Send In The Clones

by SanctusCecidit

Summary

Due to nothing more than a silly administrative error, two men found out the terrible truth behind their jobs at RED and BLU. Letting others know their dreadful secret could mean their deaths- but secrets have a way of getting out.
Scarred, battered and possibly not too sane, Medic finds himself trapped between three wars as all hell breaks loose. There is only one way he can survive- he has to trust a member of the enemy team, and a backstabbing, murderous, slimy, two-faced snake of a Spy. Can he learn to work with his mortal enemies, or is the clones’ rebellion doomed before it starts?
- An illustrated Sequel to 'You Need to Get A Head'

Notes

Author's Note: Woah, I've finally finished it! This story is a Sequel to my first TF2 fanfic 'You Need to Get A Head'. As is my way, I've chosen not to publish until I've finished writing the entire story. It's novel length and separated into three parts, and 40 chapters in total. I'll admit to being pleased with the end result. I'll publish new chapters every Thursday and Sunday. Like the first story in the series, it contains a lot of dark humour because I'm a sick puppy, but I will reassure my readers that it does have a happy ending. So that's alright then.

Comments are always very gratefully received, positive or negative, and I'll do my best to reply to every single one.

As with my previous story, it is illustrated. Here is this chapter's fanart:
http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Prologue-Kyrie-Eleison-473845158?
Please, please don't read this until you've read my earlier story, since you will spoil yourself in several major ways.

Disclaimer: Culturally, the 1960s were very different to now, and the characters in this story might sometimes express views that are considered offensive in these more enlightened days. The opinions of a group of psychopathic mercenaries do not necessarily reflect those of the author!
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'A clone of Einstein wouldn't be stupid, but he wouldn't necessarily be any genius, either.' - James D. Watson.

Project Pelargonia had seemed the perfect solution to a terrible problem, at the time.

The Teufort Administrator sat in her high-backed chair, in the sound-proofed room at the TF Industries HQ where she ran, well, the world. She mused with a slightly irritated air on how every solution seemed to birth a new problem.

Administrator (VIA001/r): Assigned to Dust Bowl, Teufort and Cold Front. Exceptionally intelligent and able, but lacking social skills. Committed to her job to the point of obsession. Impossible to bribe or corrupt. Suffers from high blood pressure related to chronic chain-smoking, and carpel-tunnel syndrome in both wrists. Mentally stable, but unlikely to remain so if prevented from working.

However, as the years had passed, Helen had realised that the Project wasn’t a perfect solution, but it was the only one she had. And yes, she enjoyed wielding power over life and death, if those she sent to their deaths truly counted as ‘alive’, that is. Personally, she doubted it.
She found herself thinking of geraniums, those little red-flowering plants that people with spare time and an interest in filth kept in their gardens. To make more geraniums, you cut off a little bit of stem, put it in a pot and voila- new plant. You made as many plants as you needed to fill a pot, or a patch of soil. No more, no less. And when they finished flowering- you threw them away, keeping maybe one or two for the next year.

A few years ago she had been tasked with the life-long job of keeping the peace. The battling Mann brothers, Blutarch and Redmond, must be kept in stalemate. They were both powerful, callous and stupid, and between them, they controlled a large proportion of the world’s economy. If the balance tipped, if one became too strong...She leaned forward and flicked a red switch.

“We have taken the enemy intelligence.” She flicked that switch off, and flicked a blue switch. “Alert! The Enemy has taken our intelligence!”

She reached for a packet of cigarettes and pulled a long white tube into her thin hand and lit it. A deep breath filled her lungs with soothing smoke. They called her the Administrator, or the Announcer. What she really was, though, was the fulcrum of the scales, the one who kept the peace for billions of lives. She supposed some would see it as a stressful sort of a life, but in many ways it was actually...dull. Repetitive. However, one had to support the family business. She was, she vaguely knew, obscenely rich, but she never really got to see the money or have a chance to do anything with it. It just built up in the background to the theatre of her life and was ignored.

It was her own fault her job was dull, and she was proud of it. Her mother had had a far harder time maintaining the stalemate; it was very difficult picking teams of mercenaries that would be perfectly balanced against each other and win or lose precisely half the time. Some of the paid fighters would always excel, and some would always be, well, useless. Her mother had spent a lot of time shuffling teams around and always recruiting more people to fill the places of those who fell in battle.

That had all changed when Conagher and Daecher developed the Respawn technology between them. After that, she could hire the best mercs in the world and keep them alive indefinitely- at least, until their minds broke under the strain of the constant violent deaths and rebirths. Not that it mattered- who would care if a few violent thugs and psychopaths had nervous breakdowns? They were expendable and good riddance.

Ironically, it was a young mercenary, almost still a boy, newly hired, who had given her the final solution to the problem:

“Y’know what’d be wicked-bad? If I got to fight myself. Then I’d have a proper fight for once, instead of going up against all these morons and old dudes.”

She had gaped and gone silent, and the boy had backed up a step and started stammering (it did amuse her how these hired killers found her terrifying, and she did her best to encourage this). She had stopped for a discussion with Daecher, and thus, The Secret was born. Not that it had been called that at first- its official title was ‘Project Pelargonia’. Daecher had gone into one of his moods and insisted upon that name rather than ‘Project Geranium’, and Helen had to admit it had a certain ring to it. With the respawn technology, why keep hiring new mercenaries? It was possible to spawn someone more than once, so why not make copies and send them off to fight in the battles? When they burned out or their minds broke, they could be replaced. And so, Helen researched and found a team of nine people whose skills meshed perfectly. In return for a huge wage, their job was simple: give occasional blood samples, and keep their mouths shut.

The young man who had come up with the idea was the first recruit, and he became known simply as Scout. Conagher and Daecher were the next recruits since they were both eager to try out their life’s work. They became the Engineer and the Medic. To them, she added Soldier, Sniper, the
Heavy Weapons Expert, Demolitions Man, Pyro (-technician or -maniac? Or both? There was some debate on his official title, even now) and, finally, Spy. Oddly enough, it had been Pyro of all people who had tracked him down, but he was also the most useful. Their copies were sent off to fight in the Mann brother’s little war, the stalemate was maintained and the world prospered. However, there had been a little problem nobody had foreseen at first, and Helen often wondered how they had been so short-sighted as to overlook it.

The copies went out to their battlefields, and met their opposite numbers- themselves. The first clones had been suspicious and uncomfortable killing their exact doubles, and they had asked awkward questions about their roles. This could not be allowed, so the Administrator had had to wipe them all out and start again. Medic had provided an answer to the problem-Take the respawn data, and deliberately corrupt it. Make new clones with mutated DNA, but still the same memories. Most of the altered clones would be unviable or of weak health, but a few strains would prosper and, more importantly, look different enough from the originals they had come from. These strains were given a numerical designator, and the individual clones within a strain line had a unique letter. Helen had often pondered how quickly people would accept the extraordinary as usual, and sure enough, the clones were sometimes suspicious, but they believed that their opposite numbers on the enemy side were completely different people who simply had some similarities to them. Helen snorted sourly, smoke pouring out of her nostrils in puffs. People were so easy to fool!

Occasionally, there had been slip-ups, when two fully identical clones had been posted to the same battleground. It had always caused problems as the teams realised that they were facing themselves in the fights. That was normally simple enough to deal with- terminate both the RED and BLU team. There must never be any witnesses. Even Helen found getting rid of eighteen people at once distasteful, but she knew that alternative was worse. Keep the Secret. Keep the Peace. Keep the world safe, at all costs.

It had only happened four times in the past, but now it had happened a fifth time, at Teufort. It was two identical Medics, this time, both from strain 029. The RED Medic, rather than screaming off and telling his team, had been unusually devious and secretly kidnapped the BLU Medic, using a method that was both ingenious and breathtakingly horrific. She had dispatched Spy to investigate the situation, and things had gone a little differently than usual. She took the cigarette out of her mouth and blew a cloud of smoke into the quiet room.

“I think you have some explaining to do, Spy.”

“Madame Administrator.” As always, the man stood somewhere behind her, close enough that she could smell those foul French cigarettes of his. She supposed he thought it was intimidating or some such nonsense. “You said you didn’t want any unnecessary destruction of company property, I seem to remember.”

“So I did. However, considering the RED and BLU medic both found out about the cloning process, why did you only kill the RED one?”

“Simple. Firstly, they told no one on the base of their discovery, and secondly, I could explain away the death of one Medic as suicide, but if they had both died at the same time- questions would have been asked. This was the most efficient path.” There was a slight, sour chuckle. “Hmm, and thirdly, I am interested in seeing how the surviving Medic copes with his new-found knowledge.”

The Administrator’s thin, perfectly painted lips crooked into a smile. “Badly, I suspect.” She turned her chair to look intently at Spy, eyes narrowed. His masked face was its usual careful blank. “To know you are one of many, unknown, utterly anonymous and completely expendable- that is, truly, a fate worse than death.”
Spy blinked rapidly, but he did not reply. She arched an elegant eyebrow.

“You’re surprised to hear me say that?”

“Somewhat, I admit.”

“We’re not monsters, Spy.” She took a long drag on her cigarette. “Perhaps you should consider what you have inflicted upon BLU Medic 029/c. Death would have been preferable.”

“As you have said before, we do what is necessary,” The thin man looked down and straightened the fingers of his dark violet gloves. “Pleasant or not.”

“Oh, indeed we do. That is why I have a... pleasant task for you now.” Helen replied. “The Medic is your responsibility. You will keep an eye on it- I mean, him- and deal with any situation that may arise. I think you need a quick reminder as to exactly why Project Pelargonia has to be kept so secret.”

That was Helen’s first mistake. At the time, she did notice Spy’s eyes widen briefly as if he was... pleased? The man just gave a short nod, though.

“As you wish, Madame.” He said in his usual lilting but clear French accent.

She waved her hand in dismissal, and waited until the man had left the room. She sat thoughtfully for a moment, drumming her long nails on the arm of her chair. Perhaps she should make sure someone kept Spy under observation? He had been a little unreliable recently. Yes, she decided, she would have him shadowed. She pressed a button and cleared her throat.

“Miss Pauling, could you ask Sniper to come and see me?”

That was her second mistake.

Those two mistakes would, one day, end her life- and save the world.

This is the story of how that happened.

In Chapter One: Let's find out what the various mercenaries at Teufort are doing- and see which team is losing badly.
Author's Note: Guess what, my faithful readers? It's SUNDAY! I can post some more story! YAY! Thanks so much to those of you who were patient and waited for me to finish writing this. I appreciate your time.

I'm surprised no one has asked me yet 'What's with the weird latin chapter names?'. They're parts of the latin Requiem Mass, for reasons that may or not become clear later on (spoiler: they will). 'Kyrie Eleison', the title of the prologue, means 'Lord, Have Mercy'. The title of Part One, 'Libera me', means 'Free me'. As with my last story, I'll provide translations for any languages I use at the bottom of each chapter.

The song Engineer is singing is a Country song that was really popular during the 60's called 'Let's think about living', and it's one heck of an ear worm. You can listen to it here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=6k3I2fh-8VQ

New artwork is in its usual place: http://sanctuscecidit.devianart.com

Part One: Libera me

The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion. – Albert Camus

Chapter One: Night of the Living Medic

The Engineer of BLU had a charmed life, compared with some of the other mercenaries. His sentries and dispensers kept him a lot safer than many of the team, and he was best at defensive tactics, so he had quite a bit of peaceful time in between waves of attacks by the RED team at Teufort. He had set up his 'nest', as the other mercs called it, in the courtyard that led to the BLU's Intelligence. If anyone wanted to steal their intel, they would have to get past his sentry, and soon, that sentry would be capable of firing rockets at any intruders wearing red. He tightened a bolt carefully, singing under his
breath.

"...Let's forget about the whinin' and the cryin'
And the shooting and the dying
And the fellow with a switchblade knife
Let's think about living
Let's think about life..."

He switched to whistling through his teeth (a habit that made his teammates regularly want to commit murder, although Engineer was not aware of this) as he tightened the other bolt holding the rocket cartridge onto the top of the sentry and then carefully attached the green earth wire to the main body of the unit with a washer and screw. He then replaced the fuse into its correct place, and the sentry beeped and the rocket attachment pivoted on its axis, ready and waiting to fire at any REDs who tried to sneak past. He grinned to himself in satisfaction, convinced his little corner of Teufort was nice and safe now.

"In every other song that I've heard lately
Some fellow gets shot..."

There was the sound of running footsteps coming from the corridor to his right, and he readied his shotgun and swung in that direction. However, the blonde man who ran around the corner, pale blue lab coat flapping behind him, was no threat.

"Hey, Doc. Din't think I'd see you round here. Thought you'd be with Sol or Heavy at the..." The taller man glared at him as if he'd said something highly offensive and then swung his syringe gun up and pointed it at his teammate. "Woah, Doc, it's me!"

The man just snarled and opened fire. Poison-filled hypodermics shot past Engineer's shoulder and hit something behind him with a thwip noise. He spun around to see the RED Spy decloak and stagger, reaching for his pistol with an arm that was full of needles and rapidly losing the ability to move.

"Arrêt!" The man said, backing away from the two mercs as Engineer swung his shotgun around. He squeezed the trigger, but before he could fire, Medic leapt past him and swung his saw low through the man's guts. Entrails spilled and coiled as the skinny man fell forward to land face-down in the dirt. The still air filled with an unpleasant, warm organic smell, and Engineer grimaced and stepped back, but Medic just gave a nasty smile, coughed briefly, and then jumped over the dying man and ran off, saw held high, in the direction of the Intel room.

"Uh...thanks, Doc?" He stared after Medic and then looked down at the RED Spy. The man was writhing and gurgling in a way that made Engineer firmly hope it was a dying reflex and that the poor man wasn't conscious at this point. The Spy started jerking as if in a fit, and Engineer clenched his jaw and shot him in the head. The body went still. He sighed. "Dammit."

Seeing a violent death wasn't unusual in itself; his job might seem to be technical and complex, but it boiled down to making murder machines. Sure, there was the dispenser too, which healed folks, but it healed people so they could then go off and murder people. However, the death of the RED Spy had disturbed him because of who had done it, and how. It was just a little bit more evidence that made him more and more worried about the BLU team's Medic.

Medic was not well, and Engineer feared it wasn't the kind of illness any medigun or dispenser could fix. After the accident with Respawn that had left the guy stuck halfway between life and death for three days, well, he hadn't been right...in the head. There, he'd said it.
There were the obvious changes- that dry cough he'd had ever since the incident, and also the dyed hair. Why in Sam-Hill had he bleached his hair? At least, Engineer assumed he'd bleached it, and not just developed blonde hair as a result of his experiences. Hm. Was that possible?

The RED Pyro padded out of the corridor underneath Engineer, and before he could react, the sentry swung around and reduced the intruder to chunks of red meat. He dropped his shotgun again. So yes, a cough, and the hair colour- but those weren't so bad. What was really bad was the way Medic acted during the battles. Engineer gave a brief, sour smirk. Listen to him, worry about Medic's sanity! The man was brilliant, for sure, but he had never exactly been on the same planet as everyone else. Now, though, well, for a start, there was that laugh! Engineer frowned. Many, if not most of his teammates laughed during battle and most people would find that a bit disturbing, but the Medic, well, his laugh was truly manic.

"Mrrdrkk!" Engineer looked up as the BLU Pyro limped around the corner. "Mrrdrkk!" The suited man held his crooked left arm and Engineer could hear him panting and wheezing through his gas mask.

"He ran off to the Intel room, son. Use my dispenser. Who attacked you?"

"Srrrt." Pyro replied, staggering closer to Engineer.

"That baseball bat, eh?"

"Yrrs." He made a high-pitched keening noise and another explosive wheeze. "Usssmmrrrr attrrrhhhk. Nrrd mrrdrkk."

"Sorry, didn't quite catch that."

Pyro made a noise that sounded almost like a sob, and collapsed against the dispenser. It hummed, and a tendril of healing blue light reached out to connect to the injured man. He gave a moan and wiggled his left arm.

"Better?"

"Urrrhhr."

"Mrrrhmm. Nrrrs nrrrrrr frrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr. Mrrmdrrkk hrrrssh thrrrm."

"He says his filters need replacing. Medic has the spares." A lilting, accented voice said behind Engineer. "He is finding it hard to breathe."

Engineer jumped and let out a soft hiss through his teeth. "Spah, I swear you do that on purpose."

"Bien sûr!" The BLU spy replied with a snorting laugh. "It's all good practice. I see our charming Medic met my crimson counterpart again?"

"Again?" The shorter man repeated with a grimace, looking down at the gruesome corpse of the RED Spy.

"Oui." Spy got a cigarette out of his slim case and held it to his lips, but then looked at Pyro and stopped, idly putting the white stick back into the box. He cleared his throat and flexed his thin fingers. "Medic has been chasing the enemy Spy all over the base, killing him at every opportunity. And that is not the worst of it, my friends."

"No kiddin'?"
"I saw him cut their Spy with that saw of his...and then..." He coughed lightly and shuddered. "Heal him so he could hurt him once again. I believe that if I had intervened, he would have gutted me next." Spy looked down at the RED corpse with a disdainful grimace before it suddenly faded away to respawn.

"Hhhrss frrrrhhhnnngg srrrrrh." Pyro murmured.

"I agree, although I might not have used such strong language."

"Dammit." Engineer said, shaking his head. "That's just not right."

"I think we may have a problem on our hands, oui?" Spy twitched the fingers of his gloves and then fiddled with his tie. "However, right now, we need to get Pyro back into the fray. I will find the gentle docteur and get Heavy to drag him back here if I have to."

"Shyyuh shyyuh."

"I'll talk to him, once I get the chance." Engineer said with a sigh, knowing that this was the kind of problem the team were always happy to leave in his hands. He wasn't sure how he'd ended up being the solver of non-practical problems on his team, but if he didn't look after the welfare of his teammates, nobody else would. *I joined BLU to build machines, dammit.*

"I'm fully charged!" An accented voice said from somewhere below them.

"Dag nab it." Engineer knew that couldn't be the BLU Medic and he grabbed the panting Pyro and dragged him away from the sentry.

"Time to go." Spy said, cloaking again as the enemy Soldier pounded into the courtyard, rocket launcher on his shoulder.

"WE HAVE YOU SURROUNDED, AT LEAST FROM THIS SIDE!" The man's voice boomed as he was surrounded by the glowing red light of an Ubercharge. The RED Medic ran after him, grinning. Engineer risked a peek at the RED team's new healer. Their old one had died in very sad circumstances, and his replacement was another German with the usual long, equine face that Medics always seemed to have, but this man was tall, gangling, with flaming red hair and pale, freckled skin. The RED Soldier launched a rocket and Engineer pulled Pyro back swiftly as his sentry and dispenser exploded into shrapnel. Pyro's laboured breathing was loud in his ears.

"Srrrrhhhhuh." He murmured.

"I can build another one." Engineer replied with a sigh. "Not your fault. C'mon."

"Hahah, you suck!" The RED Scout sprinted into the courtyard in front of the Soldier and Medic, and zipped past Engineer and Pyro before either of them had a chance to fire. Engineer aimed and shot the Medic in the head. The skinny doctor dropped to the ground, but the Soldier turned around and fired his rocket at the two BLUs.

Engineer briefly heard the Administrator call out.

"Alert! The Enemy has taken our intelli..."

And then the world exploded into searing white and gold.

RED Sniper heard Soldier's rocket blasts from his perch far away from the thick of the battle. They
say that the observer sees the whole of the battle, and Sniper felt this was definitely true. It wasn't just sight, though - a good tracker used all of his senses. Without even thinking about it, he analysed the tiniest changes in birdsong and the currents in the wind on the back of his neck. A brief cold wind or the smell of smoke could signal the arrival of a BLU with murder on their minds.

Right now, he had his rifle scope focused on the filthy water that acted as a moat separating the two forts, RED and BLU. A ripple in water moved... a flash of blue...he squeezed the trigger. The bang of his rifle was deafening and the kickback impressive, so when he looked back down the scope, all he could see what a widening patch of red water. He gave a toothy smile, exposing his long canines.

"Gotcha, ya pesky ankle-biter." He stretched and leant back, feeling his spine creak and pop. Damn. I'm getting old. Unconsciously he reached over and had a gulp of lukewarm coffee from his mug. There was another flash of blue below, but this time it was their RED Scout, carrying the enemy's intelligence. "Huh. Good lad." He smiled. The youngest and newest member of their team was a brat, but he had a heart of gold, he felt, buried in there somewhere. As long as Sniper only had to tolerate him in short doses. The young lad gave a whoop of joy and ran into the building beneath Sniper's feet. He readied his rifle again, but that pesky roof made it impossible to take any pot-shots at the BLU Soldier stomping across the bridge without revealing his position. He leant sideways, trying to get a view. Hmm, this was new. Behind the Soldier was the BLU Medic, but he wasn't healing the burly military man. Instead, he had his syringe gun out. The Soldier looked back and gestured impatiently at him, but the Medic shook his head.

"Success! We have secured the enemy's intelligence."

Sniper smiled again. The BLU Soldier turned around and pointed a finger at his companion, who raised his arms and shrugged. Sniper could hear an angry American accent, but could not make out the words at this distance.

"RUN COWARDS!" An accented voice yelled as Heavy bounded into the open area in front of the bridge. Sniper could hear the whirr of his minigun as he faced the two BLUs.

"Go on, finish 'em off." He muttered to himself. Sure enough, Heavy fired the minigun, ripping the enemy Soldier to shreds in a few seconds. Then, something very strange happened. The BLU Medic aimed his syringe gun at Heavy and Heavy...did nothing. "Go on, kill the wanker!"

The large man lowered his weapon slowly, and the Medic opened fire, peppering him with syringes, running closer to fire at point blank range, but Heavy still didn't retaliate. Instead, he ran over to the BLU Medic and then pushed him into the water. The German gave an outraged cry and then there was a splash. Heavy walked off slowly and thoughtfully.

*What the hell? That's some shonky business, right there.* Ah well, this was an easy situation to solve. The Medic was out in the open water, and it was the work of a moment to line up his rifle for an easy headshot. The rifle cracked and the enemy stopped swimming, his arms and legs spreading lazily as he floated on the surface. Nice, clean kill.

He felt a slight breath of warm air across his neck, and spun around with his kukri at the neck of a Spy. Then he growled under his breath and lowered his weapon. RED Spy adjusted his tie and cleared his throat.

"Good to see you too, Sniper."

"We have taken the enemy's intelligence." The Administrator's dry voice called over the crackling P.A. of the battlefield.
"What're you doin' here, mate?" Sniper frowned. His friend looked uncharacteristically nervous, his eyes darting around warily as he fished out his cigarette case. His hands even trembled slightly as he lit up yet another of those horrible Gitanes he smoked. "Somethin' the matter?"

"No, I...well, yes." The Frenchman took a long, deep drag of his cigarette and exhaled in relief. "I needed somewhere to hide for a little while."

"Hide? Seriously? You?" Sniper shook his head and turned back to watch the battle. "Well, think we've got this one anyway, mate. We bag that last case of Intel, and we're done. Who're you hidin', from and why don'tcha just cloak like usual?"

"I've tried, ah mon Dieu I've tried! That fiend always seems to find me no matter what!" There was a distant explosion and Spy shuddered, his head whipping back and forth nervously.

"Fiend? What fiend?"

"We have secured the enemy's intelligence!" The Administrator's voice cut in.

"That Medic." Spy sighed and half-sat, half-collapsed down the wall. He unconsciously rubbed his stomach.

"Flawless victory!" The Administrator's voice crowed. Soldier cheered from somewhere below, and Sniper heard Demo and Scout join in. "Well done."

"Well, that's that." Sniper leant his rifle against the wall and took a satisfied gulp of cold coffee. He looked curiously at Spy. "You look knackered."

Spy gave the taller man a half-hearted glare and Sniper smiled slightly. Both of them liked to keep their own company, both killed for money, and the both understood the need for privacy. Some would call them mere acquaintances, but Sniper considered Spy his only true friend, if only because he didn't expect too much. He was certain Spy considered him a friend, too, because of moments like this- Sniper was the only person who saw Spy anything other than suave and in control.

"C'mon, show pony." He punched the skinny man in the arm. "Tell me about this fiend-like Medic of yours."

"I have died to that demon of a man seven times today." Spy said, slipping a hand under his mask and scratching his hair. "Not just died, either. Today has been truly vile!"

"Not just died?" Sniper asked, his forehead wrinkling, trying to banish the idea that put in his head. "I...cannot talk about it." Spy sighed. "This is some sort of retribution...for what I did to our Medic. This is my penance."

"Bollocks." Sniper replied shortly, hunkering down to sit next to the miserable man. "Yeah, you teased him. But I joined in, didn't I? I laughed. Solly n' Demo laughed. It was funny! Even crazy doctors don't kill 'emselves due to one silly joke."

"Ours did. Who else can I blame but myself?" Spy took another long drag on his cigarette. "I have killed many people, often when their backs were turned and they had no way to defend themselves. That is my business, and I don't regret it. However, driving someone to suicide, an ally...that is truly unforgiveable."

"Look, mate, he treated you like dirt for three years. What were you supposed to do, bend over and take it up the arse? He acted like a total twat around you, and a little bit of teasin' in revenge was
"And yet, I am the one still alive." Spy replied, watching the smoke twirl through the air, "I...sometimes wonder..." The man's voice trailed away into nothing.

"Wonder what?"

"Ah, non, it is nothing. Forget I spoke." Spy took a long, hard drag on his cigarette and then walked off without another word.

In Chapter Two: BLU Engineer confronts BLU Medic, and the new RED Medic has an embarrassing problem.

Translations:

Bien sûr! - Of course!
Yay it's posting time! This story has generated a lot of interest both here and on deviantart, so thanks for that, everyone. As you may have noticed, it starts slowly, but there will be lots of action and (hopefully) unpredictable plot twists coming up.

I've done the usual fanart for this chapter on my deviantart webpage at http://sanctuscecigit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Two-The-Wrong-Questions-475486559?ga_submit_new=10%253A1408001086. The graphic for this chapter took me ages, because the RED Medic was really difficult to get right! Anyway, I do it for fun, so who cares?

I've included translations at the bottom of this chapter. You may notice I've chosen to put any Russian in Arabic, instead of Cyrillic. I can read Cyrillic, but I found it just looked wrong, somehow, in the story, so I chose to write it in its equivalent phonetic Arabic.

Fun fact: Writing these stories has taught me a huge number of foreign swear-words!

The BLU Engineer gritted his teeth and sighed, slowly pushing the door to the infirmary open. *Time to talk to Medic.* He was not looking forward to this. The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced that the man had become unstable. Was telling him off worth a bonesaw through the neck? Probably not. However, the team couldn't keep on losing. Engineer didn't even want to think about making the Administrator mad. There was something about that woman that told him it'd be a very, very bad idea for them all.

There was the sound of voices from the room, and Engineer sighed in disappointment. Typical, he'd got himself all ready to confront the doc, and he was already treating someone! He really shouldn't listen in, should he...

"...But Doktor, red hunting hat is not just teen rebelling, is symbol of Holden being self." That was Heavy.

"Zhis book is about the aimlessness and pointlessness of zhe teenage years, zhough. He never achieves anyzhing useful." The voice paused and coughed. "So far, at least."

Engineer felt his brown furrow in puzzlement. What were they talking about?

"Nyet, book is about being unique person not like any..." Heavy paused as Engineer knocked softly on the door. "Vkhodit."

Medic turned around and smiled slightly at the shorter man as he went into the room. He was holding a kidney bowl full of bloody swabs and Heavy was sat up on the gurney, rubbing his shoulder.

"This a bad time?"

"Nyet, Doktor was just removing bullet from my shoulder." Heavy guffawed suddenly. "I think RED Sniper missed."
"Look at the size of zhis zhing!" Medic declared, holding up a long, thin bullet covered with blood and fragments of muscle. He dumped the swabs into a metal bin and placing a pair of stained forceps into a small autoclave. "Need some help, Engineer?"

"If you got a moment, Doc."

"I see you at dinner, Doktor." Heavy said, standing up. "I cook tonight. Special Russian stew, is good!" The large man padded out of the room.

Medic grimaced. "I hope he doesn't overcook it too much."

"Seems you an' Heavy get on well." Engineer commented, taking his hard hat off and leaving it on a chair.

"Ja," The man replied, looking slightly wary. "Shouldn't ve?"

"Course you should!" Engineer replied with an inner smile. In some ways, Medic reminded him of one of his more clueless engineering students from back in the day. Head full of brains, completely lost when it came to people. "S'always good to have a friend."

"So zhey say." Medic replied, nodding solemnly as if agreeing to some complex scientific theory. He coughed again. "So, vhat can I do for you?"

"Oh, just a coupla things." He said casually, sliding off the glove on his right hand. "Been havin' difficulties with the hand again." Where his ring and pinkie fingers should have been, there were instead two robotic digits made of smooth jointed metal, joined to the flesh with a flat plastic plate. The tip of his remaining fingers were an unpleasant pale blue-purple colour.

"Hm, zhe ischaemia has advanced. You need to control your blood sugar levels better." The doctor got a small needle and poked it into the tip of his fingers before he could object. "Did you feel zhat?"

"Nope."

"How is your range of movement?"

"They feel a little stiff, but not so bad." Engineer replied, wiggling his fingers. "I can still use my tools just fine."

"Vell, it has progressed as ve expected it to. Zhe sooner ve operate, zhe better." Medic replied thoughtfully, tapping a finger against his lips. "How are zhe blueprints coming along?"

"Fine." Engineer chuckled slightly. "I guess it's a bad thing that I'm lookin' forward to it?"

"Of course not!" Medic gave the shorter man that wide and slightly disturbing grin of his. "It vill be a fascinating procedure, ja?"

"Sure will, Doc." Engineer cleared his throat and decided to go for the plunge. "What I really came to see you about was to see how you were doin', though."

"Me?" Medic frowned, and Engineer thought he could see a touch of guilt in the German's expression.

"You...don't seem your usual self at the moment." Engineer said hesitantly. He could feel his heart starting to pound and he swallowed. "You've seemed kinda troubled since the... incident. You sure you're ok?"
The man froze briefly and flexed his fingers nervously. "It has just left me with this persistent cough, that is all. I am well otherwise. I suspect that being trapped for so long left me with some soft tissue damage and inflammation, the most obvious of which is in my trachea and pharynx."

"I don't mean ill. I mean...troubled."

"Troubled?" Medic looked puzzled.

"Doc, there's no nice way of puttin' this," Engineer replied, putting his glove back on and glaring up at the doctor sternly, "What the hell have you been playin' at recently?"

"What?" He said, looking offended. "I have no idea what you mean!"

"I know what you did to the RED Spy." That finally got a reaction. Medic paled and looked away guiltily. "God knows I don't like that sneaky sonovabitch any more'n you, but keeping him alive and torturin' him? That's not right and you know it."

"I. Hate. Spies." Medic replied in a soft voice so venomous that it sent prickles up Engineer's spine. He picked up a small scalpel and fiddled with it idly. "They deserve it, all of them."

"All of who?"

Medic swallowed and coughed, but stayed silent.

"C'mon, Doc, tell me what's eatin' you." Engineer said, sitting down with a sigh. "It won't go any farther, you know that."

"It's none of your business." Medic muttered, but sounded more wistful and miserable than anything else.

"'Least you admit there is somethin' wrong." Engineer said.

"I admit nothin'." Medic replied flatly. He turned away and started putting various surgical instruments in a drawer.

"Damn it, Doc!" Engineer stood up, raising his voice angrily. Medic looked back at him in surprise, as people generally did when he felt the need to be firm. "When it makes us fail, day after day, it becomes my business, got it? You're off chasing the RED Spy, barely doin' any healing and we are losing!"

The man just shrugged, still turned away from him. "So?"

"So?!" He shouted in exasperation. "Do you want to get fired like our last Medic, you goddamn idiot?"

Finally, he got a reaction. The doctor jerked like he had been shot and spun around to face Engineer. "Nein! Du scheiß verräter!" His long face went a waxy white with outrage. "You reported me?! How dare you!"

"Alright, Doc, alright, calm down." Engineer held up his hands placatingly. "I'm not the type to tell on folks, and I felt you better hear it from me 'fore the Administrator comes calling. You just gotta get your act together, son."

"Ja..." Medic ran a hand over his pale forehead and stifled a cough. "I see what you mean. It is...a private matter, but I shall have to leave it for now, I suppose. I can't risk... You have my word."
"You fightin' over a girl or somethin'?" Engineer asked with a smile, eager to disperse the bad atmosphere now he had got his point across.

"Ach, nein." Medic replied with a slight, choked laugh. "No women around here."

"Well, I'm not so sure..." Engineer replied slyly. He nudged Medic and got a slightly puzzled glance in return. "I've heard these here rumours about Pyro..."

Medic laughed at that, and Engineer smiled as the tension eased from his face. "Patient-doctor confidentiality. I can tell you nothing." His laugh dissolved into a coughing fit and Engineer pounded him on the back, but it just made him cough more.

"Gottverdammt! Not helping!" He cleared his throat and smiled slightly at the shorter man. "I suppose I should say thank you, Engie."

"Don't mention it." He replied with a shrug. "But should y'ever need to chat, you know where to find me, right? Now let's go and see how much Heavy has overcooked that chicken."

"Ja, let's."

"One final thing, Doc..."

"Yes?"

"What's with the hair?"

"Oh...that is easy to explain. Blonde hair makes it harder for RED Sniper to aim at my head- less of a contrast, see? That's my theory, anyway."

"Huh. Is it working?"

"Well... no."

Gottverdammte. I have to face them all again. The new RED Medic had only started this new job two weeks ago, and he slunk along the corridor towards the mess hall reluctantly. It was no good; even though he had never had a big appetite, he was hungry. Unfortunately, eating meant spending time with the other mercenaries. He didn't feel any particular wish to socialise with any of them (unless they had a particularly interesting or amusingly horrible injury) but it seemed the joint mealtimes were something of a tradition and the only way he could get a decent meal on the base.

He pushed the door slowly open, hoping nobody would notice him. Luck, as always, was not on his side.

"Ah hell, Medic, not again."

RED Engineer put his fork down as the Medic quietly snuck into the mess hall, trying not to be noticed.

Scout looked up and started snorting with obnoxious laughter. "Man, that cracks me up, every time. Sorry, Doc, but it's just frickin' hilarious!"

"Rrrgh." Medic ground his teeth together until his jaw ached along with the rest of his face. In the two weeks he had been here, he had managed to tolerate- barely- his teammates in this insane but well paid new job, but he loathed being laughed at. Thankfully, many of them seemed happy to either ignore him or were distant at best. Spy, for instance, seemed to be off his own world most of
the time, as was Heavy. Pyro was a complete mystery. Sniper was quiet and thoughtful but not unwelcoming, but Soldier was loud and obnoxious while Scout, Demo and Engineer were irritatingly friendly and determined to pester him. He would have much preferred to be simply left alone.

"Surely you all got equally sunburnt when you started working here?" He demanded, his scorched face hurting with every word.

"Now yer just takin' the piss, laddie." Demo growled. "Ye think I got sunburnt?! Me?"

"Vell...except Demo, zhen."

"Nuurr huurr."

"And Pyro." He added smoothly.

"I did once. It was awesome- I peeled off my whole face in one go!" Scout said with an enthusiastic nod.

"Bollocks you did." Sniper remarked, running his callused hand through his hair. "You whinged about the pain and wouldn't stop pickin' at it fer days."

"Well, sunburn fuckin' hurts! It was blistered and everything!" Scout protested.

"It is not so bad." Medic insisted. "It is only pain, after all." The mercs gave him one of those blank looks at that, and he sighed inwardly. Heavy looked at him briefly, frowned and looked away again. Medic found himself studying the giant of a man. There was something...odd about him, but he had never been particularly good at analysing personalities. He had better things to do with his time, so he dismissed the thought.

"It'll do ye some right nasty damage if ye keep getting burnt though, won't it?" Demo asked. "Yer face could fall off!"

"Zhere are times when it is painfully obvious you are not a man of medicine, Herr Demo." Medic replied with a sigh.

"Never claimed to be, laddie. I blow people up, you stitch them all back together."

"Seriously though, why'd ya keep gettin' sunburnt over and over? Shouldn't you have gotten used to it by now?" Scout asked.

"Hrrrr mrrrihrrrn hrrrrs thrrrr hrrrrmrrrrsh buhhffrrrr hrrrrr drrrrms." Pyro said.

"Ah..." Medic looked helplessly at the masked man. The blank eyepieces had turned around to look at him expectantly.

"Dang, Pyro, I bet you've hit the nail on the head there." Engineer said approvingly. The strange man in the rubber suit made a burbling, happy noise.

"What the fuck did he say?" Scout asked.

"Hrrrr mrrrihrrrn hrrrrs thrrrr hrrrrmrrrrsh buhhffrrrr hrrrrr drrrrms." Pyro repeated patiently, waving his gloved hands for emphasis.

"He said he reckons it's that medigun o'yours." Demo explained. "You know how the gases always leak a wee bit and heal you up? He says it means the burns get healed before they turn into a tan."
"Ja, zhat is my zheory too." He said in surprise. He scratched his nose, and then stopped with a wince. "A few weekends vizhout zhe gun should sort it. Did zhe previous Medic have zhis problem?"

The REDs at the table fell silent, and Medic realised that he said the wrong thing yet again. For a group of bloodthirsty killers, they were oddly sensitive about the sorry fate of their previous healer. It had been *interesting* to find out he was doing a job that had caused the previous incumbent to commit suicide, and it was positively *fascinating* to find out he was going to die and be resurrected several times a day. His first death had been when the BLU Medic had decapitated him...then he had been set on fire...and then decapitated by that Medic *again*... headshot by a sniper's rifle... backstabbed by a Spy... He was starting to regret his career choices. To hell with sensitivity!

"Vell," Medic insisted impatiently, "Did he? I vant to know."

The Heavy Weapons Expert, a giant thug of a man, suddenly got up and left the room, taking his plate with him. Spy left as well, leaving his untouched food behind.

"Eh, sod it." Sniper said, looking after Spy, but not moving to follow him. "Not that I noticed, mate. Maybe a coupla times. He wasn't a bloodnut like you though."

"What th' hell is a bloodnut?" Demo asked.

"S'a man with ginger hair." Sniper explained, waving his fork for emphasis. "I've got a mate like that, back home. One minute o' sun and he was as red as a baboon's arse."

"Red as a baboon's arse!" Scout repeated, snorting with laughter again. "You crack me up, Sniper!"

"I don't care for zhat comparison." Medic said sternly, but quickly stopped when he realised how much frowning hurt. Instead, he sighed and sat down at in a spare seat. "Who cooked tonight?"

"I did. Soss n' mash, with baked beans." Sniper nodded towards the cooker where the pots sat. "Help yerself."

"Danke." Medic said, getting up to help himself to a portion of the starch-ridden, unhealthy food and then returned to the table, poking the sausages suspiciously with a fork.

"Where's Sol tonight?" Scout asked.

"On patrol, he says." Engineer replied with a shrug, cutting up his sausages.

"What fer?" Demo asked through a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

"Oh, ye know what Solly can be like when 'e gets a bee in his bonnet. He reckons the Doc was murdered, an' he's off looking for infiltrators."

"Interesting." Medic mused, cutting up his sausages into neat segments.

"What?" Engineer asked.

"Vell, did it ever occur to him zhat it could have been one of RED who murdered your late healer? Does he purely zhink in terms of outside zhreats?" The remaining mercenaries glared at him balefully. "It's a possibility, you must admit. Hypothetically, Engineer, for instance, wouldn't be vell placed to commit such a crime."

"You want to repeat that, son?" Engineer slowly got to his feet, holding the table edge tightly in his
hands. "I reckon I din't hear ya correctly."

"I am speaking of possibilities," Medic continued unconcernedly, popping a piece of sausage in his mouth and chewing for a moment. "After all, you are best placed to sabotage zhe respawn. Zhat is, if you believe zhe Medic was murdered."

"And you do?" Demo asked, his voice oddly low and hoarse to the doctor's ears.

"Vhat? Of course I don't!" Medic declared witheringly. "All zhe evidence points towards suicide. As I said, I was talking of hypothetical possibilities. I am not zhe paranoid delusional vone around here, yes?"

"Mrrrrrr krr hrrsssh hudd uh purrrruhhnn hrrs frrrrh uhhhr hrss mrrrrf."

"I'm...sorry, Herr Pyro, I didn't quite catch zhat."

"He said you're good at puttin' your foot in your mouth" Engineer explained, sitting back down slowly. "I can't say I don't agree with that."

"S'alright, we all do it sometimes." Demo said, patting Medic on the shoulder. He tried to inch out of reach of the Scotman without making it too obvious. "You heard about the time Sol annoyed a wizard? See, he had this sour cream and some racoons..."

Medic looked down at his plate and concentrated on eating his food while Demo droned on. He tried not to sigh in exasperation too obviously when a rubber finger poked him. He startled and looked up into opaque glass lenses. Pyro tipped his head on one side like an inquisitive dog.

"Ja?"

"Frrr yrrrr." The masked man's hand uncurled to reveal a tube of burns cream. He placed it forcefully in Medic's hand, and then made a beckoning gesture.

"Uh, danke Pyro. Maybe zhis vill help." He said blinking in surprise. Pyro made the beckoning motion again and then tugged at his arm. "Was ist los?"

Pyro pulled him close and pressed his cold, rubbery mask against Medic's ear. "Sheeeee Sppy. Turrrippkkk to Shhpyyy. Pruhhhmisssss." Medic pulled away and looked at him in surprise, but the strange man just placed a gloved finger to his lips.

Spy? Why does he want me to see the Spy? Medic pondered, but as he looked at that masked face, he decided ignoring Pyro's request would be distinctly dangerous.

He looked down at his meal, and realised he had lost his appetite yet again.

**In Chapter Three: BLU Medic receives a mysterious note, and the RED Spy gets some unwanted visitors.**

*Translations:*

*Vkhodit* - Enter

*Du scheiß verräter! - You piece-of-shit traitor!*
Author's Note: As usual, my artwork for this chapter is in my deviantart gallery: http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Three-Enlightened-Self-Interest-476168438?ga_submit_new=10%253A1408261556. Many thanks to everyone for your responses! Now, enough drabbles, it's time for some proper plot (although the drabbles were important- lots of chekhov's guns in there).


Today's fun fact: Large doses of penicillin can cause a growth of Aspergillus niger, aka bathroom mould, on your tongue. Nice.

Fun fact no. 2: This website's spell checker just suggested altering 'Aspergillus niger' to 'Papergirls tiger'.

"BLU Medic,

I know what happened to you. I need to know more. The map shows a place with no cameras. Meet me at 1am. I swear you will be safe.

I am an ally."

BLU Medic 029/c frowned as he looked at the piece of paper he had found in his pocket after the battle today. It was crinkled, water stained and splattered with blood- some of it his own, most of it the RED Spy's. The corners of his mouth twitched for a moment, before he remembered Engineer's warning. The man was right, of course- he now knew the price of losing his job. Unlike the others on his team, he knew how expendable he truly was. Killing that Spy over and over had been so satisfying though, even if he had been dressed in red and not violet...

No. Stop thinking like that. You can't afford to.

He looked at the note again. It had been made of letters from a newspaper glued to the page, so he couldn't tell who had written it. Should he go? Would he gain anything from it? He rubbed his neck and coughed, thinking over the hellish last few weeks, and trying to figure out, once again, why he was still alive. I found out that we're all clones, hired by one person to fight both sides of an endless war. The other person that found out was assassinated. So why didn't they kill me too?

Did they think he was cowardly or stupid enough to be threatened into obedience? Well...maybe he was, a little. He did value his own life highly, and preferred not to take stupid risks if there was not a chance of respawn catching him. Maybe this was a test, of sorts, to see if he would take the bait? The late RED Medic had been very secretive, so there was little chance anybody else could have found out. Therefore...

I will ignore the note. It's a trap. He nodded firmly to himself. He stood up and started to pace, and
Galileo fluttered down to land on his shoulder. *This is my battle and I will do this my way.* Not that, right now, he had much idea how to proceed- but he had determination, time and lots of paper. He would find a way. *First of all, I need to find out where this entire operation is based...*

And that was the difficulty, he realised with a sigh. This needed the entire team, but if he told them the truth- that they were all clones with false memories, fighting in a pointless war- they’d not only consider him mad, they’d all be very quickly dead. The Violet Spy had made that very clear.

"Coo?" Galileo pressed his head against Medic's cheek.

"Life is much simpler for birds," Medic said with a sigh. "You have seen zhe new RED Medic, I suppose?"

"Coo."

"Vhen I saw him, I zhought: Now zhey are taking zhe Jarate. Zhat ginger-haired, red-faced, gangling freak!" He reached back and ran a finger along Galileo's head. "Zhey chose the most ridiculous-looking Medic zhey could, as a reminder."

Galileo just preened a strand of his hair. He coughed again, and Galileo flapped to keep his balance.

"Verdammt Husten!" The cough was worrying. It was getting slowly worse rather than better. The medigun helped for a while, but then it would deteriorate again. He had tried taking a course of penicillin, then a stronger course, and only ended up with an upset stomach and a black tongue for his troubles. He had then taken an X-ray, but it had shown nothing other than a blurry white thickening around the trachea, as if he had a chronic infection. The best solution would be to ask Engineer to help him perform some exploratory surgery. It would be easy enough to do– a dose of morphine for fun, a scalpel, his medigun and a large mirror and he would be all set. Of course, the angle would make it rather fiddly. When he had been placing the Ubercharge device on his own heart he’d lost a retractor in his thoracic cavity somewhere. He had handed Engineer his lungs to hold while he fished it out and he remembered the man being rather concerned about that for some reason. He had even gone pale, but Medic hadn’t even been able to tell the man off, since he had been unable to breathe at that moment. Still, he had found the missing piece of equipment and it was all fine in the end.

The only problem was that Engineer had refused to ever help him with any operations ever again- 'Until hell freezes over', was his exact phrase. And he didn't trust any of the other mercs to help him.

"Life is complicated, Galileo. So many problems. Problems and more problems." He looked at the note again. An ally would be so incredibly useful right now. He sat down again and drummed his fingers on the desk, unable to settle to any one task. He crumpled the note up in his hand, feeling the paper crinkle and crush under his fingers, and then reached for a kidney dish and a box of matches and lit the piece of paper. It was oddly satisfying watching it go up in smoke, and for a moment, he wondered if this was how Pyro felt when he burned things. It...simplified matters. No more note, no more complications. The infirmary filled with the smell of burning paper and the smoke gave him a coughing fit.

*Schieße!*

Enough was enough. He moved over to the gurney, switched on the large medigun and lay down under its healing rays with a sigh. He would forget about the note.

However, the writer of the note would not forget about him.
RED Spy took a long, hard drag on his cigarette and wondered why the nicotine no longer seemed to give him its usual magical calming effect. Admittedly, he had been smoking a lot recently - but it was the only way he could cope, right now. The last few weeks had been hell, and even worse, he knew he could blame no one but himself.

He locked the door of his sparsely decorated room and then removed his balaclava, feeling relief as the cool air hit his sweaty skin and thinning scalp. He took his gloves off and ran his fingers through what hair he had left on his head. Even with his other problems, he felt the usual spark of irritation at his receding hairline. Spy was vainer than most people realised and his balaclava was a perk of the job that happened to hide the way his hairline had become his worst enemy in recent years. He moved his fingers from his offending scalp and rubbed his forehead gently, trying to ease the permanent headache that he had had for the last two or three weeks. There was a knock on his door.

"Herr Spy? A moment of your time, bitte."

He shuddered and clenched his fists. The idea of speaking to anyone right now made him want to throw a very immature tantrum. He needed, so very much, some peace and quiet, some rest, to try and sort out his whirling thoughts. Without consciously thinking about it, he cloaked and went still.

"I know you went in there. I can smell your cigarettes. I can get Engineer to remove the lock if need be."

"Merde." He muttered. He quickly put his balaclava back on and opened the door grudgingly. "What do you want, Medic? It is getting rather late."

"You have not been eating." The taller man glared at him sternly, although the attempt at intimidation was somewhat ruined by his scorched red nose and cheekbones. "I was wondering if you are entirely well."

Spy swallowed and sighed, wishing the man would go away so he didn't have to deal with this. "Of course, Docteur. I am simply not a big eater."

"Not good enough." Medic replied. He picked a black bag off the floor behind him. "I wish to examine you. A quick checkup, nothing more."

"My dear Medic," Spy said, taking another puff on his cigarette, "I will submit to your gentle administrations the day I die, and not before."

"Ah, sehr gut!" Medic said with an evil grin. "You died today, several times."

"Putain." Spy growled. Medic suddenly grabbed his arm and looked at him carefully.

"Your hands are shaking." He commented. "You are most certainly underweight. If you are sick, you will not be effective on the field and that could affect our fighting abilities. We could lose, and that would be bad."

"Ah, Docteur, you care so much for us all. It warms my heart."

The red-haired man shrugged. "I am paid to keep you alive and healthy. So, do you wish to be examined here or in the infirmary? Those are the only two choices you have right now."

"Here then." Spy said shortly. "And make it quick."

Medic grinned and shut the door behind him, putting his bag on Spy's bed. He rummaged around for a while and muttered to himself producing various shiny metal surgical implements, a bag of red
lollipops, two speckled brown feathers, a blunt scalpel, an unlabelled bottle of unfeasibly big yellow pills, and finally a stethoscope and what Spy assumed was a blood pressure monitor.

"Take your shirt off."

Spy slowly unbuttoned his fine linen shirt. "If you ask me to turn my head and cough, the answer is no."

"Zhat depends on what I find, ja?"

Much to Spy's surprise, except for the fact that Medic's fingers were icy cold, pointed and bony, the man worked quickly and efficiently and did not bring large needles into the procedure. Spy was a very private man, and had managed to avoid being examined by their previous quack by antagonising the man whenever he got the chance until he would rather slash his wrists than... his breath suddenly hitched and he winced as if in pain as he thought that. Medic gave him a questioning look, hitching an eyebrow up his high forehead.

*It worked, far too well.* Spy had standards- a kill should be quick, efficient and clean. Unlike Medic, he did not enjoy seeing others suffer and a slow-dying target was a dangerous one that could retaliate. It had happened a few times, of course- sometimes, assassinations went messily wrong- but killing someone on his own team? By driving them to despair? Unforgivable.

"Hmm. 170 systolic, 110 diastolic." Medic finally said with pursed lips. "And heart rate of 100 beats per minute, sometimes ectopic."

"How fascinating. *Now* will you leave me alone?"

"Do you realise how unheahlzy zhat is?" Medic demanded, pointing a finger at him like a school teacher. "Your blood pressure is very high and your heart rate is far too fast. Do you vant to suffer a cerebrovascular accident?"

"Are you suggesting I am likely to wet my trousers? I am beyond that stage in life."

"I mean a stroke, dummkopf! Do you know nozhing of medicine?"

"I specialise in ending lives, not prolonging them...much like yourself, in fact."

"Rrrgh..." Medic shook his head and clenched his hand for a moment before forcing himself to relax. "No, you vill not distract me. You are obviously suffering from stress, Spy. According to my psychology books, zhat means I must now ask you to tell me how I can help you and get you to talk about your problems. Once you have done zhat, you vill be healzhy again." The German looked at him expectantly.

"I must be dreaming." Spy muttered, grabbing his shirt and buttoning it up slowly, wondering how he could get rid of the quack. "If you think I am sharing any details with you, docteur, you are the one that needs your head examined, not I. I simply have many things on my mind at this moment."

"Ja, ja, sehr gut. Keep talking." Medic said encouragingly.

"Non!" Spy spat.

"But it is part of the procedure!" Medic was practically pouting, his long face even longer and his bottom lip protruding slightly.
"Listen to me, Docteur," Spy said, grabbing the man's tie and hauling him close. "If I had any problems- which I do not- you are the last person I would ever confide in, understand? Now get out of my room!"

"Very vell." Medic tugged his tie out of Spy's gloved hands and folded his arms. "Perhaps I can advise RED of zheir Spy's deteriorating mental stability, hmm?"

"If you believe they would trust your opinion on sanity, you are even more delusional than I suspected." Spy snarled back, but then swallowed and forced himself to be calm. Why am I picking a fight? I have enough enemies already. He sighed and rubbed his brow. "I...apologies, docteur. That was uncalled for."

Medic looked surprised, but continued to glare at him for a moment, before shrugging and pushing his glasses up his nose. "I am going to prescribe a course of Clonazepam for you. It is a very effective tranquiliser and will make you capable of doing your job again." He paused thoughtfully and then brightened and smiled. "Of course, a better solution would be to remove a section of your adrenal glands..."

"Good night, Docteur." Spy shoved the man gently but firmly towards the door.

"Zhey are located just above zhe kidneys...it would be quick and only briefly agonizing..."

He shut the door firmly and threw himself onto his bed. His head was pounding and he briefly thought of finding out more about that drug Medic had mentioned. He had been unable to get hold of his old contacts since he had taken on this job, but maybe he could acquire some of it through non-medical and utterly illegal channels.

There was a soft knock on the door. Can't I get a moment's peace around here?! Spy found his hands clutching at his balaclava and had to resist screaming at whoever it was disturbing him this time.

"Spy, open door. You did not eat dinner, so I brought you sandwich."

"Heavy?" Spy asked in astonishment. If there was one team mate he expected to hate his guts, it was Heavy. After all, his best friend had died due to Spy's actions. Spy flinched again. You just had to remind yourself of that, didn't you? Curiosity overwhelmed his wish to be left alone. "Entrez."

The large man pushed the door open and ducked into the room, carrying a white plate with the aforementioned sandwich. Spy's nervous stomach churned at the sight of it, and he cleared his throat.

"Merci beaucoup, Heavy, but I have little appetite tonight." Spy said diffidently, not wanting to antagonise a man who could crush him in two.

"Spy is not eating." Heavy stated, shoving the plate at him. "You will get weak and then enemy Engineer's sentries will not be sapped. They hurt very much."

"Ah, enlightened self-interest is something I can understand." Spy said, feeling relieved that Heavy's largess had a sensible reason behind it. Heavy's brow wrinkled at Spy's words, but Spy had always suspected that the brute was not as stupid as he seemed at first- merely not very competent at speaking English. There was the glint in those eyes of one who observed the world and saw a lot more than others suspected- but was happy to be mistaken for dumb muscle. He gingerly accepted the sandwich and took a bite. The soggy bread formed a lump in his dry mouth and he swallowed it piece by piece. "There."

"Eat it all." Heavy ordered, folding his arms and showing no signs of leaving him alone.
"I am not sure I am capable of that, but I will do my best."

Heavy sighed and rubbed the back of his broad neck. He frowned for a moment and stared searchingly at Spy. "You blame yourself for Doktor's death."

The sandwich dropped from his suddenly numb fingers and landed on the floor, and for a moment his stomach knotted dangerously before he swallowed and forced himself to stay calm. He wondered how to reply, and realised that, for once, the plain truth was the only answer.

"I do." He stated bleakly. "How could I not? The facts are plain enough. If I could take it back...well, there it is. Mea culpa. I refuse to try and deflect blame."

Heavy sat down on a battered chair that creaked under his weight, and looked at Spy carefully before glancing away. "It was not your fault."

"Ah...come again?" Spy blinked and sat down slowly on his bed.

"Doktor had...problems. Other things, secrets. He was...troubled. Cannot tell you more." The man looked at him with a measuring frown. "That is why I have not punched you to death."

Spy went silent in thought. He had once been prone to babbling when trying to sort out his thoughts, but in his occupation that was a very dangerous habit and he had forced himself to change. His fingers knotted together so tightly they hurt. "I...see." He replied slowly. "I won't pry. We all have our personal troubles here. Ordinary people do not become mercenaries, after all."

"Hnn. Is true."

"I realise he was a dear friend." Spy cleared his throat awkwardly. He had always found Heavy difficult to talk to- the man was too quiet and it was hard to read his emotions. He was so very closed in, and Spy felt lost when facing people he could not manipulate, if he so wished. "I am sorry for your loss."

Heavy stood up and gave the Spy an icily cold look. "Goodnight, Spy." The large man plodded to the door and left without another word.

Spy blinked, and then carefully picked up the remains of the sandwich from the floor, suddenly feeling exhausted. He had worked for RED a long, long time. He had seen other team members come and go, and he realised he was completely sick and tired of his job and everything that went with it.

After disposing of the sandwich, he threw himself down on his bed dramatically and fell asleep, still in his suit and mask.

In Chapter Four: BLU Medic receives some worrying notes and the BLU team discuss...hitting each other with birch twigs??

Translations:

Verdammt Husten! - Goddamned cough!

Schieße! - Shit!

Putain. - literally 'bitch', but used in this context to mean 'Bloody hell'.

Ja, ja, sehr gut - Yes, yes, very good.
Entreé - Enter.

Merci beaucoup - Thank you very much.

Mea culpa - I am guilty (Latin)
An Ally

Chapter Notes

So, who was waiting to see how the Latin titles were relevant? *crickets* Ah well. Choral music is surprisingly metal when you translate it. The relevant piece can be found on youtube here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WvHDrcA084.

As usual, the link to my artwork for this chapter is below the text.

Thanks once again to my lovely and no doubt very sexy and attractive readers for your views, reviews and kudos. Keep 'em coming! I will reply to all reviews, I promise.

"Blu Medic,

You did not come, but I will still wait to hear from you. I swear I won't betray you. I will be waiting at 1 a.m. again, in the same place.

An Ally."

Medic felt his lip rise in a slight snarl as he read the new note he had found in his pocket after the battle today. The only explanation he could come up with for how those notes got there was that someone was waiting for him to die and then placing them on his corpse before he respawned. The thought made him feel oddly violated.

I'm not going. He thought sternly, but he had to admit, his interest was piqued. An ally. Someone he could talk to...or rant to. He felt the need for a good, long rant right now, to someone he could trust.

Trust, yes...that was the core problem, wasn't it? He had power over other people's life and death but not his own. That missgeburt Violet Spy had made it clear what would happen if he spoke to anyone about what he had found out.

If you tell anyone what you have discovered, you will die- and so will they.

Of course, it was of no concern to him if this mysterious 'Ally' died. He was a pragmatist, after all, and as long as he was not the one who pulled the trigger, he was not responsible. However, he could die too- and that was more serious. An unpleasant death was the last thing he wanted to happen to him. Actually, that was not the most logical way to put that- an unpleasant death was something he did not want to happen to him ever. He put the note back in his pocket and grabbed a paper bag from his desk drawer.

"Galileo? Where are you? I have millet for you!" Pasteur and Kepler flew down to him immediately, climbing down his coat with their spiky little claws to get into his hands as quickly as they could. There was no sign of Galileo, though. The smart little dove had disappeared yesterday, and he was starting to worry...

"Medic!" A voice called. It sounded like Demo, and from the tempo of his voice, he was completely healthy. Medic ground his teeth together, wondering what possessed his teammates to call for him when they were utterly lacking in any interesting injuries. "Y'there, Doc?"
"Dun need Medic. Am fine...jus' little tired." That voice was Scout's and he sounded drunk. Medic sighed, coughed, and pocketed the note quickly as Demo and Scout entered the infirmary. Predictably, Scout could barely walk and Demo was holding him up. The younger man lifted his head and gave Medic a vacant smile before flopping forward.

"Demo, vhat have I told you about getting everyone drunk? I told you zhat you drink too much and now you are trying to spread zhe habit to zhe entire base!"

"Not fuckin' drunk." Scout mumbled. "Nossada single drin'. Oooh...feel sick."

"Ey, don't lay this one on me, Doc. The wee laddie got clobbered by the RED Scout an' dinnae call fer healin'. I reckon he's had a few too many blows to tha' head. I found 'im curled up on the rec room sofa crying intae the cushions."

Scout tried to struggle free of the Scotsman and staggered upright. "I wassn't cryin', faggot...I...got...uh...hayfever."

"Put him on zhe stretcher." Medic ordered. "Scout, lie still. Understand?"

Demo dumped the skinny boy onto the gurney, and he lay back and closed his streaming eyes against the bright examination light above him.

"Sure thing." Scout said, with a slight smile. "Ma, turn down the lights will ya?"

"Ah, shite." Demo muttered.

Medic quickly examined the man, who was surprisingly compliant compared to normal. Sure enough, he was photosensitive, had an unequal pupil size, but most tellingly of all, a large, mushy feeling, hot patch on the back of his head. Through Scout's short brown hair, he could see mottled purple and black bruising covering his scalp and stretching down his neck. The colouring was almost beautiful, like a mosaic on his skin. Medic poked it inquisitively.

"Holy fuck!" Scout cried suddenly. "That hurt. What the hell, Doc?"

"How are you still conscious?" Medic demanded. "Vell Scout, your skull is intact- probably- but you most definitely have concussion, quite a bad one. You will be staying here tonight."

"This sucks." Scout murmured, closing his eyes and lying back under the wispy blue beam coming from the suspended gun.

"Do we have to keep 'im awake?" Demo asked anxiously.

"Ach, nein. Zhat is a common misconception." Medic said sternly. "Sleep is better. It will help him heal, alzthough zhe Medigun vill do most of zhe vork."

"What if he drops into a coma?"

"Zhen ve vill have some peace and quiet for a while." Medic replied.

"Ma, look at me, Ma..." Scout muttered, his voice barely more than a sigh. "Is anyone lookin' at me...boink..."

"Doc..." Demo said warningly.

"Alright, alright!" Medic replied, holding his hands up placatingly. "I vill sleep in here tonight and
"Wait 'til I tell the boys ye slept wi' Scout!" Demo said with a chortle.

"Ah, I see. Very amusing." Medic replied with a solemn nod.

"S'a shame though, it's me birthday today an' I was gonna invite everyone to join me fer a piss-up." Demo nudged him, and Medic shifted and moved away slightly. "Never see ya drunk, Doc. I believe ye can't know what a man is really like until ye've seen him rat-arsed."

"Ach, nein," Medic smiled weakly. "I don't drink to excess. It has an...unfortunate effect on me."

"Yeah? Yer an angry drunk? Wouldn't mind seein' that."

"Vell, no. Not as such." Medic replied slowly.

"You puke a lot? Get randy? Start cryin'? Fall over?" Demo asked curiously.

Medic gave a sudden laugh. "Let us just say it is one of zhose four."

"Damn, laddie, now I wannae see you get bladdered!"

"I hope you enjoy your party." Medic said with another nod. He was sorry he couldn't join the party. Although it sounded rather noisier than he preferred, he had recently decided he ought to spent more time with his team. This 'friendship' thing made little sense, and he had had very little practice at it, so he had determined that observation was the best approach and had carefully watched the interactions of his teammates, especially Engineer and Demo, since they seemed the most socially able, in order to figure out the correct way to proceed. "I wonder...perhaps you could bring me a beer at some point? Just zhe vone."

Demo gave a small smile that widened with genuine warmth. "Sure thing, laddie. 'Fraid we've only got that American Blu Streak shite though."

"Danke, Demo." Medic replied with a smile. He gave a short cough. "Even zhat watery beer vill be better company zhan him." Medic waved an arm towards the sleeping Scout under the medigun.

"See ya later, Doc."

"Gute nacht, Demo."

The man left the room, and Medic's hand flew to his pocket and grabbed the note again, and then reached for a box of matches.

They will not break me down so easily. He thought ferociously as the note burned merrily. The smoke irritated his throat, just like it had the previous night, and he realised with a sinking heart that he would have to do without the infirmary medigun tonight.

As he hastily threw some sheets onto one of the infirmary beds for himself, he tried to stifle his coughing, but he could not stop.

"Th' Hell, Doc." Scout murmured, curling up into his blankets. "Noisy bastard."

He got out his portable backpack medigun and turned it on, pointing the gun at himself with a sigh of relief. Hopefully, Scout would not wake up and see this.

It was going to be a long and painful night.
Life at Teufort continued in its usual bloody fashion. Everything seemed normal, but there was an undercurrent of tension that every mercenary, BLU and RED, could feel. The corridors of the battlements echoed with gunfire, but conversations in the living quarters, rec room and mess halls were oddly muted and quiet.

On the RED side of the moat, Heavy and Spy were withdrawn and silent. They were watched carefully by their team.

On the BLU side, Medic was watched even more closely by his concerned comrades. Rather than charging into battle and tormenting the RED Spy as he had before, he now lurked in the background, determined not to die and get another note in his pocket.

Galileo was still missing.

With little healing and very few Ubercharges, BLU continued to lose.

"BLU Medic,

I know we are all clones. You are not alone. Help me find out more. We should work together. We can fight this.

You know where you can meet me.

Your Ally."

RED Spy tried the little yellow pills the RED Medic gave him, and found them marvellous. He thanked the doctor emphatically and placed them in his cigarette case for safe keeping. Life became tolerable again.

"BLU Medic,

You are avoiding me. I need your help. I will not betray you.

The sooner we meet, the sooner we can act against our enemies.

Your Ally"

Violet Spy moved unseen amongst the two teams, analysing body language, listening to conversations, watching and waiting for a sign. He saw the BLU Medic hiding around corners, and shook his head ruefully.

"You play a dangerous game, mon ami," He whispered, reaching for another cigarette, "But you better not give up."

BLU lost for the seventh time in a row.

"BLU Medic,

Are you happy to know you are just a clone? I cannot believe that. I want to be free. So do you. I don't believe you are a coward. Prove to me that you're not.

An Ally"
And someone else watched the Violet Spy, waiting for him to make his move. This watcher was good at waiting. He had had lots of practice.

BLU Medic breathed in the soothing steam of the communal showers with a sigh of relief. There had been no note after the battle today- another victory for RED, although BLU Scout had claimed one briefcase- and the hot water trickling down his back was soothing. He got a generous handful of shampoo and started massaging it through his tangled hair, hissing as his fingers got caught in a thick knot clotted with blood. Lots of splashback today. It seemed his colleagues had started to get used to his habit of hiding around corners and adjusted their fighting style, and he and Soldier had destroyed a sentry with an ubercharge.

"Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna in die illa tremenda, in die illa!"

Quando coeli movendi sunt, quando coeli novendi sunt et terra.

Dum veneris judicare saeculum per ignem." He tugged at the clotted knot in his curly hair.

"Verdammt dumm wirres Haar! Vielleicht sollte ich sie alle abrasieren ..." He cleared his throat.

"Tremens, tremens factus sum ego et timeo dum discussio venerit atque ventura ira,

Dies illa, dies irae, calamitatis et miseriae dies illa, dies magna et amara, amara valde.

Libera me..."

"What the hell was that creepy shit?!" A higher-pitched voice suddenly called through the mist. "Doc, that you? The fuck are ya singin'? 'Least it's better than your violin playing."

"You are are full o' surprises, Medic." Engineer commented. There was a rustle of cloth, and both the mercenaries stepped into the shower room. "That wasn't half bad. From somethin' classical?"

Medic stopped and coughed suddenly in embarrassment- not at being caught naked, he had long got used to that with the base's horrible military-style communal bathing facilities- but at singing without even realising he was doing it. His throat had felt better in this humid room, and that melody had been dancing around in his head the entire day...

"It vas zhe Libera Me from Faure's Requiem." He replied stiffly. "A very famous composition, Scout. You've not heard of it?"

"Shucks, Doc, I hadn't heard of it either." Engineer said, rubbing a bar of soap into a lather. "So, who taught ya t'sing?"

"Nobody." Medic blinked, pulling at a particular bad knot with foamy hands. "It is just a piece I have a record of. Ugh, I have someone's tooth stuck in my hair. How did zhat get zhere?"

"One of Heavy's punches?"

"You talk about me behind back, eh?" A voice suddenly boomed cheerfully from outside the tiled room. "Who was singing Requiem?"

"Huh, boring old dude music." Scout muttered. "Should've known."

"You know of it, Heavy?" Medic asked in surprise, and then mentally cursed himself for underestimating the man again. He had always striven to be objective and not swayed by emotional
or cultural bias, and yet he kept making assumptions about the giant of a man with his poor English skills. Heavy's eyes met his and they crinkled knowingly with amusement before the big man looked away to throw a towel on a hook.

"Is like banya in here," He commented.

"What's one of those?" Engineer asked curiously.

"Is very nice hot steamy room." Heavy explained. "Can sit, relax and hit friends with birch branches."

"Wait, what?" Scout asked, starting to snort obnoxiously with laughter. "You hit each other with sticks? You kinky bastard!"

"That don't sound like my idea of relaxin'." Engineer commented

"I don't know this word, 'kinky'." Heavy complained, rubbing a bar of soap into a lather.

Scout stuffed his knuckles into his mouth to hide his braying laughter until Engineer cuffed the back of his head.

"Don't those branches hurt?" Engineer asked.

"Nyet. They are softened first, in hot water. Is pleasant after cold. It, eh...refreshes."

"Ah, I see," Medic said, freeing his hands from his hair and soaping up his arms. "Zhe extreme cold in Russia causes vasoconstriction of zhe extremities, and stiffening due to zhe hardening of zhe lipid bilayers zhat make up zhe cell membranes, but zhe percussive force of zhe branches encourages good circulation, enabling a quick recovery."

Scout gave him one of those tiresomely familiar blank looks, while Engineer paused thoughtfully.

"Da," Heavy replied with a slow nod. "Banya feels good after cold. Doktor has got it right."

"Hey Doc..." Scout was looking at the German curiously. "What's that?"

"Vhat?" Medic shifted awkwardly under the attention.

"That is one weird frickin' scar, right round your neck. Never noticed it before, how'd you get it?"

His hand flew to the ridged line of tissue. "Hmm. I have no idea. Must be a battle wound."

"But your medigun heals you all the time, right? So, how'd d'it get there? It looks like someone tried to saw ya head off!"

Medic opened his mouth and tried to think of a reply, but the Administrator's voice suddenly rang out.

"Attention, BLU Medic." The soap shot out of Medic's hand and hit the wall, while the other three men stopped and froze.

"Ja, Frau Administrator?" He asked, looking upwards questioningly, trying to figure out where the voice was coming from.

"You are required in the Comms room for debriefing." The woman said shortly. "Report there as soon as you finish your shower."
"Arschloche." Medic muttered quietly. "Ja, Frau Administrator. I vill go zhere immediately." The other three mercs looked at him anxiously, but he straightened his shoulders, stared back proudly and then left.

"Fuck. He's in a shitload o'trouble." Scout muttered. "You tried t' warn him, Hardhat. I'm kinda sick of losing though."

"I don't like your language, son, but he sure is." Engineer replied ruefully. "He brought it upon himself, but even so, poor guy."

"What Heavy doesn't understand," Heavy said thoughtfully, "Is how Administrator knew we were having shower. I do not like what that makes me think."

"Oh gawd!" Scout shrieked. "Heavy, I wish ya hadn't said that! Fuck, now I can't get clean without wonderin' if a pervy old lady is watchin' me!" Scout shuddered, wrapping his soapy arms around his skinny torso protectively. "I need a shower just thinkin' about it...I mean...ah, fuck it!"

Engineer just looked at the door Medic had exited through, and his brow creased with worry lines.

**In Chapter Five: It's time to meet another of the Violet team, and BLU Medic finds out his days are numbered.**

*Translations:*

**Missgeburt - freak/deformed**

*Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna in die illa tremenda, in die illa! Quando coeli movendi sunt, quando coeli novendi sunt et terra. Dum veneris judicare saeculum per ignem. - Free me, Lord, from death eternal on that day of dread, when the heavens and the earth will be shaken while you come to judge the world with fire.*

*Verdammt dumm wirres Haar! Vielleicht sollte ich sie alle abrasieren - Goddamn stupid hair! Maybe I should shave it all off.*

*Tremens, tremens factus sum ego et timeo dum discursio venerit atque ventura ira. Dies illa, dies irae, calamitatis et miserie dies illa, dies magna et amara, amara valde. - I tremble and I am afraid, awaiting the trial and coming anger. That day of anger, that day of calamity and misery, that day of great bitterness.*

*Arschloche - Arseholes (That's a bit of a letdown after the last bit, isn't it?)*

Author's Note: It's Sunday, so I can post some more story! The temptation to post the whole thing in one go is incredibly strong, but I am sure you, my dear readers, prefer to be tormented like this, right?

Thank you so very much for all your readings, reviews, follows and favourites. I really appreciate it, especially the reviews (hint hint). This story has reached over 1000 views already, which is immensely flattering. Thank you all for taking the time to read my silly witterings. I have a challenge for you all, actually: in the next chapter, Medic will finally meet this mysterious 'ally'. I want to hear your guesses as to who it could be. In fact, let's make this interesting and add a prize. The first person to guess correctly will get an sfm portrait of their favourite class and loadout, being generally awesome and doing TF2 stuff. Deal?

Now, on with the story, and it's time to give you an idea where this story will eventually head...also, let's all see Medic lose his shit. You know you want to. The artwork for this chapter is in my deviantart gallery, http://sanctusceedit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Five-Hobson-s-Choice-477760964?ga_submit_new=10%253A1408870228. You know what you must do.

At first, there was light.

Then, there were noises. Metallic clangs, little creaks and clicks.

Shapes started to form. A shadow flitted back and forth. A hand reached down and everything went briefly black.

The shapes came back, shifted, sharpened.

"Hardhat? What the hell happened?"

Engineer grinned in triumph and leant close. "Well, would ya look at that."

"Did I get shot or somethin'? How'd I get here? Where's the Doc?"

"Seems it all worked out." Engineer turned away and made a quick note on a blueprint. "What do you remember, Scout?"

"Uh...the Administrator was talkin' about one of those clones that died, one of the altered ones. Then Medic started ranting about some shit or other, and you an' him got into a fight. You brained him with your wrench. Dude dropped like a stone. It was fuckin' hilarious!" Scout started to laugh, but there was something...strange about the sound.

"How do you feel?"

"Hey I'm good." Scout said, but he realised that it wasn't quite true. He felt sort of hollow and weird, and his eyesight was strange. He could see fine, but it seemed like everything was freaky and
"Son, I'm afraid I've got a bit of a shock for ya." Violet Engineer said, wiping the grease off his hands onto his purple overalls. "See, the cloning experiment worked out only too well. They're fully human, and they're dyin' out here, day by day. We make 'em, and send them off to fight, and kill them when they're not useful any more. It ain't right, and I decided- I ain't takin' part in it no more."

"Hell, better them than me, hardhat." Scout snorted in reply.

Engineer made a disapproving huffing noise. "There ain't no good way to tell ya this, son- that argument with that ruthless bastard of a doctor was, what, six years ago. I got developin' this here prototype soon after. I just got it workin', see. Just...take a look a yourself for a second."

Scout looked down and startled with a metallic clang. He looked down at his jointed metal chest, shiny and painted a deep violet. "Holy shit..." He said, leaping down and facing the Texan. Perfectly balanced metal feet hit the floor. He walked towards Engineer menacingly. "What the fuck did you do to me?!"

"Hold on there, son! I built you. I created you." Engineer replied with pride. "Y'see, I saw all those clones bleedin' and dyin', day by day, and I thought 'That's just plain wrong'. So I decided: let's do this Texas style."

"Robots can't die. No matter what, they can be fixed and rebuilt, and I can make as many as I like." The Violet Engineer continued with a solemn nod. "It's taken me six years to get you to the point where I could copy Scout's mind from the cloning system into your positronic processor unit but now, here you are! How's it feel?"

"So...I'm a robot now?" Scoutbot asked, his metal fingers clenching and stretching as his glowing lilac eyes looked at the Violet Engineer from his expressionless face.

"You always have been, son. I just gave you Scout's memories."

"Hot damn, I'm a robot!" Scoutbot shouted, wiggling his shoulders and torso experimentally before looking down at the shorter Engineer. "How fucking cool is that?!"

"Glad you like it." Dell Conagher gave a slight laugh. "You're the very first. The first of many. I gotta work on memory capacity for the older mercs and..." Engineer stopped and patted him on his hard, cold shoulder. "And then, we can end the slaughter, and retire the clones for good."

BLU Medic had a dreadful secret. He tried to keep it hidden from the others, but he suspected they figured it out sooner or later for themselves. It was a terrible thing for an objective, logical man of science to admit to.

He...he...had an artistic temperament.

It was incredibly frustrating- which in itself just confirmed that yes, his emotions ran very high- and he did sometimes envy the way great artists or musicians were allowed to let their passions run amok as if they had about as much self-control as spoilt toddlers. If your particular talents lent themselves to medicine instead, you had to keep that aspect of your personality under wraps, lest people think you insane. Hmm. Come to think of it, people seemed to think he was somewhat insane anyway, for some reason he couldn't quite fathom. He personally felt it was everyone else who was strange, not him. He mentally pictured most people as going about with their heads metaphorically in buckets,
Right now, that artistic temperament was running wild and his blood fizzed in his veins with anger. (Not literally, his medical training added conscientiously- fizzing blood would make him very dead, very fast). It was almost pleasant, in a way. It made him feel alive and righteous, ready to take on the world. Or at least to have a good rant at that nörgersch Schlampe. Hadn't he had done all that had been asked of him? Hadn't he had ignored those ridiculous, taunting notes they had sent to test his ability to keep a secret? He knew perfectly well his team thought he was in the middle of a nervous breakdown and it infuriated him. He felt his hands curl into fists and the nails bite into his palms.

Whatever the Administrator said, he would have an answer, and it would be loud and not very polite. He took a deep breath, smoothed back his spiky wet hair and walked down the steps to the Comms Room, head back, shoulders held proudly. He would not be intimidated by that shrill harpy. The air hissed slightly as he entered the room, indicating that the PA system was active.

"At last, Twenty-nine C." The woman's voice called sourly as he sat down next to the microphone.

"Frau Administrator." He replied curtly. While she normally addressed team members by their titles- Demo, Spy, Scout, und so weiter- but since the incident a few weeks back, she had always called Medic by his serial number. A reminder, he suspected, that he was just a number. "I have many calls on my time."

"As do I." The woman replied dryly. "These include explaining to Blutarch Mann why his Teufort team, once one of the best BLU teams, is now failing consistently. Perhaps you could assist me with this?"

"Oh ja, I can." Medic replied, feeling his lips lift in a snarl. "Tell him you control zhe RED team as well, and zhat you don't care who loses or wins. Zhen ve shall see who is in trouble."

"Or, I could tell him that his Medic, once a valuable mercenary, has lost his mind and is no longer functioning as a viable fighter. It has happened many times before. I very much doubt he would even care. Two truths, yours and mine. I think he will believe mine."

"Why do you even care?!" Medic snapped in reply. "Ve fight, and kill, and die, all by your vord and it does not matter! NOZHING EVER CHANGES!" He realised his voice had raised to a shout and he stopped and coughed, waiting for the inevitable explosion, but the Administrator surprised him.

"It does matter." She replied quietly. "I am breaking protocol telling you this, Twenty-nine C, but it seems that in your case, protocol has been broken many times already. The work you do here is not just important, it is vital. The stalemate between RED and BLU must be maintained...are you unwell, Medic?"

Medic waved a hand dismissively, trying to stifle the coughing fit. "Viral tracheitis." He lied, clearing his throat and wiping his eyes. "Just a slight infection. It will pass in a few days."

"As I said, your work here is far more important than you realise." The Administrator continued. "Normally, if a mercenary is performing as badly as you have been recently, they would be swiftly removed. You have seen this process first hand..."

"So I have." Medic swallowed and clenched his teeth.

"...However, your situation is highly unusual, so I am giving you a luxury I have never given a
failing mercenary before: a warning. Just one. You are a valuable piece of property..."

"Property." Medic repeated with a snarl.

"...But you are rapidly losing that value. If you cannot restore the stalemate, Twenty-nine C, you will be...removed. I will have no other choice."

The anger running rampant through his veins was suddenly replaced by something as icy as absolute zero. Medic felt his face go cold as this new, powerful emotion took over: utter fury. The words just poured out of his mouth.

"You treat us as lab rats in a maze and expect me to be grateful? You think that I can be manipulated by your threats? You think I can be motivated by fear into being an obedient little clockwork soldier for your schemes? I am sick of your games and I will not take part anymore." He leaned forward, grabbing the desk in his fingers. "I do not scare easily. And need I remind you that you are in the same situation? Should we continue to fail, maybe you will get killed off too, since you are just the administrator clone for Teufort, as we once discussed.

"You are as much a puppet as we are. The only difference is that you fool yourself into thinking you are in charge, but you have no more idea who runs this camp I have. Maybe one day, the Mann brothers will get sick of you and your charming assistant Miss Pauling, and you will find you are as disposable as we are. In fact..." He paused and coughed, clearing his throat before glaring venomously up at the nearest camera lens.

"You. Are. PATHETIC!"

There was a moment of silence in which Medic could hear his own hoarse panting for breath only too loudly before the speaker hissed again. He coughed, a single sharp bark, and briefly tasted something sharp and metallic in his throat.

"The offer stands, even with your little tantrum." The Administrator said in a voice laced with liquid helium. "Bring BLU to victory or die, Twenty-Nine-C. You have five days."

"Get out of my sight." He growled in reply, and there was a click as the comms room went silent. He sat down and breathed deeply for a few moments, massaging his temples with his long fingers, until his breathing returned to normal.

He leant back to stare at the ceiling for a moment, and then started to laugh. It was a wheezing, gargling laugh, but it still contained some mirth. The woman had tried to scare him, but all she had done was make his path clear. He could ignore those disturbing notes, and be sentenced to death in five days time. Or, he could find out who this 'Ally' was and... only maybe die. There was of course a third option, too- he could escape Teufort and run away. However, that path would take him nowhere interesting, so he'd keep it as a last resort only.

"Coo?" There was a flutter of wings and a set of tiny clawed feet landed on his head. He tried to look at the top of his own head and grinned in pleasure.

"Galileo! Where have you been, you naughty bird? I was worried."

"Coo." The dove replied, quickly grabbing a length of damp hair to preen before hopping down onto his shoulder and awkwardly staggering down his arm onto his hand. He roused his feathers with a brrrr noise, before settling them and looking at Medic expectantly.

"What is it?"
The white dove flapped his wings and then held out a leg. Medic's mouth dropped open as he realised there was a tiny folded piece of paper attached to it. He unfolded it in puzzlement.

"BLU Medic,

Galileo knows me. He visited me for a holiday. Maybe this is a safer way to send you notes?

Meet me tonight. We have much to talk about.

Your Ally."

"So zhat is where you have been? Visiting an old friend?" Medic demanded of the dove. Galileo just looked back at him with his tiny beady eyes. "Do you trust zhis man?"

"Coo." Galileo tipped his head on one side and then preened a wing. Medic rubbed his forehead, realising he was indeed asking a bird for his opinion. Perhaps I am going insane... He nodded firmly and grabbed a scrap of paper, writing a brief note on it.

"Give him zhis." He said abruptly, giving the dove the paper.

"Ally,

I will be there.

BLU Medic."

In Chapter Six: Medic finds out who this 'Ally' is, and shows off his innate flair for diplomacy (not).

Translations:

Nörgerisch Schlampe - Nagging Bitch

und so weiter - and so on
Author's Note: I was just thinking I'm having far too much fun posting this. Aren't writers supposed to be tormented souls?

Anyway, I asked last chapter who you thought the 'Ally' was, and now we have a winner! It will be announced after the story. As always, there is a piece of fanart with this chapter- one I particularly enjoyed doing. You can find it at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Six-Tactful-Diplomacy-478639931.

"Thursday, June 13th, 1968

BLU is much better after the transfusion this morning. More and more, I am convinced this will work. I do wonder how much trouble I will get into, but I am determined to help this man. I see no way to avoid discovery during the final procedure. I don't care. I will find a way to escape. And if I fail, what does it matter? I will have done what I must, and I have never feared death. No matter what, my exact double will still be alive! I am effectively immortal, and I must put this right.

I only hope that Mikhail will..."

RED Heavy closed the journal again with a sigh. He had read the RED Medic's last entry before his death time and time again. He presumed the doctor had been interrupted in the middle of writing that final sentence, but he wished, so much, that he knew how it would have ended. Later that day, a few hours after Medic had written that last entry, he had been the man who had found him, dead from cyanide injection with a suicide note under his gloved hand. He remembered it continually, as a freeze-frame nightmare, and the loss of his doktor was a constant aching void in his life. He missed his voice, his silly theories, his laughter, their nights together...it was all gone for good.

The RED team's brittle and uncertain sympathy was nothing more than annoying, and the only one he could tolerate spending any time with right now was, ironically enough, Spy. At first, the skinny man's histrionics had made Heavy want to punch him in the face, but after he had read through Medic's journal, he had started to feel an odd, uncomfortable sympathy towards him. Spy had not been to blame for Medic's death but he thought he was and was obviously falling apart due to it. One of two things had happened: Either his Medic had truly gone insane and delusional, or he had found out about something terrible, and had been murdered to cover it up. There was only one person in Teufort who could know the truth.

The BLU Medic.

Heavy had watched the enemy team's healer as often as he could without causing suspicion, and he did seem to be acting somewhat erratically, charging into battle like a berserker with a saw one minute and hiding the next.

He had thought up the idea of leaving notes in the Medic's pocket when he died so that he would find them later on, but it had been harder than he expected to kill the suspiciously familiar-looking doctor. He ended up relying on other team members to kill him and then sneaking the notes onto his body. It still hurt horribly to do so, but at least he hadn't caused the final blow. However, those notes
had been ignored. He had got more and more desperate- and then he had had an unexpected visitor.
Galileo.

The bird was plump and healthy and obviously being well-looked after. Heavy had smiled and felt an odd flood of relief. This BLU Medic was looking after Gustav's doves. For some reason, that made him feel hopeful again- and Galileo was more than happy to take the man a note.

Tonight, for whatever reason, the BLU had finally agreed to meet him in this tiny and muddy little pump room he had found. One of the very few advantages of living in the Soviet Union was that he knew how to spot hidden microphones and cameras. He had spent a portion of his life under surveillance and was used to it, in a tired sort of a way. This room, he was certain, was safe and secret. It was also hot, humid and stinking, but he didn't care.

There was the echo of footsteps outside, and he tensed, ready to defend himself if need be, with either his fists or excuses, depending on who it was. However, the pale face that poked around the corner suspiciously was...

"bozhe moi!" Without thinking, Heavy crossed the room and grabbed the startled man in a tight hug, but the Medic tensed and he felt a slice of cold against his neck.

"Doktor! Ya skuchal po tebe!" Without thinking, Heavy crossed the room and grabbed the startled man in a tight hug, but the Medic tensed and he felt a slice of cold against his neck.

"If you don't let me go," BLU Medic said waringly, his voice a threatening growl, "I vill decorate zhis room vizh your liver."

"There is ceasefire." He told the Medic, but he carefully released the man, reminding himself again that this was not his doktor. Except for the blonde hair and dark shadows under his eyes, he did look absolutely identical. Now he got to see him up-close and outside of a frantic battle, it wasn't just the shape of his face, but his mannerisms, the way he stood, how he glared up at him...everything. Just seeing him made him feel a stupid sharp stab of joy. "It is against rules to attack now."

"I don't care." BLU Medic replied with a chilling calm, but after a short pause, he put the Ubersaw back into a leather sheath on his belt. "So, it was you who sent zhe notes. Zhe RED Heavy. Perhaps I should have realised zhat- RED Medic did mention you vere good friends."

"Da...we were." He said with a slow nod.

"I wondered if it vas a trick by zhe Administrator." Medic said, apparently half-talking to himself. He paused and coughed softly.

"Is no trick." Heavy replied. He sat down, but Medic stayed standing warily, hovering near the door. "I read Doktor's journal, and found out about you, and clones. He kept you alive as head for three days, da?"

The German nodded silently, unconsciously rubbing his neck. "It vas necessary for zhe tests. A very clever vay of hiding his experiment."

"You feel angry with him?"

"No?" Medic said slowly. "Should I?"

"If someone kept me as head for days, I would punch their face through back of skull." Heavy admitted.

"At first, I was angry," Medic replied thoughtfully, "But I saw ve could discover much, and what he did had purpose. And, vell, he vas good company."
"Doktor's journal says you got very sick." Heavy said. He looked at the man's pale face and slightly sunken cheeks. "I think you still are?"

Medic's eyes narrowed and he glared back. "Why did you want to meet?"

"I found Doktor. He was dead, from injection of bad poison. He had note, saying he killed himself. I think it was all lie."

"It was." Medic swallowed and looked him in the eye. "I was there when he died. Your friend was murdered. They killed him because of what we had found out. It was a Spy..."

"It was Spy?!" Heavy stood up and grabbed the doctor's shirt. "Which one? Tell me!"

"Don't touch me." Medic replied evenly, his tone as light as if they were discussing the weather. Suddenly, the ubersaw was back, pointed at heavy's throat. He let go hastily.

"Izvinite."

"It was not the BLU or RED Spy. This was a different man altogether..."

The BLU Medic sat down and explained with short, jerky hand movements what had happened on the final day of the RED Medic's life. Heavy listened and felt that anger that always bubbled just under the surface getting harder and stronger. This Violet Spy, this 'Original', had murdered his Doktor, callously and coldly, just for finding out things he wasn't supposed to know. That was...horribly familiar to Heavy. He knew an entire country that worked like that. His family lived in hiding because none of them had wanted to believe the comfortable lies of the Party. It was a tired, old, often repeated story, but it still made him furious.

*I want that Spy dead. I will crush his throat with my bare hands, and I will do it slowly.* His fist clenched around a pipe and he imagined it tightening around the skinny coward's throat, squeezing and squeezing...

"...And then, when I finally woke up, I found that...Heavy!" The BLU suddenly stopped and pointed at his hand.

Heavy looked down and realised that blood was pouring from his palm where he had crushed a rusty old metal pipe with in his fist while listening to Medic's story.

"Dummkopf!" Medic exclaimed, reaching for a pouch on his belt and getting out a roll of bandages. He paused thoughtfully for a moment, putting the bandages back in the pouch before getting them out again. "I don't even have my medigun with me. You must have a tetanus booster when you go back to your base, understand?" The German grabbed his hand without asking, in just the same way his own Medic would have done. The cold fingers held his larger hand and dabbed at the wound with a stinging cotton wool ball, and then quickly placed a wad of damp cotton on the cut and bandaged it up. The dressing felt oddly cold- Heavy assumed it was some antiseptic of some sort.

"I want Violet Spy dead." Heavy stated. "I want to crush him into little bits."

Medic made an odd snorting noise, not looking up from his work and then shook his head.

"Is not funny." Heavy said in a low growl, snatching his hand away.

"You lack ambition." The man looked up at him with a horrible smile and grabbed his hand again to pin the end of the bandage in place. He looked him straight in the eye. "Ja, I vant Violet Spy dead. But why stop there? Why not end the whole stinking business?"
"Doktor?"

"Kill all the originals, the Violets. Find the cloning base and destroy it, the respawn, all the machines, every last thing." Fingers dug into Heavy's arm. "Ve clones outnumber them. Ve can stop this!" Medic stopped and coughed lightly.

Heavy blinked and swallowed, gently detaching the grasping hand from his arm. He felt suddenly weary. He realised he had had a stupid hope he hadn't even admitted to himself that he and this BLU Medic could be friends, at least. However, this man might look and sound like his poor dead RED Medic, but he was not him. Not at all. Not even close.

"I think that is overkill." He stated.

"I think you mean overkill." Medic rubbed his brow thoughtfully. "Zhe Violet Spy has to die. After that...we shall see. But...before I can help you, you must do me a favour."

"What?" Heavy asked suspiciously.

"Zhe Administrator," He growled the word venomously, "Vill kill me in five days time."

"What?" He repeated in surprise. "Why?"

"BLU has lost too many fights in a row. It is...probably my fault. Zhe Administrator certainly zinks so. She and I had a lovely chat earlier today. Either we win some battles or she vill kill me. So...I need zhe REDs to lose."

"You want me to lose? On purpose?" Heavy asked indignantly.

"Eh, sort of. I have a plan." He replied earnestly. "It would be too obvious if you simply fight badly. I have seen you in battle, you are good at what you do..."

"Thank you, Doktor."

"Yes...therefore it would be more convincing if you fall ill." He continued, rummaging in the pouch he had got the bandages from before. "What would you prefer? I can inject you with various chemicals to produce cardiac arrhythmia, nausea, coma or fever..."

"Nyet." Heavy replied firmly. "You are not making me sick."

"You do zhis, and I help you get your revenge."

"Either I help you, or you die. So, we do this my way. I pretend to be sick."

"Your Medic will not be convinced." He grumbled, crossing his arms.

"I am good liar." Heavy stated, staring back stubbornly. "Very good, when need to be."

"Rrrgh...very well." Medic pinched the bridge of his nose. "I better leave before my team wonder where I am. Zhey, heh, are keeping a close eye on me because zhey zink I am losing my mind."

"Hnn." Heavy grunted.

"If you lose tomorrow, ve meet back here." Medic said, getting up and absent-mindedly dusting off his coat.

"I do not like this." Heavy grumbled. For a moment he shivered reflexively, feeling suddenly cold in
the humid room. "But, is worth it to get revenge. I meet you here."

"So it is." Medic agreed, smiling suddenly as he opened the door and stepped out of the dingy room. "By zhe vay, I apologise."

"What for?"

"I saw a chance, so I took it." The man looked back over his shoulder, his smile suddenly becoming wicked and rather manic. "Zhat dressing is covered in arsenic trioxide solution. Just a small dose- not enough to kill, but I'm afraid you vill start feeling razher unvell soon. Take some aspirin, get plenty of rest and drink lots of fluids, ja?" And with that, the doctor suddenly turned and ran like hell back to the BLU base.

"Vernis! Mudak!" Heavy said, running after the speeding man. His brow pricked with cold sweat and he realised he was starting to feel nauseous. " Ty khitryy mudak!" He slowed down, panting for breath and wiped his forehead. It was no good- Medic could run faster than him normally, and right now the world was starting to spin and his limbs were trembling with an unfamiliar weakness.

The night air suddenly felt icy cold as he staggered back to his base, trying to claw off the very well-secured bandage on his hand. He felt an odd mixture of anger, frustration and a creeping admiration. His lips crooked in a slight smile. The BLU Medic might be an utterly crazy bastard, but he was certainly no coward.

**In Chapter Seven: RED Heavy is 'mysteriously' taken ill- will the RED team win another battle?**

*Translations:*

*Ya skuchal po tebe! - I've missed you!*

*Bozhe moi! - Oh my!*

*Vernis! Mudak! - Come back! Bastard!*

*Ty khitryy mudak!- You devious bastard!*

And finally, the winner of the sfm portrait is... **Diredevil**! Congratulations! You won by a mere five minutes. Yummpie mentioned the RED Heavy first, but he said he thought it couldn't be him because his language is too good, but as chapter eight of the previous story explains, his written English is much better than his spoken. Now we have to figure out a way to get in contact outside this website so we can arrange for your portrait!
Scout was starting to fidget as he sat in the respawn room, waiting for the day's battle to begin. He jogged in place for a second, and then looked around at the gathered REDs. He checked his watch again. *Where the hell are they?*

"Mission begins in fifteen minutes."

"Where are they? Fuckin' slackers." He said. "If they don't show up, we're *screwed.* No sappin', no healin' no, uh...big fat guy shooting crap."

"Deserting during the battle is a capital offense." Soldier muttered. "Once I get my hands on them, we'll do it the old fashioned way and rip them to shreds with wild horses."

"Right, Sol." Demo snorted, the noise louder and echoing into his bottle of scrumpy. "So, ye jus' need 'em to turn up and then get a hold of four horses. There must be a load o' hosses in this desert."

"Right! No problem at all then. You'll help, then?"

"Wouldn't miss it fer the world, laddie."

"Guten morgen, herren. Sorry I'm late. I vas experimenting."

"Do I even wanna know, Doc?" Engineer asked, folding up his newspaper. Scout briefly noticed he'd been reading some boring article about some twins robbing a bank or something. *Huh. I could do that. I'd make a totally amazing bank robber.* "I hope ya not gonna tell us you've been elbow deep in Heavy and Spy's..." He looked up and his voice faded into silence.

"Not zhat kind of experiment." Medic said with a slightly muffled sniff.

"Mhrrdrrrk hrrrrrrks hrrrl!" Pyro said, clapping his hands in excitement and giggling. He raced over to Medic and hugged him.

"Er...danke Pyro. Let go, bitte." The man gingerly unpeeled the firebug from his waist.

"What the *fuck,* Doc?"

Demo just looked up and started laughing. "Well, that's one way o' stoppin' you gettin' burnt every day. Plus it'll scare the BLUs shitless!"

"It's completely logical." Medic replied as haughtily as he could. He was wearing a large hood over
his head, a pair of goggles and a surgical mask. The end result was that Scout felt the healer looked more like some sort of creepy-ass bug than their doctor.

"Were yer just jealous of Pyro, mate?" Sniper asked quietly. "I bet he'd have lent you a mask if you wanted to match his good looks."

"Uhhh hrrr!" Pyro replied enthusiastically.

"You better be able to keep up in that outfit." Soldier said warningly.

"Zhat should not be a problem." Medic replied, waving a hand airily. "If I get heat exhaustion, zhe medigun fumes vill stop me passing out."

"Mission begins in ten minutes."

"Doc, that ain't exactly reassurin'." Engineer stated, closing his toolbox.

"Zhe choice between heat exhaustion and developing basal cell carcinomas is an easy one to make." He replied.

"Well, 'least you're here now." Sniper said. "But Spy and Heavy are still missin'."

"Non, I am here." Spy said, materialising from the thin air. He yawned and rubbed his eyes with his gloved fingers. "My apologies. I think I overslept somewhat. Medic, is that you or was our erstwhile healer replaced with a dragonfly?"

"Rrgh." Medic grumbled.

Scout looked more carefully at Spy. You didn't survive on the mean streets of Boston without learning to spot anything out of the ordinary, and there was something... odd... about Spy. He looks like he's a bit drunk or some such shit. He can't be, he never gets drunk...

"Well, now we're only missing the fat man." Scout said.

"He better turn up soon or I'll be putting his name on my list." Soldier growled.

"You don't know his fucking name."

"Then I'll make up a name, write it down and then punish him."

"If ye put Heavy in with four wild horses, I'd bet on Heavy." Demo said with a grin.

"Ah, hell yeah. Those horses' legs'd fall off. Shit, I'd pay to watch that." Scout replied with a snort of laughter.

"Going AWOL is not a laughing matter, Private!" Soldier barked. "Back in the war, we used to strip cowards naked, smother them in honey and stake them out for the ants."

"Weren't you in Poland, Sol?" Sniper asked curiously. "No biting ants there."

"Death by tickling is a terrible thing to watch, even for a hardened veteran like myself." Soldier shook his head sadly. "Sometimes the poor bastards could last months. Their giggles of agony could be heard right through the camps."

"Mission begins in five minutes."
"Hrrrhrrrs hrrr hrrrk?" Pyro asked.

"He seemed healthy enough yesterday, Sparkie." Engineer said thoughtfully. "Heavy don't get sick, anyway. Man's like an ox."

"I prefer bear, not ox." A deep but uncharacteristically quiet voice said as the door opened and the giant man in question staggered into the room and quickly sat down on the bench. "Ox is dumb, bear is smart."

"Ye look proper rough this mornin', lad." Demo said in concern. "Hangover, is it?"

Scout looked over at Heavy in surprise. Sure enough, the Russian man looked pale and clammy. He rubbed his forehead with his large hand and slumped back on the bench.

"I am leetle bit sick this morning. I think I maybe caught bug. Does not matter. We fight like normal."

"You sure you're ok to fight, son?" Engineer asked in concern. "Demo is right, you look all in there."

"All in what?" Heavy asked in puzzlement.

"Hrrr shrrrrddd grrhhh hrrr brrrd." Pryo said, patting the large man on the shoulder in concern.

"Is nothing." Heavy insisted.

"Why didn't you come and see me, Heavy?" Medic demanded. "And what happened to your hand?"

"I got dizzy and grabbed for..for a thing." Heavy said slowly. "It cut my hand."

"Rggh..." Medic muttered in annoyance. "You are not going into zhe battle until you have had a tetanus booster and a checkup. My medigun can heal trauma injuries, but it can only stabilise infections, and you could become very sick. You could even end up in cyclic respawn!"

"What's that?" Scout asked curiously.

"A very bad zhing. Respawn can bring zhe dead back, but it does not remove pathogens or toxins. It had to be designed zhat vay- or ve vould lose our stomach contents and clothes each time ve died. Ve would wake up naked and hungry in Respawn."

"But what about bullets? Ah'm not full o' bullets am I?" Demo asked anxiously.

"Ah!" Medic replied in pleasure. "I am glad you asked zhat. Zhe bullets used on zhes battlegrounds use zhe radioisotope Lead-209 as a tracer to enable zhe respawn system to remove zhem before reconstruction."

"That's why all our ammo has to be made 'specially for us." Engineer said with a firm nod.

"Anyvay, zhe point is zhat if a patient is badly poisoned or very sick and dies, zhe respawn vill bring zhem back- but zhey vill still be just as poisoned or infected. So, zhey vill die again, and again. Eventually zhey vill recover, but it could take veeks of constant death and respawn. Highly unpleasant."

"Nobody'd want that." Engineer said, shaking his head. "Just let the Doc do his job, Heavy."

"Mission begins in sixty seconds."
"It is just silly sickness. I beat it up with bare hands." Heavy said firmly, struggling to lift his minigun. His arms shook with the effort. "Medic can give me stupid leetle injection after battle, but I am not needing checkup."

"The docteur knows what he is doing. I trust his judgement." Spy remarked with an approving nod. The REDs all stared at him in astonishment. "What?"

"I vill get it immediately. Zhis cannot vait. Heavy, follow me." Medic ordered, turning around and leaving. He waved a gloved hand briskly. "Do start vizhout us, ve vill catch up."

"Now?" Heavy grumbled.

"Eh, I dunnae think he'll leave ye in peace 'less ye go with him, laddie." Demo said. "We'll be fine fer a few minutes. It's nae but a little prick."

"That is what they say about Scout, too, but look how annoying he can be." Spy said with a smirk, lighting a cigarette.

"Suck on it, jerkface." Scout spat in reply, aware it wasn't the best insult in the world.

"Mission begins in thirty seconds."

"Alright, I come. But this better be quick." Heavy said, following Medic warily. "Sasha and I want to get back to battle and kill many BLU babies."

"Ja, ja, whatever you say. You can tell me your symptoms in zhe meantime."

"Nyet."

"Ach, du liebe Gott! You are..." Medic's irritated reply was muffled as the door closed behind them. Scout shuddered slightly. "Creepy bastard."

"Must be a bit hard on the big guy, all this." Engineer said, hefting his toolbox onto his shoulder. "Doc's just a lil' bit too like his old friend for comfort."

"Mission begins in ten seconds."

"Nay, they're nothing like each other." Demo suddenly said pointedly, looking Engineer in the eye. "Ye gotta remember that."

"They seem pretty damn similar to me." Soldier declared. "Funny accent, bravery of a dead fish, always hiding around corners while real men are doing their fighting for them."

"Yeah, Sol's right." Scout said with a nod. "It's like they're..."

"C'mon, time to go." Demo replied loudly. "No time for talkin', right? Right?"

"Five."

"Hope they catch up soon or we're gonna be inna whole heap o'trouble." Engineer said.

"Four."

"Three."
"Two."

"One."

"FORWARD!" Soldier screamed and ran out of the room, his rocket launcher hefted on his shoulder.

Scout leapt into the air and ran out of the respawn room, heading for the tunnel that led down to the sewers. As soon as he moved, he felt his heart kick into gear and he whooped with joy as he jumped down into the fetid water. He loved this place- it gave him the chance to really use his mad skills. Their previous base, Dust Bowl, had been all about capturing points and though the team knew he was amazing and awesome, he hadn't been absolutely vital like he was here. Above, he heard the poc-poc of a grenade launcher, followed by an explosion and an angry scream. That sounded like Pyro. Screams like a little girl when hit.

He sloshed along the pipe and dived into the creek it emptied into, swimming in a zig-zag pattern to avoid stray bullets. Streak of bubbles zipped through the water around him, so he knew someone- probably the BLU Sniper- was taking shots at him. He wanted to grin, but he had learnt from bitter experience to keep his mouth shut while in this nasty water. He finally surfaced right next to the matching sewer pipe that came from the BLU base. At least these pipes weren't actually being, y'know, used while a battle was on, so the water didn't contain too many... solids. During a battle, the mercs made their own arrangements, especially if they were suddenly surprised by an enemy. He swam down to the base of the creek, and then pushed his feet against the muddy bottom and shot upwards, leaping into the pipe like a salmon.

"Alert! The enemy has taken our intelligence!"

"Whaaaat?" Scout whined. "That is total bullshit!" Well, it didn't alter his job. Let the old guys get the briefcase back. Today, he was hunting BLUs.

"The enemy has dropped our intelligence."

"Nice one, guys." Scout grinned and sped off down the tunnel. He paused at the little control room someone had mysteriously hidden in the sewers to check his ammo. Yep, he had plenty. He frowned, feeling unusually introspective as he always did when he reached this point. He remembered that first day...had he really seen what he thought he saw? Fuck it, how could he doubt his own eyes? But..it was impossible, right? Yeah, totally.

"Alert! The enemy has taken our intelligence!"

"Fuck this shit. Scout muttered, and ran on towards the intel room. There was no sound of echoing footsteps in the pipe, and as he entered the BLU base, no beep-beep of a sentry, either. So, where the hell had their Engineer set up his nest? He skidded sideways into the courtyard and was greeted by the fizzing and crackling of a sapped sentry. "Ha! Nice one, Spy." He muttered. There was a shout behind him, a bang and he felt like someone had shoved his left shoulder hard, and he spun around to shoot at the enemy Engineer. Two quick shots, and the man dropped with a gargling cry.

His left shoulder was numb, and he realised he couldn't move his arm but a warmth flooded through it and promised to become agonising in a few seconds.

"Medic! C'mon, man!" He cried before remembering. "Ah, crap."

Now the burning pain came, spiking whenever the lodged lead shot moved inside his muscles. He was hard though- he could take it. He'd been shot so many times now, and not just in this stupid-ass
war. He'd even gotten winged twice back in Boston. No biggie, as long as he didn't lose too much blood. He realised his arm was dripping. *Fuck.*

"This sucks." Scout muttered, running down the stairs towards the deeper areas of the BLU base. The sentry was gone - how well was the Intel guarded right now? There was no noise, except for the splat-splat of blood dripping from his fingers. He was starting to feel dizzy and his sight sparkled. "Doc?"

No reply. No noise. As he swerved around the corner into the empty computer room that led to the intel, he could hear nothing but a slight crackling. *Huh. Sounds almost like...*

He sprinted down the corridor and leapt into the Intel room to be greeted by the BLU Heavy, a giant of a man even taller than their own Heavy and just as scary (to people who weren't as badass as Scout, of course). There was the whirr as his minigun span up. Well, no problem. He could run faster than that fat man could aim, long enough to take him out at least. The man grinned wildly though and Scout realised two things at the same time: Firstly, he was getting weak from blood loss, and secondly, that crackling noise was a medigun ready to ubercharge.

"Mothe..." What he had to say was drowned out by the cackling laugh of that crazy BLU Medic and the sound of custom-tooled, slightly radioactive, two-hundred dollar cartridges ripping his skinny form into stringy damp shreds.

"The enemy has captured our intelligence."

**In Chapter Eight: BLU Medic hasn't escaped the Administrator's wrath entirely, and RED Medic presses Heavy's berserk button.**

*Translations:*

*Guten morgen, herren:* Good morning, sirs.

*Ach, du liebe Gott!:* Oh, for the love of God!
Author's Note: Ooh lots of interest over the last couple of chapters. I suspect people are thinking 'Wow, after piddling about for ages, this story actually has a plot!'. It does indeed, dear readers- a long and somewhat complex one with lots of subplots and blood all over the place. Thanks for all your reviews, favourites and follows after my last chapter- some of you came up with some really good guesses. I found myself thinking 'Why didn't I write that? That's much better than my plot!'. Still, I won't steal ideas...that's require, you know, effort. Talking of effort, this chapter has far too much foreign language in it. Ah well.

In other news, I just won a golden botkiller mk II on Mecha Engine! Go me!

As usual, the artwork for this chapter is at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Nine-The-Road-To-Hell-480181869.

I've also been messing about with animations and I've done two animated portraits of the BLU Medic and the Violet Spy. Animation is really, really addictive, apparently. Who knew?

"Zhere. Zhat wasn't so bad, vas it?" RED Medic said, withdrawing the needle. "You don't seem zhe type to be scared of injections."

"I am not scared of injections." Heavy stated in a low growl, glaring at the man menacingly. The Medic just tipped his head on one side in what Heavy assumed was curiosity- it was impossible to tell with that mask on. He was completely fearless, damn him. "Now, we get back to battle." He hopped down from the gurney the doctor had insisted he sit on and staggered slightly as the room span around him.

"You really are unvell. I zhink you should stay out of zhe battle today." The Medic said sternly.

"Nyet. Is not possible." Heavy stated flatly. Chyort voz’mi, he felt ill. Stupid doktor! He had had a sleepless, painful, sweaty night, and although he was feeling somewhat better now, he still felt exhausted and weak from the ordeal. Sasha seemed far too heavy for comfort today, and his muscles all ached. What he could give just to curl up in bed with a hot mug of tea and a good book! "Is just bit of sickness."

"You seem to have caught some sort of viral infection, which means you could pass it on to zhe ozhers in zhe base." The Medic replied, stripping off his gloves and putting them into a bright red bin before replacing them with identical ones. The masked man cocked his head and shrugged slightly.

"If zhe whole team gets sick, I vill be in trouble. I do not like to be in trouble."

"Alert! The enemy has taken our intelligence."

"We are losing." Heavy grumbled, stifling a yawn. The idea of staying in bed for the day was so very tempting... "I am needed."

"Ach, I may be new here, but I know zhat vone day's failure does not matter." The Medic said,
waving his hand idly. "But if everyone gets sick, we will lose for several days. The Administrator would not be pleased."

One or two days of losing will keep BLU Medic safe. Heavy rubbed his aching forehead. That madman didn't deserve his help, but right now, he was the only ally he had. And besides...

"The enemy has dropped our intelligence."

"I am wondering where you picked up this illness." The doctor mused. "We are isolated here and not exposed to many pathogens. Did you... go somewhere you shouldn't?"

"What? Nyet!" Heavy replied, realising as he said it that he sounded horribly guilty.

"It is alright, my friend, I am a doctor and I can keep a confidence." The man nodded, which would have been more assuring if he didn't look like a giant insect. "Most venereal diseases are easily treated with a course of antibiotics, and I can advise you on preventative measures..."

"You think I have clap?" Heavy asked in astonishment.

"Well, do you?"

"No! Am just sick from little bug, is all!"

"Hmm." The doctor folded his arms. "You have a choice, either you stay in the infirmary for twenty-four hours for observation, or I will have to perform several unpleasant tests and take samples for culturing."

"Hnn. I stay here then."

"Alert! The Enemy has taken our intelligence."

"Sehr gut! The bed in the corner is freshly made up." He shoved a bottle of pills at the large Russian. "Take three of these every four hours, get plenty of rest and drink lots of fluids, ja? I will come and see you after the battle. I better go and see what I can do out there before those dummkopfs all die."

"Poka." He said grudgingly, before lying down on the soft, clean sheets and stifling a sigh of relief. Damn, it felt good to be able to just rest for a while. Heavy looked dubiously at the bottle the Medic had given him. Acetylsalicylic acid, 300mg. Well, forget that! He wasn't taking some random chemical with a suspicious name like that.

"The enemy has captured our intelligence."

He would have killed for a few aspirin, though.

After the battle, BLU Medic was called to the Comms Room again. As he padded down the stairs, he gritted his teeth, wondering what the bitch wanted this time. As he entered the room, the light hiss of the active PA system greeted his ears.

"I suppose you feel very proud of yourself, twenty-nine-C." The Administrator said. Medic could imagine her giving a disapproving sniff as she said it.

"Now you mention it, ja." Medic replied smugly, his arms crossed insolently. "You wanted a victory for BLU, you got one."

"The latest report from REM067/a mentions the RED Heavy was taken ill this morning with an
unknown viral infection and was absent from today's battle. That seems oddly convenient."

"Yes, it was fairly convenient. As you English say, 'Fortune favours the brave'."

"The use of poisons is strictly forbidden in your contract."

Medic shrugged idly. "The contract someone else signed, you mean? As I understand the situation, I never signed or agreed to anything. That aside, though—how exactly would I be able to poison a member of the opposite team? It's not as if we meet for coffee und kuchen."

"I don't believe in coincidences, Medic."

"Neither do I. However, I fail to see how I could be a suspect. Does the RED Medic think he was poisoned?"

"Teufort is being closely watched." The Administrator replied, ignoring the question. "The situation here is becoming unstable. If it devolves further, we may have to take drastic action. You are aware what that means."

"Oh ja, it means you are threatening me yet again." Medic replied. "So, you threaten me when we lose, and you threaten me when we win. You make it hard for me to see why I should do what you want." Medic looked at the ceiling and smiled slightly. Even though he knew he was in mortal danger, talking to the Administrator was oddly freeing.

"By 'Drastic action', I mean the removal of the entire RED and BLU teams. Would you want that on your conscience?"

"I would not be the one who had killed everyone, and I would be too busy being dead to worry about right and wrong."

"What do you want, Twenty-Nine-C?" The voice actually sounded exasperated for once.

"Knowledge." He replied, putting his hand over his mouth and coughing briefly. "And maybe a little respect."

"You play a dangerous game, Medic." The voice paused. "Continue performing your duties, and maybe you will gain one of your wishes, in time."

"And maybe you will too." He found himself replying, although he wasn't entirely sure why he said it. The speaker clicked and went silent. He coughed again, and stood up to leave the dusty room before it irritated his sensitive throat even further.

"BLU Medic." The speaker hissed and popped again.

He frowned and turned back. "Frau Administrator?"

"One last thing. We once discussed the possibility that I, too, am a clone of some original Administrator."

"Indeed ve did."

"I believe this to be true." The voice continued quietly.

"As do I." Medic said, sitting down again and drumming his fingers on the desk. "And? You have some great philosophical point to make?"
"I have realised that it does not matter."

"What..."

"What I do has value. I am important, clone or not. Unlike you, I do not need others to boost my flagging ego. I need no one. I am who I think I am, because I have a mind that thinks that it is me."

"Cogito ergo sum." Medic said absently.

"Not quite." The woman replied. "Cogitationis glorificatus sum."

"Ah, I'm afraid that my latin knowledge lacks somewhat outside of anatomy..."

"I think, therefore I have worth." The Administrator said. "Perhaps this is an attitude you should adopt. Administrator out."

The speaker clicked again and went dead.

"Galileo?"

"Coo!" The dove flew down from the top of a computer cabinet where he had been warming himself and landed on Medic's shoulder. Kepler and Pasteur fluttered down as well to land on his head and other shoulder. He carefully wrote out a note on a scrap of paper, trying to make it as legible as possible.

He carefully rolled up a tiny piece of paper and attached it to Galileo's leg. He wondered if the RED Heavy would be able to meet him tonight- if he had been the RED's Medic and he had presented with those symptoms, he'd have confined him to the infirmary under barrier nursing protocols. It really depended on how competent that freak was. He liked the idea that RED's new Medic clone was an idiot, although, logically, that was highly unlikely.

"Off you go."

"Coo!" Galileo flapped off out of the room.

Medic smiled as he watched the dove fly off on his errand. It was odd, but even with the hideous stress of the last few weeks, he felt strangely happy. He had a goal, albeit a far-off one, and he could finally make use of all his intelligence, ruthlessness and cunning to achieve it without anyone trying to arrest him or drag him off in front of a medical board. It made him feel alive.

He padded out of the room and up the stairs into the living quarters.

All he had to do was survive.

Easy, really.

And then he started coughing again and this time, he briefly tasted blood.

The infirmary was now a lot quieter than when Gustav had been running it. No weird bits of clicking equipment, no cooing doves hiding in the filing cabinets and no Doktor, ambling about, humming under his breath, singing or writing nonsensical notes. In fact, it felt wrong. Everything felt wrong. Heavy had woken up several times when the Administrator had announced the poor progress of the battle, snorted and turned over to go back to sleep.

The last time he woke up, he opened his eyes to an empty room. Blinking, he carefully made a quick
assessment of his condition. Yes...he did feel quite a lot better now. Not as sick or dizzy. He sat up. Oh...maybe a little dizzy still. He yawned and stretched, realising the ache in his muscles was almost gone.

"Ah, awake, are ve?" The Medic muttered, looking up from the desk. At least he had taken off that stupid mask. His face was starting to peel, though, so he looked just as ridiculous. "How do you feel?"

"Am better." Heavy stated.

"Hrm. Zhat seems highly unlikely. Viral infections do not recede zhat quickly." The German got up from his desk and padded over to observe the large man. "No symptoms at all?"

"Ny..." Heavy started to lie, but Medic cocked his head to one side, and he realised that, this time, a lie would get him nowhere. "Only leetle bit of dizzy. But much better."

"Zhat is...odd." He mused. "Have you been exposed to any strange substances recently? Eaten anyzhing unusual?"

"Nyet?"

"I ask because your symptoms match eizher some sort of low-dosage metal poisoning, or, heh, botulism. Have you been eating tinned food? No vait- if it was botulism, ve'd all be sick. Frankly, I am at a loss. A faecal sample vould..."

"No." Heavy replied firmly.

"You are no fun." Medic said, crossing his arms in annoyance.

"Da, I am not fun. So I go now." He stood up and determinedly ignored the last bit of shakiness in his legs. His stomach suddenly reminded him that a) it existed and b) it was empty, so he plodded over the infirmary fridge and wrenched it open to peer inside.

"Vhat are you doing?"

"Where is my sandwich?"

"Oh, it's you who keeps leaving food in zhere, is it? I zhrew it away. You should never mix medical samples vizh food, dummkopf! You could give someone food poisoning." Medic replied primly.

Gustav had always said that, too, but at least he had simply lectured rather than thrown his sandwiches away. Suddenly he hated the man in front of him and he had to resist the urge to punch him. You never, ever, threw food away, not if it was still good to eat. He knew he wasn't short of food now, but it had become a habit etched in steel. Heavy had lived through famine in Russia, and he knew what starvation felt like- what it was to go beyond hunger into that desperate state where you'd gulp down filthy water just to feel full and every day was filled with exhaustion and pain. Heavy had survived, driven on by anger and determination. If you had a gun, and food, you got to carry on living. Many hadn't, although they were not officially talked about- unless you wanted a trip to Siberia. He grabbed the Medic's lapels and dragged him to within spitting distance.

"You," He growled, "Do not touch my sandwich. Ever."

The doctor cocked his head on one side curiously, not even remotely frightened. "Interesting. Why are you so attached to a sandwich?"
Heavy hesitated, unwilling to explain. "Because." He stated flatly. He continued threateningly. "You throw my food away again, I crush you."

"And zhen I woul'd respawn." He replied with a shrug. "But at least you woul'd not be puking your guts up and getting my infirmary dirty. I hate cleaning."


"Sasha? Ohh...you mean your gun. Why woul'd I touch your stupid gun?"

Heavy snarled with fury and hurled the Medic at the infirmary doors, smashing them open. The German hurtled through air into the corridor outside, hit the wall opposite with a bang and crumpled into a groaning heap.

"Ich brach mein Kopf..." The doctor muttered, slowly sliding further down onto the floor, his eyes closing. "Mein Gott, es ist voller Sterne...ugh."

"Wassat noise?" There was the sound of scurrying feet. "Doc? Damn it, what the bloody 'ell happened? Who duffed you up?"

"He insulted Sasha." Heavy stated, striding out of the infirmary, glaring at Demo. "And threw away my sandwich."

"Ich möchte bitte hinlegen... müde."

"Eh sod it, Heavy. I know ye' protective of your gun, but bit of an overreaction, that." Demo grabbed the stunned man and hauled him up with a grin. "Betcha won't do that again, eh Doc?"

"Wo bin ich?"

"He is stupid leetle man." Heavy said, glaring at the Medic.

"Curse it, wee big laddie, he's our Medic." Demo replied tiredly, hooking the doctor's slack arm around his shoulders. "Look, I know ye miss the old fella, but takin' it out on this chappie won't help, and ye know it."

"He insulted Sasha." Heavy repeated stubbornly, clenching his fists with anger that refused to die down.

"Uhh...mir ist schlecht...ich denke, ich werde kotzen."

"I don't give a damn, Heavy." Demo said sternly, dragging Medic back to a bed and throwing him down onto it. The man moaned and curled up on his side. "It's not this poor bugger's fault your pal got killed, so leave him the hell alone."

For a moment, Heavy came close to picking up Demo and hurling him out of the room as well, but he stopped himself and took a deep breath. Instead, he just grunted bad-temperedly. He had to admit, Demo was right. The new Medic rubbed him raw, just from existing and being so similar to Gustav—especially since he knew exactly why he was so alike. The doctor was a constant, tormenting reminder.

"Here." Demo reached into a pocket and got out a small silver hip flask. He unscrewed it, and took a large gulp before shoving it into the Russian's hands. "Brandy. Best medicine in the world. I'll sort out the Doc, you go an' drown yer sorrows. It'll make yer feel better fer a bit."
"Spasiba." He said shortly, the flask dwarfed in his large hands.

"Gottverdammte...zhat man is sehr verrückt. Should have let ihm krank blieben." Medic struggled upright, but Demo firmly pushed him down again. "I need to..."

"Ye need to lie down, Doc. Go on then, get on with ye, Heavy." Demo said, waving him away briskly, pouring a glass of water and offering it to the stunned man on the bed.

"Da, I go." He muttered, walking back towards his quarters, still prickling with fury and also an odd feeling of disquiet. There was something Demo had said...something that didn't fit...

"Coo!"

A pair of clawed feet landed on his head, and he found himself smiling slightly despite everything.

"Privyet, leetle bird." He reached up a hand and Galileo obediently hopped down onto his fingers and extended a leg. He quickly turned away from the nearest camera so all it could see was his broad back, and pulled the note off the bird's scaly foot.

"RED Heavy,

If you are well enough, meet me tonight. There is more you need to know.

Your Ally."

Heavy smiled grimly and crumpled up the note. Demo was right, of course- their new Medic didn't deserve to be thrown into a wall, as satisfying as it had been.

Unfortunately, he forgot all about that odd little thing Demo had said until much, much later.

In Chapter Nine: RED Heavy and BLU Medic meet up again, and we find out what the Violet Spy has been up to all this time.

Translations (so, so many translations):

*Chyort voz'ni - Damn it*

*Kaffee und kuchen - Coffee and cake. This is a traditional afternoon break for Germans, and a chance for a chat with friends or family.*

*Cogito ergo sum - I think therefore I am*

*Ich brach mein Kopf - I broke my head*

*Mein Gott, es ist voller Sterne -My God, it's full of stars*

*Ich möchte bitte hinlegen... müde - I want to lie down, please...tired.*

*Wo bin ich? - Where am I?*

*mir ist schlecht...ich denke, ich werde kotzen - I feel sick...I think I'm going to puke*

*Spasiba - Thank you*

*sehr verrückt - very crazy*
ihn krank blieben - him stay sick

Privyet - Hello
Chapter Notes

Author's Note: You guys are waaay too good for my ego. I shall have difficulty getting through doors soon, and I like it. Thank you so much for all the reviews, follows, favourites and reads. Keep 'em coming, and I shall reply to every single one, I promise.

Did you know there's a TV Tropes entry called 'Send In The Clones'? Not surprisingly, this story has used that trope a few million times.

The image for this chapter is over at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Nine-Dancing-with-Despair-480811776 as per usual. Enjoy!

When Heavy left the RED base late that night, he was starting to feel like he ought to write a list of the people he wanted to punch in the guts, to make sure he didn't miss any of them out. Let's see...Demo, Scout (just for being generally annoying), the new Medic of course, Engineer for trying to cheer him up, the BLU Soldier for obvious reasons, the Violet Spy...the Administrator? Maybe not. He didn't think he had it in him to punch a woman. Anyway, he'd never met her. How about the Mann brothers? Yes, that sounded a good idea, and of course, the next one on his list...the BLU Medic.

When he reached the pump house, little seams of light streaked out around the battered blinds. He heard a brief, muffled cough.

"Doktor." He said, stepping into the small, greasy room.

The BLU Medic snapped an orange-covered book shut and looked up, giving the larger man a tight, fleeting smile. As he stood, Heavy's fist swung round and buried itself in his stomach, making the man double up with a grunt.

I can tick that one off my list now.

Medic staggered sideways and reached out to lean against the wall, panting for a moment before straightening up. To Heavy's surprise, he gave a wheezing, breathless laugh, waving a hand in greeting.

"I vill admit I deserved zhat." He gasped, clutching his abdomen but still chuckling slightly. "You should be feeling mostly recovered by now, I hope?"

"Da." Heavy said shortly, feeling oddly cheated.

"I am razher surprised your Medic let you out of zhe infirmary." He commented, slipping and then sitting down suddenly with a slight groan. "I vould have kept you under..."

"...Observation for twenty-four hours. He wanted to, but I threw him into wall."

"You did?" The BLU Medic raised an eyebrow questioningly, just the way Gustav would have done. "I presume you had good reason?"
"He insulted Sasha and threw away sandwich."

At least this man knew how serious that was. His eyes widened in horrified shock for a moment before his lips narrowed in a gleeful smile. "I always knew he was an idiot. I hope he was badly hurt?"

"You don't like him?"

"He is a freak." Medic spat. "He should not be here. Twenty-Nine-B should be here."

"And they killed him."

"Ja." Medic replied heavily. "Zhey killed him. And zhat is only zhe start of it. I don't zhink you realise yet just how dangerous zhis situation is. How long have you vorked for RED?"

"Hmm?" Heavy blinked, confused at the sudden change in direction. From past experience, he knew this could mean the doctor was about to go off on a completely unrelated tangent. Trying to get him back on subject was often next to impossible. "Four years."

"Zhen you are four years old." Medic stated flatly. "I have only been alive for eight monzhs now. Zhat new Medic of yours? He vill only be, vhat? 30 days old, I would estimate. Ve are created as ve are needed, and given someone else's memories. A head full of lies."

"I know this." Heavy said, however, hearing it spelt out to him like that was still shocking. *Four years old...I can't be only four years old. It's ridiculous...it can't...* He found himself remembering how many times he had taunted the enemy team and called them babies. It didn't seem quite so funny now.

"Zhat is not the vorst bit, zhough." He continued seriously. He stood up and his hand clutched at Heavy's broad arm earnestly. "Do you know how often zhey kill off clones when zhey don't need zhem any more? *All. Zhe. Time.* I have been zthreatened due to...apparently underperforming, as you know. Your Medic was killed because of what ve found out. Zhat would be bad enough, but zhat is only zhe beginning!"

"What..."

"Zhe Violet Spy and zhe Administrator have made it very clear." The BLU Medic said, his eyes staring manically into Heavy's. "An individual mercenary not pulling zheir veight, zhey die. Someone vanting to retire, zhey die. A team losing constantly- zhe team is killed. I assume zhat is what happened to zhe last RED team here. Zhe Administrator told me today zhat if zhere is any sign zhat I have told anyone zhat I know, she vill kill us all. *Every single RED and BLU!*"

"You are sure?" Heavy asked. It seemed impossible. That kind of thing didn't happen in America, surely? America was supposed to be *safe*!

"Zhey vill go to *any* lengths, commit *any* atrocity, to protect zhis secret and keep us fighting. Ve are replaceable. Ve are disposable. Ve are nozhing to zhem, just...chess pieces, und I don't even know vhy." Medic threw his arms wide in frustration.

"Gustav, you..." Heavy stopped and clamped his strong jaw shut, realising what he had just said.

The man stared at him for a second and started laughing. It was not a pleasant laugh. It was sharp and desperate- the laugh of someone dancing with despair. Heavy realised that this man was not truly insane- he was eccentric, cracking at the edges, yes, but he was not broken. Instead, he was carrying a terrible burden of knowledge that would have driven most people into a screaming, twitching heap.
And being kept as a severed head for a few days couldn't have helped...

"Gustav! You called me Gustav!" Medic repeated between gasps. "Zhat is not my name. It vas never my name. Zhe only name I have is Twenty-Nine-C. I am not a free man, I am a number! And you are...are..."

"Nine-H" Heavy stated. "But that is not..."

"Really? Ve have a name in common. Vhat a coincidence!" The gasps of laughter turned into a coughing fit and the man scrabbled in his pocket for a handkerchief. "You...you...must..."

"Doktor, sit. Calm down." Heavy ordered, shoving the hysterical man down onto a wooden crate. There had been times before now when he had wished he could simply put a bucket over Medic's head when he got over-excited like this...as soon as he thought this, he cursed and reminded himself that this was not the man he had known as Gustav. Gustav was gone, murdered by the same people who now threatened them all, just because they were in the way. Heavy ground his teeth together until his jaw hurt. This whole situation was wrong and confusing. He shook Medic roughly, trying to get him back into some sort of lucidity.

"Entschuldigung." He spluttered between coughs. He waved a shaking hand apologetically and took a deep breath and swallowed, screwing up the handkerchief tightly in his hand, but not before Heavy noticed speckles of red on it. "It has been a difficult few veeks."

"I see that." He said slowly. "Doktor, you are right."

"Vell of course I am!" The man snapped in reply. He paused and rubbed his throat unconsciously. "Vhat about?"

"We have to stop it, all this." He replied seriously.

Medic smiled with a hint of mockery. "I zhought zhat vas overkill?"

"I changed my mind." Heavy said grimly. "What can we do?"

"Zhat is the problem." Medic admitted, his smile fading. He cleared his throat. "I have no idea. Do I leave, or stay? Vhere vill I find out more? I need money, allies, time!"

"You have ally."

There was a moment's silence before Medic looked up at him and smiled again, more warmly this time. "Danke. You may be RED, but zhat is, eh, quite a relief, actually. Zhen I...ve... have to decide what to do next."

"Well, for start," Heavy said slowly, not quite able to believe he was suggesting this, "We make sure teams lose equal amount of time. I think RED need to lose again, then BLU."

"Sehr gut." Medic said, rummaging in one of his pockets. "I zhought I had more arsenic in here somewhere..."

"Nyet!" Heavy said quickly. "I just pretend to still be bit sick."

"Are you sure you can do zhat successfully? Maybe it would be better to tell zhem Sasha jammed during zhe fight?"

"Sasha does not jam."
"But..."

"Sasha. Does not. Jam."

"Alright, alright!" Medic said, holding his hands up appeasingly. "Far be it from me to besmirch your gun's reputation. I don't want to be zhrown into a vall too. I just hope you are a good actor, Heavy."

"Am good actor. Hide many things."

"So I believe." Medic replied drily.

"What do you mean?" Heavy demanded, resisting the temptation to grab the man's shirt and shake him. He had pummelled enough people today outside of battle. It made life so much less complicated, though...

"RED Medic told me about you." BLU Medic replied with an amused smile. "Zhat you have a degree in Russian Literature, and you like orchestral music of zhe Romantic and Modern periods, in particular Rimsky-Korsakov and Shostakovich. You learnt English from reading smuggled books, and your written English is far better zhan your spoken grasp of zhe language. You alvays beat RED Medic at chess. He found zhat very annoying. He said you prefer to hide your intelligence, which seems a very odd thing to do."

"Bee stings make you very sick." Heavy replied, folding his arms and glaring down at the doctor. "You were nearly arrested in England during war. A guard came to you with broken leg and you thought he had annoying sniff, so you sewed seagull wings on his back. You tell people you lost your medical license when patient's skeleton was removed, but you don't tell them you were patient and trying experiment on yourself that went wrong..."

"It could have verked!" Medic interrupted quickly, "Zhey stopped me before I..."

"You have very sweet tooth and love candies. You are bad chess player, but good at poker. You love music too and have good tenor voice, but you are too embarrassed to let people hear. You are very bad violin player..."

"Vhat? Who says zhat?!"

"...and you are brave and fearless, except if there is bee in room."

"Vhat?! Zhat is..." Medic paused and smiled slightly, clearing his throat. "...all absolutely true. Except for zhe violin playing. I am good at zhat. So, I suppose blackmail is out of zhe question, zhen?"

"Da." Heavy felt the corners of his mouth twitch in a smile.

The doctor sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I better be heading back to zhe base. At least ve have zhe beginnings of a plan, ja?"

"Da." Heavy agreed. "I see if I hear anything and tell you. Send leetle bird for next meeting time."

"Ja, I vill." He replied with a nod. "Weekend tomorrow, so ve have some time to think vizhout getting shot at. So, RED loses on Monday, BLU on Tuesday."

"Da." Heavy agreed, but he felt a thrill of guilt all the same. Deliberately losing a fight made him feel like a traitor. Maybe he was?
"I vill speak to you soon." BLU Medic replied, nodding and then getting up and leaving the tiny damp room.

Heavy stood in the quiet room for a moment. His actions were putting eighteen people in mortal danger- did he have the right to do that?

He thought back to when he had discovered his Medic, slumped over the gurney with a suicide note in his cold hand. In the days that followed, he had tormented himself with questions, trying to see what he had missed in his beloved friend's behaviour, asking himself what he could have done to stop him, and wondering why he hadn't confided in Heavy before he had taken his own life. He had felt shocked, miserable and betrayed. He should have stopped him. He should have been there. He should have realised. How could Medic have been such a coward?

Now he knew it had all been a lie. He had found and read Medic's journal, and had realised the man had uncovered something he wasn't supposed to know about...and then suddenly died. It was obvious that this BLU Medic was now being taunted and played with as well, perhaps in hope that he'd completely crack and could be removed without suspicion. He felt his hands clench into fists.

He didn't care if his actions put other's lives in danger. It didn't matter. He wanted revenge, even if it killed him. No matter who died, he would put his hands around the Violet Spy's neck one day.

"Run, Spy, run." He muttered under his breath. "I am coming for you."

He smiled grimly. For now, he would see what he could find out. Medic was right- he did prefer to be seen as just dumb muscle, because he was not only smart, but smart enough to know it made life easier. It meant he could find out things without anyone getting suspicious. Medic understood science, yes- but he had never understood people. Heavy would listen and see what he could find out about the mercenaries' backgrounds. People spoke to him because they assumed he wouldn't remember, or was too stupid to care. It would all help lead him to this Violet team. He stretched in satisfaction, fingers scraping the ceiling, and then left the tiny room.

There was a moment's silence before Violet Spy uncloaked and smiled sourly. At last! He got out a cigarette and lit it with a relieved sigh as the spicy smoke filled his lungs. Now he had two co-conspirators, and the Teufort Administrator was doing an excellent job of making the whole situation more and more volatile. The whole base fizzed with tension and discomfort. Of course, his two erstwhile allies wanted him painfully dead, but that was par for the course for a Spy. He had never felt any need to be liked or admired.

He had no plan, of course- only fools made plans. Instead, Spy preferred to map out probable outcomes, and then figure out how he could change their most likely course to suit his own ends. So far, his little schemes had worked out well- he had left the journal for the RED Heavy to find, and captured that little white dove the Medic was so fond of and trapped it inside the RED base for the Russian to find. He was happy to admit to himself that that was a stroke of genius.

He took his French cigarette out of his mouth and blew a perfect smoke ring. As long as he could keep the two men on edge, the situation would continue to develop. There was one worry, of course: the BLU Medic's cough. Spy knew very little about medicine, beyond which parts of the body were most allergic to pointy bits of metal, so he had no idea how the man's recent adventures had resulted in that particular symptom, or whether it would get any worse. Maybe it was terminal- Spy did not know.

His lips twitched. If the BLU Medic did die...it was not necessarily a disaster. Imagine how the RED Heavy would react to that. Oh yes, that would work. It would be a shame, of course, but what was one more clone death...
Spy stopped the thought right there. *No. That is how the others think. If I start seeing these people as disposable, I will be as bad as the rest of the Violets. This is a war, and people will die- but I will not waste their lives.* He knew he was irrevocably committed at this point. He had vowed that the RED Medic 29/b would be the last clone he would ever kill. He had killed so many of them over the years. At first, he had accepted it, but eventually it had become discomforting, sickening, and finally, tedious.

Once he was found out, it would certainly mean his death.

He smiled sourly, smoke pouring out of his nostrils. He could live with that.

So to speak.

**In Chapter Ten: Meet the Violets.**

*Translations:*

*Entschuldigung : My apologies*
"So, you ready, Scoutbot?" Violet Engineer asked, tightening a screw on the metal man's neck.

"Hell yeah. I was born ready. Uhh...made ready." The robot replied enthusiastically. Engineer removed his screwdriver and Scoutbot patted his neck thoughtfully. "You know, bein' a robot is fucking weird." He continued conversationally.

"How so?" Engineer smiled in reply. He had to admit he was astonished at how well this process had duplicated Scout's mind. The robot could even hold a conversation! It was a miracle of science, for sure.

"Ah, y'know, switching off instead of sleeping. I don't need to pee or eat, shit like that." Scoutbot replied, walking in step with Engineer as they set off down the corridor. "And chicks...you know Miss Pauling?"

"Sure do." Engineer replied.

"She's hot." Scoutbot said. "But now, you know what? I don't care. That's frickin' weird. I bet she'd go for a robot too. 'Cos robots are cool."

"Well, robots don't have no sense of romance, son." Engineer explained. "They don't need to procreate, see." Privately, he very much doubted Miss Pauling would be sexually interested in a Scoutbot, any more than she was interested in Scout himself. Engineer had built him piece by piece and even if she did have romantic feelings towards the robot, she was going to be badly disappointed come the wedding night. He stifled a chuckle at the thought.

"You make it sound gross, dude." Scoutbot said resentfully, but then straightened up. "Hey, it'd be great to be friends with her though. Reckon she'd go for that? Doesn't everyone want a cool robot friend?"

"You never know." Engineer replied. "Anyway, right now we've gotta impress the team and convince 'em you're as good as Scout."

"Hey, I'm better than that sack of meat!" Scoutbot said indignantly, holding a fist against his chest with a clang. "I'm tougher, can run farther and faster."

"Uhh..yeah. Maybe you shouldn't call folks 'sacks of meat'. People might get the wrong idea."

Scoutbot started to chortle, his normal snorting laugh given a metallic echo. "Oh yeah, I should be takin' over the world, right? That's what robots always do. Totally ready when you are." The robot
nudged him with a sharp, cold hand. "You could be the mad scientist, and I'd say 'ALL HAIL THE MAKER!' and kill shit an' stuff."

"I hope that's a joke, son." Engineer gave Scoutbot a stern glare. He had taken a number of risks making this model. He had no obedience protocols or morality circuits- he had felt they would have interfered with the process of copying across Scout's mind. Memories were delicate things, and Scout had lived a rough life, back in the streets of Boston. If he had given the robot some sort of Asimov-like set of three rules, what would happen when he remembered getting into a street fight? Engineer had felt it might shut him down, so he had fatalistically decided that, should the worst come to the worst, he would always respawn if Scoutbot got violent.

"Jeez, Hardhat, where's your sense of humour?" Scoutbot whined petulantly in reply. "C'mon, I was just having fun'n shit."

"Alright, alright. Just remember folks could take it the wrong way." Engineer pushed at the doors. "Well, here we go. Wait outside until I call, ok?" He entered the room, and the Violet team looked up at him expectantly. They were all there, except for Spy and Sniper, both of whom were off fixing that mess in Teufort. The Administrator was there too, sitting at the head of the table and idly smoking. Engineer noticed the other mercenaries were seated as far away from her as they could without being rude.

"You arrive at last, Engineer." The Administrator said, crossing her legs and taking a quick drag on her thin cigarette. "I thought you would turn up on time to a meeting you insisted upon."

"About time, maggot! We've been waiting here for hours for this intel of yours." Soldier shouted, standing up and glaring at the shorter man. "I was about to send out a search party."

"Hours? It's been like five minutes, man." Scout replied, tapping his watch. "You got no patience."

Demo started to laugh. "Aye, that's the pot calling the kettle black, for sure."

"What did you want to see us about, Herr Engineer?" Medic asked sourly, glaring at him with open loathing. "You had better not be wasting my time."

Engineer opened his mouth to say something unpleasant in return, but stopped himself. "Nope. Gotta demonstration to show y'all today."

He tried not to glare back at Medic, but had come to despise the doctor over time. It was Medic's fault his work on teleportation technology had been twisted into creating life- and then callously killing it. The German doctor didn't have a single shred of compassion in his entire body, and had never suffered a single moment of guilt over what they had developed between them- unlike Engineer, who had had many sleepless nights the last few years. There had been numerous fights between them, some armed, some not, but each time one flared up, someone would end up bleeding or worse.

"Something I think you'll all think is pretty gosh-darn exciting, if I'm any judge." He continued mildly.

"You have news?" Heavy asked interestedly, looking up at him intently.

"This I gotta see!" Scout said enthusiastically, leaping to his feet. "What is it, Engie? Some cool new machine?"

The Administrator stubbed out her cigarette by pinching it between two long red nails with a sizzle. "What have you been wasting your time on now?"
"You could say that, son." Engineer said with a nod. "You all know my feelings 'bout Project Pelargonia."

The Administrator snorted sourly and rolled her eyes.

"Your pointless and sentimental hand-wringing, you mean?" Medic said. "Ah yes, ve all know. Your hands are just as bloody as everyvone else's here, and you know it."

"Engineer has a point, though," Pyro commented in his muffled voice, "What we do is...horrible, too horrible. If there was a better way, we would take it."

Demo and Heavy nodded in agreement, while Soldier looked thoughtful, Medic continued to glare at Engineer, Scout apparently paid no attention, and the Administrator listened unemotionally. It had taken them years to learn to understand Pyro, but nowadays he could join in any conversation with the other Violet mercs without any difficulty.

"Well, I've been working on a solution to the whole problem. One that'll stop the deaths of all those people."

"They are not people." The Administrator replied sternly. "They are clones. They have no individuality. They are just machines made of flesh."

"I dunnae know 'bout that." Demo said thoughtfully, drumming his hands on his glass of orange juice. "Ah reckon there's more to them than meets the eye, y'ken. But as the wee firebug says, it's not like we have a choice."

"Terrible things happen in war." Soldier commented to Demo. "You've got to accept that, private."

"So, if there was a way to stop Project Pelargonia, you'd take it?" Engineer asked insistently.

"I think it'd be good thing." Heavy agreed. Medic took a deep breath and opened his mouth, but Heavy elbowed him in the ribs and he fell silent with a sideways look at the Russian and a raised eyebrow.

"Alrighty then." Engineer said in satisfaction. "Come on in, Scout!"

"What? I'm right here, man." Scout replied in protest.

"Here I am, bitches!" Scoutbot burst through the doors, his arms wide. His face was, of course, expressionless, but Engineer was certain he'd be grinning if he could. "You lookin at me? C'mon, pay attention to me! The awesome metal dude has arrived!"

"What the fuck is that, Engie?" Scout said, prowling over to Scoutbot and walking around it.

"Wow, I never realised how fuckin' ugly I was as a human." Scoutbot said, turning to face Scout as he paced around. "I mean, seriously, dude, get some dental work done. You look like a rabbit."

"Bite me, jerkwad."

"Scoutbot is a fully automated robot." Engineer explained with a proud smile. "I used a copy of some archived respawn data to give him Scout's memories. He has replaceable parts, so he can be maintained and- this here is the beauty of it- he can't die."

The Administrator looked up at the robot and her lips twitched slightly. "Well, this is unexpected."

"Th' Hell, Engie." Demo muttered, his eye wide in shock. "Yer playin' God."
"Hell no." Scoutbot said easily. "He's playing at being a mad scientist, right Hardhat?"

"Not helpin' Scoutbot." Engineer muttered sideways to the robot.

"So that thing thinks it's me?" Scout asked in astonishment. "Dude, that's sick."

"I don't think I'm you, faggot." Scoutbot spat back. "Engie explained it all to me. You're just jealous you're not a badass metal man like me. I'm better than you."

"Swivel on this, tincan." Scout replied, holding up a middle finger and glaring at the robot. Scoutbot just chuckled metallically in reply.

"I'm not sure you've done a good thing here." Pyro said uncertainly. "I know you meant well, my friend, but this...is not natural."

Medic started to laugh quietly, steepling his fingers and watching his team mates through amused eyes. Engineer felt a cold tingle start in his spine. I wish Spy and Sniper were here...I know they'd agree with me. They were so rarely around though- always off on yet another job.

"So you would put us all in metal men?" Heavy asked.

"It's a copy, just like the clones..."

"Precisely." Medic suddenly interrupted. "As you say, 'Just like the clones'. In other words, what does it matter if the vessel for the memories is flesh or metal?" The doctor got up and stalked over to Scoutbot, looking at him closely. "Tell me, Scoutbot, do you want to die?"

"Wha? Hell no. 'Course not."

"It has the same drives as the clones, zhen. Zhey can zhink. Zhey have emotions, and a personality. Zhe only difference it is made of metal- which is far more expensive to obtain zhan carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and a little nitrogen, ja?"

"Currently, organic material for the clones is obtained by rendering down meat unfit for human consumption- buying the raw metal needed for this would be prohibitively expensive." The Administrator said disdainfully, staring idly at her polished nails.

"But..." Engineer stuttered, stunned at the response. "They can't die. We can repair them if they break."

"And I'd be wicked-bad in a fight!" Scoutbot said enthusiastically.

"And the clones can't die eizher. Zhe only difference is zhat zhis costs more."

"The clones can die." Engineer said firmly. "'Cos we keep killin' off the poor bastards when they ask the wrong questions."

"And who says these robots von't also start asking questions?"

"I don't trust robots to do my fighting for me." Soldier said, sticking his jaw out firmly. "They will turn against their masters sooner or later. We'll end up as their servants, cleaning their floors, servicing them sexually and wearing revealing maid outfits. And I do not look good in black stockings!"

There was a moment's embarrassed silence around the table.
"We cannot trust metal men." Heavy stated.

"I'm sorry, laddie. Yer heart's in the right place, but like I said, this is playin' God. Nothin' good can come of it."

"We're already playing God!" Engineer shouted, clutching the table desperately with shaking hands. "Can't you see this is better than wasting human lives?"

"Engineer, eat chocolate." Heavy said, shoving a paper-wrapped bar over the table to him. "You are acting funny."

"Hell no!" Engineer snarled. "I don't need no chocolate, I'm fine! I can't believe you won't even consider this! How can you think using up human lives is better?"

"Zhe ethical issues are exactly zhe same." Medic stated. "But zheze robots are unproven. Who knows how zhey vill act off zhe leash, so to speak?"

"Hey, you sayin' I'm gonna go berserk soon as you turn your back?" Scoutbot asked in annoyance. "I'm not outta some crappy B movie, fuckwit. It's not like I...bzzzt...KILL ALL HUMANS." The robot's eyes flared purple and it held its arms out straight in front of it. It took a jerky step towards the Violet team. The seated mercenaries scrabbled for weapons they weren't, in fact, wearing, before the robot doubled over, snorting with obnoxious laughter.

"Fuck this shit!" The human Scout muttered, holding a hand to his chest. "I wasn't scared really."

"Oh man, that was hilarious! You shoulda seen your faces! I tell you, being a robot is the best thing ever." Scoutbot giggled.

"Ye did well, Laddie." Demo said apologetically to the fuming Engineer, "But the answer's no. We cannae take the risk."

"Shut that thing down, too." Scout said, eyeing the robot sourly. "There's only one Scout in this base."

"I'll shut you down, faggot." Scoutbot replied, trying to puff out his thin metal chest.

Engineer's shoulders slumped, and he could feel his throat constricting. Years of work, and they wouldn't even consider it. They were all too comfortable in their rut, happy to give the occasional blood sample in return for an obscene wage. He was right, he knew it!

"I guess there ain't anythin' more to say." Engineer said with a sigh. "Well, seems I wasted my time here."

"Your efforts are appreciated," The Administrator in a bored voice, "But a robot army is not financially viable. None of your impressive range of qualifications is in economics, I believe."

The Violets avoided looking at him, and the room was silent. He sighed again. "C'mon Scoutbot."

He plodded out of the room, Scoutbot following him.

"Hey, hardhat..."

"Yeah?"

"You're not gonna shut me down, are ya?"
"Hell no." Engineer replied. He looked back at the door and his fist clenched, his mouth setting into a thin, furious line. He could feel himself trembling with anger. "Right now, you're the only friend I got."

A cold metal arm slid around his shoulders and squeezed. He looked up at Scoutbot's expressionless face in surprise.

"If you ever read comic books, hardhat, you'd know that a robot friend is the like the coolest friend there ever was." Scoutbot said. "Fuck 'em all, I say. I'm glad you made me even if they don't care."

Engineer managed a smile at that. "Thanks, son. You're a good 'un at heart."

"Bullshit. No heart, right?" Scoutbot said with a chuckle. "So, what now?"

Engineer sighed. "I'll think of somethin'."

"Maybe I can help you there." A voice with an English accent said behind him. Engineer spun around to stare at the trespasser in astonishment. "And in return, you can help me."

**In Chapter Eleven: Heavy and Medic both realise that their situation is a lot more desperate than they thought. Is it time to take drastic action?**
Author's note: Hi folks! So many reviews and pms. I appreciate them all! I wrote this story really for my own enjoyment, but sharing it with you guys is making it twice as much fun!

This is one of the chapters with a real 'LE GASP!' moment, if I have judged it correctly. Artwork is in the usual place: http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Eleven-Blood-and-Sand-482245190.

Incidently, Sniper is right: Vegamite is damned delicious.

"Ah Hell, Medic, not again." Demo said in disappointment as he entered the BLU Mess Hall the next evening. "Y'know what? Next time it's yer night tae cook, I'll switch with ye. You can do dishes that evening instead."

"Nein, danke. You deep-fry everyzhing." Medic replied unconcernedly. "You even fried a chocolate bar vonce."

"And it was fuckin' delicious!" Scout said, banging the door open. "Ah crap, not salad again?"

"Doktor thinks we are rabbits." BLU Heavy commented with a grin, picking up a piece of lettuce and dropping it back on his plate.

Medic gave Heavy a half-hearted glare. "I zhink you are a group of people who don't eat enough roughage. I am zhe one who has to treat zhe results of zhat, and it is not a pleasant task."

A number of the BLUs looked down suddenly. There were a few coughs of embarrassment.

"Let me see..." Medic said, tapping a finger on his chin. "Who has visited me for haemorrhoid cream recently? At least half of you have. Let me name zhe sufferers: S..."

"Woah, woah, too much info, Doc!" Scout said waving his arms. "Stop lookin' at me like that. I ain't the only one on the team whose name begins with 'S'. My ass is fine, just like the ladies all say."

"You're always claiming to be a badass." Sniper commented, tucking into the salad enthusiastically. "When I heard you groaning and panting in the lavvy the other morning, I thought you were looking at a dirty mag."

Demo started snorting with laughter and shoved a fist into his mouth.

"Hey...you..." Scout was momentarily lost for words. "That's not funny, downunder!"

"Oh come on, fellas, grow up." Engineer said with a sigh, buttering some bread. "Medic's right, we can't eat fries every day."

"Ah, dinner is right on time." Soldier said, banging the poor abused door open again. He looked at his plate in disappointment before straightening up and nodding at medic. "Good work, Private.
Healthy soldiers are effective soldiers with regular bowel movements."

Demo started to choke and Heavy pounded him on his back hastily.

"I appreciate a change." Spy commented idly, still smoking one of his foul cigarettes. "It is nice to have something not soaked in salt and fat for once. American food is filthy!"

Medic frowned slightly at Spy, but helped himself to a chunk of bread and started to butter it. The skinny Frenchman had been deliberately polite to him recently and it got on his nerves. He had a horrible suspicion the man was actually trying to be pleasant. He didn't like it one bit.

"Unfortunately, I was unable to get any decent sausage, only this 'bologna' nonsense. I find the colour very untrustworthy."

"Oh, I quite agree." Spy said, looking disdainfully at the uniformly pink meat. "Do you think it is made of plastic, docteur?"

"America has the best food on earth! We invented eating. We made burgers..."

"German." Medic stated flatly. He coughed slightly into his hand as a crumb of bread lodged in his throat.

"...pizza..." Soldier continued, ignoring him.

"Italian." Spy said helpfully.

"...barbecue..."

"Australian." Sniper said proudly.

"Non, Spanish surely?" Spy said.

"Stop interrupting!" Soldier barked hotly.

"Spanish? Don't come the raw prawn."

"I believe it is so, mon ami."

"Huh. Learn something new every day. Well, we Aussies perfected it."

"...apple pie..." Soldier continued doggedly.

"English."

"Can be Swedish, or Dutch too." Heavy pointed out.

"Where the hell did you guys learn all this crap?" Scout demanded. "Was there a 'Food History for Violent Mercenaries 101' course I slept through?"

"Silence, Private! I'm trying to educate you here! Peanut butter..."

"Canadian?" Engineer said with a smile.

"Crunchy or smooth, Sol?" Scout asked.

"SHUT UP!" Soldier roared, throwing a slice of cucumber at the youngest mercenary. "And last but not least, condensed milk." The room was briefly quiet except for Medic's continued coughing, and
Soldier looked around suspiciously.

"Da, we will let you keep that one." Heavy said with a slow smile.

"I should think so too." Soldier grumbled. "It tastes damn fine on toast."

"Oh please." Spy said, rolling his eyes. "Milk on toast? That is about the most revolting thing I can imagine."

"More so than Vegemite, mate?" Sniper asked curiously.

"Hrmmm..." Spy pondered, rubbing his balaclava'd chin, a piece of bologna dangling from his fork. "That is a hard one to judge..."

"Nah, it's easy." Scout said, biting into a piece of cucumber and then continuing to speak around a mouth full of salad. "Vegemite is fucking disgusting."

"It's un-American." Soldier said, nodding fiercely enough to make his helmet wobble.

"All the more for me." Sniper said with a quiet smile before stealing some lettuce from Spy's plate.

"Why do you eat it?" Medic asked, holding his hand over his mouth and coughing again. He reached for a glass of water and sipped it.

"S' tasty an' easy to make. Lovely on toast with a bit of butter, it is." Sniper said, crunching into the lettuce with relish. "Good salad this, mate. Nice an' crispy."

"Danke, Sniper." Medic said, in-between coughs. The crumb of bread in his throat had become a piece of chilli. "Glad you...rrgh, fick... diesen Husten!"

"Is Doktor alright?" Heavy asked concernedly.

"Hey, you're not gonna give us all germs are ya?" Scout asked worriedly, poking at his food with a knife. "Bet ya coughed all over dinner when you made it. Gross. I don't wanna cough my fuckin' guts up too."

"Ich denke..." Medic choked out, feeling his eyes starting to water. He took a shuddering, gasping breath, holding both hands over his mouth. "Spy's smoke..."

"Nonsense." Spy sniffed, holding his cigarette protectively. His thin fingers on his other hand reached out and snatched a piece of bread from Sniper's plate and he popped it in his mouth quickly.

"Put it out right now, Spy." Engineer ordered. Spy made a dramatic sighing noise but stubbed it out on the battered table.

"Bitte, Ent..." His throat felt tight and burning, as if it had a lump of fire stuck in it. Gottverdammt!

He waved a hand at the mercenaries in apology before getting up and staggering out of the room, trying to ignore the stars forming in front of his eyes as his lungs spasmed and his throat tightened mercilessly. Something seemed to rip down at the base of his neck, and he could feel a stripe of raw pain as he tasted bitterness in his mouth. He blinked, trying to clear his vision, and weaved his way to the infirmary.

The infirmary gurney wavered in his watering eyesight and he grabbed it and flicked the medigun switch, almost collapsing onto the stretcher as it surged into life, bathing him in blue light. The spiky
pain receded and he gasped in relief as he was finally able to breathe properly again. He lay down and closed his eyes until the sparkles in his vision were gone before sitting up with a sigh. It was only then he noticed the state of his hands.

"The guys were..." Scout skidded into the infirmary, before slowing down and looking wide-eyed at Medic. "Holy shit. Doc, you ok?"

Blood. Too much blood. Dark red, in speckles, clots and jelly-like lumps decorated his fingers, and he realised his lips felt damp and something had dribbled down his chin. His mouth tasted salty and metallic. He turned and gave Scout a weak smile.

"Nein, Scout, apparently I am not." He said simply.

"Uh, but you can fix it, right?" Scout asked, hovering uncertainly between coming closer and keeping away. "You can fix anythin', even if it fuckin' hurts at times, cos you're a sadistic bastard. You...you just need medicine, right?"

"I have no idea." He replied quietly, shrugging and prodding his throat. Antibiotics had not been effective. No soreness...swollen lymph glands...coughing up blood... and a white shadow on the x-ray he had taken. It all added up in a very unpleasant way. "Tell no one, Scout."

"What?!" Scout exclaimed. "That is bullshit, man. The guys gotta know if you're sick." "Tell no one." He repeated, lowering his voice threateningly.

"But Engie might..."

"No one!" He shouted, and coughed again briefly.

"Uh, okay." He replied uncertainly. "I'll get back to dinner then. I'll say you weren't hungry or somethin'. I'll tell them you got the 'flu."

"Danke, Scout."

"Uh, I'm not gonna catch it, am I?"

"Your concern is admirable." Medic replied drily. "I vill do some research and decide upon a treatment regimen. And nein, I don't zhink it is infectious."

"See ya, Doc. Hope ya feel better soon."

Medic waited until the door closed and then spat out several curses in both German and English before curling his hand into a fist and thumping the stretcher. Finally, he sat down and put his head in his hands. How could this have happened? He had stopped smoking years ago, when the health risks had become obvious- he preferred not to risk his health unless he had a good reason, such as a particularly interesting piece of research to carry out, or he was unusually bored. Surely it was too late for his past excesses to affect him? And why had it happened now? It seemed too much of a coincidence. He thought back to the life-support machine RED Medic had hooked his head up to during his time in his care. Had he been exposed to some carcinogen that had caused a previously existing benign tumour to metastasize?

It didn't really matter. He smiled bitterly, realising that once again, his path had been made clear to him. This was something he couldn't treat himself. Regular use of the medigun could stabilise the condition, but to have even a chance of recovery, he would need surgery, radiotherapy, and with the new drugs coming out, maybe even chemotherapy...all the things BLU would never waste money on
for a mere clone. Once BLU found out how ill he was, there were only two possibilities: either he
would die very fast, or they would leave him to die slowly. If he was going to die, he would rather
do so on his own terms and in his own time, while achieving something worthwhile.

So, it was time to take a third option.

"Galileo! Herkommst!"

"You're sick!" RED Heavy exclaimed, looking down concernedly. "So very sick." His large hand
moved to give a gentle pat.

"You have broken barrel clamp and sand in your rotor assembly. Poor Sasha. I make you better." He
stroked the six barrels of his beloved minigun. Over the years, practically every part of his favourite
weapon had been upgraded and replaced, but as far as he was concerned, she was still his Sasha. He
had built her from scraps and old tractors, and she had saved him and his family from death many
times. At first, she had been wired to a car battery he had carried in a backpack, and fired smaller
bullets that were really just lumps of lead. He had used her to shred intruders to their secret hideaway
in the Drzhugdzhur Mountains, far from the centres of power in Moskva and Leningrad. Later, she
had saved them all in a more subtle way- a mysterious man with an American accent had offered him
money and resources in return for a look at his gun. How the US military had found out about Sasha,
Heavy had no idea, but she had formed the basis of that little M134 gun of theirs. That gun was, in
Heavy's opinion, vastly inferior, but he had used the money to improve Sasha into the sleek,
murderous lady she was today. His sisters had joked that Sasha was the only woman Heavy would
ever fall in love with, and that was more true than they knew. Heavy smiled slightly, but his smile
slowly faded into wistful sorrow.

He took off the broken barrel clamp and discarded it into a box marked 'For Engineer', before
undoing the bolt assembly and removing the front rotor unit. He remembered fondly when Sasha had
had a four-stroke petrol engine strapped on to turn the barrels. Had that been after or before the car
battery? He couldn't recall. Getting the barrel spin speed correct had been a nightmare and Sasha had
shot her own barrels off several times before he got the gearing right. It was amazing what a man
could achieve with a hammer, a socket set, a Ph.D. in literature, a lot of physical strength and a
deadly determination.

Sand dropped out of the gun's chassis as he opened it, and Heavy frowned in annoyance. He did not
like deserts. The silence and isolation reminded him of his harsh homeland, but the constant grittiness
and dust that stuck to the sweat on his skin was a constant irritation. And the heat, of course! Much
to his intense embarrassment, he had passed out due to heat exhaustion in his very first battle. Their
Medic at the time had been tall with grey hair swept away severely from his face and had given him
a lecture on drinking enough, because they were running about in a desert, Gottverdammt!

Heavy paused, scrunching the grease rag in his hand. It was so strange to imagine that the grey-
haired Medic, his Gustav, the cracked BLU Medic and the ginger-haired man he had so recently
thrown into a wall were essentially the same person. He didn't know, or indeed care, how they had
achieved it, because he...he was out of gun oil. Chyort! Maybe Engineer or Soldier would have
some? He'd try Engineer first, since the laid-back Texan was far better company, most of the time.
He picked up his box of scrap metal and headed out of his room towards Engineer's workshop-
come-bedroom. The usual sounds of the base during ceasefire filtered around him- Scout and Soldier
laughing, a crackling transistor radio playing pop music, Spy and Sniper arguing over something...

"Say that again, filthy jar-man."

"It's true, prancin' show pony. 'Delilah' is about a bloke murdering his girl. God's honest truth."
"It's about a man who is cuckolded! I swear..."

The rest of the conversation was lost in another loud bark of laughter from Demo this time. Scout and Soldier joined in with their own guffaws. All in all, Heavy thought, it was just another Saturday evening- and then something terrible happened.

He smelt cigarette smoke.

It wasn't just any smoke, either- he recognised that stink. He whipped around and saw a perfect smoke ring curl up into the air behind him. There was a mutter of laughter directly in his left ear, a slight breeze and the box of metal dropped to the ground with a clatter.

"...So, if yer so smart, tell me what 'Hey Jude' is all about." Sniper's voice sounded in the distance.

"Now that is a strange one. It sounds so deep and meaningful, but what it actually means alludes me..." RED Spy replied, equally far away.

"Spy, show yourself." Heavy hissed, swiping at the air.

"I think not." The disembodied voice replied.

"Are you Violet Spy? " Heavy demanded, grabbing uselessly at thin air. "You killed him. When I find you, you will die screaming. Is not threat, is promise."

"Well done." The voice replied, coming from an entirely different part of the room. "Now, may I make a suggestion? Run."

There was a sudden quiet. The smoke dissipated, and the breeze stopped. Heavy panted for a second, trying to decide what to think past the familiar, comforting rage that wanted to take him over. He had been discovered. They had been discovered. Now everyone's lives were in danger.

"Coo?" Clawed feet landed on his head, before skidding down to land on his shoulder. Heavy reached up and the bird hopped onto his finger.

"Leetle bird! You must take message to master."

Galileo bobbed his head and held out a leg. Heavy frowned and took the message.

"RED Heavy,

A problem has arisen. Meet me as soon as you can. I will be waiting in the usual place.

Your Ally."

"Yebat yego." Heavy muttered, quickly ripping up the note and breaking into a run.

In Chapter Twelve: Let's find out who Violet Engineer just met, and see what Heavy and Medic decide to do next.

Translations:

_Fick...diesen Husten! - Fuck...this cough_!

_Ich denke - I think_

_Herkommst! - Come here_!
Yebat Yego - Fuck it.
Issues of Trust

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: It's kind of ironic that I wrote this chapter just a few days before 'Expiration Date' came out, in which Medic uses the word 'Metastasizes'. It amused me at the time, especially since he actually uses the term wrongly in the video. A cancer only metastasizes if it spreads to other organs- which, of course, it can't do within a bread loaf. This is leaving aside the fact that bread can't really get tumours anyway and...why am I bothering trying to put realistic biology into this silly game?

That point aside, I think we can all agree that nobody would want to try and say 'Metastasizes' while drunk.

I've had a huge response to the last chapter, thank you so much everyone! Keep those lovely comments and kudii (I've decided this is the correct plural of 'kudos') coming, I wuv them all, even the bad ones! The artwork for this chapter is at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Twelve-Issues-of-Trust-483050091

"It's taken me a while to find you, Violet Engineer." The gaunt intruder fiddled with his tie, straightening it with a pat. "I believe we share a mutual interest."

Violet Engineer crossed his arms and looked suspiciously at the slender, aristocratic man standing in front of him.

"Who in Sam-Hill are you?" He demanded. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't fill ya full of lead this very second."

The man folded his arms behind his back in a way that seemed oddly bird-like. He stalked past Engineer and walked slowly up to Scoutbot.

"One reason? Very well. You have not got a gun on you. Now, this is remarkable." He stated, tipping his head on one side to examine the robot. Scoutbot looked back, his lilac eyes dimming slightly. "You built it entirely yourself? You must be a genius."

"Who're you calling it, you cranky old bastard?" Scoutbot responded. The man startled slightly and smiled.

"It can talk! Have you measured its IQ?"

"You got ten seconds to tell me who you are, or you are a dead man." Engineer growled, tugging at the glove on his hand.

"My name is Gray." The elderly man extended a hand, but Engineer just frowned suspiciously. "And I know more about you than most, Engineer. I believe I can help you."

"How'd you get in here?" Engineer demanded, removing his glove. Jointed metallic fingers glinted in the light.

"Holy shit, hardhat!" Scoutbot said in horror. "What the fuck is that?! When did you lose your
"Tell you some other time, Scoutbot." Engineer said, twitching his robotic hand in dismissal. Gray Mann was watching his fingers move in apparent fascination.


The metal fingers he had been admiring grabbed his shirt and dragged him close to Engineer's face. The skinny old man was surprisingly heavy. Gray just smiled at him, as relaxed as if he was feeding ducks in the park.

"I can stop the Gravel War. I can stop the use of clones." The old man said.

Violet Engineer let go suddenly. "For real?"

"I call bullshit," Scoutbot commented, folding his arms with a scraping noise. "Don't trust this dude, Engie. He'll want to take me to bits or reprogram me to be evil or some such shit."

"Can it be switched off for a moment?" Mann asked, waving his hand in the robot's direction. "I would rather talk privately."

"Bite my shiny metal ass." Scoutbot retorted, slapping the body part in question with a clang.

"Heck no." Engineer answered Gray. "You don't come even close to bein' trustworthy yet. And Scoutbot turns off when he wants to, not when I say. Now tell me more about stopping the clone wars."

"You are the only person working at TF Industries who has a shred of moral decency left, do you realise that? The longer you stay, the more it will get worn away. One day you'll be as ruthless as everyone else- as ruthless as the Medic, even." Gray replied, walking in front of Engineer, hands folded behind his back again.

"What the hell is that thing on your back?" Engineer asked.

"Long story." Mann replied with a hand wave. "You are completely alone here, aren't you?"

"Don't know what you mean." Engineer said uncertainly, the metallic fingers of his robot hand clenching and unclenching reflexively.

"Your work is being used to make legions suffer and die." Gray continued. "And nobody cares but you about the sorry fate of the clones. You feel you have more in common with the fighters down in the gravel wars than with the Violet team—You're all unappreciated, tormented and unnoticed. You have never been so alone in your life."

"You better watch your mouth, son. I don't like those words coming out of it." Engineer replied warningly.

"Can I beat him up now?" Scoutbot pleaded.

"How are you gonna stop the use of clones?" Engineer insisted.

"The same way you want to." Gray replied with a smile. "By using robots instead. I suppose I should have explained. I am Redmond and Blutarch's long-lost brother and if you come and work for me, I can shut down the Gravel Wars—permanently. I have the money and knowledge. Give me your expertise, and help me build my robot army. The clones will suffer no more."
"A robot army? Hey, can I be a badass robot general?" Scoutbot asked.

"Why should I trust you?" Engineer asked, ignoring the robot.

"Why should anyone trust another?" Gray replied with an idle shrug. "To trust is always to take a risk. It's up to you to calculate how big a risk that is. But if you turn down my offer, can you live with yourself, knowing you could have stopped the wars?" He leaned closer. "Do you want to atone? To be redeemed?"

Engineer blinked.

"Come with me, Engineer. Visiting TF Industries requires a lot of bribery, and puts my informants in a great danger. If you don't join me right now we may never meet again. Why not earn your name back and become Dr Conagher again?" Mann extended a thin, age-spotted hand.

Engineer looked at it for a second, and then Dell Conagher shook it with his metal hand.

"What about me? Can I come?" Scoutbot asked.

"Let us leave immediately." Mann said, tweaking the shirt of his suit meticulously. "Bring the robot."

"Hell yeah! Roadtrip! Woo!" Scoutbot leapt and punched the air in celebration.

"No, wait, first I gotta complete a little errand, then we go." Conagher replied. Gray Mann looked suspicious, but Dell gave a slight smile and shrugged in apology. "Sorry fella, but I don't delay my insulin injections for nobody, not even mysterious old men offerin' me the chance of a lifetime."

RED Heavy burst into the pump room and looked around for the BLU Medic. The room was bathed in a blue glow and Medic sat on a crate, his medigun balanced on a box and pointed at him. The cold light highlighted the hollowness of his cheeks and his deep-set eyes were sunk in shadow. He looked up at Heavy with a slight smile, the shadows on his face shifting. Galileo, Kepler and Pasteur were all with perched on him in various states of sleepiness.

"Ah, zhere you are. Glad you could come." Medic said. "I have a big problem."

"We have big problem, Doktor." Heavy started breathlessly, talking over the top of the other man urgently."Big, big trouble."

"I have to leave."

"What?"

"What?"

"Vait, vait..." Medic held a fist to his mouth and cleared his throat quietly. "Me first. I am leaving zhis base. I found out somezhing...unpleasant zhis evening."

"I think maybe I found out same thing." Heavy said, but Medic looked at him oddly.

"I doubt it." The man paused thoughtfully and sighed. "I discovered zhat I am sick. Very sick."

Heavy stopped himself from replying Yes, I know. "Sick?"

"Vell, I am dying, actually." Medic gave a slight wheezing laugh that seemed completely out of place. "Eh, zhat sounds so melodramatic."
"Dying?" Heavy roared, grabbing the man's shoulders in concern. "You cannot die again!" As soon as the words left his mouth he wanted to curse, but Medic didn't notice his slip of the tongue.

"I need to do more research, but the evidence points towards an aggressive squamous cell carcinoma of the trachea, already metastasizing." Medic explained. The Russian looked blank and Medic sighed. "Cancer. Throat cancer. Quite advanced. That is why I have been coughing."

"Chyort! Nyet..." Heavy said, feeling his throat tighten in dismay. He felt as he had suffered from one of those punches to the gut he was so fond of dishing out. As he kept telling himself, this man was not Gustav, but somehow, he felt he had to keep him alive. He had failed one Medic; he would not fail this one. "You cannot die! But...you can cure it, da? Doktor can cure anything."

"Vizh the equipment on the base, nein. The medigun can delay its progression...for a while. The Administrator is itching for a reason to get rid of me. This would be too good an opportunity for her to ignore." Medic explained. "So, my plan is to escape, make money and get treated while I go back over my knowledge of Respawn and figure out how to shut down the cloning system."

"But you are wanted man!"

"Ach, nein." Medic replied with a bitter chuckle, looking up at the bigger man. "Have you not figured this out yet? Gustav Daecher is a wanted man, but nobody is looking for Medic Twenty-Nine-C. Nobody is looking for Heavy Nine-H. We do not exist!"

"That...is..." Heavy ground to a halt as the enormity of the realisation thudded around his head. He was not Vrag Neroda, an Enemy of the People. He was not on any lists. He had never even been to Russia, his supposed homeland.

He had no family.

No sisters or mother waiting for him to come home.

He supposed he had known the truth since he had found out about the clones, but now it finally seemed real. Something went snap in his head.

"Heavy?"

So what did he have?

"I come with you, Doktor."

Medic looked up in surprise. "What?"

"Violet Spy is here." Heavy said. "He knows we have been talking. I do not know how he found me out. I did not see him, but heard him, smelt smoke. He made threats."

"Spy!" Medic hissed, getting to his feet and grabbing for his ubersaw, prowling the room suspiciously. He turned and glared at Heavy. "You could have been him in disguise, all along!"

"I know you are not- I punched you in stomach, da? And you know I'm not- you poisoned me." Heavy explained. "You remember that?"

"Of course I do." Medic replied with a weak grin. "It was a very effective Spycheck, ja?"

"So, I am not Spy, you are not Spy." Heavy summarised. "You die if you stay. I maybe die too. So we go. How do we make money?"
"A disgraced doctor and an incredibly strong Russian will never be short of money in this 'Land of Opportunity'." Medic said wryly. He held up a set of battered keys. "Sniper is always leaving these in the mess hall. I am ready to leave immediately." He patted a suitcase next to the crate he was sitting on.

"I pay for gas." Heavy said. His lips twitched into a nasty smile. "I have many guns for that. I go get my things and come back here in little time."

"I shall see you zhen." Medic replied with a nod and then cleared his throat. "Zhank you."

Heavy gave a brief nod, and went to pack some clothes. When he came back Medic tossed the keys to him, and the two fugitives stepped out of Teufort, and into the campervan.

It roared off along the dusty road and into a new beginning.

And Violet Spy watched it go with a small, satisfied smile.

In Chapter Thirteen: In the final chapter of part one, Violet Spy finds out that he is being watched, and gets to see his carefully laid plans utterly torn to pieces.
A Spanner In The Works

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: A lot of pm's for this story have been along the lines of: "Sanctus, is Sniper in this story?" "When's Sniper turning up?" "Do we get to meet the Violet Sniper?" "I can't wait to see the Sniper!"

Wait no more, my fine audience. This chapter...*drum roll* has Sniper in it. Hope you like it. Thanks as always for the views, reviews, follows and favourites. They always make my day! I really enjoyed doing the artwork for this chapter and you will find it at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Thirteen-A-Spanner-In-The-Works-483685065

The campervan disappeared into the distance, hidden from view by clouds of desert dust. The sun began to set, colouring the landscape in deep oranges and browns. The long shadows moved slowly across the ground. The cicadas started to hum as night fell.

There had been some yelling from the BLU base recently, but now it was quiet again. Had they realised they were missing a team member, or had it just been Sniper complaining about his lost keys?

Violet Spy lent against the wooden wall of the Teufort base and considered his next move. He lit a thoughtful cigarette. Was it time for him to make his intentions plain? Or was he better continuing to 'work' with the Violets for a while longer, putting them off the scent and giving the two deserters more time to flee? It was a shame he could not bring a car to these missions of his; one would be very useful right now, but a mysterious car parked next to a base would most definitely give his location away. Instead, he had travelled here by teleport. The clones knew surprisingly little about their bases. There were hidden doorways concealing a network of teleporters connecting TF Industries HQ with every single base, as well as other, more sinister equipment that Spy prayed he'd never see used again. Four times was more than enough. There was something so...impersonal about mass murder of that kind. He shoved off the wall and sauntered around the corner, reaching the wire fencing surrounding the battlements. A slight breeze flickered against his brow. Decisions, decisions...

A cold sliver of metal suddenly made contact with his neck. He froze in place as it cut a little strip of pain into his skin and a long arm snaked around his thin chest and held him in a strong grip.

"Wot's this?" An Australian voice suddenly said in his ear. "A Spy, caught off his guard?"

"Filthy jar-man." Spy hissed, reaching up to pull at the arm tight against his chest.

"Prancin' show pony." The voice said in reply, low and threatening. "The Administrator sent me to keep an eye on yer. You've gone way out of line. I reckon I have to kill you now, mate."

"Is that so?" Spy replied, keeping as still as he possibly could, his gloved hands going slack.

"Yep."
There was a moment's stalemate as neither man moved and then Spy started to snort with laughter. After a moment, the Violet Sniper joined in, his kukri dropping to the floor with a clatter. As the shorter Frenchman turned around, the Australian grabbed him in a hug, pounding his back enthusiastically.

"It's been too long, ya mincin' wanker." Sniper said with a grin.

"Indeed it has, disgusting bushman, indeed it has." Spy replied, stifling his snorts with a smile. "So, our esteemed lady of Teufort sent you to kill me?"

"Sure did."

"Mon dieu, what an idiot." Spy said with a sigh. "But I already knew this."

"You think everyone's an idiot." Sniper pointed out.

"I find it is a theory that has withstood the test of time." Spy replied wryly.

"You includin' me in that?"

"Of course, my dear friend."

"Huh, figures." Sniper said with a snort. "So, what schemes were you buggering up this time?"

"This may take some time to explain, mon ami." Spy said, waving a hand idly. "But let me start by saying that I am a filthy traitor, a quisling, a turncoat and a disgusting collaborator that deserves to be shot at dawn."

"Why change the habits of a lifetime, eh?"

"Tais toi, I've not finished." Spy ordered, raising a finger warningly. "You and I, we have discussed this before. I have found out more, and the...situation that has arisen here has convinced me once and for all: the clones are becoming human. Non... that is not right, is it... they have always been human but now they have developed... individuality. Oui, that is the best way to describe it. I can no longer take part in their creation and use."

"Huh. Well, was bound to happen sooner or later, I always said so. Like those little flowers they named the project after. You take 'em all from one plant, but each new cutting grows different." Sniper replied thoughtfully. "You and I, we get to see these clones a lot more than the rest of the blokes. They don't know the half of it, right?"

"So true. I suspect Engineer is the only one who would be sympathetic to our views."

"Nah, he doesn't care about anythin', beyond tinkering with whatever the hell he's building in that bloody workshop of his, and pickin' the next fight with Medic."

"How much do you know of the recent occurrences here?" Spy asked.

"Not much, mate. I was sent to keep an eye on you while you kept an eye on them poor buggers." He gestured at the two forts with his thumb. "Seems you let two of them get away."

"On purpose, I assure you." Spy said with a smile, tapping his cigarette meaningfully. "I gave them just enough... encouragement to persuade them to leave."

"The old cigarette trick, eh?" Sniper rubbed his unshaven chin with a rasping noise. "So...the reason behind this is...?"
"Curiosity, I suppose." Spy replied idly. "I am interested to see if they come up with any useful plans. Away from the base, I can meet them and see what ideas they have." He quickly summarised the recent events at Teufort after the arrival of the new RED team. His hands moved quickly and gracefully to emphasise the important parts of his speech.

"...and so, we now have a furious RED Heavy determined to get revenge, and a dying BLU Medic who has nothing left to lose. Interesting, no?"

"...And both of them are after your blood. Sod it, mate, you're the worst Spy ever, you know that? You're bloody awful at it." Sniper said, drawing his breath in with a whistle. "Y'know, if you wanted to give up on the whole clone thing, you could just go the Administrator- the real one, that is- and tell 'er to shove it."

Spy snorted sourly. "Oh yes? You think we are any less prisoners than the clones? Even if I was not killed immediately by Miss Pauling, I have many, many enemies, remember? I doubt I would be allowed to keep highly secret technology such as my disguise kit. How long would it be before someone recognised me? Cosmetic surgery would not be enough."

"You should try not being a complete twat to everyone you meet. Might make you a few friends for a change." Sniper snatched Spy's cigarette off him and took a quick drag. "So, a RED and a BLU working together, huh? Unusual, that."

"A Heavy and a Medic." Spy replied with a smile. "That is a lot less unusual."

"Huh, true. Worst kept secret ever, that. So, are these two..." Sniper made an idle but fairly obscene hand gesture.

"Not as far as I can tell. They barely trust each other. It has been most amusing to watch, in fact." Spy sighed suddenly before grabbing his cigarette back. "I better report in to the Teufort Administrator. I will no doubt be berated for my 'failure'."

"Take your ear plugs, mate."

"I will suggest that I chase after our two renegade clones. Perhaps you should offer to watch Teufort?"

"Sure thing, mate." Sniper said, touching the brim of his hat in an idle salute. "Hang on, got somethin' for yer." Sniper lent down and rummaged in his dusty backpack and produced a large radio.

"Long distance radio?" Spy asked.

"Yep, one of two. You know the frequency an' codes to use. I don't trust yer not to run off and get into more trouble than you can handle...again."

"Or maybe I shall come running to rescue you, for once." Spy replied, raising an eyebrow underneath his balaclava. "This could very well be useful."

"Praps we'll meet again soon?"

"That rather depends on just how angry the Administrator is with me." Spy replied resignedly. "Ah well, it is too late to regret this path I have chosen. Farewell, filthy jar-man, may we meet again soon, and still in one piece."

"So long, prancing show-pony. Don't get blood on yer suit."
"Attention, Mercenaries of Teufort."

The Administrator's voice rang out over Teufort, echoing through the battlements, the computer rooms and the living quarters of both RED and BLU.

In the RED mess hall, Demo, Soldier and Scout looked up curiously.

"Two of the mercenaries on this base have turned traitor and deserted their posts."

In his workshop, BLU Engineer lowered his wrench and turned to look at Pyro, who was perched on a desktop, watching him work. Pyro shrugged.

"We believe they have been collaborating, for reasons unknown. As you are aware, fraternization with the enemy is strictly forbidden in your contracts."

"Mon Dieu." Sitting on his bed, RED Spy listened idly for a second, before swallowing another little yellow pill with a grimace. They did not seem to be working as well any more, but it didn't matter-he could simply take more.

"The RED Heavy and BLU Medic left the base last night, stealing the BLU Sniper's van to make their getaway." The woman's voice sounded unusually subdued.

In his bedroom, BLU Scout caught the ball as it bounced back into his hand from the wall of his room. "Holy shit." He muttered quietly.

"They will be tracked, and brought to justice. Desertion will not be tolerated."

In the BLU mess hall, BLU Heavy looked up from the fridge, his mouth dropping open in surprise. "Doktor is gone?"

"It is considered likely they will have travelled as far from this site as possible. A liason group of both RED and BLU mercenaries from other sites have been tasked with tracking them down."

In his infirmary, RED Medic altered a strap on his mask to improve the fit. He snorted slightly and shook his head. "Good riddance, you spine-breaking Russian madman. I hope you get shot."

"There is a small possibility they may return to this base. If they are seen, they are to be killed on sight."

Sitting miserably in the corner of his sparse, bed-less room, BLU Sniper grumbled to himself. "But will I get my van back? Don't care if they bugger off, but why'd the stupid wankers have to steal me van?"

"The other bases involved in the Gravel Wars have also been alerted to look out for the renegade Heavy and Medic. They will be hunted down and caught."

On the roof of the BLU compound, BLU Soldier spat on the floor and looked out over the desert. "You never did come back right after being stuck in respawn. Now you're my enemy, you traitorous bastard. I will kick your ass all the way to Hell myself."

"If you have any relevant information regarding this event, contact me immediately. Failure to disclose information will be considered grounds for dismissal."

"Hey I know somethin'." RED Scout said suddenly. "Ages ago, when we first got here, I saw something really weird..."
"Shut yer trap, laddie." Demo growled warningly in reply. "Or I'll shut it for ye. Nobody says anythin', Y'hear?"

"That's seditious." Soldier growled, but Demo just hit the back of his helmet in disgust.

"Be warned that anybody else considering leaving will face the same punishment REH009/h and BLM029/c will soon face: death. Administrator out."

The twin bases both paused in stunned silence for a moment before the shouting began.

Violet Spy walked nonchalantly down the corridors of TF Industries as if he hadn't just had a vitriolic ear-shredding courtesy of the Teufort Administrator. It would not have surprised him if he had blood trickling out of his ear canals by now. It didn't bother him hugely; he had long ago learnt to ignore that witch's attempts at intimidation and he just played along with them now.

He lit a cigarette and watched the smoke curl idly for a second before inhaling deeply. He had two choices now: he would either go after the clones with the Violet Team's blessing... or he'd go anyway. Time to find out which it was. He smiled slightly, wondering what effect it would have on the team for a member to resign, if that was what he had to do. Sniper would join him, he was sure, and maybe Engineer too, if he could get him out of his workshop for more than five seconds...

"I tell you, I said nozthing to him!" He heard an angry accented voice shout as he opened the door. Spy rolled his eyes sourly. Maybe Engineer had come out of his workshop then- and immediately got into yet another fight with Medic.

"Do not threaten doktor, leetle man." Heavy's low voice rumbled threateningly.

"You are always picking fights with him and now you've finally got your way." Soldier growled. Spy frowned in puzzlement and padded along to the conference room where all the noise was coming from. Obviously, yet another argument had broken out, but he was curious to see what had caused this one. He found his colleague's bickering quite amusing, especially for what was left unsaid.

"Your enmity with Engineer is well known, Medic," The Administrator said, "But with the other current issues we have to deal with, this was poor timing."

Spy's eyebrows shot upwards underneath his balaclava. If the Administrator had deigned to turn up, this was not just some typical childish spat. The insanely powerful woman normally left them to their own devices until one of her clones needed to summon them. Whether she was the original or not, nobody knew. Maybe she had clawed her way to the top of the heap- or maybe it had been luck. Spy felt his spine prickle. What was certain was that she always knew exactly what all the other Administrators were doing at any one time, even though she never met the women scattered around the sprawling headquarters in their individual command centres. He had told himself many times that she must simply be in possession of an excellent network of informers, but a less sceptical corner of his mind muttered words such as telepath, psychic or even...

Gestalt.

"I SAID," Medic shouted furiously, "Zhat I did NOZHING!"

"I believe you." Pyro replied, so softly that it took Spy a moment to translate it, even after all these years getting used to Pyro's speech. "I have hardly seen anything of him recently."

Spy pondered cloaking and listening in for a moment before deciding to take the direct route and ask
everyone what the hell was happening. He pushed the door open and sauntered in, smoke trailing behind him. Every single one of the Violets were already there, except for Sniper and Engineer. The Administrator and Miss Pauling sat at the end of the table.

"Problem, gentlemen?" He asked, waving his cigarette idly.

"Ye could say that." Demo replied, clutching a glass of orange juice in his fingers. "Engineer's buggered off. Gone wi'out a trace."

"What..." Spy felt his stomach go cold with surprise and an odd sense of indignation. But I was going to be the first to leave, and that Texan grease-monkey beat me to it!

"We need to search every cupboard and hiding place in the base to see where Medic stashed his corpse. Scout, go outside and check for shallow graves." Soldier ordered.

"Hell no." Scout spat in reply.

"Be reasonable." The Administrator said, knitting her fingers together. "As far as that is possible for any of you. The Engineer was obviously disappointed that his idea was turned down, and took what he saw as appropriate action."

"You saying he...topped himself?" Scout asked with wide eyes.

"Doubtful." Spy replied, sitting down at the table. "I think Madame Administrator means that he has left. Deserted. Run away. He was unhappy with his role here, as you may have noticed."

"Good riddance." Medic muttered. Heavy glared at him disapprovingly, but the doctor just shrugged in reply.

"He was last seen on security camera 542, accompanied by his robot..." Miss Pauling said softly, reading from her clipboard.

"Wait, wait...did you say robot?" Spy asked incredulously.

"He built this entire fuckin' copy of me, can you believe that?" Scout said. "He said it had my mind and everythin'. Stupid bucket of bolts!"

"Ah yes, if it had your mind, it would be stupid." Spy replied reflexively.

"Screw you, Frenchie."

"Now is not the time for pointless bickering." The Administrator snapped. "Spy, do you have anything useful to add?"

"I'm afraid not. I have been away monitoring the situation at Teufort, as you know."

"Indeed." The woman drawled. "And I know what a wonderful job you did there."

Spy stayed silent, placing an unbothered look on his face. "Sometimes, situations evolve beyond even our control. All we can do is to monitor and direct, but we do not have power over the actions of the clones."

"But we do." The Administrator said. "We have the ultimate power over them. I may yet have to use that."

"That's nae summat I want to see again." Demo muttered. "Not ever."
"No one has ever claimed zhey enjoy deploying zhe base's killswitches," Medic said, pushing his
glasses up his nose, "But sometimes, sacrifices have to be made."

"Nice it's no' us making them, eh?" Demo pointed out, staring mournfully into his drink.

"People die in war, private." Soldier replied solemnly. "War is hell. Wonderful, exhilarating, hell."

"Engineer must be found and persuaded to return." The Administrator said. She paused thoughtfully
and her eyes drifted over to Spy. "Spy, this is top priority, even over the current problems at
Teufort."

*Merde*...

"I want Engineer back alive as soon as possible."

*Putain de merde."

"Miss Pauling will accompany you."

*Putain de bordel de merde!*

"Of course, Madame." Spy said, giving a slight smile and a nod, but internally he was fuming. With
Miss Pauling accompanying him, he couldn't get out of this task, and that meant that the RED Heavy
and BLU Medic would slip out of his grasp and vanish out into the world before he could find them.

As Miss Pauling nodded and looked at Spy with a charming yet knowing smile, Spy realised that, for
the first time in his life, he had completely and utterly failed. His objectives would not be completed,
and he would be unable to continue with his schemes. He was totally trapped into fighting on the
wrong side of a conflict that had not even begun yet.

Even worse, he had absolutely no idea what would happen next.

**End of Part One.**

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In Part Two: Months have passed since the two renegade clones deserted, but Teufort has
never returned to normal. There are whispered secrets around every corner- and secrets can
kill. Violet Spy, meanwhile, has the most difficult task of his life facing him: making Heavy and
Medic trust him. Will he succeed, or just give up and resort to blackmail as usual?

The clock is ticking, and the Day of Dread is coming. One thing is certain: those who survive
will be the lucky ones...
Lost And Found

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Wow, it seems the ending of Part One made people really eager for this next part! I wish this website would let me be a little more flexible with formatting, but it is determined to be mean. To save you all the effort of going through previous chapters, Part One took place in Mid-June - early July 1968.

Can I remind my readers that they are not allowed to kill me when they finish reading this chapter? Pinky promise? Good.

Thanks so much for all your reviews, pms, reading, likes, favourites, follows and offers of chocolate. Well, I admit the last one hasn't happened yet, but there is still time. Artwork for this chapter is at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Fourteen-Lost-And-Found-484466093.

Now let's continue...

Part Two: In Die Illa Tremenda

"Nor dread nor hope attend a dying animal; a man awaits his end dreading and hoping all." - William Butler Yeats

Chapter Fourteen: Lost and Found


It was a beautiful Spring day when Jemima Cordes stopped her rusty station wagon in a cracked, muddy street in the Lower Ninth Ward. She had come a long way to get here, but she was not entirely certain this was where she was meant to be. It was just a street like any other, as far as she could tell. Wooden shotgun houses were scattered in overgrown grassy lots, all painted in various pastel shades. Here and there, the paint had peeled in the humid climate. Some houses were boarded up or half destroyed. Jemima assumed that was hurricane damage from some past storm.

...After the RED Heavy and BLU Medic defected, Teufort had had a short ceasefire before they were replaced. It only took a few days and then the fights for the intelligence continued.

BLU Sniper's camper van was eventually found with stolen plates, on route 90 just outside Beaumont, Texas. It was identified as the vehicle used in a series of armed robberies at various gas stations. Much to Sniper's annoyance, it was impounded by the police for further investigation...

Two boys ran screaming across the city street after a bright red ball. This street looked...too normal? She began to have doubts and wondered if she was in the right place. She ran her dark-skinned hand through her tightly curled brown hair.

...Violet Spy had decided that Engineer must have left willingly since there was no sign of a struggle. The robot he had built was missing too, but they found his workshop was full of prototypes- Pyros, Heavies, Snipers, and even Spybots. Years and years of research and work. There was no sign of a
journal, and all the blueprints were missing. Engineer had carefully left no papertrail at all...

She wished she knew more about the man she was looking for. She didn't know his name. She did, of course, know what he looked like.

..."I have no idea where we should go, Heavy." BLU Medic had said in exasperation. "Just pick a direction and drive. I need...I need to rest." Medic had slumped back with his eyes closed, and Heavy had looked at him in concern and realised the sick man had fallen instantly asleep.

Heavy had picked east...

He was white, German and quite handsome, in a rather equine sort of a way. He was unusual enough that people had known about him, although it had taken quite some time for the people who owed him favours to speak up. 'Lamanche Street. Look for the green house with the white geraniums in the window boxes', they had said. She couldn't see it, and paced further down the street.

...Why had they left? In Teufort this question was asked again and again.

"I know why Medic left," BLU Scout had said, "I know what I saw. He said I wasn't to tell anyone, but hell, how's he gonna know? He was sick. I saw...well, it was fuckin' gross. He was coughing, and there was this blood... and bits... all over. He's real sick. Like, dyin', I think. Maybe it was somethin' the Medigun couldn't cure and he wanted to get away, y'know?"

"Maybe you can explain why he left with the enemy Heavy then. He's just a spineless deserter." BLU Soldier had growled in reply...

They said he was an ex-nazi. They said he had done terrible experiments in the concentration camps. They said he would accept any patient, no matter what their background or skin colour. They said he never asked questions. They said he would help people with problems they could not go to an official doctor to get sorted. They said he could work miracles.

... "Nay, I got no idea, laddie. I guess yon Heavy must've been mad wi' grief at losing his best friend, but why did he leave wi that BLU Medic? Makes nae sense." RED Demo had said.

"I wondered if they coulda left separately, but it's one helluva coincidence, then, them both leaving at the same time." Engineer had replied thoughtfully.

"I know why that BLU Medic left." RED Scout had said."I saw somethin'...somethin' amazin' and weird and shit."

"Shut yer trap, lad. Right noo." Demo replied firmly...

They said he called himself Doctor Gerhardt Weiss, although people whispered that that was not his real name, and he was not a real doctor. That name had given her hope that she was looking in the right place for the man she wanted to find.

RED Spy's anxiety levels had gone even higher with news of the two deserters. The others seemed insensitive to it, but a good Spy was always aware of subtleties and atmospheres. Teufort stank of danger and it made him feel trapped and desperate to get out.

Occasionally, he wondered what was happening to him, but more often, he took the little yellow pills and forgot, for a while at least.

Could that be his house? It was more blue than green, but maybe the paint had faded. White flowers filled the window boxes. Weiss. German for white. That was the key.
...BLU Medic had woken up in the middle of the drive with a snort and a cough.

"Where are ve?"

"Is Doktor alright?"

"I vill use zhe medigun again soon. Where are ve?" He repeated.

"Texas. Sign says 'Amarillo'."

"Hmm." Medic rummaged around for a moment and then unfolded a map. He studied it for a moment, and the laughed briefly. "Ahh, I know where ve should head. I have an idea. Keep going east."

"Not going anywhere until you take break and use medigun." Heavy had replied stubbornly...

Jenima checked her pockets quickly to make sure the little pistol was still there. As she looked down, she noticed her swollen tummy once again and smiled wryly.

"Could he be dead?" Miss Pauling had pondered, idly cleaning her gun with an oiled rag.

"Possibly." Violet Spy replied, blowing a smoke ring idly. "This is starting to feel like a wild goose chase, oui?"

"I don't know what to do next." She replied with a sigh. "We've been at this months with no joy."

"There is only one thing we can do," Spy said, "$\text{Perhaps we could, heh, promote a clone. Which Engineer clone has been out in the field the longest?}"

"That would be BLE002/a at Hydro. I think you're right, this is now a waste of time and money," Miss Pauling said regretfully, "$\text{But I don't like losing the Violet Engineer like this. What if he breaks the code of secrecy?}"

"If he does, then we will be able to locate him again. But for now, I suggest we give up this hopeless chase."

"The Administrator wants him found."

"So do I. But I have no leads...and many other tasks I wish to complete."

"Well, ok." Miss Pauling replied with a sigh. "$\text{Back to base then. And you can carry on with your other assignments...}"

Violet Spy nodded, trying not to look too pleased. The trail was six months cold at that point, but he had contacts and ways of finding people. Engineer was street-smart, American, and could fade into the background. Heavy and Medic, however, would never achieve that...

The street was fairly empty, except for the two boys and an old woman, grey hair cropped short for practicality, who was brushing her porch and glanced at the young pregnant woman with a slight smile.

"Excuse me, Ma'am, is this Doctor Weiss' place?"

"You don't wanna see him. Too late for that." The woman replied, looking at her with a certain hard sympathy, leaning on her brush. "$\text{Gotta live with your mistake now, hon.}"
"Oh...oh, this weren't no mistake." Jemima replied in her soft southern drawl, smiling and patting her baby bump. "Gerhardt's a..." She paused significantly. "...friend."

"Huh, didn't know he had no friends, except that big scary Russian. Mister Cherny, he calls himself. Watch out for him, sugar. I don't trust him, not one bit."

Jemima had heard that Dr. Weiss had a Russian friend. Everyone said was a commie spy for the KGB. The idea was so ridiculous it made Jemima want to laugh. Some said he was hired muscle the doctor kept around as a bodyguard in case he got any angry comebacks from his work. Jemima had her own theory about that. Now she would find out if it was true or not.

... "Why there, Doktor?"

The two fugitives had stopped for the night and were sat in the back of the van, bundled up in blankets for warmth in the desert night. The only illumination was the blue light that flickered from the doctor's medigun.

"Ve need to make money and perform our investigations. Since ve don't officially exist, making money in any legal way is going to be next to impossible. From what I have heard about zhe city, it could be a good place to hide. New Orleans has a lot of poverty and crime, and zhat means nobody asks too many questions."

"I do not like to hide." Heavy grumbled.

"Hide, or die. Zhat is our choice." Medic replied with a shrug. "I don't like it eizher. Zhis is not how I imagined spending zhe last few months of my life."

"Doktor shouldn't speak like that."

"I am just being realistic." Medic said, eyeing Heavy sternly. "Even once I have saved up for treatment, my chances are slim. All I vant to do is to live long enough to achieve my goals. Avoiding zhe issue is just a form of cowardice."

Heavy glared icily at the German. "Hope is not cowardice. Hope is bravery. Giving up is being coward."

"Very wise. You should be a poet."

"So tomorrow, we drive to New Orleans, find hideout there, da?" Heavy said, changing the subject quickly...

Jemima knocked cautiously on the faded green wooden door of the long, narrow house. There was the sound of movement from within, and a young woman, barely an adult, opened the door cautiously.

"What can I do for you, Ma'am?"

"Is this the residence of Dr. Weiss?" Jemima asked, smiling pleasantly. "Could I see him, please?"

The woman looked at Jemima with a measuring eye. "He's with someone at the moment. He'll be a few minutes yet. Do you have an appointment?"

...Violet Spy unrolled a large map of the states and started to place pin tacks on it, marking a series of gas station robberies over the course of two days. New Mexico...Texas...Louisiana. Spy frowned. Louisiana? Why there?
Ah well, at least he had an idea where to look. Heavy and Medic would give themselves away, somehow. Maybe his old 'friend' Marcello could help, assuming he wasn't in prison by now.

With a cheerful whistle, Spy left the TF Industries headquarters for what he hoped was the last time and walked the hell out of his old life...

"Oh, no, there ain't no appointment, I just wanted to see him." Jemima replied, placing a hand on her swollen tummy pointedly. The woman's eyes widened with shock and a little jealousy as she figured out what Jemima was going to say next. "Tell him Jemima says hey, and congratulations- he's gonna be a father."

"Fuck it, Engie, are you done yet?" Scoutbot asked, fidgeting with a rattling noise. "My arms are gettin' tired."

"Now that's just a pure lie, fella, and you know it." Dell Conagher, no longer the Violet Engineer, replied with a smile. "You don't get tired. Just keep it there a little longer...ok, there." Scoutbot let go of the large robotic arm and dropped it onto the table.

"Huh. All I am these days is a dumb blue collar worker." Scoutbot grumbled

"Dunno about that, son." He replied with a grin. "You sure make a good mechanical vice too."

"So...who's this arm for? A Heavybot?"

"Got it in one. Mr Mann wants a copy of all of us. A lot of the work is already done, but there's a whole load of tweakin' needed."

"I don't trust that old dude."

"Can't say I do either, but this takes us in the right direction." Conagher bent down and altered an adjustment screw with a jeweller's screwdriver, deep inside the arm.

"He's got an English accent." Scoutbot said authoritatively. "That means he's up to no good."

"This ain't the movies, Scoutbot." Dell replied, connecting two crocodile clips to the arm. It suddenly flexed, clenched its fingers and then fell flat again.

"Holy shit." Scoutbot said, taking a step back. "That thing is freaky."

"You're a robot." Engineer reminded him.

"Yeah, and that is like, a bit of one. How'd you feel if I brought a human arm in here and made it move about?"

"Medic did that once." Dell said thoughtfully, rubbing his chin.

"Yeah, and you fucked him up with your wrench for it, right?"

"Huh. Guess you have a point there."

"I hope you are making progress, Dr Conagher." Gray Mann's said softly as he entered the room. The man always spoke softly. Scoutbot felt he was fucking creepy and that was the God's honest truth. Sure, the clone-thing was all kinds of nasty, all the Violets knew that, but this dude? Ten times worse. Scoutbot didn't like the way the old man looked at him- as if he was just some dumb machine. And hardhat couldn't even see just how bad he was. "You are behind schedule. A long way behind."
I gave you six months to develop the Pyro and Heavybots."

"Your schedule, not mine." Conagher replied easily. "It'll take as long as it takes. It'd help if I had access to the memory system at TF industries, o'clock."

"We've discussed this, Dr Conagher." Gray replied, folding his hands behind his back. "They don't need those memories, or that level of intelligence. That is what causes the problems with the clones. Keep them simple, and we avoid rebellions and other problems of that nature. We avoid complications."

"Aww, man." Scoutbot whined. "But I could do with some company! You know how boring it gets when you humans are all asleep, or eating, or stuff? Fucking. Dull."

As always the old man ignored Scoutbot, like he was just some machine. If he could have done, he'd have frowned and stuck his tongue out at Mann, but no tongue, no eyebrows. Eh, he was too old to act like some kid anyway.

"Which model is this?" Gray asked curiously, picking up the arm and turning it over and over in his thin hands.

"Heavybot. Or, it will be once I'm done. It's pretty gosh-darn hard making it capable to handle the high torsion stress of holding that mini..."

"How long until it is ready?"

"Three more months?" Conagher hazarded. "Give or take."

Gray gave a short nod and started to walk out, but then stopped and looked back with a thin smile. "Ohh I forgot to mention. Your old team was looking for you. The Sniper, I think it was. He was dealt with."

Engineer looked up suddenly. "'Dealt with?'"

"Do I hear concern in your voice?" Mann said patronisingly. "They are no longer your allies. Once I captured him, he was...persuaded...to tell me all I wanted to hear."

Engineer's hand gripped tightly onto the tiny screwdriver. "You...is he...?"

"Before he died, he told me that TF Industries has a price on your head. All the Violet team has been scrambled. The order: shoot to kill. They don't even want you alive. What a good thing you're safe here, hmm?" Without another word, he walked off. Scoutbot could hear Dell's breathing, harsher and faster than normal. Once the door closed, the screwdriver dropped from his hand. It hit the floor with a soft, musical tinkle.

"Damn." He said softly. "Goddamn it. Damn, damn, damn."

"Shit. Fuck. Sniper's...like, damn." Scoutbot spluttered. "But...they were tryin' to kill us? That's harsh, real harsh."

To Scoutbot's surprise and horror, Engineer took his goggles off, and wiped a tear from his eye. He sat down in resignation, and gave a shaky sigh. When he spoke, he suddenly sounded old and tired. "How'd I get into this, Scoutbot? Seems everywhere I go, it's the same 'ol story. Who's on the right side? Where're the good guys? Where's the hero who does the right thing?"

"The only good guy I know is right in front of me." Scoutbot said firmly. "And you know what?
The world stinks. Always has done. You said it yourself, it's not like the movies. Here, in the real world, the good guy always loses, 'cos he's a sucker. I learnt that, out on the streets. Out there, you learn fast, or you die."

"Are you saying I'm gonna lose?" Conagher asked querulously. "Are you saying I'm a sucker?"

"Hell no. What I'm saying is: Don't be a sucker. You can play it smart. You're fucking smart, the smartest, so act it."

Dell Conagher nodded slowly. He knew Scoutbot was right. He had trusted, he had hoped, and it had never worked out. It was time to assume the worst from everyone. Trust no one, hope for nothing. He picked up his wrench and his robotic hand curled around its familiar metal.

Having good intentions wasn't enough. He had always been trapped in this stupid war, and now he knew it. All he could do was continue working on these robots, but now he'd use all his brain power to be as ruthless, devious and cunning as any man could be.

After all, he'd always been good at learning new skills.

In Chapter Fifteen: Jemima Cordes meets up with the mysterious Gerhardt Weiss- and turns his life upside down.
"Doctor Weiss will..."

The door banged open, making the whole rickety house shake and the doctor strode out, looking furious. Jemima looked up with a bright smile. He had lost weight since she'd last seen him, and he looked somewhat pale and sickly, but oh yes, he was definitely the man she was looking for.

"Miss Carrere, vhere is zhis..."

"Gerhardt, my darling!" Jemima rushed over and threw herself into his arms. She briefly heard his breath rattling in his chest before the man startled and fell back a step. "I've missed you so much. Why did you run away from me? I thought you loved me!"

"Get off me!" Weiss snarled, pushing her arms away from him. "Is zhis some attempt at blackmail? Who zhe hell are you?"

His assistant was giving the doctor a suspicious glare, and he sighed suddenly, clearing his throat and pulling briefly at his collar. "Get in my room and ve vill discuss zhis."

"Thank you so much." She said, giving him a charming smile. He scowled and gestured impatiently, and she stepped into a long, narrow room that had been turned into a surgery. The walls were painted white, and cupboards filled with pointed metal instruments lined the walls. A white-sheeted stretcher dominated the room, but the most unusual part of the room's decor was the strange contraption that hung from the ceiling. It was festooned with wires and cooling fins that glowed with a slightly green-tinted light. A nozzle suspended on a joint was attached to the machine by two thick rubber tubes. The whole thing hummed slightly. Jemima nodded to herself in satisfied recognition.

The doctor closed the door behind her and then threw himself into a wobbly wooden chair behind a desk, flicking a hand at her to do the same. He coughed and rubbed his throat briefly before pinning
Jemima with a venomous glare.

"So," He said abruptly. "What is all this nonsense?"

"I've been looking for you for a long time." She replied, folding her hands neatly in her lap. "You sure weren't easy to find. Seems the locals wanted to keep you hidden. You've earned a lot of no questions answered."

"I am owed many favours." He muttered, still glaring at her.

"Some folks might go questioning the morals o' what you do." Jemima commented idly, examining her fingernails.

"Zhey are not zhe ones vith large families and no food. So are you just someone come to lecture me about my terrible vays, hmm?" He shook his head dismissively and stifled a soft cough. "If zhe women didn't come here, zhey vould go somewhere else-and most likely not survive zhe procedure. Not a pleasant vay to die. And my prices are reasonable."

"No lectures today." Jemima replied with a shrug. "I didn't go to all the trouble of bribing those neighbours o' yours just to question your standards."

"Bribes?" Weiss' high forehead wrinkled in puzzlement before he snorted derisively. "You have a lot to learn about making money from blackmail."

"I'm not here to make money." She replied. "I just wanted to find you. You're looking well, better than I expected."

"I have no idea what you mean." He replied stiffly, knitting his fingers together and glaring at her.

"Oh, you do. I know so much about you, Gerhardt Heinrich Weiss. More than anyone else in this city." She paused thoughtfully. "Except maybe one other."

"I very much doubt that. Now, I suggest you leave before I..."

"How's your throat?" She asked idly, fishing around in a pocket.

"What?! How do you kn..." He stopped suddenly and stood up, looking down at her threateningly. "None of your business."

"Oh Doctor, you're not very good at this, are you?" She took a slim silver case out of her pocket.

"Out. Now." He grabbed her arm firmly and pulled her to her feet.

"May I say two final things?" She asked, looking directly into his eyes. "You'll want to hear them."

"Go on." Weiss didn't let go of her and his grip remained tight.

"Firstly," She said, her smile widening. She had to admit, she was enjoying this. "Does the phrase 'Twenty-Nine-C' mean anything to you?"

"Gottverdammt!" He suddenly pushed her away from him in horror and anger. "Who are you?! Who sent you?!"

"And secondly," She continued sweetly, flicking open the silver case to reveal a row of Gitanes, "Would you like a cigarette?"
"You!" He hissed, reaching for the nearest metal implement. "Sie...Sie...Hurensohn Schweinebacke! Warum kannel Sie nicht verpissen?"

"Such dreadful language, Docteur." Violet Spy's disguise fizzled and he lit a cigarette unconcernedly. "And that is a spatula. I suspect it would not do much damage."

"How dare you just walk in here?!!" Medic shouted, his voice cracking and going hoarse. He took a laboured, wheezing breath. "How dare you? Where the Hell did you get that disguise?!" He tried to grab Spy's collar, but Spy easily sidestepped him. The German paused and coughed slightly, panting for breath.

"Please, Docteur, hear me out before you kill me." Violet Spy said, holding his hands up placatingly. "I pose no threat to you, I swear it."

Medic made a growling noise in his throat and suddenly called out. "SERGEI!"

"Who-" An elemental force suddenly slammed him against the door, making the entire house shudder. Spy looked up and found himself staring at a towering and furious Russian.

"Ublyudok! Ya ubyu tebya medlenno dlya togo, chto vy sdelali!"

"Wait, wait, please. Look, I come here unarmed..." A large hand rummaged in his pocket and produced a small pistol. "...Except for that." He finished lamely. The other hand felt inside his jacket and produced a butterfly knife. "...Alright, alright, and that. Let us say I was unarmed in spirit, oui?" The weapons were tossed away in disgust.

"Give me a good reason why ve shouldn't just kill you." Medic snarled.

"Well, I did save your life, Twenty-Nine-C."

"Don't call me zhat, ever." The man spat. "You never saved my life. I owe you nothing."

"I kill him anyway." Heavy said, his voice even deeper than normal with anger. A hand started to tighten around Spy's neck.

"Listen, please!" Spy pleaded. "I am on your side! I was supposed to kill you! I disobeyed orders to keep you alive! You are supposed to be dead!" He felt the hand on his neck tighten slightly.

Medic's eyes were still narrowed in suspicion and he folded his arms, but he suspected he had bought a few minutes to explain himself.

"Heavy, you read your Medic's journal- why was it intact? I wanted you to find it, Heavy. I realised..." Spy paused, struggling to come up with a suitable way to explain and painfully aware he was rapidly losing his usual poise due to the hand around his neck. His spine made a creaking noise. "Twenty-Nine-B was...extraordinary. More than...a clone! I had to...but he made me think. His last words...I want to help you. I am here to help!"

"Leetle man is speaking nonsense." Heavy growled, his hand tightening again. "He dies now."

"Using the clones is wrong," Spy wheezed. Spots were starting to form in front of his eyes as the great hand cut off his blood supply to his head. "I...left. Not...a Violet now. Price...on my head...too. Swear it. Fugitive...just...like..." His vision was going grey and the blood sang in his ears. A hand fumbled for his disguise kit and he pressed a button with tingling fingers, hoping it was the right one. He forced one final deep breath into his lungs...
Jemima Cordes' scream rang out, and Miss Carrere rushed in to see Mr Cherny throttling a heavily pregnant African-American woman with Dr Weiss looking on approvingly.

Unsurprisingly, she started screaming as well.

"Elise, zhis is not what it looks like..." Medic tried to explain as Heavy dropped the disguised Spy hurriedly.

Spy covered his face with his hands to hide his expression and made his shoulders shake. Considering he had just almost been strangled to death, it was not as difficult as he would have liked.

"I thought...I thought he cared!" He wailed, his disguised voice going high and hysterical. "How could he? I love him!"

Elise Carerre put her arms around his shoulders and whispered something soothing before yelling again, for police, neighbours, help, anyone. There were answering angry shouts, and fists pounded on the door before it burst open.

"Gottverdamme!" Medic hissed. As Spy looked up, the furious German pointed a finger at him. "I vill get you for zhis."

"What's happening here?" A deep male voice boomed out.

"Did you hear that? He attacked this poor woman!" Elise spluttered, her arms tightening protectively around Spy's shoulders. "They tried to kill her!"

"You commie bastard!" A hand grabbed at Heavy, but he seized the man's wrist and pushed him back with such force he smashed through the cheaply built wall.

"Get them!" More people poured in. "Murderers!"

"Doktor, is time to go." Heavy said, and without waiting for agreement, he grabbed Medic's collar and yanked him out of the back door of the green house and sprinted down the street, dragging the bewildered doctor behind him in one hand, and punching his way through with the other. He heard Medic's doves cooing in confusion as they fled.

Spy heard footsteps chasing after the two men and tried to ascertain which way they were headed. Not that he needed to- the tracker he had put into Medic's pocket during that embrace would keep an eye on them nicely.

"Are you alright, honey?" Carrere's voice asked concernedly, pulling the disguised Spy determinedly out of the building and into the street. He could hear splintering wood behind him. "Come on, you come along to my ma's place, you can rest there."

"No, no, it's alright." Spy swallowed and looked up bravely with a trembling smile. "It was a shock, that's all. I'll be fine."

There was a sudden alarmed shout inside the green house and the smell of smoke. Carrere's dark eyes widened with shock. "Oh no...The gas cylinders!" The woman grabbed Spy in a surprisingly strong grip and pulled her away just as firmly Heavy had done with Medic. She broke into a run, pulling Spy along behind her. He heard the crackling of flames behind him, and the two of them broke into a sprint as a sickeningly loud boom thumped into the sky, followed by calls, screams and shouts. A corner of a window box shot past Spy and hit a tree in front of him, scattering white geranium petals and leaves.
The woman and the man disguised as a woman slowed down and looked back, panting for breath. Elise gave a laugh that was half a sob.

"Well, looks like I need a new job." She turned to look at the woman she had rescued...

...and found Jemima Cordes had vanished into thin air.

**In Chapter Sixteen: Violet Spy catches up with the two renegade clones and tries to strike a bargain with them-or, at least, convince them not to kill him.**

*Translations:*

*Sie...Sie...Hurensohn Schweinebacke! Warum kannen Sie nicht verpissen? -* You son-of-a-bitch pig's dick! Why can't you just piss off? *(German has some wonderful insults)*

*Ubyudok! Ya ubyu tebya medlenno dlya togo, chto vy sdelali! -* Bastard! I'll kill you slowly for what you did!
Two blocks away, Heavy and Medic had finally lost their pursuers when the explosion rang out. Medic sank to his knees with a wheezing groan.

"Ach, du liebe Gott..." He moaned, hands clutching at his curly blonde hair in exasperation. His three doves, plus a white and brown speckled newcomer who had mysteriously joined his flock, fluttered around him anxiously. "I can't believe he found us. Scheiße, he has ruined everyzhing. Wertlos Fettbacken!"

"I think our house just exploded." Heavy said thoughtfully, hunkering down to look at the doctor. "Is Doktor alright?"

"Ja, same as usual." Medic replied impatiently, waving a hand in irritation and stifling a cough. "Gah! I was so close. Now ve shall have to move and start again."

"Plenty of other cities in United States." Heavy commented.

"No matter where we go, he will find us." Medic replied. He gave a gulping chuckle. "Perhaps we should emigrate."

"I am not running from leetle Spy." Heavy said in disgust, folding his large arms.

"Agreed. Ve find him, ve kill him."

"You think he really left Violet Team?"

"Ha, nein. You?"

"Nyet, not for minute."

Heavy offered Medic a hand and pulled him to his feet. Over the last few months, the doctor had
stayed sick, but apparently not got any worse. New Orleans had worked out well for them; they had blended in as best as a German and a Russian could in America. Contrary to what Spy thought, the doctor had had a variety of different patients; not just desperate women but also bullet wounds, stabbings, various ailments picked up in unfortunate places...anything that the person would rather the authorities did not know about. It had been dirty work but it paid well. Heavy had worked nights in the rougher local bars, preventing drunken fights. They had saved quite a sum.

In the late afternoons and early evenings, Medic stopped work to use his medigun on himself for a while and they would meet up and discuss ideas and plans. Although Heavy didn't really understand the dials and numbers on the gun, he had noticed that Medic had slowly increased the gas dosage as time went on. It was now getting close to the highest dosage, but it was still keeping the doctor's symptoms under reasonable control. Heavy worried, but kept silent, knowing that the doctor would just scold him if he made a fuss. The man already knew he was living on borrowed time, after all. He faced it with a stoicism and cold determination that Heavy couldn't help but admire.

Their time in hiding had been...pleasant, in an odd way. No regular deaths or getting shot at, although he did miss using Sasha every day, and he missed the RED team more than he had expected to. He had got to know the BLU Medic a lot better and had found out just how eerily similar he was to Gustav. Or, he supposed it was entirely expected he would be similar; perhaps the strange part was their little differences. BLU Medic was even more highly strung, prone to manic fits of laughter at the oddest times, but he was also somewhat quieter and more self-contained, less social. Most of the time, though, he could barely tell him apart from his dearest deceased friend and the man would gesture in a certain way, or say a particular thing and he'd be so like Gustav it'd almost physically hurt. Even after however many months it was, he still missed Gustav every single day.

Then, the day had come when it had happened. They had met up in the afternoon, and Gerhardt had mentioned how he had read in Nature that some scientists had crystallised RNA. Apparently, this was an important thing, for some reason. Heavy had just nodded, and Medic had talked...and talked... and talked. It had felt soothing, familiar and just so right. Too right. He had had to keep reminding himself that this was not Gustav. Never would be. He could not let himself get too fond of a dying man.

Ultimately though, he had come to trust and even like the man who had once poisoned him simply for the sake of convenience. He hoped that Medic- Gerhardt as he had chosen to call himself- had come to trust him, too. After all, they were allies in a war nobody even knew they were fighting, and they shared a joint secret.

"Vell, zhis is a disaster." Medic said in resignation. "Ve have lost everyzhing. All our money and equipment was in zhat house. I..." He trailed to a halt.

"What?"

"I believe it is entirely possible I vill not live long enough to save up for treatment now." He continued with a sigh.

"I am not giving up. You are being pessimist." Heavy said.

"Not zhis argument again! I am being realistic." Medic snapped. "Even vizh a medigun, which I no longer have, I doubt I have more zhan a few monzh left. I'm sorry, my friend, you may have to carry on our cause vizhout me soon. Ach, zhis is so inconvenient!"

Heavy opened his mouth to try and think of something to say to that, when they heard more shouting. Medic heard it too, his head snapping around as he listened. They were too far away to
make our words, but it sounded angry and dangerous.

"And now we have angry mob after us." Heavy stated. "Time to run again."

"Ah, my own angry mob! I always wanted one of those." Medic said with a slightly desperate smile. "It's something of a family tradition."

A rusty brown station wagon suddenly screeched to a halt in front of them. The passenger door was flung open and Violet Spy called over to the two astonished fugitives.

"There is a large lynch mob headed this way." He said urgently. "Get in if you want to live."

"How did you..."

"No time for that!" Spy cried, gesturing impatiently.

"I am not going with little coward man." Heavy snarled.

"Neither am I. I think the mob is more trustworthy."

"Look, I apologise, this reunion has not worked out quite as I intended." Violet Spy said exasperatedly. "So let us forget trust and try it this way: come with me, and I will tell you where I have hidden Sasha and your medigun."

"WHAT?" Heavy bellowed in fury. "You kidnapped Sasha?!!"

"I heard the commie, over there!" A shout rang out. "The Nazi will be with him!"

"Not precisely." Spy replied in irritation. "You are outnumbered, no matter how good a fighter you are. When they get here they will rip you to shreds. So, you can either stay here and die or get in this car, do you understand?"

"Give me Sasha. Now." Heavy growled.

"Oh, I don't have it here." Spy said loftily. "I am no fool. I can take you to it."

"Heavy," Medic said quietly, "I need my medigun. I'm sorry, but I, at least, have to go with him."

"Chyort!" Heavy spat, getting into the front passenger seat while Medic climbed into the back.

"Bien!" Spy said and without a word of warning, pushed his foot hard down on the accelerator, and the ancient vehicle roared off down the road, leaving the mob far behind.

They travelled in furious silence for a few blocks with Heavy and Medic both glaring at Spy balefully before Spy cleared his throat.

"So, here we are at last." He said. "My plan is that we leave the city and stay at a motel I know that asks no questions. It is quite pleasant."

"Tell me where Sasha is." Heavy said in a low growl.

"I see you are not to be distracted today." Spy said lightly. "Very well, I will tell you where I have stored your weapons—once I extract a promise from you. You must swear that you will never do me harm."

"Very well, I swear it. Now give me my medigun." Medic said behind him.
"Oh, docteur, not you. You would break such an oath as easily as breathing." Spy paused, noting the German’s slight wheezing. "Or rather, as easily as breathing used to be for you."

"Vorlaut Arschloche." Medic muttered.

"I want Heavy to promise. Swear you will do me no harm, or let Medic do me harm, and I will tell you where you can find your weapons."

Heavy paused and tried to think like a twisted, devious Spy for a moment.

"I only promise if Spy does not two-cross us."

"Double-cross." Medic corrected.

"I not harm you, if you not harm us." Heavy stated. "If you try to hurt Gerhardt, I twist your arm off and feed it to you."

"That is only fair." Spy replied with a shrug. He suddenly swerved left into a side street. Wooden warehouses surrounded the car and he pulled up in front of one of them. "In here. I have a couple of other things to show you as well." He got out of the car and motioned to his two passengers to follow him.

"Get behind me, Doktor." Heavy commanded.

"Sergei, if he wanted us dead he could have just left us to the mob." Medic said tiredly. "You are not my bodyguard."

Spy undid a padlock and sauntered into the warehouse in that smug way of his that made Heavy want to punch him. The small building was filled with mounds of boxes and a few tarpaulins; in one corner sat a stack of familiar-looking blue and red briefcases. The air was still, as if no one had entered for a long time.

"I will admit this is not your original minigun, Heavy- or should I call you Sergei?"

"Nyet. Only friends call me that." Heavy said firmly.

"Hmm. How about enemies?" Spy asked thoughtfully.

"They call me nothing because they are dead."

Medic snorted quietly with mirth.

"Yes, well, as I said this is not the original Sasha, but I presume you have figured out that the gun you knew as Sasha is as much a copy as you are, non? She is the standard minigun issued to Heavy clones. Every scratch is identical. Admirable craftsmanship, I feel."

"Just give me my gun." Heavy said flatly.

Spy peeled back a tarpaulin with a flourish. "Voila!"

Heavy inspected Sasha carefully and was oddly disappointed to note that he truly could not tell her apart from the minigun he had hauled about for so many years. He ran his large hands over her barrels, feeling the cool metal under his fingertips. He searched her carefully for any new scratches, but the only ones missing were those that had appeared recently in the battles at Teufort. However, he knew this was not his Sasha, and he felt a brief pang of grief in his heart. There are more important things right now. He told himself sternly.
"Hnn. It will do."

"Your medigun, Docteur." Spy held out the backpack and gun with some difficulty, his thin arms trembling.

Medic frowned and carefully checked over the proffered equipment. He looked at the dial on the side and gave a sigh of relief.

"Yes, it has a full tank of gas. I believe you can make more with the correct resources?"

"Ja, zhe ingredients are not difficult to get. Oxygen, water, malic acid, adenosine triphosphate..."

"Please, do not continue, I may die of boredom." Spy said holding his gloved hand up. "I can provide money; you get whatever you need to make it. Now, I have a gift for you both. Over here, if you please?" The skinny man walked over to a dusty filing cabinet and handed a couple of manila envelopes to the two men.

Heavy frowned suspiciously and opened his, just as he heard an astonished curse from Medic. He looked down at the documents. A birth certificate and passport bearing the name 'Sergei Mikhailovich Cherny'.

"Are zhese genuine?" Medic asked.

"Of course not!" Spy replied with a snort. "The proper question should be 'Will they work?', to which the answer is yes...almost."

"Almost?" Heavy asked suspiciously.

"You do not trust me. I do not trust you. So...let us strike a bargain, Nine-H and Twenty-Nine-C. We work together, and I will have the final inking added to those forgeries to make them utterly indistinguishable from legal documents. Do you want to truly become full individuals, with all the rights and freedom that entails?"

"Mikhailovich?" Heavy asked.

"Ah, that is just my little joke." Spy said with a smile. He reached into his pocket and got out his cigarette case.

"Spy will not smoke." Heavy stated firmly. Spy looked at him questioningly and then at Medic. He shrugged.

"So, do we have a deal, Sergei Mikhailovich Cherny and Gerhardt Heinrich Weiss?"

"For now." Medic replied, raising his hand to his mouth and coughing slightly. "It's not like we have much choice. What I want to know is what you stand to gain from this."

"Can I suggest we leave this city? Then I will tell you everything." Spy said. "As for what I can gain, that is simple." The man turned away, but Heavy heard him mutter a final word under his breath:

"Redemption."

In Chapter Seventeen: Back to Teufort, and questions are being asked. In particular: What's wrong with the Red Spy, and who knows more than they should have done?
Translations:

Wertlos Fettabken! -Worthless dirtbag!

Vorlaut Arschloche. -Cheeky arsehole (have you noticed all these insults seem to be directed at Spies?)

Mikhailovich - Son of Mikhail
Author's Note: We have a new comic! The take-home lessons from it that I could see were: Soldier and Zhanna are the cutest couple ever; Sniper has had horrible luck with family; Heavy is smarter than he looks; Scout won't accept who his father is; and Medic is secretly working for the Administrator- and having fun with TF Classic team's giblets in the meantime.

Some things I wonder though...

a) In one panel, there is a budgie attacking an eagle. Valve tends to put a lot of depth into their lore- is this a metaphor? The eagle has been used repeatedly to represent Gray Mann- he even stands in a raptor-like pose- so, who does the budgie represent? Foreshadowing, or throwaway detail that I'm overthinking? I suspect the latter, actually. Ah well.

b) If the Administrator is that sick even with Engineer's help, what state is Gray in by now?

c) Without any Australium, has Saxton Hale secretly become as weak as the other Australians?

Anyway, those of you who hated chapter fourteen may now rejoice: this chapter has Sniper in it. Two Snipers, in fact. Enjoy! Can I stop paying for bodyguards now?

Artwork is here: http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Seventeen-Living-With-The-Big-Lie-486516861. It's angst time!

Something was rotten in the base of Teufort.

All the mercenaries, RED and BLU both, knew it. After the defection of the two renegade mercenaries, nothing felt quite the same. The same thoughts bounced through every single head:

Something is wrong. Something is not what it seems.

Some held secrets, unaware that others were just as burdened. Some, like the BLU Pyro, became quiet and withdrawn. Others, such as the RED Scout, pushed themselves harder and harder to try to forget, sprinting hundreds of laps around the base every day.

Violet Sniper, who was far less dead than the Violet Engineer had been led to believe, watched Teufort from his rocky nest, squashing black widows, filling jars and aiming his parabolic microphone whenever he saw someone speak. There were so many untold stories down there, but surely the saddest had to be the RED Spy's. Sniper had been the first Violet to witness the final end that so many of the clones met, and he suspected he had also been the first to realise the horrible crime they had committed in allowing themselves to be cloned. The RED Spy was almost the longest serving mercenary of any currently in Teufort, and he was nearing the end of his usefulness. Respawn was miraculous, but how long could a body stand being murdered and resurrected several
times a day? Forever, on the drawing board, but in practice it was only a few years before the person's nervous system fried and their mind unravelled and finally broke under the strain. He had seen Soldiers break down in tears, Medics faint at the sight of blood and Pyros walk into their fires. Worst of all had been that BLU Sniper at Sawmill, his exact double, unable to aim because his hands shook so much. Violet Sniper had planted a bullet in his brains without hesitation. And now, here at Teufort, the RED Spy was falling, and he could do nothing to stop it. He turned the microphone towards the RED infirmary.

"Don't you care about your long-term health, dummkopf?" RED Medic was saying, glaring accusingly at the slight man laying on the bed.

"I care more about my short-term well-being." Spy replied, gritting his teeth. Sweat beaded his brow. "The pills helped, for a while. Now I need something stronger, that is all."

"Nein, that is not going to happen." Medic said firmly. He walked around the bed thoughtfully. "Zhis is very strange. How many were you taking?"

"Just the dosage you prescribed." Spy suddenly winced and clutched his stomach with a groan. "Bordel!"

"How many," Medic repeated, "Were you taking?"

"I felt the need to...supplement the dosage, as time went on." Spy admitted, rubbing his forehead with a clammy un-gloved hand. "I acquired more. It caused no problems."

"Rgh." Medic grunted in irritation. "And here we are."

"The delivery was late." Spy confessed. "I started to feel unwell, so oui, here we are. I just want another prescription."

"Zhe benzodiazepines are not supposed to cause dependence..." Medic said thoughtfully to himself. "Zhis is very strange, but I know what I see here. You are getting no more drugs from me."

"What?!" Spy cried in dismay. "But I need them to function!"

"You have become addicted, Spy. Zhat is why you are experiencing withdrawal." Medic said sternly. "You do seem rather prone to addictive behaviour."

"Nonsense." Spy replied, getting out his cigarette case. A long-fingered hand neatly plucked it from his shaking fingers.

"As I said, prone to addictive behaviour." The German said, examining the case idly before returning it. "One zthing at a time, zthough. I shall inform RED zhat you are on sick leave for a week, at least."

"But I am not ill..." Spy insisted.

"I say you are." Medic stated. "Not only is zhere zhe withdrawal, but you are obviously suffering from anxiety, perhaps even nervous exhaustion. Since zhe drugs have failed, ve shall vait until you have recovered from withdrawal, zhen look at electric shock zherapy...

"Absolutely not." Spy said, clenching his teeth and swallowing.

"Hrm." Medic muttered, tapping his front teeth thoughtfully with a scalpel. Violet Sniper winced as he watched it through his scope. "I wonder... I am going to tell RED you need sick leave due to an adverse reaction to medication I prescribed. It is mostly true, ja?"
"I suppose I should thank you for that. I share your opinion of our erstwhile leadership." Spy sat up and rubbed his forehead with his forefingers. "However, another prescription..."

"Nein." Medic said. "You stay here and rest. If there is any hint that you intend to sneak out and obtain more clonazepam, I will inform the entire team that you have become a drug addict. I think your sense of pride is stronger than your cravings, ja?"

"Did you not swear, as part of the Hippocratic Oath, to keep the medical records of your patients confidential?"

"I consider it more of a suggestion than an oath." Medic replied with an idle shrug. "Sometimes, in order to obey one promise, another must be broken. I think keeping you from destroying your health takes preference."

"I will stay." Spy said shortly. "I give you my word."

"Sehr gut." Medic said with a satisfied nod. "You need rest. I will inform the team that you are unwell, and limit their access to the infirmary. Would you like someone to obtain your personal effects from your bedroom?"

"Sniper." Spy said, leaning back and closing his eyes. "Send Sniper."

Violet Sniper smiled slightly at that, and found himself briefly wondering what Violet Spy was up to right now. How long was it since his friend had given up on finding Engineer and gone AWOL? Six weeks, eight, maybe? He had no doubt Spy would turn up at some point. He always did.

He saw the Medic leave the infirmary, and after a short while recognised his own double enter. He made an irritated noise—didn't the RED Sniper know that that scrappy beard looked terrible on him? He looked like some crazy down-and-out. Still, that was not the Violet's problem.

"Wotcher mate. Th' Doc says you're crook." RED Sniper walked over and sat down by Spy's bed. "You look terrible. So, what's up?"

"Wish I knew, mon ami, truly I do." Spy replied, sitting upright with a groan. "Our esteemed quack is insisting on keeping me here for the next week, at least."

"Yeah?" Sniper said concernedly, his high forehead wrinkling. "It's more'n a visit from Huey and Ralph then."

"I confess I don't even know what that even means." Spy said, wrapping an arm around himself for comfort.

"Ne'mind." Sniper said. "So, let's cut the bollocks here: what's wrong?"

"I said I don't know."

"Yer a lousy liar for a Spy. What's wrong?"

"Do you not speak understand English? I said I do not know."

"What's wrong?" He said again.

"Mon dieu, you are annoying!" Spy said, rubbing his forehead with two fingers. "Medic said I need peace and quiet, not disgusting Australians pestering me, so why don't you give it a miss for once?"

"You're gonna tell me what's been eating you for the last few months. Don't think I haven't noticed. 
Not leaving you until I get an answer."

"Ah, merde." Spy sighed. "Truly, I don't even know! Sometimes...I feel like I am losing my mind. It feels like everything is about to go horribly wrong, as if there is some disaster, lurking, waiting to pounce. There is a pall of dread over me and it presses in further every day, darkening my thoughts. Every little sound makes me feel under threat, ceasefire or no. Before today I was coping, with... some help."

"Help?"

"Pills." Spy confessed, his voice getting quieter so that Violet Sniper had to turn up the gain on his microphone. The Frenchman shivered suddenly. "They long ago ceased to do anything but give me an hour or so of peace. And now...I have none left."

"Ah, bugger it." Sniper took a deep breath and let it go explosively. "You're a bloody idiot, you know that?"

"I had little choice." Spy replied, lying down again and staring at the ceiling hopelessly. He made a small keening sound in the back of his throat. "I just wish I knew why this is happening to me. What is wrong with me?"

"Perhaps nothing." RED Sniper replied, scratching his beard thoughtfully. "I've not told anyone this, but I reckon...there is something wrong here. Dead wrong."

Violet Sniper frowned in concern. He pressed his eye tightly to his scope.

"How do you mean?"

"Ages ago, back when we first moved to this base, during our very first battle, I was up on the balcony, and I saw something I won't forget." Sniper shifted uneasily and crossed his legs. "Could hardly believe my eyes."

"What? What did you see?"

"The BLU Medic and our Medic...they were the same person. Completely identical. I saw 'em next to each other, out by the bridge. Like they were twins."

_Bugger._ Violet Sniper thought.

"That's not possible." Spy replied quietly.

"I know what I saw." Sniper persisted. "And what happened after that? Respawn failed, Medic killed himself, poor bastard, and then a month after, that BLU Medic deserted, taking Heavy with him, for God knows what reason. See what I mean? Too many coincidences, that- and those two Medics right at the centre of it all. Something is wrong here, dead wrong. I haven't a bloody clue what, but we're trapped, right in the middle of it."

"Shut up you stupid wanker." Violet Sniper muttered to himself, glaring down his scope."Put a sock in it, right now. You never know who'll be listenin'." Apparently his RED clone was not telepathic, though.

"Maybe you saw something similar without realising it, and it left you all out o' sorts." RED Sniper continued. "S'my best guess."

"Mon dieu," Spy said softly, "Mon dieu. I do not even know what to think of that at all."
"Best to rest and get yerself clean before trying to figure it out, mate." Sniper stood and patted the man on his shoulder. "It'll be a rough week, but got to be done. Just...don't tell anyone what I said, right? Don't want 'em thinkin' I've gone doo-lally."

"Of course not. They would think me insane. And Sniper, kindly do not tell the team what I have told you today."

"Course not. Now you just rest, right? An' no more pills!"

Violet Sniper leaned away from the scope and clenched his jaw in concern. He hoped like hell that the Administrator hadn't been eavesdropping on that particular conversation. If she found out about it...

He shook his head and continued to watch the base, hoping that there would be no more surprises.

Twilight was falling over the lake-dotted plains of Louisiana by the time Violet Spy and his two begrudging guests left the outskirts of New Orleans. The flat landscape quickly became monotonous and Spy had always got bored easily. He had attempted to make conversation a few times, but the two clones had just glared at him, furious and silent. No doubt it would take quite some time to earn their trust. Perhaps he could arrange to save their lives in some dramatic and brave manner? No...that won't work. They would realise it was a ruse immediately.

A little of the last of the sunset behind them reflected pink onto the clouds as they drove north and Spy glanced in the mirror to take a look back at the view south. As he did so, he noticed with surprise that the BLU Medic had fallen asleep in the back seat. He wondered, briefly, if it was a tiny little grain of trust, but looking at the dark shadows around the doctor's eyes he quickly realised that trust had nothing to do with it.

"Your friend is not well, is he?" Spy commented.

Heavy was silent for a moment, before shifting slightly in his seat. "Nyet. He was due to go for first hospital tests this week. We had made enough money. Now he will miss it."

Violet Spy cursed silently. He would never, ever admit it, but he was beginning to realise that he had miscalculated, badly. Walking into Weiss' house and pretending to be a jilted lover had just been a bit of fun- he certainly had not intended to blow up their house and condemn Twenty-Nine-C to a slow death. Generally speaking, it was better not to sentence an ally to death- it tended to create ill feeling, and a dead person was rarely very good at intrigue.

"My official bank account is frozen, but I have money TF Industries does not know about. Once we have found a suitable place to stay, I will pay for any treatment he needs. It is the least I can do for...

Spy paused, realising that Heavy had quite the impressive list of grudges to bear. "...Everything." He finished lamely.

The large man was silent again.

"I am not a man of medicine, but my job does teach one a certain amount of practical biology." Spy continued. "I have never known a Medic clone develop this... particular ailment."

"You..." Heavy started to say in a low, angry voice.

"Yes, of course I know what his condition is. Cancer is a terrible, dreadful thing. I listened to many of your conversations, back in Teufort. It is...was...my job. The fact you are still alive is proof that I am on your side now." Spy replied, feeling an uncomfortable need to explain himself. "I wonder about
the diagnosis, though. One would think other Medics would have developed the same illness. It seems odd."

"Gerhardt says tests would have shown for sure but he was certain. Symptoms fitted too well."

"It must be quite a worry for you." Spy commented idly. It had long been a habit of his to fish for not just the usual information and intelligence a Spy collected, but also emotional data. On the surface, it did not seem as useful, but knowing what worries a person had, any phobias, or how they reacted to circumstances was vital. If Spy knew how a person thought, he could change it to suit his needs- or successfully disguise himself as that person. Anyway, he was naturally a nosey person.

Heavy just grunted softly and looked out of the window. Medic snorted and coughed and the large man's head whipped around to look at him, worry flitting briefly over his features, but the German just rubbed his throat and continued to sleep.

"You are quite protective of him." Spy said, trying yet again to make conversation.

"Hnn." Heavy said, not even looking at him.

"If we are to work together, I need to know how his illness affects him day-to-day. Otherwise, I may not recognise the signs if he were risking his health. Medic- the Violet Medic, that is- seems to have little common sense when it comes to his own physical limits. I assume Twenty-Nine-C is the same?"

"You will call him Doktor Weiss." Heavy stated firmly.

"As you wish... Mr Cherny."

There was another moment of silence. An ambulance raced past in the opposite direction, its sirens screeching.

"He uses medigun every day. It keeps him from getting too sick. He gets tired easily, especially when on run from angry mob. I think...he is more ill than he will admit." Heavy said. "He does not eat enough. He says it hurts to eat. I make him borscht and ukha as treat, is easy to swallow. He liked ukha best. Fish head sticking out made him laugh."

"That sounds...delicious." Spy replied politely. "Oh- I just remembered something else I wanted to ask you. I assume you would wish to share a room with Twe...Dr Weiss when we reach the motel, for safety's sake?"

"Da." Heavy stated. "You have separate room. We have locked door."

"Would you prefer a double bed or two singles?" He asked, in as casual a manner as he could.

Spy watched carefully out of the corner of his eye and saw Heavy's eyes widen and then narrow. One of his large hands clenched and flexed. His mouth opened and then closed.

"You..." The large man stumbled to a halt. "Two singles."

"Interesting," Spy replied, "So be it. For what it is worth, I am sorry for your loss."

Heavy snarled slightly, his upper lip lifting and showing his teeth briefly. He stared ahead at the darkening road.

Spy looked briefly into the mirror at the exhausted man in the back seat.
"Both of your losses." He muttered to himself, and drove into the night.

In Chapter Eighteen: RED Sniper isn't the only mercenary with secrets- what did BLU Pyro see?

_Ukha: A Russian speciality- a thin soup with fish. It's now considered a delicacy and served in restaurants. I spent a short time living in Siberia just after the fall of communism. It was a time of great poverty in the country, and I had the (dis)pleasure of eating the more traditional form of this dish: Take a thin barley broth, add an entire gutted fish of random species, then boil it until it falls apart. Eat and try not to notice if you find bits of fin or eyeball in your spoonful. This strikes me a dish Medic would adore!_
Clockwork Soldiers

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Hey, guess what? I'm internet famous! (This is the best sort of famous) I was looking through TV Tropes the other day, and 'You Need to Get A Head' is recommended there as a TF2 fanfic! Ooh it's all exciting! *bounce bounce* In other news, I may have drank too much coffee. Does it show?

My knowledge of Cantonese is pretty much non-existent, so if anyone wants to correct my language in this, please do.

Now let us continue with the story and see what BLU Pyro knows...

This chapter's artwork: http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Eighteen-Clockwork-Soldiers-487321309

BLU Pyro liked to watch Engineer work. He had spent many happy hours sat on a table, legs swinging freely, while his friend bent metal, tightened bolts or hammered at various contraptions. He made all sorts of things- not just the machines he used in battle, but tiny clockwork automatons, working model aeroplanes and even metal sculptures if he was feeling artistic. Pyro could tell when he was working particularly hard because his aura would flash and sparkle, giving off bright yellow arcs of electricity. Sometimes the arsonist would vaguely remember that the bright colours he saw weren't real, but he had long ago realised it didn't matter- they helped him understand a world that was noisy and baffling. The flashbacks and hallucinations were his constant friends. They didn't crowd him or make him feel anxious. They didn't care that he had to burn things to stay sane.

Right now, Engineer's aura was a softer yellow glow, supportive and helpful. He held up a long thin metal rod in a handheld clamp.

"Think you might enjoy this, Sparkie." He said, smiling lopsidedly. "Want to learn a li'l bit of Engineering?"

"I don't mind just watching." Pyro replied, looking down at his gloved hands.

"Oh, you'll like this." Engineer replied easily. At first, Spy had been the only person the team who had understood Pyro's speech, but Engineer had finally picked it up in the last few months. Like Spy, Engineer was kind to him and he enjoyed his company. He wondered if, one day, all the mercenaries would understand him. He hoped so. "This thing here is a shielded metal arc welder. It uses electricity to melt metal together, producin' a whole ton o' sparks while it does so. Want to give it a go?"

"What colour sparks?"

Engineer chuckled. "Not somethin' I ever considered before, but they're white, yellow or blue dependin' on the temperature."

"I could try." Pyro said uncertainly, wishing he could go back to simply watching.

"Well, it'd sure be handy to have some help around here." Engineer said with a grin. "Say, want to
practice on this?" He tapped a metal sculpture a few feet high. It looked a bit like Soldier, but was missing its arms. He handed Pyro a welding mask, and put one on himself. He then opened a window and turned on a large industrial fan.

"What's that for?"

"Just to make sure there're no nasty gasses or dust." Engineer said reassuringly. "I don't normally bother, but I know you got problems with that kinda thing. Don't worry, you'll enjoy it."

Engineer launched into an explanation of how the welder worked, and Pyro was surprised to find out it did not involve any gases- just electricity heating up two pieces of metal. The shorter man warned him that the metal Solder on the bench would have a current running through it. As he explained, Pyro watched with fascination as Engineer's head gained a halo of sparkling, crackling light. He startled when an arc of pure white zapped over to him and caught him on the shoulder.

"You got all that, Sparkie?" Engineer asked, swinging his welding mask down.

"I touch the electrode briefly to the join to start the arc," Pyro stated, tugging on the thick gloves, "And once the sparks start, I move it slowly down, moving the electrode inwards as it is burned up." _Burned up_. Maybe this would not involve his beloved dancing flames, but watching things turn into ash was purifying. When things burned, they vanished into dust and Pyro was set free.

"Do you want give it a go?"

“Hou, ngo wui si haa.”

“Let me see... that means ‘yes’, right?” Engineer asked with a grin. “Knowin’ you is an education, for sure.”

"You know so much," Pyro replied shyly. "You know more than I do."

Engineer laughed easily. "Not when it comes to exothermic reactions and Chinese!"

"Cantonese." Pyro corrected.

"Sure thing, fella, whatever. So, here ya go. See if you can attach the arm to that rod comin' out of the shoulder there."

Engineer handed over the welding electrode. Pyro cautiously touched it to the arm joint, and the light flared. Behind the darkened mask, it was just a bright dot but the colour was amazing- a bright blue-white like the sun on the hottest day in a Hong Kong summer. The electrode vibrated under his hand as the sparks spat and fled. He struggled to hold the wobbling end steady, but the metal of the sculpture's arm magically joined its body as if it had always been held together. Pryo started to chuckle in delight, seeing his fire create rather than destroy. He stopped, and admired his work.

"See, told you you'd like it." Engineer said approvingly. "Now you gotta give it a good steel brushin', then you can do the other arm."

He diligently cleaned the joint and then started on the other arm, sealing it onto the body in just the same way. When he had finished, he put the model Soldier on the workbench proudly.

"Very good!" Engineer said enthusiastically. "Now, watch this." He took two crocodile clips attached to a car battery and attached it to the sculpture's back. To Pyro's amazement, the little figure marched down the workbench. It was slightly jerky, but the movement of the sculpture's legs matched their own Soldier's gait perfectly. Pyro giggled with delight, clapping his hands together
"A clockwork Soldier!" He exclaimed happily. "Just like us."

"Just like us?" Engineer repeated, pushing his goggles up on his forehead and looking puzzled. "What do ya mean?"

"Nothing." Pyro said hastily. "Nothing at all."

"C'mon, Sparky, what do you mean?" Engineer smiled encouragingly. "We talking religion here? I've got no problem with a fella havin' beliefs. I was raised Christian myself, though it don't sit well with the sciences, I tell ya."

"Not a belief." Pyro said. "I'm...I shouldn't tell you what I saw."

"What did you see?"

Pyro stayed silent, cursing himself for slipping up. Engineer was his friend- he didn't want to see him harmed.

"You can tell me, son. Won't go any farther. What did you see?"

"You don't want to know." He said softly, looking down at his hands. Tiny bits of metal from the Soldier sparkled on his gloves.

"Now you got me real curious and that's a fact." Engineer said, his forehead wrinkling.

"When the RED team arrived, in the first battle," Pyro said. "Did you see it?"

"Still all at sea here, son. I didn't see nothing out o' the ordinary."

"When the battle started, I ran across the bridge. I saw their Medic give the RED Demo an ubercharge, and I airblasted the RED Medic into the water and set the Demo on fire. He died quickly." BLU Pyro said softly, trying to keep the mental pictures inside his head. They insisted on projecting themselves in front of his eyes like a cinema screen. He could see it now- the Demo and Medic surrounded by a shining shell of red energy, utterly invulnerable. The RED Medic's sadistic grin changing into recognition as BLU Medic ran up and healed Pyro. The scream of fury and pain as the RED healer hit the barricade and plunged into the filthy water of the creek, his ubercharge wasted and his spine fractured. His height. His black curly hair. His face...

"They were the same person, the two Medics, and in that moment, they knew it." Pyro finished.

"Hot damn." Engineer said quietly. "You sure?"

"They could not handle it. That's why RED Medic took his life; that is why BLU Medic ran away. I don't think they could cope with the knowledge. The..." Pyro stopped, aware that he couldn't explain how he had been told the rest of it by the spirits and figments of his own special little world. "I think we are all copies, sent here to fight."

"But..." Engineer stopped short and blinked. "Their Engineer sure looks like me. Same accent, too. Bit shorter. And with respawn...it's possible, only too possible. And our Medic, he dyed his hair..."

"To look less like his copy." Pyro nodded. "To feel unique."

"It wasn't enough, was it?" Engineer murmured thoughtfully. "He was never the most stable- Hell, none of us are- but those last few weeks- he was losin' it. Losin' it bad. Damn. Poor fella."
"This is what we were made for, our Tao." Pyro stated. "This is where I should be, I think. I accept it. He didn't."

"Hot damn." Engineer repeated, wiping his brow with his arm. "Better keep this to yerself, Sparky. I mean, I can't say I like it much myself, but imagine if, say, Soldier or Demo found out- they'd go off like pop-rockets. You think anyone else knows?"

Pyro shook his head solemnly.

"That's good, I guess. If everyone found this out, it'd be chaos." Engineer paused, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "You've given me a lot to think about."

"I'm sorry." Pyro said, hanging his head in shame.

"Ah heck, you've done nothin' wrong, son."

"Can I keep the metal Soldier?"

Engineer's worried expression faded into a smile. "Sure thing."

Up in his nest, Violet Sniper snarled into the night and made a deep grumbling noise in his throat, switching off the parabolic microphone.

"Ah, piss."

He ground his teeth together in frustration. Perhaps the Administrator would forgive one slip, but never two. He had better contact Spy, fast. It was time for them to take action, before it was too late.

It was just a matter of time. Teufort was going to fall.

"So, you have us here, and now you have a lot of explaining to do." Medic glared venomously at the Violet Spy before turning his attention back to the medigun and flicking it on.

He gave a grunt of surprise at the red colour of the twist of light that latched onto him from the nozzle, but he couldn't help but sigh in relief as the pain in his neck lessened and breathing became easy again. It was slightly disturbing how unpleasant being a mere few hours late with his usual treatment had been. His condition was getting worse. There would come a time, soon, when the medigun would no longer be enough. Gottverdammt, he had been so close to getting surgery!

"It better be good explain." Heavy rumbled threateningly, sitting down on the bed opposite Medic's in their cheap motel room.

"Very well." Violet Spy replied, reaching into his jacket pocket and then stopping.

"Smoke if you vish." Medic said with a resigned hand wave. "I doubt it vill make much difference at zhis point."

"Gerhardt is being..."

"A realist." The doctor snapped. "It doesn't mean I am giving up."

"I think I can wait a little while longer." Spy said, slowly taking his hand out of his pocket. "I could be instantly killed for what I am going to tell you now but considering I have already done enough to earn a messy death at the hands of the Violets, I cannot say this bothers me hugely."
"Get talking." Heavy said.

He paused for a moment and then took off his gloves, removed his jacket and finally twitched the balaclava off his head with a sigh. The Frenchman's shoulders slumped and Medic couldn't help but stare. Without the mask, the suave, mysterious and obnoxiously smug Spy was just a slight, middle-aged man rapidly losing a fight with male-pattern baldness. Medic could have easily snapped him in two like a twig. The skinny man smiled sourly at Medic's reaction.

"So, no more secrets."

And the Violet Spy began to talk.

In Chapter Nineteen: Violet Spy tells his tale, and Heavy and Medic get into an argument.
A Hopeful Pact

Chapter Notes

Author's note: Hey, guess who? Yes, it's Sunday so it's me again. First of all, a special thanks to Kageshi Makira for suggesting better Cantonese phrasing for Pyro, last chapter. I was pretty amazed to find out that my frantic googling of the language had produced something that even made sense, truth be told! Apparently it did, but was rather formal and stiff sounding. Thanks, Makira, I owe you a shiny.

A lot of people were surprised at my idea of a Chinese Pyro, but I'd always vaguely thought Pyro was Chinese. After all, the Chinese invented fireworks! I guess it's simply my headcanon. I hope that Pyro's real origins or appearance are ever revealed- I think he's far more fun as a mystery. Interestingly enough, Jjump started writing her story 'Scar Tissue', about a Japanese Pyro, about the same time I wrote my first story here. Funny how that happens. Her story is well-worth a read, although sadly not complete (hints and prods).

Now let us continue. As always, the artwork is at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Nineteen-A-Hopeful-Pact-487952976

Time passed in the hotel room. The clock ticked quietly, but the main sound was Spy's voice.

He told them about Redmond and Blutarch Mann, and their endless war. He told them about the stalemate. He explained what would happen if one of the two sides won, and how the Administrator and her predecessors had kept the peace for over a century, allowing the world to prosper (or fight its own dreadful wars, he added bitterly). He told them about the problem of finding enough mercenaries to keep the Gravel Wars contained, and how Project Pelargonia had been dreamt up by Medic and Engineer as a final, desperate solution to a terrible problem.

"So, you are saying zhat...all zhis, zhe use of clones, the alteration of zhe genomes...was my idea?"

Medic asked in dismay.

"Non." Spy said, spreading his hands. "It was Gustav Daecher's."

"But..."

"You are not him." Spy stated.

"I know zhat, but..."

"If I may continue..."

Spy continued to talk, and as he spoke, Medic realised he was sitting up straighter, pulling his shoulders up. It was as if he was gaining energy from the action of speaking. He started to wave his hands around energetically, in a way completely unlike his normally reserved manner.

The nine original mercenaries became the Violet team. Their lives were incredibly comfortable- they each collected the salaries of a small army of men. If the Mann brothers objected to the use of respawn, they said nothing. They were kept in the dark about the use of clones.
The Violet team had watched with a terrible fascination as their doubles fought and died. The first clone to die permanently had been a RED Soldier, who had respawned as a series of chunks of meat wrapped in fabric. Not surprisingly, Violet Engineer had been mortified and had raced to sort out the respawn glitch. Respawn was redesigned with multiple backups and fail-safes. The second clone to die, a BLU Sniper, had suddenly keeled over due to massive organ failure, mid-battle. He had respawned...and instantly died again. And again. And again. Violet Sniper had watched in horror until the clone's respawn unit was shut down (by the BLU Pyro's axe). After extensive research, it was realised that not all the clone strains were viable in the long term, even if they worked for a little while, and the only way to figure which ones worked was to try them out.

The third incident was a group of clones at Gullywash that rebelled after when they realised the RED and BLU Scouts were identical to each other. They refused to fight. The Mann brothers had got suspicious, and it had been Spy, god help him, who had pointed out they only had one solution: terminate the entire base, all eighteen mercenaries. It was a necessary evil. It became a standard practice to execute any mercenary that was causing problems or was just not needed any more. The clones were expendable. After all, they weren't unique individuals- they were just copies, tools to be used up. Not real people. The death count rose.

Project Pelargonia was the dream that slowly turned into a nightmare. The Violet team watched their exact doubles die, over and over, sometimes permanently. Tensions rose. Some of the Violets-Soldier, Scout and Medic- were not overly bothered by the deaths of the clones. Others – Pyro, Demo, Heavy and Spy- felt some discomfort. Engineer and Sniper, however, found it difficult to live with, and eventually, Engineer snapped. In the middle of yet another of his arguments with Medic...

"But Engineer is a good friend!" Medic said in astonishment. "Vhy would I pick fights vizh him?"

"Medic- Violet Medic, that is- is the man who originally had the idea of creating varied strains of clones by carefully corrupting the respawn data. It made Project Pelargonia feasible, but the death count skyrocketed as a result, because some strains were weak and had to be... removed. Engineer found that too distasteful. Now may I continue?"

...Engineer had taken his wrench and smacked Medic around the side of his head, leaving the doctor in a coma. Had it not been for the medigun, Medic would have suffered permanent brain damage. Needless to say, it created a certain coldness between the two of them. Medic remained as committed as ever to the Project, but Engineer retreated into his workshop and barely spoke to the other mercenaries after that. The halls of TF Industries became quiet and an unpleasant tenseness settled over the entire Violet team.

The different mercenaries coped in their varied ways. Soldier seemed unaffected, already too broken to care. Medic poured himself into some new project involving 'Human augmentation', but refused to tell anyone what it was about. He constantly pestered the Administrator to give him a set of clones to experiment on, but his requests were always denied. Pyro became a silent shadow, lurking on the edge of conversations and leaving lit candles around the base in odd places. Heavy threw himself into developing new miniguns of varied designs and capabilities. Demo, ironically, stopped drinking and even started joining Scout on some of his runs. Scout ran more and more, using up his bodily reserves and getting ever thinner, frail even. He would spend days running the same circuit around the base, over and over again. Spy worked hard, performing mission after mission for the Administrator.

Violet Sniper spent little time on the base, distancing himself from the other mercenaries as much as he could, except for his friend Spy. He spoke about what he had noticed, watching the clones from his various high perches in different bases.
"They're not us." He had told Spy. "They might have our memories and our genes, but soon as they step out there an' live different lives, they aren't us any more. They change, starting right away. They're not copies. They're *people* - and we're usin' them as weapons."

Spy had not been convinced, but he had started to look at the clones in a new light- looking for signs they were each different and unique, as Sniper claimed. He had not found much evidence until a mishap sent him on a mission to Teufort to keep an eye on a delicate situation involving two identical clones- Medics 29/b and 29/c.

"And I know what you did there." Heavy said in a growl.

"Yes, I killed your Medic, and I will never forget how he died. It changed me. It changed everything." Violet Spy confessed, struggling to put his thoughts into words. "He...showed regret over what he had done to 29/c. To fix it, *he was prepared to give his life*. I will never forget what he said, shortly before he died:

"*Because...it is my...duty? Because someone, somewhere has to give a damn. Because I choose to. Because I understand, now. I see you there, and I know what I did...to you, and many others. Because I always told myself sacrifices had to be made. Because...I am sorry.*"

"I know, I was zhere." Medic replied pointedly, breaking the mood.

Spy blinked. "Indeed you were. But you see, the Medic *I* know- the original- would *never* have done that. To be that selfless... His clone had more humanity than he does! I realised that Sniper was right- and we were wrong, so very, very wrong."

"Yet you still killed my Doktor." Heavy stated. Medic's brow wrinkled in puzzlement at that odd expression: *My* Doktor? He decided it must just be Heavy's clumsy English.

"I am a hired killer, and it was the simplest solution to a complex situation. The solution I know best." Spy said, shrugging bleakly. "Also, it was the wrong one. I knew it, immediately. I regretted it. I realised I could not do this job any more."

"Now you want to make it right?" Heavy asked, glaring malevolently at Spy. "You think you can earn forgiveness with nice leetle words? No matter what you do- actions, words- I never forgive you. Never. Know this."

"Did I ask for your forgiveness?" Spy snapped in reply. "I don't believe I did, because I believe I am beyond damnation at this point. Any actions I take are bandages on the festering wound, and yet my soul demands I must try. May I continue?"

"To just resign would simply mean my death, so I knew I had to work behind the scenes, and stir up trouble- but that is something I have a talent for. I wanted you to rebel. I wanted you as allies. I located 29/b's journal and left it for Heavy to find. I left *you* alive, 29/c, against orders."

"That is not my name any longer." Medic said firmly.

"No, it is not, not now. You are Gerhardt Heinrich Weiss- or will be shortly."

"If Spy keeps promise." Heavy said suspiciously. "This does not explain why you showed up in base and made threats."

"If I remember rightly, I made no threats. I simply alerted you to my presence and recommended a course of action- to leave. If it sounded threatening, that is merely a coincidence." Spy sniffed, and tweaked the sleeve of his suit.
"You were hiding like coward."

"Oh, was I? I wonder why that could be...maybe because you would have undoubtedly killed me on sight? Yes...perhaps that was my motivation." Spy replied sarcastically. "As it was, I knew Medic would be leaving to seek treatment for his illness, and I wished him to have company when he did so."

"I would have gone with Gerhardt without sneaking Spy blowing smoke in my face." Heavy declared.

"You would?" Medic asked in puzzlement. "Why? You would not have profited from it."

"Because you are friend." Heavy stated simply.

"Oh." Medic said, frowning and blinking in surprise. "That's...eh, I don't quite know what to say. Danke, Sergei."

"May I break up this heart-warming scene and continue my story, s'il vous plait?" Spy snapped sourly, rubbing his forehead with two fingers. "It has been a long day and I wish to finish this before I die of nicotine deprivation. So, you both left the base, oui? I intended to follow and watch, to see what you did and intervene at an appropriate moment. However, fate had other plans. Engineer chose the next day to desert the Violet team, and I was called in to search for him. I was partnered with Miss Pauling in an attempt to find him. Thus, to my intense irritation, I lost track of you both. Miss Pauling is a dangerous individual..."

"What?" Medic said with a laugh that turned into a cough. "She is just a secretary."

"Oh, Docteur, you were handling the intrigue so well up until then." Spy said mockingly. "She is a highly trained assassin. The female of the species is more deadly than the male, just as Darwin said."

"Kipling." Heavy muttered.

"If there is one person you must always avoid, it is Miss Pauling." Spy continued, ignoring Heavy. "Do not be fooled by her choice of disguise. She utterly committed to Project Pelargonia and she would kill you in an eye blink and feel no guilt. The only difference between her and our lady Administrator is that there is only one Miss Pauling. She has never been cloned. Consider what that may mean, if you will."

"It means that once she is dead, she is gone for good." Medic said, smiling viciously.

"Bordel." Spy replied, rolling his eyes. "Why do I have imbeciles for allies?"

"Continue your story." Heavy said, glaring at the slender Frenchman.

"Merci." Spy said. "Violet Engineer could not be found. He has vanished, without a trace. For six months we searched, but eventually we had to give up the chase. I went back to looking for you both- and that is the last TF industries and the Violet team heard of me. Your hiding place was ingenious, incidentally- the nameless, hiding amongst the ignored. It took me some time to track you down."

"And ruin our lives." Medic stated.

"I admit that our meeting did not go as well as I would have liked, but you were trying to strangle me to death. Surely I am allowed to defend myself?"
"No." Heavy said flatly.

"So what was the point of all this? Why did you want to find us?"

"As I said, if I am going to stop Project Pelargonia, I need allies. I need you. And I want to find others. We will build a full team, clones and originals both, and fight back!"

"I fail to see what you would gain from this." Medic said suspiciously.

"Other than a clear conscience? Nothing, nothing at all." Spy shrugged.

"There is a problem here. Suppose we succeed- what then?" Medic got up from the bed and started to pace thoughtfully, the medigun's red beam following him faithfully. "It sounds like the use of clones is better than the alternative."

"How can you possibly think that?" Spy exclaimed, spreading his hands wide dramatically. "After all you have been through, you think this is a good idea? Project Pelargonia is evil, corrupt to the core. Must we shred kittens and kick puppies before it becomes too much for you to stomach?"

"A necessary evil, perhaps?" Medic replied with a shrug. "I am glad not to be involved now, but what if, without the clones, one of the brothers wins? Surely this is better than w..."

WHAM!

An iron-hard blow hit Medic across his face and spun him around on his axis. The left side of his face went numb before becoming hot and throbbing. He saw lights behind his eyes and tasted blood in the corner of his mouth. He forced his streaming eyes open and looked angrily at Spy, who shrugged innocently, holding his hands up in denial. Large hands grabbed his shoulders and spun him around to face an angry Russian face.

"You wanted to stop it before, but as long as Doktor is not suffering, is alright for others to, hmm?" Heavy shouted at him, shaking him roughly. "Is fine, long as you don't see? You saw exact double die, but is not you, so is not problem. No one else matters to you but Doktor. Little baby coward!"

Medic blinked with one eye, lost for words in face of Heavy's fury.

"Cloning is bad, must stop. When people want war, they find way to make it. They find other way, but we stop them using us any more, any of us. I am not tool, will not be thrown away like broken thing! If we not stop it, we as bad as Violet Spy!"

"Why, thank you for that." Spy said quietly.

"I..." Medic started.

"No, you shut up!" Heavy barked. "Maybe you not care now because you have just given up and are waiting to die. It not your problem any more, da?"

"What! How dare you say that?"

"Show me! Show me I am wrong." Heavy demanded, his grip on Medic's shoulders becoming tighter and more desperate, almost pleading. "Show me you still care what happen."

"I was merely saying that we have no alternative..." Medic replied, feeling rather baffled by the large man's outburst. His bruised face was rapidly cooling down from the medigun's healing beams and his eye started to open again. He glared at the huge man who glared right back at him.
"Clones were not always used, so they can stop using them, go back to old way." Heavy pointed out, jabbing Medic with his finger. "Or maybe we take battle home and get rid of coward Mann Brothers for good."

"I like the way you think." Spy commented with a small smile.

"So you stay and die in corner like rat, but I am going with Spy and stopping this." He declared, folding his arms decisively.

"You think I wouldn’t trust you two to organise a rebellion?" Medic spat, stifling a cough. "With all those hopeful thoughts and happy feelings you would both end up very messily dead. No, this rat is coming, whether you like it or not! Someone has to stitch you dummkopfs back togezher when you do something heroic and stupid."

"Bon! Trés bien!" Spy said, clapping his hands together enthusiastically. "I thought it would be hard to make you both to join me, but it seems all I need to do was let you two convince each other, and my job is done!"

"Chyort." Heavy muttered, looking down suddenly.

"Gottverdammte." Medic said, holding a hand to his mouth and coughing.

"Gentlemen, it is late and we ought to get some rest," Spy said, smiling gleefully, "But tomorrow—the Clone’s Rebellion begins!"

In Chapter Twenty: Violet Spy receives an urgent cry for help, the RED Scout tells his story—and we find out what happens when secrets get out.
Violet Spy did not get to sleep for very long that night. Once he had left his two new allies to bicker in their shared room, he crept back to his own single room and lit a cigarette with a satisfied smile.

_Putain,_ that felt so good after going half a day without a single smoke. It was worth it, though. Not only did a little show of thoughtfulness help to convince the Heavy he could be trusted, it also meant he didn't have to put up with the Medic's coughing, which he found incredibly irritating and unpleasant. _Thus is the price of having allies._ He vowed to get the man treatment as soon as he could, before he felt the need to smother him just to make him shut up. It would also mean he would survive long enough to be useful, of course, which was a definite plus.

He frowned, looking at the smoke twirling from his cigarette. Medic's illness was puzzling. Admittedly, he wasn't a physician, but it did not make any sense. It had developed so soon after his misadventures with the RED Medic that it couldn't possibly be a coincidence. The two events were linked, had to be. However, what with healing and respawn, surely any long-term ill effects would have been cured by now? In fact, wasn't it even possible the medigun could cure cancer? Or was it limited to trauma-related injuries? Spy frowned, wishing that he had listened to one of the Violet Medic's long diatribes on the subject instead of tuning his rambling out.

He prowled around his cheap room for a bit, letting the nicotine relax his muscles and thoughts, and then sat down for a pleasant read before bed. Once he finally felt calm and at peace, he settled into the clean sheets and closed his eyes. He must have been more tired than he realised, because he quickly spiralled down into a black oblivion.

_Beep. Beep. Beep._

"Quoi?" Spy blinked himself awake, trying to figure out what had disturbed him, and then scrambled upright when he realised it was the long-distance radio Violet Sniper had given him. He rummaged in his bag and held it up, clicking the transmit button. "This is Boomslang, over."

"Chameleon reporting in." Sniper's voice crackled and popped over the airwaves. "Sunset for the
twins. Sunset for the twins. Over."

"Merde!" Spy hissed.

"Too bloody right mate. No solid time yet, but I reckon it'll be soon. Over."

"I will get there as quickly as I can. Dove and Bear are secured. I will bring them. Over."

"Be quick as you can. Over and out."

Spy leapt up and raced out of his room, still wearing his black silk pyjamas. He hammered on the door of Heavy and Medic's bedroom.

"What is it?" Heavy's voice asked sleepily.

"Emergency." Spy said through the wood. "We have to leave for Teufort, right now."

"What is this nonsense?" Medic's voice was tired and irritable sounding.

The door opened with a click and Heavy glared at Spy before yawning.

"Not nonsense." Spy said breathlessly. "I will explain on our way. I know you do not trust me, but I beg you: come with me now. Lives depend on it. I dare not talk freely here. Please."

Medic raised his eyebrows in surprise and looked at Heavy, who shrugged.

"Da, we come."

"If only to see how you intend to stab us in the back next." Medic added. "It would get boring if you were not constantly endangering our lives."

Spy did not even waste time answering that, but raced back to his bedroom to throw his clothes into a suitcase.

Shortly after, the three fugitives sped away into the night.

Miss Pauling's neat court shoes clacked along the echoing, lavender painted corridors of TF Industries headquarters. Bars of bright morning sunlight shone through the windows, striping across the darker corridor as she walked from shadow to light and back again. She held her clipboard tightly to her chest as always. It was something of a habit, but a useful one, since this particular clipboard was reinforced with Kevlar and could withstand a bullet impact or two, should the need arise. Thankfully, no one had thought to shoot at her—so far.

She tapped on a blank metal door, and then pushed it quietly open. A bank of television monitors looked back at her, showing scenes of battle set against snow. As she watched, a BLU Pyro in the top right monitor stepped on a nest of sticky grenades and exploded into red fragments. It was a sight that Miss Pauling had seen so often she barely registered it now. In front of the bank was a high backed chair facing away from her. A finger with long red nails flicked a switch.

"The enemy has captured your intelligence."

"Ma'am, a moment of your time please?" She asked.

The same long finger was held up in acknowledgement. Another switch flicked.
"Victory." The Administrator leaned back and reached for her cigarette. "Good morning, Miss Pauling."

"Morning, Ma'am. Sorry to interrupt, but I've got some urgent news for you." She said, pushing her glasses up her nose.

"Tell me." The woman's chair spun round and she looked at the secretary expectantly. Miss Pauling was pleased to note that the Administrator did not doubt her at all. She knew that if Miss Pauling said it was important, it was.

"I was examining the security camera data from the RED infirmary in Teufort earlier today, and I found a problem. Could I show you please?"

"Please do." She rolled her chair back and gestured to the control panel.

"This conversation was recorded last night. There are others as well." Her small fingers flicked over the board, and the largest TV lit up.

The two women looked at the Spy, pacing anxiously back and forth near an unmade hospital bed. He took off his balaclava, scrubbed his hair and then put it back on.

"I think that RED Spy will have to be taken out of service soon." The Administrator said.

"Yes, that clone has started to fail, but that's not the big problem." Miss Pauling replied grimly. "You'll see."

RED Demo entered the room, making Spy jump and swear.

"Aye there Spy, I came tae see how you were doin'." Demo said cheerfully. Spy turned to glare at him. "Bugger it, laddie, ye look like death warmed up. Who'd have thought a body could be allergic to penicillin like that eh?"

"Did Medic not tell you no visitors?"

"Yeh, but nobody listens to 'im, crazy barmpot that he is. I reckoned you needed a wee bit o' company if ye were off yer legs. Cheer you up a bit an' that. Anyway, I'm a nosy bugger an' I wanted to see how you wuz doin'."

"I am fine." Spy replied through clenched teeth. "Goodbye."

"Ah, don't be like that." Demo said. "Look, I brought ye a fruit basket." He held up his hand.

"It's an apple in a plastic bowl." Spy stated.

"S' the thought that counts." Demo said with a shrug. "Can I get ye anythin' else?"

"Yes, you get get some silence for me. You can find some about five miles south. Go and fetch it immediately."

"Eh, come on laddie, I know when someone is eatin' themselves up wi' worry. What's bothering ye? Why don't ya talk to ol' Uncle Demo?"

"You're younger than me." Spy replied witheringly.

"Young Uncle Demo then." Demo replied with a grin.
"Hey, is it visitin' time now? How's it goin', Spook?" Scout banged the doors of the infirmary open.

"Merde."

"I dinnae ask him to come." Demo said with a shrug. "Keep the noise doon, Scout, the lad's not feelin' good."

"Yeah I know, I just came to..."

"Cheer me up." Spy finished. "Good. I am now cheerful, so you can leave."

"Hell no, I only jus' got here." Scout stated, flinging himself into a plastic chair. "You look like shit."

"You are so reassuring." Spy said sourly. He made a soft moaning noise and then rubbed his forehead and sat down on the bed. "Ah well, since I have an audience, however unwanted, I may as well make an announcement."

"Announcement?" Demo asked curiously.

"I have decided to retire. I am leaving RED. I have had enough. This... illness... has convinced me that my skills would be better used elsewhere."

"Fuck. Like, woah. Really?"

"Ah, hell." Demo said softly. "Don't that, laddie. It's no' a good idea."

The listening Administrator frowned slightly. Miss Pauling nodded solemnly.

"I don't believe my career choices are your business." Spy said stiffly. "I merely wish you to pass this news on to the other mercenaries."

"I ken it's not my business, but... I cannae tell ye why, but don't retire. It'd be bad."

"I know why." RED Scout suddenly said. He voice was unusually quiet and lacked its normal arrogant nasal edge.

"I doubt ye do." Demo replied.

"No, I know what I saw." Scout said, spreading his hands in a wide gesture. "Stuff isn't what it seems here. I reckon...we can't leave. Not really."

"I think ye should shut yer trap right noo. Spy doesnae want to hear yer ramblin's." Demo said warningly.

"Indeed he does not." Spy said, fiddling with his nails.

"No, listen! This is important n'shit. I know what I saw." Scout said. "It was the first day we got to this base..."

The Administrator took the cigarette out of her mouth and leaned closer to listen.

"...I found the sewer pipes, you know? The ones under the base. Well, me an' the Doc went exploring through the pipes in the BLU base. I ran on ahead, 'cos waiting for the old dude to catch up is fuckin' boring..."

"Shut the hell up, Scout." Demo said, his voice low and threatening but the young man ignored him.
"...so I ran into the BLU Medic. Only, he wasn't. He was our Medic, but dressed in, like, blue. Same guy, like a double..."

"STOP TALKING!" Demo shouted.

"...No, you shut up, this is important!" Scout insisted. "...I shot him in the guts an' he totalled me with that wicked nasty saw. Everything went to hell the next week, right? Like, Medic topped himself, but I reckon he was set up..."

"Ah Gods, ye pesky wee scunner." Demo moaned, putting a hand over his eye.

"...'Cos the whole thing stank, right? Dude was crazy, but he wasn't about to top himself. I know, I've lived on the edge, and I've seen stuff. I got thinking, and I took a good hard look at that faggot of a BLU Scout, and yeah, he totally looks like me too, like my uglier, younger brother."

"I suggest you keep your theories to yourself, Scout." Spy said, suddenly sitting straight up and listening intently. "Careless talk costs lives, as they say."

"I reckon we all need tae walk away an' pretend this conversation never happened." Demo muttered, looking down at his tightly curled fists.

"Fuck that." Scout replied easily. "We're in the middle of somethin' big, I know it. I don't think we can leave. I got this idea that we're, like, lab rats in the biggest experiment ever, us and the BLUs. It's kinda cool, really. But you know what they do to lab rats when the experiment is over?" Scout drew a finger across his neck dramatically.

"You are not the only one to have noticed oddities here, Scout." Spy said quietly. "Others have as well. I am not at liberty to say whom."

The Administrator's finely curved eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Ach no..." Demo said, closing his eyes in dismay.

"However, enough is enough. I will leave- and accept whatever fate has to offer me." Spy lent back and closed his eyes, his face suddenly losing its tension and looking peaceful.

"Hope ye're happy, Scout." Demo growled. "Ye might've just signed all our death warrants."

"Watch." Miss Pauling said softly.

The RED Demo looked directly at the camera monitor and frowned worriedly, before leaving the room.

The Administrator gave a nasal sigh. "I see. An unpleasant security leak. It's puzzling how that Demoman seems to know more than he should."

"I'm afraid that's not all." Miss Pauling said regretfully. "After seeing this, I decided to look back over some previous records as well. The two strain-029 Medics were seen by four different people in the base during that first fight- on the RED side, Sniper, Scout and Demo and on the BLU side, Pyro. They've been telling other team members. Let me show you."

Miss Pauling's hands flicked over the board, quickly bringing up a different recording. The two women listened in silence.

"They were the same person, the two Medics, and in that moment, they knew it." BLU Pyro said
"Hot damn. You sure?" BLU Engineer asked.

And another:

"I don't give a damn, Heavy. It's not this poor bugger's fault your pal got killed, so leave him the hell alone." RED Demo shouted at RED Heavy.

"'Got killed'?' The Administrator asked, raising an eyebrow.

Miss Pauling nodded grimly. "Somehow, the RED Demo figured out it was not a suicide."

Another:

"The BLU Medic and our Medic...they were the same person. Completely identical. I saw 'em next to each other, out by the bridge. Like they were twins." RED Sniper said.

"That's not possible." RED Spy replied.

"I know what I saw."

And one final one:

"Doc's just a lil' bit too like his old friend for comfort." RED Engineer commented.

"Mission begins in ten seconds."

"Nay, they're nothing like each other. Ye gotta remember that." RED Demo said pointedly.

"That RED Demo knows far more than he should. Too much." Miss Pauling said. "I wish I knew how he found out all these things. It's very suspicious."

"Hmm." The Administrator pressed her thin lips together. She closed her eyes briefly. "I gave them a chance. More than I have given any other base."

"I believe there are now a total of six Teufort mercenaries who have suspicions about Project Pelargonia- eight if you count the missing Heavy and Medic clones." Miss Pauling stated.

"I think this shows that staying our hands has not worked." Helen stubbed out her cigarette, the last of its smoke curling from her nose. "We cannot afford a repeat of the Gullywash incident. If the Mann Brothers found out- no, this has gone far enough. I believe I have no choice."

"I agree, Ma'am." Miss Pauling stood back from the control desk, and the Administrator rolled her chair back. She sighed briefly.

"Remember, we do what we must." She said, talking to herself as much as the younger woman. "That does not make it pleasant. An evil act, for the greater good. This is our burden." Miss Pauling nodded silently.

The Administrator took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment, then she unlocked a clear plastic safety cover and removed it from a rarely-used black button. Above it were the words 'Terminate Base: Teufort'.

Her long nail pressed it down with a firm click.
In Chapter Twenty-One: It's a race against time to save the mercenaries of Teufort. Who will survive, and who will fall? And what is the RED Demo's secret, anyway?
With A Whimper

Chapter Notes

I can tell you loved the cliffhanger of the last chapter. It wasn't at all frustrating, was it? This chapter ends up a big revelation which I hope will really surprise people. Nobody has guessed this little twist in the tale- although a few people have got close...

The usual artwork is on at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Twenty-One-With-A-Whimper-489401677. Creating it gave me feels :(. 

On the RED side of the base, Demo was waiting. He knew what would happen next, and he knew it meant that either he was going to be found out, or he'd soon be dead. Perhaps both. He poked miserably at his late breakfast, not feeling at all hungry. He was never very good first thing in the morning, but today he had no appetite at all. The scrambled eggs just looked wobbly and disgusting.

I've got to leave, before...

"Hungover again, Private?" Soldier said, banging the door open and marching in. As usual for the mornings, he was dressed in camouflage pattern boxer shorts, his combat helmet and fluffy pink slippers. He looked around curiously. "Up early for a ceasefire, aren't you?"

"Couldnae' sleep." Demo muttered. He nibbled at a piece of toast.


"Not this time, laddie, I'm stone cold sober." He held out a hand to demonstrate but his fingers shook. "Ah, dammit. They always do that. Honest."

The burly man walked over to the coffee machine and poured a mug of foul black coffee. Demo wrinkled his nose.

"How can ye drink that first thing inna morning?"

"It's for you." Soldier pushed it across the table to him. "Drink it. Do you want to let the team down?!"

"S'not me who's let us down." Demo murmured to himself.

"Right, son." Soldier sighed and sat down, putting his large hands flat on the table. "Our squad won't function well unless all privates are fit and well. Tell me what is bothering you."

Demo looked up as his friend. He'd always got on well with the slightly crazy American, even if he was a bit loud at times. Hell, Demo could be loud too, and that wasn't just his explosions. They seemed to have a bit in common- or maybe it was because Demo found Soldier's crazy stories made him laugh. The man was just good company, simple as that.

"Not sure ye'd believe me." He replied.

"Try me." Soldier said firmly.
"See, it's like this." Demo said, pausing and trying to organise his thoughts. How could he start to explain? "This war, this base...none of it what it seems."

"I knew it!" Soldier said triumphantly. "Those BLUs are KGB officers! I always said so..."

"Nay, it's..." A noise interrupted him- a high-pitched whining alarm, more felt than heard. "Ahh, shite." He leapt to his feet urgently. His heart started to pound and he felt his spine prickle with fear. He really wished he wasn't sober. It's happening. It's really happening. God help us all.

"What?"

"Can ye no' hear it?" Demo cried.

"Hear what?"

"Sol, do ye trust me? Really trust me?"

"Sure do, son. Unless you're drunk. You're not drunk, are you?" Soldier got up too, looking puzzled.

"If you don't leave this buildin' in the next sixty seconds, ye'll be dead men." Demo grabbed Soldier's arm and yanked him out of the room.

"Wait, wait Private! You're not in command around here."

"EVERYBODY OOT!" Demo shouted, still dragging the unwilling American along behind him. He heard, or maybe just imagined, the sound of valves opening in the walls. "EMERGENCY!"

"The fuck's he been drinking this time?" Scout's sleepy voice said.

"Drunk already, son? You're a disappointment." Engineer muttered, coming out of his room with a disapproving expression.

"C'mon! Ye gotta leave, now! Ye're all gonna die!" Demo continued to pull Soldier down the corridor, but the American suddenly stopped.

"Ach, he has delirium tremens again." Medic complained, padding out of his bedroom and raking a hand through his ginger hair. "Go to sleep, Demo, or let Respawn vork it off."

"Respawn won't be working, not now." He said frantically. "Either ye come wi' me or I go alone."

"Now that there? That's the worse threat ever. It's just plain embarassing." Engineer replied.

"They have a point, Private. We must all be an alcohol-induced hallucination of yours. Next we'll be turning into pink giraffes if my theory is correct."

"Ah great. Now Sol is having one of this crazy moments too." Scout muttered. "It's too early for this crap."

"Nae, listen to me! Ye gotta..." Demo glanced up and down the corridor of the living quarters. "Ah, to hell wi' it!" He turned away from the baffled REDS and broke into a full out sprint out onto the battlements.

"Well, what was all that about? He been at the absinthe again?" Engineer asked.

"Fucked if I know." Scout replied.
"I think I vill put him on lithium for a while." Medic mused thoughtfully. "Maybe zat vill vork."

It was then they heard it.

It was a gentle hissing which quickly became a roar.

"Dammit!" Soldier suddenly sprinted off in the same direction as Demo had gone. "Follow me men, that's an order!" The door slammed behind him.

An oddly chemical, fruity odour filled the room. The three men looked around in puzzlement.

"What in Sam-Hill..." Engineer said, looking up as white vapour started to pour from the air vent above his head. "Damn."

"Oh gawd...it's gas! They're gassing us!" Scout said frantically, jumping from one foot to the other. "Engie, do somethin', stop this!"

There was a series of clicks as the doors of the base locked shut around them. The three men drew closer together, backing away from the vent. The mist started to pool around their legs and Scout coughed.

"Nerve agent." Medic said quietly. "Ach, zhis is not good."

Engineer ran at the door to the battlements and tried to ram it open, but it wouldn't move, and all he managed to do was stir up the air. He tugged at the handle, but it refused to budge. Scout grabbed his arm with a trembling hand.

"You can stop it, can't ya, hardhat?"

"Just stay calm, son, stay calm." Engineer whispered, closing his stinging eyes. Without consciously meaning to, his hands reached for Scout and Medic. A gloved hand and a bandaged one held tightly onto his as the mist flowed over the three of them. 'I'll...I'll think of somethin'. I gotta think of somethin'."

"I should never have taken zhis job, never." RED Medic muttered softly, his breathing becoming hoarser and ragged as the mist rose higher and higher. "Auf...auf... wieder...sehen... Dumm...k..."

The gas flowed over the trio and swallowed them.

In the infirmary, RED Spy looked up from the loaded pistol in his lap when he heard the hissing noise. He had been staring the gun for some hours. The sight of its metal curves was soothing- a reminder that every problem had a solution. If he sapped Respawn... He looked up as he heard the click of the door locking, and then further up as white vapour curled out of the air vents and pooled onto the floor.

"I see." He commented quietly, reaching for his cigarette case. His hands trembled from drug withdrawal, but he managed to light a cigarette. He looked idly at the smoke twirling from the end of it, and down to the mist rising from the floor.

Spy knew then that everything would finish here. It was over. He was so tired, so damn tired, in a way no amount of sleep could cure. There was a cure though, and it was pouring through the air conditioning system. He smiled, suddenly feeling calm and at peace for the first time in months.

So be it.
He put the cigarette to his lips, lay down, and took a deep breath.

Violet Sniper's head snapped up when he heard that high-pitched, wailing alarm drifting over to his nest above Teufort. He knew that noise- it was the alarm specifically made to tell any non-clones to leave a base quickly, and was inaudible to the clones themselves. During the process of creating a new clone, they were exposed to that particular frequency at such a high level it permanently deafened them to it. That had been another of Violet Medic's 'clever' ideas.

"Piss." He spat, rummaging in his bag and grabbing a few items before leaping to his feet. He ran down the slope, cursing his lanky but uncoordinated legs. He had never been a fast runner, and sitting still in one place for hours each day had not helped that.

How long did he have? One minute until lockdown and the buildings flooded with nerve gas, and then maybe five before everyone in the twin bases would be dead? No matter what he did, people were going to die. The BLU base was closer. If he could save even one of them, it'd be worth it. As he ran, he strapped on a gas mask and wrinkled his nose at the odd bleach-like odour of the filter. He could hear his own breath and briefly wondered if this is what it felt like for Pyro.

He skidded and half-leapt, half-fell down the rock scree to the concrete buildings of BLU and quickly chopped a hole in the rusty fence with a combination of his kukri, boot and pure desperation. He crawled through and ran over to the nearest doorway, banging it open.

The hallway inside seemed suspiciously normal- just an average BLU base, with its concrete walls and cheap green carpet tiles. He heard a brief snatch of whistling and he sprinted down the corridor towards it, bursting into what turned out to be the BLU Engineer's workshop. The three men inside looked up at him in astonishment. Engineer held up his wrench, Pyro had some sort of long, glowing stick in his hand and the other man...

"Who the fuck are you?!

...was Scout, holding a can of soda and staring in astonishment at the purple-clad masked man. Sniper held up his sub-machine gun and pointed it at them.

"Come with me or yer dead men."

He heard the first tiny hissing noise. The three BLU mercs looked at each other. Pyro murmured something and advanced on the Australian.

"Ah, sod it, no I don't mean it like that." Sniper tried to explain hurriedly. "I'm not gonna kill yer. They are tryin' to kill yer." He pointed with his gun at the air vent on the wall in front of him.

"They who?" Engineer asked, his wrench not lowered.

"I'll explain later." He held out a black rubber mask. "Put this on and follow me."

"Mrrrrrr mrrrr?" Pyro asked.

"Yeah, that one's not good enough for this."

White mist started to pour out of the vents. Engineer looked up, his eyebrows shooting up his forehead. The door clicked and locked.

"What in Sam-Hill..." BLU Engineer said. His eyes flitted around and Sniper could see the thoughts flashing through his head. "Damn."
He grabbed the mask from Sniper and slipped it on. Pyro grabbed a mask too, but he took the air filter cartridges out and replaced the ones in his existing mask with the new ones.

"What the hell is this? Why're you trustin' this guy? What's going on?" Scout cried, jumping from foot to foot anxiously and stirring up the vapour. "Is this gas? Did he do this?"

"Put the mask on, son." Engineer ordered, but Scout backed away.

"No way, I don't trust this bastard."

"Hrr." Pyro muttered. He walked over to Scout and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Yrrr shrrrrhhh hrrrrrm."

"Huh?" Scout blinked watering eyes as the gas rose.

"Put it on, NOW!" Sniper shouted desperately.

Pyro just made an annoyed noise and then punched Scout in the jaw. He grabbed the boy as he fell, and hoisted him onto his shoulder in a fireman's lift.

"Ghhh!" He ordered, pointing imperiously.

BLU Engineer grabbed his toolbox, Scout flopped on Pyro's shoulder, and Sniper got his master key out of his pocket. He breathed a sigh of relief as the door unlocked, and the group ran out of the base as quickly as they could.

Sniper's keen hearing listened out for any threats, but there was something far worse: silence. There was no other noise than the tinkling of rocks under their feet as they scrabbled back to Sniper's nest. Engineer started to fall behind, and Sniper grabbed the shorter man's arm and pulled him roughly behind him. As they got to the top of the slope, he saw a man in red, pacing back and forth. Even from this distance it was easy to see who it was: the RED Demoman.

"Don't shoot!" He called breathlessly. The man held up his hands in a gesture of peace and ran down towards the men.

"The hell..." Engineer panted, sliding down against the rocks and ripping his mask off. "...is happening..."

"Get a dispenser up right now!" Sniper barked.

"Srrrrhhh!" Pyro said urgently, lifting Scout gently off his shoulder. Sniper looked down at the young mercenary. His body was stiff, his back arching and his eyes were rolled back in his head, showing only the whites. They could hear his breath rattling in his thin chest.

"Bugger." He murmured, looking down at the runner. "They got him. Poor little sod."

"Erectin'..." Engineer placed his toolbox on the floor. "...a dispenser." He opened the toolbox and fumbled out the parts and started to build.

There was the crunch of sand and gravel, and as Sniper looked up, a rusty station wagon skidded to a halt near the rocks. Three men leapt out of it.

"Mon dieu..." Violet Spy cried, breaking into a run. The former RED Heavy trotted behind him, and the BLU Medic lagged in the back, wheezing for breath as they approached. "Assistance, Docteur!"

"Ja," The German panted, "I see it."
"'Bout bloody time." Sniper muttered as the BLU Medic lowered his medigun and aimed it the unconscious Scout. Heavy ran over and held the convulsing young man down.

"What poison did zhey use?" Medic demanded.

"Nerve gas of some sort, I reckon." Sniper replied.

"Soman gas." Spy added.

"Ach, not good." Medic muttered, gasping for air after the short run. "I vill do my best."

"How th' Hell did ye get out?" The RED Demoman reached the ragged group and stared in astonishment at the motley crowd. His eyes widened as he noticed the two men dressed in purple, but he just rolled his eyes and glared at them. "Ah, shite, not you two bastards."

"What the..." Spy's eyebrows shot up under his balaclava.

"Tavish?" Sniper asked in surprise. "That's you, isn't it? What th' bloody hell are you doin' here?!"

"No... this cannot be!" Spy declared. "You cannot be here."

"Eh, well, I did this deal..." Demo started to explain sheepishly.

"What is leetle Spy talking about?" Heavy asked, looking up with his eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Medic?" Engineer said, tightening a screw on the dispenser. A blue tendril of healing gas reached from the machine and attached to Scout. "But... you came back? How..."

There was a sudden explosion of a rocket blast from the RED base, and a dot soared into the sky followed by a trail of smoke.

"The bloody loony listened to me." Demo said. He waved his arms "OVER HERE, LAD!"

Even from this distance, though, they could tell something was wrong with the way Soldier flew. He tumbled lazily through the air, arms and legs flailing around until he landed with a very solid thump and lay still. Demo ran off and grabbed the burly American, dragging him towards the dispenser.

"Reporting...for duty..." Soldier muttered between ragged gasps for breath. "...Maggots."

"Hold in there, pal." Demo said, putting his arm around shoulders. Soldier didn't even murmur in reply, and his head hung limply from his shoulders. "Ye cannae die or I'll tell folks ye're a civilian, got it? Doc, got another one for ye!"

"Ja." Medic replied distractedly. "Put him next to zhe dispenser."

"Demo. What did leetle Spy mean?" Heavy asked again, glaring suspiciously at the Scotsman.

"Ah hell, like it matters right now!" Demo sighed. "This is nae a good time to talk aboot it!"

"I think it is the perfect time." Violet Spy replied acidly. "I do not know how he ended up on your RED team, but your trusted grenade-thrower over there? I would know him anywhere. He is not a clone. He is the original. The Violet Demo."

In Chapter Twenty-Two: The desperate survivors of Teufort make their escape, and Medic has to make a terrible decision.
For the first time in years, the corridors of Teufort were completely silent. The hum of the base's machinery whirred down and stopped. The deadly mist slowly thinned and dissipated, revealing the mercenaries scattered like discarded dolls through the base.

There was RED Pyro, maskless and curled up on his bed, looking as peaceful as a sleeping child. The replacement RED Heavy was slumped over Sasha, a grease rag dangling from his hand. BLU Spy was naked and sprawled in a corner of the showers, warm water still running over his body. BLU Sniper was face down on the table of the Mess Room, a mug of lukewarm coffee by his side. So many others. They had all simply dropped wherever they had been when the gas hit them, with no sign of struggle except for the occasional broken glass or plate.

Outside, the huddled survivors were much noisier.

"You expect us to believe that, son?" Engineer asked angrily, advancing on Demo. "You just happen to get caught up in this right little mess, but had nothin' to do with it?"

"I tell ye, this isnae' my fault!" Demo said, backing away and holding his hands up protectively. "They didnae ken 'bout me. They tried tae gas me too!"

"I think he's tellin' the truth." Sniper said, stepping in front of Demo protectively. "How he got here, I dunno, but I heard enough stuff from the base to make the Administrator signal for a base wipe. It's what she does. Why sort out the problem the hard way when you can just kill everyone instead? Nice an' tidy that way." Sniper turned and spat on the ground.

"Bloody Scout wouldnae keep his mouth shut." Demo said with a sad sigh. "I tried tae warn him, again and again. He never listened. Ach, I'm just bloody useless."

"There were others too, mate, not just him." Sniper commented. He glanced down at his watch. "We got fifteen minutes before the cleanup crews come. If we're still here, we'll be as dead as those poor buggers inside."

"Scout and Soldier cannot be moved. Zhey got a full dose." Medic stated firmly. The two unconscious mercenaries were laid out on the floor next to the dispenser. BLU Scout lay still, his breathing shallow, while RED Soldier twitched and writhed, struggling for every breath, his mouth flecked with foam. His eyes flickered open under his helmet now and again, but they had little sense in them.
"If we stay here, they will kill us all." Spy stated. He paused thoughtfully, flicking the ash from his third cigarette in as many minutes. "Sniper's van has beds."

"Nice idea, mate, but it's back at the Violet base. I got here using the teleport, like normal." Sniper pointed out.

"RED Sniper has a similar model." Spy said. "Could you hotwire it, Engineer?"

"Hmm?" Engineer said distractedly. "Well, sure. It's just a case of crossing a coupla wires. But why should I..."

"That will have to do then." Spy said firmly.

"Vhen did you become zhe doctor around here?" Medic asked sharply.

"Do you agree that Sniper's van is our best choice for an ambulance right now?"

"Vell, yes, but..."

"Good." Spy stated. "Engineer, Demo, and Pyro can travel in my car. Heavy, Medic, Soldier and Scout can travel in Sniper's van. The more kilometres we can put between us and this base, the safer we will be. After that..." The man trailed to a halt and held up his hands in exasperation. "Mon dieu, I don't even know! None of this is according to plan!"

"There's forest, north, in Colorado," Sniper said. "I can find us a good place to camp. Safe n' hidden."

Medic gave a sudden bitter laugh that turned into a cough. "I knew ve needed zhe talents of zhe full team, and here ve are. Be careful vhat you vish for, indeed."

"Soldier and Scout not helping much right now." Heavy said with a shrug.

"Hrr mrrrn." Pyro said reproachfully.

"If ve must go, zhen let's go." Medic declared, rubbing his throat.

"Ok, let me get that van goin'," Engineer said, putting his wrench away and getting out a pair of long-nosed pliers, "And once we stop, I think a lotta people round here have gotten some explainin' to do."

The van and station wagon roared off along the cracked road, leaving Teufort for what would be the last time.

Medic grabbed the edge of a unit as they swerved around a corner and briefly cursed Sniper's driving, before looking back at his patients. He frowned, his lips compressing into a thin line. He had a choice to make— the one that all trauma surgeons faced sooner or later. It was one of the reasons why doctors had such a high rate of depression and addiction in their ranks. It was generally not spoken about, and Medic certainly had no intention of ever telling the other mercenaries about the dilemma he faced right now.

The medigun was running out of gas.

If he divided his use of the medigun between both patients, the dosage would not be high enough, and they would both die. If he concentrated on one, however...that one would live.
There was another complication, too: he needed the medigun himself. Without using it twice a day as he had been doing, he would get very sick, very fast.

In other words, only one of the three people in the back of the van was going to live. There was no point wringing his hands in guilt over it— it was simple fact. He paused thoughtfully, mentally summing up the possible actions he could take. Unfortunately, the cause of action he’d most like to take— save all the remaining gas for himself— was the least logical. He briefly wondered if Sergei realised just how ill he was now, and how far the disease had progressed. He had done his best to hide it, since he did not want to make the Russian pester him even more than he had been doing, and his sympathy was of limited usefulness, anyway. The truth was, though, that he would most likely die soon even if he saved his life today, and therefore resources used on him would be wasted. Getting the rebellion going— that was more important to him than a few extra weeks of life.

So, that narrowed it down to Scout or Soldier. Which one had the greater chance of survival? Both were comatose. Scout was lying still, barely breathing. He looked peaceful, his young face child-like in repose. Soldier convulsed and twitched, fighting against spasming muscles to get air into his lungs. Blood leaked from his lips where he had bitten his tongue.

"Ma, look at me, Ma..." Scout murmured, his voice barely more than a sigh. "Is anyone lookin’ at me..."

The choice was obvious.

Medic felt the familiar ache in his throat and stifled a cough, and then firmly pointed the medigun at one of the two fallen mercenaries.

A few hours later, the two vehicles drew up and stopped on an obscure side road with a crunch of gravel, and the exhausted and heart-sore mercenaries looked out blankly at the tall conifer trees surrounding them. Sniper silently padded out of his van, followed by Heavy. The Australian flopped down onto a rock with a defeated sigh. The travellers in Spy’s van also staggered into the fresh air. Spy went around to the trunk and got out a wicker basket that made squawking and cooing noises. He opened it and the four doves flew out.

The back door to the van opened with a soft click, and Medic stepped out, rubbing his eyes and running a hand through his curly hair.

"How’re they doin’ in there, Doc?" Engineer asked, putting his toolkit down and sitting on it with a sigh.

"I’m sorry, Engineer," Medic replied solemnly, "Scout is dead. He was exposed to too much gas. There was nothing I could do."

"Damn it." Engineer sighed, looking upwards at the tall trees and listening to the sough of the wind through their branches. "Why’d it have to be the young ‘un? Dammit, dammit, dammit."

"Poor wee laddie." Demo murmured, closing his eyes and slumping against the side of Spy’s car.

"Soldier is still unconscious, but stable. He needs more treatment, but should recover, in time." Medic said, suddenly staggering and leaning against the van for support.

"Doktor is unwell?" Heavy said in concern.

"Not now, Sergei, ve have other worries." Medic said, waving a hand tiredly.
"Schrrrr mrrrhhh brrrr bhrrrrhhhn." Pyro said softly.

"Alas, that is true." Spy muttered, stretching until his joints popped.

"Least we can do." Engineer said, scratching his head.

"I'm...sorry I did not quite catch zhat."

"He said we shall have to bury him." Spy explained quietly, waving his cigarette.

"We've got nae shovels." Demo pointed out. "But there's enough rocks here to make the poor wee laddie a good cairn."

"What is 'cairn'?’" Heavy asked.

"We make it for all of them." Engineer said firmly, standing up and brushing his knees off. "It's a pile of rocks, Heavy, used as a memorial."

"Da, we build big memorial. Write their names in stone." Heavy agreed.

"And then," Engineer continued with a soft, mild voice. "I want to know what the hell is goin' on, and then I'm gonna punch someone, hard."

The group worked in silence. Scout was wrapped in a sheet and carried carefully out of the van by Heavy. Curled in the Russian's arms, the young runner looked tiny by comparison. There was barely any weight to him- he certainly weighed less than Sasha. Heavy suspected the survivors of Teufort felt just like he did: blank, emotionless and not really able to feel anything right now. It was easier to just run on fumes until this all became real again. He vaguely knew that sooner or later, he would be furious. Right now, it was too much effort.

They found a suitable site a reasonable distance from their vehicles and nestled Scout so that he was curled up amongst the stones and then piled more rocks until the white bed sheet that served as his funeral shroud was completely hidden from view. Heavy noticed that Gerhardt worked distinctly slower than anyone else, stopping often to catch his breath. The shadows got longer, and a brief rain shower splattered the rocks with dark round marks as the air cooled.

"I reckon that's enough." Engineer said, his voice slurring with tiredness. "S'pose we should say a few words. Dag nab it, I can't even think straight right now."

"Here we remember our fallen." Sniper suddenly said, taking his hat off and holding it to his chest.

"They did not die in the execution of their duty," Spy continued softly, "But due to the idle cruelty of others."

"We will ne'er forget 'em." Demo continued. "We'll bring their killers to justice."

Heavy looked dully at the three Violets. Sniper's face was a careful blank, Demo looked tearfully angry and Spy's mouth was a tight, trembling line, his eyebrows drawn close together and his eyes held wide and unblinking.

"On the BLU team," Engineer said, "We remember Scout, Soldier, Demo, Heavy, Medic, Spy, Sniper."

"On the RED team," Demo said, "We remember Spy, Sniper, Scout, Heavy, Medic, Engineer, and Pyro."
Heavy cleared his throat hesitantly. "I have words to say. Is poem I wrote for...someone." Normally, the idea of admitting that he liked poetry would have been acutely embarrassing, but to hell with that- this was the time. The assembled mercenaries looked at him in dull surprise.

"Go on, Sergei." Medic said, with an encouraging nod.

"Only nameless grieve,
When nameless fall.
Why do they not answer,
Questions we never ask?
We are dolls,
We march on,
Spit, sawdust and sand."

There was a moment of silence.

"It'll do." Engineer replied with a sigh, dusting off his knees. "C'mon, let's get back to the cars. We've done all we can here, and I want to know what's goin' on."

"Nein." Medic said firmly. "Gas masks do not provide full protection and many of you are suffering from low dosages of nerve agent and need to rest. Ve... ve can..." He stopped, his voice breaking down into a coughing fit as he scrabbled in a pocket for a handkerchief. Heavy rushed over to him, putting a hand on his shoulder in concern, but Medic irritably batted his fingers aside.

He is sicker than before.

"I say we discuss it now." Spy said. "Then you can all decide whether I should die or not, and we can get on with our lives- or...oh please be quiet, docteur. Go and use your medigun for a while."

"Ah!" Medic gasped, pausing to catch his breath. "Zhere you have identified zhe main problem. I am out of gas for it. I used zhe last of it on Soldier."

"But without it, you cannot survive! You told me..." Spy stopped suddenly. "How long?"

"Wait, what's this about Medic?" Engineer asked in concern, but he was ignored.

"I have no idea." Medic gave Spy one of his unhinged smiles, wiping his mouth and then folding up the bloody handkerchief. "Hours? A few days?"

"Stoopid, stoopid, stoopid!" Heavy shouted, glaring at his friend. He grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "Why you make such stupid decisions all the time?"

"ENOUGH." Engineer suddenly yelled, thumping a nearby tree in exasperation. "YOU WILL ALL TELL ME WHAT'S GOIN' ON OR SO HELP ME I'LL PROGRAM A SENTRY TO KILL EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU, YOU GOT THAT?"

"Yeah," Sniper said tiredly, "We got that. Loud an' clear. C'mon, mates, I'll get a fire goin' and we can talk."

In Chapter Twenty-Three: Soldier wakes up, Engineer gets his explanation and Medic's illness gets far, far worse.
Author's note: Ok guys, are you prepared to be really jealous of me? So jealous you could chop my head off? Here goes: I just won two australium weapons in a row from Two Cities. I think the phrase is 'you jammy git'. I've never even heard of that happening! My gaming buddies all hate me now. I can tolerate this.

Talking of everyone hating me, I have weathered the abuse I got from poor Scout's death, and you may begin to see why I did promise a happy ending to this story, since the path to get there is pretty dark.

Spoiler: I know you don't all hate me really. Right? Right??!

Those of you who have just caught up with this story, thank you so much for joining us—it seems my readership increases with every chapter I post! You guys are gluttons for punishment. Thanks for your reviews, keep 'em coming.


Soldier opened his eyes and tried to look around himself. Everything see-sawed and spun, and he couldn't see enough to figure out where he was. He could hear someone shouting, but it seemed a long way away. The shouting died down and was replaced by soft talking, which faded into nothingness. Time passed. He opened his eyes again, and this time he squinted until he figured out that he was in the last place he wanted to be.

*Why the hell am I in the hippie's van? How did I get here?*

Had he been kidnapped? Hippies brainwashed people into being peaceloving beatniks, all into free love and patchouli, didn't they? Well, they'd not manage that with him! The free love part didn't sound so bad though...

He uncurled limbs that trembled and shook, and as soon as he moved, his head started to pound. His teeth chattered and he clenched his jaw, which only made his head hurt even more. In fact, everything hurt. His limbs tingled and ached, he was trembling uncontrollably and he felt like he could puke any moment. They had drugged him! He'd show them, he'd...where was his helmet? Where was his helmet?! Ah, there. Damn, it was cold. He seemed to be wearing a grubby grey bathrobe that was too tight across the shoulders, and very little else. He decided it was time to get up, but all he managed was an uncoordinated roll and he fell to the floor with a thump.

"Curse you, pinko hippie drugs." He muttered, trying to push himself upright with arms that shook and felt as weak as celery. "I'll kick your ass before you take me alive."

"...Heard summat. Think he's awake?"

"Ach, nein, not... possible yet. Not after... zhat level of exposure."

That sounded like Medic! What was he doing involved in this conspiracy? Dammit, he couldn't
"Nae, he's a determined wee barmpot, that's fer sure." That was Demo! Demo was his friend. Had they brainwashed him into joining them? "Lemme take a look."

The narrow door opened, and Soldier found himself looking up at Demo. The Scotsman smiled tiredly at him. "Told ya! He's awake. C'mon Sol, ye've had a right beatin'. Do you remember anythin'? Can ye walk?"

"Of course I can walk." Soldier stated, completely failing to get his arms and legs under any kind of control.

"Heavy, gi' us a hand, will ye?"

"Da."

Demo stepped over and past him and slung his arms around Soldier's, while the large Russian stepped into the campervan- but it was not the Heavy he had been expecting. He tried to kick with his legs, but the man just ignored him and helped Demo pick him up and carry him out into a conifer forest. From the sloping shadows, it was late in the day. He could hear the crackle of a fire and smelled smoke.

"You!" He spat. "Traitor! Deserter! Traitorous deserter! You abandoned the team! And went off with that BLU scumbag of a Medic! Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kick your ass into outer space!"

"I give you two." Heavy growled. "One, you are deserter and traitor too, and two, you can barely move right now."

"He is... doing vell, better... zhan I expected." Medic commented. Soldier couldn't see much beyond the sky right now, but the man sounded strange to him- wheezing and taking odd pauses in between words to breathe.

"Let's put 'im down here." Demo said.

"Nah, mate, wait. He needs a blanket underneath 'im. You lose more heat through the ground than the air, everyone knows that. One underneath, one on top."

"He needs to be... sitting partly upright." Medic said. "To help him...breathe."

"Put me down right now, Private. I don't need your molly-coddling."

"Yes you bloody well do. Yer just come back from the brink o' death." Demo told him. There was a swishy fabric noise and he was gently lowered onto a blanket and propped up against a conifer. Demo tucked the edges of the blanket around him carefully. "Now before we go off on one o' yer rants, ye might want to think aboot who just saved yer life."

Soldier looked about and spotted the BLU Medic, sitting against a tree with his eyes closed. The deserter was no longer wearing blue. Instead he was dressed in a white lab coat, currently stained with dust and mud. However, he had seared those facial features into his mind so he could shoot the bastard should they ever meet again.

"So you're here too, you spineless coward! You got five seconds to explain your actions, Mister." He looked further around and noticed that there were more BLUs- their Engineer and Pyro, plus a Sniper and Spy in a strange purple coloured uniform. The oddest thing was that no one was shooting
anyone else. "What the hell is going on here?!

"I believe this may take some time to explain." Spy said. "Suffice it to say we are all on the same side here. We have been played for fools for a long time, all of us, but it is time for the truth to be known. Who wishes to begin?"

"I zink I better start." Medic said, opening his eyes and taking a laboured breath. "I...vas involved first."

"I could argue I was involved before you, but please continue, Docteur." Spy said, lighting a cigarette from the campfire. Heavy snatched it off him and stomped it into the ground with a glare.

"I tell Doktor's story." He stated.

"I can still talk, you know." Medic snapped.

"Hnn. I talk better." Heavy replied firmly.

The story the large man told was hard to believe, but it seemed that the traitorous BLU Medic agreed with it, as did the purple-clad Spy, who looked at the needle-carpeted floor when Heavy spoke about how RED Medic had died.

"I knew it!" Soldier growled. "It had to be murder- everything pointed to it! So, you've arrested this maggot of a Spy here and what now? Measure him for a rope necktie? Or do you want me to interrogate him first?"

"Ye can barely move, Sol." Demo said tiredly. "What're you intendin' to do, talk him tae death?"

"I am not a prisoner." Violet Spy told Soldier. "I am a willing ally."

"So'm I." Sniper added.

"Uhhh hrrrs rrhhh." Pyro said softly, staring at the fire.

"So you were, Sparkie." Engineer murmured. "Dang it... I can't believe...we're...damn, Medic, no wonder you were actin' a bit doolally there. He...he cut your head off and kept it alive? Surprised it didn't send ya off screamin'. And to then develop... Doc, I'm so sorry."

"I'm no clone, I'm me." Soldier declared, putting his finger on the flaw of this story. "I think you're making this all up to give your pathetic yellow selves an excuse to desert."

"If this was all made-up," Spy said wryly, "I would not like to imagine the kind of mind that could come up with such a twisted tale."

"Shhrrhhhhrrr."

"Hmm, quite." Spy agreed.

"I would recommend zhem... for psychiatric assessment." Medic said with a nod. "Or drowning."

"I don't believe any of this." Soldier said.

"Perhaps I can continue?" Spy asked. Heavy gave a short nod. Soldier frowned in puzzlement. Heavy seemed oddly not-murderous towards the backstabber. The skinny man told his story of bleeding-heart liberalism and pinko thinking, and Soldier's attention wandered for a bit, until he got to the point where Heavy and Medic fled Teufort.
"You fraternised with an enemy?!!" He exploded. "What kind of bullshit is this?"

"Gravel Wars, entire battle, everything is sham." Heavy stated sternly. Spy nodded in agreement.

"Indeed. You were all created by us, to fight both sides of one battle." Spy said. "A balance of power, you understand, to stop either of the Mann brothers becoming too powerful."

"I dunno why I didn't just go and put a bullet through the Mann brother's brains." Sniper commented, stirring a steaming pot on top of the fire. "Solve the problem, dead easy."

"Money, dear boy." Spy said drily. "We were in it for the money, remember? At first."

"What kind of traitors are you?!!" Soldier demanded. He tried to move, but couldn't manage more than a slight shuddering squirm. "Killing our leaders!"

"Oh shut up and let zhem... finish the story." Medic said impatiently, before swallowing and coughing. Sniper handed him a steaming mug. He breathed in the steam gratefully. "Danke."

Spy continued talking, telling everyone about the Violet Engineer leaving the team, and his fruitless search for him, until he reached the point where the two deserters were hidden like the rats they were in New Orleans.

"Why New Orleans?" Soldier asked suspiciously.

"Medic found work as a paediatrician." Spy explained. Medic frowned and opened his mouth but Spy swiftly jabbed him with a sharp elbow. "Heavy was a security officer. They intended to raise money to get Medic treatment and further the cause of the clones."

"I told you, I'm not a clone." Soldier said. "If I was, I'd know."

"I, ah, joined them there. This was when I heard from Sniper that there was a serious problem in Teufort." Spy continued. "Filthy jar-man, care to elaborate?"

"Sure thing, prancin' show-pony." Sniper said, passing around more cups of steaming liquid. "Wild mint tea. Found some growin' along a local stream. 'S good for what ails ya. Make sure Sol has some, but let it cool first."

"I'll do that." Demo said, accepting a tin mug for Soldier and himself. "Now, Sol, don't argue and jus' take a wee sip, okay?" He said, blowing on the tea and then holding it up to Soldier's lips.

Soldier was thirsty enough to do as he was told, just this once. In war, there wasn't always room for dignity, and he had been honourably wounded in battle, so he had the right, he figured. The liquid was warm, aromatic and soothed his churning stomach.

"Roight. Now I can tell my bit." Sniper said, and launched into another long-winded and boring story of various people saying things. He explained how he had overhead various conversations, and how they had made the Administrator decide to gas the base.

"Careless talk costs lives." Soldier said with a nod.

"Seems this damn well did." Engineer murmured. He had his chin resting on his hand and was hunched over his tea, eyes half-closed.

"Hrrss mrrr frrrrhhn." Pyro murmured softly, looking down at the ground. His shoulders shook and a keening noise came from his mask.
"Hell no, Sparkie, it's not your fault, never." Engineer said firmly, shuffling over and patting the masked man on the shoulder. "You didn't throw no killswitch."

"Engineer is right." Medic added. "Zhe person who does... zhe act is zhe one... at fault."

"Are you really dying?" Soldier asked curiously. Medic's eyes narrowed as he looked at the injured man.

"No. I made it all...up to get sympazhy." He replied.

"Oh, that's all right then," Soldier said shortly.

"Rrrgh." Medic grunted irritably.

"So, BLU base was closest n' I strapped on a gas mask and went and got out who I could- which was Engineer, Pyro and Scout, the poor little wanker."

"A gas mask is not enough...to stop exposure." Medic panted. He stopped briefly, pulling at his collar and making a quiet whining noise before continuing. "It is also absorbed...through the skin."

"Yeah, that's why I got Engie to build a dispenser as soon as we got out- I reckon we all needed that bit of healin'." Sniper replied. "Wot I want to know is how Tavish ended up here." He glanced at the Scotsman accusingly.

"Ah, bugger it, it's no' much of a story." Demo said with a shrug. "I couldnae stand pissin' around in the headquarters, watching those poor sods go out and die while we sat on our arses and did bugger-all. So, I did this deal, with 001/n. The zero-zero-one's look just like us Violets, so we, eh, came to this agreement: he and I, every year, we swap places. We get half the money each an' both get to blow shite up, wi'out doin' it fer so long a stretch we go nutty. We wuz both happy."

"How long ago was this?" Spy demanded.

"About five years, ye ken." Demo admitted. "Everything was fine 'til we moved to Teufort. Then it all went doon the lavvy. I saw yon BLU Medic and thought 'oh bugger, now we're in trouble'. Seems I was bloody right."

"Wait, what's this about Demo?" Soldier asked.

"I'm sorry Sol, I couldnae tell ye the truth." Demo said sadly, holding up the mug for Soldier to drink more. "I'm no' a clone like these others, y'see."

"I'm not a clone either." Soldier said firmly before drinking.

"That's why I tried tae stop the lads all talkin' aboot the weird things they had seen, 'cos I knew what'd happen." Demo hung his head miserably. "When I heard the alarm, I knew nobody else on the base'd hear it, and I tried tae get everyone oot- but only Solly here listened to me." The Scotsman gave a long, sad sigh.

"You know, I sort o' hoped that by joinin' a team, I'd be able to keep one bunch o'clones safe, ye ken." He continued. "To try and do summat to help, at least. I dinnae manage it though, did I? I'm just a bloody failure."

Soldier closed his eyes, searching through his ragged memory. He did vaguely remember Demo shouting at something...mist coming through the walls...rocket jumping...he could not remember landing though.
Could it be true? Could he be some sort of copy, fighting in a pointless war? No. I will not believe it. It's a BLU conspiracy.

"No!" He said out loud. "This is all a stinking BLU ploy to try and brainwash me. It won't work, you sons of bitches! You got to Heavy and Demo, but I am strong-willed- you won't get me!"

"Can I punch him yet?" Heavy asked.

"The poor wee man's half dead, leave him be." Demo replied, glaring at Heavy.

"I will resist your stinking BLU tricks with every ounce of my strength." Soldier declared, trying to fold his shaking arms and missing. "I am going to report your insubordination to the Administrator. Let's see how you like that, you pathetic cowards."

"Gottverdammte!" Medic snapped suddenly, struggling for breath. "I don't...have time for all zhis scheiße. If...if..." Medic started coughing, but controlled it with a gasp. "Let zhe dummkopf live in his fantasy world. If he doesn't vant...to believe us, ve can just dump him here in zhe middle of zhis forest and let...zhe bears eat him."

"No bears 'round here, mate. Plenty of wolves though." Sniper said helpfully.

"I just want some proof." Soldier stated stubbornly. "I demand proof!"

"Proof!" Medic spat. He stood up suddenly, swaying slightly. "Alright, I vill give you proof."

"Doktor needs to rest, is very unwell." Heavy said worriedly.

"Shut up, Sergei! I vill show zhis idiot." He spat. He pulled impatiently at his lab coat and shirt, undid the top two buttons and pulled it down far enough so that Soldier could see a thin, white scar that circled his neck. "See? Zhat... is where RED Medic... cut my head off. Is zhat...good enough proof for you?"

"You could have cut that yourself with a razor blade." Soldier replied, unimpressed.

Medic's top lip lifted in a snarl and his face went dead white in fury. "Zhis is ridic... He stopped and coughed harshly, ignoring the red speckles that decorated his hand. "...cul...ous..."

"Woah, woah, Doc, calm down there." Engineer said in alarm, standing up cautiously. "You're gonna do yourself a mischief. Heavy's right, you're real sick and you have to rest."

"I don't care!" Medic gasped, struggling to draw a breath. He glared angrily at Soldier. "You just vant to...ignore zhe truth because it...it means you are not... some mighty war hero. I vill not accept zhis!" He coughed again and this time it was a dreadful gargling splutter that left blood trickling from the corner of his mouth and nose.

"Mrrrdrrrk!" Pyro stood up in alarm, his arms reaching for the doctor.

"Give up if you vish, Soldier." He gurgled, his voice getting softer. He closed his eyes tiredly. "I should have let...you...you..." He made an odd tiny gulping noise and his hands scrabbled at his throat desperately. "Kann nicht atmen...bitte...helf..."

Heavy leapt up and caught the doctor as his ravaged and exhausted body finally gave up its fight and he stopped breathing.

In Chapter Twenty-Four: Soldier finally gets the proof he wanted, and Heavy reveals a secret
he and Medic had been hiding...

Translations:

*Kann nicht atmen...bitte...helf* - Can't breathe...please...help...
Author's Note: You know, the reviews I got for the last chapter were very weird. There was a general big NOOOOO at Medic's fall at the end of it, and yet people complimented me on my writing and said it was a fantastic chapter. I feel very confused. I can only assume that you folks like to suffer. This is logical, considering you've stuck with me this far!

Seriously, though, thank you *so* much for your reviews and comments. The popularity of a story that I wrote purely for fun has blown me away.

The 'Scottish thing' that Demo does in this chapter really is a thing, called the Sgian Dubh. Incidentally, Demo's place of origin, Ullapool, is a lovely place and well worth a visit. You can see dolphins in the sea there and it is one of my favourite places to go on holiday.

The artwork for this chapter is both complex and rather fluffy. It certainly took me a while and I've done it in a bigger format to show all the details. It's at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/#/art/Chapter-Twenty-Four-Blood-Is-Thicker-491536594?hf=1. Hope you like it!

"Nyet! Ya nye pozvolyo etogo!" Heavy cried, patting Medic's face urgently. "Doktor!"

"He's not dying, you ignorant maggots, he's choking!" Soldier shouted. "Did no one ever teach you first aid?"

"Bugger it, he's right!" Sniper cried urgently. "You've gotta..."

"Heavy, slap him on the back, hard as you can!" Soldier interrupted.

The large man looked puzzled, but then brought around a large hand and thumped the doctor. Medic's eyes opened in confusion and he made a soft 'guh' noise.

"You call that a slap? Again, you sonnovabitch! Harder!"

Heavy swung his arm back and then brought his hand around in a wide arc and thumped the man as hard as he could.

"Hrrgggg..." Medic gurgled. "Rrrr...gak!" Something black shot out of his mouth and he suddenly took a desperate, ragged breath, and another, folding up on the floor with his streaming eyes squeezed shut.

"Doktor?" Heavy shook his shoulder gently. "Gerhardt?"

"Th' 'Ell was that?" Demo said.

"Hrrr." Pyro said, picking up a small black object.
"You alright, Doc?"

"Fick..." The man panted, taking gasping, shuddering breaths. "Was...zum... Teufel?"

"It looks like a piece of rubber tubing." Spy said curiously. "How odd."

"Zhat vas...vas..." Medic croaked, opening watering eyes that quickly widened in astonishment. "Gottverdamnte. What zhe Hell is zhat zhing?!"

"Hrrr hrrrll uhhhss." Pyro said, handing the piece of rubber over. Medic sat up carefully and took the piece of ragged, blood-covered tubing. He lifted up his glasses to look at it closely.

"Oh..." He said. "Zhis...cannot be...no..."

"What is it?" Heavy asked anxiously.

"Zhis," He rasped, clearing his throat, "Is a piece of air tubing from zhe life-support system RED Medic used for my head. It fed compressed nitrogen over zhe larynx so I could talk. Vhen I vent zhrough respawn it must have, eh, come along for zhe ride."

"You mean to tell us you've had that thing lodged in your throat for nearly a goddamned year?" Engineer asked in astonishment.

"Vell," Medic said, his voice momentarily breaking into a squeak. He coughed and swallowed. "It would seem so. Let me zhink about zhis- In my job, I am constantly exposed to medigun gas, and I zhink zhat meant zhat rather zhan reject zhe foreign body, my trachea healed around it instead- as much as vas possible, creating a constriction of zhe airvay..."

"And as your throat got more and more irritated, you used the medigun more and more..." Spy said wryly.

"...Until last night, ja." Medic's expression suddenly changed into one of horrified realisation. "Oh no...you know zhis means?"

"What?" Engineer asked in concern.

"I do not have a squamous cell carcinoma of zhe trachea!" The doctor exclaimed angrily, running a hand through his hair in exasperation. "I am not terminally ill!"

"But that is good thing!" Heavy objected. "Is very good thing."

"Nein it is terrible!" Medic shouted hoarsely, his voice frying and warbling. "I made zhe wrong diagnosis! Zhat is appalling medical practice. Zhis is unacceptable! Zhis is...get off me, dummkopf!"

"You are going to live!" Heavy cried. "Ya tak vonovalsya!"

"Put 'im down, Heavy, you don't know where he's been." Sniper muttered.

"Alright," Soldier admitted in a quiet, shocked voice completely unlike his normal bark, "That's some pretty damn good proof right there, Doc. I believe you. Whatever your battle plan is, I'm in. Wherever it takes us."

"At least we have achieved something positive today then." Spy said. He reached for his cigarette case and lit a cigarette with relish. He paused thoughtfully and offered them around to the group. Sniper, Engineer and Pyro all accepted one, although Pyro simply lit his from the fire and watched the smoke twirl without making any effort to inhale it.
"Damn I need a drink." Demo stated.

"Hang on." Sniper said, and went to rummage in the van for a while, finally producing a case of beer. He passed them round silently.

"Let me add a li'l somethin' to that." Engineer opened his toolbox and got out a bottle of Kentucky bourbon. He took a long gulp of it, shuddered and then passed it around.

The group sat in tired silence for a short while, too exhausted to talk, but far too on edge and heart-sore to sleep. The beers were drank, and the liquid level in the bourbon bottle went steadily down. The sky darkened from twilight into true night. The air cooled and gained a chilly bite, and Demo went and fetched another couple of blankets and bundled them around Soldier. Pyro fed more wood onto the fire and sat and watched it silently. Engineer eventually broke the silence.

"Wish I had my guitar." Engineer said with a sigh. "I could do with a song right now."

"If anyone starts playing the harmonica, I will happily kill them." Spy stated sourly.

"So, Heavy. Poetry, eh? That's your hobby?" Sniper asked quietly, staring into the fire with his eyes half closed. Wood popped and shifted, and he opened his eyes wide briefly before closing them again.

"Da. If anyone laugh, I punch them." Heavy said warningly.

"Nah, mate, not laughing. Not in a laughing mood right now." Sniper said, waving a hand idly. "Just...didn't expect it."

"It is good way to learn new language. No one care if you get it leetle bit wrong." Heavy explained. "They think it deliberate."

"I like your poetry." Medic croaked. "I vould like to hear more."

"Da?" Heavy said in surprise, his sparse eyebrows rising. His mouth tweaked briefly into a sad smile. "Spasiba. It is mostly burnt, but I write out what I can remember for you."

Pyro suddenly got up and walked away, but returned quickly with arm fulls of dry wood, which he fed into the fire.

"Careful there, mate, this is a bloody dry forest. Whole sodding lot could catch with us inside it." Sniper said, poking the ground idly with a stick.

"Hrrd!"

"No, that's not good, Sparkie." Engineer said. "We're well hidden here. Reckon we could stay here a few days while we find our feet and recover."

"That your car, Spy?" Soldier suddenly said, his eyes flicking open.

"Oui."

"I thought Spies drove Aston Martins. Little sporty things." Soldier said. With a grunt of effort, he twisted his head around slowly to look at Spy's station wagon. "Not rusty old Fords."

Spy smirked and took a deep drag of his fourth cigarette. "Surely a Spy will drive whatever people do not expect him to drive? Unpredictability- that is the key to my work."
"You managed it." Medic muttered hoarsely. "Where did you get that 'Jemima' disguise?"

"Given the nature of my work, my disguise kit contains quite a few extras." Spy said smugly. "There are two ways of being invisible, mon ami. One is to cloak. She is the other."

"Huh, that's so bloody true." Demo muttered.

"I don't understand." Heavy said. "I could see her."

"Many choose not to." Spy replied. The bourbon reached him and he took a large gulp and then coughed. "There are times when I wish my innate cynicism was not justified. So far, it has always been completely accurate, alas."

"The world stinks." Demo said. He held up his empty beer bottle. "Why'd you think I drink?"

"'Cos you're a bloody pathetic, self-pitying drunkard?" Sniper suggested.


"Mm? I'm awake. Totally awake." Soldier blinked, his eyes somewhat unfocussed.

"No yer not. Time fer bed." Demo insisted.

"Wait- we have to do something first." Soldier said. "Anybody got a knife?"

"I got one." Demo reached down to his ankle and produced a small stubby knife with a horn handle.

"You keep a knife in your sock?" Engineer asked curiously.

"It's a Scottish thing." Demo said with a shrug. He handed it to Soldier, but it quickly dropped from his weakened grasp.

"Damn it. Demo, you'll have to help." Soldier's weakened voice became commanding. "Men, today we have been through great adversity, and yet we've survived. We come from many different backgrounds, but we are allies now. Our enemies are many and we are few. But we will not give up, and we will triumph. Today, we are blood brothers." He held a shaking wrist out to Demo, whose eyes widened with realisation. He smiled grimly and nodded in approval, cutting a small semi-circular cut in Soldier's wrist, and then his own. He pressed the two bleeding wounds together, and then handed the blade to Engineer on his left, who cut his left wrist and pressed it to Demo's. The knife went around the circle, from mercenary to mercenary.

"This is ridiculous." Spy said, sighing in disdain. "Disgusting, and utterly barbarian."

"Unhygienic." Medic agreed with a croak.

"Just do it, lad." Demo ordered. Spy grumbled but did so.

Medic still looked rather baffled by this tribal display, but he took part as well. Spy pressed his slender wrist to Medic's sinewy one, their eyes meeting briefly with a short nod. Heavy pressed his wrist to Medic's, and then Pyro removed a glove to show a copper-skinned hand, speckled with pink burns, which he cut to complete the circle.

"No one will stop us." Soldier declared. "We will get vengeance for our fallen."

"Aye. We're all in this together," Demo said, "Wher'er it takes us." There were nods and murmurs, and a feeling of solemn peace finally settled over the group, along with a wave of sleepiness.
"Uhhh nhrrrr hrrr uh frrhmrrrhr." Pyro commented.

"That was a good thing you did there, laddie." Demo said to Soldier, before realising the injured man had fallen asleep with his head resting on Demo's shoulder. Demo sighed sadly, looking at his friend. "Ah, yer poor bastard. I nay would've thought it'd be you that'd get hurt, of all of us. Nothin' keeps you down for long. You always come bouncin' right back. Not this time, though. They got you good and proper, didn't they?"

He carefully eased Soldier down onto the ground and then lay down next to him, placing Soldier's head on his thigh for a pillow. Engineer yawned, curled up on his side and closed his eyes, then opened them briefly when Pyro put his arms around him and cuddled in close. Sniper and Spy slept back to back, their curved spines just touching, and Heavy lay on his side and put an arm around Medic, who lay flat on his back and was already snoring.

The group of former enemies, RED, BLU and Violet, slept soundly through the night.

Medic woke up late the next morning, listening to the sounds of the camp around him. Footsteps. Quiet, muttered conversations. There was a crackle of the fire and a clang of something metal. A dove pecked his ear impatiently, and he sighed and turned over before making an astonishing realisation.

_Mein Gott! I can breathe properly!_

His throat felt like he had been eating handfuls of razor blades, and his back was stiff and bruised, but to be able to breathe in and out and not feel dizzy, exhausted and nauseous from lack of oxygen...it was wonderful. He had forgotten what it was like. He opened his eyes and stretched before sitting up.

"Mornin' mate." Sniper said, hunched over by the fire. He had a stick with something small, rodent-like and dead skewered onto it. "There'll be squirrel for brekkies soon."

"Squ..." His voice rasped and squeaked and he cleared his throat, "Squirrel?"

"Yeah." Sniper shrugged. "Best I could do."

"Good morning Doktor." Heavy said from the other side of the fire. He was nibbling on a morsel on a stick. "Is not bad. Would be better with dill."

"Guten morgen." He yawned, enjoying the ability to do so without immediately coughing. For the first time in a long while, he was hungry, although he wasn't sure if he was hungry enough to eat rodents yet. He looked around the campsite. Engineer and Pyro were nowhere in sight. Demo was leaning against a tree drinking something out of a tin mug. Spy was hunched by the fire, smoking and staring off into space, and Soldier was still asleep, sprawled on the ground and so bundled up in blankets he was barely visible.

"Mornin' laddie." Demo said. "How's the throat?"

"Better." He said shortly. Obviously, not being terminally ill was a good thing, but recovering in such a dramatic way had left him feeling rather stunned and off-balance. He had assumed for so long that he had only a few months of life left that it had affected all of his recent decisions and actions. He felt almost...disappointed. After all, now he had to make long-term plans and everything was going to get far more complicated. Rather than simply sowing the seeds of rebellion as a legacy, he would have to be involved every step of the way. "How is Soldier?"

"Sleeping... I think." Demo said, looking down at his friend with a frown. "He's normally such an
"early riser."

"Zhe sleep vill do him good." Medic replied. "How is everyone else? Any after-effects from zhe exposure?"

"Nay, nowt beyond a few bad headaches and tummy upsets. Guess Engie's dispenser helped." Demo said. He cleared his throat. "I gotta thank ye, Medic."

"Hmm? Vhat for?"

"You saved 'is life." Demo explained waving a hand at Soldier. "An enemy RED, an' ye dinnae even hesitate."

"I left BLU monzhs ago, and stopped zhinking of RED as an enemy even before zhat. Zhey vere just zhe people I vas supposed to kill for some unknown reason." He replied with a shrug. "Zhings have become so complicated I have given up playing sides. If someone who could be useful to me is injured, I vill heal zhem."

"As always, I am amazed at the the depth of your compassion, docteur." Spy spoke up, waving his cigarette in the air. "However, it does please me that your physical condition is so improved." 

"Of course, zhe underhanded and dirty techniques Spies utilise means zhey vill always have a special place in my heart." He added sourly.

"Squirrel's ready." Sniper announced, handing a skewer over to Medic. "'S already skinned and dressed, no nasty bits left. Best meat is on the legs."

Medic took the skewer, and realised it was not a twig, but an arrow. He gingerly took a bite of leg meat and chewed the tough meat carefully. It reminded him slightly of rabbit or the dark meat of chicken, and was more palatable than he expected. He swallowed, wincing at the pain in his throat.

"See?" Sniper said. "Not so bad. It's better in a stew. It's a bit dry like this."

"Strangely enough, I have little appetite this morning." Spy commented. "I cannot imagine why. I thought I would see about acquiring some supplies for us today, seeing that I have the disguises, a car and a working bank account. I think there are many things we need, such as, oh, to take an example at random, palatable food."

"Are you able to get medical supplies? Zhere are medications some of zhe mercenaries vill need, such as insulin for Engineer, and if I could obtain more medigun gas for..."

"Bastard BLU, I will kick your..." Soldier suddenly muttered, blinking dazedly. "Oh...yeah, I remember now." He tried to struggle upright, but failed until Spy gave an irritated sigh and pulled the muscular man into a sitting position.

"Yes, I can get medicines. And clothes." Spy added. "Soldier cannot spend all his days in a dirty bathrobe."

"How're you feelin'?" Demo asked Soldier.

"Fine." Soldier replied firmly.

"Leetle Soldier cannot even sit up without help. Is strange 'fine'." Heavy commented through a mouthful of squirrel.
"I am a man of war, I won't complain about pansy little things such as a pounding head, feeling sick to my stomach, or desperately needing a piss." Soldier declared.

"I think I better be setting off..." Spy said getting up hurriedly.

"Eh, sod it." Demo said with a defeated sigh. "I'll hold ye upright, Sol, but that's all I'm holding, got it? C'mon, let's go before you wet yer pants." The Scotsman hauled the weakened man to his feet and steered him off into the forest.

"I am not sure whether to be sorry or thankful than I do not have any friends that close." Spy commented after they had left. Sniper snorted quietly.

"I am wondering if Demo missed his calling in the nursing profession." Medic said thoughtfully, ripping off a squirrel leg and gnawing on it.

"We could also do with more general stuff." Sniper told Spy. "Blankets, tents, cooking pots, all that."

"And bird food." Medic added, as his four doves fluttered down from the trees and tried to steal his breakfast. "Galileo, no! Squirrel is not good for you!"

"I reckon we'll have to move about a bit, to avoid being found, right?"

"I would strongly recommend it." Spy commented.

"Ve need to stay here for a week, at least." Medic said firmly. "Eveyone is injured, sick or exhausted. Ve all need to rest."

"Morning y'all." Engineer said, walking back into the camp with a damp towel over his shoulder. "Whooo-eee that stream is cold."

"Roasted squirrels and cold baths...I suppose we shall have to get used to living like savages." Spy sighed. "I knew when I chose this path I would be risking death, but perhaps I may have changed my mind if I had known I would be risking...dirt."

"Bloody poofter." Sniper muttered. "We'll be fine."

"As long as those Violets don't catch us before we are ready." Engineer pointed out.

"So true." Spy replied sadly. He rubbed his wrist unconsciously. "At least we have close to a full team now, even if it was achieved through...horrific means."

A bleak silence briefly settled over the camp. A crow called and Medic briefly watched it soar overhead on black wings.

"I...can't really take it all in, still." Engineer admitted, sitting down and shaking his head when offered a roasted squirrel. "To think that everyone in Teufort, all the fellas, 'cept for us six is..." His voice trailed off.

"I think it is big sudden shock, hard to believe all at once." Heavy said sympathetically. "We got used to people coming back from dead."

"Yesterday was one of the more interesting days in my life, I admit." Spy said. "It makes me certain I have chosen the correct side."

"Too bloody right, mate." Sniper agreed.
"Y'know, I wish Scout was here." Engineer sighed. "A small band of desperados working to bring down an evil super-corporation? That li'l string bean'd have loved every minute of it. We could sure do with his skills, even if he runs his mouth off all the dang time. Poor fella."

Medic could sense Heavy looking at him questioningly. He looked back and frowned. Heavy nodded, raising his eyebrows. Medic shook his head, and mouthed 'no'. Spy looked between the two of them in puzzlement.

"Gentlemen, is there something you wish to share?"

"Nein."

"Da." Heavy said.

"Sergei..." Medic said waringly.

"We are not first clones to escape." Heavy said. Medic made an irritated noise and folded his arms.

"So much for being sworn to secrecy." He grumbled.

"Hang on, are you sayin' there are other clones running around out in the world?" Sniper asked.

"How'd they escape?"

"Did you ever try keeping a Scout in vone place for any lengzh of time?" Medic asked. "Extracting a pancreas is easier."

"I will have to take your word on that, docteur." Spy said, grimacing in disgust.

"Very fiddly zhing, zhe pancreas, very delicate." Medic mused. "I tried giving Engineer a second vone..."

"Say what? When was this?" Engineer said in alarm.

"But I could not get zhe wretched zhing out of zhe RED Spy in vone piece. I'm sorry, Engineer, I tried." Medic admitted. "Ah vell, it vould no doubt have ended up back in Spy as soon as he respawned, anyvay."

"You were telling us something about escaped clones?" Spy asked impatiently.

"We know escaped Scout." Heavy explained.

"What?!" Spy spluttered. "Why did you not mention this before?"

"Isn't it obvious? Because ve did not trust you!" Medic pointed out sharply.

"We must contact him now." Spy said, getting up and pacing in excitement. "Can you find him?"

"Vell, ve know vhere he vill be soon," Medic paused thoughtfully, "Alzhough 'He' is not quite zhe correct pronoun here..."

In Chapter Twenty-Five: Medic tells the story of an unusual patient he had, back in New Orleans...

Translations:

Nyet! Ya nye pozvolyo etogo! -No! I will not allow this!
Was... zum... Teufel? - What... the... hell?

Ya tak volnovalas! - I was so worried!
An Unexpected Patient

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: I love all the guesswork I'm getting! I particularly like the way no one is guessing correctly, because I'm a horrible human being, as my lovely reviewers often tell me :). There was much rejoicing over Medic's survival in the last chapter, so let us now continue and find out what is happening with that mysterious Scout...

Make sure you admire this chapter's artwork over at [http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Twenty-Five-An-Unexpected-Patient-492115884](http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Twenty-Five-An-Unexpected-Patient-492115884)! Or, mock and sneer at it if you prefer. Either's good.

New Orleans, November 1968

The horribly hot weather had finally subsided a little, and Gerhardt Weiss was catching up on some much needed sleep. He found the climate in Louisiana very difficult to cope with- he seemed to be spending his life bathed in sweat. Occasionally, he woke up and coughed, rubbing his aching throat irritably before falling asleep again in his narrow, lumpy bed. He had even pulled a thin blanket over himself for warmth and was drifting through a dream about breathing underwater when he heard someone banging urgently on the front door.

He woke with a snort and sat up, blinking and groping around for his glasses. It was still dark, so he switched the light on and then swore as it blinded him.

"Hey, is this the Doc's house? Open up! Emergency!" A muffled voice shouted through the wooden door, pounding on it again. Weiss' sleep-addled head thought the voice sounded vaguely familiar, but could not quite place it. There was the noise of creaking floorboards from the next room.

"Doktor? There is noisy person at door." Sergei Cherny called through the wall.

"Ja, coming, I hear zhem." He threw a labcoat over his pyjamas with an irritated mutter.

Unfortunately, some of his more colourful patients tended to show up in the small hours, and he and Sergei had a standard practice for dealing with them: Weiss would open the door, while Cherny would hover nearby with his shotgun ready for any sign of trouble. The word had rapidly spread through the criminal network of the city: Weiss could cure anything, but you had better not make trouble, and pay up promptly. It had worked well: he had only got shot once, which Weiss considered an acceptable track record. As for the man who had shot him, well, most of him was found. Eventually.

"C'mon, man! He's dyin'!"

"I'm here, vhat is..." Weiss opened the door. "Mein Gott!"

A slender young man stood in the door, holding another young man who was obviously badly injured. He was bent over, his bloody hands pressed hard into his abdomen and moaning in pain. The uninjured man looked up at Weiss and his mouth dropped open.

"Holy shit!" He cried. "You're a Medic! The fuck are you doing here?! Did you escape those
"Scout?" Weiss said incredulously.

"Is little Scout?" Cherny asked in astonishment. "How did he get here?"

"And a Heavy too?" Scout said. He paused and shook his head. "Damn, that's...no, wait, look, you gotta help him. He got shot in the gut. You got that gun of yours, Doc? I'll pay, I got money, lots o' money."

"Er...ja, of course." Weiss said, shaking himself and gesturing to the Scout to follow him. "Bring him through."

The injured man was hauled through and placed on the stretcher in Weiss' treatment room. Cherny and Weiss finally got a good look at him.

"You are both Scouts?" Sergei asked, as Gerhardt quickly flicked the large stationary medigun on and put it on a low setting- enough to keep the man alive while he removed the shot, but not enough to heal the wound too early. The Russian was right- the semi-conscious man was also a Scout. Not only that, but they both had long, messy black hair, green eyes, a narrow face and the same clothing. In fact, they were absolutely identical.

"Yeah. We were at Gullywash. I was with BLU, and there was this new RED Scout who signed on. Looked like my long lost twin. We got talkin', outside of battle, and we both realised some serious shit was goin' down."

"Oh, zhat sounds familiar." Weiss said sourly, reaching for a pair of long forceps. "I am...I was...29/c. I met 29/b and then they killed him. Zhat is zhe, eh, short version of zhe story."

"And they didn't kill you? Man, you got lucky. I'm 4/b and my friend here is 4/r. Those purple bastards- they killed every fucking dude in the base. I heard these gun shots and screams... we were doin' laps of the base. We had no weapons on us so..." Scout cleared his throat and looked slightly embarrassed. ".We ran. Started out fresh and stuff, made a new life. How's Rick doing, Doc?"

"He should recover. I just need to remove the shotgun pellets and close up the wound." Weiss commented.

"He chose name Rick?" Cherny asked.

"Yeah. I'm Bobby Ford, an' he's Rick Ford. We look so alike, we decided we'd best pose as identical twins, y'know?"

"I suppose zhat is logical." Weiss replied thoughtfully.

"Jesus fuck..." Rick suddenly groaned, writhing in pain. "Th' hell happened?"

"Chill, bro, it's all ok." Bobby replied. "You got shot, but hey, look who fixed ya up!"

"Holy shit! You're a Medic!" Rick gasped, grabbing Weiss' arm with a bloody hand. "The fuck are you doing here?! Did you escape the bastards too?"

"Lay still, Scout." Weiss ordered, carefully grabbing his hand and detaching it. "You have a lot of shot inside you still."

"Y'know, we gotta stay in contact." Bobby said. "I bet you need us. Is this how you're makin'
money, huh? Stitching up badass criminals like us?"

"Scout is criminal now?" Cherny asked.

"Hell dude, shows what you know. I always was, why'd do you think I joined BLU...or RED...or whatever the fuck happened. They drop a shit-ton of money into the right hands, boom, there goes my juvie record!"

"Bitte sehr." Weiss removed a final pellet and dropped it into a kidney dish with a ping and stifled a cough. "All done."

"You gonna heal this massive rip in my guts or what?" Rick asked, panting for breath.

Weiss muttered in irritation, and turned up the dials on the suspended medi-gun, quickly knitting Rick's wounded abdomen back together. The wounded man sighed with relief and sat up.

"Wow, Doc, you're just as..." Rick started.

"...Amazing as ever!" Bobby continued, talking over the top of him. "It's fuckin' lucky we..."

"...Heard about this mad doctor who'd..." Rick said.

"...Operate on stone cold criminals like us..." Bobby interrupted.

"...But I never thought it'd be you, Medic..."

"...I mean, what's the chance?"

"So, what's your story?" Rick asked.

Weiss blinked rapidly, looking between the two identical men, his mouth opening and closing. "Do... do you alvays do zhat?"

"Do what?" Bobby asked, his brow wrincling. "Oh, you mean..."

"...Talking over each other? Yeah, it just sorta..."

"...Happens that way."

"Least, it does when I'm not shot in the guts." Rick finished. They both shrugged.

"It is very irritating." Weiss said.

"Yeah? Never thought of it that way." Rick replied.

"So, how'd do you end up in this shithole?" Bobby asked, looking around the room with a grimace.

"Is long story." Cherny replied. "I tell you all about it..."

"So, zhere ve are." Medic finished telling his tale to the fugitives as Demo and Soldier staggered back into the camp. "Zhey are making money by robbing banks. Zhey say it is all zhey are qualified to do. Zhey have made quite a substantial sum of money."

"I don't suppose it occurred to any of you escapees to earn money in a manner that was not morally reprehensible?" Violet Spy asked.
"What's wrong with being a paediatrician?" Soldier asked in puzzlement as Demo sat him down again and pulled a blanket over him. Demo just rolled his eyes tiredly.

"Not much choice with no papers to say who we are." Heavy pointed out. "You want job, people want name and what last employer thought of you, or bank account numbers, or passport."

"Well, this at least, I can fix." Spy said, stubbing out his cigarette and immediately getting a new one out. "I will arrange for your various certificates to gain their final inking during my trip today."

"But you said..." Medic started, but Spy waved a gloved hand.

"Yes, I said you could have them later. However..." He sighed and rubbed his forehead. "The situation has changed, oui? I believe we have little choice but to work together now. Our fates are entwined."

"Danke, I suppose." Medic said grudgingly.

"These documents take quite some time to perfect, but perhaps I should obtain them for all of us." Spy mused. "It may take months though. However, this is beside the point. Can you contact these Scouts?"

"Yes and no..." Medic said. "Zhey told us vhere zhey vould be going next. Ve can meet zhem zhere."

"They said they have target in Minnesota next, in town called Grand Rapids. They look for quiet town with small bank, not much money, but not much security either. We were to meet afterwards in place on map." Heavy looked towards Medic, who shrugged. "Or just I, if Gerhardt too sick to travel by then."

"I believe what zhey actually said vas 'I guess it'd just be you if the old dude has copped it by zhen'."

"Tactful." Spy commented.

"I found it a refreshing change." Medic replied, "And now it seems I can give zhem a surprise. Rggh, zhat misdiagnosis is so irritating. It has ruined all my plans."

"It also means you will live. Surely that is a good thing?" Spy asked curiously.

"Ach, yes, of course, but if I had known it was something so simply cured, I would never have run from Teufort and ended up..."

"Alive?" Spy pointed out.

"Spy is... right." Heavy said grudgingly. "If we had not run, we would have been gassed with others. Soldier would be dead, too, since you would not be alive to heal him. This is best way things could turn out."

"That is a sad commentary in itself."

"Y'know what? I don't deal in what-ifs. There is just plain no point. We're here now, and I say we should get a hold of these Scouts." Engineer said. "Dag nab it, though, like one wasn't noisy enough...when're they robbing this here bank?"

"They said on 16th July. Is same day as launch of big rocket to moon. Good distraction, they said."
Many people watching television that day." Heavy explained.

"Aww heck, I wanted to watch that." Engineer grumbled.

"Eh, you believe some rubbish, Engie." Demo said, holding a tin mug up for Soldier. "It's all a sham, they're just pretendin' tae send astronauts to the moon to get one over yon Russkis. Eh...no offence pal."

"Hnn." Heavy muttered, crossing his arms.

"Wait a doggone second there, Demo- you believe in the Loch Ness Monster but not Apollo 11?"

"I know what I saw! An' look at the facts: the yanks lost the pissing contest over sendin' a man intae space first, now they want to prove their place inna playground, am I right? Why spend all that money when they could just hire some actors?"

"But the Americans were the first to send a man into space! I remember it well. That George Gregory went up in his big rocket." Soldier stated. There was an awkward silence.

"Leaving that aside," Spy said tactfully, "It seems we have some much-needed breathing space. Time to recover and consolidate."

"Now we're all on the same page, Medic and I can start thinkin' of ways to shut down the cloning systems. For good, if we can." Engineer said.

"I'll find us good places to stay an' whatnot." Sniper suggested.

"I shall see about creating more forgeries, and also paying for any goods." Spy sighed briefly. "So much for spending my declining years rich and decadent."

"Wait, wait, what can I do?" Soldier said. "I demand to be given a useful task."

"Your task is to get fit enough zhat you can fight again." Medic pointed out. "Zhe paralysis vill lessen over time as zhe remaining nerve agent is metabolised and zhe damage repaired."

"Or ye can have an honourable discharge." Demo added with a grin.

"WHAT!" Soldier shouted, struggling to sit up and failing. "The day I stop fighting is the day I die!"

"Very probably." Spy muttered.

"Were you always a smartarse or did you work at it?" Sniper asked.

"It's a calling." Spy replied idly, waving his cigarette. "Trés bien, we have a direction. Once Soldier is well enough to travel, we head north and give these Scouts a surprise."

"I'll pack my earplugs." Engineer replied with a sigh.

**In Chapter Twenty-Six: Let's see what the Violet Engineer has been up to all this time...**

*Translations:*

*Bitte sehr - There we go (Medic says this in the Meet the Medic video when he puts Heavy's heart back in. Well, either 'bitte sehr' or 'put it zhere', it's hard to tell).*
"Turn left."

"I said: Turn left."

The newly created Heavybot just looked dumbly at him. Gray Mann frowned at it in annoyance. Conagher had said he had finally got the Heavy, Pyro and Scoutbots into a reasonable working state, but Gray had crept down to his large, well appointed workshop to take a look for himself. He didn't trust the Texan, after all. Why would he? After all, he didn't trust anyone but himself.

He stalked around the large robot in puzzlement. Since his little white lie about the Violet Sniper, Conagher had been quiet and solemn. Not surprising, really; it had been both a threat and a promise. He couldn't risk the man going back to the Violets and telling them about Gray's schemes. If Helen got to find out about it...well, it did not bear thinking about.

"Turn left!" He barked at the machine, but it did not pay any attention.

"Hey there, asshat." A metallic voice said. There was a faint sound of scraping metal. Gray's eyes narrowed and he turned around slowly. "Does Engie know you're snoopin' around in here?"

The Scoutbot was stood in the corner, its purple eyes now glowing and its arms folded in suspicion. The robot was a remarkable feat of engineering- a fully self-aware duplicate of a living person, but it irritated Mann no end. The thing thought it had the rights of a human even though it was just a machine, and worse, it made Conagher distrust him.

"I own this building. I can go where I wish." He told the machine. "Where is your master?"

The robot made a odd rattling noise. It took Gray a second to realise it was a derisive snort. "Master? What fuckin' master? I'm not some B-movie tin can, y'know."

"Where is Conagher?" Gray said with gritted teeth. "There is a problem with these machines. They won't obey me."

"Yeah? Maybe they got more sense than I thought."

"Shut up and tell me where the Engineer is." Gray commanded. The Scoutbot cocked his head to one side.
"Say 'Please'."

"I could have you disassembled for your insolence."

"Yeah? Ooh I'm scared now, real scared. I got no pain sensors, why should I care? You mess with me, Engie'll just repair me, and then he'll never work for you again. You can't kill a robot, dude."

"Very well," Gray Mann replied with a snarling sigh. "Pl..."

"Hey, what're you doin' in here?" An American accent said behind him.

"Just admiring your work, Dr Conagher." Mann said softly, turning around with a neat little smile. "I seem to be unable to operate these Heavy and Pyro bots though. Perhaps you could take me through it?"

"Well, see, here's the thing." Engineer said, sitting down on a metal stool. "There's a li'l bump on the road here."

"What do you mean?" Mann asked suspiciously.

Engineer looked at him through those goggles of his. It was impossible to make out his expression, which Mann suspected was entirely deliberate.

"You killed Sniper. My friend." He said simply. "You think I was gonna let that slide, boy?"

"Oh please, Dr Conagher. He was here to kill you. He is an assassin." Gray pointed out. "Did you expect me to let him shoot you?"

"It's a funny thing." Engineer said, pulling his goggles up onto his forehead. "But people think that because it takes a lot to make me angry that I'm dumb or don't notice things." His eyes turned in Gray's direction, and they were icy cold. His voice got louder. "You think I'd not check up on your facts, boy? I know all the frequencies TF Industries uses in their communications. Sniper, last I heard, was alive and watchin' over Teufort. So, this begs the question: why'd you tell me that lie, son?"

The Scoutbot started to chuckle quietly.

"Very clever." Gray Mann replied with a thin smile. "I admit it: I never touched a hair on your precious Australian's head. However, the threat TF industries presents is real, surely you must see that? These are people who use humans as weaponry. You think they have any more regard for you?"

"Heck no." Dell replied evenly. "I know who... what they are. But they'd want me back alive, I'm certain of it. Hell, they'd probably lock me up and throw away the key if they got their hands on me, but kill me? I don't see that, nope, not one bit."

"Hardhat's right." The Scoutbot agreed with a creaking nod. "He's too valuable. No way they'd blow him away. He made the respawn, teleporters, all that shit."

"With a li'l help." He admitted modestly.

"Well, this is a shame." Mann commented. "I was hoping we could work together in a more pleasant atmosphere."

"Any atmosphere is of your own makin'." Engineer stated. He idly reached for a wrench on the
nearest work bench. Mann noticed the gesture and tweaked his suit, noting the reassuring heaviness on the left hand side.

"Agreed. I suppose I should apologise." Mann replied, spreading his arms wide placatingly. "Perhaps my methods were rather heavy-handed. I was telling you the truth about shutting down the wars and the use of clones, though. I do wish to see the whole sickening circus stopped. Now, tell me about your progress, if you will."

Engineer gave him a long, measuring look before turning away. "The Pyro and Heavybots are complete, though they have a much more simple AI than Scoutbot here. They're pretty much programmed like my sentries- find an enemy, shoot it."

"Yeah, they suck." The Scoutbot agreed. "They can't even win a game of tic-tac-toe."

"Personally, I'd like to make somethin' a bit more complicated, but there we are."

"Excellent work. And the other robots...?" Mann asked.

"Comin' on, slow but sure. I've made plans for them all, now. Like this Medicbot:" He rifled through the pages and held one up proudly. "One wheel, built for speed, will repair any broken robot it finds."

"Why the labcoat?" Gray queried.

"Oh, just my lil' joke." Engineer smiled faintly. "I made them all look a bit like their livin' counterparts."

"I see. Could you give me a demonstration of the Heavybot?" Gray asked.

"Heavybot, activate." Conagher called out. The large robot jerked upright, its eyes lighting up with a violet glow.

"That is so cool." The Scoutbot said, leaping up onto a bench and sitting down, swinging his metal legs freely. "Shame it's as dumb as a brick."

"Scan for enemies." Engineer commanded. The large robot looked around ponderously, its neck creaking and rattling.

"Walk forward." Mann commanded, but the robot did not move. He looked at Conagher questioningly.

"As I said," Dell remarked, his voice going cold again. "There's a lil' bump on the road." He stood up, wrench in hand and advanced on the taller man. "You tried to lie to me, tried to threaten me. I don't scare easy, son."

"Oh, this is gonna be good." The Scoutbot said with malicious glee.

"So y'see, these robots can only be commanded by me. My voice, and even then, only after I enter an eight-digit security number. It's hard coded and you won't be able to remove it. It's deep inside the processor design, encrypted. So, if'n you want your robot army, you can't be rid of me. I won't let these robots be used for things I don't like." Dell paused, slapping his wrench against his palm meaningfully. "We got a deal?"

"I'm sorry it had to come to this, Dr Conagher," Mann said sadly, reaching inside his suit, "But I need full control of those robots. I dislike coercion- at least, when it's used on me. You hate being
underestimated? Well, so do I. For instance..." His hand grabbed his pistol and he whipped it out and shot Dell Conagher cleanly through the chest. Blood sprayed and Engineer dropped to the floor with a grunt. "I have a very good aim."

"NO!" The Scoutbot shrieked, leaping over to his fallen creator and kneeling by his side.

"Dag nab it..." Dell said, clutching his chest and gurgling.

"He shot you!" The Scoutbot said, pawing at the man's chest to loosen his clothing.

"I... I know. Remember...what I tole' ya." Engineer said, reaching up and holding his right hand out, palm facing the robot. His arm trembled with the effort. "Remember, Scoutbot. Make me proud."

"No, it's not gonna end like this." Metal fingers grasped flesh ones. "Hardhat? Stay with me! Stay with me."

"Lung shot..." Engineer choked but continued. "Too late."

"It's nothin', just a little bit of metal. Scrap metal, right? You love scrap metal. Damn it, Engie!"

"Remember, Scoutbot." Dell repeated. He coughed and his eyes started to glaze over. "What I did."

"Yeah, you did good. The best. You're the best." As the robot talked, Dell Conagher lips tweaked into a smile before becoming fixed and still. His beloved wrench tumbled out of his slackening hand and hit the floor with a final clang. The Scoutbot stood up slowly and turned to face Gray.

"You murdering bastard!" It said, stalking towards him. "I'm gonna fucking mess you up."

Gray aimed and shot the robot cleanly through one knee joint and then the other, and it dropped to the ground with a metallic wail. Hydraulic fluid leaked from its ruined legs, mixing with the blood pooling around Conagher. It used its arms to try and wriggle away, its eyes glowing fiercely.

"You'll never get the robots to work." The Scoutbot spat at him. "He was a fuckin' genius! Those plans are useless without him. The Violets will find you and they'll make you pay!"

"You're right. Those plans are probably of limited usefulness- except as a basic guide." Gray Mann stepped daintily over the dead man "However, I am a fairly accomplished engineer myself. And I have something better than an unproven blueprint." He reached into his pocket again and pressed a button. Two large men in a grey guard uniform came into the room behind him.

"Clamp the robot to the bench." He commanded. The guards stepped past him and slammed the crippled Scoutbot against the workbench and then tightened various chains and vices around its arms and legs.

"What the hell are you doin'?" The robot asked, squirming against the binds with an unpleasant high-pitched scraping noise.

"It's called 'reverse engineering'." Mann stated, plucking a circular saw off its wall bracket. He switched it on and approached the helpless robot, the light sparkling on its spinning edge. "Since Dr Conagher wouldn't help me, you will. It may take me a while- but we have all the time in the world."

"No! No, no, NO! I won't fucking help you!" Scoutbot cried, throwing himself around to try and get out of the clamps. "I'm not gonna help! I won't! Stop...st..."

There was the screech of metal-on-metal, and Scoutbot's shouts faded into white noise and static,
then electric crackles, and finally, nothing.

Grand Rapids, Minnesota, July 1969

"Everyone down, this is a holdup!" A voice shouted behind the startled customers of the Grand Rapids Bank. There were screams and people scattered left and right, except for one tall, middle-aged man who slowly sank onto the floor with a hidden smile. "Lie down on the floor and stay still, and nobody'll get hurt."

From his position on the floor, Medic could only see two sets of feet in baseball shoes padding around the floor. Right on time. He risked a glance up and saw the two skinny young men in black balaclavas prowling around. One of them walked up to the cashier's desk.

"Hey there, Miss, stay calm and you'll be fine. We don't wanna hurt you." He said, leaning idly on the counter and tapping on the glass. "You're behind all this nice shiny bullet proof glass, right? Shame all these guys here aren't." He gestured at the terrified people on the floor with his sawn-off shotgun.

One of the two men padded past Medic, and the doctor stuck his foot out and tripped him.

"What the fuck!" He snapped, pressing his gun threateningly to the Medic's head. "You did that on purpose, old man. Don't be a hero, got it? Heroes don't live long."

"I know zhat only too vell." Medic said, putting on a serious voice and trying to sound scared. A foot nudged him. The man blinked in recognition.

"Shut the hell up, man." The voice had an amused edge to it.

The other man at the counter- Bobby or Rick, Medic could not tell them apart- gestured at the woman impatiently. "C'mon, hand over the green, quick."

"Hey, dude, I reckon we should take a hostage." The other man shouted across to his partner. "This old guy tried to trip me up. On your feet, fella."

"Please don't hurt me." Medic got to his feet slowly, hands held theatrically in the air and trying to sound scared. The Scout by the counter gave him a quick wink and carried on stuffing notes into a bag. A skinny arm grabbed Medic's chest.

"You're gonna come with us, make sure the cops don't hunt us down." He was told. "Anyone follows us, the Kraut here dies, got it?"

"Kraut?" Medic asked in annoyance, but got poked in the ribs.

"I know you're gonna phone the cops, but you give us fifteen minutes, and he lives. We see any police sooner than that, and we blow him away." Scout held two fingers to Medic's head and made an exploding noise. "You got everythin', bro?"

"Yeah, we got a good haul."

"Let's split then. See ya, ladies and gents. Don't sweat it- the bank's stinkin' rich, you'll get your dough. Right, kraut, move!" Scout nudged him and Medic shuffled towards the entrance, trying to make it look like he couldn't break free any moment.

"Get in the car!"
"Where are you taking me?" He demanded, pretending to struggle.

"Shut the hell up." One of the Scouts barked, pushing him into the back seat and climbing in after him. He could hear shouts and sobs from inside the bank as the other Scout got into the driver's seat and put his foot down hard on the accelerator.

As they sped away, both Scouts started snorting with laughter.

"Oh man that was hilarious!"

"You just walked in there and waited for us? You're stone cold, you know that?"

"Fuckin' awesome, man."

"I felt it was the best way to contact you." Medic explained, as Bobby (or possibly Rick) put away the gun and slapped him companionably on the shoulder.

"How're you doin', Gerry?"

"Damn, it's good to see ya, Doc."

"I thought you'd be dead by now."

"You looked fuckin' sick last I saw..."

"...Like, at death's door."

Medic felt his head starting to spin as it had last time he had talked to the two Scouts. There was something very exhausting about them.

"Did you call me 'Gerry'?" He asked querulously.

"Hell yeah, it's..."

"...shorter than Gerhardt and a better name."

"Suits ya."

"No it doesn't." Medic stated firmly. "Do not use it again unless having your organs pulled out of your nasal cavities is your life's wish."

The two Scouts just laughed.

"Damn, you never change."

"Seriously, Gerry, it's good to see you, heh, not dead."

"Let us just say I made a miracle recovery." Medic replied carefully.

"That is so you." Bobby said with a snort of laughter. "What crazy thing did you do this time?"

"Give yaself a new windpipe from a gorilla or somethin'?"

"Not exactly." Medic said.

"So, is the fat guy with you?"
"His name is Sergei." Medic said pointedly.

"Yeah, him."

"Ja. Ve felt zhat he wouuld be a razher conspicuous visitor to your bank heist, so he stayed behind... vizh zhe others."

"Others? What others?" Rick asked suspiciously.

"If you ratted us out, Doc, we'll be pissed."

"Ach, nein, nein." Medic said, holding his hands up placatingly. "I zhink you vill be pleased. Ve have zhe entire team vaiting to meet you."

"No shit?"

"How the hell did you..."

"...manage that, Doc?"

"You mean like, Soldier, Demo, Hardhat an' everyone?"

"Fuckin' A, dude! I mean, wow!"

"Are we talkin' a whole team of clones here?"

"Mostly clones, ja." Medic said, giving them a quick explanation of the events a couple of months ago. "Ve have a plan, and ve travelled here to recruit you."

"Woah, like, seriously? A whole camp of rebels?"

"And you even got three of the purple bastards on your side?"

"You sure you trust 'em?"

"I am sure I don't, but ve have zhe same aims for now. Ve have a camp out of zhe city. Turn right here." Medic said, pointing, as they sped out of the town along a flat highway edged with spruce and birch trees. The car swerved onto a dirt track.

"Hey, you're gonna ruin the paintwork with these shitty mud tracks!"

"This is an expensive car! Yeah, we din't pay for it, but even so..."

"Just drive, Rick." Medic replied tiredly.

"I'm Bobby." Scout corrected.

"Does it matter?"

"Nah."

"Sehr gut. Now drive."

In Chapter Twenty-Seven: Engineer and Medic explain to the Scouts their plan to stop Project Pelargonia.
Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Well, the last chapter certainly got a reaction. I would say I'm sorry if Engineer and Scoutbot's fate upset you, but I'm totally not, since I'm pleased people got attached to my characters even when they're quite minor. Did I ever mention I'm a horrible human being?

You may be glad to hear this chapter doesn't contain any angst, unless listening to Medic trying to explain a plan counts (I think it does). There is only one more chapter after this in part two. I can't believe we're two-thirds of the way through. Bah!

I did something a little different for the artwork in this chapter: a group shot of the Pelargonia Rebels. It was very difficult to make, since trying to get them all to stand still and smile while I took the photo was pretty much impossible. Anyway, I hope you like the end result, even if only a few are them are paying any attention to the camera: http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Twenty-Seven-We-Are-Superior-493460057

There had been no sirens as they left and Bobby Ford felt he could relax as they bumped along a shitty dirt track into the forest. He tried to keep up his speed, just in case any cops were still on the trail, but he had to slow down when he hit a pothole hard and the Doc had whacked his head on the roof. He grinned to himself. It was good to see the crazy old bastard had lived. He looked better too—he'd lost that hollow, pale look he'd had before. Bobby didn't want to think too hard about what Medic had done to heal himself. It probably involved...spare parts. Other people's.

"Wow, dude. You live in Bumfuck, Minnesota. You must be so proud." Rick said from the back seat.

"Ve move around a lot, to avoid being found. So far, so good." Medic explained. "Having no official existence, ve are hard to track."

"Oh man, I know that story, jeez." Rick said.

"Yeah, it's fuckin' dumb: You can't get a legal job without ID, right?" Bobby added with a nod.

"But havin' no ID makes bein' a criminal way easier." Rick added.

"So, yeah, the Man din't think that one through!" Both Scouts laughed.

"Hrm, ja." Medic replied. "Now, turn down zat track to zhe right."

"Seriously? That's, like, a path!" Bobby swerved the car, making Medic swear again.

"Where did you learn to drive?" He snarled.

"Taught myself." Bobby said proudly.

"I believe you." Medic muttered, grabbing the seat for stability.
"Hey, is that it?" Rick said, pointing past him from the back seat.

There was a flash of white amongst the trees and Bobby leaned forward eagerly. Sure enough, it was Sniper's van. As he watched, the door opened and Sniper strolled out, coffee mug in his hand as always. He looked at them and tipped his hat solemnly. There was another, newer camper van parked next to it, a rusty station wagon and a number of dark green military ridge tents clustered around a central fire pit under a canopy. Engineer folded up his newspaper and stood up as they arrived.

"Let me get out first, bitte." Medic requested. "So zhey know you're friendly."

Bobby had already leapt out of the car, though, and Rick got out too, slamming the door.

"Hey guys, we're here!" Bobby shouted enthusiastically, ignoring Medic's little irritated noise.

"Greetings, Privates." Soldier said, staggering to his feet with the help of a walking stick. He gave a salute and his fingers trembled slightly. "Welcome to your own private war."

"Fuckin' hell, Sol, what happened to you?" Rick asked in astonishment pointing at the stick.

"Combat injury." Soldier said proudly. "Would have killed a weaker man."

"It did." Engineer muttered sadly, briefly looking away at the trees.

"Sol got the highest dose of gas of any of us. Nearly killed 'im, but he dunnae give up easily." Demo explained. "He's recovering, slowly but surely. Good to meet ya, laddies."

"Hey Cyclops!" Rick whooped and thumped Demo on the arm, while Bobby did the same to Soldier, making him stagger slightly.

"Woah, sorry dude." He apologised, holding Soldier upright.

"Gentlemen." Spy said, standing up fluidly from his folding chair. "I am not sure whether we need to be introduced or not."

Bobby looked the Spy up and down suspiciously. Medic had explained how this Violet bastard had ended up in their camp, and how he had saved their lives, but the Scouts had met him before. He remembered the screams when this man had sent the rest of the BLUs to a very final death.

"So...you're the Violet, right?"

"Not any more." Spy replied smoothly.

"Just so you know, I don't trust you. Don't try anything..."

"...or the bro and I will fuck you up. Got it?"

"I would be positively insulted if anyone trusted me." Spy said smugly. "It would mean I was not doing my job very well."

"You are not doing your job very well." Medic pointed out.

"Indeed. Therefore, I must be trustworthy, oui?"

"That's..." Rick spluttered.
"But..."

"Ok, cut the bullshit, let's have a look around this camp."

"Not much to see, mate." Sniper said. "You know my van- well, it's the Teufort RED Sniper's, really, poor wanker. The other van's our ordnance van. Looks like a normal camper, right? It's full of guns, ammo, everything."

"Cool." Rick said, padding about to poke into one of the tents. "What's in here?"

"Srrrrh!" Pyro leapt out of the tent and grabbed Rick in a hug.

"Woah, shit!" Rick said, leaping backwards. Bobby snorted in laughter at him as he struggled to get loose.

"Ah, leetle Scouts have arrived." Heavy said, strolling into the camp with what looked like an entire tree over his shoulder. He slammed it onto the ground and Pyro let go of Rick and ran towards it, rubbing his hands gleefully. "Did Police come?"

"Nah, Gerry helped there."

"Gerry?" Demo asked in confusion.

"He means me." Medic said in resignation. "The Scouts took me hostage."

"Huh, good idea." Engineer commented, ignoring the glare Medic gave him.

"Mornin' mates." Sniper shoved a mug of coffee into Bobby's hands. Bobby looked at it suspiciously and wrinkled his nose. He handed another one to Rick. "So, which of you is which?"

"I'm Bobby."

"I'm Rick."

"Cannot tell leetle men apart." Heavy complained.

"Yeah?" Bobby said with a grin.

"Kind of deliberate." Rick said with a nod. "Makes us harder to track..."

"...or some such shit. Anyway, it's a laugh." Bobby finished.

"So, the rest of you guys taken names like Gerry and Sarah here?"

"Sergei." Heavy stated in a low voice.

"Oh, please." Spy said, rolling his eyes and waving a cigarette. "I haven't used my real name in a decade."

"Only 'cos you can't remember it any more." Sniper said with a smile. Spy just snorted.

"Well, we're here now..."

"...So we can tell you how we're gonna take down those purple bastards, right?" Bobby saw the slightly glazed look around the camp and grinned to himself. It was real funny how guys reacted when he and Rick said the same things at the same time. It wasn't actually deliberate- they had been
on the run together for fucking years and it just sorta happened.

"Engineer and I have some plans." Medic explained. He suddenly grinned in a way Bobby found slightly disturbing. "Ve zhink ve can shut it down. Zhe whole zhing. No more clones."

"Holy shit, dude. How?" Rick asked.

"We realised that takin' out the machines wouldn't be enough- they could be replaced, or repaired." Engineer said, sitting back down on a camping chair that creaked comfortably. "But you know what can't be replaced? Information."

"Zhe human memory is a fascinating zhing. It is not organised like a book. Instead, it seems to work by association. Zhat is vhy ve forget zhings, sometimes- ve fail to associate zhe memory vith a suitable reference. Zhe hippocampus is involved in zhe formation of new memories, but it seems zhe whole brain has a role in zhe storage of memories. Lashley showed zhat deliberately inducing lesions in specific locations in zhe rat brain did not affect zheir ability to navigate previously encountered mazes unless zhe entire brain function was compromised, so ve can conclude zhat memory storage is a universal feature of..."

"Uh, Doc? Kinda getting off the topic there." Engineer said.

"Hrm?" Medic said, frowning in annoyance. "But zhis is important!"

"Mangling rat brains is important?" Sniper asked.

"Rgh, nein! I am trying to explain. Zhe cloning procedure is an offshoot of zhe respawn technology, ja? It produces exact copies of zhe Violet team- vizh some alterations to zhe genome before recreation. You see, zhere is an ongoing debate about zhe importance of nature versus nurture in zhe development of skills and personalities. Feral children are evidence zhat zhe cultural...

"Doc!" Engineer interrupted. Bobby noticed Heavy looking at the floor with an odd little smile. It looked very weird on the big man's face.

"Alright, alright, I vill give zhe version for Kinder." Medic said grudgingly. "From zhe information Sniper, Spy and Demo have provided, ve know zhat ve clones are a snapshot of zhe Violets at zhe moment zhey joined TF Industries, before zhey found out about zhe cloning project. Zhe small alterations to memory- for instance joining RED or BLU razher zhan Violet- are achieved using hypnosis, and zhe human mind has an astounding ability to ignore any faulty memories zhat do not fit. It is a sort of in-built error correction."

"But here's the thing: if we can wipe out those snapshots of the originals, Doc and I think it'd be pretty much darn impossible to make more clones of the Violets." Engineer explained. "Once that info is gone, it's gone. They can't use the current mercs- too much has happened since they joined. Any clones of the Violets as they are now would know how they were made, and how they are gonna be used and thrown away."

"Memory is not recorded in a linear fashion, so it is simply not possible to remove six years of memory vizhout greatly damaging zhe intellect." Medic agreed with a nod.

"Sometimes, I wish that was possible." Spy muttered.

"Hypnosis is not powerful enough. Zhe mind resists." Medic continued. "If zhey wished to continue making clones in secret, zhey would have to recruit a whole new set of mercenaries. Our original selves would be useless. Zhey would have to retire- or go into battle zhemselves for vonce."
"Or they'd just get killed." Demo said. "I dinnae think the Administrator'd let them leave wi' all that knowledge."

"So, we need to go to base and destroy data." Heavy said.

"That's the idea." Engineer nodded. "It's stored in tape rolls, real flammable. Probably there're backup copies too, so we need to get those as well."

"Uh hrrr hrrrinngg!" Pyro said enthusiastically.

"We cannot simply march up to TF Industries and knock on the door. We would be shredded within moments." Spy pointed out.

"Teleports." Sniper stated. "Sneak into a base, take the private teleport to HQ. The RED and BLUs wouldn't even know about it. Good an secret, right?"

"Woah, the bases all have teleports to the Office of Evil?" Rick asked in surprise.

"Aye, laddie." Demo nodded grimly. "We...eh, I mean, the Violets used 'em on their 'missions'."

"But when we get there, they'll just open fire, right? End of story." Bobby pointed out.

"They are unfit for combat and out of condition." Soldier declared, gesturing with his stick. "We have been in battles for years and years."

"Alas, I have to admit this is true." Spy said. "From what I have seen, the clones are, quite simply, better fighters. Their skills have been honed and they are used to working together as a group. Gentlemen, you are not the equals of the originals, you are superior."

There was a moment's stunned silence, before Engineer suddenly held out his gloved hand and snapped his fingers at Medic. The doctor made a grumbling noise, fished in his pocket for a dollar bill and handed it over.

"Would you care to explain what that was about?" Spy asked politely.

"I lost zhe bet." Medic said bitterly.

"On second thoughts, I do not need to know." Spy said.

"They won't have got new clones for Teufort yet." Demo said thoughtfully. "They leave a gassed base empty for a few months, just in case. Teufort'd be our best bet to teleport back."

"Bien sur!" Spy said sarcastically. "The lingering presence of the nerve gas would just keep us on our toes, I suppose? And the Administrator won't possibly be expecting us to invade a base she will know we are aware is empty right now."

"Yes! So we go to Teufort!" Soldier said enthusiastically. "Spy is right: they will never see us coming."

"Closest base to here is Sawmill, isn't it?" Sniper asked. "We better move camp though, in case the police are still after the Bank Brats here."

"Yeah, they'll..."

"...Be doin' a search all around for us by now."
"We got the dosh though!"

"We can grab the rest of our stash too. I tell ya, we are loaded."

"Vonce Soldier is fully recovered- I estimate two veeks to a monzh- ve can attack."

"Go without me." Soldier said dramatically. "I would only slow you down. It's for the greater good."

"Bollocks to that, Sol." Demo replied. "You'd not leave any o’ us behind now, would ye?"

"Nrrr hrrr." Pyro muttered, not looking up from chopping logs.

"We are team." Heavy stated. "We go together. Do leetle Scouts want to join us?"

"Wait, what? Are you fuckin' dumb?" Rick cried in amazement.

"'Course we do. This is like, the coolest thing ever." Bobby agreed.

"A bunch of rebels, goin' up against the big evil corporation?"

"Is that totally cool or what?"

"We're in. All for one..." Rick held his hand out flat, and Bobby put his hand on top of it. He waited for the rest of the mercs to join in, but they just looked on in bafflement.

"You guys suck." Rick muttered, shoving his hands back in his pockets sulkily.

"I think we are agreed, then: Sawmill is our destination." Spy said in summary.

The group spent a couple of weeks preparing for the attack, planning routes into the base and stockpiling ammo while Soldier regained his full strength. Heavy, Demo, and Soldier had all fought at Sawmill, and they shared maps and plans, to which Spy and Sniper added directions to the HQ teleporter. There was an underground room with a small bedroom and mess for any visiting Violets that was accessed through a barricaded building situated fairly near the RED respawn room. There was some wire fencing near there that could be cut through for quick access.

"Ok, I better pack my bolt cutters." Engineer had said, making a quick list in his neat handwriting.
"Pyro'll have his axe for the doors." Pyro giggled and clapped his hands.

"Won't they notice a big hole in the fence?" Sniper had asked.

"Of course. But by then, we shall be inside TF Industries Headquarters, and it will be too late for them to worry about such things." Spy had pointed out.

They would enter the base at 2am, when the mercenaries would be asleep from a day's hard fighting, and move silently ("I said silently, Scouts!") and swiftly, teleporting into the headquarters.

"What then?" Heavy had asked.

"We fight our way through." Spy said with a shrug. "I admit this plan lacks a certain...finesse, but I do not know which part of the cloning system we need to destroy to remove the data. Sniper, Demo and myself know the way to the machinery rooms, but Engineer and Medic will be our guides once we get there. And do not forget, there is no respawn, so no heroics- this means you, Soldier."

"I am heroics, maggot." Soldier declared.
"There is one important thing to remember, gentlemen." Spy said solemnly. "Above all else, Engineer and Medic must survive. The rest of us- we are expendable. This mission can succeed without us. But they must live. Understood?"

"No pressure, hardhat." Rick had said with a grin.

"Will the respawn there still remember you and Sniper, do ya think?" Demo asked curiously.

"Don't intend to test that, mate." Sniper said gruffly.

"Tonight, we attack." Spy declared. "We should all try to get some sleep before then- it is going to be a long night, gentlemen."

"Well, good luck y'all." Engineer said.

"We will survive and we will be victorious." Soldier stated certainly. "We are on the side of Good."

"Or at least," Spy said, lighting a cigarette, "The side of Slightly Less Evil. Possibly."

**In the last chapter of Part Two: The rebels attack Sawmill, and Violet Spy shows who side he is really on.**
Recycled

Chapter Notes

Author's note: Here we are again! It seems my author's notes are getting as popular as the story itself- or at least, as annoying. This chapter marks the end of Part Two, and has what is undoubtedly the worse cliffhanger of the entire story, but also what I consider to be the story's Crowning Moment of Heartwarming, too. Feel free to include your death threats and poetic descriptions of the bodily harm you wish to inflict upon me in your reviews, as usual. I'm sure you won't disappoint me, my dear readers.

I would like to give a special thanks to Bossloki for her incredible ability to spot the tiniest of errors in my writings- really appreciate it! I always proof before posting, but sometimes, errors slip through even with the best of intentions.

The artwork for this chapter is in its usual place at
href="http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Twenty-Eight-Recycled-494228288"

Twilight had fallen, and the mercenaries had retired to their tents to try and grab a few hours rest before the attack. Heavy had fallen into a light sleep; he had been at war long enough to fall asleep pretty much anywhere and at any time.

"Sergei?"

Heavy's eyelids twitched, but he ignored Gerhardt's voice and shut his eyes tightly.

"Are you awake?" A bony finger poked his shoulder insistently.

"Hnn." He grunted. "Am awake now with doktor prodding me."

"I vanted to talk to you about somezhing." Medic said. Heavy opened his eyes in resignation and turned over to face the German.

"Is bad time. Should be sleeping."

"It is important." Medic said earnestly. "I have been zhinking and I realised: you vere right."

"What about?"

"When I zhought I was dying, you told me, over and over, not to give up, zhat I should have hope." Gerhardt said. "I didn't listen, because hope is... hard work. It is far easier to give in and wait for death. But I was wrong. I survived, and now ve have a chance at ending it all."

"I called Doktor coward. Was wrong of me." Heavy admitted.

"Vell...maybe," Gerhardt said thoughtfully. "You see, I have always zhought zhat optimists are always disappointed, while zhings always turn out better zhan a pessimist expects. So, I chose pessimism, so I would never be disappointed."
"Sounds like miserable way to live." Heavy commented, stifling a yawn.

"Ja." Medic said. He clutched hold of Heavy's shoulder earnestly, his voice rising in excitement. "But you have taught me ozhervise. Now, I can see it. I can see it! Ve vill succeed. Everyzhing has fallen into place."

"Da, we will punish all leetle coward Violets." Heavy agreed. "Get some sleep, is going to be long night."

Medic rolled onto his back and smiled at the canvas roof. It rippled slightly in the wind.

"Nozhing can stop us now."

The convoy drove into position a couple of miles away from the compound, and the last part of the route was completed on foot under the canopy of trees. The soft pine needles muffled their footsteps, but it was horribly dark and Sniper had to direct them, giving the whispered instructions and using the stars as a guide. The branches reached in over their heads and formed an utter blackness from which rustles and the occasional squawk echoed. Engineer shuddered lightly, trying to squash the slight claustrophobia he felt from being so surrounded. Texas, with its open horizons, was so different. However, 'different' was a pretty good description of his life now. He was a nameless clone, and all his friends were dead, except for two people who were both risking their lives alongside him tonight. He didn't have a life any more: he had a cause. He had tried and tried to wrap his mind around that, but it had only ever remained words. He had not really let himself do anything but act recently. One day, maybe, he'd let himself collapse into a gibbering heap, but right now, he was needed, so he didn't.

Even thought he had gone into battle so many times, his stomach fluttered with what he was prepared to admit was nerves. He couldn't shake this, heh, gut feeling, that it was all going to go horribly, horribly wrong.

Oh, listen to him! As if he could tell the future. He was a man of science, not some arts major who believed in clairvoyance and such cockamamie nonsense. He took a deep breath of resin-scented air to steady himself. Whatever happens, will happen, but at least I can say I did my best.

The horizon ahead gained a glimmer of grainy greyness rather than the black of the trees as they crawled forward.

"Nearly there!" Soldier whispered loudly before Demo thumped him and hissed at him to be quiet. The light got brighter, and as they moved out of the trees, the floodlit base seemed dazzlingly bright. Sure enough, it was silent and deserted except for a brown rat that skittered out from under a building and into another one. The chain link fence was directly ahead.

"Time to go." Sniper said quietly. "For Chrissakes, be careful. We're near RED Respawn- the hut to the right is the way in to the teleport."

Engineer got his bolt cutters out of his tool kit and started to snip his way through the wire fencing. It was surprisingly easy to cut through; Engineer realised it was more there as a psychological barrier than a physical one. Medic had ranted on about how they were only prisoners because they thought they were- now Engineer began to see what he meant. We could have left any time we wanted- but we didn't want to. We thought we were getting paid. We thought we mattered.

We were wrong.

"Way is clear," Heavy said, "But leetle Engineer did not make hole in fence big enough."
"Damn, sorry big fella. You're right. Don't want you to get stuck there."

"Zhat woulde be a disaster." Medic agreed. He paused and cleared his throat. "Before ve go, I woulde just like to say...danke. To all of you. Zhis has been...zhe most amazing time of my life." His mouth twitched into a brief smile and he climbed through.

"It's been bloody awful if you ask me." Sniper muttered, curling up his long legs to scramble through. The rest of the team followed him, and then stood up on the other side. Spy pointed with a gloved hand at the wooden shed opposite that had a large sign on it saying 'Red Valley Mining'.

They crept out from the fence and into the most difficult part of the mission- crossing the open ground to the shed. One by one, they padded across it, trying to make as little noise as possible. Everyone except Soldier had crossed when they heard the muffled humming and heard the footsteps. They scattered, heading for any shadows they could find as the RED Pyro came around the corner. He walked past, and then paused and came back, looking around in puzzlement. Engineer reached down for his shotgun, but Spy stopped him.

"If you shoot him with non-custom ammo," He whispered, "Respawn will not remove the bullet, remember?"

"Damn it." Engineer hissed. He knew what Spy meant- without using the Lead-209 labelled custom ammo RED and BLU used, the RED Pyro would end up respawning and instantly dying from the shot, and respawning again, and again... Engineer could kill, but he could not condemn anybody to that.

There was a sniffing noise from the RED Pyro's mask, and he lifted his head, walking towards their hiding place. He took hold of the axe on his belt.

"Whrrrrs hrrr?" The masked man tipped his head on one side.

Engineer and Spy froze, going as still and silent as they could.

"Hurrrhhh?"

Medic growled impatiently, grabbed Spy's pistol and shot the RED Pyro clumsily in the chest. The man staggered, and Medic shot him twice more until he fell down and lay still. He stayed there for a few seconds before his body was teleported away to respawn.

"What the Hell, Medic?" Engineer whispered as fiercely as he could.

"Fucking harsh, man."

"Hrrrr srrrrkk brrrrssrrrrrd!" Pyro said, his voice breathy with horror.

"No vone else woulde make zhe decision, so I did." Medic whispered back angrily. "Sacrifices have to be made. I did not come all zhis way to fail now."

"Medic did..." Soldier said, before all the mercenaries hushed him. He continued in a lower voice. "Medic did what was necessary. War is not pretty, men."

"I have been able to pick the lock." Spy said quietly. "If you have finished committing your war crimes, let us continue."

"You and I will be havin' a little talk about this later, Medic." Engineer said sternly, but Medic just waved a hand in irritable dismissal and handed Spy's pistol back to him.
Spy opened the wooden door with a slight creak, and they entered the resin-scented darkness. Once they were all in, Pyro lit his cigarette lighter and the rest of the mercs switched on their torches.

"Anybody else think this is too fuckin' easy?" Rick asked.

"There should be cameras..." Bobby added.

"...alarms..."

"...shit like that." Bobby finished with a nod.

"Fortune favours the brave." Soldier stated.

"You think it could be a trap?" Engineer asked.

"If is trap, I crush it with my hands." Heavy growled.

"Down here." Sniper said, gesturing towards a splintered set of stairs that creaked and groaned under their weight.

The ten men walked down into a cavern filled with bright lights and terminals very like the corridors underneath Teufort. Machines beeped and the smell of fresh wood was replaced by the burnt ozone smell of electronics. Engineer did not have time to look around, though, because Spy ushered them onwards.

"Over here." Spy said, directing them towards a side room. He opened the door, and there was the teleporter. Engineer recognised the bright spinning platform, but it was purple, rather than the blue colour he had half been expecting.

"Ready weapons, Privates." Soldier ordered. For once, they all followed one of Soldier's commands, checking ammo and flipping off safety catches. Medic switched on his medigun. "God speed, you sons of sinners. Make me proud."

"See you in heaven." Spy said, stepping up to the plate. He paused and looked back. "Or, more likely..." The teleporter spun and he vanished.

The rest of the team stepped through, one by one, with Medic and Engineer last. Engineer watched the doctor step through, and then took a deep breath and stepped up himself. Here goes nothing.

"...the bloody hell is this?" He heard Sniper say as he materialised into a plain windowless concrete room with just one door on the other side and a large TV monitor on the wall.

"This is not the teleport room!" Demo cried in dismay. "I dinnae ken where we are."

"Greetings, gentlemen." The monitor suddenly lit up, and they found themselves looking at a thin middle-aged woman with a white streak in her swept-back hair. Spy, Sniper and Demo all gasped in recognition, while the clones just stared, slack jawed. They had never seen her before, but that voice—oh yes, they knew it well. "We have been waiting for you."

"Fuck! It is a trap!" Bobby shouted, twitching and hopping from foot to foot.

"Oh man. Oh shit." Rick murmured.

"Congratulations, Spy. You succeeded beyond my wildest dreams." The Administrator continued with a small smile.
Spy's mouth dropped open and his eyes widened in horror as the other nine men's weapons all swung around to point at him. He held up his hands protectively.

"You will get a bonus for this. You rounded up the rogue Teufort clones, as instructed, but also the missing Gullywash Scouts and even pushed Violet Sniper into revealing himself to be a collaborator. Excellent work, Spy."

"You...you...bastard." Sniper said quietly. "I thought you were my friend."

"You planned this! All along! Ficken Arschloch! Huhrensohne!" Medic snarled. "Never trust a Spy."

"Coward Spy! Traitor!" Heavy roared, stepping closer to the skinny man.

"Brrrssrrrrrd!"

"C'est...c'est..." Spy spluttered, backing into a corner. "Non...ce n'est pas..."

"I never liked you." Soldier growled. "Never trust a Goddamn cheese-eating surrender monkey."

"Bloody frog!" Demo said, punching Spy in the jaw. His head snapped back and hit the wall, and the skinny Frenchman slid down to the floor with a groan, clutching his head. One of the Scouts darted in and kicked the fallen man in the stomach, making him curl up and retch.

"Now I have to decide what to do with you all." The Administrator mused.

"Tout ce que..." Spy said, wheezing for breath. Scout kicked him again and he moaned. "Wait... wait... listen..."

"This had better be good." Engineer snarled, stepping forward and pulling him upright, glaring at him, goggles glaring straight into his streaming eyes.

"Madame Administrator," Spy said thickly, twisting awkwardly in Engineer's grasp to face the monitor. His face was starting to swell on one side. "Whatever...you do to them..."

"Are you going to plead for mercy for them, Spy?" The Administrator asked emotionlessly. "Compassion from the betrayer?"

"Whatever you do to them," He repeated, more firmly, "Do it to me as well."

"I beg your pardon?" The woman asked, suddenly puzzled.

Spy twitched himself free of Engineer's grasp and unconsciously smoothed down his suit. He stood up straighter for a moment before groaning in pain and hunching over again, clutching his stomach. He looked up the monitor haughtily. "I did not bring them here for a reward."

The woman fell silent, as did the mercenaries in the room.

"I brought them here to destroy Project Pelargonia." Spy continued. He suddenly smiled, his teeth clenched and his eyes glinting malevolently. "I would rather die than work for you again, you vile, scheming hag."

"How disappointing," The Administrator replied disdainfully, "You failed."

"Oui, I failed. I admit it. But they are my allies, my comrades-in-arms...my friends. And I..." Spy sighed in resignation, as if he could not quite believe what he was saying. "... Mon dieu, I am such
an idiot... I will stand by them."

"So be it." The Administrator said. They saw her lean down and flick a switch that was beneath the view of the camera. There was a hissing noise.

"Oh no..." Engineer felt his spine freeze in horror, and the group clustered together as the room filled with sweet-smelling gas.

The last thing he heard, as everything faded into grey, was Spy's bitter laughter.

**End of Part Two.**

**In Part Three:** Two years have passed since the clone's rebellion failed, and Gray Mann has put his nefarious plans into action. Robots are overrunning everything, and Miss Pauling is alone and surrounded by enemies- but maybe an old experiment of the Violet Medic's might be useful, after all...

**Translations:**

*Ficken Arschloch! Huhrensohne! -Fucking arsehole! Son-of-a-bitch!*

*C'est...c'est...Non...ce n'est pas... - It's...it's...no, it's not...*

*Tout ce que... - Whatever...*
Chapter Notes

Author's Note: I am most disappointed in you all. I only received a few threats of bodily harm, and only one death threat. For shame! I expect better in the future. The more imaginative and grisly, the better.

And now, here we are in part three, and it begins with a jaw-dropping chapter, if I have calculated correctly. Hope you enjoy it!

Edit: deviantart is now working, so here is this chapter's artwork: http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Twenty-Nine-Pyrrhic-494771274. It's a bit of a different style to the artwork before, and it took me absolutely ages to do! Hope you like it.

Now, let's find out Spy's real name, eh?

Part Three: Dum Discussio Venerit

"No man can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck." –Frederick Douglas

Chapter Twenty Nine: Pyrrhic

Gray Gravel Company Headquarters, The Bahamas, February 1971

"Yes," Gray Mann said, looking at the massed rows of robots. "It's time. Let us begin."

"All hail the Maker!"

And so it began.

The Teufort Administrator started on her third cigarette in a row and ran her perfectly painted nails over the board in front of her. It was finally time to re-open Teufort and add it back to the rota of active war zones. It was...odd, the way she hadn't actually wanted to start the Intel fight there again. That base seemed almost cursed. After those two 029-strain Medics had been assigned there, nothing had gone quite right again for TF Industries. Those two clones had gone renegade, she had had to throw the kill switch and then the three Violets had defected. Defected! They were hugely well-paid, involved in a world-changing scheme and lived in utter comfort. How could they possibly wish to leave? At least they had managed to clear up that mess, but she was beginning to wonder: How much longer can Project Pelargonia continue? The cracks were starting to show. It was time to come up with a new solution to the endless problem.

Creak
Helen looked up. Had she heard something? Must be her imagination. She had this creeping feeling that everything was going to go horribly, horribly wrong. Pah! Superstition had no place in her world. She leant forward.

"Mission begins in ten minutes."

*Clink*

She whirled her chair around and frowned, uncrossing her legs. "Whoever you are, go away. This is a restricted area."

*Whirr*

Clone VIA001/r had time for one last thought of her daughter before the bullets shredded her to bits, and then everything went horribly, horribly wrong.

The robots poured like grains of salt out of the blue tank and into TF Industries. They swarmed over the building, invading every corridor and room. Hundreds of Scoutbots and Pyrobots led the charge, and grenades flew over their heads from the line of Demobots. Snipers took to the roofs, making sure nobody could escape, and Soldierbots, Heavybots and Medicbots poured in behind them.

The Violet team's job for years now had been to give blood samples and oversee a secret war. Few of them had held a gun in some time and none of them had been in a combat situation for years. Their training was rusty and they were out of shape. Even if they had been in top notch fighting form, there were a hundred robots to each mercenary, and they stood no chance. They fell.

Once they had been dealt with, the Spybots arrived and headed towards the various Administrator's consoles, flicking switch after switch...

Terminate Base: Hydro.

*Click.*

*The BLU Heavy briefly wondered what that crackling sound was...*

Terminate Base: Hightower.

*Click.*

*I built that.* The RED Engineer said in satisfaction, before turning around...

Terminate Base: Lakeside.

*Click.*

*Woah, is that water gettin' higher, or is it just me?* The BLU Scout asked...

Terminate Base: Sawmill.

*Click.*

*Hrrr rrhhhr mrrr!* The RED Pyro cried, running away from the spinning blades...

Terminate Base: Nucleus.
"Is...is...that thing supposed to be doin' that?" The BLU Demo asked, his face bathed in pulsing green light as he looked upwards...

Terminate Base: Upwards.

"Mon dieu, what is that smell?" The RED Spy asked, his nostrils twitching disdainfully...

Terminate Base: Dustbowl.

The BLU Sniper looked down his scope and realised the disused missile they had all taken for granted until now had smoke coming out of its engines...

Terminate Base: Well.

The RED Soldier looked up at the incoming train and grinned. This was his kind of locomotive. Every single carriage was filled with bombs...

Terminate Base: Foundry.

Medic 029/a spluttered and gasped for breath as the air got thicker. He pulled himself along the floor, trying to avoid inhaling too much of the stinking smoke that had filled the air. His unruly hair had long since burnt away and his rubber gloves smouldered.

"Anyone still alive has let me down..." He spluttered, before falling to the floor.

No one heard his final cry. There was no one still alive.

TF Industries fell silent except for the tapping of metallic feet. The robots had carried out their simple commands successfully. However, if Dell Conagher had lived and had given them more complex programming as he had wanted, perhaps they would have noticed the hidden door deep in the vaults of the sprawling building.

Perhaps.

As it was, though, they passed right by it and left, their job done. Gray Mann smiled to himself. The Gravel Wars were over, and just as he had promised the late Dell Conagher two years previously, Project Pelargonia was finished.

Long after the robots left, a tiny noise echoed through the still halls of the TF headquarters. A little metallic click, like a lock opening, followed by a creak.
"You know, Théo, you ain't so bad," Scout suddenly said, stretching his legs out in front of the two bar heater and wiggling his toes, "'But I'm never callin' you 'Dad', though, just so you know."

"Quoi?" Spy replied, his arm lazing over the edge of the white leather chair in his large Boston home. "Did I ask you to?"

"Well, no..." Scout admitted. "But since you and Mom..."

Violet Spy felt his face stretch into a smile as he glanced at the golden ring on his left hand. "You were livid when you found out about Rachel and I."

"Yeah, well, I thought you were no good for her." Scout stated. "You're a stone-cold killer, always off doin' shit and actin' like such a fancy faggot around the ladies that they all wanted to jump down your pants..."

"I...don't think you quite mean that." Spy replied idly. "Faggots, as you so crudely put it, are not known for their..."

"Look, let me finish, ok?" Scout said insistently. "I thought you'd just get her into bed an' dump her. She's my Mom, I'd not let anyone do that."

"I would have said that is her choice, not yours." Spy said. He sniffed the air. There was a delicious smell coming in from the kitchen, and he could hear Rachel humming along to the radio as she cooked Thanksgiving dinner. Her cooking had somewhat changed his attitude towards American cooking. Although simple compared to French cuisine, the food she prepared was very different to the over-salted bilge served in the base. "She..." He paused, and leaned over, offering Scout a cigarette.

"No fuckin' way." Scout said. "They wreck your lungs."

He leant back and looked at the ceiling, avoiding Scout's gaze. "She waited for me, even though I could be anywhere, even though she knew of my profession. She never asked too much about my past, but she trusted that I would return. Do you know what trust means, to a Spy?"

"Means you got a schmuck you can off, right?" Scout said with a grin. Spy gave him a stern glare. "Sorry dude."

"You never change, Rick." Spy said with a slight smile.

"Rick?" Scout said in puzzlement.

"I mean..." Spy suddenly felt confused. Names filled his head. He knew Scout was called Edward, but he wanted to call him Bobby, or Rick. Where have I heard those names? He blinked, trying to get rid of the sudden baffling mental images in his head: Two sets of obnoxious laughter, the sound of gunshots, a needle-sharp pain in his forehead and threaded through it all, a sickly sweet smell that entered his nostrils and tainted his thoughts. He blinked.

"Wake up."

His breath caught and he leapt from the chair, looking around for the foreign voice.

"Dude, you ok?" Scout asked in sudden concern.

"Fine. I am fine." He said firmly, sitting down again and clutching the arms of the chair with a
creaking, leathery noise. He rubbed his forehead slightly. *Just tiredness. That is all.* The feeling of wrongness stayed, though. He looked around the familiar room again. This was his house, his life. The Gravel Wars were over, and he and Scout were no longer part of the Violet team. They were rich and had no need to work. He was free, he could...

"What's happening?" Scout said suddenly.

"Nothing, nothing..." Spy blinked again, and for a moment, he saw a white room and heard the beeping of machines. He felt a wave of dizziness, and everything seemed to slide sideways. "Mon dieu."

"Spy?" Scout's voice faded, and the white room appeared again. A wave of shivery cold overwhelmed him, and Spy groaned, opening his eyes to grim reality at last.

"What... the... fuck..." He heard Scout moan from somewhere to his left.

"Wake up, all of you." A woman's voice said imperiously. He knew it from somewhere. He tried to sit up, but the world spun and he quickly lay down again and swallowed. "You're needed. Wake up."

"God, I feel sick to my stomach." Engineer said weakly. "Did I respawn?"

"What've I bin' drinking this time?"

"Where are we?" An unrecognised voice with a soft, lilting accent asked.

"We're still alive?" Spy heard Soldier mutter muzzily. "There was a bright light..."

"Ah Gawd, I'm gonna..."

Spy closed his eyes, trying to ignore the damp, retching noises Scout made. It sounded like a few other people were tipped over the edge as well, and Spy made himself breathe deeply and evenly so that he did not join in.

"Mein Kopf schmerzt..." Medic's voice said fuzzily. "Zhe gas...I zought it was more nerve agent. Ve should all be dead!"

"Yes and no, Medic." The woman's voice said.

"I feel...weak. I do not like it." Heavy stated.

Spy opened his eyes again and this time, his vision was focused enough for him to look around the tiled room. The nine other mercenaries lay or sat on hard metal tables arranged in two rows down the walls of the room. They all had various wires and tubes attached to them, and Spy unconsciously reached a hand to his face and realised he had a pad on his forehead and some sort of tube hooked into his nose. He tugged on it but it would not come out and all he managed to do was to make his eyes water. The two Scouts were sitting upright and swearing. A small, slight man with an oriental cast to his face, pale copper skin and several flat, pink scars on his face and neck sat upright and scrubbed his hands through his long black hair, eyes darting about nervously. *Pyro. That must be Pyro.* Heavy, Demo, Engineer and Soldier were still lying down, while Medic was muttering to himself and viciously yanking out his various wires and tubes. Sniper was apparently still unconscious, his eyes tightly shut and his breathing steady. In the middle of it all stood a petite woman in a purple skirt and blouse. She held her clipboard and stared at him measuringly.

"Miss Pauling?" He croaked. "We meet again." He pushed himself slowly upright with arms that
trembled with weakness. Unthinkingly he groped around his hospital gown for his cigarette case.

"I thought I was back in Texas, with..." Engineer stopped suddenly and sat up with a sigh. "Well, never mind that."

"I think this could take some explaining." Miss Pauling said, tapping a pen on her clipboard. "Would you like the short or the long version?"

"I am just surprised..." Medic paused, gingerly pulling the tubing out of his nostril and then sneezing. "...that I am alive."

"I was where I belong." Pyro said, and Spy realised that his was the soft, lilting voice he had heard earlier. "It was bright and beautiful. I know that place."

"You have all been...gone for some time." Miss Pauling explained. She took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes. Spy noticed with surprise that her eyes were red and surrounded by shadows that suggested deep exhaustion.

"Gone?" Spy asked suspiciously.

"Sort of dead...ish." She said, looking down and fiddling with her glasses.

"What do you mean by that?!" Medic demanded.

"Violet Medic wanted you- for his experiments. He said he had some, um, 'upgrades' he wanted to try out."

"And you stopped him?" Spy asked, feeling his heart starting to pound in dread.

"Well...no." Miss Pauling admitted. "But Mu...the Administrator and I insisted you weren't to be in any pain. He said he wanted to keep you in 'neural stasis', as he called it. The nerve agent killed you and Medic kept you...preserved, unable to feel anything. We're not torturers, you know."

"You say you are not torturers. I say dead fish still stink if I call it rose." Heavy grumbled, sitting up and stretching.

"What did he do to us? What did he do?" One of the Scouts said, feeling his chest anxiously.

"I don't believe a word of it, I feel completely normal." Soldier stated firmly. "I don't feel even a little bit dead."

"Engie..." Scout said, his voice cracking. "Oh God...Engie."

Spy looked round, and what he saw made him finally give up the fight with his queasy stomach and clamp a hand over his mouth before throwing up over the edge of the bed.

"Uh," Engineer said, awkwardly cradling the stump where his right hand had once been, "Thanks for the concern y'all, but actually, this ain't anythin' new. You know I'm diabetic? Well, it caused this here problem with my hand. I had already lost some fingers so I got designing myself a nice new robotic hand. It was ready to go soon after Medic left Teufort..."

"I was looking forward to that procedure." Medic said sulkily. "At least I got to do your foot."

"...so I chopped off my hand and replaced it. Far better than the original, even if I say so myself." Engineer added proudly.
"And I always said you were the sane one o' the bunch." Sniper suddenly muttered, eyes still tightly closed. One of his hands reached up and scratched his nose idly, as relaxed as if he was sunbathing.

"Engineer always wore glove." Heavy said thoughtfully.

"Sure did, big fella. Now you know why. I thought it might creep y'all out. Never thought it'd make you puke though. You alright there, Spy?"

Spy cleared his throat and coughed, wiping his mouth and panting for breath. "So, what did that quack do to us?"

"We are stronger." Pyro said. "I can see it."

"I need to see his notes." Medic breathed, clapping his hands and apparently trapped between fear and excitement. "I vant to know vhat he did."

"It was top secret. Even the other Violets didn't know you were down here." Miss Pauling explained. "So...I don't know what Medic did to you. But...I could revive you, right? So it can't be too bad."

"Why did you wake us up now?" Sniper asked, yawning and sitting up casually.

"There is...a problem." Miss Pauling said. "I need your help."

"Our help?" Demo said sarcastically. "Why should we help you, after everythin' you've done to us?"

"Um," The woman said, sounding unusually uncertain. "I have some bad news, and some really terrible news. Which do you want first?"

"The bad news." Soldier said firmly.

"You remember being captured?" She asked.

"Yes?" Spy replied.

"That was...a while ago. You all died two years ago." She said. "Your...um, bodies have been kept here in stasis ever since."

Spy felt like vomiting again, and swallowed firmly while others in the room gasped or swore.

"And the really terrible news?" Engineer asked quietly.

"A day ago," Miss Pauling said quietly, her voice trembling, "They attacked. Robots. They killed everyone. I...I don't know why. Everyone except me. I... didn't look important, so they left me alone. I knew you were here, so I thought, with the power down, you... I just pressed all the buttons that looked important and hoped you'd be revived."

"Everyone?" Spy repeated blankly. "When you say 'everyone'..."

"I mean, everyone." Miss Pauling said. She took a deep, shaky breath and ran a hand nervously over her messy hair. "Respawn was pulled to bits. All the Violets are dead. The Administrator is dead, all the, the... other Administrators are dead. They... threw all the base kill switches, all of them... Everyone is dead. Except us." She suddenly gave a bright, brittle smile that had little sanity to it. "TF Industries is finished. There will be no more Gravel War, no more clones. Well done guys- you won."

Normally, dire news would cause the group of mercenaries to break into shouts and arguments. This
time, though, there was just stunned silence. Spy opened his mouth and closed it again. Heavy made a small grunting noise, as if in pain. Medic started to laugh and smothered it hurriedly, shoving his knuckles into his mouth and biting down on them until they bled.

"You said robots?" Engineer asked quietly.

"The Violet Engineer went missing some time ago." Miss Pauling explained. "After developing a prototype robot that we rejected. He took his blueprints."

Engineer gaped for a moment, his face draining of colour. "No...I'd never do this. Not ever."

"What I've always said," Sniper commented, finally sitting up and casually removing a needle from his arm, "Is that the clones are all different. You can't lead a different life and be the same person. Engie- the Violet Engineer- hated all this. Hated it with a passion."

"War sometimes does strange things to a man." Soldier commented, his voice unusually soft and introspective. "It can turn them into something...they no longer know."

"We need to look at what is now." Pyro said. "Are there any robots left?"

"On the upper levels...maybe? I don't know." Miss Pauling said. "It's gone quiet."

"This is our base now." Heavy said firmly. "We take it back. Puny robots will go."

"Yer in a hospital gown, wee big laddie." Demo said tiredly. "What'll ye do, moon 'em to death?"

"I think your supplies are in the room next door. It's locked, but I bet Heavy can fix that." Miss Pauling said. She reached into her blouse and pulled out a tiny ivory-handled pistol. "We better find out what's going on in the rest of the building. Are you able to walk yet?"

"Ja." Medic said, his voice muffled by his bleeding fist.

"Yes."

"Yessir."

"Yeah."

"Aye."

"Da."

"I guess so."

"Hell yeah."

"Sure."

Spy swung his legs off his bed and collapsed onto the floor. "Make that a 'no'."

"Bloody poofter." Sniper muttered, grabbing Spy around the waist and hauling him upright. "You need to smoke less n' eat more, you weakling."

"Fuck you, Sniper." Spy said, holding on tightly to his best friend. "For your information, I have not smoked in two years."
"Not funny, mate."

"No, I suppose not." Spy admitted.

The group staggered after Miss Pauling, and, sure to her words, found their clothes and weaponry from the night of the Sawmill invasion stacked neatly in a cupboard. Everything had two years worth of dust on it. Spy grimaced and grabbed his suit, vowing to find a dry cleaner as soon as possible. After that, the group cautiously set out, dropping into their old combat roles easily. A sickly smell like rancid fat drifted along the silent corridors and their feet echoed with every step. Spy already knew they would find no one alive here- and then he heard the rustle. He hissed to the group to stay back. They held their various guns up ready to shoot whatever approached...

"Coo! Coooooo!"

"Vhat..." An entire flock of doves, mostly white, but with a few pied, flew around the corner and straight into Medic, settling on his head and arms, cooing in anxiety and rustling their feathers.

"Those are Medic's doves." Miss Pauling explained. "I guess the robots left them alone."

"Galileo!" Medic said suddenly, his eyes wide and concerned. "What happened to Galileo? Ah, mein Gott, he must have starved in zhe forest..."

"Coo." One of the doves squawked and pecked his ear. He winced, but reached up a shaking hand and petted the bird.

"Violet Medic insisted we collected your doves. He said he would look after them." Miss Pauling said. "He said they didn't deserve to suffer."

"Ah, zhank God you are alright." Medic said, his voice slightly muffled, stroking the dove's soft feathers.

"Hundreds of people are dead..." Rick muttered

"... But you're more concerned about your dumb birds." Bobby finished.

Medic opened his mouth to spit out a venomous reply, but closed it again and shrugged. "Zhey are my birds. Eins, zwei, drei...noch zu halten, Tauben! Eins, zwei..."

"Let us continue on, hmm?" Spy suggested. He cloaked, drifted ahead silently, and that was why he found Violet Medic first.

**In Chapter Thirty: The team find out what's going on in the real world, and they find out why Miss Pauling is to be feared.**

*Translations:*

*Dum Discussio Venerit - The Judgement*

*Mein Kopf schmerzt - My head hurts*

*Eins, zwei, drei...noch zu halten, Tauben! Eins, zwei... - One, two, three...stay still, doves! One, two...*
Tragedies and Statistics

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: And there was much rejoicing! It seemed people were very glad to see the team back last chapter, even though it has the highest body count of any chapter in this story. This is hilariously ironic, give what Miss Pauling says later on in the chapter below.

Today's special thanks go to Alithia Sigma, who came up with the perfect description and nickname for the two Scouts- Scout Squared: One Scout, two brains, two mouths, two baseball bats, and twice the attitude. Although, mathematically speaking, shouldn't that be four times the attitude? Anyway, they get to bug everyone this chapter.

The artwork for this chapter is at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Thirty-Tragedies-and-Statistics-495533612, and it's the one image from the stories I'd say really deserves a Mature rating. It creeps me out to look at it, even though I drew it. I think I was a little too successful in achieving the look I wanted. So, consider yourself warned.

The Violet Medic was leant up against the wall, one slack arm in his bloody lap. His dull eyes stared at nothing. A pool of congealing blood surrounded him. A white feather floated in it, the red-brown blood slowly wicking up into its fibres.

"Over here." Spy called to the others. Predictably, the Scouts got there first, but the others quickly followed. "Shotgun wound to the chest. Dead." He diagnosed.

"Mein Gott...It's him." Medic muttered, kneeling down to stare at the man of whom he was a copy. The original Medic was slightly taller and fatter, with neat, straight hair unlike his clone's tangled bird's nest. A crescent-shaped scar curled around his left temple and into his hairline. "You. You did all of zhis." He said quietly, looking at the dead man.

"Gerhardt?" Heavy questioned.

"Ve are all here, due to you." Medic murmured. "Your ruzhlessness, your genius. Did you save more lives zhan you killed? You gave me life, you made our lives hell, and now you are dead and I am not. Vere you an angel or a demon, Gustav Hans Daecher?"

"All men are both." Heavy said solemnly, putting his hand on Medic's shoulder. Medic stood up and gave him a sad smile.

"For months...years, in fact... I have wanted zhis man dead. Now he is. And... I don't feel anyzhing." Medic said bleakly, looking up at Heavy for guidance.

"Revenge doesnae give you anythin' worth having, laddie." Demo said seriously. "When all is said and done, it just sucks ye dry and leaves you empty."

"Come on, son. There's nothin' worth your time here." Engineer said, firmly grabbing Medic's shoulders and pulling him away. "Let's see what else we can find."

They continued on through the base.
"Breaking news this afternoon is that more reports of robot attacks throughout the US and Canada have been flooding in. The robots seem to have been picking random businesses as targets with no apparent grand scheme. There have been large explosions in several mines run by Jenkin's Coal Company, flour fires at the Red Bread bakery, gas leaks at Goldstream Fuel and large chemical fires at Bigg's Steel Rods main refinery. Casualties are still being counted, but are expected to be in the high hundreds at this present time.

"President Nixon, at a short press briefing, urged the public to remain calm before retiring to the oval office with Secretary of Defence Melvin Laird to discuss emergency measures and any possible military action.

"Safety officials commenting from the White House have asked that all robot sightings be reported to them, using the number appearing on the screen now. The robots are of mixed appearance and size, but all possess jointed metal bodies and blue glowing eyes. They are to be considered extremely dangerous and should not be approached even if you are armed. If any robots are sighted in your neighbourhood, stay inside and lock your doors. Stay away from any windows and remain out of sight.

"There has been a great deal of discussion as to who could be behind this attack. Given the high level of technology on display, Australia has been contacted to give its view on the situation. The only reply received so far was 'Piss off, having a barbie. Deal with it.'

"The USSR is claiming no involvement, but has warned that any attempted attacks will be met with equal or greater force. Is this an admission of guilt, or a safety precaution? Military units are being mobilised to answer any perceived threat, and Nixon has stated that any attempt by the Soviet Bloc to take advantage of this situation will be met with deadly force.

"Wait...yes, I've just heard that we have a reporter at the site of one of the recent robot attacks. Over now to Harry Reasoner, reporting from California."

"Thank you Michaela. The scene here at the Blue Streak brewery is one of devastation after a group of robots transported and detonated a large bomb in the middle of the malting floor. The ABC News crew were in the local area and were able to get some shots of the robots in action. As you can see, they are heavily armed and use brute force rather than tactics. Once again, we must urge the general public not to engage these robots. They appear in huge forces and will easily overwhelm a single individual, armed or not. The robots arrived in a large blue tank-like vehicle and poured out in waves. Little is known about them yet, but it is hoped that a specimen can be captured for analysis.

"In other news, after a nervous day on the stock exchange in light of the robot attacks, the prices of many shares have plummeted to record lows. There are rumours of an opportunistic takeover of Mann Co. by..."

Bobby switched the TV off in disgust.

"Those metal fuckers look like us!" He said angrily. "See, that one? It looks like Me an' Rick."

"Shit, it even has my bat!" Rick declared.

"They're takin' the piss." Sniper grumbled.

"It has to be the...the Violet Engineer." Engineer said, rubbing his arm uncomfortably. "Why would he do this, though?"

They had explored the whole base and found...everything. It seemed the Violets had put up quite a
fight. They had found them all, eventually, and each one save for the Violet Medic had been surrounded with destroyed husks of robots. Engineer had scavenged what he could of the robots for research purposes, and they had removed and buried the bodies of the Violet team and the Administrator clones. To see the row of identical female corpses had been hard even for the toughened mercenaries, and Miss Pauling had had to excuse herself.

Now they had retreated to the living quarters of the Violets to wait and see what happened next. Rather than the battered and threadbare furniture of Teufort, the rec room was modern and well-appointed, with the latest contemporary formica furniture and a large colour TV. Their luxurious surroundings did little to lift their mood, though. They had fortified the living quarters using Engineer's sentries, and then dragged boxes of supplies from the rambling base there- ammo, food, anything that could be useful in the event of a siege. It seemed highly likely the robots would be back at some point and they were determined to be ready for them.

"Those sites they are attacking are all owned by either RED or BLU." Miss Pauling said. "If it was Engineer, I would have expected him to have a vendetta against the TF industry subsidiaries- Mann Co, Dalokohs, or Valve Corporation, for instance"

"But disabling RED and BLU would stop the use of clones, non?" Spy pointed out, stubbing out his cigarette and lighting another one.

"By killing a load of innocents?" Engineer asked, prying with his fingers into a robotic leg to remove the plating.

"You can't trust filthy traitors, son." Soldier told Engineer. "Who knows what goes through their corrupted minds?"

"Uhhh rhhrrrs hrrrr."

"You're right, Pyro, we could be considered traitors." Spy said with a nod. "I consider myself a traitor, several times over." 

"I don't think it matters any more if you're traitors or not." Miss Pauling said, pushing her glasses up her nose and glaring at the blank television screen.

"I hope they find out who sent those robots soon," Spy commented, "Or it seems like all the world powers will be at each other's throats."

"Vell, the last world var vas over twenty years ago. Zhat means ve're due a new one." Medic said, staring at his nest of papers at the table and tapping a pen idly. "All it takes is vone megalomaniac Scheisskopf."

"Uh, wait, what?" Rick said in puzzlement.

"But weren't you, like, on his side, Gerry?" Bobby asked.

"Hitler was German too." Rick finished.

"Austrian." Medic corrected before pausing and looking up at the Scout, his eyebrows drawing down in sudden anger. "Vait..."

"Leave it, Doktor." Heavy said. "Scouts are just silly leetle men."

"I think we have more important issues, guys." Miss Pauling said tiredly. "Like the robots...?"
"You zhink I am a Nazi, Scouts?" Medic asked, crossing his arms and glaring. "Is zhat it? I am fascinated to know."

"You think I'd team up with a Nazi?" Soldier suddenly said, rising to his feet and glaring at Rick as well. "How dare you!"

The two Scouts' heads flicked back and forth.

"I'm waiting." Medic said.

"Uh...well, I kinda thought..." Bobby started.

"...You know, they dug human experimentation an' shit..." Rick continued uncertainly.

"...That's, like, right up your street." Bobby finished.

"Ah, bugger it." Sniper said, drawing his hat down over his ears and leaning back. "Wake me when it's over."

"Zhe National Socialists wanted to 'purify' Germany, removing all non-Aryans or the mentally or physically disabled, by death or sterilisation." Medic said with a disapproving sniff. "Vhy would I vant zhat? It'd be so...boring."

"Uh..." Rick said, his mouth opening and closing.

"What?" Bobby asked.

"Vhat about sickle-cell anaemia? Or beta thalassemia? Or Tay-Sachs disease? So many wondeful ailments vould be viped out! I vould have been left vizh only zhe boring Caucasian vones to study."

"Well, that is certainly a unique argument, Docteur." Spy said drily, waving his cigarette about. "For a moment there I thought you might have developed a conscience."

Medic gave Spy an icy glare. "I vas not even in Germany during zhe War. I joined many of my fellow countrymen and emigrated to England. And don't ask me vhy I left, zhat is none of your business."

"See? See?" Soldier said. "Medic is on my team, and I would never collaborate with a Nazi, so Medic can't be one. Now get down and give me twenty, you ignorant maggot."

"Fuck off, Sol."

"Ladies, can we talk about the robots?" Demo insisted.

"No." Miss Pauling said firmly. "We don't talk, we stop them."

"Da, robots are bad. We fight them." Heavy agreed. "We crush them into leetle bits."

"Maybe I can find out more about them if I get my hands on one." Engineer said. "Find out how to shut them down."

"We have to save America!" Soldier declared, punching his fist into his palm.

"Fightin' robots? Badass." Bobby said.

"I'm in." Rick agreed.
"Uhh hrrr." Pyro said with a nod.

"Got nothin' better to do," Demo agreed.

Spy sighed. "Well, I shall ask the obvious question if no one else does: How, exactly is this our problem? This is something the military should handle, not us. Gentlemen, we are only nine...I mean, ten..."

"Eleven." Miss Pauling corrected firmly.

"We would be risking death. Permanent, messy death."

"Spy's right, this is out of our league." Sniper said, tipping his hat back and sitting up. "Full scale war isn't our line o' business. We're better at... personal service."

"If you expect me to sit around doing nozhing here, zhink again." Medic argued. "You zhink ve have zhe slightest chance of surviving zhis? Zhe robots vill be back, and zhey vill come for us, again and again. If ve do nozhing, ve die."

"More to the point, I say we go." Miss Pauling said, rising to her feet. "The Administrator is...is dead, and that means I am in charge now."

"Oh, please." Spy replied, rolling his eyes. "You think I am taken in by your act?"

"Pardon?" Miss Pauling said, frowning with a puzzlement that could easily become anger.

"You think I didn't figure it out? You were always in charge. Ask a mathematician which is the most important number, and he would answer 'one'."

"Actually, it's zero." Engineer pointed out.

"Tais toi, s'il te plait, I am making a point here! There was always just one of you. Single, and unique. Your disguise is very good, and I applaud you for it, but you entered all the figures, hid the bodies, checked the accounts...the tiniest action on your part could affect millions and yet, you were never a target, never obvious."

"Well, ok." The small woman replied, her narrow smile torn between irritation and amusement. "You want to know what my job really is?"

"Was." Demo corrected.

"Is." Miss Pauling insisted. She tweaked her glasses straight and stood proudly. "My job is saving the world. Yes, I kill clones. I send them to their deaths, so that millions won't die in a pointless neverending war. I reported the two identical 029 Medic clones at Teufort to the Administrator, knowing I was signing their death warrants. I told her about the security breaches, understanding that it would lead to the base being gassed. I don't regret any of it, you hear? None of it."

"How can you live with yourself?" Engineer asked, his voice breathy with horror.

"You know that saying: 'A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths are a statistic.'?" She asked, raising an eyebrow. "I prefer tragedy to statistics."

"You're bloody insane." Sniper said.

"You pee into jars!" Miss Pauling snapped in reply. "Soldier wears kitchenware on his head. Heavy talks to food. Medic is a twisted sadomasochist..."
"What? No I am not!" Medic replied indignantly. "How dare you say zhat?"

"...and also delusional. Spy dresses up in women's clothing..."

"That is just a useful disguise!" Spy spat in outrage.

"Pyro hallucinates constantly. Engineer chopped his own arm off and enjoyed it, and I don't even know where to start with Demo..."

"Watch it, lassie." Demo said warningly.

"Out of all of us, only Scout is normal." Miss Pauling finished, waving an arm in the direction of Bobby and Rick.

"Woah, you think so?" Rick said with a grin.

"Hey, want me to show you just how normal I am?" Bobby asked.

"That's the worst pick-up line ever, son." Engineer said with a sigh.

"My point," Miss Pauling continued, ignoring the two Scouts, "Is that Project Pelargonia is over, finished, but I've still got a job to do, and you will help me."

"You ordered my Doktor's death." Heavy growled. "If you were man, I would crush you, but I do not hurt women."

"I do." Medic snarled, getting to his feet and reaching for his bonesaw threateningly. In a split-second, Miss Pauling drew her pistol and fired. Medic dropped to the floor with an angry scream, grabbing his ruined knee and clenching his teeth in agony.

"Oh, did I mention I'm a really good shot? Silly me, I forgot." Miss Pauling said sweetly, tucking the gun back into her blouse. "Medigun time, Doctor Weiss."

"Sie sind Verrückt!" Medic hissed, pressing down on the wound. "Someone make me a tourniquet. Mein Gott!"

"There was no need for that, Miss." Engineer said reproachfully, calmly grabbing a handy power cord and handing it to the injured man. "There's no way I can let those robots run amok. Kinda think it's my responsibility to sort this mess."

"Aye, let's get oot there and save the world." Demo agreed, nodding enthusiastically.

"It is the duty of every red-blooded American to help his country in its time of need." Soldier said.

"Mon dieu, when did we become a bunch of..." Spy screwed up his face in a grimace, "Heroes?"

"When there was no one else left." Heavy said solemnly. "Hero is just person who has to save others to save self."

The ten people looked at Heavy in surprise. He shrugged his massive shoulders and continued:

"Hero is man with nothing left to lose."

There was nothing any of them could really say to that.

In Chapter Thirty-One: Medic grosses the team out while they're eating dinner, and the
Scouts investigate a suspicious noise in the night...

Translations:

Tais toi, s'il te plait -Shut up, please.

Sie sind Verrückt! -You're crazy!
Author's Note: I've just noticed something utterly terrifying. The views for this story have just hit 15,000 over on fanfiction.net. Arrrghhhh! I only wrote it for the lulz and now there are all these people reading it! Many thanks everyone who has stuck with me and reviewed, commented, favourited, followed, or just plain read it. I appreciate it all, although I do think you're all nuts :D.

This is another one of those chapters where nothing much happens, but hopefully nothing happens in a fun way. That's what I hope, anyway.

Artwork here: http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Thirty-One-The-Six-Million-Dollar-Merc-496099644

Considering some of the other things Sniper had eaten in his time in the Bush, most would assume he'd eat absolutely anything thrown at him, but actually, that was not true at all. With one of those ironic twists Mother Nature is so fond of, he actually shared with Spy the trait of a rather delicate digestion. Sure, he could eat bush tucker with no problem, since roasted meats and fruits were pretty easy to digest, but the deep-fried food that Engineer and Demo loved would have kept him stuck in the dunny for a day if he ate enough of it. Stressful situations made him lose his appetite completely as well, so right now, he poked at the fried chicken and rice dish Engineer had quickly prepared. Spy sat on his left, and also prodded his food listlessly. The other mercenaries ate noisily and quickly, as befitting men who had not had a decent meal in two years. Sniper's stomach twisted again.

_Bugger me. Two years. What the hell has been done to us?_

Maybe that was why he wasn't hungry? Perhaps Violet Medic had removed his stomach! Or made him only able to eat metal! Or...

Sniper was saved from going into a full panic by the return of Medic, who came back into the mess hall hobbling on crutches but wearing a manic grin.

"I have found something very interesting!" He said, wobbling before collapsing into a chair by the wall.

"Haven't you healed your knee yet?" Miss Pauling asked, idly fiddling with a pen.

"He probably got distracted by an interesting-looking bit of gore." Spy said, blowing a smoke ring.

"Verpiss dich, Spy," Medic replied, but with far less venom that he once would have done. "Look, I found _zhis_." He held up what seemed to be a piece of bone with a slightly silvery sheen to it.

"Uh, dude? Where did you find that?" Rick asked, his nose wrinkling.

"In my knee, of course." Medic explained. He looked at it with a frown, and then spat on it and buffed it on his shirt, leaving a red stain. "It is my patella."
"Your kneecap?" Engineer asked with a grimace. "You... you took out your own kneecap to show us?"

"Put it back in now." Heavy ordered firmly. "Bit of knee should be inside knee, not in hand."

"Nein, zhis is important." Medic said, waving a hand at Heavy. "It makes walking razher difficult, but you have to see zhis. Can you see zhe colour of it?"

"Please tell me I'm not having this conversation." Miss Pauling said, looking at Bobby pleadingly. He just shrugged in reply.

"You get used to it after a while, Miss." Rick said.

"It's silver coloured." Soldier stated. "That's not natural."

"Listen." Medic tapped the piece of bone on the arm of his chair with a metallic *plink*. "I took some samples and examined zhem under magnification. It is laced with a titanium, vanadium and silicon matrix- many fine threads and what looks to be some sort of circuitry. I would appreciate if you would take a look at my photos, Engineer."

"Oh...well, sure thing." Engineer replied with a resigned shrug.

"I also took samples of zhe muscle tissue nearby, and zhey contain similar structures." Medic continued to explain.

"You mean we've got a load of metal inside us now?" Demo asked nervously, rubbing his arms. "Ach, bloody hell, that's not good."

"Did Violet Medic do this to us?" Sniper asked quietly.

"I zhink so." Medic replied with a nod. "From what I have read of his notes so far, he had plans for making humans upgradable, programmable. I assume ve must be his prototypes."

"So we're, like, cyborgs?" Rick asked excitedly.

"Woah, badass." Bobby said, nodding enthusiastically.

"Wait...is this technology American? I won't have filthy foreign machinery in my bones." Soldier declared.

"Bloody hell." Demo muttered. "This just gets worse and worse."

"I think I am going to be sick." Spy said with a gulp, pulling at his necktie.

"Don't you bloody dare." Sniper growled, his own stomach knotting and going cold.

"Nein, zhis is good, don't you see? If ve can access zhe circuitry, who knows how powerful ve could become? Hand-eye coordination, strength, memory, all our senses could all be improved...I vonder...did Daecher suspect zhe zhreat ve faced? It is if ve are perfectly designed to defeat robots."

"I don't feel any different." Bobby said in puzzlement.

"This can't work, can it?" Rick asked.

"If it vas going to be a problem, ve vould be showing signs of tissue rejection by now." Medic said sternly. "Zhe quality of his vork is superb...if only I had such a chance to experiment on a group of..."
"You don't." Miss Pauling said flatly, tapping her pen next to her untouched food.

"I need tissue samples from everyvone." Medic continued. "Ve can start vizh blood and bone samples, to see if zhe same alterations exist in us all, except for Fraulein Pauling, of course."

"Ah, mon dieu. Just when I think I am free of the tender ministrations of mad docteurs." Spy sighed, pushing his food away. "Maybe we could change the subject? Engineer, have you made any progress?"

"Kind of." Engineer said, chewing and swallowing. "It's sorta baffling, really. I only got li'l bits of robot to work with and they're pretty darn smashed up so I can't tell much, but what I've seen is real strange."

"Hrrr srrr?" Pyro asked.

"See, it looks like my work. I can see a few of my techniques in there. We all have our favourite ways o' doing things, and I can see whoever built this favoured the same titanium alloy I do. See that there blue tinge? That's a grade 9, strong but workable. But there's hints around and about that this ain't my work. There's bearings that are millimetres out of alignment, and the edges are still a bit sharp. Not smoothed off properly. Shoddy stuff."

"So? What's that all mean?" Demo asked.

"Well, I think my original Violet fella was involved in makin' this thing," Engineer admitted, rubbing his neck uncomfortably, "But I don't reckon he finished it off. Someone else did. Someone who don't care quite so much about the little details."

"How is this useful to us?" Heavy asked, looking up from his empty plate.

"Not sure it is-yet. The robots here are too smashed up to look at shut down routines, programming algorithms and all that. One thing we know for sure is that they can be killed by all our usual weapons."

"Your eleven degrees have been so helpful, Engineer. We would never have figured out the hidden meaning behind those bullet holes and scorch marks without your help." Spy said drily. Sniper gave him a warning kick under the table. His friend seemed incapable of holding back if he could think of a suitable sarky reply, even if it got him into trouble. Maybe it was a Spy thing? Or a way for him to let off steam? Huh. Seems likely. Can't say this is the most relaxing day of my life. Of course, it could be simply that Spy liked being a wanker.

"No need for that attitude, son." Engineer replied, giving Spy a disapproving stare. "I've only just gotten started."

"Zhe important zhing is zhat ve can kill zhem." Medic stated, hobbling over to the table and collapsing in the empty chair left for him. He placed his kneecap next to the plate of cold food and grabbed a fork eagerly.

"Fucking hell, Gerry." Rick said tiredly.

"Get that thing off the dinner table, dammit." Bobby finished.

"Vhat zhing?" Medic asked in puzzlement.
"Enough of this." Spy sighed deeply and knotted his fingers together. "It is getting late, and I have not had a good night's sleep in two years. I presume we shall be standing watches?"

"I will take the first watch." Soldier declared.

"Two people, on one watch." Miss Pauling stated firmly.

"Da, I will join Soldier." Heavy said. "Am not so tired."

"I think it would be better if it was someone else." Miss Pauling said thoughtfully. "Someone more, uh..."

"Intelligent?" Medic asked, a new sharpness in his voice, his fork stopped in midair. "Is zhat what you vere going to say?"

"No, no." Miss Pauling said hastily, waving her hands in dismissal. "That wasn't it at all."

"Sergei is not stupid." Medic continued, righteous annoyance starting to colour his voice. "He is highly educated and very observant."

"Gerhardt, is ok." Heavy said, tugging at Medic's sleeve tiredly. "Not important thing right now."

"Nein, I am sick of everyone zhinking you are an idiot. It is insulting!" Medic said angrily. "It vill stop, do you...what is zhe matter vizh you?"

Spy hurriedly hid his laughter with a cough and Sniper jabbed him with a warning elbow.

"Tiredness, mon ami, that is all." He explained, waving a gloved hand airily. "I am somewhat overwrought after the day's events."

"What I was going to say," Miss Pauling said, glaring equally at Spy and Medic, "Was that Soldier and Heavy both have long-range fighting capabilities. Tactically, a different pairing might work better. I wasn't going to say anybody was smart!"

Spy hastily stuffed a hand into his mouth and bit his knuckles to stifle his snorts. Sniper gave up being subtle and cuffed him around the back of his head.

"Hhh grrrrhh?" Pyro suggested.

"Yes, I think you and Soldier would make a better pair." Miss Pauling agreed. She stood up. "Guess I better find somewhere to sleep."

"Zhere is a slight problem vizh zhe sleeping arrangements." Medic commented. "My room does not seem to have a bed."

"Heavy's room has a double bed. You could share his." Spy said, his voice slightly muffled. Sniper stamped down on the Frenchman's foot hard enough to make him yelp, but he noticed Heavy's venomous glare at Spy. Medic, to his surprise, glared at Spy as well and even shifted protectively in front of the larger man.

"I shall sleep in zhe infirmary. I don't vish to disturb Heavy's sleep." Medic said, looking at Spy warily.

"I'll take the sofa next doors." Miss Pauling said with a sigh. "I don't have a bedroom and I'm the smallest here."
"I've got no bed either." Bobby said hurriedly before Rick could open his mouth. "Maybe I can..."

"Heck no." Engineer said. "You can sleep on the floor of the Violet Scout's room."

"Hell yeah, I get the bed!" Rick said excitedly. "C'mon bro. You can have some of my blankets."

"G'night mates." Sniper stretched, his knotted back popping and creaking as he stood up and stretched. "Unless we get attacked over night, I'll see you all tomorrow mornin'."

The mercenaries all headed for their various beds, leaving Soldier and Pyro in the silent room.

"Game of poker?" Soldier asked.

"Uhh hrrr!"

Bobby normally slept well, but the floor was hard, even with the expensive carpeting in his room. This wasn't that cheap itchy purple stuff in the RED base, nope, it was a deep pile in a pale green that actually matched the paint on the walls. Even so, it still was a lot harder than a mattress. He turned over, but his shoulders dug into the floor uncomfortably. He sighed and opened his eyes.

"Bro?"

There was a snort from the bed.

"Hey, bro, wake up."

"Hrrr?" Rick muttered, turning over with a yawn. "Fuck off, Bobby."

"I can't sleep like this. Let me in the bed."

"Hell no." Rick said, pulling the blankets around him. Bobby got up and padded over to the bed anyway. Having a double was awesome at times like this: he always knew everything Rick was thinking and although they enjoyed talking, they didn't really need to. They tended to interrupt each other when talking to other people, but actually, that was more just to dick them around. It was just too funny watching them get all puzzled and shit. Bobby knew Rick would always say and think the same things he did, and he knew he could trust him entirely, so he ripped the blankets back without hesitation.


"Bitch."

"Jerk."

"Night dude."

"Night."

They both sighed and were quiet for a moment. Bobby felt his thoughts starting to wander into dreams when Rick suddenly spoke.

"Hey, you hear that?" There was a rustle as Rick sat up.

"Huh?"
"C'mon." Rick got out of bed. Bobby followed without question, and then he heard it too. It sounded sort of like a cat's cry, but not as high-pitched.

"Not a robot." Bobby said thoughtfully. "We better check it out, though."

The two clones padded bare-footed out of their room and into the corridor that connected the sleeping quarters to the mess hall, infirmary and rec room. Out here, they heard the noise again and it was easier to tell what it was now: a muffled sob.

"Is that..."

"Yeah, think it is."

"What do we do?" Rick whispered.

"Hell, I don't know." Bobby said, shifting awkwardly.

"I'm gonna go see her." Rick said firmly, striding towards the rec room.

"She'll shoot us."

"Nah." Rick replied, putting his hand on the door.

"Hey, hey, wait up!" Bobby hissed, scampering after his double.

Rick pushed the door open and there was a hasty sniff and silence as Bobby entered the room. Miss Pauling looked up at the two Scouts with reddened eyes and a sulky pout to her lips. Bobby couldn't help but think she looked fucking adorable, all snotty and damp like that. There was a problem though.

*It's a crying woman. What the hell do I do now? Shit. Don't panic. Gotta think of something...*

Bobby hopped from foot to foot, not noticing that Rick was fidgeting too. This was far beyond his area of expertise but...if he got this right...he had to get this right...

"What do you want?" Miss Pauling asked sulkily, glaring at the two intruders without bothering to hide her tears.

"Uh, you ok?" Bobby asked, sitting down next to the woman. Rick sat on her other side, and she looked warily between the two of them before sighing.

"Yeah." She said, blowing her nose and hiccupping. "No...Doesn't matter."

They sat in awkward silence, broken only by occasional sniffs.

"So, uh, what a day, huh?" Rick said, clearing his throat uncomfortably.

"The worst." Bobby agreed with a nod. "Must've sucked for you, Miss."

She gulped and sobbed again, shaking her head in denial.

"C'mon, what's eatin' you?" Rick asked insistently.

"You can tell us."

"Mum's dead." She suddenly blurted out, knotting her fingers in the damp tissue.
"Huh? You mean the robots shot your Mom?"
"Goddamn, that's harsh."

Miss Pauling nodded silently. "We weren't... weren't... that is... but she was still my Mum, no matter what."
"Metal bastards. We'll fuck them up, I promise."

"What was she, a secretary or a cleaner or somethin'?" Bobby looked around the rec room thoughtfully, not noticing the withering look of scorn the young woman gave him. "Didn't know there were other women working here, other than you and..." He felt his throat harden into a lump and he looked at Rick in horror.

"Holy fuck." Rick breathed. "Seriously? She was your Mom?"

"She never let me be cloned. She didn't want that." Miss Pauling murmured, looking into the distance. She gave a sudden gulping laugh. "I used to sit on her knee, as a kid, and watch the fights. All those fighters dying and killing, all the blood... It was black-and-white back then, of course, but it made me laugh. She'd always tell me I had a special job to do, and helped me choose my first pistol when I was three. She... she... was a terrible mother, I guess, but..." The woman sighed and fell silent.

"Wish my Ma was that badass." Bobby mused.

"You only get one Mom." Rick agreed.

"I didn't." Miss Pauling said softly. "I got several. I don't even know which of them was really my Mum! I never did find out. How... how stupid is that?"

"Can't imagine my Ma being dead." Bobby said quietly. "Dunno what I'd do if that happened."

"Fuck."

"This sucks."

"It does." Miss Pauling said, wiping her nose and clearing her throat. "But I have a job to do."

"Your Mom'd like a nice revenge, right?" Bobby said, smiling down at her. She smiled back tremulously.

"We'll get them, all of them." Rick said firmly. "Promise."

"You'll make her proud." Bobby added.

"She'll get a revenge. A good one." She cleared her throat and smoothed her skirt down with a shaky hand. "I'm sorry I disturbed you both. Go back to bed. I'll be fine."

"Hell no." Rick replied easily.

"We're not going anywhere." Bobby agreed. He briefly looked at Rick, who shrugged. He could feel his heart starting to pound with nervousness or excitement, he wasn't sure which, and his arm moved on its own, sliding along the back of Miss Pauling's neck until it rested on her opposite shoulder. Rick's arm slid in the reverse direction until his hand rested on her other shoulder and she was nestled in the arms of the two identical men.

"Uh, guys?" Miss Pauling said, looking between them in puzzlement, but making no attempt to
move from the double embrace. Bobby could feel her muscles tensing warily under his arm.

"Two for the price of one, right?" Bobby said with a grin, looking straight into her reddened eyes.

"This...this is a bit weird, isn't it?" She murmured softly. Bobby's fingers rubbed a little circle on her shoulder, and she made a tiny noise in the back of her throat as her shoulders started to relax.

"You'll get used to it...if you want to." Rick said.

"Do you?" Bobby asked.

"I...I don't know." She replied leaning back against their arms with her eyes closed. Bobby found his eyes roving over her throat as she swallowed, the pale skin rippling slightly. There was no denying it- even with a snotty red nose and tears on her cheeks, every inch of her was gorgeous. There was a little freckle in the curve of her throat, and that was gorgeous too. "But right now...don't go."

"All the time in the world for you." Bobby said, and ran a finger softly down her cheek. She sighed sadly, sniffed, and relaxed into their arms.

**In Chapter Thirty-Two: The team decide it's time to take action - the robot war starts here!**

*Translations:*

*Verpiss dich - Screw you.*
Author's note: I've had a few comments and pms along the lines of 'OMG! Nobody died last chapter!'. Hey, I don't kill people off constantly, y'know. Only when it's suitably dramatic. Anyway, let's have more dialogue, ok? I like writing dialogue.

Another special thanks is needed for Bossloki for her incredible ability to spot tiny errors I've missed even after editing and proofreading! Thanks, I owe you a portrait :D.

Artwork is here: http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Thirty-Two-Call-To-Arms-496877180.

"The headlines again today: International tensions continue to rise after more robot attacks in New Mexico resulted in yet more casualties. Evidence is mounting that the USSR is preparing a pre-emptive strike, and Nixon has urged the general public to remain ca..."

Click.

Heavy moved back from the television and sat glaring at the blank screen.

"Hey I was watchin' that!" Demo protested. "It's gettin' bad out there, proper bad. It's all gang aft agley."

"Eleven in the morning and too pissed to talk. New record." Sniper commented.

"I was quotin' the bard." Demo said.

"That was not Shakespeare." Spy said idly, lighting a cigarette from Pyro's lighter with a nod of thanks.

"Ach, ye pesky wee scunners! That was..."

"CAN Y'ALL HEAR ME?" Engineers voice suddenly rang out and everyone clapped their hands over their ears. Spy burnt his fingers and Demo fell off his chair.

"What?" Miss Pauling asked in bafflement looking around at the mercenaries. "What is it?"

"Holy fuck!" Bobby said, sticking a finger in his ear and wiggling it around. "That sounded like it came from inside my head! What the hell, Engie?"

"DID IT VORK?" Medic suddenly bellowed inside their heads.

"Engineer and Medic have gained the power of invisibility!" Soldier said excitedly, leaping to his feet and waving his arms around wildly. "Good work, privates! I can't see you at all."

"Oh, please." Spy sighed, sucking his fingers and then waving them in the air to cool them.

"Hrrr crrrr frrrrrrr hrrrrrrrrrrrr!" Pyro said excitedly.
"No!" Spy cried. "You can't check for them, Pyro. We have no extinguishers to hand."

"Can leetle Engineer and Medic hear me?" Heavy asked curiously, looking up into midair.

"VE HAVE SUCCESSFULLY ACTIVATED ZHE CIRCUITRY IN OUR AUDITORY CORTEXES." Medic replied. "IT SEEMS VE ARE ALL LINKED TOGEZHER."

"DAMN MEDIC, YOU SURE ARE LOUD. CAN YOU KEEP IT DOWN A BIT?"

"YOU ARE FAR LOUDER ZHAN I AM BUT I AM NOT COMPLAINING." Medic replied peevishly.

"Bloody hell, it's too early in tha mornin' fer this." Demo said, clutching his head and stumbling to his feet. "Yer deafening us all!"

"What's deafening?" Miss Pauling said, sounding slightly irritable.

"Can ye no' hear that?" Demo asked curiously.

"Wssssshh ssss swwsss?"

"Is too quiet now." Heavy stated, idly flicking a page in his book.

"How's this?" Engineer's voice asked.

"Tell me what I'm missing!" Miss Pauling demanded.

"This is fuckin' weird. We can hear Medic and Engineer speaking in our heads." Rick explained.

"They said something about...uh...something something science stuff." Bobby continued.

"The auditory cortex, Dummkopf." Medic's voice said in annoyance.

"Seems the old Violet Medic had some ideas about making us work together better as a combat unit." Engineer mused from inside their heads. "Doc and I were going through his journals and we found these activation codes. There's a whole load of others too, so we're findin' out what does what."

"My God, we will be unstoppable!" Soldier said excitedly, sitting down and fidgeting.

"Tell them to come in here. I need to hear all this." Miss Pauling insisted, standing up and tweaking her glasses straight.

"Did you hear that?" Demo asked the two voices.

"Hear vhat?"

"This is getting bloody annoying." Sniper growled. "Come in here and tell us what you've been buggering about at."

"OK! DAG NAB...sorry y'all, I tweaked the gain a bit too much there." Engineer said.

Everything went quiet and then Medic banged the door back and limped in, grinning excitedly.

"Zhis is remarkable!" He exclaimed, waving his hands around enthusiastically. Engineer walked in behind him, looking tired but satisfied.
"Ok, now tell me what's going on." Miss Pauling ordered.

"Th' Doc and I couldn't sleep last night, so we decided to get looking into these here 'upgrades' the Violet Medic planted in us all." Engineer said, sitting down with a sigh.

"Ah great. The nerds had a science party..."

"...Now they're gonna bore us with it."

"Is important, leetle Scouts." Heavy said, folding his arms sternly.

"It seems these here implants can do a whole load of stuff." Engineer said, accepting a cigarette from Spy. "Once powered up, what they do depends on what we tell them. It's just a question of using the right codes at the right time."

"The Violet Medic has zhis." Medic said, hobbling across to the table with a wince. He dramatically flicked a large roll of paper out across the table before sitting down.

"Have you still not healed your leg?" Miss Pauling asked tiredly. "Do you like pain or something?" Medic gave her a withering stare that he then transferred to Spy when the latter started snorting with smothered mirth.

"It seems you share my theory about the good docteur and his...proclivities, Madamoiselle." He said with a small smile.

"Zhis is more important zhan healing a minor injury." Medic replied with a self-important sniff. "May ve continue?"

"If y'all have a look at this diagram," Engineer explained, tapping at the paper with a gloved hand, "You can see that there is a list of numbers for each of us...except Miss Pauling o' course."

"I developed some X-rays of Engineer, and zhe metallic structures are present throughout his entire body!" Medic said enthusiastically. "I wish I knew how it was done...maybe using an altered parasite, or an engineered bacteria acting as a tracer. Syphilis, for instance, would..."

"Stop talkin' right now, Doc." Sniper said. "Just tell us what matters."

"We found this li'l unit in the Violet Medic's lab." Engineer got what looked like a small pocket calculator out of pouch. "It kinda looks like my work, but that don't make sense because the old Violet Engineer high-tailed it outta here, what? Three years ago?"

"I explained this, I thought." Spy said. "A clone took his place. The replacement Engineer was not thrilled about his new job, but it seems he was able to work successfully with our erstwhile Medic, even so."

"He was. They got on well." Miss Pauling confirmed. "You'd know that, Spy, if you hadn't betrayed us."

"A decision I still do not regret." Spy retorted.

"Huh, I dunno know how anybody could stand to work wi' that workaholic loony...eh, no offense, Doc." Demo commented.

"Now if you take a look here, y'all will see that some of these codes have this li'l symbol by them." Engineer explained hurriedly before Medic could start an argument. "We just plain can't make those
codes work. Seems they need an external source of power, but we just can't work out what that power'd be."

"I offered to be electrocuted to see if that would work, but Engineer wouldn't allow it." Medic added sadly.

"Some of this stuff, though, works right outta the box. Mind if I show 'em, Doc?"

"Go ahead." Medic said with a wicked grin.

Engineer reached for Soldier's chair and with a slight grunt of concentration, picked it up, Soldier and all. Soldier started to cackle.

"Good work private, Good work!" Soldier said, looking down at the astonished mercenaries. "We can now rearrange the furniture whenever we want. This is truly a victory for America!"

"There is also the communication system as you already know, and I can now run faster than the Scouts." Medic said.

"Whaat? That is total bullshit, man." Bobby said indignantly.

"There is no way an old dude like you could beat us." Rick stated.

"Ja? Why don't we try it?"

"Hold your horses there." Engineer said placatingly, still holding a giggling Soldier in his chair. "We can also upgrade you Scouts too so you can run even faster than before. We've got enough information here to make us all a bit stronger, heck, maybe even strong enough to have a chance against those robots."

"Chance or not we try to stop them." Heavy said. "I will not look away while people die."

"Agreed." Miss Pauling said. "I can monitor the news feeds and then we can travel to the site of the next robot attack. Have you guys got all your weapons back?"

"But by the time we get there, the battle will have already ended." Spy pointed out. "Their attacks are spread throughout the continent!"

"Yeah, that's a point." Miss Pauling said, rolling her eyes. "Wouldn't it be great if we had, oh a continent-wide network of teleporters or something?"

"She's got you there, mate." Sniper replied with a smug smile.

"I'll go and start searching for new robot attacks. Are you all ready to go?" She asked.

"I am always ready." Soldier said from his position near the ceiling.

"Huh. Suppose so." Sniper said with a shrug.

"Uhh hrrr!"

"I want to try these implants in the field." Medic agreed.

"I guess we gotta start somewhere. Sure wish we could get all the codes workin' though."

"We smash tiny baby robots."
"Hell yeah,"
"Right, bro."

"Got nothin' better to do." Demo mumbled in resignation.

"This is madness. This is certain death." Spy said.

"No, Spy, it isn't." Miss Pauling said with a charming smile. "Certain death would be not going, because that'd make me angry. You'd not like that."

"Merde." Spy muttered. "Whenever you find a suitable site for our mass suicide, then."

"I better go and..." She suddenly paused and sounded oddly sad. One hand clenched briefly. "Switch on the Administrator's panel and get working."

"We can help!" Rick said, leaping to his feet at the same time as Bobby.

"No...no, that's ok, Scout." Miss Pauling said, standing up and pulling her shoulders back proudly. She paused, and patted Bobby awkwardly on the shoulder. "You do your job, and I'll... do mine."

"The only thing we can do now is wait." Demo said. "Ah, bloody hell."

"What is that saying about war?" Spy commented, flicking ash from his cigarette. "'War is months of boredom punctuated by moments of extreme terror'?"

"Not true!" Soldier objected. "War is days of boredom, followed by hours of excitement, followed by seconds of getting shot, followed by months of agony."

"Followed by centuries of being dead." Spy added gloomily.

"Ah, come on guys, lighten up..." Rick said.

"...I mean, this is totally cool, isn't it?" Bobby continued, spreading his arms enthusiastically.

"Ten badass fighters saving the world..."

"...From a horde of evil robots." Rick agreed.

"If we do not fight, maybe world leaders drop bombs. So, we fight." Heavy said.

"You know why we're roped in tae do this, don't ye?" Demo said bitterly. "'Cos everyone else has a reason to live. We don't, so here we are. We're expendable bits o' junk."

"Now that's just pessimistic and you know it." Engineer objected. He tugged his glove off and flexed his metallic fingers pointedly. "We're the right folks in the right place. We'll do this."

"We are headed towards victory or death." Soldier said firmly.

"Are those the only two choices?" Spy asked sourly.

"You gone yeller, mate?" Sniper asked. "You scared?"

"Of course I am scared!" Spy snapped. "I am a sane individual with a keen sense of self-preservation and self-confident enough that I have no need to pretend otherwise."

"Spy is being leetle baby coward." Heavy said in disgust.
"It is possible we shall not survive." Medic admitted. "I am surprised I have lived this long, frankly. I remember..." He stopped and paused for thought. "It seems so long ago, when this all started, when Twenty-Nine-B died."

"It seems like only yesterday." Heavy said, looking down at the ground solemnly.

"A fateful day, indeed." Spy said with a sigh. "The day it all began."

The room fell into silence as the mercenaries waited for the signal from Miss Pauling. Occasionally, one of them would try to start a conversation, but it would peter out into nothing. Medic excused himself at one point and came back fully healed with no limp. The shadows moved across the room as the day wound on, tedious and yet tense.

Come lunch time, Heavy made a small mountain of sandwiches for them all, which they ate with varying levels of enthusiasm. Rick flicked on the TV and they sat and watched a daytime quiz show and called out the answers (Engineer got every single question right, Soldier none.). The tensions started to fade as the time wore on into the afternoon, and they started talk in quiet voices, as if they were at a funeral. Sniper, Engineer and Medic were just falling into a light nap when Miss Pauling's voice rang out over the speakers:

"They're attacking! They're attacking!"

"Where?" Soldier asked, getting to his feet and grabbing his rocket launcher.

"I've got a report of a blue tank at the Liam Ranch Coal Company, New Mexico." She reported. "It's not started unloading yet. That's owned by RED, you can teleport right into the site!"

"MOVE, MAGGOTS!" Soldier bellowed, but the other mercenaries were already grabbing their things and racing out of the room.

"'Bout time!" Bobby said excitedly, racing down the corridor to the teleporter room with Rick and Medic at his heels.

"The teleporter room is hidden and should stay safe." Miss Pauling's voice said. "Once you leave it, well, who knows?"

"Coo?"

"Nein, Galileo, you cannot come along!" Medic said as they burst into the concrete-walled teleporter room. The air was stuffy and airless and filled with the buzzing of machinery.

"The civilians have been evacuated, so you've got the place to yourself. Good luck guys." Miss Pauling said. "Remember: there's no respawn, so be careful. I'll be able to see how you do on the monitors."

"You can see us there?" Rick asked curiously.

"How much of the sites can you see?" Bobby said.

"...Like, could you see the Gullywash shower block?"

"Er...let's talk about that when you get back, ok?"

"Y'm ready?" Engineer asked, hefting his toolbox.

Heavy cracked his knuckles, hugged his minigun to his chest and strode confidently through the
teleporter. The others followed him, arriving in a small room with splintery wooden walls. Sunlight shone through cracks, creating stripes on the floor. They could hear a low-pitched hum from outside, like a metallic beehive.

Soldier nodded curtly, and he and Heavy led the way outside. They emerged out of a derelict office building into a wave of desert heat and dust.

Spy shielded his eyes against the sunlight and looked out towards a rocky outcrop about four hundred yards away. A metallic blue tank, as tall as a four story building, was parked there. As he watched, its hatch slowly opened and the light glittered off a horde of robots as they poured forth. There were mechanical clanks as they marched out in unison. He heard gasps and curses from around him as more and more of the metal men came out, drawing up in untidy lines ready for attack. An army. It was an entire army. And there were only ten of them.

"So this is it," Spy said quietly, "We are all going to die. Again."

In Chapter Thirty-Three: The team goes to war- and discovers more about how their new upgrades work.
The Quick and the Dead

Chapter Notes

Author’s note: Sorry I’m late. We had a family emergency of the broken computer variety. Remember, readers: never let your folks know you can fix computers. Only grief and suffering will follow.

Since this is coming to an end, I’ve been asked if I have any plans to write more. Well, a few. I’d like to write a few drabbles about the team and possibly an epilogue. I love the TF2 ‘verse, so I may have to come up with an entirely new story as well. We shall see. Artwork is at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Thirty-Three-The-Quick-and-the-Dead-497477164.

“Now that just ain’t right.” Engineer said angrily, looking at the clattering robot army. “That’s shoddy workmanship, right there. My granny could’ve build better!”

“It’s a boatload o’ shoddy workmanship. Armed to the teeth.” Demo pointed out.

Medic looked over the rattling ranks of the robots. The desert breeze briefly stank of exhaust fumes and oil as it blew into the group’s faces. He found himself looking over the group of mercenaries, and yes, his friends. They had been forced together by coincidence, mind-bending stress and horrible tragedy. They had all seen enough to force them to the very ends of the bell-curve of sanity and they had somehow endured when everyone else had fallen. Now they stood, shoulder to shoulder, and it was obvious they had no chance of surviving. Medic felt his face stretch into a grim smile. It had all been worth it. Every single moment. He felt more alive right now than he ever had.

“What are you ladies waiting for?” Soldier cried. “SCREAMING EAGLES!” He ran down the slope and then fired a rocket at his feet, soaring into the air and raining rockets down on the distant wall of robots.

Heavy roared a battle cry and charged forward after the Soldier, while the two Scouts gave a hollering whoop and sprinted ahead.

“Wait fer me!” Demo cried, running after the other fighters. Medic followed him, flicking his medigun on and training it on one mercenary and then the next. Spy cloaked and ran off to the left somewhere, while Sniper stayed behind, resting his rifle on a piece of planking and staring through the scope.

“Stay in contact now.” Engineer said, his voice suddenly coming from inside Medic’s head.

“There’s a place that looks like it’d make a good choke point, lettin’ you pick off the robots in small groups.” Sniper said. “Scouts, go left. No, you stupid wankers, left.”

“Look at me! I’m so fast! Dammit, this is awesome!” Bobby said excitedly, zooming away from the group.

“I see it.” Heavy said. “We stay together as group, make them bring fight to us.”

“Over there, there’s an ammo cache. I can set up a dispenser and sentry there.” Engineer replied.
Soldier suddenly landed with a thump in front of them and grinned.

“No heroics, Sol.” Demo said warningly. “There’s no respawn, remember?”

The wind blew another gust of oily air towards them, and the clanking and grinding noises got louder.

“Fuck, those things stink.” Rick muttered, putting shells into his sawn-off shotgun. A line of Scout robots appeared around the corner and raised their guns.

“Two-stroke engines. Means they can work at any angle without clogging the air filter, but they burn oil, so yep, they sure do stink. Here they come.” Engineer said, hitting his sentry with his wrench. “Good luck y’all.”

One the robot’s heads exploded into shrapnel. “Piece o’ piss!” Sniper said gleefully from his distant perch.

The robots started to fire, and then there was no more time for thought. Medic felt his old instincts taking over and he fell into his usual pattern of letting the other mercenaries take the damage and then using his medigun to heal them. It thrummed and vibrated under his hands as he chose target after target. There was a sudden explosion that knocked them back a few paces, and Demo guffawed.

“Take that, ye pesky wee metallic bawbags!” He yelled gleefully, firing another set of sticky grenades.

“Somethin’s happening at the tank, mates.” Sniper said into their ears. “They’re getting...oh bugger.”

“What can you see?” Spy asked from wherever he was hidden.

“A bomb. They’ve got a big bomb and they’re coming right for you.”

The dust cleared from Demo’s explosion, and they saw another mass of Scoutbots coming straight over the ruins of the first wave. Soldier snarled and fired a rocket right into the centre of them, scattering scrap metal across the landscape. One of the small robots leapt past its fallen comrades and fired directly at Pyro. He staggered back with a yelp of pain and then aimed his flamethrower and blasted it back with a gust of compressed air. As it flew through the air, Rick shot its arms off and it dropped to the ground and skidded to a halt, twitching and spraying black oil.

“Hey bro, you see what I see?” Rick asked.

“Woah, yeah, I see it.” Bobby replied excitedly, and the two Scouts suddenly raced right at the approaching horde. A Scout robot turned and shot at Rick, but he leapt inhumanly high and swerved out of the way.

“These upgrades are wicked awesome!” He shouted.

“Get outta there! Ye’re gonna die!” Demo screamed.

“No way, we got this...” Bobby replied, somersaulting and firing downwards at the robots beneath him.

Rick, meanwhile, sprinted along the ground, and suddenly jumped and skidded into the remains of a robot, grabbing something. “Got it!” There was a brief flash of golden light.

“Bro! You ok?”
“Holy shit.” Rick sounded unusually quiet.
Bobby leapt over and grabbed Rick, hauling him upright.
“Regroup, you insubordinate maggots!” Soldier barked.
“Vhat happened?” Medic asked impatiently.
“Yeah yeah, we’re comin’.” Bobby muttered.
“I feel weird.” Rick said. He looked up, and his eyes glowed golden. “I’m ok, though, I’m ok.”
“Bloody hell.” Demo said, setting off another round of explosives and making them all stagger.
“You charged up the implants!” Medic said excitedly. “Vhat did you get from that robot?”
“We thought we saw some money on the ground.” Bobby explained. “But it’s gone now.”
“You did. Those were Australian dollars.” Sniper said.
“Australian?” Engineer said, reaching for the upgrade panel in his belt pouch. “That explains it! Money from down under is laced with Australium. The robots run on it- and these here implants of ours must as well!” He punched some buttons and Rick shuddered, the light in his eyes fading.
“We kill more robots, we get more power!” Heavy said with a vicious smile.
“Odd, how everything unexplained always ends up being due to Australium in some way.” Spy mused. “How very...convenient.”
“Scouts, grab that money. That’s an order.” Soldier said. “You’re in charge of distributing it.”
“I upgraded your speed and agility a whole load more, Rick.” Engineer said, his voice raising in excitement. “You know, fellas, I think we may actually have a chance.”
“GIVE ‘EM HELL, BOYS!” Soldier yelled, and ran down to meet the next wave of robots, Heavy, Demo and Pyro on his heels.
The two Scouts cheered and raced ahead, Rick now moving so fast he was hard to track. He leapt so high it was more like flight than jumps, firing down at robots and then twisting out of the paths of the bullets. Bobby collected some more money with a whoop of triumph and started to drop it on people’s heads. Engineer’s hands flew over the console in his hands, punching in random codes at first, and then gaining more certainty as the money rained down on them all.
“Hey Doc, think fast.” A voice called from overhead. As Medic looked up, a wad of cash hit him between the eyes. For a brief moment, he had no control over his body as his limbs jerked and his vision flashed with golden light, and then as his sight returned, he felt new knowledge flood through him. He looked down at his medigun and frowned, flicking switches and setting dials according to the calculations sprinting through his mind. *Do not think of targets...think of parabolas...z=x^2+y^2...with suitable modifiers...*
“Soldiers incoming! Rockets!” Sniper called.
“Fall back to the sentry.” Engineer commanded. “Take cover- those rockets’ll tear you a superfluous new one.”
“Get behind me.” Medic said, his mind suddenly full of certainty. “All of you. Be ready to fire.”

“Doktor, no!” Heavy cried. “You will die!” The group ducked as the first of the Soldier robots fired over their heads. The missile screamed past and hit the rickety wooden building behind them, setting it on fire. There was the crackle of flame and smoke stung their eyes.

“You’re insane, man!” Demo shouted. “Stay back!”

Medic paced forward, ignoring the grabbing hands trying to pull him back. Perhaps they were right—perhaps he was insane. But if he was, he had been for a long time and he had never felt as certain of anything as he did right now.

“Fuck it, Doc, you’re gonna die!” Bobby called urgently from somewhere overhead.

The Soldier robots hefted their rocket launchers and fired, the muzzles of their guns flashing and crackling, dispensing deadly black dots that moved swiftly towards the group of humans. Rather than target a person, Medic moved the medigun in a curve and flicked the ubercharge switch. An arc of brilliant white light hung in the air and flickered before stabilising. The rockets hit the wall of light and exploded harmlessly, making the doctor do little more than stagger slightly under the force.

Medic heard himself starting to laugh manically, hooting and howling with mirth.

“FIRE, YOU SONS OF SINNERS! FIRE!” Soldier yelled, but his voice was drowned out by a volley of bullets, fire, rockets and grenades.

Heavy roared and sprayed the entire row of robots with bullets, while Pyro ran in and out of the shield, setting individual robots on fire and then retreating before they could retaliate. Spy suddenly appeared in the middle of the group of robots and threw a sapper down before cloaking again, making the nearest machines spit sparks and grind to a halt. Engineer fed his sentry bullets at a faster speed than the eye could follow, and Demo launched pipe bomb after pipe bomb to scatter randomly along the ground before exploding under the robots’ feet. There were metallic screeches and the air smelt of burning oil and rubber.

Medic’s shield fizzled and petered out. There was a moment of silence as the smoke cleared. The ground was littered with bits of metal and twitching robot remains. The huge bomb lay abandoned in the dirt, rocking slightly. Rick and Bobby zipped around, collecting as much money as they could before dropping it off on one of the team. The group looked at Medic in astonishment. He smiled and shrugged, feeling oddly embarrassed.

“It just seemed like a good idea.” He explained.

“Doktor is credit to team!” Heavy cried, picking up the surprised man, hugging him tightly and then kissing him.

“Ah... Sergei?” Medic said, squirming slightly. The Russian was his dearest friend, it was true, but this was... was... not as uncomfortable as it should be. Still, he made an effort to at least look like he was trying to escape the larger man’s warm arms.

“Dude, you’re fagging up the place.” Rick said complained.

“I believe it is a Russian tradition.” Spy commented from wherever he was hiding. “We kiss in France, as well. Not all countries are terrified of showing affection.”

Heavy slowly dropped Medic back to his feet.

“Da, Russian.” He said with a nod and a slightly sheepish grin.
“More robots coming.” Sniper suddenly said. “Heavy bots this time, I think.”

“Can you do that again, Doc?” Engineer asked.

“I, ah, don’t really think this is the time or place...”

“No, dammit, I mean the shield.”

“Oh! Ja... I need to build up another charge first.” He explained, stepping backwards into his usual position at the back of the group. He could hear the marching of more metallic feet now—a low thumping into the dry desert earth. He hefted his medigun in readiness and turned to face the approaching legion, pointing his medigun at Heavy.

“Doc! Behind you!” Sniper’s voice rang out.

Medic turned around just as a surviving Scout robot raised its shotgun and fired at point-blank range. He gasped and raised his hands instinctively. There was a loud bang, a flash of purple, and a cry of agony.

“Doktor!”

“Medic!”

“I’m... I’m... alright?” Medic let out the breath he had been holding, clenching his hands in puzzlement. He was unharmed—how was he unharmed? There was a gurgling groan, and Spy uncloaked and collapsed in front of him, his lower chest and abdomen reduced to bloody ruin by the shotgun blast. His gloved hands pawed at the mortal wound, becoming slick and wet as he sank to the ground. Bobby snarled and beat the errant robot with his bat until it stopped moving.

“I knew it.” The French man croaked, blood pouring from his mouth. “I knew, one day...”

“Show pony!” Sniper cried in the team’s ears, his voice cracking with emotion. “You bloody idiot! Damn you!”

“Srrrh!” Pyro tried to run forward, but Heavy held him back firmly.

Medic turned his medigun on the man, but his blood was rapidly soaking into the dust around him. Too rapidly. All he could do was slow down the inevitable.

“What did you do that for, Dummkopf?” Medic demanded, kneeling in the blood next to the dying man and trying to hold his wound closed with slippery hands.

“So many have died. What is one more life, after all this?” Spy asked, gasping for each breath. He smiled sadly, his lips turning a bluish-purple. “My life for yours. Perhaps...I have at last, earned my redemption. Remember, Docteur... someone, somewhere, has to give a damn.”

“Just lie still while I heal you.” Medic said, pulling the man’s jacket tightly shut over the dreadful mess of his abdomen. “I can fix zhis.”

“You always were... a terrible liar.” The man gave a brief snorting laugh, then breathed out in a final long sigh.

“Spy?”

There was no reply, and Spy’s head fell to one side as his body went still, a slight smile still tweaking his lips.
In Chapter Thirty-Four: Was Spy's sacrifice in vain? And will anybody except Sniper actually care?
Author's Note: Well, Sunday's chapter certainly got some powerful responses! I was quite pleased at some of the angrier reviews I got. That might sound odd, but I was glad people had got attached to the Violet Spy as a character. I wanted him to start off as a creepy villain, and slowly become more and more sympathetic. Seems I managed it!

Only five more chapters to go after this. This does not please me. Ah well, I hope you like the ending anyway. We're getting to the climax of the story now— the scene I imagined that made me realise I just *had* to write this entire story!

Anyway, I hope you all enjoy this chapter. It has beer in it, so surely it must be good, right?

Artwork is here: [http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Thirty-Four-Someone-Somewhere-498230286](http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Thirty-Four-Someone-Somewhere-498230286)

The group stood around the dead Violet Spy for a moment in stunned silence.

"Robots incoming." Sniper said quietly, his voice little more than a defeated whisper in their ears.

"There'll be time for crying later, ladies." Soldier said. "Now let's celebrate the Frenchman's life with some good old fashioned robot murder. FORWARD!"

The group swung forward as the deafening crackle of rapid gunfire started, but Medic could not look away from the dead man.

The insufferable, murderous, two-faced, smug bastard of a Spy.

The man who had made his life hell for years.

The cold-blooded assassin.

The betrayer.

The man he had tolerated, but never liked.

The man who had saved his life several times over.

The man who had now taken the shot meant for him.

He was glad he was dead. Wasn't he?

He shook himself. It did not matter. They could all die today, after all. Probably would.

Gottverdammt.

Spy seemed to glow with a purple aura, and Medic frowned, leaning forward and blinking. No...it was not his eyes playing tricks. His corpse was surrounded by a soft glow. He knelt down and
prodded the aura, but his fingers passed right through it. *What is that?* He wondered, trying to pummel the information out of his brain from his all-nighter with Engineer studying the Violet Medic's notes. There had been something about visual cues, and Engineer had commented how a particular bit of circuitry looked just like...

"Mein Gott." Medic breathed out slowly. With shaking hands, he flicked the medigun's beam onto the dead Spy and turned it up to its highest gas dosage.

"Th' bloody hell are ye doing, Doc?" Demo cried, twisting around to look at the German while still firing grenades. He suddenly dodged sideways as a bullet whizzed past. "You know that won't work! Man's gone mad wi' grief. Heal the living, Medic! Poor bugger's beyond your help now."

Medic concentrated, watching the man's flesh knit back together until the ragged remains of his suit showed nothing but pale unscarred skin underneath. Spy was whole again, but it didn't matter: his heart was not beating and he did not breathe. He was still dead - just a prettier corpse than before.

Medic sighed in resignation and was about to turn back to his living comrades when the body suddenly twisted and convulsed, the muscles going stiff and forcing air into Spy's abused lungs. The masked man's eyes opened in terror and confusion, and he curled up on his side and coughed, spitting out lumps of clotted blood and several unintelligible curses.

"Qu'est-ce que c'était?" He muttered weakly, staggering to his feet before being pulled back down by Medic so he didn't get shot by passing bullets.

"Fuck me dead!" Sniper cried in astonishment.

"Maybe some other time." Spy mumbled dazedly, wheezing and clutching his head. "Mon dieu, I did not enjoy that."

Bobby ran back to the group with his hands full of money and went pale with shock when he saw the masked man standing there. "Spy's alive!"

"Mrrr frrrrrrnn!" Pyro said, grabbing the skinny man and hugging him tightly.

"How the fuck did you do that, Doc?" Rick demanded.

"Keep firing!" Soldier commanded, clutching one arm that ran with blood. Medic pushed past him firmly and activated his shield as the Heavy robots got closer.

"I did say some of those circuits around our hearts looked a bit like a lil' respawn machine." Engineer commented thoughtfully.

"You were right." Medic replied, bracing his arms against the force of the bullets hitting the shield. "Zhey just needed zhe medigun to power zhem."

"Every robot dies, we get stronger." Heavy said, his mouth opening in a wide, vicious grin. "We come back from dead. We stop bullets. RUN, COWARDS! WE ARE STRONGER! YOU ARE ALL DEAD!" He laughed loudly and whirled his minigun in a wide arc, shredding the approaching robots.

"We are unstoppable! Forward you sons of sinners!" Soldier cried triumphantly. "Nothing can stop us now!"

"Oh, you just had to say that, didn't you?" Spy grumbled, carefully but gently peeling Pyro off and then cloaking again.
With a roar, the group moved forward, a relentless force beating back the mechanical hordes. Rockets exploded, fire spat, metal fragments flew and Medic found his consciousness narrowing down to who to heal next, where to go and what to avoid. His arms started to ache and he could feel moisture trickling down his chest and back as the sun got higher, but still he fought on. At one point, he heard a strangled cry from Sniper and raced back to resurrect him, before returning to the front. Both Scouts died at different moments and he brought them back, too. His feet, urged on by the power of Australium, sped over the ground and his thoughts raced in his head, weighing the severity of the team's injuries, calculating rocket trajectories, predicting tactics...his eyes stung with sweat and Soldier's battle cries got hoarser as time wore on. The ground clinked with metal fragments every time he lifted a foot and the air became thick with black smoke and exhaust gas. His eyes stung and teared up at the acrid fumes as he pointed his medigun at Heavy, Demo, Soldier, Engineer, Spy, Demo again, Heavy, Soldier...

"Doc?"

...Back to Heavy...

"Doc! You can stop now." A hand shook his shoulder. "Stop!"

He blinked and shook his head, looking around at the battle ground. The mercenaries' clothes were ripped and bloody, and they were swaying with exhaustion but everyone had survived. The ground was littered with a trail of scorched and blackened metal that led back to the empty tank. A robotic hand twitched briefly in the dirt and Heavy stamped on it. Medic rubbed his eyes slowly, his head still ringing with the sounds of battle.

"Bugger me." Sniper said in an awed voice. "We won."

"You all deserve a medal." Soldier croaked before sitting down hurriedly.

"Hot damn." Engineer said, wiping his forehead and getting a melted chocolate bar out of his pocket. It drooped pathetically in his hands, but he shrugged and ate it anyway.

"I want a mountain of cigarettes, a glass of water and a beautiful woman." Spy said, leaning against the scorched remains of a building and closing his eyes. "If that is not possible, any two of the above would be acceptable."

"I'm so knackered that if I had those right now, mate, I'd probably smoke the woman, drink the cigarettes and shag the glass of water." Sniper said, staggering over to Spy's side and putting an arm around his thin shoulders.

"One of those may even work." Spy said with the ghost of a smile on his tired face. "Although I am not sure how pleasurable it would be, especially if the water was iced."

"Time to leave." Demo said with a yawn and a stretch. "Let's see what the wee lassie makes of this."

They trudged back to the teleporter and transported one at a time back to the base. Medic realised he was beginning to see double and his head spun. Dehydration, heatstroke, or exhaustion? Maybe all three? One of the Scouts- he couldn't tell which one- was limping, but now that he had stopped fighting, Medic could barely lift the medigun. It would have to wait.

"Oh my God, that was amazing!" Miss Pauling said, running to meet them and completely abandoning her usual poise. "You...you...well, you didn't all die. I saw it all on the monitors. Bobby, are you ok?"

"Twisted ankle." Bobby replied, taking a step and wincing. "Shit."
Miss Pauling quickly put an arm around him to help him walk, which Bobby greeted with enthusiastic complaints of how it hurt and how much he totally needed her help to walk. Spy made a brief snorting sound of disgust and Bobby quickly turned and gave him a smug grin which vanished before Miss Pauling could notice it.

"I guess you guys would like some beers?" She asked hesitantly. "That's normal man stuff, right? I put some in the mini-fridge in the rec room."

"Ach, yer a life saver!" Demo said gratefully, speeding up to something approaching a sprint and heading off towards the rec room. The group followed just as eagerly.

"You are all dehydrated and should drink some water first." Medic objected.

"Bugger that." Sniper said. "I need a beer and some food."

"Yeah, come on, get that stick outta yer arse and drink wi' us!" Demo said, slapping Medic on the back.

"Stick? What stick?" Medic asked suspiciously before Heavy put his large hand on the German's other shoulder.

"Tonight we celebrate victory!" Heavy exclaimed squeezing Medic's shoulder fondly. "Gerhardt is great hero!"

"Ah, vell, I..."

"Yes Privates, you outdid yourselves today and we have earned some R&R. Not too much, though. Partying leads to weakness."

"A party?" Miss Pauling asked eagerly. "I've heard of those, but I've never seen one. How does it work, exactly?"

"Woah, you've never partied?"

"Like, never?"

"Wow, babe, have we got something to teach you!" Bobby said, grinning.

"First, lose the clipboard, ok?" Rick commanded.

"Well...alright." Miss Pauling said. "But if you ever call me 'Babe' again, I'll break your fingers, ok?"

"Uhh...right, right."

"I would like to hear the news before we descend into decadent binging and revelry." Spy said as they staggered into the rec room.

"Yer serious, laddie?" Demo asked in astonishment.

"We could do with knowin' if the blokes have noticed our day's work." Sniper commented.

"Precisely." Spy said as Miss Pauling carefully put Bobby down on the sofa and sat down next to him. Rick immediately claimed the seat on her other side. The lanky Frenchman strolled over and switched the wireless on, frowning as he searched through the static and squeals for a news station.

"...incredible sequence of events at the Liam Ranch Coal Company Mine, New Mexico. A team of
ten men appeared on the site of the robot invasion and destroyed an estimated two hundred robots..."

"Huh. Thought there were a lot o' them." Sniper said.

"...most remarkable is that according to eye witness accounts, the ten men seem to perform some superhuman stunts, such as leaping impossibly high or dodging incoming missiles. Some claim that they even saw a man brought back from death..."

"Hm. I never want to experience that again." Spy muttered.

"Shall I leave you dead next time?" Medic asked, flicking the top off a bottle of beer and gulping it down, before collapsing onto a second couch next to Heavy.

"...However, the greatest controversy surrounds a short clip recorded by a passing local:

'REUN COWARDS! WE ARE STRONGER! YOU ARE ALL DEAD!""

"Hnn. Is true." Heavy shrugged and drank his entire bottle in one long gulp.

"...As you can clearly hear, this fighter has a strong Russian accent. The international community has come to no consensus over what this could possibly mean. No official statement has been made by the Soviet Troika, but there are those who wonder if this is a sign that the USSR has also suffered attacks and kept them secret..."

"They haven't." Miss Pauling said, primly removing the top of a beer and giving it a suspicious glare.

"...Many are wondering: if the Soviets are not to blame, who is behind these attacks? President Nixon is flying to Australia to join a 'pool party' with the Australian President in the hope of gaining some insight to the attacks. Many people are asking: What if Australia is behind the attacks, and, if so, can we defend ourselves against the most technologically advanced nation in the world with anything other than a pre-emptive nuclear strike?"

"Thanks Tom. And now, let's go over to 'Cooking with Sammi' where I believe Samantha is preparing food for a truly world-ending feast. Tell us more, Samantha."

"Thank you Terry." An artificially chirpy voice replied. "With the current world situation, I thought that today I'd looking at clever and tasty ways to use all those little odds and ends that we might have left in our pantry in the next few days. Let's start with this delicious little appetiser that works well for informal barbecues but also as a starter for a dinner party: fried rat kebabs with a moss and barbed wire dressing.

First, you need to catch your rat. Try to find one without too many weeping sores or other signs of radiation poisoning..."

Spy reached over and flicked the off switch in disgust, then rubbed his forehead.

"So..." He drawled, lighting a cigarette and taking a long, hard drag. "Have we improved the situation, or made it worse?"

"Da." Heavy said, tossing his empty bottle to one side and grabbing a second one.

"I don't know what to suggest, guys." Miss Pauling said, carefully putting her beer down. "I think you bought us a few more days, anyway. But if Australia decides to break out the big guns, well..."

They sat in silence for a few minutes.
"We keep fighting." Soldier said sternly. "We kick those robot's asses so far up their spines they'll be shitting circuitry!"

"Da. We fight enemy we can see." Heavy agreed.

"Hmm, I am surprised Engineer did not object to the technical limitations of your metaphor, Soldier."
Spy said, looking around in puzzlement. "Come to that, where is he? Please tell me we did not leave him behind at the coal mine!"

"Don't get your panties in a knot, I'm here." The door opened and Engineer entered. Medic would admit he was not the best reader of body language, but the shorter man seemed a little furtive and ill-at-ease. "Just had to take care of... some stuff."

"Problem?" Medic asked.

"Just the usual, Doc." Engineer said with a disarming smile. "I know some of you guys are a bit squeamish about needles, so I just went to sort out my insulin."

"And that is all?" Spy asked suspiciously. Medic noticed Heavy looking at Engineer with a slight frown.

"Sure." He said. "Hey, is there a beer for me 'round here?" He strode over to the crate and grabbed a bottle, quickly flicking the cap off with his gloved hand.

"So...you actually drink this stuff?" Miss Pauling asked, holding her bottle at arm's length. "It smells like mouldy bread."

"I prefer me scrumpy, but this is fine after a day's hard fightin'." Demo said.

"Ah, that reminds me of something I was going to ask you, Tavish." Spy said, quietly waving away a proffered bottle with an elegant hand.

"Aye?"

"Why do you drink this 'Scrumpy', and not a Scottish beverage such as whiskey? If my memory serves me correctly, scrumpy is brewed in southern England."

Demo snorted in laughter and then wiped his nose and mouth. "Price, laddie! Scrumpy is no' the best, but it gets ye drunk, good an' quick. It's no' bad for somethin' a pesky Sassenach brewed. I couldnae find any of ma clone's booze on this site though, the poor wee dead bastard."

"Wait, wait...your clone?" Miss Pauling asked. "That's the wrong way round."

"Ah, eh...nobody told ye, lassie? I'm the Violet Demo. Me an' clone 001/n did this wee switch, a few years back."

"Which means that Tavish beat me to the title of 'First Violet to resign' by quite a long margin." Spy said sulkily. "To answer your question, Demo, your erstwhile copy stopped drinking a few years ago. He only drank coffee and orange juice, occasionally not out of the same cup."

"Whaaaat?" Demo said, his nose wrinkling in disgust. "The pathetic fannybawbag!"

"I won't ask what that means, because I suspect I do not want to know." Spy replied.

"So...Demo went AWOL years ago?" Miss Pauling asked in astonishment. "Why didn't any of you tell me this?"
"It's a crazy, confusing world out there, Miss Pauling. A world wracked by war, magic hats and talking animals." Soldier said.

"Srrrrrrrr hrrr rrhhhh. Hhrrr grrr hr srrrrlyyy mrrrrhrrk hrrrrn!" Pyro agreed, pointing to his head.

"Can't help but think we've done quite a lot to make it confusin'." Sniper said.

"Most of it was done to us." Medic said bitterly.

"Hey, let's stop all this philosophical shit and get wasted." Bobby said, waving his bottle around.

"Aye!" Demo said, raising his bottle and draining it.

"Right, so how does this partying thing work, then?" Miss Pauling asked seriously. "What do I have to do? Is there a checklist I can study?"

"Damn, Miss Pauling, you got some gaps in your education, you know that?" Rick said.

"Let us guide you." Bobby said with a wide grin.

"We are the party masters!" Rick agreed enthusiastically.

"I got my eye on you, Scouts." Engineer said warningly. "No funny business."

"Hey, the bro and I..." Bobby said.

"We're gentlemen." Rick finished.

"Ok, Miss Pauling, first you got to drink that beer." Bobby ordered.

Miss Pauling looked at the bottle suspiciously and took a gulp and then pulled a face. "You do this for fun?"

POP!

Spy opened a magnum of champagne with one of his best smug smiles. As the two Scouts gave him matching black glares, he passed Miss Pauling a champagne flute. "Perhaps this is better suited to a lady's tastes."

The drinks were passed around, and the group slowly became more relaxed. Conversations existed of earnest questions by Miss Pauling, and a few scattered, lazy responses. Sniper left at one point and returned with some strips of beef jerky and a large bag of potato crisps. After a mere two beers, Medic found the room was starting to spin, and he reasoned it must be exhaustion rather than intoxication. Ah, but wait- if we have been kept dead for two years, we will all have lost any built-up alcohol intolerance! I must make sure everyone knows.

"Zhere is a problem." He said, feeling his eyes flutter. "Problem?"

"Ve are not used to zhis any more." He said. At some point, he'd ended up leaning against Heavy's shoulder, but this seemed entirely right and comfortable. "Ve have no alcohol tolerance."

"Aye." Demo said, closing his eye happily. "Really hits the spot after two year's kip, eh Doc?"
"Mn." Medic replied, as his own personal world fizzled out for the night.

In Chapter Thirty-Five: Why Spy should never get drunk, and Engineer has a secret...

Translations:

*Qu'est-ce que c'était? - What was that?*
Author's Note: As I predicted, the last chapter was liked, a lot. I am starting to wonder if I have given you all Stockholm Syndrome, yet, with all these highs and lows. Maybe? I'm glad you all stuck with me though. The response has been incredible. I assumed this story would be less popular than the prequel, but boy, was I wrong. I guess you all like sick jokes, creepy humour and death? Nice. Remind me to cross the street if I ever see any of you walking towards me...

Enough of the insults, let's have some more story. Artwork is at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Thirty-Five-Redemption-498820044

He had leapt. It hadn't even been a conscious decision. One second, he was prowling around, cloaked, looking for suitable targets to sap, and the next thing he knew, he was leaping through the air and there was the sensation of a huge fist punching him in the guts. He had tried to land on his feet, but suddenly his legs felt weak and he had collapsed to the ground. Then the pain had started. First a dull throb that within seconds had built up to scorching trails of fire in his midriff. He was dying, due to some stupid, stupid heroic act. Why the hell had he done it?

He had thought 'Oh. So this is what dying feels like.' Yes, it had been painful, but what had caught him by surprise was the dizziness, disorientation and nausea. He had wanted to crawl away into a quiet corner and vomit, but there were people there and he had made some ridiculously selfless speech as everything faded into grey.

Then there was a flash of light, a sensation that he could only describe as feeling like being kicked in the soul, and...he had come back.

Spy shuddered and curled up on his bed, wondering if he would ever sleep again. He knew what it felt like to die. His chest and stomach still ached from the shotgun blast, although he realised that was almost certainly psychosomatic. The worse thing, though, was the odd creeping sense of shame.

The clones died and came back several times a day, and they got up and fought again. They were always far, far stronger than we realised. Stronger than us.

They could have beaten us at any time.

There was a single loud thump at his door. He uncurled and grabbed his mask, quickly smoothing it into place and flicked the bedside light on. The world spun slightly due to the expensive alcohol dancing through his veins.

"Entreé."

The figure that came in filled the doorway and had to duck to enter the bedroom. Spy's eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Heavy? And what can I do for you?"

The large man came in and sat down, staring silently at Spy for a moment. Spy cleared his throat.
"It is rather late to be visi..."

"You saved Doktor's life." Heavy said.

"So I did," Spy said. "I will admit it was a rather painful experience, and completely unplanned on my part."

"You should have died."

"Well, I am so sorry I disappointed you on that score." Spy replied irritably. "I shall try harder to die properly next time- oh wait, no I won't, because I am lying. It is a thing we Spies do, you understand."

"I do not want you to die." Heavy said. His large hands clenched and unclenched.

"You...don't?"

"You killed Gustav. But you risked life to save Gerhardt. You are changed."

"Aren't we all, mon ami." He said with a sigh. "Aren't we all."

"Da." Heavy suddenly got up and paced over to tower over the skinnier man. He held out one of those enormous hands of his.

Spy blinked, before extending his own, currently ungloved, hand. The Russian's hand clasped it and shook it, just once, before letting go.

"Friends?" He asked curiously.

"Nyet." Heavy said firmly. "But we are even."

Spy gave a short tight smile. "I can live with that." And as he said it, he realised that the thought of having one less enemy filled him with a curious, content feeling. When had he started caring about being liked? Mon dieu, I have changed, and it is all the fault of these damned clones.

Heavy turned to leave, but Spy looked at the large man, and found himself thinking of what Heavy had lost, and found himself calling him back. Heavy turned back, looking both suspicious and curious.

I cannot believe I am doing this...Perhaps it is the champagne...

"Heavy, let me ask you a question: have you ever been in love?"

Heavy flinched and then gave Spy a steely glare. "I not answer that."

"Do you know what the basis of love is?" Spy asked. "What it is, when all the reasoning and romance is peeled away? At its core?"

"No one knows that." He stated, turning to leave. "Spy is drunk. I am going now."

"Wait, humour me here. We French are a nation of romantics, oui?" Spy said. He found himself thinking of Rachel, and wondered if she had waited for him. She has. I know it. She has waited so many times before. I do not deserve her. "The basis of love, it is trust. Some say friendship, erotic fascination, or think it is some unknowable magical bond, but they are wrong. To dare to show one's absolute vulnerabilities, to share all those dirty secrets, without shame, and to know that one will be accepted no matter what- that is the wellspring from which love flows."
Heavy turned back, and nodded quickly with a thoughtful frown. "Is possible."

"Gerhardt trusts you." Spy said, leaning forward intently, "Consider it."

Heavy paused thoughtfully, his face slowly contorting into a frown, and for a moment, Spy thought he was going to get punched.

"I realise this is none of my business," Spy said hurriedly, "But, putting ethical issues aside, I believe it is in all our best interests. You make Medic a lot more...manageable."

The man shrugged, still glaring at Spy. "I am going now." He repeated, turning away from him and clasping the door handle.

Spy gave a light snort of mirth. "Goodnight, Mr Cherny."

There was a pause as the large man turned the handle. "Call me Sergei." He said, and then left.

Spy blinked and then lay back, removing his mask. He ran a hand through his thinning hair out of habit, and then slowly smiled. Odd- the world was being torn to pieces and he had seen so many deaths, including those of his close Violet comrades, but he suddenly felt truly happy for the first time in many, many years. He felt...clean.

He closed his eyes contentedly. Definitely the champagne....he thought, as he drifted off into a deep, satisfying sleep.

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"Welcome to the ABC Evening News on the 17th of February. This is Howard K. Smith reporting on the latest events from around the world.

"The mystery of the robot attacks deepens today with the voice recording of another member of the mysterious group of fighters who have gained the ironic nickname of 'The Justice League', after their successful destruction of eleven consecutive robot attacks throughout mainland USA.

"This newest recording cannot be broadcast due to its extreme language, but is of a man shouting obscenities at the robots in a strong Australian accent. Further talks have been held with the USA, USSR and Australia, but there is still no sign of any world power admitting its involvement in these attacks. Analysts have theorised that the People's Republic of China could be behind these attacks, but Chairman Mao-Tse-Tung has categorically stated that his country has no interest beyond continuing its Great Leap Forward, although he admires the work the robots have done to 'destroy the capitalist centres of industry in the US'. Chairman Mao has stated that the robots are clearly doing the bidding of a communist sympathiser.

"This defamatory statement has added to the general panic happening throughout America, with many stockpiling essential supplies. A food riot broke out today in Cheyenne, Wyoming, after a local supermarket ran out of tinned food, and there have been mile-long queues for gas throughout the country.

"President Nixon is once again asking people to remain calm and assures that pre-emptive strikes will not even be considered unless the government is absolutely certain of the identity of the aggressors behind these apparently random and brutal attacks on US businesses."

"Robot alert!" Miss Pauling’s voice rang out. "Here we go again, guys."

Medic woke with a snort and wondered why his face felt warm and sticky. He blinked and realised he had fallen asleep face down in a plate of spaghetti. His hand groped for the bottle of Benzedrine
he kept close at hand, and he quickly gulped down two of the pills.

"...'Fess." He groaned, levering himself upright and peeling pasta and mince off his face.

"Dag nab it." Engineer muttered, taking off his goggles and rubbing his eyes. "We can't keep doing this." He motioned to Medic to pass over the pills.

"Get moving, ladies! War waits for no man. Or woman." Soldier barked, his helmet jammed on his head lopsided so that one bloodshot blue eye pecked out from underneath it. He rubbed his stubbled chin with a harsh scraping noise.

"Ahh fuuuuck." One of the Scouts called from outside the mess hall.

Miss Pauling burst into the room, dressed in combat fatigues and straightening her headset. She pulled on her backpack containing the upgrade control panel and untwisted a few straps until it was comfortable. The all-male team had objected to a woman in a war zone, but Miss Pauling had given them one of her looks and pointed out that if they could patch her into their internal communication system, she could handle the Australium upgrade system for them, freeing them up to fight more robots. Soldier had put his foot down and stated that she would not be coming along to any battle he was involved in, but she had eloquently argued that yes, she would, by shooting him in said foot. Oddly enough, the only team members who had no problems with her coming along were the two Scouts, who pointed out that this was the 70's, women had rights n'shit, and that 'Damn, she looks so hot in that outfit.'

How many fights had they been in? Medic could not truly remember now. It had all turned into a blur of pain, exhaustion and oil fumes. They took Temezepam to sleep and Benzedrine to wake up again, and ate whatever they could, whenever they could. He vaguely wondered when he had last had a wash or cleaned his teeth. Not that it mattered- they probably all stank to high heaven by now. He watched the group assemble, grey-skinned and stubble-faced, running on fumes and desperation. We are running out of time.

The only exception was Heavy, who had refused any stimulants and looked about as winded as a man who had been for a healthy short run. While the rest of them fought with hissed curses or grim silence now, he still roared with laughter when his minigun minced robots, cheered when they won and carried injured team members to the doctor for him to heal or revive them. The man was remarkable, and Medic found himself lost in admiration of his sheer courage and determination.

We can't keep going like this. Sooner or later, we will fall.

As the group charged out of the teleport into the latest battle, Medic found himself remembering when he thought he had been dying of cancer. This was a similar sensation to then- a feeling of the clock ticking down to an uncertain but unpleasant future. This constant fighting was a brutal regimen, and they were all living on borrowed time. Bruises were not healing as quickly, infected cuts were becoming more common and even though they were victorious, time after time, they were slipping. He had had to treat Pyro for an asthma attack, Bobby had had a terrible blinding migraine, and Engineer had collapsed with low blood sugar twice. Still, they kept fighting.

If not us, then who?

They all knew it. They were not the heroes, they were not even the good guys, but there was no one else left. Medic dully watched the robots explode and healed mercenary after mercenary after mercenary as fire spat and smoke roiled around him. All they could hope for was that their hidden opponent would run out of robots before they ran out of strength. It seemed unlikely, though: the latest battles had had more...
robots, not fewer, and some of them had been towering leviathans that took huge amounts of damage before they fell. Medic realised he barely felt the passage of time any more. He just mechanically listened for shouts and cries of pain, healing and reviving, saving shields for the larger waves and running away from rockets as the sun rose and set, and oil and blood splashed onto the rocky ground.

This is turning me into a robot too.

Today's battle ended with a fight against a giant Soldier robot which fired enormous glowing rockets that blasted huge craters where they landed. Medic gritted his teeth, and shielded the group as they used their inhuman aim and enhanced vision to take it down with a final metallic shriek.

After that first victory nearly two weeks ago, they had celebrated and partied. After the second one, they had quietly drank and enjoyed a large dinner. The third and the fourth left them tired, but satisfied that they had done a good job. After that, the victories stopped feeling quite so euphoric. It was just a punishing routine that was pounding them into dust.

"I think that's the last of them." Miss Pauling reported in their ears, her voice dull with exhaustion. "Let's go home."

"Wish we could find out which wankers are behind these attacks." Sniper growled, trudging over to join the battered group.

"There has to be a way." Spy said, lighting a cigarette with shaking fingers. Once he had lit his own, he passed them around to all the mercenaries except for the Scouts.

Soldier suddenly fell to the floor, his helmet rolling off a short distance.

"Sol!" Demo cried, kneeling down. He slapped his face and the burly man twitched and started to snore. "Huh. Wish I could do that."

"Exposure to nerve agents can cause long-term narcolepsy." Medic explained, stretching his shoulders until they creaked audibly "Or he might just be sleep-deprived."

"Sol, wake up, I'm not gonnae carry ya. SOL!"

"Hrrr wrrrh.\hrrrdhrrrsss hsss." Pyro said with a shrug. He picked up the larger man and slung him over his shoulder without any apparent difficulty.

""I am not ashamed to admit I cannot continue like this much longer." Spy said, blowing smoke out of his nostrils.

"Uh, fellas?" Engineer said diffidently. "Got somethin' I've been meanin' to tell y'all."

"We keep fighting until they are all dead." Heavy said. "There cannot be many robots left now."

"The number of attacks has gone down to one a day, though the individual attacks are now bigger." Miss Pauling said thoughtfully, walking over to them and putting her upgrade control back into her backpack. "So...maybe we're winning?"

"Hrrr crrrm hrrdhrrrsss hsss." Pyro said, shaking his head sadly.

"Y'all, I...kind of have a confession to make." Engineer said.

The group turned and looked at the short Texan.
"Ja?" Medic asked.

"Well see, I reckon I've figured out where all these robots are comin' from."

"Vhat! Vhen did you do zhis?"

"I got the last data I needed today." Engineer took off his hardhat and swallowed. "Thought it'd be a mighty fine idea if we took the fight to them for once. Thing is though, the way I found out, well...y'all gonna be pissed. Real pissed."

"What did you do?" Miss Pauling asked suspiciously.

"Think it might be better if I show you." Engineer said. "When we get back to the base, I got somethin' for y'all to see in my workshop."

In Chapter Thirty-Six: Engineer knows he's gone too far this time, but who will be the angriest? Soldier, Miss Pauling...or Medic?
Plagiarism and Hypocrisy

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: I hope you enjoyed last weeks cliffhanger. It seems people generally like cliffhangers in the same way they like a really nasty dose of 'flu, and yet I keep writing them because I like to watch you all suffer. Hopefully, the payoff will be worth it. Be warned, there is mathematics in this chapter. You can pretend it's magic if that makes you feel more comfortable, though.

I am hoping you guys will be kicking yourself for not guessing what Engineer's been up to. That's what I hope will happen! Let me know if I've managed it.

Artwork is at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Thirty-Six-Plagiarism-and-Hypocrisy-499581721, with an extra: a portrait of Miss Pauling in battle fatigues, being her usual badass self. Hope you like it!

Engineer had to admit he was nervous. It didn't happen to him very often- the ability to fix most problems that came his way had given him a relaxed attitude to the unexpected, but this time, he knew exactly what to expect: the mercenaries would most likely never speak to him again, especially Medic. And he'd deserve their scorn, every last bit of it.

Heavy had insisted they all take a shower ('Because you all stink like dead fish', in the Russian's own words) and then eat a full meal before Engineer was allowed to show them his private little scheme, and now they were all gathered outside his workshop, ready and waiting for his announcement that would no doubt make them his enemies for life.

No matter what, I know I did the right thing, even if they'll hate my guts for it.

"Right, so I got a confession to make." Engineer started without any more introduction. "When this all started, I knew I had to find out if whoever is sending the robots was usin' my work."

"The Violet Engineer's work." Spy pointed out. "The man whose hand does the deed carries the guilt."

"I know that!" Engineer snapped, before pausing and rubbing the back of his neck. "See, even if it's not me doing it, it's a man with my thoughts and my memories. So I found myself wondering: could I end up goin' down that road? I didn't like how that felt. I decided I had to take a closer look at these robots. I had to, you understand?"

"What," Miss Pauling said in a flat, threatening voice, "Have you got locked up in there?"

"A Soldierbot." Engineer admitted. "I captured it in our very first..."

"LET ME AT IT! I WILL KICK ITS ASS INTO THE NEXT MILLENNIUM!" Soldier shouted, shoving past Engineer. Heavy grabbed him and pulled him back.

"I get it first, I will crush it into tiny leetle robot pieces." He snarled.

"Save some fer me, I want to keep it slow." Demo added, balling his hand into a fist and punching
his palm meaningfully.

"I can't believe you, of all people, would do this! Don't you realise what a massive security breach this is? It could have transmitted data on us all! It could..."

"I want to see this thing! Bro, got your bat?"

"Sure have. Let's waste it! Who's with me?"

"Schweigen!" Medic suddenly barked, making everyone turn and look at him in surprise and puzzlement. He cleared his throat. "It means 'be quiet'. I trust Engineer's judgement on zhis. How have you contained zhe robot?"

"Well, Doc, you kinda gave me the idea." He confessed. "You know, when you...ah, dang nab it, best y'all come and see."

The group followed Engineer into his workshop and he took a deep breath and then whipped a tarpaulin off a small object on the large central bench. Blue light lit up the room. There were various gags, and finally, a strangled noise from Medic.

"Mein Gott." He said, hesitantly walking closer to the bench and rubbing his throat unconsciously. He suddenly gave a short, high-pitched laugh. "Vell, zhat brings back memories."

On the bench, attached to a car battery by a couple of crocodile clips, was the fully functional head of a Soldier robot. The head swivelled towards the group, its blue eyes glowing.

"I am a robot." It stated. "Beep."

"It ain't too bright." Engineer admitted. "I'm pretty darn sure the Violet Engineer didn't write its AI."

"Dude, you're sick." Rick said, his eyes wide.

"It's cool though." Bobby admitted.

"I'd sack you for this, Engineer," Miss Pauling stated, "Except I'm not even sure I'm employing you any more."

"I wouldn't do that, Soldier." Engineer warned as the man reached over to prod the robot head. "He bites. Believe it, it's a good thing my fingers can be replaced easy. Tell the fellas what your name is."

"Soldierbot, 8825d-121, rank, General."

"General?" Heavy asked.

"I think it's makin' that up." Engineer said with a shrug and a slight smile. "Sometimes it's an Admiral, or a Major-General. It once decided it was a Field-Marshal."

"I presume you have a reason for showing us this abomination beyond a childish wish to shock us?" Spy asked.

"See, this is what I figured: these things had to be communicating with their home base somehow, right? Their AI just ain't up to coordinating the fights. So I had a look inside Soldierbot's head and found out what frequencies he was transmitting."

"This thing has been contacting its superiors from within this base?" Miss Pauling asked in astonishment. "How stupid are you?"
"Hold on there, Miss." Engineer said, holding his hands up placatingly. "It's shielded in here, no radio signals can get in or out. He can't get a hold of his home base. All I wanted was the frequencies. From then on, finding the home base was just a case of simple mathematics. What do y'all know about triangulation?"

Miss Pauling blinked, and then her eyes went wide. "Ohh...that's brilliant."

"Hrrr!" Pyro said, jumping and clapping his hands excitedly.

"Very clever. Why didn't you ask me to help, zthough? Zhis would have been fun." Medic said.

"I wasn't really doing it for fun." Engineer explained, feeling his spine prickle with relief. It seemed Medic would not be trying to remove his liver today. *I should have known the Doc wouldn't react like a normal person would. Does he even understand the difference between 'horrific' and 'interesting'?*

"Think I've missed some of the conversation here." Sniper complained.

"Yeah, what's this shit about triangles?" Bobby asked.

"Honestly, did none of you do high-school math?" Miss Pauling said impatiently. "Look, it's simple: If you want to find out where a radio signal is coming from, you go to three different places..."

"Or more." Medic pointed out helpfully. "To allow for errors."

"Or more, yes, and see what direction the signal comes from. Then you draw lines on a map and they all meet where the signal starts."

"I have done it a few times to find targets." Spy said, tapping ash from his cigarette. Engineer glared at him and shoved an ashtray in his direction. "I presume you have found our enemy then?"

"I think so, yep." He rolled out a map. "Here, smack dab in the middle of the Bahamas." Engineer jabbed the curly paper meaningfully.

"The Bahamas...the Bahamas...why've I heard that on the news recently? I remember thinking it was odd at the time..." Miss Pauling asked herself, tapping her lips with a finger. "...Oh, yes, that was it, but it's only sort of related. The Gray Gravel Company is based there. They're the people that are trying to take over Mann Co. now that its stock values have dropped through the floor. I bet Saxton Hale is flipping his desk right now."

Engineer felt ice trickle down his neck, and he stared at the young woman in sudden, horrible realisation. He heard Spy and Sniper both gasp as well.

"Oh..." She said thoughtfully. "You think..."

"The civilian casualties, the destruction, the world panic- was it all engineered just to take over a business?" Spy said, the visible parts of his face going grey with horror. "That is...a special kind of evil."

"Some will do anything to make their own life better." Heavy said, folding his arms grimly. "No matter who suffers."

"I don't understand." Medic said. "Why would anyone want to run a business? Isn't that rather boring?"
"They get fast cars and loose women..." Rick said.

"...That's gotta make up for the boring bits." Bobby added.

"Not my idea of a good time." Sniper said. "Too noisy. Too many people."

"WE HAVE TO STOP THIS." Soldier shouted, slamming his fist hard into the work bench. The robot head leapt and fell on its side. "This traitor is twisting the American Dream to suit his own ends."

"Oh really?" Spy said sarcastically. "I would have thought this is precisely what the so-called 'American Dream' aspires to be: profit and business, no matter the cost to others. Selfishness above all else."

"Come and say that to my face, you cheese-eating surrender monkey." Soldier growled, grabbing Spy's lapels and bringing him to within spitting distance.

"Sleep lightly tonight, Soldier." Spy said quietly, glaring unwaveringly at the bigger man.

"Pack it in, yer pair o' big girl's blouses!" Demo said, pulling Soldier off the skinny Frenchman. "Ye can all kill each other once we've dealt with this Gray Gravel place, right?"

"Beep-boop, maggots." The Soldierbot head suddenly interjected. Engineer absent-mindedly picked it up and placed it upright again.

"Yeah, it's great to talk about going out and fightin' this company, all guns blazing," Sniper pointed out, "But we've fought hundreds of robots over the last few days. How many do y'think they've got buzzin' about in that base? Thousands? Tens of thousands?"

"Hrrrd nrhr hnrhrhr." Pyro muttered.

"What did leettle Pyro say?" Heavy asked.

"He said 'We'd need an army.' He's right." Miss Pauling said gloomily. "I don't... think we can stop this. All we can do is keep on fighting and wear him down. We have to keep trying, guys."

The group filed out of the workshop and back towards the rec room. They sat down in a dour silence.

"Sorry y'all." Engineer said sadly. "I did my best."

"You did well." Heavy assured him. "Now we all rest for tomorrow's fighting, da?"

"Why?" Spy suddenly snapped. "What is the point? No matter how many robots we destroy, Gray Gravel will make more. Gentlemen, we have achieved nothing!"

"Way to be a downer, dude." Bobby said reproachfully.

"An army." Medic said thoughtfully, apparently talking to himself. He tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. "An army..."

"Gerhardt?"

The German looked around from person to person. He frowned briefly, and then suddenly smiled.

"Er, Doc? Somethin' the matter?"
"Es ist so offensichtlich!" The doctor started to laugh, looking around at the mercenaries. "Can't you see? Ve already have everyzhing ve need to defeat these robots! Everyzhing!" He saw the baffled expressions of his companions and laughed even louder, his voice rising into an hysterical giggle until Heavy grabbed him and shook his shoulders roughly. He blinked and looked at them all with a maddened grin.

"See what?" Demo asked, his fingers clutching at the arms of the chair warily.

"I think it is time for Doktor to sleep." Heavy said firmly.

"Nein, nein, listen..." Medic gave a final gasping giggle, gulped and then excitedly explained his idea, waving shaking hands in the air enthusiastically. Engineer felt his mouth drop open. Medic's idea was obvious, elegant, and utterly, utterly horrible.

"No!" Demo cried, leaping to his feet first, following by Sniper and Spy.

"How can even conceive of such an idea?" Spy demanded. "It is unspeakable!"

"No way, mate." Sniper said.

"Stoopid, stoopid!" Heavy protested. "Is very bad idea."

"Hrr srrrn!" Pyro said, shaking in disgust.

"I will not do this silly thing, for it is a thing and it is silly." Soldier stated.

"Doc, you are fucking sick." Rick said flatly.

"What he said." Bobby nodded.

"We can't do that." Engineer stated. "We just...can't. What kind of people would we be?"

"I like it." Miss Pauling said with a shrug.

"What?" Sniper asked.

"Yes, it sounds bad, but world domination by a ruthless and murderous super-corporation would be a lot worse, for a lot more people." Miss Pauling pointed out reasonably. "Remember what I said about tragedies and statistics?"

"I remember, and it convinces me no more now than it did then." Spy said.

"Has anyone got any better ideas?" Miss Pauling asked sharply. "No? Fine, we'll just sit by and let the world end, ok? Good luck living with yourselves after that, knowing you could have stopped it."

"Ve have to do zhis." Medic leant back, folding his arms and looking sternly at the group. "You know it as vell as I do."

The mercenaries looked at each other and fidgeted for a few moments.

"Chyort." Heavy sighed. "Gerhardt is right. Bad thing will stop worse thing. Is only choice we have."

"I'll go along with it," Engineer said, suddenly clenching his jaw in determination, "But on one condition: if we find the Violet Engineer, I get to deal with him. Y'all got that?"
"I had thought," Spy said softly, almost to himself, "That my days of morally questionable behaviour were over. Project Pelargonia filled me with fire- I had joined a mission I could believe in. Then, I realised I was on the wrong side, so I turned cloak. Black and white, good and evil; it had all become simple. Now I realise I was fooling myself, all along. The world is...messy."

"Bloody poofter." Sniper said, patting the Frenchman affectionately on the shoulder. Spy glared at him.

"So, any objections?" Miss Pauling asked briskly. "No? Good. Let's all get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a busy day."

**In Chapter Thirty-Seven: Medic puts his plan into action and we find out what Gray's plans are.**

*Translations:*

*Es ist so offensichtlich! - It's so obvious!*
Author's Note: Well, here we are, at the beginning of the final story's climax. Only two more chapters after this! I feel kind of sorry. It's been enormous fun throughout! I shall have to think of something new to write. Hmm...

Anyway, enjoy, and congrats to those who guessed correctly. I didn't outsmart you. Grrr.

Artwork is at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Thirty-Seven-Your-Days-are-Numbered-500172734

The next few days started quiet, but as time went on and Medic's plan was put into action, the corridors of TF industries got louder and busier, filling with bustle and noise. Heavy walked through it all, feeling somewhat at a loss. Miss Pauling strode past at one point, waving her clipboard and chattering to Medic who also had his own clipboard and seemed to be enjoying himself thoroughly.

Engineer spent his time pushing cartfuls of weird equipment around the place, but Heavy found he had nothing much to do except get in the way of the productive people. He got into the habit of making platefuls of sandwiches and leaving them in the mess hall fridge for whenever the busy people needed a bite. It was about all he could do to help.

*If this plan does not work, we will all die.*

Heavy did not fear death. He never had. There were worst things than dying, and fear made fools of men. Lose or win, everything would end in the next battle, no matter what. He had no idea what would come after. He loved fighting the robots- feeling the power to kill flood his mind and senses was exhilarating, but it could not last forever. It was obvious the other mercenaries were close to being completely worn out.

He walked past the rec room and noticed Spy and Sniper sitting there quietly. One or other of them would sometimes make a comment, and the other would nod or shake their head, but Heavy could see that what they were really doing was making the most of what might be the last time they had a chance to enjoy each other's company.

The other mercenaries not involved in planning were doing similar things: the two Scouts were burning off nervous energy by running laps around the base, while Demo, Pyro and Soldier were playing 'will it explode?' with a wood fire and some damp dynamite they had found in one of the base's many storage rooms.

Gerhardt bumped into him on his way past to somewhere, and muttered an apology before rushing off again. Heavy stared after him for a moment, and then shrugged and went to his room. He heard a distant explosion and a shout of triumph and he snorted, smiling briefly.

He padded in and sat down on his large bed. It creaked comfortably under his weight, and he grabbed a volume of Russian poetry from the bookcase and settled down to read.
'Your heart will be reduced
From fear and regret.
And you'll have strengths enough
To answer them again:
"From all that was my life
I never will abstain!"
And you'll have strengths enough,
Having recalled this rake,
To all that you have loved
To cry again: "Come back!"

He put the book down and stared at the ceiling for a moment, before grabbing the leather-bound journal filled with messy writing that always sat on his bedside table.

"August 1st 1967, Cold Front
Memo: Remember to darn socks.

Mikhail is far better at coping with this than I am. He just takes it in his stride. He told me I think too much. How can I not think? He might as well say I should not breathe! I don't know what it means or how I am supposed to act. There is no set protocol for this situation, and it is not one I ever thought I would be in again. These are just the confused impulses of youth! Surely I left all that behind years ago?

I am too old for this.
It has to stop. I will tell him tomorrow.
Damn you, Misha."

"Coo?"

"Did Twenty-Nine-B say you could read zhat bit?" An amused voice suddenly interrupted. "It looks personal to me."

Heavy jumped guiltily and slammed the journal shut, looking up at the man leaning against his doorframe with Galileo on his shoulder. Gerhardt looked tired, but was smiling.

"I don't zhink I have ever seen your startle reflex before. Interesting." Without being invited, Medic walked into the room, shutting the door behind him. He sat down backwards on the desk chair and folded his arms along the top of it, resting his chin on his arms and staring at Heavy thoughtfully.

"How is plan going?" Heavy asked.

"Oh, ve are ready. Zhe machinery is very efficient. Engineer is just finishing building teleports." He said.
"So tomorrow, we go."

"Ja." Medic said. His fingers twitched and fidgeted, drumming along the wood of the chair for a moment. "Tomorrow, it all happens. For better or worse."

"Da." Heavy agreed. "If worse happens, know you have been great friend to me, Gerhardt."

"Not as good a friend to you as Twenty-Nine B vas." He replied with a slightly sad smile. "I read his journal too. I thought it was maybe time I told you I knew about... that, since it seems you were not intending to ever tell me."

Heavy blinked and opened his mouth silently before closing it again. For once in his life, he felt utterly flummoxed and had no idea how to reply. "When did you read it?!" He finally demanded.

"Ve shared a tent back before ve attacked Sawmill, ja? I sneaked a look, more than once. I have not really had a chance to tell you since then- it has been so busy." He explained. "Also, you talk in your sleep."

"What did I say?" He asked, feeling a rising surge of guilt though his gut.

"I don't know, I don't speak Russian." Medic replied airily.

"Bastard." Heavy replied, starting to smile. "You are churning me up."

"Winding you up." Medic corrected. He sighed and looked around the room, briefly melancholy. "When we first met, I poisoned you. I dragged you out of your life at Teufort. I made you work with Spy and I am always boring you to death with science talk. I don't know why you put up with me, Sergei."

"Because..."

Because you need me.

Because you never, ever give up.

Because your passion burns so brightly.

Because you never let fear stop you.

Because you always see things through to the bitter end.

Because you are no coward.

He knew, though, he'd never be able to explain that in English, so he settled for a simpler version.

"Because is easy to listen to you talk and I am lazy."

Medic laughed, a genuine warm laugh of humour for once. It was a pleasant sound, and Heavy wished he had heard it more often. "Ve have been through a lot, you and I, ja?"

"Da. So many things. Some good things, many, many bad things." Heavy agreed, not entirely sure where this conversation was going.

"And yet, in all that time, my dear friend, you never asked me if I wanted... to try chilli vodka." Gerhardt said.
Heavy just stared in shock for a moment before he felt his face stretch into a smile he could not even come close to controlling. He reached under his bed and produced a dusty bottle. "It is nasty drink. It hurts mouth a lot." He handed it over.

"I like it already." Gerhardt replied with a grin.

"Gerhardt," Heavy said, watching the man carefully examine the bottle before unscrewing the lid, "I have question."

"Ja?"

"When I slept for two years, I had dream, good dream. What did you dream of?"

Medic paused thoughtfully for a moment, and then got up and sat down on the bed next to Sergei. Their eyes met.

Medic raised the bottle to his lips with a smile.

"Gesundheit."

Gray Gravel Company, the Bahamas, 19th February 1971

Gray Mann looked out over his control centre with a satisfied smile. It had been astonishingly easy, even with those idiots destroying his robots on many of their missions. They were a puzzle- he knew he had destroyed the Violet team and all the clones at the bases, but obviously a small group had escaped. He could see why- they were deadly fighters and worked so well as a team it was beautiful to watch.

He walked over to the window, arms folded behind his back and looked out over the sparkling sea. It amused him to think of that ragged little group of mercenaries, no doubt thinking they had thwarted him time and again and wrecked his plans. If anything, though, they were helping, and he was slightly annoyed that they had been so oddly quiet the last three or four days. They kept his robot attacks in the news, which caused more world panic and drove stock prices lower and lower. He had already bought controlling shares in RED and BLU after quietly killing his idiot brothers, and although the destruction of TF Industries was unfortunate, he could still mop up the remnants of its subsidiary companies. Then he'd withdraw the robots, blow up this base, claim a generous chunk of insurance and walk away, rich, powerful and ruling a good 98% of the world.

How had so few people noticed the shift in power over the last few years? Guns and bombs, armies and fighter planes, countries and even the Superpowers- they no longer mattered. Those mercenaries, with their tactical prowess and fighting skills, were a dying breed, soon to be extinct- and the poor fools did not even realise it!

True power lay in numbers and paper, not brute force. Businesses ruled the world now, and soon, he would rule the businesses. All of them. Monopoly laws would be a thing of the past. Governments would beg him to give them the weapons they felt they needed (but didn't- he would not allow an unprofitable third World War to happen), and to give their citizens jobs. He would treat people well, of course- he was not a monster. He would be the benevolent dictator, making sure everyone had enough for their needs. Of course, it just so happened that a happy society would consume, and every time they spent the salaries he paid them to buy items he made, a little bit of the money would stay with him. Acquiring riches had nothing to do with hoarding money- that was the mistake his stupid brothers had made. To become rich, truly, obscenely rich, you had to be the one who
controlled the flow of money to other people. He could then use that money to grab all the
Australium in the world, not just the pitiful amounts he had at the moment, and he would live
forever. He would be a god.

And nobody would even bother to stop him.

A flash of light caught his eye out of the window, and he saw two battered-looking grey trucks drive
up and park just off the road, near the main bridge that linked his island HQ to its larger neighbour.
He had exceptionally good eyesight, and even without binoculars, he could make out the eleven
people getting out of the two vehicles. He smiled thinly as they spread out in a protective circle
around the smallest member, who placed a piece of machinery down and started fiddling with it.
Gray frowned and leant forward. The device started spinning, and projected a flat white disc of light.
A teleporter. Why is he even bothering with that?

The Engineer had not finished, though. He moved a short distance away and started building again.
Another teleporter, and another. A whole row of them.

What is going on?

He pressed a button on his desk. "Sections 6 and 7, go and deal with those intruders."

"All hail the maker!" The speaker crackled in reply.

"Yes, yes, all hail me indeed."

He returned to watch as the group stood back from the row of teleporters, eyes narrowed
suspiciously.

There was another flash of light as one of the teleporters activated. Then the next...and the
next...figures stepped off the machinery one after the other and were greeted by those waiting. Gray
cursed and reached for his binoculars. With shaking hands, he raised them to his eyes and peered
down at the growing army.

"Oh...bugger."

A group of Scouts ran on the spot and checked their pulses. An army of Soldiers barked orders to
each other, helmets wobbling. A legion of Demos raised bottles in salute. Medics, Spies, Snipers,
Pyros, Engineers, Heavies...

A sea of clones. So many he couldn't even begin to count.

The binoculars dropped to the floor and smashed as Gray dashed across the room and mashed the
button with his fist.

"Activate all Sections! All of them! Get those clones! Kill them!"

"All hail the maker!"

"SHUT THE FUCK UP AND JUST GO!" He screeched, running back to switch on all the robot
control panels and slamming buttons left and right.

A warm tropical breeze drifted over the clusters of identical people as they sorted themselves out into
groups. Each full team of clones had a different coloured armband so they could stay together as a
group. There was a lot of quiet chatter and muttering, but most just waited tensely.
"It will be different to before," Medic had explained, "Zhey will be copies of us, as ve are now- and ve vill not alter zheir memories. Zhey vill know who zhey are, and vhy zhey are here. Zhis means that if ve all agree to zhis, so vill zhey, for zhey vill be us. Zhey vill not rebel like ve did, because zhere is nozhing for zhem to rebel against. Zhey vill have free vill and zhere vill be no secrets. I...hope."

The final clone- the yellow Pyro- walked through and nodded. Engineer nodded briskly, adjusted his black armband and turned to his copies.

"Ok, y'all, here we go." He said, looking at his clones. He shuddered slightly as the sea of identical faces looked back at him. "This is a mighty strange situation to be finding ourselves in, don't I know it. Y'all know the drill: keep those dispensers up and runnin' and those sentries firin'. If you have to choose which machine to keep going, make it the dispenser because that keeps everyone trucking. Ready?"

Next to him, Spy idly lit a cigarette and prepared to give his own speech.

"Well, here we are in a situation I never thought I would see repeated." Spy said to his group in resignation. "I like it no more than you do and...where are your armbands?" He placed a gloved hand over his face. "You removed them. Of course, Yes, I know I removed mine as well, but that is different!"

"Right maggots, listen up and listen good." Soldier barked over the mass of helmets. "You give your best fight today and that's an order. Sun Tzu said 'Invincibility lies in the defence; the possibility of victory in the attack.', so anyone found defending today will be court marshalled! I want to see none of that 'trying to stay alive' nonsense. Get out there and KILL EVERYTHING THAT MOVES. Except us, and the other clones. They can live..." Soldier motioned his group closer and continued in a whisper. "...for now."

"Ok, jerkwads, listen up." Bobby said, swaggering back and forth in front of his group. "Without us, this whole thing falls apart, got it?"

"They think we're just here to grab the money..."

"... but that's a load of shit."

"Yeah, you get the money, that's prio, but you can fuck those robots up too." Bobby said.

"And if any of you lays one of your filthy fingers on Miss Pauling, we'll come and get you." Rick finished with a snarl.

"Hrrr hrr arrrrr." Pyro said, looking over his masked group. He launched into a long speech, full of arm waves and dramatic poses. The Pyros looked on in bafflement and shrugged uncomprehendingly at the muffled speech, eventually spreading their hands and shaking their heads to indicate that they couldn't understand a word. Pyro sagged in disappointment, stood thoughtfully for a moment, and then grabbed one of the flares from his sash. He lit it, popped it into his flare gun and shot it into the air with a loud bang and a rain of rainbow coloured sparks. The Pyros cheered their leader and clapped excitedly.

"If you think I'm givin' a speech to you bunch of fruit-shop owners, think again." Sniper grumbled, glaring at the cluster of lanky Australians watching him. "Just go and shoot something."

Demo took a large swig from his scrumpy bottle and belched impressively. He looked over the other Demos with a huge, sickly smile. "I love you guys." The one-eyed men cheered and tried to perform a massive group hug that quickly turned into a drunken rugby scrum.
"Wow, ok. Well here we are. Miss Pauling said, looking over her slightly baffled-looking clones. "You know I'm not used to making speeches. Look after your groups, keep those upgrades going and stay low. No need for us to get shot when there are a load of guys to use as bullet-fodder, right?"

She suddenly leaned in closely. "And if any one of you flirts with Bobby or Rick, I'll bury your body in quicklime. Choose one of the other men if you want, but those two are mine."

"Zhese dummkopfs vill be doing zheir best to die horribly and rapidly." Medic said, walking back and forth in front of the neat rows of identical doctors. "Don't let zhem do zhat. If you see a Medic fall, drop everyzhing and revive him, since ve are zhe most important vones here. Ve shall need to charge our shields and use zhem straight avay, for zhe advance across zhe bridge vill be under concentrated fire. Oh, and good luck, all of you."

There was a rumble of noise from the Gray Gravel Headquarters, and a silvery mass of robots poured out of the front gates. There were so many it looked more like a sparkling stream of water than the wave of mechanised death it truly was. Heavy looked at the approaching horde and then turned back to his army of clones, hefting Sasha with a vicious grin. He gave what he would afterwards consider to be the best battle speech ever:

"CHAAAAARRRRRRRGE!"

In Chapter Thirty-Eight: The final battle, clones versus robots, has started, and the prize is: the world. Gray, though, has one final dirty trick up his sleeve...
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Well, here we are, at my favourite chapter, and the scene I thought of that made me think 'I totally have to write a sequel!'. It's the grand climax of the entire story. I'm really not sure how trips to New Orleans, drug-addicted Spies, and cyborg kneecaps got involved, but it...sort of happened.

The artwork for this chapter was the hardest of the lot to do, but I was really pleased with it. If you've not looked at any of my chapter illustrations, please please look at this one! It's at http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Eight-Zzzap-500954869. I nearly broke my computer making it!

The horde of robots and the horde of humans both poured onto the bridge, the space in between them filling with explosions and lethal projectiles. The original group of rebels, with their distinctive black armbands, formed the tip of the spear that forced its way across the bridge, and shields from a dozen Medics made certain that rockets and bullets simply bounced harmlessly off the clone army. Any robots that tried to get within melee range either got melted into slag by the Pyros, or shorted out and fried as they hit the Medics' shields, dropping to be crushed underfoot or kicked into the sea. Cheering and yelling to each other, the Scouts leapt through the air, dodging missiles and throwing money to each other and the other mercenaries below, while the Engineers set up sentries to form a curtain of covering fire and secure the ground as the force moved forward. At the back, Miss Pauling’s clones rapidly punched upgrade after upgrade into their portable terminals, occasionally taking a neat step to the left or right to avoid a stray bullet.

Violet Sniper watched through his scope, picking out suitable targets in the glittering mass. He knew that if he got it just right, something magical could happen. He aimed at a Scout robot, and fired. Its head exploded into scything hot fragments of metal that sliced through a dozen robots near it. Sniper chuckled quietly to himself before looking for another target. A blue glow made him look further back in the column of approaching machines.

"Medicbots and Soldierbots incoming." He said warningly. "Nasty."

"I will deal with them." Spy said confidently, from wherever he was at present. "Watch and learn." A group of the Medic robots slumped over and started sparkling with static.

"Nay, wait ya two-eyed moron, I've..." Demo shouted. There was a loud bang and the group of Medic and Soldier robots exploded into fragments and there was a cry of pain from Spy. Sniper sucked in his breath as he saw a tiny purple dot hurtle through the sky, arms and legs flailing wildly until it was neatly caught by Heavy.

"Ah, my Russian friend," Spy said breathlessly, "So sorry to drop in unannounced. Now, what was it I wished to say? Ah yes, I remember- MEDIC!"

"Bloody show off." Sniper muttered.

"Guys, shit's about to get real." Rick warned.
"Fucking huge robots, incoming!" Bobby added.

"Yeah, I see them." Sniper commented. "We've got giant Heavies, Soldiers and Pyros coming through, and at the back...ah shit. Giant Medics."

"Concentrate fire on one Medic at a time, men." Soldier ordered. "Take it down, and get the next. We might lose ground here, but we can and will take it back!"

"Hey guys, gimme a moment..." Rick said, before grabbing a jar of white fluid out of his backpack and hurling it at one of the towering Medic robots. Sparks crackled from its joints, and it made a creaking noise that sounded like disgust.

"Get that one first." Bobby commanded. Rick leapt past and they highfived in midair before shooting off in opposite directions.

"What was that stuff?" Demo asked. "No, wait, I dinnae want to know."

The army of clones pounced on the hapless robot, raining bullets and fire down upon it. It flailed helplessly for a moment before its arms dropped off and it finally fell to pieces on the spot. The air stank of ozone and scorched milk.

"Good, now the next one." Spy said.

"My turn!" Sniper said, winding a long arm back and throwing his Jarate in a long arc that splattered neatly against another giant Medic.

"Curse you, Bushman!" Spy snarled. "I was standing right next to that! You owe me a new suit. Again."

Gray Mann knew that numbers ruled the world, and the numbers now told him he was going to lose. He was not outnumbered, but he was outgunned- those mercenaries would just not die! He fingers flew over his control board up in the penthouse of the tower building as he frantically calculated how long he had before the clone army would get through the gates and enter the building. Twenty minutes, at most? At least he had his helicopter up above and ready to go. The safety checks would take ten minutes or so, if he skipped the less important ones.

What a mess. What a godawful waste.

Even more annoyingly, once those clones got into the building, they'd have access to all his technology. The robots could be replaced, but the information used to construct them was irreplaceable. If they got their grubby little hands on the blueprints, his plans would be ruined rather than just set back a little.

He frowned and looked over the control panels, deep in thought, before looking at one particular corner of the computer banks and starting to smile. Well, he had intended to blow this place up for the insurance anyway, hadn't he?

He started flicking switches.

No time like the present. Let us say twenty minutes...

No need to rush. He wanted them all in the building before he blew it sky-high, after all. Best to let them think they had won... He set the timer and the little digital numbers started to flick down.
He looked at the figures with a quick smile. A glowing red digital countdown. Perfect. He loved the James Bond films- although it always disappointed him when the villains lost. They'd always been the good guys of the story, to Gray Mann. They were sensible businessmen (mostly), not chisel-jawed womanizers like the so-called 'hero'.

This time, the heroes would lose, even if they weren't womanizers, as far as Gray knew.

"Doktor! Stay back!" Heavy cried.

"I am fully charged!" Medic walked forward with a cackle, projecting a shield. The giant Pyro robot swung round and its flamethrower roared straight through the shield and the doctor cried out in agony.

Heavy roared in fury and whirled around to face the Pyro. He released a catch on Sasha's motor and let the gun spin freely, spitting out bullets so fast they knocked the giant robot backwards until its flames were too far away to do more than gently warm the mercenaries.

"Es tut so weh..." Medic groaned, crawling on blackened hands that cracked and oozed. "Was soll ich jetzt sagen? Ah, ja... M... Medic?"

A Medic wearing an orange armband leapt over a green Soldier and ran towards the dying man. He looked at him and tutted, shaking his head. "You forgot zhat zhe shield doesn't stop fire, didn't you?"

"...Fick dich..." He gasped as the orange Medic flicked his medigun on and his skin sealed and turned a healthy pink again. He sat up and ran his hands over his face. "Ugh."

"No need to zhank me." Orange Medic said pointedly.

"I von't." Medic replied easily.

"Arschgiege." The other Medic ran back to his own group.

"Dummkopf."

"Stupid! Leetle man should stay away from Pyros!" Heavy said.

"Ja, I know, I just forgot." Medic mumbled, hefting his medigun and zapping a passing Soldier who rocket-jumped overhead with his feet on fire.

The Pyro robot's head suddenly exploded in a shower of sparks and it keeled over, smashing into a giant Medic robot and toppling it over at the same time.
Gray Mann leapt into the seat of the helicopter, cracked his knuckles and checked the fuel levels. Good, he had a full tank. He flicked a couple of switches and then turned the ignition key. The helicopter roared into life around him, and the oil light lit up. Gray Mann rolled his eyes and snarled in annoyance. Ah well, he had plenty of oil down below. Drums of it, in fact.

He ripped off his headphones and walked off the helipad and back into the building. As he passed his office, he just peeked in to take a look at how the fight was going. He saw the last giant Medic robot fall on the monitor and smiled nastily. *Right on time.*

"That's the last Giant Medic down!" Sniper crowed. "Get the rest of those wankers and we're home free!"

"Prepare to storm the building!" Soldier cried triumphantly. "We're winning. VICTORY IS OURS, MEN!"

A giant Soldier exploded into fragments. A sheet of metal hurtled through the air and slammed into Bobby, killing him instantly. He dropped to the floor in a tangled mess of crooked limbs.

Medic grumbled impatiently, and hurried over to revive him, and then the army rushed forward towards the remaining robots. He could feel his heart pounding with exhilaration and a rising hope.

Could they really have won? Could everything have gone right for once?

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Gray Mann quickly filled up an oil can and raced back upstairs to the penthouse level. As he sprinted across the tiled floor, he caught his foot on something metallic and tumbled to the floor, the oil can falling and spilling its contents. He hissed, grabbing his ankle and sat up to look at what he had tripped over. There was a broken Spybot on the floor, its joints smoking. He frowned in puzzlement and crawled over have a look at it, but was interrupted by a metallic voice behind him.

"Hey Chucklenuts, remember me?"

"You?!!" He leapt up and glared at the intruder, reaching in his pocket as he turned. "I took you apart years ago."

"See, this is why you suck at this," Scoutbot paced towards him, a shotgun in his metallic hand. His purple eyes shone with fury. "Engie told you, right back at the beginning: robots can't be killed. And guess what? All those fuckin' medicsbots you just activated on site, you programmed them to fix any broken robot they found. Any robot. Engie would never have made that mistake, but guess what? You shot him, dumbass."

Gray slipped his hand slowly around the handle of his pistol. Scoutbot suddenly swung up his gun and shot, turning Gray's right knee into a mess of blood and bone. The man screamed and dropped to the floor, and Scoutbot leant down and quickly disarmed him.

"You...idiot machine..." He said through clenched teeth, grabbing his ruined knee.

"Nah, this right here? This is what you always got wrong. I had a lot of time to think while I was in bits, and here's what I realised: Engie was right, y'know? When he built me, it was different to those clones, 'cos even though I was made to fight, he gave me the choice. He was a good guy, and good guys don't have to force people, or robots, or clones or, or... whatever the fuck else... to do stuff their way- they'll know it's right, so they'll do what they're asked to do. They know it's for the best."

"What do you know about anything?" Gray hissed. "You're just a machine. A tool."

"Screw that." Scoutbot replied easily. "Now see, losers like you, nobody wants to do stuff their way, so they force people, not ask. And then what happens? Sooner or later, someone fucks their shit up. And brother, I am here to fuck your shit up." There was a clatter and another Spybot appeared in the doorway. It reached for a gun, but Scoutbot leapt across and poked it with his finger.

There was a buzzing noise and the robot dropped and shuddered, smoking curling from its joints as it gave a final creak.

"What..." Gray croaked.

"That thing? Yeah, that was a little present from Hardhat. He didn't trust you after you fuckin' lied about torturing and killing Sniper, so he gave me this extra gadget, right here in this hand. It was kinda his insurance plan, y'know? Shame you were too dumb to spot it when you took me apart, but as I warned ya then, Engie was a genius." Scoutbot held us his right hand and it crackled with lilac sparks. "Zap! Deep fried robot!"

"So, what are your plans now, little machine?" Mann sneered, taking off his jacket and using it to tie a tourniquet around his thigh. "Hand me over to the authorities? I can buy my way out of that."
"Huh? Nah. I just wanted you to know you sucked before I killed ya." Scoutbot spun and shot Gray in the forehead. "HEY DUDE, YOU SUCK!" Scoutbot cackled as the body slumped to the floor, and then he heard the background beeping noise he had ignored thus far. He padded over to the control panel and looked at the flickering numbers curiously.

...3:11

3:10

3:09...

"Huh. That looks bad." He said thoughtfully. He drummed his metal fingers on the computer panel with a tic-tic-tic noise. "Shit. Like I know how to defuse bombs. Isn't it the green wire you cut? I'm sure it's the green wire." He ran over and looked out of the window at the battle below. There was just a sea of scrap metal now. The clones had won, and they were inside the building, probably celebrating their victory and mopping up the few remaining robots. No doubt there'd be an Engineer clone there somewhere who could stop this thing, but by the time he got here and Scoutbot had managed to explain that he was on their side, they'd all already be sitting around on clouds playing harps.

Did robots even go to heaven?

...2:55

2:54

2:53...

Wasn't he supposed to wait for the last second? Isn't that the way these things always happened?

"Ah, fuck it." He said, and placed his right hand flat on the control panel. He concentrated, eyes dimming briefly as he summoned more power into the circuitry embedded in his fingers. "Zzzzap!"

...2:52

2:51...

In The Final Chapter: Has Scoutbot saved the day? And how will the humans react to this unexpected help?

Translations:

*Es tut so weh - It hurts so much*

*Was soll ich jetzt sagen? - What do I say now?*

*Fick dich - Fuck you*

*Arschgeige - Arse-fiddle (German has the most wonderful curse words!)*
In Paradisum

Chapter Notes

I can't believe it. We're finally here. The last chapter of the entire story. It feels like some massive saga is over, even though it's only novel length actually. Thank you so much for your support throughout. The response has been unexpected, overwhelming, and very heartwarming. Any last comments or reviews will be gratefully accepted, and I hope you've enjoyed reading this story. Those of you who are reading it long after it has been completed, do please consider still reviewing it- I'm not intending to go anywhere.

So, what now? Frankly, I don't know. I think this story is told and does not need a sequel. However, it easily lends itself to drabbles, extra scenes and side-stories. There are various back stories I thought up that never got into the main story- such as why Pyro is fond of Spy, and what Medic was doing in England during WWII.

Some people have expressed an interest in writing related stories, artwork or music. Be my guest! Please let me know what you come up with, I'd be thrilled to see.

There is one final piece of art for you: http://sanctuscecidit.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-Thirty-Nine-In-Paradisum-501551402

So, for now, farewell, and thanks once again for reading.

---

...2:50

2:4a

%:?:8

?:?

+++ WARNING AT LINE 86~*4n +++

+++ E-RЯ0R: DUCK AND C0V3R +?+

"Another one's got a sentry up!" Rick warned as the army poured into the bottom floor of the tall building. "Those things are nasty. Shit!" He leapt out of the way as the enemy sentry swung his way and peppered the wall behind him with bullets.

"Not for long." Spy replied, as the sentry sparked and slumped. The Engineer robot that had built it fell backwards with an arrow in its head. "Dammit, bushman, that one was mine!"

"I could do this all day!" Sniper said gleefully.

Heavy's minigun spun up and was ready to spit out a wave of bullets just as the floor lurched underneath them and an enormous boom rang out over their heads. The mercenaries dived for the floor as the rumbles died away and were replaced with an eery wailing noise and a series of clattering thuds.
"Guys are you ok? Guys?" Miss Pauling asked from her control centre by the trucks.

"What was that?" Spy asked, looking up cautiously. The final standing robot creaked and fell over, the blue light in its eyes fading to black.

"The top of the building exploded!" Miss Pauling replied. "The top couple of floors look completely ruined."

"The robots... just deactivated." Engineer said in wonder, walking up and poking one cautiously with his wrench. "They've switched off, all of them."

"Let's hope they stay that way, aye?" Demo said, hefting his grenade launcher onto his shoulder.

"Black team, you better go and find out what happened. Everyone else, secure the island." Miss Pauling ordered.

"She's so bossy." Bobby grumbled, but the group did as she asked, anyway.

After strictly forbidding Soldier to rocket-jump, they sprinted the entire way up the emergency stairs to the ruined penthouse, coming out on the top floor. The ceiling was mostly gone and blue sky opened above them, cooling their sweaty faces with a pleasant sea breeze. Seagulls cried and soared overhead.

Inside, though, the penthouse floor was a black-streaked ruin. The husks of a large bank of computers running along one wall produced a thick black smoke and the occasional yellow spark. The air stank of ozone and burnt insulation.

"Well, I guess that was what controlled all the robots." Engineer said, still panting for breath after running up the stairs.

"And I suppose zhis vas who controlled zhem." Medic said, pointed to a charred corpse slumped next to the computers. "Look at zhis vound. Headshot."

"But who killed him?" Soldier asked, rubbing his chin. "It's a puzzle, wrapped in an enigma, covered with cream cheese and sprinkled with cilantro. And I hate cilantro."

"I...I...I did." A metallic voice croaked. "Don't... ddd... don't... shoot."

The mercenaries swung around towards the source of the voice, weapons at the ready. Engineer cautiously walked forward and flung a metal panel out of the way, revealing a broken robot. Its legs and one of its arms were smashed to pieces and its eyes flickered with a dim purple light. As Engineer got closer, he could see this one was built differently to the other Scout robots- the joints were smoother and better fitting and its jointed metal panelling of a superior brushed-metal finish.

"Who built you, son?" He asked suspiciously.

"Hardhat ddd... did." The robot replied, its head jerking uncontrollably. "The others...made by him." It lifted a twitching arm and pointed at the corpse, and then the lights in its eyes dimmed, and the arm dropped with a clatter.

"I'm gonna fix this thing." Engineer said with determination.

"I'm not sure that is wise." Spy said, using a handy sparking wire to light a cigarette.

"I need to know what it knows." Engineer replied stubbornly. "I reckon we all do."
"I second that." Miss Pauling said in their ears. "We can keep it under guard back at the base."

"When we get back, I am going to sleep for a week." Medic declared.

"There's a wee problem though." Demo pointed out. "I'm nae sure we've got enough beds for all of us, now. There's a whole lot more of us than there used t'be, aye?"

"Hrr crrrnhh srrrhhh hrrr." Pyro said, pointing at the floor.

"Good idea, Sparkie." Engineer agreed, hefting the broken robot onto his shoulder. "We got to keep an eye on those shut-down robots downstairs, so why not have some of the fellas bunk up here? It's not like anyone's using this building now."

At first, there was light.

Then, there were noises. Metallic clangs, little creaks and clicks.

Scoutbot's vision swam into focus and he moved his head slightly, looking up at Engineer. The man looked at him thoughtfully with no sign of his normal easy smile.

"Hardhat," Scoutbot said, his voice a little screechy with static. He tried to move, but his arms and legs felt weak and he could only make them wobble before his motors whined with the effort. "Holy fuck, I got blown to bits. Good thing I don't feel pain."

"Welcome back online." Engineer said, still oddly cold and distant. "There's no fluid in your hydraulic system right now, so you can't move much. Don't try- you'll just burn out those motors."

"Thanks, dude." Scoutbot said gratefully. "I knew you'd come through for me."

"Don't thank me too much, son." Engineer replied, grabbing his wrench. "Sure, I fixed you, but I've left you disabled so we can have a little talk."

"Aww, man." Scoutbot complained, trying to move again. "I'm on your side, I swear it. Those other robots were all dumb fuckers, built by that bastard Gray. You built me...well, Violet Engie did. Not you. You're one of those clones, right?"

"I was a clone," The BLU Engineer replied thoughtfully, "But now I'm just me."

"Uh, right." Scoutbot replied uncertainly. "Look, I'll tell you everything. I got nothin' to hide."

"Starting talking then." Engineer replied flatly.

"It all started with this bright light..."

How can a story ever end?

The story only ever truly ends if everyone and everything dies and leaves nothing behind. Otherwise, there is always a new tale to be continued or little strands of plot that don't get neatly tied off.

Is there even such a thing as a happy ending? Surely a happy continuation is better than an ending?

Gray Mann, of course, did not get a happy ending, for he was dead. A few bribes to various government agencies and the local police, and soon he had never existed. Miss Pauling could erase people from existence in a way that would have made Stalin proud.
But what about the others?

"Hey bro, think fast!"

A baseball hurtled towards Bobby and he caught it with a smug grin. "Nice try, asshat." He hurled it back with all the strength his elastic-band arms could manage.

A delicate hand snatched it out of midair, and Miss Pauling grinned at the two men.

"Hey, get outta here, this is man-stuff." Rick complained.

"Yeah, no girls allowed."

"Says you." Miss Pauling replied with a smile. "I came here to ask you something."

"Aww man, you got more work for us? What now?" Bobby moaned.

"Sort of. There's a new James Bond film out, 'Diamonds are Forever.'" She explained. "Your job is to go and watch it- with me."

"You mean, like, a date?" Rick asked, his mouth widening into a gleeful smile.

"Yes of course a date." Miss Pauling said hotly, dropping the ball and putting her hands on her hips. "I've been waiting for you to ask me out for a week! So, tonight. Film. Us. Let's go."

"Uh...both of us?" Rick asked hesitantly.

"Both of you." She replied with a smile.

Bobby and Rick looked at each other and gave identical shrugs.

"Ok."

It was a sunny day in Boston, and Rachel was loading dirty clothing into her washing machine when a pair of arms wrapped around her waist and a warm voice breathed in her ear.

"Did you forget about me?"

"Théo!" She turned around and grabbed him, pulling him close and kissing him, and then shoved him away angrily. "You bastard! Where have you been? I thought you were dead! I know your business takes you away for long periods sometimes, but you were gone, you were gone for good and I..."

"Shh, ma petite chou-fleur." He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "I am sorry I was gone for so long. There is so much I cannot tell you, but to be away this long...was not according to my wishes."

She sighed and leant against him. "I knew you'd come back." She murmured inhaling the scent of clean linen, aftershave and, alas, cigarettes. "You always do."

"You waited for me?"

She smiled up at him. "Of course I did."
"I will not be leaving you again. I have retired. There are..." He stopped and his mouth twitched in some private joke, "...Others who can do my job now. I have had enough of it all. I would like... to stay. If... you will have me?" He asked her, suddenly looking uncertain, his usual suaveness dropping away.

Rachel looked at him curiously. He had lost weight since she had last seen him, and his eyes were shadowed with exhaustion and a hint of pain. She knew she would never get the truth from him, but wherever he had been, and whatever he had done, it had left its mark on him. There would be nightmares and sleepless nights. Such was the burden of a truly good man in a rotten world. Perhaps, though, she could help him find some peace.

"Of course I will." She said softly, running a hand along the corner of his jaw. "How is Edward? Is he with you?"

"Yes, he is." Théodore looked uncomfortable for a moment.

"Is something the matter? Oh my God! My little boy is hurt, isn't he? Bring him in, I'll look after him, I'll do anything, I'll..." The man put a gentle finger across her lips.

"No, he is not hurt. Let us just say...he is twice the man he used to be." Théo sighed. "This is going to take some explaining..."

Sometimes, at the end of the story, things get forgotten...

There was a dark cupboard in Engineer's workshop with a large padlock on the outside. Inside, a dim blue glow lit it up.

"Beep boop, maggots."

There was no reply. There a distant sound of movement and some voices, but no one came closer. The Soldierbot's head looked around, but it could see only blank wooden panels.

"I am a robot."

Perhaps it was a good thing Gray Mann hadn't given his robots a more complex mind.

"Beep?"

"Try the left leg now." Dell Conagher said, taking the screwdriver out of his mouth.

"It works! Thanks, man. You're the best." Scoutbot said, moving his repaired limbs. "Being stuck in one place was so fucking boring!"

"I'm sure it was. No hard feelings, I hope?"

"What? Hell no. You just fought like a million robots, right? I mean, I could have been just like them."

"I for one am sure glad you're not." Dell replied. "We all would've have been turned into meat paste, when that bomb went off, otherwise."

"Me too." Scoutbot pointed out.

"You're not made of meat." Dell pointed out with a small smile.
"Bite me, asshat." Scoutbot replied easily.

Conagher chuckled, before pulling his goggles up onto his forehead. "Seriously, though. I owe you, big time. Not only did you save us all back there, but...it's good to know the Violet Engineer wasn't behind all this."

"He tried to stop it all." Scoutbot said solemnly. "He was a good man in a bad place. He should have gotten the hell outta there, but he'd not give up like that, not Engie. Damn I miss him."

"Well, if there's anythin' I can do to help..."

"Nah, just...be yourself." Scoutbot replied, hopping up onto a bench and swinging his legs idly. "Oh, uh, well, there was one thing."

"Name it, son."

"There's...something I've always wanted to do. Promise not to laugh." Scoutbot said.

"What?"

"Promise!"

"Alright, alright, I promise." Dell said, holding his hands up.

Scoutbot told him. Dell listened earnestly, and then nodded and smiled.

"I reckon that's possible. Heck, it'll be interesting to try, so I'll give it my best shot. Least I can do for you."

"Woah, really? Like, for real?"

"Sure thing. Let me do some calculations, and I'll get back to you."

The newly created clones did not get a happy ending.

They got a happy beginning.

Their first act had been to prevent the end of the world, and now they had a luxurious facility in the Bahamas to live in.

They could do whatever they wanted and be whoever they wished- and what greater happiness is there than free will?

Under the tropical sun, arguments were fought, hierarchies established, friendships and alliances were made, and a thousand new extraordinary tales began.

But those are stories for another day.

Gerhardt Weiss watched the sea wash over the pebbles of the Bahamas beach as the sun set, and wondered why the sound of the waves was so soothing. A couple of great egrets stalked along the edge of the waves, their feathers as white as his dove's.

He only had one dove left, now. The others were alive and well, and had been adopted by some of the other Medics. It had seemed a little miserly to keep them all to himself. Galileo, though, he had
insisted on keeping. The poor dove had been through enough as it was. He stroked the little bird's head as he sat there. He missed his flock, but at least it meant less work cleaning up bird shit.

He felt oddly empty. He had been propelled along by dumb fate and a wish for vengeance for so long that he had almost forgotten how to make decisions for himself. In fact, had he ever really had a chance to choose how his life unfolded?

"Gerhardt! I look for you all day! Why do you hide out here?"

He smiled slowly and turned around. Maybe he had made a few choices, after all. Unexpected, inexplicable ones. I am a partly-mechanical copy of a disgraced doctor who had power over life and death. I've only lived four years and yet I've fought in three wars. I saved the world- and no one will ever know. I don't give a damn about what is normal, any more. Sergei crunched his way down the beach towards him. The larger man sat down beside him, and Gerhardt leant against him with a comfortable sigh.

"Just getting some peace and quiet." He replied. A brief whisp of cool breeze hit his face. "I like the noise of the waves."

"Da, many busy people." Sergei agreed. "I just keep out of way, let them do politics."

"Politics?"

"Miss Pauling knows many people, has glued many palms..."

"Greased many palms." Gerhardt corrected.

"...Paid people and bought stocks. Prices were cheap due to robot wars, as Gray Mann wanted." He continued. "She says she now owns Gray Gravel company. She is calling meeting tomorrow of all of us to decide what we do now. She says we have technology, money, many clever people and robots, and we should do great things with them. She has ideas for us. 'An Institute for Betterment of Mankind', she said."

"She is... a formidable woman." Gerhardt said.

"There are twelve of her now." Sergei reminded him. Gerhardt just shuddered and Sergei laughed. "You are scared! Scared of leettle women!"

"I am not!" Gerhardt replied hotly.

"So, do you have plans?" Sergei asked.

"Not really. This place is too interesting to leave," Gerhardt said thoughtfully, "But I zhink I vil take some time away. A holiday. I've never had one of zhose. It could be an interesting experience."

"Never?!" Sergei asked in astonishment. "But everyone has holiday sometimes."

"I zhought ve could go to New York. Zhe Natural History Museum zhere has an excellent fossil record, especially for zhe Phylum Chordata, which is unusually..."

"We?" Sergei asked.

Gerhardt blinked and looked at him in surprise. "Vell... I assumed you woulzh come vizh me."

Sergei placed his warm hand over the doctor's chilled one. "Always."
"Now, as I was saying, the Phylum Chordata is divided into Vertebrata and Tunicata..."

The sun sank below the horizon as Gerhardt started to explain the diversification of vertebrates after the Permian-Triassic extinction event. He then moved on to describe how to tell apart Saurischian and Ornithischian dinosaurs, the evolution of bird beaks and the importance of keratin in achieving flight.

Sergei simply listened as the tide went out and the cicadas started to sing, and Gerhardt talked, and talked, and talked.

Even after all the horror they had been through, after all the death and the violence they had seen, it suddenly felt like everything was going to be alright.

"You ready?" Dell asked.

"As I'll ever be." Scoutbot stood nervously on the ruined penthouse floor of the Gray Gravel building, fidgeting and shifting from foot to foot. "You sure this is the best way to test this?"

"It'll work. My tech don't fail." Conagher replied firmly, setting down his toolkit. He gave a sudden impish smile. "Anyway, some fella- can't think who- once told me robots can't die. They can always be repaired."

"Dude, not helping." Scoutbot said peevishly.

"You know what to do. Just give it a try."

Scoutbot walked to the centre of the ruined floor, and then rocked on his heels for a second before breaking into a sprint. He accelerated towards the edge of the building, and then leapt out into the clear air, hundreds of feet above the ground. The wind buffeted around him for a moment as his legs span against nothing and his feet tried to grip onto pavement that was no longer there.

Shitshitshitshitshitshitshitshitshitshitshitshitshitshitshitshitfallingshitgonnadieshit...

"NOW!" Dell called.

A pair of shiny metallic wings unfolded from the robot's segmented spine and he thrust his legs back as the jets in his feet fired and boosted him forwards and upwards. The wind roared against his jointed metal body as he soared into the blue sky.

"IT WORKED, ENGIE!" He yelled back to the tiny dot on the building far below, his metallic voice no doubt lost, but the figure waved back anyway. "IT WORKED!"

The Bahamas opened up beneath him as he flew higher, a scatter of islands glittering in the bright sea, and Scoutbot whooped and hollered with pure joy. He was a badass robot that had saved the world, and now he could fly.

Life simply didn't get any better than this.

The End.

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