The compound at Teufort rises, sprawling, out of the desert as Miss Pauling’s car kicks up sand in the dry wind that’s already clogging your lungs. No amount of sunscreen can save you from the pale glare overhead; the only thing that eases your eyes is the brim of your homburg—and barely that. You’re still squinting as your escort stops the car outside the fence.

“We’ll walk,” she says with a polite smile, lightly slapping the steering wheel with her driving gloves.

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What it says on the tin: a reader-insert fic with a plausible tenth class. A quick-paced, slow-burn Reader/Medic fic. 50% realism, 50% escapism. 100% guilty pleasure.
The compound at Teufort rises--sprawling, rectangular, aluminum, red--out of the desert as Miss Pauling’s car kicks up sand in the dry wind that already clogs your lungs. Heat-haze swims in the air, distorting lonely buildings that look more suited for barns and silos than a base of operations of any kind. You narrow your eyes against the gleam of tin roofs. All you've seen for miles is dust and orange sands, desolate stretches of dirt and withered islands of brown grass, terrain so dry and ashen you half-expected to see the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg* before anything resembling civilization. No amount of sunscreen can save you from the pale, golden glare overhead; the only thing that eases your eyes is the brim of your homburg, and barely that. You’re still squinting as your escort stops the car outside the chain-link fence.

“We’ll walk,” she says with a polite smile, lightly slapping the steering wheel with her driving gloves.

“Miss Pauling.” You frown through the windshield and fence at the silent, wood-and-aluminum complex.

She stops, hand on the latch of her door. “Nervous?” She peers over her glasses, and you nod. Her green eyes are kind.

“A little,” you correct before she speaks.

“I’m sure you’ll settle in just fine! The boys are used to one another, so you’ve missed their adjustment, fortunately,” Miss Pauling assured, stepping out of the convertible. You do the same as she efficiently brushes the wrinkles from her purple skirt and blouse. “That'll keep the fist-fights and explosions to a minimum.” Before you can so much as blink, let alone demand and explanation, she simply barrels on. "And, as you know, your personal items have already arrived, so you’ll have nothing to worry about this evening. Of course, that does mean someone might have had time to… snoop. But they’ve been warned already about getting into your crate to satisfy their curiosity.”

Sure. You resist the urge to press a hand over your eyes. Curious mercenaries would certainly be polite enough to stay out of your things.

Well, this is why you agreed to carry your weapons and unmentionables in with you this afternoon.

You don’t bother brushing travel-wrinkles out of your dark jeans or the red, collared button-down you had selected. The wrinkles will be there no matter what. You take your messenger bag from the backseat instead as Miss Pauling reaches for a clip-board alongside the console, and sling it over your shoulder. “Work starts tomorrow, at seven-hundred hours,” she continues, opening the gate, “so even if things seem awkward, they’ll straighten themselves out on the field.” She smirks again, reassuring, and you almost forget she shot a man in cold blood not an hour ago, mumbling something that sounded a lot like "loose-end." You respect that. Of course—you have to, you suppose. Part of the career, and all that.

You fall into step beside her, your boots padding quietly on cracked soil and sand. You glance sidelong at Miss Pauling, stomach twisting anxiously—you’re a head taller, even while she stands in black pumps… and damned if she didn’t dispose of the body that way, too, insisting that she
needed no assistance! But no, it isn't her enviable ease that makes you self-conscious: it's your size. Not simply height, nor the fact that she has a thinner figure. It's sheer mass—broad shoulders, filled to fit the frame. Wide hips, large hands. Just… bigger than many of the women you’ve been around in your life.

Now, you have a job where it might help, and for that you are thankful, even if you do feel rather overlarge standing next to Miss Pauling.

You try your best to swallow the ingrained embarrassment, metal double-doors set into a garishly painted wall becoming your primary focus. The portal to your new home, if all goes well. Fingers tighten over the messenger bag, as though having the gun it conceals close to your hands will make you more secure.

A creak.

You must have missed some signal, for out of the double-doors file nine mercenaries. Your eyes snap to Miss Pauling, but she offers no glance. The air seems thicker now, and you very much wish you had your weapon pressed coldly against your palm, cooling the heat that threatened to color your cheeks. Nine scrutinizing glares: you’re not what they expected. Of course you’re not.

What the hell are you doing here?


You’d forgotten how much you hate being stared at.

“Gentlemen.” The two of you have stopped just short of the step, and Miss Pauling addresses them easily. The classes are already familiar from briefing—the spy, easily recognizable, stands toward the back, feigning disinterest, smoking a cigarette. Or perhaps he is disinterested; the mask does its work.

He raises a brow at you beneath the balaclava and you quickly find another face. The demoman (one eye, as Miss Pauling had said) is drinking, but his singular gaze is far too clear for your liking—perceptive. You move on. The youngest is—ugh—clearly checking both of you out… and damn it you’d stopped listening—

“…new team-mate. She’ll be staying for one week as part of the evaluation, and if things work out well for the new class system, she’ll be joining your contract permanently. Gentlemen,” Miss Pauling tucks the clip-board beneath her arm. “Meet the Specialist.”

With that sweeping gesture, you think you really ought to say something.

“Hello.”

Smooth.

You try a small smile, fingers curling over the top strap of your bag.

“You!”

“How d’you do?”

“A girl, huh?”

“Ach, another American.” The Spy takes a long drag on his cigarette, and immediately turns away.
You frown before any of his teammates can speak. “Excusez-moi, monsieur.” He stops. You know your pronunciation is excellent; that’s the only praise you can give yourself. The spy turns, and lowers the cigarette, smoke curling around his balaclava. “I’ll admit I failed my French course,” you add. “But you’re in the United States, are you not? It seems American coworkers would be an occupational hazard.”

But the spy does not miss a beat: “I was told this team would be comprised only of the best. On a day such as this, it seems I was misled.”

Miss Pauling frowns. “Spy—”

He draws upon his cigarette again. “But we shall see tomorrow, non? Until then, I have other business.” He turns on his heel and reenters the compound.

“Don’t let the Frenchie bother ya.” The boy shrugs, offering a cocksure grin, dog tags jingling when he folds his arms. “So—a girl.”

You sigh. “It would appear so.”

“Cool. Been just guys around here for waaay too long—except for you, ‘a course, Miss Pauling, but you don’t come ‘round often enough. Maybe you’d like to—”

“I have work that I need to get back to today,” the woman replies coolly, hardly sparing him a glance from behind her spectacles. You rather admire that. Again. “So, if we could move things along—Specialist.”

You reflexively straighten as soon as the code-name registers. “Ma’am,” you manage after a moment.

She waves a hand. “Just Miss Pauling.” Her attention turns to the eight mercenaries left on the steps. “This is Pyro, Soldier, Engineer, Medic, Heavy, Demoman, Sniper, and I’m sure you’ve gathered this is Scout.”

“You do recall some mention of the Scout being rather young, and, put more politely during that briefing than you were thinking now, a loudmouth. You resign yourself to filtering out the useless chatter.

Your next thought is that, all-in-all, they don’t make an unattractive lineup (not that the pyro has removed their mask, but even so--). "Mercenary" made you think of grizzled, battle-scared ruffians but that might be an unkind stereotype, especially considering you’re one of them for now. Still, if all goes well, and you have to look at them almost exclusively for the next five years, well... you can live with that.

Of course, they could turn out to be a bunch of assholes.

That would be unfortunate.

“Exactly what sort of specialist are you?” The sniper peers from beneath a wide-brimmed hat and amber shades. Australian, from the sound of it.

Your hands tighten around your bag again. You look to Miss Pauling, still in a long-suffering conversation with the scout. No help. “It’s... a bit difficult to explain. I’m sort of—”
“One-part vanguard, two-parts surprise,” Miss Pauling answered.

You try to telepathically send your gratitude through the rippling heat-waves.

“The best explanation is to see the new class in action. You’ll learn best how to take advantage of her tactics during warm-up and on the field.” She gives you a nod, sliding her glasses back up the bridge of her nose.

“It might be a wee bit easier if we knew something about the lass!” The demoman—sporting a thick, Scottish accent—makes a broad gesture with the bottle in his hand. A brown bottle, rather mysteriously unlabeled.

“My crate didn’t reveal much?” You snap your mouth shut.

You really hadn’t meant to say that; you would have done the same in their place. Did it matter? At least the group had the decency to look a little embarrassed, if not ashamed.

Miss Pauling sighs. “You were expressly told not to.”

More averted eyes and awkward shuffling.

“I’d, uh, like to apologize, ma’am.” One of the men—with dark goggles pushed up on his forehead; the engineer, you recall—steps off the platform, removing a thick work-glove. He dusts the hand off on a pant-leg before offering it. “Name’s Engineer—Engie, if y’like.” There’s a comforting drawl to his voice, and you find yourself relaxing somewhat... it’s familiar. You take his rough hand and shake it firmly.

“No harm done.” You offer a smile. “I’d have been tempted.”

“Let me also say that I am sorry!” The soldier—immediately and easily recognizable in a helmet and uniform coat—marches off the platform to crowd the engineer out of your space. He gives a short salute. “It is a violation of company personnel code to rifle through a fellow’s belongings. My apologies, private!”

Gods, he has a voice like a damn drill sergeant. You force a half-smile. “More like an ensign, I think, but apology accepted—”

“Oh-ho, a Squid, eh?” He grins conspiratorially.

*Shit.* Your knuckles whiten against the dark, canvas strap. “Not... exactly, no…”

“No personal questions, Soldier.” Miss Pauling frowns.

“Of course!” He gave her a hasty salute. “I will be running the obstacles course. I expect you need a stretch to warm up before the battle, ensign. Come find me after you’ve been briefed.”

“Thanks.” You have absolutely no intention of running anything today, but the man marches off, apparently satisfied.

You turn back to the group to find the largest positively looming over you. He had seemed huge, of course, standing near the door, but now—you feel utterly dwarfed. It’s... new. Unusual. Intimidating, yes, but also something of a relief after feeling so clunky beside Miss Pauling all day.

“Wish to apologize also,” he says, extending a massive hand. Russian, no mistake. You brace yourself for a crushing grip, but it never comes; his calloused hand is gentle—deceptively so, beneath scarred knuckles. “I am Heavy. If you have questions about weapons, I can answer them.”
“Thank you.” Your head is tilted rather further than you’re used to, but at least he blocks the sun. “I appreciate it.”

“You are welcome.” He returns your smile. “Also, you have good books. Selection is… big.”

You chuckle. “I pride myself on them. Perhaps you can borrow a couple sometime?”


Then, Scout is hot on Heavy’s heels. “Guess I’m sorry, too. Not good manners to look through a lady’s things an’ all.”

You can’t quite smother a cheeky grin. “It isn’t as though I left anything in that crate of an especially personal nature. It’s fine, all of you.”

The boy folded his arms. “Heh—I did wonder after I saw ya why we didn’t find any kind of—”

“Mrmp mry. Mrk mrr.” You find yourself in a bone-crushing hug that smells of rubber, kerosene, and smoke.

“Uh—” Gut reaction is to return the embrace, even though you can feel the filters of a gas mask poking into your shoulder.

“Pyro says they're sorry, and thanks,” Engie provided.

“Oh—you’re welcome—hrk.” The hug threatens to break ribs at this rate.

“All right, let’s not try to send the poor girl through respawn before she’s been calibrated into the system.”

Oh. Yes. Respawn. It sounded much too good to be true, though you desperately want to see it in action. Of course, you’d rather not experience it to gain the information—no, you’ll be doing your damnedest tomorrow to make sure you don’t actually test the miraculous technology.

With your luck, you'd end up actually dead.

“Speaking of,” says Miss Pauling as Engie gently pries Pyro away from you, “Medic can take you inside and get everything set: calibration, exam, and system compatibility.”

“But you may wish to get settled first.” German. He steps down to offer his hand. Tall, lean, in a fitted white coat—you could have guessed without introduction. His gaze is appraising behind little, round spectacles as he offers a bare hand, gloves tucked into his belt. “Medic, of course.” His handshake is firm, hands smooth—callouses centered mostly at the bottom of the palm, and on the first and fourth fingers (trigger and pencil?). His grip, however, is just a touch too tight. You hold his icy gaze, and attempt not to squirm like an insect, his eyes crinkled just a little at the edges, hard, scrutinizing. Your hand tightens before you let go. His brows arch.

Involuntarily, you clear your throat. “I’d just like to take my bag to my room.”

“Be glad to show you the way,” says Engineer. But you notice his eyes rest on Medic—not you—and the doctor pretends not to see.

But then, the moment is gone.

“We can give ya the tour!” adds Scout.
“Before you do...” The Sniper finally removes himself from his perch reclined against the wall. He offers a firm, wry handshake, fingerless glove and all; the trigger callouses on his forefinger apparent on the back of your hand. “Sniper.”

It takes you a moment to find the right name. “Specialist.”

He releases your hand, mouth giving a knowing twitch. “You’ll get used to it.”

*A self-amusing reference on your part to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: "This is a valley of ashes[...] above the grey land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg[...] blue and gigantic--their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose. Evidently some wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice[...] His eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days under sun and rain, brood over the solemn dumping ground."

Chapter End Notes

Please do provide a bit of feedback if you have the time. I have drafts of the first few chapters written, but if there's anything you'd like or hope to see, please let me know! This is my first time doing a reader-insert, and I believe I should certainly take the reader's thoughts into consideration, since we have the opportunity, no?

REVISED: 1/15/19
Your little entourage offers a tour of the whole facility, and you try to file away the locations as well as possible—workshop, showers, rec room, medical wing (here, Medic leaves the four of you to prepare the equipment), mess hall, armory, and single dormitories. Simple plaques label each room: Engineer, Soldier, Heavy; a few have been covered, deliberately scratched off, or—in the case of Scout—defaced (with a permanent marker addition: The Incredible). Pyro skips off with what could be construed as a muffled farewell when you reach the end of the final hall.

“This one’s yours,” says Engie, gesturing to the last door, yet unlabeled. “There’s a key taped next to the handle inside; don’t lock yourself out, now.”

“Thanks—I appreciate it.” You smile, reaching for the doorknob.

“Not a bit of trouble. We’ll see y’all for dinner after you’re done with the doc?”

“Can’t skip dinner with work first thing tomorrow.”

He nods, readily returning your smile. “We’ll see you, then—come on, Scout.”

“But—”

Engineer wraps a hand around the boy’s shoulder and nudges him down the hall. “Let the lady get settled in!”

You miss Scout’s reply as you close the door behind you and sag against the grey frame. Today has been... a lot. You rub a hand over your eyes. There will be even more before you can call the day done, but you’re here. Not home, but perhaps a... a place to be, if all goes well.

Pressing your hand close over your forehead, you open your eyes. There’s a simple cot with a metal bedframe along the wall across from you, lit by a single window just to its left, sunlight brightening the barren, wood floor. Your room is just large enough only for the bed, a plain, cheap-looking wardrobe to your immediate right, and your crate, sitting—as promised—in the center of the room, with a few feet of floor-space to spare. You can get one shelf under the window for your books, you think, and one on the far right wall beside the wardrobe. The rest... well, you can figure that out later. At worst, you’d just make some room in the wardrobe—it isn’t as though you’ve brought many clothes; you require little besides a few spare uniforms.

You set your messenger bag on the bed, mattress creaking under its weight, and gaze at the cloudless, cerulean skies visible out your window. It’s all pleasant enough: sunshine, a wooden floor smelling of old pine, and the tang of iron in the air. Books in your crate. The relief of a job. Excitement of something new.

But the iron bars which cross the glass remind you immediately that this isn’t a dorm or a new apartment. No matter the behavioral regulations outside combat, for all intents and purposes, this is a war-zone.

You flip open your bag, and inside, buried beneath a few sentimental items and all of your unmentionables, is your Lancaster-Charles howdah pistol. It’s only been in your hand for the last six months, but the top-of-the-line, .577 caliber, four-barrel beauty is nothing to sneeze at. You run
your fingers along the black gunmetal, tracing smooth contours down to the mahogany-and-bone inlaid handle—a gift from Miss Pauling and the mysterious executives after you passed the exams, when your temporary contract was drafted. You’d very much like to strap the holster to your thigh now, feel its comforting weight as you make your way to the medical suite.

But the doctor probably would not appreciate an armed patient in his operating room. You shiver, and replace the pistol at the bottom of your bag. Best to just get the procedure over with, whatever it entails.

And yet, you promised you'd never enter a room like that again.

Your hands tighten into fists, press close and hard over your eyes. Every fiber of your body down to the bone aches with the need to sink to the floor, to stop and stay and refuse to meet the antiseptic chill, the colorless comforts and thin smiles. But--no. You must. Your teeth creak under the hard set of your jaw. Money. Steady job. Self-sufficiency.

Money--money to send home.

You straighten your back, force yourself to take easy, measured steps toward the door. There's a light-switch, and an iron hook to one side, and the key, as promised, taped just beside the doorknob. A trembling hand removes your hat and hangs it on the hook, and another peels the key from its place beside the doorknob.

And then, you square your shoulders to meet the medic.

Chapter End Notes

REVISED: 1/26/2019
What Are You Made Of?

Chapter Notes

WARNING for: needles, surgery, drugs, blood, and general medical unpleasantness in this chapter.

Also, stem cells were not discovered in human cord blood until 1978, though research on cells that have the ability to produce other cells began as early as the mid-1800s, and the first bone marrow transplant was successfully performed in 1968. I've set this fic sometime around 1969, and work on the assumption that TF2 takes place in an alternate universe--albeit one very much like our own. I figure respawn could not exist without some stem cell something, and research would probably have been done through private funding for RED and BLU--so, not readily available to the public, but definitely plausible in this universe.

I am aware as well that one does not need a spinal tap to obtain adult stem cells, but since when does Medic really go the least invasive route?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It does not take long to re-locate the medical suite. You feel dwarfed standing before the steel doors, and wonder at the chairs lining the hall; there can hardly be a need for a waiting area in a mercenary base. Or… so you hope. Pray. Desperately. A chill runs along your arms, and you knock before you can lose your nerve. The door swings just slightly, silent on its hinges.

"Ja, come in!"

You push through, pale light reflecting on steel, and enter a miraculously pristine space, white and silver and sterile. The doctor glances up from a gurney that’s been fashioned into a rolling table.

"Ah—there you are! Shall we begin?"


“Wunderbar! There are gowns hanging by the door. You may use zhe privacy curtain in the far corner.”

You do as instructed, tearing your eyes away from the stomach-turning instruments to fetch a white hospital gown (with team-color ties—you wonder if it might be in slightly poor taste, all things considered) and step behind a curtain, half-drawn around one of three sick beds. With a sigh, you unbutton your shirt and fold it neatly on the cot, trying to force down the trepidation constricting your throat. They said you’ll be out in time for dinner; surely it can't be invasive, nothing extensive. Your bra goes tucked between the folds of your shirt, and it seems your fingers won't listen to logic: they're trembling just as before.

You hesitate on the button of your jeans. “How much?”

“Shirt and brazier off, please—the main modifications will be made in zhe chest cavity. Be sure to tie the gown in the front, not behind you.”
Good. Fine. Chest cavity. All right. “Thank you.” It’s a simple matter to shrug the gown over your shoulders and tie it shut. Strange that he should allow you to keep your pants on for now, but you’re quite grateful for the illusory protection they grant. If this was a trip to your regular physician for a full examination... well. This isn’t a regular trip, nor your regular physician, is it? You draw yourself up with a deep breath, push the curtain aside, and cross to the waiting doctor and gurney.

Your brow furrows when you realize Medic is positively vibrating with ill-concealed excitement. “You are ready?”

“Yes.” Your stomach clenches, turns once, twice.

Blue eyes peer over spectacles. “You are unsure.”

“Well—”

He nods, brusquely busying himself with three brown bottles now sitting amongst the needles and scalpels. “You do not trust me. It’s as well you shouldn’t.”

“It isn’t personal, I—” His words register. “It’s as well?”

The medic shrugs, elegant coat pulling across his shoulders. “You have met me only today.”

“Yes.” The embarrassed heat leaves your cheeks. Trust in a doctor is usually implicit. Demanded. This—this is refreshing. “Exactly. I... trust that my employers want me alive.” You moisten your suddenly dry lips, and an idea occurs. “I, ah... would you mind telling me what you’re doing, what you’re going to do... the steps, before you perform them? I know that I won’t be able to crane my neck to see the whole time, so—”

He arches a high, dark brow. “You have a medical and scientific curiosity?”

“No.” Medic’s expression turns toward disappointment, so you start again. "Well—I am extremely curious about respawn, though I doubt I’ll understand most of the technicalities. But medically, I don’t..." You break off a frustrated sigh, not wanting to seem ruder than you already do. "In here, I want to know what’s happening so I can be ready." So you don't have to guess, don't have to backpedal, don't have to wish you'd broken a doctor's wrist because they were too wrapped up in themselves to peruse a damn chart to check for allergies. "If you have scientific secrets, that’s fine, just—you know—if you’re going to take my pulse at the wrist, and I can't see you, just warn me that you’re about to touch my wrist. Please.” You can feel the warmth of embarrassment creeping up your neck again, and your gaze drops.

“Oh.” Surprise flickers across his features. “This has been a problem before.” Medic’s eyes are unreadable through his spectacles.

You shift uneasily. “The family doctor was fine, but hospitals—”

“You will find that zhis is not ein hospital.”

You cannot tell if he means this well or ill. Perhaps, it just is.

“In any case, I will respect your wishes, and explain what I can.” He turns away, points to the covered table. "Please, get up on zhe gurney.”

You do as he says, some relief settling in your stomach. He actually agreed... not a hospital, indeed. “Thank you.”
Medic nods, waving a careless hand. “Bitte.” He turns away and strides to a deep sink, where he rolls up his sleeves and scrubs to the elbow in hot water. Well, you assume it’s hot water. No one said the base didn’t have hot water. After all, everything in this damn desert is hot, even if there happens to be no water heater available. “This means you prefer not to use anesthesia, ja?”

You freeze, halfway to the sterile pillow, elbows crinkling the stiff sheet. “Uh—”

“Not that I was planning to use it anyway, of course. Local anesthesia, yes—complete, no.” He shakes the water from his hands crisply over the sink. “Not enough out here to use it on every little procedure anyway.”

Your head drops back. “This isn’t major enough to require it, then?” As you had thought. Done in time for dinner. Yet... something in your gut won’t let it go. After all, a thing like respawn can’t happen without some kind of major modification; you don’t need a PhD to tell you that.

“Mm?” He flicks his wrists over the sink one last time and returns to your side. “Oh—relatively speaking—yes. Quite major. But! It is very simple, und I’ve had time to perfect it with eight others before you. Heart replacement and syncing up your body’s electromagnetic field and DNA sequences to the respawn system—very simple, really.”

Oh—oh. Oh, fuck. Heart repl—

“Don’t look so nauseated! You’ve lost all your color.” Medic’s lips draw back from his teeth in a feral grin, shoulders fixing themselves in a gesture of ease; he paces around the gurney as though desperately trying to offset some manic intensity. Or perhaps, it is simply the ease of a predator, those relaxed shoulders and quick steps—lazy and buzzing with well-contained excitement. Your mind flies. This is a nightmare. A fucking nightmare, not even in your worst experiences could anything--

All thought disappears in a bolt of white fear when he lifts a scalpel.

“Of course, there will be a general examination first.” He sets the blade down with a click, and the dull roar leaves your ears as swiftly as the tide. But he’s still grinning, and it’s downright fucking disconcerting. What kind of sick bastard—“Now, before we begin, are there any general health concerns?”

There’s still a buzzing in your skull to the tune of two words: “Heart… replacement?”

“Oh, it’s very simple—” There he was saying that again and, oddly enough, it’s just as reassuring as it was the first time. “It’s just that your heart, as it is now, could not withstand die über-charge.”

Your poor heart is hammering in your chest. “What if RED doesn’t keep me on?”

He peers over the round spectacles. “You wish to stay, do you not?”

“Yes.” Even as the word leaves your mouth, you’re re-evaluating. Leave your life in the hands of someone sick enough to joke about cutting into a person and replacing their heart before any medication? No, you can get right up off this table and...

And it doesn’t matter; you can’t go home.

Besides, you’ve already said yes.

“Then you’d better make sure they decide to keep you, ja? Leave zhe medicine to me.” He fetches something from the table—a thermometer, and you open your mouth automatically to let him tuck
it under your tongue. “I will also check your pulse.” You nod and offer your hand, palm down. It’s still trembling, worse now. You bite your tongue and try to get it under control. But soft fingers enclose your wrist, finding the pulse-point with ease, just under your thumb, and he doesn’t look at you, doesn’t acknowledge your weakness. Gratitude is beyond your grasp at the moment, but you might feel it later. You count the rhythm under your skin, the thrum in your chest as it slows to a regular interval. One, two, three. His hands are cold.

But then, so are yours.

You hear Medic step back, and open your eyes. He’s recording data on a clipboard, and after a moment, takes the thermometer from you and adds that measurement to his paperwork. He sets it aside in a sharp, graceful movement. “Now, I will map the incision—not that I require it at this point, of course, after doing it so many times, but you might be interested.”

You find you don’t care if the doctor has done it ten times or one-hundred times; as far as you’re concerned, no one should be free-handing a surgery. “Please.” You wonder if there was something else, anything else you could have done, somewhere you could have gone...

Medic’s fingers find the knot on the gown and unravel it without trouble. And, it’s at this very moment you realize that all of your general physicians have been women.

The sudden urge to either bury your face in the sterile pillow or sucker punch the bastard and run is overwhelming.

But, when Medic pushes the edges of the gown away from your chest with polite, careful hands, his gaze is detached, clinical. He fetches a marker from the table beside him, and presses chilly fingers against your collarbone. Dark hair falls across his forehead as he finds the dip in your clavicle and draws his forefinger down about three inches. His eyes are an icy, grey-blue, their edges crinkling handsomely behind his spectacles in concentration. Medic uncaps the marker, keeping the lid between his teeth, and presses the tip to your skin, just above the finger marking his place. “I will use a sternal incision,” he says, remarkably clearly considering he did nothing to remove the marker’s cap from his mouth. He draws his index finger and the marker vertically down, between your breasts, and you close your eyes, trying not to squirm as the felt tickles your skin, trying not to think about exactly what getting to your heart through that flesh and bone will entail—

A whir, a pricking against your scalp, and you fight to keep still, jaw clenched tight. What the hell —

Your eyes open to a pair of tiny, black orbs and an unassuming pink beak. You blink. “Medic?”

“Hm?” He glances up. “Archimedes!”

Archimedes. Greek. Scientist or mathematician? That sounds right. You make a note to check the books back in your room to see if any are relevant—

“Go on, zhiz is a workspace!”

But you can feel tiny talons settling on your scalp, hair loosening to make room for the little, warm body nestled above your forehead. Strange... but not unpleasant. It’s certainly the most comforting aspect of your experience so far, not that it takes much to out-do any doctor, let alone a man who might not be entirely sane.

Medic sighs. “If there are two things Archimedes cannot resist, it’s hair and flesh wounds—and
I’m afraid you’re about to be irresistible on both counts.”

“The little, black-marble eyes leave yours.

A genuine smile crosses the doctor’s features. “Oh, yes; Archimedes loves open wounds—he thinks they’re a fine nesting space. Probably the warmth, though why he doesn’t mind getting blood in his feathers is beyond my comprehension.”

Well. If he doesn’t mind having the bird in a sterile space... “As long as he stays out of my—er—*chest cavity,*” Oh *god* what is this day coming to? ‘I’m all right if he stays.’ It’s a fine distraction from... what will occur. “I’d like it.”

Medic blinks, brow arching, and you nearly ask if you’ve said something wrong, but he waves a hand. “I doubt he’ll want to move now that he’s comfortable. Are you quite ready to begin?”


“*Gut.*”

There’s a needle in his hand. How the hell did—

“I will inject a local anesthetic.”

And the needle is in the flesh of your chest, just below your left arm, fluid seeping under your skin, liquid and hot and prickling and *oh gods.* He could have given you more warning.

You squeeze your eyes shut. There's no way you can do this. You can't—

“It will take several seconds for full effect. I will also administer a muscle relaxant with a few drops of morphine to make the incisions easier, and take the necessary bloodwork for respawn. In the meantime—”

The cool, efficient press of his hands checks your lymph nodes, breath, heartbeat, and things you’re not even sure about as the warmth tingling under your skin seeps into the muscles across your chest. Distantly, you feel another pinch as Medic’s hand comes away with a syringe of dark, red—blood. Eyes shut. That was blood. Yours. You feel a little light-headed. Archimedes flutters and fluffs his feathers, tugging at your hair and coiling it.

“*Gut,*” you hear again. “Now, I will begin the incision.”

Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck—

Not entirely sure you’re relaxed enough for this, you open your eyes to see Medic, gloves (team color again, and this time you’re absolutely *sure* it’s in poor taste) securely pulled up to his elbows, tossing some alcohol swabs aside. Your chest is cold now. Or very hot? Or—no longer there? You hadn’t felt him disinfect the area at all.

“You may wish to close your eyes—or watch. If there is any sensation whatsoever, alert me immediately.” Cold eyes peer seriously over round spectacles. “I can’t have you flinching and puncturing something we want to keep intact.”

Yes. *That* would be a disaster. You frown.

At least he didn’t bullshit you about concern for your pain.
You do as he suggested, attention shifting from the crinkles at the corners of his eyes, the utmost focus clear from the turn of his lips, to Archimedes’ talons just above your brow, the sensation of the dove’s breath and fluttering heartbeat as you hear tools, metal against metal, scrape somewhere to your left.

And then, Medic begins speaking.

Your focus wavers a bit—the heady sensation of what you suspect is the relaxant flooding your spine and clouding your thoughts in a pleasant, rosy fog. Better late than never.

First, he comments on the procedure itself—what makes the technology function, how the recipient of the improved heart becomes invincible when combined with certain energies. Fascinating, if you could pin down your thoughts, wandering like some elusive butterfly. And then, the respawn, with too much science to understand much besides the fact that Medic needed a blood sample, and a few stem cells that he’d retrieve after surgery.

Stem cells. The only stem in your body you know of is the one connected to your brain.

Needless to say, your happy stupor is effectively shaken.

“And I imagine they explained the nature of die respawn system—your cells and body will be retrieved and reassembled from the memory of the machine.” The excited notes of his voice are almost enough to drown out the stomach-turning grinding. “Quite, quite remarkable. However, I do not recommend getting sent through the system any time it is convenient for you; the process takes several minutes that the team might need support, and it often causes unpleasant side-effects: nausea, headache, muscle pain, dizziness... but, they are a low price to pay for staying alive—or, at least, not staying permanently dead. You’ll still feel the pain of death, and that should deter you from abusing the respawn too often.” He pauses, and you hear the clink of metal. “Of course, there are times when it is less painful to die.”

A shiver crosses your skin, prickling along your arms and your scalp. Archimedes ruffles his feathers.

And then, Medic begins chatting about his doves. Plural. How the hell you hadn’t noticed earlier (they were apparently kept not far from the windows) was beyond you. Or perhaps not so: you’d been anxious to get this done. You take a breath to ask about his reasons for keeping them here.

“I would not recommend speaking right now, Specialist.”

You immediately abandon the attempt.

“I’ll let you know—it’ll only be a moment.”

Specialist. It would take some getting used to, indeed. If it weren’t for context, you might forget that the name was meant to be attached to you at all.

You creak your eyes open when a whirring hum reaches your ears, careful to keep them fixed directly above, never straying to where Medic worked. The source of the gentle sound is immediately apparent—a strange, metal apparatus in a harness, emanating waves of... something, faintly colored (or was it merely light to aim the machine? Like an x-ray, or—)

“Ah, willkommen! Welcome back.”

You blink, flicking your eyes to the right. Medic looks quite pleased with himself, bouncing on his heels as he strides to your side. “What?” Your voice creaks.
Shit. It feels like someone dropped a toolbox, or maybe a bloody car on your chest. You clamp your mouth shut, next breath shallow. Better.

“Hm? Oh, ja—you weren’t watching. You were dead for a moment while I replaced your heart. How was it?” His grin, absolutely manic as panic rises in your chest.

But you clench your jaw and stuff it down. Bastard. He’s been doing it on purpose. Bastard. You repeat the word until the rising terror is gone, shoved aside in favor of irritation. Bastard. You’re alive. You never have to do this again. Alive. Bastard. He could have led with ‘alive.’ Or maybe ‘surgery was a success.’ Not: hello, you were dead for a bit—was it nice?

Bastard.

You draw another breath—it catches, as though your chest is suddenly too small.

“Und, I took the opportunity to obtain your stem cells with a lumbar puncture—” He takes note of the blank look no doubt creeping over your features. “Oh—you might know it as a spinal tap.”

Spine? How did—no. You don’t want to know. Good enough to have been unconscious.

Dead.

Oh, fuck—you signed up for this, didn’t you? You can’t even remember it. Like being asleep, and not even that. Just—here you are, congratulations!

In the grand scheme of things, not all that bad, is it?

You close your eyes and let the soothing hum of the beam flow over your chest. The medi-gun technology, you realize now. There hadn’t been any diagrams in the paperwork, but you should have known it immediately by description; honestly, you hadn’t expected to see it until tomorrow on the battlefield, but if it saves you from a long recovery period… “Now what?”

“Now, you will heal and take deep breaths. You’ll need your full lung capacity for tomorrow. With the medi-gun, you’ll only need to be here for a few minutes more.” He grins. “Amazing, ja?”

Evidently he doesn’t need a confirmation, because he breezes right on. “You’ll see it again on the battlefield. Now, it operates on half power, to ascertain proper healing. Fast healing can cause… side-effects unwelcome in a controlled setting—nausea, excess scarring, weakness in the muscles. On the field, it does not matter. I’d like to have you in full, top performance for your review, in this case.”

You draw a large breath, wincing as your lungs seize in protest. Your stomach is… quite empty.

“And then dinner?”

He chuckles. “Oh, yes. Healing consumes a great deal of energy, even at an accelerated pace. On the field, you’ll want to pack sandwiches.”

…Okay.

“Und you may look at the incision area, if you would like.”

You do.

Blood, lots of blood. Bastard. All over your chest, some of it still glistening under the light of the medi-gun, the rest faded to sticky rust, painting your stomach and breasts with angry streaks and careless droplets. But—the skin is closed, neatly, a lovely eight-inch, dark scab under neat, black
stitches, fading beneath faint, ruby light.

There are rusty stains on your pants, too, asshole. “Any tips on getting blood out of denim?” You ask dryly.

“Ja.” He smirked. “Don’t wear denim.”

The gust of a sigh passes your lips.

“Deep breaths.”

You draw another, frowning as the oxygen feels foreign still.

Medic nods in approval, and waves a hand over the table. “Ask zhe engineer about your trousers.”

“Thank you.” Your brow arches, but you’re not at all convinced that it couldn’t have been avoided; his eyes, after all, are still entirely too amused.

“Bitte. Welcome to Teufort.”

Chapter End Notes

I did work a little with portraying the accent in dialogue--please let me know if it isn't effective.

REVISED: 1/26/19
Your chest seems too small yet for whatever the hell the doctor put in, but the scars are little more than pink lines now, the pain minimal. One long, eight-inch line sits between your breasts, little rays branching from it where each stitch had been looped. Sensitive, still, but tightly sealed. All-in-all, better than lying in recovery for a month, you suppose.

Medic insists that you keep a plastic ball in some sort of tube afloat using only your breath before declaring you fit to depart. Breathing finally feels more natural, and the first thing you want to do upon being cleared and told to re-dress is take a bloody shower, and then, upon getting the pungent iodine scent off your body and its coppery residue off your chest, you want only to go back to your room, flop onto crisp sheets, and stare at the ceiling for about an hour. Only then will you be fit to eat.

But when you draw back the curtain, dressed and ready to put your plan into action, Medic stands genially on the other side, lips upturned in a smirk. Back straight, coat crisp, white—impossibly so, and you realize with some annoyance that he had to have donned a new one—spectacles high on the bridge of his nose. “Shall I escort you to the mess hall?”

“I’d really like to shower first.” You don’t bother adding that the others had already shown you the mess' location, and despite being... incapacitated for a few minutes, you have not forgotten.

He ignores your pointed look. “You may miss dinner in that case. It’s already eighteen-hundred hours.”

You stifle a groan. There go the pleasant dreams of a nice, hot shower on your tender incision site, but you still smell absolutely ripe, sharp with iodine and the copper of blood. Your fingers find the sticky, rusty stains showing at your collarbone. “May I have a cotton ball and some alcohol for a moment, then?”

“Ja, ja.”

After a quick alcohol bath to get the visible stains off, you join Medic by the doors, just as he flips the manila folder on his clipboard closed. He gives you a strange, sidelong glance, and you’re not sure what to make of it before he strides to an adjacent office and deposits the records on a large desk, locking the door behind him.

You don’t mention it. Instead: “Dinner?”

He nods. “Yes.” But his expression has not changed—intent, a focus you cannot pin down. "And, needless to say, anything that occurs in this room or my office…” He gestures to the now-locked door; the brass plaque on it reads simply: ‘Medic.’ No name, no indication of a PhD. “…is strictly confidential and will not be repeated. Anything you might tell me will not leave this room.”

“Except to go to the Administrator’s desk.” You frown. Surely he doesn't think you're that stupid. This is a good opportunity, not a free one.

Medic isn’t disturbed in the slightest by your remark. “Of course. But you need fear no immediate breach of confidence. Und, if you have any problems here, you may contact Miss Pauling with your concerns.”
Now this is... odd. You assumed, if anything were amiss, Miss Pauling would find you, and, you expect, no one wants that. There was no number, no point of contact beyond—

“There is a phone,” he continues. “Upstairs, on the second floor, near the stairwell. Pick it up, dial zero. You’ll reach Miss Pauling.”

After all the morbid jokes and unsubtle ribbing (no pun intended), that’s it? Have you passed some sort of test? Now that you are compatible with the system, does he actually consider you a member of the group? Had your dedication been in doubt?

Or, worse—does he anticipate trouble?

But he gives no indication, only returns your nod and strides out the door, holding it open for you to follow. You do, silent.

“Do you have any questions?” Medic asks amiably as you walk together down the sparse hall, past scuffed wood pockmarked with dents and what look suspiciously like knife-holes.

Only a thousand you aren’t sure how to broach. “What’s for dinner?”

Medic laughs outright. “Hungry, Specialist?”

“More than a little.” You’re glad the moment has passed, whatever it was. “We had lunch just outside Phoenix—that was hours ago now.”

“I don’t know what Herr Engineer has planned, but it will no doubt be satisfying.”

“Does he usually cook?”

“No, we take turns every other day. If anyone has a problem with what you have selected, they can make a sandwich.”

You chuckle. “I like that.” It sounds an awful lot like home.

The scent of something warm and sweet reaches your nose, and your stomach growls. You resist the urge to walk faster toward the half-open door at the end of the hall, fingers curling and uncurling at your sides. “Where does it come from? The food.”

The medic adjusts his glasses slightly, pushing them down the bridge of his nose, eyes fixed on the hall ahead. “We receive a shipment every two weeks of standard ingredients. At first, it was—ach—what do you call army food? In zhe cans and zhe foil.”

“Charlie-rats.”

There’s a glint in his pale eyes, and you nearly bite your tongue. Shit. That’s not common knowledge is it?

"Er... MCIs, I mean."

“Ah, yes! They shipped MCIs first.” You decide to keep your mouth shut, rather than ask why they didn’t send A- or B-rations in the first place. Perhaps he had been lying from the start, hoping you’d expose clues about your origins. Is this because he recalled your response to the soldier’s initial greeting? Perhaps you’re on the paranoid side. “We convinced Miss Pauling to see about real food, and here we are—milk, fruit, relatively fresh vegetables, lunch meats. Anything else you need, you can find in town, not that we’re exactly welcome.”
“So Miss Pauling said.” Finally an opportunity to dig back, in your best innocent tone: “Something about property damage?”

He waves a hand. “They still accept our money at the grocery market.”

You push into the mess hall; a kitchenette and long table with rickety chairs, smelling delightfully of—

“Pancakes!”

The engineer chuckles, scooping several off an iron skillet and onto a platter in the center of the table. “I’ll take that as a sign you don’t mind ’em a bit.”

The spy, sitting closest to where you stand, mutters something about bastardized crepes.

“It’s perfect!” But you freeze, grin still reaching your eyes, even as your stomach sinks somewhere under the floorboards. The spy’s eyes are unreadable, fixed and unyielding, pinning your feet where they stand.

Ah, yes. This isn’t for you. You just happen to be here.

After all, they couldn’t know. Bloody hell—you hope they can’t. You shake your head. As though enjoying the thought of pancakes—even the revelation that they may be a comfort to you—could really give away your region, your home-town. The very idea is foolish; surely the cadence of your voice would give away more. But you sober, struggling to keep the smile carefully on your lips.

“Thank you.”

The last thing you need is a breach of contract on the first day, intentional or otherwise.

“You’re welcome, darlin’. Now don’t just stand there—pick up a plate before these hooligans eat it all.”

You don’t have to be told twice. Pancakes. You pile them onto the nearest free plate, your gusto dampened by the invitation, the golden fluff, their sweet smell—a steaming stack of flapjacks.

“Gonna leave some for the rest of us, Spesh?” Scout says around a mouthful.

“Don’t pay him any mind!”

“Scout, do not talk with your mouth full!”

“Spesh?” You wrinkle your nose. “Really?”

The boy waves a hand at you and the spy, swallowing his food. “I’m workin’ on it.”

Your plate now full of delectable breakfast-for-dinner, you hesitate, looking over the table. Nine chairs. The spy sits at one end, Heavy at the other. Scout is nearest you, with two empty chairs beside him. Demoman and Soldier sit opposite. The sniper is nowhere to be seen, and Medic has not taken a seat, but rifles around the refrigerator instead.

“Sit next to me!” Adds the scout helpfully, and you stifle a sigh. Better than standing about like an idiot. “Snipes prob’ly isn’t comin’ anyway.”

You set your plate down. “Does he have something against pancakes?”
“Nah,” He laughs. “Just likes bein’ alone or somethin’.”

“He might be better inclined toward company if you weren’t so loud,” observes the spy dryly, rolling an unlit cigarette between his teeth.

Medic sets a lager at the place next to you, beside the heavy, and grabs a plate from the stack. “Beer?” he asks.

“Tea?” You return hopefully, hands resting on the back of your chair.

“Iced tea in the fridge,” calls Engineer over his shoulder.

“You open the white, subtly curved unit—it looks as though it’s seen better days, perhaps before being impacted by a rocket—and quickly find the pitcher.

“Glasses’r in the cabinet to your left.”

“Thank you, Demoman.” The title seems unwieldly on your tongue. Do the others have trouble identifying one another by job description each day?

It doesn’t matter. He gives an genial smile, and you suddenly feel a little more comfortable scrounging about their refrigerator and cabinets.

You pull one down, fill it, and replace the pitcher among several bottles of beer, a carton of milk, and several brown, unlabeled bottles not unlike the one Demoman drank from earlier—and, you notice with a quick glance over your shoulder—very like the one he was drinking now. Your brows draw tight in a frown; there’s barely a clink at the table behind you.

An awkward silence has fallen over the mess hall, disturbed not at all as you take a seat at last between Medic and Scout, who steadily pours syrup over his pancakes until the plate becomes a soupy mess. The others eye you none too subtly over their meals. Your hands are slick with sweat as you grab a fork and knife from a pile beside the platter.

Why. Things had been going fine.

The responsibility of carrying on a conversation shouldn’t be yours, should it? You cast your eyes to one side, and the heavy politely returns to his pancakes. The medic, on the other hand, stares openly, brows arched, neck of the beer-bottle pressed between his fingers. You shiver, and try keeping your eyes on your food instead, laying claim to the syrup as soon as Scout gets his hands off it.

“So—” The demoman fixes his eye on you, and your hands almost lose track of the syrup, dripping steadily onto your plate. “—tell us what you’ve got, lass.”

You manage to tip the bottle up before things get messy. “What I’ve got?”

“Aye—your weapons, lass—assumin’ you don’t go in fists swinging. Not tha’ there’s anything wrong with that.” He winked. Not a blink. A definite wink, as though he’d long since grown accustomed to telegraphing his body language to convey the gesture.

“Well.” You set the bottle of syrup aside. The rest are attentive, now, open, and you catch the inside of your cheek between your teeth. “Shouldn’t we… see if anyone else is coming to eat?”

Engineer steps between you and the Scout to put more pancakes on the table. “Pyro already got their plate, and Sniper probably won’t show ’til we’re gone.”
“So, out with it!” The soldier clanks his fork on the table. “What’s your layout?”

Layout.

Loadout?

“Well—my favorite is my Lancaster-Charles.” You clear your throat unnecessarily, and immediately feel as though everyone at the table knows it was superfluous. “A—uh—howdah pistol.”

“British weapon,” Heavy observes. “Not common military issue—is old.”

“Strange choice, considering we’re not shooting tigers in the colonies.” Spy lazily pinched the unlit cigarette.

Scout stuffs another forkful into his mouth. “That Heavy’s close enough to a tiger if ya ask me. Or maybe a bear.”

That earns a round of chuckles.

You taste your pancakes with amusement. Damn—you haven’t had such a meal in quite some time, not since you left home. Fluffy and golden and sweet. Warm like a summer afternoon.

“So you’ve got a big pistol—what else?” demands the boy.

“A ballistic shield,” you say more readily. Why conceal things now? At least they aren’t asking personal questions. “Collapsible; experimental, according to Miss Pauling, but as much as I’ve used it, it doesn’t seem to have any problems—doesn’t catch or anything.”

“Almost as good as running in bare-knuckles!” The demoman tips his bottle back with a grin.

You’re emboldened. “I think you’ll like the third one best—you’ll likely appreciate it.”

“Well, go on, lass!”

A grin. “Gyrojet Conversion Pistol.”

Heavy’s face lit up immediately. “Is new! Have not gotten my hands on one yet; may I see it, please?”

His excitement is contagious. “Sure—you can come by after dinner if you’d like, or you can see in the morning?” You notice you’ve powered through half your pancakes already, and there’s no small amount of relief when Engineer steps over to fill the platter again.

“Ya mind cluing the rest of us in, if you’re done geekin’?” Scout grumbles.

You twist your fork, an extra energy to the movement. “Basically, it shoots tiny, bullet-sized rockets with extremely low recoil, so I can use it with my shield.”

“WHY USE TINY ROCKETS WHEN YOU CAN HAVE A BIG ROCKET?”

You try to ignore the saliva on your forearm and pray it missed your plate. “Well, Soldier, why would I have big rockets if you already have a rocket launcher? We don’t need two.”

The soldier taps his chin. “You have a point, maggot!”
You can feel a long day coming tomorrow, if the man insists on maintaining the drill sergeant routine.

Demoman looks a little blissful. “Bullet-sized explosives?”

“13mm-style chamber.” A shrug. “It’s not an explosive so much as a rocket-propelled bullet. Light chamber—and I can convert the pistol into an assault rifle with a detachable barrel and stock. Lightweight and ready to go.” You grin.

“How accurate?” asks Heavy.

“At about twenty-five yards, you start to lose it, but with a ballistic shield—”

“You can get right on top o’ th’ bastards!” Demoman slaps the table, cackling, and takes another drag from the mouth of his brown bottle.

“That’s the idea.” You reach for more pancakes and refill your plate. “The microjets build acceleration over time, so the best place for me to fire is mid-range.”

Medic nods quietly, finishing his lager, plate still empty. “Perhaps you should accompany Herr Scout for the first hour. See how well you can defend him to the point—he’s fast enough to get in and out of range, while you hold position.”

You nod, trying not to pour the syrup too dejectedly. Might as well resign yourself to a very long day tomorrow. Of course, you ought to give him the benefit of doubt; perhaps the boy will be a bit different on the field.

“Aw, man, this is gonna be great, you just watch!” You nearly choke on your next bite as Scout slings an arm around your shoulders. “You get to watch me work! Trust me, I’m the best team playa’ here. You’re gonna love it, Spesh—”

Or not.

You glance sidelong at Medic, who simply grins, giving a half-hearted shrug as he helps himself to the platter. Jerk. You reach for your tea—and very nearly choke on that, too; syrup and pancakes and sweet tea is almost as bad a decision as pancakes and beer.

You should have bloody well known. If the southerner knew where the tea was, then he made the tea, and when he said ‘tea’, it was sweetened iced tea, no doubt about it. But even as you try to get the sickening amount of sugar and syrup out of your mouth, you can’t help but feel that much better for a little taste of home. A home, at any rate.

Chapter End Notes

For a fairly campy canon, I’m doing an unusual amount of research.

The weapons cited herein are quite real, and, rather period-accurate. The Lancaster Charles howdah pistol, is, however, about 100 years old at this time--though I imagine an improved version has been crafted for the Specialist. Who doesn’t want a four-barrel pistol with enough power to stop a full-grown tiger?

The Gyrojet, on the other hand, was very much developed in the 1960s, though it was
not immensely popular, and never made it as a standard-issue weapon in the US. There were assault rifles, flare launchers, and derringers made with this technology as well, and few remain today.

MREs (Meals, Ready to Eat) weren’t the packaged meal of choice for the US military until 1981. Starting in 1958, troops were given wet food in cans (instead of the dehydrated meals that exist now), with a brown, foil accessory pack. They were commonly called "C-rations" (or "Charlie-rats") by the troops, though they were not the C-rations that had existed before, among A-, B-, D-, and K-rations, which ranged from fresh, to kitchen-ready, to high-energy food. Instead, they became MCIs--Meal, Combat, Individual. ...You see, I was just going to have the Specialist reply: "MREs," but this is more accurate to my 1969ish setting.

The more you know. (Research is my jam.)

REVISED 1/27/19
Morning comes early, and with it, the relief that you spent the last month rousing yourself before the sun in preparation. Pale, grey light filters in the window, washing your uniform—a high-collared jacket that buttons left over the breast, short, black trousers, and high, black, steel-toed boots—into a sickly sort of coral, rather than its usual brilliant team RED. Next, a quiet breakfast, knuckles white around your steaming mug. And then, finally, at six-thirty precisely, you fetch your weapons and report to the Spawn Room.

Half the base faces the gravel pit, which is—as you understand it—the point of fighting this private war. Most days will be spent spawning from the western room: a small complex, containing a vaguely capsule-shaped machine (respawn, of course) and personal weapon lockers, followed by a short, steel tunnel leading to the quarry: the war-zone proper. Others, you’ll report to the south-facing spawn, an identical room linked to a sealed office, in which—as you understand it (this a common disclaimer for your life now, as most of the reports you were given in briefing had more black marks than an FBI file)—important documents regarding technologies and team tactics are kept. A maze of underground storage areas then leads to the space where the RED and BLU bases connect—a covered bridge, dirt, and a water source that provides the bases’ running water and electricity; you’ve studied the maps extensively.

But, the only thing that matters now is the former: the map that had been labelled “Badlands.” You close your eyes and envision the choke points, five in total. Today, you will be taking them back.

The sniper and spy are both already present when you arrive. The former gives a nod, which you return, and the latter… merely lights his cigarette. No matter; you still haven’t finished reviewing your mental image of the terrain.

You stop beside a bench and deposit your weapons. Muscle memory brings the Lancaster’s holster to buckle around your thigh as you envision every detail of the Badlands you can recall until, at last, you sigh, and force yourself to focus on preparing properly. On your belt, there is room for a stock, a barrel extension, and your Gyrojet pistol. The latter belongs higher on your waist, not long enough to interfere with the Lancaster. Its accessories, on the other hand, slide across your front, tuck just above your left trouser pocket, secure and out of the way. The ballistic shield—now a little Kevlar rectangle no larger than the cardboard box your boots had been delivered in—clasps at the small of your back. Perfectly fitted and engineered, indeed.
“You ‘bout ready?” Scout asks, tapping the edge of a baseball bat on each of his heels. He’s slung a short shotgun over his shoulder, belted a pistol on his hip.

A nod. Your eyes are drawn to his headset—remarkably like the sort of noise-cancelling monstrosities you’d find on someone working with airplanes—but this set keeps one ear free to his surroundings.

“Oh, yeah—” He snaps his fingers. “We gotta get you a thing.”

Before you can ask, the engineer presents you with a much smaller device, one that fits right against your ear. “Here we are; this way, we don’t have to yell at each other all the time. Press the button on the edge there when you’ve got a message fer us; you don’t have to hold it, but you’ve gotta press again to stop. Otherwise, we’ll hear every nasty thing you’ve got to say to those BLUs until you hit respawn.”

Your fingers find the button. “One click to talk, a second to stop?”

“That’s the idea.”

Over the loudspeakers: [Mission begins in twenty minutes.] You blink.

“’s just the Announcer—or the Administrator… whatever ya wanna call her. She keeps score and stuff,” Scout supplies.

Scorekeeping. The money has you in the habit of never asking too many questions, but... there are so many things that don't quite add up.

You take a seat on one of the benches before the boy tries to strike up another conversation; the fewer questions that come to your mind the better. It's time to keep quiet, do the work, and earn your place. It's easy to be content watching as the other mercenaries file in and take a moment at their lockers. The heavy carries his minigun with him from the base—presumably because it is far too large to fit in the standard locker. He sets it further down your bench gingerly, never out of his sight, as though it were a child in need of close, constant care. From the locker, he draws a shotgun, looking comically small in his giant palms, like it is no more than an overlarge pistol. He greets you quietly, but pays little mind, checking over every inch of his weapons.

The demoman, despite his heavy drinking last night, seems to suffer no hangover whatsoever this morning as he strides straight and graceful to his locker. “Mornin’!” Two weapons that appear to be different styles of grenade launcher and a third—some sort of club—are drawn from its depths... and then a bottle that he immediately tips to his lips. Perhaps the man is simply never sober; it would certainly explain the mysteriously missing hangover.

Medic is next, medi-gun already strapped to his back, as he had promised yesterday. It seems slightly different from the healing mechanism in the medical suite, but the—you decide to call it a “nozzle”, like the bit on the end of a firehose—the nozzle is very much the same, this time portable with the aid of a bulky power supply mounted like a backpack. From his locker, he draws a vicious bone-saw and a gun that... You can’t suppress a shiver, creeping along your spine and prickling your arms: it appears to be loaded with hypodermic needles. The German moves more slowly than he did in the lab, but carries himself as though the medi-gun weighs absolutely nothing.

Medic is last to arrive, toting a flamethrower, each step a rolling bounce on the thick soles of their boots, mask and flame-retardant suit already on. A pistol—or flare gun, perhaps—joins their arsenal, alongside a fireman’s axe. Apt? Or ironic? The idea of a fireman wielding a flamethrower takes you back to Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451, and you cut that thought as short as possible.
“Now, I think we can all agree that if RED’s giving a new class system a try,” Engineer addresses the whole room, “so is BLU. Better be on our guard.”

You frown. “How do we know what they’ll be experimenting with?”

“Surely you were briefed,” the spy scoffs.

You rise from your place on the bench. “I know both teams have the same classes. But if mine is experimental—”

He blows a puff of smoke in your direction. You refuse to cough. “They already know and seek to match it.”

“You’ll be seein’ a double of yourself on the field,” Engie explains. “Be prepared. Color’ll help, but the first time, it might be disconcertin’ to shoot something what looks like you—but you’ve gotta move past it.”

You think wryly of every time in your life you’ve deigned to look in a mirror. “Shouldn’t be a problem.”

Your brow furrows. Could it hurt to ask? It is pertinent, after all... “Is it psychological warfare? An illusion?”

There’s a collective shrug.

“Somethin’ like that. For all we know, when they look at us, they see themselves. I don’t know if it’s about keeping identities secret or trying to cause hullabaloo—just be prepared.”

“So, are you ready to take this gravel pit, maggot?” demands the soldier.

You nod firmly—as though there’s really a choice. “Ready when you are.”

“You only have a week.” It’s the first you’ve heard the sniper speak since yesterday afternoon. “Betta make it good.”

Scout bounces on the balls of his feet. “All right! Stick with me, an’ you’ll do great, Spesh!”

“Could you perhaps… not call me ‘Spesh’?”

He shrugs. “Yeah, better not to nickname ya when you might just disappear, right?”

Your jaw clenches.

Scout bounces on the balls of his feet. “All right! Stick with me, an’ you’ll do great, Spesh!”

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He shrugs. “Yeah, better not to nickname ya when you might just disappear, right?”

Your jaw clenches.
“I can handle anything.”

[Four.]

“Tch—

[Three.]

“—we’ll see, mademoiselle.”

[One: go!]

Nine mercenaries bolt out of the gate like horses at the starting gun, and you, close on Scout’s heels, draw the ballistic shield from your back, fix it tight on your forearm. Folded, the shield is barely enough to cover your torso, but with a firm flick—it cracks into place. A black, fortified wall of Kevlar and Plexiglas—just enough of a window for you to peer through. But there appear to be no enemies in sight just yet, as the sniper and spy peel away from the group.

The little bugger just ahead is fast, you’ll give him that, and dry, desert air presses down against the Kevlar, keeping firm pressure upon your arm, dragging your body. Should’ve left the damn thing closed if you expected to keep up. Scout dances ahead, turns the corner alone, and your heart hammers hard against your chest, almost loud enough to drown out his whoop, and the first, deafening shot.

The rhythm of your blood stutters, hand closes around the grip of the Gyrojet, tugs it free from your hip. You lead with your shield-arm as the shots continue in earnest, and skid around the corner after Scout.

Ahead: hard-packed dirt; a low-roofed wooden structure houses a silver point, showing bright blue—how long has this fight continued, a stalemate, that it can be marked like the corners of a game-board, its mercenaries the pieces, pawns scattered along the open, orange yard?

Scout doubles back. “Too slow, fatty!”

There’s a retort on your lips… and then you see the BLU heavy, every bit as large as that of your own team, a spitting image, spinning six barrels of sure death. Your knees meet packed dirt, hard, set your shield firmly, covered on one side by Kevlar, on the other by the building’s corner at your shoulder. “Scout!”

“I got ya!”

He ducks behind you as the bullets hail, sending tremors along your forearm, but you’re braced—alive, alive, oh Almighty—

“Sp—” Saliva on the back of your neck.

“What—”

“Welcome, mon ami.”

Vomit. All over the floor. Head spinning. Floor—ceiling—concrete—aluminum—wood—gunpowder. Heave. Your arms tremble; drop to your elbows. Your nerves are on fire. Electricity along your skin. It’s bile, on the floor; your stomach—breakfast was—

[“Where the hell is the specialist? I left her right out—”]
“THAT MAGGOT OUGHT TO BE ON THE FRONT LINE.”

“Does it matter? We can win regardless; let her stew.”

Your teeth clench against the smooth tones in your earpiece. Mon ami. You strike the floor, weak, blinking water from your eyes—you’re a fucking mess. Kneeling in a pool of bile and tears, all trembling limbs and aching head. The last memory is... the voice. The BLU spy—not your own. Of course. It—

“Specialist. Specialist. Spezialist!”

You press the earpiece with trembling fingers. “Yes?”

“How is zhe respawn sickness?”

“It’s shit.”

He’s laughing. “You’ll grow accustomed.”

“First time’s the worst, lass!”

“Now gather yourself and get out here—we’ve captured the first point. Go right from zhe respawn doors.”

“Ok,” you croak, and press the button once more. Ass. You spit on the concrete, grimacing, pushing to your knees, then onto shaking legs. You draw a deep breath.

Well, your nerves don’t appear to be firing all at once. But you do smell of vomit.

Fuck.

You clamp down on the urge to heave again and carefully, with slowly strengthening steps, move for the double-doors. Your weapons are precisely as you had readied them, on hips and thigh.

Right now, you’re beyond wondering exactly how.

When you reach the left hall, you draw the shield from your back—but this time, you leave it compact along your forearm, settled and gliding with the breeze as you begin a steady jog, then heighten the rhythm to a sprint. It’s as though the gunfire had not ceased since that first shot: no sound but explosions, whistling rockets, the distinct crack of a pistol.

“Aboot time!”

The demoman backpedals across the field to your side—the next point is up a set of rickety stairs, upon which you can just see the brim of Sniper’s hat. With a snap, your shield is at full height, and your ears strain to filter out the noise. Scout scrambles around the building—a shot ricochets off the corner of your Kevlar and you duck behind, flinching. Too much movement through the window—red, blue—an explosion, and the ground trembles.

Demoman crouches with you, and still he has to shout. “Tha’s not our Sniper up top! Scout’s gonna try tae hit the stairs, draw him and whoever else is up there out and down—I’ve set up some stickies. If it works, it’ll blow ‘em sky-high! Then, we rush. Cover my back as we go!”

You nod. But silence in the midst of such a din feels foolish, so—“Yessir!”

He laughs, a raucous sound. “I’m not a sir, lass!” The demo thumps you on the back, and your
shield rocks against cracked dirt. “I—”

Three, rapid-fire explosions, and you draw the Gyrojet from your side.

“NOW!” He’s already moving.

You scramble up after him, turning a tight arc, scanning the field. Scout, Demo ahead, dashing for the stairs, cackling and whooping like madmen. From the corner of your eye: blue—you draw your shield tight, fire—

The bullet whistles, whizzes, strikes the BLU soldier full in the chest, but not before your shield shudders with the force of a shotgun blast.

Breathe, breathe, fire.

He drops, hissing, and you swear you can hear his faltering curses. Blood blossoms across his coat, blue becomes purple, maroon, red. A gurgle. Dead.

Breath leaves your lips in a gust. Heat presses upon your head from a merciless sun.

“Spesh, get up ‘ere!”

Your feet find the stairs, creaking. There are scorch marks, and there are… bits. You try not step on them as you climb in reverse, shield covering each step. Practiced, easy.

You find yourself overlooking the complex, plumes of fire and explosions close, but their causes are not immediately seen; red and blue uniforms scattered about the field. Blood soaking into thirsty, cracked soil.

A hand on your shoulder. “I’ve got the stairs, lass—cover Scout on th’ point!”

Automatic reflex brings you to the hot edge of the silver point, a simple desire to follow orders; you kneel just in front of the scout, standing with his shotgun at the ready. Nimble fingers draw the barrel and folding stock from your side, snap and screw the implements into place—your Gyrojet becomes a rifle in seconds, braced above black Kevlar.

There’s an enemy scout rushing the structure, and you fire—miss four times, connect once, and the boy shudders, keeps running, blood streaming down his arm. Fire again, reload, crouching low, clicking the clip into place as your shield shudders, and crack! Through the Plexiglas window, you see the BLU scout fall, unmoving, as you return the barrel of your Gyrojet to its place. Two steps behind the corpse is your team’s Soldier, waving cheerfully, rocket launcher tucked under one arm. He takes a position out of sight.

When you look again, there’s only a pool of quickly drying blood in the rusty soil where the BLU scout’s body had been. It’s almost a relief.

The din of your heart is softer now.

“’bout another thirty seconds!”

Until this point is considered won and the team is able to move on to the next, you suppose. The immediate horizon shows no sign of BLUs yet—

“Bloody hell—”

An explosion crashes behind you—too close: the breeze stirs your hair, and you crane your neck
around—

“Hold it!” Scout pushes off your shoulder to find Demo on the steps, clutching one arm close to his side, swearing absolutely blue—

“—fuckin’—no—stand on the POINT, ye git!”

CRACK! CRACK!

Demoman tumbles backward off the wall, hands ineffectually clasping blood and skin and tattered cloth—

It isn't like a mirror, not really, as your blood runs suddenly ice-cold under your skin. You almost don't recognize her, your very own visage twisting in a grin that brings a phantom pull to your lips in strange, displaced muscle memory. Fingers, long and crooked and so familiar clasp around a Lancaster-Charles, shield almost ineffectual on her arm, commanded only as the two-handed weapon allows, covering her non-dominant side. Eyes flick to your own hands, one supporting your shield, the other tightly wrapped around the Gyrojet, hardly able to believe--but the cuffs at your wrists are red.

Hers are blue.

“They told me I’d see you.” Her voice—so very like yours; confident, hard syllables from your lips, twisted in a cruel smile. Your mouth goes dry—

BANG.

[The control point is being contested!]

Buckshot throws itself against the BLU specialist’s shield with a clatter, scatters all over the point, and Scout pumps the lever on his scattergun. “Don’t think just because you’re a girl, I’m gonna—”

CRACK!

Your ears are ringing, moisture trickling down your cheeks, bitter scent of iron in your nose.

“Headshot.”

The wet on your face is—oh god.

She snaps the howdah open, flicks four bullets in without missing a beat.

You launch yourself forward, drawing your shield over your head, rifle dragging behind, heels cracking on the scorching metal of the point, forearm nearly giving way as you and your double tumble, as the edge of your ballistic shield catches on hers, and she growls.

“Shit—”

Tangled limbs.

CRACK!

You don’t think the shot did anything but prolong the incessant ringing. Roll, find the edge of the building, and—

Snap.
Her heel breaks the skin of your cheek, cracks against bone. You splutter, and respond in kind, slamming your shield down on both her legs, drag yourself upon it, ignore the twinge in your arm under the straps, ready your Gyrojet—

**CRACK!**

Pain, searing, choking, blood and sweat dripping into your eyes, and you aim, bleary—her body is right there, and she can’t move—

You squeeze the trigger. Fire, fire, fire, fire.

*RED has regained control.*

She’s stopped struggling, and you let yourself fall, head dropping onto Kevlar. You set your gun aside, press the sweating palm across your eyes until you can make out the corpse under you, face-down, twisted to one side, bleeding scarlet through her coat. Smells of gunpowder and iron. Four holes. Bone shows white.

Your stomach heaves, but you force the bile back.

Your cheek stings, half-numb as your body tingles in heady waves. Shock. Your counter-part’s bullet is buried in your shoulder, and there’s no way you’ll lift the shield without doing further damage. The pain is still keen, blood draining onto the Kevlar and Plexiglas, ruby in the morning sun.


Fucking hell.

*Medic!*

The ringing in your ears subsides, and you lift your head—and immediately drop it when your shoulder screams a protest, one that might have manifested on your lips. You’re beyond caring.

[“Specialist, ya’ll have the point—what’s your status?”]

*Medic—* More blood and saliva on your chin and shield.

You take a deep breath, and the edges of your vision darken. “MEDI—” Coughing, spluttering, no good. Your ears tell you there’s a battle raging somewhere; of course he can’t hear you.

[“Specialist?”]


[“Ten-four, ma’am—hold tight.”]

You let your eyes drift closed against the sun’s glare on the point—just for a moment.

“Keep your eyes open, Specialist! This does no good if you are already dead.”

You pry them open to a familiar hum, a pair of black jackboots, the blood- and dust-stained tail of a white coat. He kneels, tilts your head up with a gloved hand beneath your chin. “Medic?”

*Ja, ja*—hold still. Zhis will be quick, but it will not be painless.”
“Wh—”

The beam of the medi-gun is hot this time, boiling, your skin tugging, wrenching, *screaming*—and then—

You breathe, only lingering traces of copper on your lips.

“Ausgezeichnet.”

RED Team has captured the point.

“Come!” He offers a hand, and you take it, pulling yourself up on unsteady legs. The corpse of your double, you note, is gone, and you stoop to retrieve your rifle. When you straighten, you’re confronted with an infectious grin: “We have another point to capture.”

It *might* be a post-healing boost of serotonin talking, or, perhaps, the adrenaline that comes with a small victory, but you find yourself suddenly ready to do it all again.

Chapter End Notes

Transl: Ausgezeichnet - Excellent

Please do let me know if the action sequences are clear, since they're going to be a fairly large part of the fic—I want to make sure they're enjoyable. In fact, if there's anything that could be revised (I have looked over previous chapters and tweaked a few things in the meantime), please let me know!

REVISED: 2/16/19
The thirty minutes set aside for lunch are the shortest of your life. At the sound of the bell signaling the end of the first round, the mercenaries each headed for their lockers and produced all manner of sandwiches, canned soups, and bottled water. You immediately realize two things: first, that you have not been assigned a locker, and likely will not unless your contract is extended, and second, that you have no food.

Your stomach protests this fact with a muffled gurgle, and you sink, resigned, onto the nearest bench, then proceed to unbuckle your shield and set it aside. You stretch your legs and twist your hips in an attempt to stave off cramps, blood still thrumming hard through legs that do not yet realize that it's time for rest.

Nearby, Scout slurps some soup directly out of its aluminum can, and you press your head between your hands, deciding to study the distinctly inedible concrete instead as your stomach calls for something—anything. You frown. There’s no way in hell you’re asking if you have time to run upstairs; hopefully they just won’t notice you were too stupid to think about packing a damn lunch. And after Medic had suggested it yesterday, too.

Yes, you can swallow your hunger before your pride; it goes down easier.

And there’s a sandwich dangling just under your nose, between your gaze and the concrete floor. You blink. ...Still there. You follow the arm offering the tasty morsel to find the engineer, smiling gently. “Take the sandwich, darlin’.”


He chuckles, waving you off. “I figured. So I made a couple, just in case.” He produces another and joins you on the bench. “Well, go on! We ain’t got much time.”

You both start in. It’s turkey. Maybe chicken. Truly, the sandwich tastes all the better for being shot at and healed and exhausted and half-starved after respawn this morning.

“Now, for tomorrow,” the engineer says between bites, “I suggest you make somethin’ tonight, and bring it down with ya in the mornin’. It’ll keep ‘till lunchtime; you can use my locker if y’like, ‘til the week is up.”

“Thank you.” Now you really don’t know what to say. You—well—you’re touched. He doesn’t
have to go out of his way for you. Hell, nobody in this room even knows your name!

“T’m—I... thank you. I mean it.”

“’S no trouble,” he assures in that steady drawl.

There’s a silence, interrupted only by the others’ conversations, hushed in this moderate space. You’re not sure you want to strain to hear them—after all, the biggest point of conversation must be you. Namely, the embarrassing amount of time you’ve spent in respawn this morning. Eight times you’ve awoken here, each more tiresome than the last.

“So—” you say, to occupy the hush “—your turret. It’s... neat.”

Oh, boy, you’re on your A-game today, aren’t you?

But the engineer just nods, gaze distant. “Sure is. Designed ‘er myself.”

You inwardly heave a relieved sigh. Either he isn’t much for conversation, or he’s the most polite person you’ve met in your life. “That’s impressive—how long did it take?”

He finishes his sandwich, considering. “Oh, the first one... I reckon the prototype took roundabout three weeks to finish—it had some problems, but another week or so took care of those.” He passes a fresh bottle of water, and you give a grateful smile.

“Seems like a short amount of time.”

He shrugs. “I try to be as efficient as possible with all my projects. Y’see—”

[Take places to begin the next round.] You almost drop the last bite of your sandwich when the speaker system crackles, and hope nobody saw their potential teammate flinch at something so small.

If Engineer saw, he makes no motion, just finishes the last of his own meal, nods, tips his hardhat. “We best get to it.”

In minutes, things become precisely as chaotic as they’d been earlier. Scout runs circles around the first point, desperately trying to keep RED’s tenuous hold on the position, dodging a BLU soldier’s rockets, stumbling, already bloody from shrapnel. Your demoman has been sent to respawn, and Spy is nowhere to be seen. Medic is busy somewhere in the alley to your left with Heavy and your own team’s soldier—no help there. And the damned sun is absolutely merciless, sweat beading on every exposed inch of skin, wicked away only where your clothes cling close.

Nothing for it but to rush the soldier, you suppose, and bring your shield to the ready, prepared to tackle the rocket-happy blue bastard to the cracked dirt—

**Thup.**

A bullet severs the soldier’s spine, and your eyes follow the angle to Sniper’s silhouette nearly twenty feet back, in a second-story window. You nearly wave a signal of appreciation, but a voice in your ear shuffles you forward—[“Get t’Scout!”] You make the push, free from any pursuit of rockets, and duck into the low shelter beside the boy.

“Nice ‘a you to show!” he grunts, pumping his shotgun, and the din from Heavy’s whirring weapon nearly drowns out the click.
Both the Russian giant and Medic guard the by-way ahead, beating unseen adversaries back with cover fire, the miraculous medigun healing every injury before it can even bleed. Heavy stands, unflinching, bellowing a great, joyous war-cry to the heavens, commanding more firepower than any one man ought to be able to control with his own two hands, and Medic holds just behind, white coat stained with scarlet flecks of blood, its tail whipping gracefully around his legs, each movement deliberate, every step deceptively light across soil and sand. It’s… well… it’s bloody well fantastic.

_BANG._

“You gonna watch the meat-shield all day or what? Enemy Pyro and a Demo comin’ up left—nine o’clock!”

The Gyrojet is in hand before he even finishes speaking. You crouch, spot the BLUs—coming up fast, indeed—and hold position.

“How much heat can that thing take?” Scout draws his pistol and fires three times at the demoman. His flak jacket soaks up most of the damage—but a bloodstain shows on the blue fabric at his shoulder, not that it slows snarling the man at all. You block a grenade with your shield, send it bouncing away, but the blast rings in your ears.

“It’ll take enough!” you shout over the incessant ringing.

Scout’s mouth is moving. You’re not very good at reading lips between trying to hold your ground and keeping an eye on the enemies almost at the point, but you think you’ve gotten the gist—“Pyro’s yours!”—just as he dives from the shelter with his scattergun.

_Somewhere, a voice—The Voice—echoes: [The control point is being contested!]_

And the pyro closes in. Expressionless black holes form a dead gaze in a mask too like some great, black skull, an uncanny contrast with the cheerful sky-blue rubber of their suit. The pyro pumps their trigger, no touch of emotion in that empty black. You crouch as the flames rush, flaring and flickering, to wash over your shield in a stomach-turning inferno.

“Going in hot” has never meant half so much to you as it does in this moment, nothing behind your Plexiglas but white-hot plumes of certain doom.

The Kevlar heats, but holds.

It’s only a moment before the pyro moves, left and right, attempting to flank you with that steady blaze, but you’re ready, twisting on your heels, tilting the riot shield just so, holding steady, refusing to be pushed even as the air is sucked drier than you thought possible, fogged with kerosene and biting heat. There’s no room, no way to see around the column of flame and Kevlar to find Scout—successful or dead, you have no way of knowing.

The crackle and rush of flames can’t drown out the muffled frustrations behind that mask, a stream of distant growls and hissing curses beneath twin filters. By the time you realize this signals a wrathful new tactic, it’s too late.

Flames curl around your shield’s black edges as the pyro rushes with the force of an angered hound, all blunt, forward trauma and gnashing teeth in tongues of flame. Knocked flat on your ass, the only thing to do with the weight of a mercenary and flamethrower baring on your body is to brace both boots as high under the shield as you can and kick, tucked into a ball, all the force your prone body can muster.
You’re screaming again. But your arm tugs free of the shield’s straps, and all goes tumbling away—pyro, flamethrower, Kevlar—and you throw yourself to the right, roll desperately down, off scorching metal onto hot sand and soil, smoke in your lungs, arms burning, the lingering traces of singed hair offending your nose. Up, up legs firm on the cracked ground—you’ve lost the Gyrojet, but you yank the Lancaster from its holster. Orient, find the target—

CRACK. CRACK.

The suited figure slumps, ceases stirring. You can hear the hiss of the gas tank. You cough, blink lingering tears and dust from your eyes. Adrenaline sets your limbs trembling as your feet take your place on the point, fingers of one hand caressing the barrel of your pistol.

“Nice job.” Scout jogs to your side just as the Administrator announces the point reclaimed.

The acrid scent of burned hair won’t leave your nose. “And what the hell were you doing all that time?” You bend to retrieve the shield—quite charred, but structurally sound—and Gyrojet. Both find their places on your belt, as the weight of the howdah in your hand is the only thing keeping your fingers remotely steady.

The boy scowls. “Oh, high ‘n mighty already, huh?”

You open your mouth to apologize—you’d just had a near-death experience, after all (one that would have been horrendously slow and painful at that), and it had sharpened your tongue—but he barrels on. “The demo gave me trouble, alright? Now let’s move before more show up. There’s a back way they might not use; we can get ahead.”

A quick nod, and he starts off, taking care that you are close behind. You dodge around the now-captured structure and double back near a concrete wall, close alongside some long, wooden storage shed. The shadowed enclave is a relief, but the inside of your mouth still seems caked with dust, each breath a hot, choking irritation. Scout slows near the building’s far edge, and steps back against the concrete bricks as you approach in his wake.

“Check the corner—I’ll cover our rear. If things are clear, we’ll make the push.”

“Can do.” You creep ahead, hands wrapped around the howdah, sidling carefully along the aging wood’s edge—it’s hot on your back, even in shadow. You take a breath, and peer around.

The BLU sniper covers a corner across the way, but appears not to notice your slight movement, focused down his sights on a skirmish between your team’s heavy, who has abandoned his mini-gun for his mighty fists, and the enemy scout, wildly swinging his bat, dodging this way and that. The path to the point, should no one else arrive, appears clear.

“Scout—”

Click.

The barrel of a revolver, pressed cold on your forehead.

“Any words before I send you back to respawn, mademoiselle?”

You jaw clenches. “Spy.” Fingers twist, useless, around the handle of your pistol, wanting nothing more than to drop it and put your fist straight through that blue balaclava.

You’re sure the intent shows on your face.
But he only grins. “Ah, yes—I’m afraid I did not properly introduce myself before. Spy for Builder’s League United, at your service—of a sort.”

Every bone in your body screams to fling yourself forward, to crack this bastard’s head on the concrete wall behind him in payment for that first meeting. The metal pressed between your eyes says otherwise. Instead, you think back… where had things gone wrong this time? “It was never Scout.”

“Non, I’m afraid not. He took care of our Demo well enough, but I took care of him.”

You know you cannot raise your Lancaster to a suitable angle of injury before he can pull the trigger. This piece of shit’s just playing. Extending your life as long as he can for the sake of proving his superiority. “I’ll be back,” you hiss, "with a bullet just for you.”

He laughs outright. “Bold, but I think not, chérie. I have business besides a game of cat-and-mouse with a second-rate hireling.” The spy presses the revolver so hard that you can feel the imprint of the barrel on your skin, its steel edge digging a ring between your eyes. “Now, you are ready, non?”

Your teeth creak, blood racing hard beneath your skin. “Yes.”

You close your eyes.

You’re kneeling on the floor, heaving, every nerve sparking, on fire. You curl your fingers against the concrete, nails scratching and catching, and try to focus as your stomach seizes again. There’s no trace of any earlier mess, but you waste no time in replacing it. You shiver, trying with everything you have to keep the rest of your stomach’s contents down.

“Your brain is testing your nerves. It’s very like waking up to learn you were sleeping on your arm, ja?”

You spit, and blink blearily around the room—Medic stands only a few feet away, tall and composed as ever. Had he just come through respawn like that? “To an extreme,” you agree, and spit again. Shit. Needles crawling from head to toe, each beat of your heart pressing them tight beneath your skin. “Yeah. I… hadn’t considered.” Your nails dig into your palms as you try to force your stomach still, pressing a hissing breath between your teeth. Out of the watery corner of your eye, you see the doctor nodding, observing your misfortune. Exactly how long has he been there? You squeeze your eyes shut against the next wave of nausea.

“It won’t stop, no matter how many times you’ve gone through respawn, but, eventually, you’ll know what to expect, and it will not be as troublesome as once it was. Zhe vomiting, on the other hand, will cease at some point—let me know when it does.” A ring of genuine interest in his tone. Never pity. “I’m trying to determine whether it is a reaction to overstimulation and pain, that, once you’ve become used to the sensation, is no longer triggered, or if it is a mechanism not unlike the electric sensations—or something else entirely. Perhaps psychological.”

“Mmhm.” You push yourself upright, on your knees, and open your eyes to find Medic peering down at you.

“Shall we?”

You draw a deep breath, nod, and stand, trying not to let him see the last tremors as they leave your body. Medic nods, slight, and draws a canteen from his belt. “Drink.”

Water. Lukewarm, but you feel worlds better without the grit and acid sticking to your teeth.
“Thank you.”

He nods, replaces the canteen, and draws the wicked weapon you had eyed this morning. “Syringe Gun,” he supplies, his grin baring straight, white teeth. The fluorescents glare on his spectacles.

Your mouth goes a bit dry.

“Due to your… particular feelings about medicine, you may want to take care to avoid my BLU counterpart—for this reason.” The Syringe Gun clicks as a hypodermic needle slides into place, golden liquid catching the artificial light. “It is quite painful, and, should the plunger depress, you’ll find your limbs quite useless. Among other things.”

You have no idea how to reply to that, but you’re quite sure you don’t want to know about other things. “Yeah. Thanks.”

Medic chuckles, and leads the way toward the field. “How did you die zhis time?” he asks over the distant din of battle.

Your blood runs hot, lips parting in a sneer. “Spy,” you grumble. The smug curl of his mouth is fixed in your memory. “Damn bastard cornered me and put a bullet between my eyes.”

“Ah.” The doctor considers you over his spectacles. “And he was the first this morning to kill you, ja?”

There’s a thrumming in your skull, one dangerously close to fury. “Yes.”

“Don’t waste your time now.” You want to protest, but Medic raises a gloved hand. “But—hold on to that anger; remind me tomorrow, and we will hunt your spy. For now, Soldier and Scout will need your help on the point.”


“Excellent. Lead the way, Spezialist.”

The day rushes in a swift flow beneath the bright, Arizona sun after that. By the time the final round is declared won—by your team, much to your relief—you’re stiff and sore, half-dragging your own sorry ass to the Spawn Room.

Scout stretches his back until it gives an audible pop. “Well, ya don’t suck,” he declares.

It doesn’t exactly feel that way, after losing track of the number of times you’d been sent through respawn this afternoon. “Thanks. I’ll try to not suck even better tomorrow.”

The engineer chuckles. “Y’ weren’t all that bad, fer day one.”

“Yes, you managed not to drag us down—congratulations.” The spy was already halfway through his cigarette, a lingering fog settling around the suit-jacket slung over his shoulder.

You decide to just keep walking as Engie frowns. “Give the kid a break. She did fine.”

“More time off ze field than on? Barely acceptable.”

You can feel your cheeks heat as you shuck off your coat, eyes on the door. Engineer catches your elbow. “You remember where the showers are?”
Oh. Showers. “Yeah.” You’re covered in sweat and a fine layer of that orange dirt. There had been time for a shower last night, but—

“Good.” He turns to corner his (rather rude, but not incorrect) teammate.

—the showers were in one long, tiled room, each one barely separated by short partitions (not unlike those that divided urinals), and if the entire team was…

Actually, perhaps you aren’t quite as filthy as you thought. You had just come through respawn not twenty minutes ago.

Had no one considered this?

You’re standing awkwardly in the hall, making for no destination whatsoever now. Scout, Demo, Soldier and Sniper are already gone. Yes—yes, you’re absolutely sure you can wait an hour or two. You can just… shuffle back to your room with your equipment. Surely no one will say anything? Then, you can shower after—

“Hrrdrmrph.”

Pyro stands at your shoulder, head cocked, flamethrower in tow.

“Hey.” You smile weakly. After today, those black, empty lenses are more terrifying than simply disconcerting. “Are—”

They hold up a gloved hand. “Mr mrr muhrmph mrmr.”

You strain to hear, try to decipher the syllables, run the memory of the sound through your head. “Um—I’m sorry. I didn’t quite—”

“Mrrph.” Pyro sets the flamethrower carefully on the concrete and displays both overlarge hands, and then flashes them in a rapid series of movements that—sign language. It must be sign language.

“Oh—I’m sorry. I can spell all right, but I’m not—”


“Oh!” You start to spell a clumsy ‘thank you,’ but Pyro seizes your fingers. It’s your turn to tilt your head. The mercenary takes your hand, presses the tips of your fingers to your chin, then tilts it perpendicular from the wrist until your palm sits parallel to the ceiling. They let go, expecting. You repeat the movement, and pyro claps their hands with a pleased hum. Thank you.

Well, now you know one phrase.

“I’ll do that, I think. My squadron was mostly--" You shut your mouth and follow with the next thought. “How do they manage to shower in the marines, do you think? I understand they’re well-integrated.”

Pyro shrugs.

You nod. “I guess it doesn’t matter. Do you—er—” Maybe you shouldn’t ask. “Do you always wear the... uniform?”

A vigorous nod. “Mrmuph.”
“Okay.” You know you definitely shouldn’t ask why. Pyro moves to continue down the hall, but you touch the shoulder of the thick suit—caked with a fine film of dust. “When will they all be done?”

A-B-O-U-T—A-N—H-O-U-R.

You give the sign for ‘thank you,’ with a grateful smile, and Pyro returns a thumbs-up, and disappears down the hall with their flamethrower.

“Mighty Defender speaks Pyro’s language?” Heavy takes up the entire doorframe to the Spawn Room. Exactly how long he’s been standing there is unclear.

You bark a short laugh. “I don’t feel particularly mighty, but yes—well—I can spell.”

He thumps your shoulder, and it doesn’t jostle your aching muscles nearly as much as you expect. “Ah, is not so bad! You have never seen war before, da?” You shake your head, and he nods. “This—this is all very different. I would say I am sorry you must be here, but you chose it.”

You open your mouth to reply, but the man hurries on: “I do not ask why. For your family, for yourself, to run away—does not matter. You have skill—will become a great credit to team!” He shrugs massive shoulders. “Not there yet. But you will, if you decide to stay.”

You’re halfway to tears before you bite your tongue. “I—I really—”

“Not for thanks.” Heavy’s brow forms a serious line. “Just work hard, and be sure to make dinner for yourself. No one cooks today, and you need to eat. Easy thing to forget.”

“Thank you—I will,” you promise, not sure if you mean you’ll continue to work hard (because he’s very right, you want to be here, even after the respawn sickness, the backstabbing asshole, the bullets, the smoke, the frustrations and the heat) or if you mean you’ll be sure to remember supper, or both. You’re just… _grateful_ , and again left with no way to convey even a fraction of feeling.

Chapter End Notes

There’s been interest in expanding this fic to include other romances, and it’s definitely something I want to include, but for now, I think I will continue with just Medic, so that further planning will continue to be straightforward; I’ll work others in when I’ve finished this one, I think, so that nothing gets mixed up, and updates can continue to be fairly timely.

[Revised: 6/23/19]
WARNING for: blood, injury, and delirium in this chapter.

PTSD, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, is not going to be a central theme of this fic, but I thought I ought to at least touch on it and some of its symptoms. Regardless of respawn, the protagonists regularly experience traumatic/stressful situations. After some time, it's not strange to assume (with all of TF2's special circumstances), that most of the mercenaries will work past it (or not experience it at all) and react far differently to stressors than most people would.

All of this said, PTSD is nothing to be ashamed of, should you experience it at any time in your life. This is a perfectly legitimate reaction to highly stressful circumstances and situations, and is very treatable should you desire to seek help.

This chapter touches on only one of the possible symptoms thereof.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The deadbolt inside the shower hall tells you that, yes, someone had thought of your situation, and you can shower in peace. There’s a long, metallic shelf on the nearest wall for your towel, clothes, and soaps—alongside a few the men had left behind: Prell, Ivory, and the like, things readily and cheaply available. Black tiles cover the room (an odd choice in color, you note again; any bathroom you’ve ever seen has been white, or, if the family in question was on the up-and-up, some mod shade of orange or blue), floor to concrete ceiling. Concrete. It occurs to you tonight that if there’s ever a tornado (you’ve been assured that this is highly unlikely, no matter how similar the terrain and weather might seem to parts of Oklahoma), this room might be your best bet for shelter. As you shrug out of your uniform, orange dust cracks and crumbles to the tiles.

And things suddenly make sense: the black of the floor doesn’t show a mess as readily.

You try not to dwell on that thought (or look too closely between the tiles), and select one of the partitioned stalls. It all seems relatively clean, from the showerhead to the silver drain. The spout isn’t fancy, offering a simple, general spray—no rivulets or simulated rain here—but it is mounted high enough above your head to be comfortable; you quite appreciate that, closing your eyes and tipping your face to the gentle rhythm as it washes hot over hair and skin. You sigh, deep and sharp through your nose as the water washes down your face. It’s… been a day. Quite a day, indeed.

Respawn is what makes this for you, you think. That death is only temporary makes all the difference. The ultimate transcendence. There has been little time to think about it, until now, under the steady rhythm of water washing the day’s dust and grime off and away, kneading the stiffness and strain from your muscles. You have defied death today, experienced the impossible—as you will tomorrow, and the day after.

The thought sends a thrilled tingle running along your skin, and you turn to fetch the soap.

As though a testament to your newfound immortality, along your sternum runs the scar, just a thin, faded line now, a little disconcerting in its perfectly parallel precision. You trace it with a finger.
Sensation has completely returned to the tissue around it, but the scar itself seems sensitive only to pressure. No matter. You have yet to experience the über-charge Medic had described, but if it’s anything like the miracles of respawn and the medi-gun, it will be well worth everything.

You work some shampoo into your hair, taking care to massage your scalp, trying to work the sandy grit and sweat away and down the drain. That’s one constant: dirt. You get just as filthy as you would have where miracles of science didn’t snatch you out of the jaws of death. The other is, simply, pain. Most deaths today were so fast you hardly had time to learn what tore you away from the sun-drenched battlefield—quite thankfully. You close your eyes, rinsing the suds from your head. The alternative was… slow, terrifying, leaving a memory that worked its way under the skin, a warning against repeating the mistake.

It was just before the conclusion of the first round. The air had stilled, disappeared into cloudless skies, taking any relief of the morning’s cool with it. Merciless, pale heat on your scalp, soaking into your scarlet uniform coat, instigating longing thoughts of shade and cold water…

The final point. You had to reach the final point. Sniper’s voice had come over your earpiece, told you the others were making the push. You could offer support.

You’re too focused to check the corner before you skid around the concrete edifice.

There stands the enemy engineer, sunlight catching on his goggles. You raise your shield, yet folded—but he’s already pulled the trigger. Your ears ring. There’s a steady rush in your head, a tingling in every limb, and you sag against the near wall, fibers of your coat catching on every imperfection. The BLU’s mouth is moving, but your focus wavers, and your legs give way to the cracked dirt beneath you, sleeve sliding, clipping, tugging.

And now, the pain. Your arms have already seized your middle, and you clench your teeth, prying one hand from the scorching knives in your gut, to know, to see. It comes away shining crimson, your palm sticky. Even if you can draw your pistol fast enough… the taste of iron is on your tongue. And so, you raise your chin, ready for the killing shot.

It does not come.

The Engineer eyes you a moment as your body shudders in a racking cough, and, with a curt nod, hefts his half-finished sentry and disappears. Tears sting the edge of your eyes. “Bastard,” you spit, as one rolls hot down your cheek, and wrap both arms tighter around the holes peppering your stomach. No point in counting them. No point in looking. With each breath, it seems a thousand jagged shards of glass shred every inch of your torso from the inside. Your lungs seize on the next mouthful of hot, desert air and you splutter, blood spraying scarlet past your lips into the too-bright air. You make the next breath shallower, but your stomach, your chest, your skin, still burns, still slices, and everything is so very red. Cold creeps at your fingertips as they curl into the tattered holes of your coat.

You’re dying.

A trembling hand, slick with blood, slips, trips over the button on your ear-piece. “Medic!”

Those two syllables are agony. You spit, trying to push the suffocating taste and scent of iron from your lips. Blood and saliva dribble, hot, down your chin. Wipe it on the back of your hand; sticky crimson catching the light like a merry mobile of stained glass and crystal. “Medic!” White sparks dance at the edge of your eyes, and waves of darkness lap not far behind. Can’t they hear you? Isn’t there someone, anyone?
You press back against the concrete until you can feel the impression of each uneven ridge and stone, gather your legs to stand upon cracked dirt, and—

Hot, white pain rips through your torso, and you slump, sand and dust prickling your cheek. “Med—” You cough, spots bursting across your vision, blood spattering the orange soil.

There’s a sound ringing in your ears—not gunshots. Not the din of the battlefield. Sensation returns, the stream running over your shoulders, a comforting embrace smelling of soap and earthy well-water. It’s… a cry. Above the rush of water, a human voice, wailing, echoing along the tiled walls and…

Your mouth is open, throat raw. You. It’s you, making that sound, the ungodly call that’s raised the hair on your neck. You clamp down on it, cover your lips with both trembling hands.

Shit.

You breathe, let the water do its work, wash the memory off and away. Focus. Focus on the sensation of the water over your shoulders, of the silver faucet, the ebony tiles. There’s one at eye-level, cracked, a hairline fracture through the black, crooked, like a spider’s web. Inhale. Exhale.

Oh, hell. What if someone had heard?

You hold your next breath, listen. There appears to be no sound from the hall, no valiant attempts to break down the door and rescue you from… yourself. You shake your head, creep silently over to the bolted door, and wait, breath baited, count out the seconds.

Nothing.

Your gust of breath is a sigh of relief now. Good. Perhaps the concrete is beneficial for more than just its potential to withstand high winds.

The room seems… suddenly quite empty, and your shower effectively finished. Yes. You move back to the shower stall and close the faucet. It’s time to get to bed, and forget whatever that was. It isn’t as though you stayed dead! You’re here, now, as you will be tomorrow, and the day after. You shake your head, tugging your night-clothes on with a little more force than necessary. Stupid. You can withstand a little pain.

At least no one had been privy to your little experience. You take comfort in that; the last thing you need is another dose of embarrassment or a series of awkward explanations.

Of course, there’s no way you could know that there is at least one person in this base with absolutely exceptional hearing—one person who certainly knows of this episode. Whether his hearing is actually better than that of his fellows or if he simply listens more effectively than the others on this base is debatable, but matters not in either case: Medic, startled out of his evening tasks by a chilling sound, followed the distant, muffled call to its source. The showers, bolted shut. A frown creased his brow as he waited by the door, straining to hear of any struggle; if there was a fight, he was fully prepared bring the thing down, deadbolt be damned—but, if it were as he suspected… that approach simply would not do.

Beside the bolted door, he waited, breath baited, counted out the seconds. There was no movement inside, only the keening wail that prickled flesh down to the bone. And then—

It stopped. Cacophonous breathing. He looked about, casting suspicious glances up and down the hall before resolving to stay. If you had fallen unconscious…
But then, pacing. And then—the water fell silent. Medic nodded, slowly, brow furrowed.

Yes—as he had suspected, indeed. A gross stress reaction. In the War, they’d called it Shell-Shock. It was… something he had not thought on in some time; anything the others had experienced at the start of this employment had long since passed. Likely, it had been triggered by a disruptive memory or some discordant thought, and unless you went to him, there was little to be done, but you seemed to have handled it well yourself—for the moment. Perhaps it would happen again, perhaps it would not. For now, he knew there was nothing for it but to record the incident in the appropriate medical files. It would certainly be interesting to see how things progressed.

Medic paced down the hall, back the way he had come—long gone by the time you left to return to your room—hands clasped neatly behind his back, boot-heels clicking upon the floor, the echo of that pained howl catching fast in his memory.

Chapter End Notes

The More You Know: PTSD was not categorized or diagnosed under that name until the 1980s, as the Vietnam War provoked more serious research into the condition. Beginning in 1952, what we know as PTSD was called "gross stress reaction," listed in the first Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association. In WWI, it was called "Shell Shock" after soldiers' reactions when exposed to heavy artillery fire.

(Oddly enough, when I went searching for Germany's research at this time (since Medic presumably did most of his training in Germany), I found that in the 1670s, both the Swiss and the Germans identified the behaviors the made up PTSD, but they called it 'nostalgia' and 'homesickness', respectively. Freud would later write about the afflictions, but his theories regarding "war neuroses" with its 'war ego' and 'peace ego' did not gain much ground. And, as Medic is in the States, I'm sure he's done some reading on what the APA is up to; mental health may not be his priority, but it does fall into his purview as the team's doctor.)
Sleep was fitful, but you woke alert enough to don a clean uniform in the morning-dark, and shuffle down to the kitchen, where the scent of coffee and a hot kettle waited. You take a seat across from the demoman, half-slumped in his cup of tea. There’s the distant sound of a bugle, but it’s not enough to jostle either of you into more than a grunt of “g’morning,” and you’re halfway to a light doze over your own steaming mug when a gloved hand clicks something onto the table before you.

You blink. It’s a little, brown bottle. “What’s this?”

Medic stands at your shoulder, hands behind his back. “Dietary supplements. You will take one each morning, and one each evening.” He moves to the cupboard and draws a mug down for himself. It sounds a hollow ring on the countertop. "After two weeks, take only one each day."

“What’s this?” Your brow furrows. He can’t be criticizing your eating habits already!

“It compensates for nutrients lost during respawn,” Medic replies as he pours the coffee. “Potential negative side-effects will be negated or at least slowed over time.”

You press a hand to your brow. First, your identity in exchange for this position, then, your heart in exchange for temporary invulnerability, and now, your damned vitamins, too. “Equal exchange, I suppose,” you say, dryly.

The doctor shrugs, taking his cup and carrying it to the door, back the way he’d come. “Remember to take them. You won’t like it if I have to administer zhem for you.”

Of that you have no doubt.

And then he’s gone, door swinging shut behind him. You frown at the bottle; a bright reflection of the fluorescents winks cheerfully on the amber glass and white, metal lid. There’s no label—no indication of what, exactly, the capsules inside might supplement.

“Best t’just take it, lass,” advises the demoman, slurping his tea. It occurs to you that this is the first time you haven’t seen him nipping at the bottle. “Migh’ not be exactly what ’e says it is, but it’s better than th’ alternative.”

You might have some idea, but you ask anyway: “What’s the alternative?”

The man fixes you under his singular, tawny gaze. “Y’had the surgery, did ye no’?”

“Yes.” Your fingers tighten around the mug’s porcelain handle.
He nods. “Well, there ya go.”

The shiver elicited by this non-explanation and your decision to take one of the red capsules are absolutely unrelated. Mostly unrelated. You swallow the pill, supposing you ought to eat something with it, though Medic gave no particular indication either—

[Alert: BLU spy in the base! A BLU spy is in the base!]

“Aw, bloody hell!” Demoman knocks back the rest of his tea in one gulp and nearly upsets his chair on the way to the door. “Bloody boggin bassa can’t fookin’—”

You’re scrambling up, tucking the bottle into your pocket as a siren begins to whine over the speakers. “What? What’s going on?”

“Grab yer gear, lass, and get down to th’ intelligence room!” He takes the moment to tighten his belt before bolting down the hall, calling one more complaint over his shoulder: “The bloody scadge’s started early!”

Well… you’re not entirely sure what a ‘scadge’ is, or exactly how the spy might have gotten into the base before seven in the morning, but you’re already careening down the hall toward your room, sparing more than one furtive glance about the corridor, as though you might see the smarmy bastard lurking around any corner. You wish now that you’d just taken your weapons to breakfast. In fact, you’re seriously considering strapping on your Lancaster as part of your daily routine—like brushing your teeth, or finding a clean pair of underwear.

As soon as you throw open the door to your room, you’re reaching for the weapons lined neatly upon your bed, ready for the day: howdah pistol first. You strap it immediately on your thigh. Then, Gyrojet, and then: ballistic shield. These you can carry and buckle into place as you run, making your way through the unceasing din of sirens toward the south-facing spawn—the one linked to the vault where RED’s secret documents were stored.

You see the pyro turn the last corner up ahead, and fall into place beside them as you enter the spawn room. Everyone else is already present, holstering weapons and slamming their lockers shut—all, you notice, except Demo, Engineer, and your team’s spy.

“Ah, neue!” Medic appears beside you, smiling—a complete and utter change in manner from mere minutes ago. The air around him practically buzzes with an excitement too reminiscent of the disconcerting glee he displayed your heart surgery two days ago. “You’re ready for a hunt, ja?”

It makes sense now. “You knew.”

“Yes. We were supposed to capture the enemy intelligence today—but I did not know zhe BLU spy would be so eager to begin.” He flashes a broad grin, eyes narrowing, glinting dangerously behind his wire-framed spectacles. “To track him down today would sate your lust for revenge and benefit the team. There was no reason to put your focus in jeopardy yesterday: victory is made by zhe team as a whole.” Yes—it all makes sense now. Of course you should have known not to be tempted to deviate from the objective in the first place. “Now, what do you say we give the spy a taste of his own medicine?”

The very thought gives you a thrill, and you find yourself returning his grin. “Where do we start?”

“You and I—we will take the right corridor. Scout will lead Soldier and Heavy to retrieve zhe enemy papers. Engineer has already begun to set up a defensive perimeter—Sniper and Pyro will join him. Demo and Spy have already begun their task. Kommi.”
You do, following the even click of his boots on the concrete into the hall. The ballistic shield
finds your hand as you follow close in the doctor’s shadow, just on the tail of his pristine coat. 
Only the tap of boots and the whisper of fabric can be heard as you move down the corridor—
when had the siren fallen silent?

The only eggshell-colored walls in the entire base fly by in your hurry to keep up with Medic; he
was far faster than you anticipated with that bulky medi-gun apparatus over his shoulders. Your
brow furrows. Still—the man has no armor, no particular defense should some distasteful surprise
be waiting for you ahead. You open your mouth to tell him so when he suddenly dodges to the left,
to round the first corner; you grab for the edge of his coat but your fingers meet only air as he holds
his ground, aims—

Lowers the syringe gun, gives you a nod. The hall is clear.

“Shouldn’t I—?” You indicate your shield-arm helplessly. This is what the ballistic shield is made
for: pressing or holding a small area. An enclosed location gave you the greatest advantage; the
wide field of the gravel pit didn’t showcase half the possibilities of—

“Oh, you haven’t seen me work in a tight space yet, Fräulein Specialist! Let me assure you, my
skills are most effective in the closest range you can imagine.” Something in his grin is
reminiscent of that jagged bone-saw, and you find there’s no way to reply.

So, you follow him down the too-quiet hall, moving at a steady pace. If he won’t let you take
point, you’ll cover his six. You’re sure to turn in tight semi-circles, sweeping methodically, shield
high, Gyrojet low, eyes keen for even the slightest movement, the smallest disturbance in the air…

A thought occurs: “How do we know there’s a spy in the base?

The doctor gives a derisive snort. “Our spy ran across him, but did not succeed in killing the man.”

The spitting image of Scout leading you to sure death is one that does not readily leave your mind.
Nothing had seemed off. Voice, expression—how was anyone to determine the false in such an
uncanny imitation? “How do we know our spy wasn’t replaced?”

“Oh, believe me, Specialist—” Medic’s chuckle raises the hair on the back of your neck. “—we
made quite certain.”

“Ah.” You fervently hope you’re never in such a position, and firmly decide not to ask for details;
you don’t want to know.

Footsteps ahead.

With a snap, your shield extends, and you move—but Medic blocks the path with his arm, shaking
his head once, firmly.

_Tap tap tap tap._

He lifts a gloved finger to his lips, and readies the syringe gun as you draw your Gyrojet high, your
stance an awkward in-between; not fully defensive, nor committed to attack.

Why won’t he just let you—

Pyro. _Your_ pyro, thank god, rounds the corner, bent in a graceful arc over the flamethrower’s shaft
and nozzle, sweeping it before them like the muzzle of some great hound.
But Medic does not lower his weapon.

“Mmmrmph. Mhuddah.”

And neither has Pyro lowered their flamethrower.

“Pyro. Have you found anything?” The doctor asks conversationally.

The mercenary shakes their masked head. “Muhrmn. Hrn?”

Doubtless, the sound was inquisitive; it would not be a stretch, you decide, to interpret it as “you?”

Your eyes flick to Medic’s shoulders, rigid beneath the starched white of his coat. You shift uneasily.

“Nein, nothing,” he replies, voice perfectly even, each syllable carefully selected and uttered in exact rhythm.

“Hmrmpf.”

Medic gives no indication of comprehension, not the smallest nod, nor the subtlest arch of his brow. Your fingers tighten around the Gyrojet’s handle.

“In that case, Herr Engineer could use some assistance.” The doctor steps aside, turns to indicate the hall through which you had just trekked. He gestures with an open hand, elbow tucked close to his torso, and the barrel of the syringe gun sweeps with his pivot, pointing ineffectually at the wall just ahead. “He is setting up a dispenser close to the central intersection.” You complement Medic’s position, turning to allow your team-mate to pass.

“Huddah!” Pyro gives a thumbs-up.

Medic’s lips curl. “Excellent. We’ll have that spy soon enough.”

The pyro strides past, eclipsing your view of the doctor for only a moment.

First is the sound of heels scrabbling for purchase on the concrete. Your eyes missed the instant of movement—and for a moment you’re not sure who struck first. The flash of silver. The glint of blood. A waver in the air as Pyro melts away in a flash of blue.

And Medic, a triumphant grin, fluorescents glinting on his spectacles, hair in a disheveled sweep across his forehead, constraining the BLU spy’s limbs with an arm across his waist, jagged bone-saw pressed to his neck, the smallest flecks of crimson coloring the blade’s edge. A shallow wound shows in a tattered tear of the spy’s trousers, blood upon his thigh.

Holy hell.

“Well, Specialist? He’s yours.”

All trussed up and glaring steadfast, suit mussed—so very, utterly, deliciously opposite yesterday’s meeting—for you. You can feel your heart race a little faster, a hollow thump behind your breast.

“Monsieur,” you say, a grin creeping over your lips. “I’m afraid I did not introduce myself properly yesterday.”

He spits, and you frown. “How very rude. Are you not a gentleman, sir?”

“As though you’re worth my consideration,” he snorts. “I’ll get what I came for—this little game is
of no consequence."

You raise your eyes to Medic’s. The doctor has adopted an expression of keen interest, brow high, mouth quirked so very slightly.

“It's all meaningless; you’ll be gone by the end of the week,” the BLU spy sneers.

You're suddenly not sure what to do. The spy granted you a quick, clean death—twice. You don’t have a knife with you to make your retaliation suitably messy (in keeping with revenge) and short (in keeping with simple fairness). The Lancaster is already in your hand, wood warm against your palm. Leaving him to bleed out is simply too risky. But the pistol alone seems too easy, after the way he’d played with you yesterday, and Medic—observing, intent—makes you suddenly feel as though this is some test of... mettle? Mercy?

Beads of sweat prickle your brow, slick your palm.

“Neue.” Medic nods, letting his mouth curl in an inviting grin. “Anything.”

“The girl requires coaxing?” The spy laughs outright, full, sound echoing along the hall. “Go home, cherie: this is no place for a soft heart. Tell your mother you’ve failed. There won’t be an—”

His lips are moving, but you do not hear the rest. Tell your mother you've failed already, just as lost and useless as you ever were? Tell her there will be no money? No. The world is dark, and it is red, and you force an open hand against the blunt edge of the saw. Silver teeth grind against leather, pierce soft flesh. One beat; two—and blood, crimson, glinting in the white light, pours from a dozen jagged slivers in pale skin, splashing upon the blade, and the spy’s voice gargles, scratches, catches, stops, nothing but ragged, rattling gasps—and you level the four barrels of the howdah with his head.

“Ready?” you ask, word bitter on your tongue.

But the spy only gasps ineffectually, gaping like a fish. He drops to his knees, gloved hands scrambling to stop the blood for even a moment—

“The Specialist. At your service.” You pull the trigger.

Scarlet and crimson and burgundy. Sticky, bitter iron pricks your throat with each breath. You wait. You watch, until the white shards disappear from the wall, the heavy lumps of matter and shreds of leather fade from the floor, the body evaporates from view. Until respawn takes every trace of consequence from your action, leaving only the spray of blood, a memory on the walls, hot on your flesh, trickling derisively down your nose.

Chapter End Notes

The More You Know: The title 'Fräulein' ("Miss") is rather out-dated in the present, often considered rather offensive--almost like "missy" or "little miss," as my beta mentioned. Neither of us are sure when it became condescending, but I wanted to keep it here for that reason--whether or not the title was still in accepted use in the late 60s--because it is a bit condescending. Because sometimes Medic is kind of an arse.

[Revised: 6/23/19]
Forgot to Remember to Forget

Chapter Notes

Thanks again to my wonderful beta, and to my lovely readers. This chapter's title is from a 1956 Elvis Presley song, "I Forgot to Remember to Forget."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tonight, the shower peels dried flecks of blood from your skin, your hair. Your last respawn had been… five hours ago now? Six? Enough time to paint yourself and the walls with the BLU soldier’s blood before the enemy scout had found safety in the opposing base, dragging RED’s intelligence with him. The Administrator had ordered an immediate ceasefire, and after an hour’s seclusion in your room, here you are. Black tiles, hot water, and a soapy scent to replace the coppery tang that had settled in your nose. Rose-tinted suds rush toward the drain.

You sigh, and roll stiff shoulders.

It wasn’t your fault, not really. The scout had to bypass your engineer, sniper, and pyro in order to leave the base with RED’s papers. But—you hadn’t been looking when Medic took a bullet to the head. You weren’t fast enough to block the hall. You hadn’t heard until the little shit was right on top of you—and the BLU soldier was barring your way.

Stupid mistakes.

You turn the water up a little higher, as though a good scalding might make them as inconsequential as sending a man to respawn.

Sending a man to respawn in the most inhumane way you could conceive. Fingers tighten against your scalp, shampoo running down over your forehead. You squeeze your eyes shut. Go home, chérie… tell your mother you’ve failed utterly—

But your mother’s face is there, just as it was at the airport. Bright with tears. Your memory is kind, and removes the scarf she had been wearing—you can see her hair. You wonder if her cheeks are no longer so sallow, if she’s been able to tend to her flowers.

Are the burns gone?

Has she stopped cradling her arm against a sunken chest?

Hot water wicks your tears away before you even acknowledge them, mingling with the blood and the dust and the soap, disappearing down the drain.

You don’t want to think about this. Not now. Not today.


As soon as the job is secure. As soon as the job is secure, you’ll send a letter. You promised. Send it with Miss Pauling; she’ll make sure it arrives.

If your job is ever secure. You lost the intelligence today.
Stupid, stupid. Stupid mistakes.

The water doesn’t prickle your scalp anymore, just hums along as though it were only lukewarm. The tiles are still chilly beneath your feet. You sigh against the water trickling over your lips.

Stupid mistakes, yes—but you recall Medic’s earlier observation: a success (or a failure) is made by the team itself, as a whole. The others must have made stupid mistakes, too.

Yours contributed to the loss, but so did theirs.

You only hope the information stolen was of little enough consequence.

Slick fingers find the silver knob again, and you let the water run cold before shutting it off completely, shivering as you reach for your towel. Might as well let the others chastise you, if they will. They were all too busy in their own, private grumblings to notice you slip away immediately following the ceasefire.

You throw on some sweatpants and an undershirt before stepping into the hall with your wet towel and soaps in a bundle. You can leave your things in your room, and then head for the mess hall. Lunch hadn’t happened, exactly, as it had on the field, and the day isn’t yet over, so—

“Docteur, you already seem quite determined that the girl should stay.”

Well, for a spy, he certainly isn’t being discreet in his volume. The door to the common room, you notice, is slightly ajar. You hover, indecisive, glancing about the hall for any movement. You really shouldn’t…

“Nein. I am determined she has the best possible opportunity.”

But you do.

“A pretty sentiment,” Spy scoffs. “You and I both know better.”

“You seem to forget, Herr Spy, that part of this test is a matter of teamwork. And if no one is willing to try—”

“Come now, doctor—”

“No. Medic is right. This is team. Should act like it.”

“She has to earn—”

“Does not have to earn being treated fairly,” Heavy’s voice rumbles. “No one has to earn fairness.”

You strain to hear.

“I did not mean…” Spy sighs. “Yes. I did not mean to imply otherwise.”

You decide it’s best to make yourself scarce before the conversation ends and you’re outed as an eavesdropper. The bundle has dampened your shirt, but there’s a warmth settled in your chest. You blink back tears again.

Now you’re just being silly.

You try not to think of your mother.
In your room, you hang the towel off the door to the armoire to dry, and place your toiletries on one of its upper shelves. The crate still sits, half-empty, in the middle of the floor. The neat stacks of books inside are calling. You peel off your damp shirt and bra, fling them carelessly over a chair. You’d rifled through the volumes only once since arrival (Archimedes was a scientist and mathematician, thank you very much), but you know your favorite is three down from the top of the stack, familiar to your hands, smelling sweetly of ink and well-loved paper.

Every time you find yourself in a bookstore, you’re tempted to buy another copy—that one has a lovely illustration, or this one is full of footnotes, or that one is an early edition with leather binding, or this one bears the love of its previous owner, palpable through its worn edges, like a thousand fingerprints coloring glass.

You settle on the bed with the only copy you’d brought—a paperback with pages that aged a graceful yellow. There’s still light out the barred window, but no one will begrudge you an early evening, surely? Perhaps they won’t even notice you’re missing.

Chapter 1. On February 24th, 1815, the watchtower at Marseilles signaled the arrival of the three-master Pharaon, coming from Smyrna, Trieste, and Naples...

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A knock rouses you from chapter eight, just as Edmond is left in a lonely cell at Chateau d'If, wrongly accused, enduring a sleepless night. Your brow furrows. “Just a second!” You find your bra and undershirt where you’d left them, and throw a button-down on for good measure before opening the door.

“MAGGOT!”

Oh, god.

“You have not run the obstacle course since arrival!”

Ah, shit.

“And you know what? WE LOST OUT THERE TODAY, MAGGOT. You will run that course whether you like it or not!”

“Soldier, I—”

“Move it, ensign! Move it, move it, double-time!”

“If you’d just give me a—”

“NOW!”

Your boots are on and you’re jogging down the hall before you can tell your feet what to do. You clench your jaw. Asshole with his drill-sergeant voice and—

“Hup, hup, hup! YOU CALL THAT MOVING, SOLDIER?”

At least he’s right there running the narrow hall with you. Better than standing on the side of the track with a coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other while everyone else does the—

“LEFT!”
Your boots almost lose traction, but you make it out into the dusty yard. The *unbearably hot*, dusty yard. You squint through white sunlight at the barrels and tires and makeshift track. There’s sweat already beading on your forehead. What are you doing out here again?

“NOW GET YOUR REAR ON THAT COURSE BEFORE I KICK IT OVER THERE, MAGGOT! It should be complete in seven minutes.”


“NOW, GO!”

You have half a mind to tell that firecracker to go to hell because you have a book to read, but… this is a distraction, good as any.

That, and you’re not sure yet if he’s above trying to send you to respawn after-hours for ‘insubordination’ or some such nonsense. If you can avoid starting fights at this point in the week, you will.

And so, your feet take up a steady rhythm on the hard, cracked dirt. Orange dust clings to your boots. So much for not having to clean them tonight.

It’s a straight path to a set of tire obstacles, then a few barrels you assume Soldier expects you to hurdle, a sharp turn, some more barrels to dodge through, and a loop around to do it again. Joy. At least you have something to focus on—namely, not tripping and falling on your face as you get your bearings on these obstacles.

You make it around once, remaining proudly upright.

“EIGHT MINUTES, MAGGOT! AGAIN!”

You grit your teeth and keep running, trying not to let your breath hitch too much on the dusty air. You’re already sweating through both shirts. Once you clear the hurdles, your fingers tug the buttons on your over-shirt free, and you peel the damn thing from your shoulders as you dodge left and right.

“NINE MINUTES. YOU’VE GOTTEN SLOWER, ENSIGN!”

You throw it at Soldier’s helmeted head and don’t stick around to see if you were successful. At least you’re slightly more comfortable now, under the sun’s merciless rays, sweat-drenched and panting; there’s less fabric between you and the breeze created by your rhythmic pace.

This time, you barely have to focus on the course—your feet know where they’re going.

You wonder if you ought to apologize for letting Medic get shot in the head. It wasn’t your fault, exactly, no, but if you had been watching his six instead of trying to take point again, maybe—

“NINE MINUTES, TWENTY-TWO SECONDS. HYDRATE, MAGGOT!” He gestures sharply to a watering station tucked in the shade of a nearby shed, upon which your button-down sits, neatly folded.

You draw uncomfortably deep breaths as you slow to a jog, reaching greedily for the tap. Perhaps this isn’t all bad. The man isn’t *completely* off-kilter.

And then you realize that Soldier has not had a watch, clock, or time-keeping device of any kind on his person since you began this routine.
Your fingers twitch as you gulp down the water. Your breath slows after a moment of staring slowly off into the desert. Waves ripple in the air, distorting your view of the orange plains. And then, you return to the course.

Before long, the faint wind brings a soft jingle. You turn your head just in time to see Scout breeze right by. And then, he turns, and jogs backward, still steadily ahead, grinning. Show-off.

But you can hardly blame him—that he trods over the tires without missing a step, no need to double- or triple-check his position, is rather impressive.

“You know ya don’t have to do what he says, right?”

You sigh between breaths. “It seemed easier this way.”

“Figured it out quick, did ya?” Scout laughs.

You give a half-grin. “I’m a quick study.”

“Oh?” He waggles his brows. “In that case, I’ve got—”

“Save it.”

Scout only laughs harder and makes a graceful turn to vault the first barrel. As you struggle over, both hands braced on the wooden edge, you envy his light frame. You can clear the barrels no problem, but—you could use some finesse.

“I’m really more interested in Miss Pauling,” he calls over his shoulder. “She’s something, ain’t she?”

“She is.” Oh, absolutely. “But she’s also rather… busy.”

“Always,” Scout agrees. “But one day she’ll get a day off, y’know?” He weaves between the next set of barrels.

So far, you had successfully maintained distance, but you begin to slow now. But—this was your fourth (third? fifth?) circuit, after all! Scout had only just begun.

You also realize that these are possibly the shortest sentences Scout has uttered to you these last couple days (not counting monosyllabic warnings on the field). Perhaps half his energy was diverted in running. This might be the way to have a proper conversation! You know, if you could catch ample breath.

On the clear stretch, Scout turns to face you again. “So, what’s ya type?”

Your brow furrows. “My what?”

“Ya type—like… nerdy guys, tall guys, dark and handsome—”

“I—” You cough. “Um.” Really?

“Like… I like dangerous and gorgeous, y’know? Smart. And—”

“Can kick your ass.”

“Yeah! Er—” He’s flushing, and if you weren’t completely out of breath and aching at this moment, you’d celebrate with a leap and a cackle. But he recovers quickly. “So—what?”
You release and exasperated breath.

“SEVEN MINUTES, ENSIGN, CONGRATULATIONS. All it took was some competition!”

You let your steps falter straight into shade and the promise of water, panting. Scout jogs the whole way, expectant. He even jogs in place while you threaten to devour the watering station’s entire jug, soaked from your bra to the undershirt, all exposed skin sticky with sweat.

“I don’t really…” You shrug. “I don’t have one, really?”

“Aw, come on, that’s no fun!”

You shrug again, slurp down some more water.

“You married?”

You nearly choke. “No.”

“Boyfriend back home?”

You crumple the little, paper cup in your fist. “No.”

“Well, if you don’t have a type—”

“Scout, please.”

He raises both hands. “All right, all right—ya don’t have to give me the Death Stare!”

You blink. You… hadn’t realized. But if it worked, fine. “I just want to focus on getting this job, all right?”

Scout nods furiously. “Sure, sure.” He starts to go off, do some stretches—but turns on his heel, grins. “But after, right?”

“What?”

“After you get the job, you’ll tell me? We can hit the bar!” You open your mouth to reply, but he hurries on: “I’ll be fun! Maybe you can give me some pointers, yeah? Put in a good word with Miss Pauling for me?”

You press a hand through the sweat of your brow, let a chuckle pass your lips. “Tell you what, Scout, I—” Standing there in the sun, all big, hopeful, eyes and his best attempt at a charming smile, he reminds you so much of home that you have to push the ache from your chest. “If I get to stay, I’ll see what I can do.” He punches the air, and you shake your head. There is… something else, all bound up with that steady, aching beat of your heart. It can’t wait. You clutch your button-down in one hand. “Soldier, am I dismissed?”

“Dismissed, Specialist!” His voice echoes from within the shed, already engrossed in who-knows-what.

“Where’re ya goin’?” Scout asks in the midst of a hamstring stretch, dog tags jangling.

You spare a glance over your shoulder, but your mind is already gone from here. “I’m—there’s…” You don’t let your steps slow, carrying you across the cracked dirt. “I have a question.”

“Hello, veteran merc, here!”
“Not—you can’t answer it. It’s not…” Your brow furrows. Home. “I have to go.”

“Spesh—”

“Sorry!”

You push through the base’s double-doors, a rush of cool air as your vision adjusts to the artificial light, stars and spots swimming before your eyes. Your boots sound an uneven rhythm upon the floor.

You remember well the way to the med-bay.

Chapter End Notes

The book is, of course, *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas, this translation by Lowell Bair.
Lie of C/Omission

Chapter Summary

Many thanks again to escapistsoverign, my beta, to whom I owe some of Heavy's dialogue near the end of the chapter this time around.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Of course, would the doctor even be in the medical wing? The last you knew, he had been in the common room with Spy and Heavy—

Perhaps you shouldn’t bother him. He’d been kind enough to you already, more than you had any right to expect, practically an interloper on this base, without a full contract and, really, he has better things to do, surely, than answer your silly questions, and you’ll have a letter to your mother by the end of the week…

You stand before the metal double-doors.

This is ridiculous. There’s a book waiting in your room, a sandwich to be had, another long day tomorrow—and three more after that. Just… just wait.

“Spezialist?”

Bloody fucking hell.

You feel your teeth clench, your eyes squeeze shut. But you open them, turn, try to look… casual. Or normal. Or something like that.

Medic has a notebook in one hand and a pen in the other, spectacles high on the bridge of his aquiline nose. He arches his brow. “Are you feeling all right?”

Oh. You must look a sight, sweat still drying on your skin, undershirt soaked through—you wring your button-down between your hands. “Yeah. Fine. I just…”

“You needed somezthing?”

No. This is foolish.

“I’m sorry. It’s not important.”

He peers through his spectacles. “Are you quite sure you’re well, neue? Perhaps I could just take a look at—”

“No—I—yes. I’m fine. No. Soldier just had me running the course and it’s…” He makes a note in the margin of the open page with a graceful turn of his wrist. “It’s… hot. Outside.” And getting hotter by the second in here.

Medic arches a graceful brow. Graceful. You’re stuck on that word today, aren’t you? “Hm.” The
doctor wets his lips, adjusts his spectacles. Why did… why are you here again? Oh. Right. The question you’re not asking. “Well,” he says shortly, “if there is nothing you need—”

You feel your cheeks heat all the way to the tips of your ears. “No. Yeah—I’ll just…”

You turn on your heel and do not stop walking until you reach your room to sag against the door with a groan. Holy shit. Why. You killed a dozen men today without batting an eye, and yet, you can’t go an hour during ceasefire without embarrassing yourself. You kick off your boots, toss the button-down aside, peel off every sweaty layer, and tug the towel hanging from the armoire over your shoulders. One pair of shorts, underwear, and a fresh bra later, you’re sprawled across the stiff mattress again, book in hand.

Well, you’re having no worse a time than poor Edmond.

As for Dantès, he remained a prisoner. Lost in the depths of his dungeon, he heard nothing about either the fall of Louis XVIII or the collapse of the empire…

You’re on your stomach with a pillow propped under your head, one arm wrapped securely around the pristine pillowcase, when: Knock knock knock.

Not even past chapter ten.

“Spesh! Hey, Spesh!”

You groan. “Please stop calling me that.”

A muffled laugh. “It’s time for dinner! Unless you’re not hungry, a’ course, in which case I can eat your—”

You tug on a shirt and throw the door open. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, there, Scout.” You join him in the hall with a grin, realizing our stomach has been complaining quietly for the last half-hour. “Who’s cooking?”

“Demo! He’s pretty good—makin’ some kinda soup today, and it smells great. Soldier, though… unless it’s a hamburger, Soldier can’t cook for shit, so plan for it—he’s cookin’ next. On Thursday.”

“What about you?”

“Me? I’m pretty good at just about everything I do. I’ll be on dinner duty next week.” He winks, and just grins when you roll your eyes. “My ma taught me how to cook.”

Ah. “My mom… tried to teach me.” The dull ache is back in your chest. You try to push it away. “I’ve never been as good as she is.”

“Yeah, me either,” Scout admits. “But I’m still pretty damn good.”

You shake your head, turning the corner without looking to your teammate in order to double-check the direction.

“Oh, and uh—fair warning—I think Spy wants to talk to you.”

You almost trip over your own feet. “Why?”
Scout shrugs. “Dunno. But he really wanted to come bring you for dinner, and I thought I’d spare ya.”

“I appreciate it.” You wonder if this has anything to do with your eavesdropping.

“No problem! Kind of a creep, Spy.”

You can’t help the corner of your mouth sneaking up in a smirk. “I think that’s his job.”

Scout raises his shoulders. “Eh.”

He was right; the mess hall does smell brilliantly of savory stew—but not hotly, you realize as you creep through the door. You draw a deep breath. It’s even… faintly minty. You pause, casting your eyes over the room: Spy is already here, in his spot at the end of the table, rolling an unlit cigarette between his teeth. He fixes you under his gaze as you approach, heading for the chair you had occupied that first night, and his dark stare does not abate, even as you shift uncomfortably and avert your eyes, turning your attention firmly to Demo, who sets a heavy kettle in the center of the table as Scout leans across, brow furrowed, frowning into its depths.

“I thought it was soup.”

“So ‘tis, lad! Cold soup. Pea soup just like Granaidh used to make! Good for guests in the summer—or ungrateful scouts in the middle of the desert.”

Demoman begins ladling the stuff into bowls even as the boy in question makes a face and plops down into the chair beside Spy. “Ok, but it was hot when I left.”

He chuckles. “Chemistry ain’ just good fer explosives, lad; it’s a simple task tae make a soup cold.”

“Yeah, sure.” Scout folds his arms.

Demo steps out from behind your usual seat, and—all the embarrassment comes flooding back. Medic is here already here, too. And, just beyond him, Heavy. The doctor smiles, gives you a nod. “Specialist—you are feeling better, I trust?”

“Yeah. I was fine—I am fine—just tired…”

You hear the creak of the refrigerator door. “Beer, anybody?” asks Engineer.

“Please!” You take your seat, avoiding Medic’s eyes, but the man is determined. He removes his spectacles, wipes them on the edge of his coat, studying your face carefully as he does. You force yourself to meet his cool gaze evenly.

“Gut,” he declares as Engie sets an open bottle beside your bowl. “If you find you are having trouble sleeping, come see me. Being overtired can affect your performance more zhan you might expect.”

“I will.”

The medic nods and replaces his spectacles.

You release the breath you’d been holding. Soldier, you notice, is missing, as is Pyro again. Though, now you have good reason to suspect they don’t care to remove the mask in anyone’s company, and one can’t exactly eat supper through a gas filter.
You fetch a spoon from the middle of the table as Scout chatters on about something or other, and you notice (with more than a little annoyance this time) that Spy is still staring. Well, if he has something to say, the man ought to damn well say it and get it over with! You avert your eyes again, taking a spoonful of the thick, green broth—

And out of the corner of your eye, you catch sight of the sniper, his lanky form folded over a chair against the far wall, propped on two legs, a bowl of soup resting on his knee.

You nod a greeting, which he readily returns, but says not a word.

The soup is sweet, rich—with just a touch of mint. Cool, refreshing, with a promise to be filling. “This is lovely, Demo!”

The man chuckles. “Thank y’, lass. I daresay me mum wouldn’ have a complaint!”

You take a sip from your bottle; the beer is… well, it’s cold, and it contains alcohol.

“Mama should be proud,” replies Heavy, leaning across the table to get another helping from the kettle. “Is delicious!”

“Eh,” says Scout. “It’s green.”

“Eat it, boy—it’s good fer ya.”

Sniper taps his spoon against the bowl in his lap. “The kid’s just spoilt.”

“Hey, man, you got somethin’ against the way my Ma raised me? Cause I—”

“Gentlemen, please.” Spy massages one masked temple. “Scout, eat your supper.”

He wrinkles his nose. “You ain’t my mother.”

“Scout.” The Frenchman rolls the unlit cigarette between his gloved fingers. “In case you have not noticed, I am a man who keeps a sound schedule.” He passes the cigarette from one hand to the other. “I am also a man you have prevented from having a particular conversation at the time that suited me. So, it is my turn to speak, if you do not mind.”

The boy’s mouth drops open. “I—”

“Maybe this is surprise, Spy,” Heavy interjects over a mouthful of soup, “but things exist more important than your schedule. Dinner, to give example.” He laughs, but Spy… is certainly not amused; he pinches the cigarette tight between his fingers.

You’re sure you haven’t mistaken the warning latent in the Russian’s tone. The others appear to have noticed, too, eyes shifting back and forth expectantly, but—

“I can assure you this will interrupt your dinner no more than idle chatter.” He sighs, and you almost expect a puff of smoke. “Now—” says Spy. He fixes his eyes on you, spoon halfway to your lips, mouth hanging open. Brilliant. “Specialist. Why are you here?”

You close your mouth with as much poise as you can muster, and set the spoon on the edge of your bowl. Is this question even allowed? You half-expect Engineer to speak up as he did before, but you can—

“Spy!” All eyes turn to Heavy, frowning across the table. “Why do you ask this?”
You swallow. “It’s ok, I—”

“I am giving the girl a fair opportunity.”

Heavy’s brow creases. “Is not your business!”

“Did you not say that I ought to be more flexible?” Spy’s fingers twitch.

“Should be, yes! But this is not fair question—”

“Guys…”

“—we do not ask you why you choose lies and backstabbing!”

“Now, now…” Engie raises his hands. “We can all jus—”

“No, no—” Spy’s eyes flash. “—let the man continue.”

“Girl does not owe you story! Can start over here; does not matter!”

“Do you think I cannot find out what I want to know without—”

“Now y’all really—”

“—asking, mon ami? That I do not ask without—”

“Without other end in mind, no!”

“You—”

“Shouldn’t—”

“GENTLEMEN!” The chair clatters to the floor behind you.

The engineer lowers his hands, and Heavy drops his gaze. “Thank you.” Spy returns your pointed look evenly, the corner of his mouth catching in the slightest grin. “Specialist?”

You sigh, turning to retrieve your fallen seat, and Medic catches your gaze halfway. His eyes crinkle at the edges, lips turned in something like a smile… he is impressed? Amused? You right your chair, and return your attention to the Frenchman. “I will answer your question.” You look to Heavy. “Because I choose to.”

You have no idea if honesty will win you points with a bloody spy, but it’s all you have.

“But I won’t be talking about where I come from—fair?”

“Fair.” The man nods.

“Ok.” You take a breath, look into the depths of your soup, as though it could tell you exactly how much to reveal, how much to play close to your chest. “I’m here, in part, for my family.”

Scout rocks back in his chair. “You an’ half the room!”

Spy glares him into silence. “And…?”

You lift the beer to your lips. Ugh. Part of the pay from this week can go toward buying something… more drinkable. “The money is good. Great, in fact, if I get signed on.” You set the
bottle down. “And—” You consider the words carefully. “—I’ve never had the chance to be this independent before. I can… do something.”

Medic chuckles, and you arch an eyebrow. “Genau!” He shakes his head. “It is apt!”

Demoman catches the giggle, like some kind of infectious cough. “He’s right, lass—y’ fit right in if murder an’ mayhem is yer idea of doing something!”

And now you’ve got it, too. “I guess… it is a little silly when you say it like that.”

“A good sort of silly, it seems.” You fall silent, watching as Spy replaces his cigarette in its case, and pulls out a new one. Still, he does not light it before letting it perch between his lips. “It is something to think on, certainly, Specialist.”

Chapter End Notes

All right, darlings--I'm going on vacation for just over a week, and wanted to make sure I got this update out for you before I left town. I'll try to have a little something extra for you all in addition to the usual update upon my return!
Your fourth day at the base dawns as early as the rest. The team is back to warring over the gravel pit, to endless rounds of capturing one point after another, and you hear nothing more of the stolen intelligence—either in reprimand or concern—until a chance encounter with the last person you wish to meet on the field.

It was an accident, judging by the surprise that flickers across his face when you turn opposite corners to stand, face-to-face, in a narrow alley. You had been pushing to the next point, and the BLU medic… had probably been answering the call of a teammate or two of his that you had left bleeding.

But, oh—the grin that captures his lips when he recovers makes your blood run cold.

You raise your shield just as the doctor pulls the trigger on his syringe gun, and the dart bounces off Kevlar with a metallic clink.

“Fräulein.”

“Doctor.” You’re covered well; you know nothing short of a rocket at point-blank range will knock you down, not here between these walls. You draw your Gyrojet—

His brows arch, gaze searching the alley’s mouth behind you. “Ah—Herr Pyro.”

Shit. You turn, anticipating the threat of flaming demise, drawing the Gyrojet high to level it with —air. Thin air.

And there’s a dull, burning sensation in your shoulder. You follow the barrel of the pistol to your wrist, over forearm and elbow, to the needle buried at the fold between shoulder and chest.

Your vision swims; arm drops to your side, heavy.

Oh. Oh, no. No—

Precisely what your medic had warned you against.

“This wasn’t your fault, really, fräulein.” You thrust your shield-arm forward, but the doctor dodges the shove smoothly, sidestepping across cracked soil to fire his syringe gun again—and you’ve left your chest open, shield drawing back just a fraction too slowly—fuck.

The dart whistles—a stab, a pinch in your abdomen, and you rip the needle out of your coat and
skin as fast as you can, gritting your teeth against the tug and slide.

With a snap, you strike at the man’s grinning face again, but—

_Burning_. Across your thigh, you hear fabric tear under the teeth of the bone-saw, your leg gives, the moment transforming into a slow battle to keep yourself upright; you lash out, steel-toed boots striking true—a grunt as the medic hits the ground behind, and you scramble to crawl back the way you had come, dragging your injured limbs, and—

“BASTARD!”

White flashes of pain blind your eyes, his gloved hands wrapped around your bloody thigh, fingers digging into your torn flesh and muscle, and you roll, hissing, dragging his arm under your legs, scrambling to your forearms—you fall. The shot to the abdomen has made half the necessary muscles near-useless, little better than a steamed mound of pasta sloshing about against your will. You throw yourself to one side, your bodily weight centered atop the medic now, your blood smeared over his blue gloves and once-white coat, lips drawn back in a snarl. You strike his face with your shield. Once, twice—glass cracks between wire frames—before his free hand brings the bone-saw to your hip.

The blade grinds against bone, tears a scream from your throat, tenuous fibers of uniform fabric dragging, fraying, mingling with sinew and skin, and the medic is far stronger than you anticipated—

_Crack_.

Face-down in the orange dust. Long fingers clasp the back of your skull, your hair, and—

_Crack_.

The pain is white, red, burns, turns your stomach, draws the strength from your limbs, dust in your eyes—

_Crack_.

Again, he slams your face into the crumbling soil. Your nose is broken beyond repair, you’re sure—blood hot, dusty, coppery on your lips, tongue—pins and needles dance across already swelling flesh. Gasping breaths through your bloody mouth. Distantly, you can hear the BLU medic cackle, and if the pain had not overloaded every nerve, your flesh might crawl.

The shield is pinned beneath your chest, and your remaining arm barely listens to command, inches across the cracked landscape of orange soil, grasping, clawing at dirt, catching on trousers, can’t find your Lancaster’s holster to—

“Allow me, _fräulein_.”

You scream. It takes a moment to register why—he’s sliced the holster free from your leg, with no care for the flesh he’s taken with it. Your head spins; you gasp against the gritty dirt.

Only one option occurs to you:

“HELP!” Your voice cracks, echoes along the alley walls.

That sets the medic laughing even harder. “_Gott im Himmel_—you think someone will come? They’re busy with the next point; they have no time for you.”
You spit, spraying the blood from your nose and half-numb, swollen lips onto the dirt. “Then kill me.”

“In good time.” A pinch at your shoulder, but thrashing does no good, soil falling into your jacket, loose stone and clumps of dirt digging into your stomach. The doctor’s knees are solidly on your back, his legs pinning yours. “A case full of medical records and none of yours among them, Specialist—but don’t worry: I’ll rectify my lack of knowledge shortly.”

Your head spins. Medical files. Why?

“Have you any idea what I can exploit with the right information?” Apparently your question had been verbal.

The ground seems to lurch beneath you.

He tears another scream from your lips with a slice across your spine. The teeth of the saw grinds, vibrates along vertebrae into your skull. You squeeze your eyes shut as the void creeps into the edges of your vision, white sparks of pain blurring your thoughts.

At least you’d bleed out before he accomplished much, at this rate. Was this even meant to yield results? So far the only thing he could find out, it seems to you, is that you both feel and react to pain.

Quite the revelation, that.

You’re floating a bit now, some combination of the drugs and blood loss, and, really, this isn’t the worst thing that could have happened to you; your own mother has faced worse. Faces worse. This; this is nearly over now.

[“Spesh, could use some support!”]

[“Where the Hell are ya?”]

There’s no chance of your hand reaching the button at your ear now, as your breath comes in weak rattles. The sun fades to a hopeless grey.

[“ON YOUR LEFT!”]

[“Where in the fu—”]

[“FOUR O’CLOCK, FOUR O’CLOCK!”]

The darkness fades to familiar black before a cracking pain brings you, gasping, back. The sun glares in a clear sky, and you squint, groaning; the pain is gone now, leaving only a hum in your limbs that warms you down to the bone, and though your eyes reveal nothing but an indistinct blur, it is a sensation you recognize by now.

You let your eyes settle closed, allow them to rest a moment while your body and mind take inventory. You need to ask if he knows what was stolen from the base yesterday. If he does not…

“Medic?”

“Ja.”

Something’s wrong.

Your eyes snap open again, and you realize only now you can’t move any of your limbs, cannot lift
your head, muscles groaning under useless strain.

The BLU medic’s visage swims slowly into focus as he sets his medi-gun aside. Your lips draw back in a snarl, but his voice is just as amiable as that first reply: “Oh… am I not the one you were hoping for?”

“What the fuck?”

“I don’t have zhe data I need.” His grin turns your stomach even as rage races through your veins. Where is your team? How long have you been here? What the hell does this bastard think he’s doing? “Now hold still.” A short laugh. “Not that there’s much choice, of course—”

Panic rises in your throat as the fabric of your coat parts beneath the blade of his saw, burgundy threads snapping and fraying.

“Let me die!” you blurt, heart racing. “Please. This is wrong. This is a battlefield. You can’t—”

“Shh—shh. Specialist. I will let you return to respawn in a few moments.” He chuckles. “Very nice of me, nicht? It’s more than your medic did for our spy. Has he told you zhe story?”

You have no idea what the fuck he’s on about, and waste no more time considering it and try with everything you are to thrash, to move—anything at all to get away from that razor edge. You strain until tears prick your eyes, but your head only lolls uselessly to one side and another on steady waves of panic. Your limbs lay heavy and useless as stones spread on the cracked, orange dirt.

The medic lowers his blade to your chest without another word, and pain erupts, racing across your skin. You hiss, you wail, unintelligible syllables falling from your lips. First, haphazard cuts shred flesh, sending flecks of blood across his face, catching on cracked spectacles, and you squeeze your eyes shut, clench your teeth, screaming, as the saw grinds on bone, sending tremors through your chest, vibrations along your spine.

“Oh, so he is experimenting with another model… Oh, Specialist—wouldn’t you like to see?”

No. No, you wouldn’t. But when a hand plunges itself into flesh that should never touch the afternoon air, your eyes snap open.

You’ve seen flesh before, and blood, and muscle and bone, ragged sinew and skin—things outside in the hot, desert sun that should never have seen the light of day.

But you have never seen a human heart.

And this—you’re not sure it’s human any longer, if it ever was; this beating burgundy bundle, crossed with veins and wire, larger even than your fist, open and throbbing in the desert air, clenched in a cerulean palm.

There’s no sound now from your throat, as though the pain no longer matters, as though you’re so far beyond repair that your mind knows there’s no sense in sounding the alarm. You stare. You stare as rubbery fingers slip through your flesh, paw through intestines and veins like so much ribbon, as the blood flows in waves and feeds the dry soil, fills sandy cracks in ruby rivers, and the sun goes dim.

Icy eyes alight with glee, spectacles sliding down his nose.

The image of your heart, beating steady, copper branches gleaming to the sky, is first, last,
Knees on concrete and here you are, retching again. Distantly, as the heaves subside, you hear a scream. Someone is in pain. The voice echoes into the hall, but with trembling limbs, you're in no condition to answer. You just dearly wish it would cease.

It does not until you close your mouth tight.

Fucking shit.

[“Spesh, you outta respawn yet? The Hell happened to you?”]

You spit and hit the button on your earpiece at last. You flex your fingers as you stand. The joints are stiff, but they comply.

“On my way. Got in a fight with the enemy medic.”

If you could call it that.

[“Apparently ya got pretty trashed—that asshole is lookin’ awfully cheerful right now.”]

You feel a bit ill at the thought. “I’m sure he is. Somebody do me a favor and shoot him in the stomach a few times and let him bleed out. Or maybe put a knife in his gut.”

[“Only if you take care ‘a this heavy first. Can’t even get to the freakin’ point!”]

“I’m on my way.”

The nagging question of whether your team knows what intelligence was stolen will have to wait.

Chapter End Notes

I'll have a bonus update for you all in the next day or so, since I was gone so long. ;)

My thanks again to the lovely escapistsoverign, whose pen-name has changed to orchiids. Do check out their new fic if you have the time; it threatens to break my heart.

I think I forgot to mention last time: I'll be referring to Spesh's shield exclusively as a ballistic shield, as that's a bit more correct than using 'ballistic' and 'riot' interchangeably. The main difference being that a ballistic shield is made of sturdier stuff with a little plexiglass window vs a riot shield made for police facing smaller projectiles and made mostly of plexiglass.
...Say 'Live and Let Die'

Chapter Notes

The title of this chapter also comes from 'Live and Let Die,' of course.

WARNING for: blood, graphically described injury/death, delirium, medical unpleasantness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two minutes left in today’s final round. You’re on the fourth point, Gyrojet rifle braced on Kevlar. Fingers curl tight, slick with sweat, on the handles of your weapons. If your team can hold, the day will belong to RED, stolen intel or no. Well—you spare a glance over your shoulder—if you can hold the point. None of your team is in sight; Pyro, Scout, and Demo, you know, are currently being processed at respawn. You haven’t seen Medic since the previous point was captured, Spy is never around anyway, Soldier and Heavy got caught in a skirmish, the last you had seen…

Sniper’s voice at your ear: [“You’ve got three BLUs comin’ up center. Soldier, Scout, an’ the pyro.”]

A crack echoes through the hot, still air.

[“Two. Soldier’s down.”]

“Thanks! Any of our own in the area?”

[“Engie here—bringin’ a sentry yer way.”]

[“Heavy an’ the doc are busy holdin’ the west side.”]

“Thank you—how long, Engie?”

[“ ‘Bout another minute.”]

You squint through the harsh sunlight at the gap between buildings ahead, take your aim. The moment one of those BLUs shows so much as a shoulder, you’re prepared to pull the trigger.

Why are you on this point alone? If you lose…

A flash of blue. You fire.

“Have’ta do better than that!”

You squint down your sights at the weaving figure, shotgun cradled between his arms. “Watch me,” you mutter, and squeeze the trigger. Your lips curl in satisfaction as your bullet draws a bloody line along his shoulder, his face contorting in a grimace.

[Thirty seconds!]

He pumps his shotgun, and the pyro moves in a flanking maneuver at ten o’clock.
“Got that sentry, Engie?”

[“ ‘Bout fifteen seconds, partner.”]

“Pyro’s coming up left—” you call “—I’ve got the scout.” You fire again, and the bullet sails over his head.

“No problem.”

The little bastard is almost upon you. Well, let him come—the little prick will get more than he bargained for. You holster the rifle and draw your Lancaster, ducking behind the ballistic shield.

A bang. The clatter of buckshot. A steady creak and clank behind you.

The scout is three strides away. Two. One—

You bring the shield’s edge up under his chin with a snap.

[The control point is being contested! Additional time.]

Crack. Vision spins. He brings the butt of his scattergun up for another strike, but meets only Kevlar as you drop back a step. Grasp your Lancaster—fire. The scout drops with a cry to his knees, clutching the hole in his thigh, shotgun clattering to the ground. You raise your pistol again—

“Fall back now!”

[Five.]

You grit your teeth and dive back to where Engineer waits, finger on the go-switch.

[Four.]

Click.

[Three.]

The sentry whirs to life. In a spray of blood and bullets, both the BLU scout and pyro are little more than shredded piles of so much cloth and bloody matter.

[One. Victory!]

A giddy laugh bubbles up from your belly, and the engineer gives a hearty slap to your back. “Done good an’ right!”

“Oui.” A waver in the desert air, and Spy stands at your shoulder, lighting a cigarette. “As well as can be expected, under the circumstances.”

“Were you there the whole time?”

He smiles. “And you did not need my aid.”

“But Engie—”

“Can’t expect you to hold all on yer own. I just gave a last-minute push.” Engineer nods and pushes his goggles over his forehead with a wink, and you can’t help the grin that captures your
features.

The spy takes a long drag of the sweet-smelling smoke. “We will see what comes, non?”

Another laugh escapes your lips. “Just like that?”

He shrugs slim shoulders beneath his suit-jacket and blows a curl of smoke to the blinding, azure sky. “There is potential.” With that, Spy turns and begins the walk back to base, melting into the heat-waves and leaving nothing but the trace of heady tobacco behind him.

With a twinge of discomfort deep in the joint, you feel the engineer’s heavy hand on your shoulder. “Maybe you should get to the doc—that scout knocked ya a good’un.”

“Oh…” There is a dull ache behind your eye, but the thrill is still running too strongly in your veins to let you feel the full force of what was likely some major swelling and a minor concussion as blood trickles along your scalp. “Yeah. Right now?”

He nods, and starts back toward the base after Spy, stepping off the metallic point—now showing red—onto the cracked, desert soil. You follow, tucking your pistol into its holster, and folding your shield down to size. “Medic gets right over there when anybody’s got major damage what won’t wait until tomorrow. I think most day’s you’ve been pretty fresh outta respawn, haven’t ya?”

Your brow furrows, and you ignore the twinge along your hairline. “Yeah—usually I just head back to my room, and everybody hits the shower.”

“Except the doc, when there’s a need.” He wipes some sweat on his scarlet sleeve.

“So I should—what—just head to the med-bay as soon as we get back?”

A brow arches, and Engie casts you an amused, sidelong glance. “The infirmary?”

You bite your tongue. “Yeah.” Damn it all! Can’t watch your mouth for one damned minute?

He must have caught something in your expression, because he says no more on the subject—only reaches into a pocket to produce a gingham handkerchief, and offer it in an open palm. “It’s a bit dusty, but it’ll keep that blood from gettin’ in yer eyes.”

You take it and shake some crumbling flecks of that orange dirt from the fabric. “Thanks.” Tenderly, you press it to where you know things are stickiest, blood all muddled up with your hair. It stings. Your pulse has slowed, and by now, there’s a little throb in your skull with each heartbeat. Hopefully the doctor has some Tylenol.

Nearly everyone has already returned to base, replacing their weapons and shrugging out of heavy coats and cumbersome belts and sweat-soaked vests in the locker room as you and Engineer arrive.

“Hey, Spesh!” Scout bounds over just as you lift the handkerchief from your head to check and see just how much blood you’re losing up there. A quick glance reveals that the fabric isn’t soaked, but you are a little concerned as the throbbing becomes more acute the longer you linger without treatment. “Heard you an’ Engie took care ‘a busin—ah, crap.” He gestures to the bloodied gingham and then to your head. “What now?”

You shrug. “Pistol-whipped with a scattergun.”

“Don’tcha have a shield for that?”
You press the handkerchief gingerly back to your head. “I was busy not getting shot by said scattergun. Do you see any bullet-holes?”

“No, but you’ve got a great big knot on yah noggin.”

“Stuff it.” But it’s a cheerful sort of brush-off, even as your head complains more loudly than before when Scout responds with a laugh. “Where’s Medic?” You don’t see the white tail of his coat anywhere—and a couple of other faces seem to be missing as well.

“He’s patchin’ Heavy up. You should head over with Snipes—I think he’s got a stab wound or somethin’—hey! Hey, Snipes!”

The lanky bushman straightens from clicking closed the clasps on his rifle’s case. “Wot?” He slides the whole thing into his locker; along his right forearm is a tightly wound bandage, a faint bloodstain already showing through the linen.

“You’ve gotta go see the doc, right? Spesh, here got knocked in the head; you should go together! Team bonding and stuff.”

Oh good Lord. “Scout, I know where it is—”

“’S all right.” Sniper shrugs. “I’ve gotta go anyhow; come or don’t.”

Pointedly ignoring Scout’s self-important grin, you hurry after the marksman, and fall into step beside him in the hall. Your throbbing head appreciates the relative quiet. Only the click or squeak of your boots follows the two of you through the tiled halls, but after several moments, you’re squinting uncomfortably under the fluorescents. Damn head injuries—damn them all.

And the sniper doesn’t seem like he’ll be the one to begin a conversation. You rub your temple, shake your head against the ache between your eyes. “So what happened to you?”

He shrugs. “Scuffle with the spy there at the end. Got a good slice on my arm—” He raises the bandaged area for a brief look. “—but I finished ‘im. Took care of the wound m’self.”

From what you can tell, it looks like he did a pretty good job dressing it, too. “Do you do that often?”

He lifts a shoulder again. “Sometimes.”

You nod; wince when there’s an extra twinge in your head, and then proceed to nod much more slowly and slightly. A man of few words, evidently. He takes a seat in the hall nearest the infirmary’s door, and you leave a chair’s space between you both. The sniper, from what you know, appears to be a man that likes his space and his quiet. You can respect that.

You peel the handkerchief from your head again, catching your lip between your teeth. Stings, aches—not the worst thing of the day, but shit. It’s getting sticky already, and that means it’s clotting, but the throbbing in your skull only seems to get worse. You close your eyes against the white fluorescents.

There’s no discernable sound from the infirmary, so you settle into the uncomfortable plastic chair and wait, borrowed handkerchief still clutched on your lap.

SLAM.

Ah, shit, shit, shit. You press a hand hard to your forehead. Needn’t have settled in, apparently.
You peek through your fingers to see Heavy striding out of the double-doors.

“Thank you, doktor!”

“Ja, bitte.” Medic appears beneath the door-frame, blood still staining his elbow-length gloves, gleaming in ruby drops and rivulets against the cheery, scarlet rubber. “Who’s next?”

Sniper waves a hand between you and the door. “Go’head.”

“But you—”

He shrugs. “Mine’ll keep.”

You hesitate, already halfway to your feet. Technically he was here first. Not to mention _stabbed through the arm_. “Are you s—”

“Jesus Christus!”

Yours and Sniper’s gazes rest slowly on Medic, a tall, rigid force of disapproval, glaring down the bridge of his nose, over his spectacles. “One of you needs to step through this door immediately.”

“Sorry,” you mumble instead, and keep your eyes on the cracked, grey flooring as it transforms into white, marble-imitation at the threshold of the infirmary. You follow Medic’s crisp coat, yet stained with the orange dust of the battlefield, as it flutters over the tiles.

“Haff a seat on zhe table.” You frown. Every word is decipherable, but… his words are usually crisp, clear. Now, his accent is nearly impenetrable; you could cut through it with a knife, if you had one. This… even on the battlefield, your team’s medic has never seemed this rattled—or irritated. You swallow your nerves, but they still flutter at the back of your throat as you obey and take your seat on the table, still warm from Heavy’s bulk.

You raise your head as Medic strides away and starts the faucet at the deep sink. “Vhat is it?” He washes his hands, gloves and all.

“Pistol-whipped. I—uh—probably have a concussion.” Your nerves aren’t helping the matter, either, adding a sharp edge to each throbbing wave of pain. You take a slow breath of the chilly, sterile air. The bitter smell of antiseptic turns your stomach.

“Tch.” He shakes his hands over the basin. “We shall see.” The doctor turns sharply on his heel to face you, eyes flashing, cold, under the harsh light.

Only the steady thump behind your breast proves your heart is exactly where it should be.

You swallow the bile that rises in your throat and draw another deep breath, clutching both hands around Engie’s bloody handkerchief.

“Hold still.”

That certainly doesn’t help either as your limbs reflexively seize.

“Spezialist, please!”

“Sorry!” You squeeze your eyes shut. “I’m sorry, Medic—I—” Something, something, must find _something else…_ “Is there anything bothering you?” You exhale sharply through your nose, ignore that there’s an arsenal of needles and scalpels only feet away. Focus, questions… “You seem a little—”
He barks a laugh. “Tense, do I?”

Your brow furrows. Your breath comes a little easier now that you can’t see the blazing ice, the cracked spectacles... “Yeah. And we won today, so I sort of thought—” Rubbery fingers come into contact with raw skin and you gasp and bite your tongue.

“We won, but it vas not a victory,” Medic hisses, and you hear the click of his boots retreat to a nearby corner, followed by the creaky hinge of a cabinet. “Der schweinhund!” The cabinet slams shut with a deafening crack. You squeeze your eyes shut against the white flash of pain—oh fuck, oh hell... “Zhere is no victory vhen your research has been stolen. Und how, hm? Wie?” A click nearby. “Hold still. Stitches first.” The darkness behind your eyes is warm; it helps, even as the doctor’s harsh syllables rake across the day’s memories like fingers through your intestinal ribbons.

Fingers clasp the back of your skull and your eyes snap open to the dust and the blood and the sun.

“Fräulein!”

An almost audible crack, like stepping on a dry twig in the silence of an autumn evening.

The medic’s cracked spectacles glint and gleam, your blood in flecks across his face—**not again.** “No.” You lash out; you won’t be taken over like this again—not again, no; you know what’s to come and you won’t be caught off-guard. Not again.

“Bitte—hold still...!”

Not again. No, you won’t; not again, that twisted heart beating under the golden desert sun, glinting, copper ruby red cerulean rubber and cracked glass and sand and gleaming teeth; no, not again—

White coat stained with the blood and the dirt and you can seize the lapels this time; there’s no wicked saw here, not now, not again, no—

“Oi! Specialist—sheila—sheila, listen to me!”

Hands clasping your shoulders. Leather, fingerless gloves.

Still here, still here, he must still be here—not again; you’ll be ready, you are ready; not again, no —

“Sheila, look at me. You’re at the base. In the infirmary.”

Amber aviators pushed onto a wide-brimmed hat. Eyes—eyes like a cat. One hazel, one green.

“That’s it—calm down, now. Come on.”

A glint of silver. Not again—you won’t be put down again, heavy-limbed and gasping, not again, pricking, pulling flesh—

“PUT THE FOCKIN’ NEEDLE AWAY, DOC!”

No. It won’t happen again. You’ll end him, or you’ll end yourself.

“DOC, JUST GET HEAVY, DAMN YOU!”

Fists crack against metal; the more you strike, the less you feel. Hands hanging useless, intestines
and veins like ribbons in the breeze, pass through slick fingers, not again, not again, not again—

“*Bloody hell.*”

Heart thumping, steady, steady, steady—no—not again—

“*Tikihy!*”

Giant hands capture your fists. You won’t be restrained. You won’t. Not again.

“You hurt yourself. Stop now.”

Your hands are free.

“Shh. Tell me—tell me what are you seeing.”

You could run. You could…

Your breaths are ragged, and your heart races, safe inside your chest. “Heavy?”

“Yes. Tell Heavy. What do you see?”

You swallow. The sun… it won’t… not… “It’s bright.” Your head throbs, sharp.

“*Da.* Lots of lights. What else?”

Lights. Heavy… still wears his bandolier, but not his vest? “No Kevlar.”

He nods, slowly. “Was very hot. And else?”

“You’re very big.”

He laughs, softly. “*Da.* Now, what are you feeling? Better?”

You catch your lip between your teeth. “My—my fingers are tingling.” You draw a deep, stuttering breath. “And my face.”

Heavy nods, slowly. “Breathe; will be all right. In. And then out.”

You follow his instruction, flexing your fingers with a wince.

“I fetch bottle of water from fridge for you—I will not leave room. Is ok?”

You nod. Your mouth is a bit dry. “Thank you.”

Now that the mountain of a man has moved, making his way toward a little refrigerator on the opposite end of the room… you see a great deal more:

The gurney upon which your first surgery had taken place is up-ended, sterile sheets and paper winding across the tiles. A tray of medical tools lays scattered across the floor, thermometers and mirrors, scissors and stethoscope, things you cannot name. You’re sitting now on one of the curtained-off cots saved for extended stays, the thin mattress marginally better than the papered examination table. Heavy is the only person in the room aside from you.

You groan, bury your tingling face in tingling hands. “Please don’t tell anyone about this.”

“I will not; no worry.” You glance up with a start to find Heavy offering you a bottle. For a man so
large, he is unexpectedly quiet. “Drink.”

You take the water gratefully, and the man takes a seat beside you.

“You still need bump on head fixed,” he says. “First, I must know what has happened. But not until you are ready to say.”

You take a long, cool drink from the bottle, let the water wash away the figment of dust from your throat. “I—should be able to—” You bite your tongue, shrug. “I’m alive. I can work through it.”

Heavy nods. “Da. You can. But no need to work alone—you are on team now. Can help.”

Your heart aches a little.

You wish your mother were here.

“The—during the second round, I—disappeared for a bit.”

“Thought you were busy. Said you got in fight…”

You nod, draw from the bottle again. Cold. Wet. Far from the desert’s glaring gaze… “With the BLU medic. It—”

You exhale sharply through your nose, flex your fingers. Heavy rests a large hand on your shoulder. “Is not to happen again. Will not. You are safe here.”

Your stomach turns, stills. You breathe. “There was a scuffle, and—do you know they stole medical records yesterday? That’s what was in the case. Mine hadn’t been added yet, so…”

Heavy grunts, a deep rumble in his chest. You look up to find his gaze steely, distant. “Need say no more. Doktor will want to speak to you—our doktor.”

You resist the urge to rub the pins and needles out of your cheeks. “I’m sorry.”

“Why sorry? Not for sorry. Experience was real. Respawn does not fix bad memory.”

Your shoulders sag. “Yeah.”

“Are you ready? Will wait to fetch doktor if not.”

You nod, slowly, draw a deep breath, finish your water. “I’m ready.” The room catches your eye again—a disaster. Bloody well embarrassing. “Shouldn’t I tidy a couple things up a little before—”

Heavy shakes his head. “Is good offer, but no. Doktor will want to put things back himself.”

Your teeth catch the inside of your cheek. “Not even the table?”

He rumbles a chuckle at that. “Fine. Just table. I will leave to get Medic—you will be ok?”

You nod, set the empty bottle aside, slide off the cot. “Yes. I’ll be ok now.”

Stormy, grey-blue eyes sweep over you once, ascertaining, before he departs through swinging doors. You stride over to the upset gurney and bend to right it, ignoring the tingling protest of your hands, and push it to a standing position… approximately where it had been, under the medi-gun’s mounted harness.
The doors swing open, and Heavy leads your team’s medic back into the infirmary, his expression as implacable as stone. Medic, however, struggles, mouth twitching, gloved hands fluttering at his sides. Red gloves. Red class patch on his shoulder. Red tie around his neck, loose and crooked—probably your doing, you note with embarrassment.

“Fr—” He clears his throat, stopping to stand before you at arm’s length, Heavy lingering behind like some hulking shadow. “Specialist. He called you ‘fräulein,’ didn’t he?”

You nod, gritting your teeth tight.

“You are feeling better?”

You nod. “Yes.”

“You know who I am?”

“Yes, Medic.” You look at your feet, still protected by leather and steel. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t—”

“Bitte. I should have known better. I was too distracted to notice.” The click of his heels returns to the same cabinet as before, and you raise your eyes to meet Heavy’s gaze; the man has not moved. He cocks his head, and you give what you hope is a reassuring nod. You do feel… calmer, now.

“Tell me—” Medic continues. “—how much did he see?”

“Doktor—”

“It was your heart, wasn’t it?”

Your fingers curl at your sides, hands empty. You realize you have no idea where the handkerchief has gotten to—handkerchief. That’s a safe thought.

You almost can’t see the bloody copper, the beating, burgundy lump of flesh each time you blink. “Yes.”

Something shatters, shards of glass tinkling across the tiles.

“Wichser. Hurensohn! Ich werde dich mit meinen bloßen Händen töten! Ich werde seine Adern aus seiner Haut reißen, um die Wände mit seinem Blut zu bemalen! Ich—”

You don’t turn your head—even as restored as you feel now, you can hear the driving rage behind each syllable, though you have no idea what the words mean, and to catch that anger again… if that’s what it takes to trigger whatever this issue of yours is, you’re in no hurry to repeat it. But—

You twist and twine your fingers together. If the doctors were identical down to their voices, surely this would disturb you as well?

But the guttural, hissing rhythm of his rage as his tongue curls around syllables unfamiliar to your ear seems to catch itself up in the rhythm of your heart, the throbbing of your head, and your thoughts are nowhere near any matter beside the infirmary here, now…

“Doktor, please!”

There’s another crash as Medic falls silent.

He returns to your side. “On zhe gurney, please,” he says, quietly. You obey, casting another glance at Heavy. The Russian is still, a great sentinel in the middle of the half-wrecked infirmary.
“I am going to clean your wound, check for a concussion, and add stitches before I finish the job with zhe medi-gun.”

You nod, slowly. “Thank you.”

Medic tips some alcohol onto a swatch of gauze. His spectacles catch the light, but they are whole, sliding down the bridge of his nose. Your jaw clenches.

“He is a coward,” the doctor says, softly, deliberately. Here are the sounds uttered with conscious deliberation. You close your eyes as nimble hands press and clean the raw skin—it stings. “And he will pay for stealing from me.” You can feel Medic’s warm breath on your forehead against the cold cleanse of the alcohol. “I did not tell you, but zhat heart is a prototype. I plan on changing over the old technology for the others as soon as my observations are complete.” His hands leave your skin. “Open your eyes, bitte.” You do. Medic’s brow furrows as he flashes a pen-light through your gaze. “Ja. Concussion. Throbbing pain, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“The medi-gun will fix that.” Through the spots dancing before your vision, you see him turn to the now-upright tray where he has set new tools. Now, he chooses a thick ointment, spreads it with a cotton-ball and brings it to your head. “This will dull the pain so you don’t flinch when I begin zhe stitches.” He fetches up a sterile needle and thread. “Six, I think,” the doctor mutters absently. His eyes crinkle handsomely at the edges, even as subdued wrath gleams in their icy depths.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks again to orchids, my lovely beta, who helped especially with the German this time around!

I went back-and-forth with myself on whether I’d provide a translation, since Spesh has no idea what was said, nor will she. But, for your convenience:

Transl. "Wanker. Whore-son! I will kill you with my bare hands! I'll tear his veins from his skin to paint the walls with his blood! I--" 

Updates will now return to the regular weekly-ish schedule!
Chapter Notes

This delay brought to you by the author's trouble with Plot Impulse Control and the author's amazing beta, who declared Not Yet on pain of readers' emotional whiplash. My deepest gratitude to orchiids, without whom this fic would be wrapped up in various knots.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_Dantès passed through all the stages of misery endured by prisoners forgotten in a dungeon. He began with pride, which is the result of hope and a consciousness of innocence; then, he began to doubt even his innocence; finally, his pride collapsed, and he began to pray, not yet to God, but to men…_

Evening. You’ve read those sentences at least three times. You know well what will befall Dantès now, even if you don’t make it through the paragraph: a friend, the only one he will have for the next fourteen years, and then, a means of escape.

You put the book aside on your night-stand, gently. Orange sunbeams streak through the bars on your window, play upon the ceiling as you roll onto your back, tuck the pillow behind your head. The sunset’s fingers stretch, slowly, toward your door. You’re clean, you’re fed, the memory of your headache long gone, today’s events pushed as far from your mind as you had been able to force them.

You sigh, close your eyes. Heavy was as good as his word: when you went to make a sandwich (there wasn’t any of Demo’s pea soup left from last night), no one spoke to you any differently; you returned Engineer’s handkerchief (it had been among Medic’s tools on the floor) with thanks and without incident.

Incident. There’d been only the two today, and… perhaps now, you can make something of them. Releasing a long, slow breath, you try to separate the true events of the infirmary from those of your mind. There is little to find—a blur of shapes and words, your absolute resolution, the memory of blinding sunlight and mocking syllables; you dearly hope you hadn’t caused your Medic any real harm…

Sniper. Sniper had been there. You bring your hands to your face. Oh, hell. You’ve spoken to the man—what—twice? And he saw that? Shit.

Bloody hell. You have to talk to him.

_Fuck._

Fine, fine. This is fine. You’re an adult. You’re currently killing people for a living. You’ll march out of here, find a teammate that knows where the sniper might be, seek him out, thank him, and apologize. And somewhere, in the back of your mind, you can hear your mother agreeing with you.

_Mom._
You yank the pillow from behind your head and drop it over your face.

Nope.

Tears of frustration prick at your eyes. Apologies to Sniper be damned! Without this job, there’s no insurance. Without this job, the medical bills… your teeth sink into the inside of your cheek.

Even if Heavy (in his kindness that you’re not sure you understand) overlooks today’s episode on your performance review, Sniper and Medic certainly won’t. And why should they?

You bloody well attacked two of your own teammates. You’re a damned hazard!

You swallow the lump in your throat.

Maybe—perhaps they’ll be kind? As though you deserve any more consideration. They’ve been kinder than anyone has a right to expect already.

How are you going to explain to your mother why you’ve come back home so soon? Why you have no job, no future, no insurance that could help, and why, why the hell do you have this innate ability to fuck up so brilliantly every fucking time—

Knock. Knock.

Your heart leaps to your throat. You consider pretending you’re not in.

“Specialist? Is Heavy. Do not have to answer—just came by to make sure you are ok.”

You bury your face further in the pillow as your tears spill over. You’re… not. You’re not all right. Your arms wrap around the pillow, press so hard you almost can’t catch a breath.

Silence.

You can lie here and pretend you’re off exploring the base. You can pretend you’re running the course outside. But there’s a nagging prickle in the back of your mind: if he cares enough to ask, you ought to trust him with the truth at least. After all, in three days’ time, you’ll likely never see one another again—and what will it matter what he knows then? You uncover your face.

You swallow the tears trying to catch your voice. “Heavy? You still there?”

“Da. Still here.”

“Ok…” You press the heels of your hands over your eyes and draw a deep breath. “…just a second.”

You rise slowly, and pad to the door in your socks, a pair of khaki shorts (borrowed from your brother’s drawer before you left home), and your bra; you pull on another of the red button-downs before unlocking the latch. You’re going to have to do laundry tomorrow at the latest. You swallow the lump in your throat.

You open the door to find that Heavy takes up most of its frame, and he bows his head to look at you. “You are ok?”

“You want company, or no?”

You open your mouth, close it. Shake your head as tears well up again, but you will them back. You can’t—you won’t. He shouldn’t see you cry; he’s seen enough for today.

“You want company, or no?”
“I’m really…” Nails dig into palms. “Not sure.”

Heavy nods, slowly. “Can stay for a while. If this works, good; if not, I will go. Does this sound good?”

Yes. Yes, that could… It requires no firm decision. Just… good. You nod. “Thank you. You can—um—come in?”

Heavy shakes his head once. “Should not intrude. There is little library upstairs—usually quiet. But no need to leave if you do not want to.”

You consider it. “A… the library sounds nice. Just a minute—I’ll put some shoes on.” Never know what’s going to be on the floors of these halls, after all. Nails and bolts… among other things. You have three pairs here: the steel-toed boots for your uniform, an old pair of Keds, and some Mary-Janes for… reasons unknown. Maybe one day you’ll go into town. Maybe you knew you’d not be staying long. You tug the boots on and enter the hall behind Heavy. “Lead the way.” Your attempt at a smile is a poor one.

If he notices—and how could he not?—he draws no attention to it; only offers conversation: “Is probable Engineer did not think of it when he showed you the base. Is pretty new, and mostly only me and Demoman using it.”

You nod. “Where did the books come from?”

“We all have our own books, but if there are some we do not mind others borrowing, they go there. Others we buy on trips to town. We will be here some time.” He shrugs his massive shoulders. “Should have library.”

You couldn’t agree more with the sentiment. “I do love books.”

He rumbles a chuckle. “Me, too! Not many in library yet, and is very hard to find books in Russian here. I read books here to help with English. But so many words! Always using dictionary.”

“I can’t even read your alphabet,” you confess. “You’re one up on me.”

“It would be useful, though!” If you stay. It would be good to know him better. You fall silent, and follow the mercenary up the rough-cut wooden steps. Some of the stairs don’t match the others, as though recently replaced after some accident. The days here have been so busy—you haven’t actually seen any unsafe practices yet (Demo, constantly drinking and working with explosives, or Medic, with his seemingly distracted nature, come to mind as likely perpetrators), but the evidence seems to be everywhere, from cracks in the tiled bathroom walls to the dented refrigerator, to scorch marks on the main hall’s floor, to these half-repaired stairs.

You almost run straight into Heavy on the top step. “Here.” He opens the door on the left for you.

It seems the room was little more than a supply closet before two overstuffed armchairs, a table, and two low bookcases, stacked atop one another, moved in. Three shelves bolted to the back wall (they likely held some boxes or cleaning supplies for the base originally) are packed with books. You step into the space, and pull the chain that lights the fluorescent fixture above. There’s a lamp on the table that might be more ambient, but even with the flickering, white lights… the room is serviceable—cozy, even. You head immediately for the stacks of books on the back wall as Heavy ducks through the low doorway, angling himself to one side to get through the narrow opening.
Two dictionaries—one brand-new and another at least a decade old—some dime-store mystery novellas, and a couple of Mark Twain’s works cover the first shelf. The second is packed on one side with comic books, on the other with classics: Bronte, Dickens, Tolstoy, Hawthorne, and Shakespeare.

“Am always trying to make Scout read The Death of Ivan Ilyich. Is not working.”

You chuckle. “Does he read anything at all?”

He nods. “Yes. Comic books, but also likes Twain novels. Is too difficult for me to understand the Mississippi English, and no translation to Russian in my collection yet.” He shrugs. “So I have not read them. But I did try.”

“Well…” Your eyes roam the shelf, warmly studying the spines both brand-new and—er—well-loved. “Ivan Ilyich is one I haven’t read… if Scout won’t read it, I can.”

But Heavy shakes his head. “Maybe you can convince him. Chose it for Scout. You—I have to think first on book for you.” You can feel your face fall—confusion, annoyance (does he think it would be too difficult for you to grasp?)—and the man offers a smile. “I like to give books with meaning,” he explains. “You could read Ilyich…but would rather give you book that means more.”

“Oh.”

“For example, gave Doktor Crime and Punishment—Dostoyevsky.”

You can feel your jaw tighten at the mention of Medic. You combat the stirring guilt by running your fingers along the loose binding of the first book you can see: a weathered, coffee-stained copy of Wuthering Heights. You hear the big man settle into one of the armchairs with a creak.

“Did he like it?” You ask, after a moment, feeling the concave contour of the spine beneath your fingers, tracing along the pages’ edges at the top, soft, smelling faintly of must.

Heavy chuckles. “Did not give it to him to like. You have read it?”

“Yes, a couple years ago.” For college, you almost add, but you bite your tongue and gently tug the next book—a tiny volume of Shakespeare’s tragedies—from the shelf.

“Well, Doktor liked to disagree with it.”

You consider the story’s end, Raskolnikov’s romance and rationalism, a greatness eventually traded for humility, truth, and religion—and juxtapose it with your memory of the medic’s pride, his boundless exuberance, the careless air when discussing your momentary death during surgery the very first day you met. “I bet he did.”

“But he did enjoy reading. Liked many of the ideas; this is how I choose a book to share. Scout is good Catholic boy, but also fighting war without thinking about what it means—would benefit from Ilyich. Is about life, from view of death.”

Catholic? You wonder how Heavy knows, and what it has to do with this particular novel.

“But you…” He muses, before you can ask. “Will take time.”

You nod, replace the book on the shelf, and move to explore the smaller shelves braced on the adjacent wall, behind Heavy’s chair. The top one is filled with myths and legends, worn tomes that
look suspiciously like they chronicle some kind of black magic. It’s… peculiar.

“So—only you and Demo and sometimes Scout come up here?”

“Sometimes Sniper borrows books, but I do not think he reads here. Spends most days in van.”

At the mention of Sniper, you abandon your attempt to find out more about this strange collection of tomes. “Van?”

Heavy nods. “Sniper has big… van with house. Er—camper, *da*?”

“Oh—yeah.” Your brow furrows. Now or never, right? The opportunity to take care of this… bit of business has fallen right in your lap. “He doesn’t stay in his room?”

“Not often, no.”

You bite your lip. “Would he be there now?”

Heavy tips his head to look at you. “Why?”

“Sniper was…” You sigh. “He tried to help me before you arrived, and I want to thank him.”

The man nods. “Probably in van. Is almost ten o’clock? Will likely be there. Would you like me to go with you?”

You hesitate. It would be good to have his company, some support, but… “No, thank you. I appreciate it, but I should probably… I need to do it myself.”

“I will be here. You know where to go? Just to left of front door, in main yard.” He lays a gentle hand on your shoulder as you pass; he didn’t even have to rise from his chair to reach. You tilt your head, questioning. “Should not be alone on field tomorrow. Will stay with someone, yes? Maybe Scout. You work well together.”

You nod, slowly. Yes, that—it’s an excellent point. You don’t want to talk about it, not now, but… you’ll make sure you’re not alone again. “Yes. I’ll… I can do that.” Heavy returns your nod, and releases your shoulder. You take a breath, and start out before you lose your courage. You stop, there in the doorway. “Heavy… thank you.”

“Was nothing.” His eyes are sincere—and sad.

With the best smile you can muster, you hurry out into the night.

The camper’s beige walls seem almost blue beneath the midnight of the desert sky, and the moon’s silvery beams play upon the cracked soil, no sound in the air but your breath, and the faint hum of a radio crooning from a mercenary’s open window. You hesitate under the moonlight, shivering in the rapidly cooling night, at the door to Sniper’s lonely vehicle.

Now, looking up at a door peppered with more than a few haphazardly repaired bullet holes, your stomach turns. What will you say?

“Are you gonna stand there for anotha ten minutes, or are you gonna knock?”

You jump back from the muffled voice. “Sorry—I—if you’re going to bed, I can—”
The camper’s door swings open to reveal the sniper, leaning in the frame. “Might as well come in.” He shrugs. “You have somethin’ to say, right?”

You nod dumbly as he waves you in, and you climb the aluminum steps.

Inside, it seems almost too small for the lanky Australian—not to mention for you and your ample shoulders, your long legs, the heavy boots you insisted upon wearing out here when really you could have just—

“Sit.” Sniper nods to a bench wrapped halfway around a little table in the style of a discreet breakfast nook. You scoot in hurriedly, fold your hands, bite the inside of your cheek. Shit. The hell are you doing here after ten o’clock at night?

The man looks at you expectantly, mouth a fine, grim line. His Akubra is tipped jauntily to one side as though he had donned it as an afterthought before letting you in. He folds his arms.

Right, right. What the hell are you doing here—that’s exactly what he wants to know.

“I—uh—” You sigh. “I’m not sure how to…” You avert your gaze to the tabletop, the linoleum cracked in more than one place, hairline fractures sparking across its surface. “I want to thank you for… earlier. And apologize.” You raise your head. “I’m sorry for… all that. You shouldn’t have had to see that or…” You swallow. “I’m sorry.”

But the sniper only shrugs his lanky shoulders. “No ‘arm done.”

Your mouth drops open. No. No, there was most definitely harm. “I’m—I’m pretty sure I—”

“Yeah, you hit me; it happens.”

What? “Uh—I—”

You think you hear him chuckle, but it ceases so quickly that you’re not entirely sure. “Look, sheila—Specialist—I know wot happened. Happens to everybody.” He shrugs. “’cept maybe the medic, but he’s a bit crackers, innit he? Well—’im and Pyro—but not a soul on earth knows about Pyro, anyway.”

“You—”


“Oh.” You fold your hands, worry one of the buttons on the bottom of your shirt. “Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

The sniper works a kink out of the back of his neck. You flick the button until you’re sure it’s in danger of coming loose. Silence stretches into the camper’s stuffy air.

“So…”

“Well…”

“Good talk,” you offer, with what you hope looks like a passable, if sheepish, smile.

“Yeah.” He nods.
You scoot out of the seat. “I’ll—er—see you tomorrow, then?”

He opens the door. “Yeah.”

You try not to hurry down the steps. You really do. “I appreciate… thanks. Good night!”

“’Night.”

Well—you decide, hurrying across the moonlit yard—that didn’t go horribly.

Chapter End Notes

The text at the beginning is, once again, from Alexandre Dumas’ The Count of Monte Cristo, translated by Lowell Bair.

Many thanks again to orchiids, who helped a great deal with Heavy's dialogue as well as keeping me on track!

Updates will be spaced out a little further now that classes have started, but I promise they'll not cease!

(Oh--I nearly forgot to mention that there's now a blog tumblr under the url purple-compromise if anyone is interested in some of the information I've gathered in reference to weapons and such mentioned in this fic, or TF2 goodness in general, and even some fanart done for the fic by a couple fabulous people(*cough*fabulouspotatosisterandmechan0latry*cough*); feel free to give me a shout over there!)
The fourth night, you sleep like the dead (and try not to dwell on that simile, actually) until you wake to darkness, whole body aching down to your bones. The moonlight glares just enough on the alarm clock for you to know that it’s a little after three. Far too early to be up and ready for battle.

You try to roll over and go back to sleep, but shit. Every muscle groans and seizes in protest. So, you hiss, and gently, gradually stretch each limb from where you lie, stifling the sounds of complaint. You’ve been sore the last few nights, sure, but not like this; you feel like you’ve been hit by a car, your body has reduced to one big bruise. It defies all understanding! You haven’t done anything differently or particularly strenuous since you were fixed up by the medi-gun. And even if you hadn’t received treatment, anything major enough to cause this kind of pain is always solved by respawn—

Oh. Shit. You forgot to take your vitamin yesterday.

You sit up, groaning, and open the bedside drawer to dump one of the pills into your aching hand. Even your joints complain as you unscrew the lid. It seems the doctor knew what he was doing in prescribing these. Imagine that.

Ugh—but you don’t want to swallow the capsule without water. Grimacing, you push yourself off the bed and set the pill aside. Maybe you should just keep a bottle in here.

You shake your head. Bottled water. It had seemed ridiculous to you, until Miss Pauling explained that anything coming out of the tap here was somewhat hazardous. You didn’t inquire any further after that; ‘somewhat hazardous’ is quite enough of an explanation for you when it comes to drinking water.

You tug the shorts on from this afternoon, slip your Keds onto bare feet, and creep into the hall. It’s some distance to the mess hall from the team’s quarters; you shiver, and buckle in for a long, chilly walk that already isn’t helping your sore muscles. Hell, even breathing seems like a chore in the crisp, night air. Some obnoxious snoring finds its way through this corridor, and it doesn’t help the too-early-in-the-damn-morning headache cropping up behind your eyes.

At least you won’t be running into anyone at this hour.

You round the first corner. And then, the next, lit only by milky emergency lights placed about every fifteen feet, casting eerie shadows across the floorboards, highlighting a gouge here or there in the plaster and wood, something that might be a scorch mark or old blood. Your sneakers make almost no sound as you move along, nothing but your breath on the air and the faint hum of those caged bulbs. It’s… well… you’d have to be half out of your mind not to find it a little creepy.

It occurs to you that you’ll have to pass the medical wing on your way to the promise of fresh water. You shake your head. Medic won’t be there, anyway. Not at three o’clock in the morning with no in-house patients or emergencies to speak of. The thought eases your nerves.

Medic is…

You’re just not ready to speak to him yet. Not when getting this job relies so much on his professional opinion of your health. Not after yesterday.
You have straightened yourself out a bit, yes. You’re… pretty confident that you won’t be mistaking him for that BLU sonovabitch again. It’s just—it’s something you’re not ready for. Not right now. Not if he plans to write up the final medical report and send it straight to the Miss Pauling’s desk…

Your fingers curl, nails digging into palms. Now is not the time to think about that.

The infirmary—dark, shadowed doors and chairs—sits silently on your right, and you pass without incident.

Now is the time to take your vitamin and get back to bed before morning. You have a job to do, after all. There’s no room for panic, and no room for sleepless nights.

You fetch a cold bottle from the little refrigerator without turning on the main fluorescents, moving slowly through the grey shadows. There’s just enough light from the emergency lamps in the hall to tell Demo’s brown bottles from the little, labelled ones shipped in by RED. You clasp it between your fingers and hurry back into the hall, but—

A flash of movement.

You freeze, barely two steps from the door.

There’s someone near the infirmary. Collared shirt, tall boots, dark hair—he passes beneath one of the lamps and white light gleams on his spectacles.

In the next breath, you dive back into the mess hall, clutching the cold bottle between your fingers, eyes shut tight, listening…

What color—what color was the tie draped around his neck? Did you imagine the wrath evident in the turn of his lip? Your heart hammers against your ribs. You listen, strain your ears. No sound. Not the click of boots, not the swing of the infirmary doors.

You’re not sure if your hands have begun to sweat or if it’s merely the condensation on the water bottle that has made your palms slick. You bite your tongue, draw a sharp breath, try to keep the sound muffled in your throat, and peer around the corner—slowly now—


Like you imagined the whole thing. Not that there was much. But… hallucinating a whole person, surely—

You frown, straighten up, and creep into the hall.

This is stupid.

You march to your room (quietly, no sense in waking anyone up or… drawing any attention whatsoever), sparing a single glance at the med-bay doors as you pass. Nothing. Not a light, not a lingering swing of the doors on silent hinges. Like you’d been wrong after all. Just… tired. You’re just tired. It’s early. You’ll take your pill, get a couple more hours of sleep, and be as good as new in the morning.

Good as new.

The second time you wake, to your usual alarm, the aches have faded to a mere background
sensation, as crickets compared to the jarring steam engine of pain that had woken you in the dark. You don your last clean uniform, and stretch in the grey light of morning, loosening your muscles, massaging away the aches, and finally finishing the now-warm bottle of water on your nightstand. New day; new opportunity. Two left after this.

You buckle the Lancaster to your thigh before heading to the kitchen for a nice strong mug of caffeine and a slice of toast. Demo is at the table again, and this time, you catch him pouring a shot of something into his tea. “G’mornin’,” he mumbles, setting the brown bottle aside.

“Morning.” You bring a mug down from the cabinet with a clink and give it a once-over. There seems to be old coffee ringing the bottom. You grimace, and decide to wash it first.

“So, you like the work all righ’?” Demoman asks as you pour a little soap into the white porcelain (of course, nearly everything here has the team color on it, and this cup is no exception; the outside of the mug reads ‘RED’ in proud, scarlet letters).

You nod, casting a glance over your shoulder. “It’s… I like it.” And you do. Truly. All —complications— aside.

“I thought so.” He takes a long drink from the mug with a satisfied sigh. “That little smile ‘a yours when you nail one o’ them buggers in th’ face—” He chuckles. “Y’make a charge tae be proud of, that’s fer sure.”

Your brow furrows as you rinse your mug. Sure, you’ve bloodied the scout’s nose, struck the pyro full in the mask… but in your mind, it seems you’d rather not be close enough to do either. But he’s right. It’s damn satisfying, and you find yourself smiling at the mere thought. “Thank you.” You give the mug another once-over. Better. “Use many shields yourself?” you ask. The way he expressed the compliment, it seemed perhaps…

“Aye, from time to time. Y’ever hear of a targe? Good Scottish weapon! Steeped in tradition! Why —”

“Good morning!” Scout waltzes through the mess doors, chipper as a damn robin. You shoot him a Look; you’ve only just poured your cup. That kind of energy before breakfast just isn’t fair.

“Scout, don’t ye know better than t’interrupt, lad? Sit yer arse in that chair an’—”

“Morning, Scout. You were saying about the targe, Demo?”

“Ain’t we s’posed ta hold off on that? I thought—”

“It’s in the original contract, boy—didn’t ya read the bloody thing?”

“Yeah, yeah, I signed it, but—”

Oh. You take a steaming gulp from your mug. You put it together: they must be arguing about secondary weapon sets. Part of the arrangement with RED was to use the standard issue stuff before purchasing your own (plus another four sections regarding what can and can’t be used for certain classes, defining your class, regulations regarding approved weapons depots—the damn US military didn’t bother with half that amount of regulations…); not that you could really afford to buy anything until you’d received a couple paychecks. You assumed the rest of the team had been made to go standard as a control to see how the introduction of a new class would function and how the team dynamic would fare.

“—smart enough tha’ it’s not gonna complicate anything!”
“Shut up! Too early for arguing!” The room goes dead silent as Heavy strides, glaring, through the door, and you certainly don’t blame anyone involved. He continues on to the coffee pot, a great, lumbering giant, and, evidently, not a morning person. You scoot out of the way and take a seat at the table.

“Morning,” he greets as you pass.

“Good morning, Heavy.”

He mumbles something you’re not entirely sure is English and pours himself a mugful of coffee. He drinks the first sip black, then adds enough sugar from the canister to make you certain the bottom of that cup has to be a silty pile of sugar.

Scout drums his fingers on the tabletop, and Demo sips from his not-just-tea. “Need a pick-me-up?” he offers, waving the bottle in Heavy’s direction.

“Nyet.”

“How ‘bout you, lass?”

You arch a brow. “What is it?”

He chuckles. “Fine batch o’whisky, it is.”

It has to be better than the beer you’d had the other night. You offer your mug. “Thanks!” You could use a little something to steady your nerves today. Keep your thoughts from that incident you’re definitely not thinking about. You watch the amber liquid sink into the mug—rather more than a shot, you suspect—as Demo fills your cup to the brim.

“Specialist.”

You turn. Ah, shit—if he thinks he’s going to chastise you for drinking before seven in the morning… “Yes, Heavy?”

But he simply eyes the pistol on your thigh, quite unconcerned with the mug between your hands. “You will stay with me today, da?”

You feel the blood drain from your face. What happened to his suggestion to stick with Scout? If Medic is anywhere, it’s close to—

“Will be only you and me. I need cover; we can try new strategy.”

You hope the panic hadn’t been evident on your face. It’s not that you don’t—you’re an adult. You can work with Medic. But, after yesterday… You fold both hands tightly around the mug, take a sip, let the liquor-laced liquid calm your whirling thoughts, release the tension already building in your shoulders. There’s a comfortable burning along your throat now. “No problem.” Why does Heavy expect to be alone? Where will… You shrug off the thought. No matter. You have a job to do, and you’ll see it done.

Heavy nods and finishes his coffee in one impressive gulp. He offers a dark smile. “Will make tiny baby-men cry.”

“Oh, come on,” Demoman rolls his eye. “Gonna keep her all day, are ye? I can’t work with the lass?”
You can’t help but feel a warm little rush of pride, and hide your smile on the rim of your mug.

“Maybe tomorrow.” The Russian rinses his dish in the sink. “I called first.”

Scout laughs. “Too slow, Demo!”

Perhaps you’re not a complete failure after all.

Chapter End Notes

My thanks to my amazing beta, orchiids, and for all the support I’ve received from the lovely readers. I can’t express how much I appreciate all of you! From kind words, to art, to speculation, this is an absolutely amazing experience, and I wish I knew better how to say thank you.

As I said, with the semester going into full swing, I’ve written far enough ahead that updates will continue steadily, about every 1.5-2 weeks, so we won’t have to stop while I get all my coursework done. (And the next chapter is rather lengthier and a bit of a doozy, so we all have a little something to definitely look forward to ;) )

And if you’re looking for a little extra entertainment, and haven’t already, I have a TF2 blog going under the url purple-compromise on Tumblr if you’d like to join us there for between-update references and antics!
Lend a Hand (If You Have One)

Chapter Notes

You all have been incredibly patient in waiting for more--so please, have three chapters, just for you! Thank you so very much for your support and patience, and I do hope you enjoy this long-awaited update.

Warning for: blood, graphically described injuries, and death

In the locker room, you find Heavy and stand in his silent shadow, simultaneously trying not to stare and not to blatantly avoid looking as Medic flits in, a darkness upon his brow, glasses perched so far down the bridge of his nose that you can see sleepless circles under his eyes. Perhaps he had been wandering the halls last night.

You can’t decide if that’s better or worse than a hallucination.

He fixes his gaze upon you and your eyes drop immediately to your feet. Shit. But, beneath the murmuring of your teammates, the click of Medic’s boots comes no closer, straying instead to the long line of lockers.

In your tangle of nerves, you look up at Heavy, and the man seems invincible. He has to be seven feet tall! How on earth can you defend this man? Anyone else, sure, but Heavy… a veritable walking fortress, if you’ve ever seen one. You’re fairly certain he could perch you on one shoulder and carry Scout under the other without trouble. Not to mention that you can’t take point the way you might with anyone else, on pain of about a dozen bullets in your back. Heavy is the very definition of defense, capable of cover fire over a wide area, and fists like hammers should anyone get too close. How on earth can you defend something so… self-defensible?

[Five.]

Your eyes wander from the top of his shaven head to his unarmored legs. You’ll cover his six, you decide, make sure no one flanks your Russian giant. Yes. You almost nod to yourself, right there in the middle of spawn. Not a soul will get close. Two layers of Kevlar? Those BLUs will be lucky if he even feels a tickle.

[Three.]

You look up to find Heavy staring down at you, and can’t help but grin. “Ready to make some assholes regret getting up this morning?”

He laughs. “Will make them run for cover!”

[One. Go!]

Medic is suddenly on your partner’s other side, and you barely catch yourself before recoiling into the Russian’s shadow. “Heavy,” he says. “Danke.” But the man only nods, and before you can wonder at the exchange, the doctor is off, through the doors, and out of sight, rivaling Scout for speed.
“Ready?” Heavy asks.

You nod, readjusting your grip on the folded shield. Now is not the time to wonder. “Ready.”

“GO!” He lumbers forward, Sascha lovingly clasped in his burly arms—the gun almost seems not to weigh a thing as his shoulders shift and flex in fine planes beneath Kevlar and cotton. You follow, and as you leave the gate, the bullets in Heavy’s bandolier gleam bronze in the morning light of the sun.

The first, dry breath of desert air reaches your lungs, prickles your throat, and the first shots of the day ring out over soil and sand. The Gyrojet is cold in your fingers, gunmetal gleaming. Breathe. Focus—and the barrels of Heavy’s mini-gun spin to life as you round the first corner behind him.

Your doppelganger sitting comfortably on the point was not the first challenge you wanted to see today, but you’ll take it. The lead rain of Heavy’s bullets keeps the BLU specialist behind her shield, unmoving. It would be the perfect opportunity to get around behind for—

A wisp of red. A flash of silver. And you can almost hear the BLU’s gurgle as she chokes on her own blood and collapses upon the point. There’s a sympathy pang of pain below your shoulder-blade, but you shrug it off and shake your head as Spy fades again in to thin air.

Huh. So he doesn’t just fuck off to God-knows-where every day.

Heavy takes the opportunity to make the push before any reinforcements arrive—and you follow, close on his heels, snapping your shield to full height, eyes on each flank.

Scout has already made it to the unoccupied point, as Soldier takes down the Demo and Pyro coming up on his nine with a pair of rockets. Things seem clear, clear, entirely too clear. Just where is the medic? The BLU heavy? Their soldier? Hanging back until your team makes the next push, pooling their strength to regain what’s shortly to be taken?

Or—

You spin in a tight arc, check your six. Nothing. Pyro has taken a position in the corridor, watching your back. They give you a thumbs-up. You return the gesture with a nod and a grin.

[RED has taken control of the point.]

A fine start to the day. The only thing that would make it better is a nice, cold glass of tea.

Engineer appears behind you. “I’m settin’ up a sentry; y’all keep goin’.”

You nod.

“Da. We continue push.”

“Right behind you, Heavy.”

“You, too, Pyro—git goin’.”

And you see Heavy’s shoulders tense.

And then, voice at your ear: [“Y’all, that engineer’s a spy!”]

You blanch. Oh, shit. But even as you turn, Pyro is there, and the acrid scent of burned flesh assaults your nose, the spy’s wails echoing off the nearby sheds and low walls.
You barely keep your meager breakfast down (and that whiskey you accepted from Demo definitely isn’t helping). The worst in the scent is burned hair. Acid and smoke, a smell that reaches into your throat and clutches at it until you choke. You manage a “Thanks, Pyro” before hurrying behind Heavy as fast as your legs can carry you. Burning is a death you have no desire to witness, even if it is that BLU asshole of a spy… flesh melting off bone and simmering sinew, the slow cease of thrashing limbs… No. You keep your eyes fixed on Heavy’s broad back. Best not to think about it.

“Hurry up, slowpokes!” Scout doubles back around the alley you and Heavy are crossing. “They’ve got a shit-ton set up over there; gonna need the firepower ta clean ‘em out.”

Heavy grins. “We will kill them all!”

His excitement is infectious. You don’t doubt his ability—or yours. “What’re we looking at?”

“Heavy, Engineer and sentry, the demo respawned and I almost got blown ta Hell by a sticky trap, so watch that—and the soldier.”

Three on four? Five if you count the sentry. If… Your brow furrows. Should you? Do you have the authority? It didn’t hurt to ask. It isn’t as though there’s a hierarchy—no captain to defer to. Your fingers find the button on your earpiece. “Spy. What’s your position?”

[“You do realize this channel is not the most secure.”]

You resist the urge to roll your eyes. “Can you make it to the second point when we push?”

A pause. [“We’ll see if I can make time for it.”]

You click the button again, closing the channel. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“He will be there,” Heavy assures. “How long can you withstand sentry fire?”

“As long as it takes,” you respond.

He shakes his head as Scout shifts nervously from foot to foot, watching both entrances to the alley. “Do not need hero. We need you alive to capture point. How long?”

You shake out your shield-arm, feel the Kevlar and steel drag upon your shoulder. “At least ten minutes, maybe more. It’ll take a while to punch through even the window.”

He nods. “Good.”

Scout whistles. “Good shit, there. Now can we get a move on? We don’t need that spy sneakin’ up on us while we make a decision!”

“Specialist will draw sentry fire; Scout can get behind, hit Engineer first. I will flank other side, keep them down until Spy takes care of sentry. We are ready?”

You nod. “Can do.”

“Great! See ya on the other side; I’ll wait about five seconds for Spesh to get into position. Soon ’s I hear the sentry, I’m in.”

“Good. Go!”

Scout doubles back and Heavy hurries ahead, out of sight; you position yourself at the mouth of the
alley, grip your shield, take a breath. You know well that the point is just beyond, to the right. Perhaps six steps will bring you even. Another breath—and you launch yourself into the dust, crouched low, shield wall before you, already absorbing the first hail of bullets, vibrating along your arm. The Plexiglas cracks and complains, but holds steady, quickly pounded into a white film, capturing the copper shells. Six steps exactly.

Perhaps you’d underestimated the power and velocity of a full sentry, but you dig your heels into the soil, sneak a peek to the right—hear Scout whoop and the discharge of a shotgun beneath the din that shakes your shield. The whir of a mini-gun. Damn. The shudder of the shield reverberates down to bone, rattles your joints. If Spy doesn’t take the damn thing down soon…

You cast a glance over your shoulder. That’s the other thing you don’t need at this moment: a flanking maneuver. But there is nothing—not even a waver in the air that might signal the BLU spy’s approach.

You fire a couple shots in the direction of the point, no idea if you’ve hit anything—there’s nothing to be seen, and if you try to snatch another glimpse, the odds of falling are great, to say the least, as bullets whistle and kick up sand around you. Gods, how much longer can you crouch here? It seems the BLUs are busy with Heavy and Scout, but where the hell is Spy? How long have you been here, the disturbing crack and rattle and clatter jostling you to your core? You bring the Gyrojet close to your torso and hit the switch on your earpiece.

“What’s everybody’s status? I can’t hold here much longer.” Another long crack appears in the window of your ballistic; you can see nothing now but mock cobwebs tangled up with bullet shells.

One breath, two. Three, four, five.

You grit your teeth. Shit.

Try to bail or hold out? If you move, and Heavy and Scout still live, they won’t stand a chance.

Really, there’s no choice. So you buckle in. Fire three more rounds around your shield—

The pistol clatters to the ground. You look—

The flesh of your hand is shredded, glove in ragged tatters, muscle torn, bone showing white through a crimson flood that drips and gushes onto the orange soil. *Fuck. Fuck, fuck, oh fuck. Stupid, stupid, stupid.* The pain—almost doesn’t register as such; a distant burn, an ache that rivals your memory of that first day on the field with a gunshot wound to the shoulder, mind whirling; *damn fucking moron!* Tears refuse to fall from your eyes to kill the pain that is now forefront, so you scream, you yell—starting with curses and finishing on a frustrated, wordless syllable.

Finally, the shudder of your shield stops, and so you take the instant to strip the glove from your non-dominant hand and wrap it in a makeshift, shoddy leather tourniquet around the ruined flesh. You hiss as it closes over your useless fingers. *Fuck. Shit. Damn—fuck.* Your fucking trigger finger is missing and your thumb is useless. You decide not to look for the severed mess; that’s a sight you don’t need. But your Gyrojet—

Oh, hell. There it is, disembodied and still on the trigger. Fine. *Fucking fine.* You grit your teeth and shake the flesh off the pistol, scooping the weapon up against your shield, into your non-dominant hand.

*This* is going to go well, you just know it. Blood races, hot anger and embarrassment fueling every motion as you spring to your feet and charge the point. You’re down one hand; it doesn’t fucking
matter now how many BLUs are up there. And you’re definitely not calling for Medic. This situation is already embarrassing enough as it is. Best to capture the damn point and let respawn take care of it; that’s as good a plan as any right now, when you’re as good as dead sitting here with one hand waiting for aid. You can feel the blood run down your arm, between leather and ruined skin, onto the ground. You might be a little light-headed already. It might be blood loss. It could be shock.

In any case, you unleash a roar as you throw yourself upon the point, and fire the last of your clip into the injured soldier, who drops immediately, spilling his own blood all over the steel; it gleams in the sun.

“What the holy fuck, Spesh? Sweet mother of—”

“I’M FINE.” You drive the shield with the full force of your shoulder into the slack-jawed BLU engineer before that asshole can get his wrench in range, and grunt with satisfaction as Scout finishes him off with a pistol round. Ugh. Nothing but pain, pain, and more pain. Why the fuck couldn’t it have been anything but your fucking hand?

Stupid. Stupid shit. You have half a mind to stomp that engineer’s corpse into the ground for the mess his sentry made.

“Specialist!”

You turn to face Heavy, trying not to jostle your dominant hand—what’s left of it—any more than necessary. “Good to see you,” you manage.

[RED team has taken control of the point!]

“Now, I think I’ll—”

“Have you called for Medic?” The man hefts his mini-gun in one, mighty arm to turn you gently to get a better look at your hand. You stare at your boots and the bloodstained point instead of meeting his eye under the concerned furrow of his brow. “You need Medic now!”

Scout is still gaping. “Yeah, holy shit. DOC!”

“No, no—I’m fine.” You hiss as your instinct was to grab the boy with your decidedly non-functional hand. You drop it immediately, smearing blood across Scout’s shirt, and your vision wavers. “No—look. I’ll bleed out. Catch up with you on the next point. Until then, let’s keep moving, and I’ll—”

But Scout wipes the disgusted look off his face and hits the switch on his headset. “Hey, Doc, we need—”

“Even my shield looks like shit! No—” Heavy lays a hand on top of your head.

[“Ach—shut up! I am busy. Find a health pack. Wrap it up. Move on.”]

“Nah, that’s not gonna work, see—Spesh’s hand—”

Heavy’s massive palm leaves your crown and clicks the switch on his earpiece. “Specialist has no trigger finger. Will take long time to bleed out. She cannot use her hand.”

Silence. “Heavy… please.” You grit your teeth, and your hand, your one functioning hand, is full of both shield and pistol—you can’t hit the radio yourself to apologize or—
“Insists she is fine,” he adds grimly.

And then, across the sand and soil, echoing between stone and wood and steel, a drawn-out wail reaches your ears, amplified through the mic; it grates across your skin, the chilling sound reaching down to bone. Scout shivers visibly. It sets your teeth on edge. Heavy’s eyes, serious as ever, don’t even give a lingering blink.

[“Fine,”] Medic hisses. [“I will continue zhis later. You know where to find me.”]

“Da.” Heavy closes the line and fixes you under his stony gaze. “You see? Is not so bad.”

Yeah, ok. You swallow, wishing you had a free hand to rub the goosebumps from your skin. You’re under no illusions about that sound. Your cheeks, to top it all off, still burn with embarrassment. “Heavy. I’m fine. I can fight until I fall; it wouldn’t have been a problem. I—”

He shakes his head firmly. “No. Part of team. Could not have point without you. There is no need to die; Doktor has no one else to heal.”

“Yeah, I mean—I get not wantin’ to bother Medic, I guess, since he seems pretty pissed today, but damn, Spesh! Let somebody give ya a hand! The doc won’t hold it against ya later. Promise! I mean—if he did, you’da never met me.”


Heavy nods. “This way.”

“Where I think it is?” Scout asks.

“Yes.”

Heavy lays a massive hand on your shoulder as the boy skips ahead. He keeps his voice low as you stride after Scout, biting your tongue against the pain (for you’ll be damned if you start complaining now). “Will be fine. Doktor is not angry with you. Will heal you. Has part of what he wants today, anyway; he should be more focused on team.”

You’re no fool. That ungodly scream had to do with whatever Medic’s personal mission was today, and as much as you’re sure you don’t want to know… you need to. Especially after he’d told you to hold off on your own vengeance until the opportune moment.

But really, you’re well aware there’s only one thing it could have been.

The destination, as it happened, was a shed—one you’d previously assumed locked. Inside... Scout’s hands are raised in a placating gesture, but Medic’s glower still has you biting your cheek.

“See, Doc, I told ya—”

“I said I was fine.”

Medic rolls his eyes behind his spectacles. “You are not fine, Specialist,” he replies sharply. “Now—where is the finger?”

Your brow furrows. “Er… the finger? Back on the ground where I got shot.”

“Ach, for—” He bares his teeth. “No. I can’t fix it without… the medi-gun doesn’t just regrow limbs or digits or anything else!”
“‘Cept teeth,” mutters Scout, but that only earns him a wicked leer.

“Doktor—”

“Heavy, please.” Medic rubs his temples, then fixes you in an icy gaze. “It has nothing to do with you.” He sighs. “You didn’t know, of course. These two, however, should know better!” His jaw tightens as your gaze flicks to your boots. “You expected respawn to catch you, ja? That is your definition of ‘fine’? It will be long time before you begin bleed out, you know.”

As you’d realized originally, this is stupid. The whole thing. The four of you are wasting time.

“I can stop zhe bleeding, but without your trigger finger…” Another short, lingering sigh; the sound curls in the air, sharp and cold. “Turn around, bitte.”

You’re no fool.

But you do.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to thatdamnokie over on Tumblr for acting as substitute beta!
Concrete. Head spins. Nerves flare. Kneeling, you raise your hand beneath your gaze, flex it, fingers exactly as they should be, skin rippling, leather of your fingerless glove flexing along your knuckles. Good. You stand on shaking legs in respawn.

It… you’re seldom aware of the instant of death, but it’s usually preceded by some pain or inkling of where, when, and who had delivered the blow—what weapon and why. But whatever Medic had done left no memory of pain. One moment there, and the next, gone.

It’s a relief, and you will your blazing nerves to settle, stepping out of respawn on pins and needles. You hit the earpiece. “Scout, Heavy—still third point?”

[“Yeah. Ya feelin’ all right, Spesh?”] He sounded almost terse, and you feel your brow furrow as you retrieve the ballistic shield from your belt.

“Great, actually.” Only partly a lie. You’re not vomiting, at least. “You all holding fine?”

[“We’re good.”] You can hear gunshots. [“Can probably use some support on the left flank while we pu—STAY DOWN, JACKASS—while we push.”]

“I’ll be there asap.”

[“Heard that! See ya soo—YA LIKE THAT? I’M A FREAKIN’ FORCE ‘A NATURE, ASSHOLE!”]

You click the line to your mic closed and chuckle. You’re actually looking forward to catching up with the team.

You pass Engineer’s setup on the first point, and he tips his hat with a grin as you jog. It brings your attention to the sun glaring down on your own uncovered head; it might be a good idea to invest in a little something to shade the eyes.

Bang! Buckshot clatters off your shield as you round the next corner, and instinct brings it to full height with a snap. “You will meet your match, little Specialist.” The BLU heavy’s bulk blocks the narrow alley, broad shoulders nearly touching the wall of each dusty shed. A nasty grin spreads across his face, shotgun between hands that make it seem no bigger than a pistol with an extended barrel, massive mini-gun at his feet.

For an instant, your heart sinks, but then—your teeth bare in a slow smile. He wants to make a stand? In this little alley? A direct challenge with no way to flank? Oh, that’s a mistake on his part. You can feel a laugh stirring in your chest, but you keep it to yourself. “Sure about that?” you ask instead, and duck behind the shield when he fires again, and again, ineffectually. You raise your Gyrojet level with your ear and watch through the window—only somewhat fractured—as the
heavy drops his shotgun to ready the mini-gun.

“Good thought,” you say. Oh, man—this is just what you needed. You waste no time in pulling the trigger.

**Shuhussshh!**

Blood splatters in wide patterns on both walls, and the mini-gun clatters to the ground as the BLU heavy clutches at his throat for the barest of instants. You fire again, and he falls. “Headshot. Almost the first try,” you shrug, cheeks burning with glee. “Close enough, right?” A laugh burbles up in your chest and you don’t bother to stifle it as you leap over the massive corpse and continue on.

What the hell had he been thinking? So proud he failed to realize he’s not the only walking fortress on this field?

Oh—haha! Indeed! A walking fortress, a wall of Kevlar and steel and Plexi. Better not let it go to your head.

“Heavy, I—”

Oh, fuck. You know that voice. Terror seizes your gut as he rounds the corner.

At least his expression reflects yours. Wide eyes. Spectacles slipping down nose, frazzled in a way that tells you…

This was a trap. The heavy was meant to wait for support before cutting off RED reinforcements.

There’s a deep pain in your chest, and you struggle to keep drawing breath. You want to run, to not look back for even a moment. You want to stay and tear out his throat with your bare hands.

You think you’re going to be sick. You raise your shield as he gets his bearings.

His gaze flicks to the corpse behind you. “I told you to wait!” He cries. Eyes, icy, return to you, and your grip on the Gyrojet tightens. You draw a sharp breath. You took down his giant; you can do this.

There’s a deep crease between the medic’s brows. “Back for a follow-up *Fräulein*?” The syllables rake your memory, but you dig your heels into the cracked soil, bite your cheek until a coppery tang fills your mouth, even as the same scent fades from the air, no doubt with the heavy’s corpse. He fires the syringe gun, but the dart bounces harmlessly off Kevlar. “And so soon, too.” But he does not grin, not like yesterday, ribbons and copper and red—

A feral cry tears from your throat. “Shut up! Just shut up!” You squeeze the trigger.

*One, two, three, four.*

The medic screams, dropping to his knees in the dust. “*Fick.*” Three of four shots precisely where you intended: left shoulder, right shoulder, the junction of hip and thigh, torn through his white coat, slowly blossoming burgundy as blue gloves try to staunch the flow.

But it’s not enough, no, as a churning stomach turns to flame, a red wrath over your nerves, pouring life into every limb, the bitter copper in your throat spurring you forward.

Boots dig into soil and you throw yourself behind the shield, slam the man down into orange,
cracked dirt, knocking glasses askew, spilling blood further into white linen, onto soil and sand. He
grits his teeth against another cry, even as blood slowly trickles from his nose, then flows rapidly
over his lips. Your shield pins him from shoulders to thighs, and you lie across it, facing him down
eye to eye, pistol pressed into his jaw. His spits in your face, spattering his blood in flecks across
your cheeks.

A laugh tears from your throat. Is this all? “Is this all?” you ask him, digging the barrel into the
soft flesh between neck and chin. “Yesterday, after all—this is what it takes?”

“Things don’t always follow as planned,” he growls. “If Heavy had waited for me, fräulein—”
You flinch, press the barrel until a hitched gasp escapes his lips. “...Fraulein?” A crease appears
between his brows, eyes flicking over your face as he pieces things together, and it’s too late—you
can't take it back now. He laughs. “Oh, you’ve given away a bit much, haven’t you? The sooner
you finish me and get back to the battle, the sooner you can forget all this unpleasantness,
fräulein.”

Fuck. The way his voice curls cruelly along those syllables drags at your mind, plucks your nerves
like the strings of a violin, high and shrill. Your jaw clenches. “You have nothing.” The barrel of
your Gyrojet moves to his temple, presses until it forms a white ring just above the jointed arms of
his spectacles. “You know why I don’t just pull the trigger and finish you? I don’t want to. If I do,
you’ll just be dead, and then what?” You yank your arm free of the shield, raise yourself up just
that extra few inches to bring the butt of your pistol down at his hairline, watch the skin split and
bleed as the BLU squeezes his eyes shut, grinds his teeth against blossoming pain.

“And I can’t bring you to death’s door and heal you up like new to do it all over again, now, can I?
Where does that leave us?” you hiss. Drop the gun just above his head, and squeeze the man’s
graceful throat.

But he laughs. “Will you waste your time with torture, zhen, frä—”

Force your hand into the hard press of his Adam’s apple, wrap fingers around the frantic tendons
and soft, giving flesh until his gasps become choking sounds, half-formed in a helpless throat. The
medic does his best to sneer even as cheeks grow red and icy eyes dance wildly behind broken
spectacles.

He tries so hard to move, but there is no decent angle to be found beneath the shield, and you know
he cannot unseat you, not as his efforts become languid, the twitching beneath your palm less
frequent.

You raise your hand.

He gasps, splutters, chokes. There’s a rush, a buzz starting in the back of your skull. He’ll die—oh
yes—but not until you decide. Not until you’re satisfied, and the memory of his fingers pawing
through your intestines is distant, insignificant.

“A close simulation, isn’t it?” You ask as the BLU’s nostrils flare and eyes burn indigently. But—he’s not looking at you.

“You could have continued for another twenty seconds without risk of brain death.”

Medic.

You raise your head.
The RED medic.

You feel your cheeks heat. How long has he been there? You wet your lips. “Another… twenty seconds?” You hadn’t been counting, in all honesty; just watching the pallor of his face, feeling the life falter beneath your fingers.

“Ja.” What little sun there is in this alley catches his spectacles, and you swear his eyes are glittering. "You feel the schadenfreude?” But it isn't really a question. Lips pull back from teeth in the semblance of a grin, and it reminds you of his barely contained display of rage in the infirmary when you'd told him---what had been done.

“Do you… want to…?”

He shakes his head. “Not now; I do believe this is therapeutic.” He nods toward the mess you've already made, eyes sharp, mouth curled in something like pleasure. "Do continue, neue.”

Well if this doesn’t make you self-conscious... But the look of disgust curling the BLU’s bloody lips spurs you on. You grasp his neck again, but don’t squeeze, not yet. You wait for his icy gaze, but—

He won’t even look at you, leering up instead at the RED medic. As though—what? He’s more of a threat? More a threat than you—you who strangled him half to death and are perfectly prepared to do it again? You whom he wronged? You with a greater thirst for reconciliation, with a desperate cause in your mind each and every morning? You whose position, after yesterday, was still in peril? You snarl and grasp his chin. “Look at me. Not him. I don’t give a shit what he did earlier. This is about yesterday.”

The medic grins, closes his eyes. “Ah, fräulein. You’re going to waste part of your last forty-eight hours on me? I’m flattered.”

Your blood heats, races, rages behind your eyes. “My last hours here? I’ll—look at me. LOOK AT ME.” You seize his throat again, dragging the nails of thumb and forefinger into his jugular veins, digging until his eyes snap open. “Helplessness isn’t a good feeling, is it? Feels better to wish you would just hurry up and die, doesn’t it? Why don’t we move to that?” With your other hand, you press into the bullet wound at his shoulder, thumb squicking through blood and muscle until you feel the either bone or the copper of the bullet—and he hisses.

[“Spesh, where the hell are ya? Can’t cap the point alone here!”]

Like a shock of cold water, dumped, icy, over your head. Shit.

Medic clears his throat, softly, and you raise your gaze. “Neue, I’ll finish this, if you don’t mind.”

You nod, slowly, and open the channel on your mic. “Sorry, Scout. Ran into the heavy and medic. I’ll be right there.”

[‘Heard. Hurry it up, though; it’s gettin’ tense!”]

You close the line as Medic nods. “Gut. And don’t worry, Specialist—” Your eyes follow the graceful line of his body from gleaming white shoulders to the curve of black-clad legs as he plants the heel of his jackboot on the BLU’s neck until his doppelganger chokes and writhes. “I’ll be sure he suffers.”

Chapter End Notes
It seems such a short time later that you’re showered and laundered. Engineer had been glad to show you how to operate the “improved” laundry facilities, which include a washing machine and dryer that look like they’ve been tinkered with since the day they arrived. They each have a dozen buttons that appear to be non-functional or seem to match a doomsday device rather than a washing machine—but if it means you get incredibly clean clothes in one miraculous hour, you’ll take it without question. As far as you can tell, it’s just one incredible device after another on this base.

Like the medi-gun.

Now, with damp hair and pants and a button-down that smells like industrial soap with a hint of lemon, you stand at your little window, watching the sky change behind the bars. Orange fades into lilac. The sun is hidden behind distant mountains, and the desert glows salmon, then lavender under the sky.

And you wonder about suffering.

What, exactly, is Medic’s definition, and is it anything like yours?

Chapter twenty was your laundry-time reading today, and so very apt: “Let me make myself clear: I would fight a duel for an insult, a blow or a lie, and I’d do it with hardly a thought because, thanks to the skill I’ve acquired in all bodily exercises and the gradual way in which I’ve accustomed myself to danger, I’d be almost certain of killing my opponent. Oh, yes, I’d fight a duel for something of that sort; but for slow, profound, infinite and eternal suffering I’d try to avenge myself by inflicting similar suffering. ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’” The Count’s words ring true down to your bones.

Of course, there are some sufferings for which vengeance cannot be taken.

And your mother—your mother would advise forgiveness. But there are some things that simply cannot be forgiven.

Knock, knock, knock.

You turn from the window and slowly register the wetness on your cheeks. “Yes?” You wipe the clear traces of tears from your face. Damn things are becoming all too common.

“Spezialist? May I speak with you, please?”

Your heart jumps to your throat. Oh, hell. Is he ready to admonish you now, especially after that display today? Let you know that the medical report for your employers will not pass scrutiny, and you’ll need to come to terms with your removal, send a letter home—

“Spezialist?”

Today couldn’t have changed anything. You hardly looked any more stable strangling the life out of a man for some relief than you did during yesterday’s panic in the med-bay. “Sorry—just a second.”
You straighten up, shake out your arms as though you can fling the doubt and fear and frustration to the far corners of your room, take a long breath, and unlock the door. It reveals the medic, tall in his crisp coat—clean and blindingly white, his tie impeccably straight, fingers bare, polishing his spectacles on the lab-coat’s lapel.

“Good evening.”

“I—good evening.”

He replaces his glasses with a nod. “Where would you like to speak?”

You’re taken aback. “Here,” is the first thing that comes to your mind and tumbles out of your mouth. “Here is fine.” You step aside, and Medic glides through the door.

As he passes, you catch a scent on the air; he smells of antiseptic and spicy… resin?

The man finds a chair while you hesitate at the door. Should you leave it open? This is… a professional call, surely—as he sits, he moves the tail of his coat out of the way, lest it become wrinkled. You nod, brow furrowed, and close the door with a click.

As the sound reaches his ears, Medic’s brows arch. “A far cry from yesterday.”

Your cheeks heat. “I’m sorry. I am feeling better now.”

“Clearly.” He folds elegant hands over his lap, elbows resting on the arms of the chair.

“That wasn’t—” You catch the inside of your cheek between your teeth. “Yesterday, when… did I hu—”

“Nein. Don’t worry about that. I’d worry more about how you’re going to control zhis.”

“Control…” Hot, indignant tears seal your throat, but do not yet touch your eyes. “I—”

“That—I’m sorry. I did not mean to accuse.” With a sigh, he removes the spectacles. “Sniper says my bedside manner needs work.” A dark chuckle. “Perhaps.” He cleans the immaculate lenses on the tail of his coat. “But I find it gets in the way of my work.”

Your jaw clenches.

“Gets in the way, indeed.”

“We are men of innovation, tools of destruction.” He replaces the glasses, peers over their edge. “Whatever the contracts say, we are weapons. Some take to it better than others. Some quickly, some slowly.”

You say nothing. What is there to reply? He’s seen what you are. The episode—the… the wrath on the field today, beyond any action that should be taken in war. And it’s going to cost you. Again. You bite your tongue to hold back the lingering tears. You won’t cry. They can sign the paper firing you from the company, but you won’t let them see you cry. Let him chastise you—he’ll be just another doctor, then, faceless in a white, sterile sea of hospital rooms with their wan nurses and frowning physicians delivering news with lead tongues and dead eyes that make you want to shove four barrels down their throats and show them how lead truly tastes—still less heavy and cruel than the judgements and the treatments and false comforts—

“To have these… episodes is not unusual. You need to know this.”

You shake your mother’s weary eyes from your mind. “The circumstances here—”
“Are unusual. But no less real, as you’ve learned, I’m sure. Particularly after yesterday.”

You’re quite certain ‘improved bedside manner’ doesn’t include reminding a patient of events that triggered a… panic. Panic. That seems like the right word.

“What happened to you yesterday—in the war, we called it shell-shock, and it didn’t often include such violence—at least, not right away.” Medic steeles his fingers, drops them, curls his fingers along the arms of the chair. “You’ll forgive me; psychology has never been my focus, but you have had two attacks so far, and I will need you to describe—”

You freeze. “Two?”

“Ja.” He sighs. “The second day, during your shower; that was the first one, nicht? Unless there was one I missed. I suspect you were experiencing a flashback to the battlefield or some recollection of pain?”

You purse your lips, nails digging into your palms. “How did you—”

His lips curl in a smirk. “While I may lack bedside manner, I have an affluence of attention, Specialist. If someone needs medical assistance, I know it.”

“Oh.” You swallow, settle on the bed, draw your legs up, crisscross, beneath you.

He nods. “Now, I need you to describe these episodes so that we can form a means of treatment.”

We?

Your mouth moves, but no sound comes out. This… even when the Navy discharged you from training, the doctors never… You frown. “It was like being back there,” you begin. “I can’t… tell that I’m actually at the base. It was the pain and—” Torn flesh, blood, wicked eyes. “—everything again. I don’t… I can’t make it stop, because I can’t tell it started.”

He’s pulled a little flip-pad from his pocket with a fountain pen. “And the emotions that accompany it?”

You hesitate.

Medic catches your eye over his spectacles. “Spezialist, it isn’t your fault.”

Your fingers curl, missing the grip of a pistol. “I really—”

“You don’t understand.” He heaves a sigh, taps a finger on the edge of the little, leather-bound notebook. “Heavy has experienced episodes like this.”

You blink. “Heavy?” It—it would explain how he had calmed you with such ease, but…

“Yes. At the risk of violating doctor-patient confidentiality, I will say—though—” He fixes you under his gaze, the harsh line of his brow igniting an instantaneous shiver down your spine. “I trust you will tell no one. Ja?”

Your flesh crawls. You nod. “Of course. I won’t.”

“Gut.” And the wrath leaves his features as quickly as a lone cloud in the desert sky. “You would say Heavy is fearless, yes? A pillar of strength, truly an Übermensch?”

You know that word. Dostoyevsky expounded upon it in his *Crime and Punishment*—and now
you have a greater inkling as to why the book was given to Medic. “Yes.” Heavy seemed implacable as stone, a great mountain both on the battlefield and there in the infirmary.

“He has a history of extreme stress reactions. For years now, after…” Medic catches himself, clears his throat. “Let us say his past was not a happy one. He no longer has the hallucinations—the attacks, reliving the memories—but his nightmares can be insufferable. All this, years later.”

Years? Heavy? If Heavy has nightmares even now, how can you possibly hope—

“You are not weak.” He frowns, turns the sleek pen between his fingers. “Experiencing fear is not weakness—you would not say that Heavy is weak, would you? Nein. Of course not. And so neither are you.” His attention returns to the notes. “Now—zhe relevant emotions, please.”

You release a long breath through your nose. It’s not an argument you can beat. “Fear,” you admit at last. You look at your hands. “Sometimes anger.”

Medic nods, scribbles readily on the pad. “We can use that.”

Your brow furrows. “Anger?” Last you checked, that emotion was a source of destruction. One that could well have ended up sending Medic through respawn.

“Jawohl, anger. In much the same way as earlier today; I trust you did not have any episodes between then and now, ja?”

“I didn’t.” You frown. What if… he could write you a treatment and send you packing right here, right now, could he not? Truly, this means nothing unless… “Medic, I need to make this work.”

He does not look up. “Of course.”

“No—” You press your fists against your knees. Your jaw tightens. “It’s not… not just this. It’s everything.”

Medic lifts his head. His brows arch. “What is it?”

Your face heats to the tips of your ears. “I—need to know. Now. If I won’t—if there’s no chance of staying.” You fixedly stare at your legs, folded tightly on the scratchy bedspread. You will not cry.

“My mother—my family thinks—” You take a breath. “I won’t be able to go home right away. I need to find… I need another job before I go back. I can’t go home like this.”

His brow creases. “I never said anything about your leaving, neue. Zhis is to help you stay to the best of your health.” You lift your head to find him frowning into his notes.

“Now… racing heart, rapid palpitations, during these episodes?”

“What?”

“Palpitations,” he replies shortly. “Fluttering, pounding rhythms of the heart. Stuttering or racing in the chest or throat. Difficulty—”

“I know what palpitations are. My mother’s had them.” Your arms fold tightly over your chest, bite your lip. Your mother’s been on your mind too much, and you’re getting irritated. Forge on—perhaps he won’t notice what you’d let slip… “What I don’t understand is—why—how can I be staying? I mean, keeping me until the week is up, sure, but after—the medical report—”

“Because there is no reason for you not to stay.” Medic arches an irritated brow. “Unless, of
course, you’ve suddenly decided that you cannot answer simple questions—”

“No, I—all right. Sorry.”

He nods, slowly. “Gut. Now. Palpitations or racing heartbeat during these episodes?”

You frown. You can’t—you don’t recall anything like that at all. Just adrenaline, a fast beating, yes, but nothing that made you ill or particularly short of breath that you can recall. Nothing like your mother had described. “No… nothing like that.”

A slow grin, and Medic’s spectacles catch the low light from your window. His chuckle raises the hair on the back of your neck. “Perfekt!”

Surely it was a far cry from perfect. Ok, fine, no physical symptoms is great, but you’re quite sure you’d tried to strangle your own medic yesterday and—

Your heart.

That’s it.

That’s fucking it.

You laugh, low in your throat, until the chuckle shakes your stomach and racks your shoulders. Ha! For a moment, you’d almost been under the impression that the doctor actually cared! Of course not! No, this—this makes sense. Your damn bloody heart is what he’s after!

Oddly enough, the thought actually makes you feel a bit better, in a backward sort of way.

You may not know much about the medic, but you do know that the man is devoted to his work. And you’re walking around with one of his experiments in your chest. And after the way he’s behaved since yesterday—it’s apparently a very important one.

He’s motivated to keep you around. For science.

“Something is funny, Specialist?”

You can’t seem to stifle your laughter. “Is there—a way—to help—” You draw a gasping breath and giggle anew. “—or are you fullofit?”

His regal look of indignity only makes you laugh harder. “Of course! I would not be here if it were not possible. “I have sedatives that can help you avoid nightmares, if necessary, and—please control yourself, Specialist! What is so amusing?”

You cover your mouth, draw deep breaths, try to smother your amusement. “Sorry—I’m sorry—just…” You heave one last, long breath. “I’m the experiment. Or…” You recall the stolen intelligence. “A living briefcase, you might say. I just realized that you won’t tell Miss Pauling I’m not working out—you can’t. Because of my heart. I’ve been worried since yesterday and—”

Now the medic chuckles, but only briefly. “You were worried you’re unsuitable for this kind of work. I did not lie when I said this reaction is normal, neue. Didn’t you hear me when I said I’ve seen many soldiers go through such things? You are new to this environment; many of those here had already become accustomed to battlefield trauma before being hired—though not all. Had you been here a year ago, you would have seen half this team share your experience.” He flips the little notebook closed. “Now, as for my experiment—yes. You cannot overstate my investment in it at this time.” He shrugs. “But what of that? It is what I am here to do. Innovate medicine.”
What of it, indeed?

Medic tucks the notebook and pen away, studies you with an icy gaze. “Does it disturb you?”

You still.

Does it disturb you any more than IVs hanging from silver hooks like so many transparent nooses, dripping golden fluid in a dirge’s rhythm? More than skin, red and raw, so slow to heal that eyes prick more from frustration than pain? More than a head shaved clean and hidden under a scarf, whose cheerful colors seem only to mock that which it covers?

“No.” You draw your knees up under your chin, and meet the Medic’s even gaze. “As long as things are kept where they’re supposed to be, and that BLU son of a bitch stays on the other side of respawn, I have no problem with your investment.”

If this is what it takes, you’ll work with the doctor to overcome your… shell-shock and get back to proving your worth on the field first thing in the morning. You’ll be the best damn experiment this base has ever seen.

You’ll seal this fucking contract if it’s the last thing you do. For Mom.

Medic grins, teeth glinting in the low light like the bone-saw. “Ausgezeichnet.”

And… maybe a little for you, too.

Chapter End Notes

With thatdamnokie’s help, I should have chapter 18 back on schedule! My thanks again for your patience!
The final day of your trial dawns grey. It seems highly unusual, unsettling as you dress and arm yourself for the battle—and it would seem your teammates, as they shuffle silently through the halls, pour subdued cups of coffee, agree. You will the unease from your thoughts. Anything else, today of all days…

You will prevail. For your mother, for your family, for that glowing ember of pride in your heart as you stand in the locker room this morning. The desert sky can threaten as it likes, seem stout, strange, stormy—none of that will matter.

Medic catches your eye from across the room and gives what might be an encouraging nod. That smile is—genuine. But unsettling. You return it, as it’s the only one you’ve been offered so far this morning, and he strides over, bouncing on his heels.

“How would you like to pair with me today?”

You swear your heart stopped.

But your answer—“Yes!”—comes spilling off your tongue just the rain threatens to fall today: sudden, quick, and hard from the skies.

He chuckles, adjusting his spectacles, that wide grin only broadening. “Gut. I think you will enjoy this, neue. Consider it… our first field-test, hm?” He winks.

His restrained excitement at the thought of testing makes the man reminiscent of some loping puppy, ready to go out and fetch. A loping puppy that could tear a man’s intestines out through his ribcage, playing a game of fetch that included spilling blood and shattering bone. But the image held well enough.

Heavy slaps you on the shoulder. “Über is… best feeling. English is too limited to explain… you will enjoy.”

The first time you’d ever witnessed an übercharge, it had been Heavy himself, leading a push behind enemy lines. He seemed to glow brighter than the desert sun, tall, eyes aflame with primal energy, flowing across the field with grace and strength, heralding doom in the rattle of his mini-gun. Bullets tore the air like the screams of their victims, whistling, whirring, blazing like a summer storm.

It was magnificent.
The thought that you might, some match or other, command such power thrills you to your very core. Perhaps, at the Medic’s side, it could even be today.

But you shouldn’t get ahead of yourself. The last thing you need is to be distracted enough to make a mistake.

[Go!]

You hang back just a moment, to let him take the lead as he had during your hunt for the spy. But, he only readies his medigun with the shadow of a smile. “I’ll be right behind you, neue.”

With a nod, you surge forward on the heels of Soldier and Heavy—Scout and Pyro long gone. Out, into the grey, pale light, soil colored a dusky orange, the wood of the buildings tinged black—

And a glow washes over your body, a pleasant tingling on your skin that caresses muscle and bone, warming your cheeks, bringing a faintly metallic, rainy scent to your nose that might be from the weather or the medigun itself. Any aches left from the previous day are gone, forgotten in the slight breeze.

The taste of blood and storm are on your lips, and you swear your vision is sharper, the edges of each corridor more defined, the sweat already beading on the enemy’s foreheads clear as day across the field.

You feel healthier than you have been in your entire life. If you could bring this home…

No. Not right now. You—

“Overheal,” Medic explains, close behind. You cast a glance over your shoulder to see that bone-saw grin. “It takes your peak health and boosts it to absolute optimum. You will take more hits, fatigue more slowly—even if you aren’t constantly being healed.”

“It’s brilliant!”

He chuckles. “And it does not stop there. This is just the beginning!”

Boom-click.

You’d almost forgotten the opposition. Fortunately, the BLU scout wasn’t a fan of subtlety, and like to fire before being completely in range—buckshot clattered harmlessly off your shield, not that it would have mattered at this distance, had you taken some. Not with the medigun’s energy flowing over you.

“Retaliate, Specialist.”

Oh, you do. You aim the Gyrojet and pull the trigger at the boy zigzagging his way across the soil, shotgun in hand. Miss. Miss. A wound opens along his arm.

He hisses. “That all ya got?” Boom-clilck. You crouch behind the shield, sure that Medic is well-covered behind you. Through the window, you see your team’s pyro slip around to flank the boy and close your eyes as they pump the flamethrower’s trigger.

You don’t look, but his screams intermingle with what you’re sure is raucous laughter, muffled behind a gas filter. You press on, the acrid scent of hair and stomach-turning burning flesh chasing you through the air.
The BLU heavy is on the point, paired with their demoman and specialist—the latter gives you a wicked grin to accompany the heavy’s leer… it seems he has not forgotten the alley yesterday. A chill creeps down your spine even as the warm scarlet waves soothe it away, heating your blood as you lead the charge, Medic keeping pace close behind, Pyro breaking away into a flanking maneuver.

Chaos on the point as you halt, crouch—

“Medic, down!” But he’s already there at your shoulder, crouching behind the shield with you. You can feel his breath at your ear, steady, as the Kevlar rattles against your arm with the force of the mini-gun’s bullets. Through cracked Plexiglas, you can see the heavy does not flinch, even as your Scout approaches his six, throwing the demo off his focus long enough for Pyro to airblast him into the dust—an opening for Soldier to leap into the fray with his shotgun—lest the force of a rocket harm the REDs already fighting for the point. The heavy absorbs four shots from Scout’s scattergun before finally allowing a window in his cover-fire for you to rise again and get a clip’s worth of shots into the BLU specialist’s back. You’re close enough now to hear the rattling gasp as your doppelganger goes down, her coat rapidly turning maroon as she collapses over her shield.

The sight, uncanny, turns your stomach.

The heavy collapses but a moment after, choking on his own blood. Scout and Pyro give chase to the demo. You turn, sweeping the area for any new resistance, boots squeaking on the bloodied steel point.

“Spezialist--!”

“Bonjour.”

You whip around as quickly as you can, dominant shoulder burning, until Kevlar strikes a solid form. Shit. The spy hisses, stumbles, slides off the point’s sloped edge—

And Medic raises his bone-saw even as you aim your pistol, biting your tongue against the pain.

Blood glistens on the air. The doctor strikes again—and again—and again—for the spy’s part, he does not scream, only glares as best he is able with his head hanging only barely upon his shoulders. Slumped, at last, into the dirt, you can almost taste the copper on the air as Medic, blood in flecks across his coat, leans down to grin wickedly at the spy’s wild, bleary eyes.

“Did you think I’d forgotten your part in it?” he asks, and deals the killing blow with one smooth, gleaming arc through the air. The spy’s head rolls into the dull, orange dirt.

With a snap of his wrist, Medic flicks the blood off his blade, replaces the saw on his belt, and draws the medigun in another smooth movement. The effect on your shoulder is instant, pain soothed as crimson waves pour over the wound until the only trace left is the smallest tear in your coat.

“Shall we?” he asks with a genial grin.

You nod, furiously, and surge off toward the next point, following in Demo and Scout’s tracks. The BLU team, you find, has wasted no time in buckling down their defenses here, but you see Heavy standing his ground not twenty feet from the fortifications, and take up the place beside him. “Need some support?”

He spares the barest glance and grins, uttering a booming chuckle. “Always welcome! But do not want to steal doktor.”
The man in question scoffs. “You insult me, Heavy; I can handle both of you easily!”

The hot, heady rush catches you after that, a buzz of both victory and scarlet energy, and you lose track of how many enemies you fell at Heavy’s side. An engineer too caught up in repairing his sentry. The demoman, taking a swipe at your pyro. Soldier, Scout, Specialist. Maroon running crimson into the orange soil and sand. You move on to the third point together as Scout sounds a triumphant whoop.

_Crack._

Draw Medic behind you with one arm. Hit the dirt, shield up, tense. Check for damage—

Heavy lies in the sand, a neat, bloody hole where the bullet pierced his skull. Shit.

“I’ve got that asshole!” Scout races off, dodging between buildings, and you rise from your knee to a low squat. Hold your breath. _One. Two. Three._

“He should be combating the sniper now.” His voice is at your ear, breath stirring the hair on the back of your neck. “We can still hit them hard without Heavy.”

“All right.”

Pyro falls into step beside you as you charge into the open, shield high as the BLU soldier fires a rocket, and you brace for impact—

_Swush!_

You blink. A gust of air from Pyro’s flamethrower sent the projectile whirling back to the point, and the BLUs scatter. “Now!” You’re not sure who your shout is meant to reach.

Anyone listening perhaps. This is the best opening your team can hope for.

Charge. Boots pounding a harsh rhythm in the dull, orange dirt. Out of the corners of your vison, you see Pyro and Soldier fanning out on the right and left as the BLUs regain their bearings on the point, raise their weapons—

You fire three shots, and drop to the ground in your defensive position. Buckshot clatters off Kevlar. You can feel Medic close behind you, the medigun’s energy radiating along your skin. Catch sight of the enemy soldier through Plexiglas.

The heavy has switched to his shotgun, and ignores you for the sake of whipping the barrels toward Pyro, so you take the chance to sight down your Gyrojet and—

_Bang!_

Your arm recoils to your side as the rattle against your shield sets your teeth on edge. _Fuck_, that was too close. The heavy. He’s turned his leering attention to Soldier, coming up on the right, and with both the BLU’s distracted once again…

“Specialist.”

_Bang!_

Pyro’s body collapses, slides slowly off the silver point, and you ready your Gyrojet again—

“Spezialist,” Medic hisses again, so quietly you almost can’t hear it. His syllables buzz with
urgency. “Zhe spy. Using your shield as cover until he gets close. Ten feet.”

You squint through the Plexi. Yes—there’s something like a heat haze, and a stirring along the sandy orange soil. *Shit.*

*Boom!*

And down goes Soldier.

*Double shit.*

And now the BLU pyro joins them in defense with those empty, black eyes.

“Fuck.” You fire three shots at the soldier, but they’ve hit nothing vital, the barest traces of blood showing on his coat.

Your shield shudders again as you struggle to reload. “Fuck.”

“Specialist, I need you to take some damage.”

You take the risk of whipping your head around to face him. “You want me to *what*?”

*Boom-crack!*

“I don’t have enough energy for an Uber-charge, and that’s the only way we’re making it out of this! The more energy the medigun expends in healing, the more heat energy it builds for the charge.”

*Boom!*

You take a deep breath and drop the Gyrojet. Draw your Lancaster in both hands. *Fuck.* Now you’ve lost sight of the cloaked spy. What if Medic can’t heal you fast enough?

Then neither of you will be making it anywh—

“Just do it!”

Launch yourself to your feet, and crack! Your shield glances off a solid mass that materializes into—

Haze of silver, the glinting edge of a balisong pressing for your eyes—

You draw your left arm up, knock the spy’s arm down and the balisong plunges into the soft skin between shoulder and collarbone. You hiss as he yanks the blade back, a sick slide as your flesh struggles to hold the blade in place, squicking as it draws up and back, silver spilling blood across the air. But the pain is replaced with heat and needling twitches in the muscle, and you know the medigun has done its work.

“Again!” Medic urges.

You feign being a fraction too slow, and the spy opens a rift along your arm.

Heat, tingling along your skin again, and—

“I am fully charged!”
You feel it the instant it hits. Scarlet, crackling energy ripples along your skin, a burning flame in your blood, rushing to your head and it’s red, spinning, spiraling, rushing as the whole world falls away into one, single, burning instant as you raise your shield, draw the Lancaster high in one hand, and for an instant, you wonder—can you withstand the recoil like this?

Squeeze the trigger, with two assured fingers, and cackle breathlessly as the recoil hums along your wrist like no more than a light patter of rain in the wind. It fells the damned Soldier in a single shot.

Your grin bares your teeth as a free, low, wicked laugh rumbles up from your very bones, rising through your chest, warbling madly in the air—Oh! This… this…! The air is bright, dancing before your very eyes, textures and color among the grey you don’t recognize, beautiful—and the blood! Oh, the blood gleaming on the sand and your sleeves and in the terrified gazes of those BLU bastards, so bright, entrancing as a rose swaying in a sunset breeze…

The spy can’t cloak again, not yet, and so he runs—but he seems so slow; you witness every flex of his muscles, the footprint as he leaves it in the cracked soil—you fire. Blood flowers from his back, blooming against blue, and he falls so slow and graceful and you’re firing again as the scout scrambles to escape, as he fires desperate shot after shot bouncing with a ring like metal, high and sweet, chimes in the wind, ricocheting harmlessly off Kevlar and skin alike.

Your heart hums, thrums, joyous, calling: this is what you were always meant to be.

Chance a grin over your shoulder, and Medic—

Oh…

His skin crackles with that same singing spark, scarlet, and his eyes glitter like blood. Elegance, proud and tall as the tails of his coat crack behind him. Wicked genius in his grin.

“Take the point.”

You plant one boot on the spy’s bloody back and climb over him without care, reveling in the faint squelch of the sucking, gaping wound. Track burgundy blood over the gleaming silver and blue, and delight when the light fades to red.

[RED team has captured the point!]

And the power holding your body high is gone in a rush, like an exhale, gone in a moment, fizzling out. You gasp as your body trembles, natural adrenaline racing to catch up, trying hard to regulate the wild beating of your heart. A hand clasps your elbow before you feel your knees start to give.

It’s Medic, spectacles catching the grey light, still grinning madly. “Ist gut?”

“It’s… that was—” Your mind and tongue struggle. “—amazing.” You draw another unsteady breath. Words, words. They seems so pale in comparison. “It..”

“Aguzichnet, wunderbar,” he suggests, moving his hand smoothly from your elbow to shoulder, fingers curling lightly into your coat.

“Is it—” Your voice catches momentarily and you draw yourself up a little, taking another deep breath as your heart settles. “Is it always so—”

He chuckles, low in his throat. “Every time, Spezialist. Every time.”
Your grin is shaky, but genuine. What you wouldn’t give in this moment to experience that every day. “What now?”

“For now…” Medic’s hand drops from your shoulder, and he takes a step forward. “Komm—we can regroup with zhe others before—”

Crack.

Your brain does not process the moment of impact, but it does command you to take cover, a reflexive crouch behind Kevlar, arm poised to shield your whole body. Your brain will not process the event as it happened, so you experience it in steps, backward, a short stint of recent memory, the only way you can:

Blood, first. Blood, hot on your face in spattered spray. It rolls down your cheeks as Medic collapses into cracked dirt, head cradled in splintered bone and a cushion of bloody matter, glistening almost black in the low light filtered through stormclouds. The bullet had pierced his forehead, leaving a neat, dark hole graced by a single, curled lock of hair. His skull, of course, cracked, shattered, and in reverse, you piece it back together, play the instant over in your mind.

He didn’t even have the opportunity to look surprised.

A heavy piece of something slouches its way down your face among the blood and sweat. You don’t dare touch it, not even to wipe it away.

No. How could you let this happen again? Bad enough the second day, and now, this—worse, because you watched it, and there’s no immediate target to open fire upon.

And now you’re kneeling in the middle of the battlefield with a sniper just waiting for you to move. Your fingers curl tight inside the handle of your shield, leather glove creaking against the metal.

Well, you’ll give him what he asked for.

You rise.

Crack.

Follow the invisible trajectory from spider-webbing cracks to a narrow shed’s window, boarded up, save for a three-inch space between planks. A perfect sniper’s perch. Digging your heels into the dirt, you sprint forward, head bowed behind the shield, and you bloody well hope that bastard can see you coming, and prepares. You don’t need to shoot him in the back of the head while he’s distracted. No, you want him to see your bloodstained face when you blast him apart.

A repeated mistake will not cost you the contract.

The sniper can’t get off a second shot before you double around the neighboring shed, and you clear the first corner. The second. Throw open the fragile door.

Up, up the creaking steps. You care little for the sound. There is one thing and one thing only on your mind. There’s a single color in your head—it is red.

A living, breathing red.

You don’t slow when the sniper stands, snarling, at the top of the stairs, kukri drawn and ready. You don’t miss a step when he reaches over your shield, curved blade pointed at your skull. Draw
the shield up, under his arm as you spring up the final step, throw your body into the Kevlar. The snap, satisfying, settles your breath as he falls, nose crunching, shatters. The blade clatters behind you as you wrestle the BLU, half-pinned by your shield and spitting blood as you rise to your knees, his long legs lashing out at anything he can reach. The kukri clatters and spins across the floor. You bring your shield up, force it down upon his head.

Blocked, barely, by spry arms as he pushes back. You tumble—over, over, over, over—

Crack, crack, crack, crack—

Gather your legs. Catch yourself halfway down the stairwell.

The sniper sneers, wipes blood from his mouth and displaced nose on the back of his hand, reaches back for his rifle.

You draw your Lancaster, and with two hands, forego your cover.

Bang!

He drops. Slowly, shaking stiff limbs, rolling your neck, you climb. His body trembles.

Bang!

Skull fragments, splinters, explodes. Dead.

You spit on his corpse.
Chapter Summary

The holidays were quite a lot busier than expected... so without further delay, chapter nineteen!

Warning for: gore, death, drugs, and medical unpleasantness

[You failed!]

The words echo across the field, tangible and hot and you gnash your teeth against your double’s sickly-sweet smile. “Good luck on your evaluation,” she says. It turns your stomach to think of that false kindness spread upon your own features. You’ve never looked that way, have you? “Maybe I’ll see someone with better mettle next week.”

You stare straight down the barrel of her pistol. “Or I’ve doomed us both. A class on each side or not at all, right?”

There’s little satisfaction in the way rage overtakes those familiar features before she squeezes the trigger.

She dispatches you with a single shot.

Your fingers curl against concrete as you push yourself upright in spawn, drawing blood from the inside of your cheek. Failed. Even your best was not enough. There are no tears pricking at your eyes; the thought only makes you cold, an emptiness settling in your chest as your mouth fills with an arid, metallic taste.

Both Sniper and Scout tumble out of respawn behind you. Neither will look at you, and your fingers stray to the Lancaster on your thigh. Comforting, heavy, cold.

“Ah! Spezialist!” Medic bounces in on the balls of his feet, Heavy not far behind. He claps your shoulder, smears a splatter of blood across his cheek with the other sleeve. “Marvelous work today. Now, before dinner, I’d very much like to check over the—”

You wet your lips. Furrow your brow as the man chatters on, nearly vibrating with excitement. “We lost,” you manage.

“Hm?” He arches a brow. “Oh! That’s such a small matter, now! We’ll win it all back come Monday. No one ever really gains an edge. Now—”

“WE LOST THE DAY, MAGGOTS!”

Scout groans, head thumping against the door of his locker. “Here we go.”

“I EXPECT TO SEE EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU RUNNING THOSE COURSES STARTING TONIGHT, YOU SORRY SARDINES!” Soldier tramps about before finding your little corner of the room, and one thick finger levels directly with your nose. “ESPECIALLY YOU, ENSIGN GREENIE.”
You open your mouth to reply, to agree—after all, what else is there to do besides pack; you’ve royally fucked up.

But: “Excuse me, Herr Soldier.” Medic fixes the man in an amiable gaze over his spectacles. But something in the arch of his brows, the quirks of his mouth is… undeniably chilling. “Am I mistaken, or did the Specialist double your kill-count today?”

“THAT DOES NOT EXCUSE—”

“What about this? I will personally see to the Specialist’s study of maps and our usual tactics, hm? Since the problem, clearly, has nothing to do with her physical prowess.”

“THAT MAY SOUND REASONABLE, BUT—”

“Soldier, why don’t you an’ I go over the plans in the boardroom now?” You hadn’t even seen Engineer come in. “We’ll bring everybody up to speed later, when they’re really payin’ attention.”

Soldier, much to your surprise, seems to consider this. “All right,” he mutters amenably. Then: “PREPARE YOURSELVES, MAGGOTS. WE MEET FOR DINNER AT 1800 TO TALK STRATEGY.”

He and Engineer leave, the latter throwing a thumbs-up your way.

“Thank freakin’ God,” mutters Scout, and slams his locker shut. “Gonna get a shower in freakin’ peace.”

“Well—” Medic’s energy is back immediately, eyes alight. He rocks on his heels. “—I’ll prepare the infirmary and you can meet me there once you’ve taken care of your gear. Be prompt! Or I’ll come looking for you, and the procedure will cut into dinner again.” He barely waits for affirmation before flouncing out of the locker room, not bothering to store the syringe gun or bonesaw beside his sullen teammates.

You stand there a few moments, trying to reconcile an embarrassing loss with the doctor’s absolute cheer.

Scout appears beside you. “You uh—got a surgery scheduled with the doc?”

“Something like that.” You purse your lips, swallow. “I have no idea what it is.”

He nods. “That makes sense.”

Your brow furrows. “What do you mean?”

“Never seen him go outta his way with Soldier like that for somebody else. Makes sense if he did it for a surgery.” The boy shudders and pats your shoulder. “Good luck with that!”

Heavy turns from his locker, shakes his head. “Do not listen to Scout. Is not so bad.”

The boy snorts. “Says Mr. Indestructible over there.”

“Heavy throws you a conspiratorial grin, and you chuckle.

Scout casts a glance between you. “Now, hey—wait a minute! You tryin’ ta suggest somethin’?”

Heavy shrugs, meeting your eye again with amusement before turning to his locker. “Some are more sturdy than others.”
“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hey!” Scout jerks a thumb at his chest. “I’m as sturdy as they come, alright?”

But the Russian is already making his silent way toward the door.

“No, hey! C’mon!” The boy dashes through the locker room, leaving you standing over one of the benches as he bounds toward the hall. “No way Spesh is sturdier than me! She’s got a shield, and that’s cheatin’—c’mon, Heavy! Whatdaya mean?”

You smile as the indignant shouts fade into the hall, and roll your shoulders, stretch your neck to either side. The shield and Gyrojet are heavy on your belt, the uniform coat clinging weightily along your arms. Best to get all your gear sorted and… get to the med-bay.

A sinking feeling settles in your stomach as you move through the empty halls. The others are already hitting the showers or—you suppose—the board-room. Pyro has already disappeared to their quarters. You don’t recall seeing Spy at all since the match ended, but that is hardly unusual. So, you try to find comfort in silence, but only end up catching your lip between your teeth as the quicksand swallowing your stomach threatens to rise up and enfold your mind, too.

Failed.

It’s just never enough. Why isn’t it ever okay? Things don’t have to be good, you just want them to be fine. Just… decent.

You need to call your mother.

You need to know if she is okay.

With a constricted huff, you dump your belt—shield, Gyrojet, and all—onto the wrinkled bedspread. You strip off your gloves and add them to the pile, then your thigh-holster with the Lancaster, and finally peel the coat from your shoulders, leaving you standing in tall boots, trousers, and a white, cotton undershirt, feeling like you should be sweat-soaked—but there’s only the electric clean feeling of respawn still clinging to your skin.

Automatically, you reach into the wardrobe for a button-down, but stop halfway, turning the scarlet fabric over in your hands. Does it matter? The medic will probably just have you take it off anyway to check your…

You shudder, and swallow the sudden lump in your throat.

No use thinking about it now.

You pull the shirt on, one arm at a time, but don’t bother buttoning, and hurry into the hall before you have the opportunity to change your mind. Why did you agree to this again?

You know why. Fold your arms tightly across your chest, wrinkle the fresh-pressed shirt, and grit your teeth. Step, step, step down the empty halls. Pass Demo, just out of the shower, drops of water clinging to tightly shorn curls, running down his brow. He grins, and you wave absently as he passes, his filthy uniform balled under one arm.

He was wearing nothing but a towel.

You don’t have the capacity to be even retroactively embarrassed. You don’t turn around. You just press on, pushing your way through swinging doors into the infirmary.

“Ah! There you are! I was afraid I would have to come find you. Please--sit up on the gurney and
we’ll get started!” You swear his voice climbs an octave in excitement as he bustles over to the sink to wash his hands and yank another pair of those red gloves up his elbows.

You try to ease the tight fist of your stomach as you sit upon the cold table, scratchy sheets crackling.

“Today vas most certainly a success!” You look up and he’s right fucking there, grabbing a thermometer from the tray beside him. “Open, bitte.” You do, letting him tuck the instrument under your tongue. “Close.”

You do. The glass is cold.

Not as cold as it will be when he decides to use the scalpel. You try not to grit your teeth. Medic would likely not appreciate mercury all over his workspace.

“Everything worked beautifully, Spezialist! Zhe rate of decay decreased by, oh--at least a quarter! With some tinkering, I might be able to increase the duration of die uber by half! What do you think of zhat? Ah, herrliche! We’ll just check the integrity of the hardware, ascertain zhere are no side-effects, though respawn does impact zhe data more than I would like--”

You did, in fact, think it was quite amazing, not that Medic so much as took a breath long enough for you to interject your response. But it would be far more wonderful if this did not involve opening up your chest and poking around the organs again. Not that this would make Medic change his mind. So, it really makes no difference that he has not stopped his excited tangent since you arrived.

“--so, of course, my ultimate goal is a heart that won’t suffer wear during uber. I made a concession with crafting a half-artificial organ. More opportunity for wear and tear with non-organic parts--pah! But! You appear to suffer no ill effect--” He takes the thermometer from your lips and holds it to the fluorescents. “Hrm. A little low, but zhat is normal, nicht?”

You nod. “Gut.” He shines a pen-light over your eyes without warning. “Don’t squint, please.” You do your best, hands folded tight together on your lap. “Gut,” he says again. Next are your ears. And then cold, thick rubber at your neck.

You flinch with a hiss.

“Agh! Your lymph nodes,” Medic explains shortly, and strips the gloves off his hands, tosses them aside on the tray with a clink of disturbed instruments. “I’ll be checking your lymph nodes; be still, bitte.”

You squeeze your eyes shut, jaw tight. He’d completely forgotten about fair warning. Your stomach turns, and you brace yourself.

Cold fingers on your skin, gentle.

You hope he doesn’t forget when it comes time for something major. “What are you going to do?”

Expert fingertips press along the contours of your neck, massaging into tissue. You swallow, and feel your skin shift under his cool hands. “I am checking your lymph nodes for signs of infection,” he grumbles.

“I know. What will you be doing?” You add “please” as an afterthought.

“Oh—I’ll be looking at your heart to check for damage.” His fingers leave your neck, and you
open your eyes to see Medic snapping the gloves back on. “Visual check, today—I don’t want to tamper with the data. I’ll be checking structural integrity, overall health, swelling, buildup of fluids in the chest cavity.”

“Oh.”

Well, that’s better than poking and prodding, isn’t it?”

“Now, please lay back and I’ll begin the procedure—I find no sign of outward complications.” Marginally.

You have to uncurl your fingers to do so, and you wince when the blood returns to a normal flow through stiff joints. You push yourself back and pull the unbuttoned shirt from your shoulders.

“Medic?”

He barely turns his attention from the sharp implements spread across the tray. “Hm?”

“Should I be wearing a gown?”

A crease forms between his brows. “Should you… Oh! Ja, I suppose.” He bends over at one of the cabinets and tosses you the red-stringed cotton monstrosity, immediately digging through a drawer as soon as the garment reaches your hands.

You take the opportunity to remove your undershirt and bra and toss it all in the direction of a chair near the door. They mostly make it, and you pull the gown over your shoulders and lie back, closing the front but not tying it.

Medic holds a syringe to the light, pulling a colorless liquid from a stoppered bottle through the needle.

You feel a bit sick.

“Just the same as before. I’ll numb the area, make the incision, and make an assessment.” He sets the bottle back in the cabinet, and flicks the syringe gently before bringing it to the table. “Of course, eventually, we’ll do it without drugs.”

“What?”

Medic’s brow arches. “Your pain tolerance is high, and the medigun, as soon as it won’t interfere with the data, will do fine. Morphine doesn’t grow on trees, after all!”

Your chest is tight. Your breath comes in the slightest gasps. “But—we get supplies every month, don’t we?”

He tucks the gowns edges to the side, probably not unlike the way he would tuck your skin in just a few moments to expose— “Ja, but my budget goes elsewhere.”

His eyes linger on your breastbone, and one gloved finger pokes the thin scar that bisects your chest. “Zhat healed very nicely.”

Self-consciousness mingles with anxiety, and you’re quite sure you’re going to be sick.

And then he’s sterilized the skin and stabbed the needle in before you can blink. You dig your fingers into the edges of the gurney to keep yourself from moving. The metal cuts under your knuckles as the liquid seeps, hot, under your skin. If you had something, anything to distract as the
needle pulls out of your flesh with a pinch—


“Hm? Oh! Archimedes is usually resting there by the window in the afternoon—they’re all eating, but—a moment—”

You follow the click of his boots with your ears and open your eyes slowly to the fluorescents, but don’t move. He’s somewhere there above your head, aaaaaaaa...

Aaaand there’s the flood of warmth at the base of your skull, crawling under your skin, lighting up your veins, a cold contrast against heated flesh. “—yes, you’ve napped most of the day, haven’t you? But, Neue asked, und you wouldn’t want to disappoint, would you?” Somewhere through the fog, you wonder if he always addresses his doves that way. “No, no, I’ll let you out after, Lister—just Archimedes for now.”

A slow smile starts on your lips, even as your stomach clenches.

Medic, with a click of his boots on the tile is above you again, Archimedes nestled between his palms. He lifts one and lets the dove free. It hops down onto your stomach with a soft flutter.

“Better?”

Your fingers, stiff, uncurl from the gurney’s edge. You open your mouth, but your tongue feels slow. Instead, you nod, and the room drags behind your gaze. You stop that immediately. “Thank you,” you manage.

“Gut, gut. Here, Archimedes, make up your mind! I can’t have you at the incision site!”

Indeed, the dove has hopped along to the sterile area, but you can’t feel a thing.

“Archimedes!” With a huff, Medic gently sweeps the dove to nestle in the gown by your shoulder. “Fine?” But you’re not sure if he’s asking you or the bird.

He saves you the trouble by drawing up the larger syringe, with its thick, menacing needle. You close your eyes against it.

“Und zhe second.” There’s some kind of sensation near your chest, but it’s not pain, exactly.

You feel Archimedes stir at your side, tucking himself closer and making a nest of the open gown. It brings warmth to your chest. Well—so do the drugs, you suppose, but that’s another matter entirely. You do your best to uncurl cramped fingers again and be… somewhat relaxed.

Dinner. You could have dinner soon. That would be nice.

“I understand you performed a revenge kill on the sniper.”

Oh. Even through your fogged mind, there’s no mistake. You catch the inside of your cheek between your teeth, and bite perhaps a little too hard in the soft, red haze behind your eyelids.

“Yeah.” Did he really have to bring that up now, fragments of bone splitting, splintering, blood raining through the perch, wood drinking it up like--

“I wish I’d seen how you performed after the uber.”

Horrifyingly.

“Fine.”
“Hm.” His thoughtful hum seems distant. “No strain? No extra energy? Changes in heart-rate or breathing?”

“Don’t think so.” Your chest is starting to feel heavy.

“Hm. Perhaps next time I’ll be there. Now--do not speak please--zhe same as before.”

You don’t mind that in the least. You’re pleasantly light-headed, and would rather not shatter the calm. Archimedes makes a little sound before changing positions again, tickling the skin of your shoulder.

“My concern is zhat there tend to be a variety of reactions after experiencing invincibility. Unnecessary risk-taking is one.”

You should probably feel admonished. You just feel a little floaty.

“But my main concern is physiological at zhe moment. So far, all your tissue looks marvellous! A little bruising here on zhe surface near your clavicle, but when we fix you up with zhe medi-gun, that will be gut as new! Nothing to worry about. Now, your--”

One, two, three, four beats of your heart.

Your brow furrows. You can’t hear him at all. There’s only the hum of the overhead fluorescents, the quiet whir of the medigun on standby.

You open your eyes this time.

He is still there, tall and decorated with little smears of blood along his sleeves, his lapels. As you watch, Medic raises a hand slowly to his chin, draws his fingers slowly along his jaw, painting his skin a shadowed red. He reaches his ear and tugs the spectacles up higher so they no longer catch the light.

His gaze is intent, softer than you’ve ever seen it, burning still, but without its bladed edge. His lips are parted, as though he had something more to say, and found the words suddenly gone.

“Medic?”

“Spezialist, please!”

If your chest weren’t so heavy, you might have twitched at the sudden bark. And there--the chilly, sharp edge to his gaze again.

“Do not speak. I’m going to… if I’d--well.” The blood on his jaw catches the light. “Your heart looks better than I expected.” He grows quiet again, and you don’t close your eyes. His gaze turns to your open chest again, below where you’ll let yourself peek. “The desire of my double to bring you back to life before examining your heart is not lost on me.”

There’s a great weight constricting your breath.

“Truly,” he says, quiet, and you strain your ears. “This is the only way to see it.”
MACV

Chapter Notes

Well, a month is terrible, but---yeah I wanted to be done with this chapter before that. Things happened in it that I did not expect, and... well... here we are. You'll see what I mean.

Thanks to Kilgamesh on tumblr for helping me sort through some things and acting as my beta this time!

Warning for: alcohol, discussion of drugs, death, and possibly dissociation

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After that surgery, you just wanted as little awkwardness as possible to accompany your dinner.

The table was piled high with hamburger fixings, a steamy platter in the middle of the table, and you cast your eyes over the chairs without really seeing. Heavy is here, and Scout, but the rest seems... out of focus. Your stomach turns a little, despite the fact that any painkillers would be long out of your system after being patched up with the medigun, and you decide to be thankful that Medic chose to stay behind to complete his notes on the procedure. There isn’t much more prodding you can stomach today. You slide into your seat beside Scout, clearly putting the finishing touches on his plate.

“So,” he says, offhand, “magical freakin’ experience or what?”

Gods, you hope the embarrassment doesn’t show on your face. “Or what,” you grunt, helping yourself to the first platter you can see. Green beans. The heavy heat swimming through your blood stretches out the seconds like a click, click, click, hands on a clock under fluorescents, glinting on glass, peering into your chest with something like admiration, and--

“Hey—ya all right there?”

A chill creeps along your spine, and you snap your eyes shut, taking your seat properly. “Sorry,” You nearly drop the tongs. “I’m--uh--the morphine is just wearing off, I think.”

Heavy, at the opposite end of the table, brilliantly covers his incredulity.

Scout covers his frown with a turn of mock-annoyance. “Morphine? The doc uses diddly sh---crap on me!”

You vividly recall the boy having no problems saying ‘shit’ (and worse) multiple times on the field, but then, you realize: gentlemen don’t swear at the table, a credit to the way his “ma” raised him.

The thought brings the whisper of a smile to your lips. “He said he was going to stop using it once having the medigun on all the time won’t ‘interfere with the data’.”

Scout snorts. “Sure.” He digs into the burger on his plate. “Doc’s pretty greedy with those meds. Pretty sure he hadn’t opened the cabinet in a year before you got here. Not sure what he’s savin’
‘em for.”

“Emergencies,” suggests Spy dryly. “Perhaps one day we won’t be able to rely on miracles.” He pinches an unlit cigarette between gloved fingers.

“You wishin’ ill on the equipment, there, Spy?” asks Engineer, amusement playing on his lips.

“Non. Merely expressing a desire for appropriate preparation in a worst-case-scenario.”

“Engie and the doc test everything every day,” scoffs Scout. “You think they’d let us shoot at each other if nothin’ worked?”

You can see the arch of Spy’s brow in the shift of his balaclava. “Are you certain you wish to put blind trust in things you do not understand?”

A shiver passes over your skin, like the smoke that might curl from his cigarette. You wonder if he knows something you don’t. But--of course he does. That’s his job, after all.

You push the beans around your plate.

“Speakin’ of--” Scout gives you a sidelong glance before returning to his food. “--do ya trust him?”

There is a strange spike of adrenaline that rushes through your fingers, triggering an involuntary tremble, and you wonder if, perhaps, the morphine had not completely worn off after all. “Who?” you ask, though there is no doubt.

“Medic.”

You wet your lips, and know without looking that bloody well everyone is listening. “He’s the doctor,” you reply slowly, and if any of them knew your history, they would know this was a piss-poor answer and an even poorer lie.

Scout fixes you under his gaze this time, brow creased. He has never looked this serious before. “He doesn’t have a license anymore, ya know.” But the boy’s tone is light and you have no idea what to make of this.

The breath stops in your chest. This is a question you’ve never had to ask yourself.

What’s better: a doctor with his papers and a sheaf of death certificates, or a man with knowledge and living blood?

The only answer you have right now is “What the fuck.”

Scout’s lips are a serious crease. “Ya didn’t know.”

Engineer raises a hand. “Now—now hang on--y’all’ve gotta understand, he did have one...”

“He don’t now.” Scout shrugs.

Your mind flicks back to the plaque on Medic’s office door; it held only his title. No MD. No PhD. Nothing.

“An’ ye think the rest of us are right an’ proper?” Demo snaps over his bottle.

You can’t help but flinch a little at that, though Scout seems unmoved. “She’s got a right ta know! I get it; we’re mercenaries or whatevah, but when somebody’s shootin’ you in the back one minute

"..."
and pokin’ around your insides the next--”

“What?”

You’re not sure who said it. It’s like you heard the question from a distance, through the muffled, heavy silence that followed.

Scout stares fixedly at his plate. He had not meant to give away that much information. Spy and Heavy are staring hard at the boy. The others won’t look at you. Your mouth is dry, hands fisted in your lap.

“What are you talking about, private?” Soldier, you realize, demands again. “Are you accusing a fellow of treason?”

“Yes, Scout.” Seven heads whip around to the double-doors. Medic stands there, arms folded neatly across his chest, pristine again even after surgery. “Do finish. I’m quite anxious to hear the full accusation before we begin throwing one another under zhe table, hm?”

Scout firmly keeps his eyes on his lap, and you just want to slide out of your chair and melt into the floor. “You shot her,” he says, low. “Yesterday. You coulda fixed her.”

Your brow furrows, and you can’t look at any of them. Yesterday, you’d lost half your hand on the field and would have been dead useless. You should have just charged off the way you had planned. You never should have let Scout and Heavy take you to Medic. It was a waste of time then, and it’s a waste of energy now. You’re the problem here. Your throat tightens.

But Medic’s lip just curls in disgust. “Could I? I told you then, und I will tell you now: zhe medigun cannot regrow limbs! Would you have preferred that I let her bleed out?”

“You coulda fixed that.” The boy’s fingers curl in his lap, and you bite your lip. You’re the problem. Miss Pauling could send you away tomorrow little more cause than this, and she would be right. Perhaps you should go. This argument is worth nothing.

Medic barks a short, humorless laugh. “And then what? Let her run around the battlefield without fingers to fire her weapon? Let her get torn to shreds without any means of defense? Her death was completely painless--”

Crack! Scout strikes the table with his hand. “BUT DIDJA HAVE TO USE MY GUN?” The choked sob makes your veins run cold, and you can taste the blood that trickles where your teeth had pierced skin.

Engineer is on his feet in an instant, brows knitted together, leering, even as he hustles to Scout’s side, clasping his shoulder. “The hell have you done, Medic?”

But the doctor is quite unmoved. “It was the most efficient, painless method available to me. Zhe specialist’s death was instant; ask her.” Cold eyes peer over his spectacles, and your blood chills further under his gaze.

You find strength in your next breath, and clasp Scout’s forearm. The boy is stifling tears, turning whatever pain had been in his voice into a snarl.

“Scout,” you say, and your voice wavers. “Scout I’m sorry. It’s all right, really. I didn’t even know what happened until I was in respawn.” You don’t understand. You squeeze his arm gently, and keep talking. “I didn’t feel it. I wasn’t even sick after.”
Your brother would never let you hug him. Not even in the hospital. Not even when he finally broke down in tears when your mother was at worst.

You stand, seize Scout’s shoulders, try to make him look at you. “It’s all right.”

He shakes his head furiously, all traces of the tears that had been shining in his eyes gone. “No. No it’s not,” he hisses. “Do you have any idea what I’ve done with that pistol? Do ya?”

“Scout—” Engineer tries to keep a hold on him, but to no avail; he shakes off your hand and the Texan’s.

Scout pushes through to where Medic still stands, arms crossed neatly, but—in an instant—Spy is there, placing a firm hand in the middle of the boy’s chest. “Don’t,” he says, so quietly that you almost cannot hear.

He tries to sidestep, but Spy is there, smoothly mirroring his movements. “He’s a fuckin’ bastard!” Scout protests.

“Oui,” Spy agrees, grimly. “But would your mother want you like this?”

Like a blow to the stomach. “D--don’t you talk about my ma,” he says through gritted teeth.

But spy’s eyes are impassive. “Well?”

“No.”

This time, when Scout tries to storm past, Spy lets him, and the boy disappears through the doors without a backward glance at the doctor.

There is a wretched, sinking feeling in your chest.

“Well, gentlemen,” says Spy. He fixes you in his gaze. “Mademoiselle.” You find you can’t move in any direction, only stand like you’re sinking into the floor. “I believe we may continue this later.”

In the general murmur of assent that follows, you almost miss a muttered: “Walk with me,” as Spy passes the doctor, who nods and joins his departure.

“Solly,” says Engineer, “why don’t you an’ I get this cleaned up? Put some leftovers in the fridge.”

“Acknowledged!”

This jolts you out of your place rooted to the tiles. “Let me!” You blurt.

Engie shakes his head. “Nah, darlin’, we can take care of it. You kin take a plate with ya if ya like —”

“Please.” This is easy; it comes spilling off your lips without prompting. “I insist. You all go on ahead.”

The man doesn’t like it, but the set of his jaw is resigned. A shallow puff of breath leaves his lips. “All right. If ya need anything, you tell us, ya hear?”

“I will.”

You won’t.
But as the mercenaries hesitantly depart, you begin clearing plates with a set fury. Heavy might have touched your shoulder on his way past, but you’re unsure; your mind winds down and down until there’s only the sink, a cupboard of Tupperware, a stack of filthy dishes, and the tiles on the floor.


You do like scotch.

You lift hazy eyes to Demo, who leans heavily against the back of his chair. For a moment, you’re afraid he’s been there the entire time. But--he must have left to fetch...

“What’s this?” you ask.

“After today, ye need it more’n I do, lass. I prefer to think of it as a toast to the next year gettin’ tae know you.”

Rather than to your health as you depart, remains unsaid.


But he shakes his dark head, cocking a brow over his eyepatch. “Things were always gonna change. Doesn’ matter if it was you or some other poor bastard lined up tae join the team.” He shrugs. “It isn’t yer fault.” He gestures with his own bottle in hand. “Take it, lass. There’s a fight twice a week as it is, whether you’re here or not.” He winks in an exaggerated fashion with his good eye. “Trust me.”

With a something like a smile crookedly lifting your lips—though you cannot feel it reach your eyes—you crack the bottle. “Thank you.” And take a sip from the mouth. It burns, but it burns good and you let yourself cough softly, tears springing to your eyes over the caramel-dark, smoky flavor.

Demo grins. “To th’ battles,” he proposes, and clinks his unlabelled brew against yours. “On and off the field.”

The second sip is smoother, and, though it cannot melt the chill lodged in the pit of your stomach, it is a start.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, we will be addressing what happened here. But--for some reason this chapter feels like a bit of a risk--if you have any feedback, I would certainly appreciate hearing it.

MACV - U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
Chapter Summary

What?? Two within a week?? UNHEARD OF. Thanks again to kilgamesh over on Tumblr for betaing this one.

WARNING for: brief delirium, blood, gore in this chapter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dinner left you with no appetite, and you had collapsed on your bed, *The Count of Monte Cristo* in hand, before you even realized you reached for it. It takes three hours of tossing and turning on your creaking box-spring just to reach chapter twenty-six.

“*Man,*” says the Count as you read, “*is a very ugly creature when you examine him closely.*”

And you find you can read no more. You press the book on the nightstand beside your alarm clock with a tight frown.

Midnight.

You cast your eyes about the room, pushing the memory of Scout’s anguished bark far from your mind, until the little bottle of vitamins on top of the wardrobe catches your gaze. Might as well find some water before you forget. You roll off the bed and land on stockinged feet with a soft *thump.*

No use trying to sleep in any case.

You throw on a pair of trousers and shirt, slip on your Keds, and creep into the hall. All daytime visions and worries and deaths and respawns aside, at least you’re not having nightmares.

You find the nearest piece of wood and softly knock on it as you pass.

The hall seems less menacing tonight, despite the wan glow of the emergency lamps. As you pass the medical wing, your stomach turns. You didn’t bother putting any stipulations on your little arrangement with the doctor. Foolish. Desperate. To have your organs bare to the air yet again—running ribbons, ravenous fingers spilling speckled stains and—

You bite your tongue, dig your nails into your palms, and the pain jolts you awake at the double-doors to the kitchen. Medic was exuberant, but not completely inconsiderate this afternoon. Well. Not until dinner.

A little probing in the refrigerator turns up a bottle of water. You wonder, would Medic try to push the boundaries? How long before you were more *experiment* than human? Once your heart—*the* heart; could it really be considered yours anymore?—worked to the doctor’s satisfaction, would he start on your liver next? Your stomach?

Your brain?

Spider-webbing cracks in Plexiglass blur the blood, *crack, crack, crack* the blade skitters, spins
across creaking floorboards skull splits splinters splatters sticky slouching down your cheek—

*Fuck.* You push through the double-doors to the training yard and gulp down a cold breath of night air, watch exhale mingle with the desert night in a white puff that sails out under the moonlit sky. Your hands grip the chilled bottle tight, trying to calm the trembling quake spreading through them. *Shit.* You squeeze your eyes shut.

You have no recollection of running for the doors.

With a slow, shuddering breath, you open your eyes again and try to chase your mind away. You turn your gaze to the night sky.

Stars speckle the heavens, more than you could count in a lifetime, so many more than you’ve seen in the last couple years, living close to the city. Out here, the stars twine together in silver rivers across the blue-black, velvet night.

The door clicks shut behind you at last as you stare, there on the concrete steps. Night smells of sand and silence—and just beneath, the crisp, spicy scent of a fire. Your brow furrows. You’d been under the impression that the base’s heat was gas-burning, not wood (and God rest your souls if BLU ever decided to take advantage of the former).

Your Keds make no sound on the cracked ground as you step off the stairs. You filter out the soft, swinging strains of a radio once again through someone’s open window to follow the distant crackle of flame. You creep around the building until shadows fall and flicker across orange sand. Your eyes follow them to a roaring bonfire, twice the size of Pyro who sits, elbows on suited knees, cradling their masked face between their hands, nearly close enough to catch fire themselves. The sound of a guitar, idly echoing over the roar of the flames reaches your ears, and you squint past the bonfire to see the dim silhouette of either Engineer or Soldier.

Not sure if they see you, you approach slowly, the roar of the flames calming your nerves. The snap of dry wood echoes on aluminum walls behind you. Pyro’s head turns when you’re only a stone’s throw away, and they wave, a welcoming arc that points to the sand halfway between them, and—the twang of the guitar stops, and the figure leans over the arm of his chair until the orange light reaches his features. It’s Engineer, and he raises an arm in welcome, too.

“C’mon, have a seat! Wish I’d brought out another chair, but we didn’t think anybody else’d be up.”

It’s after midnight, a silver half-moon hanging in the black sky among a river of stars, a fire higher than you are tall warming your face and your hands, radiating against the cold, night air. In the middle of a desert in Arizona. With a mercenary in a fire-retardant suit that speaks not one comprehensible word, and another playing his guitar like they aren’t being paid to wake up in the morning and kill for ten hours out of the day.

And you’re a mercenary, too, aren’t you? The only difference is you’ve left your pistol under your pillow and raced outside like a madwoman as soon as your thoughts turned sour.

“You can take mah chair if ya like;” Engineer offers, moving to set his guitar aside but you shake your head as you draw closer.

“Don’t worry about it! I don’t mind sitting on the ground.” You sink carefully onto the sand about halfway between your team-mates. The sand is cold under your palms.

“Can’t sleep, either?” you ask.

“I like comin’ out a couple times a week; it helps me shake off the losses. I don’t know how often Py does this, but I certainly don’t notice much wood lyin’ around.”

You look to them, but Pyro only shrugs.

“Got a couple beers here—want one?”

You let your eyes wander to the tall, flickering flames, dancing against a dark sky. A prod at your arm, and you return your attention to Pyro.

W-H-A-T’S—W-R-O-N-G?


The strumming twangs to a halt. You can practically hear your team-mates stiffen as they exchange a look over the flames, the red tendrils flickering in the void of Pyro’s mask.

You open your mouth to take it back when Engineer clears his throat.

“Look, darlin’.” He frowns, brow furrowed under the goggles pressed up over his forehead. “It’s not my business to disclose what exactly happened there, but what I will tell ya is that them dog tags ain’t just for show.”

Your mouth runs a little dry at that. You never quite made it far enough for your tags to mater.

Engineer’s hands tap nervously along his guitar. “Scout served in ‘Nam before this job.”

A shiver creeps down your spine at that; your stomach turns, and you almost wish Engie had not told you. All reports coming out of Vietnam were… horrible. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugs. “Don’t be. Not fer askin’.” The man sighs, fixing a distant gaze on the fire. “But that’s all I’m gonna say about it. He’ll tell ya if he wants to.”

You nod. Of course. You would not even think of asking for more.

After a while, Engineer starts up his strumming again, chords that reach down to your bones and grasps at all the longing and desperation there, a tune you recognize—House of the Rising Sun.

“That ain’t all, though, is it,” he says as the song carries softly over the sand.

“No,” you find yourself admitting.

No one speaks for a while longer, and you know neither of the mercenaries will try to draw any further answer from you that you do not wish to give. The very thought puts a pang in your heart.

“What do you think of him?” you ask.

You have no idea how Engineer knows which ‘him’ you mean, but he answers accordingly before you can explain: “The doc,” he says slowly, “is enthusiastic, and a bit on the merciless side—I won’t lie to ya—but he’s good at what he does. He won’t let nothin’ damage ya permanent.”

You look at your feet, half-burrowed in crumbling dirt and sand. “So he’s… pretty fair, then?”

His fingers pause on the strings. “Hmm—well. Medic’s pretty trustworthy. Is this about that
experimental heart ‘a yours?’

“Well—” You wrap your arms around your knees. “—yeah. How did you…?”

Engineer lets a little half-grin spread across his lips. “Who d’ya think helped him build it? Medic’s pretty brilliant about the human body, but he needs a little extra expertise when it comes to machinery, just to get things more efficient. But don’t mistake—the medigun, the uber—none a that would exist without him. I’m just the practical guy.”

Pyro tugs your sleeve as Engineer’s attention returns to the flames, a more lively tune picking through the air. T-R-U-S-T-W-O-R-T-H-Y, they sign. M-E-D-I-C—K-E-E-P-S—S-E-C-R-E-T-S.

You nod, reflecting, as another stack of wood collapses with a crunch, and Pyro applauds the subsequent shower of sparks as they escape among the stars. You do remember your vitamin this night, when you crawl into bed smelling of sand and smoke as the first grey tendrils of dawn creep through your window. But, Man, you cannot help remembering, too, is a very ugly creature when you examine him closely.

Chapter End Notes

This excerpt of Monte Cristo, translated of course by Lowell Bair, is brought to you from page 176, chapter 26.
Saturday was largely spent in your room, emerging only for a bite of toast in the vacant kitchen, and to utilize the hall’s bathroom. The bottle of scotch sat within reach, on the nightstand, not that you are able to stomach more than a sip or two with only one piece of toast and a glass of water in your body. The alcohol swam along your blood every couple hours, releasing the tension that had gathered across your shoulders while dragging up such unwanted thoughts that, by afternoon, you weren’t sure if the stuff was a blessing or a curse.

You still have not written to your mother, you realize as the clock reads somewhere between 3:45 and 4:00. But you do not lift yourself from the bed. You do not move your hand to find a pen and paper in the nightstand drawer. You stare instead at the beams above, scarred and worn, as yellow sun streaks between the window-bars, casting creeping shadows that drag along the opposite wall until they kiss the ceiling.

What would you even say?

Mom, you consider. How are you?

But you would want an immediate reply to that question. A reply you would have to wait weeks for—and that was if Miss Pauling even agreed to give your parents a false address, went through the trouble of sending someone to the P.O. box, of forwarding the letter to her, then delivering it here to you.

There is a phone.

But you don’t feel right about using it. Not when it wouldn’t align properly with the story you had told your parents.

You press the heels of your hands over your eyes. The CIA, of all things. If your father had caught on to your story, he had made no sign. But surely he knew that, after the way your Naval training ended, the idea that someone from “higher up” thought “you had potential for overseas work” was… frankly ridiculous.

All the same, something Miss Pauling said must have convinced him. Or maybe, it was just the money.

In either case, training and then working with the CIA involved little to no contact with family, and in any case where contact was made, your parents could not know where you were, whether it be in or out of the country. And they accepted it. Hell, maybe it wasn’t the money—maybe it was all that mess with the Soviets. Every time you heard the crackle of a radio newscaster, you were reminded: it was putting everyone on edge. How much of a stretch was it to believe utmost secrecy was necessary to your faux post with the CIA, even in training?
Paycheck. Your hands slide to your hairline, and clutch at it. Who gives a fuck about secrecy—you need a fucking paycheck.

You turn over, bury your face in the coarse fabric of your pillowcase. The tears are already there, prickling at your eyes. You wonder why you have any left. How many times can one person cry over the same thing?

Mom. How are you? I hope you’re not pushing yourself. I don’t want to have to rush back because you’ve gotten an infection again--

No. Your fingers curl into the mattress.

Mom. I hope you’re doing well. I miss being home, and I miss seeing you and Dad and--

No. You’ll worry her.

Mom. I’m sure you’re worried about me; please don’t be. Things are fine.

No. You have no idea if things will be fine. Not before tomorrow.

Your pillow sails across the room and strikes the door with a sad, soft thump. It slumps to the floor, and that just makes you angry. Why why why why why are you so stupid—

You curl up tight, knees tucked up under your chest, arms wrapped around your head, burying your nose in itchy blankets, trying to quell the desire to break anything within reach. Fuck. Stupid. You can’t do anything properly. You can’t keep a job, can’t finish a thought, can’t help your mother, can’t can’t can’t fucking can’t.

A tight, sharp breath through your nose. You grit your teeth. Draw your arms and knees closer. You release the breath on a hiss. The coiled, wrathful thoughts leave, but the tension, the latent, furious energy, still crawls through your limbs, burns in your chest, creeps along your skin.

You need to walk, run, shoot something.

You can’t peel yourself from the mattress.

It seems you had fallen asleep that way, because you next find yourself on the floor, Lancaster in hand, grateful that you weren’t so trigger-happy that you fired when the next knock came. You rub sticky eyes, squinting at the clock as you call--“Who is it?”--and find it is after seven in the evening. Unless, of course, it was actually seven o’clock on Sunday—

“Is Heavy. You have eaten supper?”

Still Saturday. You replace the pistol where your pillow should be with a groan. “No,” you admit. You walk toward the door, eyeing the space on the floor where your pillow is still sadly slouched. You pick it up and toss it back to the bed before unlatching and opening the door.

Heavy is there, bowing his head a little under the door-frame. “Why?”

You lick your lips, trying to convince your mouth to be a little less dry, hoping your eyes don’t give away the afternoon’s major activity. “Fell asleep,” you say, and don’t bother with the ‘crying’ bit, nor the bit where you haven’t been hungry all day.
“Should eat,” says the man simply, shrugging massive shoulders.

“Yeah.” You lean against the edge of the door, still clutching the handle.

He nods, slowly. “Now.”

You study the hulking man in your doorway. Without a doubt, he could easily hoist you over his shoulder and force you to the kitchen, if he so chose. But you are not afraid. Imposing, Heavy might be, but for you, in this moment, he only seems solid--unwavering, not threatening.

So, “All right,” you say, and find yourself following the Russian down the hall.

Strange, you find yourself considering, that the great, Red fear of the nation manifested here in a giant that just wanted to make sure you did not starve.

The monosyllabic conversation continues through dinner—affirmation or denial of assistance, of preferences. Leftovers are fixed into something edible. Food is consumed. You find yourself in the tiny library again, sitting across from Heavy in a little, cushioned chair. His eyes, serious, remind you of the sky when it snows.

“Are you comfortable seeing Medic?” he asks.

You know the surprise shows all over your face. “Am I…?”

“Yes. I know you will be seeing him for experiment.” His gaze is steady, not judging; he states simple fact. Still, you find yourself shifting uncomfortably in your chair.

“Yes,” you say.

But Heavy’s mouth tugs in a slight frown. “Also know you are still upset.”

You do duck your head at this.

“Scout is all right, if this is what bothers you.” His brow is furrowed slightly when you lift your gaze. You are glad to hear it, and cannot help wondering if your teammate had received a similar visit earlier today. “Saw him briefly,” Heavy continues. “He was running courses and arguing with Soldier. Normal day.” He shrugs.

“I’m really glad. I… don’t want to be a problem.”

“No problem.” The firm, stony edge of his voice makes you believe it for a moment.

Silence settles, and you turn your eyes to the titles on the shelves as Heavy shifts a little in his oversized armchair, busying his hands with some tomes left on the table. He piles them neatly. Many of the books are well-worn, paperbacks and faded, hard covers, crinkled brown and blue and black and burgundy.

“You were…” Your eyes return to Heavy as he seems to struggle for a word, eyes flicking through the air like he might find it printed there. “…upset,” he decides, though from the way he frowns as he says it, you can tell it is not the word he wanted. “Yesterday, when you learned doktor does not have license.”

Your hands worry the arms of the chair. The wood is dry, cracked under your fingers, in need of a new coat of varnish. You have no idea how to explain your concern. “It isn’t… legal to practice without a license.”
Heavy shrugs. “Is not legal to kill for money.”

You purse your lips and try again. “If a doctor doesn’t have a license, that means he lost it. And… doctors only lose their licenses if they’ve—” You bite the inside of your cheek. Done what? Anything worse than poisoning a patient in the name of ‘curing’ them? “—done something terrible.” Vague, utterly lame responses. Well, at least you’re coherent.

“You have not also done terrible things?” Heavy asks, and you did not know it was possible to say such a thing without the smallest ounce of blame seeping into the words. No, his voice and those grey eyes were as steady as ever, even and mild.

“It’s different.” You bite your tongue as the words leave your lips. Why? you’re already asking before Heavy gets the chance. “I don’t….” You stop. Try again. “I do terrible things… It isn’t on purpose.” But you do kill on purpose. But they don’t stay dead. If you kill them and they come back alive, does that mean it never happened? If they feel pain that is erased in the next instant, have you really caused them any damage?

Does a doctor lose a patient because he chose to?

Heavy must see something in you, because he says no more, only looks on, considering. Does he know you’ve floundered and come up with no satisfactory answer? Is there some defeat written in your eyes?

At last, he nods, slowly. “Ask him next time, and then you can decide if you are comfortable, da? Do not agree to things if you are not comfortable. If you do,” he says seriously, “there will be hurt.”

On my part or the doctor’s? you wonder, and shudder, recalling the day you tried to kill him in his own infirmary. Perhaps it would be both. “I will,” you promise. But you’re not sure if you’ll have the courage. It is possible that there will not be a next time.

“Miss Pauling will sign your contract tomorrow.”

Your eyebrows shoot to your hairline. It’s almost as though he knew the somber color of your thoughts. “What makes you say that?” you ask.

Heavy shrugs his massive shoulders. “You are good asset to team.” He says it so simply that you are not inclined to disagree. Like it’s some invariable truth.

“How can you be so sure?” you find yourself asking, with a pure, genuine desire for the answer. How?

He smiles a little at that, mouth quirking at its edge. “Because is true. You will see tomorrow, spetsialist.”
This chapter would not be possible without kilgamesh, over on tumblr, who helped me a great deal when I started getting frustrated with different aspects of the action (that I had not adequately planned--imagine that). Thank you so much, Beretta--this one's for you!

Warning for repeated mentions of throwing up, though it never actually happens. Some mild dissociation maybe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tomorrow comes early as you cannot stay asleep for more than a couple hours at a time, waking to darkness over and over as your stomach tangles itself in knots, and your mind spins in circles that keep you just on the edge of nightmares and the comfort of your bed.

From what you know of Miss Pauling—little, resolute, professional Miss Pauling—you cannot help but believe the woman will arrive early this fine Sunday morning, hand over what was more than likely your letter of rejection, and order you to be gone from the base by sundown. Stomach turning, tumbling, trembling, you shrug on the uniform coat, pulling it secure over your shoulders, laying the collar even. You strap the Lancaster to your thigh; the weight feels good. The coat makes you feel hidden, enveloped and warm.

But you hesitate at the door. Is it incredibly pretentious to dress in the role you may be denied?

You try to duck into the high rim of the collar. You push into the hall, feeling the gentle tug of the holster on your thigh, the faint chill of the air-conditioned hall on your cheeks. The flex of your thigh alongside the pistol feels right and real.

No, there isn’t a damned reason you can’t wear this coat. You’ve worked months for this, gave up seeing your mother heal for this. You—

Scout totters out of his door in a wrinkled pair of shorts and t-shirt, hair a mess of stuck-up tufts. There’s a bounce in his step again; relief floods your chest as your previous thoughts evaporate into air.

“Good mornin’, Spesh!” An easy jog puts him at your side, as though the thought that you’d be even with his door very shortly, should he wait, did not occur to him. “Pretty nervous?”

You bite back several comments about throwing up, his astute powers of observation, and your desire to run outside and scream like a madwoman. “Yeah.”

Scout nods. “I don’t think you need ta worry about it. Miss P’s pretty fair, and you’ve been really good this week.” He gives you a sidelong glance, the corner of his mouth sneaking up in a cocky little grin. “Y’know, not like my caliber or anythin’, but pretty damn decent.”

First instinct is to roll your eyes. “Thanks. Feeling fantastic now.”

But you do find your stomach has settled a bit.
He grins, heaving his shoulders in an elaborate shrug. “I just have that effect on people.” The boy holds open the door to the mess hall for you, and furrows his brow as you pass. “You goin’ somewhere?” He gestures up and down. Your brow furrows, too, as you try to figure out exactly—

Oh. “The coat?”

“Yeah. We’re off today, unless you know somethin’ I don’t know.”

You attempt a casual shrug, but it manifests stiffly, all wrong. “Just thought I’d wear it,” you say, and it sounds hollow even to your own ears. What else could you say? You felt safe in it? Strong? Sure?

It makes you feel like you are part of the team, simple and red and clean?

No. “Just felt like it” is really the only verbal answer you can possibly give. And Scout seems to accept it, bustling over to the refrigerator for a half-gallon of borderline-questionable milk. As for you, you tug a cup down from the cupboard for your morning beverage, careful to check the ceramic for old coffee-rings or scummy traces of soup. The mug is acceptable, but—

There’s a trace of spicy smoke on the air, and your fingers immediately find the grip of your pistol just as a hand finds your wrist. “Fair warning,” curls a voice, soft, at your ear. “Our doctor is on his way.” Our? Your bare fingers curl into the handle and trigger as your teeth creak, shoulders tense- “Our doctor, mademoiselle.” He releases your wrist only when your hand falls slack against your thigh. A faint current of air signals the beginning of his departure. “I will intervene if necessary.” You open your mouth, but you know he’s gone.

Damn spies.

Scout has a mouthful of toast. “What’cha doin’ over there? Catchin’ flies?”

You snap your mouth closed, quite unsure how to broach the subject. He needs the warning more, but how to delicately...

There’s a stutter and a grinding halt in the easy breakfast-time domesticity when those parade-polished heels click in from the hall. You’re much too late as Scout squares his shoulders and folds his arms tight, glass of milk in one hand and toast in the other. Much too late as Medic’s eyes sweep over the boy with a cool ambivalence over his spectacles. Much too late as the doctor reaches above your head to pluck another mug from the cabinet, quite unbothered by the fact that your nose is almost buried his sleeve.

He smells like antiseptic and it’s all you can do to ignore the reflexive bile that rises in your throat, but at least he doesn’t smell of blood and dust and gunmetal glinting steel—

You draw your next breath, sharp, as he moves to set the coffee kettle, back pressed hard into the counter, its tiled edge drawing a line across your spine; the air smells of wood and old bacon. Fingers curled, you inhale again, focus on the stale breakfast smell.

“Guten Morgen,” he says at last.

Scout takes a sullen bite of his toast.

“Good morning,” you manage, and the corner of Medic’s mouth twitches in a smile. Your nails dig into your palms, and you stare resolutely at the cracked tiles on the floor. This is your teammate, not your enemy, no matter how familiar his face.
But even as you return to your own mug and redouble your efforts to make something of breakfast, you cannot shake the feeling that you’ve been mocked.

The silence settles uneasily, but the minutes tick by, and you fill your cup. Scout sits next to you at the table, and nothing worth an intervention occurs. You stomach a piece of toast. Medic stirs his coffee. Scout finishes his milk. You keep sipping.

Scout finally taps his fingers against the worn grain of the tabletop. “Placin’ any bets for Spesh today?” he asks, but does not look at the doctor. The doctor-sans-license.

Medic unfortunately takes this as an invitation to sit down across from you both. “It would be a pointless exercise,” he says. “There would be no bets against her.”

The boy snorts. “What, ’cause she’s your pet project?”

But you’re still staring at the doctor. You knew he wanted you to stay, but to claim such confidence in your abilities, in what little potential you might have shown this week…?

Your mug is halfway to your lips, and you make no move to put it down nor to sip.

And he’s looking at you.

“I’m flattered you believe the rest of zhe team thinks so highly of my work.”

You want to look away, but you can’t help looking for some reason in the arch of his brow, the sardonic turn of his lips as he addresses Scout, but looks at you.

“Hey, uh—” The crinkling of the boy’s brow is practically audible. “You all right, there, Spesh?”

“Yeah, fine.” A scalding glup does an extraordinarily poor job of covering your embarrassment. “I’m—um—I’m sure a few people have criticisms of this week regardless of—er—Medic’s… work.”

“Nonsense,” says Medic brusquely, unpinning you from his gaze. “You have adapted and performed admirably.”

“Yeah, keep goin’, doc.” Scout grumbles; he pushes back his chair, swiping his empty glass off the table and dumping it in the sink.

The doctor still doesn’t pay the boy any mind. “I would expect Miss Pauling zhis afternoon. Do you have any plans for the day?”

Your brow creases. Plans? Beyond trying to keep your toast from leaping out of your gut at the first sign of a nervous influx? Why? “It’s my day off,” you reply dumbly.

Medic nods amicably. “Ja. Und, if you have no other plans, perhaps you could make time to return to zhe infirmary with me. I have some thoughts.”

As a chill creeps over your skin, your stomach drops somewhere far below your chair.

Well, at least you don’t have to worry about throwing up anymore.

“You’re shittin’ me, doc.” Scout leans against the counter, easily replying in your place. “Tryin’ to talk somebody into workin’ on the weekend?”

Medic straightens his glasses, finally deigning to turn his gaze to your teammate. “It’s not work if
“It’s voluntary recreational experimentation.”

“You mumble into your mug.

“And besides, we’re being paid!”

“We’re bein’ paid regardless.” Scout rolls his eyes. “I’d rather get paid for not getting cut open, thanks very much.”

“Well,” says the doctor stiffly, “I was not asking you.”

And his eyes are on you again as you try to pretend you’re somewhere far, far away. Like your room. Or a sunny beach with white sand in--no, no; never mind. Sand has been ruined for you regardless of color. A river instead maybe. With muddy banks and tall grass.

“Well?”

Sadly, you are not on a sunny river-bank apart from your nerves and decisions that, were they not so grave, might amuse you with their fictional level of ridiculousness.

Join Dr. Frankenstein in his lab, indeed.

At least Victor Frankenstein had a fucking license.*

“Well, I…” You coil your hands around your mug. “What if Miss Pauling arrives early?”

He waves a dismissive hand. “You don’t need to worry about that. If anything, she’s more likely to be late. Now—”

“Ya don’t have to go,” Scout interjects with a shrug. “We’re workin’ tomorrow, and if you wanna let him cut ya open then, whatevah. But you don’t gotta do it today.”

You know that; of course you do. And surely Medic isn’t vindictive enough to jeopardize having you here if you say no? But--but if you can manage it…

No. Your stomach roils, your nerves flag, your mind is stretched thin already, a trembling, fragile band of rubber. You wouldn’t make it. “I’d—really rather not, if that’s fine.”

Your fingers tighten around the cup as his brows arch, and you grit your teeth. You know you’ll do it if he insists.

But Medic shoves himself from the table, chair scraping horribly. “Suit yourself, Specialist.” The way he hits each consonant, guttural and harsh, curls you further around your mug.

And then he’s gone, tromping off down the hall, the click of his boots drawing distant.

“Moody asshole,” observes Scout.

You’re just glad Medic hadn’t pressed the issue.

Though you have no idea what you’re going to do with your day now, far from the infirmary. You settle for taking another drink.

“You know what?” Scout asks suddenly, and doesn’t wait for even a grunt in reply. “You look like ya need to play ball.”
Honestly, after an hour, standing in your undershirt while your coat lays neatly draped over the nearby fence, you strongly suspect that Scout was, in fact, the one that needed to “play ball.” His over-eager batting and the fact that there were only two of you in the middle of a damned desert had already lost you six baseballs to the dusty red wasteland. Any balls that weren’t lost dented the shed at your back with nasty cracks that left deep divots in the wood.

You catch this one in the glove he’d lent you with a snap. Underneath, your palm stings. “Letting off a little misplaced aggression, Scout?” You ask dryly, and pitch again. He doesn’t swing this time; the throw was too high. He catches it bare-handed instead. There’s some massive structure behind him, about twenty feet back--much larger than the storage sheds that dot the area--but the ball never gets far enough past him to strike it.

“Ain’t you?” Scout grins.

Honestly, you don’t have any aggression left for the day. Your bones are weary, and your stomach turns near-constantly, until you question why, only to remember what it is you’re nervous about, and proceed to become twice as anxious. You shrug, and catch the ball he returns. “I don’t exactly feel like kicking the shit out of anything right now.”

You decide not to mention that if you weren’t standing in the yard with sweat steadily pouring off your brow, you’d probably be curled up around a pillow, pretending you didn’t exist.

Scout laughs and when you pitch again, smacks the ball off to your right, where it cracks against the shed again. “Guess most people get tired of it. Me?” He puffs out his chest. “I’m always ready to go.”

A smile inches its way over your mouth without permission. You cover it by bending down to pull the dust-discolored ball out of the dirt and sand. You wipe your brow as Scout saunters over, offering the bat, and bite back a groan, tempted to just wipe your face down the front of your undershirt. You’re really shitty at this part of the whole ‘baseball’ thing.

Now is as good a time as any to wonder about the structure across the way. “What’s the building there?”

The boy follows your gaze to the edifice you’ve been facing this entire time. “Dat’s got weights ‘n stuff in it. Basically our gym.” He shrugs, now directly trading the glove and bat.

But your interest is piqued. “Can I see?”

Scout’s brow furrows. “Uh—sure? I mean, it’s not like anybody’s stoppin’ ya. Ya kinda live here.”

That is like a punch in the gut. You live here. You do. You have. For a week now. And in a matter of hours or minutes, it could all be gone. The months spent training—days on end disassembling, reassembling your weapons, firing in the range, learning the maps, late nights reading dossiers and praying, fearing all this would not be enough—

“No one… ever mentioned it,” is all you say, distant.

Scout taps the bat restlessly against his heels. “Yeah… Soldier really likes his obstacle course, and I don’t think anybody else uses it much. Heavy, sometimes, maybe. Demo, on weekends, if he feels like it with that sword a’ his.”

And—and you’re angry.

How dare anyone believe they can tell you whether you deserve this position or not? They brought
you on, months in advance. Brought you to the middle of a god-forsaken desert. Gave you a room. A new name. And today *they* will decide whether or not to take it all away?

“Um—you gonna go or are we playin’?”

That was the fucking question, wasn’t it?

“Yeah.” You snatch your coat off the fence where it hangs, shake the sand from it. “We’re doing one of those things.”

Scout watches with a furrowed brow as you stride past, headed for the broad, squat building with its sloping roof and rough walls. “You—uh—you ok?” He catches up in just two bounds.

Your fingers curl into the heavy fabric of the scarlet coat. “I’m… okay.”

“Uh, nice try, there, but I don’t think ya are.”

“I’ll be fine, Scout.” Your boots kick up little, orange clouds of dust.

He puffs out a little, annoyed breath, but you pay it no mind, pushing your way through the heavy door into the gym. You stop so short that Scout jostles your elbow in the doorway.

‘A few weights and stuff’ is not the way you would have described it. Weights there were, yes, but the room was huge. Targets, armor, supplies piled in the corners, on shelves. A finished floor fit for basketball (though you see no hoops). Blanks. Clay pigeons. More baseballs. Punching bags. A boxing ring.

“There’s a boxing ring.”

Scout heaves his shoulders carelessly. “Yeah.”

You face him directly as the door clicks shut. “*It’s a boxing ring.*”

“Um… that’s what ya said.”

The fury is still burning in your gut, but it wars with the familiarity of this single thing. You have to know. There’s even a wrestling mat stored along the wall. Your fingers are wringing the hell out of your coat. Just the sight of it has you itching to jump in. Everything—everything would be fine for fifteen minutes. Stance, sweat, blood—

The door creaks.

“Specialist!” You turn to find Miss Pauling there, clipboard tucked under her arm, glasses sliding crookedly down her nose. “Nobody knew where you went.”

Any determination that had arisen, flowing through your veins, throws in the towel immediately. Your shoulders slump. Your mouth runs dry. A chill creeps down your spine.

“Miss P!” Scout stops just short of sliding an arm around her shoulders, folding flustered arms over his chest. “Great ta see ya!”

“Scout.” She doesn’t even really look at him; spares him a single glance and fixes you in her gaze. You wish she wouldn’t. “I need to borrow the specialist for a few minutes, so if you could—”

“Yeah—yeah, no problem!” The boy gives you a broad grin, claps you on the back. “Good luck! I’ll see ya in the mess, Spesh; it’s gotta be time for lunch.” He gives Miss Pauling another too-wide
smile on his way past. “Maybe we can talk for a minute before ya have ta leave today an—”

“Scout, please.”

“Got it, got it—sorry.” He pushes the door. “But seriously—”

“Scout!”

“Gone!” And he was, the heavy door clicking shut behind him.

There’s bile rising in your throat when Miss Pauling turns back to you. She straightens her glasses and smiles. “Nervous?” she asks.

Not even one irritable, sharp response comes to mind. “Yes.”

She gives you a gentle pat on the shoulder. “Don’t be.”

That was certainly very easy for everyone to say, wasn’t it? You try to return her smile, but you have a feeling it looks less than relaxed. From the way Miss Pauling’s brow creases, you’d wager it looks more like you’re about to get sick on her sensible, black mary-janes.

“She, she says, gesturing to a stack of metal folding-chairs in the corner. You nod and grab two, setting each of them up with a grinding screech of half-rusted joints, and sit only after she does. “Now, I know you’re very nervous, hoping things will go through fine, so we’ll dive right in; this won’t take too long.”

“You’re… very busy,” you manage to say with practiced politeness.

Miss Pauling gives a helpless lift of her shoulders. “Always; it comes with the job. I don’t really even have the time to think about how busy I am, so it’s all right. But—” She straightens her glasses again, though this time they do not need it. “—we’re here about you.” You try to meet her eyes as best you can. “I’ll start by saying that the team speaks very highly of you.”

All of them? Yes, most of the team seemed content with your performance, but what was said to one’s face and out of one’s company are, too often, completely different things. But you keep your mouth firmly shut.

“Reports of your cooperation on the battlefield are, overall, very positive, and footage of the battles supports reports of your skilled performance.”

There’s a ‘but’ coming, you can feel it in your gut. You shift in the chair with a creak that echoes uncomfortably through the gym.

Miss Pauling’s eyes have returned to the clipboard. “There is the matter of your lingering psychological complications—what Medic identifies as ‘Gross Stress Reaction’—”

There it is.

“—but, he identifies that it’s well in-hand, so that won’t be an issue unless you wish to terminate our agreement on those grounds, which you may do at any time.”

Your mouth is hanging open, lips parted, voice quite lost. That… that was different. That was…

“Do you want to go home?” Miss Pauling asks.

“No!” You slide to the edge of the chair, which groans in an irritated fashion, but you don’t give a
damn. “No—I want to stay. I haven’t changed my mind. If you thought—if my performance—if I
did well, yes—yes, I want to stay. I need to stay. You know that, ma’am.”

She meets your eyes again with a gentle gaze. “I know; I remember. I just need you to know that
you have the option.”

You nod. “I understand.”

The woman’s gaze flicks to the little, silver watch on her wrist, framed by a worn, black band.
“Good. Well, in that case, we can speed things up a little.” From somewhere under the paperwork
on her clipboard, Miss Pauling draws a little, scarlet-and-saffron scrap of fabric. She presses the
embroidered circle into your hands, and you forget to breathe. “Congratulations, Specialist.”

Lips parted, you trace the crimson circle, the yellow wash that makes a shining background. The
neat, black stitches that form a scarlet shield which houses four, black barrels: the shield and
howdah.

A class badge.

*Your* badge.

“Affix it to the right shoulder of your coat tonight, and you’re official.”

Your lungs are burning by the time you remember to breathe.

“Well, after a couple signatures on the full contract of course, but—”

In your hands. You can feel it, every satin ridge. Miss Pauling’s voice becomes a gentle rhythm at
the back of your mind as you blink the tears from your eyes so you can just keep *looking*. The
colors are as bright as your mother’s scarves. And when your gaze blurs again, scarlet and saffron
run together in a wash of hope, and all the half-drafted letters of failure in your mind are scattered
to the wind when you finally hear Miss Pauling’s words again:

“Welcome to the team.”

*Actually, he didn't, but you wouldn't remember that until much, much later.*

Chapter End Notes

**HOLY SHIT, YOU GUYS. WE HIT A MAJOR RESOLUTION.** Though I consider it
more of a... beginning. Time to start getting down and dirty with some real plot
reveals, what do you say?

Thank you all so very, very much for sticking around, and I look forward to getting
into even more in the next few chapters.
Correspondence Interruptus

Chapter Notes

This chapter is shorter, but... on the dense side. You'll see what I mean. Gonna get rolling.

Warning for: disembowelment, medical unpleasantness

---

Mom, I hope you’re well. I’m so excited about this job. I know I’ll be gone for most of the year, but I may be able to visit next spring. Your letters will find me wherever I am, so don’t worry about that. Well--they’ll find me eventually. I’m relatively safe, and very happy with what I’m doing. It’s exciting. I’ve finally gotten somewhere. I just wish--

Mom, I hope you’re well. I love where I am right now. I secured the position, and I won’t be home for a while, so I just really want to know how you--

Mom, I hope you’re well. I wish the best for everyone at home. Especially you, all things cons--

Mom, I hope you’re well. I don’t know why I didn’t--

You throw down the pencil and it clicks against the near-empty bottle of scotch on the library’s table. Fucking shit.

“Scout tells me you are on team.”

You jump, knees crashing against the underside of the table before your rear smacks back down on the chair.

Heavy stands in the doorway, head bowed a little to fit when he steps through.

“Yes--I--didn’t see you there.” Your eyes return to the table and you flick the pencil so it rolls across the worn, wooden surface, clickclickclick. There’s a dull ache behind your eyes. “What time is it?”

Heavy looks at the bottle, then back at you. “Is time to stop drinking.”

A little, burbling laugh bubbles up from your belly. “It started out celebratory.”

“Now you are frustrated.” He taps a large finger on the edge of the table, indicating the crumpled pile of half-written, scratched-up letters.

You’re not laughing now. “Yeah.”

“Scout did not know where you went.”

You roll your eyes. “He patted me on the back and practically ran out after poor Miss Pauling like a
puppy.”


“He’s… smitten?”

“Da! Smitten. Good word.”

You’d never really thought about it, but you suppose so, trying to blink the growing headache away.

“I may sit?” He asks, gesturing to the large armchair across from you.

“’f course.” Your tongue does feel a little heavy, now that your teammate mentions how much of the bottle is missing. It really is time to stop.

Heavy does, the chair creaking under his weight. “Wanted to congratulate you,” he says. “Glad to have you on team.” He offers a hand and you clasp it, noting that even after getting to know him, to fight with this mountain of a man, that he controls his handshake well, his grip gentle even as the gesture is firm. The warmth of acceptance washes over you, and you know it isn’t the scotch.

When he lets go, you two sit in a comfortable silence, surrounded by the cozy weight that a room full of books provides, as though the ink has spilled off the pages and made the air laden with silent words. Your eyes wander to the newest draft of the letter. You scoop it up, and crumple it to join the others.

“Do you write letters to your family, Heavy?” You ask. It’s a bold question. You immediately wish you could take that moment of foolish whimsy back. But you can’t.

But Heavy just nods slowly, grey eyes distant. “I write to them often. Call when possible.”

You think you read a veiled sorrow in his gaze, but can you be sure? “Is it hard?” Might as well push your luck. Worst case, he loses his temper and sends you to respawn (you’ve seen no evidence of such hot-headedness in Heavy, however; not like that). Perhaps if you offend him, he’ll just break your jaw and send you to the infirmary.

Never mind. Your stomach drops at the very thought. That is the worst-case scenario. No doubt Medic would add extracurricular surgery to a simple broken bone.

But Heavy simply replies: “Da.” He surveys your pile of crumpled letters a moment. “But, my family knows I fight.” He shrugs. “Am good at it. Pays well.”

You nod, slowly--and stop when it makes your vision a little unsteady. “My parents know I’m doing something dangerous, but… not this.” You rub your temples. “They think I work for the government,” you admit. “But I’m… my mom is very sick. Or was. It’s… she was okay when I left, but not very good.” You look at the tabletop, scattered with ruined papers, the shelves holding worn books, the rough walls--anywhere but Heavy.

The admission makes your heart heavier, not lighter.

“You are worried. Is understandable.”

“I left to help pay for her treatment.” You focus on the rising pain behind your eyes. “I don’t know what to say to her.”
When you raise your head, Heavy suddenly looks years older. There are harsh lines around his eyes, wrinkling his forehead, framing his mouth. “I understand.”

And you believe him. The words hang in the dense air, dark and open. The ache behind your eyes becomes the prickle of tears, but you hold them back.

You believe him.

“I’m sorry,” you say.

Heavy nods, slow and sure. His grey eyes are warm, empty of tears, as though he had already spent them all long ago. “Am sorry, too.”

You try again, later, alone in your room:

Mom, I hope you’re well. I want you to know that I secured the job, and I’m very, very excited about where I am, but know your letters will find me eventually no matter where I happen to be. So don’t worry about that. As for me, I’m worried-- Scratch the line. Try again. So don’t worry about that. I will be gone most of the year, but I might be able to visit next spring. I hope so. In the meantime, I want to know how you are. How you’ve been. Have the doctors-- Scratch. Try again. I hope so. I have missed you. Things here are good, but I worry. Scratch. Again. I have missed you. I’m sorry I didn’t ask more questions.

You throw away that draft, too.

It’s Scout’s turn to make dinner tonight, and he chooses something much trickier than you anticipated, given the conversation you’d had with him earlier in the week: scalloped potatoes with rationed ham he spiced up using some wine and kale from the previous week’s run into town. The potatoes smell wonderful, heavy and savory, sitting in a glass pan upon the worn table as you slide into your usual seat. The chair creaks. The rest of the team has already arrived, most starting in on their meals as you serve yourself, the metal spoon clinking against the pan as you scoop.

Scalloped potatoes, creamy and flecked with pepper on a plastic plate, red, like so much of your life now. The sauce oozes over your plate, steaming, pulling the hue from crimson to rose. You take the first bite and burn your tongue, but they taste just like your mother made them.

She says your name from across the table.

The fork clatters to the floor.

“Mom?”

You’re in a hospital, and someone has dropped a syringe on the tiled floor and it clicks, clicks, clicks, rolls under the wheeled bed with its stiff, papery sheets and silver rails.

The nurse whisks it away, gone before you can see her face, but it’s no matter because you’re staring at the rusty splatter on the white tile in the corner. Someone bled in here and no one bothered to clean it up.

The place reeks of antiseptic, but it’s a goddamn lie.

She says your name again and this time the word is attached to a question, but you’re too distracted to know what, exactly, and the doctor slouches in, dispassionate. Mostly-grey with creased skin,
sickly pale like it’s absorbed the milky paint from every crisp sheet and corridor. But there’s still that mark on the tile, rusty-brown and flaking. Every breath brings the suffocating edge, alcohol and bleach, deeper through your lungs, a ribbon of needles snaking into your chest.

And it’s cold, cold enough to keep the bodies fresh.

You’re screaming.

Guts on display in the white, cold light, fingers thread through intestines, a bundle of tangled yarn, scraping, sliding, staining the doctor’s fingers. It’s the grey doctor, stained glistening blood-red but it should be blue, should be blue, should be sun and heat not ice and tile, and why? Why should it be blue?

“Specialist.”

-

You gasp, but your arms won’t move. Eyes snap open and find a moonlit ceiling.

One breath. Twothreefourfivesix.

It’s your ceiling, a silver moon showing through iron bars on the windowpane. There’s a shiver crawling over your skin, head to toe under tangled sheets.

Fuck.

You can’t remember the last time you had a dream quite like that, vivid and clear. It seems there’s a dark veil hanging over your shoulders, cobwebs clouding your head, sticky tendrils left from a nightmare you would like to forget before morning. Slowly, you bring your hands up to your face, rub them gently from your forehead down to your chin.

Yes, it’s the way you remember it. Yes, it feels real enough. A glance to the foot of the bed reveals that, no, your insides are exactly where you left them, though they still writhe and tingle, phantom pain just beginning to fade. You reach for the bottle of water on your bedside table and finish it greedily, lukewarm liquid going easily down a dry throat. It clunks hollowly on the floor when you toss it aside, and bring your knees up to rest your forehead upon, squeezing your eyes shut tight.

But all you can see is your mother, her head bare.

The night will be long.
Second First Day

Chapter Notes

The end of the semester is getting crazy, but there we are! Thank you, as ever, for your patience!

Warning in this chapter for: blood, graphic violence, some dissociation

Despite the night, you wake early, with plenty of time to sew the patch on the shoulder of your uniform coat. The grey dawn filters through the window, highlighting the creases of your fingers, silhouetting the pull of the needle. Stitch by stitch by stitch, the emblem is secured on your dominant side, proud, the saffron field catching the early morning glow and making the sunlight, flowing quiet through the window-bars, its own.

As you button the coat over your chest, you force yourself to recall yesterday’s supper—the real supper—in place of the phantom memory still looming in your mind. The quiet congratulations. The casual conversation, the surprise at Scout’s mastery over bacon and potatoes. Medic’s curious absence, attributed, in your opinion, to your refusal to join him in the infirmary, though Engineer insisted the doctor frequently got distracted with personal projects and it was likely nothing to do with you. Well, you’d see today, whatever the case.

On your way out the door, your eyes fall on the little wastebasket, overflowing with crumpled scraps of ink-stained paper. A graveyard of letters. You bite your tongue, shake it off.

You are assigned a locker in the minutes before the match begins, located halfway between Heavy and Demo parallel to the metal benches. You fill it with bottles of water. The latter slaps you on the back, welcoming your first truly official match. You hear the countdown under the fluorescents. You don’t notice Medic until he’s out the door after Heavy, and you decide it’s probably better that way.

You draw your weapons. You follow the steps you’ve learned upon this field. Distantly, the first point is captured. Distantly, you slaughter your way over the cracked, orange soil. The sun rises. It glares overhead. Sweat runs down your forehead in sticky rivulets. Your Gyrojet hisses. Shots crack against your shield. Second point, third point. Fourth—

PAIN.

Hot, slicing through your arm with such force that your pistol nearly skitters to the ground. Your shield comes up, drop to one knee, but—

The ground rushes to meet your back, a hollow thump that throws your breath from your chest and by the time your vision has righted itself: “Looks like you’re still fucking here,” your own voice spits, too close to your skin, saliva sprinkling your cheeks.

“Yeah,” you grunt, gathering up your legs even as the BLU specialist presses down with her full weight, shield locked with yours, crushing and snarling, white-hot sparks of pain shooting into your chest with each attempt to throw the doppelganger and her pistol back.
"I’d say ‘congratulations,’ but I think fuck you is more in order."

A bark of pain escapes your lips as her wrist slips from your grip, punching her Lancaster straight into what you are sure is a bloody bullet wound through the bicep, scarlet pain flickering, flooding, clouding your vision. “Fuck you, too.” Your fingers try to find her hand again, to pry the pistol from her grip, your Gyrojet lost somewhere in the sand around you, past the snarling mirror presented before your own visage.

But now your fingers are gliding, sliding through blood and sweat, well-oiled skin on skin, coats catching, and you can’t bring your legs under the shields to force her off and away. Panic creeps in, mingles with the pain, pooling behind your eyes, shocks riding the skin and sinew through your arm until the only thing keeping you from dropping your fist is the mad threat in the BLU’s eyes, eyes you’ve seen a hundred times looking at you from the surface of a pool, through the fog of a bathroom mirror, the waxed surface of a towncar, and here, alight, alive with such wrath, calling without words for blood—

Snick. Snick, snick, snick.

You grunt as your double collapses, boneless, and a familiar burgundy suit melts out of the air above. Spy wipes his blade on the BLU specialist’s back before flicking it closed, the silver balisong disappearing within the folds of his coat.

“This is what happens when you wander off alone,” he says flippantly.

One patent-leather shoe helps you nudge the corpse off your body, and you manage one deep, sand-laced breath as she strikes the ground. You have forgotten the gunshot wound as you try to push yourself up, and promptly collapse over your arm—burning, stinging, aching, searing—

“Shit.”

“You may want to find Medic,” the Frenchman lilts. “As for me, I have other business.”

Gloved fingers curl into a fist. “Wouldn’t it be easier to just—”

“Au revoir, mademoiselle.”

Ass.

Once more, you try for a standing position, this time getting your boots under your hips first, keeping your weight off the injured arm. It’s awkward with a shield still waving about attached to the other like a kite catching every little breeze, but you manage.

The BLU’s corpse is gone, only a rusty stain in the sand to suggest it had been there at all, and no trace whatsoever of Spy remains. You wonder what the hell everyone seems to have against medi-kits.

There are gunshots in the distance for you to filter back into your hearing—the patter of guns sprinkled with explosions, like rain and thunder. The battle had moved on without you, or you without it, if Spy’s dry commentary was any indication. Well, you feel more yourself now, in control, as you jog across the packed dirt, gritting your teeth with every step as it jostles your arm and shoulder. But you still don’t want to see the medic. The very thought sinks a stone of trepidation into the pit of your stomach. What if he is angry after yesterday? What if he holds your rejection against you? What if he refuses to heal you?

Well, then you’ll finally have occasion to use a medi-kit.
You suck a deep breath of the achingly dry air and flick the button on your earpiece. “Medic?”
Static. Static and gunshots. That is, until you round the next corner and find him immediately in the
fray, tall and bloody, readily recognizable in the white of his coat. He looks—

Occupied. You immediately regret calling. Maybe you can slip off since he hasn’t seen you—
[“Ja?”] His voice cuts through the radio static.

“I um—if you can’t it’s—what I mean—I’d like to request, if—”

But he’s caught sight of you, even as he evades the swift swings of the BLU scout’s bat, sunlight
glaring on his spectacles. [“Ja. A moment.”]

He does not sound pleased as he kicks the scout’s legs from under him and slashes vigorously,
messily at the boy’s throat with the jagged teeth of the bonesaw.

You suddenly feel a bit ill, and fire a handful of shots into the fray before the BLUs notice your
position. You finish off the demo, you think, and wound their soldier. And then, Medic
approaches, still blood-splattered—none of it so far as you can tell, his—and he nudges you into the
cover of the alley.

“I suppose zhis explains where you were,” he says, eying you over his spectacles, and hefts the
medigun off his shoulder in half a moment.

“When?” You hiss as the medigun stitches every scratch, scrape, and bullet hole with a series of
sharp pinches and replenishes lost blood, searing under the skin. A bone you didn’t even realize
was broken snaps into one piece. You flex your hand.

“A moment ago! I tested the adjustments I made to the medigun last night. On Heavy, of course, as
a control—and I have increased zhe efficiency greatly—the feedback loop is such that über can be
achieved in almost half the time!”

Feedback loop means little to you, but greater efficiency and half the time, yes, those sound fine—
quite all right, in fact. Good, perhaps.

And maybe he sees it on your face.

“How would you like to see how much faster we can make it?” he asks, revealing his teeth in that
manic grin you’re becoming perhaps too familiar with.

But you’re grinning right back. Too familiar and too contagious. Truly, your grip on sanity is
tenuous. Most importantly—he isn’t angry. “Why not?”

Right now, there is no why, now how, no basket of crumpled letters, no scars, no clinics, no guilt.
There’s just a couple of assholes that need to be reminded who they’re dealing with. Because once
the über lights your nerves, the world, for just a moment, is yours.
Lend a Hand Redux

Chapter Notes

Warning in this chapter for: blood, graphic injuries, graphic death, gore, respawn

Enjoy, lovies.

There are so many words for red, and they cross your mind in rapid succession as the energy of the medigun ebbs and flows across your skin, coaxing to the surface a clarity, a buzz and rush that had been missing from your blood this morning, a connection to the very air around you, to the energy of the battle. Your team has yet to capture the fourth point, despite the time you lost wrestling with your doppelganger, despite the seconds spent finding the medic to recover your wounds. Soldier grapples with the demoman—evidently you had not finished him off—two sets of hands grasping the trench shovel, each trying to wrest it away from the other. You fire a shot from the Gyrojet —shuwush—and this time it pierces his neck. He slumps forward and down with a solid kick from your team-mate, spilling scarlet over cerulean and into the cracked dirt.

Scarlet, it’s the first, the brightest, alive.

A bullet grazes your skin, and before you even register the extent of the damage done, your flesh is sealed again.

“Excellent!” declares Medic, behind you, voice harsh and lilting under the unyielding sun.

You wonder what he can see from there, just over your shoulder—the window in your shield, perhaps, as you keep a shotgun’s spread from passing beyond. If Medic falls, it’s over, your opportunity for that invincible high gone, but you—you, you’re expendable in the meantime, a bulwark of flesh; and another round, this one larger, so much larger, rends a hole in your dominant shoulder, tearing muscle, shattering bone, whistling out the other side.

But there’s crimson crawling along your skin, swimming through your blood, humming, healing with a hiss and a crack and an electric jolt.

Crimson, the second, the energy, ethereal.

“The time it takes will be even less!” the words spill from his lips in an excited whirl, and a high, tittering laugh follows.

A shiver runs down your spine, whips the adrenaline humming under your skin into a frenzy. “Down!” you bark, and know he obeys in time with the drop of your knee, black steel and Kevlar planted in the sand before you. That bullet had been the first in a volley, courtesy of the BLU heavy, but they get no further against the might of your shield. A flame of pride flickers to life in your chest. You can feel Medic’s breath at your ear as before, only days ago, creeping along your
skin, curling under your sweat-soaked collar.

“As before,” he says, as though you could think of anything else. You have to take more damage in this pursuit—this hungry chase for power, for raw invulnerability.

But the pyro is coming up on your dominant side, flamethrower at the ready, and such injury is not so easily controlled, not at all the way you need, so you drop the Gyrojet and unfasten the Lancaster howdah from your thigh, press it between both hands, line up the shot.

*BRRACK!*

The pyro stumbles, weaves, either reeling from a bad shot on your part or simply mad, for that hollow mask keeps surging forward.

*BRRACK!*

Stopped dead this time, mask-down in the dusky dirt, burgundy broken through the back of the blue suit. You return your attention to the heavy’s ceaseless assault, but your mind stays on the bare, broken flesh.

*Burgundy*, the third, the dark, rich.

“Once more,” urges Medic at your ear. You heed him, rising slowly, switching your weapons again, and advise him, quietly, to stay three paces behind as you advance. The bullets will strike and graze you, but they must not reach the doctor. This is the plan.

Rising, you advance on the BLU’s position, one solid step at a time, shield protecting your vitals, your very body a barricade for Medic. Bullets tear into your thighs, and your steps waver, even as the medigun’s energy stitches and sears every wound closed before blood can soak your trousers. You keep on. Step by step by step, waiting, breath baited, squinting against the sunlight, listening for--

“Fully charged!” Delight, pure delight gives buoyancy to every letter, and a grin spreads, dangerous over your lips, drinking in the realization, the panic in your adversary’s eyes, the steely edge, the useless anger as he sees his end come before him.

*Sanguine*. The last. Death.

It comes before black. And after the black comes cold cement.

Respawn.

Your gloved fist strikes the ground, and now your freshly formed knuckles are bruised. “FUCK.” You pound both hands on the cement for good measure, palms open, and push yourself up off the floor. “FUCK, FUCK, FUCK.”

Completely un-fucking-acceptable.

And worst—you have no idea what the fuck happened. Setting your jaw, shoulders tense, you draw your shield and Gyrojet, and march for the door. You flick the switch on your earpiece.

“What’s the current objective?”

[“Holdin’ the fourth point,”] Sniper’s voice crackles through the line.

“Thanks,” you grunt, and race across the packed soil. You pass the first point, the second, the third
without incident. Engineer is set in a narrow junction between the third and fourth points, and you give him a wave as you pass. You might have spoken, if you weren’t so dead set on learning what, exactly, became of the previous plan.

You wonder what happened to Medic. He had not been in respawn with you. But he had not been the one to reply on the radio, either.

You would have thought, had it been your fault, that he would have some choice words for you. Hell, you have some choice words for you.

The swarm of gunshots grows louder, the distant buzz becoming a roar, and you should slow down, take the next turn cautiously, but you don’t particularly care. You snap your shield to full height all the same, skirting the edge of the shed, and come upon the fourth point.

Demo is there, cackling as the BLU soldier stumbles upon some sticky bombs, and so is Heavy, providing cover fire over the most direct route to BLU’s base. Pyro is sweeping the area. The enemy scout attempts to breach your team’s defense, but even without your aid, you know he won’t get far. You join them on the point all the same, shield raised and ready, and fire a couple shots at the boy.

“How long?” you ask Heavy.

“Ten more minutes,” he says. “Can hold easy if we are not distracted.”

A solemn nod in agreement.

The BLU scout has gotten too close to Pyro, and is wailing in the consequences.

You wonder how appropriate it might be to ask after Medic and the events you have missed. You elect to wait, at least until this round end, and perhaps, if you feel like a gamble, ask the doctor himself.

“Damn bloody unfortunate that last bit o’ dyin’ ye did,” says Demoman.

Your fingers tighten on your weapons with a squeak of leather. “Yeah.” You fire a shot at the enemy soldier who has seen fit to peek around the corner. He disappears before the bullet hits.

“What happened?”

“Spy,” he says, casting you a glance; you’re not sure if it is meant to be read as amused or sympathetic. “Put a fookin’ knife between yer ribs.”

“Oh.” You fire another shot at a flicker of blue between spots of cover.

Well, that was certainly delightful. And explained why you died so quickly; that bastard knew how to pierce a heart with ease--that you had learned in the last week. It leaves you as disoriented in respawn as a sniper round to the head.

“Medic was right bloody fookin’ pissed.”

That has your attention. You spare him a glance. “Where is he?”

“Respawn pretty soon I shouldnae wonder.” He fires a grenade with a hollow thwoomp. “INCOMIN’!”

You catch your cheek between your teeth. “Did the spy get him, too, or…?”
The grenade had ricocheted into the alley and, by the agonized sound that followed the boom, took a man or two with it.

Demo utters a raucous laugh. “Nah—ye think the spy got away after that, what with the doctor right behind ‘im?”

Your brow furrows. Put like that… “No, probably not.” Unless he was very, very fast. It had happened before.

“An’ besides, he had a full uber.”

You’re not entirely sure what that has to do with anything except to reflect further shame on the situation and your performance. Evidently, this thought shows on your face, even as you squint across the field to fire at the enemy pyro, weaving across the sand.

“Mr murr mr mr mrmrph.” Your own pyro is at your elbow now, possibly squinting behind their mask at the doppelganger quickly approaching. Their hands are occupied by the flamethrower, even as you reflexively glance at them for guidance.

Heavy’s mini-gun is spun up and ready again before you even think about engaging the enemy directly, and the BLU is soon no more than a corpse riddled with holes.

“I am not good at understanding little Pyro’s language,” the Russian admits as Demo produces a bottle from one of the pockets on his vest and takes a swig. “But, is possible they explain uber. Is correct?”

“Murmrmph!” Pyro removes one hand long enough for a thumbs-up.

“Medic used it on himself,” Heavy supplies.

You blink. “I… didn’t realize that could be done without somebody else.”

He shrugs mountainous shoulders. “Is recent development. But before you.”

What a strange expression, before you. “So, the energy doesn’t have to be shared? Is it more efficient that way?”

“Is same, maybe?” Heavy shrugs again and spins up his gun as the BLUs seem ready to regroup. “Best to ask Medic.”

Not that you expected otherwise, really. Your next question is one you must swallow as your counterpart, the BLU heavy, and the BLU medic round the corner.

You can’t help the muffled feeling of satisfaction and excitement. Here’s somewhere to throw your energy after that royal cock-up. You won’t make the same mistake.

The folding stock slides off your belt in half a moment, snapping to length, and you affix it to the butt of your Gyrojet with a few turns of the wrist. You brace the barrel on the top of your shield, peering through the Plexiglas view as Pyro and Demoman fan out on either side of the point for cover behind crates and half-finished walls. Your finger edges the trigger, but no one fires. Not yet.

BLU Medic is supporting the heavy, leaving your doppelganger to take point alone. Your teeth creak. A dull ache registers in your jaw. Her gear is the same as yours—you know where a ballistic shield tends not to cover on the move, and, you’re beginning to learn, she’s careless: the legs are a prime target, and her dominant hand, too, currently grasping her howdah. Your brow creases. She
can’t fire without exposing herself. What’s the game?

Heels dig into the sand, her pace quickening.

You fire the first shot.

Hit.

You can’t hear her swear over the whirring of two miniguns, and you drop to your knee for best cover as a dozen bullets rattle the Kevlar. Your shield trembles. You hold steady.

Heavy laughs raucously over the din.

The BLU specialist has dropped to a similar defensive position there in the middle of the field, likely nursing her calf, perhaps preparing to switch weapons since she won’t be moving until the medic advances far enough up the field. But, his way is slow-going. Though the BLU heavy can lay down a devastating path of cover fire, they are outnumbered. Demo has lobbed a half-dozen grenades to harry their way. Pyro is slipping closer, dodging around to get behind, take out the deranged doctor—fuck. Your stomach drops into your boots as the minigun swings around to scatter bullets at Pyro’s feet, and you fire three desperate shots, but the heavy does not so much as flinch.

Not that you should have expected him to, really. You know the thrill.

But Pyro doesn’t stop, either.

You can see the bullets tear through their suit, their skin, blood shining at their legs and thighs, but they’re still running like a thing possessed. Steps waver and wobble, but as soon as a rubber finger pulls the trigger and a roar of flame lights the air, the drumbeat of boots under bullets and explosions alike fall steady, a scarlet demon wielding fire like nature—elemental, sudden and devastating.

But they fall, bloody, beaten just as the first flames licked the heavy’s skin. You ready your pistol again, hot anger rising in your throat. A sharp word can be heard, cracking over the rattle of your own team’s minigun, one that sets your teeth on edge. You know the BLU medic had been counting down to uber. Pyro was felled too soon; the doctor’s sharp, indecipherable word is in reprimand.

And every time you shoot, you only aid them. Your only real hope is one of Demo’s explosives, that one of them might blow the pair away—too much damage all at once to be repaired. Much like a knife to the heart.

Where the fucking hell is Spy when you actually need him?

[“Demo, you stay right where the bloody ‘ell you are.”]

You freeze and flick your gaze to the Scot’s last known position. He’s still there—but barely. He growls over the comm: [“Sniper, can’t ye—”]

CRACK!

The BLU specialist slumps forward, fragments of blood and bone spattering her shield, eyes that are yours red and wide and hollow. You draw a hissing breath, stomach writhing in your gut. The heavy and medic had been drawing dangerously close. This is one line of defense out of the equation.
You want to throw up.

[“That’s yer openin’—make use of it!”]

You tear your eyes from the corpse. Sniper must have someone advancing on his position. The three of you are on your own to hold the point. Odds in favor of RED again as long as the medic doesn’t hit uber before you can take them down.

A deep breath of hot air coats your mouth with dust. You perch the Gyrojet’s stock on your shoulder, sure to keep the BLUs from seeing you loosen the Lancaster. You’re the only one with a shot at getting close. If you can get in and surprise them with a point-blank round from the howdah, Heavy and Demoman can surely finish them with ease…

You flick the switch on the earpiece. “I’m going to rush,” you say, low. “I might not get past the heavy, but as soon as one of you gets a clear shot, finish it—blow both of ‘em to Hell.”

[“Da.”]

[‘Aye, lass—good fukin’ luck.”]

One breath. Two. Three.

Up you launch yourself as the Gyrojet clatters down to the point, creeping just low enough to the ground to provide maximum cover for your legs; if you don’t make it, after all, this exercise means nothing. And you’re going to make it, by God.

The shield rattles along your arm, screaming at you to stop and stand your ground, but you push forward, toward the incessant whir and clatter of the minigun, toward the mountainous man shouting thick curses and phrases that fall on ears deaf to them. There is the tremor of your arm, the weight of the pistol in your hand, the subtle shift of cracked soil beneath your boots, the pull of muscles under skin as your surge forward. The Lancaster’s hammer clicks under your thumb. You wait until you see the heavy’s snarling face over your shield, and even as he raises his gun higher, you pull your howdah over your shield, level it with the man’s chest.

Perhaps the recoil will push your aim back just enough to give you a headshot. Regardless, this should be the opening your teammates need. Either way, your wrist will be broken beyond proper repair as soon as you pull the trigger.

You pull the trigger.

**BRRACK. CRACK! AH, YES THAT’S THE STUFF. PAIN. SEARING PAIN. OH, FUCKING SHIT.**

At least you’ll be dead in a moment anyway. The sight of the BLU heavy’s throat blasting apart like an overripe tomato is more than satisfying enough to carry you through respawn.

But you’re alive. The heavy is at your feet and your hand is fucking useless, your howdah lying on the ground with the heavy. And, the BLU medic—

Snarling, until a scarlet hand draws silver across his throat, a river of red-hot blood, and he joins his partner in the dust. Your own medic stands in his place, grinning like the pair of you had never been through respawn at all.

“Zhat,” he says, eyes glittering over blood-spattered spectacles, “vas doctor-assisted homicide!”

You can feel the chuckle start deep in your chest. Is it the wordplay or the adrenaline? The little
titter quickly rises into full-on guffaws. Your wrist is aching straight through the bone, but it’s filled with pins-and-needles now, heavy, like someone stuffed it full of cotton. You keep laughing, and decide not to look. Medic is laughing, too, and you wonder if yours sounds quite as mad as his.

He wipes his blade on his doppelganger’s coat, smothering the last of his chuckles, hangs it back on his belt. “Here.” He draws the medi-gun, switches the power on.

You sober quickly, raising your arm to offer your damaged hand, though it is not necessary, and sigh when the beam is focused on your skin, swims through your blood, and bite back a scream when the bones of your wrist snap back into place without ceremony. “Thank you.”

Amusement crinkles the edges of his eyes as he removes his glasses with one hand to try and buff out the blood on his sleeve. “Try not to mangle your hands anymore for the good of zhe team, hm?”
So, a Man Walks Into a Doctor's Office...

Thank you all for your patience! I'm afraid I got a new job at the beginning of May, and had to get used to the new schedule and workload to figure out where I could fit writing in... and then I got a concussion at said job that had me out of work for a month, unable to even read. But! I have returned, good as new!

Special thanks to kilgamesh once again, and to Sov, who has returned to beta!

So, without further ado, my deepest thanks again, and on with the chapter.

Warning in this chapter for: drugs, medical unpleasantness

You only get up the courage to ask after you’re on the table, thoughts tumbling slowly: “They told me you used the über on yourself today, after…” but the statement loses its momentum, and you give up on concluding it. You immediately regret bringing it up. The doctor had not been angry on the field after respawn, but that doesn’t mean he is not irritated with you for that spectacular blunder—backstabbed the bloody instant before über. The shame hangs on your shoulders like the itchy hospital gown on your skin.

“Ja,” he says.

You squeeze your eyes shut against the fluorescent lights. Stupid. You want to keep him talking so you don’t have to think, but this—stupid.

But the painkillers are already swirling around your system and you can’t stop your mouth now. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

Surprise this time. “No?”

You feel Archimedes stirring at your shoulder.

“Well, I suppose it stands to reason. Zhat is a recent development—before, the energy required what you might call a conduit to make a circuit back to me. A few minor adjustments with Engineer’s help lets me use it alone, but it is a waste unless I’m in a… tight position.” You can hear the click of tools on the nearby tray.

“Was it a tight position?” As much as you’d like to cram these words back into your mouth, you’re certainly not stopping now.

You can feel his hesitation—or maybe that’s just the warm turn of drugs under your skin. “No.”

No?

“Now no more talking,” he says, and you can’t decipher the tone, but now you’re really certain you’ve fucked up.
Archimedes resettles again, rustling his feathers on the skin of your shoulder, nestled against your neck.

CRACK.

He’s broken through your breastbone. You wish there was some way to skip that step. You also wonder if, perhaps, he broke it a little harder than necessary today.

“Zhe schweinehund backstabbed you,” he says shortly. “It was my fault.”

Your brow furrows and you open your eyes against your better judgment. There are flecks of blood spread over Medic’s cheeks, and all his focus is below, where you refuse to look. There’s a crease between his brows, mouth set in a hard line. You can’t speak now to ask why he thinks the fault is his.

“I vas… distracted. By zhe time I saw him, I could do nothing.”

There is a sensation of pressure, tugging somewhere on your left (in your left, actually). The doctor’s jaw tenses with effort, and you squeeze your eyes shut again.

“Before you’d touched the ground, I hit zhe uber, but—too late for you. Zhe spy could not cloak, so I killed him.” A light chuckle creeps into his voice, a touch of dissonant delight. “I rent him into three pieces.”

An involuntary shiver crosses your skin.

“The rest were easy, until die uber faded; it does not last as long on only me—not to mention how much the effect is prolonged with your heart to catch zhe current.” You can hear him rummaging through his pile of medical instruments, clinking on the metal tray. “I think it was zhe pyro that finished me.”

You can do little more than wait to see if he deigns to continue. You can’t make any apologies, no exclamations, no questions. There is only the wet sound of blood and tissue and soft breath.

“But!” he says, too sharp, brighter than the cold, white fluorescents. “We took the day right from under the enemy, so it’s of no consequence!”

If your head weren’t swimming so fast, you might be able to follow that thread of too-bright tone and find out what Medic actually means, but every time you grasp it, it slips away, nothing but a beam of light in a corporeal grip.

Archimedes sounds a short, whirring coo.

“I agree! The heart is working beautifully—but no, you can’t taste it; zhis one is running an electrical current… and I don’t think the Specialist will be so forgiving as Heavy, hm?”

You hope it’s a joke, and try not to squirm under this not-doctor’s fingers.

Not even a damn doctor what the fuck.

Something Heavy had said prickles the back of your mind: Do not agree to things if you are not comfortable. A bit late now, isn’t it? And not just an hour too late—nearly two weeks too late. You signed the papers, submitted to the surgery, and now your heart is forever a ticking time-bomb of tangled wires and copper.
“Well, Specialist, it appears your heart is holding better than anticipated, so we can close you up for today and get you off to dinner.” You open your eyes so you can see his glittering gaze, the amused turn of his lips as he prepares to try and wheedle another surgery out of you. “Unless, of course, there’s something else—”

“Why don’t you have a license?”

As much as the idea of a morphine-free surgery repulses you, you’ll be quite glad when you can keep from blurting stupid questions in the infirmary.

The man in question blinks once, owlishly, behind his spectacles, before chuckling, low in his throat. The sound sends a cold shiver over your skin, but his voice is warm, cheerful: “It’s quite the story. Perhaps while I tell it, we can continue—maybe take a look at your liver!”

Your head is full of clouds, and all you can reason out is that you want to know, and this is the way to learn, so—“Fine.”

Medic’s responding look of glee is such that even through misty thoughts you add: “But just looking!”

The doctor presses a hand to his chest—and the affronted, hurt look might be believable if said hand weren’t blooding his white coat in the process. “As though I would do anything else without asking!”

“I think you’d ask afterward.”

He shrugs. “I didn’t say whether it was forgiveness or permission I was asking.”

And if that doesn’t cover every interaction you’d ever had with a doctor, well, slap a helmet on your head and call you Soldier.

Rather than answer, Medic directs the hanging medi-gun at your flesh, and you can’t help but relax into the prickling heat of the crimson beam before realizing (as your breastbone cracks back into place) that this means he wants to make a second incision to check your liver. Bastard.

“You really want to know how I lost my medical license?” he asks, and a wry grin colors the doctor’s voice.

“Yes.” You wouldn’t have asked otherwise, now would you?

Nonetheless, your stomach turns.

“You really, really want to hear it?”

Your teeth creak under the pressure of your jaw. “Yes.”

Medic leans close over the table, spectacles creeping down the bridge of his nose. He adjusts them, gaze piercing. He reeks of blood and antiseptic and you fight the urge to squeeze your eyes shut. The doctor stops scant inches from your nose. There’s menthol on his breath that does nothing to drown out the metallic tang of his profession.

“A man came to my office.” You try not to notice your own unnerved reflection in his glasses. “An office I had here in America, near the east coast. He complained of back problems—down to the bone, he said.” The medic’s voice is low, so low only you would have heard, had anyone else been present. “Well, I could fix that, of course. With a bit of surgery, I said. So! I put him under.” Quiet,
like a well-kept secret. “Und you know what I did? I made the incisions. Each and every one so precise! Zhis was before my medi-gun, of course, so I had to make do with blood transfusion to keep him alive. Pah! If only I knew then…” He begins to move away, but before relief can settle in your chest, he moves closer, breath at your ear. “No matter. By the time I vas finished, I had his entire skeleton in my possession. Zhe entire thing! And you know what else?” Medic lifts his head, blue eyes glittering, exuberant, demanding your attention. “When I left, he was still alive!”

With a cackle, brusquely he pushes himself from the table, your gurney wheeling out of the beam—but still he laughs, tittering, high-pitched burbles that drop your stomach, chill your skin, snap your foggy mind forward.

“He was not,” is all you can insist, squeezing your eyes shut against the fluorescents, against the doctor hugging his bloody chest with maniacal glee.

“Hoo! Hooohooohooohooooo… oh… oh-ho, yes he vas! A triumph, Specialist, indeed eheeeeeheeeheeeheee—”

“Medic, that’s impossible!”

“Ah-ha…ah… ooohoo…” As his laughter settles into burbling hiccoughs, he grabs the edge of your table, drawing the gurney back to his side—and you with it.

You hold tight to your snarl of indignation. He’s having you on. He must be.

“You don’t believe me?”

“Should I?”

He chuckles again, quietly this time. “Does it matter if it’s true? You were expecting something equally horrible, ja?”

You were.

His mouth twists in a smile, as if sharing some private joke all to himself. “Then what does it matter? Now, I believe you promised me a surgery…”

Bastard.
Bottom of the Bottle

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the delay once again, but--HAPPY NEW YEAR, friends! I'm sort of embarrassed at how time has been getting away from me.... but hey, I'm doing better than the TF2 comic updates so that counts for something, right?

Thanks again to Sov for the beta!

Warning in this chapter for: alcohol and drunkenness

You find yourself unwilling to climb into bed after your post-surgery shower, dinner, and five-chapter session of Monte Cristo. Sunrise does come early with Soldier’s rendition of reveille and the scent of slightly-burned coffee, but ten o’clock in the evening is hardly late, and there’s a lively buzz under your skin. A buzz that you desperately hope has nothing to do with Medic’s prodding this afternoon; in any case, it makes the very thought of sleep unlikely.

So, you poke around the halls of the base, trying your best to look like you have a destination in mind. Somebody is playing a radio again, a jazzy tune that could be Glenn Miller or Artie Shaw… old stuff. Your parents’ age of music, something from your childhood. Hell, probably Medic or Spy’s age of music. Your brow furrows. How old is Heavy? Or Engineer for that matter?

You won’t bother theorizing about Pyro. You can start asking about age if and when you finally learn what gender they are and what their bloody face looks like.

You spare a glance into the cluttered rec room and quickly try to move on before you disturb--

“Where ya headed, lass?”


Demo and Sniper are kicked back on opposite ends of the sofa, each with a bottle. “Well, then!” says the Scot. “Pull up a seat, Specialist!”

You hesitate for the barest moment before entering the room. As far as you can tell, the television isn’t on. No cards out, no books. Just a drink, it seems, and one sofa cushion available between them.

You grab the nearest mismatched dining-room chair and drag it within reach of the coffee table. If your companions think anything of this decision, they say nothing as Demoman produces another brown bottle from between the cushions beside him and slides it over the gouged tabletop. “Ah always say, if ya can’t sleep, have a drink!”

Your brow creases, but you seize the chilled bottle and pop the top on the edge of the table in a perfectly shameful fashion. Your grandmother is rolling in her grave, but everything in this base could go up in flames tomorrow and nobody would miss this shitty fiberglass and plywood
furniture. The cap gives a satisfying pop. “How did you know?”

He shrugs. “Nobody just goes wanderin’. Now--drink! Homemade scrumpy, tha’ is.”

You think you’ve heard of scrumpy, but you can’t remember what it is. Not that Demo has steered you wrong before. The first sip is crisp, cold… cider. A smile immediately catches your lips and you take a long draught. There’s an aftertaste of cinnamon, like pie. “It’s lovely!”

Ever-silent Sniper makes a sound like a chuckle, and your eyes shift to his bottle. It’s one of those piss-poor beers from the refrigerator.

“What?” You’re not sure you heard that correctly.

“Hm? Don’t listen to tha piss-throwin, sheep--”

You can feel the crease between your eyebrows. “Piss-throwing?” There’s a sinking feeling in your gut, a nagging memory from the battlefield that… no. No, it has to be another creative insult and nothing more.

The men exchange a look.

And then Sniper crosses an ankle over his knee, reclining further into the sofa. “You mean it wasn’t in me file?”


“Yeah, actual piss.” He takes another sip off the beer. “You’re tellin’ me you’ve gone almost two weeks an’ you ain’t seen jarate?”

Your mind ticks back a few days to the shards of glass in your hair and your unfortunately soaked coat, heavy and sticky on your arms and shoulders. “It… definitely smelled like…”

“Piss,” Sniper nods.

“Piss,” Demo agrees.

Well--damn. You take another swig from your bottle. “…yeah.”

Their ensuing raucous laughter, you assume, is brought on by the taut mixture of disgust and utter regret plastered on your face. Sure, it’s a clever use of one unfortunate byproduct of sitting hours in one place but please. Between a bullet to the brain and a face-full of piss, the headshot is by far the more respectable defeat.
“I wish I didn’t know this.”

Of course, that only makes the men laugh harder, and, frowning, you hope Sniper chokes on that beer.

“Start drinkin’ a little faster an’ maybe you’ll forget,” Demo laughs with a cyclopic wink.

“We work in the morning.”

Sniper grins. “So ya need to forget before that.”

You toss back another swallow from the bottle. “You should have to suffer with me. You and your jars of piss.” Elbows on your knees, you pinch the bridge of your nose. Ugh. This is so far from all right. Hair soaked with piss. Forget showering; you’re glad respawn exists. So, so, so damn glad.

“Jarate,” he corrects.

You give a most unladylike snort.

Sniper settles the heels of his boots on the coffee table, folding them one over the other, tipping the beer to his lips again. He peers over his shades. “What if I go drink for drink with ya?”

A terrible idea. “Bad idea. We’re working in the morning.”

“Ha! You can take ‘im, lass,” Demo chuckles. “Man’s a damn lightweight!”

You assume the man in question is rolling his eyes behind those aviators. “Am not.” He shrugs. “‘Sides, don’t hurt me none if she’s wantin’ to act responsible. But, there’s always the first respawn of the mornin’. Nothing better for a ‘angover.”

One more drink of the scrumpy as you assess your teammate. Sniper is tall, yes, but rail-thin. You’ve got more mass. You can take him on easily, especially if he’s been drinking with Demo for some time already. What could three or four drinks hurt? It might even quell the restlessness in the pit of your stomach, send you to your room, lull you to sleep before midnight.

“All right, Sniper.” You finish off the cider, savoring the cinnamon on your tongue. “What’s the poison?”

He shakes his head, a tiny grin tugging at the edge of his mouth. “Don’t wanna have an unfair edge--I’ve got standards, y’know.” He nods toward the third party. “Demo, whatcha got?”

Demoman doesn’t need to be asked twice; he leaps right up with a steadying extra step. You take this as a sign that you have the unfair edge: only one drink down while these two have been at it longer than you can guess. “Ah’ve got just th’ thing!”

For a moment, you think he’ll run right out of the room, but he skitters to a halt at a rickety-looking cabinet in the far corner. When the doors creak open, you learn that, rather than shelves holding games for slow evenings as you originally assumed during your tour of the base, the shelves sag under the weight of liquor bottles of all shapes and sizes--many empty, never thrown out for lord only knows what reason. And, by some miracle, Demoman reaches his hand back to the rear of the cabinet and tugs forth a square bottle, only knocking one out of place, slamming the doors shut just before the thing teeters off the edge and to an unforgiving doom on the concrete floor.

Demoman brandishes the prize above his head before returning. “Rum!” he declares, and saunters back to the sofa, missing one vital detail:
“Shot glasses?” you ask.

Demo scoffs. “What, we cannae trust you to measure out your own?”

Well, when he puts it that way… “Fine, fine. I’m sure we can both keep things even.” Of course, it might balance out Sniper’s head start if he shorts himself on each drink, so really, it doesn’t matter either way, you suppose.

“Ladies first,” offers Sniper with a grin when Demo presents the bottle between you.

You take it up, clenching your fingers around the thick bottle, down from the neck where your teammate had held it. Indeed, you realize, slowly, as you take your time to swirl the dark liquid about, he holds all his bottles that way.

But you--you're going to tip it back like a cold cuppa.

No matter how this goes down, that Aussie beanpole will be out in under four shots, and you can go to bed with a nice buzz.

Oh, gods. You were wrong, wrong, so wrong, so very, very wrong.

Well--no--not exactly completely wrong. Sniper is as much a lightweight as you anticipated, but six shots in and he’s so fucking drunk that apparently he looped back around from horizontal to--to--fucking upright. He won’t go down. And the more he drinks, the more ornery he gets and wants less and less to just--stop--just--concede.

“’At’s anothah one. Drink anotheah one. Or rr yah done? Cos I’m not done, shheilah.”

He had to have shorted himself a great deal not to have collapsed over the table by now.

“Go-on, then, go-on! Or yah done?”

You just want to go to fucking bed. No--wait--not… just bed. Sleeping. Sleeping. Work tomorrow.

“Ffine.” You snatch back the bottle and--you're… you're irritated. Sleep. You need it. But you also just feel so damn nice, you know? Like… wow, you feel a giggle bubbling up in your chest, so you let it out. So it doesn’t build up too much pressure in there, yeah?

So now you’re giggling in the middle of a shot and whoops there it goes.

Rum splattered from your lips all over the coffee table and all over your shirt and all over the sofa which means all over your drunk-ass teammates.

Which of course means everyone is laughing like a tom-fooling idiot, covered in rum.

Sniper, doubled over with only the arm of the sofa holding him somewhat upright. Demoman, snorting over his brown bottle, slapping his knee like seeing someone burn their damn nose snorting a shot is the funniest fucking thing he’s ever seen.

Which reminds you, this fucking hurts damn it shit.

You’re desperately rubbing at your nose, but it’s not working and holy hell it burns. “Tha’s it oh shitshitshit that’s it it’s over!” You snort. You keep snorting because oh, gods.

“Aha! Ha-ha! Tha’s it, Oi’m tha winnah--keww it!”
You try to roll your eyes but you still can’t get the fucking alcohol out of your nose so it’s pointless. “You--nnghshit--flakin’, piss--ggghhhhh.”

Meanwhile, Demo is laughing to damn tears; you can hear it.

Probably time to cut your loss… your… time… you should leave. You look like enough of a kook. And you’re still snorting.

Burns like the devil, though, so you’re going to keep the fuck at it. And make your way out.

“Good--gghhnnnight, asshholes.”

They only laugh harder, and you still haven’t moved from your chair. You just… need to work up to it. Just a--just a second.

At least the men can’t seem to get any more words out, either.

You push straight up from your seat--get it over with. Ohhhhhhhhh boy, not a good idea, stomach heaving, head spinning, but shit, you’re upright, so bed it is. Well, bathroom to flush out your nose and then fucking bed. No--not. Bed. Just bed.

“Ghnnnight.”

“G’noighhahaha.”

“An’ good fookin luck!”
Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay again--finally got a job with insurance and stuff (extraordinary, right?), so I really don't have as much time to work on my writing, but I think I'll start using my lunch break for that purpose... we'll see what happens! In any case, I have no plans to cancel the fic, so don't you worry. That said, I do have a fair portion of chapter 30 written already. Thank you all so much for being patient, and special thanks to Sov for beta-ing this chapter.

Warning in this Chapter For: hangover, vomiting, blood, graphic violence, torture

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You certainly might have thought the light filtering through your little window was beautiful if it weren't driving a nail straight into your pounding skull.

Oh hell you made a mistake last night.

Somewhere in the base, there’s a bugle trumpeting in time with each throb of your head.

Oh shit.

You sit up, wipe the sticky remnants of drool off your cheek. Apparently you had one amazing fucking sleep but as your stomach rolls and the veins in your head thump an awful jive you wonder whether it was remotely worth this.

To make matters worse, if Soldier is already sounding that blasted bugle, that means you’re fifteen minutes late, and that means no breakfast. Ugh--not that you want any. You pass a rough hand over your aching eyes, squint across the room, and try not to let your stomach heave. A little water might be in order. An aspirin if you can keep it down. You scoot gingerly toward the edge of your bed, careful not to give your stomach even the slightest reason to rebel.

And there’s glass on the floor.

You groan, glaring through the morning light to make sense of it. You don’t remember carrying any alcohol to bed with you last night. The water bottles are made from plastic. And--

The shards spread over the floor are few, and they’re amber, and sprinkled among them… pills. Vitamins. Your respawn vitamins. A frustrated sigh escapes your lips, and your head aches. You must have remembered to take one and dropped the rest in the process. Well. You’ll clean that up later. For now, you swing your legs off the mattress and avoid the mess in order to dress for the day.

You almost trip and fall into your wardrobe.

What a day this will turn out to be.
You have no idea how you’re even standing and wearing, not just pants, not just an entire uniform, but two guns and a ten-pound shield. Under blinding fluorescents. With every click and greeting and chuckle before seven o’clock in the morning entirely too fucking loud. But you did this to yourself, so you stand at the ready, wishing for respawn.

Wishing for it—now that’s just sick.

Your only condolence is that you have seen neither Sniper nor Demoman since the day began. But that doesn’t keep you from wanting to vomit all over your boots.

“Guten Morgen!”

“Shit!” You thump into the nearest locker and almost ruin your boots after all, glowering into the bright fluorescents with a squint where Medic stands perfectly preened and grinning as though he’d suddenly apparated and verbally assaulted you on purpose.

“You look terrible, if I may say so, Spez.”

Definitely on purpose, with a new nickname, to boot. At least ‘Spesh’ sounds a bit more refined in German.

“Thanks,” you croak, and attempt to scrape what’s left of your dignity off the floor by standing straight, folding your arms tight over your chest.

Medic rocks merrily on his heels. “A bit too much to drink?”

“How could you tell?” This is not helping the throbbing in your skull one bit.

“Vell, I haven’t seen Sniper yet this morning—or Demoman, either. Now, coupled with the lovely shade of green you’re wearing, it was—”

[ Mission begins in five minutes. ]

You do an incredibly poor job of suppressing a groan. The Administrator’s voice is not soothing in the least. “Do me a favor and let me die in the first thirty seconds. I’ll try to take somebody with me.”

The doctor outright laughs, and it sends a brand new set of needles through your brain. “No, no, Specialist, no need.”

At this rate you’ll have a frown permanently etched on your face. “It sure feels necessary to me.”

“What I mean to say is that this is something the medigun can fix.”

The first good thing you’ve heard all morning. “What—really?” You direct a reverent glance at the medical marvel on his back.

Medic nods. “Oh, yes, quite easily.”

You draw a deep, slow breath. Relief, only seconds away. “That would be… fantastic.”

A beat. Two. Three.
“Medic?”

“Yes, Specialist?”

“You’re… not going to help?”

“No.” He smirks.

You should be angry. But all you can manage is a slack jaw and a dumb “Why not?”

[Mission begins in two minutes.]

His Cheshire-cat grin only broadens. “You have a lesson to learn.”

“You--” Your hands clench, unclench against your coat, in the crooks of your elbows. “You--” A stab of dark, throbbing pain as you feel your blood pressure spike unreasonably. “You--asshole.”

Medic chuckles, and there’s a fucking twinkle in his eyes and even though you think you’ll actually spill your guts all over the floor if you move the slightest inch, you have a mind to sock that look of his smug face anyway--

“We fight now.” Heavy pushes between you. “The other team.” He gives a pointed frown.

“Indeed.” You nearly jump out of your skin as Spy uncloaks far too close, the spicy curl of smoke reaching your nose—and this time, you do... chuck it, so to speak. Fortunately for you, not on Spy’s patent-leather, but on a nice, bare piece of concrete reached by one desperate, clumsy scramble.


“Kill me,” you croak.

And there comes an unexpected, answering groan: “Only if ya shoot me first, sheila.”

You can hear the squeak of rubber as Pyro throws up their hands. “Mph mm mmmph.”

“Don’t ya worry, Pyro. They’ll be cleanin’ up their own messes after we win this thing, won’t ya’ll?” You can’t even get out another sound before your stomach clenches again. Not that you actually want to know what Engie means by messes, plural, and he apparently doesn’t expect an answer as a shuffle of boots moves toward the battlefield. “C’mon, partner; let’s get set.”

You’re sure this will be more embarrassing after you die, and you’re suddenly not sure if you’d rather stay here on the floor or face the inevitable mockery.

A hand pats your shoulder as your fight the weakness spreading into your arms, the concrete threatening to cut into your palms. “Hey, ya got this,” says Scout.

You try to chuckle, but it comes out as a sad splutter. “Thanks.”

“Just try not to stain the floor too bad, huh?”

You take it back: embarrassment starts now.

“Yeah.”

He gives you a teasing nudge. “See ya out there, Spesh.”

“Uh-huh.” You spit again as the boy jogs off.

Well, on the bright side, at least you’re under contract now, and a little thing like a hangover isn’t going to get you kicked out. Not today, anyway.

But that little bit of sunshine doesn’t keep you from adding another three tosses to your acrid mess.

Hell, you made a mistake last night. But, you made that bed, so you’re going to have to lie in it. Of course, you’ll be lying in it with trembling legs, a weak stomach, and tongue that sticks to the roof of your mouth, whilst smelling delightfully of vomit--but lie in it you shall. At least, until you hit respawn and life is once again its usual rosy hell.

Rosy--that’s funny because you’re on the RED team, and it’s… red… and…

You spit one last time and push yourself up with shaking limbs.

It wasn’t actually that funny.

Your aching eyes make a quick sweep of the locker room to see how Sniper is fairing--but he’s
nowhere to be seen. Apparently that bastard managed to show up at the last damn minute and still beat you to the fight.

“Oi, you done lollygaggin’ yet?”

He’s standing just outside, leaning precariously against the wall with his rifle in hand, sweat rolling down his face. Sniper’s voice may be steady, but you know he’s not much better off.

“Are you?”

“’m not lollygaggin’. Just checking up on yah to give you some advice.”

The Lancaster makes its way to your hand as you join him under the damnable sun. “Really?”

He nods--slowly, mind you--with a smirk. Until last night you hadn’t known he could twitch a lip, smirk, grin, or otherwise smile. “Professionals,” Sniper said, “should have standards.”

Your head is throbbing far too much to play guessing-games, so another one-word response it is: “Standards?”

“Yeah. Like being on the field when the match starts.” You open your mouth to inform him that he was just as sick as you when time was called, and is, in fact, standing here right now--but, pointedly, he taps the butt of his rifle twice in the dirt.

_He’s been out here since the match started. On the field._

_Asshole._

But what passes your lips is an indistinct grumble.

Sniper wipes some sweat from his brow, a little grin irritatingly present on his face. “Oh--and one more thing.”

You press a hand to your temples and squeeze, but it does nothing. Your cheeks are burning. Of all the chastisement you expected, you didn’t consider any might come from your fellow hungover idiot--let alone come from your fellow and successfully embarrass you. “What?”

“You really shouldn’t make such a fool of yourself.”

Your blood freezes. That voice isn’t--

_Pain_--and then the orange grit of soil on your cheek, in your mouth, your hands--your hands, where’s your _gun_?

Cough; wheeze. Blink away the glare and the grime, there’s your pistol--

Spinning away with the kick of a patent-leather shoe.

_Fuck._

Blood clouds your vision as that damnable heel makes contact with your face, and the whole world is a bright, solid flash of blinding pain. Your arm won’t obey to wipe the blood clean, lying uselessly in the dirt. You recognize now that it’s where the pain first began--a knife under your shoulder to sever the tendons. Blood trickles over your lips. You spit.

“Asshole!”
A foot planted solidly on your back, even as you try to roll in the direction of the base. “Non, non,” he says, too patient, too calm. Not smug, not amused—it sets a cold feeling in the pit of your stomach. “Fair,” he says. “Revenge, I understand, mademoiselle… but taking more than your due?”

You scream as the toe of his shoe sinks into the wound at your shoulder, and the spy does not speak again until he’s had his fill, and you’re panting against the blood and the sand and the dirt. You grit your teeth.

“I will admit I did not think you had it in you, girl. Near-decapitation. No, that’s not who you think yourself to be, is it?”

You gather all remaining strength into your undamaged arm; if you can just knock him off balance… One, two—crunch. You screech against the metallic tang and grit on your lips as a fresh wave of blood streams from your now-broken nose, head crushed into the sand with your adversary’s weight.

“A military girl should have more discipline, even one dishonorably discharged.”

Your heart doesn’t have a chance to freeze, your mind no chance to panic at the implication that he knows because your world is bright white again with a blow to your side, sun streaming now through your bloodied vision, light catching on the edge of a blade as it plunges through your other shoulder. How no one can hear your screams as they echo around the compound, you don’t know.

It occurs to you only now that your earpiece is lying on the shelf of your locker. The best you can hope for a teammate’s timely respawn. There’s nothing to be done with arms that won’t move and blood seeping steadily into the ground.

“Better,” the spy says, so calm, so casual. None of the glee his medic showed, no wild excitement, not even the bloodlust you felt when dispatching this man days ago in the halls of your team’s base.

You fear it will take every last drop of your blood before he’s satisfied with his retribution.

“Now.” He’s half-standing on your chest, you can feel it, but you can’t see more than white and crimson. “Your scout was the first to fall, and that gives us another…” You hear a click. “Seven and a half minutes, mademoiselle. All the time in the world, non?”

A groan escapes your bloody lips before your can pull it back.

The spy clicks his tongue. “Now, you Americans have a quaint little saying… ‘Don’t dish out what you can’t take.’ I do believe that applies here.”

A groan escapes your bloody lips before your can pull it back. The spy clicks his tongue. “Now, you Americans have a quaint little saying… ‘Don’t dish out what you can’t take.’ I do believe that applies here.”

Your next breath ends in a rattling wheeze when the blade sinks between ribs.

“Considering what you did to me, you should have no trouble with this.” And the flesh folds back together as the knife comes out.

Pain—you need—gone—gone the air is gone and you try again—catch, wheeze, whistle—no, no—

“How is it?”

Each breath seems to seize, stab, abort—not enough air and you’re drowning, drowning in the sun and the blood and you try to make a sound pass your lips, please, please, please—
“Nghk--” Gurgle, gasp and it stalls again, stabbing, drowning--

“You will have to speak up.”

“K--ill me.”

You would beg if you were able.

The whisper of fabric beside your prone form can’t be heard over the rattle of your breath, but you can just make out a blue balaclava blocking the sunlight through your bleary eyes. A flutter of hope rises in your desperate chest.

“I would be inclined to fulfill such a plea, cherie--” His tongue lilts on his lips, too cold, too dry to mean mercy “--if you were not such a priority to your medic.” The sun blinds you again as he rises.

Your breath comes hard, fast, desperate, chokes--no air--please--

“And please do tell him so.”

Your chest is so heavy. You might be crying, but you’re not sure, eyes and cheeks and forehead sticky with blood, painful little gasps passing your lips as vision wavers, darkens, only the tiniest fraction of air reaching your lung, not enough as your mind grows fuzzy, sluggish, drowning brain and lungs and maybe you’ll die soon--

You feel more than hear the body drop at your side.

Distantly, so far away, you wonder who it is, hope it will be over no matter the color of this corpse.

“Specialist.”

You might flinch if your body would allow. But--then--a sluggish realization as your brain ticks backward--the French lilt is different, softer--

“I… wish I had been here sooner. This is beyond a medi-kit.” He stops, letting you process the words.

Please.

“All that I can do is end it.”

Please, please, please. A rattling wheeze is all that escapes.

And then all is dark.

Chapter End Notes

For those who were just waiting for the rivalry with BLU Spy to return... congratulations. And I’ll admit, it was rather based on a tidbit we got in the newest comic where Spy offhandedly comments to Sniper: "Some of us would have liked to torture him." Please do let me know how you think this went, if you have any particular feelings on it.

Small revision 2/17/19: Spez- shortening of Spezialist
What Everyone Has Against A MediKit

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much once for being patient and sticking with me, and special thanks to Sov for beta-ing this chapter, and to diananock and kilgamesh for their help!

Warning in this Chapter For: blood, graphic violence, death, injury, medical unpleasantness

In respawn, squeeze eyes shut. Focus on breathing. Inhale, ignore the phantom twinge as lungs expand, try to forget the drowning pressure on your chest. Exhale. The next breath can’t come fast enough. You hold the air in your lungs, savor the relief, exhale, take a new breath.

Alive.

You open your eyes, revel in the clear vision of the door and the dirt and the sky beyond.

Whole.

You have to get to the battle, but the thought of leaving this space wraps an icy hand of terror around your heart. Grit your teeth. Draw your weapons, grip unsteady, fingers trembling. It’s over, you tell yourself. This life is brand new.

The team will be missing their Specialist. Of course, you’ll probably have to explain where you were, that you did not actually spend the last--how long has it been? Ten minutes? Twenty?--being sick on the floor. Then again, you’re not sure if the truth is less embarrassing.

You stride to the door, slowly, each step solid, though all you want to do is stay, curl up in the corner and nurse the terrified chill in your chest until it melts away.

A shadow wavers and solidifies just outside. You tense, halt mid-step. He wears red, but you find yourself baring your teeth. You are not a fool.

The Spy spreads his hands, and moves no further. “I understand. Ask me a question, Specialist.”

A sigh hisses through gritted teeth. What could you ask that no one could simply dig up? That could not have been seen or overheard? So many things about you have been recorded, and… “Two nights ago,” you say, “Scout had an issue at dinner.”

The corner of his mouth sneaks upward in amusement. “He was angry at a situation similar to the one I just found myself in. The difference is, I was completely incapable of healing you.”

You feel your shoulders slump in relief--you’re in a brand-new body, but you feel exhausted. “Thank you for that, by the way.”

“Think nothing of it.” He averts his gaze, adjusts leather gloves. “I would hope you’d have done the same.”

“Of course, Spy.”
“Mm.” He glances back toward the field. “Heavy needs support at the third point. Fetch your earpiece, and I’ll tail you there.”

You’re unlikely to forget that piece of equipment again. You fetch it and hurry out to the field where Spy still stands, shifting his weight anxiously, eyes everywhere.

“Go. I’ll follow.” He cloaks as you heft your shield and move for the corner. You want to thank him for offering to accompany you. You’d like to tell him you don’t need it.

But you do.

You really do, and you can’t find the words to admit it.

It’s a straight shot from the corner of the storage shed to the third point. You click into the comm system, ignoring the turning of your stomach at the thought of the verbal abuse and rightful mockery you’re sure to face. You’re really not in the mood for it anymore.

“I see Heavy and Engineer on point three--is there any danger of sniper fire if I move in?”

[“Should be clear, Sheila. I’ve got eyes on you.”]

Even so, you make the run as fast as your boots can carry you, folding your shield down to be as streamlined as possible. Debris from an earlier scuffle is shuffled under your feet--splinters of old wood, bullet casings, shrapnel gleaming sharp on the sand.

Your chest stabs with phantom pain each time you draw a breath of hot, dusty air. You try to narrow your focus down into your boots, one-two, one-two, heels pressing into the dirt and sand, crunching, kicking up clouds.

CRACK.

Fuck---

You stumble, cover behind a stray crate. Paint flakes off the faded Mann Co. logo. Splinters catch on your coat. Gunshot. Well, of course it was a gunshot; this is a battlefield. What it should not have done was startle you into hiding. You lift your head, peek overtop the crate.

Empty sand. Abandoned sheds. Dry wood.

But the shot had been close, hadn’t it? There would be no need for cover otherwise, not when you’re holding a shield, now would there?

[“You’re clear to move now, Specialist.”]

A puff of relieved breath escapes your lips as you rise and repeat your running rhythm. “Thanks.” There had been something, then. You don’t look like a frightened rabbit that once nearly ended up on the dinner table, forever flinching at nothing. That’s the last thing you need. Better to endure teasing at the hands of a hangover than admitting to…

You’d call it torture, but that might be too strong a word. And it was your own damn fault, anyway. Torture lasted longer, hurt more. The goal wasn’t death. What the BLU spy had done was… painful retaliation.

So you take the deepest breath of air you can, until your lungs are burning, full to bursting with effort, and release it in a slow hiss through your teeth. Because you can. Because every cell in your
body leaps at each breath of ready oxygen.

You run for the point.

“Specialist!” Heavy waves an arm in greeting, hefting his minigun in one hand--for even the briefest of moments, it’s an impressive feat. Your joints twinge with sympathy.

You return his grin as you leap onto the platform. “What are we looking at?” You hope they launch into a discussion on tactics and the lay of the field. By the time they finish, you’ll be getting shot at, and no one will remember to ask where you’ve been.

“At least two in respawn,” says Engie, tightening a bolt with his wrench.

“Scout and Soldier,” Heavy adds.

“I’ll have the sentry finished up here by the time the point’s ours, and y’all can get a move on to finish the round up.”

Crack.

[“Enemy sniper down.”]

“Make that three in respawn. I’d worry about the BLU Medic ‘n Heavy, but I’ve got a feelin’ they’re waiting for us out at the final point.”

It certainly seems like them. Where your pair seems to relish the charge, BLU enjoys…

Waiting. Blood. Screams where no one could hear. Ribbons and ribbons and ribbons running red flesh--

A large hand pressing on your shoulder. “Is very hot in sun,” rumbles Heavy.

You suck a sharp breath through your nose. “It is.” It is. There’s a glare on your head, sweat trickling down from your scalp, a burn on your cheeks. You avoid Heavy’s gaze, though you’re grateful. You just… can’t take the empathy you know you’ll find. You’re working. You can get a grip on your own mind.

If you can’t do something so simple, then what are you doing here, hm?

Dishonorable discharge.

“Which of ours are in respawn?”

Engineer clicks his headset. “Sniper, team check?”

[“Eyes on you, Medic, Pyro--back from respawn--an’ Spook’s out there somewhere.”]

“Thank ya kindly.” He switches the set off. “We--”

KRRRBSSSSS--

“Getdown!”

--BOOM!

Your shield snaps to full just as you’re knocked off your feet. The ground trembles, sand scattered
across the point, creeping into your uniform, grating on skin.

Your ears are ringing. You wish those telephone-bells weren’t so familiar now.

“I thought you said the Soldier was in respawn!” That’s what you want to say. Your mouth is moving. You think you’re saying it. But you can’t hear it, which means no one else can, either.

Damn, you hate explosions.

The ground shudders again, and you’re tempted to lie still, but you squint through the dust hovering in clouds over your position. Red light gleams on the particles, casting eerie columns through the destruction. There are two dark shapes approximately where you left your teammates. Under your hands, the ground is humming. The sentry? If you’re lucky. The teammate-shaped shadows aren’t moving, but you try not to dwell on that. It’s no good to lie here.

You push yourself slowly to your knees, shield first, trousers and boots scraping sand over metal.

There’s a blinding flash. Ringing, ringing, cotton in your ears. Somehow, you’ve tumbled further back, your shield half across your shoulder-blades, arm bent at an aching angle, face pricked with sand on sun-heated steel.

If muscles could groan, those in your arm would be protesting loudly as you shift your shoulder and elbow. Your arm moves, albeit slowly. You think you’re intact, though your face burns and your ears ring and a shooting pain races up your spine. You have all your limbs, and that’s a blessing.

But you need to move, you need to find some way to retaliate, now. Now, before the Soldier comes charging up with a bladed spade and a mind for disembowelment.

You’ve certainly had enough of being defenseless today, thank you very much.

Sand cuts into your cheek as you shift your head, try to ascertain your position. No one in sight. But--a machine--the sentry, so close! It appears to be trembling, perhaps an indication that it’s running after all, but even if that isn’t true, it would provide a little more cover, some distance…

You brace your arms on the ground and slide your body ahead. Buttons scratch on the point. You draw the Lancaster from its holster on your thigh, and you find you catch less on the ground with each shuffle. Where the Gyrojet has gone, you have no time to worry now.

The ringing in your ears gives the illusion of eerie quiet, muffled silence enveloping your head.

You wrap your body partway around the back of the sentry and look into the dissipating dust. The humming of the sentry reverberates through your whole body now. It’s comforting, even if the security is merely an illusion.

The shield is unwieldy here, and you consider shaking it off, but--no, not yet.. You fold the bottom up instead and clasp your Lancaster-Charles in both hands, pointing into slanted rays of sunlight, squinting at little more than dark shapes. They move slowly. You draw a sharp breath; the scent of gunpowder and copper coats your nose. You grit your teeth.

Sound filters back into your ears. A shuffling gait. A mechanical hum. Your own rasping breath, too loud between metal and kevlar.

Sunlight gleams on the double-barrel of a shotgun.
BRRACK!

You squeeze the trigger again.

BRRACK!

You must have hit something, you *must* have, if only because the bullets are so damn *big* --

The barrel comes up, and you bury your face in the crook of your arm, squeeze again.

BANG!

BRRACK!

Your ears are ringing, but you can hardly hear it over the searing burn that flares along your back. You raise your eyes to see the Soldier raising that damnable trench shovel. The sun gleams on polished iron, arms raised, blue coat pulls across a barrel chest--suddenly ripped to ribbons. Red tears though blue, shredding coat, skin, bone. A mouth opens in a cry you cannot hear. Blood spatters like rain across sand and steel until the body can no more remain upright and crumples in a bloodied heap.

You draw a shuddering breath and let your head fall upon your shield arm, let your pistol clatter onto the point.

*Fucking hell*.

“...so long. Specialist. Specialist?”

You lift your head, but the voice is coming from behind. You can hear the hum and the rattle of the sentry again.

A little huff of relief over your shoulder. “Thank God,” Engineer says, and you see his boots and then knees materialize beside you as he hunkers down, a white box in his hands. “I’ll get ya patched up right quick.”

“Thanks.” You’d really like a bottle of water.

“Can ya help me get your coat off?” You can hear a frown in his voice. “Or will I need to cut it off?”

Your brow furrows and you brace your elbows under your chest and push--to an onslaught of stabbing, burning needles coursing through your back. You grunt, hiss, drop onto the newly won point. “Cut it,” you hiss, clamping down on the involuntary heave of your stomach. It’ll be cooler without the coat, anyway. Between the steel under your stomach and the beating sun, you’re sweltering--apparently you haven’t lost enough blood to chill your veins just yet.

“Alright, just relax a minute. Keep an eye out front.”

You wish you didn’t have to, but you prop your head up and look out across the field. Heavy is nowhere to be seen, which likely means he’s on his way through respawn. There isn’t the slightest breeze to cut the stifling heat or stir a single grain of sand. The field is still, eerily so, like a color photograph left in the sun, a little too hazy, a little too yellow.

Your jaw clenches when you hear the rip of fabric, feel your coat peeled away in two, pushed aside to dangle from each arm. You imagine you can feel stray fibers pulling on ragged skin, but that
seems unlikely.

“Now, this is gonna sting…”

Before you can ask what, exactly, is going to sting, you’re hissing and clutching at the point with both hands, alcohol or iodine pouring across your back, soaking into the remains of your coat and shirt.

“Now I’ve gotta dig some of this buckshot outta here, so…” He passes you his bandana, red and damp with what is probably sweat. “You, uh, may wanna bite down on that.”

You really hope it isn’t sweat. “Respawn will clean it up for you,” you argue. Really, is there anything wrong with slapping a bandage on it when, in all likelihood, you’ll be dead in the next ten minutes, anyway?

“I’d like ya to be able to function until then, ma’am. And if Medic catches up before you die, I don’t think having half a pound of metal sealed into your back for the rest of the match is a good idea. Now--I’ll do my darnedest to be quick.”

Whatever smart comment might have come to your lips is gone with the handkerchief you’ve stuffed into your mouth to muffle a reflexive scream. Holy hell, shit, and damn, you wish Medic was here. Fuck. If there’s one thing you can say about Engie, it’s that he finds what he is looking for and moves on quickly, his touch precise. But you can’t say he’s in any way delicate.

Your jaw clamps down on the bitter bandana. Poke, wiggle, yank, poke, wiggle, yank through the flesh of your back, stinging and burning and bleeding. You squeeze your eyes shut and wonder if maybe Engineer would be gentler with a circuit board. Fuck, if there was ever a time the doctor to show up with his medigun--

“Done.”

You huff a muffled sigh of relief.

“Now…” More alcohol splashes across your back, and your forehead hits the point with a solid thump, imprinting several grains of sand across your brow. “…sorry. If ya can make it to your knees, I’ll wrap you up and you can be on your way.”

You spit the hanky out. It had definitely been covered in sweat. “Thanks.” Slowly, you brace your arms, ignore the sharp pull and burn across your back, and push yourself to your knees. You chance a glance back at Engineer, but he’s only beginning to unravel the bandages.

“Pull your shirt up a little, an’ arms out,” he says.

You do your best, arms slouching even as you grit your teeth to force down the pain, and Engie doesn’t complain, only pushes bloody material up and aside where it falls too low, and winds the bandage around your torso. It brings a steady, creeping burn, bright and tingling. Every too-harsh tug stabs reflexive nausea through your stomach. You squeeze your eyes shut against it. The sun burns through your eyelids, turning your little world red.

But this is no different from the way your waking world is painted now, this red. So many things… scarlet, crimson, burgundy. Blood, yours--theirs. Power is red. Victory. Friends are red. A still-beating heart. And pain--pain is red. This pain as it spikes through muscles, skin, and sinew with each turn of calloused hands. You hiss through your teeth and crack an eye open to check his progress.
Only two wraps. You’re a whole mess of pain that keeps getting tighter and the bandages haven’t even covered your breasts.

You never would have thought that you’ve been spoiled by a doctor, and certainly not one that takes obvious, gleeful delight in his work. But you have. You have been spoiled by the medic and his quick-fix marvels.

Fuck, you don’t even feel weird about wishing for a physician undoubtedly out of his mind. You just want the pain to stop.

But it won’t, and it doesn’t, not even when Engineer ties off the bandage and gently pulls your ragged shirts down over the wrapped wound.

“Thanks.” You keep your breaths shallow to avoid pulling the bandages tighter across the mess of your back. It doesn’t help.

You’ll probably never consider using a medikit again. No medigun? No deal. Slight nausea and tingling is a step up from… this. Well--provided death isn’t dealt with seizing, stabbing, blood free-flowing, splutter stop--stop--

You shut your eyes, open them again. Breathe. Hot pain across your shoulders, gone from your chest.

The engineer is still speaking. Perhaps he has not noticed. “...but we’ll be alright.” He squeezes your forearm. “Now, you get on to the next point. Medic might be around by the time ya get there. I’ve got this position covered.”

“Sure;” you say when you can find your tongue. “Thanks again.”

He nods, tips the brim of that yellow hardhat in a way that would be endearing if you could find a way to focus on something besides the throbbing pain that echoes every beat of your heart. “Be careful, now.” He bends down to scoop up your fallen gear, and you might be more grateful for that than the bandages.

The Lancaster goes into its holster first, more slowly than you care to admit, and then you hesitate, hands hovering over the shield and Gyrojet. You’re not sure you can even lift your shield without tearing whatever sorry clots your body is trying to manufacture. So, you take it first, in both hands. Stifle a grunt. What normally feels so light is clawing angry fingernails from your shoulders to your spine. It goes on your belt, too, and Engie, bless him, does not comment.

The last thing in your hands is the Gyrojet pistol, and that works fine for you. Maintain distance, fuck a couple of BLU bastards over on the way to the next point, and hopefully catch up to Medic on the way. Good plan. Fine plan. ...okay plan.

It’s either this or wallow in regret over the past twelve hours.

Fuck it--you can manage both.
Thank you so much to my patient readers, and most especially to my editor, Shiqq, and to my beta-readers kilgamesh and diananock! My work wouldn't be nearly so well-polished without them.

**WARNING in this chapter for:** blood, death, graphic violence, high levels of self-loathing, more literary references than you asked for

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Today, staring down your double is not so much like looking into a mirror as it is staring at your very own William Wilson*, a Dr. Jekyll, all-infuriating in gentle perfectness.

A backward reflection, all in blue, coat neatly buttoned, collar flat, uniform crisply ironed, every hair in impeccable place, her pistol gleaming, shield black as the desert night. Her grin is as polished as her boots.

But you--? Oh, you can only imagine the sight. The remains of your shirt hanging in bloody tatters from your back, face striped with sandy burns, pistol weighing your hand down at your waist, boots scuffed and trousers dusty-worn. Ragged and blood-soaked, you must look like you crawled out of the Pit to bring tidings of Hell.

Her brows arch into a familiar look of surprise. “Shit.” At least, for all her pristine appearance, she’s no more loquacious than you.

You simply fire your gun.

Alas, either she is too quick or your aching arms are too slow, taking aim just a little too obviously before pulling the trigger. Her shield is up in time to absorb the hissing bullet.

“Let me put you--”

You know before she finishes the statement, what she’s going to say. You know she’s going to shoot you and have done with it as soon as she finishes. It’s what you would do. It is what you tried to do. For a moment, you entertain the idea that maybe, somehow, she is you, whether through some science fiction miracle or explanation beyond your imagination. Does it matter? It does--oh--it does. For if she is so, how dare she? How dare she leave her mother at home and send half a paycheck that does nothing if she isn’t alive when it arrives. She plays at living, pretends there’s nothing wrong.

You know before she finishes what she’s going to do.

“--out of your misery.”

So you grab her gun and it fires harmlessly into the air, savor the surprised intake of her breath just before your fist connects with her jaw. She splutters, draws her shield up. Her pistol clatters to the ground, and you strike again. When the blood on your hands smears across her skin, you savor that,
The shield comes up a second time, and you know you can’t take it down—so you catch her boot with yours and tumble to the ground atop the doppelganger, pinning her arm and the shield against her body. Her free hand claws at your elbow, tangling fingers in your dusty sleeve, but you bring your fist down on her face.

You remember well how it feels to be trapped under the one thing that keeps you safe. The BLU Specialist struggles and writhes, but like a turtle stuck on its back, she finds no purchase. She abandons your sleeve and forces her hand up to scratch at your neck. You seize the wrist with one hand and break her nose with the other.

She’s as much a mess as you are, now.

All the while, she has been swearing, screaming, spitting. But you take little notice as the edges of your vision flicker and darken. Adrenaline sings through your veins, takes the edge off the burn in your back, and the blood, so much blood slips through your fingers, turns your stomach with every copper-laced breath, but you can’t stop now.

Her arm twists out of your grip and braces on the ground and you have to throw yourself forward to keep from losing your balance, forehead landing on her sticky cheek. Fingers dig into your back and you scream. Bandages are no protection against her blunt nails, which seem to find each hole and gash and bring new blood bubbling to the surface.

Your hands fist in the sand and flaking soil, pushing you upright enough to drive your elbow into the side of her head. Her arm drops, eyelids fluttering. Your injuries burn where she sought your weakness. You want to get up and finish this with the Lancaster. You’re not sure how long she will be stunned, not sure if she’ll regroup the instant your weight is gone from her chest.

But you’re feeling weak again. You don’t have much choice; you search your thigh for the Lancaster.

A blow to your chin snaps your jaw shut, teeth cracking, splitting pain up through your skull.

“Get the hell off me!”

Ah, words from bruised and bloody lips.

She moves to strike you again, but you reach across, barely block her hand with the arm not groping for your gun.

You’re just off balance enough to be thrown to one side, tumble onto the sand, hiss at the hot ground on your back, the slanting rays of sunlight in your face—but only for a moment before her shadow falls upon you.

Crack.

You gasp—air, air—your nose is useless now and she should have had time to grab her gun and finish this, but you need to breathe, need breath, hot and dry, dust coating your throat—

Your nose cracks again.

Warm. Gentle.

Red.
The BLU’s bloody, swollen snarl drops slack, and your lips curl into a shameless grin.

One solid blow of your open hand under the chin sends her reeling back, and it feels good—oh, Lord, so good! The plane of your back is strong and solid again, so free of pain that you’re almost shocked, reveling in the play of muscles you’d nearly forgotten could work with such ease as you fall upon your double again. This time, as she struggles to find her weapon, you yank her up in one hand by her mussed collar and, in the moment before she rights her head, drive your open hand down on her throat. Tissue shudders, gives, and her breath leaves in a whistling wheeze. You drop her, watch as she folds and writhes in panic on the ground.

Blood and orange dirt cake her uniform. Boots, scuffed, lash out blindly. Her face no longer bears resemblance to yours, swelling blue and glistening scarlet.

Your hand finds the Lancaster-Charles at your thigh, takes aim at her chest, and fires without another look. She will have stopped moving, chest rent open, bare to the sky, but you don’t need to see it. Instead, your eyes trace the translucent energy that hums along your skin back to its source.

“Medic,” you say.

But he stares. He stares like he’s been doing it a long time. He stares like he has no intention of doing anything else.

“Thank you,” you say.

You strap the Lancaster into its holster and recall that, though healed, you must look a fright. Your shirtsleeves hang loose around your wrists, and between blood-soaked bandages and ragged clothes, you must still seem like you clawed your way through Satan’s gates. Something dribbles past your lips and you wipe it on the back of your hand.

Oh. The blood from your nose is still there and still wet. You try to clean up the rest on your sleeve. Nothing wrong with more red on red.

Medic blinks at last. “I had heard you needed healing, but it seems you were doing quite well.”

“Something like that.” You catch his gaze behind the spectacles and find it sharp. The ice-blue unsettles your stomach.

He chuckles, but it seems hoarse. The curve of his throat contracts tightly as he swallows. “Vell, I won’t say my intercession wasn’t… timely.”

You bend to retrieve the Gyrojet you’re reasonably sure belongs to you. “I can’t argue that.” You’re rather relieved to have broken eye contact, and so you purposefully fix your gaze just above this time to find the single, unkempt curl that adorns his brow.

“I’m rather close to having enough energy for über… zhe damage was somewhat extensive.” His gloved hand plays along the medigun, perhaps thoughtfully. “Shall we continue, Spez?”

You unbuckle the shield from your belt with a nod. Before they start wondering where you’ve gone again. “Yes. Final point?”

“Jawohl.”

You steal one final, furtive, glance (In me didst thou exist…) at where you left your double, (…and, in my death, see by this image--) but all that there lies is a rusty stain on disturbed soil.***
Medic is still at your side when the last bell rings to announce victory, and cackles right along with your breathless whoop that rises in the chorus of Pyro’s muffled shouts and Demoman’s wild cries of joy. The point flashes red behind you, and your heart sounds a triumphant rhythm.

\[Victory! Until tomorrow.\]

It is the call that returns you to the base, and Pyro skips ahead while you holster your weapons. You roll your shoulders as you walk, already daydreaming about a nice, hot shower when you hear--music? The notes are distantly familiar and you turn your head for the source of what you realize now is a proud hum.

It’s Medic.

There’s a very distinct little roll to each of his steps, and he’s humming as though he either does not know he’s doing it, or knows and does not care if anyone hears. You’re not sure if you’ve ever seen him so happy outside of surgery or battle--not even under the same circumstances as these. There’s a small smile gracing his lips that seems… content. It’s a smile, not a grin--not manic or mad or biting. It is… pleasant.

When someone claps you on the shoulder, you almost trip over your own feet. “Not a bad day for a slow start, eh, lass?” Demoman asks, flanking you.

You hope he didn’t notice your stumble and try to scrape together enough dignity to reply. “I won’t say no to a victory,” you manage.

There’s a muffled grunt of agreement, and now Pyro has turned, walking backward in their heavy boots, waving a simple “yes” with their fist.

“Don’t know a one who will,” Demo says with a chuckle.

“Not willingly,” Medic agrees.

“TODAY IS A GOOD DAY!” Soldier declares, and though you take a quick look around the scorched and bloodied area, you have no idea where he could be, nor any idea how he could have overheard the conversation.

You chance a glance at Medic again, but of course he’s stopped humming, and while he still seems reasonably content, that little smile is gone, too. Instead, a small crease sits between his brows as though he’s already moved on to thinking about his next experiment.

You really hope it’s nothing to do with a post-battle surgery because you’re not sure you can take it. You’re almost fresh from respawn--rushing back to the point with the doctor after a minor setback involving a rocket--but all you want to do is take a hot shower and curl up on your bed for a quick nap before dinner. Your hangover might be gone, but there’s a new, gentle throb in the back of your skull, as the adrenaline subsides, that has nothing to do with alcohol nor the nasty tumble you took scrapping with the BLU scout just a few minutes ago.

“Ah, it’s a fine day!” Demo pushes a hip flask in your hand, and you immediately push it back. He laughs--“Lost the appetite, Specialist?”--and takes another swig.

“You could say that.” Your hand unconsciously rubs your temple and you brace yourself for Medic’s smart comment.

It doesn’t come. He looks at you, catches your gaze, looks away just as quickly.
You’re absolutely baffled.

But Demoman just trucks along, slinging an arm around your shoulders. “I don’t blame you, lass! Next time, next time we’ll do it on a Saturday, an’ spread the drinkin’ out the whole day--no better way to blow off some steam, let me tell ye! An’ it’s the one way to get Sniper to utter more’n four words together, you know.”

“Maybe not this Saturday?”

That earns you another peal of raucous laughter. “As ye say, as ye say!”

In the locker room, you shuffle off your coat and gear as quickly as possible, knowing full well that you won’t get to the showers first, but you might at least get to read a little in the quiet of your room beforehand. That is, if you’re quick enough to avoid Medic’s prodding. The Lancaster, as always, stays with you to be stored under your already lumpy pillow, so as you lock your Gyrojet and shield away, you’re ready to finish the day. But just as you sling your coat over one shoulder to head in--

“Specialist.”

And you had nearly thought you would escape the infirmary. You turn, resigned, to face him. “Yes, Medic?”

But he isn’t really looking at you. He’s hanging the bonesaw and that wicked syringe-gun in his locker. “How do you feel about lentils?”

What? You blink, and you can feel your brows furrow. Lentils. “I--like them fine?”

“Good,” he says, crisply.

You wet your lips, weighing the options and wondering if you ought to ask. “Why?” Honestly, what else are you supposed to do? Let a lentil non-sequitur just fly by?

Medic looks up from his task. “To know whether you’ll be eating or not, of course.”

“Oh.” That would make sense, you suppose, if he’s concerned about portions. “Well. Yes--yes, I’ll definitely be having dinner--”

“I don’t like ‘em, and I have to eat anyway!” gripes Scout from the corner.

The doctor doesn’t even turn to acknowledge him. “Make yourself a peanut-butter sandwich.”

“Heavy used all the bread!”

“Go to zhe grocery market and save me the trouble.” Medic shuts his locker with a click.

Scout throws his arms in the air, and you stifle a chuckle at the display. “C’mon, doc! Can’t ya just make some pasta?”

“Nein! ” He whisks a gloved hand in your direction. “Dinner is at seven, thank you.”

You fight and lose the battle not to roll your eyes as you go.
*And if you’re making such an obscure reference**, you must have lost more blood than you thought.

**The reference in question is to Edgar Allan Poe’s short story William Wilson, wherein the title character’s doppelganger is a better person than he.

*** “In me didst thou exist, and, in my death, see by this image, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself.” --Edgar Allan Poe, William Wilson

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**Chapter End Notes**

**Translations:** *Jawohl* - yes, respectful and emphatic, especially in a military context (i.e. “yes, sir”)

**The More You (May Not Want to) Know:** It only takes approximately 11lbs of pressure to crush the trachea…which is about as much pressure as it takes to crush a soda can. Using a “knife hand” technique as Spesh demonstrates here (striking with the edge of the hand to prevent breaking your own bones), it can be done. Please don’t try this at home. Or anywhere, really. In my research, however I also learned that by learning to hold air in your esophagus, you can withstand more pressure, like a hose full of water that won’t bend. I’m less sure of how legit that bit of information is, but it does seem to make sense.

**Small Revision 2/17/19:** *Spez*- shortening of *Spezialist*

I’ve been doing a lot of reading and looking at videos for bare-knuckle boxing techniques, and while you WOULD NOT want to kill or damage your opponent so severely in a bout, the Specialist would know how, particularly after military training.
The Table Tilts

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the delay, but I daresay this chapter is rather worth it. ;)

Special thanks, as ever, to diananock and kilgamesh, my betas, and to my editor, Shiqq!

Aaand, I don't think we actually have any content warnings for this chapter, so, without further ado....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You had forgotten about the mess you left half-swept into a corner this morning, but there it is, amber shards and scattered white pills. You suppose you ought to finish what you started or risk cutting your feet when you undoubtedly forget again in the next hour.

With a sigh, you sling your coat across the rickety chair and unbutton your undershirt, which follows in a sweaty, wrinkled heap. From the wastebasket, you pull a couple discarded, half written letters and smooth them out, deliberately not looking at the words. Even so, scattered phrases mock you in spotty ink: “wish I could call,” “hope you’re doing well,” and worst, “I’m sorry”—among them. Picking through the shards to salvage what pills you can is a welcome distraction from the weight that settles in your chest. It takes a great deal of focus not to slice your fingers or get any pieces stuck to your skin—after all, the med-bay is not the place you want to go after successfully avoiding it for the night, even for tweezers and a band-aid. What pills you can recover are shoved in the top drawer of your bedside table. The glass and all the rest are swept up in the papers and dumped in the wastebasket.

At last, you throw yourself on the bed, ignoring the pathetic creak of the mattress. Despite being healed not long ago, weariness settles into your bones. Monte Cristo is an arm’s reach from your position, but your eyes are suddenly so, so heavy. Without even lifting the book, you know what happens next--

Edmond Dantes has completed his rebirth as the mysterious Count of Monte Cristo—a man fabulously wealthy, full of charity, a man almost inhuman in appearance and manner, wit and strength. A man who has all that a mortal could desire but cannot escape his thoughts of pain and mortality, suffering and vengeance.

So difficult to let go. If you could find some way to burn the images of creased skin—sickly pale like it’s faded into the bleached white of every crisp sheet and corridor—and blood on tile, rusty-brown and flaking… You bury your face in the crook of your elbow. You sink your teeth into your skin until the pain lets you breathe deeply, focus past that mire of melancholy.

If you could let go, maybe you’d be stationed on a ship right now instead of playing mercenary. Your stomach flutters. Well—perhaps you’re not so disappointed in your situation as you should be. It’s selfish, but why wouldn’t you be happier this way? The Navy was all too eager to throw you out on your ass at the first sign of trouble. But Miss Pauling, she knew, and she wanted you here anyway. Medic, he saw and offered to help. Maybe he wasn’t a doctor, not really, but he’d helped you more than any certified asshole you’d ever seen. He’s a bastard, and he’s off his rocker, sure,
but... he never tried to tell you that you are.

You wonder what Medic is cooking. More than that, you wonder if he looks as much a mad
scientist while tossing vegetables into a pot as he does filling a syringe or drawing his bonesaw
across an enemy’s throat. It’s very hard to imagine him slicing vegetables faster than flesh without
that manic grin. You’re tempted to go down to the mess and see for yourself, but even this too-firm
mattress is far more appealing than standing under your own power right now.

The sun through the window is warm on your bare back, making the room unfathomably
comfortable. You’ll just have to content yourself only speculating what the doctor must look like in
the kitchen. Perhaps he does seem perfectly ordinary, much the way he did after battle today,
humming and almost content. You wish you’d had the time to figure out what song it was. The
tune seemed naggingly familiar.

You’re awake before realizing you even fell asleep. The clock reads 6:30--just enough time to
commandeer the showers before dinner. You sit up, straps tightening around your thigh, and frown.
Apparently, you neglected to remove the Lancaster before settling in for a nap, and now you must
decide whether to just leave it on or tuck it under your pillow for tomorrow. Would anyone notice
if you wore your gun to dinner? Was an attack particularly likely between now and bedtime?

Yes, someone would probably notice, and yes, someone (Scout) would probably say something.
No, attacks outside working hours don’t seem to be the norm. In any case, you’d really just rather
avoid commentary on what will likely be termed paranoia. With the… stress reaction, the shell-
shock, Medic hasn’t ordered any restrictions, but you’d rather not push your luck.

Besides, you’ve been doing very well, if one pointedly ignores the thing that definitely didn’t
happen on the field first thing today and certainly wasn’t remotely related to an enemy spy.

You unbuckle the holster and slide the pistol under your pillow before tucking the leather straps
into the armoire. From there, you select some jeans and a button-down, a clean undershirt and
underwear. You press these items to your bare chest before realizing you ought to at least pull the
dirty shirt over your shoulders for the trip to the showers.

It ended up not mattering, as you met no one on your way. Still, you know that if you’d gone
without, you would have given half the base an eyeful. That’s just the way things work.

Of course, one person on this base has already seen it--in a purely professional context. So, really,
it’s not like he nor anyone else has actually seen anything. You’ve… really never had to worry
about interacting with your doctor anywhere besides the office or hospital. Never actually thought
about having to take meals with someone who has not only seen you with most of your clothes off,
but has seen you with a great deal of your skin off.

And that train of thought can stop right where it is because you need to board a different one.
One... not so goddamn weird.

Shower. That’s safe. Hot water eases the leftover tension from your back, perks up sleep-slowed
muscles. The air still smells like a commingled mixture of at least four kinds of soap and cologne,
the steam making it all feel like an extraordinarily clean sauna… as long as one doesn’t inspect the
floor for the countless grains of sand scattered around the drains. Still, it’s not at all unpleasant.
After all, it doesn’t smell like sweaty, bloody men anymore.

When you suppose twenty minutes have gone by, you reluctantly turn off the water and dry off,
dress yourself fairly neatly, comb your fingers through your damp hair. From here, you return to
your room to drop off the dirty clothes in a half-full hamper, and head back toward the mess hall. The smell, even before you put your hand on the door, is brilliant--warm and inviting, buttery and savory. It’s homely and enticing all at once, and your stomach suddenly realizes how very empty it is. Eagerly, you push the door.

You stop immediately in the doorframe, heedless of the creak of hinges as it closes behind you.

Somehow, when you had tried to picture Medic being *domestic*, you still imagined him in full field doctor regalia, coat buttoned and belted. *Somehow*, it had never occurred to you that he might actually take it off.

But there he is, dishing up a plate with his shirtsleeves rolled up, just bare hands and forearms. The plate settles into Pyro’s very much gloved hand, but you can’t stop staring at the well-fitted vest and shirt across Medic’s back, at the pull of muscle under the skin of his arms.

Honestly, you act like you’ve never seen a man before.

You tell yourself you’d do the same thing if Pyro showed up without a fire-suit, or Spy without his mask, or--

“Mrmrrmph.”

Medic glances over his shoulder and relinquishes the plate into Pyro’s full custody. “Oh--*Spez.*”

You shift your gaze quickly to the table. No one there. “Am I early?”

“Not very--as you can see, everything is nearly ready.” He returns his attention to the stove, to the assorted pots and pans there.

Your ears tune into an energetic pop and sizzle. Something, you realize now, is frying. There’s an empty space left on Pyro’s plate--not that you’d paid attention until now. The rest is covered in what could be rice and--yes--lentils. But Pyro isn’t paying the slightest attention to what Medic is finishing on the stove; you get the stomach-turning feeling the empty eyes of that gas mask are staring at you.

“Hey, Pyro,” you say.

“Mrph!” At least the muffled voice seems cheerful. You’d hate to think you were being rude by not greeting them when you came in. You had just been a little flabbergasted--understandably so, of course.

Medic scoops two flat, roundish cakes onto Pyro’s plate. They smell amazing, each a lovely golden-brown. “Looks good,” you offer.

“Mrmrrmrmmrph!” Their free fist is shaking a simple ‘yes,’ but their head is tilted, still staring.

You feel like you should say something, but you have no idea what.

Fortunately, Medic speaks first, before a ridiculous half-sentence spills out of your mouth. “Of course it’s good!” He returns to the sizzling pan, scooping more cakes onto a platter at his elbow. “You’ll like it better once you’ve tasted it.” He pauses to stir a pot. “Pyro, are you sure you don’t want Scout’s portion?”

They shake their head. “Mr mrgmrr.”
“Vell,” he says with a glance, “be sure to come back if you change your mind.”

Pyro flashes an ‘okay’ with one hand, and, black, empty lenses never leaving your eyes, gives you a thumbs-up before exiting, steaming plate in hand.

You have no idea what you’ve done to get a thumbs-up or what it could mean or why it might be used as a goodbye, but you gave a smile in response and managed an “enjoy dinner” and that’s what really counts.

And now, you’re standing just inside the mess hall, alone with Medic under circumstances that are definitely not medical. You have no idea what to say.

Nervously, your hand rakes through damp hair. Your eyes flash to the table. It’s not just empty--it’s unset. “Can I help?” tumbles out of your mouth before you even finish processing.

Good manners--good manners. You can practically hear your mother saying that good manners can fix everything.

“No.” The doctor doesn’t even turn from his work, and you immediately deflate. You’re confused. You’re irritated.

“I can get the dishes out,” you insist. “It isn’t any trouble to--”

“I know.”

Then what the hell? “Medic, really--”

He waves a flippant hand in your direction, dishing more cakes onto the platter and covering it with a large bowl. “Just get yourself a drink and have a seat; I’ll take care of it in a moment.”

You debate marching to the cupboard and setting the table anyway. He hasn’t even looked in your direction since acknowledging your presence. Gently insisting that he’d like to do the work is one thing, tossing your offer to the side with simple “no,” is quite another. You stop the trek you’ve started and redirect yourself to the refrigerator. Well, if he wants to do all the work himself, that’s his business, you suppose.

The heavy door opens with a creak. The selection is quite the same--water, shitty beer, eye-wateringly sweet tea--and you hope your paycheck comes soon so you can throw some good lager and bourbon in here. You wrap your hand around a bottle of water and take a seat close to the end of the table. No sooner do you crack open the bottle than the sizzling starts to die down and you hear the clink of porcelain in its wake. You bring the water to your lips and try to quash the thought that, conversationally, Medic is much better in the operating room. Friendlier, anyway. Which is saying a lot, considering how much of a bastard he is even doing what he likes best.

And then, the covered plate of cakes is set in the center of the table, followed by two pots, each on their own trivet. You try to ignore the play of muscles as he sets each cast-iron container but his cuffs are rolled to the elbow, and for some reason that makes it as fascinating as if you’d never even thought he had arms under that coat. You take another drink of water so he doesn’t notice how rude you’re being.

“What are we having?” you ask when he disappears behind you.

For a moment, you wonder if he didn’t hear--and then you feel him at the back of your chair. You can’t help but tense at the sudden closeness as he passes a plate around in front of you, close enough to see the veins, blue and purple, under the skin of his wrist and in his hand. You can’t
“Schwäbische Linsen mit Spätzle,” he says; you can feel his breath stir your hair (you, yourself, are not breathing), a little chill prickling over your damp scalp, “und Latkes.” The tension leaves you all at once and air rushes in when he moves to the next spot and sets another dish. “It’s… Swabian-style lentils over a pasta--er--dumplings--Spätzle--with potato pancakes.”

He continues around the table, setting each plate. You probably overreacted slightly at his being so close--something to do with coming off the battlefield not long ago, you’re sure. Now he’s at your other side, setting the place at the end of the table, looking at you expectantly through his spectacles. Right--you’re having a conversation.

“That sounds really fantastic.” Your mouth is on auto-pilot. You should say something else. “It’s something you ate at home?”

Medic’s face relaxes into what might be nostalgia. Nostalgia--or satisfaction at your polite compliment. “Oh, ja--we were very near to Swabia, and even if my grandparents were not natives of it, this sort of food was very common.” He bustles back to the counter, and you can hear the ring of silverware. “Latkes, I learned from my father--these were always around for holidays and zthings.”

In all honesty, you hadn’t expected him to tell you so much. Even saying that he lived near Swabia feels like a huge amount of information--not that you have a good idea where Swabia is, nor what’s around it. Knowing he had grandparents and a father he grew up around makes him seem a lot less like a mad mercenary doctor and more… ordinary. As he moves around the table again, setting a knife on one side of each plate and two forks on the other, shirtsleeves rolled up and medical equipment nowhere to be seen, it’s almost difficult to imagine that this is the man who--just today--spilled a scout’s intestines on the hot, desert sands, and laughed freely, mingling scarlet blood and orange soil in a syrupy dance. You frown.

Medic leans over your chair again to set your utensils. You can smell his cologne even through the savory scent of supper, something spicy and dark like--

“Hey, Doc--is dinner about ready? I’m wastin’ away here!”

You can practically hear Medic roll his eyes as he steps back just as casually as if he were nothing more than a waiter who did this every day, leaning into personal space to set a damn table you already offered to set. “You don’t even like lentils! You could have made yourself something else at any time.”

You turn your head to see Scout swaggering between you and Medic to his usual seat, followed right after by Engineer and Demoman. “Yeah, but it looks like you’ve got other stuff here--”

Medic slaps the boy’s questing hand away from one of the lids. “Nein! Sit down!”

“All right, all right, geez,” he grumbles, rubbing his hand and taking a seat. He does a good job of ignoring the pointed chuckles from the other side of the table.

Next through the door is Heavy, who boisterously compliments the smell of the doctor’s cooking, to which the man in question preens. And then Spy, gliding in with an unlit cigarette between his lips and a bottle of wine in his hand that he does not offer to share, and Soldier--punctual to the second, you suspect--and finally, Sniper. As Medic finishes tidying up the stove, Demo offers to get drinks, and you politely decline, with plenty of water still left in the bottle.

The murmur of conversation that begins is pleasant, and you let it wash over you for a minute, not even really realizing that no one has tried to touch the food since Scout was admonished--until
Medic is at your shoulder again serving you.

You try not to let your mouth hang open too long.

First is the Spätzle—what you recognize as the sort of rice-shaped pasta from Pyro’s plate. Medic goes around the table and places this first. Then, a rich mixture of lentils in a dark sauce, over the noodles, and when Scout opens his mouth to protest, the doctor utters a sharp “you eat it right, or not at all.” Last is a helping of two latkes on each plate, still leaving a pile of several more on the platter. And just before you take your first bite--

You realize Medic is sitting across from you tonight. And he appears to be waiting to gauge your reaction. You suppose it’s because you’re the only one who hasn’t eaten his cooking before, and the doctor is nothing if not proud. So, you take a bite of the main course and try not to feel terribly scrutinized.

It’s brilliant. Savory, with just a hint of sweet earthiness from the lentils, tart, creamy and filling. “Medic, this is fantastic.”

He grins, all sharp edges and glee that could turn a stomach—and now you can line up the man on the field with the one across the table. “Danke.” He takes a forkful of his own, seems to study it with pride. “I rather think so.”

Well, at least his modesty is consistent.

There’s a range of assent mixed with rolling eyes and dry chuckles across the table as the rest tuck in with no less gusto—save for Scout, studiously picking around the lentils to eat any Spätzle that escaped the flood of actual nutrition.

Conversation gradually picks up and ebbs and flows like normal, turning from the day’s battle to what the weekend might bring, and then--

“Ensign, I haven’t seen you out on the courses lately,” says Soldier, helping himself to another of the latkes (which are also quite brilliant).

Oh, boy. You run up and down the field every day. You fight. You die. You run some more. There’s really no reason to go out and run an obstacle course afterward. “We get a lot of exercise on the field,” you say, evenly.

“That may be true, but we must always stay in tip-top shape, and that means PT--PT for everyone!” He eats half the cake in one chomp.

“Soldier…” You finish your water. “…isn’t the point of PT to stay in shape when you’re not in combat?”

He nods, helmet bouncing. “And we are not currently in combat, ensign!”

Indeed. You bite back a sigh and try a change of subject instead. “Soldier, you keep calling me ‘ensign.’”

“Because you’re a squid.”

You can’t help but chuckle. “Yeah, and you call everyone else ‘private’—were you in the army?”

“Uhhh--” Scout sends a glance between you and Soldier.
“In the army? *In the army?*”

Oh, shit. You begin backpedalling as fast as humanly possible. “Er--the Marines?”

“Here we go,” mumbles Scout.

“I WILL HAVE YOU KNOW THAT I APPLIED FOR EVERY BRANCH OF THE UNITED STATES MILITARY! ARMY! NAVY! MARINES! AIR FORCE! EVEN THE NATIONAL GUARD! AND DO YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENED, ENSIGN?”

Your mouth moves but nothing comes out because, really, you don’t want to even hazard a guess. You *might* suppose that he was rejected by all of them, but even that feels unlikely as he doesn’t seem angry or embarrassed or even ashamed.

“I WAS TURNED AWAY FROM EVERY SINGLE ONE.”

Oh. You should offer your… sympathy?

“And it was then I realized: it is not Uncle Sam’s rubber stamp that makes you a Soldier! Having the soul of a warrior makes you a Soldier. It is your willingness to fight!” He thumps his chest. “Those rejections made me realize I already *was* a Soldier! So--I shipped myself off to the European theater AND KILLED NAZIS.” Soldier thumped a fist on the table. “AND I HAVE BEEN GRATEFUL TO HIM EVER SINCE!”

Your brow furrows. “To… Uncle Sam?”

“To Uncle Sam!” He raises his glass in a toast that you belatedly, bewilderedly, meet with your own.

As Soldier downs his glass, you find your head spinning just a little. The War ended… twenty-four years ago--*when your younger brother was born*. If what he said is true, Soldier would have been at least eighteen in 1943, making him…

Soldier would have to be at least forty-two years old.

What.

The realization must be showing on your face, because Spy rests a gloved hand on your shoulder, and when you meet his gaze, rolls his eyes. You hope that means there’s some logical explanation for this--like, maybe the soldier is having you on.

But Spy offers nothing more, and returns to his wine.

“So, if you don’t want to run courses for your PT, ensign, there’s a whole building full of equipment! There’s no excuse! BE THE SOLDIER YOU WERE ALWAYS MEANT TO BE!”

Well. Apparently you aren’t as adept at distraction as you thought, or you overestimated Soldier’s distractibility. You had almost forgotten about the training annex… you recall the boxing ring no one had deigned to tell you existed--empty, ready, and waiting while you sat (nervous, so afraid of being brushed off and declared useless) across from Miss Pauling. You can feel your heart start to hammer in your chest at the mere thought, how good it might feel to fight, for once, not to *kill*--perhaps Soldier wasn’t so far off after all. You take a breath. Should you?

Soldier is staring at you from down the table, somehow appearing to peer through the helmet that
hangs over his eyes. Most of the others are listening with casual interest, probably wondering how you’ll dig your way out of this.

Might as well.

“Does anyone know how to box?”

Chapter End Notes

*Spez*- shortening of *Spezialist*

Imagine a wink and finger guns from the author, please.

And yes, friends, I have started the draft of 33.
Bloody Recreation

Chapter Notes

Here we are once again, friends, and, as always, thank you so much for your patience and loyalty! Many thanks once again, too, to Pelinal here on AO3 for their fantastic editing work.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

All eyes sweep down the table, from you to one man in particular; Heavy sits frozen with the fork in his mouth, brows arched.

Honestly, you should have guessed he would be the only one. He’s a whole different competitor with all that bulk, but with the right approach, you could--

“Whoa, whoa, hang on, Spesh--you know how ta box? With gloves and a ring and the whole bit?”

A surge of pride rises in your chest. “Bare-knuckle,” you correct.

Scout’s jaw goes slack. “Uh--isn’t that kinda, y’know, illegal?”

“Isn’t killing people for money?” A smile lifts the corner of your mouth.

Sniper chuckles. “Just a mite.”

Heavy sets his fork aside, leans across the table. “You wish to fight me? No gloves?” It’s difficult to tell whether it’s disbelief or caution or the quiet thrill of challenge that colors his words.

Your heart races already at the promise of a fight: the rush as the world melts away around you, seconds to calculate the next move the scattered rhythm of flesh on flesh, jarring bones-- “Yes.”

His brow furrows, and you still can’t read the expression.

“If you can handle it,” you add, a touch of goading.

Heavy’s face lights up immediately and his booming laugh carries across the table. “Okay, okay, boxing match with little Specialist,” he returns; a jab of his own.

A disgruntled huff passes your lips, but you can’t smother your grin. “I’m not little.”

He chuckles. “True. For most people, you are big. But for Heavy--” He shrugs his massive shoulders. “--everyone is babies.”

You can’t help a giggle.

“Aaaaand that’s why my money’s on the big guy. No offense, Spesh.” Scout rocks back in his chair.

That sends a wave of determination straight to your head. “Oh, none taken.” You pop a bite of latke into your mouth and catch Medic blatantly studying you over his spectacles. As though he’s calculating the odds already. You wipe your mouth on your napkin. “It’s nothing on me when you
lose it."

That sends another round of laughter along the table—including yours. Scout, however, furrows his brow.

“You’re a big talker now, but Heavy ain’t gonna be a walk in the park, ya know.” He folds his arms over his chest, wrinkling his red tee. “I’m not sayin’ I don’t think you’ll get some hits in, but without your gear, just fists—” He shrugs. “The bigger guy’s got an edge is all I’m sayin’.”

Spy swirls his wine glass. “Then put some real money where your mouth is, as they say.” He pushes back his empty plate and takes a cigarette from its case. “Ten dollars on the specialist.”

Scout’s mouth drops open a little, and so does yours—but you recover first and manage to cover the stupid look with a sip of water.

“That’s—all right fine, old man—ten dollars on Heavy. Matched.”

A sly smile curls Spy’s lips around his unlit cigarette. He lifts it between his fingers. “Done.”

“Well, while we’re gettin’ in on the money, I’ll put a fiver on Heavy,” Sniper says with the hint of a grin.

Engineer hums thoughtfully. “Guess we’ll have to make it a pot—five on Spesh and ten on the big guy.”

Your brows arch almost to your hairline. “Playing both sides of the fence?”

His grin is only the smallest bit sheepish. “I don’t have doctorate in mathematics fer nothin’.”

“Not in engineering?” You’re rather surprised.

A wry chuckle. “I have that one, too.”

Before you can try to puzzle that out, Soldier declares, “A BOX OF ROCKETS ON HEAVY.”

Scout frowns. “Uh… Solly, RED supplies our ammo. An’ you’re the only one who uses those.”

“THEN A BOX OF SHELLS.”

“But--ugh, never mind.” He rocks back in his chair again, dog-tags jingling.

“Five on Heavy,” says Demo. “No offense, Lass. Yer two different classes.” He gives you a cyclopic wink. “Anyone else, and the money’d be on you.”

You cover the fact that you really are flattered with a chuckle. “Oh, I see how it is. I do good work on the field, but when it comes to the ring, bigger is suddenly better, no question!”

“No,” says Heavy, eyes glittering. “Bigger is always better.”

“I’ll have you know I’m a heavyweight in my own right! Besides…” You elbow Scout’s ribs and his chair returns to all fours with a crack. “There aren’t any classes at all in an illegal sport, right?”

“Yeah,” he replies, “but Heavy’s gonna punch you inta next week--trust me, I know.” He touches his jaw with a wince that brings at least three questions to your mind.

To your surprise, Heavy’s grimace almost matches Scout’s. “Should not wake sleeping men from
nightmares.”

Phantom images of your own demons suddenly fill every unoccupied crack and crevice, sweep up your spine with such a chill that you wonder how you managed to forget for even an hour. Perhaps this was a bad idea, maybe--

“So! That’s one for Spesh,” Scout indicates Spy, as though nothing had been said. You’re galled. You’re grateful. “One for Heavy,” here, he indicates himself. “One for each because Engie can’t make a decision--”

“I come out of this a winner either way, boy.” He cocks an eyebrow, a calm little grin settling on his face. “Can’t say the same about you.”

“Yeah, but I make out better when I win, wise guy. Demo ‘n Sniper have money on Heavy, and… that leaves you.” He jerks a thumb in Medic’s direction. “You’ve been pretty quiet, Doc. Whatcha thinkin’?”

A quirk of the lips tells you that his silence has hardly been that of passive disinterest. “My two greatest achievements in single combat--vhat do you suppose I’m thinking?”

Scout suddenly grimaces. “Somethin’ I don’t wanna know about, prob’ly.”

“Hm.” The doctor’s sharp eyes rest on you. “Suffice it to say--twenty dollars on the Specialist.”

Your thoughts stutter; you aren’t sure you heard that right.

“Oh my god,” Scout says.

You quite agree.

But your heart is hammering, and not in an entirely unpleasant manner. Twenty dollars! Medic meets your eyes with a shadow of his manic grin, no doubt knowing that your mind is absolutely reeling. He could buy a simple revolver for the return on that bet. A brand-new radio. Probably armfuls of lab equipment. But far more than that--somehow he’s absolutely sure that you’ll win him the money.

“You seem pretty confident there, Doc,” Sniper muses.

You’re finally able to wrench your gaze away from Medic’s, to acknowledge your teammate’s thinly-veiled inquiry, and it occurs to you that, truly, you should be distinctly worried, not thrilling and preening at the assured confidence you’ve been presented.

Demoman grins unabashedly over his bottle, not shaken in the least. “Sounds like a biased bet to me.”

Oh, fuck, you’re going to lose. Medic has been blinded by his own pride in your damnable heart, but it’s not your heart that’s going to be fighting, is it? An artificial heart isn’t going to give you an extra five inches and another fifty pounds and fists the size of bricks, no. You’re not fooled in the least. You see it with sudden, blinding clarity: you’re going to get pummelled phenomenally.

Phenomenally pummelled for fun, but phenomenally pummelled nonetheless.

“No offense to Heavy, of course,” the doctor says, but his eyes are on yours again, as though you’re the only one who needs to hear his case, crystalline and sharp through pristine spectacles. “Zhe Specialist is simply faster, with greater stamina. Heavy is strong, yes. Zhe stronger of zhe
two, certainly. But Specialist--she is vicious.”

That word shouldn’t roll off anyone’s tongue the way it does his, a soft, curling lilt, pleasure and glee wrapped up together.

Besides, it certainly isn’t a word you would use to describe yourself, not in the ring, not even at your nastiest on the field--that’s not who you think you are, is it? hissing in a voice like smoke and blood. Just like that, you can’t breathe again, and fingers curl into fists. You can’t panic now. You can’t. You can’t. You have to focus--the pain in your palms as nails catch skin isn’t enough--

You’re still facing Medic. The doctor. He’s cooked the meal you can still taste on your tongue, savory and sweet. His tie--scarlet silk--red, safe, catching white fluorescents, it’s the right color. The right color. White sleeves are still rolled up to his elbows, impeccably clean. There’s a fleck of sauce staining the seam at his shoulder, as yet unnoticed. Sweat gleams under his tight collar. The knot he’s used on his tie is a crisply done four-in-hand. It’s the one for military dress. You remember. A double twist ‘round, tucked between, pulled snug, savvy, never too tight. And it’s red. You find his eyes again and air rushes back into your lungs, a quick gasp as you remember where you are.

Things are fine.

Medic is looking at you and you feel like he knows, but you can’t find it in yourself to be embarrassed, not when there doesn’t appear to be an ounce of pity behind those spectacles--only recognition.

You’re back, and thank God for that.

Conversation trickles back in, like you’ve only been gone for a handful of seconds at most.

“--nah, he’s just got money ta burn, an’ somethin’ ta prove--or, he’s got somethin’ cooked up we don’t know about, but I’m not layin’ any more money on it,” Scout is saying.

Oh, right. Twenty dollars? Who the fuck would put twenty dollars on a recreational match arranged over dinner? You’ve been around him long enough to know that Medic is not a stupid man. Reckless, yes, proud, yes, but not stupid.

So why would he up the ante so steeply? You wonder if he knows something you don’t.

“A… rather high bet, isn’t it?” you manage at last, and keep your eyes on his face, searching for the smallest misgiving, the slightest clue about this madness.

Folly, of course, as he gives only a careless shrug and the same amused smile as before. “I can afford it.”

Knowing your own salary, you have no doubt--but it’s the principle of the thing.

“Let the man do what he will with his money,” says Spy, a swirl of burgundy in his glass and the faintest turn of amusement on his lips. “Once Heavy names the time, since you’ve made the challenge, we shall see who comes out the better for all our bets.”

“All right.” You drain the last of the water from your bottle.

Down the table, Heavy seems to be chewing methodically, thoughtfully. Then, after a moment: “Eight o’clock is good for you?”
It wouldn’t hurt, you think, to head outside early and warm yourself since it’s been so long; the last time you got into a match just for the fun of it had been during boot camp with one Seaman Recruit Alison “Hammer-fisted son-of-a-bitch” McKinnley. The skills you’d picked up during school were transformed into self-defense habits, the feel of real, organized matches half-forgotten. And then, that raven-haired problem recognized one of your counters in hand-to-hand training. The rest was two bloody noses, four reprimands, and a half-dozen stolen moments of illicit peace. You change into a couple layers with a bit more give, slip on your sneakers. After that, of course, was the OTH.* You wonder if getting caught with McKinnley would have been more or less embarrassing a discharge.

The halls are empty but you don’t mind, as long as your team is not at the ring already--you’re quite looking forward to being alone for a little while.

Outside, the air is already winding down into a cottony warmth without the blaze of the sun. You push the door of the outbuilding, inhale the scent of steel and plywood and the rubbery sort of smell that accompanies gymnasiums.

“You are early.”

For a moment, you can’t find him--but Heavy is not an easy man to overlook. He lays on a mat just beyond the ring, supporting himself on broad arms.

“So are you,” is the only thing you can think to say.

He smiles, sits up, folds his legs like a butterfly and straightens his back. “Preparing.”

“What a coincidence.” Your expression softens, too, and you pace around the ring to the mat. You step up on its edge with the ball of your foot, press down toward the floor with your heel to stretch your Achilles.

Heavy stands, stretches his arms above his head, out in front, then to either side.

You try not to think about how fucking huge his shoulders are. You fail, and mentally prepare for an inevitable broken nose. You switch feet.

“What did you learn to box?” you ask.

A crease appears between his brows. For a moment you think he won’t reply--the pause is just long enough for you to consider apologizing--and you recall Medic’s words about Heavy’s nightmares. “Russia.” The corner of his mouth quirks. “And you?”

You catch on, and relax. “America.”

Amusement crinkles his eyes, and he drops into a series of squats. You take the opportunity to step onto the mat and stretch out on your stomach for some slow abdominal twists.

The silence that ensues is companionable, broken only by gentle puffs of breath and the creak of a joint or two that aren’t quite ready to exert themselves. You focus your mind down to the pull of muscles beneath your skin as they flex and relax. To your breath, in and out, flowing like silk down into your belly, then up again into the air. The energy warms your chest. It tingles along your arms, buzzes down to your feet. The adrenaline, the thrill, the promise of a fight.
Your head snaps up as the door creaks, but you can’t see over the raised platform of the ring. Patiently, you finish your set as boot-heels click on the cement floor. You know who it is without looking, by now—US military-issue boots have a flexible sole, and while patent-leather might click if the wearer so chose, only one person on base makes this distinct tread.

“I’ve brought zhe medi-gun,” Medic says with a grin, rounding the corner.

“I’m sure that’s not necessary.” You sit up, glance at Heavy to try to gauge his opinion on the matter, but he only shrugs. “I’ve fought plenty of matches with only a bag of ice and an aspirin waiting for me.”

“I imagine such scuffles weren’t against anyone of Heavy’s caliber,” he replies dryly. “Would you enjoy wandering around tomorrow with a concussion or internal bleeding until respawn?”

“We do not have to hurt,” says Heavy. “So there is no need to hurt. We have medi-gun: we use it.”

You still can’t help but feel your machismo has been undercut, but arguing with upwards of 350 pounds of muscle and logic before you fight said three-hundred pounds of muscle seems unwise. “That makes sense,” you concede.

“Of course it does.” Medic takes the pack from his back and sets it in the corner by some folding chairs.

He has put his uniform back on, you realize, watching while coattails swish around leather-encased calves. The realization brings a brief feeling like disappointment.

You try to ignore the sound of his restless footsteps and continue your routine. Step into a lunge, count out the seconds. Heaving Heavy in here with you is one thing—he has his own business. But Medic is here to wait. He’s extraneous. It unsettles the atmosphere.

You straighten up. Switch legs. Lunge again.

There’s a question rising in your throat. You try to distract yourself with rhythmic breathing, but—well, it’s not your fault he’s here.

“Do you really think I’m going to win?”

“Why would I bet in favor of someone I believe will lose?”

You can come up with at least three reasons, but since they all stem from sentiment on the part of the person making the bet, you must admit they don’t seem plausible. Before you can reply, you hear Heavy speak from somewhere over your shoulder:

“Would be foolish,” he says, but his deep tones are colored with amusement. “But people do many foolish things for many reasons.”

Medic snorts. “Sometimes people who can’t see zhe reason assume it foolish—even when the thing is flawlessly rationalized.”

“Some people think too much,” Heavy replies, “and some talk too much.” You turn just in time to see him wink at you over Medic’s shoulder. “Both are still foolish.”

You don’t hide your grin, thinking Medic is rather a bit of both.

“Pah—” Medic says. “If anyone thinks too much and has gotten foolish, Heavy—”
The door creaks again, and this time: “Mrmrmrph?”

“Yes?” At this point, you’re fairly certain you recognize your name. But one can never be sure.

“Mr mrrd!” Pyro comes, suit squeaking, around the corner.

“They told you what’s on, I take it?”

Pyro makes the ‘yes’ sign with their fist, nodding. “A-N-D,” they spell, then present both hands, palms up before flipping them palms-down. Then, they spell, “B-E-T.” Repeat the motion. You repeat it back--open hands, palms-up and then down--to an enthusiastic nod of approval.

“And what did you think of the bet?” you ask. It doesn’t matter, really, you suppose. But you want to know.

Pyro opens a hand, displays five fingers, and points at Heavy.

You can’t help the sinking feeling in your chest, but then, Pyro holds up a hand--“wait.”

They display five fingers again, and point at you. You smile just as Heavy chuckles. “You bet five dollars on both of us?”

“Mrhr!” Pyro displays the ‘okay’ symbol and it feels like a bright grin.

Medic clicks his tongue with amusement. “What a diplomat.”

Pyro shrugs, and the door creaks again. You decide not to attempt any further stretches if the room is going to continue filling up like this.

Demo and Engineer come into view, each with a cooler in hand. “Brought some drinks!” the former declares.

You’re certain no one will have a drink finished before the fight is over, but that means there’ll be one for you, win or lose.

The others are talking, starting to move some of the folding chairs into positions suitable for watching the fight. You take a deep breath and close your eyes. The drone of voices, the shrill shriek of chairs unfolded, the crack of a bottle being opened. Inhale, focus. The door creaks again. Scout starts chattering immediately. You hear the murmur of Sniper’s voice, too.

Open your eyes. Exhale.

Soldier is on the heels of Sniper and that accounts for everyone. Or--you count again. Seven. You and Heavy make nine--

“Are you ready?” Spy asks, just out of reach of your elbow, which you’re pretending didn’t jerk itself backward when you registered his voice.

“Yes.” You relax your arms. Shake our your suddenly tense shoulders as much as possible. “Yes, I am.”

He produces a silver case from his coat, draws a cigarette from it with a nod--“Good”--and places it between his lips. He lights it behind a gloved hand and takes a long drag.

The smoke is sharp, so spicy that you’re not sure whether it’s pleasant or if you’d like to request that he move outdoors.
“I am eager to see how you choose to approach him.”

Absently, you rub your chin. “You… do know it’ll be over in five minutes or less?”

Spy chuckles through another cloud of smoke. “Yes. You suppose they are unaware?” He nods toward Demo, Sniper, Soldier, and Scout, all cracking into the cooler, chatting and leaning on creaking chairs.

You nod, arch an exaggerated brow. “Yeah.”

“If they wanted a full showing, they could have volunteered for warm-up fights.”

The image of Scout running around in circles until his opponent lost their temper flits across your mind, leaving a trail of amusement. “Maybe next time.”

He looks almost surprised. “Already arranging another?” He puffs on the cigarette. “You’d like the opportunity to break everyone’s noses, I suppose.”

There’s a full grin on your face now. “Maybe.”

“I’ll have to be the first to disappoint you; I find I’m quite satisfied with mine unbroken.”

“That might be, but perhaps you’d like the opportunity to break mine instead?”

Spy chuckles. “Not yet. For the moment, I find your presence tolerable and your skills acceptable.” He releases a thin stream of smoke from his lips. “Good luck, Specialist.”

You don’t bother hiding how unabashedly pleased you are at such a compliment. “Thank you.”

Not enough. “I--”

But he waves a careless hand and slinks off to where your teammates have taken their seats. You roll your shoulders. Spy doesn’t join them, instead leaning against a support beam that offers not only a good view of the ring, but of the room at large. Habit, you suppose.

You tug your shirt brusquely over your head. This leaves you in a white tank that will allow for maximum flexibility; after all, you’re going to need all the flexibility you can get. You toss your t-shirt over a nearby set of free-weights, and pace a circle, swinging your arms, pumping them across your chest. You’re ready. You can do this. You’re ready, you’re ready, you’re ready, you’re--

“Dayum, Spesh!”

You pick your head up.

“If I’d known how many guns you were packin’ under there I mighta put some money on ya.”

You can feel the flush hit your cheeks and fervently wish you could will it away, or at least lose the self-conscious grin. “Your loss, Scout.”

He shifts, chair squeaking, so he sits with one foot flat on the seat, the other on the floor, resting an elbow on his knee, swinging his beer between two fingers. “You still gotta knock Heavy out, though. But remind me not to piss ya off, anyway.”

That’s enough to distract you from being scrutinized. “You know we often go to blood or forfeit, right?”
“Uh, yeah, that’s cool an’ all, but I don’t think you’re gonna have trouble knockin’ each other to
the floor.”

“Blood is enough for me,” says Heavy, stripping off his shirt, too.

If you had a reply, it’s promptly overridden by the iron bulk of his shoulders, the flex of his arms,
and the sound paunch of his stomach. He turns slightly to make some remark to Medic, and his
back is a mess of white scars that were certainly not sustained on any modern battlefield. The man
is an absolute juggernaut, with fists like hammers and the stature of a giant.

And you’re going to fight him in unarmed combat.

What the hell are you doing?

You close your eyes and pinch the bridge of your nose. First blood, that’s it. First blood. Forget

Remember, this is recreation.

You open your eyes to see Medic with that ever-curious expression on his face. “Ready?”

“Yeah--yes.” You straighten your back, try to relax your shoulders. “I’m ready.”

“Yes.” He peers intently through his spectacles. “I believe you are.”

Medic nods toward where Heavy climbs onto the platform. You follow, one foot braced on the
edge, pulling yourself the rest of the way with one hand on the ropes, and slide through.

Inside, Heavy offers you one of those massive hands. You accept, shake, give him a firm nod that
he returns. His grey eyes are as soft as ever, and bright with excitement.

Yes. The thrill returns to your blood, singing. Nobody dying. Two friends beating the hell out of
each other because, sometimes, that’s all you can do. Safe as houses.

A grin cracks across your face and Heavy claps you on the shoulder. “Fight well.”

“And good luck,” you offer.

“Take your corners.” Medic springs up to the edge of the ring and perches there, leaning on the
ropes, but does not enter. “Blood, forfeit, or loss of consciousness wins zhe bout, are we agreed?”

“Yes.”

“Agreed.”

You face Heavy, ropes at your back. A furious heartbeat hammers in your ears, slams inside your
chest. Blood races. Take a deep breath.

“Ready?” You and Heavy step forward until you’re but two paces apart. Medic’s eyes are alight--
as bright as though he has stepped into the ring to fight this match himself. Perhaps, in his mind, he
has. You and Heavy are his crowning achievements after all.

Perhaps that’s the secret: he wins no matter who is victorious. You’re not sure why, exactly, that
eases some of the tension crowding your mind. And not a moment too soon--

“Begin.”
Your mind is delightfully blank as your hands mirror Heavy’s, raised to the chin, elbows tight. But where Heavy’s hands are fisted into great hammers, yours remain open, relaxed, ready. One breath, two--neither of you move.

Heavy’s fist flashes out in a hook and your forearm catches him halfway; next breath, your hand fists and slides along his arm, up toward the shoulder--he dodges left, but your knuckles catch the edge of his jaw in a hammer-strike. Inhale; you’re recovering your arm from the attack and for half a moment, you’ve left yourself open on that side. Another hook rockets toward your cheek, and you fold your torso, step back, desperately, bring up your hand--

But the hook has transitioned neatly into a hammer-strike.

The world is ringing like an antique telephone, high and shrill.

Searching--searching--searching, ground, torso, Medic leaning heavily over the ropes, ground--fist--

Your arm blocks the blow without conscious command, but the strike rattles severely along your bones. Capture the pain and suck a deep breath. The world is right again, but the ringing persists, muffles a voice.

Another hook, but you’re ready--you shove the opposite arm forward with just enough force to stop his momentum, and, as his other fist flashes out, you whip your arm back across, fully extended, snapping your hips to cut the back of your hand over his eyes and nose, and, following, your right hand presses forward, jabbing its heel just under his ribs.

It isn’t until you’re already reeling that you realize you’ve left yourself open for an axe strike just below your ear.

The ringing doesn’t stop.

But this time it doesn’t keep you from seeing a final hook angled for your temple. Thoughts race. Your arms can’t move fast enough. So you step into the blow, bow your head so the thickest part of your skull carries the force.

Over the ringing in your ears, you can hear Heavy’s furious cry even as you feel his fingers fracture against your forehead.

His arm had not reached full force, but you still find yourself reeling, stumbling back and fighting to get your hands back into defensive position. Inhale. Heavy has withdrawn his fractured hand--an opportunity.

Exhale, step forward, hand open for a heel strike just under the chin--

But he raises his fractured fist.

You have just enough time to be surprised, but it’s too late to change direction; you’re committed. Heavy’s arm glides along yours. The last thing you see is the pull of muscle under skin, the crease of an elbow, and a rather distorted view of overhead fluorescents.
*OTH stands for “Other Than Honorable,” referring to military discharge

Chapter End Notes

**The More You Know:** $20 is a good marker for Too Much Money to spend on certain things in 1969. It would be a lot like me dropping $50-80 on something nowadays (approximate of course because I’m comparing prices of amenities and estimating that way). A $10 bet (that Spy places) is already a bit excessive for an ordinary person in 1969, like throwing $25-40 at something. More reasonable would be $1 to $5, which would be more like a $5 - $15 bet.

So…. $20 is a lot when gas is $0.32 per gallon, a gallon of milk is $1.10, and minimum wage is $1.60/hr.

**The Even More You Know:** Without gloves in the equation, boxers must be much more precise and controlled in their movements because nothing is protecting the bones of the hand from impact. This is why many of the strikes employed by Spesh and Heavy in this scene use the fleshy part of the hand (in a “hammer” motion or open-handed in an “axe” motion) or its heel, rather than the knuckles we see frequently employed on television and in the movies.

Furthermore, by going gloveless, it’s much less likely that combatants will receive multiple concussions without stopping the fight. Padding may keep the skin from breaking or bruising, but it does not keep your brain from rattling about with the impact of a punch at full-force. Attacks made with a glove are harder because a boxer need not worry about fracturing his own fingers, and thus, the risk of concussion to an opponent goes up.

Speaking of fractured fingers and hands, Spesh’s technique of stepping into Heavy’s fist before he reaches maximum velocity is a real technique. By stepping into a blow, you can absorb the attack at reduced force, while deciding what the opponent will hit; in this case, a much harder bone than Heavy wanted to strike in the first place, resulting in fractures.

The final move is carried by Heavy’s wrist and forearm (avoiding the use of his broken fingers), catching Spesh along her ear and the back of her head. The force, combined with an opponent already being off-balance, can bring them to the floor.
No warnings necessary for this chapter I think--please do enjoy! Many thanks as always to Pelinal here on AO3 for their fantastic editing work.

Red. Awareness returns slowly, suffused with scarlet light.

“Medic?”

There’s no sun, only flickering fluorescents. It’s not the battlefield. Yet, he swims into view looking pleased as…

“Heavy?”

He’s here, too, grinning, blood clotting and drying thick on his cheek and nose. “Best fight in long time.”

Oh. Yes. Yes, it’s all coming back. A friendly boxing match, and--and this means you were knocked unconscious. Shit.

You roll the stiffness out of your shoulders as Medic switches the medigun off. “It was only on half-power… you should feel less confused in a moment.”

Heavy offers a hand. “Congratulations,” you manage, and take the offered hand. He pulls you up slowly. “That was fantastic--you certainly know your stuff.” Medic turns the medi-gun’s rays on Heavy, and he relaxes under their effects until you hear a stomach-turning crack. “It was brilliant, using your arm--surprised me and avoided using your broken hand--sorry about that, by the way.”

He shakes his head, makes a show of flexing his fingers. “No--was good work.”

“Brilliant,” Medic agrees.

You grimace. “I’m afraid you’re still short twenty dollars.” You’re not sure if the turn in your stomach is disappointment or a side-effect of the healing.

But Medic responds with an absolutely ridiculous grin. “That’s the best part, Spatz --you won!”

“I what?”

Heavy traces a finger across his cheek and the bridge of his nose, though blood that now has no visible source. “When you hit me across, I bled.”

“You drew first blood just before he knocked you unconscious--wunderbar!”

Oh. A laugh, triumphant, bubbles up in your chest. “That’s fantastic!”

“Still got knocked on your ass, though,” Scout mutters.
Your brow arches, but you can’t erase your gin, even in jest. “Would you like to share that experience, Scout?”

“No!” He attempts a casual shrug, but it’s too late. “I just, uh, mean it’s pretty cool that you got knocked on your ass and still won.”

“Damn right,” you chuckle.

Medic claps your shoulder, warm--and with a start, your realize that he has forgone the gloves. His fingers, cooler than his palm, press into your skin and you’re drawn to look at him. His eyes glitter. “Next time, perhaps, we’ll try my hand, hm?”

Your heart leaps into your throat at the same time your stomach drops through the floor. For a moment, you can smell blood and sand and gunpowder, hear a desperate, aborted breath, gargling, clicking in a throat beneath your thumbs.

What if you fly into a rage and kill him on accident?

Tingling fingers and shattered lab equipment come back to you, too. You can’t trust yourself. He should know better.

“Perhaps,” is the only word that leaves your lips, formed messily around an attempted smile. You feel light-headed.

A crease appears between the doctor’s brows, and he squeezes your shoulder tighter. You draw a breath, latch onto the discomfort, the impression of every finger over still-swollen muscle. Distantly, you become aware of continued chatter, something about Medic having a snowball’s chance in Hell compared to Heavy, and a cold, damp bottle is pressed into your palm.

Sniper has given you a beer.

Greedily, you lift it to your lips. Gods, it’s bitter. Hops that bite back are the only flavor in this watery brew, but you’re suddenly thirsty, suddenly aware again, and the world settles back down the way it’s meant to be.

Medic’s hand slides off your shoulder, the impression of his touch lingering on your skin.

You want to thank him, but he nods before a word can leave your lips, and then Heavy leans over to murmur something that dominates Medic’s attention completely.

“Haven’t been to a fight like that in years,” Engie admits, and you reluctantly shift your gaze to the others with their beers and casual smiles. “Forgot how much fun it is. ‘Course, normally it’s the boys with gloves on and the whole bit.”

You take another quick swig from your own bottle. “I have a hard time imagining you at a boxing match.”

He grins, tapping a finger on amber glass. “Friend a mine back in university liked to go, dragged me along for the ride. Had more fun than I thought I would.”

You’ve half-formed a reply when a solid punch on the shoulder is quickly followed by arms thrown around your waist.

“Hrrrmhrrrrmm!”
You find you’re becoming used to it.

“Congratulations,” Engineer supplies, though you think you’d quite gotten that impression already.

“Thanks, Pyro.” When they look up, you raise a hand and dip your fingertips from your chin. With delight, they flash the okay sign, retrieve what you assume is their beer off the floor, and poke a straw up under their mask to sip at it. It takes every fiber of control you have not to let a giggle manifest.

“Takin’ Heavy one to one is really impressive, y’know, winnin’ or not,” muses Engie.

You know. But all the same… “More impressive than fighting myself every day?”

He chuckles. “Well--sometimes I think that’s a whole different ball game.”

There is certainly, you think, something to be said for that.

Someone is at your elbow again, and this time, you recognize that cool touch as it raises a shiver across your skin. Medic presses something into your hand. A glance reveals a twenty dollar bill.

“The winnings? But I--”

He shrugs, mouth half-curled in a grin. “You did zhe fighting. I only laid a bet.” He drops his hand back to his side, but, restless, it moves to the pocket of his coat instead. “Place an order with Mann Co. before the mail goes out tomorrow; find yourself something new to add to your kit, perhaps something for hand-to-hand combat, hm?”

You open your mouth to protest again.

“Think of it as a favor to me. In the interest of… observation.” The way he says it is completely clinical, purely focused on the experiment in which you’re simultaneously an unwitting and entirely conscious accessory. But his eyes, so intent in holding yours, are warm enough to make you doubt.

Warm enough to heat your cheeks.

You know precisely what it is that you want. The page in your Mann Co. catalogue has been marked since Miss Pauling gave you a copy during training to peruse at your leisure.

And here it is: a full-page advert in glossy color displaying a beautiful, double-edged Kabar pattern seven-inch blade. It boasts a brass hilt with four gleaming knuckles. Only the finest virgin steel, the page boasts. Totally unsullied! adds a disembodied image of Saxton Hale’s head, Until that first, satisfying stab, the way nature intended! Complete with a black, leather sheath, and the Mann Co. guarantee, it’s a fine trench knife available for purchase at $18.75.

Actually, the price is close enough to make you wonder if you’ve blabbed about it while drugged on the good doctor’s table. Supposing that you have, it was quite nice of him to remember.

Without another thought, you tear the order slip from the back of the catalogue and scribble in the numbers. That finished, it’s time for a few chapters of Monte Cristo; a fine end, you suppose, to an unexpectedly fine day.

But--outgoing mail is leaving tomorrow.

You have no letter home to show for it.
A frown creases your mouth. The pen has not left your hand yet as you set both catalogue and completed order aside. What can you say when you left so many things unasked and undone?

You roll to one side, lean over, pull a sheet of paper from drawer on the bedside table. You’re nearly out of time. Perhaps this time… perhaps the truth, and no questions.

Mom, I love you, and hope you’re well. I know I’ll be gone for most of the year, but I may be able to visit next spring. I’m relatively safe--

Well, mostly the truth.

--and excited for what this new work will bring. I think about you and Dad and R. every day.

You stop there for a while, tapping the back of the pen against your lips and teeth.

Some of my first paycheck will be coming soon; let me know if it has problems reaching you, and I’ll have it fixed right away.

Yes. That wasn’t so hard.

Give Dad and the boy my love.

All my heart,

You sign your name at the bottom, and spend several seconds just staring at it. Strange, how wonderful it looks, how precious, when you haven’t heard or seen it in weeks. Stranger still it is to think just how much you’ve taken your own name for granted your entire life.

And strangest of all: the thought that you really don’t mind.

Chapter End Notes

Spatz - sparrow ; chosen here for its sound--it's just close enough to Spezialist that a non-speaker might mistake one as a possible abbreviation for another
Today, you don’t peel off by yourself. You don’t blunder out of respawn on your own. You only lead the charge when there’s a teammate at your back. It works: four hours, and you haven’t seen the enemy spy once.

In fact, hardly anything of note has happened. Your team is leading by two captures, and the day is good--incredibly so. Perhaps it was the festivities of the previous night; everyone seems to be in a lively mood, belting marching songs and bold taunts at every opportunity. All right, so maybe Soldier is the only one belting marching tunes, but he sings enough for nine men, and you, for one, do not mind a bit.

When the bell rings for lunch, you wipe the sweat from your brow and wind your way through storage units and sand with more than a little pride. Scout has long since raced ahead, but Heavy stays at your shoulder looking as light as you feel, eyes twinkling in the sun.

You feel something like a song rising in your throat, and before you know what it is, you’re half-singing the verse: “Can’t help myself, I love you and nobody else! In and out my life, you come and you go, leaving just your picture behind, and I’ve kissed it a thousand times--” And then you’re stepping in that easy motown rhythm.

And Heavy is chuckling--not making fun, you can tell. Chuckling with fondness, trying to catch the rhythm himself with a bob of his head, but he can’t quite keep time with your invisible band.

And you feel good. It’s a fine day, for all the blazing heat, for all the blood, and your half-singing is a fully committed melody before you know it. And you know what? Damn it all: you deserve to have a good time.

“I’m weaker than a man should be, I can’t help myself; I’m a fool in love, you see. Want to tell you I don’t love you--” You hip-check Heavy and immediately regret it, because now you’re bruised and he didn’t even waver in his stride. But he’s laughing harder now, so you don’t mind terribly. “- -and I’ve tried, but I see your face, and I get all choked up inside…”

“You listen to Four Tops! ” A half-question from Scout, whom you can, of course, hear perfectly, despite being at least twenty feet away from the entrance to the locker room, just able to see him leaning against the wall with half a sandwich through the heat-hazy air.

“Is there anybody who doesn’t? ”

“Ya never know with all the old men around here.” He grins, shooting an emphatic look at Spy, who, to his credit, ignores the boy as thoroughly as though they stood on separate planets.
You shake your head, heading over to your locker, shrugging off your coat and weapons’ belt as you go. A bit of dry air on your button-down does you good, but it’s not quite enough, so you undo your cuffs and roll the sleeves. A great improvement, and with it, you’re ready to free your lunch from its cell. As you input the code with a couple turns of your wrist--your brother’s age, your birthday, your favorite number--you find you’re quite looking forward to a sandwich and a few bottles of water. Hunger never occurs to you during battle, but now…

There’s a box thrust under your nose. Tupperware, with your title in slanted, curling script. You follow the line of the hand that holds it, the wrist, the crisp-white sleeve, to find Medic with a slightly unnerving smile on his face.

“For me?” is a rather stupid question, but it leaves your mouth anyway.

Fortunately, he seems to know what you’re actually asking when he nods in answer. “It’s leftovers.”

Oh. “Thank you.” Your fingers close around the box. “Very much. I--” Medic’s hand brushes yours as he relinquishes his grip, and you look down at the lid. “You didn’t want…?” It’s labelled. He labelled it with your name. He never intended to eat it himself, even though, by all rights, he’d made it, and anything left was his.

“No,” he says, as though it’s the simplest thing in the world.

You tear your eyes away from the slanting script, and you can’t read his face. But he’d planned to give this to you all day. That was--

“Oh, come on! Can’t ya stop playin’ favorites for five damn minutes?”

Medic does not even turn around, just keeps his eyes level with yours. “Scout, when was your last examination?”

“What? Shit, I don’t know, maybe--”

A dark eyebrow arches neatly over the rim of a spectacle. “Would you like it to be now?”

“I’ve uh--got a thing I gotta do.”

“As I thought.” His eyes still haven’t left your face, and they glitter with humor. “Your own business, one might say.”

You can’t help the smirk that creeps onto your face, but it quickly disappears when you hear a grumbled: “Yeah, and apparently you do, too.”

Both brows are at attention now. “Did you say you’d like to have your kidneys swapped with goat bladders?”

“Bye!”

You try to swallow away the blush creeping up your neck and cheeks. “Well… anyway… thank you, Medic.”

He waves a careless hand. “Think nothing of it.” He hums. “Though--speaking of examinations, I’ll be opening you up today, and it might take longer zhan usual. I hope you don’t mind.”

Ah. This is a bribery. Maybe an apology. Definitely a mutual benefit thing.
Well... at least you’re getting something out of it.

Heading to the infirmary today is as easy as your walk to the showers. Perhaps it’s because you don’t think too much about what’s to come. Perhaps it’s the peace that settles in your chest each time you remember your letter is out, soon to be in your mother’s possession.

Medic is washing his hands in the deep sink when you push through the swinging doors.

“Ah, Specialist, excellent!” he greets. “You know what to do.”

Indeed you do. You step back to one of the curtained beds where there’s a gown already waiting. You strip your shirt and bra and stack them neatly, and slip the gown over your shoulders, then return to the operating table. Your stomach finally knots itself a little, but you studiously ignore it. “Ready.”

“Very good; have a seat.”

You perch on the table’s cold, angular edge.

“Everything went quite smoothly today, ja?” His gloves are already on as he presses the stethoscope between the folds of your gown; the instrument sends chilly prickles along your skin.

You wait until he’s finished to agree. “The best match we’ve had since… well, since I arrived, I think.”

“Hm…” Medic appears to think about that as he sets the stethoscope aside and gestures for you to lie back. “Certainly a highlight. The best for scoring and territory, perhaps.”

His summation is puzzling. You squint against the fluorescents and get as comfortable on your designated slab as possible. “How else would one match qualify as better than another?”

“Oh, all the territory and scorekeeping is quite pointless, really.” You hear the clink of scalpels and glass on their aluminum tray.

This has gone from puzzling to baffling. “Then… why are we here?”

“Vell--” He comes suddenly into view with a syringe drawn up with faintly amber solution. “--I am here to practice medicine.” You look studiously at the white light and ceiling tiles as he swipes a bit of alcohol over your skin and delivers the pinch of the needle.

A slow exhale leaves your lips when the liquid begins its icy curl into muscle and blood. “So you are.”

Medicine.

“I’ve only numbed the area today, Specialist; we’re doing away with narcotics.” His voice grows slightly distant as he takes the empty syringe and drops it with a dull sound in the deep sink.

“All right.” It isn’t particularly, but here you are.

Sensation, as your chest rises and falls with each breath, is becoming rubbery and thick, as promised.

There’s the sound of boot-heels on tile, tools on metal. There’s the low buzz of too-bright lights. The scent of alcohol and bleach and metal.
So cold.

You’d pile blankets on your mother’s bed after every treatment, but it never seemed like enough.

Here you are, and you’d sworn you would never be in a room like this again. But the gloves are on your chest this time, pushing coarse fabric to either side over numbed skin, distantly, professionally weighing and measuring the odds and risks of the procedure. Another pinch, stronger this time, and the doctor waits, bides his time as this solution takes effect.

He moves again, and you realize: the cold not-sensation of your chest being open to the world at large is quickly becoming routine. You’re getting accustomed to the pinch of the needle, the numbness as it spreads, the pressure of the scalpel, the crack of bone.

You’re becoming accustomed to seeing him there, eyes sharp, mouth curved in an eerily satisfied little smile. Accustomed to the reflection of fluorescents on his spectacles, of bloody, gloved fingers absently smearing blood on his jaw.

“I asked my mom about how she did it, once.” It spills out of your mouth like it’s always wanted to be said. You can’t blame it on painkillers this time. Medic meets your eyes sidelong, the smallest crease between his brows. “I said I couldn’t understand how she kept going to chemotherapy, to be radiated, said I didn’t think I would have been able to do it.”

His busy hands stop. He says not a word.

You close your eyes. “She told me that if I had to, I’d do it. That there’s no real courage or secret strength.” Eyes open, but you aren’t quite seeing him. “You can, because you must.”

Something happens behind Medic’s eyes, and the lines around his mouth deepen. “She is very wise,” he says, softly. And then, one gloved hand, still damp, clasps your naked shoulder. Your own blood stains your skin in the shape of his fingers, but even afterward, in the shower, watching it run down the drain in red whorls, you can’t bring yourself to mind.

Even later, in bed, you’ll wonder why you told him. You’ll think you ought to be embarrassed, ashamed that you’ve said too much.

And again, you won’t be able to bring yourself to mind--this time, in no small part because of the Tupperware container you find in the fridge while hunting for dinner, neatly labelled with your name in slanted script. You smile when you sit down to eat.

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY, BIG REVEAL #1

The More You Know: Chemotherapy first came about as a treatment for cancer after WWII, when a compound called nitrogen mustard (related to mustard gas used during the War) was discovered during tests to find better chemical agents for war or as protective measures. Nitrogen mustard was studied and found to be effective against lymphoma (a cancer of the lymph nodes) by damaging the cancerous cells’ DNA, preventing them from dividing into more dangerous cells. Then, in 1956, a compound called methotrexate was found to have similar DNA-disrupting properties, and was used to cure Metastatic cancer, and through the 1960s, many remissions (and, in some
cases, cures) were seen in different types of cancer treated with these chemicals, setting chemotherapy as the standard cancer treatment that it is today. For breast cancer in particular, chemotherapy was used as an "adjuvant therapy," meaning it was not used until the tumor had been removed, in order to destroy any remaining cancerous cells in the body.

Radiation has been used in the treatment of cancer since 1899. However, during the early 20th century, it was discovered that radiation could cause cancer as well as cure it by damaging the cancerous cells, so smaller and smaller doses were prescribed in order to prevent damaging side-effects. Then, starting in the mid-70's, the invention of the computer allowed radiation to be aimed more precisely, and map cancerous tumors in three-dimensions. The fic takes place before such precision, however, and even now radiation burn is a very real side-effect of treatment.
Chapter Summary

My great thanks, as ever, to my editor, Pelinal, here on AO3 for their invaluable feedback, and to all of you. Happy belated New Year!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Several days fly so fast you don’t have time to think about them.

Each day is marked, as ever, by blood and the scent of gunpowder, of sand coarse against skin, of bright flashes of pain and victory and defeat. The thought that any gains and losses are inconsequential haunt your evenings as you lie down to sleep, puzzling in the dark over what it all might mean. Needles and smiles and jokes and petty arguments fill each afternoon. The mornings smell of electrical burning beneath the coffee pot, of tea and soap and toast.

You wake in your clothes from the night before. Rummaging around for something clean, you find what’s left of the vitamins and take one, recalling dimly that it will probably help with the body aches that have been plaguing your nights.

When you leave your room, it’s in an undershirt and jeans. You can’t be bothered with more at the moment.

“Specialist, you look like you naked wrestled a badger covered in honey!”

You’re afraid to ask if you or the badger was covered in honey at the time. Perhaps this is a hint that you need a shower.

Soldier, it seems, emerged from his room just as you did--though he’s in his uniform, as usual, and you have the sneaking suspicion he’s been up for hours. “You’re not getting sick are you?”

You are tired, and you ache, but you suspect it’s not because you’re coming down with a cold. “I don’t think so.”

He hums, and you’re pretty sure you can feel him squinting through the helmet. “Maybe you oughta see Medic just in case. We need you in top shape!”

You smile. “I don’t think you need to worry about that, Soldier.”

“But I do! Do you have any idea what could happen if for ONE MOMENT WE STOPPED BEING DILIGENT?”

“Er--”

“THE ENEMY WOULD GAIN A FOOTHOLD, THAT’S WHAT! MORALE MUST REMAIN HIGH! OUR SKILLS MUST STAY SHARP! WE HAVE TO BE READY! AND TO DO THAT, WE MUST TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER, ENSIGN!”
He’s overwhelming, but his heart is in the right place, you suppose. You’re just so tired. You offer a grateful pat, the embroidery of his class patch rough on your palm. “I appreciate it, sir.”

Suddenly, the whole lower half of Soldier’s face turns just as red as his coat as he bursts out with a dry chuckle, and gives a sharp salute. “Thank you, ma’am!”

“What for?”

“For recognizing my rank, though you don’t have to, not when we’re all mercenaries here.”

You do recall that he doesn’t exactly have a rank in the first place, never having been accepted into any branch of the armed forces, but, technically, any rank you had has been stripped. And after all that, it’s nice to have someone consistently recognize that you did serve. So, really, who are you to say he doesn’t, when he fought just as hard as anybody? And it’s obviously important to him. “You’re due as much respect as anybody else, Sarge.”

The man is almost bouncing now. “I think you’ve earned yourself a promotion, Lieutenant!”

That draws a chuckle from deep in your chest, and then a giggle. “Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t encourage him.” Spy lights a cigarette, leaning on his door-frame, as you pass.

A well-placed elbow from Soldier almost sends the silver lighter flying. “Too late!”

________________________

Though the contract said alternate weapons could be used after your initial trial period, this is the first time you recognize one. How could you help but notice? There was just enough time between the flash of gold on the barrel of a hulking siege weapon and your instinctive drop behind your shield to register that the minigun to which you’d become accustomed was not this one.

Now your arm trembles against what feels like an impossible barrage and your ears pick up the BLU Heavy’s barking laughter over the ring of metal and Kevlar and the whir of perfect gunmetal machinery.

Each bullet feels like a miniature bomb rocking your defense, makes you dig your heels into the desert soil. The plexi is a blurred mess of cracks threatening to puncture.

But that isn’t the worst of it.

No, the worst is that when you finally get the opportunity to move, you find yourself looking down the bore of a Colt .45 coupled with your double’s twisted, mirror grin before waking up in respawn.

Damn, you hope your Ka-bar arrives soon.

________________________

“For what?” Scout swings his locker shut with one hand, and all you want to do is crawl into the nice, quiet space under your bed.

“Making?” You trade your Gyrojet for a water bottle and close your locker softly, holding out no hope that Scout will get the hint.

“Dinner.”

Your blood runs a little cold. “Oh, shit.”
"You forgot?"

"Look, Scout, all I want is a shower," you groan. Today hasn’t exactly been good. There’s a new, gentle throb in the back of your skull that has nothing to do with alcohol nor the nasty tumble you took last round facing the BLU demoman. You’re very nearly fresh from respawn, but you’d certainly made that life count… it bought an extra fifteen seconds’ edge that ended not long after with victory.

You just wish victory meant you could go lie down.

"Nobody’s sayin’ you can’t have a shower, Spesh!" He shrugs as you start toward the door, and doesn’t hesitate to tag along. “And ya don’t have to get fancy or nothin’. All I’m sayin’ is, if you don’t cook, we don’t eat.”

Your mouth twitches in an effort to remain neutral. “What if I’m not hungry?"

It’s worth it for the expression of horror that seizes him, complete with jaw-dropping action. “You-you wouldn’t do that, not to me!” He pokes miserably at his ribs. “Look at me, I’m wastin’ away here!”

“You’re right, you’re right. But don’t expect anything spectacular.”

“Oh, boy. Yeah, you were right.” You can hear Scout’s fork clink on the plate. “Consider my expectations lowered.”

You puff out your cheeks in a little huff, staring hard at your own plate. “The pantry was almost empty,” you mutter. “That’s not my fault.”

Heavy nudges your shoulder with his elbow. “Is better than when Sniper burned salad.”

“Oi! That was only because somebody thought it was a great idea to tinker with a perfectly functional stove!”

“Now hang on, there was no reason for you to use the stovetop to make the thing when there’s plenty’a counter space—”

“Not when this arsehole decides the kitchen’s a great place to clean medical supplies!”

“Rich, coming from a man who keeps urine in jars.”

In moments, no one seems to remember that they’re eating nothing more than stir-fried vegetables and Spam. You give Heavy a relieved smile, and settle in for what promises to be good fun.

Things culminate in a sleepless Friday night. You turn over to peer at the clock--11:30pm. You turn over again. Huff a frustrated growl into your pillow. Turn over again. Open your eyes. 12:00am. Again. 12:15. Again. 1:30. The night sky seems not to move at all; only a pale sliver of moon can be seen through the window against a hazy, black sky. The stars hardly glimmer through the shroud of half-formed clouds, insubstantial as smoke. There’s an itch under your skin. An ache behind your eye.

It’s like ants creeping under your skin, marching along muscles and stirring you to a buzzing, sleepless state.
No matter how long you lie still and pretend to be asleep, nothing happens. There’s only the buzz of the emergency lamp in the hall. The wan light of the moon. The steady huff of your breath.

The Lancaster-Charles makes a bit of an irregular lump under your pillow, but you can’t bring yourself to move it from its place.

Your skin crawls so badly you decide it might be best to get up. After all, there’s no work in the morning. You can sleep as long as you need--once sleep comes.

Slowly, you roll to the edge of the bed and push yourself up, pull your legs from under the still-cool blankets, rub your forehead and eyes, pinch the bridge of your nose. A walk. A walk or a hot shower ought to do some good--no worse than lying here without rest.

Your feet are cold on the rough-cut floorboards. From your wardrobe, you produce an old sweater, stretched from years of use, forest green, and so soft. When you tug it on, it combs your already itching skin unpleasantly, but it keeps the peculiar chill of the night at bay. With your keds on your feet, you’re ready to… roam the halls like some sort of specter, you suppose. You could even head outside and make things a bit *Wuthering Heights*.

Well--perhaps not. The last thing you need is a gun leveled at your face because you couldn’t resist the urge to tap on an unsuspecting teammate’s window.

The hall is dark and still. One of the emergency lamps flickers faintly. There’s the sensation of dizziness. A vague, crawling nausea. The atmosphere buzzes, and your steps seem driven by someone else entirely, guiding you on and on--maybe the ants, still shuffling under your skin.

Your sudden foray into the Gothic isn’t helping, either.

Shadows shift and darkness drags upon your shoulders. Old coffee stains seem splattered like blood. Cold claws your cheeks; the second curse of the desert, the opposite face of a scorching coin, a liar playing two sides.

The air smells of ash, you think. It ghosts a melody into your ears--the high, soft strains of a violin, sighing each note to an empty, uncaring night.

You stop. No… you’ve never heard this before. It can’t be our own midnight invention, it--

You hold your breath. Listen.

It isn’t a record. And it’s not in your head.

Someone is playing.

You’re not the only one sleep eludes; the music continues in soft strains, long phrases, rising and falling like the tide and then floating like a breeze through long grass, stirring grey-green trees. You stand dumbly without knowing how long. The pace of the violin slows.

It isn’t your business, but--

You follow it.

Winding down the hall, you find you don’t have far to go. Part of you wonders if you had known, suspected the whole time. You went forward, after all, not back to the hall where your teammates still sleep. And this was the closest habitation to your position when it began.
The infirmary.

Music reverberates from behind the doors, and you can almost feel it on your skin, in your chest. You imagine your heartbeat answers the rhythm— one two, one two, one two…

Rolling hills and grey moors. Mist that clings to a mountain-face, capped in snow. Stones lying still under the river-sun. The wind rises and winds among it all, travels, links them one to another.

Moss on the riverbank.

Your body is still now, mind no longer racing. Gratitude hums in your veins, but it seems so wrong to interrupt, like bursting a bubble suspended in the air before it’s due. A few moments more, and you’ll be ready to sleep, to go on your way without disturbing him. At the song’s end. You sit, so quietly, in the nearest chair; by some miracle, it doesn’t squeak, doesn’t groan.

Grass tickles your knees, and the sun warms your head. Wind whistles among the feathery strands of a willow tree, and skates across the river’s surface. There's a dock of plywood, old and grey, and a little white house one could very well call home.

You close your eyes.

Chapter End Notes

The piece I'm imagining for the last section (minus the piano, of course), if anyone is interested:

Fritz Kreisler - Prelude and Allegro in the style of Gaetano Pugnani
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJUvPa7qC0Y
This chapter hasn't been beta'd just yet, but as soon as it is, I'll update accordingly. I've just been sitting on this one a little while, and thought it'd be nice to have it out--Happy Valentine's Day, all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There’s a sort of stiff pain in your neck that abates when you roll it off your shoulder and squint. It’s still dark. You grunt, stretching your body in the hard chair, wondering--

Ah. You’re still outside the infirmary.

You squeeze your eyes shut and pinch the bridge of your nose, right between them. It seems eerily quiet now, all trace of the music gone, silent, like the half-second before a grenade detonates, the intake of breath before a knife slips between your ribs.

You feel a bit ill, but coax yourself up and back to your bed.

When you pull the blankets over your shoulders this time, it’s with a soft sigh, and the memory of music on the air.

The clock reads about 12:15, and judging by the instinct to bury your face in the pillow, that’s 12:15 pm in bright, glaring sunshine. Well, at least you slept. Blinking blearily, you’re a bit surprised no one’s come around to check and see if you’re alive. Of course, sometimes Sniper never makes an appearance on Saturday, so maybe everyone supposes it’s none of their business.

After a good stretch against your scratchy sheets, you’re seized with the desire to just… stay buried for the remainder of the day, draw up your blanket against the sunshine.

Sun. Disagreeable stuff.

With a huff, you pull yourself into a sitting position, whereupon your motivation runs dry. A few minutes with a book wouldn’t hurt--you’re long past breakfast, after all, and Monte Cristo is within ready reach. Perhaps he has some wisdom for you today. The book finds your hands. The Count’s threaded plans are all drawing to a close, you remember, pulling tighter and tighter in knots that weave a net of elegant revenge.

Unfortunately, all you can do is remember, as you get stuck on the same handful of words again and again and again and again and--

Stop. Close the paperback with a snap. Rub your hands harshly over your eyes. Evidently, your brain thinks you’ve spent quite enough time in bed, and so, you comply with its demands to get dressed and stand upright, slowly but surely. Shuffle into your bra. Shuffle into an undershirt. Shuffle into jeans and shuffle a button-down over your shoulders. Shuffle your feet into keds.

Somewhere in the midst of your quiet shuffling, you realize--
There’s no sound outside your room.

You frown, strain your ears. No arguing. No radio, no hammering, no water nor crash of dishes in the sink.

What the hell? This is not a good day for a mystery. It isn't that you don’t appreciate some quiet, but there’s a lingering stiffness in your muscles and the fog that just won’t leave your head…

When you shut the door behind you and enter the hall, you hope some sound will reach your ears, but, it isn’t so.

You search the kitchen first and find it empty, with only a pile of fresh coffee mugs and dishes in the sink to indicate that anyone had been here at all. You look out the window into the sandy yard-nothing. The common room is deserted as well.

Had everyone swanned off without telling you?

You can’t help a frustrated pinch of hurt at the thought.

“There you are!”

And you nearly jump out of your skin.

“Miss Pauling!” It’s too late to recover gracefully, so you ignore the fact that you are, apparently, a grown-ass mercenary who leaps when startled and hope that your supervisor will, too. You’re not exactly the picture of a solid investment this morning.

“I didn’t mean to startle you.” She adjusts her glasses, generously averting her eyes just a little so you can compose yourself.

“No, it’s--” You straighten your shirt and flick a couple of buttons into what you hope are the right holes. “--it’s quite all right, I was just… where is everyone?”

Miss Pauling raised her eyebrows like she’d nearly forgotten. “Oh, I just sent them into town for supplies; they’ll be gone for a couple more hours.” Before you can ask why, she holds up a square envelope. “I came to bring you this.”

Your mouth runs dry. You reach for it, hand unsteady; you recognize the curled script that makes your name and whatever PO Box address it came through. “Is…” Your fingers close around the cool paper. “Is there a problem?” That was rather fast, you don’t say.

Your throat begins to close. She’d sent the others away. She sent them so--

“What’s wrong?” you demand. You pinch the letter between your fingers. Make no move to open it. Can’t bring yourself to move. “Miss Pauling--”

“Hey, hey--nothing’s wrong that I know of.” She raises both hands, and there’s kindness in her eyes, but anger, anxiety roils through your stomach. Kindness could belie anything. Placating smiles are always a breath away from cold platitudes.

Your teeth bare in accusation. “You always know.”

“Specialist, please--”

“You always know, Miss Pauling. The Administrator always knows.”
Fingers lock in an iron grip about your wrist, and your jaw goes slack. “Specialist!”

You look down. Her brows are drawn in a tight crease, but her eyes remain soft.

“That’s her handwriting on the envelope, isn’t it?”

Your sigh is shuddering, deflated. “Yes.”

“And so…?”

You draw a deep breath. “She’s fine.”

Miss Pauling lets go, and the pale imprints her fingers left stand out on your wrist. Your eyes linger there for a moment as they begin to fade, watching the clear outline of each digit fade into mottled blurs. “I’m sorry,” you say. “That was uncalled for.”

She reaches for your shoulder now, squeezes it. “Just open the letter, Specialist. If you need anything, let me know.”

Your fingers still tremble slightly from the outburst. You slip them under the seal, tear the paper in a jagged line, breathe deeply before pulling the letter from its confines. You undo the trifold, bring out two sheets covered in your mother’s tight, even script—proof that she’s alive.

That doesn’t stop your stomach from turning over as one word leaps from the page before you can even read the first, neat line.

_Infection._

Ragged little attempts at breath, more irregular every second, and your hands tremble so badly that the ink begins to blur.

“Specialist—Specialist…” Miss Pauling has both your forearms now. “I told you it’ll be okay, didn’t I tell you it would be okay? It’s going to be okay.”

“Y—”

She did. She did, and she was _wrong._

This is _not okay._

You wet your lips, stare at curled script that won’t arrange itself into any more words. Her fingers are pressing lines into your skin, trying to ground you, but you can’t quite feel your hands or your soundless lips.

It’s never been okay.

You don’t know why you thought anything could ever be okay again.

The floor is cold. You don’t remember sitting down.

“They caught the infection in time to _administer antibiotics._ The days seem long while I’m confined to home, but I will recover. They _caught the infection in time_ to administer antibiotics—”

Miss Pauling.
“The days seem long while I’m confined to home, but I will recover. They caught the infection in time to administer antibiotics. The days seem long while I’m confined to home, but I will recover.”

Miss Pauling is reading the letter.

“She’s… says she’s okay?”

Miss Pauling stops, and you lift your head. “Yes--she’s going to be fine. She says she’s recovering, and my reports confirm that.” She’s kneeling beside you with the papers in one hand, clutching your arm tightly with the other.

“Thank you.” Your voice sounds cracked, dry, even to your own ears. You try to work up enough moisture to swallow. “I… I’m sorry. I don’t know what--”

“It’s all right.” She loosens her grip enough to rub gently, reassuringly. “You… care about her a lot.”

“Of course I do.” Now that the feeling is coming back into your fingertips and the world sharpens, so, too, does the embarrassment. You cup one hand over your eyes. “This wasn’t very professional.”

“This wasn’t exactly a professional part of my visit.” She squeezes your arm softly once more before letting go. “It won’t be in my report.”

“That’s--that’s very kind of you.” You gather enough courage to look at Miss Pauling again. You wet your lips, draw a deep breath. “Did you know I’d…” Fucking flake? Flip my shit? You don’t know what to call it politely.

“I had an idea,” she admits. “And I know it won’t affect your performance, so there’s really nothing for me to report.”

You tilt your head back against the rough, lumber wall behind you. “Enough of an idea to send everyone else off of the base.”

“Yes.” She hesitates. “I… don’t mean to embarrass you.”

“I believe you.” That doesn’t quell the feeling, however. “And… thank you. I’d feel worse if anyone else saw it.”

Miss Pauling smiles gently. “No trouble at all. You do need groceries.”

An empty chuckle sticks in your throat. “That we do.”

Silence falls, not pointed enough to be awkward, but too tense to be comfortable. It’s broken first by the quiet shuffle of paper as Miss Pauling folds the now-crinkled letter and extends it to you, then your quiet word of thanks. You hold the letter close to your chest.

“Depending on how much bickering they do, and how distracted Soldier and Pyro get... you have at least an hour before the boys get back.” She stands and offers you a hand which you accept, taking care to keep most of the weight on your own legs.

“Thanks.”

“And if anyone decides to ask, you can tell them that you did a supplemental interview with me about your weapons loadout.”
“That’s good… or she can tell them she was in surgery with me.”

You’re hot with embarrassment from your chest to the tips of your ears.

You lift your head. Heavy with dread, you see that Medic stands casually a short distance up the hall behind Miss Pauling, hands in the pockets of his labcoat, a self-amused smirk begging to be punched off his face.

“Medic, I told you--”

“Mm,” he assents, lightly, “I never agreed. Zhe Specialist is still my patient, you know. Really--”

“Medic!” Her voice cracks, sharp, like a whip, and even you involuntarily flinch. “Go. Now.”

His gaze flits to you for a moment, peering over his spectacles. You can’t meet his eyes, finding the smallest crease on that immaculate white lapel, instead. You clench your jaw. He inclines his head, and turns away without another word.

When you look at Miss Pauling again, her cheeks are flushed. “I’m so sorry. That--” She clears her throat. “Well--I should have made sure. Are… are you all right?”

You actually take time to think about that for a moment. All right? No. Better than you were moments ago? “Yes.” You straighten your back, smooth down the edges of the letter against your chest. “That wasn’t your fault.”

“Still,” she sighs, “it’s my responsibility.” She tugs at her blouse, brushes down her skirt. “Just--take your time. I’ll make sure he doesn’t bother you again.”

You rather doubt she can bar him from doing whatever he likes while she’s gone, but… “Thank you.” You extend a hand.

She studies it a moment before shaking it firmly, a smile teasing her lips. “Just doing my job.”

“And what is that, exactly?” Amusement half-starts in your voice. “Babysitter for mercenaries?”

Her smile broadens at that, and it’s contagious. She shrugs, but her voice, when she answers, betrays some pride: “I’m a Civilian.”

Your name is at the top in the same neat letters that labelled your school supplies for years --

I’m so glad, and more than a little relieved, to receive your letter! Even more so, I’m joyed that you seem happy in what you’re doing. I pray every day for your safety.

Your father and brother are well, and happy to hear from you. Your father is almost ready to retire again, I think, and keeps talking about moving someplace with better weather. Your brother is doing what he always does, insisting on staying here at home for just a few more months. Every time I tell him I’m all right with just your father at the house, he insists that he’s just trying to save money. He pretends not to worry about you, too, but did tell me to say hello for him. He must have read your letter fifteen times--but don’t tell him I told you that.

They also insisted that I have to tell you, though I don’t want you to worry, that I was hospitalized again for a few days last month. But, they caught the infection in time to administer antibiotics. The days seem long while I’m confined to home, but I will recover. I am grateful that the medicine
is doing its work, but one can only do so much reading and cross-stitching before getting a bit cross-eyed! I’m doing better already, I promise.

I know you’ll worry anyway, but please, try not to dwell on things too much. Remember that fretting doesn’t do good to me or you, just makes you tired to your soul.

That old, familiar refrain--and she’s right. She’s always right.

But it’s such a hard thing to do.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, this was a bit of a downer, and I apologize... but it's the set-up for something more exciting. ;)

Chapter Notes

Again, this chapter hasn't been beta'd just yet, but as soon as it is, I'll update accordingly. But, I apparently have a limit on my self-control, and have been excited for this scene to happen since chapter 4.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The entirety of the letter is nearly memorized, and your leg is cramping at the junction of the hip. Here you sit, pages pressed between your fingers, on the edge of your stiff bed, probably breaking down the mattress but unable to make yourself care. No sound but the ticking of the clock on your night-table and the whisper of paper on skin as you trace your hands over the words like a prayer.

Amber fluid catching empty light, a sluggish seep into fragile veins, burning slowly. Blood under the bed, a rusty stain on grey-white tile. Anti-septic that clings and bleaches lungs breathing refrigerated air. Monitors beep and whine, assaulting the ear as steadily as the march of the clock. Chill seeps into bone. Doctors speak, but never say anything.

Paper crumples and you scramble to smooth it out against your thigh. You fold it neatly into three parts along the folds your mother had made, and tuck the sheaf in the bedside drawer underneath fresh paper and pencils and the newest Mann Co. catalogue. Vitamins roll quietly on the wood inside as you slide the drawer closed.

Sharply, you sigh through your nose and rise, stretching cramped legs and spine. And then, you go, locking the door behind you. Your legs know where you're going even before your cloudy head does.

The double-doors are as imposing as ever, steel and sterile.

It's so quiet, you wonder if he's even inside. You stand there for a moment, just staring. You watch the quiver of fluorescent lights as they reflect on the doors, on the arm of every chair in the little hall. You hear their faint buzz and smell the lingering anti-septic. Your stomach turns, and that's what does it.

You push through.

"Medic?"

"In here."

To your right, the office door, labelled so neatly with his title, stands ajar. Medic stands behind a large desk absolutely papered in files, documents, and records. He appears to be digging through them, a pen in one hand, held high with a turn of his wrist, like he expects the thing to leak at any moment. He finds what he's looking for and tugs it out of a stack.

Then, Medic lifts his head, peering through his spectacles. “Well? Come in.”

You shove down the surge of embarrassment and enter. There's a low chair on this side, padded and covered in what might be leather, and you can't help but wonder how it was procured when the
You do, mostly because you feel strange looking down at him. You’d much rather see eye-to-eye. Ha, there’s some irony. Actually, this whole thing is--

“Well?”

Right. Why the hell are you here?

You do your best to meet his eyes, so strange without lenses to give you even an imaginary barrier. “What can you tell me about cancer?”

“I can tell you zhat you don’t have it.” He doesn’t drop your gaze, just speaks readily. It’s matter-of-fact.

“But can you, in theory, cure it?”

Medic’s brows arch, and he shifts, crossing one leg over the other, folding his hands neatly in his lap. “As I said, Specialist, you show no signs of the disease. Do you ask personally, could I cure it, or in the hypothetical, is there a cure?” His diction is perfect, precise, and you might feel uncomfortable with the way he refuses to be the first to look away if this weren’t so important.

“Both.”

He unfolds his hands, rests his elbows on the arms of the chair, refolds them. “It was never my area of study.” He says it like a warning. Like you’re liable to argue. Like he expects blame.

You swallow, mind ticking slowly. So strange, so out of place. A physician doesn’t hesitate to lie, to spit venom of omniscience. Only one word comes to mind:

“Please.”

Medic breaks contact, looking firmly down at the mess of the desk. His brow creases. “There are treatments.”

WHAM.

His eyes snap back to yours, and you leave your fist where it has connected with the desk, still seated; you hadn’t even needed to move. Your jaw clenches tight. You exhale slowly, through your nose. “I am aware.” You don’t picture your mother getting up from dinner, pale, telling you all, in an even voice, to continue. You don’t think of the day she collapsed in the garden and your brother leapt the distance to catch her before she hit the ground. “They said that, too, ‘treatments.’ What you mean is poison. They always say she’s getting better, even when she can’t leave the house because she’s throwing up in her own bed. It’s always improved, always treatable. No one ever says cured.”

For the first time since you met, you’ve pinned him beneath your gaze, unavering, fueled by
months of keeping quiet, months of blind trust, never arguing, sitting and fighting tears in windowless, soulless rooms holding too-cold hands and listening to the drone of doctors that said everything was going so well.

And Medic wets his lips. “Zhat is because there is no cure, as such.”

Your fist relaxes, returns to your lap like it’s been banished. You release his gaze, dropping your eyes for just a moment. A chill seizes your stomach. “What about the medi-gun?”

He shakes his head, almost imperceptibly, and the weight of it threatens to bow your shoulders. “The nature of cancer is—like so many things—to reproduce.” He shifts in his chair, considering. “It is like… a parasite. What do you do to a parasite? You kill it.” Medic leans just slightly over the desk, catching your eyes again, serious. “But, the diabolical genius of cancer is that the parasite is you.”

Your eyes drop back to your hands, to the deep, crescent-moon impressions scattered across the heel of your palm. You hear the high-backed chair scrape upon the floor as Medic rises and paces around the desk, speaking softly, musing. “Your own cells become the parasite, and to kill it, you must kill yourself.”

There’s a hard lump in your throat that you studiously ignore and stare harder at your hands. At your fourth finger where the skin has thickened over the years, cradled against the grain of a pencil your mother taught you how to use. The scar on your wrist from where you’d fallen against the asphalt in the tenth grade, and your mother had come early to take you home and clean up your face—which didn’t scar; you’ll never know why—and tell you to be more careful. The new callous across your trigger finger that evidences every check that returns home even when you cannot.

The palm suddenly on your shoulder pulls your gaze away. “But—to prevail…!” You meet Medic’s eyes—alive, dancing, enamored of some idea, just within his grasp. “To bring yourself so close to death that you survive, while zhe parasite withers away and dies…! This is excellence. This is not a cure, this is victory!” He offers a hand.

Victory. The idea stirs something in your breast. A smile and flippant joke as the nurse connects the IV with its saline and poison. Bright scarves, warm colors in every hospital bed because she insisted on bringing them. Flowers that still bloomed when she finally came home, like they knew her hardworking hands anywhere. You can, because you must.

With a breath, you accept, folding your fingers in his.

The distance you travel is short, across the medical suite to the windows on the opposite wall, where the carriers for Medic’s doves sit, to where the medi-gun rests, perched in its harness like some gliding bird of prey, fixed mid-air. “This is my finest work. But it does not do what your mother will if she is to survive—what she has done. I can rebuild men from almost nothing!” His hand tightens around yours before releasing it to reach up and roam the instrument with a passion. “But cancer…” He rests his palm along the barrel. “My machine rebuilds cells. Tumors are built from cells, your own cells, and the cancer has captured them down to the DNA—unless the cancer were completely removed, it would simply be rebuilt, regrown.” He turns to you again, intent, your gazes even now, unbarred by any obstacle. “Cancer cannot be cured, Specialist; it must be killed.”

Chapter End Notes
The More You Know: The chapter title, Pharmakon, is a term in ancient Greek for "drug"—but is used to describe both poisons and remedies

Previous to the 20th century, patient rooms in hospitals were built with large windows to give access to both sunlight and fresh air. Before good sanitation systems were in place, this helped control the spread of bacteria. In fact, even the linen closets and corridors had many windows in them for the same reason—and the practice was very effective. The only downside was that this created a sprawling building where staff would have to walk long distances from nursing stations and storage to patient wings.

It was not until 1937 that prioritizing efficiency over direct access to sunlight was suggested, wherein a hospital floor would use $\frac{1}{3}$ less space. So, by the 1950s, with antibiotics and improved aseptic practices, physicians believed they could maintain patient health without so many windows, and some even preferred the new temperature controlled environment with air conditioning, heating, and electric lights.

And so, windowless, air-conditioned patient rooms began appearing in the 1960s and 1970s. Because cancer treatment was going through new advances at the time, I imagine the Specialist’s mother would have gone to a newer hospital, perhaps a research facility, to receive treatment. Thus, the air conditioning and cold electric lighting that we find familiar today.
It must be killed.

Those four words are with you when you go to bed that night, and when you get up the next morning. To kill and to cure are not so separate as the hosts of physicians you’ve seen before pretend. Deny, deny, deny that any patient under their care had ever perished. Lie about the poisons and the radiation, couch them in fancy language, and say—as the hair falls in clumps and skin goes grey, blisters, burns—that this is *improvement*, that as the cells sicken and die, as the tumor is cut away, that all is *well*, that this is a *cure*: clean, clear, constructive.

Not Medic.

Returning from respawn, you see him at the second point, alone, wicked bonesaw in hand, grinning as the enemy scout sprints forward. Barbed wire catches the sun; the bat, wrapped tightly, sharp, gleaming—but Medic just rolls his shoulders like he’s waiting on the morning paper. Surely he knows that the scout has greater reach, that he’ll be struck before his saw can even begin to bite flesh?

And you’re just out of the Gyrojet’s range.

You take aim anyway, but Sniper’s voice stays your finger on the trigger: [“Wait for it.”]

For what? You're still running, but it’s too late now; the BLU scout raises his bat, and--

The teeth of the bonesaw catch on barbed wire as Medic steps smoothly with the swing, and momentum carries the boy past. The bat clatters to the ground. Medic’s fingers close around the holstered scattergun on the scout’s back--

For the briefest instant, the BLU is cradled in the crook of Medic’s elbow, and then--the teeth of the saw bite into his neck.

Blood spatters the point, sprays the doctor’s cheeks and coat in fine flecks, and the Scout’s legs twitch once, twice. The corpse slides to the ground as Medic takes a little half-step back, as in a waltz, drawing his arms out wide.

He smiles, tilting his head just enough to catch you from the corner of his eye. “Another successful procedure, wouldn’t you say, Spezialist?”

You stand dumbly, mouth half-open. “Indeed.”
In the back of your mind, the words are there.

Agony. White-hot and absolute. Not just radiating from your screaming shoulder, not simply the phantom sensation of needles where your arm and hand should be, but across your entire body.

Tears on your cheeks collecting every sharp speck of red dust. Blood pooling in a sorry brook as you drag yourself, remaining hand clawing at the ground, sand catching under your fingernails. Every inch you gain rips like lightning through skin and muscle and bone.

You can hardly see for the merciless sun refracting through tears, for the pain that blinds in scarlet sparks. You had been close to cover when you began. Only a ghostly sliver of hope whispers that you can make it, that maybe you’re already there, that you can rest.

But it doesn’t matter much; your fingers feel like ice, and the world spins and spins.

One more pathetic heave of your heavy form across burning sand, nonetheless. Another tearing pain in every nerve.

“Specialist!”

You hadn’t noticed… you’re face-down now, huffing pathetically in the mud of your own blood and tears. “Specialist!” But—that’s a voice you know.

“Medic!” Your lungs still work, protest though they may.

Suddenly, you’re staring at the ice-blue sky--and then, the dark crease of a concerned brow. “Scheisse! Your arm, where is it?” He disappears from your vision, leaving only the cold, cloudless atmosphere in his wake.

A laugh wracks your chest, crackling bolts of pain through your shoulders, your phantom limb. “Hell if I know!”

He returns, frowning, searching your face through his spectacles. “Spatz…” There it is again, that foreshortening of your name. “You know I can’t fix you without it.”

Yes, you remember. You close your eyes against the light, the creeping cold.

“Just make it stop.”

“Then give me your gun.” Your hand doesn’t obey they order, and you’re not sure if that’s because it’s the one you’re missing or if you simply have no strength left at all. “Unless you’d prefer the bone-saw?”

No. You’re lucid enough to know that. “Just--” Your ribs creak under the effort of breath “--take it.”

His hand, so light, closes around the mother-of-pearl inlaid handle, fingers running, in passing, along your thigh as he drags it from the holster. Warm, so very warm. Four barrels slide up and leave your hip. Then, the click of the hammer.

In darkness, the words are there again.

In crimson light, your body sings. Every step, the pounding cadence--your finger on the trigger, the heart of harmony--each push and pull of muscle, the soaring melody. In every bullet that glances
off your shield, a concerto--in the cries of your enemies, an orchestra.

And when the maestro demands just a little more in the low, sharp rhythm of his voice, you take copper and lead into your flesh, let the symphony score your skin. It rends, rips, ravages, scarlet and crimson blending, melting together in crescendo to burn it all away--

*Silence.* The moment of impact.

“Now, *kill zhem all.*”

You only wish you had a knife. One, two, three, four--the pistol, so easy, so impersonal, but they fall all the same--five, six--

The song washes through, makes your heart light, bids your feet to dance.

Bloody corpses disappear and leave only faintest traces in the sand like notes lingering on the air as they fade away. Scarlet and azure and burgundy.

But they will return, and when they do, you will pull the trigger again.

The words are there in the music.

---

Cacophony. The whistle of your Gyrojet, the crack of a pistol, boot-heels on steel, hum of the medi-gun, bullets on kevlar, bitten-off scream of frustration and rage--

Something’s happened. You turn.

Medic rips the knife out of his side with one hand, teeth gritted and gnashing against the pain, the blood, medi-gun still clutched in the other fist, weighing his arm down, but it’s no matter as he lashes out, sun gleaming on silver and scarlet. The blade slices a ragged tear through mask and flesh as the spy’s hands fumble for his revolver.

You bring your pistol about and squeeze the trigger, once, twice.

*Shu--shushh.*

Blood blooms violet in the breast pocket of his sapphire suit, soaks the crisp collar of his shirt. To his knees he goes, and you fire once more for good measure, punching a hole through the spy’s back.

Good.

“*Danke.*” A whistling wheeze returns your attention to Medic as he haltingly holsters the medi-gun. The side of his coat is soaking rapidly, crimson on white.

“Medic--”

*Ping!* A bullet glances off your shield and, without thinking, you counter with three shots toward the enemy scout, rapidly approaching. *Shit.*

“It’s all right.” He’s at your side, syringe gun in one hand, the other wrapped tightly around his torso, a vain attempt to staunch the blood. “I’m all--”

Suddenly, you’re catching him around the waist, Gyrojet abandoned, spinning across the point; through your shield, you can see the scout, seconds away, still unloading his pistol in vain. He’ll be
upon you in a moment, and you can’t draw your howdah without dropping Medic --fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck--

A whistle, and the BLU scout staggers. Another. He rips the syringe out of his shoulder, but it’s too late; he’s weaving like a drunkard. Two more, and he’s face-down in the orange soil.

Medic is grinning, though his arm trembles. He rests the gun on top of your shield. “Ha.” You can feel his ragged breath on your cheek, elbow pressing into your ribs with each shallow wheeze.

“Medic, we can’t--”

“Go!” You almost jump out of your skin, but it’s Heavy, close behind you, nearly on the point. “I will hold. Get medicine!”

You don’t wait, not even when Medic starts to protest; you simply readjust your grip, fingertips sliding, sticky, already soaked, and begin falling back. Desperately, you scramble to remember where you might find--

“Left. Storage.” He’s pale, sweat beading on his face when you chance a glance, tugging him along, shuffling, shuffling.

It seems like ages--but you reach the door and slam it shut behind you, syringe gun and ballistic shield clattering to the ground. Sunlight filters through cracks in the slats of rough-cut timber, just enough to see, and slowly, you lower Medic to the floor, where you help him shuffle off the heavy medi-gun. Then, you scramble for the kit.

When you return to his side, Medic is stretched out flat on his back, both gloved hands pressed tight over the wound, eyes closed. He doesn’t open them even when you snap the lid off the box and begin rummaging for disinfectant. *Shit.* Bloody fingertips let the bottle slide back amongst the bandages twice before you get your leather-clad palm around it and pry the cap off.

“Medic.” You nudge his hands, still clasped tight to his side, blood soaking his coat all the way down to his thigh now. “Come on--”

“Nein.”

Gritting your teeth, you start using more force, but he holds fast. “Medic, I need to bandage this now.”

He opens his eyes, alight with amusement, but not quite focused through his spectacles. “I’ve already lost too much. I have--mm--” He hisses softly, breath hitching. “I would say, five or ten minutes before brain death, even bandaged.”

“What?” You let your hand fall back to your side, disinfectant braced on your knee. “Why did you let me bring you here?”

Medic grins. “You weren’t listening.”

The cap goes back on the bottle, tightly. “*Shit.*”

He tilts his head back, closes his eyes again, and you see it now--the grey pallor slowly seeping into his skin, mottling lips and cheek. “And Heavy wouldn’t exactly…” It takes three trembling, shallow breaths before he can continue “...approve of what I’m--hggh--going to ask.”

The words are there between his breaths.
You know what he’s going to say, and your hand wraps around the pistol at your thigh before he opens his eyes again and fixes them upon you. “The flesh is weak.”

A slow, steadying breath as you stand, take aim, and his gaze does not leave you, not once.

*It must be killed.*

Chapter End Notes

φαρμακος (*Pharmakos*) - druggist, poisoner, sorcerer... but also, a human sacrifice to the gods as a means of purification or atonement, often a person already condemned to death

*Spatz* - sparrow; chosen here for its sound--it's just close enough to *Spezialist* that a non-speaker might mistake one as a possible abbreviation for another
Tea and Company

Chapter Notes

My thanks to phoenix-youngblood on tumblr for taking a look at this chapter for me! Should further revisions be done after my editor takes a look, I'll update accordingly, as always.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You find you can read again, but the quiet of your room is no place for it. There, thoughts loom too loud and close, barely concealed in your bedside drawer. In silence, you are alone. In the deserted expanse of wood and cotton and iron, failures feed memory, and memory throttles your mind until all you can see is white, white walls--

The little library, too, is empty of breathing people, but so, so full of kings and beggars and lovers and scholars in the heady scent of ink and paper. From here, you can hear the television turned a little too loud, but not clearly enough to discern any words. The distant buzz of a saw vibrates up through the floor from what you assume is Engineer’s workshop, and the hum of an electric fan stirs the hall. Here, there is just enough evidence of life to fill the air around your mind, enough to allow you to concentrate.

Settled in, you find yourself wrapped in the ever-tightening machinations of Monte Cristo. On and on his game goes, all the pieces settling carefully into place, unti:

The Count had been carefully watching Caderousse’s death agony and he saw that the end was now drawing near. He leaned over the dying man and whispered into his ear, “I am--------” And his lips uttered a name so softly that he himself seemed afraid to hear it...

One, you almost intone aloud. You smile, cannot help but smile in your chair as the Count declares the first stroke of his revenge. With the end of the chapter, you suppose it must be just about time for a cup of tea to--

Heavy is settled in the armchair opposite.

“Oh!” You fold your novel on your lap, trying not to look terribly ruffled. “I didn’t even hear you come in!”

Heavy lifts his head, removing rectangular reading glasses from his nose. “Did not want to interrupt.” He nods toward your book. “I know this one--is very good. About…” His brow furrows in an expression you recognize as word-searching. “Mm--winning… with justice. People deserving it die.” You open your mouth to guess, but he shakes his head, holds up a finger, and you wait, patiently, as he concentrates, mutters a few phrases in what must be Russian. “Is… revenge! Story of revenge. Very popular.” He marks the place in his own book with a finger. “Is film, too, I think.”

“Yes! But that was years ago.” Ah, to have known Heavy when he was in school, too, both reading the novel that would become so personally important. Maybe… “Have you ever seen it?”

“No.”
Your mouth breaks into a grin. “Neither have I… maybe we could find a copy of it somewhere?”

“I would like that.” He smiles. “Good rest from cowboy movies.”

You utter a mock-groan. “Anything might be better than another cowboy movie.”

“Mm…” Heavy’s eyes grow distant, a small frown catches his mouth. “…but they are better than news, sometimes.”

A weight settles on the room as you recall last night’s reports, the rumors of war between China and the Soviet Union. Former allies, turning on each other, for what? Power? Some stake in Afghanistan? It gives only small relief to think there are no missiles turned on the United States, but if any other powers were to get involved…

“There have to be better times ahead… I’m sorry, Heavy.”

He shakes his head. “My family is safe. And the Soviets…” His frown deepens the creases around his mouth. “They are not Russia. This is not what was supposed to be, and they will have their fall.”

You nod, without knowing what to say. After getting to know Heavy, you had begun to wonder if, perhaps, the USSR was not what people claimed; nothing awful could have created someone like Heavy. But people aren’t their governments, are they?

He watches as you set your book aside, still struggling with something to say. You don’t want to ask anything that might—"Is all right,” he says. “Maybe someday, I tell you, but today…” He shrugs. “Is okay.”

“Thank you.” You offer a small smile. You still don’t know what to say, but… “I was thinking about making some tea… do you want some?”

A nod, and his face relaxes, just a little. “This would be nice, thank you.”

You roll your shoulders, give a small stretch before standing. “Do you take milk or sugar?”

“Both, please.” He replaces the glasses as you nod.

“No problem; I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Take your time,” he calls as you descend the creaking stairs, probably already absorbed in his book again.

You try not to think too much on it, the bone-deep weariness that you catch in his eyes sometimes.

Engineer bustles past when you reach the hall, a sandwich in one hand, a sheaf of papers in the other that he’s frowning at so hard that you’re surprised it hasn’t caught fire. He’s gone in an instant without even a nod; in fact, you’re not sure he even knew you were there. If he left the shop… you strain your ears--yes, apparently the saw had stopped sometime in the last hour, and you never noticed.

The television is still running, though, some kind of soaring music drifting through the halls now, maybe from an epic film. Hm. Figures somebody would finally switch things up without inviting anyone else. A quick glance as you pass the door reveals Soldier and Scout on the sofa, absolutely riveted. There’s even a tissue crumpled in Solly’s hand. You try to keep the rising giggle contained in your chest. Maybe they just didn’t want to embarrass themselves. You try not to smile until
you’re at a safe distance.

When you reach the kitchen, Sniper is bent double, head in the refrigerator--moving bottles around from the sound of it--muttering something under his breath. You elect to leave him to it, and make your way to the cabinet by the sink. Two clean mugs find your hands--one cream with the RED logo, one plain black--and set them on the----

“BLOODY HELL!”

_Crack! Ping! Skitter._

And now they’re both in pieces on the floor.

“Bloody tell somebody when ya come in the room, would ya? You’re as bad as the damn spook!”

You eyes slide from his aviators to where your hands are still outstretched: Sniper’s closed around the neck of an unopened bottle of beer, and yours blocking the business end with the crook of your thumb. A beat. Two. Three. Slowly, you lower your arms at the same time.

You swallow. “It wasn’t intended.”

“Try to make some noise next time, then, would ya?” Sniper rights the bottle, squints at it behind his amber shades as though expecting the top to blow off.

You turn to assess the rest of the damage. There’s shattered ceramic from your feet all the way to the table. “Yeah, guess I’ll remember that.”

He follows your gaze and sighs. “Here--I’ll get it.”

“I’m the one that dropped--”

“An’ I almost knocked ya over the head,” he rubs the back of his neck, eyes still on the floor, “so we’ll call it even.”

Your mouth presses in a thin line—you ought to have remembered that everyone else is just as jumpy as you after eight hours of explosions, after all—but you relent. “All right; thank you.”

“No worries.” He moves to get the broom, and you fetch the kettle from the bottom cabinet rather than try mugs again just yet.

When he’s done, Sniper trades the offending bottle for a fresh one from the refrigerator, and tips it in a little salute off the brim of his hat when he passes by. “Now, don’t you go sneakin’ up on me again, or I’ll have to put a cowbell on ya.”

You grin. “If you put a bell on me, you have to get one for Spy.”

“Ha, not a bad idea, that… the trick’ll be gettin’ him to keep it on.” He gives a half-wave, and disappears through the swinging door.

Soon, the kettle is boiling with a cheery little fire under it, and then you’re carrying a baking pan stacked with the pot and two mugs, one cup of milk, and a dish of sugar carefully up the stairs.

You set it on the little table and pour, watching steam rise and roil in a soothing mist. Heavy’s eyes are on you, book set neatly aside, when you turn back to him with his mug--another of the RED logos. He takes it carefully. “Thank you.”
“You’re very welcome.” You’re just thinking of snuggling back into the chair with your book, mug in hand, when--

“You and Doctor, you are liking each other, da?”

Your palm burns where it’s suddenly closed like a vice around the thin ceramic. “Wh--what?”

He calmly sips his tea like he hasn’t just accused you of--well, maybe you’re leaping to conclusions, but it sounded like--”You are not so jumping now when you go for surgery. In battle, together, you kill armies of crying baby-men!” Heavy meets your eyes over the rim of his glasses. “He does not worry you.”

Oh. Oh. Yes, yes of course, that makes a great deal more sense.

You find yourself chuckling, quite possibly out of sheer relief. “Yes, you’re right. We’re getting along better.”

Heavy nods, smiling over the rim of his cup. It makes sense that he would care about how you get on with Medic; you’ve noticed they’re close to one another, effective comrades and friends--and, you flatter yourself that Heavy seems fond of you, too.

“What is different?” he asks.

Your brow creases. What changed, indeed?

You take a slow sip from your tea--it’s perfect, sweet, dark with the faintest edge of bitterness, rich, and almost hot enough to burn. But the question… it is not so simple. “Just… time, I suppose. We’ve talked, many times--I mean, there isn’t much to do during surgery besides talk, and I’m there almost every day. And I wouldn’t call those ideal circumstances, but the conversations aren’t unpleasant.” You wrinkle your nose. “Well… not usually.” You sit down, slowly, settling back in the chair. “He’s more respectful than I gave him credit for.” Your fingers tap the edge of the mug. “It’s not that different from the rest of the team, right? You spend time with them, see them bleed and eat and kill and play, and one day, it’s all… turned into respect.”

Heavy hums, folding one hand almost all the way around his mug. “I think,” he says with a twinkle in his eye, “I know what book to give you.” He holds up one finger just before you can sound even a single thrilled shout. “I do not have translation yet, but I will start looking.” He smiles. “I think you will like it very much.”

Chapter End Notes

The text at the beginning is, once again, from Alexandre Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo*, translated by Lowell Bair.
Midnight Vellum

Chapter Notes

Once again, my thanks to phoenix-youngblood on tumblr for taking a look at this chapter for me! Should further revisions be done after my editor takes a look, I'll update accordingly, as always.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Whirling in the dark, bits of singing nonsense spattered among images of white walls, of hot sand, of blood glistening in the sun, too-bright fluorescents, flowers fading in their vase, grey, misty rain-

Your brain won’t stop.

Flames and bullets and red, copper gleaming, crimson on silver, running, pooling, slick, fingers pawing intestines running ribbons, no air, no air, no air, no no no no--

Sit up and ignore the way the room spins as you gasp for breath. Inhale. Exhale. Your lungs don’t burn; the air is cool. There is no sand under your fingertips, only the rasp of stiff sheets. But you’re trembling, arms, hands, legs, and toes.

Fuck.

Inhale, hold the breath until it grows tight and stale. Exhale.

Mouth is dry.

You throw still-vibrating legs over the edge of the bed, grit your teeth. Slowly, you lower your feet to the floor, settle them. A few moments and they become steady enough to retrieve some loose pants and slip on your keds.

The walk to the kitchen is spent trying to control the leftover tremors in your fingers, and by the time a cold bottle of water is in your possession, they’re steady again. In the dark, the water feels impossibly wonderful on your lips, and you drink greedily until it’s empty, dispose of it. Grab another to take with you.

Vaguely, you wonder what time it is, in this half-real world, so impossibly quiet.

You don’t want to go back to bed. Your brain still feels like a trembling wheel, round and round, sending signals to keep every muscle on edge, ready to flee. Your legs itch like they need to run. Rub your face, pinch the bridge of your nose. Maybe a trip to the gym wouldn’t hurt…

Except you need to be ready for battle first thing in the morning.

Pace. Back and forth across scuffed tile. Window, refrigerator, table, wall, window, door window. No. Nothing for it; your legs protest the very thought of returning to bed, muscles crawling like they’ve too much energy, and this little kitchen can’t contain them.

So, you slip out into the desert chill, and into the gym. It’s easy to start a brisk jog around the
perimeter, to watch the boxing ring and free weights and standing targets breeze by. One, two, three, four; one two, three, four, a steady rhythm of steps.

The stillness is eerie compared to the electric atmosphere that charged the place only a couple weeks ago during your bout with Heavy. Perhaps he’ll be amenable to doing it again soon. Perhaps, if you exhaust yourself in the ring each evening, maybe you’ll begin sleeping better. Maybe you can even convince some of the others to get a little variety...

You recall Medic’s offer.

And this time, you consider it. It’s been so long now, since that bloody afternoon, since you lost sight of the infirmary and lashed out that you’re not sure how you ever saw a resemblance between your medic and his BLU counterpart at all. The facial expressions are always wrong: no one else has ever looked at you like you’re nothing more than a bundle of matter, barely flesh and blood. Nails dig into palms. You don’t want to see that face, not now. Not ever again. Something else, something else, before--

Medic. Challenging Medic to a bout.

Yes, that’s safe. Sizing up the fight.

He’s tall, of course, broad in the shoulders, but not so large as Heavy. It would be a completely different match. The way he moves on the battlefield, striking so fast that it’s dizzying to behold, even while carrying a bulky apparatus, leads you to believe he’ll be even faster in the ring. Much faster than Heavy, certainly—not that Heavy’s strikes are anything to sneeze at.

In fact, this time, you would be fighting someone of the same weight class. Yes… wouldn’t it be fun to see how he does, completely out of his element? No weapons, no drugs, no needles… just fists and wits. The way his mouth turns at the corner when weighing his odds. The way it turns so easily into that razor-sharp, bonesaw grin when he makes the first move. How might it feel to have all that energy and precision directed at you this time?

What a fight it could be! Tomorrow evening, provided nothing particularly insane happens between morning and dinner, you’ll ask.

By the time you’ve come to that conclusion, your breath is coming in heavy gusts, heart racing with exertion, and your legs, while not as tired as the rest of you, at least seem to have settled to a soft hum. The brisk walk back to the building should be enough cooldown. And then--

Bed. In the dark. Alone with your thoughts.

You catch both your hands in your hair, scrubbing uselessly at your scalp. Aren’t you an adult? Aren’t you meant to feel like a normal human being? Can’t you control your own brain long enough to--

Music again.

Hands return to your sides as the door creaks and closes tightly at your back with a click, exhaling the last breath of cold, night air on your neck. You don’t remember exiting the gym, but that’s no matter--

Violin. Sighing long notes of gentle breezes and flickering flame. Candles in the night and pen gliding on paper that curls near an open window, where, below, water flows gently in a whispering stream. From the eaves, water drips, drips, drips, pools grey and blue in moonlight.
You know where to go.

The doors are closed, but you can hear the song clear as the morning sky. Writing by candlelight as white wax drips slow and sullen on glinting brass. The air smells like the wet springtime soil, like lemon balm used to polish a mahogany desk.

The chairs are, as always, here. There’s no shame in staying to listen.

So quiet, each melody drawn with the bow, but it’s all you can hear. So immediate, it’s all you can think.

Lean back against the high, plush arch of the desk-chair. Let the vellum, painted in tight, curling script, lift up and away in the breeze. Let them sail away, like fluttering birds, out into the silver night.

Yes… just a few minutes, and you can face your room again.

“Specialist.”

Smoke. Smells like grandma’s front room, spicy, heavy in the air. Safe.

“Specialist.”

You think someone is talking, but you really wish they would just go away.

“Specialist.”

Ugh. You think you should be offended that he apparently came in without knocking. Your mind is heavy, hazy. Better open your eyes, try to figure out what the hell he wants. *Nnnshit.* Why in heaven’s name is Spy talking to you in the dark? And *holy hell* why does your neck feel like it got wrenched three directions in a boxing match?

“Specialist, there’s been a change in plans.”

You blink, dumbly. “What?”

Spy frowns, brow no doubt furrowing under the mask, but continues patiently. “We will not be on the field today; I am preparing to steal the enemy intelligence.”

Oh. Oh, right. Okay, but--

You’re not in your room. You’re sitting in a chair. And… metal double-doors. Rows of seats... Ah. You fell asleep outside the infirmary, and that means Spy has--

He cocks a derisive eyebrow as you piece everything together. “You may want to get dressed.”

And *there’s* the embarrassment rushing to fill your cheeks. “Yeah, I--look, I know this is strange, but I just couldn’t--”

“I’m sure.” He waves a dismissive hand, turns slightly away, but you can still see a smirk turning the corner of his mouth in the dim ember of his cigarette. Ass. “You will be needed at the edge of the BLU base to ensure I am not followed. Expect the alarm at seven-thirty, and I will expect you fifteen minutes after.”

You nod, push your groaning muscles into a standing position. “Okay, I--” Oh *hell* there goes a
nice spike of pain from your neck right into your brain. You grimace. “What time is it?”

“Six o’clock. But I advise being ready at spawn in one hour. I will need cover if things go wrong.”

“Of course.” Your cheeks are still burning. Sleeping outside the infirmary; what are you, a lunatic? Yes, the professionalism is appreciated, but-- ”Seriously, Spy. I couldn’t sleep last night. I wandered around for a bit and... sat down, apparently--”

He flicks his wrist again, the cigarette between his gloved fingers casting smoke in the air, hazily catching the dim glow of the emergency lights. “You don’t owe me an explanation, I’m sure.”

Why you? Why this? Why him?

It’s too early to come up with any sort of retort, and the muscles in your neck are still berating you for your midnight stupidity, so you settle for a mediocre eye-roll. “I’ll see you in an hour.”

“An hour and forty-five minutes,” he corrects. “If all goes to plan.”

You pinch the bridge of your nose, hoping it’ll dispel the headache creeping in to settle behind your eyes. “Goodbye, Spy.”

There’s a smirk in his voice, a gentle hum as his cloak activates. “Au revoir, rêveur.”

It’s not fair. You know he’s making fun of you, and you have no clue what manner of name-calling he’s stooped to now. What a fine start to the day.

Chapter End Notes

The music I was thinking of this time was ‘Air on the G String,’ Johann Sebastian Bach
An absolutely incredible solo rendition on violin: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgAw93L9gG0
The icepick screech of the siren drives nails into your skull, intensifying the tension headache that has most certainly not abated since you woke, but—as promised—you’re in place, underground, on the edge of BLU’s base. Situated dead center between two cinder-block walls, you hold your shield at the ready, not entirely sure what you’re waiting for but certain you’ll know it when you see it—or don’t see it, as the case may be.

It feels like you’ve been in position for an eternity, headache compounded by every wail of the alarm. Even a single thought feels too large, too complex to hold onto for more than a moment, pain stabbing behind your eye, reaching into your gut to stir your meager breakfast into nausea.

Lights too bright. Body too heavy. Why won’t that damn siren just--

**CRACK, CRACK!**

Knees bend, shield up. Gunshots ring over the alarm now--too close. Furrow your brow as though that might help you see through walls and around corners. Lift your Gyrojet to a ready position at your shoulder.

There!

The flash of red as Spy materializes is the only thing keeping your finger from trigger. He sprints with loping steps, clutching a blue briefcase against his chest.

“Move, move!” he hisses, and you turn just slightly to allow him to brush by. Then, over his shoulder, “Hold them off!”

**Zzing!** A bullet whistles far too close for comfort as “them” charges into the hall. BLU scout, pyro, and… their sniper?

Yes, there aren’t any ideal perches or nooks in these narrow halls, but that beanpole and his rifle aren’t going to be useful rushing like--

**Rtatatatatat!**

You duck back behind your shield. Right. Submachine gun. Shit. You peer through plexiglass, watch the scout and pyro spread out, one one each grey wall.

Between the submac fire and actual flames, you’re not going to have any opportunity to get off a shot before they’re on top of you. Damn, you wish Medic were here. Things are so much easier when you don’t have to worry about getting your hand shot off while returning fire.
And the pounding in your head won’t cease.

There’s nothing for it—you can’t stay behind your shield like this forever; the pyro is only feet away, readying their flamethrower.

You poke the barrel of the Gyrojet out just enough to fire two shots. *Shush, shu-hush!* Squint through the window.... one grazes the suit, draws only a thin line of blood. The second bounces off the rubber like a ball of crumpled aluminum. Shit. Already too close for the bullets to reach velocity.

*Ratatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatataa*

*Shit, shit, shit, shit.* You need to think. But there’s so much damned noise.

The flamethrower lights up, adds an eerie hiss to the gunfire that ricochets down the hall.

The Scout can’t get to you, pressed as you are against this wall, behind your shield, but the pyro will force you to change angles as they come upon your unprotected side; then, it’ll just take one shot to the back of your head—and that’s if the scout decides to be kind.

A transparent plan. But how to counteract it?

Noise, noise, so much *fucking* noise.

The pyro is close, too close, kevlar hot against your arm. You’re going to have to change the angle of your shield, expose yourself, or let them press you backward, down the hall. Retreat isn’t a bad option. Heavy and Medic are at the next junction, and, provided they haven't met any resistance, they could dispatch these three for you without trouble.

Their sniper has stopped firing now--only the roar of flame fills your ears.

Bum rushing the Pyro is an option. Not a good one, but an option, while the sniper reloads--and if you can get a shot off and into the scout fast enough…

Fuck! If you could get your sluggish fucking brain to work sometime this century…!

Let your feet drop you back a few steps toward the next hall, to Medic, to Heavy. Slow and steady down the hall will buy more time than wasting your life in a foolish attempt to charge forward and just be done with it.

Damn everything--if they’d positioned Medic with you in the first place, this little skirmish would be over already.

March slowly back, stay against the wall, make sure your feet don’t get tangled up together.

Chance a glance backward down the hall in your steady, sluggish dance, Pyro unaltering; they can do this all day, but even the smallest misstep as you creep so slowly back, and you’re… well… *toast.*

That would be a lot funnier if your brain weren’t trying to beat its way out of your skull to the rhythm of every bullet.

Your legs protest this steady abuse, crouched, shuffling back, tense from ankle to hip, still moving steadily only because anything less means a long and painful death as flame sears skin, devours flesh, eats and eats until there’s only agony, wishing for mercy, for death, for--
Sweat rolls down to sting your eyes. Don’t think about it. Just creep back, legs bent like a crab, ignore the way they burn in exertion, resolve to practice this maneuver more off the field. Forward is such little trouble. But backward...

Now would be the perfect opportunity for a fourth member of their team to rout and finish you from behind--most especially that bastard spy. You can only hope he’s focused on theft at this moment, because you can’t afford a second glance, lest your shield falter even a fraction.

Deep breaths. One step. Another. An--shock, needles of pain racing through your leg. Your ankle turns--tendon seizing from knee to calf, and you fire off a shot that diverts the gout of flame for half a second. *Shit*, you’re not going to make it. Your legs can’t take this.

Something, something, you have to do something. There’s no single thought you can scrape together, no plan, but there has to be--you’re overlooking a simple solution, you know it. You keep reaching, reaching, but there’s nothing in your brain, absolutely nothing, nothing, nothing but all that damned noise--

Flat on your back--pinned--gasping too-dry air under the press of an overheated shield. You had frozen in the middle of the hall. Just stopped moving. How? How could you have done nothing? And now, as though scenting blood in the water, the pyro is on you first--crushing arms and chest beneath kevlar that’s burning through your sleeve and into skin. Through charred plexiglass, you can make out only that black, empty visage of a gas mask.

Oh, no no no no no no no, stupid, stupid--

Your Gyrojet is gone from your hand, not that it would have been of any use. The howdah is your only hope now, broken wrist from kickback or no. Black gloves claw the edges of your shield, heavy boots kick and bust your legs and knees and if you can *stand* after this, you’ll be amazed.

One hand closes over the Lancaster, while the other remains pinned, alternating between trying to force the Pyro up and off and pulling the shield tighter to your chest to keep you from exposure as the pyro, in turn, tries to pry your shield from your body, and pins you tighter, trying to reach around and seize your skull, fingers writhing like snakes.

The howdah only draws in degrees. The shield is wrenched up, you pull it down, the gun moves only a fraction before being pinned back under your torso.

The pyro is screaming something under that mask, and though not a single word comes clear, it chills your blood.

Up and down again, howdah sliding closer and closer--then, with a deep breath, shove the barrels out from the edge of your shield, brace the trigger guard on the metal edging--*BOOM!*

Blood spatters the plexiglass window like rain across a windshield. Half a sigh of relief passes your lips, and you heave the corpse off, raise your miraculously safeguarded hand--

The single, silver barrel of a pistol between your eyes.

"Goodbye," says the scout.

Fuck.

You’re not ready when respawn spits you out, and you stumble, catching yourself with forearm, hip, and knee on the concrete floor. Lay there for a moment, head spinning, lower it to the crook of
your elbow. Reeling. How could you have let that fall apart so stupendously?

[Victory!]

The nice thing about grabs for intelligence, they're over quickly when done right. And this time, no real consequences for your stupidity. Very, very lucky.

You release a slow breath through your nose, and the fight leaves your limbs in a way it hasn’t since your earliest instances of respawn. Oh, wouldn't it be nice to just go to sleep? Just close your eyes and let the pounding in your head slip down into sweet nothing. But you have a pistol digging into your thigh, and the chill of the cement seeps quickly into your uniform.

“Uh… Spesh, you doin’ okay?”

You can’t even find the energy to be embarrassed. “Yeah.”

“Why are you on the floor?”

Slowly, you twist your torso, press both hands to the cold concrete, begin the laborious process of sitting up. “To make you ask questions.”

“Ha, ha--your ma teach ya that one?”

A little huff leaves your lips that was probably meant to be a laugh. “Yeah.”

Scout smiles wryly, a strange expression for such a youthful face. “Mine, too.” He offers a hand, and you take it, grateful, your limbs still impossibly heavy. “Respawn hit ya hard?”

“Yeah. It hasn’t done that in a while, but…” You shrug, letting that thought drift into nothing. No explanation, just a nebulous sort of non-answer that always results in gestures of understanding, even when no one knows what was meant to be said.

On cue, Scout nods as though you’d explained and starts down the hall back to base, toward the stairwell you don’t feel like tackling. He half-glances over his shoulder to make sure you’re still with him. “Well, we got the stuff, so that leaves a whole day! Maybe you should think about restin’… you’re looking pretty shit for bein’ fresh out of respawn.”

That does garner a bark of laughter. “Don’t sugar-coat it or anything.”

He turns, walking backward to face you, and winks. “Hey, it’s just because I care.” He turns back just in time to begin the stairs, though you’re sure he could have managed based on the way he runs the obstacle course.

Meanwhile, you’re schlepping each step like you have lead weights strapped to your boots. Each step drives a shock of pain through your bones and into your skull. “I just haven't been sleeping well, that’s all.”

“Huh.” He rubs the back of his neck, but doesn’t look at you. “Is it real bad?”

You frown, not sure whether to tell the truth. It’s nobody’s business, and you don’t need pity. “Just a bad dream or two sometimes.”

Scout stops at the top of the stairs and waits with his hand on the steel door. “I, uh… I hate to say this, but you might wanna see Medic if it keeps up like that.” He turns the handle, pushing the door open with a shove.
Keeps up like what? He couldn’t possibly know how bad it is, not based on what you said. Unless... unless you'd said more. Shit, why is it so difficult to focus? Every time you reach for a thought it writhes away from your grasp like a worm.

Something must show on your face, because before you can form any kind of reply, he starts again. “I’ve, uh… I’ve had nightmares before. I mean, who hasn’t right?” He catches sight of your expression again and falters. “Look, what I mean is, if it’s bad enough that you’re not sleepin’ and you’re lookin’ like that, it’s worse than you said. And if it’s that bad, as much as I don’t like the guy, Medic has stuff that can help ya sleep, and he might even share if ya ask. An’ you don’t have to say anythin’, either.” He opens his hands in a defensive gesture, shrugs. “S’just all I was gonna say. Can’t have ya fallin’ down on the job, ya know.”

Such a simple thing. And even though he’s rambling and trying to play it off, you can feel the prickle of tears at your eyes, so you tilt your head back, draw a deep breath through your nose, swallow. “I appreciate that, Scout.” He looks at the floor, at the stained planks and scorch marks as you walk. “Do… do you still have them?”

You’re not sure how you passed into this sudden understanding, and you half-expect him to laugh it off, deny that the dreams he’s had were anything like yours, that he hasn’t dreamed like that since he was a kid. But he just purses his lips, eyes trained, steadfast, on his shoes. “Not much anymore. Not, um…” Scout crosses both arms over his chest, caving in on himself, just a little. “Not usually. I did a couple weeks ago, but, uh--before that was a long time.”

A couple weeks ago. It clicks together, suspicions confirmed.

“I’m sorry about that,” you find yourself saying.

He inhales sharply, shoulders snapping straight, as though trying to find his bearings, clear his mind. “Nah, it’s not your fault.” He purses his lips again, nervously itches his nose on the back of his hand. “Nobody’s fault, really. I don’t like talkin’ about it much, but…” You don’t even know where the two of you are headed now, and you’re not sure he’s paying attention, either. Perhaps it doesn’t matter; his feet move, no intention of slowing. It reminds you of the itch that led you on your latest midnight jaunt. “See, I um… I had to kill a buddy of mine with that pistol, over in ‘Nam.”

So casual, the way the words fall into conditioned air. They should be heavy, humid. But as you walk, the words come out dry.

“He was wounded real bad, couldn’t do anything for him; he was gonna be dead in a few minutes, or dragged off by some bloodthirsty bastards and me with ‘em. But--” Scout swallows. “He said he didn’t mind.” A crease appears between his brows, and he wipes his nose on the back of his hand again. “Said it was okay.” This time, when he tilts his head back to look at the ceiling, it’s you pretending not to see. “I was up for weeks.”

You don’t know what to say. What can you say? What can be said?

His mouth curls at the edge, wry. “I know it sucks.” What an understatement; you could have come up with that. “And… sometimes you can’t get over it by yourself.” He stops walking at last, and you follow suit. He offers a half-smile. “So… get some sleep, Spesh.” He punches your shoulder lightly. “You’ve got people that need ya.”
Knuckleduster

Chapter Notes

My thanks again to ScrapThat for taking a look at this chapter for me! Should further revisions be done after my editor takes a look, I'll update accordingly, as always.

But, most of all, my deepest gratitude to each and every one of you! It's been exactly four years since TiWWaN was first posted, and what it just blows my mind that not only am I still here, but all of you are, too! I'm humbled and so very, very grateful to have such an incredible group of people following, commenting, and providing such encouragement. Thank you, thank you, always--thank you. Now, without further ado...

WARNING for: blood, weird science, and unadulterated flirting

Knocking—a sharp intake of breath and your lungs ache with the shock of it. Open your eyes, blearily. Sun coming through the window, iron bars casting shadows across the comforter. More knocking. Try to raise your head. Limbs too heavy.

“Lass?” Muffled through the door.

Call something like “come in,” but you’re not sure if your tongue made the right sounds.

The knob turns, door creaks, and Demoman stands hovering in the frame, brow creased. You hadn’t locked your door. What time is it?

Shit. Your heart thumps in your chest. Did you oversleep, have you missed—

“Dinner’s ready,” he says, and you relax, try to wade through the fog in your mind to piece it all together. Today, Spy had stolen the intelligence, and battle had ended early. After being dismissed, you spoke with Scout, returned here, laid down on the bed for a moment, stretched out across the covers… and now— “Are ye feelin’ all right?”


Demo nods, but a small frown creases his mouth. “As long as we’re going regular through respawn, we shouldnae get sick. It kills the bacteria, cleans ye up. But… you went through today, didn’t ye?”

No illness. Yes, you seem to recall something about that... in the paperwork, maybe, or during one of Medic’s surgery monologues. “Yeah, right before the end.”

Demo’s brow arches, the perfect picture of puzzlement. “An’ you’re still… hm, that’s some powerful insomnia ya got there, lass. I know Medic’s got some tranquilizers stashed away if ye can get him to share. If not, I’ll give you an old DeGroot remedy.”

You chuckle dryly, rasping in your throat. “Is it scrumpy?”
“No! Well… sometimes, but no’ today.”

You smile, resettling on your stomach against the blanket. “Thanks.” You just feel so heavy, mind ticking through fog and mire. “I think I can just sleep now. I’m not hungry.”

He nods, presses a hand to his chin. “All right, but I’m makin’ a plate for ye.”

“I appreciate it.” You can feel the weightlessness creeping into your limbs again, and the door creaks, but you’re already far away, eyes shuttered against the world.

You wake to the hazy purple of evening. The base hums as usual, a television show murmuring away, water running through the pipes, someone with their radio on nearby, trumpets cheerfully wailing. You draw a deep breath through your sleep-cottoned mouth, and find you do feel rather better, more focused. Eyes sweep slowly to the clock—8:08. Any leftovers will probably be in the refrigerator.

With a sigh, you sit up, stretch your back and your arms languidly, freeing the tight muscles and cracking joints awake. You reach for your lamp, and flick it on; the lavender light of evening won’t be enough for long.

Standing, you try to brush some of the wrinkles from your collared shirt and trousers, creased and clinging like the last remnants of sleep. The thought of food and maybe a nice glass of tea is sounding more and more appealing to your slow-moving mind when something by the door catches your eye—

A small crate. This means you didn’t lock your door before passing out cold; careless, but not important at the moment, not when a cube of cheap pine stands against the dark, worn planks of the floor. You squint, puzzling it out, letters stamped on the crate’s side manifesting themselves into the Mann Co. logo.

Oh—yes!

The surge of excitement boosts you to moving more quickly, a grin springing to your face, burning your mind awake, pushing you across the floor to your prize. On the crate’s lid helpfully sits a crowbar.

Fantastic. You’ll have to thank whoever dropped it off, and, of course, figure out where to return the tool, but… first things first.

Your broad smile doesn’t abate as you crouch beside the box, grab the crowbar, and angle its edge just under the crate’s lid. A gentle wiggle, and it slips between planks, pulling nails with a creak. You count quietly to yourself, not caring a whit for sounding like a child because on three! you push the lever, the lid groans, and all at once, pops open in a single, satisfying movement. It takes little effort to jiggle the other nails loose from the opposite side, and you seize the paper sitting on a bed of straw beneath.

Good hunting! it reads: Official kabar trench knife, 7” blade, ready for action, 18.75, complimentary corporate shipping. A bright seal of authenticity accompanies Saxton Hale’s reproduced signature at the bottom.

In half a second, the invoice flutters the floor and you’re digging among the straw, paying no mind to how the fibers prickle at your skin until you find the sheathed knife, leather and metal cold under your fingers. You draw it, slowly, into the light.
It’s even more beautiful in person. The warm glow of lamp-light shines gold on the brass knuckles and the dark scent of new leather hits your nose as you turn it this way and that. It draws smoothly, silver blade gleaming beautifully, its edge bright and promising. You slide the knuckles over your fingers and decide right away that it was meant for you. Each ring sits elegantly on your hand, and the leather wrapping rests comfortably in your palm, like everything had been fitted personally for you.

You feel beautiful yourself, seeing how the gleaming bronze stands against your skin, how the blade extends the line of your arm as you roll your wrist and point it straight. It shines in the low light.

Brilliant.

You must show Medic.

The weight of the knife against your calf is comforting, even exciting, as the hilt peeks over the top of your boot. With every step, you feel it there, waiting to be drawn, and by the time you reach the infirmary doors, you’re so thrilled that knocking doesn’t even come to mind—you just push through. After all, you haven’t seen Medic all day; you’re certain he won’t be bothered. In fact, he’ll probably pester you for a surgery, but you find you don’t—

He’s standing at the gurney, elbow-deep in a metal basin, blood splashed all the way to his shoulders, a crease of intent focus between his brows—but his head snaps up at your arrival. “Ah! Specialist, perfect! Would you mind holding zhis for me?”

This turns out to be… well, it’s—you’d… really rather not know what it is, exactly, but it bears striking resemblance to a bloody liver, and before you can protest it’s in your hand. Your poor, naked hand, now dripping with frigid blood.

You really wish you had taken your time crossing to his side, but here you are and it’s much too late now. Nothing to do but ignore the cold, fleshy weight in your palm, the way it gives against your skin, soft and damp and wet like a slab of bacon fresh out of the refrigerator.

Easier said than done, of course.

“Medic, what are you doing?”

He doesn’t look up from the basin, where you now see another fleshy thing being connected carefully to a bunch of thin, copper wires. “Testing electrical impulses on various organs.”

Shit, you probably are holding a liver.

“Why?” you ask.

“Animation.” He twists each strand just so, gaze intently focused through his spectacles.

Blood doesn’t well up properly where copper pierces the organ; it’s obviously been dead and preserved for some time. Your stomach churns unpleasantly. You want to avert your eyes from the carnage, but the repetitive wrapping of wire, the precise rhythm of his fingers, creates a pleasant economy of motion that you can’t help but watch. It’s… interesting to see this from the other side. You never watch when you’re on the table. Some of the wires are braided together between dextrous fingertips, others wound securely about squelching flesh. He rolls and crafts each piece, metal and flesh, like he does it each and every day; care and precision coupled with an agility that comes only with repetition.
How many times has he carried out this experiment?

“At the moment,” he says, scooping the organ out of your raised hand and tucking it into the tray just centimeters from the first, “the only means of resurrection is through respawn. It is very inconvenient.”

Inconvenient? Inconvenient. A fantastical machine that brings you back to life an infinite number of times a day, in better condition than when you started—and he deems it inconvenient.

“Are you sure you don’t mean incredible?” you ask dryly.

He cocks an eyebrow, peering at you sidelong, hands still rotating and adjusting the experiment in its tray. “I know what I said.”

Dimly, you realize that you’ve been watching his bare fingers dancing over copper and flesh, perhaps feeling the need for extra dexterity that the rubber gloves do not afford. It’s no wonder he didn’t think twice about slapping something into your ungloved palm... your cold and now rather sticky palm.

“Then you’ll have to explain to me how the most miraculous piece of technology on this planet could be construed as inconvenient.” You punctuate this with a raise of your own brow before making your way toward the sink near the back of the room.

With a glance, you can see his posture change, shoulders pressed back in familiar pride, but that crease of frustration still sits at the corner of his mouth. “I don’t disagree with your assessment of its value, but we must always strive for better.”

With your clean hand, you turn on the faucet and reach for the… dish soap. Dove. You hope he can’t see the amusement no doubt all over your face as you tip some into your stained palm. Apparently, he has some concern about keeping his hands soft.

“If we could do away with the respawn system—perhaps by modifying the medi-gun—I could resurrect you wherever you fell.” You shake your hands off over the sink while he follows the bundled wires over to a machine that looks something like a cross between a defibrillator and a radio. “There would be no need for proximity to the respawn machine, no need to wait minutes—only seconds.”

If respawn sounded like science fiction, that sounds like absolute fantasy, but you’re curious. You’ve already seen things you thought impossible; who are you to say it can’t be done? “And you plan to use electricity?” You return to the table and tray, but stop a couple steps away, wary now of surprise entrails.

“The body has its own electrical currents,” he replies, adjusting three black dials on the front of the machine. “But it is not all I will need.” Then, he checks the connection of the wires to two copper prongs on its side. Apparently satisfied, he stands back, and meets your eyes over flesh and aluminum and steel with a grin. “For now, let’s see if this works, shall we?”

His energy, as always, is infectious, and you find yourself smiling. “Let’s see it.”

He holds up a bloodstained finger. “There’s just one last thing.” From the counter behind him, he produces a glass canister filled with a clear liquid that he pours slowly into the tray until it just barely fills the bottom; the only thing connecting what you assume to be the experiment and control. “Done.” He replaces the canister’s rubber seal and lets his finger hover beneath a little, silver switch between the machine’s black dials. Over his spectacles, Medic meets your eyes,
grinning. “Ready?”

A bright flutter of anticipation settles in your chest. “Yes.”

Without further ado, he flips the narrow switch, and the machine buzzes to life. Your eyes follow the twisted cables from the machine to the tray, where the organ flinches and shudders before settling into a steady, gentle pulse, flesh writhing like some living thing against the copper that encases it.

Sunlight gleams on crimson and bronze, limbs hanging useless as two lumps of meat off your shoulders, veins and wire shuddering in desert air, fingers pawing through intestines like ribbon, blood on glass, no—no breath, no air, wheezing, whistling through lungs, can’t—

Medic’s shoulder brushes yours as he leans over the tray, spectacles slipping slightly down his nose, and you draw a stuttering breath. You hadn’t seen him move. Slowly, you unclench your fists, flexing them back to life. He doesn’t step away, maintaining that singular, all-important point of contact, and you wonder if he knows. But you don’t ask, instead jerking your chin toward the wire-and-flesh thing: “It works,” you observe.

“Oh, I knew what that would do… *this* is the reaction I’m looking for.” He indicates with a rust-stained fingertip the organ you had been holding; alongside the other, it moves gently in the same pattern, as though electricity danced across the short distance from one to the other, working them in a similar mind. But, after a moment, it stops and starts at intervals, stuttering, as if the connection between them isn’t quite strong enough. You tilt your head, looking at the tray as a whole… ah—whatever is in the bottom of the tray has begun to evaporate.

“Everything functions in a system,” he murmurs. “If you remove the parts, sometimes they still remember what they should do, even disconnected, even dead.” Medic’s eyes roam over the tray in minute flicks, back and forth in a rhythm like reading. His mouth twists in a thoughtful frown as he produces a little book and pen from the pocket of his labcoat, and finds the thin ribbon that marks his page without ever taking his eyes off the experiment. After a few beats, he begins recording in looping shorthand.

You’re not sure when you stopped observing the experiment and started observing Medic, but there’s something calming in each movement, of his pen on the page, in the tilt of his head as he regards the experiment between notes. It’s methodical—quite unlike the manic excitement and impulsiveness you so often see on the field, unlike the coiled, energetic potential he displayed when you arrived only minutes ago. His shoulder presses closer against yours to the rhythm of his pen scratching on paper. This is the in-between time, you think, the moment before drawing the bonesaw across an unsuspecting throat, the quiet seconds before uber, the intent observations before countering an attack—

“You weren’t at dinner today,” he says, fitting the ribbon back between pages and closing up the book.

“Uh—”

“Demo said you were sleeping—” Medic continues “—have you been experiencing nightmares to keep you from resting at night?”

You feel your cheeks heat. While it's certain Demoman means well and there’s nothing wrong with telling the team why you were not joining them, per se—well. You wish he hadn’t. “Sometimes,” you admit, tersely.
He turns to face you properly. “You should tell me when these things happen. You're not expected to solve everything alone.” He frowns, readjusts his spectacles. “I thought I'd made myself clear before.”

You fold your arms, gaze dropping away to boots on bloodstained tile. “If I need help, I'll ask for it.”

Medic hums a dubious note, but paces away to switch off the machine. You let yourself watch again when you hear the click, and find him steadily unwinding wire from the now-still organ. “You’ve been taking your vitamins each day as I’ve prescribed?”

_The vitamins! Fuck._ “Yes.” Shit, when was the last time you’d taken one? You still have a few more in your drawer, you think, after that unfortunate incident with the bottle…

“If I remember correctly, you should have enough for fifteen more days.” When he’s done with the wire, he wraps it in a loose coil to hang across the dormant machine. “I should have another batch ready by then.”

You _definitely_ don’t have fifteen. Hopefully they’re not that important—especially since you can’t remember the last time you took one. “All right.” You’ve missed a few days and you’re not dead yet, so it’ll probably be fine.

Medic hefts the aluminum basin, used organs and all, and up-ends it into a large, plastic bucket that doesn’t look nearly secure enough to be holding hazardous materials. He drops the tray itself onto a counter spread with other containers and tools that you fervently hope are set aside to be washed before crossing to the deep sink. You assume he’s going to wash his hands, but he sets about undoing his labcoat instead, turning toward you again. “I assume you didn’t originally come by to assist me with an experiment.” Practiced fingers flit down the ivory buttons, and you’re confronted by the overwhelming urge to avert your eyes. “Perhaps you were hoping for a surgery?” The teasing grin that accompanies his jest isn’t making you feel any less like you’re seeing something you shouldn’t as he pushes the coat from his shoulders, revealing a neat, charcoal-grey waistcoat underneath.

“No!” You do have sense enough to steer this conversation as far from impromptu operations as possible.

Medic chuckles, folding the stained coat in half twice and tosses it beside the sink before turning on the faucet. “Vell?”

As he rinses his fingers only to unbutton his cuffs and push the sleeves out of the way, you’re very grateful that you can, in fact, remember why you came. It gives you an excuse to stop looking and reach for the sheath tucked against your calf. “Something came for me today.”

He washes all the way to the elbow, peering over his glasses to see as you draw the blade, sheath and all, from your boot. “Ah! Is zhis what you bought with your winnings?” Medic shakes the water from his hands and delves into an overhead cabinet for a white towel; this, he tosses atop the stained coat before approaching, turning the sleeves back down to his wrists, fixing the buttons without even a glance.

A proud grin finds its way to your lips. “Yes, it is—thank you again for that.”

“I believe I told you that you did all the work, anyway.” He waves a careless hand before extending it for the blade, which you turn and place hilt-first into his palm. “A trench knife.” The doctor places his other hand beneath the sheathed blade, tilting the brass hilt and knuckles so that
they catch lights overhead.

“I’ve wanted it since training,” you admit. “It’s the first thing I circled in the catalogue.”

A small smile tugs at his lips as he slides his fingers around the grip and draws the silver blade, its elegantly tapered edge and soft, triangular point reflecting the fluorescents. “Beautiful design.” Leisurely, his eyes trace their way down the blade, across the air, to meet yours. “And deadly in your hands, I’m sure.”

A shiver dances over your skin. “I’ll bring it with me tomorrow—” You raise a brow, the corner of your mouth quirking to match. “—and we’ll see.”

Medic’s smile broadens into a full grin, and, carefully, he sheathes the blade, turns it gracefully in his fingers, and presses it hilt-first back into your hand. “I look forward to it.”

The blade is still warm from his touch.

Chapter End Notes

Knuckleduster - n - a metal guard worn over the knuckles in fighting to increase the effect of blows and to protect the fingers; also nickname of the Short R.24/31, a British twin-engined, high-wing cantilever monoplane flying boat designed and built by Short to Air Ministry for a "General Purpose Open Sea Patrol Flying Boat"

(i.e. the ship is in the air, folks)
Chapter Summary

My thanks again to ScrapThat and to the Discord crew for taking a look at this chapter for me! Should further revisions be done after my editor takes a look, I'll update accordingly, as always.

WARNING for: blood, graphic violence, death, the usual

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There are, after taking one before bed, only six pills rattling around in your bedside drawer, but when you wake, your mind is clearer than yesterday, the thin film that seemed to separate you from the battlefield dissipated. The itch like ants beneath your skin, however, is back with vengeance—but you hoped the battlefield would distract you sufficiently, if not alleviate the issue altogether.

Fortunately, it is so.

Unfortunately, the reason is you’ve spent more time in respawn than on the field.

And this is because, via the contract, your trench knife must replace the howdah.

Early morning, air still cool, you flee into a narrow alley, shield raised against an incoming rocket. Heels dig into cracked dirt as kevlar rocks against the explosive force. Out of the corner of your eye, you see the BLU demoman dodge between buildings at the other end; he hasn’t seen you, not yet—so, planting your shield firmly against the soldier’s onslaught, you take aim in the opposite direction with your Gyrojet. It takes three shots to fell the unsuspecting demo. Clip empty, you draw the knife, narrowing your eyes through plexiglass as the soldier runs screaming for your shield, barreling into you shotgun-first. Roll with the impact, shove him forcibly away with the ballistic, raise your blade, and—two barrels pointed at your chest.

Respawn.

Regroup with Medic. The enemy heavy defends the third point, bullets hammering like fists upon your shield, sun blazing upon your head. As soon as Scout comes around the other side, you’ll be able to make your push forward; so you wait, watch—vibrations rattling painfully down your arm, soothed constantly by the hum of the medigun, a heady balance between discomfort and relief that buzzes at the base of your skull. Medic’s breath at your ear lets you know that he’s close enough to benefit from the shield’s protection, sharp and shallow, waiting on the thin precipice between neutrality and action, just as you.

[“‘Bout eight seconds!”] warns Scout.

You shift slightly onto the balls of your feet, muscles ready, itching to go. Medic’s weight resettle behind you, and you feel the shift in the air, his lips at your ear.
“Spez —”

A faint wheeze, breath wavering against the skin of your neck before dead weight slumps down against your shoulders, shield wobbling dangerously as you fight for balance, hand scrambling for the knife at your calf, drawing it up, mind racing because you just know —

A hot, sharp blade slides between neck and collarbone, vertically parting flesh down and down into your chest. Your head won’t turn far enough, but you can see a blue, pinstriped sleeve, a bloodstained glove, and Medic’s head lolling against your back as you support his corpse.

You want to swear, but there seems to be a hole through which the necessary air whistles. You want to return the favor, but your arm won’t obey.

“Au revoir,” the spy says blithely before a second, sharp pain colors everything mercifully black.

Second point. Sighting down the Gyrojet modded into rifle format, braced on the top of your shield, keeping the enemy pyro at bay with well-placed shots as Engineer hurries to finish the sentry behind you.

“I only need a minute and a half,” he assures, and you believe him, the sound of metal on metal and the turn of a crank whirring behind you.

The pyro is no problem right now, not at this range. It’s the approaching scout that gives you pause. You slide a few more rounds into the Gyrojet’s chamber and fire three shots: one hits the pyro, but not lethally; the others completely miss the agile little bastard as he dodges and weaves his way into range. You duck your head as buckshot clatters against your shield, not yet close enough to impact you with much force. One more shot draws a thin line of blood on his thigh, and he stumbles, but makes it too close for the Gyrojet to be effective any longer. He fires again, and you crouch low, draw the knife. As soon as he raises the scattergun over your head at Engie, you snap to your feet, seize his shoulder with your shield hand, pull him in close — BANG!

Respawn.

Touch base with Medic again, back on the first point. Overheal lights your veins and draws strength to your limbs, but does little to assuage the sense of sinking morale.

You play a strange game of deadly tennis as the enemy demoman launches grenades your way, arcing through the air, leaving seconds to change angles and deflect them with your shield—all the while dancing around a minefield of stickies. Boots shuffle through sand and soil, kicking up dust; one wrong move, and it’s over for you and the doctor. Uber would be ideal right now, but the risk of total annihilation is too great; you can’t rely on the medigun to heal you quickly enough to build the charge.

It’s the old-fashioned way, then, moving left and right in tighter and tighter arcs, around deadly mines half-hidden in dust and behind crates. Medic, ever in your shadow, following your footsteps exactly to the whispered rhythm of your Gyrojet, to the cadence of each explosive launch. You can feel him not far behind you, like there’s an invisible thread keeping you on the same plane, not unlike the tempo that keeps dancers moving in time.

So you know exactly the moment that rhythm is broken, the catch and scuffle of a boot out-of-place.
This time, you twist in a tight arc, shield still pointed the enemy demo just in time to see Medic, teeth bared, folding over the medigun and onto the sand as the BLU spy tugs a silver blade from his back. You squeeze the trigger, but he’s too close, bullet bouncing harmlessly off his suit before gaining velocity. The gun leaves your hand, spinning over the distance to crack him right in the forehead, but there’s no time to savor the delicious look of surprise as you crouch—another grenade bouncing off your shield rather than exploding in your face out of nothing more than luck—and yank the trench knife from your boot, fingers folding into the brass knuckles.

You launch yourself across the narrow space, snarling. Sunlight glints on the decorative, silver barrel of a revolver. The toe of your boot catches on a blue—oh fuck.

Respawn.

Heavy, Pyro, and Scout have retaken the first point by the time you rejoin them, seething with embarrassment and frustration. It’s like that BLU asshole is targeting you on purpose.

You push it from your mind as you rejoin the doctor again, crouching behind a pile of crates just before the second point, his mouth creased in a serious line. “Medic,” you begin, snapping your shield to full height in preparation for the charge, “he’s—”

“Ja, I know.” He glances back down the path, eyes narrowed over his spectacles, like he’s not sure the bastard in question isn’t lurking about, though you have the sneaking suspicion he had to incubate in respawn along with you after the sticky grenade incident. “I should have been watching.”

You blink. “It’s not as though you can be expected to heal me, dodge mines, and have eyes in the back of your head.”

“I should.” He scowls. “But that’s only one situation! Zhis is the fourth time today.”

Oh. This is only your second at the spy’s hands. “We should kill his streak,” you say absently. Maybe the spy is just having a particularly lucky day, and it’s nothing to do with you at all.

“Yes.” He’s frowning, gaze unfocused like he’s contemplating the next move, so you take the opportunity to survey the situation beyond the pine crates.

Scout is nowhere to be seen, but Heavy and Pyro are trapped in cover on the opposite side of the field, ducking sentry fire. The enemy engineer sits on the point with his sentry, your double crouched behind her shield alongside him, while in the alley some distance away, your team’s demoman and soldier are locked in a tussle you can’t quite see. Maybe the enemy heavy and medic are involved, but you can’t be sure.

“It’s rather irritating he’s decided to be a nuisance,” he murmurs. “We had such a nice chat, too.”

Something about the way his voice trills on the word sets a shiver on your skin. You squint at the field, trying to gauge how far you can get before the sentry redirects its focus. “Do I want to know?”

When you chance a glance back, Medic’s gaze is cast to the ground, shoulders so stiff that for half a second, you expect to see blood blooming on his coat. But there is nothing, only the tight pull of fabric over his shoulders, and an uncomfortable crease between his brows.

“Medic?”
His head snaps up, an innocuous expression immediately plastered over his features. “It isn’t important right now.” The lightness that invades his tone is stark enough to make you suspicious. “I’ll keep a better watch this time; if he comes, you will know.”

You purse your lips, but the piercing sound of sentry fire has not stopped. You’re needed on the field. “All right.” Your bare fingers shift on the Gyrojet, resettling its grip against your gloved palm. “Are you ready?”

A firm nod as he flips the switch on the medigun, its healing waves flickering to life, flowing over your skin. “Jawohl.”

Glance around the corner again. Pyro has moved into a nearby alley, but Heavy is still pinned behind a wide, metal crate. You shake out your shoulders, taking a deep, steady breath. Pick a target with your eyes, set your boots to the ground. “Ready—go!”

Together, you race onto the field, soles pounding on the cracked dirt. You watch the sentry, watch, watch until it begins to swivel on its axis, and you slide to the ground, shield up, Medic settling in behind you just as the rounds rain upon kevlar like hail. The hand holding your pistol comes up alongside your ear, and you extend one finger under the trigger guard to activate your radio. “Heavy, Pyro—I’ll keep the sentry fire while you move in; slow and steady.”

[“Da.”]

[“Mmm mrmrph.”] Across the field, if you turn your head, you can see Pyro flashing the “okay” signal.

Good. You click the button on your earpiece once more, ignoring the steady drum of bullets that hums down your arm. Across the field, you see Pyro dodge forward toward a low, wooden crate just as Heavy steps out and shuffles to take position where they had been a moment before. Gyrojet bullets whistle from the point, but miss, and the sentry remains fixed on you.

The next move will be more difficult, as Pyro will almost certainly activate the sentry. So, like a well-oiled machine, you begin the slow walk forward, crouched low to the sand, knowing you can trust Medic to follow. Distant explosions echo off wood and aluminum, but you ignore them for now. The other half of your team will have to contend with that.

You keep an eye on Pyro as they go, nozzle of the flamethrower sweeping in a fine circle in front of them, holding steady—

They flinch, but don’t slow when a bullet tears through their shoulder, instead pressing forward, faster, faster, beyond the next point of cover—

Shit. You launch to your feet, sprint, but not fast enough to get the sentry to halt its swing.

Another bullet punches straight through Pyro’s chest, but still they run, like a mad, possessed thing, flames now leading their charge—

But the sentry shreds them to their knees before fire can lick even the edge of the point. Damn it… you slide back to the dirt, now mere meters from the sentry, the engineer, and your doppelganger, who leers at you over the top of her shield.

The flood of bullets be damned, you take a couple potshots at her smug visage and find yourself somewhat satisfied when she ducks back down where you can’t see that damnable face.

A quick glance behind reveals Heavy, crouching so low behind a wooden crate that it would be
comedic if you weren’t concerned about his ability to get up and move without the maneuver costing him his life. Shit. It’s perhaps… twenty feet back. Doable. “Medic.” You fire two more shots toward the point just as the BLU specialist exchanges bullets of her own. You hiss when one tears a hot, bloody streak over your arm only for the medigun to seal it up in a heady rush of adrenaline.

“Ja.” You feel his breath on your neck, in the hollow of your ear.

Any warmth on your face is almost certainly an effect of the sun. “If I give you sufficient cover, can we fall back for Heavy?”

You can almost see the twist of confusion that overtakes his features from tone alone: “What?”

“Can we do it?” Another three shots off the side of your shield, and you have to reload, taking care with the arm curled against kevlar, hardly mobile, rattling against sentry fire.

A dramatic little huff stirs your hair. “Yes, but try not to take too much damage! If you go, so do the rest of us.”

As though you needed a reminder. You click back into the radio. “Heavy, we’re falling back for you. Stay put until we’re in range.”

[“Why?”]

Regret. “I don’t have enough firepower to do it myself!” Perhaps on your next trip to respawn you’ll trade back.

[“Will be ready.”]

“Thanks.” You leave the link on, just in case you need it mid-field.

Fire off two more shots, then count silent beats, nodding your head slightly in time—one, two, three—so Medic can see. On four, you move, carefully, steadily rolling your boots back, shuffling in the sand, uncomfortably reminded of yesterday, retreating backward in the same movements. But this time, Medic is with you, the medigun’s gentle waves soothing muscles before any burn or tear can set in. A frown creases your mouth as you realize that—by extension—you’re making him do the very same thing, without benefit of healing.

Well, shit. The plan is, however, working, sentry gun rattling away uselessly at your shield. A glance through battered plexiglass tells you your doppelganger has started moving. You grind your teeth, but know you’ll be close enough that Heavy can make a difference by the time she arrives. Let her come. You fire three more shots, this time at her exposed shins—but she moves too quickly, veering off to one side.

Steady, your pace is steady, but she’s closing fast.

“Medic, get to Heavy and we can deal with her,” you say, sending two more bullets to ricochet off her shield. “I’ve got the sentry.”

He makes a sound of disagreement in his throat, but in the next moment, you feel the overheat fade from your skin, leaving an emptiness in its wake as he peels off toward the crate, boots sounding a speedy rhythm on sand. You push forward in turn, to the sentry, to your double, keeping all their deadly fire on your shield.

Bullets hammer on kevlar. Sun beats down upon head and neck. Gunshots ring and rattle in your
ears. Silver glints to one side of your double’s shield, a gun—but you can’t identify it. A pistol, neither the Gyrojet, nor the Lancaster. One barrel.

Angle your body slightly to cover your side better as she fires, but it’s a near thing, balancing defense against the sentry and the BLU rapidly circling toward your flank. But it doesn’t matter, not as long as Medic makes it to Heavy without drawing the sentry’s attention. Another shot below your doppelganger’s shield, but she’s already too close for the Gyrojet to do much damage, even if it had struck true. Holster it instead at your hip, discreetly reach into your boot.

Three paces and she’ll be close enough to grapple.

Behind you, Heavy’s minigun spins to life, the whir of gears and bullets bringing a smile to your lips.

Yes, this is more like it. Behind the shield, you ready your knife, flexing fingers around leather and brass in a reverse-grip. Sascha is more than a match for the sentry and its engineer (who, if he has any sense, will have fled) at this range, especially as its bullets fall, dead, on kevlar. The BLU specialist falls back two steps, three, but you follow, ready, itching to let the blade taste blood at last—

“Spatz!”

The doppelganger’s face, framed in Plexiglass like a mirror, smirks, triumphant. What—

“Doktor!”

Spin on your heel, but you’ve missed the struggle, and your mind must scrape things back together, eyes flicking from one thing to another. Medic’s fingers curled around the BLU spy’s forearm, his other hand still wielding the medigun. The blade of a butterfly knife, gleaming scarlet, drawn from a pale throat in a familiar strike: angled down toward the heart, phantom memory seizing your skin in empathetic pain. The second strike as efficient as the first, precisely along the opposite artery—a beat, two, before blood pours in dizzying spurts.

Snap back into motion as Heavy swings the barrel of his minigun past you and pulls the trigger, but the spy is suddenly gone, gone—dissolved into a film of smoke.

A searing streak of pain lances through your shoulder, and you hiss, fingers nearly unfolding from the grip of your knife. Fuck—you barely turn in time to block the next bullet from your counterpart. Shit, shit—if you could make a damn lick of sense of anything that would make things so much easier—

Heavy, at least, still knows exactly what to do, redirecting Sascha toward the BLU’s shield, forcing her to plant. Pain rages through your shoulder, but you hardly give a damn, fury fueling every step in a simple flanking pattern. Your double has no choice, even as she unloads her clip into your shield. If she changes positions, she’ll be shredded by the minigun. If you had the Lancaster, she’d be dead already. So, the only chance she has now is to find a way through your shield before you’ve disarmed her.

Strange, how logically everything plays out even as the edges of your vision dance and flicker an angry red.

Stranger still that the Plexiglass between you and she catches a faint shimmer in reflection, just over your shoulder.

Twist—and your knife bites the air as the spy arches back, feet dancing over sand to dodge just out
of reach. Fingers dive into the breast of his coat for the revolver, but you launch your body forward, shoulder catching his chest, crashing together into cracked, orange dirt. The spy wheezes on impact, fighting to regain breath as you yank your arm from the shield to catch his knife-hand and bring yours to break his nose, brass gleaming across your knuckles. Blood splatters. Pain cracks along your nerves, but you don’t care. You raise the blade—

And your second thought, as you stumble out of respawn, is that you turned your back on an armed combatant.

The first, however, is a pure, simple: motherfucker.

Chapter End Notes

Fun Fact: The word "motherfucker" has been used as an insult since the late 19th century, chiefly in the United States, and by World War II it could refer to something “unpleasant, difficult, formidable, or oppressive” rather than just a colorful noun to describe someone. Then, in the late 50s-60s, started to become occasionally used as a positive descriptor.
Escalation

Chapter Notes

My thanks again to the Discord crew for taking a look at this chapter for me! Should further revisions be done after my editor takes a look, I’ll update accordingly, as always.

WARNING for: blood, graphic violence, needles

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The bare, grey concrete of respawn swims into view yet again, and as soon as you have control of your tongue, you begin swearing a blue litany.

[Failure.]

The swears become twice as colorful. Half of them are in German.

Wait…

You turn back toward the capsule, stomach twisting in painful nausea, just in time to see Medic stumble slightly on his first step, wobble dangerously the second. Your hand shoots out to grasp his elbow, and arm braced over yours, he rights himself. Frowning, still hissing an unintelligible stream of curses, his eyes follow your sleeve, up your shoulder, to your face.

He yanks his arm back, hisses something else, looks away, shoves right past to stand at the door to the locker room.

You can feel the crease between your brows as you watch him go, the stab of offense that lingers when your hand falls back to your side. Yes, the match has been a complete embarrassment. Yes, that last kill was humiliating—baited out of cover by the spy just before uber, finished by the BLU medic of all fucking bastards in a trick with…

It pierces your side, just above the belt, and searing pain sets in, liquid fire flooding muscle and blood. He yanks it free, dark gunmetal, a needle ten inches long; sunlight glints through the glass vial mounted atop the monstrous thing, half-empty of poisonous liquid, electric blue. Fold in on yourself, screaming, gasping against pain, arms tucked up over your abdomen but it does no good —

You don’t notice the wicked knife beneath the needle until the moment it flashes out of view, and the blood draining from your throat leaves you mercifully cold.

Fuck, you hope you never see it again. You hope you never learn its name. With a shallow breath, you clench your fists to assuage their trembling. Focus on how your nails dig into your palms. Notice that Medic has left the room entirely. Feel the stab of rejection again.

Part of you thinks you should let it go. You’re both irritated. The entire day has been one failure after another. You ought to let him walk it off, let yourself take a breather and have a shower.

“Medic!”
So much for that.

Your feet take you after him, where he has shrugged out of the medigun’s harness, and stands clattering about in his locker with the same restrained fury that spat curses only moments ago.

“Medic.”

He doesn’t even look up, and somehow that’s worse. You grit your teeth, a hot streak of irritation burning your chest. Today wasn’t your fault. He died at least half again as many times as you.

And the itch is back, crawling across your skin, burrowing into muscles, marching like ants under flesh.

“Medic, don’t ignore me.”

The metal door slams shut, and it’s a credit to the anger heating your blood that you don’t flinch. “We will speak later.”

Casual dismissal. Like a junior, a student, a child.

"If you have a problem," your syllables are clear, controlled, clipped, "I would prefer we have it out now."

"The only problem I have," he growls, turning to the bench to fuss with the medigun’s harness, “is a frankly embarrassing performance and a growing lack of acceptable data."

You try to relax. Yes, it's been absolute shit. “It’s been a bad day, but—”

“Bad?” Medic's gaze snaps away from the leather strap, fixes icily on you. "Bad? We’ve been humiliated."

You swallow tightly, try again. “Tomorrow—”

Slowly, he draws himself up. “You have been absolutely humiliated, or didn’t you notice?”

In your mind, it clicks. Jaw tightens, teeth grinding. "Oh, and that’s embarrassing for you, is it?"

His lip curls, and something roils, poisonous, in your stomach. "Your magnum opus not up to snuff?"

His mouth opens; nothing comes out. You feel a perverse little stab of pleasure.

Eyes cut through spectacles. "I'm more concerned that I chose the wrong vessel."

It stings. Vessel. A reminder that you're worth no more than what your mind and body can do—and once they are no longer able, you're completely disposable. You hadn't even noticed until this moment that you had forgotten.

Unfit for duty.

You hadn't noticed that you'd begun to believe you might be something a bit more than a convenient receptacle for his work.

"A spy! A spy!" he hisses, glowering, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “Once, perhaps twice, I can see a mistake, a distraction, but fifteen deaths? You should be unstoppable! Only an explosion should be any match for you, a heavy, perhaps even my counterpart, but a spy?”
As effective as a slap to the face, made all the worse because he's right. But you're drawn to full height, shoulders tense, jaw clenched, and your skin won't stop crawling, itching—

"You forget he had to go through you to get to me." Your fingers curl into fists. "You said you'd watch my back."

The briefest instant of surprise lights his features—and satisfaction mingles with anger, frustration, embarrassment running hot in your blood—before he draws himself to mirror you, teeth bared in a tight snarl. "As if it’s easy. How many times are you going to forget where you are and let them slaughter you?"

Ice water. The heat of rage snuffed out instantly and replaced with cold, cold stone. The way his shoulders fall just a fraction makes you think he must realize what he’s said, but he speaks not a word more. Your heart sits heavy, frozen in your chest.

You're going to make him regret it.

Calm and still and even: "We can settle this in the ring."

Lips purse. A deep breath through his nose. "Specialist—"

"We'll settle this like reasonable men,” slow, steady, perfectly formed syllables, “without taking cheap shots."

"Yo, your ass is grass, man!"

That startles you enough to take note of your surroundings for the first time in ten minutes. Beside you, with a front-row view, Scout leans on his bat, a wildly smug expression on his face that tells you he's been here the whole time. Behind him, Heavy stands hovering between the first row of lockers and the exit, stoic expression saying he's been here long enough. And there, at his locker, sits Engineer, unobtrusive as ever, studiously pretending he has heard nothing at all, quietly packing away pistol and shotgun.

The low trill of a giggle snaps your attention back to Medic, mouth twisted halfway between grin and grimace. "Now or later?"

Now, your mind hisses. Right now so you can satisfy the cold streak of wrath which tells you that you should have broken his nose immediately.

Your rationality, however, suggests later. “Two hours.” The cold rage should warm into something more forgiving.

“One,” Medic counters, a slow smile twisting his features. “I wouldn’t want you to change your mind.”

Anger tightens your throat as surely as you’d like your hands to wrap around his. “You’re going to wish I had.”

He maintains your gaze, never flinching from the fury, answering it with as much unwavering heat as he’d shown moments ago—until you turn neatly on your heel and stride toward your quarters in perfect time.

Halfway down the hall, Scout’s voice is just loud enough for you to hear: “So, uh… I’ve got five dollars on Spesh. Just sayin’.”
One hour is too long, and not long enough. Your uniform coat, the ballistic shield, your knife, and the Gyrojet—belt and all—land haphazardly on the bed. The realization that the Lancaster-Charles is still in your locker and needs to be retrieved galls you all the more, but you can’t go back. Not yet.

Fifty-five minutes to go.

You pace a neat line across the weathered floorboards of your room. Seconds stretch into eternity.

After just twenty minutes, the bitter chill that had seeped into your bones fans again into flame, and you need to move. So, you return to the now-empty locker room, and holster the howdah on your thigh, where it belongs.

Thirty minutes to go.

Might as well head to the training room now and warm up as you did before your bout with Heavy. And if Medic is already there, well… he’s welcome to fight you now, if he’s that gung-ho.

But the gymnasium is empty when you arrive, the click of the doors echoing hollowly over concrete and wood. You strip your shirt off without care and toss it over a folding chair, leaving you in the sleeveless, white undershirt. Last, you unbuckle the howdah’s holster and set it safely on a wall-mounted shelf nearby, alongside a set of small weights.

Twenty-five minutes to go.

You begin your stretches. Hamstrings first, foot braced on the edge of the practice mat. Lie down and execute a set of abdominal twists. Drag a chair over for assisted chest and shoulder stretches, hands behind you, braced on the seat as you squat. Feel the muscles contract before relaxing, blood rushing beneath your skin. Arms across your chest, forward and back, stretching deltoids and triceps. Touch your toes, then bend a little further, palms on the floor. Straighten. Sit. One leg over the other, pull it to your chest. Do the same to its opposite.

Twenty minutes to go.

Relax your posture, pull your legs into a butterfly position. Exhale slowly, deeply. The door creaks open. You close your eyes, lips pursed, teeth clenched. Inhale, sharply.

Boots on the floor, but no click of the heel. Open your eyes.

“Heavy.” You’re rather surprised.

He approaches, slowly. “Specialist.”

There’s a leaden weight to his tone; you frown. “I hope you’re not going to try to talk me out of it.”

Inhale, slow, measured. Continue your exercise.

“No.” He shakes his head, stops at a respectful distance, and perches on the edge of the ring. “But you should know, before: Doktor does not box.”

Exhale. Brow furrows. “Then… why would he accept?”

“He will challenge you to… mm…” Heavy pauses, grimly, eyes narrowed at the ground as he tries to find the right words. “Fighting... like on the street.”

Inhale. Street fighting? That seems… unusual, but you really don’t give a damn. He can come at
you with any underhanded trick he likes. He’s going to lose. “That’s fine.” Exhale.

“Should also know…” His grey eyes search the floor like he can read exactly what to say there. “Medic says things, sometimes, but... not always how he means.” A dark crease appears between his brows, stopping a sharp retort before it leaves your lips. “But he should not have said that.”

“No...” Your heart softens in a rush of gratitude, and pain takes this opportunity to make itself known above rage. "He shouldn't." You unfold your legs, draw them up toward your chest, rest elbows on knees. “Thank you.”

Heavy smiles, softly. “Teach him good lesson.”

That sparks a grin. “I will." Blood hums under your skin, ready, waiting.

Eight minutes.

You roll to your feet as the door creaks again. Demoman and Scout file through, followed closely by Engineer, hands empty. No refreshments this time; the tone is different, air lingering heavily.

You shut your eyes against it, rolling your neck. Step into a set of simple lunges.

Next come Soldier and Pyro, and you wonder if everyone knows by now exactly what happened. With Scout bearing witness, it seems likely that he’s already retold the story with significant embellishment a half dozen times already.

Shake out your shoulders, bounce on the balls of your feet.

Five minutes.

Look around to find most of your teammates seated in folding chairs, including Sniper. They converse in low tones, and you don’t bother to actively listen. You don’t particularly want to know what they have to say. No need to break your concentration.

Close your eyes, guide your mind into narrow focus. Become present in every part of your body, feet to fingertips, breath in lungs, coiled tension in muscle, and the faintest stir of air on skin.

The door again.

Two minutes.

Medic, at last, having foregone coat and vest, medigun slung over his shoulders. And then, Spy, lips pursed around a half-finished cigarette. He catches your eye, gives a nod, deep creases apparent around his eyes. It makes you wonder, but you don’t have time to devote to questions.

The doctor sets the apparatus on the floor beside Heavy, still leaning against the ring, as much a silent sentinel as ever. Medic greets him. Heavy folds his massive arms, fixing the doctor with a deadened, dark stare you've never seen before.

Even focused elsewhere, it crawls along your skin, raising the hair on your arms.

Medic, however, seems as unflappable as ever.

Gritting your teeth, you shuffle past and leap onto the platform, slip between the ropes. Take a deep breath, shake out your hands.

"Oh, Specialist? A word first, bitte."
You turn, jaw tight. He's smiling amicably up from the floor, fingers undoing the crimson knot of his necktie.

"I am not a boxer, I'm afraid. I was a wrestler, back in school, you see... And playing by the rules you set with Heavy would put me at a disadvantage." He tosses the tie to one side, carelessly onto the chair that's holding your shirt, and sets upon his buttons. "I would suggest looser restraints... What do Americans call it?" He shrugs out of the crisp, collared shirt. "No holds are illegal?" Folded loosely in half, it makes its way to the chair as well.

You watch as he removes his spectacles, polishes them on the soft cotton of his undershirt. "No holds barred," you say.

"That's it!" Medic gestures with the glasses. Lifts them up to inspect the lenses. "No holds barred."

When they pass inspection, he replaces them on the bridge of his nose. "To loss of consciousness or submission, then?"

Ha. You're well aware he means forfeit, and that it's a perfectly normal term for wrestling, but if the doctor thinks you're going to submit in any fashion, he's sorely mistaken. "Agreed."

He brightens, a grin teasing his mouth, and it just makes your stomach churn, fists itching to connect with that smug jaw. "I might also suggest removing your boots beforehand. They're not exactly conducive to this style... in fact, they might be considered weapons."

You frown, but acquiesce: he is correct. So, you slip between the ropes, perch on the side of the ring, and set to removing your boots and socks, tossing them carefully away; one stays upright on the mat below, the other tips to its side. Close enough. You cuff your trousers just above the calf to keep them from interfering, risking a glance at Medic to find he's had the same idea.

Bent in half over his lap, fingers methodically rolling the seams into neat cuffs, you can see the naked apex of his shoulders, the broad musculature usually hidden beneath his uniform. His strikes will be ruthless. There's wiry strength evident in his legs, too, as he finishes one cuff and rolls the other along the defined curve his calf. Medic is fast, this you already know. But now, you'll have to contend with him trying to get you to the floor, where he'll have the advantage, the ability to utilize that lower body strength to its fullest. You'll just have to knock him out quickly, before he has the opportunity.

Follow the line of his arm as he unfolds, gets to his feet—

Realize with a start that he's looking right at you, catching your gaze before you can avert it. Set your jaw and raise your head. He wants to evaluate you in return? Let him.

But Medic just smiles that wan, amicable little grin, and strips off his undershirt.

His scars aren't like Heavy's at all. They are neat, tidy things, raised cuts of varying length and thickness, some curving almost in semi-circles, white along his ribs; the wounds they represent had been cleaned and treated with care. Only one stands wide and gnarled and ragged—a bullet taken just above the hip. Beyond the scars, it's apparent that while he's begun to grow soft around the edges with age, battle has kept him strong. There's no mistaking how solid he is at the core, muscle layered beneath fat, built from practical training, not vain weightlifting.

Medic has neither incredible size nor bulk, but he'll be every bit as formidable an opponent as Heavy. You never doubted it, having watched on the battlefield, but it's quite different to be able to see it evidenced in his body.
A body nimbly leaping onto the platform and easing into the ring, where you should be.

You set your shoulders and reenter, scowling as you realize he’s still wearing that damnably arrogant smirk. It’s far overdue for a date with your fist.

Heavy follows, shifting over the ropes to stand in the center of the ring. “You are ready?”

Nod, staring Medic down as he does the same, rolling his shoulders, meeting your glower with infuriating ease. “Ready.”

“Okay. No holds barred. To submission or blackout.” Heavy looks at you, and then at the doctor. Raises an arm.

A deep, slow breath. Bring your hands up into defensive position, relaxed, open. Your opponent mirrors the gesture. Open hands. More likely to grapple. You’ll have to strike quickly.

Heavy’s fist drops. “Go!”

Your body moves, liquid and easy, to close the distance, mind beautifully blank as the command rings through the air. One thing only drives your blood: cold rage kept carefully at your center. One thought powers the strike, like lightning, against Medic’s jaw: *I will win.*

In motion, you can’t stop. With his forearm, he blocks the second fist you throw, but you open your hand, redirect the motion in an open blow to his shoulder, setting him off-balance, leaving him open for an axe strike with the other, cracking against his trachea. Medic wheezes, but it isn’t enough to break him, not yet, as fingers wrap, vice-like, nails digging into the soft flesh at the inside of your arm, collapsing the elbow in an involuntary jerk.

Pain cracks along your cheek, stars swimming in the air, dancing across your vision, but you don’t need to see more than his silhouette to drive the heel of your hand under his chin. His head snaps back and satisfaction roils in your chest even as his fingers tighten, tear at the skin of your arm in an attempt to regain balance. Twist your hand around his forearm to break his hold, blink your vision clear just in time to dodge backward, bare feet light and lithe upon the vinyl floor, and his fist misses your nose by centimeters. Step back in, twisting your torso to put a driving force behind your hand—catch his wrist, snap your hips back to pull him close, skull connecting with your waiting fist.

The skin across your knuckles burns, and you know it has split in several places, but a thin, crimson stream of blood trickling down Medic’s forehead, catching on wire-rimmed lenses, assuages the pain. There’s a pleasant buzz at the base of your skull. You can finish him now, any way you would like—his wrist pulled fast against your ribs, your fingers tucked tight beneath his jaw, palm flat on his throat, pulse jumping beneath your skin. Blood running, sluggishly, down his face, flushed with exertion and bruises already darkening. But he smiles, and you snarl, and shove him away with every burning fiber of fury still rushing in your veins.

He goes straight back, onto the floor, tries to roll with the impact, lands on elbows and knees, chuckling.

*I chose the wrong vessel.* Jaw creaks, mouth contorting, teeth bared. “Get up,” you hiss.


Hands lift to defensive position, your muscles burning, itching, demanding more. *How many times are you going to forget where you are and let them slaughter you?* “Get up!”

*I chose the wrong vessel.* Jaw creaks, mouth contorting, teeth bared. “Get up,” you hiss.


Hands lift to defensive position, your muscles burning, itching, demanding more. *How many times are you going to forget where you are and let them slaughter you?* “Get up!”
Medic pushes himself to his knees, skin glistening with sweat. Slowly, smiling, he wipes the blood from his cheek on the back of his hand. He peers up through his spectacles, stained on one side with little, crimson droplets. The bonesaw grin does not fade. “You’re going to regret letting me.”

_You have been absolutely humiliated, or didn’t you notice? “Get. Up.”_

He rolls his shoulders in a shrug, braces a palm against the floor, shifts his foot beneath him for the leverage to stand. “I’d much prefer—” When you realize, it’s a second too late, and you’re moving too slowly. “—you come down.”

Back hits the floor and the air leaves your lungs, hands clawing at arms wrapped tightly around your waist. Gasp, draw tight half-breaths, trying to recover, struggling to get your legs free of Medic’s weight, hands desperately looking for a way to break his hold. Breathe, breathe, try to breathe, _think._

Twist your hips hard, free one of your legs and brace it against his back. Draw a breath, deeper, abandon your attempts at dislodging his arms, grab a fistful of his hair and _roll,_ using your freed leg for leverage. Positions swapped, your leg pinned beneath his back, his arms still clutched, unyielding, around your waist—but one more twist of your hips, foot braced on the floor, loosens his grip enough for you to sit up and deliver a hammer strike that breaks his nose spectacularly beneath your fist. He coughs, splutters, but before you can attack again, gravity shifts.

One moment, you’re perched on Medic’s chest, the next, you’re flat on your back again, raising your arms against a blow to the face that never comes. In a flash, he insinuates his arm beneath yours, sweeping it back around your head to cradle your neck in his elbow, your arms trapped against his chest. You kick, lashing out blindly, but they’re caught, pinned, tangled with his. You can’t gain any traction, can’t move, can’t get your arms to obey, can’t roll—

The arm locked behind your head tightens by degrees, hardly any pain at first, but then, suddenly, every nerve is on fire, tendons burning, tearing, the sharp fear that your head might just be wrenched from your shoulders—

“I _can_ kill you like this, you know,” he says, breath hot on your ear. You can’t see anything but darkness, bright white spots dancing through your vision, face buried against his shoulder. “Submission is preferable, of course. Or I could increase the pain beyond the threshold of your tolerance so you lose consciousness. I could even smother you, to the same effect.” His breath is shallow, shuddering. “I know this is painful. _Excruciating._” The way his voice wraps around the syllables makes it sound like bliss. “You don’t have to continue suffering.”

It _burns,_ and there are tears springing to your eyes, but you _can’t_ admit defeat. Not now. The pain consumes every thought but this—you _cannot._ You must think, you must find another way, but there’s no room, no room beside the pain. You want it to stop. You want it to stop. You _need_ it to stop.

Your vision grows darker. He smells of sweat and antiseptic and—

No holds barred. There’s only one unsecured weapon left.

You sink your teeth deep into the juncture of neck and shoulder, driving down until you taste blood.

_“Fick!”_

His hold loosens enough to clear your vision, to allow a single opportunity. You drive your skull...
against his broken nose, slackening his grip, and you free your arms. The air reeks of copper, its
taste filling your throat; red, red, there’s red everywhere, filling your head, your mouth, your eyes—
and you brace your arm against his bloody neck, shove him up and off and onto the floor,
struggling all the way. You draw a deep, shuddering breath, and, as he gasps against the arm
pinning his throat to the ground, you bring your fist down one last time.

Chapter End Notes

That took a turn or two, hm?

For anyone interested, that wrestling hold is shown here, from :56 seconds to 1:05:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_B7Wd4LF28
Dénouement

Chapter Notes

My thanks again to the Discord crew for taking a look at this chapter for me! Should further revisions be done after my editor takes a look, I'll update accordingly, as always.

**WARNING** for: blood, graphic violence, and let's call it... implied sexuality

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He stops struggling immediately, limbs slack, but you wait a moment, two, three, forearm tight against his throat, breath coming in hard, short bursts, slowly drawing deeper. Bruises and blood. Your mouth is filled with the taste, metallic and cloying. His. You grimace, consider spitting. Too late now, the damage is done.

His chest hitches under your weight, trying for breath.

Let the strength leave your limbs, trembling with adrenaline, and roll to one side. Stare up at bare, yellow lights. Breathe. Chance another glance. Heavy is there, checking for signs of life. Medic’s chest rises and falls, but *hell*, he looks terrible. Bruises and blood. Skin swelling, nose twisted, flesh torn by your teeth—

Stomach seizes. “Heal him.” But your voice comes out cracked, sticky. Turn your head to spit this time. “Heal him.” Hear boots on the floor, and close your eyes. Breathe.

The pain begins to fade back in, skin tingling in pins and needles as your knuckles and face swell, the cuts across both hands burning. A dull, stabbing pain makes itself known to your head by way of the bones in your cheek, jabbing through into your brain. Pain in your brow, cracking deep, like part of the eye socket is fractured. Every tendon in your neck loudly protests the hard floor beneath your head, rails against any minute movement.

And your blood is running so fast, heart hammering. Eyes closed, your mind is so, so quiet. Only your body, your pain, the rhythm of your heart, the darkness behind your eyelids.

The hum of the medigun, so familiar. A ragged gasp.

“*Berauschend!*”

An unfamiliar word, but the way he says it makes it sound like *brilliant, bracing, excellent*, and something like a laugh coughs its way out of your throat. *Ausgezeichnet*, that one you know by now—that one does mean ‘excellent,’ but it’s not the one he’s chosen. All the same, here he is, sounding like he *enjoyed* this as much as...

Well. You do recall certain stimulus grinding against your hip while locked in close combat, but you’ve fought enough men to know that’s more an involuntary response to friction and adrenaline than evidence of actual interest. Besides, the impetus of this whole thing was so very, very far from *fun*.

You turn your head and spit again, his blood still coating your throat, burning your tongue. Draw a
sharp breath through your nose when the muscles of your neck seize in lancing pain. You can hear the rustle of fabric, the shuffle of feet, and then—energy hums along your skin, sears cuts closed, seals bone, snaps tendons into proper alignment like rubber bands. Where the aches fade, a rush of endorphins follows, a pleasant, heady relief. You don’t want to open your eyes yet.

Fingers nudge your shoulder. You want to bask in the relief a little longer, the ruby glow behind your eyes. The hum resonating in your chest. You don’t move.

“I know I didn’t wear you out.”

Your nose crinkles, but you don’t open your eyes. Hasn’t he had enough?

Medic hums. “Not even interested in gloating?”

No. No, you’re not. Slowly, you brace your palms against the floor, push yourself into a sitting position, teeth grinding as the gentle healing stops. The air settles cold on your skin. Energy has seeped back into your limbs, but your mind is so, so tired.

“Specialist?” Curious, petulant.

Draw your knees up, feel something slick on the vinyl beneath your heel. Probably blood. “Nothing to brag about.” Roll your neck from shoulder to chest.

“What?” shrieks Scout.

You’d rather forgotten about the audience.

“Whaddya mean, nothing to brag about?”

“Scout…” Heavy rumbles.

“He had ya dead to rights, and you turn around an’ almost kill him!”

Your chest feels tight. You didn’t kill him. Not even close. You were angry, but you were in control, you didn’t—how many times are you going to forget where you are?

“Freakin’ incredible! And fuckin’ freaky, actually, if ya ask me, I mean what the hell, Spesh? You think you’re some kinda vampire or som—”

“SCOUT.” The word rings so sharply you flinch as well. “This is enough.”

Enough. Open your eyes, but keep them fixed on your knees. The neat cuffs you had made are rumpled, half-undone. Enough. You’re not interested in gloating.

Your mother would be very disappointed in this kind of behavior.

Bruises and blood. The hole torn at the soft junction of neck and shoulder. Split skin along the creases of his forehead. Fractured cheek and broken nose.

“Interested in apologizing, doctor?”

The only response is the metallic creak of someone’s chair.

A bitter little smile tugs at your lips in his silence.

Yes, you rather thought so: can’t even beat it out of him. But you should know better. “Didn’t
think so.” Open your eyes, and face him, against every impulse. “Nothing to apologize for?”

Medic is seated beside you, a faint crease between his brows, a little frown pursing his lips. Crimson rivulets streak his face, sanguine flecks sprinkling temple and jaw. He’s stained heavy and deep, like wine, across the whole of his neck in fresh, gleaming streaks that glisten upon his clavicle. His blood paints a perfect map of all the damage you inflicted.

You’re not angry anymore.

With a sigh, you rise, careful not to slip. The blood is getting tacky between floor and skin. Medic watches, makes no move to follow. Yellow light catches his filthy spectacles, silver and red.

You offer a hand. He blinks at it.

Pyrrhic. It all feels so bloody Pyrrhic.

Then, he takes your hand, and you pull him up. He meets your eyes, neither cold nor furious, but searching—an ocean of questions. Questions you can’t read. Hesitation in the clasp of his palm against yours. Intent in the crease at the corner of his eye. Warmth in his fingertips. Blood in the furrow of his brow.

It just hurts.

*I’m more concerned that I chose the wrong vessel.*

You’re so tired.

Release his hand. Break his gaze. Carefully move to the edge of the ring and slip between the ropes. Heavy is there in a moment, offering an arm to help you down, and you take it, feet settling on cold concrete. All the muscles are healed, but it seems they’re moving sluggishly, as though through water.

You have to move Medic’s button-down, undershirt, and tie to get to your own, clothing all tangled up together. Shake out what’s yours. Pulling scarlet fabric along your arms, you see your skin, too, stained with his blood from shoulder to chest, soaking into white cotton. He won’t apologize, but he isn’t likely to forget this, either.

“We’ll regroup tomorrow,” you offer, casting a glance over your shoulder. He’s still standing in the ring, streaked with blood and sweat, skin glistening in the artificial light. “And then try again.” It’s time to be a proper adult about this.

Since your clothes are already ruined, you decide to forego buttoning the shirt, and set to unrolling the trouser cuffs and fetching your socks. Your team, meanwhile, seems to be quite unsure where they’re supposed to be looking and whether they should be saying anything. If anyone actually laid money on the results of this match, they’re keeping it to themselves.

Tugging your boots over your calves, you push past the weight in your chest to say, lightly, “All right, fellas, if anyone else wants a try, you’re going to have to wait until after dinner at the earliest.”

“Pass!” Scout is up and out of his seat before the word clears the air.

“What, don’ think you can keep up?” calls Demoman with a grin with just enough genuine spark behind it to seem passable.
“It’s not a ‘can I keep up,’ it’s a ‘I don’t wanna.’” He wrinkles his nose. “But if you’re feelin’ lucky, I’m fine watchin’.”

“Oh, aye—maybe when the lass is in better spirits.” He gives you a cyclopic wink, and you can’t help but smile.

“Time and place, Demo.” Stand up, lean against the edge of the ring in a way that might, if one squints, look more relaxed than weary. “You name it.”

“Oh, I’ll let ye know.” He waves a hand. “Start with a couple’a drinks, maybe, to make it even.”

“Sounds like AN ALL-AMERICAN GOOD TIME,” says Soldier.

There are murmurs of assent, a few chuckles, and the scrape of chairs on concrete as bodies shuffle, as conversation resumes. The tension has lessened, and you roll your shoulders, catching sight of Medic shrugging into his button-down, letting blood soak through the collar, blossom crimson across his shoulder. His undershirt and tie are still draped over the seat where you left them, but he pays them no mind. He removes his spectacles to clean them on the white tail of his shirt, dying the fabric before replacing them on the bloody bridge of his nose. He frowns through the glass, thoughtfully, into some faraway space.

Heavy stands at your shoulder. “He is bad man.”

“Yes.” You consider the cold, unwavering stare that took Heavy’s features before the match, hollow, something in them quite, quite dead. “So are you.” You watch as Medic takes the necktie and drapes it over his skin, letting the blood bloom sanguine in scarlet silk. “So am I.”

You wonder what that means.

Heavy is looking at you, soft and serious, like he knows exactly what it means. He rests a large hand on your shoulder. “But we are here.” He squeezes your shoulder, gently. “We are here. And that is not bad.”

Water pours hot when you turn the knob, striking your skin in sharp drops. Medic's blood runs between your breasts, down the silver drain. The coppery smell of it clings to humid air, and you open your mouth under the water’s flow to drown the memory of taste. You rinse your tongue and teeth hurriedly, spit. Open your mouth again and try to cleanse the sensation from the back of your throat. Spit. Grab your bar of Ivory when the scent won’t leave your nose.

Hot against your neck, running scarlet over skin. The way he let silk play through the sanguine rivulets. Slow, it catches the light, crimson and royal, red on white, the glint of silver, salt skin on your tongue. An impulse, almost violent, turning your stomach. Sonorous, sweat-slick, breath bleeding upon cheek, claret and rose rhythms beating beneath skin. You want—you want to— you… damn it! Fists meet black tile. A sad, little thump without fervor. Slump forward, rest your head on your hands, let the water flow down your back.

**How many times are you going to forget where you are and let them slaughter you?**

Draw a long, slow breath through your nose. The clean, soft scent of your soap is there now, the heavy humidity of the water, masking the metallic scent swiftly running away, down the drain. Red and silver.

You want an apology. You want to understand.
Chastising you about humiliation, fine. Reciting your mistakes, fine. Second thoughts about your role in his work—an unexpected sting, but fine. It’s his work and he’s entitled to any opinion regarding its... vessel. Airing matters of personal mental health to the world at large? Most certainly not fine. The only team members present were ones that already knew or would say nothing? Still so very, very far from fine.

If he’s going to act like a doctor, he should damn well practice like one.

The ember starts in your chest again, the flame that ignites when you know you’re right. You push yourself back from the wall, and work the soap into a proper lather, then set to scrubbing your skin. Well. You’re not here to change the bastard. You’re here to work. The only thing you need is respect while you do it.

Trouble is, you’d genuinely thought you had some.

Let the water run over your body. Turn it up a little so it nearly scalds the skin. Wet your hair last, pour a little shampoo and run your fingers hard along the scalp until you relax. It smells faintly of cypress. Meant to be gentle on hair or something, you’re sure, but that’s no matter: it reminds you of home, the scent lingering after showers in your family’s single bathroom, of all that time spent in the hall waiting to brush your teeth each morning. Halo was always your mother’s shampoo, but you’ve a bottle of your own now.

Rinse, and the smell stays, clinging to the moisture in the air, cleansing. Shut the water off and fetch a towel, close your eyes. Breathe. Dry and put on some clean clothes, something more casual: jeans, and—you’re skin is crawling again, faintly, so you forego the tee shirt for the sleeveless.

Being clean is a relief in itself, but your mind still buzzes, lethargy creeping into limbs. You’re going to lie down in your room, read for as long as you can tolerate the effort, and if anyone tries to interrupt, so help you—

Medic is standing outside the door to your room, frowning as though it has personally offended his honor. He’s clean, you note, and dressed again in complete uniform, though you’re not sure how he managed so well after you commandeered the showers without providing opportunity for argument.

You cross your arms, tee shirt rolled up and tucked in the crook of your elbow. “Yes?”

“Oh!” He looks from you to the door and back again, brows arched almost comically high. If you were in the mood for comedy. You’re not in the mood for much of anything at all in this moment. “I was looking for you.”

“I would assume so.”

His brow creases, and he clasps his hands behind his back. “Yes. Well, I was wondering if we might speak privately?”

Something like hope makes itself known, but it’s so buried beneath the buzz of your mind, the itch under your skin, that the sound is drowned out almost entirely. “You’ve already shared my business with a third of the team. I don’t see why it should matter now.”

Medic’s jaw tightens. He frowns, looks down past the floor, and for a moment, you think he’ll leave. That would suit you just fine.

But he looks up, finds your eyes. “It does,” he says, slowly, firmly. And it almost sounds like a simple observation of fact, something he might relate over surgery.
Unfold your arms, wring the red shirt between your hands. *It matters.* You could say no. You have every right to refuse. You draw a deep, slow breath:

“Okay.” And it almost sounds like the fall you didn’t take.

Chapter End Notes

Translation: *Berauschend* - exhilarating, intoxicating
Anagnorisis

Chapter Notes

My thanks again to the Discord crew for taking a look at this chapter for me! Should further revisions be done after my editor takes a look, I'll update accordingly, as always.

WARNING for: medical malpractice

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When you agreed, it was a concession. Granted because, it seemed, he understood. But—

“My office,” Medic says, “would be best.”

And there’s the doctor you know, snapping up the offer of compromise and brusquely determining the best course of action without question. Perhaps you’d misheard him entirely, before. Perhaps he has no idea about remorse at all. Still, you’ve already agreed, and so you take the tee shirt you’ve been wringing between your hands, and tug it quickly over your head. “Fine.” It scratches uncomfortably over skin, clinging where the shower’s humidity still dampens your arms. Ants under flesh, crawling. You rub a hand vigorously along your forearm, and the stimulation eases the itch, but only for a moment.

When you look up, Medic is watching the erratic motion, brows creased in puzzlement, frowning, and you frown right back. Damn it all, you’d really like to tell him you’d rather not speak until tomorrow. Instead: “Well?”

“Ja.” But he shakes his head slightly in the negative, as though responding to another question entirely.

When Medic starts down the hall, you follow, keeping pace just far enough behind that he can’t see you without turning almost completely around. He doesn’t bother to try, only tucks his hands into the pockets of his lab coat, back perfectly straight, gaze fixed firmly down the hall. The quiet is a little disconcerting. Unusual.

Perhaps he has come to apologize, after all. Hope is there again—distant, buried beneath exhaustion and the fog in your brain that makes your head feel too heavy for your shoulders. Perhaps he has simply come to drag the argument out further.

Medic remains silent, providing no further insight into whatever he plans to discuss, and you can think of nothing to say, until Engineer crosses your path from another corridor, offering a simple “Evenin’.”

“Good evening,” you return, and immediately wonder if it wasn’t convincing enough as the man shifts a wary glance between you and the doctor.

Engie’s eyes narrow, steely, mouth fixed in a tight frown—but Medic only scoffs: “She can very well take care of herself.”

“Yeah, we all saw that,” he drawls, folding his arms. “I’m just hopin’ you learned your lesson.”
That sounded an awful lot like a threat.

The line of Medic’s jaw tightens. “If she doesn’t want to talk, she’ll tell me.”

Not entirely true, but—“Engie, it’s fine; I’m fine.” A little drained, perhaps, still unsure what the hell Medic is playing at, restlessness is settling into your legs again, but perfectly fine.

The lines of his face soften when he turns to you. “I know—I apologize for intrudin’.” For an instant, it looks like he’ll say something else, but he changes his mind, offers a small smile instead. “You have a good night, now.”

“Thanks… you, too.” You try for a smile in return.

The engineer nods and moves on as Medic makes a disagreeable sound in his throat and continues toward the infirmary.

You try not to imagine what either of them must be thinking now. Engie will mind his own business, you know that, but the tension from this afternoon lingers, palpable. He could feel it, without a doubt, and probably wonders if it’s all going to be resolved by tomorrow. You wonder if such simple resolution is even possible. But everything grinds to a screeching halt:

Medic is holding the infirmary door open for you.

A beat.

Two.

Three.

He’s—you blink twice. He’s definitely holding the door.

“Thank you.” The courtesy leaves your lips without prompt or permission from your brain.

Medic looks at you, at his hand on the door, at the floor, mouth halfway open like he’s not sure what to say, like it’s as much a surprise to him as it is to you.

Neither of you move.

And then you remember you need to walk through the door, and do so hurriedly, not stopping until you reach his office.

He stands there, dumbly, for an instant, before something that might be “bitte” leaves his mouth in a mutter. He follows, fusses in his pocket for keys. He draws an old-fashioned brass ring from the end of a long chain tucked into his pocket. On it are three modern, silver keys, and he fits one into the lock.

This time, he enters first as the door stays exactly where he pushes it, and flicks the light on. You go in after, trying to find some comfort in this more standard arrangement, pushing any thought of what could have possessed him to act so politely far from your mind. The buried tendril of hope protests your attempt at dismissal, more loudly than before.

For a moment, he hovers beside the desk, fidgeting with the keychain, winding it around the end of a finger before remembering himself, stuffing it back in his pocket. Medic wets his lips, rests the fingertips of his right hand on the clean surface of his desk. Taps the wood lightly. Looks at the floor, frowns.
“Yes?” you prompt.

His gaze snaps back up and he gestures at the chair behind you. “Please, sit.”

The itch in your legs is making itself known again. “I’d rather not.”

Medic seems to have no idea how to handle that. Purses his lips. Drops his hand back to his side. “Please, sit.”

You’re torn between laughing and gritting your teeth to push him into his chair instead, if he’s so keen on sitting. But you do neither, frowning. “I prefer not to.” You scrub your palm again along your arm. At least while standing you can shift your legs, and the pressure keeps the restlessness in them from running too badly.

His jaw tightens, but he looks away. “I have… something important to tell you.” He tucks his hands in the labcoat’s pockets, doesn't look up, just stares at a stack of files on the desk. "It would be easier if we were seated.”

Something important. The way he says it, a heaviness colors his tone, saturating it until it sounds like shame. Shame. It’s so far opposite anything you’ve ever associated with the man that hearing the words feels like falling through a thin patch of ice—sudden and sobering. It’s enough to get you in the chair.

Even if he had agreed to apologize hours ago, you would never have expected nor demanded that he be ashamed.

“Thank you.” He looks at you, at the desk, at the floor. Moves slowly around to the opposite side and takes a seat himself. But he doesn’t speak, only pinches the bridge of his nose, slides the spectacles from his face, folds and sets them aside.

It unsettles your stomach.

The desk might as well be a river for all the distance it puts between you, tumultuous, your fingers curled against wooden arms, his shoulders rigid against the chair-back. On opposite shores of the river, you sit, watching waves where the wrathful writhe in agony for eternity, fighting and clawing at one another in the mud, so quickly drowned in blood and water*—

Medic folds his hands, fingers tight, white across his knuckles. “You know, of course, that all your medical records came to me when you were hired.”

You blink. “Yes.” Records, yes. Furrow your brow. Why? There’s nothing that...

No. Your blood runs cold. No—why would he mention that now? It can’t be what—

“Why?” you ask, before your mind can run any further.

“I know why the military discharged you.” So easy. So straightforward, so clear. Where is that shame now? You must have imagined it. Seen something that was never there, could never be there. It’s just not who he is. Medic doesn't apologize.

Unfit for duty.

No, he’s a man with something to hold over your head. Jaw clenches, teeth grind. “If you’re a smart man…” You swallow past the lump in your throat, blinking back the throbbing animosity prickling behind your eyes. “...you’ll stop right there.”
A crease between his brows, slanted in confusion. “You don’t understand—”

His voice, so calm and measured, brings the spark of anger to life in your chest. You will not do it again, won’t sit on the wrong end of a desk and endure the pitying lies that end in disposal like so much unwanted rubbish. “If you intend to threaten me, you—”

“Vas? Spezialist,” he shakes his head, “listen to me—”

“No.” Heat rises in your cheeks, spreads along your skin, wrath catching up your tongue. You won’t let it happen. Not this time. “You will listen to me. If you think you can exploit—my—th—” The words get stuck, strangled, stuttered, but you forge on. “—exploit that to get me to comply with whatever the f—”

“I’m not trying to make you do anything! I need to tell you—”

“Tell me what, exactly?” Your mouth is moving and you can’t stop it, more and more words appearing on your tongue. “What could possibly begin with bringing up my dishonorable discharge that I’d have any fucking interest in hearing?” You have no control now, none, your mind is buzzing, skin crawling too hot along muscle and sinew—

You’re standing, both hands on the desk, looming over the still-seated doctor on its other side. “Why now, Medic? You’ve had all this information since the beginning, why now? If not to blackmail me, then what? To try to tell me you kept one of my secrets to yourself? Well, well done, doctor—I commend you for saving something for later use. But if you think I’m going to sit here and let you dissect—” It itches so badly, and you’re so, so angry, but it’s different this time, sharp, stabbing into your chest, constricting your lungs. Try to scrub the itch from your skin, try to cleanse the mess in your chest with words. ”—dissect—that like another—”

Medic's words are almost inaudible, and you have to play them back through your mind to understand once his lips stop moving:

“You haven’t been taking them.” Small, soft. Realization.

Your mouth hangs open. Leaning heavily on your hands, palms crushed against the desk’s surface, breath hard and heavy in your chest.

He doesn’t rise, doesn’t speak, doesn’t move at all. He just looks at you, mouth creased in a subtle frown, the harsh lines at the corners of his eyes smoothed to something like sympathy.

“What?” All the energy has gone from your voice, and you feel suddenly small.

“The medicine. You haven’t been taking it properly.” The Medic you know seeps back in slowly, the hint of softness dissolving in the set of his jaw, the line of his shoulders. “Why?”

Push yourself back from the desk, embarrassment flaring. You’re tired. “I did take it last night.”

“And when was the last time before that?” Sharp, pointed.

You fold your arms, try to calm the crawling skin. “I don’t remember, but how did y—”

“You don’t remember!” He snaps, standing, level with you. "Every day!” His hands fly to accentuate every word. “I told you each day, Spatz! You can’t just—”

“I know! I dropped—”
His hand passes, distressed, across his forehead. “No! No, you don’t know, what’s just it!” His accent has gotten almost impenetrable, voice pitching high and reedy.

The flame stirs again. “Nobody in this room holds a medical license, so just—”

“Stop!”

It’s the ice-cold fingers curling around your wrist that freeze the words in your throat more than the command.

“Stop. Please. Bitte. Just stop.” He braces himself, forcing the next words past his lips: “You don’t know, because I did not tell you.”

There’s a stabbing pain in your chest. You follow the line of his arm to meet his gaze. There’s no desk between you now, only the air, stirred by your breath. “Didn’t tell me what?”

“I’ve been trying to tell you.” His eyes don’t leave your face. “I knew about the depressive disorder.” Hearing him say it is so much worse. Bitter, crushing, all-encompassing. You try to take a step back, but he keeps talking, won’t let go. “And then you started showing symptoms of stress reaction. You had been untreated, and it was likely your previous symptoms would return. I prescribed the medication to control it.”

Your mind is working so slowly, gears turning in syrup. “You... said supplements, vitamins.”

He draws a deep breath, meets your eyes. “I lied.”

“Ja.” Fingers tighten around your wrist, digging into skin. “I wish I did not.” He wets his lips. “But here we are.”

“Here we are,” you echo. Here you are. Blood on your hands and fire in your chest and fog on your mind and cold in your bones.

"I wasn't sure you'd be... receptive to drugs if I told you then what they were. It's—it is..." He mutters a series of words in German, all with a similar sound, until: "Stigma! People think medication will take something away, but that isn't true—not if it works properly."

Somehow, this is so much worse than blackmail. "You were never going to tell me?"

"No. Well—yes!" His fingers are tight enough to bruise the instant he feels your muscles tense. "It's why I asked you here. I—I need to speak with you."

Your heart clenches like a fist.

So, so much worse.

"We're speaking." Medic relinquishes his grip, slowly, watching for any sign you might change your mind and run. You wish you could, and promptly forget this ever happened. But there are too many questions. "How did you know that they weren't working, and why did you decide to wait so fucking long?"

"I didn't!" The indignity is in his voice is offset in the way he folds his hands, tightly, wrings them together. "At least, not until..." He purses his lips, tries again. "I suspected something wasn't right, but I didn't know for sure. I've asked you if you've been sleeping, about the episodes, about your
general well-being, you might remember. You've been lying extensively yourself."

Your stomach churns. Yes, yes you have, you're sure, but beyond yesterday's inquiries about sleep, you—you don't. You don't remember. There are ragged, moth-eaten holes where entire afternoons should be. Mornings on the battlefield. Pages of your book you can't recall.

Again. It's all happened again. Why couldn't you see it before? You should have known, should have been able to see.

He sighs, retrieves his spectacles and turns them over in his hands. "You've been rubbing at your skin—not scratching. It feels like… bugs, ja? Tiny, little feet up and down, on the inside." He polishes already immaculate lenses. "Withdrawal, from not taking the medication correctly. Your body stops getting the chemical, you experience discomfort. You're suddenly reminded to take it again, after assuring me you had been taking it all along—and the discomfort continues until the body rebalances." He replaces his spectacles on his nose. "You became so angry so quickly a few minutes ago, as though you stopped being in control. On its own, that could have been the result of my pressing the right button, but you… stopped being entirely coherent—and that—that is unlike you. So, it's either a result of the disorder itself, or a side-effect of irregular medication."

Your mind feels blank. "You had no right to keep it from me." The floor is like mud, dragging you down, making your limbs heavy, so heavy. Take half a step back, sit down in the chair.

"I know."

Lean back, rest your head against the oak, let your neck roll along until you can level him an accusing stare. "You could have prevented this."

Medic crosses his arms, gazes imperiously down his nose. "So could you have."

Shame. The last embers of righteous anger. The weight of weariness. "Maybe." You pass a hand over your eyes, rub at your temples. "Doesn't change that you're a lying bastard."

He looks away, and you wonder at his expression. It's so unsuited to his face: eyes downcast, lips pressed thin and white. He might, you think, actually be sorry. Something warm flutters in your chest, relief beneath the lead curtain of melancholy.

"What now?" you ask.

Medic sighs, meets your eyes again through his spectacles. "My professional opinion is for you to continue zhe medication as it's meant to be taken, and tell me if things worsen or improve."

You nod, hum in response. Reasonable. A rational course of action—the one that should have been taken in the first place. But… if you had known, so stubborn, so averse to help, if he’d told you… would you even have taken it? You didn't trust him then.

Still. He had no right experimenting without your consent, regardless of intent.

Another nod, resolute. Really, there’s no choice; you’re going to stay, and you need to be in control of every faculty you possess to do so. Nothing left but to try again. "We'll do it right this time."

His lips part, just slightly, jaw slack. Blinks once, twice, eyes flicking back and forth behind his spectacles like he's trying to read something in your face, but comes up blank, trying to read the same line over and over and over. "We?"

Really? Just because you can admit you’re not without fault doesn’t mean you’re willing to
outright forgive his transgression. "I'm not about to absolve you." Matter-of-fact. Perfectly calm for what it seems is the first time all evening.

"No! Ah—of course, yes." Medic tries valiantly to find something to do, snatches the glasses from his face, folds them into the tail of his coat to wipe the lenses. "We'll do it right." There's a light flush across his high cheekbones, reddening the tips of his ears, and that, you decide, suits his face just fine. A little embarrassment never hurt anybody.

You wet your lips, sit up properly. "I only have three left, so…” Shrug. "Starting over in more ways than one, I suppose."

His brow furrows, and slowly, he replaces his glasses. "How… did you manage that?"

Chapter End Notes

I don't think I should have to say this plainly, but fyi, if anyone EVER jerks you around like this, particularly a medical professional, they need to be reported. This is fiction--fiction about morally dubious and/or reprehensible individuals--with rather unique circumstances, and everyone in this fic does/gets away with shit they shouldn't, up to and including Specialist. This level of medical manipulation and outright dishonesty is never acceptable in reality.

Anagnorisis - n - noun the point in a play, novel, etc., in which a principal character recognizes or discovers another character's true identity or the true nature of their own circumstances.

The More You Know: Here’s where I blur some lines regarding the actual history of psychiatric diagnoses and treatments in the United States because as much as I try to include actual historical context and a dose of realism, this is still the TF2 universe (albeit my interpretation of it)... and I do what I want. Specialist has what is diagnosed today as Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), commonly called “depression.”

Before 1970, however, symptoms of depression were commonly diagnosed as anxiety or “neuroses.” It’s unlikely that she would have been diagnosed with depression irl, let alone anything called “depressive disorder,” but “neurotic depression” makes my skin crawl a bit, and there are plenty of misconceptions about depression on the whole without me adding to the confusion.

During the 1950s and the majority of the 1960s, the “depression” diagnosis was mainly used to characterize severely melancholic conditions seen in hospitalized patients, and was considered a psychotic, rather than neurotic, disorder. Both anxiety and depression were usually treated with tranquilizers, with antidepressants being prescribed only rarely. There was a general tendency to treat the symptoms, rather than the causes of disorders, before the rise of biopsychiatry, which began exploring the chemical imbalances of the brain.

Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor (SSRI) antidepressants—one of the most
common medications for depression today—didn’t enter the market until the 1980s. This is the type of medication I’m interpreting as being prescribed for Specialist because I’m very familiar with it, and in a universe where our characters are effectively immortal, I felt it was silly to subject her to archaic treatments.
When you enter the kitchen first thing in the morning, dressed for the day, coat draped over your arm, all murmured conversation stops. As you hang the coat on the rickety chair-back at the end of the table, Scout stares, chewing a mouthful of toast—until he notices you staring right back and averts his gaze to the crumb-covered table, toast in one hand, napkin in the other. Engineer pops up from his chair and offers to make you some toast as well, remarkably casual. You accept, if only to alleviate the awkwardness.

It doesn’t work, of course. Even Heavy sips silently at his coffee, offering only a nod, the smallest shred of comfort, while Scout continues to deliberately avoid your gaze, and Spy stirs his coffee with an air of practiced nonchalance.

For a moment, you don’t understand why, and then—oh… yes, of course. No one actually saw the resolution of your dispute, and the last Engineer knew, you’d gone off for a talk with Medic. They don’t know how to behave, and no one seems inclined—

“So, uh…” Scout mumbles around his toast, still not quite looking at you. “Didja kick his ass again or—OW!”

Speaking of kicks, the boy received one under the table with a patent-leather shoe, but Spy’s expression never changed, the rhythm of the spoon in his cup never faltered.

How did…?

Oh. Oh . You’d been shouting. Even if no one understood anything being said…

Yes, it does look rather bad. They’re probably worried you might have actually killed him this time.

That thought puts such a knot in your chest you’re not sure you want to eat.

You set about making a pot of tea anyway. Whether or not you drink more than a cup, Demo will likely decide to partake if he gets up in time. The kettle goes on to boil in silence. The toaster pops and a plate is set at your place. No one speaks.

Maybe you should just say something and get it over with. “Hey, you don’t have to be concerned, everything is fine!” “Turns out we’re both bastards and I need to be medicated!” “Medic’s a lying fuck, but we’ve worked it out!” Yeah. Silence it is.

The boiling water goes into the off-color, splotchy pot that perfectly matches the base’s mismatched dishes. You do feel better today, more alert, and you slept without interruption. Understanding why things began to go abysmally gives the opportunity to think differently about
it, to try to work your way around to something better. You did it before, you can do it again.

If only you could explain it all to your teammates.

The door squeaks open as you pour the tea into your mug, steam curling over its rim. Turn your head: it’s Medic, looking ruffled, hair mussed, poking out in several directions, dressed only in shirtsleeves, sans even a tie, obviously yet not performed his morning routine. It… really doesn’t make things look much better.

One by one, each man at the table suddenly finds that the weathered wood is, in actuality, quite uninteresting, lifting their heads to stare openly at the doctor instead, watching him cross toward the coffee pot—and you. Medic, for his part, nods amiably when he notices you standing at the stove, and flat out ignores the rest of the room—even Heavy, whose grey eyes, narrow, bring to mind a hawk scanning the tall grasses for a mouse. Whatever they believe happened, Heavy, at least, still considers it Medic’s fault.

The air is so thick, it’s a wonder anyone can breathe.

No one speaks, waiting to see what you'll do, and you’re quite sick of that already. Only one thing to do, really.

“Good morning, Medic!” Every word absolutely suffused with cheer and brightness to rival the fucking sun glaring though the window over the sink.

He stops dead at your elbow, not quite two strides from the coffee pot. Blinks once. Twice. And then, recognition: his face brightens in precisely enough manic energy to tell you he knows exactly what you’re doing. “Guten Morgen, Spezialist!”

The tension snaps immediately into a singularity that crackles and dissipates with an irritated wail. “Oh my God!” Scout slams his hands on the table. “All the suspense for that?”

The doctor smiles, moves on to fetch his coffee while you return to the table where your toast waits, and you can’t help grinning.

“Worked it out, didja?” asks Engineer.

“Worked it out,” you agree, and the first, hot sip of the morning goes down much better than you feared it might.

The battlefield remains a routine, like any other. Under the New Mexico sun, there are no pills to take, no arguments to be had, no past and no future at all. There is your own blood, immediate, as it spills on the sand. The weight of a pistol against your palm. Sun, bright, searing your skin. Every second a decision, life and death ticking by, by, by. On the battlefield, only the present moment exists, each beat of your heart: now, now, now.

When he stands at your shoulder, you can hear it, loud in your ears, the sound of the present. Now. No forgiveness to be had. No questions ever asked. A routine like clockwork, comfort in certainty.

The infirmary is different. Though, it’s perhaps not the infirmary itself—cold and white and sterile as ever under fluorescent lights—but the pair of you.

Or maybe it’s just you alone.
Clinical, he asks, “How are you today?”

He doesn’t say anything about surgery, only gestures for you to sit on the gurney. The metal edge pinches beneath your thighs as he flips the chart open, produces a pen.

“Fine.” The metal is so, so cold, even through bluejeans.

He looks up only to leer suspiciously through his spectacles. “Symptoms, please.”

You wish you were far away, perhaps back in the desert. Nobody scrutinizes you with a gun in your hand. Out there, you’re never small, a bug under glass, scuttling in frantic, useless circles beneath a vivarium lamp.

When you don’t answer, clears his throat. “You said we should do it right.”

That burns. Closing your eyes, you separate yourself as far as you can from the questions, the table, your own voice while your body remains still. You don’t listen to yourself, try not to watch as you reply: “The itching only happened a couple times today, and I was able to sleep through the night.” Simple facts.

Medic records everything with care, of course he does, and you don’t care to notice the look on his face when he finally dismisses you.

Your knife finally tastes flesh.

There’s no particular poetic justice in it, nothing more dramatic than the usual skirmish. Medic supports Heavy on the fourth point where you defend their position from the left, preventing any flanking maneuvers the BLUs feel bold enough to attempt.

It’s the Scout who’s decided he’s tough enough to take you on. He bobs and weaves like a snake on water around the bullets from your Gyrojet, too slow in gaining velocity to get the better of him before he leaps into their ineffective radius. But it’s no matter; this has happened enough times by now for you to be ready before he’s within three paces.

Normally, it would be the howdah waiting behind your shield until the last moment to turn and fire. This time, however, it’s the kabar, brass on your knuckles, leather smooth against your palm. Wait until he raises the shotgun and—step forward, drive the shield up beneath the barrels, and as the shot rings in your ears, wedge the knife in a downward stroke through cotton and skin and cartilage, deep in his chest.

Triumph, adrenaline—the boy makes no sound at first, not a drop of blood seeps beneath the blade, then—

You wrench it out, drop back as the gun clatters to the hard-packed dirt and cerulean becomes purple becomes maroon and burgundy in a flood across his torso. He does make a sound then, a bitten-off, wheezing, whistling thing. It’s terrible, and he’s going to die quickly… but you really want to do it again.

Your shield-hand flashes out, grasps a bony shoulder, draws him back in, stumbling, eyes unfocused, face contorted—and you cut this time, the soft, bare flesh of the throat, opening and spilling so brightly in the sun. A living, breathing red bleeds down your fingers, soaking into the crimson sleeves of your coat. You drop him into the dirt as his choking attempts to remain conscious stop.
The blade looks even better bloodied, bronze and ruby and silver gleaming, hot on your skin.

It isn’t particularly dramatic as these things go, and the Scout will be back in just a few minutes to try again. But, as you glance half over your shoulder to your comrades, you catch Medic’s eyes. He’s wearing a strange look, almost mystified. What, as though he should be surprised that you’ve finally gotten the hang of it? The bastard. It’s certainly not your fault you hadn’t practiced this sort of style before, and not your fault you’ve had a hard time learning, apparently.

So, you toss your head with a casual shrug that flicks the blade in a little arc, showering drops of blood on sand like rain. “Such an instrument I was to use, and on my blade and dudgeon gouts of blood.” The words come so easily, Macbeth’s resolution paraphrased on your tongue. “Not a dagger of the mind, but of the flesh, it seems.”

His expression crosses over into something else entirely, and you can’t help but feel smug.

Each time, it seems your feet drag you to the infirmary without any instruction from your brain.

“How are the symptoms?” he asks. Sometimes his pen taps on the clipboard, makes a scraping sound that runs like a chill over your skin.

You answer his questions with shame wringing your throat until replies become automatic. You can stand there in the cold and the white and it’s like you’re not there at all.

“Don’t remove the bullet,” he hisses tightly between his teeth.

You nearly fumble the tweezers back in to the medikit. “What?”

Coat and shirt have already been cut away from the wound on the back of his shoulder, bullet lodged against bone. It has to be irritating his rotator cuff—not removing the bullet is absolutely—

“Hurry!” Heavy urges over the rhythm of the mingun, over the too-close explosions that rock the aluminum shed. For now, the three of you are sheltered behind its walls, behind a stack of heavy crates, but every explosion rocks the foundations.

“Wrap it up,” snaps Medic. “Leave the bullet.”

“But you won’t be able to lift—”

“Did you go to medical school and not ment—hgk.” He turns his head too far in his attempt to glower. Grits his teeth instead. “Bandage! Now!”

Growling, you drop the tweezers back into the box with a clang and douse the raw, steadily bleeding area with alcohol, press a wad of gauze over the ragged hole, then unwind a length of bandage, touching it carefully to the top of his shoulder, tucking it quickly down beneath the arm. If, when you pull it back across, it’s just a little too tight, and you revel a bit too much in Medic’s strangled huff, well… he ought to have been more polite, oughtn’t he?

Cold air, sterile. Burns your nose on each breath. You’d rather that pain than questions.

“Today?” he prompts.

“Was able to sleep through the night, and actually felt hungry.” Fingers curl on the table, crinkling starched, sterile sheets. “The itching has stopped.”
Azure. The sky has never been so blue, the sun never so bright and so white-gold as it streams through the tears gathered in your eyes. Breaths seize in your chest, but it doesn’t hurt so much now as it did when the tears and blood flowed freely. It’ll be over very soon.

But then—scarlet, where black should be, pain intensifying into a singular point before—

A deep breath. Bright, beautiful, *like new*.

You blink the last of the moisture away, searching that crystalline sky.

A hand gloved in scarlet appears, and you take it, blood returning to its lively flow.

“Thanks,” you say, smiling with sticky cheeks.

Medic’s answering grin is indulgent, self-satisfied. “*Bitte, Spatz.* I think revenge is in order, don’t you?”

Fluorescents glare on linoleum. They cast frail, wavering shadows.

“And how are the symptoms?” His pen scratches on paper.

“Ate and slept normally.”

Bullets sing, glancing off skin with a whisper. Your voice, bright and ecstatic as the blood in your veins, rises in poetry. Each squeeze of the trigger sounds a deadly phrase. Crimson and scarlet and russet, rose-red...

Light fades, skin tingles. The air smells of copper and and ash and sand and sun.

Medic’s elbow nudges yours. “Shall we?”

A heady smile lights your face. “After you.”

White walls.

“Symptoms?”

“Slept through the night.”

And at night… *at night*—

The listlessness that sets in with the quiet. The fear you keep tucked up behind your heart where the shadows crowd close.

And even deeper, beneath the fear behind your heart, down in the pit of your stomach, you hold the absolute *knowledge* that it’s all going to fall apart. Every moment is fleeting, each spark of potential snuffed before it’s lit. Dying, each minute, everything, always, *dying*, and that’s what it means to be mortal, isn’t it? One step at a time, closer and closer to death, and why, why, why, why *not*—

But you know it’s not real. It’s not real, and it's not true, not true, not true.

But the emptiness in your chest does not dissipate. There’s no one to blame for that, you suppose,
but yourself.

So you sleep, in the hope that morning will bring something different.

It’s driving you absolutely mad.
Drafting another letter in pencil, distracted by the forest green that shows just a little through the paper from a hardcover encyclopedia on your lap. Each day is red and yellow and brown and orange and blue. Never enough green.

Maybe a little plant is what your room needs.

Frown, drop the pencil to rub your forehead, massage the bridge of your nose. A little plant. To what, brighten up the place like a hospital room?

Fingers curl against your skin.

To bring yourself so close to death that you survive...

The page holds a salutation and an expression of relief after the last message about an averted infection. You still don’t know what to say, not really, as the worry snakes its way through your stomach and ties itself in a knot that settles in your throat. But your mother is fine—she said so. Despite the infection, she’s all right.

This is not a cure, this is victory!

Your mother wouldn’t lie to you. Your parents have always been firm on one thing: it doesn’t matter what you’ve done, as long as you tell the truth about it.

Oh.

You haven’t thought on that in a long time.

Tap the eraser-end of your pencil on the paper. You’re still looking at the pale blue lines without really seeing. So many lies lately. About your position. About your well-being. About this gut-wrenching worry you can’t bear to speak. About the medicine.

The damned medicine.

I lied. I wish I had not. But here we are.

You wish desperately you had her advice. Confession is better than deception, yes. But does it count if one only reveals the truth after the lies?

You think of his hand tucked into yours, exuberant comforts of medicine on his lips. You think of his fingers curled around your wrist, poisonous confessions on his tongue.

Teeth grind slowly, jaw clenching. No advice, no answers.
Just your thoughts, and a pencil, and a book, and a half-written letter.

There’s only one place to go, really, and your feet find their way before your head has resolved to do it.

Three doors down from your own room, the oak reads “Heavy Weapons Expert” in plain black letters. Underneath, he’s added Cyrillic—you assume it reads the same in his language, but you can’t be sure. You knock, clear and solid, three times.

“Door is open.”

With a breath, you turn the knob and push through.

You’ve been to Heavy’s room exactly once, back at the beginning of your acquaintance, and everything is exactly the same—a desk and a workbench, a bureau covered in books, two chairs, a night table, a bed large enough to accommodate a veritable giant, and a much smaller bed beside it that cushions what you’re certain is the most well-cared for weapon the world over. Strange, yes. Very strange, in fact, but not the oddest thing on this base by far.

“Are you busy?”

Maybe after your discussion you can get him to talk about Sasha again. His eyes always light up like he’s talking about a child, and everything Heavy knows is technically fascinating. Besides, the rhythm of his voice is comforting, soothing. It might calm your nerves.

He’s standing at the bench, shotgun disassembled, pushing a brush smoothly through the barrel. “Not for you. Need talk?”

Your heart seizes painfully in gratitude, in warmth. “Yes… thank you.”

“Come sit, shut door if you want.” He doesn't look up from his work as a puff of gunpowder dissipates at the end of the muzzle, just indicates a large, wooden chair with an open gesture of his hand.

You do both, tucking one leg beneath the other as you sit. He nods, but doesn’t ask what's wrong, just picks up the next piece and gives it his full attention. You wish, suddenly, that you had something to do with your hands.

“It’s… a couple weeks ago.” Fingers curl against your thighs, catching the fabric of your jeans. “With Medic.”

Heavy nods, slowly, working rhythmically on the gun, no hurry, expression serene and unchanging. You wet your lips, fold your hands tightly together for something to do. How to say… where should you begin? Frown, nails pinching into the soft skin between fingers. At the beginning, simple as possible. “He… lied to me. About medicine he prescribed.”

There’s a small crease between his brows. “Lied how?” Heavy asks.

“He told me they were vitamins, but they… weren’t.”

Heavy’s hands continue busily, changing the brush for a soft, oiled cloth, but the movements aren’t so relaxed. He waits. You’re still trying to figure out how to explain—how much is prudent to explain. But… but this is Heavy.
“I’m… I have another illness. One that’s… well…” You tap your temple with a little more sarcasm than necessary. “I came here with it, but before arriving, I’d been doing better without medicine until everything with my… panic the first week. Medic gave me medicine for that illness and lied about it. I didn’t know, so... I accidentally stopped taking it every day, and it made me sick.”

Now a deep frown creases his face. “Sick?”

“From withdrawals.”

His frown deepens, and he reaches for a huge book on the chair behind him. “Do not know this word.”

You have a routine by now—he wants to look it up, deems it important enough to do it himself. And so, rather than explain, you spell. “W-i-t-h-d-r-a-w-a-l.”

The pages shuffle with a whisper, and he takes a moment on the appropriate page. A displeased hum settles in his throat. “Very important for you to know.”

“Yes. He did say to make sure I took them, but I dropped the bottle one night and forgot for a few days, since I’d put them in my drawer.” Your palms have started to sweat, and you roll them over your jeans. “The night we fought, he figured out I hadn't been taking them.”

Heavy nods, returning to the workbench, and starts snapping parts back into place. “Have you killed him for this?”

You blink. “What?”

He doesn’t look up, just shrugs one massive shoulder casually. “If you did not kill him for this, I will do it.”

The taste of blood in your mouth, metallic and cloying. “I’ve… had enough of that, Heavy, but thank you.” You swallow, and the phantom taste still stings. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t.”

He nods, but utters: “Doktor deserves it.”

“Maybe.” Roll your palms over your thighs again, skin scraping on denim. “But I agreed to try again, both of us being truthful this time.”

The barrel slides neatly back into place. “Both?”

“I hadn’t been honest about my health. Habit, I guess.” Habit, fear... shame. “Didn’t think it was anything to worry about.”

“Hm.” He takes another thin cloth, tips some gun oil into it, and begins wiping down the recoil pad, the stock, the receiver.

You shift, pulling one leg into the chair, folding it under the other. Slowly, patiently he works through the trigger guard, the ports, the magazine. “I’m… just not sure I did the right thing.”

“What is right?” He asks, not missing a beat. “Who decides?”

You don’t have an answer for that.

“Government likes to make rules for what is right, but we do not listen to them.” With every pass, he smooths the fingerprints away. “Some people say what is right comes from God.” Magazine, barrel, fore-end. “But it is so hard to know if He is listening, if He is even there.” Heavy sets the
cloth aside, sets his eye down the sight. Then, he pumps the action once, twice, assuring a smooth glide. “So—is up to you. You want to forgive? You do. You want revenge? You take. If duty is right, you follow rules. You work. If love is right, you love. You protect. You try. But no one can tell you what is right for doing.”

His words settle heavily, like a blanket over your shoulders.

He raises his head, gives something like a smile, its softness offset by the hard gravity of his eyes. “Your mama tried, and now you are grown; you make decisions best you can. But you already know this.”

Yes, you knew no one could answer for you. “Thank you, Heavy.”

He does smile at that, more gently. “Is hard, not knowing. Hard to be sure. But you will find right thing for you.”

Tears prick at your eyes, and it’s irritating because you don’t even know why they’re there. “Thanks,” you say, wetly.

Heavy hums, strides over to pat your shoulder a little bit harder than most would consider comfortable. “Enough soft talk. You would like to box?”

You sniff, vigorously wiping the corners of your eyes before anything can escape and roll down your cheeks. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

You don’t come to an immediate resolution; how could you? Those white walls fill you with as much dread as they ever did all the way back at the beginning. You separate yourself from that space, that mindset, as much as possible. Sometimes, the utter blankness, that disembodied empty feeling follows you from the infirmary and you spend the next hour recovering, coming back into yourself and working up enough focus to read or run the outdoor course or even just fix a sandwich.

If Medic has noticed, he has not said a word about it. Indeed, since that first week, you’ve not spoken frankly about the whole thing at all. Outside of battle, you speak only through a medical inquiry in the afternoon, and dismissal.

And what would you say? The issue is resolved. You chose to move on and move forward together with a proper methodology in place, no secrets. You both agreed. You work together every day as though nothing ever happened.

Why is each evening different?

It’s not until he finally asks that you realize.

You’re in his office today, but the wide expanse of the desk, the white lights, the rigid chair-back put you no more at ease than the cold gurney, than the frigid, sterile air.

“It’s been some time since the last surgery,” he says, genially, as though he doesn’t know that it’s been exactly twelve days. “Perhaps we can schedule another for later this evening, say, six o’clock?”

It’s enough to jolt you completely out of your usual stupor. Your mouth opens, closes, opens again like a damn fish. Terror starts at the top of your spine and floods every muscle with enough
adrenaline to put you on the other side of the base in eight seconds flat. “No.” Your throat is tight, breath short. It’s like he’s asked you to let him poke around in your brain while you’re fully conscious. You can’t say anything more.

“No?” Medic prompts, brows furrowed.

“No.” All other words have completely fled your mind. Fingers curl tight against your thighs.

And you brace yourself. You expect him to rail, to wheedle, whine, cajole. Perhaps lose his temper. You had a deal, after all. You’re being completely unreasonable, after all. Refusing even after such a long reprieve. No explanation. Flat denial.

His mouth pulls into a tight curl of frustration.

You look at your feet, still clad in uniform boots, black leather. You wonder how fast you can be up and out the door.

“All right,” he says, passing the pen in his hand tightly back and forth, weaving through fingers.

What? “What?”

“All right.” He doesn’t look up, lets the final consonant click deliberately on his tongue. Over and over each knuckle the pen goes, gold cap catching white light.

You sit, quite dumbly. The last time you’d objected to a surgery… well. You expected another fight. For him to storm from the room—or rather, throw you out with impunity. “Um—”

“Just go.” He flicks his hand dismissively, almost flings the pen into your lap—but it just skitters across the desk and he scrambles after it, huffing. “I’m quite busy!”

And so you do, head spinning unpleasantly.

In your room, you slide down against the door as it clicks shut, coat catching on splinters of shoddy workmanship.

You don’t trust him. The realization turns your stomach.

Battle is one thing. Battle requires cooperation. Equal exchange.

The infirmary is vulnerability. And you don’t trust him anymore, not enough.

You rest your head against your knees. You can’t avoid it forever. You made a deal, you have a responsibility. You can’t avoid it forever.

But you can today.
Thanks again to the Discord crew for looking at this one for me.

Saturday. You know it by the simple fact that Soldier doesn’t rouse the entire base via bugle—but only because Engineer confiscates it on Fridays to be returned Sunday night.

With nowhere in particular to be, you lie awake in bed for a while as the sun streams through your window. Slowly, the shadows of the iron bars move further and further down the wall in faintest increments. In the hall, you can hear footsteps. The vents carry indistinct murmurs from the kitchen. You rather wish you had a radio—or that whomever owns the one you hear from the window sometimes would switch it on now.

Languidly, you stretch, sheets scratching on skin, thin comforter tangled around your feet again. Too much tossing and turning. You roll onto your back, stare at the ceiling, at the yellowed splotches of discolored paint. It isn’t a bad day, you think. Yes, it’s only just started, but you can usually tell. Your brain isn’t as cluttered. No responsibility…

Well. Medic hasn’t mentioned surgery again for three days or so, and he probably won’t break that streak on a Saturday. You haven’t done anything medical on a Saturday since that first month.

The first month—that was… what, March? And this is… you frown. This is…

*Knock, knock, knock.*

You sit up with a grunt, nose wrinkling. “Yes?”

“Is Heavy. We go to town today—you want to come?”

Roll your shoulders and neck. “Who’s going?”

“Just Engineer, Scout, Soldier, and me,” he calls through the door. “Only one more can fit in truck.”

You consider it. There’s little else to do today, and if Medic’s not going—

“There is bookstore.” A smile in his voice, like he *knows.*

You grin. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

Engie, as it turns out, has an old, red Ranchero excellent for navigating the desert, whipping up sand and dirt on gravel roads, an orange mist curling by the open windows. The air smells of heat and dirt and leather and exhaust from the engine—and faintly of sweat, too, as you’re jostled between Scout and the door on the back bench. It’s *hot*, make no mistake, but the air is moving.
Through the crackling of the radio and the noise of the engine and the wind, you can just make out Elvis crooning:

_We’re caught in a trap._

_I can’t walk out..._

You were free to wear anything, so the most practical of your casual shirts was the winner today: cap sleeves and stripes, nothing to garner too much attention. The only problem is, whenever the truck hits a large bump, Scout’s arm smacks into yours, and your sweaty skin sticks. Longer sleeves might have been a better choice on that front, but it’s far too late now.

*Why can’t you see,*

*What you’re doing to me?*

There is, however, one thing unusual about your attire, and that’s the uniform boots pulled up over the legs of your jeans. Could you have worn your keds comfortably? Yes. But then, you couldn’t have stashed your knife in an easily accessible, discreet area. And you certainly weren’t leaving it behind. The howdah on your thigh would have been preferable, but, well, attention is the opposite of what you want, especially when the team isn’t exactly welcome in town to begin with… something about explosives?

*We can’t go on together*

*With suspicious minds...*

Scout and Soldier are in the midst of a lively discussion or argument; it’s hard to tell. In the distance, a clump of very square buildings rises closer and closer, cream and brown and orange in the glaring sunlight.

“It is MY turn to make dinner, and it’s going to be what I decide: pure Americana!”

“Okay, yeah, but last time—”

“Last time the ingredients were inferior! Today—”

“Jello salad, Solly! How could you mess that up—”

It’s the jello salad that caught your ear and tuned you into the discussion. You’ve seen it before. Hell, you’ve had a variation before, at a friend’s house, years ago, but—

The truck rolls over a bump, and your shoulder smacks into the sun-warm steel of the door, Scout sliding along behind to squish and stick to your arm _again._

“This time, we’ll have fresh, all-American ingredients! Hot dogs and salad! Only the best we can find!”

As you look through the windshield, Engineer catches your gaze in the rear-view mirror and grins, shrugging, so you roll your eyes good-naturedly. It’s better than being alone in silence, you’ll say that.

“Oh. Well. If there’s hot dogs, I guess that’s nothin’ to worry abo—”

“And dessert jello!”
“Oh. Just don’t mess it up, and we—”

Huh. Dessert. You turn your attention from the windshield to your window just as Heavy starts shaking his head in exasperated silence. Dessert should mean just jello and fruit, right?

“I HAVE NEVER MESSED UP A MEAL! ONLY HAD DISAPPOINTING RESULTS.”

“Yeah, okay, wise guy—”

“We’re here!” calls Engie.

Indeed, squat, square buildings of wood and plaster creak by as the truck rattles. There are a few people outside in broad-brimmed hats, squinting against the sun, frowning suspiciously as you watch through dust kicked up from the wheels.

Engineer pulls the pickup into an empty space outside what you assume is the grocer’s—there’s no real sign up, just “open” in the front window, and a neon sign beside it reading “DELI.”

As the engine cuts off with a click, Engineer twists in his seat, puts an arm on the bench, and looks at each of you in turn. “All right; Solly and Scout, with me. Heavy said he’s got an errand to run, and you’re welcome to go where you want, of course, Specialist. An’ everybody, remember not to pick fights or finish ‘em.” This, he directs at Scout and Soldier with a glare. “No messin’ around if we wanna be able to keep gettin’ fresh vegetables.”

“I’ll go with Heavy,” you confirm.

He nods. “Alright. Anything we can get you at the grocery store?”

“Actually… yes, please.” You dig in your back pocket, flip out some bills, and count fifteen. “A pack of lager—something dark, whatever they have—and a handle of gin if they have it, whiskey if they don’t, please.”

Engie nods, takes the money, and tucks it into the top pocket of his overalls. “No problem. Rail?”

“Mid-range—but if rail’s it, then that’s fine.” You’re not level enough to drink alcohol just yet, but as soon as you are, you’re definitely not stooping to that RED swill in the refrigerator again.

“Got it. All right, fellas—meet back here by eleven thirty.”

You hope Heavy has a watch; you really hadn't thought of it. Still, you nod, squeeze behind front seat and step out, while Engineer slams the door behind you.

Then, Soldier and Scout are off and chattering, leaving you to wander around the truck-bed and stand at Heavy’s shoulder. “An errand?” you ask as he squints across the street.

“Da.” He offers, mouth quirking at the edge. “At bookstore.”

You smile in return. “I like the way you think.”

Pedestrians with downcast eyes and unsubtle diversions of their paths to use other walkways are commonplace as you wander the side streets. It could very well be that you’re recognizable as the mercenaries that live not far from town, but you suspect that, even elsewhere, you and Heavy would be considered something to avoid, casual clothes or no. The man beside you is a giant with a face that speaks of severity; and you, potentially mistaken for an Australian, all muscle and solid weight, broad-shouldered and… well, you can’t say for sure what they might see in your
expression, especially now. You’re not quite the person you were months ago.

Whatever it is they can see, these people don’t care for it.

The quiet is nice, though, as you walk, each dry breath of hot air tasting pleasantly of someone’s late breakfast frying on the stove, scent wafting through an open window—bacon and eggs and potatoes…

The bookshop sits squashed between two plaster buildings, perhaps offices. Its wooden edifice is broken by a heavy door propped open into the sidewalk, and a large, glass window where old tomes sit on a sun-bleached blanket that once might have been wine, now faded to orchid pink.

Heavy bows through the door and you follow closely after.

“Oh! Mr. Ivan!”

Your brow furrows, then arches up to your hairline. You stop beside Heavy, catch his eye. *Ivan?* you mouth. He half-glances at you and shrugs, shaking his head (*not* his real name, then) before offering a hand to the little man hurrying from between overfull bookcases.

The shop-owner is squat, with mussed, grey hair and white beard, friendly wrinkles at his eyes and a smile missing three teeth. He shakes Heavy’s hand vigorously. “I was able to find those books for you, I was!”

“Thank you, Mr. Bolska.”

“Oh, don’t thank me yet—” He bustles around another corner, behind a high stack of boxes, to the store counter. When he comes back into view, he’s holding two dark volumes—one thin, the other considerably thick.

Your heart jumps into your throat. Is one of these for you?

“The Dostoyevsky is a brand-new translation!” He passes them across the counter to Heavy’s waiting hands. On one, the thinner of the two, you read, “White Nights and Other Stories; Fyodor Dostoyevsky,” on the other, a set of cyrillic text.

It *must* be yours!

Heavy smiles with his eyes, like he can hear your excitement. “Thank you; I am glad you could give them—” and he utters a phrase in his native language.

The other man replies, but his syllables seem heavier, not as smooth, and Heavy sets the books on the counter before fetching a billfold from his pocket and handing him cash, waving off what you imagine is an offer of change.

“What is time?” It seems neither of you have a watch, after all.

But the gentleman tugs up his sleeve, looks at the leather-banded piece on his wrist. “Eleven o’clock.”

“Mm. Still have time. Do you mind if we look?”

It takes a moment to realize the last is directed at you, as it seems you only have eyes for the black tome and its neat, white block letters. “No, not at all!” It’d be a shame not to have a look around this lovely little place, indeed…
“Take as much time as you like, of course,” says the man warmly. “And please excuse me for not introducing myself!” He reaches a hand across the counter. “Bolska. David Bolska.”

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. Every name leaves your mind immediately as you shake his hand and force a genial smile on your face. There’s your name, still, ratting around, but, but—

“Lee!” you blurt. “Er—Auralee.”

The fuck are you thinking? Elvis Presley starts singing Love Me Tender in your head.

“Good to meet you, Miss Aura Lea.” He releases your hand. “Please let me know if I can help you with anything. Mr. Ivan asks sometimes to look for things I don’t have in stock when I go into the city, and I’d be glad to do the same for you.”

“Thank you.” With a nod, you excuse yourself to the stacks, disappearing as quickly as you dare between two shelves, where wood bows under the weight of books stacked upon books. Eyes roam the titles as you try to quiet the embarrassed shouting your brain is still doing, with continued accompaniment from Mr. Presley. You really ought to have a proper name prepared for next time.

“Is okay.”

You nearly jump out of your skin. “Hm?”

“He knows we cannot tell names. Picked Ivan to call me.”

“Oh.” You frown. “Then why didn’t he just pick something to call me?”

Heavy shrugs. “You didn’t ask.”

You grumble unintelligibly and go back to browsing. Many of the paperbacks piled on the neat row of hardcovers below are new, with crisp covers and flashy titles. Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? for instance, finds your hand for a quick look, as well as In Watermelon Sugar. Your eyes roam over Colonel Sun, a new James Bond novel, and The Dragonriders of Pern 1-3 now available in a single volume.

Some of the hardcovers, you notice as you progress, are old, well-used with faded or tattered edges, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Great Expectations predictably among them.

But further back, smelling sweetly of musty paper and lilac, a small, squat shelf holding several books in other languages: a great many Spanish, a few in French, a handful in Russian, and several in a language you don’t recognize. It’s full of strange accents and a few odd letters. Something Eastern European, probably, but you don’t have enough information to say for sure.

By the time you’re ready to leave, you have a beautiful copy of William Butler Yeats’ complete poetry in hand—but you’re still eyeing the Dostoyevsky as Heavy picks his purchases up from the counter, and as you hand Mr. Bolska payment.

“Enjoy your weekend, Mr Ivan—Miss Aura Lea,” he calls, grinning like he knows a bit more than he ought. “‘Love and light return with thee, and swallows with the spring.’”

You can’t get out the door fast enough as your brain sees fit to fill in the rest, to the tune that’s been playing in your head since you blurted the damn name, with an older set of lyrics:

Aura Lea, Aura Lea,
Maid with golden hair;
Sunshine came along with thee,
And swallows in the air.

In the street, Heavy nudges you with his elbow. “Am sure you know I have something for you.”

All previous embarrassment dissolves like a bit of mist in sunlight, giving way to delighted anticipation: “I did guess.”

Heavy smiles with his eyes again, and a quirk of his mouth that nearly shows teeth, holding out the English volume. “I chose this for you—White Nights. You can read others, but White Nights is yours.”

Reverently, with a gentle hand, you take it, sliding the dark book atop your purchase, and let your fingers trace the soft cover. “Thank you, Heavy; I’m excited to read it.”

He hasn’t stopped smiling. “Story will understand you, I think.”

You look from him to the cover, back again, something soft in your heart. Such a sentiment… you’re not sure what to say, how to reply, emotions swinging wildly once more to constrict your throat just a little. “Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

The More You Know: Aura Lea is an American Civil War era song and has been sung by several artists since, including Bing Crosby in 1959, which is probably how Specialist knows it. The tune to the song was also used in Elvis Presley's hit Love Me Tender.
“White Nights. A Sentimental Story From the Diary of A Dreamer”, the first page declaims.

You had been quite unable to wait a moment longer when Engie’s truck rattled into the base’s barren yard. As soon as the engine cut, without so much as a by-your-leave, you were up and out the instant the door opened. Through the doors and down the hall, books in hand, straight to your room, plopping on the bed like a child before the door clicked shut.

The new volume of poetry found a place on your pillow, Heavy’s book opened with ceremony. And now, stretched out and comfortable—you read.

“First Night.

It was a wonderful night, such a night as is only possible when we are young, dear reader. The sky was so starry, so bright that, looking at it, one could not help asking oneself whether ill-humored and capricious people could live under such a sky. That is a youthful question, too, dear reader, very youthful, but may the Lord put it more frequently into your heart!... Speaking of capricious and ill-humored people, I cannot help recalling my moral condition that day. From early morning, I had been oppressed by a strange despondency. It suddenly seemed to me that I was lonely, that every one was forsaking me and going away from me...”

So begins the story of a young man who lives and walks the city of St. Petersburg. The streets and houses that line them are as known to him as old friends. The people as he passes are well-loved, and the finite moment between two passers-by nodding in greeting, never speaking, when they see one another each evening, treasured.

And it feels familiar.

You read and read with a ferocity like hunger, waking something that had been dormant for so long that you had forgotten it was missing at all.

The protagonist is first despondent as the city changes and moves around him, as the people so dear to him leave for the countryside on holiday. Of course, the people are not familiar to him because he knows their names or families—for he doesn’t, not a single one—but because he sees them each day as he walks to and from work, as he wanders the city on weekends. He knows their faces, their little joys and sorrows from moment to moment as a simple passer-by, observing all the time. And then, as everyone else leaves, he decides to wander away from the walls of the city, too, finding himself among the meadows, alongside the smiling country-folk, seeing the flowers and foliage in all their colors, and finds himself renewed with the springtime.
It’s tactile and gentle and beautiful.

“...And yet my night was better than my day! This was how it happened.

I came back to the town very late, and it had struck ten as I was going towards my lodgings. My way lay along the canal embankment, where at that hour you never met a soul. It is true that I live in a very remote part of the town. I walked along singing, for when I am happy I am always humming to myself like every happy man who has no friend or acquaintance with whom to share his joy. Suddenly I had a most unexpected adventure.

Leaning on the canal railing stood a woman with her elbows on the rail, she was apparently looking with great attention at the muddy water of the canal. She was wearing a very charming yellow hat and a jaunty little black mantle. “She’s a girl, and I am sure she is dark,” I thought. She did not seem to hear my footsteps, and did not even stir when I passed by with bated breath and loudly throbbing heart.

“Strange,” I thought; “she must be deeply absorbed in something,” and all at once, I stopped as though petrified. I heard a muffled sob. Yes! I was not mistaken, the girl was crying, and a minute later I heard sob after sob. Good heavens! My heart sank. And timid as I was with women, yet this was such a moment!... I turned, took a step toward her, and should certainly have pronounced the word “madam!” if I had not known that exclamation has been uttered a thousand times in every Russian society novel. It was only that reflection stopped me. But while I was seeking for a word, the girl—”

Knock, knock, knock!

“What?”

The silence on the other side of the door has the good sense to sound embarrassed.

A brisk cough. Medic. Oh, hell. “Specialist, I was wondering—”

“I’m reading,” you supply, more coolly, but the reflexive irritation still dances down your spine.

Another silence, this one terse.

“I’ll see you at dinner, then.”

“Yes.” A twinge of guilt as your thumb flicks over the edge of the pages in your hand. You can’t put him off forever. You have a responsibility.

The very thought turns your stomach and closes your throat. Responsibility. Made a deal with the devil is what you did. No—that’s not fair. He’s a bastard, yes, but not a demon.

Yet, it’s Saturday, and Saturday is yours, so you push all the guilt as far down as it will go, and take up your place on the page again.

It takes only a moment, slipping into a second skin, snug as your softest robe.

The young man, before he can decide on an appropriate greeting (which still brings a little smile to your face as you relate to the momentary distress of avoiding cliche at the expense of an entire interaction), the girl catches sight of his approach, and runs off. He follows, but dares not cross the street, knows that it would frighten her—yet before she’s out of sight, he sees a drunken man try to intercept her path.
She races, but the man overtakes her. In a moment, the narrator rushes to the other side of the street, walking-stick in hand, and pushes the drunkard—still shouting protests and vulgarities—away. He asks the girl to take his arm, for they'll receive no further trouble if they walk together.

" "There, you see; why did you drive me away? If I had been here, nothing would have happened…"

"But I did not know you; I thought that you, too…"

"Why, do you know me now?"

"A little! Here, for instance, why are you trembling?"

"Oh, you are right at the first guess!" I answered, delighted that my girl had intelligence; that is never out of place in company with beauty. "Yes, from the first glance you have guessed what sort of man you have to do with. Precisely; I am shy with women, I am agitated, I don’t deny it, as much so as you were a minute ago when that gentleman alarmed you. I am in some alarm now. [You grin, at that. Oh, yes, such alarm you know well.] It’s like a dream, and I never guessed even in my sleep that I should ever talk with any woman."

"What? Really…?"

"Yes; if my arm trembles, it is because it has never been held by a pretty little hand like yours. [Ah, so much, dear fellow, for avoiding cliche.] I am a complete stranger to women; that is, I have never been used to them. You see, I am alone… I don’t even know how to talk to them. Here, I don’t know now whether I have not said something silly to you! [Your heart reaches out again.] Tell me frankly; I assure you beforehand that I am not quick to take offence…?"

"No, nothing, nothing, quite the contrary. And if you insist on my speaking frankly, I will tell you that women like such timidity; and if you want to know more, I won’t drive you away till I get home."

"You will make me," I said, breathless with delight, “lose my timidity and then farewell to all my chances…."

"Chances! What chances—of what? That’s not so nice."

"I beg your pardon, I am sorry, it was a slip of the tongue; but how can you expect one at such a moment to have no desire…"

"To be liked, eh?" "

You don’t know why. You don’t know why, but you have to read it again. You read it again; you mark the page with a finger, let the book close over it.

Sunlight streams, yellow and gold and dusty through the bars over your window. Motes of dust dance in the beams.

*How can you expect one at such a moment to have no desire to be liked?*

The words catch, sticky, in your chest.

You open the book again, keep reading.

The narrator and the young woman speak, dancing back and forth in conversation (Don’t be vexed;
I am only laughing at your being your own enemy, and if you had tried, you would have succeeded,” she teases, and you’re soft with the truth of it, you feel it in your bones. And here, the man confesses that he is, in his own terms, a dreamer. He falls in love with those around him, with ideas and places, with the ideal romances he dreams in the night, with memories of any precious moment he spends in another person’s company. And they reach the street where they must part:

“I shall certainly come here to-morrow, just here to this place, just at the same hour, and I shall be happy remembering to-day. This place is dear to me already. I have already two or three such places in Petersburg. I once shed tears over memories… like you... Who knows, perhaps you were weeping ten minutes ago over some memory… But, forgive me, I have forgotten myself again; perhaps you have once been particularly happy here…”

“Very good,” said the girl, “perhaps I will come here to-morrow, too, at ten o’clock. I see that I can’t forbid you. The fact is, I have to be here; don’t imagine that I am making an appointment with you; I tell you beforehand that I have to be here on my own account. But... well, I tell you straight out, I don’t mind if you do come. To begin with, something unpleasant might happen as it did to-day, but never mind that... In short, I should simply like to see you… to say two words to you. Only, mind, you must not think the worse of me now! Don’t think I make appointments so lightly… I shouldn’t make it except that… but let that be my secret! Only a compact beforehand.” [Closer together, then further apart, dancing in conversation.]

“A compact! Speak, tell me, tell me all beforehand; I agree to anything, I am ready for anything,” I cried delighted. “I answer for myself, I will be obedient, respectful… you know me—” [You know me. It sticks in your mind like flypaper.]

“It’s just because I do know you that I ask you to come to-morrow,” said the girl, laughing. “I know you perfectly. But mind you will come on the condition, in the first place (only be good, do what I ask—you see, I speak frankly), you won’t fall in love with me… That’s impossible, I assure you. I am ready for friendship; here’m hand… But you mustn’t fall in love with me, I beg you!”

“I swear,” I cried, gripping her hand…

“Hush, don’t swear, I know you are ready to flare up like gunpowder. [I know you, it echoes.] Don’t think ill of me for saying so. If only you knew... I, too, have no one to whom I can say a word, whose advice I can ask. Of course, one does not look for an adviser in the street; but you are an exception. I know you as though we had been friends for twenty years… You won’t deceive me, will you?” [It catches in your throat. Can you expect one, at such a moment, to have no desire to be liked?]

When they part, you stop again, at the end of that first night. You stare at the cover, trace the words with your eyes. White Nights. How many nights will follow, you wonder.

The clock beside your bed only reads 14:36, plenty of time before dinner, but there’s a question nagging at your mind that needs to be answered before you start upon the Second Night; so, reluctantly, you set the book on the comforter and climb off the bed, shaking the sleep out of one of your legs as your feet touch the floor.

Heavy is in the library, rectangular reading glasses perched on the end of his nose, absorbed in the book you saw him purchase today, with its beautiful, burgundy cover and silver lettering. You don’t mind perching in your preferred chair—the worn, high-backed wooden one with its cushion fraying at the edges, pale green and filthy cream—until he notices your presence and finds a good place to stop.
It isn’t long before he sets the spectacles up on his forehead and greets you with a nod. “Mečtatel’.” You’ve never heard that word before, but he’s smiling with his eyes, so it can’t be an expression of irritation. “You have finished already?”

“Not yet.” You shift your weight in the chair, tuck one leg up under the other. “I have a question about it, though.”

“Then ask.”

“What is a white night? Is it symbolic, or…”

Heavy hums. “Is something that happens in springtime in Piter—St. Petersburg—that they are calling ‘Leningrad’ now.” Harsh lines appear around his mouth, but they’re quickly gone. “In springtime, the night does not come fully there. Nights are white, like with whole moon, but brighter, like just before sun goes down. Your story happens during this time, when night is almost like day.”

“Daylight in the night,” you realize. “Dreams meeting reality; they can coexist.”

That earns a full smile. “Da.”

The little discovery, the slotting of a piece into place, the glistening of a dewdrop on a web, spider’s silk, brightens your mind like it always does. It warms and settles your nerves. The thrill makes you want to run back to the text, but it would be very rude to disappear—and your further compulsion to savor the story, to let it stretch on a bit longer, wins out. You look at Heavy’s book again. “What did you get?”

“You know Pushkin?” he asks.

“A little. I know his name, and I’ve seen some poetry—translated, of course.”

“Translation does not have same effect,” Heavy muses, tapping the cover with a large finger. “But this is poems. I wrote…” He makes a long, thoughtful sound, searching for a word. “Eh—paper, on them, years ago.”

You almost pop out of your chair. “You went to school for literature?”

“Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“Nobody asks.” But he smiles, shrugs. “So I forget.”

You chuckle. “It’s part of me, so I don’t remember.”

Heavy glances down at the book, then back up. “Wish you spoke Russian.”

Your mouth quirks. “Me, too.”

“Still. We do our best.” He shifts the reading glasses back down to his nose. “Go get your book.
We talk more later.”

Chapter End Notes

Меčтател’ - мечтатель - dreamer
You do end up seeing Medic at dinner, after making it all the way through the second White Night. The feel of it lingers over your mind, pleasantly, a haze of warmth and anticipation, silver light and soft confessions of the Self. It’s quite nice—until the doctor situates himself very pointedly at your elbow.

Soldier has prepared an interesting spread of hot dogs (the whole deli was kosher, in fact, and Engineer had made sure Solly purchased a variety of options, despite his protests against “meatless hippy things”), all the fixings, and a pasty, mint-green monstrosity with walnuts sprinkled on top. You try to keep your attention on that, and hope the doctor will take a seat without speaking.

“Specialist.” A hand rests on the back of your chair.

Somewhere by the stove, Soldier and Demo are arguing about something, and Scout, of course, can’t stay out of it, so you’re getting no reprieve.

You withhold a sigh. You can’t keep avoiding this. “Yes?”

“Would you like a drink?”

Your brows arch, and you glance up to find him looking coolly down, perfectly neutral. “Gin and tonic?” you ask wryly.

His mouth tightens at the edges; his weight shifts. “I wouldn’t advise it.”

You hadn’t expected he would. “Water, then, please.”

As Medic moves away, boots clicking on tile, you cast a desperate glance at Heavy, but he’s in the middle of fixing himself a plate and doesn’t look up for an instant. You could really use an opinion right now. A little support. Something.

A glass appears at your right, and with a crack of the seal, he pours a bottle’s contents into it. The water splashes into the highball, running in smooth waves up each side. You look at the glass. You look at Medic, from the turn of his wrist as the bottle empties, to the studious, carefully constructed expression on his face. It’s almost—but he’s gone again, taking the empty bottle with him.

Your water is in a glass. A glass that Medic poured for you.

Demo guffaws as Scout’s voice pitches a bit higher. Soldier slaps another tray onto the table, this one piled high with broccoli and even higher with cheese.
You’re still staring at the water, fluorescent light bending through the scratched glass, when you hear chair-legs scrape, and Medic comes back into view with his own mismatched collins topped off with iced tea. “Thank you,” you manage.

“You are welcome,” he says, clearly, precisely. He’s forgone his coat. Crisp shirtsleeves, buttoned to the wrist, dove-grey waistcoat, neat, perfectly fitted as usual—

“Whatcha doin’ in my seat, doc?”

An excellent question. You glance first at Medic, then over his shoulder at the boy, arms folded across his chest.

But the doctor just takes a sip from his glass, peering casually over his spectacles toward some point on the other side of the room. “In your own words, I believe…” He turns just enough in his chair to face Scout. “...move your face, lose your place.’’”

You smother the laughter and you smother it hard. At least it rhymed but—

“Okay, first of all, that’s not how it goes; second of all, I always sit here.”

Medic waves a careless hand. “Take my chair; it’s all the same.”

“Apparently, it’s not,” Scout says, frowning, “since you don’t wanna move.”

Oh, here we go.

“I am already seated—”

You pinch the bridge of your nose. Why the hell is this happening?

“Nuh-uh, we ain’t doin’ this. Get outta my chair, old man.”

Spy takes a seat on your right. “Scout—”

“Listen—”

“Medic, would you just move!”

Silence.

You don’t look up from frowning at your plate. “We practically have assigned seats. We do the same thing every day.” You absolutely refuse to be embarrassed. You raise your head, look him dead in those ice-blue eyes.

A beat. Two. Three.

Medic sets his jaw, and you brace yourself with another retort on your tongue—

But he looks away. Chair legs scrape upon the floor and boots click on tile. Across the table, a chair creaks again, glass settles on wood, and Medic sits without a word.

That is, until Scout takes his seat and sticks his tongue out.

“Put it away, or you’ll wake up tomorrow with the face of an ass,” the doctor hisses, coolly. “Well…” He taps a finger on the rim of his glass. “...more than you already have.”
It might’ve escalated had Demo not burst into fits, thumping a fist on the table. “Oh, that’s good; you’ve gotta admit it, boy, you’re a bit long in the face!”

“Ah, shove it up your ass,” Scout grumbles. “At least I’ve got depth perception.”

“And yet ye can’t hit th’broad side of their heavy with a damn shotgun!”

The boy grins, reaches for the ketchup. “Oh, what’s that? I can’t hear ya over the explosions—”

You snatch up the bottle just before his fingers can reach. “Hey! I thought you were on my side!”

Shrug. “You got your seat back, didn’t you?” You let a mischievous smile creep over your lips and return the condiment only when you’re finished.

As Scout grumbles his way through that one, you ask for the plate of broccoli. Before Engineer passes it, however, he catches your gaze pointedly. Why, you can’t figure.

He slides a subtle look toward Medic.

Ah. Approval for how you handled the situation, must be.

So, you shrug slightly with half a smile and take the tray for a generous helping of cheese-smothered greens, since it seems to be the only vegetable available. As you dig in, you sneak a glance across at the doctor (slicing one of the dogs neatly into pieces, each sweep of the knife quick and precise, a surgical economy of motion). His necktie isn’t knotted in the military four-in-hand he normally wears, but a slightly more complex variation, still slender and neat, but doubled over in a pressed, accented crease. You want to call it a Victoria—that seems right—one Midshipman Rodriguez showed you during some precious free time to help a uniform stand out. And that burgundy silk stands out very well against the white shirt-collar and soft grey of his vest, indeed.

When you lift your glass to take a sip of water, you notice that Medic is looking at you now, idly curious, fork rocking like a boat between thumb and forefinger, and shit how long have you been…? Conversation is still going on without you, so nothing has been asked that you haven’t answered.

You pretend not to notice him watching and continue your meal, tuning back into whatever the others happen to be discussing.

“But d’ya actually think he’ll do it?” Scout asks.

Engineer hums, the corner of his mouth tugging into a frown. “Hard t’say.”

“They want war, there’s gonna be war,” Sniper observes from where he’s kicked back against the wall, plate in his lap. “They can say whatevah they want.”

Your brow furrows; you chew slowly. You wish you’d been listening at the beginning.

“But all the protests—”

Spy clicks open his cigarette case. “The bushman is right; it doesn’t matter what the people think. If the government wants a war, it will go on until they deem it won or too expensive to continue.”

Oh. Vietnam. A pang settles in your chest. You do dimly recall the news that Nixon promised to start withdrawing troops. How long has it been since that address?
Scout’s fork clanks and scratches over his plate as he stabs a piece of broccoli; you grit your teeth against the sound. “He said he’d bring ‘em home, so he’d better.”

Heavy rises, silent, and goes to the fridge. When he returns, it’s with a beer, and he pops the top with his thumb.

You suspect the only reason Soldier hasn’t derailed the discussion is that he’s deep in some other discourse with Demoman. Chewing thoughtfully, you also suspect that this is not by accident.

“There’s a big picture to think about.” Engineer’s brow is creased and pale where his hardhat and goggles normally sit. “The President’s got a lotta balancin’ to do. But if he says it’s gonna happen, it oughta.”

Even to your ears, it sounds like empty consolation, so you add: “He can’t go back on his word without risking backlash.” Try not to look at Medic. You don’t need him calling you on trying to—

“President Nixon has a plan—A PLAN TO WIN!” And there it is. Demo did his best.

You rest your forearm on the table, lean heavily into it, and take another bite of your hotdog. Here we go.

Soldier is halfway out of his seat, waving a hand exuberantly in emphasis. “Just because it is a secret plan does not mean that he will not do it!”

“The only thing worse than a leader with a secret, is a leader with a plan for your own good.” Medic doesn’t look up, just raises his glass and takes a drink. “Now, a secret plan for your own good… zhat means you’re listening to an idiot without a plan or a madman with one you don’t want to see.” He sets the glass aside, peers at you through his spectacles, expression perfectly measured, but something in his eyes defies the placidity, something almost—before breaking contact entirely, shifting his focus elsewhere.

Spy clears his throat, flicks a lighter from nowhere, flashing silver, and lights his cigarette at the table. “War never really stopped,” he says, as the ember settles, steady. “It just… changed.” He takes a long, deep drag. “Excuse me.” He rises from the table, disappears, smoke lingering on the air, spicy and harsh.

“There are, Nastenka, though you may not know it, strange nooks in Petersburg. It seems as though the same sun as shines for all Petersburg people does not peep into those spots, but some other different new one, bespoken expressly for those nooks, and it throws a different light on everything.”

Heavy takes another long draught from his bottle and sets it with an empty thud upon the table. The compulsion to down your water arises, and so you do. Scout pushes a bit of broccoli around his plate. Medic, neatly, resumes eating, each morsel dipped in a conservative amount of mustard. For a moment, Soldier thumps a hand over his heart and Engie taps his fingers on the table’s edge, while Demoman takes a long swig and Sniper rocks his chair.

“In these corners, dear Nastenka, quite a different life is lived, quite unlike the life that is surging round us, but such as perhaps exists in some unknown realm, not among us in our serious, over-serious, time. Well, that life is purely fantastic, fervently ideal, with something (alas! Nastenka) dingily prosaic and ordinary, not to say incredibly vulgar.”

Dinner does resume, but the energy never manages to flow quite right again. The dessert jello isn’t awful, per se, but the texture is enough to turn your stomach, curdled jelly and nuts and slick
pineapple bits. When you rise to take care of your dishes, *that* goes in the garbage without any remorse.

Then, as you wash your plate in the sink, a familiar presence appears at your shoulder—the same that so often perches there on the field, breath on your cheek and blood in the air.

“I have another batch made,” he says, so that no one can hear over the half-hearted argument about desserts on the other side of the room. “If you would like to pick them up this evening.”

Oh, yes. You only have three of the antidepressants left. That does, however, mean a trip to the med-bay... but you can suck it up, then go back to—

Medic’s shoulder brushes yours as you step out of the way to fetch the dish-towel, but just as you reach, his fingers find it first, tangled in blue gingham. And you’re frozen, fingers just brushing the corner of the fabric, as he offers his other hand. You stare, for a moment at those outstretched fingers, his soft, open palm, not quite understanding, until he looks at the plate grasped in your hand, steadily dripping onto the floor. You catch your breath, pass the dish. He doesn’t quite meet your eyes, just dries the porcelain with efficient turns of his wrist, and passes it back into your hands.

His touch lingers on its edges. “Will you come?”

*But how can you expect one, at such a moment to have no desire—*

You’re staring at the plate with its discolored scratches and little, gaudy, pink daisies as though it holds the answer.

*To be liked, eh?*

“All right.”

He smiles. “Thank you.” Small, genuine; it raises a shiver in your spine like the glint of a blade.

Standing before the doors to the infirmary is quite another thing. Tall and white and silver and sterile. The smell of antiseptic already assaults your nose, turns your stomach.

But it’s Saturday and it’s just medicine. Just medicine.

So you push through, but it doesn’t feel like the surging courage as you charge a blockade. It feels like stumbling, cold and nauseous, out of respawn, wishing for a weapon in your hands.

The doors creak as they swing shut, leaving you standing in the blinding white.

“Come in.”

Medic stands near the window, sleeves rolled up to the elbow as he adds a handful of birdseed to one of the uncovered cages that, you somehow always forget, stand in the corner. There’s a dove on his shoulder and one just inside the enclosure, scooping food out of his hand before it hits the dish. The evening sun, orange over the desert, adds a gentle warmth to his face, highlights white feathers as it streams through the window.

You flinch—but immediately regret it when you recognize the sensation of disturbed air, of the weight on your head. “Archimedes?” you ask.

Medic chuckles. “Of course.”
Little talons scratch your scalp, and the bird on Medic’s shoulder hops down toward the food. The muscles in his forearm twitch as the dove passes. “And which are they?” you ask.

“Yael and Orff.”

Now that you’re closer, you can see the one he indicated as Orff has little flecks of tan in his feathers, while the other has an unusually dark beak, nearly red. “They’re beautiful.”

He brushes his hands clean over the dish before settling back to watch them eat. “I thought you might like to see them. They’re usually asleep when we’re on our normal schedule, and you already get along well with Archimedes.” A pointed nod at the top of your head, where the dove in question is no doubt trying to make a nest. “Give me just a moment, and I’ll fetch the bottle.”

You nod, quite content to watch the birds crack open the seeds, working their beaks and tipping their heads to swallow in quick, minute little movements. You’d forgotten how much you enjoy seeing animals, just being able to watch. There’s hardly anything at all outside during the day in the desert… and anything that might be predisposed to come around is almost certainly driven away by the myriad explosions.

“Orff was a composer, right?” you ask as his heels on the tile land somewhere by the cabinets, but you don’t look. Archimedes starts tugging at your hair, and you reach up to prod him gently in discouragement.


As you watch the pair, Orff ruffles his feathers, hops over to a bottle filled with water. “What about Yael?”

Medic’s boots set a measured pace back to your side, and he doesn’t speak until you see him again, amber bottle clasped in his right hand, furthest from you. He stares at the glass, watching the sunlight glint on its edge as he turns the bottle in his fingers. “Yael is from the Torah.”

Dinner’s conversation slams full-force back into your brain.

But Medic just sets the bottle on the counter and begins coaxing the dove in question from the cage, as casually as making a pot of coffee. Archimedes has settled down in a heavy way that tells you he means to stay for a while. Yael hops onto the doctor’s palm.

Everything is quite normal except for the way the floor feels like it’s been yanked out from under your feet.

“Medic.” Your heart protests loudly; your throat closes up a bit. “Medic—where were you… then?”

He lifts the dove, and with the index finger of his other hand, gently smooths the feathers of her breast. “I lived in Germany until 1949.” Still so casual, so cool. Like you’re still discussing the namesakes of his birds.

You can’t come up with the words for what you want to ask, and apparently, to him, the birds are still what you’re still discussing. “Yael’s story—technically, I suppose, Deborah’s—is one of the few I really took with me; of course, I hadn’t heard it since I was very, very young, so when I came here, I looked at it again. Are you familiar with it?”

Even if you could make your brain work properly, you’re sure you wouldn’t know, certainly not the way he remembers.
“Sefer Shoftim, Book of Judges.” His eyes crease at the edges as he recalls, recites. “Deborah was a prophet and a Judge of Israel, and her people had been oppressed for twenty years. She sent word that the Lord commanded another ruler of Israel to gather ten thousand troops and send them to a high mountain where the enemy will meet them, and Israel will win. But, he refused to leave without Deborah, and she declared that because he has brought her, that the glory will belong to a woman.” The dove’s feathers catch the light of the sun, russet gleaming across her back. “The battle is won, as predicted, but the enemy king escapes on foot, and comes to the tent of Yael, who gives him milk and lets him rest.” Medic meets your eyes, pronounces the next words with the familiar gleam of schadenfreude in every syllable. “Then, while he sleeps, she hammers a tent-pin through his temple.” He shrugs, looks to the bird again, casually. “After this, there was peace for the Israelites for forty years.” Yael ruffles her feathers, turns her head to scratch beneath a wing. “A mighty general, sold into the hand of a woman. And they wrote a song about it! The Song of Deborah. It’s no wonder I remember it.” A strange smile catches his mouth, and he presses a kiss to the top of her head. “You see? She’s almost stained with blood. It’s a good name.”

Your mouth is completely dry. You’re not sure you could move if you tried. Still, you manage: “It is a good name.”

He smiles wanly, and as the orange of the sun deepens to scarlet, it catches the edge of his spectacles. He pets Yael with a tenderness you had no idea he possessed from the top of her head to the feathers between her wings. He glances at you sidelong. “But you want to know how I survived.” How can a touch be so gentle and a voice so careless?

You couldn’t deny it even if you tried. You want to know. You cannot ask. But it wasn’t a question; he knows what you want, and he caresses Yael gently. He hums, quietly, smiles in a way no less disconcerting than his genuine expressions of joy—but this thin-lipped grin is false, empty. “Why am I alive?” he asks, where you cannot. “Purely by chance. By their standards, I’m only mixed-Jewish, and my father was a war hero the first time, and, of course, we never practiced. My grandparents living near Liechtenstein did, and they fled to Sweden on foot, I believe. We weren’t allowed to admit having had any contact with them, of course. Even my father’s influence—and his money—that had limits.” He watches as Yael spreads her wings, moves up to his shoulder in a flutter. “And so, I served.” Archimedes, as though he can sense your agitation, resituates himself.

“1943. As soon as I turned eighteen, I was—” He waves his free hand in a sweeping motion, grasping for a word. “—I got a letter—”

“Drafted?” you manage just enough voice to take a guess.

“Drafted, yes.” He lets the hand fall. “Eight months, and then I was shot.” Medic tilts his head, like he’s trying to share a joke, but all you can feel is creeping dread. “This is twice now, I should be dead, but I am not. They sent me home, and I went back to school. They tell me I am very lucky, being passed mentor to mentor. I’m very talented, you know; I got to see things.” The way he hisses the syllables, lingers upon them… it raises the hair on your neck. “And, yes, I became a doctor.”

The dove spreads her wings again and settles on the counter in the blood-red glow of the sun, peering curiously at the little bottle left there, catching the light so well.

Medic folds his arms over his chest, waistcoat pulling tight across his shoulders. His expression is the most serene you’ve ever seen it. Not peaceful, but… quiet. “I should be dead,” it runs with the
current of a thousand things unsaid, the chill of guilt you cannot begin to comprehend, “but I am here.”

With a deep breath, you reach above your head and coax Archimedes down into your hands, where he puffs his rust-stained feathers and gives a rolling coo. So warm and so fragile between your hands, so soft. You can feel every tiny breath, the flutter of his little heart. One tiny, little life.

When you look up again, Medic is watching you, your hands, as they tremble. You wish you could make them stop, but Archimedes is so small and your throat is so tight and you don’t know what to say.

You can see the subtle motion in his throat as he swallows, as he turns toward the window, last rays of the sun, burgundy, catching on his spectacles. “And I am an excellent surgeon,” he says in the too-bright tone that portends blood and blade, stomach-turning smile upon his lips. Then, his brow furrows, and he takes up the amber bottle in hand again, sunlight flashing on the pills inside. He offers them, arm outstretched, and you lift the hand that had ruffled Archimedes’ feathers; cold glass presses against your palm. The pills click as the bottle transfers from his fingers to your own. “But I am a terrible physician.”

Your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth, mind blank, one palm ice-cold and the other gently warm.

But Medic smiles, clasps both hands tightly behind his back. “Take Archimedes with you; he’s already eaten. He’ll find his way back here in the morning, I’m sure.”

There isn’t enough power in all the world to make your mind run right. “I… I’m… thank you.”

His smile is broader at that, almost genuine, caught up in something like exactly whatever it is you’re feeling. Hesitation. Embarrassment. There’s that light dusting of pink on his cheeks again. “I will see you tomorrow, Spatz.”

You resettle Archimedes against your chest, slip the bottle into your pocket. “Until tomorrow,” leaves your mouth, and the words aren’t exactly yours. You know from whence they came:

“I stood still for a long time following her with my eyes.

“Till to-morrow! Till to-morrow!” was ringing in my ears as she vanished from my sight.”

Back in your room, book sitting on one knee and dove perched upon the other, lamplight glowing warm and yellow, you're puzzling, still. Through the window-bars, the desert sky is lavender, glowing dimly. Somewhere, you hear the faint strains of swing on the radio.

"Archimedes," you ask, "did he just apologize?"

Chapter End Notes

I did some research for this one, again, and it's... well, very upsetting but very important information, though I won't list it here. It's very easy to find if you're interested in reading further on the subject.

Also, I tried to be very sure I've broached the topic with respect; if I could do better,
please let me know.
Archimedes’ Principle

Chapter Notes

My thanks again to the Discord crew for acting as beta! And I'd like to thank all of you very much, as always, for your continuing interest in this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Archimedes flits about the edges of your vision, exploring your room, as you try to get back into *White Nights*, but after rereading the same sentence for the sixth time, you watch the dove instead. Your strange, literary doppelganger and Nastenka will just have to wait.

He pokes around amidst the books atop your armoire, and then perches on the back of the uncomfortable chair, plucking at the jeans you’ve flung there, ready for laundering. The glow of your lamp makes his wings look like gentle rays of sunlight when he takes off again.

Birds seem like a very strange choice of company, you think, for someone like Medic. So light—all fragile, hollow bones and feathered whispers—and doves, especially, are renowned for both beauty and gentleness. If you’d been asked to match him with an animal yourself, you might have chosen a great hound, equal to his ferocity in battle, to the whole-hearted energy in every experiment, or perhaps something strange—a snake, maybe, long associated with medicine and poisons alike, with rebirth and infinite—

Archimedes plops down in your lap, and the lamp catches the rust-red stains on his head and neck.

Well. A bird associated with peace who thinks blood makes an excellent bathwater is strange enough. Perfect, somehow. He surveys the room with glossy, black eyes like gleaming obsidian. More depth than there should be, you think. You’d never considered birds to have personalities like cats or dogs might, but…

He hops over onto the cover of *White Nights*, abandoned on the bed beside you.

“Do you like books?” you ask. Somehow, it doesn’t seem too silly, especially when he coos, ruffling his feathers so that they stand up and then roll back down in a little wave.

The clock reads 8:17. “I could read, if you want.” All right, so *maybe* that’s a little silly.

But the bird in question doesn’t seem to mind, hopping up on your shoulder with a rush of his wings.

You pick up the book, and find where you left off… Nastenka had just admitted that she’d been crying in the first place because she was awaiting the return of the man she loves after a full year of longing—but Archimedes stretches his neck and tugs on a tuft of hair, though not painfully hard. Your brows arch. “Not this one?”

But the dove does nothing more, so you switch *White Nights* out with your other new volume, on the side-table. “Is William Butler Yeats more your speed?”

He makes a short, whirring coo, so you open this one instead, and flip through the gold-edged pages, scented the fresh paper and new ink. Is there anything in the world like a brand-new book?
Archimedes doesn’t seem to protest (although, honestly, what do you really know about doves’ body language?), so you stop on a random page, and begin with the title.

“An Irish Airman foresees his Death.” You glance sidelong at the bird.

“I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltaran Cross,
My countrymen Kiltaran’s poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public man, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.”

You sigh softly, brows creased, before turning your attention to Archimedes again. “Yes, I can see where you might prefer some wartime poetry, you morbid thing.” But he just pretends not to hear.

Drafted. Those that I fight, I do not hate. Those that I guard, I do not love. Eight months serving until…

A gnarled bullet wound above his hip, standing in contrast to the numerous, clean scars that cover his torso, half-moons and staggered cuts, made sharp and thin like—

Archimedes lifts his head and peers at you, focused and unblinking, eyes narrowing then softening, and you half-wonder if Archimedes might be just a little… sentient, somehow.

You clear your throat, look away, turn the page to find another. “Men improve with the Years.” Your brow creases.

“I am worn out with dreams;
A weather-worn, marble triton
Among the streams;
And all day long I look
Upon this lady's beauty
As though I had found in a book
A pictured beauty,
Pleased to have filled the eyes
Or the discerning ears,
Delighted to be but wise,
For men improve with the years;
And yet, and yet,
Is this my dream, or the truth?
O would that we had met
When I had my burning youth!
But I grow old among dreams,
A weather-worn, marble triton
Among the streams."

Breath slow, you read it again, silently. Dreams passing into reality like they do on a white night, crossing barriers and blurring lines, back and forth, looking for truth. And then, a third time, letting the rhythms sink in, words like water over stones. All day long I look upon this lady’s beauty. A shiver dances across your skin, and Archimedes settles down where he’s perched, heavy and warm. As though I had found in a book a pictured beauty, delighted to be but wise, for men improve with the years—and yet, and yet, is this the truth? Feathers brush your neck. O would that we had met when I had my burning youth!

“Quo-ah-hoo-hoo-hoo!”

You nearly jump out of your skin. That’s the longest call you’ve heard Archimedes make all night and right in your ear.

“Yes,” you gasp, trying to catch your breath. “Yes, that’s quite enough, I think.”

The book snaps shut in your hand, but it doesn’t erase the half-formed thoughts pricking at your brain.

I am a terrible physician.

Gently, you coax Archimedes from your shoulder and place him on your pillow before putting both tomes away and opening the drawer that contains your night-things. “It’s just about time for bed.”

Sleep is far easier than… this. You push the thoughts away, and put them in a box.

Something pulls at your hair and you pop off the mattress, arms flailing—
“Coo.”

Blink the sleep away, squint at the night table. A downy feather catches sunlight as it floats lazily toward the floor. Beady, black eyes blink, offended, from where a dove perches on the wood.

Oh.

“Archimedes.” Well, you try to say it, but the word comes out garbled and sleep-slowed. “G’mrn.”


Archimedes flutters impatiently, wings whistling, before taking off and landing on your shoulder.

You hum. “How’re—ow!” He’s bitten your neck and when you twitch away, he pinches your ear. “Shit! Hungry, okay, fine! I’m up!”

When you stand, he flutters over to the night table again. The clock reads 0700. Ugh. Too early for a Sunday.

But you rub your hands over your face and move to the armoire anyway, dress in the clothes from yesterday and grab a towel. Might as well get first dibs on the shower after sleeping with a bird.

By the time you’re tugging your striped shirt back over your head, Archimedes has moved to perch on your homburg, still hanging unused by the door. Perhaps one of these nights you’ll actually go out. Scout had mentioned a bar, you think…

Maybe not this week, though. The locals, while they left you alone, really didn’t seem keen on having you there.

Bath-things in hand, you quietly open the door and Archimedes is fluttering off and away before you can say a word. He disappears around the corner without a second look.

You grumble, quietly, into the still air, but refuse to call out. Somebody’s still snoring like a freight train, and you’re certainly not willing to wake them. It’s only a short stroll to the infirmary, anyway, but when you arrive, Archimedes is hopping back and forth impatiently on one of the chairs.

“Did you forget you can’t open doors?”

He makes a grinding, disgruntled sound you’ve never heard before.

You roll your eyes and move toward the doors. “All right.”

Briefly, you consider whether Medic is even awake… but if his bird got you up at this hour, mustn’t he be? You push though, and barely move fast enough to avoid getting clipped as Archimedes whistles by.

A quick glance confirms that the room is lit only by the pale morning sun and a single, emergency fluorescent. Your brow arches. Perhaps Medic let you borrow Archimedes so he could sleep in. You frown. You know nothing about the bird’s routine; if Medic isn’t awake, then—

Fortunately, when you relocate Archimedes with your eyes, the dove has found his way into the only uncovered cage and started on his food. Well, that’s all right. Now…

“Guten Morgen.”

You turn just as the doors swing shut behind him, and he stands, for a moment, straightening his
cuffs. Perfectly creased trousers, shirt, a neat, charcoal vest, and scarlet necktie. Boots polished to a shine. Hair freshly slicked. He’s obviously made it to the shower before you even considered it.

And now you’re painfully aware of your rumpled, dusty clothes from yesterday, your unwashed face, your untidy hair. “Good morning.”

Medic’s heels click on the tile as he crosses to you. “I see Archimedes found his way.” Over the bleach and iodine smell of the infirmary, you recognize the warm, spiced scent of either his cologne or after-shave, no doubt freshly applied.

And you probably smell like sleep and sweat. Ugh.

You tuck the bundled towel further under your arm. “He has a routine, apparently.”

“Oh, yes.” The doctor tilts his head. “He knows what he likes and when.” He looks at you, and you try not to make yourself smaller. It’s not your fault you’re not bathed yet. “It helps me keep a schedule; otherwise, I’d never know what time it is.”

You nod, because you really can’t think of a single damn thing to say.

Medic smiles, not unkindly, but in that disconcerting way he has. “How was your night?”

“Pretty good,” you admit, but you’re reminded very suddenly, and very inconveniently, of your bedtime reading. In balance with this life, this death. “It was nice to have Archimedes around.” Mostly.

His smile gains that razor-sharp edge, but his eyes are warm. “I find Archimedes has a way of keeping nightmares away.”

You have to run that through your brain twice and keep your expression carefully neutral. “He certainly did.” You swallow, shift your weight. “Thank you.”

Medic breaks your gaze at last, looking toward the dove again, now perched atop his cage, gazing out the window at the wan sun over dunes of orange sand. “Bitte schön.”

Your heart skips half a beat. That’s… different.

The doctor removes his spectacles, produces a handkerchief from his pocket, and begins cleaning the lenses.

But you don’t have the courage to ask what it means, and you’re an absolute mess. “I’m going to get a shower before anybody else decides they need one.”

“Oh, course,” he says, and hurries to replace his glasses. “I’m sure I will see you later.” He folds the handkerchief, looks at it, looks at you, and seems ready to say something else, but the line of his jaw tightens instead.

“I’m sure.” You let something like a smile catch your mouth, but you’re still stuck with this stray thought rattling around, and as soon as you catch it, it’s going on the shelf until you can examine it later, at length… “I think Scout said something about a movie this afternoon.”

Medic rolls his eyes. “If it’s another Western thing—”

You grin properly this time. “No, I told him I wasn’t watching any more of those. They have to pick something else.”
“Well.” He tucks the handkerchief back in his pocket with an amused smile. “I might consider it.”

Now that you’ve started, you’re disinclined to stop. “Have a good morning, Medic.”

“Good morning, Spatz.”

A long time ago, you recall, the doctor had told you Heavy suffers from nightmares. But never did Medic indicate that he has them himself.

*Archimedes has a way of keeping nightmares away.*

Such a simple statement, yet with it, Medic had admitted to knowing this firsthand, that he requires something to prevent nightmares. He knows the little dove helps, because he’s had them. Possibly even has them.

But in all this time, your every sleepless night and struggle, never has he made such an indication before today. Why? Did he think it wouldn’t make a difference?

Because it is, it has, it is completely different.

You close your eyes, let the water run over your face, exhale slowly, feel every muscle relax. The spiced scent lingers, notes of orange caught in clouds of steam, joined by pine as you open your shampoo.

He’s still a bastard, of course.

But he did apologize. With an expression of *humility*, no less. Impossible. Uncharacteristic.

And yet…

You scrub your fingers across your scalp, let the water run down your back as suds drift in rivulets across your shoulders. The tiles beneath your feet are cool while the water that runs is hot, almost scalding.

It could all be a play for your good graces to expedite a return to the surgical schedule.

You hate yourself immediately for even *thinking* it, squeezing your eyes shut tight against your own callous theory. Yes, he’s a bastard, but *no one* would offer you that history, so personal, so grievous, for anything except—

As an extension of trust.

Tilt your head back, rinse, roll your shoulders, pass your hands through, heavy streaks of water cracking against the floor.

Trust. Trust *you?* Why? Beyond being able to trust that you’re going to protect him on the field, that you’re going to comply with the contract, he has no reason to trust you, no need, and certainly not with his history. You’ve discussed your surgical arrangement many times before—

And last night, he asked for nothing. No cajoling, no wheedling, not so much as an outright question put to your person.

He asked for nothing. He only *gave.*

Water strikes, scalding, as all the blood leaves your face. No. *(And yet! And yet!)* No, that makes
no sense at all.

Furiously, you crank the spigot toward cold and shiver under the spray.

Chapter End Notes

Archimedes, in his treatise *On Floating Bodies*, states: any object, totally or partially immersed in a fluid or liquid, is buoyed up by a force equal to the weight of the fluid displaced by the object.

Therefore, the volume of the thing itself can be discerned from the volume of the water that has been displaced.
If You Like It All That Much...

Chapter Notes

It's been a little while, but we're back! I hope everyone had fantastic holidays, and I'd like to wish everyone a big, Happy 2020 to everyone! My thanks, as ever, to the Discord crew for betaing and helping with revisions on this chapter.

WARNING for: PTSD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You’re perched on the ragged, sagging arm of the sofa watching Scout yank the television plug out of the wall as the video player (designed, built, and installed by Engineer) whines and spits up one more ribbon of tape like spaghetti out of the pot.

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my GOD ENGIE’S GONNA KILL US!”

“You,” Sniper drawls. “He’s gonna kill you.”

“It’s not my fault! I did exactly what he said!” He’s practically vibrating, one fist curled in his hair, the other waving desperately over the now-dormant machine, not daring to touch the tangled, crinkling mess. “Oh my GOD! What are we gonna do?”

“You,” corrects Medic, leaning on the back of the sofa, almost close enough for his folded hands to brush your arm. “What are you going to do?”

“IT’S NOT MY FAULT!”

“No one else touched it,” Soldier points out.

“Nobody’s taking the blame for this one,” you add.

“OH MY GOD, YOU GUYS CAN’T JUST—”

“You wait until Engineer is done with project,” Heavy shrugs his mighty shoulders at the other end of the sofa, “and tell him truth.”

“SHIT!” Scout flaps his hands more vigorously now and you can’t help the smile that tugs at your mouth. “I’M GONNA DIE—”

“I suggest you step away and not damage the thing further.” Spy puffs a long plume of smoke straight out the cracked window.

Scout takes one look at Spy, then the video player, then the scant two inches of carpet between himself and the television, and does a nearly four foot standing long-jump backward into the wall. “OH MY GOD.”

You try to keep the laughter contained but Demo isn’t even bothering. “Oh, you’re in for it now, lad!”
Scout wheels about. “I’m gonna tell him it was you!”

Demo tips back his bottle. “Oh, go right ahead, lad! See if he believes ye.”

Scout glares, bounces on his toes, and you’re not sure if he’s going to throttle Demoman or sprint off in a panic. Instead, he keeps shifting antishly and covers his face with both hands. “I’m so dead.” With a groan, he finally moves toward the door.

You catch his shoulder in a firm clap as he passes. “It was an accident.” But you can’t help adding: “And death is only temporary.”

“Dick,” he grumbles, and scuttles off either to skulk or hide and hope Engineer doesn’t find him.

The rest begin to disperse as well, gradually, and you’re just contemplating what’s next when Heavy rumbles: “So. Library?”

Oh, that does sound fantastic. You haven’t gotten to read any *White Nights* yet today. But when you turn to agree, you catch sight of Medic studiously frowning in Heavy’s direction. Hm. Heavy likely assumes he’s rescuing you from more probing about surgery; his interactions with Medic have been… odd since your conversation about the medication. So— “That sounds fantastic,” you say. “Would you like to come, Medic?”

His attention snaps immediately back to you. He blinks. “Ja.”

The face Heavy makes is inscrutable, brows arched but mouth completely neutral, a faint line creasing his cheek. He shrugs and rises from the sofa, striding into the hall without a word.

Medic is staring after him, brows pinched. He doesn’t move, even when you take the first two steps toward the door. “Are… you coming, Medic?”

He blinks, slowly. “Ja.” He straightens up behind the sofa, tugs his waistcoat back into place automatically, hands working while that vacant expression remains on his face. “I don’t think I have anything to read.” He looks to you as he moves, and you lead the way without getting too far ahead.

“There are plenty of books upstairs, you know.” Of course he knows; you’re just talking now, filling the air. He’s been invited along to things before, but he’s never reacted like this. What’s going on between him and Heavy?

“Of course. It’s a library.” And now he’s just saying words, too. Awkward. Perhaps he doesn’t really want—

Your brow furrows. No—Medic never does anything he doesn’t want to, so—

“What was the last thing you read?” you ask.

He peers down the bridge of his nose, somewhere into space, like the answer is between his spectacles and the stairs as you climb. “Besides texts for my work… It must have been that *Übermensch* story Heavy gave me. It started off very well! Ruined by the end.” He waves a dismissive hand. “Ach! Christendom always trying to frighten people into—” He grumbles softly in his throat, looking for words. “—making everyone the same, following rules… k—… conforming… conforming!”

Can’t argue with that, really.
“It certainly isn’t my favorite,” you admit. “The end did feel a little empty, but I like to think it was more about the love of the people around Raskolnikov, rather than moral imposition.”

He stops at the top of the stairs, eyes roving over your face. His lips part, ready to form a word, and you wait expectantly. But his jaw tightens. He searches again, for what, you cannot say, and you can’t place the expression, but— “Maybe. Heavy gave it to you?”

You’re standing together at the top of the stairs, now, shoulders brushing.

You shake your head. “I studied it, back in college.”

Medic’s brows arch. “What was your area of study?”

“English language and literature.”

“Crime and Punishment is Russian,” he observes.

You’re a little surprised to find he does, in fact, remember the book’s title. “Yes, but seeing a variety of literature from different cultures and reading translations is important. You learn different things by conversing with different texts…” You wet your lips. “…and people.”

Why did you add that.

Why the fuck did you add that.

“It makes a more complete education,” you continue, voice nearly faltering in your hurry to move forward. “But! I’m very sure there are plenty of books to choose from; you’re bound to like something we have.” You push on toward the library door, not looking back to see if Medic follows.

“Has Heavy given you a book?” he calls, close on your heels.

“Oh, yes; I haven’t finished it yet, though.” You try to greet Heavy as you pass through the door, but he’s already buried in his poetry. Chance a glance back at Medic instead to find him rubbing his hands together, one over the other.

“I’m interested in knowing what you think, once you’ve finished,” he says.

Yet another surprise. It’s been a surprising two days. Surprise, surprise.

“I’ll let you know,” you find yourself saying. It would make a good surgery conversation but you’re just… not ready for that.

Medic looks you over again as you stand awkwardly in the middle of the room. “Well. I’ll see what I can find,” he says.

Maybe he’s feeling strange about all that he said last night and you’re just making things worse. You want to read and forget this social mess.

You nod. “Good luck.” You settle into your favorite armchair, trying to relax into the high back as the doctor heads to peruse the shelves. Take a slow, steadying breath, silent. And that’s when you realize—

You’ve left your book in your room.

“Dammit.”
Medic turns halfway, looks over his shoulder. “What?”

Your jaw tightens. “Left my book downstairs.”

“Hm…” You had expected him to laugh, perhaps, but he does not; he only looks pensive. “Before you go, since you’ve also studied literature, do you have a recommendation?”

That piques your attention again, enough that you can’t quite remember why you were anxious. Do you have a recommendation? Is the grass green? Is the sky blue? Does a 7.62 round strike too fast for there to be any pain at all? You push yourself out of the chair and are beside him at the shelf in a moment. “Let’s see what we have.” Your eyes roam the titles.


You trace your finger along a worn, tan spine, its embossed, yellow lettering almost faded entirely. *The Sun Also Rises.* With a bittersweet smile, you wonder who bought it, who placed it here for souls who would know exactly what it means—nearly everyone members of the second lost generation in less than a century. That hurts, distantly, like feeling the chill through a frost-covered window.

You think of Scout, and wonder if there will be a third.

“Hemingway,” he observes.

“You know it?”

“I know his name.” Medic shrugs. “I read ‘The Bell Rings,’ but it was not exactly a war I haven’t seen before.”

Ah. Well. “This doesn’t take place during wartime,” you reply. “It’s what comes after, but—“ You consider the setting, the characters. Paris. Trying to find a way to move on, living amongst artists and poets. You purse your lips. “Well. Yes, it might actually be a little too sentimental for you.”

No one here has actually tried to leave the war. Many of you have come crawling back to its consistent inconsistency. Dying and returning, dying and returning. War that goes on and on as long as somebody profits, and you—

The first time you ever saw your own intestines, they ran like ribbon twining through fingers in the sunshine. Throat closes, heart races, blood and copper, groping hands peeling flesh cerulean and scarlet running, running ribbons—

A steady grip on your shoulder. Inhale.

*Man is matter.*

Close your eyes.

*Drop him out a window, and he’ll fall.*

Exhale.

*Set fire to him and he’ll burn.*

There is breath, warm, upon your ear.
Ripeness is all.

Open your eyes. Medic is there and your hand still hangs in the air, fingers brushing the shelf, the cool, worn wood. He’s searching your face again, this time with a sharp edge in his eyes that feels like concern, and his lips part to speak, but—

“I have a book for you.” You smile. The more you think on it, the more you love the idea and the more space it occupies in your mind, until you’ve turned and set an unnecessarily brisk pace toward the door. “Come with me.”

On your way past, you pat Heavy’s shoulder, once—“Be right back.”

You’re not sure if the man even responded, but you can hear Medic jogging the first few steps to catch up. “Is there another library I don’t know about?” he asks dryly.

Your mouth sneaks up in a crooked smile, amused, as you descend the stairs in a flurry of steps. “Yes.” You glance over your shoulder as you turn into the hall. “Mine.”

Medic doesn’t seem to know how to respond to that beyond “Oh,” but it doesn’t matter as, soon enough, you stop in front of your door, fish the key from your pocket, and unlock it, waving him in behind you.

There’s still no bookshelf, of course, so it can hardly be called a proper library, but a library it is with a stack of books on your side table, four stacks on top of the armoire, and several more piled inside the crate in which they’d been shipped.

“You’d loan me one of yours?” he says, stopped just inside the door as you frown at the top of the armoire.

“Yes, why else would I bring you down here?” You fix him under your gaze, arching an eyebrow. “Are you trying to tell me you can’t take care of it?”

“No!” Medic straightens his shoulders, absolutely affronted. “Of course I can. Heavy would’ve found a way to kill me without respawn a long time ago.”

You half-drop into the crate, bent over its edge, gently shifting titles. It’s fairly new—you know you brought it. “Yes, well,” you say into the pine- and ink-saturated air, “if it comes back damaged, I can’t be held responsible for what comes next.”

There’s an air of curious amusement to his voice. “And what is that?”

Ah, there it is… on the bottom, of course. You begin the careful process of extracting the tome. “How does hanging upside-down with your throat slit until all your blood drains into a basin sound?” You straighten up triumphantly, book in hand.

“Wunderbar.”

That… sounded a bit too genuine for comfort, and when you look, Medic is still hovering in the doorway, the usual placid smile on his face—but you’re not going to back down now. In fact, it only strengthens your case.

You shake your head, and press the book into his hands. “Catch-22, Joseph Heller. I think you’ll find it more… rewarding than Hemingway.” Cyclical patterns feel just about right for his sensibilities, you think. The way he turns a conversation and laughs at every bloody misfortune. Yes—yes you think you’re really on the money with this one. Provided he does choose to read it,
of course, barring distractions.

Medic takes in the sterile cover—blue and white, with a small, scarlet caricature of an airman in the corner—peering through his spectacles, tracing his fingers across its edge. “What is it?”

“Better,” you assure, smiling in a way that feels entirely too much like the one you wear with blood on your hands, counting the seconds to victory, “if I don’t explain.”

Chapter End Notes

The italicized passage during Specialist's realization is from Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*: [SPOILER ALERT] "Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out a window, and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all.” [SPOILER END]
Gift

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for being so patient! This was a very difficult chapter to complete for whatever reason, and I owe my thanks to the Discord crew for helping me out and doing some great beta work. Without further ado, enjoy!

**WARNING for: blood, death, suffocation, drugs, needles, generally disturbing bodily peril, suicide mention**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nastenka had cried that first White Night because she was waiting for someone who never came.

You think about that, lying on your back, sand searing any exposed skin it can find. The sun is blinding, white, scalding, upon your face. Your uniform is so heavy. Your chest doesn’t want to make room for the next breath. You can only breathe because you must—else you’d have given up on it as soon as you realized you couldn’t move more than your eyelids, contort your mouth into a grimace. You don’t even know what your body looks like. Your ears still ring from the explosion.

And you’re thinking about Nastenka, who has lived with her mostly-blind grandmother her whole young life. As an adult, she’d been pinned by the hem of her skirt to her guardian to make sure she didn’t slip away, get into trouble. And until a well-travelled man moved into their loft, she had almost no window to the outside world.

Medic, you’re sure, is dead, and Scout, too. You’ll follow them soon. Sand and sun are hot, but your body is so cold. So cold that it burns.

The man upstairs began sending her books from his collection, so that she might have something to occupy her mind and her time. Such books! Pushkin and *Ivanhoe*, every Walter Scott novel ever written—anything she could ask for. In conversation, he learned that her grandmother used to love the opera—but she hadn’t been able to afford to attend in years—and he takes them both to see *The Barber of Seville*. For Nastenka, it is wonderful, like a dream.

It’s almost like suffocating now; your breaths won’t go, your chest won’t rise. You think you might be panicking, somewhere very far away.

They fall in love, of course. A man who knows the world and a woman who’s never had the chance to see anything. A woman who can keep up their conversation and is bright and beautiful and foolish and loves, loves, loves. She tries to run away with him, and he refuses, as he has no money; but, he says, though he must leave the city for another position, he’ll come back, if she wishes it. “*When I come back,*” he says, “*if you still love me, I promise we will be happy... that is, of course, if you do not prefer any one else, for I cannot and dare not bind you by any sort of promise.*”

Ink-spots, black and deep, deep red swim through your vision, blotting out the sun.
Three days it has been since he returned, and Nastenka waits at the bridge. She waits and waits and waits, but he does not come.

There’s a steadying hand on your arm as you stumble from respawn. This was a very bad one. Your whole body is on pins and needles and you think you might just throw up.

“For a moment, I thought you’d made it.” It’s Medic’s hand on your elbow.

You swallow with a slow, deep breath, trying to settle your stomach. “Not quite.”

“Well, we can try again. They won’t expect the same thing twice.”

You take a quick look around the room as the feeling comes back into your extremities. “Scout’s gone,” you observe.

The doctor shrugs. “I’m sure he’s drawing fire elsewhere.”

That’s fair. “Are you ready?” You roll your shoulders, flex your fingers.

His hand hasn’t moved from your arm. “Are you?”

There’s still a little tingling in your chest, but it’ll pass. “Yes.”

“Gut.” Medic’s fingers tighten for half a moment before letting you go in favor of readying the medigun. The moment those cool energies sink into your skin, the nausea abates, the pins and needles disappear. “Zu Befehl*, Spatz; when you’re ready.”

Something about those syllables make you feel like you are. The melancholy from your last life is difficult to shake, but you must, and so you shall.

“Forward, then.” You draw your pistol, your shield, and it’s right back into the fray for you both.

Heels on cracked dirt. Sun and sand. The glare of aluminum and the harsh crack of gunpowder. The alleys open, wind, bloody footprints and scorch marks crossing each path. Together, you move across the field, closer and closer to the sound of battle, no one and nothing in the way. The rhythm of your heart pounds steadily with each footstep; nearly there to rout the second point, one more turn—

“Oh, shit.”

“Ah-ha! What’s the matter, fraulein? Not happy to see us?”

“Fuck.”

A cerulean glow reflects upon plexiglass as you raise your shield, backpedal, feel the metal of the medigun jab you in the back, as your boots scramble for purchase in the cracked dirt, as Medic thumps into the wall behind you, stumbling, retreating—

“Down!”

Bullets from the enemy’s minigun hail upon your shield, each one a solid punch to the flesh of your arm beneath. You can hear Medic trying to right himself, to slide closer behind you, to keep within the tiny prism of safety you’re barely able to maintain.

“Can we outlast their uber?” he asks.
The plexiglass cracks discouragingly. You look beyond, and the BLU heavy is steadily advancing. He’ll be on you in an instant. If you try to retreat, you’ll both be cut down running. “No.”

“Scheisse.”

You glance over your shoulder, see the frustrated snarl that tugs at his mouth, look beyond and estimate the distance to the next corner.

Eyes front. The enemy is only steps away.

“Medic, I’m going to start moving backward.” You shift yourself into a better position for this maneuver, and hear the doctor follow suit.

“But—”

“Now.” You don’t give him time to reply, just shuffle your right leg back. The left. The right. The howl of the minigun drowns out the doctor’s steps, but he must be moving, because you haven’t run into him yet. “As soon as he’s close enough, I’m going to stand; you need to fall back.”

“You’ll die,” he says flatly, breath hot on the back of your neck.

“Probably.”

“Little Specialist thinks she is turtle!” The heavy laughs. “Shell protects you now, but you are too slow!”

“Better than both of us going right back to respawn,” you add. Your legs are beginning to cramp. This is too deep a squat to try and move with any sort of efficiency.

“What if I don’t?”

Your jaw tightens, teeth grinding. “Then we both die horribly,” you snap. “Don’t be an idiot!”

Medic is radiating indignation, you can feel it, but he knows you’re right—he must. This is a sound strategy. There’s a lancing pain shooting up your calf, but it will work. He just has to run.

He has to run. You shouldn’t be able to hear the splintering crack of plexiglass over the rattle of the minigun, but it turns your stomach nonetheless. Your arm is half-numb from exertion and rhythmic stimulation, pummeling through the shield. He has to run. In only a few steps, the heavy will be able to angle his gun over your shield, and then—

“Good luck, Spatz.”

Something cold slides under your collar, and before you flinch, pierces the skin.

“Wh—” For a heart-pounding moment, you think it’s the blade of the enemy spy, but the pain is pinprick-small, followed by a burning rush of liquid, like the poison from a bee’s sting, hot, quickly diffusing over skin and muscle—

A flurry of footsteps on sand and he’s gone and there’s the frustrated roar of the enemy heavy as bullets whiz over the top of your shield, sail over your head, gouge and splinter the wall—

Your throat contracts, but Medic is long gone; your strategy worked, and… and…

The flesh of your neck burns straight down your spine, tingling, prickling.
Flat on your back, pinned beneath your shield, two horrible, horrible grins peering down, silhouetted against a bright blue sky. “Well, well, what do we have, Heavy?”

It’s the large man’s boot on your shield, keeping you still, but—but not quite. Though you’re thrashing without thinking, railing instinctively against being held captive, you find your limbs won’t quite obey, and that’s… that’s nothing to do with your physical position.

“Looks like little turtle could not run away.”

You sneer, though there’s a warmth flooding the base of your skull now, a slow relaxation overtaking your anxiety about the searing pain that lances through your abdomen, at the surrender of your extremities to prickling pins and needles, to—

“What shall we do with our little turtle?” The medic grins, razor-sharp, visage twisting into something monstrous.

“Kill me like honorable men,” you hiss. You’d spit right in his face if you could but your mouth is so dry, and he’s not nearly close enough yet.

But the doctor just chuckles, a nasty, staccato sound. Even at Medic’s most perversely delighted he sounds genuine. This… this is like a joyless creature read a description of laughter from a textbook and decided to try it out for himself. Your skin might crawl if it weren’t busy with…

Oh, your limbs are moving now without being asked, and the pressure on your chest increasing with every breath isn’t just the shield, heavy on your torso.

“I couldn’t call myself a scientist if I missed such an opportunity for research, fraulein. Zhe field of medicine needs pioneers, not fairytale heroes.” He kneels down beside you, but the heavy doesn’t let you up, not yet, not that it matters—

You want to relax but every muscle seems hell-bent on twisting itself into horrible knots. You think you ought to be more worried, but there’s such a pleasant fog pressing your mind, soothing and dark like…

Gloved fingers seize your tingling jaw. “What’s wrong with you?”

Oh. You’re supposed to be doing something. You’d like to tell him to go fuck himself, but you just can’t seem to manage it.

“Was ist das?” The grin turns quickly into a snarl. “What is wrong with you?”

Slap.

You hardly feel it, aside from a highly uncomfortable exacerbation of pins and needles. There was quite a lot of force behind it, but your head hardly moved.

“Gift. Er hat sie vergiftet.” There are spots dancing before your eyes, but you can see the rage that overtakes his features. “Huerenson. He poisoned you, didn’t he!”

Oh, yes. Poison, yes… you’re poisoned.

It’s not the worst thing you’ve ever experienced. And the look on that wretched doctor’s face at being denied a… a… another chance… an opportunity to… to…

Thwarted. He’s been thwarted.
“Poison!” He knocks your shield aside, seizes his bonesaw, but it’s too late already. You’d like to grin. You hope your face is obeying even if your voice won’t.

He’s saying something. It sounds furious, frustrated, defeated.

That’s nice.

That’s very, very nice.

There’s no one at your side this time as you stumble out of respawn, laughing. Your limbs tremble, nerves firing little pinpricks of pain one at a time that fade after a moment into a healthy calm. Your lungs draw deep, comfortable breaths. They exhale in triumphant delight, and your laughter echoes sharply over concrete.

Oh, freedom!

The thought that you owe it to Medic does give you pause. You shake out your arms, roll your shoulders, lift each leg to bend at the knee. He ran, yes, and still found a way to save you, too, from something you know intimately as far worse than death.

You draw your Gyrojet but leave the shield for now, letting it thump lightly against your rear as you pick up a jogging pace, out the doors, onto the field. Your mind has been overfull lately, you think, as your boots strike a steady rhythm, soles grinding on cracked soil and sand.

Remedies that hurt before they help. Medicines that harm in absence. Blood-drenched hands that heal and doves nesting in intestines. Fine paper-edges tucked against a vest, a needle pinched between fingers, pen rolling upon the desk, bullets lodged into bone—

“Bonjour.”

CRACK.

There’s a hefty dent in the aluminum siding beneath your leather-clad knuckles, and—

Your team’s spy uncloaks scant inches from your arm, pale eyes following the sharp line of your uniform from the damaged siding to your face. “That would have been a concussion.”

Slowly, you draw back, shake out your wrist. “It would have been a crushed windpipe, thank you.”

“Perhaps.”

Smooth your forefinger over the Gyrojet’s trigger, though at this range it wouldn’t even sting. “John Wayne.”

He reaches into his jacket and produces a half-finished cigarette. “The Man With No Name.”

Technically speaking, it’s the wrong answer; John Wayne didn’t play that character, Clint Eastwood did. But that’s the point. You can relax.

“What’s going on?”

Spy flicks his silver lighter and takes a long drag. “I thought you had run into some trouble, but it seems you had things in hand.”

Oh. “Thank you.” You’re not sure whether to feel touched or embarrassed. “I think I have Medic to
thank for that.”

“Oh?” The expression comes with a white plume of smoke that catches the sun.

“Yes…” Your knuckles sting sharply. “We were cornered and I told him to run, and before he did, he—erm.” Is this even appropriate to disclose? “‘Injected me with a poison so I didn’t get… caught by their medic.’”

His brows arch very slightly, but the expression somehow doesn’t seem surprised, per se. “You preferred it over the alternative, I presume?”

A chill runs down your spine, but you don’t think about it—don’t think about it… “Yes.”

“I have cyanide capsules, myself.” You’re startled by how casually he says it, taking a little puff from his cigarette like he’s discussing a particularly nice vintage or making a reading recommendation. “Perhaps I should have offered them to you the last time, but your position shouldn’t be as… risky as mine.” Another little cloud of smoke. “At least, not in the same way.”

Medic can’t always be there to give you a lethal dose. “It might be a good idea.” Not that you want these situations to keep cropping up. Why? Is it just the heart? You never asked to be a guinea pig, never asked to be a permanent receptacle for invaluable technology.

“It is very unpleasant, but I expect you are already aware.”

Your brow furrows. “Well, it wasn’t pleasant but it wasn’t all that uncomfortable, either.”

Spy frowns. Inhalates thoughtfully. Holds the smoke before releasing it in a short puff. “Then you may want to ask the doctor about what he gave you. Cyanide is extraordinarily painful… but still better than anything the BLU medic or my counterpart might have in mind.”

That’s very curious. “You think he gave me something else?”

He lifts his shoulder in a careless shrug. “Cyanide is rarely given by injection, and if you had experienced it, there would be no doubt.” He studies the burning cherry of his cigarette. “Vomiting. Seizures. Suffocation, though you’re still breathing. Your heart races. It stops.” The cigarette burns down and down, scorching the filter. There’s the slightest tremor, you think, in his folded fingers, but— “If this is not what you felt, then cyanide is not what you received.”

Your throat feels dry. “I almost didn’t feel anything.”

Spy’s mouth lifts at the corner, just a little, not quite succumbing to amusement. The smoke begins to smell of paper and ash. “Then you were given some mercy.”

Mercy. That’s a word you’ve never associated with Medic.

Then again, neither are regret and apology, and yet…

[“Spesh, we could really use ya on the point!”]

“Go.” Spy crushes the smoldering cigarette beneath a patent-leather heel. “My offer still stands if you have no success with Medic.”

“Thank you.” You try a smile, but it turns into another expression entirely, something hesitant, but appreciative, before you click into the radio. “I’m on my way, Scout.”

Spy nods in farewell as you depart, a single, solemn dip of the head.
Translations:
*Zu Befel - Military phrase; "At your command"
**Gift - poison, toxin; Er hat sie vergiftet - He poisoned her

The More You Know: During WWII, a lethal pill was developed by American and British secret services; it was a pea-sized container fashioned from thin glass, coated in rubber, and filled with potassium cyanide. These were given to agents/spies going behind enemy lines. If the capsule was accidentally swallowed, it would pass harmlessly through the person's system; but if broken, the dose of cyanide would kill within minutes. After the War, cases of cyanide capsules and pendants are reported to have been carried or used in different countries. As far as what Specialist actually received, I'll be saving that discussion for the next chapter.
My thanks, as ever, for the Discord crew for their help with this chapter.

I would like to dedicate this update to everyone at home during quarantine, to all those essential-classified employees who are still at work, underpaid and underappreciated, and to Rick May, voice actor of Soldier, who passed away today. Unfortunately, Solly does not appear in this chapter, but I'd like to have Mr. May here anyway; may he be well-remembered and rest easily.

I hope this brings a little light to your day.

**Warning in this Chapter for:** violence, blood, injury, needles, medical unpleasantness

“‘Good God, can I do nothing to help you in your sorrow?’ I cried, jumping up from the seat in utter despair. ‘Tell me, Nastenka, wouldn’t it be possible for me to go to him?’

‘Would that be possible?’ she asked suddenly, raising her head.

‘No, of course not,’” I said pulling myself up; ‘but I tell you what, write a letter.’

‘No, that’s impossible, I can’t do that,’ she answered with decision, bending her head and not looking at me.

‘How impossible—why is it impossible?’ I went on, clinging to my idea. ‘But, Nastenka, it depends what sort of letter; there are letters and letters and…. Ah, Nastenka, I am right; trust to me, trust to me, I will not give you bad advice. It can all be arranged! You took the first step—why not now?’

‘I can’t. I can’t! It would seem as though I were forcing myself on him....’

‘Ah, my good little Nastenka,’ I said, hardly able to conceal a smile; ‘no, no, you have a right to, in fact, because he made you a promise. Besides, I can see from everything that he is a man of delicate feeling; that he behaved very well,’ I went on, more and more carried away by the logic of my own arguments and convictions. ‘How did he behave? He bound himself by a promise: he said that if he married at all he would marry no one but you; he gave you full liberty to refuse him at once.... Under such circumstances you may take the first step; you have the right; you are in the privileged position—’”

Nasteneka’s only escape is through stories and daydreams, through the hope of a promise made seasons ago, while she remained trapped in the same four walls. The narrator has daydreamed each day by the sight of those around him, seeing and never quite touching.

But in the moonlight, they exist together. Together, they sit, and Nasteneka waits for the man who first showed her that there is a life to be lived.

The narrator delivers her letter.
And he loves her, though he promised he wouldn’t.

“Specialist!”

Your hand flies to your holster, but—it’s only Sniper, nudging your ankle with the toe of his boot. “Ah—sorry.” Even a small phrase sends lancing pain through your cheek. You try not to press the bandages staunching the wound too tightly.

“Medic’s ready for ya.” The brim of his hat stands sharply, painfully, against the fluorescents overhead, and he gives you space as you unfold yourself from the plastic chair.

“Thanks.” You must have spaced out a bit while waiting… maybe that scout did give you a concussion after all. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Yep.”

You’ve come to rather appreciate that Sniper doesn’t go out of his way trying to prolong conversations with unnecessary pleasantries, you realize, as you push through the double-doors, ignoring the aches, the burning, the shooting pains. There’s a good deal less anxiety that way… probably on both sides.

Medic’s mouth curls with something like distaste as he disposes of a bundle of gauze and cotton balls into a steel bin. “What happened to you?”

You frown, and sit carefully on the gurney, minding the bruises settling in on the backs of your thighs. “Baseball bat and barbed wire.”

“Where?” He clicks his tongue. “Besides the obvious.”

The obvious is the sharp cuts that decorate your fingertips, blood congealing in the cracks and whorls of your skin. The obvious is the unbearably sore, open gash along your jaw, blood currently stifled by a fistful of nearly-soaked gauze you filched from a medipack.

“The back of my skull.”

The line of his mouth tightens. “Fine. Don’t move.”

You close your eyes. You’re too tired and sore to pay any further attention; if he needs something else, he’ll be sure you know about it.

There’s a small sound as he assesses the damage, careful fingers nonetheless igniting white flashes of pain. There are spots dancing beneath your eyelids as you bite your tongue against a hiss.

“Impressive damage,” Medic muses.

“Yes, I can feel that.” You’d roll your eyes if it didn’t seem like it would cause more pain. You try not to move your mouth too much as you speak. “Fix it, please.”

“Try to relax,” he says, and you can hear the heavy rollers of the nearby table upon the linoleum as he drags it closer. “It needs to be cleaned.” You begin to reply, but—“I’m going to touch your jaw; the left side.” He does, two gloved fingers alongside your chin, a light pressure guiding your head up. “Let me see your face.”

You hiss this time, as you lift the fistfull of soaking bandages away from your jaw, blood
already sticking, congealing, pulling at the damaged skin. You do not open your eyes, bright flashes of pain sparking across the darkness.

“I trust you ‘got him back’ for it?” His breath is hot on your cheek. It burns, quite literally, where the air brushes your wound.

Something turns in the pit of your stomach. “I wasn’t kind.”

“And why should you be?”

“I don’t like to think about it.” Every pull of your lips, though you take care not to open your jaw further than necessary, stabs new needles of pain through the skin, the muscles, the tendons.

“Why?” His voice is low, intimate, not pushing. A private conversation, casual. “You’re very good at what you do.”

Barbs tear at the boy’s neck, rivulets of blood across pale skin, delicate, catching the sun like garnets set in silver.

You swallow. “Too good, maybe.”

He couldn’t make a sound when you pressed your weight behind the bat. His legs lashed out like a man dancing in the noose.

“I—” Your breath shudders. Medic saved your… not your life, no, but your… your well-being, today. You can tell him. He’s told you far more. “—always feel I lost something. Afterward. If I think about it.”

Spikes dug down to your fingerbones where the leather doesn’t cover, snagging, scraping.

“What could you have possibly lost?” The words are haughty, but his voice remains quiet, retains the soft quality of a person listening.

“My temper?” You’re hyper-aware of every spot of pain, each puncture of your fingers, the scratches and scrapes, the gash upon your cheek, the pull of bloody skin you cannot see, the dull, thudding march of your pulse inside your skull. None of it compares to the way your throat swells bitterly against your words. “Everything I’m supposed to be?”

His touch drops from your jaw to your shoulder, a careful grip that trails down your bicep, and you don’t think about it, don’t think about it, much easier if you don’t—“What are you supposed to be?”

Your heart stutters and clenches. Blood on your skin; damp pillowcase sticking upon your cheek at midnight. The shame eats its way up from your stomach to your throat. It hangs upon your spine, crawls along your skin. “Not this.”

There absolutely aren’t any tears pounding at the door behind your eyes. There’s no hot rush of embarrassment burning your cheeks, igniting a brand new inferno of blades as a little more blood seeps down your neck and into your collar.

Fuck; why this, why now, why here?

Not a single grip on your emotions, not a single rational thought, not one fucking ounce of control over your tongue—!
“Just. Use the medigun.” Your throat is tight and the words are rough, but they come out even.

You always were too honest for your own good. Every time you think you’ve learned to keep your mouth shut, you open it up and say too much.

“It—” A sound like a cough, the flutter of fabric from someone who doesn’t know what to do with their hands. “Ah, it will be painful if I don’t clean everyzhing and go slowly—”

“I’ll be fine.” Anything is better than this. Anything is better than letting even one fucking tear show on your face. You can go to your room. You can clean yourself up. You can forget this happened.

“Nein.” If you weren’t afraid of opening your eyes at this point, you’d be giving him a Look. No? How dare—“You don’t understand. If I heal you up like zhat, you’ll be in pain all night. It vill scar badly and you’ll be uncomfortable until respawn tomorrow.” A shift in weight, the soft rustle of cotton, leather soles creaking on the floor. “You don’t have to suffer.”

Your mouth pulls itself into a grim smile that breaks off with a grimace, lancing pain shooting through your cheek, your jaw, your ear. “Sometimes, I think suffering is the only thing I’m good at.” You press the edge of one finger, the least damaged, into the crease of your eye and wipe away the offending moisture there. “Please do it.”

There’s a huff of breath. The air changes.

“Spatz.” The click of boots, uneven, three steps one way, two steps another. His coat whispers as he moves. “I can send you through respawn instead.”

You open your eyes now, at last, and find them overly wet, sticky. It’s difficult to focus under the white lights. “What?”

“I vill not use zhe medigun unless zhe wounds are tended first.” He stands, imperious as ever, back straight, just a step away. His mouth draws a tight line. “If you want to leave now, I can send you through respawn. How do you want it?”

Your mouth drops open and you immediately regret it, a tearing sensation pulling through your cheek. “You want to kill me rather than heal me?”

“No.” Medic is outright frowning now, teeth bared, but only just. “I want to heal you. But I would rather kill you than know you left this room suffering.”

Shaken, right down to your core, you blink.

“Now. How do you want it? I can use your gun; it vill not hurt, but it vill leave a mess—not zhat I mind cleaning.” Every word is discernible, quick and even, but there’s no care put into pronunciation. “Or, I can use a dose of zhe same poison you had earlier; you already know how zhat will feel. Or, if you have somezhing else in mind, I vill do it.”

“I—” He’s giving you an out. Again. You don’t have to be here, with him, if you don’t want to be, and…

And…

You breathe, slow, through the tightness in your chest. “What was the poison?”

Medic’s shoulders tense, drawing the white coat tight across his shoulders. “Did it not work?”
“No—that is, yes, it worked… very well. Thank you.” You look at the floor, past bloody fingers and stained leather. The ache in your head makes everything below your knees appear just a little fuzzy, and the angle makes the back of your neck burn, so you look at Medic. “Spy found me after and was surprised when I said the poison wasn’t particularly painful.”

“Wunderbar!” A smile spreads across his mouth as his hands fold neatly behind his back. “It is exactly what I wanted.”

Encouraged, you ask again, “What was it?”

He opens his mouth, obviously ready as ever to show off, but he hesitates. Then, tilting his head with air that tells you that you won’t like what comes next, he says, “If you want to know, I will tell you while I am cleaning your wounds.”

You want to be angry. “That’s blackmail.” Shit, that’s the wrong word, but you can’t scrape together enough focus to—

“No, it’s a bribe.” Medic’s lips draw a grim line. “I will tell you another time, if you want. But you can’t sit there bleeding. You can leave through respawn, or I will talk while I work.”

He’s right. You have a choice.

He has given you a choice.

Everything hurts. But you do want to know, and the threat of tears has, it seems, somehow gone while you weren’t paying attention. “All right.”

“All right…?” His brow arches.

Clench your fingers—immediately wish you hadn’t. “Clean me up.”

He smiles, not triumphantly. Just… smiles. “Try to relax.” In an instant, he’s at the cart, tipping up canisters and arranging bottles. “I’m going to work on your cheek and jaw first; it’s the most open.”

“Fine.” You close your eyes again, body heavy. It seems you’ve used up any energy you had. You’re tired, you’re sore, you’re sticky, and just a little sick to your stomach, and you still want to know what you’ve been wondering all day—“What’s the poison?”

Medic hums. “What killed you was tetrodotoxin.” The click of his boots stop right in front of you, but you remain as you are. “This is going to sting.”

“Oka—shit!” Sting? It feels like a thousand white-hot fucking needles, and the only thing that keeps you from jerking away from the sensation is the gloved hand on the other side of your head. “Bastard!”

He titters. “If you’d let me do this earlier—”

“It would have hurt just as much.” Damn it, talking is even worse with that cloth pressed up against your cheek, and the burning just continues, forcing you to blink back the water that springs to your eyes.

Medic’s face is scant inches from yours, cradled between both his hands, and why you hadn’t noticed the fact that you can feel his breath on your chin until now is quite beyond the mental powers currently available to you.
He looks away, quickly, lifting the cloth slightly to check the wound beneath. “Better.” He readjusts to dab at other cuts underneath your jaw with intent, purposeful focus.

Silence lingers as he wipes the sticky blood from your neck along the pulse-point, and then just beneath your ear. The cloth dips down to your collar, hesitating—then skirting overtop. There’s no pain aside from what already existed, his fingers careful, and you’re letting your head just rest in his other hand, the glove not a pleasant texture, but—

Conversation. You were having a conversation, it was—

“The poison?” you prompt.

“Oh!” Medic straightens up, lets go, draws the bloody cloth back and flings it into a basin with a wet slap. “Tetrodotoxin. Tetrodotoxin is found in many ocean species. Zhe, ah, puffing fish, for instance. And zhe cone snail. I collect mine from zhe snails when I can; I find it’s sometimes more potent! And it does kill by injection, most of zhe time. Humans, even! Not zhat it eats humans, of course, but only one or two milligrams is enough to kill an adult!” He fetches up a needle and medical thread, hands gesturing too wildly to be trusted with a butter knife, let alone a sewing needle.

“Do people not notice soon enough to get help?” you ask, trying to ignore whatever feeling is stirring in your chest right now. Anxiety is a common one for these circumstances.

He takes a slow breath before disinfecting and threading the needle. “Sometimes they don’t know what it is, I think.” He squints through his spectacles, the thread folding twice against the needle’s edge before going through the eye. “It blocks the sodium channels in your nerve cells, so the nerves can’t send messages to one another.” He gestures to the rest of the gurney. “Lie down on your side, please.” You do, gingerly, unable to mitigate so many screaming signals of pain from disparate sources. The starched sheets crinkle. “Danke. Muscles stop working; this causes tremors and paralysis, an inability to produce vocal sounds, weakness, headache, irregular heartbeat. Symptoms continue—seizures, respiratory or cardiac failure. It’s usually the respiratory failure that actually kills you.” He stands behind you, and starts stitching at the end of the gash closest to your ear.

You squeeze your eyes shut against each jab of pain, and try to ask your question without moving your jaw. “How is that different from cyanide?”

Medic pauses. “You spoke a lot with Spy, didn’t you?”

“A little.”

“Hm.” He continues his task. “Well, cyanide works by stopping cells from accepting oxygen. So, it’s more like your whole body is suffocating. Very painful. Besides, it’s normally taken orally, so I wouldn’t have considered it for injection.” He pauses again, close to the end of the wound at the forward edge of your jaw. “Hm. Well, except maybe for the syringe gun.” He makes another three stitches, and you feel him tighten the sutures, tie it off, cut the thread. “I’ll have to remember that for later.”

“And the way it works makes the tetrodotoxin less painful?” Talking pulls at the stitches, though not too badly. It’s raw and sore, but at least it isn’t exposed to the air anymore.

“Oh, heavens, no!” Medic laughs. “Tetrodotoxin is normally just as painful.”

You open your eyes, furrow your brow, watching as he comes around the gurney again for a new
cloth, which he douses in what you assume is alcohol. “Then what did you do?”

He folds the cotton into fourths and then rolls it before meeting your eyes. “I laced it with fentanyl.”

“What is that?”

“A very new drug, like morphine,” he says, retracing his steps behind you. “Well—actually, it’s more like heroin.”

“HERO— fuck!” You snap your mouth shut as soon as you start seeing stars from the fucking pain of pulling at your stiches like that.

“Don’t shout!” Medic chastises. “And sit up, bitte.”

You release a slow breath through your teeth, eyes shut tight. “Just a minute.”

“You did it to yourself.”

“Yes, I know.” Carefully, using your forearms and elbow, you struggle into a sitting position without aggravating your sore and swollen fingers, and rather than scoot back down to the end of the table, just cross your legs where you are. “Now what the hell do you mean you shot me up with heroin?”

Behind you, Medic makes an irritated sound in his throat before you hear the gurney creak. “Fentanyl. It’s an anesthetic, supposedly without the same side effects and dangers as heroin.” It sounds like he’s climbed up—

You look. He has climbed up on the table behind you, side-saddle, one leg tucked beneath the other, thigh almost touching your back. “Um—”

“Face forward, and look down at your lap, please; I need to clean the base of your skull.”

Sigh. “All right.”

It does sting, but not quite as badly as the first go.

“So, if you were feeling, hm… relaxed or tired or calm or even—pleasant, zhat was fentanyl, not tetrodotoxin.”

Well, that was… kind? You try to relax as the cloth encounters your hair, as it soaks and skirts a myriad of puncture wounds.

Yes, yes it was kind. Even if the poison had been just that, you would have counted yourself lucky, certainly grateful. But to know that it was poison that he had specifically designed with an anesthetic to…

Medic almost never uses anesthetics.

You distinctly remember Scout complaining that he hoards the painkillers and refuses to use them for surgeries because he has the medigun and furthermore that he doesn’t think it worthwhile to waste them on—

The gurney creaks as he climbs down, moves toward the basin and drops this cloth in with the other.
You open your mouth. Close it. Open it again as Medic soaks a third cloth and gestures for your hands. Close your mouth, present them both, palms-down.

He frowns, the bridge of his nose wrinkling as his brows draw together. “I will have to cut your gloves off.”

Damn, you should have thought of that when your fingers were still flexible and bleeding. “I have another pair; I’ll just have to order more when Miss Pauling comes back.”

Medic sets the cloth aside, turns toward the rolling table with its aluminum tray, and starts tugging his own thick gloves off his hands. You raise a brow, but make no comment as he sets them aside and takes up some surgical scissors.

He gestures for your left hand, turns it over gently, takes it in his, so carefully that it’s almost like the energy from the medigun flowing over your skin, soft and light and precise. The chill of the blades start with your middle finger, thin steel sliding underneath the leather, tight against swollen skin, and slices your glove from palm to wrist. The pressure is painful, but quickly followed by the release of tension as the fabric gives way. And then the next finger. And the next. Gentle and efficient. He peels it carefully off from underneath before moving on to the next hand.

This one, Medic treats precisely the same way, hands moving with the same ritualistic ease. Each finger is freed from the glove, and then your hand, stained with old blood—already flaking—new, gleaming wetly in each line and crevice—and middling, sticky and still and clotting.

He doesn’t put his gloves back on to bathe your hands.

The alcohol burns, but you almost don’t notice, almost register the pain as something fine and good because his hands follow the wounds, light and careful. Each finger is given as much attention as the gash on your face had received, the cloth pressed lightly to puncture wounds, traced along scratches and cuts. Slowly, your hands come clean, no trace of blood outside the lacerations. Anything that may not have been your own is gone.

You don’t notice that you haven’t said anything for several minutes until you look at his face. And you don’t panic. Panicking would mean you’ve done something wrong, or that he has indicated discomfort. Neither is true. Medic looks…

Calm. Very, very calm.

You find that you are, too.

“Zhe medigun will work fine, now,” he says.

You nod. “Thank you.”

His touch lingers on your hands even as he turns to take care of the blood-soaked cloth and reaches overhead to adjust the machine, even as the beam washes over your skin and slowly soothes your wounds to a mere lingering discomfort.

“Thank you.” You’re not sure if it’s enough to convey your epiphany: Medic has, of his own volition, indisputably, given you a gift, and expected nothing.

He smiles, small, genuine. “Gerne, Würger.”

That’s two words you’ve never heard before, but you don’t have to ask:
“You are very welcome.”

And you think that will be where it ends for today, as the shallower cuts disappear like they had never existed, as the ache behind your eyes dissipates in rosy warmth. You relax and watch Medic move the dirty basin over to the sink and pour the russet-tinted water down the drain. He tilts his head, facial expressions shifting rapidly like he’s having a conversation, and then, casually, he says:

“You seem to be doing very well lately, with… everything.” The cloths tumble with a wet, sopping slap in the steel bottom of the sink. Medic glances back at you, over his spectacles. “Would you like to have a drink later?”

Your heartbeat picks up, and a smile lifts the corner of your mouth. Finally—there’s still a nice bottle of gin with your name on it. The first one in months. “I could definitely use a drink.”

“Wunderbar.” He turns on the faucet, begins the task of wringing your blood out of the fabric. “After dinner, then?”

Your cheek tingles, just a little, before all the pain subsides and the stitches feel rather more snug than they did before. “Why not?” You do recall that there’s work in the morning, and add, in jest, “I just won’t accept any competitions this time.”

Medic arches his brows, lays the cloths aside and begins washing his hands. “No, you don’t have to worry about me challenging you to any drinking contests tonight.” He dries both hands with a clean towel before walking back to the gurney and taking a careful look at the stitches across your cheek and jaw.

“Well, no, and I shouldn’t have to worry about Sniper during the week now, but I don’t think Demo has any qualms about—”

“Sniper and Demo?” Medic furrows his brow, meets your eyes for an instant, and—

He turns toward the aluminum tray and selects a little pair of scissors. “Ja, I suppose they’re a little enthusiastic, but I didn’t invite them.” You automatically turn and tilt your head so he can work, still basking in the faint buzz that comes with soaking up the healing beam.

Of course he hasn’t invited them; he’s only invited you on a whim, so far, and—

“I only invited you.” Efficiently, he cuts through the first two stitches; it stings when he tugs them from the skin, but only for a moment.

Oh. That’s… different. You really, really hope it’s not— “Is there something you wanted to talk about?” Snip, snip. Thread pulls at your skin.

Out of the corner of your eye, you can see him swallow, but he doesn’t cease in his task. “Not specifically, no. But I thought you might enjoy zhe quiet.”

Well. That’s—that’s fine, then. You keep your head still as he finishes, and choose a point on the far wall, just a few feet from the unlabeled wooden door at the back of the room, to stare at before conceding, “I just might.”
When it’s Spy’s turn to cook, you can either expect something exquisite, high-effort, a dish that should be impossible to prepare within the base—or something so bland and simple that you almost wish you’d cooked instead. You have learned quickly to go in expecting the latter and to be delightfully surprised when it’s the former, because it happens so very, very rarely. It was a cruel thing for him to cook so spectacularly during the first month of your employment only to cease bothering when the novelty of a new palate wore off.

Of course, considering half the team and the generally lackluster kitchen… you can’t really blame him.

“Spy, what da heck is this?”

This appears to be a cream-based sauce with. Um. Thin slices of meat in it? Served up in a pot with some long, flat slices of toasted potatoes on a pan beside it.

The man in question smirks, rolling an unlit cigarette between his gloved thumb and forefinger. “The Americans called it ‘S.O.S.’”

Scout wrinkles his nose. “What, on accounta they were in distress?”

“You BET YOUR BIDDY’S TOUGH TITTIES THEY WERE IN TROUBLE!” Soldier receives a sharp elbow in the ribs from Demo, who frowns, shakes his head, points at you, frowns up at him again. “Excuse me, Specialist!” Soldier folds his hands behind his back, straightening to attention. “This is the dinner table and that was crude!” He turns back to Scout. Slam! go his hands on the table. “YOU BET YOUR ALL-AMERICAN APPLE PIE THEY WERE IN TROUBLE! IT WAS WAR! RATIONS WERE TIGHT! YOU ATE WHAT YOU COULD GET AND YOU LIKED IT! WHEN IT’S FO—”

“Delicious is what it is,” interjects Engineer, selecting a potato and spreading the sauce over it. “We usedta have this growin’ up. It’s chipped beef an’ gravy.”

Standing as hard evidence to this statement is Heavy, who has already helped himself and is eating quite happily. So, you grab a fork and help yourself to a couple potatoes while Scout doesn’t bother with utensils. Still, it doesn’t quite add up…
“What does the S.O.S stand for, Spy?” you ask.

His little smirk broadens into something absolutely devilish. “Pardon my language, but as an American would say… shit on a shingle.”

Raucous laughter from the other end of the table that sounds suspiciously like they were already aware and just waiting.

“Really?” Scout demands, voice jumping in pitch. “Really.”

“Yes, really.” Spy sets the unlit cigarette between his lips and reclines with satisfaction in his chair.

“Waitaminute, how come Spy gets to swear?!”

Demoman shrugs. “Th’ lass did ask.”

“Yes,” you admit, serving yourself some of the gravy regardless, “yes I did. And I really don’t care if you swear, Soldier.” You smile, and the man scrunches his nose, but before he can reply, you let the other shoe drop, casually as you please: “I’ve heard a lot worse than titties in my time.”

Absolute uproar.

“Oh my GOD!”

“Pffffffffhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! Didn’t know ya had it in ye!”

You’re absolutely certain you hear someone snort, and you’re almost certain it was Spy, but you can’t prove it.

“Yes ma’am—”

“TITTIES.”

Chance a glance across the table and Medic and he’s giggling like the rest of them, but, you suspect, less from the actual swear and more from context. It’s silly, and just as he looks up—you avert your gaze to your plate so he doesn’t catch you watching again.

“Dammit, sheila—”

“You’re killin’ me!”

You don’t stop grinning even when the laughter and the table-thumping and fair bit of choking has stopped. Spreading some gravy evenly over your crispy potato, you continue, pleased as can be, “It’s like you’ve never heard me swear before.”

Scout is hiccupsing, and still hasn’t touched his plate at all. “Yeah, but that’s different.”

“Different how?” You taste the food; it’s actually pretty good. Not flavorful. A little salty. But gravy on a potato is gravy on a potato, okay.


You arch an eyebrow. “Girls can’t talk about themselves?”
At the end of the table, Heavy chews slowly, watching the boy with hardly concealed amusement, like he can tell exactly what’s coming.

Hiccup. “Well. Uh. That’s more a word that. That—” Hiccup. “Y’know… never mind.” He shoves half a potato in his mouth before you can press for a proper answer.

You know why. Half the table knows why, but you’re feeling… well, you’re feeling good. It’s—it’s been a long time since something felt simply, genuinely good. Maybe it’s that you’re comfortable with the team, maybe it’s just that you’ve gotten some food in your stomach. Maybe it’s the promise of a drink later, even if it is with Medic, who actually isn’t acting like a complete ass. But you feel good, and you’re not going to waste time overthinking it.

“Is it because it’s a rude term?” You take another bite, not concealing the amused turn of your lips, the crinkle of your eyes. “Because it’s not something I’d use to refer to myself?”

Watching Scout squirm as his ears turn pink is more fun than it has any right to be. There’s a little pang in your heart that misses your little brother, but you’ll write him a letter, maybe tomorrow. And there’s always furlough, isn’t there?

“It’s, uh, it’s pretty rude, yeah.” He shoves the rest of the potato in his mouth likes it’s the only thing keeping him from saying anything stupid. And it just might be.

You smother a giggle with a sip of water, and as you raise the glass to your lips, Medic catches your eye with unrestrained, wicked delight.

He’s a very bad influence.

“But,” you ask, lightly, setting your glass aside, “is it because, when you use it, it’s usually has a sexual connotation?”

“NO!” Bright, bright red. He goes up like a torch.

You hear Heavy’s low, rumbling chuckle as Demo starts guffawing again. “She’s got yer number, boy!”

Scout covers his face. “Oh my god.”

Medic is positively cackling.

“You did walk into it, Scout,” Spy says, smoothly, eyes twinkling.

Your face is starting to hurt from smiling so hard, and you elbow the poor boy lightly in the ribs. “I’m just teasing; I know how it is. Military vocabulary.” He does uncover his face, mouth screwed up half in amusement and half in frustrated accusation. You will write that letter tomorrow.

Scout nods, slowly, before deciding, “You’re a dick.”

That brings you to bright, genuine laughter, and delivers a new, elbow-shaped bruise to your ribs.

You dry your hands on the dish towel after putting your plate back into the cabinet. The meeting with Medic is planned for eight o’clock in the library, which means you have time to go to your room and fetch your liquor of choice before heading up, and still have at least twenty minutes to spare. That he offered the library as your meeting place is a relief; if he had suggested an area like his office, it would have made you much more suspicious that he was simply angling for a new
surgery schedule.

The only drawback to the location is that Heavy could wind up joining you by accident… this wouldn’t bother you, per se, but Medic was rather direct about not inviting anyone else. Though, surely he’d make an exception—

A furrow pinches your brow, and you turn down the corridor toward the bedrooms. Heavy and Medic haven’t been interacting normally outside the battlefield for several days… maybe that’s what he wants to talk about. Heavy has been distant when it comes to the doctor, almost irritated. Perhaps they had a serious disagreement? You and Heavy have become rather close over the last few months, you think; after all, you spend almost every afternoon in the library reading together, sometimes talking about literature, and sometimes saying nothing at all. Maybe Medic believes you’ll have some insight that he doesn’t…

“Specialist.” You glance up to see Heavy closing the door to his bedroom behind him. “You are going upstairs tonight?”

Well. You certainly aren’t going to lie. “Yes, but…” Stop just outside your door, shift your weight from one leg to the other. “Medic and I are planning on having a drink.” You wet your lips. The truth will do fine; the truth is really all you have, and you trust Heavy. Perhaps he can even clear up the mystery for you. “And I would invite you, but he was rather… insistent that it was just me.”

Heavy’s weighty brow arches, just a fraction; you’d miss it if you weren’t paying attention, watching for the smallest twitch of muscle on his forehead or around his mouth. “You are,” he says, slowly, “drinking. Alone, with Medic.”

All right, it does sound very weird when said like that, but—

He squints, grey eyes fixed on yours. “And you are… comfortable with this?”

And now you’re not sure. “Yes?” Arms cross over your chest, and you glance at your boots on the floor, then back up at him. “You and Medic haven’t been… on good terms, lately, have you?”

That expression of surprise again, a little larger this time. “No; he lied to you. Why would I have good words with him?”

Open your mouth; close it again. Your chest is warm, and so are your cheeks, but—“Heavy, have you been angry with him all this time? Because of 

He shakes his head in the negative, just once. “No. I am angry with Medic because of Medic. You did not make me angry with him. He made his actions.”

“Oh.” Something like a smile dances across your mouth as you look at him, muted wrath apparent in the tight line of his jaw, but the crease of his eyes is concerned and you’re just… you’re touched. “Thank you, Heavy.” You mean it, you do. “But…” It requires a moment of thought; how to articulate this? You’re not sure you’ve even really explained to yourself how things seem different. “We agreed to continue and try again, correctly, with the medicine, and it’s worked. Medic has actually been…” Nice isn’t the word. “Better. He hasn’t asked me to participate in surgery for a couple of weeks, and I don’t think I have to worry about that tonight.” You smile, intentionally this time, a reassuring expression, you hope. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

Heavy seems to process this, brows knitted close together. After a moment, he heaves a deep sigh. “Medic… tries. I know this.” He closes the distance between you, rests a solid hand on your shoulder, and you let your arms fall back to your sides. “But you…” His mouth makes a few shapes
that don’t seem to be English before he gives his thoughts voice. “You need to feel safe.” His fingers tighten over your shoulder. “You need trust.”

This, you consider carefully. Do you trust Medic?

You think of gentle, careful fingers cleaning your hands in with a character you can only call tender.

“I feel safe meeting with him in the library,” you decide. Heavy’s steely grey eyes remain warm, like the low-hanging mist after a thunderstorm, full of concern. “I trust him when we’re working.” And Medic has offered his own trust to you. “I think I could trust him here, too; it might not be something that happens today, but… I’m comfortable, for now.” Reach out, rest a hand on Heavy’s shoulder in turn. “You don’t have to worry.”

“Hm.” He smiles now, just a little, a crooked, amused thing, and squeezes your shoulder again before releasing it. “You will tell me if Doktor does not behave.”

That earns a chuckle, and you drop your hand back to your side. “I promise I’ll let you know, Heavy.”

He nods, solemnly. “I will work on Sascha, then, tonight.”

You fit your key into the lock on your door and start to turn it; it requires a little jiggle to the left in order to work properly, and you think that’s all, but—

“And tell me if you have good time.”

You smile. “I will.”

Climb the stairs, two at a time, bottle in hand. You’re only five minutes early now, possibly less, and you were hoping to process the conversation you just had a little better before Medic actually arrived...

Good. The library is still empty. You set your gin on the table, and study the tall, rectangular shape, the red and green label, the aluminum cap. You’d told Heavy that you feel comfortable meeting Medic, but now your thoughts are whirling faster than Archimedes’ wing-beats. Battlefield victories, fingers too tight around your wrist, flecks of blood flashing on spectacles under the yellow light of the gym, a small, genuine smile, “in balance with this life, this death —”

Perhaps he won’t mind if you just pour yourself a—

Damn it, you forgot a glass. You weigh the option of just drinking off the bottle, but no, you won’t be able to measure what you’re drinking, and that’s just asking for trouble. Nothing for it but to hurry down to the kitchen.

You almost run right into Medic at the top of the stairs. “Did you forget something?” he asks, blinking owlishly over his spectacles as you hurry to step back to a respectful distance and let him by.

“Yes; I forgot to get glasses—” You see now that under one arm is a bottle and in his opposite hand, he cradles two snifters between his fingers. “—but I see you have that covered.”

The corner of his mouth quirks in a smile. “I do.”
“All right.” Turn on your heel before the moment can become awkward, your heart pounding against your chest in a stuttering rhythm (damn it, why are you like this?), and head to the other side of the worn table, by your liquor, watching as Medic sets down his own.

The vessel’s overall shape is similar to a wine bottle, made of light green glass, and the liquid inside catches the library’s yellow light, glowing faintly amber. The label sports sharp, serif print with bold letters, designed in red and gold and black, but the words are unfamiliar.

“Asbach Uralt,” Medic supplies. “It’s brandy; very difficult to get now that half of Germany has decided to wall itself in, but Spy is very good at getting things he shouldn’t.”

The casually derisive way with which he references the Berlin Wall catches you off-guard.

“I’m afraid I don’t have the right glass for gin,” he adds before you can comment, studying the bottle of Bombay on your side of the table.

You shrug, letting your fingertips rest on the wood. It’s dry, and could use a new finish. “I don’t mind, and I’m sure the gin doesn’t care, either.”

His eyes crinkle in amusement. “No, I suppose it doesn’t. But the Weinbrand does.” He takes hold of the bottle, and cracks the seal on the metal top. “Would you like to try it first?”

“Yes, please,” you say; after all, you can’t properly try the brandy after starting with a strong flavor like gin.

“All right.” He sets the cap aside and clasps the first glass between thumb and forefinger at the stem, takes up the brandy, and pours. Amber liquid sloshes across the snifter’s rounded bottom, and after only a moment, he tips the bottle up. There appears to be hardly any brandy in the glass at all, perhaps only a finger. Then, he tilts the glass onto its side, parallel to the ground, watches with an appraising eye as the liquid inside fills the deep curve, touches the lip of the glass, and does not spill. “Perfekt.”

Medic offers the snifter, and you take it, correctly, fingers brushing his as you clasp the glass so that the short stem is cradled between your middle and ring fingers, so that the bowl rests against your palm. “Thank you.”

The brandy catches and reflects the light as it moves, flashing like a garnet in the sun. With a turn of your wrist, you swirl the glass, watching amber waves roil in a brisk, counterclockwise whorl. The glass quickly warms in your palm as Medic pours his own serving, precisely the same way, checking the amount by tipping it up on end.

You have to admit you’re not a connoisseur of brandy and cognac, exactly, but you’ve had some before, on more than one occasion, and you’re aware of the basic procedure; it’s just not your poison. Hm. You might have to be careful with that turn of phrase from now on. “Pick your poison” definitely has a brand-new meaning after today’s events.

Apparently your actual poison is tetrodotoxin with a touch of morphine look-alike.

The brandy will probably be much pleasanter.

As the glass begins to feel warm in your hand, you bring it just under your nose, and take a long, slow breath. It smells a little of fruit—not like wine, but more like… a dried apricot, perhaps, and dark, like caramel, a bit like whiskey. You raise your eyes to find Medic watching, expectantly, as you straighten and roll the brandy around the glass again.
You hadn’t been paying attention earlier, but he’s ditched the uniform coat that he had been wearing at dinner to reveal a waistcoat that’s charcoal grey from the front, and a glossy, dove grey from the back. His necktie isn’t its usual crimson, but a dark, silken burgundy, like blood as it soaks into a cerulean uniform. But that’s not the most remarkable thing.

Medic raises his glass after performing the ritual himself, extends it toward you.

The knot he’s made is triangular, larger than a Windsor, sitting handsomely, perfectly neatly in his collar, matching the waistcoat beautifully. You’ve never tied that particular pattern yourself before, so you can’t be completely sure, but you’re fairly certain it’s a Balthus.

“To your health?” His eyes are bright, clear behind his spectacles.

You raise your glass in turn. You’ve really never been sure how to really accept a toast. “And to yours.”

He smiles, crooked, sharp. “All right.” The glasses ring for just a moment; the light makes his gaze warm, ice-blue melted to a sun-touched sky. “Zum Wohl *.”

And you drink. It’s sweet on your tongue, but dark, heavy. There’s pepper, you think, as you swallow, and it burns bright. This isn’t what you would call a smooth finish. It’s rough, sharp—but most definitely satisfying.

You’ve closed your eyes and didn’t even notice. As the lingering flavor of vanilla and fruit settles in your mouth, you open them again.

“Well?” Medic sips from his glass, expectant.

Nod, slowly. “It’s really very good. A little stronger than most brandies I’ve had; it almost feels like whiskey going down.”

“Ja,” he agrees. “It’s not too sweet.”

You take another sip and savor it, idly swirling your glass.

“Shall we sit?” He gestures to the faded, frayed chairs.

“Oh—yes.” You take the green one you’ve claimed as yours, and sit down, brandy sloshing up the side of your snifter, but none escapes.

Medic takes the other armchair, beige, patterned with pastel remnants of vines and flowers. He leans back, boots flat on the floor, rests his glass on the wooden end of the chair’s arm, turns his hand so his fingers cradle the stem, palm-down.

You resist the urge to tuck one leg up beneath the other.

Silence drags on. You take another sip because you have no idea what to say.

“Is gin your usual drink?” Medic asks.

Oh, that’s a safe topic. “I’m very fond of it, but it’s not always my go-to; I enjoy whiskey and scotch as well. I like dark beers if I’m looking for something lighter.”

“Porter?”

“Yes, usually.”
“I wouldn’t call that light.” Faintly amused, he lifts his glass, switches hands to clasp it properly, and takes another sip.

“Well. Lighter as far as alcohol content,” you concede.

“Somezhing…” He considers the words for a moment “…casual.”

“Yes.” You lift the glass to your lips again, enjoy the sweetly dark liquor. Unfortunately, there’s very little left in the bottom now.

“So you would consider gin or something like brandy a drink that isn’t for a casual occasion.” He leans slightly on the arm closest to your chair, hooks one ankle over the other.

You arch an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t say they can’t be drunk on a casual basis… but if I was having dinner at home or I was at a party during the day, I’d probably choose beer.”

“Hm.” Medic nods, but you can’t read his expression or tone.

The last swallow of brandy is pleasantly warm all the way to your belly, but now you don’t know what to say again.

“Would you like another?” He tips back the rest of his glass.

“Yes, please.”

He unfolds himself from the chair, and you extend the glass for him to take. His fingers are cool against yours, and the touch lingers as he turns back to the table, and pours your glass with precisely the same ritualistic flair as the first. His waistcoat is very well-fitted; it doesn’t ride up at all when he raises the glass for appraisal, light bending through the amber liquor to reflect brightly upon his spectacles.

Mm. There’s the warmth, much faster than you expected, washing through your chest and prodding a little at the base of your skull. The brandy has to be every bit as strong as your gin.

“Is brandy your preference?” you ask, as Medic passes your snifter back into your hands.

He hums, turning back toward the table to pour his drink. “It is my favorite for special occasions. Most of the time, I drink beer—lagers.” He tips the glass to test the amount, then resettles himself in his chair, ankles crossed again.

“I enjoy lagers as well,” you say. “But I do prefer a porter or a stout.”

“We’ll have to trade sometime.” Medic smiles, radiating mischief. “We’ll see who has the better taste.”

Another sip of the brandy. “I think we’ll have to stick with the—” You squint at the text on the bottle to refresh your memory. “Asbach Uralt for tonight.”

He shifts very suddenly in the chair, readjusts his grip on his snifter.

You wince. “Did I butcher it?”

Medic’s brows shoot up to his hairline. “No! It was almost exactly right.” He adjusts his spectacles, places them a little lower on the aquiline bridge of his nose. “I was surprised.”

“Oh, good.” Relax a little against the back of your chair. “I was worried I wouldn’t remember how
He takes a slow drink off his brandy, shaking his head. “You did fine.”

“Thank you.” This time, your leg does tuck itself up under the other. Another sip has you holding the heavy liquid in your mouth for a moment to catch the peppery edges, hot on your tongue. It’s almost strange to be sitting comfortably in this chair, without a book—oh! The book.

You can tell from the intrigued slope of Medic’s brow that he’s noticed you suddenly have something to say. “How are you enjoying Catch-22?”

Medic smiles, eyes crinkling handsomely at the edges, though his grin retains that razor-sharp, glinting edge. “Very much!” But, to your delight, that doesn’t seem to be enough. “More than I thought.” He leans forward a little in his chair, elbow resting on the arm closest to you. “The humor is wunderbar, and the men are very—they’re very like people. And it’s like the War! He doesn’t make it….” He frowns at a point in space somewhere just to your left. “Pretty. Nice. He doesn’t make it sound like this big, sad thing we should all be proud of fighting in, or being very sad for. It’s not—” Medic is still digging for the proper word, and can’t find it in English... but based on that description, you think you have it.

“Romanticized?”

“Ja! It isn’t romantisch. It is people dying.” He takes a sip of brandy. “Mm—and for what?” A finger taps the side of his glass. “It must be different for the French, the English, for Poland, every country Germany marched through; that was their home. Even Russia. But America… it’s not so different for you.”

You watch as he drains his snifter, and you find you’re just clasping yours between both hands, faintly lightheaded—but that has little to do with the alcohol. “In that it was a… duty, not a necessity?” you try.

He’s up from the chair so fast that both your feet drop to the floor, ready—but Medic just moves, frowning, to the table, to the bottle. “Duty. Does that mean something that you must do, for your… spirit? Or is it something they make you do?”

You take another sip from your glass as he pours, your brows drawn tight. “It can be something you have to do because of your position, that you’re made to do, but usually duty is a commitment to something because of who you are or something… moral.”

“Then, no.” Light glints through amber. “I wouldn’t call what I did a duty.” He sets the glass aside. “Would you like more?”

Take the last swallow before passing him your snifter. “Yes, please.”

He doesn’t have to touch your fingers this time, as you pinch the stem of the glass.

“Yossarian,” he says, taking up the bottle again, “was—drafted, I think, to fly. And when he tries to go home, because he’s fulfilled his… contract, they raise the number of missions he has to finish.” The corner of Medic’s mouth curls, amused, and there’s a garnet play of light and shadow upon his cheek. “He doesn’t feel like he’s protecting anyone, not his countrymen; he’s just watching people die until he’s one of them.” He lowers the glass, studies your face for a moment before pressing it back into your hands. “I like that.” He turns, retrieves his brandy. “It’s real.”

I’m glad you like it, seems somewhat… trite, based on the weight of this conversation. “That’s why
I recommended it,” you offer, instead, and take another sip.

“Well.” He swirls the brandy in his glass. “I’m glad you did.” Medic looks at you for a moment, from your face down to the snifter in your hand, braced on your knee, back again to your eyes. “What do you like about it?”

You feel warm. “About *Catch-22*?”

His mouth pulls at the edges, brow twitching briefly. “...*ja.*” He glances away, and moves back to his chair, settling in with a drink.

“I like Yossarian.” You find yourself smiling at that, and settle back against the cushion. “I love the whole idea of *catch-22*. It’s everywhere; a cycle you can’t escape because the very thing that would allow you freedom is the catch that keeps you caught in it. The story itself follows cyclical patterns, everything folds back in on itself until—” Swirl your brandy, watch the amber whorl, little waves cascading in a circle, dancing across glass. “I won’t spoil it for you.” You grin, catch his eye. “You have to tell me when you finish it; I could go on for *hours.*”

“Why not now?” He smirks, eyes dark over his spectacles, and crosses one leg over the other, ankle resting upon knee. Another drink. “*Ve* have time.”

Your shoulders are thoroughly unwound, relaxed against the chair-back; there’s a bit of a lump in the fabric near your spine, but you don’t plan to pay it any mind. “I’m not going to give away everything that happens; besides, we have work in the morning.”

Medic hums. “*Work, ja,* every day.” He smooths a hand down his thigh to rest on his bent knee. “But *zhere* are some things I don’t mind staying awake for.”

“Like the violin?”

Shit.

*Click.* The heel of his crossed leg hits the floor in time with the arch of his brow. “You… know about *zhat*?”

The buzz that had started pleasantly in your blood is now racing toward sobriety. “When I was having trouble sleeping one night, I could hear it.” Dammit, dammit, how did you know it was him if you weren’t being deliberately nosy? “I’d gone for water, and the music wasn’t coming from our hall. So I figured…” You hope you haven’t embarrassed him. “It sounded very good.”

“Aheh—*vell,* thank you.” He takes a drink. “It’s somezhing to do when I can’t sleep.”

Since he’s offered, you might as well ask. “Does that happen often?”

“Not sleeping?” He takes the glass between both hands, turns it absentely back and forth, one last sip of brandy sloshing lazily about its bottom. “Sometimes. Usually I just get distracted with some work and forget to look at the clock; sometimes, I’m just not tired when it’s time. But you—” Medic focuses intently over his spectacles. “—if you can’t go to sleep again, you should come and tell me. I have sedatives *zhat* will help.”

“I… appreciate it.” Tuck your leg up again. “But I’ve been sleeping well lately; I shouldn’t need it.” Take another drink, try to find that relaxed sensation again.

He empties his glass. “Still. If you do, it won’t disturb me; you shouldn’t worry about waking me up.”
You definitely would worry, regardless. “Thank you.”

“Another drink?”

There’s still a couple of sips in your glass… and you consider it. But it’s better to keep from saying something you’ll regret. You’ve already slipped up once. “No, thank you; I’m still working on this one.”

He eyes your snifter, nods, pushes himself up from the armchair and sets his on the table, begins the ritual again. “It can get a bit strong—don’t want to do too much.” In silence, he measures, and you find yourself lost in a sunburst of light and liquid and shadow and—“Now zhat I’m thinking of it, why haven’t you come to see me when you’re having trouble sleeping before?”

You blink.

“Do you even know where my room is?”

Your brow furrows. You wouldn’t have bothered him anyway; surely he’s aware of that, after the discussions you’ve had. Still, “It’s just off the hall with everyone else’s, isn’t it, with your name on it?” though, come to think of it, you’ve never actually seen him come in or out of…

“Nein.” He faces you, leaning back against the table, one hand braced on the edge, the other bringing his glass to his lips. “It’s off zhe infirmary.” He sips. “I do have a room in your hall, but I haven’t used it in over a year; I moved everything to one of zhe storage rooms in zhe back.”

“Oh.”

“It’s more…” He squints off into the air. “Hhhmmmm. Practiced—no. Prakti… practical.”

Medic is usually much better with remembering words; two in one conversation is remarkable, and—ah. Yes, that’s right… he’s had more than you already. Not that he’s drunk, of course, but apparently a tipsy Medic is one who has a harder time with vocabulary, and a decidedly more relaxed tongue; you almost didn’t notice his syllables getting heavier, but, here you have it.

Back to the conversation at hand… you call up a mental image of the infirmary. “One of the doors on the back wall?” That’s all you can figure.

He snaps back to attention. “Ja. Zhe wooden one.”

“I always thought it was a storage closet.”

“It was.” A very pleased smile creeps across his mouth. “But I changed it.” He crosses one ankle over the other, letting the table take most of his weight. “I’m sure zhe enemy spy knows where it is now, but it was nice to think about him getting angry when he found my old room empty.”

That’s a frightening thought. “Does he usually go through rooms? I thought they were just after the Intelligence.”

He swirls the glass in his palm. “Mm, no. Vell. Yes? They’re only supposed to steal zhe intelligence, ja, zhat is the rule.” Another sip. “But it’s… hmm, he doesn’t like me, I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

Your brow knits together. “I thought it was me he didn’t like.”

Medic chuckles, voice trilling after a moment into a giggle. “He doesn’t like you, either, no. But
zhat’s because you’re wunderbar.” He stands out sharply against the yellow light, bowing his head just a little, adjusting his spectacles, looking right into your face. “You’re… mm —unbarmherzig.** You don’t let him bully you.” His eyes are alight. “So you don’t need to worry about him going through your things; he just wants to kill you. You don’t have anyzhing he needs.” He leans back again, tilts his head, a self-satisfied grin baring his teeth. “Now, me, a few months ago, I borrowed him after battle for a bit of… Medizin. He just doesn’t appreciate science! Now I have to make sure he’s not trying to steal my research.” Medic shrugs, little wrinkles appearing on the shoulders of his shirt, disappearing under the waistcoat. “He just won’t let it go.”

That’s… reassuring? You finish off your drink. “Medic, what did you do to him?”

“Oh, I kept him alive as a severed head for a while.” Absolutely, undeniably, unabashedly smug, from the way his eyes crinkle to the self-satisfied wiggle of his hips.

“Why?”

His face falls, perplexed, like you’ve said something strange. “Vhy? To see if I could! To see what would happen!”

And that’s… wow. That’s—

You giggle.

It’s very Medic, is what it is. It’s not funny. Don’t mistake this for something it isn’t, this isn’t funny. A man’s severed head was kept (presumably) conscious outside for battle for who knows how long, and all to see what would happen.

But you’re giggling even though it doesn’t feel humorous.

And—oh, no, Medic looks delighted.

Well, a little radiant, even, actually, as though his pride were a tangible thing you ought to be able to feel from where you’re sitting, and no, no, you can’t have him thinking you approve of torture so you cover your mouth and arrange your face into something more serious as quickly as humanly possible when your limbs are feeling as languid and easy as they are now. “No, no… I don’t think it’s funny…”

He doesn’t seem convinced.

You try again. “It’s. It sounds funny when you say it like that, but keeping someone’s head on your operating table is—”

“Oh, no, he was in zhe refrigerator so he’d stay fresh.”

Oh, shit.

And now you’re laughing. Not giggling. Laughing. It’s perfectly absurd. Absolutely ridiculous! “That—” Oh, fuck, you have to be more affected by the alcohol than you thought. “—that exp—” You can’t keep the giggles in and this is so wrong but “—that explains why he’s so chilly.”

Which means you’re both laughing and it’s wrong but you’ve stopped caring for the moment.

“You might say—” Medic’s brandy sloshes dangerously up the sides of his snifter, shoulders shaking. “—it’s strange zhat he can’t keep his… cool.”
Dammit. You can’t catch your breath now, a whole new set of giggles setting both your feet firmly on the floor. This is wrong… but…

But, this is the same man who thought puncturing your lung, severing your tendons, and watching you suffocate in your own blood was a perfect way to begin the morning. The smell of old tobacco and expensive cologne; a cold, empty smile without mercy. It’s a sobering thought. You take a few deep breaths as Medic attempts to catch his, and then you meet his gaze, his countenance still positively glowing with glee. He waits, expectantly.

And you meet Medic’s eyes. “I’m surprised he struggles so much to get ahead!”

Immediately, you’re both struggling to breathe again, Medic throwing back his head to cackle at the ceiling, pressing a hand over his face, fingers mussing the dark curl on his brow. You hiccup, clutching your stomach with one hand, eyes starting to tear up with delightful hysteria. Maybe it’s wrong, but you’re really, truly, not a bit sorry.

Chapter End Notes

*Zum Wohl - “Cheers!”; literally “to goodness” or “for the benefit”; this toast is more formal than the well-known Prost. Supposedly Zum Whol is meant to be said when drinking wine, not beer.

**Unbarmherzig - ruthless, merciless

The More You Know: SOS is a white sauce with rehydrated slivers of dried beef, served on toast (the "shingle"), and it was a common ration for the US military during WWII. However, chipped beef has been similarly served with potatoes, English muffins, and bagels before, and I figured that would be a little more Spy’s style.

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