never attempt being forthright. There was a fleeting moment after McCree’s suspicion morphed into embarrassment where Hanzo thought he might be safe. His hopes were dashed in the next moment as a smug sort of look settled over McCree, like one of his many well-worn serapes. “Don’t think I said how I made income as Quaintance.”

Hanzo hated how hot his face was right now, and he knew he must be lit up somewhere between cherry blossom pink and cherry red, “Well, you… you write as Morricone. I just… assumed.”

“Did you?” That smile spread wider across McCree’s face, and it wasn’t fair how he drew out his already low and rumbling drawl. Hanzo also hated how he easily he recalled one of Quaintance’s —McCree’s—earlier stories Stolen Song. It was a well-executed, if well-trodden idea of supernaturally stolen voices, mistaken identities, nearly star-crossed lovers, and the ultimate futility of deception in the course of romance and attempting to woo someone. The supernatural mimic, still carrying the voice of Claude’s beloved, made a simple verbal slip and exposed itself as a fraud.

“Is that really the relevant point right now?”

“Yeah, no, I wanna unpack this one. Spill. How'd you know? Fess up Shimada.” McCree's smile and demeanor made a man want to comply with his wishes. Not for the first time, Hanzo could see why McCree had been one of Blackwatch’s most stellar agents. When he wasn’t getting fired from his cover jobs, at least.

“I… have seen the name in passing on some websites. I suppose it stuck out to me because of your taste in decor.” Hanzo was already going through his other identities in his head. Wondering who he could live as, depending on the results of this conversation. He might need to run aground and start over.

McCree just pressed his tongue thoughtfully against the back of his teeth, still grinning at Hanzo with equal parts humor and hunger. “Uh-huh.” He certainly felt like a mouse caught by a cat. McCree was toying with him.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Hanzo felt his hands ball into fists.

"Like what, darlin'?" Jesse smirked, and it infuriated Hanzo that he still looked so fucking handsome even when he was being smug. It made his blood boil.

"Like you think you have figured something out about me," Hanzo's clenched his teeth tight
enough that his jaw started to protest.

"You're the one implying that, storm rider," Jesse laughed as he let his own fictional endearment roll off his tongue. Of course Jesse McCree would be so gauche as to quote himself.

Embarrassment prompted a snarl, "Did you wish for my help or not?" McCree seemed taken aback. Hanzo felt a twinge of regret. He hadn’t meant to be so… severe in his outburst. Still, it was a successful, if brutal, means to change the subject.

"Help?"

"With your—" Hanzo gestured vaguely towards McCree to indicate his current legal woes, "—situation."

McCree blinked several times, almost as if he had something in his eyes, "You... you wanna help me?"

"It is evident that this is important to you." Hanzo crossed his arms. "I will do what I can." If I can use this to blackmail you into finishing Riders of the Storm, even better.

"Well, shucks, I... I don't know what to say." Jesse paused before adding softly, "Thanks Hanzo."

He snorted lightly, "I have never heard another human utter the word ‘shucks’ out loud the way you do. It still doesn't seem real whenever I hear it."

McCree laughed, and Hanzo sternly told himself that he imagined the sensation of his heart skipping a beat in his chest.

Mercy had already told him there was no medical basis for the symptoms anyway.

He cleared his throat, "So, how long do we have?"

The smile faded from Jesse's face and he looked a little more stern. "A little over a week. Morricone... he's tough. He's actually got my face attached to him. Or a version of my face. Quaintance doesn't have any photo IDs attached to him."

"Impressive," Hanzo meant the praise sincerely. It was harder and harder to exist within society without proper ID, even entirely fictional beings like pseudonyms were hard pressed to be faked without some sort of photo identification.

"Thanks. I learned a thing or two in Blackwatch about setting up a fake identity." McCree shrugged, as if it were simple to evade the ever-narrowing spaces left behind by the requirements of local, national, and international laws that expanded government surveillance to near omnipresence, if not omnipotence. All of Hanzo's alter egos had government IDs with photos in a database somewhere. It was easier to fly under the radar when there weren't any gaps in one's official record, in Hanzo’s experience.

"And you said that you need to be present in two different states on the same date, correct?"

"Yeah," McCree rubbed his beard, deep in thought. He pulled up a holoscreen with his metal hand, and typed in a couple quick searches. "I think if we plead a case to the jury commissioners this problem can be taken of indefinitely, but you do gotta make an in-person appearance." McCree's lip twisted in a sour expression that exaggerated the subtle scar at the corner of his mouth. Most of the time it read as an absence of hair, but with his serious pout, the light actually glimmered off the raised scar tissue.
"I can be Quaintance."

McCree's fingers stilled over the holoscreen. Hanzo studied the floating panel of light, and even backwards he was able to suss out that McCree had pulled up both websites for each district's local judiciary council. "What do you mean?"

"I can be Quaintance. I can go plead your case to this... jury commissioner," Hanzo shrugged.

"I..." McCree lifted one finger and paused. He banished the holoscreen. "I don't need to tell you why that's a bad idea, right?"

Hanzo sighed, "Would you rather pose as Quaintance?"

"No! Jesus Hanzo, you know that men like us and the law don't mix well."

"Maybe for you," Hanzo sneered the words before he could check them. He took a breath to center himself. "I imagine I was helped more by the law than you were in your... less decorous past." Hanzo ran his thumb under his lip thoughtfully, "I was never arrested... or captured in an international sting operation." He tried to lift the corner of his mouth in a smile.

McCree didn't give any hint that he appreciated the levity. "Fine, you were too high up in the pecking order to be touched or blamed for anything. Doesn't change the fact that someone somewhere musta had plenty of files on you—the fuck am I saying?" Jesse dragged his hands down his face, "We had files on you—and you ain't dead—unlike yer brother."

The words plunged into his gut like a stone into an icy lake. He knew what McCree meant, but he'd still touched a very open wound. "It has been years since I was anyone of import in the clan. I am no longer the head of operations. I have traveled in places that I would have been watched with even more scrutiny than this hypothetical outing without trouble."

"Yeah, but I reckon you weren't striding into offices of the law to test how closely you were being watched either!"

Hanzo didn't give McCree the satisfaction of ceding the point. "Would you ask someone else on our team to risk gaining a reputation with the law? How old is Quaintance?"

"...My age," the cowboy sighed, and Hanzo knew McCree had already figured out where he was going with his argument.

"So we have already narrowed the list of potential stand-ins. Unless, of course, you are willing to risk paying a random individual to commit a crime for you, and pray that they are both competent and able to ask as few questions as possible."

"You know that ain't my intention."

"Then I do not see who else could possibly pose as Quaintance on this base. Genji is too... remarkable to pass undetected. Even if we were to alter Lúcio's appearance to be older, there's still a risk that he would be recognized. Not that he is even here at the moment. Who else is supposed to go? Morrison? Reinhardt? Lindholm? One of the Amaris? Dr. Ziegler—if she returns from her conference in time? Winston?"

"Alright, alright! I fucking get it!" McCree curled his lip and sucked as his teeth. "So insufferable when you're right."

Hanzo gave the man a thin smile. He knew it was not his most attractive feature, but at least he was
able to make his point. "What about you? You have a record and an active bounty on your head. Surely it's even less wise for you to make an appearance in courthouse."

"Don't have a choice. Morricone's everything," McCree set his mouth into that grim line again.

"Should we... call a meeting?" Hanzo knew, in theory, he had just as much of a right to call a meeting as Winston (or anyone else) but he'd never exercised the privilege.

"Not yet," McCree gnawed at his lip, and Hanzo found himself distracted again by the scar at the corner of Jesse's mouth again. "Really need a smoke here. Gimme, say, twenty minutes and then we can get everybody together."

Hanzo glanced over at his unopened crate of snacks. "That... sounds good actually. I shall take care of a few things and meet you in the conference room." He tried to keep the blush from his cheeks as he waited for Jesse to leave the room.

Hanzo grabbed his packages and sprinted to his room once the cowboy was out of sight. He dropped the box containing his snacks on the floor and tore open the package with his precious data and waved his hand over the lock to his safe where he kept the reader he stored everything on. He jammed the chip into place and waited the ungodly span of fifteen seconds for the transfer to finish.

Hanzo sat on the edge of the bed, hands trembling, heart racing. He skipped past whatever announcement tried to keep him from his updated landing page, impatient to see what had been delivered to him.

He held his breath as he scrolled down the list, ignoring titles he usually delighted in seeing updates for. Disappointment settled into him as he quickly realized Riders of the Storm wasn't on the list of updates. A lesser man would have called it devastation.

Teenage Hanzo would have thrown himself onto his bed for a whole weekend.

Adult Hanzo flicked the filters on his page and scrolled down towards the bottom of the list, his stomach twisting again in anticipation as he got closer to Quaintance's place in the roster.

His stomach flipped in excitement before tightening in embarrassment when he saw a new title by Quaintance... McCree. Hanzo shifted uncomfortably on the bed, almost twisting in place. He wasn't sure what to do with that information yet.

Everyone on base knew about Morricone. McCree didn't “toot his own flute” (to use the cowboy’s own baffling phrase), but he didn't keep it a secret either, and it had come up a few times. Morricone mostly took the form of judiciously applied damage control for some of their failures—or even successes.

Quaintance though... aside from the wretched painting, Hanzo had never heard the name pass McCree's lips before. He was willing to bet that no one else knew his secret. He briefly considered going to Genji to confirm but then he would have to navigate around the fact that he had eagerly devoured every title under that name, and that he was still desperately yearning for Riders of the Storm to resume updates. No, this was not a conversation he could have with his brother. Or anyone.

Hanzo cradled the reader in both hands as he looked at the newest offering. It had been some time since Quaintance (McCree Hanzo told himself sternly, again) had published anything. Perhaps this was why Riders of the Storm had been delayed for so long? Perhaps now the man could continue
updating the series? He was so consumed over the fate of his favorite series he couldn't register the information he was looking at. The Trouble With Titles. A period piece, by the look of the cover.

Some half-bedraggled, tousle-haired man in a frilly shirt that belonged at a Renaissance Faire was half-bent, half clutching some sort of writing desk and held a quill loosely between his fingers to indicate that he was an author. He was making desperate moon eyes at a well-dressed man who took up the right half of the cover—which accounted for him practically spilling off the of the desk. Hanzo couldn't decide if the man was haughty or satisfied, but he was clearly self-absorbed as his visage was revealed to the viewer through a full-length mirror he was posing in front of. He was totally oblivious to the adoration being heaped on him from the left side of the cover. Hanzo frowned with instant dislike for the dark-haired dandy. Still, the covers were often deceiving. And cheaply made via filtering effects applied to photos. Hanzo was quite certain he'd seen these same costumes used on half a dozen other covers. He tapped the image in order to read the summary.

Isidore is a writer in the employ of the court of the Floral Throne. His unlikely travels have landed him in a most fortunate position, or at least he would have said so three years ago. That was before he came to truly know his benefactor, and succumbed to the most inconvenient affliction of all: fondness for the temperamental Crown Prince Hercule.

To Isidore's terror, it is revealed that he had handed over a manuscript he'd fashioned in secret to his best friend and publisher while deep in his cups. Every word on the page has echoes of his muse, prince Hercule, and Isidore's feelings are laid bare through fiction and fancy. The novel is an instant success and now Isidore has to wonder if his muse will take notice of the humble author as something more than a simple courtier. Still, even if he does, what good will it do? The prince is far above his station, and his entire position hinges on a promise to respect the rules of court and high society. What will become of Isidore if his feelings become known? Will the prince even read the sensation sweeping the Azure Isles? And what will the prince's political enemies have to say about the thinly-veiled allegory?

It was like a personal attack. A story crafted specifically to address every Achilles' heel in what he found irresistible in a premise. Hanzo bit his lip to fight the urge to dive into the story immediately. With great effort, he powered down his reader, and replaced it in the safe. If he started in on it now, he'd be late to the meeting to discuss McCree's... legal problems. He'd scanned through the rest of the updates and the new titles that had been added via the algorithm's recommendation, but none interested him so much as the new story by... McCree.

Hanzo's stomach twisted into knots. McCree wrote those stories. McCree. Not some anonymous Jorge Quaintance. Not even Joel Morricone. McCree. The man himself, the man he knew.

McCree, a man as hardened as Hanzo himself, wrote about love with all the terror and beauty the subject deserved. On the level of any prize-winning author he'd ever read. The thought that a man like McCree—a killer, a hero, a criminal (self-admitted that he wasn't completely reformed to society’s standards)—could write with such tenderness was too hopeful to bear. It set an ache beneath the ink on Hanzo's chest.

Hanzo's stomach twisted further and a distressing flare of heat pulsed through his veins. McCree was the author of not only some of his favorite romances, but also some of his favorite pornographic material.

Hanzo pulled his hand back from the door of the safe, as though it had burned him, and he paced the length of his room. The more he told himself not to think about where McCree drew his
inspiration from, the more he wondered. The thing that had drawn him to Quaintance in particular was the fact that—compared to other authors in the genre—he wasn't always writing the same sex scenes over and over. How many were things McCree had actually done, and how many were purely from his imagination? If they were pure fantasy, were they ones McCree wanted to fulfil with someone, or were they written with the intention of appealing to an audience? Hanzo tried to get himself under control, before he ended up at a briefing with a socially unacceptable situation in his pants.

He didn't have to resort to jumping in the shower, but it was a near thing. Hanzo settled for washing his hands and face with cold water instead, which seemed to help... until he was seated across the table from McCree, trying to pretend he wasn't having difficulty looking the man in the eye.

Would that I could find it so easy to live without shame. Jesse closed one eye in a slow wink at him, that only he could see. Hanzo clenched his hands into fists under the table, vainly willing his blood to stay out of his cheeks. He couldn't quite hear anything that was being said, and his singular, sniper's focus seemed to erase the presence of every other person in the room as he recalled every passage of X-rated material McCree had ever written under the name Quaintance. Trying just as vainly to avoid wondering what was fact and what was fiction as he was trying to avoid blushing.

Jesse had always been a distraction, even before Hanzo had acknowledged any attraction to him. The man's presence was loud and could take up a whole room, until it was time to go on a mission. Then McCree was as quiet and small as the ghost of a church mouse. His absence was just as noticeable, ate away at Hanzo's attention until McCree threatened to crowd out any intelligence briefed before said mission.

Hanzo desperately tried not to think about how loud or quiet McCree might be in more personal aspects of his life. He bit the inside of his lip. McCree was smiling at the assembled gathering, but Hanzo was sitting close enough to see the worry behind his eyes.

If they were alone Hanzo could entertain the notion of sliding his hand across the table to take Jesse’s in his. Reassurance was not his strong-suit, but in his head Hanzo had all the right words to unspool the tension and worry McCree was attempting to hide from his friends. (In reality the best Hanzo could offer were obtuse implications that McCree's problems—or enemies—could disappear.) From there, it would be a trivial matter to lay Jesse out on the table, and truly put this minor worry out of his mind.

The surface of the conference room table was vast (clearly from a time where a score or more people were meant to convene and discuss urgent matters of global security, rather than a motley band of squatters that barely numbered more than half a dozen) and smooth. The lack of comfort was secondary to the sturdy build that would surely hold up to anything and everything they cared to do to it. And on it.

Hanzo absently swept his fingertips along the table, holding in a wistful sigh. Was there a credible way to rig a fire alarm to fool Athena and everyone else in the room while letting McCree in on the plan, so that they could be alone together?

"Now I see why you wanted me all to yourself, darling." Jesse makes a sweet sight all sprawled out in easy surrender.

"You did not wish the others to worry... I thought it best to reassure you in private." There's an honest smile and a genuine warmth in Hanzo's chest as he smiles down at Jesse. He places a hand where the wrists of flesh and metal cross, the protest of his knees on the conference table already pushed to the back of his mind.
"Well, I do appreciate the consideration, starshine, but I can think of better things we can get up to 'in private.'" Jesse's crooked grin draws laughter out of Hanzo. Laughter is something that Hanzo does not take for granted; ever since Jesse was the first to pull it out of some dark and secret place Hanzo didn't know still existed within him. Somewhere hidden.

He presses his laughter into the crook of the cowboy's neck, and with one hand he starts to open the buttons on Jesse's flannel, one by one. A moment later he tears himself away from the intoxicating scent of Jesse and his aftershave to lay kisses down the man's throat, savoring the way the velvety skin shifts beneath his lips each time Jesse swallows. He mouths at the curves of Jesse's neck, draws his teeth so lightly over his Adam's apple, tracing a slow and agonizing path down to the hollow of his neck.

"If you'd told me when we met that someone with a mouth as mean as yours was able to kiss so sweet, I'd have called you a liar."

Hanzo presses a satisfied smirk against the side of Jesse's neck, "You are the one who sells fiction on the side."

Jesse lets out a hearty laugh, the vibrations from his throat buzzing Hanzo's lips. He lifts his chin a moment later, "C'mere." And despite having the man pinned beneath him, he's helpless—he's always been helpless—and he pushes himself up so that he can lean down to angle his lips just so and...

With the way his imagination was working overtime, he wondered if he could moonlight under his own pen name. The only fiction of note here is the thought that McCree would ever be interested in you. Dispose of these thoughts at once. Hanzo tried to ignore the quiet discomfort gripping his stomach as he realized this was the first time he'd allowed himself to fantasize about McCree while sober. He'd tried to avoid it, as much as possible, but vodka, sake, and whiskey mixed together seemed to bring out the weakness in him.

He didn't have that excuse right now—and the thought of it made him feel ill.

Hanzo blinked several times and looked around the table. At least no one seemed to expect him to chime in at any moment. He stole a glance at McCree—specifically his neck, and bit the edge of his tongue. Foolishness. He tried to remember the man's grim expression, the dire weight that rested on McCree's shoulders as he looked at those letters earlier. As if someone had died.

The anguish at the thought of giving up on Morricone, after a decade of work.

Not the way his mouth twisted as he sussed out exactly how Hanzo knew about Quaintance.

Not the way how low and inviting his voice became when he teased Hanzo.

Not the way his scar seemed to beg to have Hanzo's mouth on it.

Reinhardt cut through his distraction, and Hanzo found himself oddly grateful for the former Crusader’s earth-shattering lack of an indoor voice. “How wonderful! It is truly moving to see you put so much on the line for your Kamerad!”

Hanzo was less grateful to be caught flat-footed and unsure of what to say. “It is… for the greater good. McCree is a valuable component to the team.”

There was something that flickered across Jesse’s face. A moment where he seemed.. crestfallen? Yet as soon as Hanzo thought he had identified the emotion there was that easy smirk twisting the scar at the corner of McCree’s mouth.
“You sure know how to make a man feel special, Mr. Shimada.” Hanzo’s stomach tied itself into painful knots, collapsing in on itself. It took all his effort and self-control to keep his face emotionless. McCree had no way of knowing how close his teasing hit the mark. *With any luck, one of us will die before he figures it out.*

“I would think *you* of all people, McCree, would be delighted by—” McCree cut through Reinhardt’s comment with a pointed *look* straight off his wanted posters.

“We’re getting lost in the weeds, people.” McCree tapped the table with his metal index finger. “Focus up.”

Hanzo sat up in his chair, and forced his gaze at the monitor at the front of the conference room. He watched the pieces of the plan come together like a slow-moving game of chess. Satya would provide each of them a pair of teleporters to be deployed via drone so that they could travel to the courthouse without having their every movement traced through the ever-growing network of security cameras blanketing American cities.

There was the usual tedium of setting up a fake address and false rental records, and all manner of records for Quaintance. Medical history, a spotty employment history, nothing that would stand up under real, sustained scrutiny, but enough to carry Hanzo through a routine and mundane brush with the American legal system. Athena even managed to unearth a database of fingerprints set aside for the purpose of creating false identities from the limited Blackwatch archives she had access to. From there it would be a trivial matter to create a set of synthetic prints to cover his own.

Jesse would have the harder time. He would have to use a good deal of makeup and latex prosthetics to obscure his true facial features. Even with their communicators and Athena monitoring the situation, Hanzo didn’t like the thought of Jesse going into the maw of danger.

“We should send someone with you, McCree.” Hanzo crossed his arms. “In case something goes wrong. I would hate to go through all the effort to clear Quaintance’s name and then have McCree end up in custody.”

Jesse glanced around the table, which did not represent the full population of the new Overwatch. “Well, back at you, darlin’.”

Hanzo sniffed, unimpressed. “We hardly have the manpower to spare.” Tracer, Lúcio, and Pharah were deployed in Indonesia, trying to track down the suspected presence of a Talon research base on one of the many islands. Soldier 76 and Pharah's mother were... somewhere. Possibly Egypt, pursuing their own goals for the moment. (And weathering the storm of McCree and Pharah’s combined fury a continent away). Dr. Ziegler was away at a neuroscience convention in Brussels. Dr. Zhou was back home, trying to untangle the legal complications of almost a decade of absence. Even Winston had managed to get off-base for a change. Winston, Torbjörn, and D.Va were in Seoul offering consultation and repair work to the seriously depleted MEKA squadron. Brigitte, Reinhardt, Satya, Genji, Zenyatta, and McCree were the only ones left on the Rock besides Hanzo himself.

Hanzo also knew, just as well as Jesse, that they couldn’t afford to leave Gibraltar’s base too empty. Athena was formidable, but Talon’s attack before Winston’s recall had proven how vulnerable the AI truly was.

“I do not think it would be wise for either of you to go off on your own,” Dr. Vaswani opined further up the table, her hair immaculately parted down the middle—completely at odds with her striped, baggy romper and gargoyle-esque perch on her chair. Hanzo made a mental note to ensure that Satya ate something this afternoon. She had been working on a *project* which often meant she
took care of her research and nothing else.

“I can go with you, brother.” Genji’s voice carried down the conference room (Hanzo had carefully seated himself as far away as physically possible from Genji, while still sitting at the same table), a husk of what it once was. Hanzo’s insides had the distinctly unpleasant sensation he could only conclude was the feeling of cold steel wires churning through electrified gelatin.

“That would only leave us with three people on base.” The strange sensations roiling under his skin had nothing to do with Hanzo’s refusal. It was purely pragmatism.

“For only a few days at most,” underneath the alien synthesizers Genji’s tone was distressingly reasonable. “Our team in Seoul is due back early next week.”

“I can go with McCree,” Satya rested her chin against her knee. “I have not been to the United States yet, and that will bring me closer to visiting nineteen countries.”

Hanzo’s attention was instantly captured by the wrinkle that formed between Jesse’s brows.

“What’s so special about nineteen?”

“It is a special prime number,” Hanzo felt himself flush as Satya answered at the same time.

McCree blinked, and then shook his head. Hanzo heard the distinct mutter of *fucking nerds* from his brother. He felt the knife of betrayal in his chest as Jesse’s scar twisted with a lopsided grin. Then he felt foolish.

“Ouch, you don’t trust me doc?”

Despite the fact that she was not as immaculately put together as usual, Satya managed to stare down her nose at McCree, thoroughly unimpressed.

“No.”

Jesse tossed his head back and laughed, longer and harder than anyone else at the table. “Fair enough,” he nodded at Satya with a sheepish sort of grin.

Dr. Vaswani did not see any humor in the situation, and she crossed her arms. Hanzo caught the barest lift of her eyebrow. One of her tells for displeasure. “You are too prone to improvisation. Hanzo understands the need for a methodical touch.” Jesse’s gaze flickered over to him, then curiously down the other end of the table. “I remind you of the famous tale where you rigged a toaster to explode.”

That got another laugh out of the table, and the stiffness relaxed out of Jesse’s posture. “You know, doc, some of my stories *are* prone to exaggeration, if not downright apocryphal.”

“McCree, I was *with* you in Bucharest!” Satya slammed her palm on the table.

“Oh yeah,” McCree chuckled. “Hanzo and Lúc were with us too. Good times, eh?” Jesse gave him a conspiratorial grin across the table. Hanzo attempted to keep his features schooled into his usual
severe expression.

“If we are quite finished with revisiting irrelevant missions, are we truly committing to the idea of sending four agents on this ridiculous mission? Three seems sufficient.”

“Don’t worry, Hanzo!” Reinhardt’s voice boomed and echoed throughout the space. “This old dog knows how to hold the line, if it comes to it.”

“Ja, papa and I have been working on improving our automated defenses as well!” Brigitte jumped to her feet, flexing her ever-growing muscles. Hanzo couldn’t help but feel a distant sense of pride. (Though Pharah had been far more influential when it came to re-shaping Brigitte’s physical fitness regimen.) “We can hold the fort until the others return!” Hanzo glanced down at Genji, and then back at Brigitte.

He wished he could ask her to come with him instead.

The thought of being alone with his brother settled like a block of ice in his stomach. He wouldn’t even have the implacable, infuriating presence of that wretched monk Zenyatta to fall back on.

It didn’t surprise him that Zenyatta had remained silent during the meeting. Anytime Hanzo was in the room the monk went silent. Sometimes Hanzo wondered if the omnic went so far as to remove his consciousness into a distant server whenever they shared physical space. In Hanzo’s early days, he had told the omnic to never speak to him again after some well-meaning attempt to welcome him to the fold. Or intervene on Genji’s behalf. Or something else that had burned his non-existent fuse. Despite later reneging on this edict, Zenyatta had continued to honor the wish he spoke in anger, and had not spoken a direct word to Hanzo since.

After listening to Genji idolize his master for what felt like hundreds of hours, Hanzo was vaguely aware that he was being taught some kind of lesson that he still hadn’t learned. It felt like a cruel mockery at this point, but Hanzo had long-ago stopped trying to unravel that particular riddle.

“Very well,” Hanzo swallowed down the icicles forming along his throat. “If that is what is decided. As long as McCree is not alone, I do not object to… backup.”

“How generous, anija.” Hanzo couldn’t be sure if Genji’s dry words were meant to be a barb or meant to cajole. He pressed his lips together, and at the very least Hanzo had long-ago stopped trying to unravel that particular riddle.

In fact, he was using so much of his brain power ruminating on his brother and Zenyatta, Hanzo didn’t even notice that the meeting had ended. Hanzo gave a start as he looked down the rest of the conference table, and saw no one else there. He glanced back at Jesse, utterly disoriented and feeling… exposed once more. Cornered.

“What?”

“You alright? Cause if you don’t mind my saying so, you don’t look it,” Jesse pushed his chair with a slight sigh.

“I’m perfectly alright,” Hanzo countered, his face taut. “And I do mind you saying so.”

McCree snorted and threw his arm over the back of his chair. The ancient thing groaned in protest—or else McCree’s jeans did as he threw one of his boots onto his knee.

The conference room settled into a cold, eerie silence.
Hanzo wondered, briefly, if this is what it felt like in one of Blackwatch’s interrogation rooms. If this is how terrorists felt when they sat across from McCree. The cowboy wasn’t smiling, and he wasn’t relaxed—not really—but he looked it. His limbs were loose, and poised for easy reaction, but Hanzo could tell that his core was engaged, ready to direct the gathered kinetic energy at a moment’s notice. The cowboy’s metal hand idly traced along the worn treads of his boots, where Hanzo well knew a knife was concealed.

It was the sort of conversation they were supposed to have ages go, when he first joined. When McCree revealed himself as part of Genji’s past. Not now, after so much blood and whiskey spilled between them. “Stop that,” Hanzo finally spat, splaying his hands flat along the table.

“Mm?” McCree tilted his head, a twinkle in his eye. “Stop what?”

“Whatever this is,” Hanzo grit his teeth. “Your… bullshit black ops intimidation tactics. Just ask your questions,” You are alone with him an unhelpful, Genji-like voice whispered. Isn’t that what you wanted? Coward.

Jesse just chuckled softly, “Wasn’t my intent, but I’ll take it as a compliment that you find me intimidating. High praise from someone like you.” McCree winked and Hanzo’s sour mood evaporated into something more exasperated and incendiary.

“Ask,” Hanzo demanded again, with all the authority he used to hold.

McCree had always had a problem with authority. “Why? Can’t I just sit here and bask in your good company?” The smirk he found so attractive earlier was the most irritating thing in existence and Hanzo found himself with a host of parallel fantasies on how to wipe it from the man’s face.

“Fine then,” Hanzo bit out, pushing his own chair back. “I’m leaving if you have nothing to say.”

“Aw, hey—alright then, hold on!” Funny, now that the smirk was gone Hanzo missed it. A small thread of grief burrowed through his heart. “Hanzo,” Jesse’s face was serious in the way Hanzo had only seen during some of their longest nights together and when he spoke of Morricone in the mail room. “Are you sure you’re okay doing this?”

Hanzo blinked, “I already told you I was. It is decided.” Why was McCree asking him again?

“Yeah but,” Jesse grimaced, “I could tell you were… You were in there real deep during the meeting. Even before your brother… voluntold himself to be your partner. If you don’t wanna do it, I understand—”

“You think I would not do this because of my brother?”

“Well, no, I just—you two are… you seemed—” Hanzo couldn’t blame Jesse for his trouble in finding the proper words to address the situation between him and his brother. There were no words. Something that must have absolutely frustrated a man like McCree who traded in them.

“Seemed what?” Hanzo lifted his brow.

“Look, I can talk to Satya—” McCree ignored his scoff “—I can get her to relent. Then Genji can go with me, and Satya can go with you if that makes it better for—”

“Do not manage my relationship with Genji for me.” Hanzo linked his hands together, boring his glare directly into Jesse’s face.

McCree leaned back reflexively, despite the distance between them, “Woah now, I wasn’t trying
“McCree. I am going to help you with this trouble, whether you want me to or not. The mission details have been outlined. They are not going to change.” Hanzo let a short breath out through his nose. “Genji and I… Genji has… always been difficult to deal with. Nothing has changed since we were children,” Hanzo felt his throat go tight. He pressed his thumbs against each other tight enough he expected to see bruises later.

Hanzo finally let out his breath when McCree inclined his head, letting his half-lie stand unchallenged. “We are still working on… repair. My brother and I can run missions together just fine, we have in the past.” Never mind the fact that they had always been part of a greater team before.

McCree appeared to be biting his tongue so hard, Hanzo could only assume the same thought had occurred to Jesse.

“Well if it makes you feel better this ain’t even about Genji, not really. I just… thought I’d give you a chance for another out. If you needed one.”

McCree flicked his eyes up from the surface of the table to capture his, and Hanzo wasn’t certain what to do anymore. Why was Jesse looking so lost and uncertain?

“I do not need… an out,” Hanzo heard himself saying, trying to will something he could understand into McCree’s expression.

“Right,” McCree answered just as distantly. “It’s for the greater good, and all that.”

Hanzo was certain a headache would start forming if he furrowed his brows any further. “You make that sound like a terrible thing.” Hanzo could almost ignore the soft, mocking whisper of good at weapons, bad at people looping in his head.

“It’s not,” Jesse agreed, suddenly sounding reasonable and more like himself. His tactical black ops self. “I was just hoping it was something a little more personal, that’s all.”

Hanzo tracked Jesse’s movements as he got to his feet and headed around to the double doors closing them in. “See you around, Han.”

Jesse paused, his hand hovering over the door handle, “Sorry, that made me sound real petty and shitty. I do appreciate the help more than you could know. Means a lot to me, no matter what your motivation is, and I owe you big.”

The shock that went through Hanzo’s body made him check to make sure the ancient, far less sturdy conference room chair hadn’t collapsed underneath him. “McCree!” Jesse stopped in his tracks.

When the cowboy looked over his shoulder again Hanzo shook his head helplessly. A whole confession worthy of Quaintance and the man behind it swelled on his tongue. For a brief, heady moment Hanzo wondered if he would actually get to see Jesse laid out on the conference table like a feast.

“You didn’t really think that I was only helping you as an asset to the team… did you?” Hanzo felt a bit of satisfaction, some pride that he had sussed out the source of Jesse’s distress on his own.

The scar at the corner of Jesse’s mouth twisted again with an easy smile, but the motion didn’t match with the sadness in his eyes. “Nah, not really.” Reality came crashing back down as McCree shut the door behind him, leaving Hanzo alone and more confused than ever before.
Blindly, Hanzo made his way to the kitchen and started pulling out the ingredients for *sakana no nitsuke*. He could make sure Satya ate something before collapsing in a heap in her lab, and then spend the rest of the day trying to understand the exchange that had just happened.

Hanzo wished he were living in a Quaintance novel. The world would be much simpler.
Chapter 2

Hanzo paced the hallway outside Jesse McCree's door. His reasons for his hesitation all boiled down to the fact that he didn't want to confront Quaintance. The author or the painting.

He wanted to avoid McCree entirely, and run from the unbearable situation.

But it was a Thursday night. If he didn't see McCree tonight, there was not a guarantee that they would have a chance to spend time together before leaving Monday night. While they saw each other every day for work and by virtue of close quarters, the routine they settled into meant that they alternated each week between spending time together. In a personal capacity. Tuesday and Thursday nights and then Monday, Wednesday, and Friday nights. With the weekends tacitly open for drop-ins.

They seemed to be dropping in more often than not these days.

He didn’t quite remember when they drew up the schedule, or who decided on the the intervals, but it was something Hanzo could depend on—provided that they were both on base or on the same mission.

Hanzo appreciated the routine, but also that they each had space, if they needed it. Which they often did. It seemed like they took turns with who needed space as well. At one point, Hanzo feared there would be a disparity, and he would need more space than the American.

When Hanzo had first arrived, less than well and running from demons as much as he was following his brother, McCree had found him holed up in an empty armory space. The smallest, darkest place he could find on base that had a lock on both sides of the door.

McCree's clearance from his previous tenure with Overwatch overrode Hanzo's, and he'd all but shrieked like a vampire as Jesse stood in the doorway, back-lit by golden fluorescent lighting. It would have been less embarrassing if McCree had caught him drinking or doing something indecent.

The truth was much harder to explain.

Hanzo swallowed thickly, and his palms began to sweat as he recalled Jesse's easy company, and the surprising lack of judgement. How McCree locked the door behind him and they both sat quietly on the floor, shoulders not quite touching. They sat there in the dark, illuminated by the end of McCree’s cigar and the thin ribbons of blue lightning Hanzo had used to divide the room into smaller and smaller pieces.

The only words they traded were uttered by McCree. *Real pretty lightshow you got here.* Hanzo didn’t know what to make of the comment on the cage he’d made for himself. It was, perhaps, the only time McCree hadn’t been able to draw him out into sharing more of himself.

Any time Hanzo felt the urge to run when he needed to stay, he holed himself up in the darkest,
smallest room he could find. He had done it since he was a child after that first brash, natural urge to run away from home. It was over something trivial and the sort of demand only a child would have, of course, but the reaction to his defiance made it clear that it was... unacceptable.

As he got older, his punishments showed him just how lenient his family had been with him as a child. He followed Genji less and less—swallowing more and more bitterness each time Genji flaunted his freedom. Genji could be truant for a week and barely got a slap on the wrist. If Hanzo dared to part his hair wrong, the leash around his neck tightened, and the precious few freedoms he had were withheld. And because he had accepted that he could neither run nor bite the hand that held the leash, he would lock himself in the smallest, darkest room to prevent his own escape.

When that was no longer enough, the dragons—as they have been wont to do, over the centuries—presented a solution.

Sometimes, when his blood ran hot like this, Hanzo wondered if their father had created the rift between them on purpose. The one that happened long before Hanzo was ever persuaded to pull a blade against his brother. There was a time where he’d thought that their father protected Genji. The favorite. The one without expectations of the clan's entire future on his shoulders. The easy and carefree child he could live vicariously through. His sparrow. Now that Hanzo was approaching his forties, and most of the clan gone, he wondered otherwise.

Perhaps Sojiro had raised them so that Genji could never stand to be ruled, and Hanzo would never hesitate to do whatever it took to bring him in line.

Or anyone else.

Hanzo shook his head, trying to purge the thoughts of family history and his residual resentment with his brother from his mind, but those feelings practically went hand in hand with the urge to run and feeling chained.

Especially when now it was his brother who tethered him here.

Hanzo made another pass in front of Jesse’s door. His heart lodged like a stone at the base of his throat. This is only another Thursday evening. I am just spending time with McCree. Forget about the briefing and the conference room. Don’t think about Quaintance.

Of course, the instant McCree opened the door, Hanzo could already see that gaudy painting over Jesse’s shoulder. Mocking him.

Telling him what a fool he was for not seeing the truth sooner. An imbecile.

“Hey Han,” Jesse leaned easily against the door frame, intentionally minimizing the obstruction of the contentious painting. It was a move that was as irritating as it was attractive, given that McCree had shed his own serape and body armor hours ago. The lack of hat, however, made McCree seem practically naked, which made him even more difficult to look at. “Wasn’t sure I’d be seeing you tonight,” the easy smile faded just a little, and Hanzo felt his irritation freeze into guilt.

“I realize it is… later than when we usually meet.” The silence that fell between them was uncomfortable. Something that it had not been for a long time. McCree was, at least, polite enough not to mention if he had noticed Hanzo pacing in front of his door for the last forty or so minutes.

“Well, c’mon in,” McCree finally mumbled after another short, excruciating silence. He stepped aside and Hanzo slipped inside the automatic door. He wasn’t sure if the door hissing shut behind him was a relief or not.
He had never shared the cage of light with McCree after that first discovery, but Hanzo felt the urge to thread the room with cords of lightning once again. He wasn’t sure which side of the cage he wanted McCree to be on this time.

“Pick your poison, or are we doing this sober tonight?”

“Whiskey. It is open.” While the taste left something to be desired, Hanzo could at least count on the whiskey bottle to be within easy reach and easily available. In less than thirty seconds, Hanzo pulled a tumbler full of amber liquid from McCree’s hand.

“Cheers darling,” McCree winked at Hanzo before turning his back to pour himself a shot as well.

“Kanpai,” Hanzo deadpanned before tipping back roughly half of the contents of the glass. He knew he relied a little too much on liquid courage, but it hadn’t tipped the scales into liquid imprudence yet.

Yet.

They settled onto the floor, drinking in silence, the bottle of whiskey sitting between them and reeking like paint thinner.

Hanzo was half tempted to throw it on the painting sitting proudly over McCree’s headboard. Just to see if the whiskey would peel the paint from the canvas. It would solve one of his problems with a Quaintance, at least.

“Why do you have that thing?” Hanzo finally broke the silence, his voice rough from the burn of alcohol. He was tipsy enough he found himself wishing his throat was hoarse from sucking Jesse’s cock.

Hanzo realized he may have been a shade more than tipsy, with that thought.

“Well now, didn’t think you’d ever ask me that one!” McCree cackled gleefully and slapped his thigh. His huge, perfect-for-crushing-the-skulls-of-men thigh.

“Have I truly never asked?” Hanzo knew he had criticized the painting often enough. It was offensive, damn near obscene. As completely shameless and uninhibited as McCree’s writing under the same name.

“No sir,” Jesse chuckled and Hanzo felt warmth tingle equally within his chest and groin. “Given how much you hate the damn thing, yeah. Yeah, alright. I can tell that story.”

“‘Story’ implies falsehood, I hope you are aware of that.” He took a sip of Jesse’s wretched whiskey to cut through the heat rising in his cheeks.

McCree tipped his head back for another tipsy cackle, “I love your wicked humor.”

The whiskey tried to burn its way through Hanzo’s windpipe. Probably his esophagus too, from the feel of it. He pounded his chest as he coughed. He could feel the warmth of McCree’s hand hovering over his shoulder through his shirt, not quite touching.

“Man, I know it’s bad, but it’s like instinct to wanna whack someone on the back when they start choking and stuff. You need a sip of water or something?”

Hanzo shook his head no, and then wished he’d said yes as he felt Jesse’s hand start smoothing circles on his back. Eventually the coughing subsided, but the weight and warmth of McCree’s
hand was almost unbearable on his shoulder. Like a burning stone. “Tell me your story then,” he wheezed out as soon as he was able.

“So, you remember when—ah shit, you weren’t here yet. A ‘course you wouldn’t remember.” McCree rubbed metal fingers through his beard thoughtfully. As always, Hanzo felt his breath release from his chest when Jesse pulled his hand away without getting any of the hair or skin caught in the joints. “Alright, so, little bit before you showed up I was back in my old stomping grounds. Had some personal business to take care of. Happened to line up pretty nicely with a sweet bounty, too.” The scar at the corner of Jesse’s lip twisted with his smile. Hanzo’s stomach flipped and he wasn’t sure it was a wholly pleasant sensation given how much whiskey was in his empty belly, but it was a familiar smile. He wasn’t sure he liked seeing it on McCree’s face instead of in the mirror or on his brother. It made his heart ache, and the ache made his chest feel so fragile and empty. Combined with the weight of Jesse’s hand on his back, it was a nearly unbearable combination.

“Personal business?” Hanzo had a pretty shrewd imagination, and he was fairly certain he could guess—but he wanted Jesse to tell him. He needed McCree to talk so that he wouldn’t be tempted to fill the silence.

“Yeah, been waiting a long time to clean up after.. Well… after a mess that I made. When I was taken down in the sting and picked up by Overwatch, I sort of… left an opportunity behind for an old buddy of mine. When I finally let go of Deadlock for good, I realized I’d made a mistake. A bad one. The price of loyalty to a bad family, I suppose.”

“I am not unfamiliar with the concept,” Hanzo took a smaller sip of alcohol, not even able to offer up the thinnest of smiles. “So you left an opening for a companion of yours to take leadership. At seventeen, while facing the threat of imprisonment and eventual death, all under the watchful eye of Overwatch’s Black Ops director.”

The ends of McCree’s hair caught the cyan lights off his arm as he rubbed the back of his neck, “Yeah, uh, try not to sound so impressed by that. It was a shitty thing in the long run.”

“It is impressive,” Hanzo insisted. “And it must be part of why you fit in so well to your new life, once you learned to accept it.” It made perfect sense why Gabriel Reyes would have picked Jesse McCree to be his protégé.

McCree opened his mouth, then shut it again. “Anyway, that was probably… well, not my last mistake, but one of my last really conscious acts of evil, I guess you could say.” There was such weight to the lines etched into Jesse’s face, Hanzo felt it through the palm on his back. It made him want to confess to McCree all the good he saw in him, all the things that made him an admirable man. All the hope he offered Hanzo by just existing and being. How meaningful their friendship was, even if it was undeserved. How much he wanted to ply Jesse’s mouth with kisses so that he could never utter a foul word against himself—

Jesse gave his shoulder one last little pat before finally pulling back, taking the urge to confess with it. Hanzo sat up a little straighter and shivered. His chest still ached, and his skin prickled all over. He was no stranger to torture—on the giving or receiving end—and yet McCree still seemed to have the upper hand on him. Always.

“You were a child, you have grown into a different man,” it was the closest thing to comfort Hanzo could offer up.

“I hope so,” McCree reached down and examined his glass full of whiskey thoughtfully. “You weren’t wrong though. When I folded on Deadlock after the sting, I left a few names off my list,
nudged ‘em towards a few I knew might stand in his way. I wasn’t disappointed, heard that Nash started heading up the New Mexico chapter of Deadlock a few years later.”

Hanzo studied Jesse’s profile carefully as his friend took a sip of the drink in his hand. McCree was quiet a little longer, staring off into the past.

“Sorry, just remembering I guess. Forgot a lot of shit, it was a long time ago.”

“Nothing too bad, I hope.”

McCree chuckled, “Mostly stupid shit. Was just wondering if he could finally get folks to believe his story after the sting-induced exodus. Nash ain’t his real name, but that’s what everyone called him. Man swore up and down that he was from Nashville, but he was actually from some suburb outside Cleveland.” McCree breathed out a laugh and shook his head, “Never did figure out why that story mattered so much to him, but it doesn’t matter now, I guess.”

“He must have been afraid of something you would see, if you knew his true origins. It is much easier to project an image if you hide the truth first.”

“Yeah… I mean Nash wasn’t the smartest of us by any means, but he had a mean streak wider than the Grand Canyon. I guess I had it in my head that if I could break out and come back he’d somehow be grateful to me and then we’d terrorize the Southwest together, just like old times.”

“You would have risked much, returning to the fold after such disloyalty.” Hanzo felt a cold twist of his insides as he recalled Genji’s betrayal. Betrayal he was too eager to punish by far. He balled his right hand into a fist.

Hanzo wasn’t sure if he could ever go back to the time there wasn’t a rift between them, but perhaps they could build a bridge.

“Yeah, I know. I was still kinda young and stupid at the time. Or short-sighted. Whatever you wanna call it. Anyway, leaving Nash out of everything turned out to be… a pretty big fuckup on my part. One I was waiting a long time to make right.” McCree pushed his bangs out of his face, and stretched out a leg in front of him. Hanzo felt wetness gather along his eyelashes when the man rested his arm on his knee, whiskey glass held loosely in his hand. The picture of easy grace and unguarded masculinity. Like the models in so many advertisements Hanzo had admired in his youth before he understood the admiration to be something more.

Hanzo felt his breath catch as he realized it was also the same sort of easy, languid sprawl that Quaintance favored in his paintings. It seemed like there were at least ten nubile men on the canvas over McCree’s bed, some of whom were so relaxed as to be boneless.

“And how does that vile painting figure into correcting the mistakes of your misbegotten youth?”

If anyone could kill with a smile, it would be Jesse McCree. Hanzo’s heart did terribly strange things in response to Jesse’s laughter. It shuddered and ached enough that he wondered if he should have Dr. Ziegler look for some sort of defect.

“Well, I’ll tell ya, smart guy.” Jesse held out the whiskey bottle in offering, and Hanzo paused to consider it. He held his own glass out after a moment, but said he’d had enough almost as soon as Jesse started to pour. A tiny bit of refreshment. Jesse topped off his own glass, but he’d been drinking a little more slowly than Hanzo. “I kept my ear to the ground, and I waited for my chance. Nash had a coup sprung on him, and half his crew left him, and half of who stood by him were dead or wounded in the fallout. Now, if there was an outside party encouraging this little coup
d'état that was doomed to failure, well, that’s neither here nor there.”

“What did you do?” Hanzo couldn’t help but admire the brutal efficiency with which Jesse had solved the problem.

“Sent him a message. Said I’d be there to collect his bounty. If he wanted it to be collected under the ‘alive’ condition, he and his posse could surrender.”

“It’s like you knew the man, darling.” Another javelin in his heart, and Hanzo could swear that his bones were dissolving at those deep, rich chuckles. “I told him when I would show up.”

“Nothing wrong with being a little early to an appointment,” McCree winked, and Hanzo was quite certain his skin had actually started burning. So pitiful to be so affected by such meaningless gestures. They aren’t even meant for you. Pull yourself together. You are a grown man.

“Of course,” Hanzo said, his voice suddenly reedy. He could barely follow the rest of McCree’s story of the shootout. Hanzo knew McCree well enough that he knew the exaggerations of the odds were closer to the truth than anyone would like. The drones and the explosives evened the playing field, however. Peacekeeper and Deadeye did the rest. The latter was an acquisition between Arizona and Venice that Nash had been unprepared for.

“Naturally, I stashed some of the good stuff for us, and decommissioned a few other things that nobody should have. Most of the bounty went to Overwatch and covering my travel expenses. I knew Nash would have a stash of trophies and shit though, so I decided to see if there was a feather I could put in my hat.”

“A true Robin Hood you are,” Hanzo said, or perhaps slurred.

“Says the guy with the bow. Listen—listen! I deserve something to remember the day I righted some of the weight on my scales.”

“Find out,” Hanzo waved his hand impatiently. Imperiously.

“Anyway, Nash had plenty of toys and money stashed away, but I wasn’t interested in most of it. Peacekeeper’s the only lady fer me, and we need to keep the lights on around here. Just when I thought I might have to settle for a chain off his vest or something, I managed to find another little stash of his. His secret, secret stash. I told you Nash wasn’t a smart guy right?”

“You intimated as much.” Hanzo’s cheeks burned at his own word choice.

“Yeah, I don’t think he knew what he had in there. I mean, most of it was fake, inauthentic garbage, but somehow… this sonofabitch got his hands on a real, bona fide George Quaintance oilwork. I have to assume that Nash took it as a trophy himself, Deadlock doesn’t really deal in...
stolen art or anything like that. Or maybe he bought it with some of his own fun money, hell, I dunno.”

Hanzo swallowed thickly, his skin crawling with a terrible suspicion. The viciousness of McCree’s vengeance, the fact that the man felt he would have been able to return to Nash’s side, and the painting itself wrote a story all its own. “You and Nash, did you have… history?”

McCree titled his head, “History?”

So much for attempting to be delicate. “Yes. History,” Hanzo stabbed a finger angrily in the direction of the offending painting with roughly eighteen debauched nude and semi-clothed men.

“Oh,” Jesse’s eyes went comically round. “Uh…. I mean no? We threatened to, I guess. Never quite did anything about it though. Was too worried about watching my back at the time. Wasn’t a hundred percent sure that I could trust him… Guess that’s part of why I did him that favor though. Figured if I went back and told him what I did, if he didn’t shoot me outright then I could make myself… indispensable.” McCree ran his thumbnail across his lower lip, staring off into the depths of his closet, deep in thought once more.

Perhaps McCree was thinking of the other life where he fled Blackwatch at the first opportunity and wormed his way into Nash’s good graces… Among other things.

Hanzo felt a bit of tension release from his shoulders.He wasn’t sure why he’d been holding his breath. “Ah. How fortunate for you.” Hanzo swallowed, and his next words turned to ash in his mouth and poison in his gut, “He does not sound like he was a good man.” He could feel something warm and wet gathering along his eyelashes again and his vision blurred just a little. He blinked fiercely, trying to clear his sight.

“Yeah, nah,” McCree said the words quietly, distantly. “I probably dodged a bullet with that one. Maybe more than one, knowing Nash. Glad he’s gone,” McCree punctuated his words by jumping to his feet. The cowboy pitched dangerously for a moment, and Hanzo was almost caught in the face by the pinwheeling arms.

Fortunately, even in his inebriated state, Hanzo was able to dodge the blow. By inelegantly diving to one side, planting his face squarely into a discarded serape that did little to cushion the tile beneath.

“Ow,” Hanzo announced, not minding Jesse’s laughter. He blinked several more times. At least he could now freely wipe away the tears that had gathered without his permission.

“Jesus, Han, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to knock you over… I didn’t, did I? Fuck, you okay?” McCree’s amusement quickly vanished, and Hanzo lifted one corner of his lips in the imitation of a smile. As false as Nash’s other treasures that McCree had turned down.

“I have suffered worse at the hands of those ridiculous training robots.”

“You okay then?”

“It seems only my pride has been injured, but, as you well know, that could prove fatal for a man of my constitution.” Hanzo was impressed with how well he deadpanned the remark, and Jesse tipped dangerously again as he dissolved into laughter.

Making Jesse laugh was like executing a perfect shot. It gave Hanzo the same sense of satisfaction, along with something… more. A warmth that he had only noticed just now, perhaps because of how deeply he had been despairing just moments prior. Hanzo felt a genuine smile curve the edges
of his mouth. A small thing, but something he privately thanked McCree for.

McCree finally staggered upright, evidently spared Hanzo’s fate. He wandered over to his dresser and dug out a cigar from the top drawer.

“So... What about you?”

Hanzo blinked at the sudden question. “What do you mean?”

McCree jabbed towards the painting with his unlit cigar. Hanzo was fairly certain he could make out one couple actually fucking, among the fifty oiled and naked bodies on the canvas. “History. You have any you wanna share?”

This is a trap. It was only the considerable amount of whiskey he’d imbibed that kept him from indulging in his well-honed ninja instincts to jump out the window. Hanzo wasn’t sure how he could escape this conversation without being made or found out. “I would hardly call what was shared history since you admit there was none.”

McCree rolled his eyes, but he was still smiling. A good sign. He snipped the end of his cigar between his metal fingers, “Well you got something. It’s not nothing.”

Hanzo raised a brow, “Shall I tell you of the actors and fashion models I admired from afar? It seems about equivalent.”

“Boring,” McCree shaped the word around around the cigar between his teeth. He struck a match against his metal arm to ignite it before lighting the end of his smoke, filling the air with the pungent aroma of tobacco.

“How do I know you are not intending to mine this for... professional purposes?” Hanzo glanced over at the orgiastic painting again. Quaintance. Just the subject he didn’t want to discuss. Jesse had somehow drawn him into a conversational corner where the only way out was to drop all pretense that he’d never known the contents of Quaintance’s writing.

“Well, that depends on what you tell me, I suppose.” That hungry grin was back, and Hanzo wanted to tell McCree his entire life’s story (complete with his first faltering kiss at age twelve and his last, fumbling attempt at a relationship at the age of twenty five) then and there. McCree pulled a slow drag on the end of his cigar and Hanzo managed to remain conscious.

Why did McCree have to have such a brilliant smile? How could he make a man feel crushing embarrassment and staggering warmth in his chest at the same time?

Well, his chest wasn’t the only place that tingled with warmth when Jesse smiled at him.

"Are people keen to tell you their histories in excruciating detail?" The question came out sharper than Hanzo intended, a nonsensical flare of jealousy grabbing hold of him.

McCree shrugged, “I mean, my editor screens all of Jorge’s fanmail so the worst of the worst never reaches me, but... some of it can be pretty interesting.” McCree’s tone betrayed little, but there was the tiniest sliver of suggestion that haunted Hanzo.

“Interesting?” He tried to keep his voice even. He wasn’t sure what was more unbearable. The fact that McCree was asking questions about his sexual history, or the fact that there was a chance that Quaintance—McCree may have read his (anonymous) fan letter he’d sent from an anonymous terminal at an internet cafe while he was in Bucharest.
McCree gave a half shrug and a cheeky sort of smile, “Yeah. I mean, not all of it’s racy. Some of it, sure, but like I said. Kerning’s got some pretty good filters built in.”

Hanzo turned his head, not quite able to look at McCree straight on. “‘Pretty good’ implies imperfection, McCree.”

He wasn’t imagining the flush that colored Jesse’s cheeks. “Yeah, well, even omnis ain’t perfect. Seen a few things I wish I could forget, but there’s some wholesome stuff in there too! Stories ‘bout folks getting together, rekindling what they already got, proposing, and even some who say that my writing made ‘em feel something again,” McCree’s voice trailed off. Hanzo could feel his own cheeks burn. Surely his couldn’t be the only such message McCree had received. “It ain’t much, but I hope that helps tip the scales of good and bad I put into this world too.”

“And the less wholesome messages?” Hanzo raised a brow.

“Oh, you saying you’re curious? Tell me a good enough story, and I’ll give you one in kind, how about that?” Hanzo watched as Jesse picked up his glass again. He met the other man’s eyes cautiously, and the cowboy gave him a rakish grin.

Hanzo tried to hold firm against that smile. “Why are you asking me about this now?”

McCree swirled his drink, watching the amber liquid cling to the glass, “Would you believe that it feels safer now, since you know what I do as Quaintance?” The words came out slowly. They sounded… not quite like a lie, but not quite true either.

Hanzo let out a slow, quiet breath that wasn’t quite a sigh. He readjusted his legs in order to buy more time. He wasn’t sure how to proceed.

On the one hand, he had never really had a friend to confide in, to talk about such things with. He and Genji had sometimes discussed such matters, but the nature of their upbringing meant that they could be called to inform on the other at any given moment. Neither of them had been perfect at protecting the other during such impromptu interrogations. Even without the clan to come between them, he had not reached out to Genji for anything so deeply personal.

_Is this what friends do?_ He was tired and drunk enough he could almost believe that Jesse was trying to make a pass at him. Almost. If he had been someone else, it would have made sense. It could have been true.

“I think I will leave the stories to you.” There was a slight sag to Jesse’s shoulders, and Hanzo was surprised to see what looked like a genuine flicker of disappointment cross the cowboy’s face. That wouldn’t do at all. “Perhaps another time,” it would be a suitable torture. It seemed a just enough punishment that he might subject himself to a tantalizing conversation with McCree that he could never act on.

McCree smirked at him again, apparently bolstered by his temporizing. “So it’s true, then, you read some of Quaintance’s work?”

Hanzo felt something akin to pride as he managed to steadfastly ignore the warmth suffusing his whole face, “I have read one or two of them.”

McCree chuckled, but it wasn’t unkind. It seemed… fond in a way that made Hanzo’s insides twist with discomfort. “Other folks would tease the great and severe Hanzo Shimada for having a human heart after all.”

“Some might say that is what you are doing right now,” Hanzo pointed out tartly. He wasn’t sure if
he was actually offended or not. He suspected not. It was certainly not new ground, in any event.

“Just a little. I won’t ask if what you ended up reading, even though I’m kind of dying to know,”
more of McCree’s whiskey disappeared.

Again, Hanzo felt nearly-compelled to tell McCree the full truth, and beg him for any hint of news
for Riders of the Storm. Or maybe if there was a rough draft lying around that he could read. “It
was… surprisingly good, given the genre.”

McCree settled into an old rickety chair with a laugh, ‘Wow, that’s almost a compliment.”

“It is… visceral,” Hanzo admitted, fearing he revealed too much even with that. McCree said
nothing to that remark, merely smiled and sipped his whiskey again, cigar smouldering between his
fingers. The silence prompted Hanzo to speak more than any goading remark could have. “It has…
more emotion than Morricone’s work. Morricone is a wit and incredibly perceptive, but at times he
can be dry. Detached in a way only a man who has been taught to compartmentalize over a lifetime
can be. Morricone may be everything to you, but I believe Quaintance has your heart.”

Hanzo allowed himself smug satisfaction at the stunned look on Jesse’s face, that enticing mouth
thankfully out of reach as his lips parted without a word.

“Is that why you do not tell anyone you are Quaintance?” Hanzo had a vague sense that his
curiosity had gone well beyond the bounds of appropriateness, but he wished to confirm his own
suspicions that he was the only one who knew what Quaintance did for a living. It had very
conspicuously not been brought up at the meeting to discuss McCree’s plans.

The cowboy traced his eyes along the wall, scratching his beard thoughtfully, ash falling to the
carpet. “Guess I never thought about it that way,” Jesse huffed a quiet sound almost like a laugh.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Hanzo let his gaze rest on Jesse, brazenly drinking in the open
buttons that exposed the hollow of Jesse’s throat and the first inch or so of chest hair underneath.

McCree caught him staring. Hanzo felt his cheeks darken as McCree held his gaze, but the cowboy
didn’t seem like he was thinking of throwing him out. “Guess I didn’t,” the cowboy slowly lifted
the cigar to his lips in a manner that was truly obscene. He pressed the butt of the cigar along his
lower lip, little back and forth teases, before finally taking a drag.

“It isn’t that interesting,” the words flew from his mouth without thought or instruction. Hanzo
finally looked away as McCree lifted a brow. “My history, as you call it.” Hanzo swallowed at his
own daring, and cradled the borrowed glass in his lap.

McCree tipped his head, rolling the smoke along the corner of his mouth. “That so?”

Hanzo recognized the dare for what it was, but his chest tightened. He was daring too much, he
was willfully forgetting the fact that he did not deserve anyone.

“It is so,” he declared in a whisper, eyes trained on the cigar teasing Jesse’s lips.

“Hm,” Jesse swirled his glass again, holding the rim loosely in his fingertips, studying the contents
at the bottom. “I think the question of whether something is interesting or not is entirely a matter of
perspective.”

Hanzo laughed helplessly, hopelessly, “That sounds like a Morricone line.”

McCree chuckled, and pulled a gentle drag off the cigar, “Listen, we ain’t completely separate in
here.” The cowboy tapped his temple lightly.

That drew a nervous chuckle out of Hanzo as he wondered, for the hundredth time today how deeply entwined Quaintance and Jesse were. Their experiences—or histories. Hanzo felt a familiar flood of heat flash through his veins, he could feel the questions forming on his tongue, heavy in his mouth. He drowned them with another sip of whiskey.

“Quaintance is… He does not seem to have as open a biography as Morricone. Does he not have… a history?” Hanzo felt his cheeks flush hotter at the word. That perilous heat that had been working its way south was ticking hotter.

McCree hummed thoughtfully at that. “Mm, Quaintance has always been a bit more of a blank canvas. Repurposed him from an old cover, but he doesn’t have much to his name. Given the type of material I write for him, I guess I felt it was best to leave him sort of… mysterious. Let people fill in whatever blanks they want about him. Less info means less chance of a stalker. Morricone’s got a handful, and they’re obnoxious to try and appease.” A frown twisted Jesse’s lips, the scar twisting under the weight of his displeasure.

Hanzo blinked, leaning forward. He’d never considered the possibility, but then his personas and covers had a decidedly less public presence. “Stalkers? And you appease them? What does that even mean?”

“They don’t stalk me of course, but if anyone gets too obsessed, they might start figuring out that Morricone isn’t real. So I gotta give them scraps here and there. Vague travel timelines. Pictures on social media. Stuff like that to send them on snipe hunts. Quaintance I don’t gotta do any of that. He keeps himself to himself entirely. Aside from a few bio blurbs here and there. Not uncommon in the business. A lot of romance and erotica authors write under nom de plums. People expect it.”

“Do you… does Quaintance have… admirers?” Hanzo chased the taste of whiskey on his lips with his tongue before taking another sip. Hopefully McCree was unaware that he was sitting in the same room with one such admirer.

McCree chuckled, “A few. Some of those things I wish I could unsee? A few of those were from admirers.”

Hanzo felt his heart pounding against his sternum, like an oversized hummingbird trying to escape his chest cavity. “So you don’t… correspond with your fans?”

Jesse snorted, “Not in that way, that’s for damn sure. I try to reply to some of the more heartfelt ones, but I’m a busy guy, you know? Insomnia’s about the only thing that’s salvaging my writing career at this point. And the odd stake-out mission.”

“You do not!” Jesse cackled again in response to his scandalized outburst. Hanzo knew his blush was obvious, but he couldn’t help it, picturing Jesse nonchalantly writing out exquisite filth while casually chatting on the comms during some of their more sedate stake-outs. Perhaps that explained some of his more… risque comments from time to time.

“When else am I gonna find the time to get things done?”

Hanzo narrowed his eyes at Jesse, cheeks still hot, and he pointed a finger at the cowboy, the remnants of his whiskey still in hand, “Every sigh you make on the comms from now on will be met with suspicion.”

His stomach flipped at the hungry spread of Jesse’s teeth. “Why Mr. Shimada, I never knew you
had such a *dirty* imagination.”

_Caught._ Just like that. Hanzo had forgotten all about the trap he had suspected. Had forgotten how masterful Jesse was at making men like him drop their guard, even while doling out praise for his black ops instincts.

He couldn’t breathe, and the way McCree pitched his voice warm and deep had finally pushed him over the edge and he was now fully hard, and he felt just as exposed as if Jesse had caught him with his hand down his pants.

He almost bolted, then and there, but Hanzo could see the shape of that conversation and he didn’t like the thought of Jesse thinking he’d offended him, scared him off somehow. Or chasing after him when he _desperately_ needed to make sure that there would be no witness to what he wanted to do.

“I am not the one who writes about people having sex for his *side-hustle,*” Hanzo shifted so that his feet rested on the floor, knees between his chest and Jesse, as if it might afford him some protection.

McCree laughed, and it took every ounce of control Hanzo had left in his inebriated body not to flinch or whimper at what it did to him. He wanted to *feel* that laugh. Have it transmitted from the press of Jesse’s chest into his own and feel the vibrations travel down to his thighs. He did his best to look haughty and severe as he gripped his knees.

McCree lounged lazily in his chair, resting his cheek against the metal knuckles of his left hand, “Yeah, but you’re a _consumer_ of the products of my side-hustle.”

“Just two,” Hanzo reminded him a little too quickly, trying to even out his breathing.

“Which two?” Hanzo shifted in place again, something closer to terror gripping his throat as he was caught by warm and twinkling brown eyes.

“You said you weren’t going to ask,” Hanzo swallowed thickly as Jesse started running the cigar along the seam of his mouth again.

“Changed my mind. Artist’s ego.”

Hanzo felt a jolt as he glanced at the painting again, and a face far too similar to Jesse’s beamed broadly at him from among the mass of rippling muscles.

Hanzo got to his feet, swaying just as much as Jesse had, since couldn’t quite feel the floor. Just the feedback of pressure transmitted through his prostheses. Two steadying hands came to rest on his shoulders, one made of flesh, the other cool metal. Without thinking, Hanzo thrust his hands out, slapping them squarely on Jesse’s chest.

“Woah, woah, careful now. No more spills tonight, right?”

“I have… clearly had too much to drink. I should take my leave,” Hanzo delivered the words with a strange, detached calmness to Jesse’s chest. His eyes fixed just above that first button and the hollow of his throat. His fingers curled just a little, just the barest amount before he flattened them once more. He was wildly thankful in this moment that he had lost two feet compared to Jesse’s one hand, that he could feel the smooth curve of the man’s pecs and the warmth of his chest beneath his palms. He stayed there a heartbeat longer before he stepped back, pushing McCree’s chest lightly to separate them.
“Aw darling, I didn’t mean anything… don’t mind what I was saying about—”

A coldness mixed with nausea gripped Hanzo’s gut. This is exactly the conversation he didn’t want to have. “It wasn’t.” He forced another pantomime of a smile at Jesse. He didn’t need to hear confirmation that all this meant nothing, that Jesse was only teasing, and that it was another in an infinite line of jests. “I would simply like to avoid passing out on your floor the night before we are deployed on a mission.”

“You need me to walk you back?” McCree shoved his hands into the back pockets of his jeans, and he shifted his weight, which seemed like a mistake given the fact that the man’s leg almost buckled underneath him.

It helped dispel the tension at least, and Hanzo couldn’t help the undignified laugh at Jesse’s expense. “That does not seem wise. I will be fine.”

Jesse frowned and took a step towards Hanzo with an outstretched hand; he shuffled a half step back instinctively. His kendo instructor would have been appalled at the quality of his footwork. Inebriation was no excuse. Jesse stopped in his tracks, his hand hovering close enough to Hanzo’s cheek that he could feel the heat of his hand. McCree looked confused, then slightly pained, his hand twitched before he settled it on Hanzo’s shoulder, this thumb sliding over the rabbiting pulse on Hanzo’s neck. “Lemme know when you get there, okay?”

Hanzo laughed, but it quickly died as McCree continued to hold his gaze seriously. “To my room?” Jesse nodded. “On base?” The cowboy nodded again, and Hanzo felt mildly jealous at the freedom Jesse’s bangs had to brush his cheeks. “You are ridiculous.”

“Guilty as charged,” McCree squeezed Hanzo’s shoulder, and drew his hand back with a slowness that (had he not seen the amount of whiskey McCree had consumed) he could have mistaken for reluctance. Jesse flashed Hanzo another smile that weakened his knees and sent a new spike of heat along his dick.

“Good night,” Hanzo whispered, shuffling backwards to the door by feel. When he heard the hiss of the automated opening, he shuffled back, somehow managing to stay upright, just catching McCree’s answer before the door sealed temptation and torture out of reach.

Hanzo turned, one hand pressed against the wall for balance, and he shambled as fast as his drunken legs could carry him forward. It was late enough he prayed he would not meet anyone else in the halls. He exhaled sharply and palmed himself through his pants, which did not have the desired effect of easing any of the pressure, and only made him more uncomfortable. Typical and fitting.

Hanzo swallowed thickly and his feet, as fickle as they were false, made the decision before he did; he realized he was en route to the abandoned armory room. Hanzo punched in his code into the keypad, reasonably certain that McCree would not be walking in on him this time.

The thought itself was not unattractive, and McCree seemed to have a knack for catching him unawares.

Hanzo stumbled as he shuffled towards an empty munitions crate, hands working his jeans open with remarkable alacrity for how much whiskey he’d had on an empty stomach. He groaned with relief as he managed to push his jeans and underwear down to his mid thighs, his cock no longer constricted. Hanzo settled onto the crate, shifting until there were the least discomfort from the shelves pressed against his back. The shelf at the base of his head skirted the line between supportive and uncomfortable. When Hanzo finally wrapped a hand around himself, he found the
relative discomfort easier to ignore.

He swallowed and slowly dragged his hand down his shaft, pulling the skin down and exposing his head, thumb following with almost too much pressure. He bit his lip as he watched the door intently, sliding his fist up with a deliberate slowness. His fingers and palm were already sticky from the clear, steady stream of fluid sluicing down from the head of his cock.

Hanzo could feel his heart pounding in his throat, some (not small enough) part of him desperately wanted Jesse to override his code and walk through that door again. Hanzo bit down on a knuckle, breathing sharply through his nose as he stopped to work his thumb just under the base of his head, wondering what Jesse would do, if he found him like this. Hanzo finally allowed himself to shiver, and he slipped two fingers into his mouth.

Would Jesse simply watch from the doorway, and palm himself through his jeans? Unzip his pants, match Hanzo's pace, and issue orders in that deep rumble that nearly undid him every time McCree be used it? Perhaps he'd stride over and push Hanzo down onto his knees and let him ruin his throat on Jesse’s cock like he wanted to earlier. Hanzo sucked down on his fingers as he remembered the obscene way McCree teased his lips with the cigar. Maybe Jesse would be the one on his knees instead. His breathing came harder, and he had resumed fucking his fist somewhere in the midst of these thoughts.

“Jesse,” Hanzo dared to whisper the man’s name, tracing spit-damp fingers along his chest, beneath his shirt. Half-fearing, half-hoping it might summon the cowboy. His heart stopped beating in his chest, and he let his hand stall as he studied the door--his middle finger resting at the new bead of pre that had replenished itself. He could feel the throb of his own pulse under the pad of his finger. There was an unbearable tension in his gut as he stared at the door, still sealed tight.

"Jesse," he said the word again. Then again, and again, and it became a mantra. A plea. An anchor. An albatross around his neck.

Hanzo started breathing again as he realized that his summons had not worked and that there would be no cowboy coming to the door to end this well-deserved purgatory. Hanzo let out a shaky breath, and let out a quiet groan of disappointment.

"Jesse." It was begging, pathetic and useless. Something that he was too proud to admit and too drunk to deny. It shocked him how badly he wanted McCree to stumble on him like this, now that it wasn't going to happen.

He closed his eyes and summoned the memory of the faint melody that paired with McCree's keycode, and as long as Jesse was on the other side of the door, Hanzo wouldn't even care how exposed he was.

"Well, should have figured you'd take a detour here, of all places. Was getting worried about you. Wanted to make sure you hadn't passed out in a ditch somewhere." There's a little curl of heat, a thrill to his stomach as Jesse just leans against the open door, admiring the view.

"There are no ditches in the Watchpoint."

"All the more reason to make sure you didn't fall into one." McCree's grin is blinding: full of the self-satisfaction only a writer can have at a good joke.

Hanzo paused to pull his pants down off his legs in a blur, and he laid himself flat along the crate, knees spread enticingly, shirt rucked up under his chin and up to his armpits. He shivered a little as so much skin was exposed to the air, but he could feel sweat trickle along his spine.
He was proud enough to feel ridiculous about putting on a show for a figment of his imagination, but too drunk and too turned on to care. Unlike the conference room, he didn’t have to hold back here while he fantasized.

“You should have knocked.” Hanzo licks his lips, his hand wrapped around the base of his dick, one finger reaching down to pull absently at his balls.

McCree grins again, not even being the least bit subtle as his eyes rake over Hanzo's body. He can’t fight his shudder, and it feels like the cowboy has ignited coals all throughout his body. "And you should have done this in a room no one else had a key code to, yet here we are." While he seems cool and collected, Hanzo can hear the heaviness at the edges of Jesse's words. The softest hint of panting.

"Are you just going to stand there?" The tremble to Hanzo's voice wasn't false, and his stomach flipped again as he could see Jesse in his mind's eye finally take a step into the room.

"Might have to darling, these jeans are killing me over here worse than you." Jesse winks at him, "But if you keep that up, I might just escape this denim prison. Got a dick hard enough to cut glass right now."

Hanzo snorted, wrapping his fingers around his length and pumping his fist again again, "Quoting yourself again, I see. I suppose I can excuse it. When a Gentleman Thief Becomes a Gentleman Caller is a classic."

Jesse laughs and starts working at his ridiculous belt buckle, “So that's one of the two you've read, then.”

"I've read all of them," Hanzo confesses, and Jesse freezes, belt half open. “Well, all, but the newest one. It only came out today, I hope you understand. I haven’t had time yet.”

This time, Hanzo is able to savour the part of Jesse’s lips, the speechless, thunderstruck look. “And I sent you a letter. A fan letter. I stole away to write one while we were deployed in Bucharest. I knew it was my opportunity to write the most anonymous letter possible. No way to trace it back to myself at all.”

The wonder on Jesse’s face makes Hanzo shiver as gooseflesh covers his arm, moving in to occupy as much space as his dragons do on his left side. Then Jesse is just there and Hanzo can feel his hot breath on his cheek, and the weight and heat of him draped over his body, his right arm clutching Hanzo like an anchor, but taking such care with his left.

In the next moment, Hanzo imagined Jesse pulling him into his lap, cocks touching and wrapping their hands around them. He was fairly certain he’d lost the plot of his own fantasy, as Jesse was quite naked without explanation, and behind him, reaching around to jerk Hanzo off. At this point, Hanzo was no longer laying on the empty crate, but bracing his left forearm against it, panting and keenly aware of how deathly silent the room was, despite the clarity with which he could conjure some of Jesse’s deepest rumbles.

He screwed his eyes shut, imagining that chin hidden beneath a bushy, unkempt beard tucked into his shoulder, all sorts of murmurs of praise pooling at the back of his skull. The real McCree could have been in the room, and Hanzo would have been oblivious at this point, chasing his bliss. That telltale heat and pressure gathered in his spine, cock, and thighs, his balls tightening.

“Ooh, baby, that’s it. Come apart, just for me. Let me see you.” At the last moment, Hanzo reached up with his left hand, grabbed his chin and turned his head to the left, where he parted his
lips and angled his mouth to kiss his imaginary Jesse as his orgasm hit.

Numbness set in a moment later, and Hanzo sank down onto his knees. He felt the cool materials of his prostheses against his ass a moment later. A contrast to the warm mess on his hand and thigh. Hanzo watched gravity pull the evidence of his deed down the side of the crate, and he was fairly certain that the endorphins and satisfaction of a good jerk off had never fled him more quickly. He traced his fingers over his lips.

He had never allowed himself to imagine kissing Jesse before. He had come close, perilously close, but he'd always managed to avoid it.

Sex was one thing, and probably bad enough, but fantasizing about kissing seemed… it felt like Hanzo had even less grounds to picture that. Or more accurately the damage had already been done vis-à-vis picturing sex with Jesse, but kissing was new territory. Territory that should have been left inviolate.

Hanzo’s lips burned, and he couldn’t stop picturing it. He’d done six hour workout routines that left his muscles less taut and tense than his stomach was now. He smokes so much, it would probably be dreadful. Somehow, that little dose of pessimistic realism didn’t make Hanzo want the reality any less.

Abruptly, Hanzo remembered that he was mostly naked in an empty, now defiled storage room. This is why you need to avoid McCree’s whiskey, Hanzo. He felt a bit of relief as he came across the one and only box of cleaning materials—meant for weapons maintenance by the look of it—and he managed to cannibalize the supplies well enough to wipe away all evidence of his actions.

While Hanzo was tempted to burn the gauze squares for good measure, he settled for throwing them away in his own room. He hastily emptied a tissue box, moved the remains of its contents into another box of tissues, and used the empty box as camouflage on top of the trash can.

Hanzo sank down onto the floor of the tiny bathroom that adjoined his room, the tub digging into his back just as uncomfortably as the shelves in the storage room. He pinched his brows as he had the sudden epiphany that he had been thirty-eight for four months. He had his own private quarters with controlled access protected by a hand-scanner. He had absolutely no reason to act like a thirteen year old boy attempting to hide the evidence of his nightly activities. He half-considered removing the tissue-box decoy, but it was far too late to attempt to regain any dignity. It lived in the trash can now.

Hanzo buried his forehead into his palms, overwhelmed by first, second, and third-hand embarrassment. “Incredible,” he hissed through his teeth. He took another deep breath through his nose and shoved the standard-issue communicator in his ear and patched into the signal he was looking for. There was silence for a few seconds, and Hanzo wondered if something was wrong with his communicator.

“Jesse?”

“Yeah?”

Hanzo swallowed thickly. He couldn’t help his shiver at Jesse’s voice right in his ear, buzzing down the side of his throat. That slow drawl was just as intoxicating as the owner’s whiskey. Right in Hanzo’s ear, it was too easy to send his imagination straight back to where it was in that storage room. “You wanted me to let you know when I had made it back to my room,” Hanzo offered, feeling suddenly helpless and foolish at the same time.
“So I did.” Jesse chuckled in his ear and Hanzo sent up a prayer to any supernatural beings in the universe that could hear him—thankful he was already seated and not standing because of how weak his knees suddenly felt. “Was starting to worry you’d fallen into ditch somewhere.

Hanzo felt his blood freeze so soundly and swiftly, he felt he should submit himself to Dr. Zhou for study. Clearly there was some heretofore undiscovered substance in McCree’s whiskey that required the attention of the scientific community. Sake. He needed sake. He wet his suddenly dry lips, uncomfortable with the amount of prophecy he had been endowed with. "There are no ditches in the Watchpoint."

"All the more reason to make sure you didn't fall into one." McCree laughed again. This time Hanzo was caught, and his knees trembled and threatened to give way. His prostheses underneath held true, and he hobbled back into his room and grabbed a bottle from the top of the wardrobe. There was a thoughtful ‘hm’ in Hanzo’s ear that seemed to vibrate through his bones. “How come you don’t call me Jesse more often?”

“What? I didn’t call you—I never,” Hanzo sucked in a breath. He had. There was another honey-soaked chuckle that threatened to melt the tungsten rods at the core of his prosthetic ankles. “You definitely did. I like it.” There was the distinct groan of a cheap military-grade mattress that filtered through the communicator. The drunkest, most desperate part of Hanzo’s mind hoped beyond hope that Jesse was indulging just like he had. He bit his lip, once again picturing Jesse with his jeans undone and a hand around his cock. Hanzo shook his head, trying to dispel the image. “Call me Jesse again.”

“Why?” Hanzo’s cheeks were already burning as he opened the bottle clenched in his hand. The sake would not help in that regard, but it had other fortifying properties.

“It’s nice.” There was a pause and he added, “Just humor me.”

“Fine… Jesse.” Hanzo ran his thumb along the neck of green glass before taking a hit from the bottle. “What are you doing for the rest of the night?” He felt a slight sense of accomplishment that he hadn’t accused McCree of secretly jerking off in the middle of their conversation.

“Mm. Finishing off my whiskey and trying to whip something up to convince Kerning I’m hard at work trying to meet my next deadline.” The image in Hanzo’s mind shifted, but was no less handsome. He could see Jesse sprawled out on the bed, knees up, glass dangling carelessly over the side of the mattress, holoscreen highlighting McCree’s excellent bone structure. “What about you? Having a nightcap? Thought you said you’d had enough.”

Hanzo almost dropped the bottle, like a child caught with his hand in the proverbial cookie jar. “I just needed a sip to wash away the taste of your swill. That’s all.” He screwed the lid back on the bottle, though the display meant little with Jesse not even in the room to witness it.

“Next big job we get, we’ll get some top shelf stuff and I’ll prove to you that I know my way around a good barrel of whiskey.”

Hanzo stashed the bottle and retrieved his reader from the safe. “Hm. Perhaps we can find a bounty to squeeze in between Talon operations.”

McCree let out an amused hum that wasn’t quite laughter. “Could use some good stake out time to keep my editor happy.”

“If you need someone to bounce ideas off of, I could listen.” Hanzo instantly regretted his words.
“Well, well. You saying you’re a fan of my work after all there, Mister Shimada?”

“I see we are back to a last-name basis, McCree,” Hanzo glanced at the reader in his hand. At least McCree wasn’t here to see the evidence for himself.

“Aw, Han, you’re cuttin’ my heart into pieces over here.”

“What does Kerning have you working on?” Hanzo seated himself on the edge of his bed, running his thumb along the edge of his reader.

“There’s a series I’m kinda behind on. I’ll probably throw something together to beg forgiveness. Again.”

Hanzo felt invisible chains constrict his lungs. “I was not aware you also penned series.” He hoped the communicator hid the way his voice splintered in his throat.

Jesse hummed thoughtfully and it thrummed through his ear, down the side of his throat, down his spine. “Yeah. Got a few under my belt.”

Hanzo’s face was still on fire as he stared at the reader sitting in his lap. “I had no idea you were so… prolific as Quaintance.”

"There's a substantial back-catalog if you ever need something else to read."

"How long have you been writing as Quaintance?” The question was one of genuine curiosity. As someone who had consumed the entire backlog, Hanzo hadn't really thought about how long Quaintance had been around.

"Hmm. About six years, seemed like a fine side-enterprise when I decided to head for the hills. I could still wander the world, do some bounty hunting, and write when the mood took me. Convenient as hell that I wouldn't have to ever meet my editor in person."

Hanzo's thumb hovered over the power button for the screen reader. "Was... my brother with you at the time?"

He heard a slap on the man's thigh as Jesse laughed again. "You trying to ask if Genji knows I write smut or not?"

"Well, you did not answer my question earlier."

"Fair enough. Here's my best answer: Not to my knowledge. I didn't share it with him or anything at the time. Whether he's found it on his own after that, I have no earthly idea."

"So it is just me?"

"You're the only one who's had the balls to tell me, at least."

Hanzo frowned, bristling at Jesse's summation of the day. "You mean I am the only one you have ever goaded into telling you."

"Whatever makes you feel the most special, darling."

Fuck you. Hanzo managed to hold his tongue, if only because he was a little terrified what Jesse would do with such an opening. "I feel honored," he said dryly, instead.

"I mean, you can feel free to tell everyone if you want. I'm not gonna deny it, but you have to tell
"'em how you know the particulars." He could hear the grin in Jesse's voice.

"I will let you sing your own praises, as usual."

"Aw, Han, you know word of mouth is the best form of advertisement."

"You may no longer possess the glands capable of housing and producing shame, Jesse McCree, but I am still fully capable of experiencing the feeling."

"You act like I had 'em in the first place," Jesse chuckled good-naturedly. "You ever need help with those shameful organs you let me know."

Hanzo somehow managed to choke on air, and Jesse's laughter was not the balm it usually was. "Shame… is a small price to pay so that a man can also possess dignity."

"Hmm, you really think shame and dignity are two sides of the same coin?"

"If one does not hold issue with any of their actions, how can you truly claim to be proud? That just means you do not examine your actions."

"Huh." He couldn't tell, but it sounded like McCree was impressed. Or intrigued. Or like he had never considered shame from such an angle.

"Why? What do you think shame is?" This was the sort of conversation they usually held in person on nights like this. On a usual night, one of them probably would have been leaning into the other's shoulder.

"Me? I think shame has a lot more to do with the shit that people tell you, and do to you. All that stuff you carry around in your head... all the times someone made you feel shitty for the stuff that they did to you. Guilt is all yours, but shame? Someone else has a hand in shame."

"So would you not say shame is purely a social construct? To be truly shameless is to live outside societal contracts? Is not some amount of shame necessary to live well inside a society? Otherwise people would never abide by the rules—written or otherwise."

"I love talking to you. You're so damn smart."

Hanzo felt his face prickle with heat and his heart lurched in his chest. I am not smart at all. "I... only sound so intelligent because you are so drunk." If I were smart, I would not keep getting trapped like this.

McCree barked out a laugh again, "Fuck, if I have to retire Morricone, you gotta promise to help me out with his replacement. We'll collab on the writing and split the proceeds, fifty-fifty."

Hanzo scoffed. "Now you are truly making fun of me. I have not written so much as an essay in years."

"It comes back to you. Besides, you got a whole cohort of seasoned writers to help you out!"

It took Hanzo a moment to parse Jesse's statement. "....How many names do you write under?!"

Jesse chuckled and denied him for the second time that day. "Uh-uh. I'm having too much fun to just give it all away."

"Well then, do not let me distract you from your... work. I'm sure you have deadlines to meet. Good night." Hanzo severed the connection midway through Jesse's response, before he could
regret the motion. He pulled the communicator out of his ear, feeling far too lonely and discontent for someone who had just spent most of the day with a man who could be called his best friend. He flopped back on the bed and rested his arm over his eyes, reveling in the slightly dizzy feeling of being drunk and tired. Hanzo was tempted to chase his exhaustion to its logical conclusion, but sleep didn’t quite take hold of him. He hovered in the space just beyond sleep, where he could hear every hum of electricity and creak in the old Watchpoint, resting, but entirely aware of his surroundings.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, drawing him from the strange stasis that had taken hold of him. Hanzo frowned, and fished it out. There was a message from Jesse. The timestamp told him he’d been not-sleeping for a good twenty or thirty minutes.

12:34PM lmk if this is any good (you promised!) and be grateful that I’m risking exposure to Athena for this. She’s always trying to snoop.

His phone buzzed again in his palm as a new message came in.

11:54PM “I ain’t just some man with a death wish anymore. I found there’s only one thing in this world worth dying for, and that’s you.”

11:55PM “Don’t die for me, Justice. Live for me. Take it from a man who knows; living is hard.”

The phone slipped from Hanzo’s grasp as it remained still. He had to tamp down the urge to scream ‘Is that all!?’ A moment later Hanzo scooped up the phone and sent off a message confirming that it was good—if melodramatic without context. No longer remotely tired, Hanzo pushed himself to sitting again.

Jesse sent him a message almost immediately. Teasing him that he might become an actual fan at this rate. They exchanged more bullshit for a few more messages before Hanzo finally said goodnight. Again. Through a third medium of communication. He set the phone on the nightstand, half-hoping it would go off again.

He should have been getting in a good night’s rest, but he was wide awake now. There was still hope! Riders of the Storm was still being worked on! Though Ernesto sounded rather… different. Not that Hanzo could reveal such knowledge without also revealing the fact that he had read all sixteen parts of the series.

It is an early draft… and context is everything.

He settled under the cover and lifted the screen reader to his face. He powered it on and navigated so quickly to The Trouble with Titles each landing screen barely had a chance to load. His heart pounded with excitement. It had been a long time since Jorge—Jesse had delved into a costume drama outside the Old West like this.

Hanzo frowned as he scrolled past the title page and publisher’s information. While Quaintance—Jesse—generally had some acknowledgements to his editor and publisher, he rarely had a dedication beyond something generic and encompassing of his readership. (To all the lonely ranch hands. Or, from Hanzo’s favorite, to everyone riding out a storm.) This one gave Hanzo pause, and he wondered if he would have noticed if he hadn’t been made painfully aware of the fact that the author was Jesse McCree. Maybe he would have, just because it was so unusual for Quaintance.
To my very own muse. Never thought I’d have one, but here I am. Can’t decide if I hope you look down and notice me one day or not. Thank god for that sweet, exquisite agony of cowardice. Here’s to every other fool living in suspense.

Hanzo felt his heart threaten to choke him as it took up residence in his throat. He re-read the dedication again, and he felt just as numb as if he’d drank a year’s worth of Jesse’s whiskey. Had McCree… found someone? Hanzo hadn’t even noticed a change in the other man. What sort of sniper was he? What sort of friend? How long had this been going on?

Hanzo stared at the words again. It made sense now, thinking on it, that Jesse had never penned anything more than a flippant line or two dedicated to all his readers. He wouldn’t want anyone to inadvertently piece together any hints about his true identity—no matter how remote the possibility.

The realization made the dedication stick out all the more. Who was this muse Jesse had found? Hanzo traced his fingers over the words and they tripled in size at his touch. Hanzo sighed and flicked his fingers so that the words were at the proper zoom level. He also wondered how long ago production of the book had started. It might give him some clue as to the identity of the subject of this dedication.

The choice of words was curious as well. ‘Look down and notice me.’ Had Jesse fallen for someone in office? Or a place of high command? There had been the corporation they had infiltrated, under suspicion of secretly funneling funds to an anti-omnic terrorist group. Jesse had been placed in a middle-management position. Filling a void for someone who was out with long term health complications. He’d had regular contact with several individuals higher up in the chain of command, and Hanzo knew (from being placed in the same office as a ‘transfer’ from another campaign) that the man had been to several parties with the middle and upper management. Parties that, despite McCree’s protests, Hanzo only observed from a far vantage point.

Hanzo had already had attended enough inane business functions for one lifetime, he was certainly not going to do so for an entity he was not actually employed with.

From what he had seen through his scope, McCree had gotten very friendly with several of the higher ups indeed. McCree was a skilled operative. He could have easily snuck away for coffee with someone while Hanzo was occupied with the mundane tasks necessary to keep up his own cover, or while doing his own infiltration tasks.

The thought made his chest ache, and he frowned. He did not think McCree would abandon his duties like that. No, surely not. His actions had to have been for the mission. Besides, the cowboy hated the rich on principle, and the fact that the company’s practices were enough to deceive their intelligence network into thinking that they could be associated with a terrorist group was enough to dismiss the notion entirely.

McCree had a distaste for most politicians as well. Hanzo could count on one hand the number of government officials McCree had ever spoken highly of, and the occasions numbered half as many. But if it wasn’t for some sort of leader or modern-day aristocrat, then why would he write the dedication like that in addition to a period romance explicitly about position, political intrigue, and loving outside one’s social station? (To be fair, McCree did not seem to be one for respecting social standing, much less authority, so perhaps he was reading into this too literally.)

Hanzo wondered, vaguely, if this had anything to do with his former commanding officers? But he’d never detected any hint of attraction there. Jesse’s relationship with Soldier: 76 seemed to be only slightly less complicated than his own relationship with Genji—if only by virtue of not having a direct blood tie. McCree was absolutely still livid with Captain Amari’s sudden return from the
dead, and Reyes… well, that was a complication all its own.

There was, however, a short stint where they slipped undercover into the Royal Air Force (at the behest of Agent Oxton’s government) to suss out a Talon sleeper cell. McCree had charmed their CO Holme in record time by not referencing a character he shared a five sixths of a name with. A smile did the rest, and Hanzo could see the man was instantly smitten.

That mission had been quite some time ago, almost eight months now. Was there a way to ask McCree when he’d started writing the novel that would neither seem suspicious nor incite further teasing? (Probably not.)

Hanzo finally flicked past the dedication and into the story proper. Like so many of Quaintance’s stories, it opened with a line that made Hanzo’s heart ache with something that wasn’t quite nostalgia. A deep longing for something he’d never had at all.

The brilliant blue hydrangea blossoms outside his window made Isidore miss the humbler, but rarer, wildflowers of his childhood that only bloomed under the perfect set of conditions—the chiepest of which was an abundance of rain. Contrary to popular opinion, Isidore did not find the summer rains unwelcome. He admired them only as a man born and raised in a desert could appreciate. Yet lately he seemed fated to apportion his hours of leisure and the time devoted to his duties of state to assuring all who saw him that the weather had not cast a pall on his disposition. Isidore was most displeased that he had little to offer in defense when pressed for the reason of his incessant sighing and frequent lapses into contemplation. He made it his tertiary occupation to avoid his well-meaning acquaintances such as Colonel Adalbert—whose primary hobby in retirement appeared to be inserting himself into delicate matters of those closest to him with all the grace and invitation of an overturned steam locomotive.

Still, Isidore had to admit, looking at his own countenance in a passing reflection, that he did not look to be in his usual good cheer. There could be little wonder why acquaintances and passers-by would be moved to enquire about his health and demeanor. His tawny, sun-kissed skin wasn’t quite so sun-kissed as it was this time last year. Isidore realized, with a small amount of horror and amusement that he had let his beard and hair become too long and unkempt for polite society—a concern he’d long thought himself above. Evidently three years on the Azure Isles in Crown Prince Hercule’s court and company hid rid him of his allergy to the rules of societal engagement he had once considered silly and wholly beneath him.

Isidore let out a sigh, twisting the ends of his brown mane between his fingers. Perhaps that was part of the problem. If only he could regain his disdain and contempt for an orderly society, he wouldn’t be reduced to a sighing ghost, trying to avoid all notice in the hallways.

“A credit to you indeed…” Isidore scoffed, his mouth twisting as he ran his hand along his beard. “If only I could be less than my word—and less of a credit to you—I might be free from this prison!” Or at least the endless enquirers as to his current state of health.

Isidore let out another great sigh. His promise to Hercule would be his undoing. There were ships that came to harbor which gave him access to the continent and the Americas, but Isidore knew he would never set foot on any vessel to take him from
this place.

Not as long as his heart lay here.

Isidore chewed the edge of his thumb and resumed his trek to his chambers. He had already spent too many hours in Hercule’s company today without speaking his heart. He needed a respite before the painstaking torture of the evening meal. Though the court on the Isle of the Floral Throne was small, it was still a court, and even Isidore’s esteemed position as personal scribe and scholar to the crown prince was not enough to afford him a seat in Hercule’s immediate vicinity—most nights, at least. He suspected tonight would be no different, and he would be reduced to staring across the table, wishing he could go back and say a hundred witty things he’d let die on his tongue earlier that day.

Hanzo ran his thumb along the edge of the reader to scroll to the next page. He couldn’t help but picture Isidore as Jesse. There were some undeniable parallels beyond the superficial similarities in looks. Isidore was rough around the edges—but hardly barbaric—and had turned his gift for writing into an asset in Hercule’s court.

Would he have been picturing Jesse in the role of Isidore if he didn’t know Quaintance was McCree? He’d already known Jesse’s identity as Morricone. Certainly he had re-imagined some scenes Jesse had written with both of them in cast place of the original players, but the characters had always been distinct and different in his head as he read the stories. This was… new.

Something pulled at his heart as he pictured Jesse sitting at a formal dinner, in a handsome vest and tailcoat. Hanzo let a smile pull the corner of his mouth up as he imagined Jesse/Isidore swooning in his room as he started the next chapter. He even found himself coming around on Hercule. The first scene he appeared in painted him as an insufferable, imperious, and pompous—which Isidore inexplicably loved—but Isidore was privy to some of Hercule’s secrets and virtues. Of course, through Isidore’s eyes, it was hardly surprising that Hercule was sympathetic and likable.

Isidore described a man who was paranoid—with good reason—and wrapped up in the weight of legacy and succession. Hanzo had to grudgingly admit to himself that Hercule was not the conceited, frivolous dandy on the cover—but he was just as infuriatingly oblivious as first suspected. Not that Isidore was any better. The man swallowed his feelings and wrote them onto page after page, but every night Isidore burned the evidence, and Hanzo had half a mind to march back to Jesse’s room and yell at him for putting Isidore through such cowardice and torment. It was the best kind of infuriation. He could only speculate how the eventual denouement would unfold. Hanzo rubbed at his eyes—which he belatedly realized were tired, even though he was still riveted by Quainta-Jesse’s storytelling.

He flicked the edge of the screen to reveal his progress. According to the indicator he was easily a fourth of the way through the story. Part of him wanted to continue, so that Isidore could be free from ‘living in suspense’ as McCree had put it, but it was already so late. Weariness overtook him and he closed the reader down, and Hanzo finally succumbed to a dark and lonely sleep.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Genji proves to be as oblivious as he is wise.

“Genji, I have a problem.”

“More than one, I would suspect, if you are seeking me out of your own volition.” The snarky declaration would have held more fraternal fondness without the truth tacked on at the end. It was a pale imitation of who they were, who they had been.

‘Don’t gloat,” the admonishment slipped out with a curl of his lip. A thoughtless, callous attempt to defend himself from retribution that neither of them needed to worry about any longer.

Genji folded his hands diplomatically, “I wasn’t. I am glad you decided to seek me out. I apologize if it seemed as though I was belittling you.”

“Even though you were,” Hanzo crossed his arms.

“It was meant in fondness, I assure you. I see it is not a good day to tease. What troubles you?” The tilt to Genji’s head was the same as when he was a child. He wondered if Genji still wore the same Schrodinger's smile that was either reassuring or infuriating, depending on Hanzo’s mood. The elder Shimada felt a bit of his self-righteousness deflate as he realized how much more apt the comparison was. He flicked his eyes away from his reflection on Genji’s visor.

“You have asked me in the past to… ‘check in’ with you when I am struggling, and I find myself doing so now,” Hanzo worried at the inside of his lip, detesting even this minor admission. Genji should be the last person on earth to help carry his burdens, but Hanzo had been driven to the edge of desperation.

Hanzo heard the intake of breath, could just barely detect the expansion of Genji’s ribs beneath the plating, but his younger sibling held his tongue. A skill dearly paid for.

“I find myself… wrestling with the idea of.. Deservedness,” Hanzo toyed with the hem on his sleeve. If he could keep things vague and philosophical enough, perhaps he could escape this conversation unscathed.

Genji, for his part, tilted his head several degrees to the right, “Interesting. Go on.”

Hanzo opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. What could he possibly say? *I think your friend McCree has shown me too much kindness and now I want more? Or: I am coming dangerously close into deluding myself into thinking that if I pursue McCree he might not find me completely and utterly repellent, despite my past actions? “I... I want something, but I do not think it is attainable.”

“I do not think you would be concerned about whether you deserved something if it was completely unattainable,” Genji crossed his arms, but Hanzo read the gesture as one of patience.

“I think I may attempt to attain it very soon, despite this fact,” the words came out soft, and Hanzo
was taken by surprise with the declaration. He could feel the furrows forming between his brows. *Did* he intend to do that?

Genji tapped a finger thoughtfully against his arm, the soft pat of carbon fiber an unwelcome reminder of the prison he’d consigned his brother to. “If it is truly unattainable, then it does not matter if you deserve it or not.”

Hanzo stared resolutely at his feet, deathly afraid Genji might read through him entirely at any moment. “What if it somehow happens?” He lowered his voice into a splintered whisper. “It would be a mistake. I don’t deserve—” Hanzo couldn’t complete the thought. It was as if he’d swallowed battery acid.

Genji was quiet for several long moments, but Hanzo heard the measured, staticky sigh his brother finally let out.

“All right. I am uncertain *what* you are talking about, exactly, but let us indulge you for a moment. Let us talk about *deservedness*.” There were a few more thoughtful taps of false fingers on false arms. Hanzo finally dared to look his brother in the visor. He did not care for the fact that he could see fear in his own reflection.

“You know better than *anyone* —”

“Why do you wear clothes?” Genji interrupted his self-loathing, speaking over him.

Hanzo blinked several times, utterly bewildered by the question. “What?”

“*Why,*” Genji stressed the word, “*do you wear clothes?*” Hanzo shook his head, still baffled by the non-sequitur. Genji rolled his neck and tapped his foot. “There are some who would say you do not deserve to wear clothes, for what you did to me. That you should crawl on your belly, naked, like a worm for the rest of your life.” The venom behind Genji’s words sucked the air out of Hanzo’s lungs. Without thinking, he reached for the sash at his waist, but an unyielding hand powered by high-grade, one-of-a-kind, state-of-the-art cybernetics gripped him by the wrist. “Let me *finish,* for fuck’s sake. So dramatic. Do I *deserve* to see my brother bare-ass naked every day for the rest of my life?”

Hanzo opened his mouth, certain a proper counter would come out, the way it always had between them. There was always something to rebuff his brother. He was vastly disappointed and only a frustrated noise escaped his throat.

Genji pulled back his hand with a chuckle. “Life is not about what we *deserve.* There are many things you do not get to *decide* that you deserve, like my forgiveness. That is a gift, freely given, with or without your say-so.”

“For something given so freely, it feels like a burden,” Hanzo couldn’t help the resentment that clawed its way up his throat again. It felt like a wild beast trying to tear him apart from the inside.

Genji tilted his head with a thoughtful hum. “The only burdens you carry are your own. Freedom can feel heavy, if you are used to chains.”

Hanzo felt angry, nauseated. “Why did I ask you for wisdom when I *knew* I would hate the answers I hear?” He pressed the heel of his palm into his forehead, a sudden pressure building there.

“Because I am your brother, and you needed to hear the truth?” The voice was gentle, but no less unwelcome.
Hanzo felt his stomach roil, and he hated everything about his little brother in that moment. Hated that he had somehow died and been resurrected as some sort of enlightened Buddha. Hated that everything he’d said was true and just and right. Hated that Genji was just as carefree and unburdened by trouble as he was in his youth.

He hated that he had missed the last ten years of his brother’s life. That there was this rift between them still, despite this second chance, that he could not bring himself to confide this one thing to him.

“Anija?” Genji said the word softly, cautiously.

Hanzo let out a slow and shaky breath. “Yes?”

“Whatever it is you seek, can I ask you to consider the possibility that it may not be as bad as you think? If you should attain it.”

Hanzo let out a sharp breath through his nose. His stomach still felt like it was trapped in a vise. “I will take your words under advisement.” It was the most ungracious attempt at being straightforward with Genji that he had attempted to date.

His younger brother was a thousand times more gracious, and didn’t point out his obvious lie. Instead, Genji clapped his hands together, “Right. Time to get you all done up for your mission!”

The elder Shimada barely contained a groan. “You get far too enthusiastic about this.”

“You just hate shopping with the plebs.” Genji stepped behind him and set his cybernetic palms against Hanzo’s back. “Go get some real clothes on, we’re going out in public. You need a wardrobe and a haircut.”

“I am one of the plebs now,” Hanzo pointed out, letting Genji push him towards his quarters.

“Hurry up,” Genji shoved him again. “I’ll meet you in the garage.”

Hanzo sighed and stepped briskly out of his brother’s push radius. “Fine, give me twenty minutes.”

“You have twelve,” Genji countered. Hanzo rolled his eyes, and jogged to his quarters, and was in the garage in eight minutes, dressed in civilian gear, just to spite him. He let Genji drive, even though this was one trait that had not improved in the slightest in the intervening years. A drive that should have taken forty minutes was carved down to twenty six, and Hanzo lectured Genji about the unnecessary attention speeding tickets or vehicular manslaughter could bring to the new Overwatch.

San Roque was blessed with a booming tourist economy that had picked up in the wake of the rebuilding after the Omnic Crisis. Here Genji and Hanzo would be no different than any other tourists looking for good food and easy ways to throw their money away.

Hanzo let Genji drag him into several boutique shops, with a wide range of fashion styles. While Hanzo was naturally drawn to some of the more polished and upscale looks, Genji gently pointed out that they should at least attempt to give Quaintance a more vintage or grungy look if he was going to plead exemption on the basis of hardship. They would just have to pray that no one in the county clerk’s office of New Castle, Indiana would be observant enough to spot that the distress to Hanzo’s (Jorge’s) clothes were entirely intentional and that his clothes were more expensive than some of the county’s residents likely spent on their cars.

“I look like a poor, gay pauper,” Hanzo sniffed at his reflection in the mirror. He had a faded, yet
fashionable, hoodie artfully worn at the seams. The silver-threaded jeans they’d settled on were also frayed and the amount of distress at the pockets threatened to expose the next layer of clothing underneath. There was a hole large enough over his right knee that he could shove his fist down his pant leg.

Genji pat him on the shoulder sympathetically, “I know how much you hate wearing anything that has so much as a single frayed thread. Your sacrifice is greatly honored, brother.”

Visions of countless months living out of a duffel bag flashed before Hanzo’s eyes, and he bristled. “I’m not that picky anymore. I have learned some measure of… flexibility.”

“Of course you have,” Genji gave him another sympathetic pat. It wasn’t worth it to hash out (in public) all the disgusting back alleys he’d crashed in and all the ways he had debased himself for the last ten years.

Besides, Genji almost certainly had just as many horror stories to match his, if not more.

They charged the clothes to an old account set aside by one of their cousins, reappropriated after his ‘unfortunate disappearance’ in the Caribbean. He let Genji drag him out of the shop and back into the streets. He followed Genji’s endless promises of ‘Just one more’ until they were standing outside the parking lot of a vast mega shopping complex.

The mall, in retrospect, was a mistake. The food court presented far too many temptations, as well as people. “This was a filthy trick,” Hanzo grumbled, as he narrowly averted a family of three adults and five children.

“It is good for you to be out in public, among other people.”

“It is too noisy,” Hanzo shoved his hands into his pockets in order to quiet the murderous intent he felt building within.

“I’ll buy you a slice of cheesecake or something later,” Genji rolled his eyes with his body language alone. Hanzo grunted noncommittally, but he already knew what flavor he wanted. It would have to do. “Anyways, we’re going to a piercing parlor and maybe a barbershop too. You need to make sure you don’t look like… you.”

“I am not going to pierce anything below the neck,” he warned his brother, already suspicious.

Genji snapped his fingers, “Damn, you got me bro! I totally wanted to think about you piercing your nipples or your junk.”

Hanzo narrowed his eyes at Genji, but he decided not to bring up past transgressions out of respect for public property. He had a very distinct memory of being ambushed and dragged into a piercing parlor in Shinjuku, and being volunteered to have his left nipple pierced the eve before he was set to go under the needle for the fourth time. He doubted his brother remembered, since he’d been so wasted at the time, but it gave Hanzo pause. Drunk and impulsive, yes, but also very calculated to make sure that their activities would come to light.

“You started it,” Hanzo offered without the deeper explanation, but he followed Genji anyway.

The mall piercing boutique was far more reputable and clean than the one Genji had brought him to all those years ago. Whether it was sobriety or maturity, Hanzo was thankful.

Despite his dire warning, Hanzo came out of the parlor with a bridge piercing, his ears pierced, and his collarbones sporting four studs apiece. The prevalence of biotic ‘minishots’ also meant that his piercings were already half-healed, which Hanzo was grateful for. The ache left behind was
tolerable, and the redness would fade soon enough.

Deep down, he knew that each piercing was a weakness that could be exploited in battle, but in his heart of hearts, he heard a quiet whisper that he was finally cool.

Satisfied that his appearance was sufficiently modified by metal (Hanzo tried not to think of the potentially vengeful implications), Genji then dragged Hanzo up three sets of escalators to a veritable haven of spas and hair salons.

It was still too loud and too crowded, but Hanzo felt a grudging sense of respect for Genji. He’d hidden this ace up his non-existent sleeve for some time now.

“How long have you been waiting to give me a makeover like this?” He glanced at his brother, wondering now if Genji was merely jealous of all the trappings and preparation he could no longer really needed with the body he inhabited.

“Awhile,” Genji smiled mischievously. “I always felt bad that you never really got a chance to follow in my footsteps and show some youthful rebellion. I will say, from experience, green as a color does not suit us. You might try blue or purple if you are thinking of dying your hair.”

“I’m not going that far,” Hanzo argued, crossing his arms. Genji laughed softly and tugged Hanzo by the elbow towards a salon, enthusiastically waving his hand in front of the shop to summon the holographic catalog of the season’s hottest looks. “You’d look good with something short again,” Genji remarked, flipping the screen to the right, summoning more flickering heads with a different set of hairstyles.

Hanzo hesitated by the entryway, his eyes fixed on the nearest empty barber’s chair. He touched the very ends of his hair.

“What’s wrong, anija?”

“Nothing… I had been thinking of growing my hair out, that is all.” Hanzo bit the inside of his lip. He hadn’t realized his intention until he spoke it out loud. Stupid. Just because Quaint- McCree had waxed philosophical about Hercule’s long, black hair did not mean he found it to be personally attractive. There were likely deeper metaphorical and symbolic meanings to the length and color of Hercule’s hair that he hadn’t considered yet.

McCree had never once commented on his hair, that he could recall. Besides, the dedication made it clear that McCree’s feelings were invested elsewhere, and he probably wouldn’t have cared if Hanzo decided to shave his head and replace his hair with cybernetic implants.

“It’ll grow back,” Genji said gently. “If you really don’t like-”

“Actually, I think I’ll get an undercut instead.” Hanzo stepped up beside Genji and flicked back a few pages in the digital catalog.

“Wh-” Genji’s posture shifted in surprise. “I suppose that would let you keep a part of it long. It would be a very different look as well. It will be more awkward to grow out, if you don’t like it, though.”

“It is hair,” Hanzo shrugged. “I think I should clean up the sideburns as well.” Inside twenty minutes, Hanzo was wrapped in a nylon cape and his skin buzzing underneath a razor. Inside an hour, Hanzo had shaved everything from the edge of his goatee up to the central stripe of hair he’d allowed to remain. He let it sit in an imperfect and messy top knot.
“Your face looks different without the sideburns,” his brother mused. “It is not a bad look, though.” Genji let out a single bark of a laugh, “Now I’m just pissed that almost everyone is gone. Especially Hana. She’s going to flip her shit when she sees you!”

“You mean you haven’t been taking pictures and sending them to everyone we know?” ‘Over encrypted channels’ went unsaid.

“No! I mean, yes I was taking pictures, but hell no! I need to be there inperson when Hana sees your new look.”

“Oh, so you will allow me the honors of sending her a selfie, how generous.” Genji wailed as Hanzo pulled his phone from his pocket.

“No—! Come on! Don’t deny me this!” His brother clasped his hands together, pleading.

“Hmph. You will simply have to settle for Satya’s honesty in the meantime then.”

“Boring,” Genji declared, and Hanzo felt a spark of anger in his chest. A protectiveness he had not felt in a long time. Not since the two of them were children together.

“She is not!” The protective spark that had once been reserved for Genji himself fulminated into something hot and ugly. The words came out too sharp, scalding on his tongue like lightning, and Hanzo wondered if he had lost control of the beasts within his arm.

Several heads turned their way. Hanzo wished that the type of ninjitsu magic that pervaded the anime of their youth truly existed so that he could turn them both invisible in the middle of a busy mall. Or better yet, cast a spell that would teleport him back to base without needing to share an awkward, forty-minute long car ride home.

The dragons did not answer every prayer, but Hanzo had learned that bitter truth a long time ago.

It was closer to an hour by the time they pulled into the garage on base. Hanzo had been so wrapped up in his own head, he honestly had no idea if Genji had said anything or not.

Hanzo slipped out of the passenger seat as soon as the hoverblock in the car disengaged and slipped out of the passenger seat, shouldering the shopping bags without a word. He didn’t hear Genji’s feet touch the ground, but he heard the drive-side door open and shut. A voice greeted them from behind the Orca.

“Howdy! Welcome back—unless I’m speaking to a Talon operative, in which case best throw down yer guns now.”

Hanzo froze as soon as he realized that the hangar was occupied by the object of his obsession. He hadn’t allowed himself to imagine how McCree would react to his new look, once he’d convinced himself that the man didn’t care at all. Idiotic. He still does not care, why worry about it now?

“Greetings, McCree.” Genji’s voice was much closer than he’d expected, and a quick glance over his shoulder confirmed his brother was standing right behind him.

“Ah, hey Genji? Guess that means it’s you and yer brother? Ya’ll are so damn quiet, I wouldn’t have known you were here if it weren’t for the engine and the doors on the car. Was ‘bout ready to brace myself for some kinda auto-piloted drone attack.” The sound of Jesse’s boots echoed through the space, and Hanzo felt the expansive space of the hangar shrink as the soft tamp of leather on concrete came closer.
McCree paused as he finally rounded the wing, looking between the two of them. He seemed to frown at Genji, almost imperceptibly, but then his expression neutralized. “Getting your undercover persona ready, I see.”

Hanzo just nodded. McCree crossed the space, and it was not the first time Hanzo had noticed the easy grace of his saunter. When he got close enough, McCree started to circle the both of them. “So this is what Jorge Quaintance looks like, huh?” The cowboy’s voice betrayed nothing as he continued his careful orbit.

“Not what you were expecting right? Isn’t it cool!!” Genji sounded excited, artificially so to Hanzo’s ears, but then there was always something artificial in his brother’s voice now. McCree’s boots stopped right in front of Hanzo.

Jesse reached out, his expression unreadable. Hanzo held his breath, uncertain why he suddenly felt so tense. Time seemed to slow to a crawl. A malleable thing where his blood coursed through his veins with the speed of a raging river while everything around him moved so slow it was infinitesimal. Jesse’s expression turned into that warm, familiar lopsided smile as his fingertips brushed along the bristles lining his scalp. Hanzo felt the weight of his body return to him, and he shuffled the prosthetic attached to his left leg.

“Well… It’s different, that’s for sure. Kinda miss the feathers,” Jesse ran the edge of his finger along Hanzo’s buzzed temple. It felt like the man had severed the muscles of his hamstrings with the simple gesture, and Hanzo had to lock his knees to stay upright. “Have to get used to it, I guess.” Hanzo swallowed as he felt his top knot move as Jesse brushed his fingers against it. “Glad you kept a little of it long. You look good in long hair. Not like me,” McCree chuckled. Hanzo couldn’t think for the pounding of his pulse through his face. He bit the edge of his tongue to contain just how much he disagreed with the cowboy’s self-assessment. The catch of Jesse’s calluses against his hair were so intimate and unexpected he wasn’t sure what to do. This was nothing like the casual, incidental touches during long nights of drinking.

“I was not aware… you had any opinion on my hair,” Hanzo blinked in a vain attempt to clear his vision and his thoughts. All he could think of suddenly was the last thing he clearly remembered reading last night. The writer and his muse, the courtier and his prince, enjoying a rare moment of leisure and a little too drunk on bourbon. An achingly tender moment of intimacy that Isidore failed to understand, despite being well-aware of Hercule’s deep paranoia. Years of discipline kept Hanzo from shivering as he recalled the line: *Isidore threaded the fallen strands of raven hair around his fingers with a veneration he had never shown to any god worshiped by man.*

“I didn’t know I did either!” Jesse let out an easy laugh. Or almost an easy laugh. There was something… tense in it. Too controlled and short to be truly free. McCree brushed his thumb against the short bristles of his temples again, and Hanzo found himself envious of the lighters and matches McCree had handled over the years.

“So what did *you* think Quaintance was going to look like?” Genji sidled up to McCree and prodded him in the elbow, above the tasteless skull plating Hanzo had somehow come to view as uniquely charming.

McCree shook his head, never once taking his eyes off Hanzo. “Not like this. Never really gave him a look in my head. Maybe an old, retired rancher. Bit of a paunch. Balding. glasses.”

Hanzo felt a sharp burst of air travel through his nostrils before he could stop it.

“Well? What did *you* think he’d look like then, Shimada?” Jesse finally pulled his hand away and Hanzo’s jealousy transferred from lighters to McCree’s belt loop as his thumb rested there.
There was a fraction of a second where Hanzo gauged the situation. The desire to be clever outweighed the risk of his brother being present and McCree catching onto his concealed thoughts and feelings.

Besides, McCree had sufficiently short-circuited his thinking he couldn’t come up with any other answer.

He looked Jesse dead in the eye, “Like a naked vaquero spilling onto a serape somewhere.”

Genji’s cackle barely registered with Hanzo. He relished the way Jesse’s eyes went wide, and he seemed to forget how to draw breath. Hanzo even allowed himself the tiniest smirk as McCree’s jaw went slack.

There was an ache that started in his chest as McCree continued to stare at him. Like he was seeing Hanzo for the first time. Mistake, a voice whispered and panic tightened his gut as Jesse remained gobsmacked.

Just as his fear peaked, Jesse finally shook his head. “Some people just don’t appreciate culture,” the words were distant, distracted. Almost under his breath.

It was a familiar argument at least. Hanzo took some small comfort in that. “McCree if you think that thing on your wall constitutes culture, I shudder to think what else you would decorate the base with if given the chance.”

“Hey, that’s a man’s private quarters you’re talking about, not the whole base. I know there ain’t accounting for taste around here.” Hanzo felt heat blossom underneath his skin as the words Jesse said improbably jumbled in his head and turned into an entirely different sentence.

They sniped back and forth, until Genji threw in his lot with Hanzo to agree that yes the painting was indeed hideous and everyone on base knew it. Hanzo felt a strange flurry of emotion. Confusion, gratitude, irritation, embarrassment.

Still, Genji and McCree both seemed oblivious as ever to his internal torment, so Hanzo considered the interaction a success. At least until he and Genji were walking back to Hanzo’s room to drop off his clothes.

“So Hanzo only shook his head and stared intently at the palm reader tingling underneath his hand. Going to the airport was never pleasant. There were too many points for potential failure to ever truly relax. Easy enough to navigate with enough practice and a robust enough false identity, but stressful all the same. Hanzo felt a stab of irritation with Tracer for being gone, and that her promises to pull another pilot back into the fold had proved fruitless.

He had flown coach and economy (and even super economy) plenty of times since leaving the clan, but being ferried around by Lena Oxton in a still relatively state-of-the-art aircraft had spoiled Hanzo again.
He just prayed that he and Genji would make their connecting flight in Dover.

Making matters worse, they had to leave the base at the crack of 3:00AM in order to make the drive to Spain and shuffle through the ritual of airport security. Brigitte had, at least, shouldered the burden of driving them, which exponentially increased their chances of making it to the airport in one piece, in Hanzo’s opinion. He had suffered enough of his brother’s reckless driving as of late.

McCree, Hanzo, Genji, and Brigitte milled about the kitchen, throwing anything resembling food into toasters and microwaves, while Satya was already down in the hangar, organizing their luggage for maximum efficiency. Once again, Hanzo wished he had taken McCree up on his offer to swap partners with Dr. Vaswani as he stared at the least appetizing frozen breakfast burrito in existence.

The prospect of several days alone with Genji was… daunting.

“Hope your new hardware doesn’t set off the metal detectors,” McCree grinned, interrupting Hanzo’s brooding and general displeasure at being up so early when it was not his idea. The familiar jingle of metal preceded a cup of coffee being placed next Hanzo’s plate, a brilliant veil of white steam rising from the jet surface.

McCree was suspiciously alert and jovial for this hour, which made Hanzo suspicious the man had pulled an all-nighter. The man was even showered and wearing an appropriately comfortable, civilian set of clothes. A cream jacket, a soft grey t-shirt made of moisture wicking cloth, and green pants that looked suspiciously too comfortable to be true khakis. McCree had abandoned his cowboy boots in favor of a pair of brown Chuck Taylors. The man had attached his spurs to them, which should have been the most objectionable thing about the outfit, but…

“Your socks do not match.” Hanzo reached for the coffee, once he had made his pronouncement. McCree’s left sock was a muted teal. The right was black with the faintest flecks of red, blue, and purple woven in a subtle pattern.

“We're two grown men, international assassins-slash-bounty-hunters, part of a legally forbidden organization, about to go on an undercover investigation, and you're concerned about my socks being the same?”

“You are a ‘grown man’ as you say.” They weren’t even remotely the same. Hanzo could understand grabbing two mateless socks of a similar color, but this was inexcusably lazy.

McCree shrugged, and took a pull from his own mug. “With the price on my head, what do I care what’s on my feet?”

“That explains your choice in footwear.”

“Don’t be jealous just ‘cause you don’t got real feet anymore!”

Hanzo flipped Jesse off with his left hand. McCree laughed.

Hanzo nursed the coffee McCree brought him, opting for scalded-roast coffee over whatever breakfast concoction he’d tried to consume. He’d have to wait for the airport and its captive pricing and familiar tolerabilities. It was somehow more infuriating that Jesse had almost dressed like a reasonable human being. He had almost dressed like a normal individual.

It was a thousand times more irritating when McCree pulled off his spurs before they climbed into the hovervan. Hanzo wasn’t certain how it happened, they hadn’t discussed seating, but he was
piled into the backseat with his brother and McCree squished improbably between them. The back row of seats had been removed to make further room for the luggage containing Satya’s equipment.

Once everyone was buckled (Brigitte staunchly refused to engage the car before this was settled), Hanzo glared at McCree. “What was the point of the spurs if you weren’t even going to wear them?”

He hated that he was close enough to feel McCree’s laugh in the pit of his stomach. “Darling, if you think I’m going to risk catching the wrong side of sleep-deprived Hanzo Shimada, you’re crazy.”

Hanzo stared at McCree for several seconds before he abruptly turned towards the window and burrowed into the insufficient space allotted to him. “You have done just that.” Hanzo closed his eyes as the other occupants of the van erupted into laughter.

The rumble of McCree’s laugh warmed his belly like a bed of warm coals. More than the press of McCree’s hip against his and the pressure of McCree’s ankle against his prosthetic. It stayed with him all through the slow shuffle through security.

On the other side of the line that divided security and the outside world, however, that warmth vanished when it came time to part ways.

“Happy trails,” McCree tipped his third most beloved Stetson at them (which also happened to conceal a communication device) and split off towards a different part of the terminal with Satya, who grunted something that was probably a goodbye and well-wish for their safety and success.

Hanzo assumed, anyway.

He and Genji made their way towards their own gate, though Hanzo made them stop at the first acceptable-looking vendor to buy an overpriced breakfast. This was the part about airports he hated most. McCree had succinctly summed up such activities as “Hurry up and wait” and Hanzo thought it was an apt turn of phrase.

He pulled out his hummus wraps and ate them in silence once they reached their gate. An additional restlessness stirred beneath Hanzo’s chafing at the dull mundanities of things such as air traffic patterns and the physics of traveling through the air at sub-supersonic speeds.

Hanzo had broken his own cardinal rule. He never took the reader on missions, ever, lest he die and it be discovered on his person. The last thing he needed was Genji mourning his corpse and stumbling across his collection of romance and erotica.

He was bored, and the reader in his carry-on was burning like money in one of McCree’s proverbial pockets. He might be able to get away with reading in the airport, and he might be able to steal a moment or two in their hotel, and during what he was assured would be a long, interminable wait at the courthouse, but on the flight itself? With only Hanzo to occupy Genji’s attention, the airport was already a risky proposition.

He didn’t want Genji figuring out exactly what Quaintance meant to McCree and how Hanzo had known. That might lead his brother to examine things far too closely.

(Hanzo told himself that it was this and not the prospect of a casual conversation with his brother that was the issue.)

Some eighteen hours and two layovers later, they touched down in Indianapolis. It was another two
hours before they finally crossed the threshold into their hotel room at the edge of New Castle. Hanzo had never before visited Middle America (if this indeed was Middle America, he wasn’t entirely clear on the boundaries), but he found it to be utterly lacking in the charm he’d been promised by McCree and the countless movies that had been imported to the Japanese theatres from Hollywood.

It was entirely mundane. Hectares of corn and soybeans separating bastions of civilization that were filled with the same patterns of areas of affluence and economic downturn as anywhere else, though the history defining those boundaries was entirely inscrutable to Hanzo. Perhaps if Hanzo was not suffering sleep deprivation and a full day’s travel he could have at least appreciated the scale of things. It was mildly fascinating that for a culture so focused on individual expression and happiness that everywhere they drove, there was yet another housing subdivision of copy and paste houses. And each and every one of them were ruled by a band of suburbanites who were ready to descend on such transgressions an incorrect exterior paint colors and disapproved landscaping with all the tribal ferocity and fervor of a troop of chimpanzees.

So much for American exceptionalism and individualism.

Without a word, he and his brother unpacked their equipment and clothes. Hanzo crashed first for a three hour nap while his brother stood watch. There were benefits to being a cyborg, and reduced need for sleep was one of them.

When he woke up, there was cold wonton soup waiting for him. Hanzo placed the styrofoam container in the weak microwave supplied by their room. They sat a tablet on the end of one of the beds, and took in Athena’s data for the network of security cameras around the city. Tiny red dots blossomed along the blue wireframe rendering of New Castle, like a fleet of angry fireflies. Government cameras, traffic cams, and other officially state-sanctioned cameras were lit with larger dots. Municipal and business cameras were smaller.

They charted a path through the gaps and blind spots of coverage. The teleporters were meant to be a backup anyway. A safety net, in case something went wrong. An escape route. There was a place two blocks away from the courthouse that was suitable. Hanzo would just have to be good enough to get there, if things went south.

There was simply no way to set one up any closer to the courthouse. Once his stomach had settled from the reheated Chinese food, the two of them set up the teleporter in their room. One half of the equation. Evading the security cameras in the hotel was child's play, so their shortcut back wouldn’t be suspicious.

It was late enough when they left that they had the cover of darkness, but there were enough living souls about to disguise their intent as something more benign as they weaved through the city at night.

Historic Downtown New Castle was probably better served by sunlight. The buildings were attractive enough, Hanzo could tell at least that much in the dark. They had the grand touches of Greek pillars and contrasting red and white brickwork that would have gleamed proudly on a sunny Sunday afternoon that all but vanished on a moonless night. Yet despite the polished and gleaming storefronts and stately buildings, one could round the corner and see a business, home, or factory that had stood vacant so long the dilapidation was uncomfortable next to everything else.

An empty factory was one such target. The omniums of the Midwest had pushed out other forms of automated labor. From the void of paint left on the brick Hanzo could just make out it had once been a place to bottle soda. No doubt someday someone much like Hanzo would roll into town and build a trendy microbrewery out of its bones, if one of the five major American beer companies
didn’t beat them to it or buy them out.

It took a good twenty minutes to set up Satya’s teleporter. Hanzo was reasonably certain he could have done it faster, but without her here to guide him, he decided to give the sheer planes of light the respect they deserved. The last thing they did was attach a small detonator to the device. A way to collapse the tunnel behind him, so to speak.

They powered up the teleporter and made the disorienting jump back to the hotel room. They stared at the portal behind them, and waited the longest five seconds of Hanzo’s life. He sighed with relief as the device went dormant, as intended.

There was nothing to do now but hurry up and wait.

After a fitful, short sleep, Hanzo woke again. Bleary-eyed, but thankful none of McCree’s alter egos lived in Australia. Six hours difference was annoying, but manageable enough.

The complicated part was spending so much time alone with his brother with so little to say. They talked about little things. Commercials. The places in America that they had been to before. McCree.

Hanzo tried not to talk about McCree too much, but it seemed like it was the one thing they had in common, and this mission was more or less at his behest, so perhaps it was only natural that McCree was a frequent topic of discussion.

Hanzo managed to read in a surprising amount of peace. When they didn’t speak—which was often—Genji seemed content to meditate or practice his kata. Sometimes Hanzo joined him, but the cramped space made it difficult to accomplish very much.

That afternoon, someone took residence in the hallway across from them. A man, from the sound of it, traveling alone. This individual was either hard of hearing, or he was attempting to mask some illicit activities because the moment he stepped into his room the television set was turned on at the loudest possible volume.

For the first forty-five minutes or so, they had amused themselves by attempting to find what channel he was watching, and then they created a new game by watching another channel on mute to see if any amusing results could be had. By fifty minutes in the game had lost its luster, and they had to conclude that the man was watching a channel which required additional payment. Genji confirmed it once he flipped to the hotel’s menu interface.

*Total Raquet* was some sort of absurd ‘comedy’ film starring Thespion 4.0. Hanzo had never had the misfortune of seeing the film before. However, at the volume their neighbor was playing it, he could have reproduced every vapid detail of the script. Thespion 4.0 was playing the role of a hapless and clumsy attorney, going undercover as a sports idol to try and break up a crooked betting ring in the tennis world. It was enough to drive Hanzo to speak with his brother. An activity that generally merited at least one day of forethought and preparation.

“Why does your master refuse to speak to me?”

Genji tilted his head. Had he not removed his visor, Hanzo would have known deep in his bones that the younger man’s grin was shit-eating. Instead, much to his surprise, there was a gentle, curious smile on Genji’s face instead. “Why do you care?”

“Must you answer all of my questions with questions!?” Genji laughed, throwing his head back. “I am trying to understand. You speak highly of him, so there must be something I can gain from
unraveling this… unpleasantness.”

Genji slotted his hands over the middle of his feet in the spaces that used to hold high arches they had both inherited from their mother. “What do you hope to gain?”

Hanzo sighed. “Nothing material.” He crossed his arms, and prayed that would be enough to satisfy the enlightened being his brother had become.

“Anything else?” There was the soft pitter pat of Genji drumming his thumbs along his soles.

“I do not… Is it not enough that I wish to understand someone who is important in your life?!” Genji’s smile got a little bigger, which did nothing to endear him to Hanzo. “What?!”

“It is nice to hear you speak it plainly, that is all. I had difficulties myself in being honest. Not just with others, but also myself.”

Hanzo breathed in sharply through his nose, and then exhaled slowly. Denying that there was any similarity between them would only bolster his obnoxiously enlightened younger sibling. Genji steepled his fingers thoughtfully, carefully considering his words.

“Are you done stalling?” Hanzo bit the inside of his lip, irritated with his brother’s posturing.

“Mm, how do I put this… anija, do you recall when you first joined us? What lead to your first… outburst with Master Zenyatta?”

“Not really,” Hanzo gave a half-shrug. “I know I told him not to speak to me again for some… what I know now to be imagined slight.”

Genji laughed, “That was almost a confession to a flaw.”

“Fine, I lost my temper,” Hanzo had to refrain from barking out the words, his temper threatening to best him once more. “I told him as much later, yet he still refuses to speak to me, despite being given permission.”

Genji laced his fingers together and placed them in his lap, “Did you ever apologize?”

There was a rattle of ceramic and metal as a service tray in the hallway across from them as the service tray got stuck on the door jamb of room 118. Total Racquet seemed to play at an absurdly loud volume before the sound of Thespion 4.0’s tennis ball launcher was finally muffled.

“What do you mean—an apology? Of course I apologized to Zenyatta! He is being obstinate!”

Genji’s long-suffering sigh covered the predictable punchline regarding testicles from the courtesy-challenged guest across from them.

“Did you actually say the words ‘I am sorry’ or ‘I apologize’? Or ‘I did not consider how my words harmed you, please accept my sincerest regrets in how I handled our interaction’?”

“Of c-” Hanzo paused. “I said something to that effect.” His cheeks burned, and he wished his brother’s face was concealed again so that he wouldn’t have to look into the warped portrait of Sojiro’s disappointed frown.
“Hanzo, with an apology one must typically—as a bare minimum—utter the words *I’m sorry*. A *good* apology usually acknowledges how the other party was wronged, your understanding of the transgression, and a promise to do better in the future.”

Hanzo studied the duvet cover with an intense scrutiny as he pondered his answer. Thespion was chewing the scenery with an audible grinding of metallic gears across the hallway. “And this… extended silent treatment was supposed to teach me that?”

Genji shrugged, “Actions have consequences, as does inaction.”

A surge of righteous anger flooded through Hanzo. “I live *every day* knowing that there are consequences to actions,” his voice was tight enough to choke on. He could hear Genji’s voice in his head, *You also know plenty about inaction.*

“I know that,” his brother said softly, instead.

“Was your master truly hurt, or was he merely trying to insert himself into…?” Hanzo gestured between them to indicate the difficulties of the past decade and a half.

His brother shrugged, “Why not both?” Genji lowered his arms after a beat. “We *have* been speaking more as of late. It is… nice. I had missed it.” Hanzo avoided Genji’s meaningful look.

Hanzo wasn’t sure where his next words came from, but he continued to stare resolutely at the duvet, plucking idly at the seams. “For all you have learned of apologies, you have yet to offer one to me.” He dared to glance at his brother from the corner of his eye.

Genji was sitting there, his mouth agape, scars pulled taut.

Hanzo clutched the duvet in his fist, “Forget I said anything, that was unconscionable. I don’t deserve-”

“I didn’t think you were ready.” There were tears glimmering along Genji’s lash line, and his jaw trembled. Hanzo turned towards his brother, uncertain of the terrain they were now navigating. It was as if their roles were suddenly reversed.

“I do not need-”

“Brother, please, can you forgive me?” Genji had adjusted his posture into a proper bow of apology. “I look back on our childhood, and I am filled with shame for the way I treated you as we got older. I often let myself misdirect my anger at our situation onto you. I wish I could go back every time I sold you out to our father, to the elders… I would stay true.”

“We both… Each of us threw the other under the proverbial bus on more than one occasion.” Hanzo let his eyes drop to the floor.

“I betrayed the family,” Genji’s face was twisted into the sort of self-loathing Hanzo could recognize.

“An inherited trait we seem to share.” Genji let out a dark sort of chuckle.

“While I am pained that I treated you unfairly, I am glad that you are able to see things clearly now.” Genji sat up, easing into a more relaxed posture.

Hanzo nodded thoughtfully, “I think I have seen the circumstances of our… drifting apart quite clearly since the moment you proved not to be dead.”
“Well, I guess we finally got what we wanted, in the end. It was a strange path to get here.” Genji’s voice was full of nostalgia beneath the voice assistance.

Hanzo tilted his head, “What was that?”

Genji smiled, opening his hands as though it were obvious, “You and me, brothers united against the world.”

Hanzo scoffed, “We are hardly ‘against the world.’”

A pillow flew in his direction, but he deflected it easily, “Brothers in arms then! Close enough! I know there are other people too. We are not truly on our own.”

Hanzo threw the pillow back at Genji, barely giving a second thought to the amateur movie theatre across the hall. “Next you will be trying to convince me that our actions are heroic.”

Genji caught the pillow, lobbing it back with superhuman speed. It was all Hanzo could do to duck down and dodge the missile. “We are!”

Hanzo scoffed, “Yes, indeed. Heroically swearing off the civic duty of men that do not exist.”

Genji’s laughter pulled a smile from Hanzo’s lips, but it also pulled at an ache in his heart. “I appreciate you stepping up to help McCree like this.” His brother stretched out on the other bed, propping his cheek up against his fist. “But why are you doing this for him? What motivated this?”

Hanzo’s heart stopped beating. He always wondered if Genji had a means to detect heartbeats implanted in all the cybernetics and machinery that made up his new body, but he was too cowardly to ask. It was something he wasn’t entitled to know. He could only hope that it wasn’t the case.

“I don’t understand the question.” It wasn’t a lie. Not really. Not in the truest sense of the word. He wasn’t certain why Genji cared, now, about his motivation.

“You must have had some reason to volunteer as you did. I know you, you hate frivolity, and…” Genji sighed, “As much as I can appreciate McCree’s paranoia, he has to know that this is the minorest of minor concerns. So why are you going along with this?”

“There was no one else,” Hanzo stared at the door, wishing that the soundtrack of Total Racquet was just a few decibels louder so that conversation would be rendered impossible.

“Hm. Interesting.” Genji chuckled, “You’re still so…” his little brother gestured vaguely between them with the hand that wasn’t supporting his head. Hanzo wasn’t sure what it was meant to encompass.

“So…?” Hanzo repeated the gesture, carving the space between them.

“Yes,” Genji agreed sagely. He smiled after a beat, eyes mischievous as ever, “I am proud of you for forming attachments, brother. Even if you’re as stubborn as ever about copping to the fact.”

Hanzo sat up taller, as if he expected armed assassins to burst in through the window at any moment. “I do not have an attachment to McCree! We are colleagues and nothing mo-” Genji curled in around himself, struggling to contain his sudden bout of laughter. Their neighbor across the hall apparently finally found Thespion 4.0’s performance amusing as there was a braying laugh that blasted through their far too thin walls.
“What are you even talking about?” Genji threw his head back with a laugh, “Did you seriously think I meant you had a crush on McCree!? Anija…” Three pillows made contact with Genji’s shaking belly in quick succession.

It did little to quell Genji’s laughter as he rolled onto his side.

This is what comes of reading too many romance novels, Hanzo privately despaired. “Still, all I meant to say was, I owe Overwatch a debt. I am merely fulfilling my duty. If that means helping a paranoid, but otherwise sensible and honorable man, so be it.”

Genji’s brow wrinkled in confusion, and his laughter had ceased by now. Hanzo didn’t like the curious tilt to his head one bit. He tried to set aside his fears about Genji’s possible heartbeat sensing abilities once more.

“What?” Hanzo examined his nails, studiously avoiding his brother’s gaze.

“It is just… sensible usually isn’t the first word people use to describe McCree. It seems… weird.” Genji tilted his head the other way, as though trying to physically wrap his brain around the concept.

“You’re w—” Hanzo shut his mouth so forcefully his teeth clicked together. Monstrous. How could he have nearly uttered such a word to his brother? After it was his own hand who had created Genji’s new existence? Just so they could re-hash the spats of their childhood? It was unconscionable.

Genji shattered his expectations by cackling instead. “No you’re weird!” Genji lobbed a pillow at Hanzo, and it bounced off his shaved temple and spilled down his shoulder into his lap. A sort of numbness washed over him. His brother snorted and pushed himself back up to sitting, “I mean McCree is pragmatic, but I dunno. Most people are taken in by his flamboyance and bluster.”

“I am not most people,” Hanzo pointed out, hoping that would be the end to his brother’s curiosity.

“You are not,” Genji agreed with the statement thoughtfully. Hanzo reached out for his reader, hoping that being short and impolite would save him as it had done on more than one occasion.

“Anything good?” Genji nodded at the reader. “You’ve barely been able to put that thing down. What are you reading?”

Hanzo swallowed. “Just… catching up on my to read list. Some bestsellers.” He was, in fact, re-reading Riders of the Storm. He was putting off finishing The Trouble With Titles, he wanted to save it for tomorrow.

“Nerd,” Genji smiled fondly, and it didn’t hold the same weight or bite it had as a child. When he had needed Genji to respect him. To adore and idolize him. When any reminder that Genji didn’t 100% of the time was tantamount insubordination and disrespect.

“That’s right,” Hanzo gave his brother a thin smile and stared at the reader. It took a while, but eventually he was able to drown out the television across the hall and disappear into the storms of the Illyan Expanse, and if he cast himself as Ernesto and McCree as Justice in his imagination, no soul on earth ever had to know.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Hanzo and Jesse both lose something precious.

Hanzo woke up the next morning, and donned his ‘gay pauper’ outfit. He glared at the flesh visible at his knee as he looked himself over in the mirror. He picked up the burner phone that would support Quaintance’s identity and complaints. He applied the false fingertips with Genji’s assistance and waited for them to dry. The last thing Hanzo did before they left was to hand Genji his hotel keycard and place his communicator in his ear.

There was a rideshare waiting at a coffee shop down the street to take him to the courthouse. Hanzo’s burner phone would reflect a much longer and more expensive journey, but any security footage of the area immediately surrounding the area would show one Jorge Quaintance exiting an ordinary sedan at 9:05PM.

Hanzo checked in with the receptionist, and avoided having an outright argument with the woman manning the station. No he was not reporting for duty, he realized yes he was supposed to wait for a message before coming in, but that was not why he was here today, and could he please speak with jury commissioner. Hanzo breathed a sigh of relief as he was told to go up one floor and speak at the next receptionist’s desk, and someone even more agitated than he stepped up behind him to report for one of their most important and inconvenient American rights.

Hanzo settled in with The Trouble With Titles, and ignored Genji’s half-assed attempts to rile him up over the communicator. He’d left off on a cliffhanger. Isidore had been captured by one of Hercule’s many political enemies who had taken the story published as fact, rather than deeply hopeful fiction.

Isidore knew he would never see a living soul again. He would never ride a horse again, never shoot a gun, or look upon Hercule’s smile across the grand dinner table. He gagged as the rank breath of his captor washed over him. There was a painful, localized pull at his scalp and the quiet snick of a blade unfolding. The next sound Isidore heard was the sound of steel on hair and the pressure was gone a moment later.

Wrapped in the fist of Vicomte Chastain, was a lock of his hair. A button from his vest joined a moment later, as did the handkerchief in his waistcoat pocket. “A pretty bundle, yes? Let us seal it with a kiss.” Pain blossomed at the corner of Isidore’s lip. The Vicomte removed the blade and held the corner of the handkerchief against the blood. Right next to Hercule’s monogram. Not enough blood to be interpreted as lethal, but enough to show intent.

Isidore laughed, and tried to catch some of the blood with his lips and tongue. “You are a fool taken in by nothing more than fancy. There is nothing between the crown prince and I.”

“And yet you hold his kerchief in your pocket,” the slow pull of Vicomte Chastain’s smile spoke of all the harm he wished to inflict on Isidore.
“A momentary kindness, not a gesture so grand as you think,” Isidore couldn’t meet the Vicomte’s eyes. If only for how badly he wanted the man’s assumptions to be correct.

“Small gestures can mean as much as the grandest act of love.”

Isidore blinked, and he could not help but lift his head to look at the Vicomte. The man flashed his teeth, a yellow tangle of terrible fangs.

“You did not expect a terrible man such as myself to care for such a thing as love? I can see it in your face, monsieur. My heart is just as human as yours. And your precious prince, and I can see the secret he harbors for you there.”

“That simply is not possible,” Isidore whispered. The Vicomte twisted the kerchief around the button and the stolen lock of hair so tightly it resembled one of the fashionable and dainty handbags that the ladies of court so favored.

“We shall see what is true, monsieur. The fanciful tale put to page or the one you are telling yourself.”

“Mr. Quaintance!”

Hanzo jumped, the reader clattering to the ground. “Ah, my apologies, yes?”

“The commissioner is ready to see you. Second office on the right down the hall behind you. Whatever you were reading must be good, I’ve been hollering your name for, like, five minutes.” The man looked more irritated than such a minor inconvenience should merit.

“I do apologize for the inconvenience,” Hanzo automatically started to bow, but he turned it into leaning down to pick up the reader instead. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” It was the least gracious sounding pleasantry Hanzo had ever heard in his life. “By the way, you know you’re in a courthouse, right? Next time wear a set of pants without holes in them.” The man barely contained his disgust.

Were it not for the night Hanzo had experienced ten years ago, he would have classified the rage coursing through him as ‘murderous.’ Instead of indulging in his overwhelmingly violent fantasies, Hanzo instead stared between the man’s eyes, attempting to peer through his skull to the back of his head and smiled until the receptionist was clearly uncomfortable.

“These are my nicest jeans.” Hanzo thought he did a passable job at sounding incongruously sweet, and it had the desired effect as the receptionist suddenly was desperate to be industrious and look anywhere but at him.

Hanzo let out a slow breath, trying to let go of the range and let it simmer into self-righteous irritation. He knocked on the office door before entering. The man inside was a middle-aged white man, like so many other men in this building. He had sandy blonde hair and small, watery eyes. Hanzo shook his hand before sitting across from him. The man introduced himself as Francis Harvey, and the name plaque on his desk confirmed him as such. He could hear McCree’s voice in his head (an unwelcome distraction): Never trust a man with two first names.

“So! Mr. Quaintance! I see we finally got you here at last. I understand you want to talk about being permanently excused from being called for jury duty?”

“Yes,” Hanzo exaggerated his accent, knowing full well that he would be viewed as less intelligent
because of it. One of the first tricks he had been taught to master for foreign business negotiations.

“Well, depending on the circumstances, that can be arranged.” The man rubbed his chin thoughtfully, dragging out the words.

“I come here from Knightstown. I use a rideshare app. Very expensive. Cost me forty dollars!” Hanzo scowled and pulled out his phone, pulling up his bogus ‘receipt.’

“Well, respectfully Mr. Quaintnace, that isn’t enough. Unless you are claiming some sort of hardship? The court does pay you for your service, after all, based on mileage, which should cover transportation costs.”

“No car, no job.” Hanzo shook his head. “Bad legs.”

“Your legs?”

Hanzo bent down and shoved his hand through the hole at his knee. He unlatched the claps and grabbed his ankle, tugging against the fabric. A moment later he deposited one of his prostheses on the desk.

“Bad legs,” he emphasized.

Mr. Harvey was frozen in shock, and Hanzo would have killed every ill-mannered receptionist in the building to be able to laugh out loud in the moment. Instead he had to look concerned, and he was worried his attempt to restrain his laughter was doing odd things to his face.

After several more moments of stunned silence, Mr. Harvey cleared his throat. “Well, I believe we can certainly extend you an exemption based on disability hardship, Mr. Quaintnace. Let me just draw up the paperwork.”

“Thank you,” Hanzo inclined his head, and he felt a genuine warmth in his chest that surprised him. He absently touched his sternum in wonder. How funny. Completing a mission had never made him feel… good… before.

“Uh, Mr. Quaintnace?”

“Hm?”

“You can uh, have your… foot… back.”

Hanzo quickly turned his snort into a cough and set about re-attaching his prosthesis. While effective, wildly inappropriate, and hilarious all at the same time, re-attaching his prosthesis was a much harder ask and Hanzo had the vague sense that he really should have known better, despite the size of the hole at his knee.

By the time he was reconnected to his prosthetic leg, Mr. Harvey had already drawn up the appropriate paperwork and sent it along to the next dotted line in the bureaucracy Hanzo would have to visit. He was appropriately grateful to Mr. Harvey and went downstairs to a different clerk of the court system. Hanzo noted the presence of several correctional officers, but he didn’t let that betray any kind of tension in his body.

Hanzo barely paid any mind to the paperwork or the individual behind the desk. He was already fantasizing about the bed back at the hotel and perhaps finishing The Trouble With Titles. He only came to when he realized his attention was required once more. Hanzo gave his digital signature, and then reached out to press his thumb to the scanner below the terminal.
It made an angry noise. *Dee-do.*

Hanzo frowned, and tried his other thumb, at the insistence of the person behind the counter. *Dee-do.* The red light over the scanner was not encouraging. Hanzo felt his heart start to pound. “What the…? Hey, uh, can you try that just one more time?”

“Yes something broken?” Hanzo tried to look just as puzzled as the clerk.

“We’ll see. Use your left thumb again please?”

The hairs on the back of Hanzo’s neck stood on end. His gut told him to cut and run, to change his mind and start spouting the virtues of civic duty, but they had already come this far, and he couldn’t let McCree down. He couldn’t.

Hanzo placed his thumb against the reader again. *Dee-do.* He held it there, willing whatever this was to resolve. *Dee-do.* From the corner of his vision, he caught a corrections officer slowly moving in closer.

“Sir, can I see your ID just one more time?” Hanzo passed his ID over, and he felt rather like a noose was closing around his neck.

“Everything should be in order,” Hanzo tried to ignore the fact that three officers of the law were slowly closing in around him. The dragons roiled under his skin. Something had gone drastically wrong with the fingerprints, clearly.

“Uh, can I ask you to just go with the good officers for a moment while we sort this out?” For the first time today, he felt pity as he saw the terror behind the eyes of the clerk.

Hanzo nodded slowly, and spoke slowly and clearly so that his communicator would pick it up, “Of course. I love a man in uniform.” The clerk let out a nearly hysterical laugh.

Genji’s voice buzzed in his ear like a tiny, reassuring mosquito. “*Ah shit, brother, really? Is this really happening?”*

For a moment, Hanzo considered unleashing his dragons and destroying the courthouse, and fleeing the scene. Still, skilled as he was, Hanzo didn’t favor his odds against three armed officers —no matter what their experience level.

Besides, he had the feeling he would disappoint McCree if he did that.

“*Stay calm brother, I’m getting Athena on this.*”

Hanzo let himself be escorted into a holding room. Two corrections officers stayed with him, and the third one left after demanding his phone. Hanzo passed it over, despite knowing he was currently under no compulsion to. Right now was about being agreeable and waiting for the right opportunity.

“*Shit, shit, shit, shit! Hanzo, we’re fucked. We’ll figure this out, I swear to you.*” Hanzo drummed his fingers on the table and hummed casually. “*The prints we picked out for you, they’re in the database for the Department of Homeland Security. Remember that train heist McCree stopped?*”

Yes. He made an affirmative hum in the middle of the tuneless song he was creating. Were it not for the saturated coverage of the news to confirm, Hanzo would have thought that to be another one of the cowboy’s exaggerations.
“Those fingerprints were found one of the bodies recovered. You’re wearing the fingerprints of a dead terrorist, brother.” Hanzo ceased the drumming of his fingertips for just one moment before resuming the motion. He let out a brief dissatisfied hum which he launched another tuneless dirge from.

Athena’s voice was in his ear next, <Agent Raijin, please remain calm. We will coordinate a plan for extraction, please do not make any hasty decisions.> Hanzo wanted to laugh. So much for the escape route they had planted. <I am running a deep scan on all my systems and related government databases to determine how this happened.>

He supposed that was some form of apology. He knew that Athena must have suspected something serious. They didn’t go digging into government databases without serious cause. Winston was very concerned about the long-term possibility of bringing Overwatch back, and he was rightly concerned that a history of disregarding sovereignty and national security would be a barrier. After all, that was part of what got Overwatch dismantled in the first place.

Hanzo supposed the fact that the terrorist was dead worked in his favor. In any case, he would be certain to be as agreeable as possible. The last thing he wanted was to be transferred to a higher security institution.

It didn’t take long before Hanzo was asked to come down to the precinct for questioning. He went along with it, answering as little as possible, but still being a model of good behavior. Two hours in they finally clued in to the fact that he had false prints covering his own. They confiscated the fake ones and took his real prints. Something Hanzo was deeply unhappy about, and he would certainly have words about with McCree. About eight hours in, Hanzo finally had to ask:

“Am I being charged with anything, officer? Or may I go?”

The official charge they gave Hanzo was perjury, which he had to grudgingly accept was a legitimately plausible pretext for holding him. The only reason he could assume they were dithering so much is that they were no doubt trying to determine if he was truly linked to a terrorist organization, or if he was simply an unlucky victim of an unscrupulous purveyor of false identities.

At the very least, Hanzo knew one thing, and that was he would not speak further without some form of representation.

The process of being inducted into the American legal system was humiliating and slow. (He made sure to surreptitiously overheat the communicator with the power of his dragons so that the device would be useless to them). They took Hanzo’s (real) prints three or four times, and took his mug shots. He could only imagine what his brother would say about that. Hanzo had managed to avoid Genji’s minor scrapes with the law—though the family had always made the problems go away.

They stripped him of all his possessions. The loss of the clothes he was less concerned about, though he suspected Genji would be disappointed. Hanzo thought the blue jumpsuit was an overall improvement, even if it was stiff and scratchy. He managed to allow them to let him keep his piercings as they were “still healing.” He was most irritated by the loss of his reader. He had over a year’s worth of data on there, and he always destroyed the evidence of the original chip.

It also meant there was nothing to do in the cell but wait, and he didn’t even have McCree’s words to comfort or distract him. He couldn’t divide the space either, and protect himself with the power of the dragons, but then he suspected his kata routine dissuaded the drunk and disorderly he was sharing a cell with from messing with him.

All Hanzo could do was wait and trust.
He eventually perched on his cot, curled into a ball with his back against the wall, and let himself fitfully rest. In his half-aware state, he found himself more concerned for Isidore’s fate than his own. Speculating about the ending, at least, left Hanzo with less time to ruminate on who the dedication might be intended for.

He still had a list of over a hundred possible suspects.

Time passed slowly in the cell. Hanzo didn’t even have the benefit of a window to guess at the passage of hours. He did his kata until his muscles were sore. He meditated. He wondered if McCree had suffered a similar fate. Hanzo tried not to think of the last one too much. His chest filled with an unbearable ache at the thought of McCree trapped in a room like this one.

During one of his bouts of meditation, he heard the sound of footsteps before he saw a pair of guards. The hairs on the back of his neck tingled.

"Mr. So-called-Quaintance?"

Hanzo looked up at the guards, taking in their khaki outerwear, analyzing the pair for any obvious weakness. He said nothing, but he gripped his hands into fists. Dread filled his stomach like a lead weight. Surely they were going to escort him to a higher security facility, and there would be no pulling him out for months. He knew enough to know wheels of justice were interminably slow.

"You have a visitor. We're to escort you. I trust there won't be any trouble?"

Hanzo's only outward sign of surprise was a single blink, but he shook his head no as he got to his feet. His stomach dropped to the floor with the guard's next words.

"Good, then we'll be taking you to see your lawyer. One Mr. Morricone."

For the first time in his life, Hanzo let his carefully sculpted mask break in front of an officer of the law. He felt his mouth part, and he knew the shock registered clearly on his face. He shut his mouth hard enough that his teeth clicked together, and he swiftly composed his expression into impassive stone once more. Inside his chest, his heart was racing. Why is Jesse here? As Joel? Hadn't the whole point of the exercise been to clear Morricone's name?

They cuffed Hanzo and led him back to the interrogation room he had become deeply familiar with. The same aging, off-white walls, a table, some chairs, a security camera tucked neatly in the corner, and of course, a large, mirrored one-way window.

The occupant seated at the table was both new and familiar. McCree had a black, wide-brimmed hat with a flat top and a blue sash tied around it. A slightly more serious look than a cowboy hat, at least. He had on a dark navy or black duster with cream colored lapels, and some ridiculous blue garter around his right sleeve. Hanzo would have to let McCree know those were traditionally worn below the vest and over the dress shirt. Underneath he wore a black collared shirt, with a black vest that had the thinnest blue and cream pinstripes with a blue pocket square so crisply and perfectly folded he had to assume it was Satya’s doing. Hanzo could even see a chain coming out of the man’s waist pocket. He noted that McCree had even modified the appearance of his arm to something more matte and conventional and less ‘I used to run with gangs and black ops.’ McCree also had a ridiculous blue string tie around his neck and a leather bolo cord with a tacky running bronco pin layered underneath the blue cloth.

The most arresting thing, perhaps, was that McCree had cleaned up his facial hair and gotten a significant haircut. Hanzo had never seen so much of McCree’s naked jaw before.
This is what McCree thinks a lawyer looks like?

“There’s no need for these cuffs while I speak to my client, is there gentlemen?” McCree had moved his accent to somewhere else in America. Some other type of South was all Hanzo could determine. All the drawls he’d seen in TVs and movies blurred together. “I’m sure he’s been a model citizen.” Hanzo looked at McCree and tipped his head every so slightly in a silent question.

McCree gave him the barest shake no. Hanzo relaxed a bit, trusting that McCree had a plan to execute.

“We’ll be outside. Press the buzzer when you’re done.” The guards uncuffed Hanzo, and then closed the door behind them, leaving them alone. Hanzo crossed this distance, and pulled a chair out from the table and sat beside McCree. The whole experience felt surreal enough he wondered if he was sleeping in his cell.

"How can anyone believe that you are a lawyer? You look ridiculous!" Hanzo kept his tone hushed, exposing as little of his mouth as possible to the one-way window and the camera above.

McCree leaned into his space, the hat giving them some additional coverage as far as the camera was concerned. "You could at least pretend that yer happy to see me," McCree frowned, and the movement seemed unfamiliar with the new facial hair.

"If you really were my lawyer, I doubt I would be happy to see you." Hanzo frowned as he realized he was overjoyed to see McCree. He shouldn’t have been.

“I’ll take that as a remark on yer present circumstances, as opposed to my fine legal mind and services.”

“Dare I ask for your qualifications, Mr. Morricone?”

“Hey now, Morricone passed the bar in Georgia six years ago. As of this morning.” McCree lowered one eye in a slow, sly wink.

"I'm surprised they let you see me, I still haven't given them a name other than Jorge’s."

Jesse shrugged, and gave Hanzo a crooked smile that looked equally as foreign (but no less beautiful), "I'm charming."

“Do I want to know how you got here so quickly? Tracer is somewhere within a five thousand kilometer radius of Bali right now. ” Hanzo had a vision of another news cycle— Notorious Bandit Jesse McCree Hijacks Airplane!

“I made Satya rejigger her transporters. Connected one of mine to one of yours.”

Hanzo blinked, a sudden heat and pressure trying to crush his stomach into a diamond. He fought to contain his anger, well-aware of their audience. “What? We have never—such a distance… Dr. Vaswani allowed this?”

“Don’t be mad at her,” Jesse set his jaw, a subtle motion that was unmissable with his jawline clear of scruff. “I made her. Told her it wasn’t optional. She wasn’t happy about it either.”

Hanzo let out a long breath through his nose, struggling to keep his tone even. “Well I see you are still alive and missing no further limbs than you were without before, so we should be thankful for small miracles. I suppose Satya will be thrilled with the theoretical implications after this is all said and done.”
“Yeah, I was sick as a dog for the first six hours after I touched down here last night, and my eye is still on the blink. Don’t tell nobody. Woulda been here even sooner, otherwise. Also, may have accidentally broken the TV in your hotel room.” Jesse gave what Hanzo assumed was supposed to be a reassuring smile. The archer did some math in his head.

“Assuming you got here no later than ten o’clock last night, visiting hours weren’t even in effect by the time you were feeling well enough to stand.”

“Still would have come for ya. Probably for the best that I was out of commission for a while. Let me use my brains and come up with an actual plan.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that there is an actual plan. Were you truly going to come in guns blazing with no forethought at all?” Hanzo sighed, “Please tell me Genji would have stopped you.”

“Hey, hey, we’re here now, and further mistakes have been avoided. I think we’re doing good. How you holding up?” McCree reached over, and let his hand rest on the back of Hanzo’s chair. There was concern in his eyes, a tightness and a worry that Hanzo felt honor-bound to erase.

"As well as can be expected under the circumstances. I have not been mistreated. If I am here much longer, however, I think they may start to deduce that I am not a citizen." A faint glimmer of competence that might complicate their lives further.

McCree nodded thoughtfully, "Yeah, I imagine they've run yer stuff in a couple different databases by now. We wait too long and it might even go to Interpol—you in there somewhere?"

"I shouldn't be." Hanzo’s prints had never been collected—as far as he was aware—until yesterday by any government or law keeping organization.

McCree's mouth pressed into a line, "Don't know that I trust shouldn't be after what all went down here.” He leaned back in his chair. "So, listen up. We're gettin' you out of here."

"When?"

McCree tugged delicately on the chain at his vest pocket, until a timepiece came out. While it had an antiquated look, the shiny black face was clearly modern and lit up with cyan LEDs for each line that marked the hour, as well as along the laser-cut hands. "I reckon... about now. Head's up!"

By the time Hanzo's instincts to punch Jesse in the throat kicked in, they were already under the table, McCree's unyielding metal hand keeping his reflex in check. The urge for self-defense increased as the earth beneath their feet shook, the lights went out, and a distant explosion roared through the air.

There was the sound of shouting, of faint alarms, and the room was painted in red light from a bulb above the door—which was now covered in a steel shield, rather like a bank vault. Hanzo had to assume the alarms were running off some sort of backup power source. Jesse threw off tiny bits of cyan lights and Hanzo looked at him in confusion.

“What was that?”

“EMP,” Jesse grunted, and started crawling out from under the table, pulling Hanzo along with him. “We cut the power. C’mon Mr. Lightshow. There should be a circuit around..” Jesse tapped his left knuckle on the wall beside the door, “Here. Use your buddies to complete the circuit and the door here should open up.”

Hanzo knew he shouldn’t delay, but he stood for one full second to marvel at McCree’s strategic
abilities. A moment later he put his hand on the wall, and he asked for the dragons to draw their ribbons of lightning through it.

There was a rolling mechanical sound as the steel cover went away, and they were able to force the door open. Outside was chaos, but McCree turned them to the right, and they ran towards the end of the hall, and another steel shield covering the next door. Hanzo followed him without hesitation, though from the hold McCree kept on his hand, there was no other option.

Once again, Hanzo completed the circuit, and he heard a shout behind them. McCree made a throwing motion, but Hanzo was too focused on his dragons to see what it was.

“Go! Go! Go!” McCree’s yell was swallowed up by gunfire, and Hanzo didn’t need the shove on McCree’s back to move forward. As they ran, Hanzo felt his right leg jerk underneath him, pitching him off balance. McCree made sure he stayed upright, and when Hanzo looked down, he could see a bullet hole torn through the fabric on the back of his calf. As he looked behind him, he saw a shimmering, floating shield of blue hard light.

Hanzo wondered if Satya liked and trusted Jesse more than she let on, or if this was for his benefit alone.

“McCree—my possessions—”

“Nope,” Jesse’s mouth was set into an ugly line, and Hanzo knew there was no argument, but he couldn’t let it go.

“My reader,” he tried again.

“Jesus fuck Hanzo, now ain’t the time! I’ll buy you a dozen readers after this and give you access to all my drafts and original edits if that’s what you want, please, just move!”

They continued to run, and a moment later they were streaking through the lobby which was a scene of chaos itself. Jesse threw another floating barrier with his left hand, his right still clamped tightly around Hanzo’s.

“Hey, wait—that’s Jesse McCree!”

“Fuck! Call it in!”

His lungs burned, and while his leg was still functional, something now felt off with his prosthesis. Hanzo couldn’t get as good a sense of pressure as he usually did, and it hindered his ability to run at top speed, and turned him into a shambling, limping thing. His muscles felt weak, and he wondered if he had over-exerted himself with too much exercise in containment, but when they staggered outside into the bright, blinding light, Hanzo felt the faintest swell of hope and he redoubled his efforts.

Now he was leading McCree.

He knew where to run to.

He felt irritation as well as joy when he heard the familiar taunt of Mada mada! Hanzo ignored it, and pushed through the fire in his lungs.

He let his senses narrow to one thing, and one thing only—the abandoned bottling factory he could see the faintest piece of. He asked the dragons one more boon—a terrible risk in the field of battle like this. Usually they only wanted one thing when there was a fight, but Hanzo was desperate
enough not to care. He asked for their strength and their speed, and their answer to his call almost toppled him over as he found himself overflowing with their power.

McCree let out a cry, but Hanzo didn’t care, and squeezed the man’s hand, dragging him as fast as his renewed strength would allow, and his vision tunneled further as he could see the teleporter spring to life in front of them.

Hanzo ducked his head down and ran blindly. The only thing that stopped him was the drywall and nightstand that both collapsed on impact. He heard McCree land on the bed beside him, and crash a little less catastrophically against the headboard.

As Hanzo coughed and tried to escape the shower of plaster, he vaguely realized that it should have been impossible for McCree to keep up with him.

“By the gods, Hanzo! Are you alright?” Satya walked over to him and assisted him in pulling him out of the wall and disentangling him from the nightstand.

Hanzo shook his head, trying to shake off the dust. “Genji?” His voice came out as a wheeze.

“Here,” Genji was standing in front of the teleporter like a reasonable human being, detonator flipped and depressed in his thumb. “We have to get out, now. Satya, you drive.”

“I hate driving,” but Dr. Vaswani grabbed the keystick—the only possession in the room other than the teleporter itself, which McCree was folding down.

In less than five minutes, they were calmly merging onto traffic on Interstate 70 West. Hanzo and Jesse crammed into the trunk space of the van, the worst job of concealment in existence, but it would have to do until they crossed state lines.

Hanzo shifted; he was uncomfortably curled up face down on his belly, but he had to imagine it was worse for Jesse who had the bigger frame and longer legs. He tried to shuffle over and give the man more space, but McCree didn’t seem interested in that.

“You okay? You took a shot to the leg out there.”

Hanzo let out a hacking laugh, that eventually cleared. “I am fine.” He gave McCree a grin that was probably delirious. “They didn’t draw any blood.”

“Motherfucker,” McCree let out a long exasperated sigh and Hanzo dissolved into laughter again. McCree looked irritated. “This whole thing was a mistake.”

Hanzo’s amusement withered away. “I’m sorry. I know how much Morricone… That was the whole point and you…”

McCree let out an irritated tch noise. “Nah, this is my fault. Shoulda listened to your first advice. Shoulda cut my losses and lived with the potential problems in the future instead of borrowing trouble. Guess we learned something though.”

Hanzo tilted his head, “What?”

“Talon didn’t just recruit talent from Blackwatch. They got back into those files somewhere along the way, without us ever knowing. That’s why you had a dead guy’s prints. They swapped it out, stole the burner prints for themselves and left us compromised goods. Don’t like it.” McCree moved his jaw back and forth, his eyes looking far beyond the boot of the car. Hanzo watched his expression long enough to see that McCree had pieced something together. Something shocking,
and something he didn’t like, but he could also see McCree file it away for later.

He trusted McCree would share his thoughts when the time was right, when he could confirm them to be true. For now, he wanted the storm in the other man’s face to go away.

“Thank you,” Hanzo closed his eyes, exhaustion taking hold of him.

“Yeah,” McCree’s voice went soft. “Don’t mention it… you got us out of there anyway. Warn me next time you want to pump me full of your Super Saiyan juice, though. That stuff packs a punch if you aren’t ready for it.”

Hanzo snorted, and he shifted, trying to get as comfortable as possible. He felt McCree’s warmth press against him, covering the small of his back. Hanzo was vaguely aware that he was suddenly burrowing into McCree’s elbow, armpit, or something equally uncomfortable, but it didn’t matter.

He was out within minutes.
They meandered about Middle America for several days. They had let Hanzo wash up at a truck stop as soon as they deemed it safe, and gotten him some new clothes and burned the jumpsuit somewhere in Ohio.

There were some places, Hanzo had to admit, that had charm. These places seemed to correspond with what McCree called Craftsman style houses, but the Victorian homes held their own tenacious charm as well.

They were camping out in a town called Stillwater, probably one of dozens of other Stillwaters in America, a college town that made the out of state plates from their fourth rental less remarkable. Tomorrow they would go to Tulsa, and fly to Minneapolis. From there they would wind their way up and cross the Canadian border from Pembina County in North Dakota where the ruins of the Leroy Omnium had turned the surrounding radius into a wasteland. Between the resources from fracking companies and the military presence in Minot, Leroy’s omnium had been the cause of some of the earliest and widest spread devastation. Much of the state was still attempting to recover, all these years later, and there were entire townships that were simply left to ruin and be reclaimed by nature.

This generally meant that military presence was light, though the border wasn’t completely unwatched, there were enough wild places they stood a good chance of crossing without incident. From Canada it would be easy enough to fly back to Europe. Hanzo had a strange realization that the Gibraltar base had become home and he was ready to go back there.

Hanzo had excused himself after they shared dinner in McCree and Satya’s room. He knew he should be staying low, and concealing himself, but instead Hanzo found his way up to the rooftop.

He couldn’t stand the way walls made him feel right now.

He watched the sun turn the sky a brilliant orange, and the city lights started flickering on like tiny jewels. Even the urban air was welcome and fresh against his nose. When he heard the door to the roof access shift, Hanzo threw himself behind an air return.

“It’s just me,” McCree’s familiar voice called. “Kinda figured you might be up here.” Hanzo slowly stood up, slightly puzzled. Aside from their chat in the trunk, they hadn’t had a private conversation since. There hadn’t really been time, and either Satya or Genji were always in earshot.

Hanzo sat down on the housing of an inert exhaust fan, legs stretched out in front of him. His prosthetic would need repair, but it seemed to still be capable of holding his weight. McCree stood just a few paces in front of him, surveying the skyline and the cityscape.

“McCree, something has been bothering me.” Hanzo bit the inside of his lip, unsure how to proceed.

“The authorities? Don’t worry. They never woulda had footage of the car we left New Castle in, and Satya ‘n Genji should both be in the clear to be the face of our operation. We’re being careful.”

“No,” Hanzo shook his head. “It isn’t that. I understand that.”
McCree shifted his weight, the sound of concrete debris crunching beneath his feet as he turned around to face Hanzo. “Then what’s eating you? What don’t you understand?”

“Why? Why did you throw away Morricone? Why did you do this, McCree—that was the entire point of the mission!” It was a relief to finally articulate the weight he’d been carrying into words.

“Why?” Jesse’s face scrunched up, like he didn’t understand the question.

“Yes, why did you stage a break out from a county jail for me? Surely there were other plans and other ways my extraction could have been handled.” Bribery, for example, was high up on Hanzo’s list of alternate strategies they could have tried. “Why did you compromise the identity you held most dear!? Now both Quaintance and Morricone are surely-”

“Hanzo…” The way Jesse said his name stopped him in his tracks. McCree seemed to debate something in his head, as he often did, before he spoke with a voice so hushed Hanzo almost didn’t hear his reason. “I’d trade any one of my lives for yours.”

Hanzo felt dizzy, the earth seemed to be reeling out of control, spinning wildly into space. Under no circumstances could Hanzo have predicted the course of this conversation.

“Why did you stop writing Riders of the Storm? Is it truly abandoned?” It wasn’t the right question, not by a long shot—and Hanzo was a master of those.

McCree barked out a sheepish laugh, and rubbed the back of his neck. “Oh. You liked that one, huh? Nah it’s not abandoned or anything. Just… reckon I got a bit stuck. Not feeling Ernesto anymore. Came up with love interest number four for Justice, but I kinda hope this next one sticks. Just… I don’t wanna just toss Ernesto in the trash you know? Kind of a shitty place to be in, to not feel the romance you been investing in for four installments, but them’s the breaks.” McCree shrugged. “Something good for Justice is coming in on that typhoon though, once I figure out how to get Ernesto taken care of.” McCree shrugged again, scuffing the concrete with his boot.

Hanzo was devastated, and he knew it showed on his face. Ernesto had been his favorite love interest for Justice so far. Although each one had been better than the last, so perhaps this new person in Justice’s life would eclipse him? It still made his throat ridiculously tight. “But… you wrote them… they were made for each other. It’s so plain to see!”

McCree shrugged one shoulder. He seemed… off. Quiet. McCree could be surprisingly silent, but this wasn’t the deadly focus of stealth on a mission. More like he was trying to withdraw completely into himself. “Sorry, can’t be helped,” McCree all but mumbled the words under his breath tipping his hat down, all but hiding the upper half of his face.

Hanzo reached up to push Jesse's hat away from his face, back onto his head. "Nothin," the words were spoken into the Stetson, nearly swallowed by the leather.

McCree moved his hat so that it covered his face entirely. "Nothin," the words were spoken into the Stetson, nearly swallowed by the leather.

Hanzo reached up to push Jesse's hat away from his face, back onto his head. "Nothing?" He couldn't seem to get the man to look in his face, and the man's eyes darted away.

"I mean, no? Not yet?" Jesse's voice pitched higher and Hanzo tilted his head, heart racing in his chest for reasons unknown.
"Not yet?"

"I just mean, nothing happened to make me feel that way." It was like their faces were opposing ends of a magnet, McCree could not be made to look him in the eye.

"For a man so good with words on the page and in person, you are not making a great deal of sense."

"You would say that," McCree sighed. He pinched his brow. "I guess... you could say.. someone happened."

Hanzo's heart was pounding against his sternum now, like it was trying to break free. "Oh?" He felt a strange twist of anticipation and disappointment having the sentiments behind the dedication confirmed. He still couldn't believe he hadn't noticed, hadn't picked up on the change before this. Of course, the cowboy would be able to play poker with the devil and keep his soul intact. Jesse must have been keeping his affection very close to the chest indeed.

"Yeah," McCree's voice was tight, his jaw clenched. "I just can't... I mean... This is gonna sound weird, but I don't-I've never... talked to anybody about writing and how I do it before." McCree paused, and let out a short breath, "Everybody you write's got a little piece of you, right? So it feels dumb to say, but Justice has more of me than... I think anybody else I ever put to page. Isidore's the only other one who comes closest. So, even if Ernesto has a lil' piece of me too, it ain't as much as Justice and I'm not..." Jesse sighed and lifted his hat enough to drag his fingers through his hair. "I'm not enough of a narcissist I guess, to keep writing at pieces of myself falling in love when there's... somebody I want for real." McCree kept his eyes trained to the ground. "Sorry, I expect you and a bunch of other folks are going to be mighty disappointed when Ernesto moves on, but... I can't."

Hanzo wasn't sure what to say to that, but McCree looked... almost miserable. "Does.. does this other person not... return your feelings?" He tried not to sound too hopeful. If McCree was this forlorn then maybe... maybe... if he were the sort of person who deserved such things...

"I... can't be sure. Maybe. Hard to tell," McCree just shrugged and shoved his hands in his pockets. He was still staring at his boots.

Hanzo settled back on his heels and a bit of tension left his shoulders as the realization dawned over him, "You haven't told them."

McCree chuckled a bit, "Nah, 'fraid not. Better with that kind of thing in writing myself. Seems like I've fucked it up every time I've tried in the real world so... I've been treading lightly this time around." Jesse finally flicked his gaze towards Hanzo, rubbing the back of his neck. "Kinda.. kinda don't want to fuck this one up, so I haven't had the balls to say anything to him yet."

If this were one of Jesse's—Quaintance's—novels, now would be when the two of them fell together in a tangle of confessions and kisses. Maybe that's why Hanzo couldn't help but latch onto the fiction Jesse unwittingly offered him. Hanzo knew who he was—the past that had authored his future.

There was no story that ended with him in a happily ever after.

"What... what would you like him to do, if he knew?"

Jesse let out a strangled sort of laugh, and rocked his weight from his heels to his toes, "Uh, I guess... I guess if he knew, I'd want him to make the first move, but I'm not sure he will."
"Who would not pursue you?" Hanzo felt his face burn and he hastily amended his statement to appear uninvested. "You have many... admirable qualities. They are either a fool or a coward." Hanzo already knew he was both.

McCree shook his head once, a rueful sort of smile stretching across his face, "Well, I ain't been the bravest man either, in this instance so I think I'll forgive him that. And I think we're the right types of foolish that'll work well together. If we get there."

Hanzo swallowed, "But... if he feels something for you..."

"See, I don't think it's got so much to do with me as it's got to do with him. Guy has some.. issues to work through. He's been working on 'em, but... you know. Gabe always used to say 'Progress isn't linear.' Usually to justify some sort of wetworks or black ops mission but still," McCree shrugged. "Dunno if he's ready. 'S why I've been treading so lightly... on top of my own shit."

Hanzo stood in a quiet sort of agony. It was too cruel. The universe was dangling this possibility in front of him. That Jesse wasn't desperately in love with somebody else, but he knew better than to hope. Hanzo wasn't the only man on base with baggage, and McCree had a knack for making fast friends wherever he went. He knew first-hand how easily Jesse could disarm someone with a smile and draw out all their demons and secrets. He could be talking about anyone.

He hoped anyway, and the spark of it caused a peculiar, splintering ache in his chest, still bound by sorrow.

Hanzo swallowed thickly, "And if he were ready, what sort of move would you want him to make?"

"Move?" McCree furrowed his brows, tipping his head back.

"Come McCree. You write for a living. Surely you have given it more thought than that." He gave the man a tired, half-smile.

"Hmm. Thought about it a lot, to be honest." Hanzo was close enough he could count McCree's eyelashes and see the flush on his cheeks. McCree scratched his beard with his metal fingers, The man drew in a deep breath through his nose before he spoke, voice tense. "I'd want... I'd want him to take me by the good hand and tug me close to get my attention."

The only hint Hanzo had that his hand had granted McCree's request was the sudden sinking sensation in his stomach that followed the release of adrenaline into his blood.

Jesse didn't blink as he stared at Hanzo, and Hanzo tried to keep his composure by counting the man's eyelashes. *Remain calm.* "What else would you want?" He wished this was happening on one of the many occasions they drank together. He could have blamed the hoarseness of his voice on McCree's turpentine-grade whiskey.

His actions too, for that matter.

"...Been a long time since anyone held my hand," McCree's remark was soft, more to himself than Hanzo. Thoughtful. Hanzo tugged Jesse another inch closer, praying that his palms wouldn't start sweating. "But yeah, uh, then he'd run his other hand up along my chest until he's cupping the back of my head." Hanzo laid his palm flat against the flannel before sliding it upwards. He let his fingers gather at the nape of Jesse's neck, tracing over the small whorls of hair at the soft skin there. A moment later he had the base of man's skull cradled in his palm.

It was too late to take any of his actions back, and perhaps it was more distressing that he didn't
want to. He threw himself into the pretense headlong, and Hanzo closed his eyes. Jesse obligingly dipped his head, enough that it almost seemed like Jesse wanted this. Hanzo gave the slightest nuzzle before he whispered his next words against the man's cheek,

"What happens next?"

McCree tightened his hold on Hanzo's hand, and he felt something like a tremor run through McCree. Hanzo realized that he was holding up some of Jesse's weight as the distance between them had somehow vanished. He put more weight on his good side, just in case.

"I reckon... this'd be the part where he and I finally kiss." Hanzo shivered as he felt the words tickle his earlobe. Without opening his eyes, he tipped his jaw, used his hand on the back of the man's head to guide Jesse just where he wanted him. He brushed his lips over Jesse's before he aligned their mouths together.

There was a moment of stillness. A half a heartbeat where Jesse didn't respond that had Hanzo's heart climbing into his throat, but before he could pull back, McCree's metal arm curled around his waist and it could only be described as a furious kiss. Something that wasn't quite relief renewed the strength in Hanzo's legs and he redoubled his efforts, kissing Jesse back.

In the space of moments, he had his fingers tangled into Jesse's hair, and the newfound strength in his knees was tested as Jesse pulled back with Hanzo's lip captured between his teeth. He couldn't say who crushed their mouths together again, but all Hanzo could hear was the insidious whispers of doubt in his head, warring with the unfamiliar sensation of hope.

*He's just enjoying the first sensual touch he's had in ages. Aren't you doing the same? You are just desperate, your feelings are imagined. He has shown you kindness and you mistake it for more. You are pathetic.*

Yet Jesse still kissed him, despite all the thoughts racing in his head.

It felt too real, and Hanzo's chest was curiously numb, but hot and wretched heartbeat gripped his gut. There was something like a sob that tried to escape Hanzo, but it was entirely consumed by Jesse's hungry mouth. Hanzo allowed himself six more seconds to indulge in this fiction before further damage could be done.

With the tattered remains of his self-control, he pulled back and gently pushed on Jesse's chest. He tried not to stare at that wide mouth as those lips parted. Lips he now knew the taste of.

*Tell him. Tell him now.*

He wasn't sure if it was the urging of hope or his self-sabotaging nature that was propelling him to action. Either way, he owed Jesse an explanation.

Hanzo swallowed and brushed his fingers along his lips, attempting to compose himself. He tried not to interpret Jesse's movements as reluctance as he put some distance between them. "I... apologize if I took any liberties, I shouldn't have—not when you—" McCree let out a slightly hysterical peal of laughter that pitched far higher than it should have been possible. "I understand if you were merely enjoying a... pleasant diversion. However, I hope... you might consider..." Hanzo closed his eyes, and it was ludicrous that he needed to summon courage to say his next words when he'd already stolen something that wasn't his, "I hope you might consider me competition for whomever holds your affections."

"...Pardon?"
Hanzo took in a short breath, perhaps he'd phrased that wrong. Even though it went against his very nature, he summoned up something forthright. "I wish to usurp whoever currently holds your heart. I... I would like it for myself." He gnawed at the corner of his mouth, hoping the explanation would be enough. He wished he had even a tenth of Quainta—Jesse's gift with words.

Jesse stared flatly at him, as if the words hadn't processed fully. "Was I have a one-directional conversation this whole time...? If you didn't think I... huh!?

Hanzo pressed his buzzing lips together, and found himself shifting back a half-step. This was a mistake. He would have to run. Abandon Overwatch and abandon his brother. Perhaps he could start over as Kenichi. Or Hideki. Those were the strongest identities he had.

McCree let out a frustrated noise and he threw his hat down beside his boots, "Hanzo! We got to work on your self-worth issues and communication skills." One hand of metal and one of flesh darted out to grab his hips, pulling him closer. Before Hanzo could make another move Jesse had him surrounded. Drew Hanzo in with insisting arms and ambushed him, mouth open and covering Hanzo's in a less elegant, but enthusiastic kiss. If it could be called that. Perhaps an oral show of support would have been more accurate.

Eventually McCree softened his hold and his mouth, and it turned into a proper kiss again. Hanzo pulled away, dizzy and just as confused as Jesse. He panted, not from lack of breath or ardor, but from a panic miles deep in his bones that this might not be real. "Communication... communication is a two-way street."

And Hanzo reached up to pull Jesse down for another kiss. They could navigate the issues of their combined and mostly compatible baggage later. They could navigate the peculiar hell of communicating around all the words and fictions they each held in their head later.

They didn't need words at all right now.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for sticking with this ridiculous story! And thank you again to everyone involved with the Big Bang project this year! I had a real blast! I'm really happy I could get this finished on time while working full time! Now I can start working on my other projects again!

Metmarfil did some amazing art for this chapter HERE! Go show love and appreciation!

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